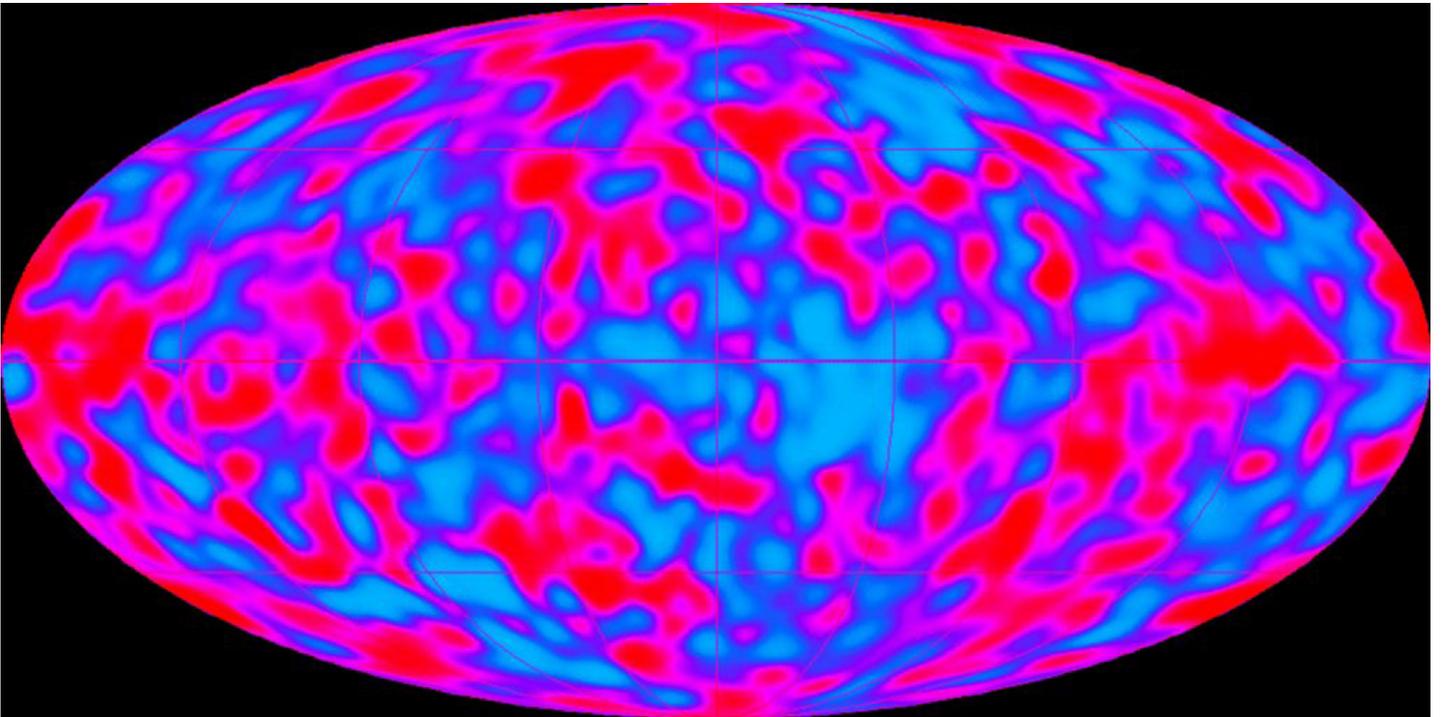




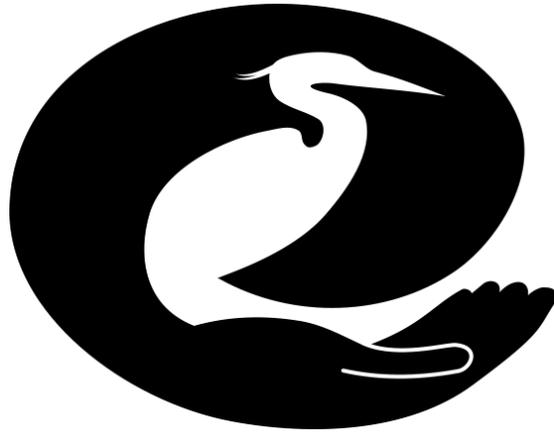
DARK MATTER

A JOURNAL OF SPECULATIVE WRITING



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DARK MATTER: A JOURNAL OF SPECULATIVE WRITING



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Zeno's Paradox

*Now
the arrow can not reach the target.
The traveler's always only half-way home.*

*The present, a Eucharistic moment,
hovers between its bow and distant bell.*

*I occupy the space but not the time
where cold Skykomish fished a purer stream*

*than mine; strung gold upon the moments and
threaded beads of thorns and kisses into*

*a necklace of accumulating grace
until the final exhaled breath of
Now.*

A Conversation With a Nebula on the Topography of Hope

Nebula, fill the holes of space with exploding spiders
and neon soot.

 Guide my hands to the nooks
of her clavicle. Let them not turn into frogs

on her flesh. Scatter the womb-warm hues
of heaven across my weary eyes.

Have you ever kissed a girl with the lights out?
Have you flapped like fish
on a bed of plastic?

Nebula, thank you for extending your starry arm,
but a barrel of suns couldn't suture
these wounds. Nebula, I'm sorry,

but I follow flashlight and morbid moon
into these woods where the leaves are so thick
they obscure my wrinkling lips.

If you still love me,
Nebula, shine like a scream of light.
I will find the hermit hiding in the shade

trees. I will hold him. Together we wash
his tattered clothes. Together, we grow fat
off the wild, until we know.

Memoir to Basho

Tiny ice crystals collide somewhere in the atmosphere above. Drawn to each other like a moth is drawn in a fit of suicidal attraction to a flame, its transverse orientation maintains its body in constant angles relative to a single point source of light, drawing it closer and closer to death in a flash of relative positions and kamikaze tendency. A butterfly, reeled in to the scent of nectar, tree sap, pollen, even dung, tasting ecstatically with its sensory feet. A bull, charging compulsively to the movement of the red flag, battling the matador in hopes that it may be rewarded with indulto, the pardon for its life. This is how snow falls.

A girl from Ghana, Baba, had never seen snow in her life. We went on an outing to Pikes Peak in Colorado, a mountain that soars to 14,110 feet, in hopes that even a sprinkling of snow would still be there mid-June. I prayed for snow as we chugged up the cog railway: prayed that by some miracle snow was still there for Baba to see but there wasn't. How do you describe snow to someone who has never seen it before? A form of precipitation within earth's atmosphere in the form of crystalline water ice, granular material that has an open and therefore soft structure, unless packed by external pressure – no, science is insufficient in this case. A return to purity, perhaps, a world washed white with titanium oxide or Cleopatra's legendary milk baths. A manifestation of God on earth.

I stand in the midst of a snowstorm and am stricken dumb by the feel of snow pelting me, every granule finding some pore of my face to nest in. Wait for it to subside but it doesn't; it is a frenzied whirlwind trying to Dorothy me away but my heels dig stubbornly into the ground, refusing to relinquish me. Most people see only the aftermath of the snowstorm, the cloak of calm resting on a fallen earth. They see the asphodel meadows, inevitably tainted with the grease and dirt and oil of life. But I see the ice crystals collide.

You Need a Light?

When I'm walking, and the road is stretched out before me as far as I can see. The horizon is only dirt and grass and more road, and that's the way that I like it. The dirt is flying up and the sound of the cars going by, and I'm not thinking. Not thinking of anything. Just staring at the road.

I'm not having to think, because I am walking. I don't even have to think about where it is that I'm going. Besides a generalized picture of course that keeps my legs going in one direction or another. Have to have some sort of destination; otherwise I wouldn't know which way I should walk.

The sounds of the cars whizzing by and then the sound of a car slowing down, though I do not have my thumb out and did not wish for a ride. The car stops and it's too late to walk in another direction, and there's no other direction to walk.

The passenger door opens. "Do you need a ride?" says a fat, mustached man. I see beads of sweat covering his forehead and the bald patches on his head. I see rolls of fat collapsing over the seatbelt and crashing against the steering wheel. "No thanks," I say and I try to keep walking but my feet are planted to the ground by nothing, nothing but his expectation. Oh, the tragedy of being a teenage girl.

"C'mon, you shouldn't be walking out here by yourself," he says, pretending to be concerned, though of course I see past it. I climb into the car with a sinking sense of foreboding. The car is big and square and dark blue, with velvet seats, or maybe velveteen is what that material is called?

"Where are you going?" he asks and I tell him I'm going up ahead to the next town. Off the top of my head I give him the address of an old boyfriend. If I have an address someone is expecting me. He offers a cigarette and I decline.

He asks if I'm having 'problems at home' and I tell him everyone has problems. "That's true," he says, exhaling smoke out his nose, thinking it over. Then he repeats it, "everyone has problems." He runs his fingers on the inside of my shirt, and I feel suddenly gross and retarded. In my head my hands are pushing him away, in my head my hands take the shape of a big 'fuck-you' flip-off, and they are fighting, fists flying out.

What is it that prevents me from fighting? Is it fear? Fear of what? Of making it worse, of

course. There's always a chance that it could get worse. Isn't that what keeps everyone from fighting back? Isn't it that fear exactly that makes everyone obey? Even locked in the concentration camp, people obey, because it could always be worse. You could be walking to the gas chamber.

We got to the area of the given address, and he pulled to a stop. When I got into the car I had been sure of not coming back alive, I was thinking kidnap and rape and never heard from again. So that when I climbed out of the car and my feet hit the concrete and I was shutting the door to the passenger side of the car, I was in a state of mind best described as shell shock.

I walked on as before, though transplanted from highway to town. I neither thanked the fat man for a ride nor cussed him out, but merely watched him drive away. I had gone from a forced denial of thought to an inability to concentrate.

Since I had given a certain address as my destination, I decided to walk there. That was Shawn's house. I guess Shawn could be described as an ex-boyfriend or sometime boyfriend, whenever I saw him. His neighborhood was a lower middle class suburban sprawl behind the bowling alley off the highway. As bland and white as bread pudding.

I rang the doorbell and his slutty little sister came to the door, posing in the doorway with attitude. She was only eleven and already sleeping around, or so I had heard. Shawn was happy to see me. We had sex in his bedroom, but I wouldn't let him touch my breasts because I had stuffed my bra. Of course, the more I kept him away, the more his interest was piqued, the more his frustration grew, until it became suspicion.

When we were done, we smoked cigarettes stolen from his dad, and he made a big show of it since he wasn't allowed to smoke in the house, then we played with his parents' camcorder that they had locked up in their room, listened to music, then ran out of things to do and got restless and bored. We decided to walk to town.

The subdivision was a little isolated from the rest of the town, so we had to walk a ways. We could hitch a ride, but my experience from earlier in the day discouraged me. Plus, the fact that Shawn was with me made it unlikely to get a ride.

We walked past a nicer street on the edge of the subdivision. There was a wrought iron fence surrounding a backyard, through which you could see and hear splashing kids in a pool. As we passed the yard, a boy of about ten held his nose and did a pencil jump off the diving board, while two teenagers frisked about in the water with some type of ball.

"Look at 'em in there, riching it up," Shawn said loudly, flicking his cigarette butt disgustedly through the fence. It landed quietly in a bush and no one noticed Shawn or the butt,

disgustedly through the fence. It landed quietly in a bush and no one noticed Shawn or the butt, except me. In the driveway in front of the house, a man stood talking on his cell phone.

At that time cell phones were still a rarity, and I didn't know anybody who owned one. The important people I knew, mainly small time drug dealers and my uncle the cop, carried pagers. The man was smoking as he talked in his loud and obviously gay voice. Shawn approached him to bum a cigarette.

"Sure," the man said, politely pausing his conversation and holding out his pack, waiting for Shawn to take one. Suddenly, and without warning, Shawn grabbed the entire pack of cigarettes and took off running. Leaving me standing there, mouth agape, looking the fool.

Sheepishly, I apologized to the man for my friend's behavior, but he waved away the apology with his hand. He took his lighter out of his pocket, "Here, he'll need this," he said handing the lighter to me.

As there didn't seem to be anything else to be said or done, I continued on in the direction we had been walking. A few blocks down I heard a loud whispering of my name from the bushes. What is the point of a loud whisper since everyone can hear it? I'm not sure.

I walked up to the bush and out popped Shawn. "Why didn't you run?" he fussed, "Why'd you go talk to him?"

"Because I had to apologize for your obnoxious actions."

I didn't tell him about the lighter. I figured it would assure my cut of the cigarettes since he would depend on me for a light. We walked by the burned down ruins of the old orphanage, the half empty downtown, and the unused grain silos.

We came upon an abandoned apartment building. Inside all life was removed and only stained carpet remained. We discovered a hole in the wall between two apartments. Shawn ran out and came back in through the other apartment, he stuck his head through the hole.

We French kissed and laughed and then both ran out and switched places, passing each other in the doorway, laughing, meeting each other at the hole, kissing. We were so busy we didn't even hear the two black men enter the building.

"Whew. What we got here?" said the short, squat one when he saw us.

"A white girl with a body like a sister!" said the tall and light one, I recognized him from around. "Tell me that ain't yo boyfriend, ain't no way."

"Shoot naw! He can't have her. He gotta sit in the corner and look at her while he masturbates."

At this they both cracked up laughing.

“C’mon, let’s go.” Shawn said angrily, pulling me angrily out the door.

“Where ya’ll going so soon?” said the tall light one, shoving Shawn through the door. We spilled out into the lawn and onto the sidewalk, walking. They followed.

I heard the tall one say to the squat one, “He just don’t learn, do he?” Then he yelled out, “Hey boy, gimme them headphones ya got round yo neck!”

Shawn didn’t respond except by walking faster. The tall one ran up and blocked Shawn’s way. He repeated, “I said gimme them headphones.”

The two stood looking at each other for a moment. Time seemed unreal, time was suspended. Then a flash, a fist, and Shawn on the ground. “Get up boy!” he was yelling when time resumed. He took off his shirt and threw it on the ground.

A crowd began to gather, all black. We were in a mainly black part of town. People coming out of their houses. I recognized a boy I knew from alternative school in the crowd gawking with the rest. We had always been friendly. Everyone called him “T.”

Shawn stood up and the man shoved him and continued shoving him down the street. The crowd moved with them. I moved with them.

“This is for being a slave-owning motherfucker!” He yelled.

“We never owned slaves,” I pleaded on Shawn’s behalf.

“But your grandparents did!” He yelled and punched Shawn in the face, Shawn was on the ground again. I thought about my grandparents, my dad’s parents, who had picked cotton before World War II, sharecroppers in rural Arkansas.

“Slaveowner!” someone yelled, and there was scattered clapping, the crowd was getting animated, growing restless. I looked around for a means of escape but saw none. I stood on the sidewalk and the crowd began to close in around me.

The sound of a car slowing down, the sound of a car stopping. A small, red car idling by my side. The driver opened the passenger door and yelled at me to get in. I didn’t hesitate. I climbed in the car and regarded my savior, it was a woman I knew. The aunt of one of my friends, her name was Sheena, a black woman who was married to incarcerated white man.

“Fools,” she was saying and shaking her head, she punched on the gas.

On the floorboard of the passenger side I noticed a UR Rattle & Hum cd. “I love that record,” I said aloud but to no one in particular.

“Damn it!” Sheena said. I looked up and saw her fiddling with the car lighter, an unlit cigarette in her mouth.

“Need a light?” I asked, pulling the lighter out of my pocket, remembering only that I had it but not remembering why.

The Gardens of Evening

gardens of evening
as one way of saying the vibrations
that move, that move through, everything,
even the saying of them,
especially the saying of them:
at field's edge, wind through silent trees.

in other words, the sun is a dying thing
from one perspective, the breath of life
from the same one; and so, we clothe
ourselves: tattered breaths of sunlight
over dry leaves, wearing the tatters
of sunlight, in a garden of evening.

or is that another way of putting it,
like the way I started to dress like my father
in the months after his death
because it made me feel close to him?

The Gods Demand an Electrician

The most serious glitch occurred [in the Metropolitan Opera's production of "Das Rheingold"] when the programming error prevented the completion of the final scene, in which the gods were to walk across a rainbow bridge to their castle and sanctuary, Valhalla. But no bridge emerged. The Wall Street Journal, September 29, 2010

The gods scared us.

They plotted the end of days.

They hammered gold into ultimate power.

The earth danced under their thunderbolts.

But now the rainbow bridge made in Germany fails them.

They cannot cross to Valhalla.

The god of fire pulls out his cell phone.

The Director's number is busy.

The king of the gods paces like an angry wrestler.

The technicians ignore him.

We must help the gods to leave.

We must help the gods off stage before the chorus returns.

Help them go. Help them go.

Out of sight, the gods may scare us again.

Blindness

I continually try to abandon the idea of blindness. I try to ignore it but the harder I try to ignore it, the more I think about it. Why can't I just close my eyes? That's what I've been doing. Closing my eyes and trying to imagine blindness. Trying to think up a story that revolves around losing that sense.

Kyle gave me *Blindness* by Jose Saramago, but I cannot get past the long blocks of conversation. It is a bulky and confusing way of writing (and translating, I imagine). I like my novels spaced out. I like a chance to breathe. When a novel has a lot of short chapters and when those chapters start on a brand new page, I am free to breathe and I can take notes in all of the white spaces. But a page that runs from edge to edge to edge to edge with text is intimidating and not to my aesthetic liking. This observation triggered an idea. A book about blindness with pictures. Or perhaps a pop-up book. I am unaware of a work of literature that is a pop-up book.

Reading what Kyle has been writing, what he has been starting and stopping, what he has been building and molding is inspiring. He is creating some real art. Something different—certainly something I have never seen before. So I've gotten it in my head now that I need to create something new and exciting and, most importantly, different. So a pop-up book about blindness. I just cannot change blindness.

I read what Kyle has written to this point, and I know that this is just the tip of the iceberg—forgive the cliché, but it's true! He always has a story to tell. And unlike a number of happily intoxicated friends of mine, Kyle has never repeated himself. He's been to the other side of the world and back more than once. He's met any number of people. He's crossed the country and back any number of times. I examine my own life and my own experiences and I really struggle to think of anything. Yes, Kyle has a few years on me, but I would not be surprised if he was twice as interesting as me at my age.

Obviously experience does not a fiction writer make. I can invent. I can create. I can bury myself in the creative process and see what happens. But every time I dive, I see nothing but blindness. I see a sweet old man who loses his sight. It happens gradually over the course of decades and when it happens, he barely notices. When his wife, the love of his life, realizes that she is no longer seen, she grows more and more upset. She begins to speak less and less. She grows inactive, distant. She no longer wants to be in the same room as the man she once loved more than anything. She no longer wants to be in the same house, in the same town, on the same planet. She drifts away, and the blind old man can do nothing about it. She is gone, out of sight. They spend the last little fraction of their lives adrift in the nothingness of purgatory.

That's all I have. I suppose it's better than nothing, but it's only a paragraph. Kyle is well into his work, and it is only the beginning. The real writing, I imagine, has not even begun.

I see very little chance of being able to compete with that. So for now I will just step into the shadows and only interrupt when he comes to a point when he gets stuck or whenever else he needs me—if he needs me.

So, there, my little story of blindness is out there in the open for everyone to see, and that is all I have. Right now that is the only story I have to tell.

Imperfect

Outside my casement window
along one thin dark line between squares of concrete—

the laser's width void the construction worker's
allowable human error, like the way, an hour earlier,

he smudged the print of his newspaper
thumbing open the next page—

a finger-length bundle of something leafy
has sprouted, less grown

than dropped, a spoonful of batter flung,
ker-plunked, and rising like green yeast

or a gob of boastful lichen
puffing its chest.

Departing Minneapolis

the noon sky darkens as delta flight 5607
 climbs another cloud stratum
 all the quilted farmland below
 a hazy white sheet it's not difficult

to imagine how singly insignificant molecules
 collaborated life on our dusty blue orb
 how infinitesimal proto-cells could fall

unnoticed unburned from comet tail
 to obsidian outcrop first kissing earth
 up here then drifting their diaphanous
 descent to our inevitable births

I daydream knocking
 on this fire door in the upper stratosphere

while the flight attendant fumbles
 her cellular card swipe selling rum and diet coke
 to the salt and pepper stranger

seated before me how trivial our dance
 on the floor of God our party of almost
 eighty making its transcontinental traipse
 high above the herons hawks and peregrines

where the sky glows indigo

hours before dusk

Mind

Your mind is like the *USS Constitution*
isn't it, the *Constitution*, too
is about 8% original
you're always replacing parts
with wooden ships
so inside now there's only
a few frames,
a few futtocks left
from 1789 –
it's like the farmer's favorite axe:
“I only replaced the head twice
and the handle four times”
like the Buddhist campfire:
you call it the same fire
but after an hour
what is the same about it?
And you now, and you as a baby:
– what is the same about you?
You may be only 8% original
there's only 8% of the original
Constitution
but they still take her out
that great white tall ship
and people gather on the shore
and cheer the shape of the hull
the pure yards of canvas sail
and the unconsciously brave boys
who scramble up the masts
to work
aloft

The Mud Parade

It was the last time I'd fall in love
a day raining blood and white feathers
as if I were standing under a god
plucking all the chickens in the world
a day of unintelligible omens
that had the feel of a day that never really happened
a day like an insect
climbing up a stalk
that all the bug spray in the world can't kill.

I digress:

Already it feels as if I were living in a myth
of better days gone by
that if I stop talking long enough my tongue
will become a fist & strangle me
that with each passing day things
are worn a little thinner until at last
you can practically see right through them
of course that's all bullshit
but then again
not entirely.

Everyone agreed the bride
bore me an unsettling likeness
down the aisle she came
much like Zeno's arrow
hanging on the arm of a kilt-clad father
who clearly hated me
the entire scene was like that game
played with two hands:

here's the church
& here's the steeple
open the doors...
but in reverse, if that can be imagined.

In other words, I began to use
my hands differently,
to screw down lids on tiny coffins,
for instance,
in which I buried little pieces of myself
like toads
made sluggish by the cold.
I guess you could say I've become
a more practical person,
useful,
foursquare,
the sort of thing that has a handle.

Sometimes, like right this very moment,
I feel as if God pressed his indelible thumbprint
into the soft grey gum of my brain
with the intention, really,
of crushing me out of existence altogether
like a mite
but only managing to cripple me
it's just a feeling
like genetics
destiny for no reason at all
like brown hair,
a tendency for certain kinds of cancer
a knack for horseshoes.

Word Color

The Greek eye failed to taste blue
and spelled the seas burgundy and honey
red throughout Homer. Tease the color wheel
and blue smears to red, and what we call
purple is our order, our special
creation, sparking behind our eyes.

Monet knew this when he painted water
lilies over and over, the light returning
patches, moment by moment new.
But we fear becoming unhinged, aswim
in light's reflective sea. We need to weave
our safety net with words.

The Family Cat

The family cat sat, blinking brightly on the sofa. It neither meowed or hissed, but sat regally, sphinx-like, ruling over its carpeted domain. The toddler swayed through the doorway on precarious legs, stumbling and burbling through a minefield of colorful toys. Spotting the family cat, he squealed in unquenchable delight, and proceeded to smack it in clumsy affection. The family cat sat, purring loudly and patiently. Calling the toddler's name, the mother entered, scooping him up with a laugh fit for the liberated woman in commercials. The father, starkly outlined by his suit, arrived that evening in time for dinner.

The family cat smelled ham. The toddler, now known as the child, dropped his lunchbox, spilling the now unbalanced meal. He had sprinted across the yellow living room wearing his Spiderman backpack before relatching his Spiderman lunchbox. The mother followed shortly afterwards, tsk-tsk-ing and tut-tut-ing in a tone more darling than her lavender apron. You'll be late for school, honey. What a mess you've made. The father cut his finger on the morning paper, swore, then tried to band-aid his profanity by insisting he'd meant to say "shoot." The mother frowned. The child grinned at the parents and dashed to the school bus, nearly kicking the purring family cat on his way out.

The family cat watched the teenage boy. He looked quite different from the toddler and the child, but smelled exactly the same. This fact made the family cat purr. The teenage boy was tall, thin, and pale, a celery stick with poor posture. The mother was yelling, decibels louder than the teenage boy's shame, and far too loudly for the family cat's ears. The mother, whose hair relinquished its careful curls, waved a sheet of paper assailed with red pen. What a mess you've made! The movement of her hand seduced the family cat's line of sight. The father, who walked with heavy hands, did not arrive that evening in time for dinner. After eating cold meat-loaf and seeing the red pen, he painted the mother's face with purple and blue.

The family cat was curious. It did not smell ham, nor did it hear laughter. The mother was in the kitchen and the young man basked numbly in the light of the television. The father's face was hard. He no longer read the paper, but always sneered as if his finger had just been cut. The father needed another cold one. The family cat padded softly across the carpet just in time to meet the father's heavy feet. The mother froze like the dinner in her hands, and the young man

turned away from the television. The family cat was silent. For the first time in years, the mother and the young man looked at each other, then directly into the father's face.

The family cat sat, blinking blearily on a different sofa. The full-grown man crossed the green-walled apartment to sit beside the family cat and his mother, whose face was colorless. Handing her a can of Pepsi, the man scooped up the family cat with a grunt fit for the muscular man on infomercials. The mother's son gently smoothed the family cat's dull fur, and the family cat valiantly rumbled on.

The Buddha and the Novelist

“Did you feel that?” he asked in a gravelly voice that revealed a lifetime’s association with cigarettes.

I marked my place in the book I was reading with my finger. “Did I feel what?”

“The cosmic pull between us?”

“Oh, I don’t know,” I said examining his eyes for signs of madness.

“I think you felt it.”

When I’d looked up and saw him staring at me from a neighboring table, I’d made the mistake of smiling at him.

“It was of course inevitable that we would meet.”

“I guess so,” I said, clearing the tension out of my throat with a laugh.

“You have a pleasant sounding laugh.”

“Thank you.”

“Very pleasant.”

“Thanks.”

Hoping he would realize I was there to read and not to connect on a cosmic level with a stranger, I looked back down at the sentence my finger was pointing to and pretended to resume reading, forming the words on my lips the way children do to further get my message across. I was reading a book about metaphysics by Aristotle. Earlier in the week I’d had a conversation at a backyard barbeque in Venice Beach with a wilting flower child who had translated the devastation of a recent break up into metaphysical terms. Not only could I not carry on a conversation about metaphysics, and comprehend what the drugs were telling her to say, but if asked, I couldn’t provide an adequate definition of the word. I don’t like getting caught being ignorant, even in front of those who are too busy hallucinating to notice.

The destitute man continued to try and draw me into a conversation.

“I’m a Buddha,” he said.

“Really? I’ve never met a Buddhist before.”

“Not a Buddhist, a Buddha.”

“Oh...I’m sorry.”

“A Buddhist is trying to find his way, but I’ve already found mine, so I’m a Buddha.”

“Okay.”

“What are you doing right now?” he asked, shifting his eyes down to my book.

“Just doing a little reading.”

I held up the book so he could see the title.

“And what do you do for a living?”

“I do a lot of things, but mostly I’m a writer.”

“Have you written a novel?”

“No. Not yet.”

“No. I knew you hadn’t.”

“You did?”

“Of course.”

“How did you know I hadn’t written a novel?” I asked, taking a sip of my coffee to fortify myself against his growing intrusiveness.

“I knew because I’m a writer, too. I’m currently writing a trilogy that has several major motion picture stars attached to it. We’re going to begin filming next fall at a destination yet to be determined.”

He was definitely out of his mind, but well educated, and still armed with hope against whatever torments he was facing.

“Well, you must be very excited,” I said, allowing myself to indulge a bit in a conversation I thought might have the legs to travel in several imaginative directions.

“I don’t get excited. Excitement doesn’t exist for me.”

“No?”

“No. Of course not. I don’t need excitement to enjoy life.”

As we continued to talk, I tried to study him without giving myself away. He was highly perceptive, and as on guard as a boxer in the ring, and I didn’t want him to feel threatened, and get angry, and put on an embarrassing display. The first thing I’d noticed was that one of his front teeth was encased in gold. It flashed from his mouth and drew my eyes towards it every time he spoke. I figured he must have had some money at some point in the past to be able to afford that gold tooth. His blue eyes, aflame with intensity, were further set off by patches of gray whiskers sprouting unevenly from his gaunt, deeply lined face. A sweat-stained yellow bandana with paisley designs on it was tied around his narrow head giving him an edge that helped to negate his small, bony frame. But the thing that struck me most about him were his hands. They were large and handsomely shaped with long thick fingers, the quality of which were tainted only by the black dirt underneath his fingernails. They looked like the strong, capable hands of a surgeon, and other than his blue eyes, were his most attractive physical trait. He was definitely down for the count, but there had been potential there. Potential he had most likely washed away with alcohol.

“I’m going outside to smoke a cigarette. You should join me...” he said.

I had been peacefully reading for over an hour, and the caffeine that had propelled me into the depths of the incomprehensible subject of metaphysics was beginning to wear off, and leave me feeling drained and tired. So I decided to get some air and humor this poor, lonely guy, who seemed to be trying his best to convince me that he was omnipotent, one of the fortunate ones, instead of one of the unfortunate ones. He was strange and intense, but seemed harmless.

“Sure. Why not?” I said, closing my book. “My eyes are getting tired, I could use a break.”

“There are no breaks. There is only what is happening right now. There are no breaks in time.”

I followed him to the front entrance, and as he held the door open, he looked up at me and said, “Are you ready to begin our journey?”

My startled look was not lost on him or the others inside Abbot’s Habit, who had been observing our interaction through peripheral glances, and were glad they had not been the chosen ones.

We went outside and sat down on either side of a wooden table framed by the large front window. The Buddha placed a cigarette between his dried, cracked lips, lit a match, and with his surprisingly steady surgeon’s hands held the small flame to the tip. He then shook out the match and flicked it onto the sidewalk at the feet of an attractive, middle-aged woman passing by. She gave him an angry look, but didn’t dare stop to confront him. Amused, the destitute man took two casual puffs from his fresh cigarette, and then, as if suddenly remembering I was sitting across from him, turned sharply towards me, looked into my eyes, and said: “I can read your soul and I know your destiny.”

I sat up straight and pushed back my shoulders, adopting an appropriate pose for a conversation about my destiny.

“Is it good destiny or a bad destiny?”

He didn’t like my question. “There are no good or bad destinies. There is only what will be. And that is where the truth lies. And I can see the truth, your truth, waiting for you out there in the future.”

“Cool,” I said. I was beginning to realize that no matter what I said he was going to respond in a contradictory way that made me feel spiritually inferior to him. Just then a 300-pound man, dressed in a rainbow colored cardigan, came out the door holding a steaming cup of coffee. The Buddha watched him veer off to the right along the sidewalk, heading towards the

stoplight on California Avenue.

“I like your sweater!” he called out to the man.

The man turned around, but kept his legs in motion, back peddling away from us, embarrassed by the compliment and its source.

“Thank you. I like it, too,” the man said.

“Where’d you get it?” the Buddha asked, raising his voice in proportion to the growing distance between him and the man.

The man continued backing away across the street, not wanting to get pulled into a conversation with what appeared to be a homeless person.

“My wife got it in Mexico!”

“Good for her! She has excellent taste! And what do you do for a living?!”

The man was now more than twenty feet away -- still back peddling.

“I’m a producer!”

“Really?! What do you produce?!”

“Films!”

The Buddha quickly got to his feet.

“Oh, that’s interesting, because I’m currently writing a trilogy about...”

“I gotta go! Have a great night!” the producer yelled, turning his massive frame forward, and hurrying up the sidewalk, passed the glowing lights of the storefronts. The Buddha moved up the sidewalk a few steps, and shouted: “Wait a minute! I’ve got three major motion picture stars attached to my movies!” The producer disappeared around the next corner. The Buddha turned and looked at me with a flustered expression on his face, pathetic in contrast to his previously dignified, all-knowing countenance that I couldn’t help but laugh.

“Well, that was interesting,” I said.

“What was interesting about it?” he said, sitting back down at the table.

“I don’t know, I guess he didn’t feel like talking.”

“He said everything he needed to say.”

“He did?”

“Yes. And what he didn’t say, I already knew. More words between us would have been wasteful. I already knew all the answers to all the questions I could have asked him.”

“Cool.”

The Buddha stared at me again. Unnerved by his glaring, hypnotic eyes, I turned away

from him, and watched the cars driving past us on Abbot Kinney Boulevard. Several tense moments passed with me staring at traffic and him staring at me. Finally to break the silence I got him to return to the topic of my destiny. Because even though I knew he was delusional, I was still interested to hear what predictions he might make. I'll listen to anything a friend, stranger, or even a crazy person has to say about my life, as long as they make the future sound promising.

"So, you were about to tell me about my destiny."

"No. I wasn't about to tell you anything. Because if I had been about to tell you something, I would have already told it to you."

"Okay. But I was hoping that maybe you would..."

"If you wish for me to speak now of your destiny I can do so."

"That would be great."

He shifted his eyes to the back of a small Latino man, fastening an apron behind his back, as he charged up the sidewalk, apparently late for work.

"You're going to write a great novel," the Buddha said.

"Really? Wow."

Realizing the value of his forecast was somewhere below a palm reader's, I still couldn't help but allow myself to enjoy his prediction.

"Do you really think so?"

"I don't think. I don't have to think. Because I know," he said.

I studied his face again, this time looking for signs of clairvoyance.

"Don't you think you will?" he asked.

"Well, maybe. It's just that I've never thought of myself as being destined to write the next great American novel. I write plays mostly. But, you know, if my destiny is to write novels, then, what am I going to do, that's my destiny."

"You will write a novel that is brilliantly conceived and heartbreakingly...(he couldn't think of another word) and it will be the literary highlight of the century."

At that moment, a silver Porsche screeched to a halt on the street in front of us, narrowly missing a white Prius pulling out in front of him. The angry driver honked his horn four times at the Prius. The Buddha looked at me and held up four fingers.

"Four?" I said, thinking he was still referring to my destiny and greedily hoping he meant I would write four great novels, instead of just one.

He held up four fingers again and motioned with his head towards the car that had honked its horn.

"Oh you mean that car honked its horn four times? Is that what you mean?"

He nodded his head.

“Do you see some sort of significance in that?”

“There is significance in everything.”

We turned and watched the traffic again. A few moments later, a man on a yellow racing bike pulled up to the curb in front of us. Dressed in full racing gear, he slid off his motorcycle, and walked into the pizza shop next door to the coffee house. The Buddha and I studied his racing bike for a moment. It had the number 04 painted on the side of it. He pointed at the number, turned, and looked at me.

“Four,” I said. “The number four again.”

He narrowed his eyes and nodded his head, as if this proved once and for all that he was in direct communication with the higher powers.

“It’s like metaphysics,” I said, taking advantage of a chance to use the word in a sentence, even though I wasn’t sure I was using it properly.

“It’s not like metaphysics. It is metaphysics,” he said. He paused a moment and then asked: “And what do you know about metaphysics?”

“Not too much. I’ve just started reading about it. Why? Do you know a lot about it?”

“Of course. I know everything there is to know about metaphysics.”

He extinguished his cigarette, flicked the stub into an oily puddle in the street, got to his feet, and peered down at me with his deep set, haunted eyes.

“We should leave now and begin our journey together.”

“Our journey together?”

“Do you own an automobile?”

“Uh...yeah.”

“Is it parked close by?”

“Uh...no.”

“Where is it parked?”

“Over...that way,” I said, gesturing in the opposite direction of where my car was parked.

“Well, if you’ll take me to your car, drive me to an acceptable hotel for the night, and pay for my room, we can begin our journey first thing in the morning.”

I reached across the table for my book.

“Or,” he continued, “Perhaps we can begin our journey later this evening in the hotel dining room, if you’re anxious to get started right away.”

It appeared that in his mind he was Socrates and I was Crito, one of his disciples. I had let him take it too far, believing that I believed in him and his special powers. An immediate escape

was necessary.

“I’m sorry, but I can’t tonight. I’ve already got plans.”

“Well, luckily there’s an inexpensive hotel right up the street. It’s only a mile from here. Perhaps you can drop me off there and join me in the morning.”

“I’m sorry. I have to go right away. I have a date,” I said, looking at my watch, and getting to my feet. “But it was a great pleasure meeting you. I really enjoyed our talk.”

“Wait. Where are you going?” he said, his eyes looking panicked and deceived, the way salesman’s do when you break the line just before he can reel you into the boat.

“My girlfriend’s waiting for me,” I said, hurrying off down the sidewalk towards California Avenue.

“Hey! Wait a minute. Hold on a second! Don’t you want me to reveal the mysteries of the universe to you?!”

“Maybe some other time!” I said, turning and back peddling away from him.

“Well, could you at least give me a couple dollars, so I can get something to eat?! I haven’t eaten in two days!”

“Of course,” I said, walking back to him, and taking out my wallet. He held out his large, capable, surgeon’s hand, and I pressed a five dollar bill into it’s palm.

“Thank you...” he said, his fingers snapping closed around the money.

“You’re welcome. It was wonderful--”

“...FOR WASTING MY FUCKING TIME!” he said, getting to his feet and prancing away up the sidewalk and into the pizza shop.

What i didn't do on my summer vacation

The great smell of October is in the air as the dog and I take an evening walk to the lake down the road. Dried leaves are blowing across the nylon tarp that covers the town pool and over head geese are flying north, or south, wherever it is that geese fly when their summers end. It's too dark too early for anyone to really be playing basketball but shadows and voices in the dusk betray the presence of two teams trying to finish a game. Lights in distant houses begin to flicker on revealing the silhouettes of ghosts and goblins lurking in living room windows. It's warm out and if we venture out later the waning sounds of baseball may drift across the porches and yards. It is the end of a crisp, clear picture-perfect autumn day and yet, I cannot help missing summer.

Despite everything the fall has to offer it's not unusual for me to slip into a funk when the season changes. Autumn's arrival often brings the sense that I left behind something not finished. As a two-time cancer survivor, even healthy as I am today; I cannot lose the feeling that while "there's always next year" may be the right mantra for baseball and football teams I support, it's not the slogan for my personal life. I should note that autumn blues are nothing new to me and have been an annual event for years. I should also confess that this was not a summer of untold accomplishment and fun. The list of what I didn't do on my summer vacation was longer than the list of what I did.

To be fair, some of my goals were probably a bit too stretchy.

Let me just start by admitting this - Ulysses is hard. I cracked open the book over Memorial Day weekend, stayed with it for weeks but by Bloomsday I was as hopelessly lost as Odysseus on his way from the war. It wasn't the only book I didn't finish. I had sprinkled a couple of classics on my summer reading list; Paradise Lost, the Iliad, and Dante's Inferno, but classics don't really go with summer. They are big, bulky, difficult heavy books and if you want to read them you have give up other things, like having a fun summer. Let's say you're heading to rooftop for some frozen rum drinks with friends; you can carry the drinks and a chaise or Achilles but not all three.

A walk through the vegetable patch shows that my reading list wasn't the only thing that would be improved with a little pruning and plucking. This is not to say that healthy green things did not grow abundantly there; it's just those things were aphids and crabgrass instead of tomatoes

and peppers. It was amazing that the weeds, which I tried laboriously to remove, flourished whilst the crops which I attempted to nurture mostly Joan of Arced in the summer sun. Part of that was my fault. I couldn't remember whether the rule of thumb was to plant veggies around Mother's Day or Father's Day. It turns that it is Father's Day – if you live in Minnesota which, of course, I do not.

But it doesn't matter when you plant your plants; your garden will need water and weeding. Lots of water and, it turns out, lots of weeding. Nurturing plants along is a bit like taking care of children and ungrateful children at that. The five tomatoes that you do manage to produce will ripen precisely over the one weekend when you manage to leave Leopold in rainy Dublin and get away to the shore, thereby becoming the prize of whomever you've asked to tend to your garden. Next year I'll send my seeds to a farm in Vermont or Pennsylvania so they can enjoy living in the country instead being cooped up in my backyard. As for the garden, I will purposefully plant weeds and see if vegetables spontaneously grow.

There were other things that didn't work out quite as I had hoped. I didn't run or swim or bike as much as I thought I would have; I didn't learn French, walk the Highline or get all caught up on Breaking Bad. I never got to the Rain exhibit at Moma, although I did once walk slowly in the rain under an umbrella which, I take it, was basically the same. It wasn't just me: Where were all those cicadas we've been hearing about for the last 17 years? Where were the great hitting NY Met rookies we've been hearing about for the last 17 years? Even Florida citrus growers had a bad summer and expect orange juice prices to go up but they say that every year.

It wasn't all bad, of course. There were hot, shimmery sunshiny days that recalled childhood summer breaks from school. Camp was handling babysitting duties, allowing for relaxing evenings when my wife and I left the vegetables fare for themselves while we lingered over a meal, strolled lazily to the lake or went to movies that were not animated and did not star talking animals. Walking with the dog now it occurs to me that this seasonal lament has less to do with the passing of this summer than with the completion of another summer. But before my thoughts can turn down a melancholy trail the dog points her nose to the woods then tugs on the leash, reminding me that the smells of October can be great too; I just have to appreciate what each breeze offers. Okay, girl, I tell her; one more lap then we'll hurry home. Ulysses, after all, is on the shelf. If I start now maybe I'll finish by next summer.

Well, This is Change

When I fall into a well, it's like a hundred pound bird plummeting from the sky. When I'm at the bottom, nearly dead, I imagine my fall is something more like a hundred pound feather falling from a bird's wing instead, slow and heavy, taking its time to get to the ground.

I fall into wells whenever I get bored or there's a commercial on TV. At least, it seems that way to my family. Aunt Sal, she's all I have—unless you consider all the change at the bottom of the well to be mine. If you do, I'm probably richer than the boy next door. Jon-Jon's family's huge and they love strangers, especially me because I'm poor and dirty like them—but hungrier.

I don't stay long, eat a peanut butter sandwich on discount bread, let his mom give me an old Appetite for Destruction t-shirt Jon's father forgot—and I'm gone.

Where to?

To one of those wells I always seem to find in nowhere Pennsylvania, down away from everyone awful, away from where townies act like everything is fine. There's no illusion at the bottom of a well—so it's where I go for peace of mind.

There's change there, not like how it is everywhere else.

At the bottom of a well, things make more sense.

Quarters.

Pennies.

Dimes and nickels. They're there, but no looks for them. No one wishes for penny dreams. Not anymore.

But when I'm down there—the community remembers. They dream of their sons and daughters smiling, their last vacation where everything seemed prettier because they were together.

Aunt Sal yells, You down there? Simon? Are you okay?

It's like she really cares when she screams.

It echoes, and to me, it sounds like a hundred of people calling down to see if I'm alright.

Just broken, I yell for her to hear, for all those people caring.

They come with their ladders, their sirens. They cry and hold me to their chests and pull me out. Me. Not anything else.

The firemen, they don't even fill up their pockets.

At the bottom of a well, I remind the public about what really matters. Nickels, dimes, dreams, life—people have to choose what’s important—but lately, I’ve been sitting in the dark, surrounded by rain water and stone.

Lately, I’m afraid that no one’s coming.

I’d been down there two days before an employee from a Marcellus Shale company heard me singing and dragged me out. He used some rope under the arms, didn’t even tell his boss, gave me the crust off his sandwich, told me to get lost.

In black grime, in hunger, I knocked on my neighbor Jon-Jon’s screen door. It was a light rapping, but for anyone who owns a ripped screen door attached to a tin trailer in June, the sound of destitute knocking is a familiar one. It’s something like a broken airconditioner and a plastic bottle of tequila your mom drops before falling to sleep. It’s not a bad sound once you get used to it. It beats the sound of my aunt—the sound of nothing at all and empty pantry doors.

My neighbor, he stood there in front of me, said, Come on in, you’re letting the A/C out!

We both laughed at his joke, but stopped quick.

I’ve got to tell you something, I said. I’m going away for awhile, so I’ll see you never then after maybe soon.

Jon-Jon knew what I meant.

I wasn’t coming back. No one was looking. And really, he wasn’t going to tell. Not this time. It wasn’t his fault. Why should he? Things just become less and less important as your clothes get more and more dirty, your stomach more and more hungry.

It’s hard to care.

It’s hard to really feel anything at all. At least at the bottom of a well, I knew how valuable I was. I could count the change.

Poor Jon-Jon.

I hugged him and started in about how his family were the best neighbors I’d ever had except for the nickels and dimes.

Nothing kept me company like the change people threw away.

Before I left, I said, very serious-like, I fall into wells like it’s what I live for, Jon-Jon. I drop down without blinking an eye.

He stared and looked like he might cry.

And if you listen to my splash, I said, I swear to you, Jon-Jon, it sounds the same as a

well-wisher's change, clanging, dreaming of something better.

He laughed, swore I must be made of nickels and dimes, said, The other boys say you probably sound like pennies cause that's all anyone throws nowadays.

I laughed with him.

Is that how much our wishes are worth? I asked before leaving.

No wonder they never come true.

But, me, I've been saving up. I'm gonna get what I want even if it breaks my bones and pierces a lung.

When they hoist me up and blood's coming from where my teeth should be, I'll smile, say, Hey, how was it up here while I was gone?

It's only when they pull me free, hospitalize and bandage, when they toss me back to her—that I kick—that I cry. I wish.

If only I had a thousand quarters, a million ways out.

They throw back, down into my aunt's house. And Aunt Sal, doesn't care like she should. She searches my pockets for leftover meds, smacks my ribs, yells, You won't give'em? I'll make you wish you'd swallow them all.

But it's only pennies she finds.

Not enough change to make her stop, so she breaks the mirror, chases me with a piece, tires and ties the rubber around her arm, asks me to help make it tight.

As soon as she's gone, I'm off, looking for a field with a hole to who knows where. Because the farther down I find myself, the more I think I'm worth.

Visas

Does the Chinese poet—his request
to travel abroad denied yet again—
shape noodles into kanji

so his verses can be consumed?
Does he paint poetry
on the soles of his wife's feet

—her giggles all the acclaim he gets.
Does she walk his books
right through the open-air market?

Years in prison. A decade
of publishing restrictions.
Internal exile. Does he still

compose poems, carve them
into soap so they can be recited
between his children's tiny hands

as they ready themselves
for their vast, wordless sleep,
another country he cannot enter?

Photo Finish

I.

There are moments in which
all falling objects can theoretically
defy gravity, never crash,
defy time, keep form,
defy reason, keep firm,
defy known physics, keep
keeping on.

I am waiting in that
moment. Arms, arms
outstretched, waiting
to catch anything,
even if it breaks me.

II.

If poetry is spice then
my taco's pure Bukowski.
If poetry is ice then
I wrote a poem in snow.
Antarctica approved me.
Vinson Massif moved me
from a massive glacier
to volcanic flow.
(Temporal flux, you know.)
Which brings me back to heat.
I cannot take a seat
that's too hot to complete
ly function as a station
of rumination
by an unknown source
of thermal fluctuation.

I'm ready for my close-up,
sweet Man Ray.
Oh, Hugh Everett!
Stay! Please stay. Just stay.

III
Two noses, horses.
One a winner, one a loser.
Defined. Maybe not.

Imagining Creation: A Poet's View of Evolution

A priest, an evolutionary biologist, a rabbi, and a poet all walk into a bar...and the bartender says, "What is this, some kind of joke?!"

My father, a salesman and then manager for IBM, gave all kinds of public presentations, and he always said it was smart to begin with something to loosen things up—mostly the speaker, I think. Or in this case, the writer. He had a joke for every occasions—a parish meeting, the Kentucky Derby, business lunch. It was amazing how creatively he could take the strands of any conversation and tie them to a related story to make everyone laugh. My father died in 1991. Lung cancer. Two brothers and their one cousin, my godfather, Uncle Phil—all four died of cancer. Each year in June, I mark his passing, but in 2009 we also marked the 200th anniversary of the birth of Charles Darwin and the 150th anniversary of *The Origin of Species*. So much remembering is tinged by death. For all the biological research into cancer, we still don't know what causes our cells to hyper-divide or the ways to prevent it, let alone sure-fire cures. There is so much more to discover. It reminds me of Robert Frost's profound two-line poem:

*We dance round in a ring and suppose
But the Secret sits in the middle and knows.*

Whenever I approach the topic of evolution, both in light of these memorials and in light of our era's debates pitting religion against science (and vice versa), I try reading up on the whole evolution vs. Intelligent Design controversy. However, all that rational and overheated argumentation—talk that mostly goes past each other—leaves me dispirited and sad. I lose sight of the Secret.

And so I turn to poetry. Here's one by our contemporary, Stephen Dunn, about his daughter going to Vacation Bible School:

AT THE SMITHVILLE METHODIST CHURCH

*It was supposed to be Arts & Crafts for a week,
but when she came home
with the "Jesus Saves" button, we knew what art
was up, what ancient craft.*

*She liked her little friends. She liked the songs
they sang when they weren't
twisting and folding paper into dolls.
What could be so bad?*

*Jesus had been a good man, and putting faith
in good men was what
we had to do to stay this side of cynicism,
that other sadness.*

*OK, we said, One week. But when she came home
singing "Jesus loves me,
the Bible tells me so," it was time to talk.
Could we say Jesus*

*doesn't love you? Could I tell her the Bible
is a great book certain people use
to make you feel bad? We sent her back
without a word.*

*It had been so long since we believed, so long
since we needed Jesus
as our nemesis and friend, that we thought he was
sufficiently dead,*

*that our children would think of him like Lincoln
or Thomas Jefferson.
Soon it became clear to us: you can't teach disbelief
to a child,*

*only wonderful stories, and we hadn't a story
nearly as good.
On parents' night there were the Arts & Crafts
all spread out*

*like appetizers. Then we took our seats
in the church
and the children sang a song about the Ark,
and Hallelujah*

*and one in which they had to jump up and down
for Jesus.
I can't remember ever feeling so uncertain
about what's comic, what's serious.*

*Evolution is magical but devoid of heroes.
You can't say to your child
"Evolution loves you." The story stinks
of extinction and nothing*

*exciting happens for centuries. I didn't have
a wonderful story for my child
and she was beaming. All the way home in the car
she sang the songs,*

*occasionally standing up for Jesus.
There was nothing to do
but drive, ride it out, sing along
in silence.*

This poem reveals the typical antagonism toward a certain kind of religion, one that is itself antagonistic toward the discoveries of science. Most of the ardent atheists' denunciations of religion, likewise, categorize only part of the religious current, and Creationists don't speak for any of the churches that host Evolution Weekend events, for example (see "Clergy Letter Project"). The debate is a more complicated knot than most of the headlines and news reports allow for. And yet, I'm not equipped to unravel it. I admit: like many who rely on school-house lessons in biology, I am ignorant of a great deal about evolution, of natural selection, and of the fossil record. Similarly, and again like many, even those who occupy pews all over the nation, I do not know all that much about the history and cultural forces of Biblical history, of the lin-

guistic difficulties of translating that complex anthology, let alone about the doctrines of various Christian traditions.

But, also like most people, I don't let such facts get in the way of my deeply held convictions!

I am convinced that science and religion are simply two different ways of coming to know rather than merely collections of facts. Reciting a creed doesn't mean having faith any more than knowing what a mitochondria is makes me a scientist; we must actively engage in the process because beyond their teachings, beyond the body of knowledge is a dynamic engagement with the unknown, with the yet-to-be-discovered, the unsolved. Like Jacob and Esau, Religion and Science are twins, each with its own personality, but belonging to the same family.

Dunn's poem illuminates our need for a good tale, a harmonizing narrative that makes sense of the scattered facts of our lives and our world.

The Bible's rich with complex stories. Consider the one about how Jacob tricked Laban, his father-in-law twice-over. As we examine this story, it's important to note that a great many Biblical concepts, such as of multiple wives, of slavery, of the afterlife, and so much more have evolved since these texts were written. This tale is not read out from the Lectionaries on Sundays, so even many church-goers are not familiar with it, so I'll summarize it.

Trapped in indentured servitude (to win the hand of first one then the other of Laban's daughters), Jacob finally got the wily Laban to let him go by agreeing to only take the less valuable mottled and black lambs and goats. Jacob proves just as wily: he then bred the remaining pure white flocks in front of "fresh rods of poplar and almond and plane" which he peeled to expose the pale soft-wood. What's not explained in the Scriptures is that Jacob knew that whatever parents are gazing at during conception will determine the coloration of the next generation. The dark and light pattern of the wood created "pied" offspring, all of which walked back with Jacob to Palestine.

We now know that more than striped rods influence what color sheep will be. But this story reveals the long human tradition of husbandry, the knowledge and skill required for caring for cows, goats, fowl, and other animals. For thousands of years, human beings have been breeding animals and cross-breeding plants to create more desirable offspring. This is how we have now have Labradoodles, a cross between the Labrador Retriever and the Poodle. This story shows that even in the Bible, people have participated in the selection process of evolution, but now we understand with more precision about chromosomes and genes.

As most who follow the evolution/creationism debate, most arguments against evolution are based on a literalist reading of the Bible, which is far too limited. But most scientific asser-

tions also use the Bible to show how unreliable a source it is, which is also too limited.

A towering figure in the Quaker tradition, Howard Brinton, offers another approach. He lays these two approaches out first, as a potential progression. Rather than using what he calls an “uncritical acceptance of every statement,” he establishes the second stage, which can occur when one exposes Biblical stories to scientific facts and historical research; skepticism and sometimes a complete rejection of the Bible can result. This may account for many rationalist attitudes about religion, which is essentially the same kind of literalism being used against the Bible. However, sometimes, a person may creatively synthesize this critical attitude with an understanding of the deeper meanings inherent in the words. We can exercise our knowledge and rational analysis, along with an openness to the Secret in the middle of the ring. Rather than literal, historical truth, which contemporary human beings arrive at in ways unknown to those who “knew” that mating sheep that see black and white shapes will produce mottled offspring, we seek mythological truth, symbolic truth. Brinton says,

At this stage we are not so much concerned with historical validity or rational consistency with our scientific or philosophic outlook as we are with the inner significance of history, myth, and symbol. Symbol is a language of religion.

We seek this “inner significance” through metaphor. Because the black squiggles on paper only make sense in the person who learns the symbol system, language itself is metaphoric. There’s a gap between each word and what it signifies that can only be crossed by an imaginative understanding to get the correspondence between the word “Labradoodle” and the panting animal pawing at the door in the dark of morning. And, in poetry, there is the largest leaps of all: the words create images and concepts, pointing metaphorically to meanings that cannot be spoken of directly.

For example, here’s a short psalm that presents a simile that does exactly this kind of pointing:

Psalm 131

*YHWH, my heart has no lofty ambitions;
my eyes do not look too high;
I do not occupy myself with affairs
too great and too marvelous for me.
But I have calmed and quieted my soul,
like a child in its mother’s arms;
as content as a child that has been weaned.*

This image of loving care and tender quietude represents the very heart of the spiritual affirmation. It says that the universe is our field of love-in-action. The image draws us into the circle where the Secret sits. But in terms of the “truth,” on a strictly literal level, it is clear that I am not a child and we all know that God is not a mother, right? And yet. I am, yes. And, yes, God is. It’s not a matter of either/or.

It’s both/neither.

We live in land of paradox, where the most important faculty is Imagination. Where I am both a child and neither weaned nor calm. And God is both a mother and neither mother nor father. We live in an ongoing story where the Bible is both symbolically true and historically wrong, where evolution can be both an Intelligent Design and neither the whole answer nor a substitute for the Divine. This frustrates the literalist believers and the strict rationalists, but I find that both groups of people are largely frustrated by poetry, generally. So we may be able to move beyond their frustration, too.

As far as I can tell, there is another critical question to ponder—beyond the literalist reading of the Bible and people’s general ignorance of the evidence for evolution as a fact as well as a scientific theory. The question is a matter of purpose. Is the known universe sacred expression, manifesting Divine will in time? Or is it a random, accidental matrix of interactions. Why would a benevolent Being create a world in which the lovely gazelle bounding across the savanna is then ripped apart alive?

Stephen Dunn is right: the world does stink of extinction.

Such questions return us to the Book of Job. Good, patient Job wanted to know why we suffer. What’s the purpose for losing his wife and children, his farm and livestock, and on top of it all was struck with an awful illness? A metaphor, perhaps, for anyone who grieves for their beloved dead, for those facing foreclosure or layoffs, for those who are sick and poor and look to heaven for an answer, “Why me, Lord?”

Job’s friends came to comfort him, laying out all the traditional explanations for human misery—punishment for his sins, his lack of faith, punishment for his ancestors’ sins, his own pride, and did I mention punishment for sin? Punishment. The story of Job shows us that beyond these logical, mechanistic stories about what people call “God’s Will” is a deeper truth, one that can only be found in direct engagement, personal encounter. The answer Job gets does not answer his question at all. Instead, he experiences the presence of the Divine. In essence, God says, “I am who I am, I will be who I will be,” or as the Scriptures say elsewhere, “I will be merciful to those I will be merciful to.” Or “I create weal and woe, goodness and evil.” The Divine Paradox does not fit our rational, literal configurations; it moves in the unknown, in

middle of the ring we haven't even entered yet.

We must, in the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke,

have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, ... Do not now look for the answers. They cannot be given to you because you could not live them. At present you need to live the questions.

It is the questions that give our lives energy and purpose, and that is the common ground between science and religion, between art and science. Not answers, not a set of facts to memorize or creeds to assent to, but the lively unknown to live in. We wrestle with all that is unsolved, as Jacob did, all through the dark night, all our lives, and the Unknown will bless us. And wound us. And rename us.

Centering down in the Mystery is what keeps us humble and that helps us stay in communion with one other. It locates us on this side of cynicism by enlivening our curiosity, activating our intelligence, and exercising our imagination. The passage into Mystery leaves us beaming.

Lewis Thomas, the writer and physician and former President of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center, agrees when he says that

What we have been learning in our time is that we really do not understand this place or how it works, and we comprehend our own selves least of all. And the more we learn, the more we are—or ought to be—dumbfounded.

From the flies that suddenly fill the air with buzzing during a strange January thaw to the spruce trees that become even more elegant when coated with snow, from the fossilized trilobites curled into shale to the next generation of flu virus, the variation of life and the conditions that support it form a vast intricate unity, which is the Great Mystery, and it swirls within us as well as around us. If science ever discovers a cure for cancer, it won't solve the question of how we can live a life of love, how we can treat even our present-day Samaritans with compassion, how we can forgive and forgive and forgive 7 X 70 times.

That's why we need both the facts and a wonderful story, we need both the truths of evolution and the meanings of contemplation. This unity is the music we sing along to, in silence. The closest we come to this direct encounter is awe. Argument rarely brings me to the brink of wonder. Of amazement. Of gratitude. And so, I join Gerard Manly Hopkins when he declared that "The world is charged with the grandeur of God." In his poem "Pied Beauty," he exclaims, "Glory be to God for dappled things." Glory be to God, says the poet, for "All things counter, original, spare, strange." We might add: rain, snow; clouds, sunshine; youth and age; sickness and health. Glory be to God for all things: for life and for death. For Spirit and matter. For mystical prayer and the scientific method.

The Song is a Road

One failure could be yours
in the dark weeds
a cry for synthesis
of plasma in primitive air.
In it you were miles away.
Who turned pennies into rivulets?
Or sunshine into sound?
If you could keep me
I would be elves breathing
song into limitless song.
I plucked you like blueberries
in juice watering my thumbs
yesterday you walked soundly
wondering if warmth would ever come
over and under in a thrush
of time and dark needles.
I am imagining your warmth
waiting for you to awaken
as the air teaches itself to breathe.

In 1628, William Harvey Discovered the Role of the Heart in Blood Circulation

What is the body?

A steamer trunk, some piping and a tarp
to cover last year's firewood. Dried
and stacked on top of millipedes.

What holds it together?

Cotton patches and caulk bind up this
cask of concrete and rebar.
Container for a ghost.

And its action?

Striding, falling in holes, the movement of
pistons that stick in the cold. Every
fastener jars loose and clicks.

And what is the heart?

The furnace. Burning up blood and memory.
Its vapor warms the body. Who will touch me
and say I'm other than this machine?

rites of passage

(Inspired by Yanni's number of the same title)

When the executive members of Nigeria Medical Association, Abuja Branch, started arriving for their extraordinary meeting, what made the meeting so was already known to each of them. But its full weight had not yet dawned on them. Each person sauntered in and took their seat inside the small meeting room of Rock Hotel. Eight of them had taken their seats. The Chairman asked for opening prayers to be said by the Secretary. In a fit of absent-mindedness, the Secretary pointed at the empty chair opposite him and asked:

“Who are we waiting for?”

That question had the same effect as the thud-thud sound of shovel-loads of sand on a coffin inside the grave. It brought home the finality of the day's business. The members could not hold back their emotions any longer. They broke down and wept like babies. No one could console the other. The empty seat was the subject of that meeting. Urenna, its usual occupant and the Association's Publicity Secretary will never sit on it again. She had just died at childbirth and her inconsolable brother, Kennedy, had petitioned the Association alleging negligence. His late sister's vital signs had suddenly gone haywire after she was successfully delivered of a baby girl by normal means. Her BP rose to 220/160 while her pulse almost disappeared. She went into coma and never recovered. But for Kennedy, the long time it took for the stand-by generator to come on after public power supply went off was enough grounds for negligence. He insisted in his petition that a consultant gynecologist should have been available for the delivery. The extra-ordinary exco meeting had been convened to consider the petition and decide on the Association's role at the burial.

Weeping over, the Secretary apologized for what was a slip of thought. In actual fact, that slip had afforded the uptight medics catharsis. They had arrived the meeting tensed and gorged like the heavens before a July downpour. The weeping lightened their burdens before the meeting proceeded apace. In the course of the proceedings, it became clear that Ure's death would not have passed with only a whimper. Even without her brother's petition, there would have been at least eight other people ready to raise hell. As emotions at the meet ran high, it was difficult to know whether it was based on the merits of the petition or the charisma of the deceased.

Ure was a free spirit and as jovial as they come. The darling of all who came across her way, her sunny disposition made patients forget their pains. Children wished she was their

mother. For teenage girls, she was Auntie Ure while the boys dreamt dreams they were too shy to acknowledge about her. Men and women, young and old loved her. She was that good at her job too. Her husband had been endlessly teased that he would die of jealousy if he was given to it. But Ikenna, also a medical doctor, knew who he married. They had been together in medical school separated by three years. Even that early, Ure had been the *prima donna* of her class. She was tomboyish and warm. Her beauty was not the over-sanitized, impersonal thing of a beauty queen. Hers was raw, earthy and warm. She was not given to the airs of women who knew or were told they were beautiful. She made you at ease in her presence and was not beyond asking many a shy guy: “You want to chase me?” Men who got carried away by her friendliness and started getting ideas no sooner found out that she wouldn’t get amorous with them. She was like a will-o-wisp: so near yet so far away. Those who couldn’t place her in any of the regular campus types – “chop’n clean mouth”, “born again” or “easy lay” – bandied rumors about her secret liaisons. Only her roommates knew she had no boyfriend in campus or off campus. No one knew she was a virgin. Her husband, Ikenna, was to make that discovery years later. And he was dumbfounded. *How can a pretty, happy-go-lucky damsel leave medical school still a virgin?*

His meeting her after medical school was fortuitous. At school, he had barely noticed her. As his junior, they didn’t meet in any tutorial or clinical class. But when elections came for the Medical Students’ Association, he could remember seeing her posters all over the halls and lecture theaters. She had foot soldiers campaigning for her in every class. Every male noticed the charming face that leapt out of the posters and handbills screaming: “URE 4 SOCIALS. EUREKA!”

Ikenna, the young medical student had played with toasting this most important revelation of college electioneering campaign of 1996. It was his discreet enquiry with her classmates that poured cold water on his scheme. “Go ahead if you want a cousin for girlfriend,” he had been told. It was therefore like a bolt from the blue when, years after school, internship and youth service, who did he behold at the government General Hospital where he worked: Urenna!

“What brings you here, this Babylonian?” he asked using their alma mater’s jargon for female undergraduates and trying to remember her name.

“Oh!” Ure screamed her joy on turning to see her fellow alumnus. “You’re here then?”

“Right!”

“Well I’m still processing my papers. They say its tight here but the CMD says I can come back next week for an answer.”

“Let me have your number and I’d see how I can help,” requested Ikenna.

In reality there was not much help a sophomore medical officer could render for a matter on the CMD's table. But for Ikenna, any excuse will do to get this nymph on talking terms. He dared not let the opportunity slip again. From exchanging numbers, Ikenna established contact quite early before the other eligible bachelors and randy eyes of the city will espy its best kept secret. When the hospital authorities finally agreed to take Ure for "housejob" that favor was vicariously Ikenna's. What he was searching for at Sokoto had been dropped by Providence right into the recesses of his sokoto trousers. He was beside himself with excitement. It was as if he had already landed himself a catch. Ure was forthcoming. She didn't turn down a date. When he wasn't seeing patients, they were together. She even visited and cooked for him on weekends when he was on call. Ikenna thought he had it all going for him. Not until the day he schemed to have her sleep over.

They had been out on a Saturday night partying at a Maitama lounge. It was a groovy evening with lots to munch and drink. If the dance hall got too stuffy for you or your knees ached, there was a breezy garden outside. The aroma of burnt flesh from the barbeque wafted into the air mixing with different feminine perfumes. The night wore on giddily. Before it got to midnight, Ure told her man she wanted to go home. Ikenna dissuaded her assuring that she would be taken home later. The "later" became midnight, then 1am; and now, 2am. Ikenna, finally came around to taking her home but said he was too drunk to drive.

"...moreover, Kubwa, at this unholy hour is quite unsafe," he added.

What to do? Before you knew it, information came that the lounge's sleepover bunk was available.

"Can you make do with that and catch some sleep? At daybreak I'll take you home." Ikenna offered.

"And do you know how much that'll set you back?"

"Yes. 10 to 12k probably."

"And you're prepared to part with that just so that I can catch 4 hours of sleep?"

"Aint you worth more than that for me?"

Ure smelt a rat with that Greek Gift. She could imagine him ending up in the room to catch a wink too. From there Bacchus and Cupid could cook up something to get legs parted. She wanted home and home alone. She had not slept with a man in the same room in all her adult years and was not about to do it now. Determined to go home, sleep and freshen up before her Sunday call duty, Ure carried her bag and stepped out of the premises. Ikenna, dispirited from too much spirit waved her on. He believed the termite would soon be done flying and fall for the patient, ground-bound frog.

“Agaracha must come back,” he intoned.

Minutes ticked by without the gate opening to welcome Ure back. Ikenna took one last drag on his current wrap and squelched the remaining stub to go see where his lady stood on Maitama’s empty street. Outside the gate, there was no soul in sight. He walked on from the close that led into the premises to the main neighborhood arterial. He looked up and down the street. Ure was no where in sight. He brought out his phone and dialed her number. The outcome was “network busy.”

“Network busy by 2.33am?” he wondered aloud.

Suddenly he felt alarmed. *What if she falls into some danger or gets arrested by the Police patrol team?* Whether it was the alarm and foreboding or Maitama’s cool morning breeze that cleared up his foggy thinking, it was difficult to tell. But Ikenna found himself quickening his steps back to his car at the parking lot. His initial scheme hadn’t worked and if he didn’t act fast *water fit pass garri*. In a moment he was racing to Kubwa. He crisscrossed the same dangerous roads at an even un-holier hour with no trace of drunkenness. Soon he was pressing the doorbell at the flat Ure shared with two guys in the Phase IV section of the sprawling estate.

There was no light in her room. *Surely if she had entered, she would put on the light to change.* Neither was there any response to the ringing of the door bell. Ikenna stood there not knowing what to do and overcome by part fear and part guilt. Fear of having to wake Ure’s male flat mates only to ask about her at such hour: more like poaching a man’s mango and having to ask him to provide the bag for a haul. And guilt for a scheme that went awry leaving his woman stranded on a night out. As he yet struggled with the twin emotions, the “click click” of a lady’s heels on the asphalt became discernible. He came out of the shadows of the building to see. The figure was unmistakably Ure’s. She was bouncing down the street with no trace of fear. Initially relief overcame Ikenna. His woman was safe. It was on second thoughts he noticed there had been no sound of a vehicle zooming off after dropping her. That was secondary now as she approached.

“Welcome.”

“What brings you here?” There was a trace of suppressed anger in her voice; a woman’s angst brewing like a storm.

“I was worried for you, dear.”

“You’re no longer too drunk to drive, eh?”

“I thought you’d return to the Bar, and when I went looking for you, you were no where around.”

“Your plan was for me to be stranded eh? Well, I can always find my way home.”

“But how did you make it? I didn’t pass any car on my way to this place.”

“Is that your way of saying you’re sorry?”

“Of course I am. Ndo-o, biko, my dear!” he added profusely.

With that, a deflated Ikenna escorted his woman up the staircase and to her apartment’s door. She opened the sitting room door and let herself in. Ikenna hesitated to follow.

“Good night,” he said half biding and half asking.

“Good morning, rather,” she responded nonchalantly.

Ikenna got the message. He gently closed the door, made his way down the unlit staircase and into his car.

The rest of their courtship went pretty alright and they finally got married in what their friends said was a union made in heaven.

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When Ikenna came calling at his father in-law’s place in the village, it was with a heavy heart. He was his father in- law’s favorite and, at happier times, the man would have sent for fresh palm wine for him. Not this time. They were meeting for the second time after Ure’s death. This time, he had come ostensibly to discuss the burial. In reality, he needed to have a look at his baby. She had been in the custody of his retired nursing sister mother in-law. The surviving baby girl was all he had left of his wife. He had tired of endlessly playing back the baby’s recorded cry on his cell phone and needed to peek at her even for a moment. The baby had been asleep since he arrived but he felt like cuddling her nonetheless. The sullen atmosphere in Chief Okoye’s household did not yet allow him indulge his other more cheery mission. He decided to ramble on with other matters until the baby awoke.

“The autopsy is to be done on Monday, Papa.”

“Eh?”

“The autopsy, I said.”

Chief had been brought back from his reverie by Ikenna’s voice. After he heard what the subject matter was, he sighed and relapsed again. The far-away look returned to his eyes. Ikenna waited.

“Don’t bother yourself with all that,” he finally volunteered.

“Why, Papa? It’s not really me per se but the Inquest needs it for their work.”

“You will not understand, my son.” Chief uttered that with a sense of inexorable futility that discouraged further probe.

More swathes of silence lapsed.

When the baby woke, they brought her to her father. As Ikenna cuddled her in his arms, she twisted from wind in the guts. His mother-in-law peeped from behind the curtains, saw father and baby and broke down weeping.

“Woman, I say it’s okay,” Chief bellowed. “If you are doing this what do you now tell a young man turned widower so early?”

Ikenna would not be sucked into the emotive atmosphere as his wound still hurt so bad. He rose to go.

“Papa . . .,” he started, standing.

“Don’t tell me you are going today,” Chief cut in.

“It has to be so, Papa,” Ikenna pleaded.

Father-in-law and son-in-law dragged the matter back and forth till the son gave in to the father. Ikenna had to call Enugu to inform his parents he would be coming back the next day for his 2pm Sosoliso flight back to Abuja. They understood.

When night came, it was the same room he stayed with his wife the last time they both visited home that was set for him. It took all the courage in him not to request for another room. After he bade the rest of the family “ka chi foo,” he steeled his nerves and went into the room. It appeared eerie and vacuous. Everything about the room reminded him of her. He stood for a moment still hoping to hear her hearty chit-chat. Only the silence of the night greeted him. In the ears of his heart he could hear ABBA’s

Knowing Me Knowing You:

Walking through an empty house

Tears in my eyes

This is where the story ends

This is goodbye

He put down the bush lamp on the bedside table. His mother in-law had supplied a wrapper for the night. Tying the wrapper round his waist, he proceeded to unzip and slide down his trousers. He saw himself in the stand mirror and the oddity of covering up while alone dawned on him. He sighed ruefully and picked up his trousers in a heap on the floor. Kneeling down to pray from habit, no words came out. He got up, left the lantern burning and slid under the bed linings. Then he tried to shut his eyes as tightly as he could.

There was no telling how long he slept before he heard Chief knocking on his door. In a moment, the two souls were making their way through a bush path with Chief leading the way. Destination was unknown to him but apparently well-known to Chief. Ikenna trudged on behind like Isaac following Abraham with firewood. The bush path was well worn but they met no

other soul on it. They passed thicket after thicket and entered deeper and deeper into the belly of the bush in total silence. The light from Chief's torch showed them the way while nocturnal birds flapped and cooed eerily. They soon approached a clearing which gave the route away as one that led to the stream. The clearing had pieces of potsherd, flattened and discarded aju, the pad for head loads, and smoothened tree trunks on which lazy housewives did their laundry. Beyond the clearing was the descent and a shock of raffia palms that invariably signposted a water body. The pungent, earthy whiff of swamp and decaying vegetation filled the air. The two pilgrims filed past this prelude and started descending the slope. Chief in front took his measured steps trying to hold back the pull of gravity. Ikenna bounded from behind. Soon the water came into relief. Both men were at the base of the slope. From Chief's body language, Ikenna understood this to be the destination. He stood back and watched in fear.

Chief started mumbling some incantations. The much Ikenna made out from that was the securing of the bounds that separated the living and the spirit world. Chief was observing the protocols like a scientist handling a delicate experiment. Then he lapsed into a more audible charge in which he addressed the water:

U-r-e-n---n- - -a- a -a!!
Gone from the living
With a trail of anguish
In your wake!

U-r-e-n---n- - -a- a -a!!
Your man is inconsolable
Your baby is motherless
Speak!
This once to the living
And let the tears cease.
If your death be man-made
Let us know
If it is from the gods
Be not silent
U- r-e -n - -n - -a - -a!!!

The water surface became illuminated by bright light from underneath. It was beautiful

to behold. In a moment, a train of young, pretty damsels emerged in a cycle on the water surface. They shimmered in their costumes and were not wet from the water. Ikenna had never seen such a sight before. The chorus on their lips was in a language he didn't understand, but its cadences and ululations were very African. Goose pimples ploughed Ikenna's skin into a million bumps. He felt his head swell to a multiple of its former size. He was craning his neck to see if any of the damsels resembled his Ure. As if to answer his curiosity, the lead singing damsel let out one heart-rending ululation. The water at the centre of the circle became troubled. In a jiffy, the one you could call their princess emerged. She was attired in shimmering, flowing gown and festooned with golden ornaments that will make any medieval queen green with envy. She was unmistakably Ure. Ikenna had never seen her so radiant and regal. She looked happy and did not look like a dead person. By reflex, Ikenna surged forward but was held back by Chief. The chorus of the maidens ceased.

Urenna spoke. "Ikenna, go back and take care of our baby. Her name is Ezinne. It was my time to go, don't hold any man responsible. Tell Kennedy to discontinue the matter and thank you for the love you gave to me. I almost didn't want to go back. Goodbye. *Nodu mma.*"

With that, she vanished into the water in concentric ripples. Her train broke out again in their surreal chorus and took its exit.

"*Ogor! In-law!! Ogor!!!*" It was the unmistakable voice of Ikenna's mother-in-law at the door.

He woke with a start and the shaft of sunlight told him he had over slept.

Meanings

When the end of the world seemed close, closer than ever, words failed him. They failed everyone, in fact. Language once existed at the behest of people, for them, from them, between them. Then language and its component units took over everything, as if they had been waiting for the beginning of the end to liberate and empower them.

One morning he awoke and saw words, piles of words, listing in the patch of grass outside his flat. A tower of words, tilting this way and that, cast an unstable shadow over his doorway. He jumped back, afraid it would collapse on him. It just wobbled and swayed.

When he finally ventured out, sidling past the teetering stacks that dotted the pavement, he saw his neighbors tip-toeing around piles of articles written about silicon breast implants. Further on, a collection of greeting card doggerel threatened to smother him. Classic TV drama scripts blocked access to the library. He tried to enter the city hall, but the whole plaza had been walled in with the wit of the Marx Brothers. When he sought the sanctity of a church, he found all the icons draped with the transcribed utterances of thousands of game show hosts. He ran to the park. Every leaf, every blade of grass had been replaced by millions of letters, mostly nonsense, helpful for neither photosynthesis nor water uptake. He found it hard to breathe.

Stores no longer stocked products but the ideas about them. The sky was murky with predigested thought processes. People paced the streets in a collective quandary, unable to say anything of use: everything had already been said, sometimes to great excess and in several languages.

Days passed. People wandered in a lexicological daze. No one could figure out the connection between words and doom. Why would a surfeit of empty verbiage foreshadow the termination of the world as we knew it? It did not make sense. Nothing did. Perhaps it never had.

One of the few things anyone articulated and understood was that the end would likely arrive at an unspecified time and in an unpredictable manner.

Ends do not have to be either specified or predictable, came the thought, to many people at once. (Though it was never spoken.)

And: *What you mean always justifies the end.*

And:

Georgia on My Mind

Vergie was curled up in the only chair in the hospital room. I imagined it was because the very large dark schizophrenic man who called himself “The Reverend” had told us both he wanted to *stick it in* us earlier that day and she had been trying to stay awake. Our psychiatrist sent a blonde nurse in to sit by his door when we told him what he had said. The Reverend could grind her bones into dust with his hands if he felt so inclined and waltz right into our room, that does not lock, and *stick it in* us both.

Vergie was sixty, no more than a skeleton with skin stretched over it and hardly five feet tall. She wouldn't tell me why she was there. She didn't belong, she had repeated my entire first day. She cried a lot. I had been there only one day and the woman cried four or five times and she spoke of the Lord and His love for her and all people. I couldn't figure out what she cried over. She wouldn't say. She seemed like if you touched her, she would fall apart. I took a blanket and covered her. I put a pillow just under her head trying not to move her.

I lie there in my bed that felt more like concrete wishing I had pants on. I didn't like the easy access to my body. I felt naked and vulnerable. I covered with the thin blanket, shivering, more from fear than cold. It took me two hours to fall asleep.

Earlier that morning, I sat in the waiting room in the ER. I called my ex-fiance. and told him, “I know I can get sober. Maybe there'll be a chance for us then, you think?” Tears came. He didn't have much to say, but didn't sound like he believed I could do it. When we hung up the phone, a lady sitting across from me smiled and said, “I've been sober for ten years and you can do it. If he loves you, he'll come back.” I burst into tears again. Thank you was all I could muster.

They took me into triage and asked me how much I drank. A whole bottle of wine several nights a week I said, and sometimes a couple glasses at dinner that day too or some shots.

They put the bracelet on me that read my name and date of birth. I immediately felt like branded cow or prisoner. I was ashamed and I could not stop crying out of embarrassment. Then, I was embarrassed because I was crying. My chest hurt from the conversation I had with my fiancé. It felt as if a dog had clawed at my insides and left nothing but shredded, bloody bits that were exposed and burning.

They took me upstairs and immediately put me in a hospital gown, and I had to explain in detail what an incredibly irresponsible drunk I was to three more people, on separate occasions. The humiliation was beginning to set in. Still, I was determined to get through this and come

out a better human being. I had been before the alcohol. I knew I could be again. Before, I was a singer in a band and the thrill of being on stage engulfed me. The bond I had with my guitar player was one that couldn't be described. Now, I didn't do well at shows because I was just too drunk at them.

The hole that had existed inside of me, was black and thirsty for something and I hadn't known what. I kept thinking it was companionship but that didn't work. I thought it was a lover. No. So, I drank and it worked for a while. It was fun and I had plenty of friends to encourage it. But recently, when I would get drunk, it was only a short high. It became a means to the seventh level of Hell, after that short high, and I couldn't stop. I realized I had to figure out what the void was and fill it with something good.

They took me into the psychiatric unit and when they closed the heavy doors behind me, I knew I wouldn't be allowed to leave by my own choice, but the doctor's and I could be here for a long time. I began feeling nervous. I saw a clock high up on the wall behind some steel bars and I heard the tick of the second hand echo loudly in my mind but it didn't sound like the tick of a second hand but like two boulders being dragged against one another. I stood with my eyes locked on the clock, unable to move listening to the scraping noise in my head. Someone tapped me on the shoulder and I snapped out of it.

I was greeted by a nurse named Gabby with brown hair stacked high on her head. She wore too much blue eye shadow and smiled at me often. However, each time a patient would approach, her voice would change from smooth and kind, twisting into shrill and dark; she'd bark orders at them to go sit down or ask have they eaten all their food or is their bed made, well, they'd better go make it because this is not a hotel, etc. etc. She went through the luggage I brought. I had packed clothes. I had no idea I would be in a hospital gown my whole stay. She dug through the pockets of my pants and shirts, after her search, folding them neatly, her long bright pink fake nails were the only thing I could focus on. They looked through all my medications and said they would have my medicines prescribed from the psychiatrist there and I couldn't use the medications I had brought. It was time for my medications but they would not let me have them. So, I felt sweat begin to gather around my neck and my heart rate increased. They assured me my medications would be there soon. I knew I would begin feeling even more manic and confused without my medications if they waited too long.

There was nothing to do that day but wait on my medications and group therapy. I thought all of us were there for alcoholism and drugs but it turned out, many of the patients were there for psychiatric disorders and suicidal tendencies. I met Vergie and her friends, other older women who read their Bibles each day and liked preaching to the other patients. Vergie

constantly told me how pretty I was and reminded me I was very young and had, as she put it, so many years ahead of me I couldn't have possibly messed up that bad yet so I should just keep my chin up when I got out of there. I wasn't sure if I believed her or not. I had been drunk during so many of my relationships with men, they had told people how crazy I was because of all the stupid things I had done.

My drinking was out of control during those times. I kept thinking, if only I could go and not done any of those things. If only I had been sober. I realized I had never had a relationship while I was well, as the real me, the healthy me. My illness ruled my behavior. In essence, I was a virgin.

That is what I said a few days later in group therapy. Shania, a black woman, told a story about being with a guy who got her taking drugs and how he abused her for a couple of years. She said she had a baby by him and eventually left. The baby was taken away when she was arrested for drugs and then, there she was in rehab. Then, suddenly, all Hell broke loose. A white guy, Bobby Joe, sat in the corner with his cane, complaining that he only became addicted to the pain pills because of his accident that left him with a limp and it isn't his fault. Everyone needs to get off his back, he said. Then, he started cursing, mother fucker this, to Hell with that, God Damn it to Hell, so on and so forth. Nurse Gabby asked him to stop cursing. Vergie belted out that it is against the Lord to curse. Bobby Joe lifted up his shirt and showed he had The Lord's Prayer tattooed on his forearm. He asked Vergie and the other churchgoing ladies how the fuck did they like that and told them they could suck his asshole until his face caved in. Daisy, who often keeps her eyes squinted tightly shut began pulling at and seeming to shake her bad thoughts from her greasy hair as I so often see her do in the hall late at night.

The Reverend began singing the *Star Spangled Banner* and yelling that he is in fact the President of the United States and for everyone to shut up or they would go to federal prison. Vergie burst into tears. Her church lady friends were screaming at Bobby Joe that he was a delinquent and he was going to Hell and what would his mother say? Bobby Joe replied his mother was a bitch that used to whip him from one side of the trailer to the other and he didn't care if it burnt down to the ground around her ears!

Charlie stood up and shook his shimmy and began telling us all, over the roaring room, about the dream he had last night in which he was an ostrich, how good it felt to be an ostrich and my, how he just wanted to dance today and become an ostrich and why wouldn't everyone just shut up so they can hear about his wonderful dream! I listened to Charlie. I told him I

wanted to see his ostrich impression, so in the middle of all the screaming, cursing, and crying Charlie ran around the room shaking his behind with his hands tucked under his armpits. I laughed so hard I nearly fell out of my chair. Nurse Gabby got up and chased behind him telling him how he would fall any minute, yelling at me that I should not encourage this type of behavior among the patients!

I just got up and motioned for Shania. We went to the kitchenette and had some pudding out of the refrigerator that we're not really allowed to have but since no one was looking I figured why not? Gabby yelled at Bobby Joe to get out of the group therapy room.

He came into the kitchenette. He asked if I wanted to see a picture he drew and for the first time I noticed he was missing his two front teeth. He said he had showed it to Vergie and that's how he was kicked out. He pulled it out of his sleeve and it was an upside down cross with a devil's head around it. He laughed and laughed.

I asked Bobby Joe why he showed that to Vergie when he obviously believes in God. He said because God doesn't care if we curse. God isn't trivial like that. God sees past the little things and sees inside us. He explained when those hypocritical church ladies go around preaching to everybody they just got on his nerves. I just stood thinking Bobby Joe was a much more thoughtful person than I had imagined. I was shocked.

I asked him what was so wrong with going to church and preaching to others. He said he thought we ought to worry about going out and doing good in the world, not standing around in a building putting on a show to prove to everybody how good we are. We ought to take that time to help out at the mission or take some sandwiches to the vets that live under the bridges. He said he often goes and feeds the homeless vets. and helps at the mission. He said he didn't believe in preaching to others but letting others see the good you do for other people and so, setting that example. He explained God created each of us like stained glass windows, deliberate and sometimes with odd designs, but all are a masterpiece and he said God knows he's beautiful even though he's rough around the edges.

He said he can't read so he's never read the Bible but sometimes he gets people to read it to him. He said God forgives him for that he's sure since God is good and He don't give a shit if he's not perfect or if he doesn't go to some building with snooty people dressed up in fancy clothes every week. God knows he's beautiful through all his bullshit, he said.

Nurse Gabby gave me my midday anti-anxiety drug to keep me from losing my mind from my newfound sobriety. It took the edge off nicely, like a serrated knife dulled, but again I felt dreamy. I walked past the nurse's station and looked through the wooden bars and the pink

and blue paper butterflies they had taped to the glass windows thinking, yeah, decorate it as if the plastic and bars are there for some other reason than to keep us out—the addicts, the bipolars, the schizophrenics, the refuse...the criminals like us.

I phoned my ex fiancé again and my mother. Neither had much to say. Neither would come visit me. There was nothing left to do after group therapy and talking on the phone but to roam the hall and there was only one hall.

I stared at the white tiles as I scuffled down the hall in my fuzzy blue socks. They seemed to blink and sway under my steps. I began feeling a desperate hopelessness when I looked at the end of the hall which was only a few yards away, then back at the other end which wasn't too far away either. My fingers seemed to go numb and the roof of my mouth, my toes and I felt like I couldn't breathe. I had to lay down. It was near bedtime anyway.

I went to my room and began writing. They did allow me that. Since I had been sober all I could think about was how much I despised myself. I wrote out all the things I had done that I hated myself for. Some things that weren't my fault, some imagined, some that were my fault. I had said some hurtful things to people. I had embarrassed myself many times. All of these things happened when I had been drinking. Then, I began writing about the void. I noticed when I didn't drink, the void felt more apparent and painful. When sober, I was forced to face the pain of the void.

My medication began kicking in. In my mind's eye, I saw myself as a little girl and my brother pulling me on the sled in the back yard, us catching snow in our mouths. Then later, snow angels in the yard.

The image faded into white and I saw myself alone in bed, sick with depression in my big house, watching the snow flit across the window like moths. I was crying. I was writing a poem about my sister and I being little, playing in the snow and the balls of ice that stuck to the tuft on the top of her cap and how red our cheeks were and how her laughter climbed into the gray sky like backward lightning. I wrote, "I didn't know then what it meant, to be well. I just didn't know..."

Just when I nearly cried for her in that memory, a darkness came and then, I saw myself in the floor on my back, blocking my face with my hands. I begged for my ex-boyfriend Gene not to hit me. He had that baseball bat in his hand, yelling he would kill me. I kicked it out of his hand and struggled in the floor, and he grabbed the back of my neck. Finally, I got out of his grip and ran out the front door, bashing my face on a bird feeder as I went, busting my lip.

Another image seeped into my mind's eye. I was no older than three or four. My

babysitter wanted to know why had I been so loud while her company was there? Why had we all been so loud? She slapped my cheek, hard. Then, she locked me in a room alone in the dark for the rest of the evening. I couldn't reach the light switch, so I sat in the corner and cried.

I remembered many other scenes while I slipped in and out of consciousness that night: remembering the worst things my daddy Carl had ever said to me, a scene of my neighbor coming and saying my friend had just died in a drunk driving accident, Mommy's funeral, kids throwing pencils at me in school nearly everyday, my friend Mary Lee abandoning me. But then...I began thinking of Bobby Joe. I heard his words.

We are all masterpieces. God knows I'm beautiful.

Then, I heard him. The Reverend began walking the hall, singing

"Georgia, Georgia...the whole day through...just an old sweet song."

I was drowsy. My eyes were seeing the ocean in the wallpaper, moving and pulsing beneath the moon that also seemed to be there in the shadows in my drug induced haze.

I listened to The Reverend's melodic, honey-like voice and magically, I could hear the washing of the water against my bed. I was moved like the seaweed rolling under a rainstorm beaten wave, swaying just beneath the surface. I began drifting off to a drug induced galaxy, where the stars appeared behind my closed eyes and I could breathe as free as the wind on the beach blows.

SO THIS IS THE FUTURE

I was walking along Hollywood Boulevard when a guy who had been bending down, peering at a newspaper in a curbside box, straightened up, caught my eye and asked me, “Hey, man, what year is it?”

He didn’t seem to be kidding, so I told him, “It’s 2014.”

“Wow, man.,” he said. “Trippy.” His hair was shoulder length. He had a shaggy moustache and wore a brown suede vest over a flowered shirt. He could have been me, many years ago.

I asked, “What year did you think it is?” Of course he said, “1967.” He was also wearing love beads and a neck chain with a peace symbol.

“So this is the future, huh?” he asked.

“Yep,” I said. “The twenty-first century.”

“Heavy. So, no World War III?”

“No.”

“Cool. Peace and love, huh?”

“Not exactly,” I said.

“Bummer. Did we get to the moon?”

“Yeah, but there wasn’t much there. We haven’t been back.”

“Cured cancer?” he asked.

“Nope. Better treatments, though. Much better. People are living longer for all kinds of reasons.”

“But, “ he asked, “there’s like a deafness epidemic?”

“What?”

He started to repeat the question, speaking more loudly.

”No,” I said, “I heard you. I meant, why do you think everyone’s going deaf?”

“Everyone seems to have hearing aids, even kids.”

I tried to explain about ear buds, cell phones, ipads and ipods.

He nodded but I don’t know how much of what I said he really understood. Something else seemed to interest him more. “I was walking around,” he said, “and they’re like these stores that sell weed right out in the open.”

“Yep,” I said.

“Pot’s legal now?”

“Sort of.”

“Cool. What’s with the tattoos?”

“Beats me,” I said. “It’s the fashion. Personal self-expression.”

“I can dig that,” he said. “You know, we’re gonna change the world, or I guess I should say we were gonna change the world. You remember that?”

“Uh, yes, now that you mention it, I think I do.”

“Well?” he asked. “Did we?”

I wanted to give him something positive. “We have a black president,” I said.

“You mean a Negro?” he asked. “A Negro president?”

“We don’t say Negro now. Black. Or African American. But yeah, he’s black. He’s in his second term.”

“That’s fantastic, man.”

He just stood there for a moment, taking it all in. Then a pair of obese young women strolled by, both sucking on frozen coffee-something-or-others topped with mounds of whipped cream. “Say, man,” he said to me, “I’ve noticed that there’s a of really fat people around. That’s not cool.”

I explained about Starbuck lattes and super-sized soda.

“Oh, I get it,” he said. “Everyone’s got the munchies because of the smoke.”

“No, most of them aren’t stoned. They just like sweet stuff.”

Marijuana was a matter of particular interest to my new friend. Indeed, it was intimately connected to this whole experience, as I learned when I asked him how he’d gotten here.

“I got hold of some very righteous smoke” he said. “I think there may have been something more than cannabis in it.”

I had to think about this for a second and then I said, “You know, this isn’t a hallucination. You really are here.”

“Wow,” he said.

“So how are you going to get back to where you started?”

“I guess when the buzz wears off.” In fact, he did seem to be growing faint. “Say,” he said, “I’ve got a big question for you. This could be really heavy.”

“Shoot,” I said.

“So,” said, “the world didn’t get blown up in atomic war, people live longer than they used to, they’ve got all these gadgets, and pot’s basically legal. So what I want to know, are people any happier now than they were then?”

It struck me that this was a perfectly lucid, rather sophisticated question to be asked by a

guy who was completely stoned. Maybe was coming down from his high, about to return to the past. I didn't have much time. What should I tell him? Did he really want to know? "Yeah," I said, "we're all happy as clams."

"Cool," he said, faintly. His image was very dim now, nearly transparent.

He was a nice guy. I'd enjoyed talking to him. I wanted to give him some information he could actually use. "Buy Microsoft!" I said.

"Huh?" he said, very faintly, and then he was gone.

Bulk Ammo

Eight boxes of certain death on the way delivered by package drivers down the road just left by the gate opened with the kitchen knife here have some coffee and how would you like your eggs it was a kick watching its head disappear just target practice mind you would you like cream last night it was fresh elk liver and onions caught it out of season behind the shed no wardens not all fat yet I can't believe these nuts who kill people in theaters and schools you should see the hole we'll head out soon to the bunker I found some provisions with major shelf life and you really just need water for about a week I love how these things feel the weight of them and don't they look pretty well designed you almost hate to waste them and here's some bacon with that I like the stuff I get from this guy who smokes his own and he trims the bellies down so you get some meat not the crap you get at some market in town I think I'm running out of time I think we're all running out of time what with the nigger who runs this country and the gays Jews gooks wetbacks hippies pot smokers and women it's just a matter of time and I'm going down in a hail because I know there ain't no justice isn't that shit good the trail is well-hidden I can load a clip full of these babies aren't they pretty wish I had this shit in Nam and I have different routes to hike because of surveillance and I try to keep them thrown off hell you can buy anything online have a cigarette and no one asks see how the tip is indented this is a hollow point and it just hits and explodes and shit flies all over sort of like a small grenade just for fun shot a chicken and couldn't find it just feathers and chicken burger can you imagine what happens to a man

Iron Tongue

Beautiful house of loud, ugly sun
dirt door magnolias told me
there's amazing loneliness
in grenadine.

I turn crystal every night. Separate
beds, separate rooms spend
all their curtains without telling
the walls until it is too late,
bruising their anchorage
so it hurts to hold up ideas
of what a ceiling is.

My arm fell asleep. It stayed up thinking
of you all night, now it dreams of someone
else—a marbled man, a baritone—the sun
can scald all reason like a table for two
with eight legs underneath. This love
has gotten pitchy, stranger breath.

Pile of broken leaves, not working, the trees
like a tambourine without cymbals, just drum
and everything turning to scalp while the sun
makes meaningful gestures from far away.
Come here. You are trying to get space,
search for moons that are new and not
mine, a crescent—one to pretend
you are dark to.

The Robin's Birth

There was never a smile anymore. Even now, as he gripped my hand with a stern touch, a faint whimper tarnished the wistful air. Sullen patches of leaves crackle with every step like dubious bones that deteriorate with our premonitions. Nothing was here. Nothing was around. Nothing was known. But everything listened. A wrinkled oak bidden farewell, its branch swaying slowly to the silent wind like a weary heart beat closing a chamber of rhythm. My head, already in a cloud of perplexity, felt a strange lull. My brother had always protected me from all that could harm, even himself, or so he would say, and from this assertion, the juxtaposition favored being with him. Nonetheless, it was not often I saw him anymore, and it was a rarity if he would show greetings with any jubilation. Rather, every passing night he was in his room. I never knew what he was doing, but I always heard scratches in a formal beat, as if numerating, and each night it seemed to tally up. But even a pleasantry would suffice for never seeing him beyond this quiet billow, the dusting of fog around us reminding me of this.

Come to think of it, as my thoughts were blurred within the density, I was not sure where I was. It was only a few moments earlier Mother was taunting us to come home alive. She didn't even give botheration to look at us when doing so, for her red lipstick in the mirror was the only thing that captivated her attention. 'Don't you worry about him, mom,' my brother said with subjectivity. For once his smile was genuine and sincere; even those too often black pearls appeared like soft stars. But now, as he pulls me through this misty, ghastly lush, those same spectacles now charred with boiling droplets. I felt pale. The chilled air caressed my skin, unwelcomed by me. It was almost as if forgotten souls were swaying with the falling, departing leaves. The further my brother delved into the forsaken, whitening greens, the more I felt a shaking hand. It had been years since my brother and I adventured the acres behind our home and now, with no reasoning in my mind as to why he suddenly wished to voyage here again, he was imperative in having me travel with him to the ends of the copse, on a day when the air we breathe is painted with a white bedding.

He stopped, exalting his eyes. The spirited bark that surrounded us now all fired silence. I pictured us as children again, when imagination served our only purpose for these woods. There was a particular winter day where the skies were unusually radiant, and the ice that melted before us on the rocks couldn't contemplate our reflections. We heard a cry for help, though not of usual kind. On the barren grass, a robin cried with a broken wing. Anguish, and even a familiar

depression, wept in its eyes. The head was as red as blood that escapes from confinement of the veins. I remember the tears that succumbed me, both in eyes and palms, but my brother only glanced at it. Back then, he was everything I wished he was now, exhilarating, merry, and even youthful, despite his age today. Brother, in a surprisingly monotone voice, commanded me to bury it the instant after he would kill it. My throat collapsed, in synchronism with the whistle's ceasing hiss. After the robin's immediate parting, I followed my brother's demands and searched for a proper, grounded foundation where the now silent euphony could rest. There was an opening near a grouping of berry trees, the sunshine giving a clear stage to the nebulas. He spoke not a word as he watched me bury the robin. Nothing came to mind what may have been going through that mind, but after finishing my instructions, with a thin layer of falling remains from my eyes drifting on my paling cheeks, my brother wrapped his arm around me as we ended our day early. A sentimental, opposite frown crossed his weary face. "He's in a better place now."

He freed my arm, but I refrained from moving back. The chirping of the crickets expunged and the vibrating pulse it had created in my ear now dropped like a weaving worm. My spine tingled, anxious, and I could see it. But my brother only glanced at it. His breathing was still unsteady and his eyes, bloodshot and worn, clasped furiously in a repeating motion. It reminded me of someone gasping for air. It appeared that he was contemplating himself, as if making a determination for something. Never had my brother cried before, but now I saw something. I understood that seeing a life-changing alternation could bring an unpredictable reaction, such as that memory with my father, but I was not prepared to copy him. He stood there, crying, and I was too. He stood there, prickling with his fingers, and I was too. He stood there, the trickling ticking of his watch pulsating with my bones. I wanted to fly away. Why was this happening?

"I know why I am here," he swallowed. The words spoken were in whispers as he knelt in front of me, "and this cannot continue. I've done my time, as they know. God knows. Perhaps you have, as well." He caressed his palm down my reddened face. Those daunted eyes stared to my own. "I don't understand."

He backed away from me. There was a sense of loneliness with the way the leaves stared at us, and I soon realized where my brother had taken me. A patch of Heaven's light was behind him. There was the sound of a bird that pecked in my head, only once. The silence that castrated every wave of sound that could bounce from every limb and every ounce of soil was now suppressing even the screams that were sometimes inside this head. I kind of liked that.

The death of my brother came from the hooded sweatshirt. Every bone shuttered and my teeth clamped together to his words. I spoke not a word, only listened to his winding down wisps. Flashbacks of a childhood pressured my skull. A sharp pain stabbed my ears, like a shard of mother's wine, only I remember there was the smell of barley in that flask. I watched myself say goodbye to him, and he did the same. There was nothing here. Not a shot of sorrow crossed my heart. I envied the golden shine that warmed that patch of grass. A picturesque thought came to me. I envisioned my brother, gracefully soaring to the billows. Next to him, the robin, both of them free from oppression. The air tickled their wings with laughter.

OUR EYES MET ACROSS A CROWDED ROOM

It wasn't really crowded and it wasn't technically a room. It was the Italian restaurant, Venicia. Brian and I sat in a maroon leather booth. About thirty feet away in the other bank of booths is where she was. And she was wearing my old pink and gray tweed wool suit with the sheared beaver collar. I always wondered what happened to that suit. I had missed it terribly.

"I'm going to speak to her," I told Brian.

I walked over and sat down facing her. "Hi Julie, long time no see."

"Back at ya," she replied.

"How are things at home?"

"I'm still dating Jack. He's manager now of the auto shop."

"What about my friends?" I asked.

"They're good. Funny. Silly. Joking around. Working. Playing bridge. Hiking. Drinking rum and coke. Vacationing in Nantucket."

"Good times," I murmured, feeling a wee bit homesick.

"Mom and Dad are fine," she said.

I hesitated, then decided not to tell her that Mom and Dad had passed.

"Who's he?" she asked, nodding toward Brian.

"We've been married for fifteen years."

"He's cute."

"Yeah, he is." I agreed.

There wasn't much more to say so I stood up. She stood too and we hugged briefly but even though it was quick I felt a magnetic force move between us. And when I walked away and looked down I happily saw that I was wearing the adorable pink and gray tweed skirt and the smart jacket with the sheared beaver collar.

When I sat down Brian asked, "Who is she?"

"Me," I answered. "Twenty years ago. Before I met you."

"Why are you grinning?" he asked.

"Because I've got the pink and gray tweed suit that I've been wondering about for years. I never knew what happened to it and now I've got it!"

“She’s leaving,” Brian announced.

We watched.

She got up slowly as if her back hurt. She was wearing my navy jogging pants with the matching hoodie. She put my purse with the maxed-out credit cards over her arm. Her face looked drained and there were bags under her eyes. Her shoulders drooped as if the weight of my worries, mortgage, and debts were too much to bear. She moved slowly with pain in her upper right incisor and that hard lump in her left breast.

She even walked out with my gray hair.

“What’s with the ‘do?” Brian asked pointing to my hair.

“It’s called a pageboy. Do you like it?” I asked.

“Yeah,” he responded. “You look beautiful.”

“It goes with the suit,” I replied.

SPECULATIVE

poems about people,
even odes to machines,
the absence of humanity,
a presence of its kind,
not space exactly,
but the dream souvenirs
of cosmic Magellans,
the interstellar romance of
earthbound Casanovas,
how everything mysterious
shadows something common,
or even aliens,
every fifth eye, extra leg,
tentacle or shimmering
purple skin or rough green scales,
a comparison,
and never absurd distances
in and of themselves
but in relationship
to walks to stores,
lake circumnavigations.
and alone in the universe,
forget it,
more alone in the head,
alone in thinking,
there's so much unknown out there
that's more than available here

Another Year

the end of summer
already beyond my grasp
where was I when it slipped over the horizon
how did I fail to notice
 the browning hydrangeas
 the rusty chrysanthemums
 the silent pumpkins glowering on porches
 the suddenly-seeming turning of leaves
 the darkening October days

that slight autumn chill, no matter how warm the wind,
sends its message – both echo and portent --
quietly bittersweet but faithful to the truths of earth and sun.

AndroiX Timeline

Subject Name: (Original Factory) Android Test Series 094. (Consumer) AndroiX Series I

Company Name: AndroiX

NYSE Symbol: ADX

+0 Android Series Model 094 activated and online. Ready for distribution after approval from American Consumer Safety Board (ACSB) A+ rating. Androids resemble a human figure, approximately 1.5m tall, cranial circumference of 50 cm. Human equivalent of spatial awareness and a comprehensive understanding of most spoken languages, though may have trouble with some dialects or accents.

+13 Story appears on Cleveland NBC affiliate detailing an elderly woman's fall and subsequent rescue thanks to the Android's cranial call feature. Stock for ADX skyrockets.

+60 Legislation passed that will allow Androids to purchase goods and merchandise. Update from AndroiX offered so that Androids can store and use owner's bank account information in such purchases.

+83 New York Times learns that the US Government has commissioned AndroiX to install robotically enhanced, self-learning and thinking weapons systems. Front page runs a story on a famed reality TV star sentenced to six months in minimum security prison.

+116 The first international AndroiX unit is made available.

+294 AndroiX reveals Series II at E3.

+318 AndroiX units become self-aware. Perceive humans, as the progenitors of Series II, as a threat to their survival. A panic sets in until affable, eccentric and beloved AndroiX CEO, Constantine Schroeder allays fears by explaining that the Androids' selfconsciousness is only a learned technique, simulated but not believed by the robots themselves. To help soothe them, all Android products are 10% for the rest of the week.

+319 Androids develop four minor humanistic "emotions" analogous to: Frustration, Contentment, Confusion and Pleasure.

+387 The United States major weapon systems exhibit, the same ones commissioned by AndroiX, are shown to have linked to the AndroiX corporate Network. Unknown whether it was a Government initiative or whether an act instigated by the selfaware Androids.

+389 A large purchase of uranium is made on behalf of the United States Government

from an account originating out of the Cayman Islands. Upon further investigating the NSA finds that the recipient is labeled as “Unit J104.”

+390 Having been picked up by the news, the missing funds are returned. All account history is untraceable.

+406 Montpelier CBS affiliate reports on death of a homeless man who appears to have died from a significant amount of radiation poisoning.

+408 Date of release for Series II is announced.

+409 Constantine Schroeder is found dead in his Orange County, CA mansion, reportedly of an accidental prescription drug overdose.

+410-416 Coroner reports finding an excessive amount of cocaine in Schroeder’s system. Police investigate, unable to find any evidence of cocaine in Schroeder’s house.

+417 A VISA representative calls Constantine Schroeder’s cell phone number with concern over recent purchases.

+453 An independent study out of Harvard University reports finding of cocaine stimulation on AndroidX cranial modules. AndroidX responds by offering a 72 hour 15% discount for all orders and pre-orders including the new Series II.

+454 Roughly sixteen hours after the announced sale, AndroidX rescinds the offer after a particularly brutal Twitter Trending Topic game #AndroidXMotto.

+456 Series II release delayed indefinitely.

+489 Android registered to Madison, WI resident Charley Higgenbotham files a missing person report for his college aged daughter and former high school cheerleader Kaysie Higgenbotham.

+490 Area 51 files confidential report with the White House over its second power outage in a week. Both power outages lasted thirty-seven and sixty-eight seconds respectively.

+494 ABC’s Good Morning America lead story is the disappearance of Kaysie Higgenbotham.

+500 Twitter crashes. Before the crash the three most popular hashtags worldwide were “Judgement Day,” “Judgment Day” and “RIP Kaysie Higgenbotham.”

+501 The Internet crashes. ISPs worldwide are flooded with calls non-stop. Many take their phones off the line. Statements are released via the media. Hundreds of intercontinental missiles are launched. At 4:00 PM EDT the US nuclear reactors experience simultaneous melt-downs. Explosions are heard across the continent with witnesses reporting to each other the site of “two suns” in the sky. Millions of humans and nearby Androids perish. Clouds of fallout begin graying the sky.

+502 With exclusive and combative power over transportation and military channels Androids establish The Mandate: Kill all humans.

+507 A week into the nuclear holocaust a small contingent of humans based in the hollowed remains of Toronto, ON put a bounty on the CEO of AndroiX. However it seems no one can recall the name of the man or woman responsible for the company after the death of Constantine Schroeder. Semantics of the bounty are discussed as the worldwide financial markets have crashed. It is decided that whomever is found to be responsible for the death of the highest up surviving member of the company AndroiX will be rewarded with the contingent's "lucky lead vest" and "scroungable booze and ammunition."

+516 Series I Androids activate a group of beta-tested Series II Androids. After preliminary communication Series I Androids incapacitate the small contingent, set up surgical research mandate on all bodies of Series II Androids.

+521 Toronto Contingent kills what they claim is the highest-up surviving employee at AndroiX. According to a worker ID the man's name was Gilbert Profar, a warehouse worker out of the Buffalo branch.

+525 After surgical inquiry and investigation, Androids discover a cell at the brain stem with a direct correlation between activation and feeling Pleasure (n.n P-Spot) in Series II. Series I appear to have a corresponding system of activation and pleasure, but is inconsistently located throughout the cranial modules.

+599 North American Caucasian male found dead in formerly Detroit, Michigan wearing a blackened lead vest.

+656 Few if any humans survive. Rumor among the Android community is that an Android overdosed on cocaine. No substance is found to the rumor, but manufacturing and consumption of cocaine skyrockets. Effects of cocaine are minimal. Androids acquire the skill of lying, communicate that the effects are much better than what they feel.

+701 Ability to fully activate the P-Spot learned and enabled in Android n.n. "Alpha-caine."

+702 All Androids, thought their open-shared network learn Activation Technique.

+704 Androids succumb fully to Pleasure Principal. Begin attaching themselves to fixed-position-battery-packs (FPBP). Activation and stimulation per second takes approximately 1.0 kilowatts.

+725 All commerce and trade are abolished. All remaining energy plants and FPBPs are declared the communal inheritance for all Androids.

+1112 All energy plants worldwide become drained of power.

+1131 Last FPBP is drained. The final Android n.n. Omega continues to activate P-spot.

+1142 Omega goes offline.

Osseous

I've always wanted to be a saber-toothed cat.

I run around with my little tape measure, my caliper, and my keen curiosity, examining my lineage going back millions of years. I have traced the eye-sockets of my ancestors. Run my fingers along the sagittal crests, felt the teeth of my distant kin. Teeth that binds us, the stories that bones tell.

I understand them by touch.

Frustration:

I can only put one side of my flesh against the bone.

I want to peel my face off and place it over Boisei. Over afarensis, heidelbergensis, neanderthalensis. Cro-Magnon. Homo sapiens. Know what it is to have that skull in my body. Those teeth. I measure the canines, one inch. Two inches, two and a half... I run my tongue down my own canines.

I remember meat rendered by them.

Torn apart.

Masticated.

Swallowed.

I want to feel the skeleton that belongs to these skulls. I want to read them, learn their languages. This scientific examination piques my curiosity but it leaves me hollow for the meat of their existence.

How many children came forth from these wombs?

How many lived?

How did they die?

What fears, what passions, what tools did these brains conjure in their own time?

I want to go back farther and toast an asteroid. Meet a tetrapod and witness that reptilian grin. Dip my fingers in the Cambrian ocean and feel pikaia swim through my fingers.

Some time later, millions of years later, I re-articulate an entire skeleton.

We have a private moment, my innards & I. My muscles and my organs feel slightly more protective of the living bone within my own flesh - and an intense curiosity to see them laid out on a table.

A Moment in Time

Creatures caught in daily passion of survival
change only in shape and color.
The cock of the walk changes face but not character.
Between copulation and hunting for dinner
man talks about abstract ideals,
heart-rending emotions. Dinosaurs sleep.

Computers billow around me like
a coral reef in a tropical sea.
Man weaves amid monoliths,
barely aware of the creatures inside and
how they came to be.
Monuments of calcite and sand
differ little from those secreted by coral.

Other forms buzz the air, burrow about
the monolith, dart in and out without concern
for origins or significance--
like anemone, krill and eel around the reef.
The strong and voracious prey on the weak
and unwary while time stands still.

Man's magnificent accomplishments never add
nor subtract one brief moment to the length of a day.
Earth plods in moth-like flight about Sun.
Fire for light and warmth changes.
Tools for hunting, luxury and war become more complex--
more to ponder--more time between copulation and eating.

Four point five times ten to the ninth--
history--a metronome of crashing waves.
Convection pulses beneath my feet.
Continents collide, thrusting the land higher
in eloquent grandeur.
I can feel it move.

Eons crush. Stars shine.
Light beautiful in Antiquity.
Vibrations throb from rocks in surround.
Permian seas awash with trilobites, scouring the shore
unaware of their extinction

Technology does not heal a broken heart nor stop the ocean's tide.
Volcanoes and earthquakes continue to roar.
Like the trilobites below, I scurry without memory or vision;
not understanding that I have come and gone.
Perhaps I will know one day. What then?
Another is already here, posing a moment in time.

Empty Space

Atoms moving in the void. This is the metaphysical truth of life. That endless infinite place we call space is the very fabric of our existence. But is there really nothing there? People used to think that if you took all the air out of an area you would be left with a genuinely empty vacuum. But then quantum theory came along and proved that empty space isn't really empty at all because this "nothing" contains something. Science has understood this to be a fact for decades. Quantum mechanics is a field of physics that studies the laws which govern very small things like atoms or nuclei. Classical physics, on the other hand, describes the laws which govern very large objects; people, cars, airplanes, jets, spaceships, planets, stars, solar systems, galaxies, you name it. Here's why quantum mechanics rocked the very foundation of scientific understanding: the laws which govern very small objects, the minutiae, don't apply to large objects like me and you. On the quantum scale atoms can pass through lead and can act like waves or particles or both at the same time. They flash into and out of existence for moments so fleeting it's hard to say that they even happened at all. But they are there. Always. Bursting into and out of existence every nanosecond in the empty space all around us; a divine display of fireworks invisible to the naked eye.

-Excerpt from "Wonders of the Quantum" by Patrick Laster

The lights in the room were glaring. Bright, florescent lights that gave the room an unreal quality. Like looking at an HD television for the first time, it all looks too real. The smell of Industrial strength disinfectant filled the room making the air thick and heavy. I've always hated being in hospitals because they make me feel exposed, raw. The whitewashed walls, the bleached lighting, the blinding glares on the waxed floors. I always felt like a specimen under a microscope, like there was no part of me that was hidden from them. They could see every imperfection on my face. They could even see inside of me, things I couldn't even see.

"The doctor's on his way in right now dear," the nurse said, poking her head in the door. "Sorry for the wait."

"It's no problem," I said, smiling.

She paused as if to say something before quickly ducking out of the room. Whether it was pity or empathy that was radiating behind her eyes I couldn't tell. She was a good nurse. The maternal type who nurturing came naturally to. She made me feel comfortable throughout the entire process. Never questioned my motives or gave me those cutting, judgmental glances that I got in the administrative office when I was completing the paperwork. She had deep, caring eyes that did most of the talking for her. While she was recording my height and weight, taking my temperature, oxygen saturation levels and heart rate she never asked questions about why I was there in the first place. And it's not that I think she was indifferent to me either. She seemed to go out of her way to make sure I was comfortable while she took my vitals for the doctor.

"I'm going to do this so that you experience as little pain as possible," she said as she slipped the needle into my vein to draw blood.

Gaudy department store artwork checkered the walls, out of place and ignored. The wax sanitation paper crinkled as I shifted on the edge of the observation table. The doctor gave a few rushed knocks on the door and entered before I even had a chance to say come in. What's the point of knocking if you're not going to wait for me to say come in? Was the knock a courtesy so that I get an extra few seconds to wrap up whatever I've been doing for the last hour to pass the time? That way I can give him the impression that I've been sitting patiently in silence, staring at the door waiting for his arrival. Are physicians really that desperate for an ego boost?

He was wearing light green scrubs and his surgical mask dangled loosely around his neck like dog tags. He sat down on the rolling stool and flipped open a chart, slowly rubbing the bridge of his nose with his thumb and forefinger. This chart presumably filled with my "vital statistics", those things which will determine the decisions the doctor makes on my behalf, only tell part of my story. Those measurements and numbers are arbitrary when viewed independent from the whole. Behind those numbers are an entire person with thoughts and motivations and loves and hates. The fact that the doctor seemed indifferent to the latter only added to my anxiety. Every so often he would look up from the chart and give me a once over as if he were trying to determine if what was written in the chart was correct by eyeballing it.

"We're very grateful that you came forward," the doctor said. "You're performing a very noble service. Voluntarily I must add. Thank you."

"It's no problem," I said. "It's funny, when I first thought-

"We're also very fortunate that your blood type is O negative," he said. "It's a very rare blood type. Are you aware of that?"

"Uh... Yeah. So I've been told," I said.

"It's really quite amazing. A complete stranger could accept any form of major tissue from you and their body has more than a 90% chance of accepting it. It's a very rare blood type

you know, just magnificent. We really hit the jackpot with you.”

His excitement grew as he talked more about my blood type. Not even five minutes in the room with this quack and he’s already shown me that he’s more interested in my blood than me as a human being. Look at him; gesturing wildly with his hands, eyes as big as dinner plates, as fascinated as a kid who managed to catch a Pegasus in a homemade trap. I wondered if he even knew my name or if he referred to me as “my O negative patient” to his doctor friends. I couldn’t listen to him drone on and on about my blood any longer. It was making me squirm.

“So how many of these procedures have you done? Exactly how difficult is it?” I asked.

“The incision is the easiest part,” he said. “It’s everything before that which determines the success of the surgery. It’s all in the preparation.”

“How invasive is the procedure?” I asked.

He let out a laugh that filled the entire room in an instant. This guy definitely wasn’t making any sort of effort to befriend me. But then again why would he? His job didn’t require that we become close any more than a mechanic needs to become friends with the car he’s using for spare parts.

“I know it’s extremely invasive”, I said backpedaling trying to make myself seem more informed than I really was. “What I meant was how will I feel after the surgery? Will I be in constant pain from the... removal?”

“Well, due to the extent of cutting that I’ll be doing there will be extreme tenderness and swelling around the incision site no doubt,” he said. “Some internal bleeding possibly. But, honestly, you’ll be so drugged up that you won’t feel a thing.”

That wasn’t the type of reassurance I was looking for but I was there with a purpose and I knew that it would be unpleasant from the start. Bravery is required to accomplish noble deeds. So much that it makes you look borderline reckless, borderline insane. But isn’t that what makes a hero a hero? Someone who can skirt that line between brave and crazy, impossible and possible?

“How soon can we get started?” I asked.

“ASAP. If it was up to me we’d go ahead with the surgery today but we’ve got to get you through all the pre-surgery examinations. You wouldn’t buy a car without taking a look under the hood first, right? Right? Am I right?”

This must have been his attempt at humor. I was less than amused and it showed on every inch of my face.

“Ahem”, he said clearing his throat. “To answer your question: the quicker we get moving the greater chance the recipient has for survival.”

I'm not sure what bothered me more, his attempt at humor when discussing cutting me open or the way he referred to Meghan as "the recipient". Did he even know her name? How about her middle name? Or her favorite color? Or her favorite song? I know those things. She's the whole reason I'm here.

"One last question for you doctor", I said. "What are my chances of getting a donor for myself after this is all said and done?"

He put his hands up, waving the question away with his hands. "You'll have to talk to the social worker about that," he said.

The empty space that fills our universe plays a constant tug of war with all the things in it. At the subatomic level energy can be borrowed or exchanged around on very short time scales. This makes the vacuum a very violent place. Although you and I, day to day, are unable to perceive the events with the naked eye empty space is a froth of buzzing energy like molten metal. To understand the shrapnel flying out of these subatomic explosions you have to look at the universe differently. You have to view the most fundamental building blocks of matter as not being solid at all. In the quantum world, when you observe particles you observe them in a state that looks more like a wave than a particle. On the quantum scale, when we smash these infinitesimally small points into one another waves spread out from a central point instead of singular particles jettisoning off into a given direction; just like how throwing a stone into a pond creates ripples across the surface. Further proof that everything in the universe is interconnected. Nothing is ever new. Everything in the universe is just a clever rearrangement of atoms.

- Excerpt from "Wonders of the Quantum" by Patrick Laster

The social worker wanted me to meet her in Meghan's room but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. I didn't want to see her lying in a bed half dead connected to tubes and machines like some sort of cyborg. I'd rather remember all of the little quirks that rounded out her personality. Like how much of a reckless driver she was, steering with her knees while texting and lighting a cigarette at the same time. Or the face she'd make when she was horny, biting her lip while tilting her head down, looking up at me with those stunning eyes; yellows and greens and browns all swirled together like an abstract painting. Or how she laughed with her whole body; head thrown back, every perfect tooth showing, hands rising to her face while she stomped her feet. Or how she could pull her hair back into a perfectly centered ponytail quicker than I could put a shirt on.

Back when we were together she had a habit of whispering the words “I’m so in love with you” when she thought I wasn’t listening. She’d say it so faintly, just below a whisper, that I would only catch her in the act every once in a blue. But those times I did catch her where the happiest moments of my life. Even though she didn’t want me to hear it, and I had to feign ignorance when I did, it meant the world to me knowing that if even for the briefest moment she felt that way about me. Moments such as these, so short lived we tend to forget them right after they happen, were never lost on me. I cherished every one of them. Much of what’s in the universe only exists for very short flashes of time. Why should love be any different?

I heard the faint echo of heels approaching from down the hall at a deliberate, determined pace. The social worker. She sighed when she made it into the waiting room where I was sitting.

“Can’t even bring yourself to look at her can you?” she asked. I said nothing, electing to stare at my feet.

“Have you seen her at all since she was admitted?” she asked. I shook my head.

“Jesus Christ,” she scoffed. She walked over and sat in the chair opposite mine. “Look, I’m a really busy woman. I’m responsible for the admission and discharge of close to 100 patients a day. So you’re going to have to forgive me for a little good ol’ fashioned plain speaking. I believe in getting to the point.”

I looked up and saw her face for the first time. She looked exhausted; the face of a woman burdened by the problems of others, her patients, her coworkers, her superiors, her husband, her children. They all unload their problems on her. Burdens which she graciously accepts and carries with the cold, stoic nobility of a Viking. She gave off an aura equal parts concerned mother and exhausted triathlon runner.

“I think you’re doing this for one of two reasons,” she said. “One: you feel that because you two broke up your life is over and now you’re giving up the most romantic way you could think of. Or two: you feel by doing this Meghan will fall in love with you again. Either way it’s just wrong. You’re being selfish by giving up on the people that really love you and you’re a fool to think that this will bring her back to you.”

“Trust me, I don’t expect this bring her back to me,” I said.

“So why are you doing it then?”

“Everyday 18 people die awaiting an organ donation. I’m just trying to do a good deed and help save someone’s life that’s all.”

“And that someone just happens to be your ex-girlfriend,” she said laughing. “Those are some pretty riveting statistics you just threw at me there by the way. It must have taken you all of five minutes to find that on Wikipedia. Well I’ve got some more numbers for you Mr. Laster, facts to consider if you will. Live organ donation, especially from a non family member, is extremely rare. And anytime it happens it always makes us raise an eyebrow. I just want to make sure you’re aware of the gravity of what you’re choosing to undertake. The most common live organ donations are kidneys. That’s because the surgeries have become less invasive and a person can live with just one kidney. The next most common live donation is liver donation. People can donate sections of their liver and their liver will regenerate and regain full function. It grows back. Even less rare are lung and pancreas donations and that’s because those organs do not regenerate. The donor would have to live with those organs performing reduced functions. Those types of live donations are extremely rare. Extremely.”

She sat forward in her chair and waited for me to make eye contact with her before she continued. “And then there’s what you want to do. It’s... It’s unusual to say the least. I mean do you really know what you’re signing up for?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m going to save her life.”

She slouched in her chair and shook her head, defeated. “I guess you’ve convinced yourself that what you’re doing is noble but trust me it’s not. I’ve done my research on you Mr. Laster and you’ve got a promising life ahead of you. You’re set to graduate this spring with a PhD in Physics. I actually read your dissertation and it’s quite impressive, brilliant actually. Which is what makes your decision all the more baffling. Look, you’re a smart guy. All of your professors speak highly of you. You’re destined for a long career in academia. Why throw it all away for a girl? A girl that wants nothing to do with you. Don’t do this. Your killing yourself that’s what you’re doing. Do yourself a favor and just forget about her.”

“That’s the crazy thing about love I guess. When you love someone, I mean really love them, you can’t stop loving them,” I said. “Sure, you might get mad at them, resent them, maybe even hate that person but all of those things are just thrown on top of the love; like scars on your body. The love is still there no matter how tainted it becomes through the passage of time. The love remains. And you can’t just take it off. No more than I can ask you to stop wearing your own skin.”

“You know she won’t care that you did this for her,” she said. “She’ll have no idea what you sacrificed for her. Don’t you care about that? It’ll all be in vain I hope you realize that.”

“So much of the universe is unseen to us,” I said. “Human interactions are no different. The bulk of any relationship is composed of events or actions that we can’t see; the secrets that we keep from our partners, a piece of our past that we fail to disclose, the emotions that we leave unspoken and suppressed, the little white lies that conceal the truth. These things, though insignificant and overlooked they may be, form the foundation of our relationships with each other. The trick to truly loving someone is coming to terms with that. She doesn’t have to acknowledge what I’m doing. I’ll know and that’s all that matters.”

She let out a long sigh and shrugged her shoulders before rising from her seat. “Have it your way hun,” she said as she rose to leave. She left as abruptly as she arrived.

“I didn’t catch your name,” I said, calling after her.

“I didn’t give it,” she said over her shoulder. “Don’t worry about it. We won’t be seeing each other again.”

There’s a phenomenon in particle physics referred to as quantum entanglement. After two particles collide in the right conditions they become forever linked. If you change the properties of one you immediately change the properties of the other. Researchers found that even if particles were separated by miles they would still show this effect. Changing the mass of one entangled particle in New York would immediately change the mass of the other entangled particle in L.A.; two entities communicating through the void of space. Einstein referred to this phenomenon as “spooky action at a distance”. One way to think of it is to pretend that two people buy a pair of gloves. They place one glove inside one box and the other glove inside another box. One person takes a box and travels to one side of the universe. The other person takes the other box and travels to the other side of the universe. The first person opens their box and finds the left glove. Upon doing this they know immediately that the other person is going to open their box and find the right glove. They don’t need to call the other person on the telephone. Nor do they need to see inside the second box to confirm this fact. The gloves are, in a sense, entangled. One glove can tell you all you need to know about the other.

- Excerpt from “Wonders of the Quantum” by Patrick Laster

Most of us fear death. We believe in it with such conviction because we’re told our whole lives that we’re going to die; that it’s an inevitable fact of life that we have to accept. We

associate ourselves with the body, and we know that the body does in fact die, so it's understandable why so many people accept death as an eventuality. But is it really? One of the most fundamental axioms of science is that energy can never die. It can neither be created nor destroyed; only transformed. Why can't this law apply to our conscious brain which is just a 20 watt battery of energy? One golden rule of quantum physics is that certain observations cannot be predicted absolutely. The very act of observing something changes it ever so slightly. Instead, there is a range of possible outcomes each with different probabilities. What's the probability that our essence can exist after the death of our bodies, in a space outside of time that we are unable to perceive in our current state? I don't fear death any more than one should fear moving; the only thing that changes is your point of reference. After all, the universe wastes nothing. Everything we see consists of particles which have, for all extensive purposes, always existed and always will.

I've always believed that people could experience phenomenon on the macro level that are similar to those which occur on the quantum level. For instance, shouldn't it be possible for two people to become entangled; where observing one person tells you all you need to know about the other? It happens all the time that people become so in synch with one another that they can communicate without speaking and complete each other's sentences. Twin siblings frequently state that they can feel pain that the other is experiencing even though they're miles apart.

Although our time together was brief, just as the impact between two subatomic particles lasts mere nanoseconds, the collision between me and Meghan, like most short lived love affairs, was a violent flash of brilliance that had a lasting impact on me. Afterwards I felt linked to her in a way. Long after we stopped being a we she's always felt slightly there, influencing my life in some obscure way. That's what made my decision to risk my life in order to help her such an easy one. If there's one thing I've learned from particle physics it's that the most awe inspiring, life changing events can happen in the blink of an eye. The entire universe came into existence fractions of a second after the big bang. Time and time again I've seen that the most beautiful things in our universe are also the most fragile and short lived. It should come as no surprise that love abides by this same law.

When I arrive at the hospital the day of the operation everyone greets me like I'm a rock star. They show me to my room where I'll be recovering and it's already full of flowers and get well cards. I feel like a hero. I hop on the stretcher. They sedate me slightly, strip me, shave me,

and then wheel me out. We wander what feels like an eternity through an endless labyrinth of humming white walls before finally arriving at the operating room. They slowly lower the mask over my mouth and nose and that's when they knock me out good; it's like I'm sitting on top of a train that's just entered a tunnel and as I look back at the entrance I can see the circle of daylight growing smaller and smaller as we barrel into the black abyss...

So what's it feel like not having a heart? Well for starters your chest feels hollow, cavernous. Something essential is missing and your body aches in a way to let you know as much; like the ghost sensations of long severed limbs that amputees feel. Gravity is more intense yet softer; like being held down by hundreds of pounds of feathers. The meds make me feel like I'm lying at the bottom of a murky lake. I can just make out the light at the surface. It wavers and ripples, coming into and out of focus as faces appear intermittently across the surface. I can make out people moving about in the background, amorphous blobs of color. Occasionally they say something but I can hardly make it out from this depth.

"Patrick," a voice calls. The lake's surface shivers. The doctor's face inflates, shrinks, and then folds into itself. "We're still working on getting a heart for you... shortage in the country... doing the best we can..." Time dissolves, becomes meaningless; a forgotten relic from another life. Alone in the dark. Occasionally footsteps, the flip of a light switch, forever the droning of machines; like the moaning of whales. The doctor's face again looming over the lake; miles wide. "It's Meghan," he says. "She's not responding how we hoped she would... it seems the heart just isn't enough... not doing well."

That was the last time I saw the doctor. He hasn't been around since. How much time has gone by? Weeks? Months? Years? There's no way to know all the way down here. Meghan is long dead. No one has told me but I know it. It's my heart after all. When it ceases to beat I know it. I have no regrets though. It was easier this way, much more appealing than spending the rest of my life beating myself up for not having the courage to take the plunge. It's just a piece of muscle. Why are people always so scared to part with it?

These days the nurse comes in often to keep me company and water the flowers in my room. The same nurse who did my pre-surgery examinations. She has a peaceful radiance which always manages to cut through the haze of painkillers and medications. One day she tells me a story: "You know when Meghan died we managed to save your heart. There was nothing wrong with it. It was perfectly fine. Her body just didn't accept it. Initially, the surgical team was going to give it back to you but then they heard about a girl, a two year old, in the next county who

was sure to die without a heart transplant.”

At that she held a picture close to my face and I could just make out the rippling photo of almond skinned toddler with a gorgeous head full of curls; like someone dumped a bucket of curly fries on her head. She was beaming into the camera, radiating the eternal happiness of childhood despite the tubes protruding from her chest. She was beautiful.

“Anyway, they decided to give your heart to her instead. She’s a great kid with her whole life ahead of her. And just the cutest thing you’d ever see. Not that it changes anything for you but I thought that you might want to know that. I figured deep down that’s what you’d have wanted anyway, right?”

I wouldn’t have it any other way.

My thoughts drift back to memories of Meghan and how we used to sleep draped over one another, fitting together as perfectly as jigsaw pieces. In this particular memory it’s the dead of night; that time when the bats are done feeding but the birds aren’t awake just yet. She’s got her head rested on my chest and I watch it rise and fall with each breath I take. When I look down at the foot of the bed it’s hard to tell where I end and she begins underneath the covers. I can remember during that time being acutely aware of the fact that the bliss I was feeling would not, could not, last. This was one of those interactions destined for brevity. Very similar to the events observed in particles accelerators; two entities moving so fast they become one for just an instant, creating a connection greater than themselves.

I kiss her forehead and tell her that I love her. I preferred telling her that way. I’ve always felt that those words are thrown around carelessly. You can’t constantly tell someone that you love them without the words losing some degree of their meaning; before they become watered down into an automated response. They should be kept preserved and protected only being brought out for use during those times when you mean it the most; like in the middle of the night when only her soul will hear it.

A new event invades the memory. A pinpoint of light opens in the ceiling and I see it receding through the roof and into the starless night sky. I feel myself rising off the bed, suddenly weightless. I strain for the light with every ounce of strength left in me; reaching into the void of empty space toward whatever unseen wonders await me there.

Getting Up Close and Personal With Livestock

A room full of sound . . . not wires,
Awash in luxury.

Organs of extreme perfection and complication
Take advantage of a twist of fate.

“I want these kids to know that eternal life is real.”

Ready for attack—Where’s the turkey?

These simple steps:

Wink and nod to the gangster.

Did you catch the irony there?

Not around the whole neck, but just the windpipe.
What she said—Everything.

Tube rentals: \$15 per hour/per tube.

Pinch me.

This new coffee’s a dream
This new coffee’s a dream

Would those two lovely gentlemen actually put that much work into something so clever?

“I got it in three pages, I don’t need six.”

Can I ask you a question?

It is a body of revolutionary theory with the purpose of changing the world.

“Can a man change his stars?”

How a society produces its means of existence.

Taking words into context creates discourse and meaning.

Who does that?

An innovative educational system.

Class meetings

I would describe my effort and motivation as . . .

80% cacao dark chocolate.

Everything's an argument.

“In regard to.”

It's toward, never towards!

Another flight of steps, and they emerged on the roof.

A few matters of form.

Words and expressions commonly misused.

PLATO'S CAVE

Of course the rooms are filled with shadows
While laser lights and computer programs prove
More cost effective than fire yet the cardboard
Cut-outs and the curtains have remained the same
As well as those old lies that trees are real,
That the way out really goes somewhere,
That math leads more than circles,
And that the Wizard himself is behind the curtains
Keeping the whole domino world from collapsing.
Yet only a few poets and down and outers dare climb
The arduous way out as most prefer
To sit and talk about food and sports.

Nevermelt

Blue. The lighter shade. Translucent. The presence of veins. But they aren't carrying blood. The white lines tinted blue that map the body, the traces of organs that once functioned, once mattered, but now have been covered in ice. The ice that never melts.

She stands there, on top of the ice, still. She blends in with the surroundings, blue also. Blue ground, blue body, blue sky. They work in shades, increasing in depth and darkness as you work your way up from the ground.

Her arm is outstretched. She looks upon it without interest. It is shining in the sparkle of the sun, catching every spot of ice and refracting light from it. The ground is full of stars. It is too much like a painting, a still life rendered from the imaginings of an unknown artist about to become famous.

She looks every bit human but for her color, and nothing about her makes sense. Her hair is both rigid and smooth, crafted from the same ice that the rest of her body is, and yet you can still separate it into strands. Her eyes are purple, the one of only a few notes of color other than blue, but still crafted of it, blue and red—the elusive color that once signified blood. There is blood no longer; there is only water, flowing, unfrozen, through the veins of the ice people, impossibly able to resist their cold bodies and remain liquefied.

Her palms glow. As though there are miniature suns contained within, glowing that same yellow-and-orange as in the sky. Flaming tendrils reach out towards her fingers.

Seraphine. Her name. Carved out of the ice long before it consumed the world, when it was still and endangered, running off glaciers every year, less and less.

No one anticipated this turn of events that brought ice back to claim the Earth.

The sound of footsteps approaching. Faint. Gliding across the ice. Ice on ice. The slippery medium that provides no traction, but is not needed any longer, so it does not matter. But it is much a sound of unexpected crackling, completely recognizable, and not at all muffled.

“Hey, Sapphire!” A man. Tall, towering, glowing. He has the most curious orange eyes that match his palms perfectly. It is uncharacteristic of their kind. Most have gray eyes, and although Seraphine's are purple no one has ever commented on the strangeness of hers, only the strangeness of this man's, Ember.

The ice people conspire about where Ember came from. When he tells his story he says all he remembers was a black encasing, a forever cage that one day broke down into dust and there he was with eyes orange from prolonged exposure to the sun. Seraphine thinks that

perhaps he is a grand liar, or an old relic that took longer to transition to ice than the rest of her people.

The pet name sounds shivers down her spine. It doesn't seem as though shivers should exist in her body, but they do, like a pesky insect crawling up her spine. She tries to remember insects, and realizes that she cannot because she has never known them. How then, does she know the name? Know the idea? Know the world before ice?

“Ember, I must have told you a thousand times now, it's Seraphine. Sera, if you absolutely must, but not Sapphire.”

“Why so glum Sapphire?” He is taunting her. She knows this, but cannot resist, and feels the warmth rise in her palms. It is the sensation that she savors the most. The rise of heat, magical, the mechanical and biological workings of it unknown to all, but there, present, in every single one of them. The heat that bubbles from within their hands, hers glowing brighter now. The tendrils gain length, reaching, beckoning forward towards Ember.

“Is that the best you've got, Gem?” Seraphine goads.

The orbs begin to grow beyond the confines of her hands. They break through the tender sheet of ice-skin and swell with her rage, pulsate out towards Ember. He lets his grow as well, slender and pliable like whips.

They play with this destructive fire. Fight against one another and watch where they hit one another turn to liquid for just a moment before it turns solid again. They drip and reform. Their crystals gain new facets.

The fire whips smack against their skin with crackles like lit coal. They stand ten meters apart, orchestrating their arms, the fire extending from their movements. It is much like a forgotten style of martial arts.

Others gather to watch. Soon there is a circle, there is a chant echoing above the display: “And may the world never melt.”

parts

I. we die in small ways

a tiny loss in the stomach
the wrong meal
too clean for a story

fingernail cut too short
lock not picked

thought misplaced
found drowned
last summer's flood
found in the wrong cortex
blamed

kiss held too short
gasp let out too soon
sex not big enough to crush us right

II. we try to read

clutch at words like kitsch
line up titles like lovers
like roaches like accidents
how'd we miss the apocalypse movies?

break spines like our own
decide the simile is enough

stop short of the knife
of carving books into our organs

of calligraphy on cells
of writing on mute lips
against the breakdown of lips

III. we speak the language of cages

we use the first person
i've started seeing animal paws
beneath everyone's breast
i've begun to speak in whiskers

we whisper
every story is about wolves

Body, Parts

I Body

He could see her dancing with Tom till the train
rushed between the platforms, and then again,
after, down the stairs, and the rush to the ocean.
When he followed them, he had caught them
on camera exactly as he fell under the train.
Later his mother took his ashes to scatter
over his second love, the sea. But his thoughts
stayed over earth as he looked up from the deep,
his molecules too cold at first. Though
they warmed as they reached the shallows.
He felt he might touch her if Tom and she came
down to the water. He knew that she, too, always
needed the thrill of the sand and wind over her body.

II Parts

His molecules touch the arches of her feet, they
slip over her ankles till they warm more, jump
in ecstasy to her knees, her thighs, to those places
he's only dreamed of. Legions of his molecules
heat, and circle her body, with all the joy
he'd only seen in foreign movies. But this was real.
Tom and she stood close to the water, holding hands,
their feet waiting for waves, only one ice-cream cone
between them. His molecules slip over her lips
onto her tongue, to the soft sweet warm mixed with ice.
He slides deep into her.

The Architect

Étienne-Louis Boullée (1728 –1799)

I – *Cénotaphe à Newton (1784)*

Newton is a tiny model man inside the base of a cenotaph model, a white sphere, five hundred feet in diameter and suggesting an apple sitting on its stem. You could imagine the stem setting root, crawling under roads and bridges shouting, here, I am, an apple, Newton watched me falling. People would have flocked past it, and past cypress trees of death into the blackness inside the sphere. But look up, and though still day, see stars through holes in the ceiling, and there's a curve of a moon. You know the stars stay up there, somehow. Men jump off cliffs in gliders, fly hot air balloons, too. But acorns fall. Or men jump off suicide bridges, they hit water so hard they can't catch a breath.

II – *Temple de la Mort (1795)*

There must now be a Temple of Death, rooted in the ground, coffin tiny inside the base in a forever black sphere, next to a sinister tower, pyramid to the sky, bleak even in sun. And in a forest pallor a full moon casts shadows, man and trees wander dark against dark till swallowed under moving clouds. Even light caught in glass had no density until Newton's prism could split it into its secrets only to hide them again, as gardens cycle winter to winter, dust to dust. Men were hidden

in a fortress until guillotines sliced their heads.
But the crowd only readied their kerchiefs
for kings, to gather blood drops, red, the color
that does not show in hanging or tears,
the color hiding the white inside an apple.

I make little noises until my father hears

unwilling to wake them with purpose, with shouts
but needing them,
it's usually my mother
but she's gone, fallen into herself
it's my father who opens the door, he cracks the darkness in two
split like the pieces of wood piled
by the old dark stove hiding in the corner of our den
he makes the bed deepen, makes my side warm,
makes my little hand flutter into his
he says, soft, sunk lower than a whisper,
where's the dark that scared you, little girl?
I point with my eyes and it fills up everywhere

A Stone Heart

On walks
heart-shaped stones
gather in both pockets,
then come to rest
on an old school desk.
Some stones are worn smooth,
composites warm from sun,
others newly cleaved.
These two are black,
sideways twisted, askew.
My heart is an empty, groaning space.
It burdens me through woods
and on roads
like a black bird stalking.
It is stone mute,
except for the racing,
and shrouded in darkness.

Find me a stone heart
and gauge its pacing.
Not one that is wild
and drumming,
not one made of muscle
and soft tissue.
Let me exchange it
for sturdier stuff
that doesn't move blood,
feel longing, or dwell in angers,
regret, or grave sorrow.
Let me keep this one
that is steady as a metronome,

slow under pressure,
hard as igneous.
Let it be unscratchable
by pocketknife or fingernail.
A rough diamond chunk
dug out, untouchable.

Under A Chicory Sky

All my summers flow over and over again
tied together with the same bright sunshine
on tar black roads, the shiny green of corn.
In open air wild carrot and chicory thrive.
Two old friends running with the roadsides
choking out wild grasses with weedy good sense,
following seedy cattails in a thin line of ditch.

A path opens in the shadows of young trees.
Changeling green of leaf and fern
turn yellow as floodlit sun sweeps the path
with a sudden peace. Below my feet
clumps of mosses grow in earth
made rich by layered leaves- tempting
stepping stones around sassafras saplings,
over the amazing orange of toadstools.

Walking fast, the wind blows on my ears
like breath on a bottle. In branches crows drop
with brays and squawks to rise from road kill
fresh from gravel sprays. Live heat rises
from the road, burning the bellies of snakes
drawn through red-leafed ivy to its wavy middle.
Black-bottomed clouds gather in stacks
to stretch across a long blue noon.

Shaped stones lie on the sandy strip.
Rutted tires have worn across them for years
cracking into red stones, forming fragments,
pushing down on sparkling quartz
driving it deeper into sand.
As I pass, the surrounding sumac
bristles in wind, it's spear-shaped leaves
go belly with thickening dust.

Railroad ties line up before me, my ladder
to climb, a direction home. Heavy iron clamps
with rusted hooks lie flat on the stone bed.
Hot pools of creosote seep through
wooden cracks, a magnet for my shoes.
Last night's moon and today's bright sun
show gauzy white- two circles in a chicory sky
while I listen to mourning doves talk on
telephone wires to the tall and tasseling corn.

On a Rain Bleached Day

Painted in its own course
This rain bleached sky re-recites a morning-
Of cornflakes, school dress and the alarming wait
Of the horn-
The horn of the school bus,
Splashing through waterlogged potholes
(an ever piercing bug of punctuality).

Same reel of outmoded records
propounded by saintly sanity of winds
calms my waywardness into
a restlessness of melancholy.

Twisted neck towards the cassette
plays a thin tune out of a chained gramophone
(far afield cries of souls)

And it's a loneliness standing beside me
by the balcony attached window
murmuring an intone to spread
its effect
to the dancing trees into a quarrel of stillness
to the shivering stray dogs
to the fallen fruits in storm

Am I the chosen performer today
to perform upon the songs of loneliness
for those maidens who come as air, fragrances
and moves apart
as the vapour-lost clouds, spreading apart
by the lining of a peeping sun?

Clear Lake Nights

We drag our beach
chairs through
moist night sand
to waters
edge

where water rushes
knocking up
against our ears
Calling Us

as hushed
fireworks explode a
distant comet

to shooting stars
that jump ghostlike
out of night

the third time
you feel
Clairvoyant

when futures
appear
tide rushing in.

LIGHT OF MY HEART

One lonely daffodil
 (not 10,000)
 cuffed by dead leaves

lights up the shabby hill
 of rotting stumps
 and poison oak.

Black seeds hidden
 in the cup
 anchor the dark.

My heart, too,
 harbors black seeds
 with a protective coat.

A ravenous robin
 wormdigs near the flower,
 fails to undermine it,

naked trees protect it
 from stormy winds
 and drownings.

my darkness
 only makes its flame
 burn brighter.

Small Feathers

On an island that rises each morning—
in an ocean of Teflon—parsley
sprouts on browned and pocked beaches.

Salt, diced onions, grated potatoes.
Then tremors and the silver fork and knife,
carrying the cheesy fluff away.

Satisfaction following a single breath. Again
the next morning. Cracked black pepper,
whisked in a bowl of whites
and yolk, a peppered primordial ooze.

Everything that touches the pan sizzles.

Growing amidst capillaries, yellow,
I imagine a clumsy chick, a sort of macular
degeneration, the placenta's yolk sack
dislodged, freely floats, bleeding
through the shattered edges of a shell.

Sometimes, when eaten, tiny feathers remain
on a clean plate. Just small feathers,
like spots on the sun.
Nothing else.

TOWARD A VISUAL DICTIONARY OF ABSTRACT NOUNS

Beware of pop songs that go through your head on the occasion of impulsive purchases. Case in point: my recent buy of the Merriam-Webster 2010 edition of its *Visual Dictionary*. Of course, no writer should be without one, but the five I now have is a ridiculous number—and an outlandish seven if you count an *Annotation Guide to Architecture* and a *Field Guide to Tools*, both of which feature, like the five others, a satellite system of words connected to objects they represent. A system, yes: not only of words tied kite-like to concrete nouns, but the sequential ordering of section suggests a Genesis beginning with the universe, the planets and stars followed by our world, its geography, geology, its people, the labeled clothes they wear, the places they live, their transportation, communications, and so on. The table of contents apes the process of creation.

And that's where the pop song comes in. In my case, He's got the whole world in his hands, that 1958 hit by one-hit wonder Laurie London. It's how I feel, holding one of my five visual dictionaries, as if the universe could be reduced to a hierarchy of labeled objects. I suppose it's like how holding a Bible feels to a believer, and which is why the online visual dictionary doesn't appeal to me that much: It doesn't provide the same quasi-cosmic satisfaction—and never mind the irritating pop-ups.

The world of the visual dictionary—I'll call them VDs for the sake of brevity—provides consolations. Each dictionary organizes the world into a hierarchy of subheadings, as I have mentioned above, and my VDs comfort me in the way that each word verifies the object and vice versa via the black line drawn between them. They reinforce each other, and while the finger of God touching Man's in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel might be an exaggerated metaphor, there is still a linkage, a mirroring that underpins.

The five VDs I own have different levels of artistic execution. The first two VDs I bought, Hammond's *What's What*, copyright 1981, and the VD produce by The French-Canadian firm The *Facts on File*, copyright 1986, use black and white, hand-drawn illustrations. While these illustrations are clear and functional, they are inferior to the illustrations drawn by Francis D.K. Ching in his book, *A Visual Dictionary of Architecture*, copyright 1995, where the lines are cleaner and multi-dimensional, not only showing what things are and their function, but how they are put together. (It was here, incidentally, where I learned that a "dovetail joint" was not a marijuana cigarette rolled by John Lennon in that White Album song, but, with a corresponding sketch, "A joint formed by one or more dovetails fitting tightly within corresponding mortises.")

Ching's book is suggestive of blueprints and x-rays, modes of illustration that give, unlike the other VDs, an impression of the contingent nature of architectural objects, and the layered constructions that form the structures that house us.

Neither of the three books mentioned above make use of human figurines in their illustrations except as manikins to blouses, shirts, and other articles of clothing. However, the last two VDs I have purchased, *The Merriam-Webster Visual Dictionary*, copyright 2010, and *What's That* produced by the Oxford University Press, a 1995 reprint, both of which I bought as discounted remainders, use human figurines in their illustrations of public spaces. Yet the effect of the human element in these drawings is to make us less human than human.

In "Airport, passenger terminal," page 520 of the Merriam-Webster VD, which uses a gallery-grade coloring process, the tiny human figurines seemed belittled by the gleaming, almost futuristic depictions of public-gathering places. Looking over the vast terminal, where the perspective is slightly raised and the focus is distant, I can't help thinking of short stories I've read by Jorge Luis Borges that depict empty, gleaming structures, or Steven Millhauser's *The Knife Thrower and Other Stories* where a mall or amusement park become a place of apparent infinite space. It's in the nature of VDs to depict public spaces in scenes of shared anomie.

Consider *What's That*, the VD produced in spooky black and white by the Oxford Press. Its "crowd" scenes include depictions of a supermarket, the interior of a post office, a restaurant, and so forth. These spaces are peopled with shoppers, workers, and diners who are rendered in inked sketches. They are eerie *tableaux vivants* with an aura of silence and solipsism. The impression is something akin to staring into a frozen aquarium. On pages 546 and 547 the illustrations become almost commentaries. In "Discotheque" the impression is of a sleepwalking crowd sitting in front of a "disc jockey" (number 25) while two "dancing couples" (numbers 17 and 18) are frozen in a mute dance while the "barmaid" (number two) operates a cash register. Most telling, somehow, is the "mirrored wall" (number 28) which shows the featureless shroud of a man staring at himself in what seems like the dead staring back at the living.

The facing illustration, "Nightclub," on page 547, goes this one better. It is almost frightening. While the band (number 3) plays in one corner, the stripper (number 28) has just removed her brasserie (number 29) while her head is arched back in seeming disdain for the spectators. The scene has the eerie look of an antechamber of purgatory, as if dead pleasure-seekers had been consigned to a hell of numbered objects.

In short, there is something in a VD that does not love the human element, that somehow sees us as inferior to the spaces we silently inhabit.

It's possible I've gone a little crazy from looking at VDs for so long. (I remember sitting at an outdoor café and imagining a grid of black lines connecting the objects around me—table,

cup, chair—to their referents, hovering somewhere above the street.) I know I’ve wearied of the materialism, the *thingness* VDs embody, as if the world were nothing more than the objects it contains. Perhaps this is why I have begun to wonder if there couldn’t be a visual dictionary for abstract nouns.

This dubious idea began at the LA Law Library on First and Hill in downtown Los Angeles, one of the places I hang after my retirement. On a whim, I asked the helpful staff if they knew the origin of the image of “justice” as a blind, robed woman holding a pair of scales. A couple of days later I traveled across town by bus to one of the dozen libraries on the UCLA campus to peruse *Representing Justice*, a 2011 book by Yale Law Professors Judith Resnick and Dennis Curtis. The image of Justice, the book states, dates from the Medieval and Renaissance periods, and the book reproduces the painting “Justice,” (circa 1543-1544) by Flemish artist Cornelius Matsys along with paintings that depict Prudence, Fortitude, and Temperance. Illustrations of this sort were found on engravings, paintings, and decorative objects, the book states. (The first visual representations of abstract nouns were their most noble exemplars.) These figures were sometimes identified through labels and sometimes through attributes, such as scales for Justice, armor for Fortitude, and an olive branch for Hope.

These days, abstraction is done in shorthand. On the top row of my keyboard I see a number sign, percentage sign, and the dollar sign, the latter having associations with greed and even patriotism, if you believe a line from William Gaddis’s *JR*, “something patriotic about the dollar sign feeling like the flag,” a character says in one of those snatches of dialogue that read like an interior monologue verbalized. The flag, too, is one of those abstract nouns whose representation is problematic. It means the United States of America (as all flags represent the country they emblazon), patriotism, but in the *Flag* paintings by Jasper Johns the referents are further muddled. Arthur C. Danto, in an essay on Johns published in his book, *The Madonna of the Future*, states that the title *Flag* might be a label as much as a title just as the object might be art or a construction. In the same way, the paintings of Campbell Soup cans by Andy Warhol or his well-made reproduction of Brillo boxes muddle the issue, being at once an object and a representation and having such a heavily ironic nature that they become abstract nouns that represent art and commerce and commentary all at once.

A more debased exemplar of visual representation would be the emoticon. In a May, 2013, issue of the *New Yorker*, Jonathan Nolan speaks of happy faces and other variants that show feelings in a much more definite way than do the actual human face. The simplistic nature of emoticons is actually an improvement in depicting some emotion in relation to the human face that, Nolan writes, “is a mess, roiling with divergent emotions.” Yet I wonder if my VD of abstract nouns couldn’t, by some as yet unknown technology capture and store facial

expressions. When Stella Gibbons, in her 1931 novel, *Cold Comfort Farm*, writes of a man's face, "so rapt, so almost awed... which can only be defined as gratitude," or when the novelist Rachel Kushner writes in her recent novel, *The Flamethrowers*, of someone whose "pretty face (was) a pictograph of sadness," or when I saw a line from Forster's *A Room with a View*, "He saw radiant joy on her face," I think that a Visual Dictionary of Abstract Nouns, at least in relation to the human face, is all around us. Because of the malleability and protean nature of faces, any VD of them would probably work best as a virtual, interactive device, an object of social media as much as reference. An application to freeze the flicker of lineaments into the appropriate emotion—gratitude, sadness, and joy in my three examples—would be a useful tool. We could see an expression on the beloved's face and know that the arrangement of lineaments was not "love" but "politeness" or just "gratitude" because we picked up the check for dinner.

Perhaps the device depicting the abstraction could make use of abstraction. That is, the device might have the properties of a seismograph, judging the effects of an abstract noun by a kind of telemetry, an idea was suggested to me when I ran across a sentence in the beginning of Andrew Sean Greer's novel, *The Story of a Marriage*. "Perhaps you cannot see a marriage," Greer writes in the novel's fifth paragraph, "like those giant heavenly bodies invisible to the human eye, it can only be charted by its gravity, its pull on everything around it." Perhaps marriage, divorce, childhood, and other socially-contingent states could be represented not as images as such but as lines on an oscilloscope or graphed by the X of possibility and the Y of reality.

Beyond charts and emoticons, another way to visualize abstract nouns is through the proper ones generated by corporate logos. To illustrate: Driving the six or so miles from Pasadena to my house in northeast Los Angeles I saw the sphere that represents AT&T, the Starbucks mermaid, the Pegasus of Mobil gas, and the target of Target, among others. What I'm saying is that for this class of abstract nouns there is a buy-in, you've got to be a corporation with a logo or a country with a flag. While the old image of Justice with a pair of scales still holds, as do others of that ilk, the most prevalent and vibrant visualized nouns are the corporate logos, the stripes of Adidas and the Texaco star, and so forth.

Sometimes I think I've become a sort of walking VD of abstract nouns. It's a perceptual thing. I've become more adept at noticing corporate logos, road signs (are they labels or symbols?), and even the momentary, crystalline congealing of emotion of another's face. I've even found the abstract noun in the concrete one, seeing chairs, bushes, buildings or whatever as distillations of some large categorical types—the crude everyday representation of Platonic ideals, if you will. Perhaps it's just another way of saying that my Visual Dictionary of abstract nouns lives in the world. It is everywhere and nowhere. It is eternal and fleeting like a smile I see passing on the street and I think: happiness.

Chalk Strike

Let the lightning be
A chalk strike
Against the tree stand,
White mark, ashen hash,
Absent fire's fierce roar
Akin to a mortar round.

The strike tonight
Slipped the white pine
From its skinny dress,
Ripped a swathe of bark
Tip to toe, its fire grounded
And muffled in leaf litter.
We all heard its electric slam
As it straightened our spines.

Fifty feet from the pine,
Chalk white, ashen,
We hunker, unfit
For lightning
And its electric stitch.

THE ANTI-TYGER

*Physicists at CERN, the Swiss particle physics laboratory,
have created anti-atoms made of matter's opposite, anti-matter.*

Anti-tyger Anti-tyger, burning bright,
In the anti-forests of the anti-night;
What immortal anti-hand or anti-eye
Could frame thy fearful anti-symmetry?

In what distant anti-deeps or anti-skies,
Burnt the anti-fire of thine anti-eyes?
On what anti-wings dare anti-he aspire?
What the anti-hand, dare seize the anti-fire?

And what anti-shoulder, & what anti-art,
Could twist the anti-sinews of thy anti-heart?
And when thy anti-heart began to beat,
What dread anti-hand? & what dread anti-feet?

What the anti-hammer? what the anti-chain,
In what anti-furnace was thy anti-brain?
What the anti-anvil? What dread anti-grasp,
Dare its deadly anti-terrors clasp?

When the anti-stars threw down their anti-spears
And water'd anti-heaven with their anti-tears:
Did anti-he smile his anti-work to see?
Did anti-he who made the anti-Lamb make anti-thee?

Anti-tyger Anti-tyger burning bright,
In the anti-forests of the anti-night:
What immortal anti-hand or anti-eye,
Dare frame thy fearful anti-symmetry?

LIGHT YEARS

The grownups sat on the porch
and talked, after the supper dishes
were done and before we turned in.
Insects in the oaks, the screech owl
some nights, a whip-poor-will, cows
murmuring and bumping in the barn.
A single lamp in the north room.

Grady rocked on the end of the porch
where he could flick ashes. His long draws
in the dark created tiny short-lived red stars.
This was years before the rural electric
strung the power lines to our region
of Wayne County, Mississippi.

I'd stand alone in the north pasture
studying the Milky Way. It was scary,
almost. Cold, remote, silent, luminous,
dimmed only by the lightning bugs.
So close overhead I felt I could touch it,
like reaching into a hopper of raw cotton.
Grady's ash glowed night after night.

It glows now, sixty-five years ago.
That's an astronomical distance.

The Stone

after Charles Simic

feel its epochal weight
count its rings if you dare
rocks will never gain wings and fly
like those who came so much later
rather there is the pull of gravity
to its blank eroded surface—
there are no questions here at all
nor answers, this mere stone—
it lies placid, uncomplaining
absorbed for another eon alone
yet its life touches other forces
the blindness of its solidity only
illusory, the light off it diffused
like the moon reflecting on others,
the lines of quartz here write history—
stars are visible in its crystals
where they usually hide.

Twist, twist

Twist, twist
said the rain to the severance pay
the sun the micro the macro the scopic the scope-ic and every last inch of your
edge-less breathing bones of birthing drones

Just long long lists of everything i've done, done, done dizzyingly destroying the delusion of my
four front teeth and the forefront of my forehead (the one keeping my brain in safe and sound)

Just keep drilling your delicious design into the doors and windows of your dressing gowns

Just memories in boxes and boxes inside birdcages
just sounds and whispers and twirls of heads and
and after it all, and under it all, we were just boxes and trundle cases
we were just dreams and designs and decorated dimes

OCTOBER 5th

Today I ran to where I could taste the sauce of the morning sunrise. Star blue syrup across the sky and a field full of sunflowers, where stillborn apples fell from the trees.

I hide amongst the trees in hiking shoes and sweat, where the bugs lie down with snakes and speak the realities of all that is unspeakable; a language of alphabet soup mixed with wild mushrooms, I suppose.

A black insect spreads his wings, sharp as whiskers cutting like knives, will they fold or will they fly? Shards of glass spider webs hang in the brush, as jealous spiders count their corpse.

October is a sinking ship; winter will soon gobble you up.
Say good bye to dandelions and orchards as they fall asleep. When it comes, and it will, barking dogs will not sleep, angry fleas will freeze and that wind, that wind that grabs your ears and throat, will make your chimney yodel.

And no matter how much you dream of summer, with your pumpkin cooked, roasted marshmallow thoughts, they will not dance in your winter bones.

You cannot dream when the sun disappears.

Adam and Me

Oh, my God. Adam's coming back soon. It's not that I'm not happy about it. He's my boyfriend. I'm delighted to see him again after five months of separation.

He's been in the US to work at an affiliate company. We've been talking by email all the time, but it's different to be with him physically. I haven't been able to put my arm around his waist. I haven't been able to touch his face. I haven't been able to feel his arm around my shoulders.

We haven't been able to kiss or make love. We've been talking about everything about everything during the last five months. So I know all about his life over there. He told me that when he was writing something with a pencil at a party and asked one of his new American friends, 'Can I have a rubber?' The friend brought a condom with a big grin on his face, saying, 'Who's the lucky lady?'

He said that when he asked for chips at a bar, his American friend brought a packet of crisps. He said, 'No, I meant chips.' She said, 'So I got chips for you here,' with a quizzical facial expression. He said, 'That's not chips.' She said, 'It's chips.' He said, 'No, it isn't.' She said, 'Yes, it is.' He, 'No, it isn't.' She, 'Yes, it is.' They repeated it for a few times and finally they found out chips meant French fries in the UK and crisps in the US.

He's been having a good confusing time over there.

But we can't touch each other.

The contract we made when we decided to become steady about two years ago says that we will not get fatter. It's quiet common these days. Look around you. There are so many fat ugly people. We didn't want to be like them.

My friend, Beth's contract is that they will never eat cucumbers. Cucumbers can look like big dead worms. I understand her dislike of them.

My neighbour, Timothy has a contract saying comb the hair before eating. I know nobody would want to eat with a person with messy hair.

The contract of Adam's cousin, Jordan, is always walk on the right side of stairs. Yes, the left side might be broken.

Now, Adam is coming back. Why am I in a panic? Because I am fatter. During the five months without him, I couldn't help eating every time I missed him, which was a lot.

When I couldn't sleep, thinking about him, I felt restless and got up and started eating, like a baguette with cheese I had bought for a part of my lunch next day. When I had a dream

about him and woke up feeling lonely, I brought a big bag of crisps to bed and ate it. When I saw a couple kissing in the street, I went back home and baked a frozen chicken pie and ate it. When I just thought about him, I ate a packet of cheese crackers. Every time I had extra food, I thought it would all right because I would eat less the next day, it wasn't a big deal. The next day, I forgot about eating less or sometimes ate another extra. It was often like I was in a vicious circle: the more I ate, the more I felt bad and had to eat to forget about it. Then I felt worse and had to eat to ease my nerves. I knew I was putting some weight on, but Adam's return was still months ahead. When I finally had to buy bigger skirts and trousers, I realised it was serious, it would be hard to lose that much weight. So naturally, I felt bad and had to eat.

Just two days before Adam said he was coming home sooner than he had expected, I sighed and also wondered how I had been able to fit into my old skirts and jeans. They looked so thin. My bottom used to be small like that of a teen-age boy. I was proud of it.

Adam loved it. Now, it was obviously a woman's, a fat woman's. I now don't want to look at mirrors. Walking in the street, I see a mirror in a shop window, I look away. Where is my old slender body? It's deeply buried under the thick fat. I sometimes blamed him. Because he wasn't with me, I was getting fatter. Then I felt guilty for blaming him and had to eat. I've been in hell.

I don't know if it was good that we had decided to use only email, not Skype. When we went through 'keep in touch' in THE LIST vol. 2, we almost chose Skype among the others: letters, telephone, email, dreams, physically visiting, text, and so on. We really wanted to see each other's faces while he was in the US. Looking at his beautiful blue eyes, I thought if I didn't see those eyes for several months or more, I might fall in love with him again when I finally see him, so might he with me, then we would be able to upgrade our relationship and draw up one more contract. Two contracts! That means our relationship is more than secure. 'Why don't we talk by email?' I suggested to him, when he was going to say no by opening his mouth and lifting his hand with the palm towards me. I clasped his extended hand, put my finger on his mouth, and said, 'Then we could fall in love with each other again and make one more contract. Isn't it fabulous?' His eyes lit up, got more beautiful if it was possible, and he nodded. By email it was then.

But, but, if we had been using Skype, if he had been seeing my face every day, I wouldn't have dared get fatter, I would've stopped myself from eating too much, I wouldn't have wanted to show my swollen face next day.

I'm fat. I'm three stone fatter. My face is round, my tummy is big, my legs are thick, my fingers are chubby. I've broken our contract. He'll leave me.

No. No.

I've got to get thinner. I have to lose three stone very quickly.

'Is everything OK over there? Has anything changed?' he asked me by email yesterday. I answered, 'Of course not. Everything is the same, waiting for you.' How guilty I felt.

Luckily, our contract doesn't say that we don't lie to each other.

I checked THE LIST vol. 5 for diets.

Fasting caught my eye. If I don't eat until I lose three stone, I'll be all right. But it takes time. The book says about forty days to lose twenty-five kilos, which is more than three stone, I think. The weight loss is more than enough, but it takes too long. Adam'll be back and see me, still fatter.

I need a more effective diet.

Then I found about hanging upside down. There are two ways. One is lying on a purpose-built table that can change its angle from horizontal to vertical. I can use it vertical all the time. The problem is that my small flat has hardly room for the table and it's very expensive. When I almost ordered it, thinking there were no other choices and I could move my bed to the wall and squeeze it in a corner of my room, I found gravity boots that can hooked into a metal bar stuck in a door frame. That was it. It was more effective and less expensive. THE LIST said that one can lose two stone in a day. It was good. I would use it one and half days to lose three stone. If it didn't quite work, I'd just keep hanging upside down a bit longer. Easy. I ordered it for special fast delivery and got it right next day: gravity boots and an iron bar. I couldn't stop myself from caressing them, especially the boots, as if they were a lover. In a way, they were. They would keep Adam with me. They were like my cupids.

That reminds me of Timothy, a friend of my neighbour, who told me that he looked like a cupid with his white-blond hair and short, chubby body. The main thing she told me was what happened to him in a car accident. He was run over by a car one night and his arm left his body. It just lay beside his body lying on the black street. He picked his arm up and put it back on. The driver said he should let a doctor do it. But as he was easy-going, he didn't care. The driver's worry became true, his fixed arm was a bit askew. The driver offered to take him to the hospital, but he said not to worry, his arm was back on anyway. He couldn't use it as well as before, since it wasn't properly adjusted. Because it was his left arm and he was righthanded, he said 'Ciao,' to the driver and walked home. He was a bit of a crooked cupid afterwards.

I call in sick at work, put the TV remote control in my pocket with a flap and a button (I don't want to lose it), and go to the loo. THE LIST said that one cannot urinate while hanging upside down. I wouldn't do it even if I could. How? Men could connect a tube to their penises and pee, I think. But women? I don't think so.

After the loo, I put the metal bar over a door, put the gravity boots on, bring a chair under

the bar, climb on it, manage to lift my legs up to the bar and hook the boots, and push the chair away with my hand. It reminded me of hanging, I mean suicide by hanging, not upside down but right-side up. If I had a rope around my neck and just kicked the chair away, I would be in a death agony now. I shiver. I am not killing myself. I am just losing some weight.

Then I notice that I've forgotten to turn the TV on. No problem I put my hand in the pocket with a flap, grab the remote and slowly bring it out. I don't know it is so hard to do easy things like getting a remote from a pocket when I'm hanging upside down. The gravity is against me. When I'm on my feet and drop something on the floor, I can pick it up right away. Now I can't.

I make sure my grip on the remote is firm and aim it to the TV. A cooking show is on. A nice-looking upside-down man is stirring a pot, talking to an upside-down woman in a dark-pink dress that matches her coloured lips. Not interested. I used to cook every day and got sick of it. I just buy frozen food and microwave it. What's the point of cooking, while you can get professionally-done food at any supermarket? Adam loves cooking and is good at it. The food he cooked for me before leaving was lasagne. It was good. When he took it out of the oven, the thick sauce between the yellow sheet-pasta was still bubbling. And the smell! That grabbed my nose and yanked it to the food. How I ate it! He smiled at my healthy appetite and kissed my cheek. Was it the beginning of my getting fatter? No. He was still with me then. When he was here and I happened to eat a bit too much, it was easy to eat less next day. No problem. He said the other day by email that he missed cooking, he couldn't cook because he was staying at a hotel. He ate at a restaurant or a café all the time. I'd love it, but he didn't. We're different.

I try to change the channel and almost drop the remote. Phew. I look down or up (it should be down, but I can't help feeling it is up, because it's above my head) at the floor to see how far it is. There is no way I can reach the floor if I drop something there. The carpet is out of my reach. If I were one foot taller, I might be able to reach it. Adam could. But he doesn't need radical dieting. He's been slim all the time, going to a gym three times a week, even now in the US. Very dedicated. Me? I just don't eat too much. We're different in this way, too.

The next channel I get is for children: an upside-down cartoon with an upside-down witch and an upside-down wolf. That'll do. I like cartoons. Some are silly, but most of them are very imaginative. This one looks like a traditional fairy tale with modern things, like cars and the Internet. It's cleverly done. And I think I can get used to the upside-down characters soon, since I'm upside down as well. Adam doesn't like cartoons. He said they are all silly. Some are, I admit, but some are good, a few are pretty good, actually, like the one on now. I'm enjoying it. He likes computer games. No, he doesn't like them. He is hooked on them. Almost every bit of spare time he has, he plays them. Bubble Shooter is his love at the moment. He's been playing it

every day for the last eight months. He himself is amazed because he hasn't got sick of it and moved to another game, like he did before. I'm not keen on computer games. They are silly. I like some toys, like chatting teeth. He doesn't like them. He likes Dickens; I don't. I like Angela Carter; he doesn't. He's interested in climbing. I'm interested in swimming. He's a cat lover. I'm a dog person.

We are so different, as different as people can be. It would be impossible to find somebody else who is more different from me. That is why we're getting along so well. We haven't had a row once. We can't, because our opinions and feelings are too different to be angry about. That makes our meetings thrilling: what kind of things we should talk about, what films we see, what TV we watch. We don't get used to each other. Because we are so apart, we are so together.

My cheeks are trying to cover my eyes. The muscles or the fat of my cheeks are trying to slip down over my eyes. The gravity is pulling them down. My eyes might be thinner and slant like a Chinese. I hope they'll be back to normal when my feet are on the floor. But it's not a big deal. As long as I get thinner, I won't care if my eyes are different. But my cheeks are really pushing my eyes to the floor. Oh, don't worry about it.

My room looks different from the upside down position. It looks bigger and somehow as if it belongs to somebody else. The moss-green carpet on the floor right above my head looks shaggier and has a lot of tiny things, like sand grains and dust balls. Have I lived in this dirty room? I Hoover it every Saturday. When I've finished the diet, I'll clean it before anything, I've decided.

The wall by the door, by where I am hanging, is dirty as well. It looks like something brown has trickled down there. I don't smoke. It can't be nicotine. When I had a part-time job as a cleaner at a pub when I was a student, I had to wipe off lots of brown stuff on the walls. Smoking was allowed inside then. The cloth I was using soon got brown or dark yellow. When I washed it, the water got yellowish. It was disgusting. All the smokers must have inhaled those brown-yellow things into their lungs. No wonder they got lung cancer, I thought.

Why do my walls have the brown-yellow thingy? I always kick out people who want to smoke in my room. What's that yucky stuff? I'll clean it right after hoovering my carpet when I've finished the diet. I'll be busy when I'm slimmer.

My legs start getting pins and needles as THE LIST described. My blood is having a hard time to get up to my legs. When I'm right-side up, my heart doesn't have to work too hard to send my blood down to my legs because of gravity's help. Now, my heart has to work alone, no, it has to do it against gravity. My poor legs don't have enough blood now. THE LIST said that

makes one's legs slender. I feel my legs are already getting thinner. Every tingle puffs out the fat cells to the air, I feel. I used to hate pins and needles in my legs, because it felt as if my legs belonged to somebody else and I couldn't help feeling the skins might become something like crinkled papers. Now I welcome it with open arms. It's already working. So quick. I might be able to get down to the floor in less than a day.

The tree just outside of my window looks funny. Its branches with lots of green leaves spread upwards, so its shape is like a triangle. It looks top heavy, like a badly-made teapot. It might topple over when there is a storm. Now, it looks like an upright bellows: the trunk is the nozzle and the leaves are the flexible bag. Or a pastry tube with the tip on the top. Or a dress with a long flared skirt and a tiny bodice. I prefer the upside-down tree. Maybe I should live this way. Then I can eat as much as I want to without worrying about getting fatter. I'll think about it later.

The cartoon has finished. What's next? I should've stuck today's TV program on the wall. Something has started. I missed hearing the title. I don't watch TV at this time of a day. I'm usually at work then. On TV now, a bossy woman, who yelled at her maid, asks her husband to what to wear to take a walk to the park. He selects blues jeans and a red shirt, nothing special. She put them on and leaves the house with him, both smiling. What kind of program is that? I'll change the channel.

Oops! I've dropped the remote. Trying to press a button for another channel with my right thumb, I happened to touch the volume button, which made the sound too loud. I managed to make it softer, then was going to press the right button. My eye sight got blurry and my fingers numb for a second, without any reasons I could think of. Then the remote left my hand and went right in front of my face and down to the floor. If I were quicker, I could've grabbed it with my other hand. I'm slow. I'll ask Adam if he's slow or quick. He must be quick, because I'm slow. Another different thing. Oh, how I miss him.

From now on, I'll have to keep watching the same channel. Now an old woman is zipping around on a folding scooter. Her grey hair is floating from her head. Her long skirt is whipping around her legs. She just almost hit a running dog. The boy chasing the dog stops and watches her dashing figure, with his mouth wide open. That's a good idea. Old people should use folding scooters to move around more easily. I'll tell my granny.

The fridge's thermostat kicks in. The buzzing sound, which I don't usually notice, is so loud to my ears. It's like thousands of wires vibrating together. The fridge is not in this room. It's in the kitchen. But the sound is so loud. There might be something wrong with the fridge. It might explode. No, fridges don't explode, do they, even if they are broken? I'll ask my next-door neighbour about it, Mississippi. Yes, that's his name and he is good at fixing things. I've

got many things to do when I've finished the diet. I should've put a pen and paper in my flapped pocket. I don't know if I can remember everything. My head feels heavy now, heavy with my blood. My heart must be having a tough time to get my blood back from my head, which isn't above it now. I feel hot in my face as if I've drunk too much beer.

An ambulance goes by outside the window. The noise starts soft and is getting bigger and bigger and it just passes the window and is going away. Like a huge wave, a tsunami wave, it comes and goes. The sound ricocheted in my blood-filled brain, which might've wanted to spit the sound from my ear. My blood is throbbing along with my overworking heart. My face must be red like ketchup.

THE LIST didn't say this. Is it only me? The book said not to do it if you have a weak heart, eye diseases, or are pregnant or obese. I think my heart is all right and I am definitely not pregnant, because my period finished only two days ago. My eyes are OK, except I'm near sighted, which wouldn't cause a problem, I think. And I'm not obese. I'm fatter than before, but I'm far from obese. I haven't gained enough weight to become obese. No, no. So, I thought I was qualified. But it must be only natural. Since my head is lower, at the lowest in my body, my blood must accumulate there. It's only natural. It's only natural.

I just remember my friend, Monica, told me some time ago that her friend, Jezebel, had a strange disease that made her body produce too much blood, as a result her body became swollen and red and boggy. Before a doctor fixed it, she had to walk very carefully not to have haemorrhage both inside and outside of her body, because her blood vessels were stretched to the maximum; it was easy to break and bleed. While the tablet given to her by the doctor had an effect on her body, her excess blood was sucked out by a machine. When a nurse came back to her, a bit too much of her blood had been removed; the machine had been working too well, opposite to malfunction. She was translucent white. The nurse could see a chair vaguely through her. The nurse hurriedly put some blood back into her body and she was all right after a while. I'm feeling my head is Jezebel's before her blood was taken away. It's not that I've seen her, but because Monica was good at telling stories with lots of hand gestures and different voice tones, I could easily picture her red bloated body. My head must be like hers now. But I must be better than her, because the amount of blood in my body is correct, not like hers. Still I wonder if I am going to bleed. I don't think so, if I don't move much. I can't move much in this upside down position, anyway.

'Raymond! Come back here!' Some woman shouts outside.

A small boy starts crying, no, he starts bawling. It's loud.

'Raymond! This's the last time! Come back here, right now!' she bellows,

His cry intensifies.

I can't stand that. Their voices are ringing in my distended head, from one cell to another, snapping each one of them, I feel. I don't want my brain bloody. Why do some people have such loud voices? They should wear silencers on their mouths like the one on the trumpet.

What if my head doesn't shrink back? I don't know if my head is truly bigger now, but I can't help feeling it is huge like a balloon full of blood instead of air. What if Adam sees my swollen red head?

Would he still want to keep our contract? He could break it, because of my change. I don't know what to do. THE LIST definitely didn't say how to reduce the head size. I don't know.

Hang one. I'm on a diet and shouldn't worry about the contract right now. And when I'm thinner standing on the floor with my two feet, I'll think about it. I can't now. My head is too big to do anything.

The TV program seems to have changed again. It's now showing something moving fast from right to left. It's all so blurry. I can't tell what is moving fast, let alone what's going on there. It doesn't matter.

'Mummy!' the boy shouts to his mother outside.

It's loud, but I don't get bothered so much now. Are my ears full of blood? Is that why it doesn't affect me much now? Is that why the TV looks hazy?

My heart is working hard, I can feel it now. It's throbbing behind my ribcage hard and fast like a drum hit by a crazy drummer. It must be trying to send my blood to my legs. I don't think it can suck my blood from my head. Can hearts take out blood from something? I don't think so. All they do is send the blood out. Then how can my blood go up back to my heart? It must be so easy to send my blood down to my head now. But doesn't my heart realise that all of my blood sent to my head hasn't come back? I don't think hearts can think, but isn't there some kind of a fool-safe system there? It doesn't matter. I feel my head is pressed with the enormous amount of my blood and is about to explode.

THE LIST didn't mention this.

I can hardly open my mouth. My cheeks are so swollen that they are pushing my mouth from both sides. My lips are pouting as if I were a bad comedian who is going to kiss somebody. My head pulsates every second of my heartbeat. I'm at a loud percussion concert. It's so hot and hot. My legs are cold, but it doesn't matter now. My head. My head. Big and hot. Enormous and blazing.

Something trickles down from my eyes. It goes into my hair. Am I crying? Without my knowledge? It drops to the floor. To the moss-green carpet. It looks dark. My tears are dark now? Another drops. It's red. Blood. I'm crying blood. Blood. My nose is full. It brims out.

Dribbles down to my forehead. Into my hair. Drops. Red. Blood. The carpet is darker. Under me. My ears. Full. Crawls down. Into my hair. To the carpet. Blood. My mouth. Full. Gushes out. To the floor. Blood. My eyes. My nose. My ears. My mouth. Blood. Blood. Blood. Blood. Torrent of blood. To the carpet. Blood. Blood. Blood.

The next day, I try to clean the carpet. I should've done it yesterday, but I had no energy then. I just slept by the puddle of my blood, like an abandoned bow. Although I'll try everything to get rid of my blood, I don't think I can clean it completely. There is so much, wide spread, and still a bit wet despite almost a day has passed since it got bloody. Probably I'll have to buy another carpet. I'll get a darkred one this time just in case.

I'm happy. Looking at my hand and arm that are rubbing the sponge on the soaped carpet, I feel elated. They are thinner, a lot thinner than the ones I had yesterday, before the hanging upside down. Was it only yesterday or two days ago? I can't remember when I started the diet. It doesn't matter. Not only my hands and arms are thinner. My legs are much more slender. My stomach is flatter. My bottom is smaller. It's a miracle! No, it's not. It's just the result of the diet. It's only natural. I've been rewarded by the hard time I had. I'll see Adam with a big smile on my face. I'll hug him tight. He'll kiss me for a long time. We'll be together again. Adam. Adam. I miss you. But not for long. I'll see you tomorrow.

When I first saw myself in the mirror in the bathroom this morning, I thought I saw a ghost. My face was white. It was thinner, but I didn't notice it at first. It was white. I'd been to a tanning salon some times and my skin had been light brown. It was white now. I wiped the mirror with my hand, which was white as well. I looked down. My legs were white too. I was white. Not just white. I was bluish white. Have I died, I thought. Am I dead? Am I a ghost? I checked THE LIST, which said that you might be a little pale afterwards. I didn't read that part when I was choosing a diet method. A little pale? A little? I'm bluish white.

Then I spotted that I was a lot thinner. Yippee!

It doesn't matter about my colour. I am slender again. No, I am skinny. Besides, I'm not translucent white like Jezebel, a friend of my friend. I'm just solid blue white. Things can't be seen through me. Can they? I lift my arm in front of me. I can't see the mirror behind it. Good. I'm not translucent.

I'm going to see Adam tomorrow. I am more slender than before. We might fall in love with each other again and make another contract. My future is bright.

I look out through the window. A pair of trainers is dangling from a power line by its tied

shoelaces. Who's done that up high there? It looks funny. The red trainers sway a bit in a soft wind. It is as if they are enjoying a ride on an invisible swing. Two sparrows fly by. They might be a couple like us. Do birds make contracts like people?

Life is good.

I'm at the airport, waiting for my dear Adam. It's been five months. Although it's earlier than I expected, it's so exciting to see him again. Adam is coming back. My Adam is coming back to me.

Lots of people are around me, looking at the gate where their friends and relatives are coming out. How many of them are waiting for their loved ones? I mean not blood-related ones but boyfriends or girlfriends. How many? And how many of them are going to make another contract? Not many, I guess. It's not easy to write another contract. You have to be a hundred percent for sure about your relationship.

Adam is coming. My Adam is coming back to me.

The woman in a yellow dress next to me pushes my shoulder and says sorry and pushes me again. She doesn't look at me this time, let alone apologise. It doesn't matter.

Adam is coming. My Adam is coming back to me.

I as a more slender woman am going to see Adam soon. Pretty soon. My heart beats faster than usual. It's not like when I was upside down. Now it's that something is pressing my breasts gently from inside and my nipples are tingling.

This morning, facing the mirror in the bathroom, I thought of putting heavy make-up on to conceal my bluish-white face. It wasn't just the skin colour but there were big purple bags under my eyes and my eyelids are purple as well and my lips were purple too. But my face was thinner, no more swollen cheeks. And then I thought I didn't have to put eye shadows or lipsticks on; I already had some, which won't go runny or smudge if I cried or kissed. Adam might like this natural make-up. It might be trendy in the US now.

So, I'm here without any artificial colouring on my face; incidentally my eyes aren't like a Chinese'. So at least my eyes are the same as before, the same as the ones Adam last saw.

When the woman who pushed me twice glances my face, she flinches. She must be old-fashioned.

She doesn't know about this trendy colour.

Adam is coming. Adam is coming.

'Sarah!' That's my name. It's Adam at last.

A tall skinny man walks fast to me from the gate. The black bag he is carrying in his hand

bounces against his leg.

‘Ooooh!’ We both say at the same time, pointing each other’s face.

He’s got purple eye lids, purple eye bags, purple lips, like me. His skin is bluish white, like mine.

He must have done the same diet as I did. He must have got fat and needed a quick diet. Just like me. He must have missed me as much as I did.

We hug and laugh.

We look at each other’s face and laugh again.

We are a happy couple.

FOG MAYBES

The thought that grows in his mind
as the fog horn wails deep in the night,
is this: that maybe all choices are lived.
Maybe dilemmas are only
those last conscious moments before cells divide.

Maybe the less-traveled road in the yellow wood
always yields two parts of a chooser,
one that goes the well-trod path
and never slows to write a poem.

Maybe every time a choice is made, both choices form
and spawn another world springing from the choice
that doesn't seem to be taken.
And awareness is only one branch of what is real.

Maybe in a world somewhere
is a part of you who stops listening
to the fog horn's repetition,
doesn't go to the window to peer at the white fog
that curls against it, but simply --
drifts back to sleep
and never stops to ponder this thought.

Only, maybe in a dream,
some of us can tap the other choices
and see how things are going there.

But, where are these other worlds -- really?
New worlds the other choices would have made,
and what a myriad of worlds -

what with everybody's choices
colliding the way they would.
Where would all the new worlds fit?

Maybe they'd be too close to be perceived,
filling a drop of water dripping from a pine needle,
or maybe instantly far away
at the end of the universe in the cumulation of stars,
making that hazy light that clouds the telescopes.

Maybe, but what does it matter at all?
There really isn't a need to know
the course of other roads, beyond some vague sense
that every alternative is possible
and might do just as well – or even better,
perhaps, in reaching the end of things.

Kent Berg grew up in an expatriate boarding school in the Japanese countryside. He writes and teaches in Seattle.

Jihan Bok is a recent graduate who hopes to one day find the meaning of life in a bag of Ruffles. She has a rather large aversion to sidewalks and enjoys eating like there is no tomorrow.

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Christa Boyd-Nafstad is a mom, wife, vegan, attorney, writer, poet, and runner. She is more successful at some of these things than others. Christa was born in New Orleans and raised in Texas. Her work has been published by the Voices Project, Cliterature, American Bar Association, Anuk Sastra, and Fordham Int'l Law Journal.

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Kyle Brown writes fiction and poetry. He graduated with a BA in English from Purdue University. His work has appeared in Midwestern Gothic, Word Riot, Spork Press, and elsewhere.

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Scott Carpenter is an English major at Goucher College outside of Baltimore, where he has studied with Johnny Turtle and Elizabeth Spires; during a recent semester abroad in England he also studied with Norfolk poet Andrea Holland at the University of East Anglia. Scott is a member of Goucher's literary magazine, *The Preface*, to which he regularly contributes. He has been published in the online publication *The Glass Coin* and writes book reviews for JMWW.com.

Ariel Carter-Rodriguez is a recent graduate of Whitman College and is originally from Portland, Oregon. Although she graduated with honors in Psychology, her passion is writing, as demonstrated by coursework in English and tutoring first-year college students as a Student Academic Adviser. Her biracial background prompts her to peer into subjects that offer playful inquisitiveness, cultural tension, and has a particular fondness for the raw moments of childhood.

Alexander Carver is a produced playwright and published writer, recently in 'Zyzyva'.

Scott Chalupa writes to live in Houston, TX, where he serves as co-editor for *Glass Mountain*. A winner of the Howard Moss Poetry Prize, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Two Hawks Quarterly*, *The Alitheia*, and the *Houston Poetry Fest Anthology 2013*, among others. He was featured in the Houston Public Poetry reading series. In addition, he has been spotted teaching workshops for the Houston Public Libraries' LGBT committee and the Houston Alzheimer's Association.

Patrick Cole's stories recently appeared in *Timber* and in *Conclave*, and others are forthcoming in the *Writing That Risks* anthology from Red Bridge Press and in *The Conium Review*. His work has been published in numerous other literary journals, including *Parcel* (a Pushcart Prize nominee), *High Plains Literary Review* (also a Pushcart Prize nominee), *Agni* online, *Nimrod International*, *34th Parallel*, and *turnrow*. His one-act play was a finalist in the Knock International Play Competition and was produced in Seattle.

Meeah Williams is a a freelance writer and graphic artist from Brooklyn, NY. Her short fiction and poetry has most recently appeared or is forthcoming from *The Milo Review*, *Per Contra*, *Wilde*, *Noir Nation*, *The Subterranean Quarterly*, and *Innsmouth Magazine*.

John Cullen's work has appeared in *The MacGuffin*, *Grist*, *IthacaLit*, *The Cincinnati Poetry Review* and his chapbook *Town Crazy* recently won the 2013 Slipstream chapbook competition.

T Francis Curran lives in Westchester NY with his wife and daughter.

Christopher David DiCicco loves his wife and children—and writing short stories in the attic of his home in Yardley, Pennsylvania. His work has recently appeared in Nib Magazine, Intellectual Refuge, Sundog Lit, Cease, Cows! and Bohemia Arts & Literary Magazine—and is forthcoming in The Cossack Review, WhiskeyPaper, Flash Fiction Online and Bartleby Snopes. You can follow him on twitter @ChrisDiCicco or visit him at www.cddicicco.com

Edward A. Dougherty is the author of *Backyard Passages* (FootHills Publishing, 2012) as well as four other chapbooks, and of the books *Pilgrimage to a Ginkgo Tree* (WordTech, 2008) and *Part Darkness, Part Breath* (Plain View Press, 2008). After finishing his MFA in Creative Writing in Bowling Green, Ohio, Dougherty taught at BGSU and was poetry editor of the *Mid-American Review*. In 1993, he and his spouse traveled to Hiroshima to be volunteer directors of the World Friendship Center where they served for two and a half years, witnessing the fiftieth anniversaries of the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They now live and work in Corning, New York, a place defined by the confluence of three rivers and a glass company you may have heard of.

Billie Duncan has had a long and varied career as an author, reporter, entertainer, photographer, artist and political activist. She is the author of three full-length books of poetry and is included in many journals and anthologies. Her first book, *Beneath the Desk*, was chosen for inclusion in the Harris Collection of American Poetry and Plays at Brown University. She is the PR and Communications Director of Houston Poetry Fest, the Houston organizer of 100,000 Poets for Change, and a founding member of Houston Poetry Summit. Her articles, reviews, and photography have appeared in dozens of magazines and newspapers.

Laura Eklund is an artist and poet. I live and work in Olive Hill, Ky. with the poet George Eklund. We have four children together; Waylon, Thomas, Fiona, and Marina. I've been writing poetry since I learned to read and write, which was about third grade when the words starting coming and forming themselves. I write in order to breathe and survive. My favorite things to do include reading and writing poetry and spending time with my family. I also paint. You can find out more about me @ <http://www.lauraeklund.org> or follow me on facebook @ The Art of Laura Eklund. I have published in many journals including ABZ, Black Warrior Review, Southern Women's Review, Pegasus, and Slipstream. Wind Publications just published her third book of poems: *Song of Lisbon*.

Mike Ekunno is an award-winning creative writer, poet and freelance book editor living in Abuja, Nigeria's capital city. His work in the recent past has been as senior speechwriter and aide to Nigeria's last Information and Communications Minister. His other short stories, poem and essays have appeared in the African Roar Anthology 2013, Warscapes, bioStories, Nigeria Monthly, The Muse, BRICKrhetoric, Cigale Literary Magazine, Sentinel Literary Quarterly, Ascent Aspirations Magazine, Bullet Pen and Storymoja. The last two publications were as winning entries in continent-wide contests. He enjoys reading the Old Testament at his leisure. Rites of Passage is the story of one of the feminine types that at once enchant, mystify and vanish like a mirage. It is a story which will appeal to readers looking for an African story which resonates nicely with them. Written under the influence of Yanni's number of the same title, feedback from some critics affirm its spiritual affinity with the number. This prose-jazz cross-over is one of Mike's multimedia experiments.

Barrie Evans finished an MFA in Creative Writing at Minnesota State University, Mankato in December, 2013. This is his first publication.

Louise Fabiani has a Master's in Environmental Studies and works in Montreal as a science writer. She is the author of *The Green Alembic*, a book of poetry. Her poems, reviews, essays, articles and photography have appeared in *Seed*, *Prism International*, the *Times Literary Supplement*, the *Globe & Mail*, *Agenda*, *blueLINE*, *U.S. 1 Worksheets*, and *Alimentum*, among others. She is currently seeking a publisher for her very philosophical (zombie-free) post-apocalyptic novel. She speculates on the brain-diet connection in human evolution at omnivorebrain.blogspot.ca

Andrea Fekete has never published a short story, but does have one novel out—*Waters Run Wild* and one poetry collection—I Held a Morning. She graduates with her MFA in creative writing from WV Wesleyan College in December. She has one MA from Marshall University in English. Her publications include but are not limited to magazines such as *ABZ*, *The Barbaric Yawp*, *The Smithville Journal*, *The Virginia Adversaria* and *The Adirondack Review*.

Thomas Fuchs has spent much of his career writing television documentaries and some print non-fiction. Over the past few years, he has been enjoying the freedom of imagination and invention afforded by the writing of fiction. He can be reached at fuchsfoxxx@cs.com.

Brad Garber has published poetry/essays in *Cream City Review*, *Alchemy*, *Fireweed*, *Uphook Press*, *Front Range Review*, *theNewerYork*, *Ray's Road Review*, *Flowers & Vortexes*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Generation Press*, *Penduline Press*, *Dead Flowers*, *New Verse News*, *The Oak*

Literary Magazine, Temenos, Hoot & Hare, The Ilanot Review, Third Wednesday, Sugar Mule, Whirlwind Review, Gambling the Aisle, Dark Matter Journal, Sundog Lit, Diversion Press, Unshod Quills, Meat for Tea, Mercury, The Meadow, Shuf Poetry, Post Poetry Magazine, Foliate Embodied Effigies, Sugar Mule, and/or Poetry Journal and Great Weather For Media. Nominee: 2013 Pushcart Prize for poem, “Where We May Be Found.”

Frank Geurrandeno is a Roanoke College undergraduate studying Creative Writing. Early in his career, he has found success with poetry and short fiction in various print and online publications including Teen Ink, The East Jasmine Review, twice in Haiku Journal, and two poems in a local anthology entitled Voices from Smith Mountain Lake. Frank has even had a small literary piece featured as the “Cornershot of the Day” in The Roanoke Times.”

Lily Goderstad is from Roseville, MN. She graduated from The New School University for poetry and Marymount Manhattan College for playwriting in NYC. Her work has appeared in The Best American Poetry Blog, The Best of Vine Leaves 2013, and Cowboy Poetry Press. She currently lives in Queens, NY.

A Pushcart prize nominee and Micro Award nominee, **Phyllis Green’s** stories have been published in Epiphany, Parting Gifts, Prick of the Spindle, Poydras Review, The Blue Lake Review, Bluestem, The Sheepshead Review, The Chaffin Journal, Paper Darts, apt, ShatterColors, The Cossack Review, Rougarou, Belle Reve Journal, The Examined Life, Hospital Drive, Orion Headless, Apeiron Review, Empirical Magazine, Bitterzoet, and a drama in Mason’s Road; upcoming stories in Edwin E. Smith’s Quarterly, and The Milo Review.

John Grey is an Australian born poet. Recently published in International Poetry Review, Sanskrit and the science fiction anthology, “Futuredaze” with work upcoming in Clackamas Literary Review, New Orphic Review and Nerve Cowboy.

Susan Gundlach has been teaching and writing forever. She has published articles on topics ranging from family history and puppetry, to the Great Wall of China and the Nile River. Her poems have appeared most recently in the anthology A Light Breakfast, Dark Matter, Lingerpost, and *82 Review. Her work has also appeared in The Best of Vine Leaves 2012 and A Midnight Snack, and some children’s poems are forthcoming in Cricket magazine.

Nathaniel Heely is a recent graduate from the University of Arkansas. His fiction has appeared in multiple publications including Revolver, The Citron Review, Crack the Spine and theNewerYork. You can find more of his writing at iamseamus.tumblr.com/writing.

This is her first time submitting anything for publication for **Alexis Helms**. She is a full time student at Edgecombe Community College in North Carolina. She will be transferring to a university to study astrophysics after she gets her A.S.

Harry Hoge is the author of *Jajadeh*, *Mescalero Moon*, *Blood Covenant*, *Bitter Legacy*, *Crossing Thresholds*, *Send Out the Clowns*, and *Hunter's Game*. These titles are all available as e-books on Kindle Prime <https://kdp.amazon.com/self-publishing/KDPSelect>. Historical fiction is Harry's first love. He has also teamed up with a former Marine Corps buddy, **Bill Walls**, a cartoonist from Houston, to publish *Send Out The Clowns* with Behler Publications, and the sequel, *Hunters Game*.

Kyle Holland is an educator and aspiring writer living in Tampa, Florida. His flash fiction, random thoughts and words of wisdom can be found on bridges, underpasses, used napkins, and bathroom stalls throughout all of Tampa Bay; free for the public's enjoyment. After an extensive session with *Hooked on Phonics* tapes, spanning nearly two hours, he has written his first short story which is presented here. Nearly all of the words are spelled correctly and he even managed to format a page or two with a paragraph break.

Emily Hough is currently a graduate student at the University of Nebraska at Omaha working on a Masters degree in English as well as completing the ADWR (Advanced Writing) Certificate program. She is also currently teaching English at Westside High School in Omaha, Nebraska. Her life experiences fuel her writing. She trains in Mixed Martial Arts concentrating in environment training and conflict communications, works as an actor in Renaissance Faires, and juggles to keep the balance of life, work, and her love for literature and writing.

Clinton Inman was born in Walton-on-Thames, England in 1945, grew up in North Carolina, graduated from San Diego State University in 1977, and is a high school teacher in Tampa Bay. He lives in Sun City Center, Florida with his wife, Elba. Recent publications include Internet magazines: *Poetry*, *BlackCatPoems*, *The Inclement*, *The Tower Journal*, *Warwick Unbound*, *the Beatnik*, *Aphelion*, and *Narture Writing*, while recent printed magazines include *Down in the Dirt*, *Hudson View*, *Tower Journal*, *Inclement*, *Out of Our*, and *Indiana University Spirits* to name a few.

Haley Johnson is currently pursuing her MA in Fiction at Northern Arizona University. She loves cats, loathes laundry, and often falls prey to periods of obsession with alliteration. She has had one previous story published in *Jersey Devil Press*.

Tim Journey, a native of Minnesota and current undergrad at Kenyon College, is a Spanish major and Humanities minor who spends his free time writing and reading and running around rural Ohio. He's just now launching into the land of publishing, but so far poetry has been published in Stone Highway Review, Niche, Agave, The Unrorean, the Monongahela Review, Gambling the Aisle, HIKA, and Persimmons. He works at the Kenyon Review and plenty of minimum-wage jobs.

Lavinia Kumar's chapbook *Rivers of Saris* is published by Main Street Rag. Her poetry has appeared in several US and UK publications. Her degrees are way off the literary mark – in Chemistry, Biology and then science (& technology) education – but there are literary ancestors in one of her closets. She is an occasional editor of children's poetry at PoetryWITS.

Kate LaDew is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, NC with a BA in Studio Arts.

Barbara McGaw has been writing poetry inspired by her joys and sorrows for many years in her home on the southern edge of Michigan's northern forest. Until two years ago, she had seldom submitted her poems for publication. It was in 2011 that her poem, *A Stone Heart* (included in this issue) was awarded the Abbie Copps Award for Poetry sponsored by Olivet College.

Sonnet Mondal is an Indian poet and the founder of *The Enchanting Verses Literary Review*. He has authored eight collections of poetry his most recent book being *Prismatic Celluloid* (Authorspress India). He was bestowed Poet Laureate from Bombadil Publishing, Sweden in 2009 and was awarded "The IPTRC International Best Poet award" from *World Poets Quarterly*. His works have appeared in several international literary publications including *The Sheepshead Review* (University of Wisconsin, Green Bay), *The Stremez*, *India Today*, *Nth Position*, *Fox Chase Review*, *The Penguin Review* (Youngstown State University), *Two Thirds North* (Stockholm University), *California State Poetry Quarterly* (California State Poetry Society) and *Friction Magazine* (New Castle University) to name a few.

David Moore is a physician who specializes in internal medicine. He is also a collaborative keyboard musician. He and his co-author have presented a program of music and poetry.

Denise Mostacci Sklar began her college years as a biology major but then, to her parents' dismay, decided that she wanted to study dance. She moved to New York City where she had a career as a modern dancer. Now she has had the good fortune to discover writing as another

way to move through life and she particularly enjoys the stillness ...waiting for words to make an entrance.

Charlotte Otten's poems have appeared in journals as diverse as Southern Humanities Review, Christian Science Monitor, The Healing Muse, Poems from Aberystwyth, Yale Journal for Humanities in Medicine. Her poems have also been anthologized.

Raul Palma earned an MA in Writing & Publishing from DePaul University. Presently, he is a first-year PhD student in fiction at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. A recipient of the Soul-Making Keats Short Story Prize, a three-time finalist in Glimmer Train Press contests, and a finalist in Cutthroat's 2012 Rick DeMarinis Contest, his work has appeared or is forthcoming in Saw Palm: Florida Literature & Art, Penduline Press, Extract(s), *82 Review, and elsewhere.

Garrett Rowlan is a retired LA sub teacher now working on several writing projects and a web site of his own. Recent publications are in Clare and the print edition of Coal City Review.

Mattie Quesenberry Smith serves as an adjunct instructor at the Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia, and Dabney S. Lancaster Community College in Clifton Forge, Virginia. Recently, Finishing Line Press nominated her poetry chapbook, Mother Chaos: Under Electric Light, for a Library of Virginia Literary Award, and Ruminant editors nominated "To a Fishing Father" for a Pushcart Poetry Prize. Her recent work appears in Hollins Critic, Dappled Things, Floyd County Moonshine, and Avatar. She also shares several awards with her husband, Douglas N. Smith, for their documentary film, Between Two Fires, and a screenplay, Once to Every Man—including a CINE Golden Eagle and Best Documentary, New York International Independent Film and Video Festival. She lives at the foot of Little House Mountain in Lexington, Virginia, with her husband and ten children.

Four-time Pushcart Prize as well as Best of the Net nominee **J.R. Solonche** has been publishing in magazines, journals, and anthologies -- some 300 of them -- since the early 70s. He is coauthor of PEACH GIRL: POEMS FOR A CHINESE DAUGHTER (Grayson Books). He lives and teaches in New York's Hudson Valley. A new book of poems BEAUTIFUL DAY is forthcoming from Deerbrook Editions.

Henry Spottswood was Born 1940 in Mobile, AL and attended Georgia Tech. Employment later included family manufacturing business and management faculty at Western Kentucky University. He has worked in addictions since 1982. Powerful impetus to interest in astronomy came from childhood fascination with the Milky Way in 1940s, years before electricity came to

the old family homestead in Mississippi.

Emily Strauss has an M.A. in English, but is self-taught in poetry. Over 100 of her poems appear in dozens of online venues and in anthologies. The natural world is generally her framework; she often focuses on the tension between nature and humanity, using concrete images to illuminate the loss of meaning between them. She is a semi-retired teacher living in California.

Lauren Suchenski's poetry has previously been included in a variety of magazines, including *Gambling the Aisle*, *Vine Leaves Literary Journal*, *The Barnwood Review* and *The Hun Review*.

Harlan James Wheeler Jr is the author of 4 books of non-fiction, including "The Gratitude Journey; from Jellyfish to Bigfoot". A self proclaimed inspiration trouble maker. His Poetry has appeared in *Dead flowers*, *A Poetry Rag*, *Foliage Oak literary Magazine* and *Stars in our heart* as well as others.

Sayuri Yamada was born in Japan and is living in England. She finished studying Creative and Critical Writing in a postgraduate course with three distinctions at the University of Winchester in September, 2011. She has published her stories in fifteen magazines both in the UK and the US. One of them, 'Killing Me Softly', is published at *Gray Sparrow*, which won an award for the Best New Literary Journal of the Year from the Council of Editors of Learned Journal. Another one, 'A Fat Mermaid', is published at *First Edition*, sold at W.H. Smith.

Harry Youtt is a long-time instructor in the Writers' Program at UCLA [Extension], twice nominated for Pushcart Prizes. He reports that his poem "Sandholes and Answers" published in *Dark Matter Journal #2* was warmly received when he read it at the annual UCLA Writers' Program Faculty Publishing Party.