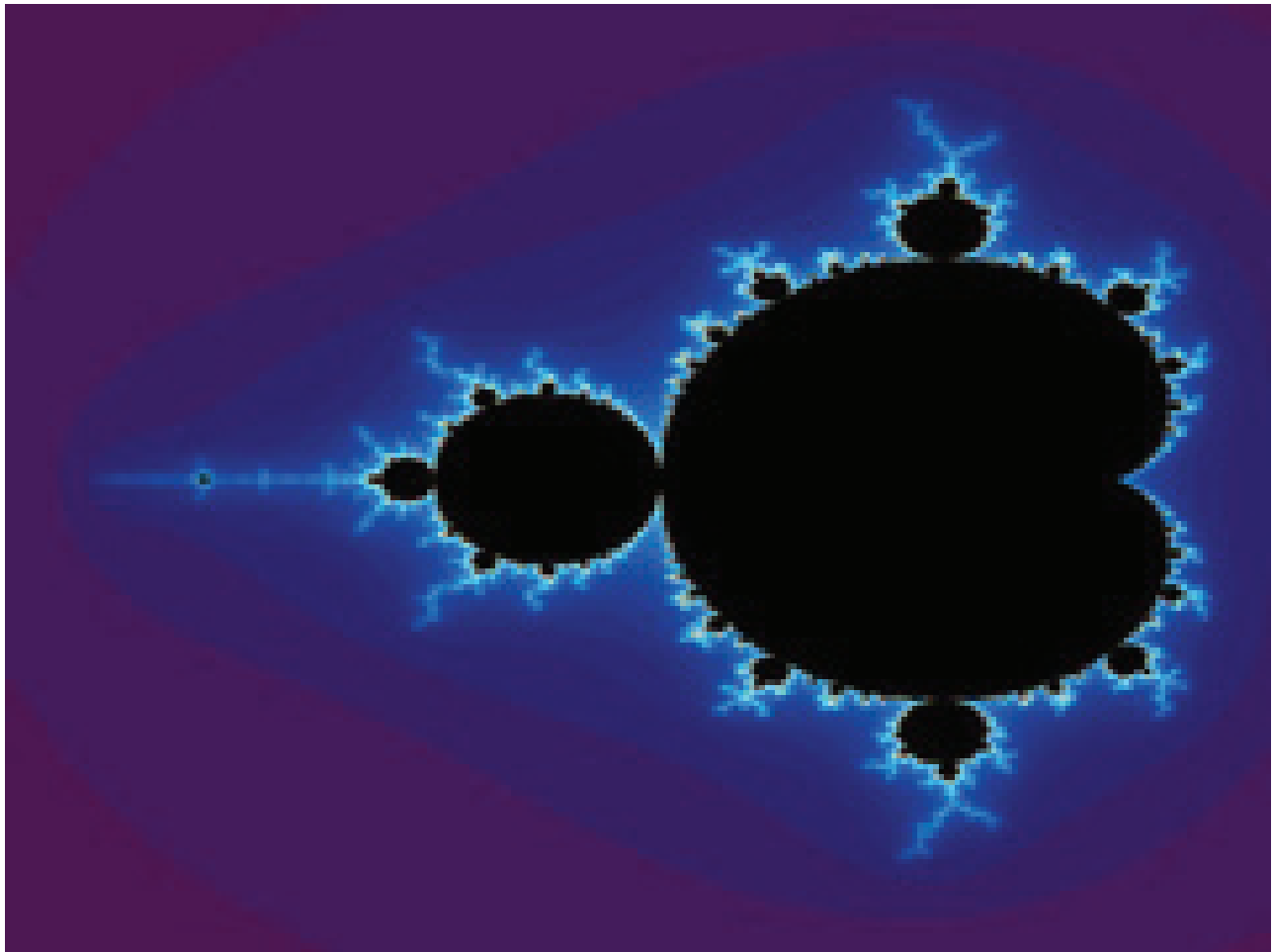




# DARK MATTER

A JOURNAL OF SPECULATIVE WRITING



ISSUE #2

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DARK MATTER: A JOURNAL OF SPECULATIVE WRITING



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## Forward

I have been thinking a lot about “substance” lately, actually for awhile, but only recently poetically. Many of the works in this issue of Dark Matter deal with the issue of “substance” in interesting ways. I’m particularly fond of how “substance” is dealt with in the essay, “Deafness as Elementary Particle”, the widely different stories “Big Bust Theory” and “Aunt Mary”, and almost every poem. As you read these works, ask yourself, how do you define “substance”?

To me, meaning is “substance”. The accidental universe is real, and as a scientist I am fascinated by its structure and phenomena, but meaning, true “substance”, requires imposition. Choices create meaning. So then, what is art? If the molecular and material universe is accidental, then it is art that imposes substance. Tick tock lives circle and circle through generations, but without art dust is to dust.

Substance – a material thing –

life can only be described by its absence

substantial – to be of substance –

the body experiences the greatest pleasure from stimulation of instinct

meaningful – that quality of a thing –

circle of life = red in tooth and claw

existence – that which has no basis in the molecular structure  
of the thing but on its impact on the mind –

we would rather grapple with the serpent than believe in an immoral universe

on thought – that which emerges  
from synapse but cannot be directly ascribed to it –

God’s are born from nothingness

art – the creation of substance from nothingness –

pain has no meaning – it is merely the symptom of the searching

## The Great Wave

When she stands completely still, she is a jellyfish,  
roaming Tokyo at the mercy of the current. Blonde tangles  
enrapture divers, men tumble from their boats of dignity.

When she fails to grasp the meaning of *mizu-shobai*, she is a  
starfish losing her grip on rocks. Floats in a tide pool,  
slips past water's frothy outline, and begins to dissolve.

When she gives up, she is a diatom. Throbbing swells shove  
and push, the crest's fingers shatter her glass walls.  
Flooding. She rides no more waves.

## Vacuity

Up Close,  
Most of an atom is  
Ether. Through space  
Unending, dark  
Matter dominates.  
The tangible is tenuous  
And lonely;

And so we seem  
To see that if we  
Speed on, heedless,  
We may dodge through  
Walls and galaxies, without  
Contact:

Truth, like the wind,  
Finds form in  
What is moved.  
There is so much  
That is nothing, we can  
Barely believe  
That we may  
Touch.



## **Nuthatch Winter**

From a treetop realm  
flakes of bark  
sprinkle down.  
The whole sky holds  
in deep topaz the little  
laboring sound,  
the sharp awl  
of the hungry beak.

This I'd create:  
a world to live in,  
where the creek snow  
is bright

It seems no one can hear  
such tiny insistent life.  
When I look up again,  
the sun's blue ice  
is shining warmly  
on my face.

## **Why I Love the Moon**

I love her best when I catch her  
dreaming her private dreams

aloof, a distant Buddha  
far enough to tempt to fancy

near enough to cast her anchor  
hard in our hearts.

We adore her, poised against endless night  
magnet to immensities beyond us.

## Time Gets Weak

Time passes  
in lurches and leaps,  
chugging and strange,  
so that this day,  
    it's lasted a year,  
a year at least,  
a millenia,  
    as if sleeping turns back time.

Refresh,  
restart,  
wake up  
    in the same place.

Day creeps back  
after sundown -  
the moon won't show  
    his face

Refresh,  
restart;  
    I long for cleansing night,  
    I pray for dark  
to cool my aching burns,  
but night  
won't come.

Trapped in a loop;  
    I'm a cycle,  
    and this day will last  
    forever.

The pair of us,  
we know.  
We've seen it all,  
    the witnesses,  
and we know of the  
    consequence  
that will fall like a drape  
with the dark.

## The Importance of Re-Inventing Time

There's this relationship,  
this inherent love, between space

and time - as if they're folded  
in on each other like linen place-settings.

Really, though, it's more like French bread  
sliced up by vectors and velocities.

And it occurs to me that things happen  
not at the same time, but in the same planar moment.

Right now, we're sitting outside  
of *Les Deux Magots*, wondering

if we'll ever be in this place again.  
But we're so quick to forget

that time and space do not run  
like a projector or a slide panel

or some ubiquitous hologram. Someone  
somewhere - neither in the past, present, nor future —

is painting, so deftly, a scene of  
us on the canvas of the cosmos,

and as I down the last of my Bordeaux, I smile as  
your form is watermarked into the setting of the sun.

## Sure, Why Not

I dipped a toe into the water; what choice and why not? The pigs came out squealing, not knowing their fathers. In the fields, the “migrants” fell like mayflies, overhead a chorus of money from country to country. This, while the ghosts of Viet Nam stood at the intersections. Smoky trails in the skies, while America dwindled, like signals drew the vultures in. Small dark crosses plummeting into burning pillars, bulldozers scraping bones away, walls of concrete drowning the gardens, fans against the birds and bats on the hillsides; all of this to explain positions. I walked denuded hillsides, swam through swamps of hope, listened to the voices of infinite voices. I slid, naked, through the mud of eons, covered with transformation. I sang loud, believing in the elegance. All this to drown disillusionment, all this to scream at the melting, all this to dance. And why not? I will order a Number 3, with fries, and a side of drama, the balloons and confetti circling overhead; I will take my coffee thick with the hands of slaves, my diamonds washed clean. How to laugh at guilt, while the gasses of the dead bubble in the water and the last rhino offers himself. Legs are scattered across the landscape like errant children. The silence of gaping mouths wanting to go home, the sunken minds of the young washing against the oily boundaries of estates; this, while the rice is stolen from mothers for guns. Small-town marching bands, shuffling through sweaty history and city farmers with filthy hands, honey dripping from their rooftops, the doctors wiping the afterbirth away; stone walls slowly crumbling against the tide. What will keep the sun from burning out? I push the heat back; it is not my own. In the fabric of space, I hang like a disco ball. Shake it, baby! Shake it all!

## Aunt Mary

*“What is done out of love is beyond good and evil.”*

Nietzsche

A dribble of fuel fell from the nozzle onto the worn leather of his boot. Though the linger of gasoline would nauseate him as he drove into the brittle timber, he did not complain. After replacing the nozzle and tearing the paper receipt from the pump, he located the sun directly overhead. Another three hours into the mountains and two more on foot. Plenty of time to set up camp and maybe cast a dry fly into the creek. He didn't expect to catch fish. That wasn't the point. Still, the old thrill of enticing a trout to rise, more of a dream than a memory, caused an involuntary twitch at the corner of his mouth. And, for a moment, the memory washed out the sound of Mary's whisper, far off and faint, the pleading voice of an aunt who died in the mountain canyon called The Devil's Elbow so many years ago.

He walked across the asphalt toward the entrance of the store. Waves of heat radiated from the blacktop. He didn't notice the name of the establishment or the cars lined up at the pumps. A blonde woman in frayed cut-offs, her legs tan and flabby, leaned over to unscrew the gas cap on her faded blue Volkswagen Bug. He glanced in her direction out of habit, but, instead of imagining what she might look like unclothed, he thought of what he had left behind. His wife was glad to be rid of him for a few days, even though she would not admit it. The people at his job would not miss him in the least, the rhythm of the mine impervious to the absence of a single employee. He told neither his wife nor his co-workers about Mary's whisper, which had crept into his dreams several weeks earlier during a freak lightning storm that failed to produce rain. The whisper germinated and blossomed into a perpetual hiss. He did not tell them that Mary called him back to The Devil's Elbow, a horseshoe bend in a creek in a canyon, a secret place revealed by Mary when he was a child.

Inside the store, he pulled a plastic bag of beef jerky from a shelf. After collecting a couple of cans of Vienna sausage, a bag of jalapeño-flavored potato chips, three rolls of Spree candies, and a six-pack of diet Dr. Pepper, he made his way to the cashier. The frozen beefsteaks and slab of bacon sat on a bed of ice in the Styrofoam cooler in the trunk of the car. The oatmeal, freeze-dried eggs, apples, peanut butter and crackers were packed in brown paper bags next to his backpack. He had more food than he needed, and he had already spent too much money for a two-day trip. His wife would be pissed when she found out. And she would find him out. The water filter, top of the line, the writing on the box claiming it could filter raw sewage into potable drink, put him out \$300. The tent and sleeping bag, \$325. The bone-handled, 12-inch stainless steel objects to be touched, somehow quieted Mary's incessant implorations, steel hunting knife, \$225. Purchasing material goods, tangible objects to be touched, somehow

quited Mary's incessant implorations, her voice like a Siren singing him back to the canyon. Shopping gave him a moment's peace.

The peyote buttons, three of them, ground down and decanted into gelatin capsules the size of large fish oil tablets, sold to him by a friend of a friend of a friend, cost \$120. He suspected he'd been ripped off on the last count but there was nothing to be done. He had no other connections and Mary was insistent on the point, besieging him about the importance of ritual in what was to come. he paid the cashier, a short, dark woman with a lazy eye, and carried the booty to the car.

\*

In the distance the rawboned mountains appeared bluish-black. The highway rose out of the desert into the hope of water, babbling brooks and morning dew. Puffs of cumulus clouds, the underbellies a dilute shade of the mountains below, hovered like moist demons over the highest peaks. Creosote and greasewood gave way to juniper and then piñon pine as the highway climbed. He had rolled down the driver's window at the gas station in an attempt to remove the linger of gasoline. The mountain air, dry as burnt toast, proved too thin to disperse the stench. He turned the radio on and hurled a glob of spit out the window. He wiped his mouth on the bare skin of his wrist.

The radio received one station, KNDN out of Farmington, New Mexico, the public service announcements delivered in an admixture of Navajo and English. The garbled languages unleashed a tangle of memories. He hadn't been near the reservation since they found Mary's body twisted and broken at the bottom of the canyon, the needle still in her arm, the syringe dangling like an outlandish mechanical mosquito void of legs and wings. He remembered spending the summers of his with his Aunt Mary, camping at The Devils' Elbow or playing board games in her single-wide trailer in Farmington. Twelve years since he had been back. Too long. Mary's death was an embarrassment to the family, as they had no clue as to her habits until then, and, after they sold her trailer and meager belongings at auction, her name faded from family lore. He remembered. A kindly, frail woman with white hair and a mole on the soft spot under her milky blue eye. The other eye shone black. She guided him into the mountains, taught him that the world was a prison and death was no escape. Painted strange symbols on his face and sang songs to the stars while standing naked next to the flames of a roaring bonfire. She convinced him to keep their secret, frightened him into believing in the ghosts of Navajo women, though he could not see them like she did, failed to hear them. But he fancied he could feel the cold touch of their ephemeral fingertips at the back of his neck, at his temples.

He slowed down for potholes when necessary, swerved into the opposite lane when



given the chance. He felt sick to his stomach. The sky cast feeble light over a forest so dry it seemed about to burst into flames. Pine needles covered the mountain floor, gray needles devoid of the moisture necessary for decay. A slight breeze shimmered through the trees, vibrating the living needles into an imperceptible sibilance. He passed a dead oak, the leafless branches clawing at a merciless sun, the blistering sphere obscured by clouds resembling smoke.

Rounding a hairpin curve, he put his foot on the brake. The turn was near. Maybe. He couldn't remember. He heard Mary's voice climb out of the gibberish of Navajo and English rambling from the radio. "Turn here. Turn here," she whispered. He pressed the brake. To the left of the highway he found the ruts of an old road. He turned off the blacktop.

Clumps of dead tumbleweeds clung in the faint ruts. He drove slow, attempted to remember, the effort evoking a sense of dread. Mary had whispered to him before, just after she died, sometimes visiting his dreams with her familiar tune. She went silent a decade earlier. The drought, he concluded, was responsible for her return. The land in need. The road led through a stand of Ponderosa pine. As a child he peeled wafers of bark from trunks and held the backsides to his nose. Mary told him the bark smelled like vanilla but he smelled only bark. Rays of sunshine burst through a break in the clouds, angled through the boughs of pines.

The remnants of a flashflood past forced him to abandon the car sooner than expected. Twisted tree limbs filled the gash in the road. Granite boulders the size of football helmets, quartz glinting here and there, were entangled in the dead branches and roots of the trees. Clouds suppressed sunlight. He pulled the car to the side of the road, pocketed the keys and stepped out. He took his time loading up. Mary had cooked canned pinto beans and bacon in a cast iron pot over an open fire when they camped. Onions, garlic, and jalapenos, she claimed, protected them from the evil spirits of dead soldiers that wandered the night. Male spirits doomed to darkness. They were protected, she assured him, untouchable, safe. When they finished eating, Mary ground up dried herbs and dropped them in orange juice packed in for the occasion. She called it dessert and they drank it together. She painted strange symbols on his face and chest, curvy lines and crescents, four armed swastikas and eye opening on top of a green thundercloud, a large bird black as night. She used oil paints pulled from her pack. She took off her clothes and painted herself. And then they danced together in the darkness to the rhythm of the crackling bonfire.

He wrapped the slab of frozen bacon in newspaper and stashed it on top of the cook kit. He added the jerky, the rolls of Spree candies and the diet Dr. Pepper from the convenience store. The Vienna sausages. Frozen steaks. The canned beans, the onion, the garlic bulb. He checked his fishing gear. The peyote pills. He put a hand to the bone hilt of the knife at his belt. The thought of locking the car crossed his mind, but he decided against it. What would be the point? He had nothing of value left to steal. Slipping on the backpack, he grabbed the canteen from the backseat of the car, slammed the door, and set off to cross the wreckage of twisted

branches and stone.

The rocks in the ditch caused him trouble. He turned his ankle on two occasions, slipped on a third, jamming his hand into the sharp end of a dead branch. Blood trickled from the heel of his palm. He stood at the bottom of the ditch staring at the wound as if it was not his own. He licked the blood. It tasted of salt. Adjusting the weight on his back with a shrug, he started up the far side of the rift.

He limped over a narrow and dusty track leading further into the forest. A scent of gasoline trailed him. His boots kicked up small clouds of dust with each step, tiny explosions emptying into silence. The breeze had died and along with it the wheeze of living pine needles. No bird song. No scurry of a squirrel or chipmunk. Only his footsteps falling like an irregular heartbeat over the parched earth. Perspiration evaporated before forming on his brow. The trail ascended and his breathing quickened. Pausing next to an outcropping of basalt, he thought for a moment he might dissolve. A hint of breeze solidified his existence and he remembered being anxious about this same climb as a boy. Mary had been unusually light on her feet, prancing up the trail ahead of him, waiting in patches of pine shade for him to catch up. He never considered the oddity until now, Mary's spectral physique. How she seemed to float just above the ground. Standing next to the outcropping of rock, he observed large crystals floating in the fine-grained groundmass of the stone. The creak of raven wings overhead interrupted his mindlessness. Mary called to him from the canyon. He had no choice but to obey.

An hour passed, according to his pocket watch, before he reached the top of the rise. From there the trail descended sharply into a gorge, pine giving way to juniper, igneous rock to reddish sandstone. Clouds congealed in the sky. The sun, blurred on the western horizon, cast blood-orange filaments through the sky, fiery veins. He remembered the canyon, how Mary would fall to her knees before the descent, bend her bony back in angled prostration, and chant to an unknown god. She whispered in a strange tongue, and, when he asked her what the words meant, she stood and looked at him as if she did not understand his question. And then she would careen down the trail like a schoolgirl in love with the seasons.

He emptied the canteen by the time he reached the bottom of the gorge. To his dismay, where he remembered a stream, only an arroyo remained. Drought. Three years of it. He should have known. He imagined pools where fish swayed in shadows cast down by shelves of rock, Mary with her wide-brimmed straw sun hat sitting on the bank munching cucumber sandwiches and talking to her invisible friends. She laughed and smiled and pointed to her nephew with a wink and a nod. They approved of him, she informed her nephew, said he was perfect. He played along, as the game allowed Mary such joy. Where was the harm?

A few clusters of greasewood and sage had taken root in the sandy soil where a pool might have been. he spotted the slither of a snake trail in the dust at his feet, the two-pronged hop of bird tracks next to it. he licked his lips. Flakes of dead skin clung to his tongue. he

thought of his wife and the Sealy Posturpedic mattress newly purchased.

The western horizon looked like a crimson laceration on the sphere of time. No chance of making it back to the car before dark. Relieving himself from the burden of the backpack, he walked a few yards along the bank of the wash and pissed next to a withered clump of arrow grass.

The first order of business, he decided, was to gather firewood to see him through the night. The gloaming played tricks on his senses. Dry stalks of felled yucca writhed, for the blink of an eye, like snakes. The sound of a mouse scrambling under sagebrush boomed in his ears and for half a moment he thought it was a javelina rooting for feed. He felt eyes upon him, human or something wild, maybe the evil spirits of Calvary soldiers his aunt claimed to haunt the canyon. The fears dissipated as fast as they rose, phantom fish jumping from the depths of his mind to disintegrate in the brute fact of reality. He located a dead juniper, stunted, intact, and fragile as bleached bone. He kicked the tree down with the heel of his boot and dragged it to camp. He located another lifeless bush further up the canyon, undersized as the first, already felled. By the time he hauled it to camp it was too dark to venture out once more.

He started a fire with twigs and the shattered stalk of a yucca. The crackle and pop of the ignited wood, the light blooming in the darkness, compacted his presence. He bent low to blow life into the glowing embers. Smoke wandered into his face, the black acidity pulling tears from his eyes. After adding larger sticks to the flames, he went about the business of setting up the tent. He congratulated himself for remembering to pack a flashlight. Mary refused to bring artificial light into the wilds, insisting it was sacrilege. Yet she displayed a framed reproduction of Serrano's Piss Christ on the wall over the toilet in her bathroom. It didn't make sense. Now or then. And when he had asked about the picture she replied with a wink and a nod. Like she knew something he didn't. Maybe she had. But she was dead and hadn't bothered to pass whatever it was along. Selfish.

They had slept together in an oversized sleeping bag when camping at The Devil's Elbow, her sweet and sour breath whispering in his ear, telling him the story over and again of how the soldiers had chased the Navajo women and girls into the canyon and caught them and performed unspeakable acts for three days and nights before cutting their throats. How the women and girls chanted quietly while the soldiers slept, the madmen's lust satiated for the space of hours, how the curse would keep the cavalymen wandering the canyon until the end of time. She whispered and petted and explained that she fell in love with a ghost of one of the Navajo girls who came to her when she camped alone on the shores of the flowing stream. She told him that water is life and then she kissed him on the cheek. He didn't understand that what they were doing was wrong, thought of it as a celebration. Only later, after she was dead

and gone, did he learn of morality, how to measure good and evil. He missed her terrible. Loved her. No one tended her grave. No one to put flowers on her grave. She needed him.

\*

Mary had railed against the Christian God, believed but despised, held hard to the faith that it was ignorant of its own design. She refused to birth offspring, had her tubes tied. Rumors of sleeping with men for money or a fix or both. He heard the whispers. His parents called her Mary the Unclean when they found out, refused to let him return to her in the summers, put her off limits as if she was already dead. They called her insane. He added another stick to the fire and stared at the embers glowing orange and red. The Dr. Pepper made him thirstier. He guzzled the contents of the can, crushed it in the grip of his hand and tossed it to the flames. He had loved his aunt. Can a whore be divine? She wasn't like other people.

Better to be alone. He removed from his backpack the plastic baggie containing the gelatin capsules. He had smoked dope in high school, attended keggers and drank himself into oblivion. He played football and basketball. Held a job at the local feed store. Stayed away from the hard stuff, the cocaine and crack, the mushrooms and acid. He was a good boy but not too good. Mediocre. A mild rebel, his aunt told his mother, not like her. He popped the top on a fresh can of soda, placed two of the peyote pills on the tip of his tongue and drank. The fire cracked under the silencing sky. He swallowed the remaining pill realizing full-well he had no idea what to expect, would not be able to discern if the pills contained peyote or something else. For all he knew it could be dirt. He did not care. He had one what she had told him to do.

\*

He found himself back in the car, palms scraped and bloody. He remembered puking. He remembered watching a bark scorpion, the amber shell translucent in the light of the flames, approach the warmth of the campfire. Nothing else. He turned on the dome light and looked in the backseat and found the sacks with the remaining dry food, empty pop cans on a bed of sunflower seed shells on the floor. He checked his pocket and found the keys and inserted one of them into the ignition. He started the car. Turned on the headlights. Flakes of blood, black as char, clung to his fingers. Sores oozed from his palms. She had whispered the peyote gods did not suffer fools. He was a fool. The drug, he conjectured, had inflated him with fear, caused a mad dash through the darkness back to the only safety available to him, the closest familiar

thing a machine. He belonged to machines.

He opened the door and stepped into the night. Still no sign of a star. Air thick with the possibility of rain. He remembered his aunt sitting next to a fire on the bank of the stream, the tremble of water flowing silk-like, the sky an accord of star shine and moonlight. She had told him once more about her ghost lover and how he was not to be jealous, how they needed him to do something, how he must not refuse. Everything depended on it. The firelight collected in soft pools just under her eyes so that the sockets became deep caverns, black and bottomless. He had arisen from his sleeping bag at the cold hour before dawn to find her still sitting there, the fire long dead, humming a tune that ached in his ears.

Pulling the keys from the ignition he walked to the rear of the car and opened the trunk. No backpack. No canteen. His hand fell to his belt and he found the knife in the sheath. He remembered. Mary had come back to him, come home. She wore a black dress that fell over her feet. A tuft of white hair peeked from the black shawl covering her head. It was her. Real. There were others, too, old women gray and young girls in black. They chanted softly, the words foreign and intimate at once. Sitting next to the fire, he could not move. His feet felt like stumps in his shoes, his butt like a root thrusting into the earth. She glided over to him, bent low and whispered instructions. How she might touch him again. What he must do. Her breath smelled of gasoline.

\*

Darkness loitered under the clouds as he turned onto the highway. A deer leapt from the side of the road into the white light of the car's high beams and was gone. The wind kicked up as he descended onto the plains. Leaves on poplar trees planted next to the highway danced St. Vitus-like, turning in on themselves, as the car zoomed past. He didn't bother clicking the radio on, preferred the thrum of the engine and sound of rolling tires.

The lights of the gas station where he last fueled the car seemed strange to him, alien, the neon advertising Budweiser beer almost alive, attempting to break the bonds of its glass prison to slink forth. He pulled the car next to a row of pumps, got out and swiped his credit card. The yellow glow from the low-pressure sodium lamps lining the lot conglomerated with cool white leaking from the fluorescent tubes inside the store to produce rainbows dancing on oil spots on

the asphalt. He replaced the nozzle, the odor of gasoline familiar in the strangeness. He walked into the store and grabbed a sack of picante-flavored sunflower seeds. On the way to the cashier, he pulled the knife from the sheath.

“This is for you.” The clerk, wearing a black smock with a nameless name patch, held up a brown paper bag. “Love Mary.” Her eyes were black.

He replaced the knife in the sheath and took the bag and walked out of the store into the night.

He drove through the quiet streets of the town. Everyone, it appeared, slept. He drove through his childhood neighborhood, the houses where his friends had grown up all dark. He tried to remember their faces, his friends, his parents. He could not.

He pulled the car into the driveway and shut down the engine with a turn of his wrist.

After stashing the brown paper bag under the seat, he opened the door and climbed out of the car.

The porch light above the door shown queerly as he inserted the key into the lock. Inside he walked to the master bedroom and found his wife sleeping on the bed, the Sealy Posturepedic. Bleached Pima cotton sheets covered her legs. He took the knife from the sheath and stood over her watching her chest rise and fall. A silver loop of metal pierced each of her nipples. A gift for him. An attempt at desire. The areolas, dark and wide, like open lesions, spilled his rage. He raised his arm. The blade plunged between her breasts. Her eyelids flapped opened and closed like bird wings too feeble to hold flight. Before she succumbed, she recognized him, forgave him with the faintest of smiles, her big brown eyes turning milky blue as the lids, like funeral curtains, pulled shut.

He left the knife in her chest and walked to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. He drank milk from the half-gallon carton, allowed it to spill from the corners of his mouth. He replaced the carton and shut the door. Grabbing an apple from a wooden bowl on the kitchen table, he returned to the car.

\*

Pulling to a stop at the gatehouse, he showed the identification card taken from the glove compartment, though the guard, a geeky kid wearing thick eyeglasses in heavy black frames,

knew him well enough. Protocol, he said, time and again. Have to set an example. A place of rules. Safety first.

He parked the car in the accustomed lot and took the snub-nosed .357 revolver from the brown paper bag. A rumble rolled through the clouds in the distance, near the mountains to the west, over his abandoned camp. Stepping into the night, he tucked the pistol in his belt and covered the butt with the flap of his shirt. He tossed the half-eaten apple to the ground and walked across the asphalt. Sodium-vapor lamps attached to telephone poles surrounded the lot. He walked into the main office and pulled out the gun and shot the woman at the receptionist's desk, a woman he did not recognize, her blonde hair unfurling as she fell in slow motion to the carpeted floor. She grabbed at the mushrooming outrage at her abdomen. He patrolled the offices behind the receptionist's desk, each the same—a desk, computer, phone, advertisements for mining supplies in frames on the walls—and shot three more strangers, two men and one woman, the cylinders of florescent light buzzing narcotic above him.

He stopped at a drinking fountain in the lobby and slurped water. A poster on the white wall above the fountain displayed an electronically enhanced photograph of a fireplace with glowing embers in the foreground and the silhouette of a curvy woman standing at a large window looking out over the sea. The caption read: Come Home to a Real Fire. The blonde woman moaned on the floor behind her desk. He walked around the desk and fired a bullet into her chest. She smiled and closed her eyes and died.

The kid at the gatehouse waved him by from inside the booth but he slowed and stopped and shot the guard in the face, the bullet shattering the plastic frames at the bridge of his nose. The kid collapsed, vanishing behind the wall of the booth, there and gone. He tossed the pistol into the booth and drove. The sky rumbled.

\*

He awoke to the sound of rain striking the nylon fly of his tent. He sat up and found himself naked on top of the sleeping bag. Strange symbols drawn onto his body with charred yucca stalks. Powerful thirsty, he searched for the canteen and could not find it and remembered it empty. He unzipped the door to the tent and crawled outside. Moist sand cooled his palms.

Roiling gray clouds, the edges tinged with white, weighed down on him like a three dimensional map of a world he failed to decipher. He collapsed face first into the sand.

\*

He awoke to the sound of surging waters. The flashflood had crested three yards from where he lay, erasing the firepit from the previous night. He crawled to the bank of the rushing stream and cupped his hands in the muddy waters. He splashed his face. He drank. The water tasted of ash and dust. He stood and looked at the sky. Splotches of blue split the clouds, signaled an outward expanse that cramped his guts. Beyond the blue was the black, the night and a million stars that mocked his insignificance with their cacophony of order, the moon, waxing and waning, waning and waxing, drumming into him the fact that the rules were not of his own making and he had no choice but to obey. A single spear of sunlight thrust through the clouds but failed to penetrate the churning waters. He watched an uprooted sagebrush bobble down the stream. She had pleaded with him, whined and whispered sweet nothings, begged him to do it so she might cross back over and be with him once more. Ghosts cannot love, she whispered, they can only want. She needed love. She had showed him what to do: the knife between the breasts, the kid's face exploding at the gatehouse, the woman with blonde hair falling in slow motion, the red blossoming from the wound in her guts. She begged him to carry it out so that she might reach across time and come back to him. She begged his forgiveness for leaving him behind.

He desired nothing more than to carry out her command. He could not. It would be against the rules of this accursed place and the price would be more and more blood. His wife was innocent and could not be asked to pay for a love she knew nothing about and could never believe.

He found his clothes, jeans and soiled t-shirt, cotton underwear and socks, folded neatly next to a living soap tree yucca. His boots, shoestrings tied together, sat next to the clothes. Soggy and chilled, he donned the outer garments. He couldn't very well walk around town naked, and that was where he was headed. He slid the empty knife sheath from his belt and dropped it before latching the belt buckle around his waist. He pulled the boots over damp socks and laced them. A faint odor of gasoline clung to worn leather.

By the time he made it to the top of the canyon, the sun beat down like an internecine eye. The ditch that separated him from the car had been pounded clean in the night. He walked across and opened the trunk and deposited the pack. He drove down the mountain and into the



town and stopped at the gas station where he last fueled the car. He swiped his card and filled the tank. A tall man wearing a black cowboy hat and red cowboy boots shot him a suspicious look while making his way from a three-quarter ton Ford truck to the entrance of the store. He stared the cowboy down, knowing full-well he was capable of taking the man's life. The cowboy touched the brim of his hat with an index finger, a sliver of sunlight recoiling from the polished ring under his knuckle, a circle of white gold.

He walked into the store and paid cash for a bag of picante-flavored sunflower seeds and a liter of diet Dr. Pepper. The clerk wore a black smock and refused to look him in the eye.

He drove to the bank. He tuned into a radio news station and listened to a recitation about the failing economy, the election cycle and an armed robbery in his home town. The bank teller, a short, Hispanic girl wearing turquoise earrings cut into the shape of turtles, looked at him askance as he withdrew two thousand dollars from his savings account. He thought she was pretty, petite yet strong, but he did not tell her. She was not for him. He did not consider that he frightened her, the traces of ash on his cheeks and forehead, the spoor of gasoline, the soiled shirt and jeans combining to give him the appearance of a madman fueled by arcane theology.

He drove back to the gas station and parked the car behind the building. He took the pack out of the trunk and tossed the keys to the front seat. A puncture wound peeked red from the heel of his hand. The middles of his palms shined like scars. Pack in place on his back, he carried the burden to the main road. His wife would be better off without him now, enough money in the bank to start fresh. She would find somebody, another miner or maybe a schoolteacher. She would never know what he was capable of doing, not like Mary. Heading north, away from all that was familiar, he stuck out a thumb. He would stop for a shower further up the road. A shower and a meal. Some new clothes. A knife. Some sleep. The sky darkened with the promise of rain.

He knew what had to be done. He started in the direction of Mary's grave. It might take hours to get there, depending how many stopped to offer him a ride. He intended to tend to her bones by filling her casket with gasoline. The hiss of the stricken match, the smell of sulfur and fuel, he prayed, would cut short her longing.

Silence fell over him like rain.

## Active Paranormalities

### *A Sestina*

When the old woman's fellow died  
in his owned historic home, Christmas tree  
left behind, she fled fake douglas fir collecting cobwebs,  
black widows dangling beneath engraved balls.  
Untouched, towered in a sunken sink,  
dishes reek — final day preserved.

“Do Not Enter” sign adorns main gate preserved.  
Lip smudged brandy glass monumenting where he died.  
Pan warmed black forest ham crusted in stacked sink.  
Cat strays to spill jug of man-ash under the tree,  
the urn widow slipped-in, beneath decorative balls  
fallen, cracked open, caves of cobwebs.

Widow rents inherited cottages of cobwebs.  
Why his final earth day kept this way preserved?  
A renter sees beam unearthly balls  
of light, like stars burning, all where he died,  
truth-yearning, gawping a garlanded tree.  
Renter spots spigot in kitchen sink

turn on, off, pour, but never the dead man's sink,  
in the main house, entombed by cobwebs.  
Perhaps he's attached to ham & holiday tree,  
riddled at death, trapped, preserved  
as in life, stuck to history even after he died.  
Opal glow on a courtyard swing, energy balls

travelling, stirring beads, oval balls.  
Tap-water overflows a renter's sink.

Woman landlord, walked out after he died,  
left a mountain of plates now caked with cobwebs.  
Attachment to respired day preserved?  
A ghost swings from a courtyard crabapple tree,

grins teeth black, rises from limb of tree  
planted eons ago, dead fruit falls in balls.  
Just like that, spreading apple preserves  
over burnt toast in adjacent cottage at deep sink —  
the apparition then broom-swats cobwebs,  
evaporates into dwelling where he died.

In lounge he died, imbibing spirits by a twinkling tree.  
Cobwebs ribbon it now, black widow balls.  
Loud breath calls: *clean sink of tangled webs preserved.*

## Self Importance

We stroll along  
through lush gardens  
and statuary,  
oblivious  
to the flock of crows  
pecking away at a grassy spot  
right near the roses,  
our presence  
sending the birds  
squawking and fleeing,  
circling high above . . .

but  
two seconds later,  
after we have passed by,  
those little bird-brains,  
ignorant of  
the two-legged  
flightless bipeds below,

quickly descend  
to settle back  
on that  
same  
exact  
patch  
of  
lawn.

## Rewind

The homeless are giving their money  
to the poor doctors and lawyers  
waiting to get home to their mansions  
in the lost and hopeless suburbs.

They're reaching into their little cups  
and giving away whatever  
their fingers happen to touch first  
and without thinking twice.

The clouds are passing weirdly overhead.  
The doctors and lawyers roll down their windows  
and look into the staring faces  
of their backing-away benefactors

whose eyes are rolling counterclockwise  
as the balked and steaming traffic  
backs up all the way into the obscure  
streets of the impoverished heart of the city.

## **To Kill a Hummingbird**

My chest might explode  
and send a thousand hummingbirds

out into a new world

breathing air for the first time,  
confused  
scared  
just like me,

and as their wings flutter too fast  
their hearts will stop  
and for a second mine  
will drop, then rest,

before their souls respawn  
and once again my skin  
begins to stretch.

## Apples

In these modern times, we  
buy apples in boxes but a bite is too retro  
for we modern kids, so we  
hack into apples to take a taste  
of what ought to be free

## Circus

Cratered and gray like a moon drawing, the elephant stands in the middle of the dirt lot, drooling, goopy eyed. I wait in line behind a girl in a yellow dress. The clown lifts her up with both hands and steps onto the platform and places her atop the elephant.

Another clown snaps a Polaroid picture of the girl and hands it to her mother. The mother hands the clown money and the clown lifts the girl from the elephant and back to the ground.

“Next!” The clown yells and looks at me. He frowns and tells me to step onto the platform. “He’s too heavy to lift,” the clown says to my father.

“Just get him up there,” my father says and hocks a tobacco loogie into the dirt.

“Too heavy,” the clown says.

“Get up there John!” My father shouts. “Come on!”

I look around and there are ten or so kids behind me, waiting. The elephant howls. I look down at the chain padlocked around the elephant’s ankle and it’s attached to a spike in the ground a dozen or so feet away. Each chain link seemed big as a road sign.

I stumble onto the first step of the platform and my sandal flips sideways and I slip and crash backwards into the dirt. I open my eyes and want to cry. The clown lifts another kid onto the elephant. The kid cries. A couple dozen kids wait in line with their parents, most of them cash in hand.

“Don’t cry,” my father says. “Get up.” He hocks another brown loogie and pulls from his bottled beer.

I roll over onto my belly, shirt riding up, and the dirt and rocks press into my skin.

The elephant groans and the clown yells and hits the elephant.

I look around and it seems there are a hundred people waiting in line to sit on the elephant now.

The polaroid camera clicks and kids cry and complain and my dad shouts, “Get up!”

I look up at the elephant’s underside.

The brown-gray skin is caked with mud and grasses and weeds and sticks and a McDonalds paper bag is glued against the rear inner thigh.



## High Concept

“So?” Arlen said. “Are you going to submit?”

Rayburn thought it was a funny way of putting it, though maybe if he hadn’t been drinking so much, it wouldn’t have seemed that way. And drinking also limited his ability to make with a witty retort (nothing he could think of to say made sense), so he asked back sincerely,

“Submit to what?”

Arlen sighed but affectionately, he thought: she was barely sober, too. Without another word, she slid her slab over to him on the bumpy, splintered bar: the screen was showing what she was talking about.

“That’s quite a commission,” Rayburn said, absently, after reading it, then slid it back again.

“What do you mean? That’s all you can say? You’re not interested at all?” She kept her voice down, then moved to the seat next to him, not wanting more of the gang—Murray, Barone, Mims, the rest—to hear.

But it was too late: a few had perked up and some were already comically grabbing at the device to see what was so important on it.

“Hey!” one of them, Murray, maybe, said. “Will you look at this!”

“That is a haul,” another (Trelis?) agreed.

“I already saw it,” someone else said, smugly. “They announced it this morning. It’s, well, an opportunity.”

“An opportunity? I’ll say,” Arlen said. “I mean, this is even more than the Macarthur grant used to be, and that you just got picked for, you couldn’t submit. Or what was the—what was the theater one, that was so much dough?”

“Richard Rodgers?”

“No, the ‘Chorus Line’ dude—not Hamlich, the other one.”

“Kleban.”

“Right. Commissions like this don’t come along so often any more—ever.”

“Who’s Folich?” Three stools to the side, Murray was straining his fat neck to see the

little screen, which was a beaming oval in the gloomy bar. “The Folich family?”

“People with a pelt,” Arlen shrugged. “What do you care where the purse comes from?”

“I didn’t say I cared. Just curious.”

“I’m working on it already,” Barone said, pulling his own slab from his—belted-to-the-last-notch—pants. “I’ll press ‘send’ before they close the place. Cinch.”

Rayburn said nothing, but thought that Barone didn’t stand a chance. Besides being an idiot, he was one of the worst scriptwriters of their crowd: if there was ever anyone who needed a new profession, it was him. Yet with all the good writers who had fled for other fields as opportunities thinned—as entire arts disappeared (who could remember the last poetry reading? Or book signing? No one there)—he stayed with it, blind to his own incompetence: who knew why?

And the Folich commission was for something better than a Barone could brew up. It wasn’t every day that the search for a new religion was announced. Extremists had finally ruined all the old ones a few months earlier, so it was inevitable (given the resulting ennui and unrest) that someone would come up with a contest to create one. Ray knew the line of competitors would be long and few clever enough to win.

“You know you should go for it,” Arlen said afterwards, her arm in his (holding them both up?) as they staggered across Times Square. “You’re a natural.”

“Don’t be silly.”

“You’d do a swell job.”

“*You* do it if you’re so interested.”

“Nah, not me. You’re the cleverest of us all.”

“Don’t talk yourself down.”

“You’re changing the subject to my low self-esteem,” she said. “Let’s stay with your lack of initiative.”

They reached Rayburn’s apartment house and there was a—strictly ritualistic—pause before Arlen came inside with him. They raced each other up the one flight and were (pathetically, he thought) panting as he fiddled fuzzily with the key.

“It’s not lack of initiative,” Ray said, entering, not bothering to turn on any lights, the two heading straight for the bedroom like rescue dogs sniffing someone still alive. In a few seconds, they had pushed papers off the bed and gotten under the covers, both shivering in only their

tops, Ray's porkpie hat propelled onto a chair piled high with his pants, holding each other for warmth in the under-heated flat.

It wasn't lack of initiative, Ray thought (or *had* thought, before he started kissing Arlen, his frozen hands fluttering over her sinewy little body, afraid of shocking her by touching her too definitively). He just knew from long experience that he would never get the Folich—might be the best, okay, could be the cleverest but wouldn't win; somebody else, somebody worse, would. Yes, he had written in every form that remained—screenplays and TV series, web shows and video games—and it had always been difficult and disappointing to see others go ahead of him. It was all bullshit, he thought, rigged and corrupt; and this prize, being the most coveted and most generous, the first in the longest time—like a cake in a window after wartime rationing which mobs line up or simply break the glass to get—would promise the most and hurt the most, would be the most corrupt. So why bother now? Why put himself through it again?

He couldn't say this to Arlen, though; he was uneasy about this side of himself—super-sensitive—so he didn't say anything: let her think him just lazy. (And Arlen did sell herself short, wrote strange and superb TV show sketches, but had always been destroyed by any bad review or any rejection and so had let it all slide, now socialized and drank too much, had even before it all went to hell.)

"You're the best," Arlen whispered, forcing his hands to find all of her (she was built like a soft boy), not caring about the cold, biting and briefly sucking on the beer-stinking tuft of hair beneath his lip. Was she still talking about his talent? He decided to take it that way, even though she always seemed like another person in bed, toughness abandoned, without any irony, all emotion. Soon "I love you," she whispered, but Ray lost the words in the shifting sheets, like a fuzzy from his hair he thought he saw or, no, a butterfly was better, but Ray stopped thinking about something beautiful, because love was bullshit, too, so why bother? Arlen would return to her senses after they came, wasn't that the way it always worked?

"Shh," he said, for he knew she didn't mean it, and why embarrass them both? Then they both slept, Arlen's arm flung over him so he wouldn't be cold during the night, Ray letting her have more than half the blanket, neither acknowledging what the other did, no thank you required.

In the morning, Ray thought he felt Arlen leave for work: something brushed his face: but her lips like her "I love you" could have been something else alive and escaping into the air. (How she endured her job in the law firm, he didn't know: she barely talked about it but would,

he knew, pick up the drinks again that night at Craven's. Ray would pay her back some day, how he had no clue).

Weirdly, two hours later, when he actually woke up, Ray wasn't sure if he had dreamed it but—he had an idea, complete from beginning to end, and knew he better write it down before it disappeared. It vaguely amused him that his unconscious self came up with it; awake he would not have made the effort.

He sat at his crappy, unstable card table, a cigarette smoking yet unsmoked in an ashtray near him (with a crude picture of a dog on it, barking over and over again “Art” instead of “Arf,” the word repeated around the thing, so it also seemed to say “Fart,” the end of the word blending into the beginning), writing on the back of some printer paper, the front holding part of a (good) script he had not bothered to complete. He wrote the idea down with utter focus, with more than he had shown about anything in months, maybe years, things being as they had been in the world for awhile and changing only for the worse.

When he finished, he felt exhausted and not just from not having eaten anything—not even a bowl of cereal or a cup of coffee. He had written it in a kind of spell, sweating and entranced, his hand made to move by someone else, as if on a Ouija board by a ghost (wait, wasn't it the other way around?), so he had had no choice and could not judge or condemn or mock his own effort.

Ray knew, of course, whose hand had guided his, a small hand with the nails bitten down but painted, anyway, in that style Arlen had which was both beautiful and butch, call it what you wanted. He thought of phoning her at work but didn't, instead sent the idea off to the Folich before he could back out, his hand shaking a bit before he hit “submit.”

\*

He didn't tell Arlen, didn't tell anyone. He watched as coverage of the commission continued and increased, as the deadline was extended because submissions were piling up. He only referred to it with his usual indifference: “a mug's game,” he called it, with a toothpick sticking out of his mouth (a steel flossing kind, so not too cool, but the best that he could do). Arlen eventually gave up encouraging him, with sadness, he thought, but no surprise.

The night after the final deadline, everyone was still drunkenly dishing on it at Craven's, most having sent something in, even those who said they wouldn't. Ray overheard some of the

ideas being spilled indiscreetly: all imitations of the old religions, he thought, dismissively, sacrifice stories, myths of mayhem and redemption, the same-old, same-old. Ray didn't want to toot his own horn but thought his was better: some cockiness even crept into his thoughts: give it your best shot, he thought, looking at his fellow—losers, say the word, it was how society saw them now, no matter what their credits once had been—just try and take it away from me.

“Did you do it?” he asked Arlen, as she left her last, losing game of pool.

“Do what, win? Are you kidding?”

“No, you know. Submit.”

“Oh.” She stumbled against him, more loaded than usual, and for the following reason:

“Of course, I didn't. I couldn't. I got nothing, you know that.”

“I don't know anything. But if you say so.”

“It's not me that matters. It's you. But it's too late now, even if you could fly to thirtythird street,” which was where the only twenty-four-hour post office had been, before it closed with all the others, and the deadline was past, anyway.

“Here,” he said. “I got you something.”

“Me? What?”

“Just look.”

They had reached one of Craven's faux picnic tables in the back, near the trompe l'oeil sailboats and sun. His own slab sat upon it, glowing with a particular kind of zeal, as if screaming something itself. Arlen looked down at it, and the footage of flowers on it made her well up.

“For me?” she said, sincerely clueless about herself, her own worth. “What for?”

“For always egging me on. For always giving me the go-ahead. I listened this time, you'll be surprised to know.”

She *was* surprised—and thrilled. In fact, Arlen seemed to not quite sober up but enter into a more grave kind of inebriation, on her best behavior, weaving but at attention.

Then Ray told her his idea, whispered it to her to avoid informing the others, the idea which had come to him in a dream, the inspiration for which she had poured into his ear like poison in an old forgotten play, except it hadn't been poison but a life-giving elixir-like. He whispered over the din of the bar (the big band-punk music had started and so had the dancing, the new style with everyone stuffed together and swaying, as if on a Saturday night subway car), so she could only catch elements of his religion: the giant naked gods, the world behind glass after death (it would be like looking at us through a maternity ward window, Ray whispered, or down at a casino from the crooked owner's office in a forties film noir), the unending

smells of burned hot chocolate and caramelized carrots (because Ray liked those smells: who wouldn't?). Then she heard him say, "I love you," though she wasn't sure he had, was almost as unsure as he'd been when she said it that night in bed, not because she didn't want to hear it or couldn't bear to hear it but because she literally was having a hard time hearing, Ray having come especially close and holding her waist around her back, as if they were skating and not dancing, the music having grown especially gay.

Three months later, Ray received a letter in the mail. The upper line held the address of the Folich; in the subject line, his own last name was typically if irritatingly misspelled (two 'g's instead of three). He didn't open it, instead turned off the slab altogether and went back to the freelance assignment he had somehow scared up: writing copy for toilet paper, one of the few physical products still needed and not replaced by an electronic facsimile. Yet he couldn't concentrate and, soon, cursing his weakness, went back to the device and opened the mail again.

And weakness was what he felt it was: he had pretended over the months to have forgotten about the Folich and had mocked other people's seemingly unending interest in it, which he said was masturbatory and enervating: the commissioners would decide the winners when they decided, and "it won't be you." Still, it had all been a performance: he, too—maybe more than anyone else—thought and thought about it, going obsessively and insecurely over the fine points of his idea (glass in the window on the world? Too many smells? Why naked gods?) unable to police and to stop himself, having to admit that he wanted it, more than wanted, yearned. (Arlen had kept his secret, told no one he had submitted. She had also for all intents and purposes moved into his place and even—on her own initiative; he had not pressed or even encouraged her to do so—begun to do her own work again.)

Now he hovered over the email in question, his finger poised to press but not yet doing so. He gave great releases of breath and his heart pounded (and he hated himself for it: how often had he felt this way in the past, fooling himself before a foregone conclusion, and yet here he was again, standing on his toes upon a ledge, like an "extreme" swimmer prepared to dive miles off a mountain into a murky and inhospitable sea. That's how he felt it, he was secretly so emotional, in a way non-artists would never understand—or would maybe expect: he was a kind of caricature, and that was contemptible, too). Then, impulsively, he touched the key and opened the letter.

And was rejected.

It was barely more than four lines, his last name misspelled again after "Dear Mr." and placed automatically inside the form, looking to him as black, forbidding and final as a redaction bar in a censored document. He hit "delete" almost immediately, and it was gone as soon as

if it had been conjured in his worst imagining.

Ray sat immobile for hours, not rising to turn on any lights, even as the sun completely set. He could not stop great gobs of tears from riding quickly down his face, like screaming children in a slide at a water park. He swallowed as many as he could, licking and liking their salty taste, his tongue wandering about as an exhausted dog's might do. He was ashamed that he had believed again, taken the bait, fallen into another trap laid by those who made offers and dispensed favors, those who ran the world. (He did not consider that they were desperate, needed a way to calm and counsel the unruly and hopeless citizens over whom they supposedly—and for how much longer?—ruled. He couldn't consider the problems of more powerful people.)

At last, a blinding line of light entered the apartment, making him blink. He saw a dirty slice of the apartment house hallway and a slight figure obscuring any more of it. Then the light vanished, the door creaked closed, and he and the visitor were alone in the blackness he had made.

“Ray?”

He didn't answer, trying to swallow the weeping sound that had replaced his voice and then realizing that he didn't care, he liked it.

Arlen snapped on a lamp and squinted. She saw Ray stuffed uncomfortably into a corner of the couch, his arms folded, like an angry ape forced to get used to a human world. A glass holding only ice sat before him on the table. He was blubbering and bawling, his bottom lip shuddering, his eyes blinking, rapidly.

“What's the matter?” she said, alarmed.

“What do you *think*?”

“I think somebody died. Right? Who died?”

“Don't be so clichéd.”

What a stupid thing to say! He hated that she had said it; he hated everything about her at that moment—especially that she had forced this failure on him, for he never would have attempted it on his own. This was what he got for listening to someone who loved him.

“Me!” he screamed. “Me! *I* died!”

Ray balled up and chucked the rejection letter at her (he had printed it out, apparently, though didn't remember doing so). It bounced off her left breast and fell onto the floor like a faulty firework. She stared at it for a second before she stooped to pick it up.

Kneeling, Arlen read it. Then she stood again before she spoke.

“That sucks,” she said.

“You suck!” he screamed and didn’t stop there: he kept bellowing, blaming her for this and for everything else, until she was crying, too; and since two people couldn’t cry at the same time, he soon stopped and just yelled at her straight, without tears, said how worthless he was and what a fool she had been to think otherwise.

Through it all, Arlen had the stunned look of someone berated by a mentally ill stranger, for Ray had taken off his self-protective attitude, displaying what was underneath, what had been there all along but just disguised.

“Go on, go!” he said at the end and didn’t have to repeat himself. Still weeping, she fled, taking her coat but in her haste leaving her gloves, which looked on the floor like blue hands she had severed to him as sacrifice.

Plastered, Ray stumbled into Craven’s that night, literally holding onto chairs in order to navigate the room. He had a blurry view of people drinking and dancing, some disappearing into gleams reflected off the bar, others shooting past him like lasers in a light show. Had he come to rub his nose in his own bad news and complete lack of talent—literally, face down on the floor, rising rolled in failure like a dead bird in breadcrumbs? Or had he come to pretend it was any other night, as if they’d all gone back to before he’d stuck his neck out again? And if so, did he hope that Arlen would be there, too, the way she always had been, drunk, self-destructive and unable to convince him of anything about himself? He didn’t know. (Either way, in his limited view of what was really there, he didn’t see her and somewhere in his flooded mind, was glad.)

It was particularly raucous tonight, he thought, the music almost unbearably loud, along with the braying laughter, which sounded as if someone had danced back into a wall volume knob and jacked it up. (Or was he drunk and so extra-delicate? Again, unknown.)

“Hey,” someone—Mims?— said, as Ray passed, pushed his way through others, really.

“You’re missing all the fun,” another—female this time—added.

“What fun?” Ray asked, unsure if he’d said one or two or no words at all.

In answer, someone spun him around, punishingly—it hurt a little—and forced him to look at the poorly dressed, underweight, no-talent clown in the corner.

Barone was dancing in his too-big pants, stuffed within a group of others—men and women, he always took what he could get. He was holding before his face a slab displaying his ugly mug, an electronic sash upon it, the red kind that pageant winners wear, a sign—even though it was obscured by the bouncing heads and dirty hair of his happy and resentful friends—that Barone had created a new origin myth, and, more importantly, received the



Folich's cash that went with doing so.

Ray immediately turned around, feeling he might be ill at both ends, his bowels and throat filling up. Not using his hands, he barreled head first through the mob which sought to stop and suffocate him. Then he emerged, gasping, onto a silent, empty street.

He staggered off the sidewalk, dropped not as if off a mountain (as he had when he read the email, which took a bit of bravery) but like a piece of trash down an incinerator, helplessly and without end. He was halfway across the two-way avenue when a van, going uptown while he went down, drove directly through him.

Ray awoke without a scratch. He thought that he was home yet didn't smell the mix of unwashed clothes and spilled red wine that usually greeted him back to life. Also, his place was often dim even in the day, the corroded dust on the blinds (which were nailed-up sheets) doubling the dark. Today he had to shield his eyes or else go blind.

Ray sat up, without a hangover, which he felt a harbinger of something bad. As he fully regained his senses, he sniffed a bizarre blend of aromas, which he couldn't quite place. Then he struggled to his feet.

He saw there was no ceiling and no end or boundaries to the white space around him. Placed at his left like marble monuments were bare feet leading up to undressed legs and a naked torso he could not bend back far enough to see. Its very presence was a statement of his insignificance and obligation to submit. The smells, now clearly hot chocolate and caramelized carrots, made him woozy, nearly faint.

He walked, weakly, one foot in front of the other, like a big baby growing up long after others its own age. He reached a glass through which the brutal light was barging, which let him see the life and world he had just left.

The light made things on the other side brilliantly clear, every detail so discernible there was no word for how it looked. He whipped a hand over the glass to speed through areas of the Earth like a TV newsman on election night showing on a screen where votes were counted. He rejected every place that had existed but for one: a brownstone building ten blocks from the place where he had lived. His fingers still working on the glass, instinctively knowing how to navigate, he zeroed in on a darkened bedroom, which the light on his side illuminated.

Arlen lay curled and bucking on her bed, an empty bottle rolling back and forth on the floor below her, a small pipe near her face, still glowing. Ray watched her weep—For him? For herself? For everything she had known to be true about him?—and his hand stayed upon the glass, like a prisoner on visiting day watching a loved one leave. He wished to scream a thank

you but knew he would not be heard. Feelings exploded out of him like his intestines had after his death.

Ray closed his eyes. Employing again his magic negativity, which worked here, it turned out, as well as it had on Earth, which was just as powerful as his talent, he turned away.

What was the point? Who cared? It was all, he thought, once more and forever, bullshit, anyway.

## Deafness as Fundamental Particle

*WHAT THE (BLEEP) Do We Know?* is a 2004 film that attempts to weave together theories from quantum physics and biology with efforts toward personal healing and spiritual transcendence. The central character, Amanda, is played by Marlee Matlin, Best Actress Oscar-winner for *Children of a Lesser God* (1986). Her live action scenes share screen time with interview sections and, at one point, a CGI sequence of hormone-besotted dayglo cell-people dancing to Robert Palmer's "Addicted to Love," this to illustrate emotions raging out of control. But the film always comes back to Amanda and her struggle to free herself from memories and emotions that are grinding her down, making her hate herself. Amanda's deafness is not overtly central to the plot (the part was, in fact, not originally written for a deaf actress), but in the end, if the viewer chooses to watch more than the filmmakers intended to show, it becomes an integral part of the film's overall effect.

The film opens with talking heads flashing by on the screen much too quickly for us to catch all of their words. We catch only phrases—"quantum mechanics," "supreme mind"—as if our hearing were cutting in and out. When they finally settle in, these talking heads (identified at the end of the film as biologists, physicists, theologians, even a chiropractor and a medium "channeling" a spirit's voice) begin to sketch out simplified versions of some of the wilder theories native to the world of quantum physics. (There are a number of questionable interpretations of scientific theories presented in this film, but this essay will largely consider how the film works on its own terms, leaving most points about scientific accuracy to others.)

The experts being interviewed begin by addressing themselves to the usual default of popular accounts of quantum thought subjects, Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, parsing its complexities as the idea that the most fundamental particles of matter can only be described in terms of probabilities. They collectively stress the common Heisenberg interpretation that says the observer changes what is being observed: "When you aren't looking," one explains, "there are waves of possibility. When you are looking, there are particles of experience."

We first see Amanda as she boards a commuter-train. As the train begins to move, the film cuts to high-speed footage of passage through the tunnel—a graphic convention of our time and place that lets this writhing tunnel suggest "wormholes in space," or one of the recurring metaphors of the film: Alice's fall down the rabbit hole in *Alice in Wonderland*. Amanda, we are to understand, is the film's puzzled, psychologically blocked Alice. The metaphor may seem a purely whimsical one, but it also tells us that *What the (Bleep)* means to present itself as having been built on an armature of logic and paradox, just as was Carroll's work.

One of the ideas that we, and Amanda-as-Alice are meant to find down this rabbit hole of thought is, again, that not only can no particle's location can be determined for certain, but furthermore that "scientists" (references are always vague and generic) have determined that these fundamental particles seem to phase in and out of existence. The speakers try to be viewer-friendly and down to earth even as they say things along the line of, "And if these particles wink out of existence and come back, where do they go when they're gone? Maybe into an alternate universe where the people there are wondering, 'Where do they go when they're gone?'"

The interviewees also all offer their personal versions of the idea that what we see outside is determined by what we think and feel inside, that we "create our own reality." We are told that people used to believe that "reality is out there," and we can do nothing about. But now, scientists theorize that there is no reality apart from our perception of it, no separate reality "outside," and "This new model of science . . . says what happens within us will create what's happening outside us."

Here, as in several places, the interviewees speak of these theories as being "a new idea," or "new paradigm." However, while some of the quantum details and implications may be new, the idea that we create our own realities from our experiences and our expectations isn't new. Limiting ourselves just to the last one hundred years in the United States, we find this idea implicit or explicit in, among others, William James, A. N. Whitehead, and—most explicitly—in the work of Adelbert Ames, Jr. Ames was the inventor of such perceptual demonstrations as the famous Ames Room, still to be found in popular science centers, where children look taller than their parents and water appears to run uphill. Ames was called a genius by both Whitehead and John Dewey. The reason? Because Ames found a way to not simply think through and present these ideas, but to demonstrate them in the most convincing manner possible, *visually*. This is because for most of us, just as the cliché has it, seeing, we believe, is indeed believing.

This points out something about the character of *Bleep's* Amanda. Her deafness is presented—or, rather, not presented—as being largely beside the point for the purposes of the film. In most scenes Amanda speaks to no one, and it is only because in one place (a memory of?) her husband signs to her or, in a small number of scenes, Amanda's roommate is careful to speak face-to-face so Amanda can read her lips, knocks wood to get her attention when she approaches, and knows some sign language, that we are intermittently reminded of her deafness. Her character's relationship to the world is based almost entirely in the visual—even her emotional states are given visual presentation. However, as must have occurred to a number of the film's viewers if apparently not to its makers, had her deafness been made more central then that fact would have further reinforced, both the themes of the film, and the directors' strategy for

presenting their points. Amanda's relationship to the world is presented as being based almost entirely in the visual, and even a slightly increased awareness of her deafness could have been used to make this narrow concentration seem more natural and less of a contrivance.

And there are other contrivances, as well: for all the talking heads' talk about new paradigms, those used in the film are disappointingly ordinary. Aside from a persistently mechanistic, almost Lamarckian, depiction of brain function (which in this film's view very much equals mind function), there is also that Amanda's world view is shaped by what we might term the "Betrayed by her Husband" paradigm.

Amanda has a very visual job—she is a professional photographer. She is embittered by her marriage's failure due to her husband's infidelity: she caught the couple in the act and now has visual flashbacks of that moment. After the opening train tunnel sequence, Amanda goes to a film theatre (again reinforcing the film's trope that psychology is primarily visual formed). Beneath such voice-over questions as "Is there a possibility that all potentials exist side-by-side?" she sees herself in a number of alternative existences in the theatre—alone; with her husband; she even sees herself looking at herself.

The theme of simultaneous possibilities is pursued again in the film's famous basketball sequence. Here an adolescent boy invites Amanda—and we get the impression she was a skilled basketball player when she was young—to step onto "his court of possibilities" and, among other possible realities, choose the reality where her shot goes through the hoop, and this Amanda does.

But she is not yet ready to recognize and embrace the idea of simply *choosing* her way out of her depression and anxiety. After she takes a series of candid pictures at a (different) train station her slightly daffy but upbeat roommate asks her if she got any good shots and Amanda answers no. The film doesn't explain this, but we as her audience understand: she says this because all the people she took pictures of looked happy. Amanda's world-view, or in the language of the film her "paradigm," remains largely a very negative one. Her first few actually spoken lines are "No," "Get real," and "My pills are fine. . . ." She takes prescription pills for "anxiety."

In a bit of heavy symbolism, Amanda spills her anxiety pills while waiting to get on a train to go to work. She stoops to pick them up off the platform, and while she seems to have redirected her visual field for only a moment, when she looks up her train has gone. This episode demonstrates some of the film's clumsiness: there is the message that anxiety has prevented her from going where she wants to go (or is it the attempt to *relieve* anxiety that has diverted her?), but also this anxious jittering has taken her off her intended track long enough to view a convenient exhibit of photographs about some (now almost entirely discredited) experiments by one

Masaru Emoto about the effect of positive thoughts on the structure of water molecules at freezing. Emoto claimed to have taped positive messages, even single words, on tanks of water which then underwent a change of structure from chaotic to crystal-like. Amanda reads the lips of the man next to her as he says, “If words can do this to water and we are 90% water imagine what they can do to the body.” Amanda clearly takes the comment to heart.

Amanda’s boss, Frank, assigns her to photograph a wedding (a Polish wedding, specifically, as if this were the height of wedding celebrations) and Amanda—flush with lashbacks of her own wedding in the same church—objects. Frank may actually be trying to help Amanda, whom he clearly likes. He tells her, “God, Amanda, you live in your past! And everything with you is about what happened. Too many memories clouding your vision.”

At the wedding Amanda is glum and an impediment to the flow of happiness. At the reception she begins to be forced to work through her assumptions, after becoming aware of how drastically they affect her visual perception: she “sees” the groom committing adultery when it is actually another member of the wedding party. Elliot, a stranger who is attracted to her, stops her from making a fool of herself by shouting out her mistake. (The word “deaf” isn’t used in the film, but at one point Amanda does irritably say to Elliot, “I read lips!” This is as close as the film gets to an overt reference.) He helps her get mildly drunk and she, Elliot, others at the reception, and the animated cell-folk all begin to dance, which is the film’s shorthand for indulgence in emotion and addiction to pleasure.

Marlee Matlin has said that she likes music with a heavy bass because she can hear it, but there is no sign that Amanda can hear the pop DJ or the polka accordion player. Her dancing is independent of the music, a personal rhythm fired by the alcohol and the dancing social mass; it is a freeing, a tilt-a-whirl of exorcism as her nervous system undergoes an onslaught of pleasure signals. . . .

She wakes up the next day hung over, appalled by pictures of herself with her top button unbuttoned, hair flying, stumbling, and she descends into a rather predictable scene of self-loathing, shouting at herself in the mirror, shouting that she hates herself, imagining herself bloated and ugly. And here is where Emoto’s water photos reenter: she imagines her thighs grotesquely bloated because she has shouted at her body. (Here again, it seems a deeper metaphor could have been effected, contrasting her recognized deafness with her body’s ability to hear.) But then she hears again the words of the man in the train station, sees him in the mirror, reminding her of the idea that thought can affect us *because* “we are 90% water.” She then begins to love herself—we know this because when her perky roommate comes looking for her she is drawing pretty blue hearts all over her skin and smiling. At the film’s end, we again see Amanda

riding the commuter train, and going to the theatre, the film's short hand for a switching junction of psychology and choice. This time when she stands in the theatre she is obviously master of her own possibilities.

All of this, despite some confused metaphors and symbols, is straight-forward enough, even pat: a kind of mini-dramatization of self-actualization, a "power of positive thinking" triumph, a commonplace moral with only the quantum physics providing support (however often specious) for the film's claim that it presents "new ideas." But, if we subvert the filmmaker's intent, if we give more of our attention to the character of Amanda than to the concepts the film wants us to embrace, we find that there is something more here, something richer, something not flashy or graphic or subatomic, something almost certainly not intended by the filmmakers (perhaps not even recognized by them), and to a great degree subliminal: being deaf, Amanda (and Marlee Matlin) is in very real ways used to actively constructing a great deal of her own reality. She interprets language through her eyes, music through her muscles and bones. The "complete" Amanda—that is, Amanda with her deafness recognized—is an even better exemplar of the film's idea than is the character the film means to offer us. The more we are aware of this the more our understanding of the deaf character, the constructivist epistemology, the quantum indeterminacy, the deaf actress, all reinforce one another, as well as the film's message.

But, again, we have to do most of this work ourselves, have to subvert the writers' and directors' choices. In the end, it seems that the filmmakers' well-meaning wish to present a deaf character as no different from any other prevented them from seeing that this was a place where highlighting just that deafness would have enriched their story.

FOR THE PURPOSES of the film, then, Amanda's deafness is almost invisible. But Matlin's own deafness makes its presence known very clearly—on the other side.

The actor and director commentary/interview, now almost obligatory on DVD releases, has become a genre unto itself. Ostensibly a menu of options meant to take us to the truths behind the feature's illusions, it is just as often another series of illusions, convenient sincerity, even attempts to distance the speaker from the film: action heroes come on as soft-spoken, thoughtful souls with all squib blood washed away. What we hear are actors under pressure, compelled to fill audio time: because they can't be seen they have to keep talking. The DVD of *What the Bleep* offers many such extras, including some interview snippets with Marlee Matlin.

For the interview, Matlin is seated in a director's chair in front of her set trailer. She signs her responses to questions, and an off-screen—male (one wonders why)—interpreter acts as her voice. In the first snippet she talks about the philosophy and the uniqueness of the film. In the second, she talks about accessing different emotions here than in her other films, and about

having to physically suggest “a great deal of internal thought processes. . . .”

In the third snippet, Matlin begins by signing that the writers and directors of the film are among the few in the business “who are open-minded enough, and open-hearted enough to not be afraid to try something that people might consider out-of-the ordinary. . . .” Our first thought is that she’s speaking about the subject matter of the film, its tripartite structure (live action, animation, interviews). But then it becomes apparent that she’s talking about her own casting as Amanda.

“This script was such an easy script to adapt to me because it’s not a dialogue-heavy character. I have done films where they weren’t originally written for deaf characters and they’ve changed them and they actually have worked for the better. And I think that I bring out a great deal because of my ability to use my facial expressions and my body language, which is part of my everyday world.”

Again, I would suggest that the film would have been richer had the filmmakers included more of the reality of the character’s deafness rather than simply editing the part-as-written to attain a neutral view. But Matlin herself is pleased by the result.

“And I’m glad,” she continues, “that this is one of those projects where it wasn’t about being deaf, at all. And the character doesn’t refer to the fact that she’s deaf. It’s not even once mentioned—because it’s not necessary. You don’t have to emphasize it. . . .” It’s not, and you don’t. . . . except when the pressure of other people is applied, as here, outside the cushioning artificiality of the film. As even these supportive, edited interview segments demonstrate, any time she has to interact with other people her deafness becomes an issue. It seems unlikely that Matlin has ever done an interview where she didn’t have to discuss her deafness. Or, as she says in the last of her interview snippets here, that she has ever been part of a movie or television production where her deafness wasn’t a factor in her encounters, at least the initial ones, with the others in the project.

It is impossible for those of us who aren’t deaf to know, but it seems likely that there are times when Matlin (and other deaf persons), can indeed forget her deafness—as any of us can momentarily forget any part of ourselves. Perhaps this happens when she is alone, or thinking deeply, or relaxing with a loved one. And perhaps also when she is acting. But once social interaction is necessary, it becomes problematic. It’s not just hell that is other people; deafness is other people as well.

In the end, taking the DVD of *What the (Bleep) Do We Know?* as a two-sided experience, experiencing Matlin as both actress and character—we see deafness going in and out of existence, like one of the talking head’s fundamental particles.



## Rifts

Cleft, as in chin  
Cloven, as in hoof  
Fracture: bones  
suddenly caught  
under stones

Crevasse,  
as when a glacier  
exposes its heart  
Fissure: think of  
rupture, ravine

Estrangement  
suggests  
eclipse  
but a yellow sun  
hovers

over the divorcing  
earth, chanting  
*graben* and *horst*,  
feeding its children  
to a fiery god

## Science, Fiction

I read a complex article  
Last night. If I  
Believe and you are  
Far enough away, moving  
Toward or from me  
At the right velocity,  
Then I've not yet read;  
In the opposite direction,  
I may have forgotten.

Some evenings I read  
Fiction, some fact, still  
Others old subjects  
As deep in debate as  
Teams or flavors or rain.  
One vocabulary seams  
Like thread in a quilt.

When I read of space-time,  
Understand the physics,  
Grasp sense in equations  
Waved in lieu of proof, I  
Consider versatile symbols.  
Patches of bold statement  
Hold us in awe.

Fiction and fact both  
Signify. And the math?  
I understand the formulae  
Like I comprehend fiction,  
Maybe exactly so: Certainty

Regardless of location or speed,  
Fine vantage point  
On which to stand  
In thrall of inadequate truth.

## Paperless

As of the implementation (application) of the system (entity) to increase efficiency of output and streamline to improve (better serve) workflow portability and redundancy reduction and to seamlessly integrate, store, access, analyze, harness productivity, and increase ROI with a complete

suite of capture tools, your efforts will be un-measurable.

You will no longer need to view your stacks grow thinner as you'll become so efficacious there will *be* no results.

Therefore you may come to dream of butterflies, which may rise up from a field of lilacs on 8 ½ x 11 wings of bright white acid free paper of ten percent post-consumer content that will not yellow or crumble over time, and will land expertly in green hanging files alphabetized in rows.

The more your output in invisible unified digital records management increases, the more

you will feel compelled to speed home nights and make labels, a corkscrew pasta of meaning unraveling onto the table as your eyes go dim in what you can only describe as a sort of

*blindness of the corporeal*, and the doctors say mm, yes, it's a new kind of blindness they've been seeing lately: They suspect it's environmental, and suggest you take up pottery.

## Fireflies

After monsoon rain subsided, after darkness seeped into the suburban neighborhood, after Mrs. Perera plucked star-shaped white blossoms to offer Lord Buddha, a host of quiet fireflies invaded our garden. They dotted every corner with moving lanterns of life: above the yellow orchids hiding in darkness, near the Chinese guava tree, over the light-reflecting brilliance of the patio floor. Dad watched *Crown Court* on the television, so we had to maintain pin-drop silence. Mom took Sha and me out of the house and sat on a fading red patio chair, closing the door behind her, leaving *Crown Court* within, escaping unpredictable wrath of the house. The moon tried to expose the contours of her aging face, and Sha and I collected fireflies. We got them to land on our palms until they got tired of us and flew away. In the buttery moonlight, Mom couldn't hide her eyes that were glistening in their moistness.

“Mom, is there a rabbit in the moon?” I asked her.

“Yes, there is. Can you see the outline? Look! Can you see the ears?”

“Are they ears? Is he listening to us, then?”

“He is, so you have to be a good boy.”

Sha had three fireflies on her palm, and she was oblivious to us. I could catch a glimpse of her brown eyes full of wonder.

“Then he probably heard Dad shouting at you,” I said.

Mom hesitated before replying, “Perhaps.”

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Mrs. Fernando always looked through her bedroom window whenever there were signs of turmoil in our house. I could see her open the window and draw the curtain a little, so she Rodrigo could see what was happening. She might have been able to see Mom coming out of the house, wringing her hands. She would have seen Dad following her to insult, denigrate, and threaten. She could have heard Sha crying.

In the morning, things were quiet in the mild drizzle, and when I was leaving the house with my Brother, dressed in our pure white uniforms, Mrs. Fernando fully opened the bedroom window to greet us.

“Good morning, boys!”

“Good morning,” I said, a little embarrassed of her potential knowledge. “I have a test today.”

“Oh, good luck! What is it on?”

“Buddhism,” I said. “It’s about Nirvana.”

“What’s that?”

“It’s kind of like heaven. There aren’t people shouting at you.”

\*\*\*

The traditional New Year was in April, the harvesting season. It was very hot around this time, and in the school bus, the white shirt clung to my body with sweat dripping down in the tropical heat. In fourth grade, I had to write an essay about my New Year vacation. I didn’t write everything; I only wrote about the good parts.

On New Year’s Day, everything had to be done at precise auspicious times according to the traditional calendar. Mom had to light the stove at 8.52 a.m. to cook milk rice. The color given that year was green, so she was dressed in a forest green shirt and a white skirt. Dad hovered over her, giving her a final countdown of the last ten seconds. Exactly at 8.52, Mom lit Rodrigo the stove. At the auspicious time, fire crackers from the neighborhood started to deafen me. In every household, milk rice was being cooked at 8.52. As it was being cooked, according to the traditional calendar, kids had to be studying. I took my Sinhala textbook and read the first lesson scheduled for May. It was a Jathaka story about one of Lord Buddha’s five hundred and fifty lives. In this story, he was born as a snake. Sha was reading a biology book.

When the milk rice was cooked, Mom prepared the breakfast table. It wasn’t really a table; we had to eat on a reed mat on the floor. All six of us sat around the mat with the food in the middle. There was milk rice to be eaten with an aromatic, spicy chicken curry. The traditional sweetmeats after the breakfast were my favorites. I waited patiently until Dad said we could get anything we wanted. I grabbed the biggest piece of coconut candy Mom had made. I knew Sha was aiming that.

“You are such a glutton,” she said.

“Sour grapes. Sour grapes,” I gloated over my little victory.

After eating, my three siblings and I had to go to the Rukaththana tree with a heavy knife and a lamp. Holding the lamp in one hand, we struck the trunk of the tree with the knife to release milky sap, a sign of prosperity. When I struck the trunk, a generous gush of sap heralded my supposed prosperity to unfold. I didn’t believe in it.

\*\*\*

The senseless ethnic conflict was raging in the country, and even though the actual combat was taking place in the northern peninsula, from time to time, the LT.T.E. sent suicide bombers to the capital. Schools had to be sporadically closed and whenever we heard glassshattering loud sounds, we immediately jumped to the inevitable conclusion: another bomb.

When the final bell rang in high school, I was getting my books together. All of a sudden, the whole school shook from a thunderous explosion. It sounded like our school was being bombed. Everyone started running, even though no one knew where the sound came from. A bomb, a bomb. It had to be a bomb. I started running to the entrance of the school. I imagined the best thing to do was to go home. When I was approaching the entrance, Mrs. Aponso, my primary school English teacher, almost caught me by surprise. She always dressed immaculately and matched her shoes to the sari she was wearing. “The Central Bank is in smithereens,” she said. “The biggest bomb to date.”

“The Central Bank?” I asked in disbelief. At the time all three of my siblings were working in banks located close to the Central Bank. Were they okay? I started running to the bus stop. I had to go there. I had to know if they were okay. Completely oblivious to sirens and ambulances, I hailed a taxi and asked the driver to take me towards the Central Bank.

“It’s all cordoned off, sir. Better not go there.”

“Take me as close as you can.”

“I will try my best.”

And we headed to the scene of devastation. The area was like a beehive. It was loud, hot, unsettling, traumatizing in its uncertainty and damage. I was eighteen at the time, and I felt helpless in my inability to even figure out what to do. Like under a spell, I advanced towards the heart of the wound, looking for my brother and sisters. The throng of people, looking for their loved ones, was clamoring to get information. I saw police officers with blood on them. Miraculously, I ran into my brother. He was trying to find out about our sisters, but there was no way we could get any information from this mess, this massive gathering of troubled people. So we headed home. In silence. In anticipation. In hope.

Both my sisters were home when we got there. They were in utter shock and could hardly speak. Sha’s bank was further away from the Central Bank, but my eldest sister’s bank was right next to it. A friend of hers had died, being squashed under debris. A friend’s friend had lost both her parents who worked in the Central Bank. A sad time, it was. We didn’t

know what else to expect in the coming weeks. Life was very precarious. We had to sever ourselves from the worldly interest in life. We could be next.

\*\*\*

Over a decade ago, I escaped the trauma of my frosted buttermilk home on Mulberry Street, and the blood bath my country was becoming. Across oceans, I traveled to lose myself in the “willing suspension of disbelief.” I did for a while, until one day, in Dr. Clifford’s sterile, white room, he told me that I had some chronic, debilitating disease. Over the years, whenever speaking was becoming hard, I thought about what Mrs. Dias told me when she was giving comments about my performance at the final debate of the All-island Debating Championship for the Western province. She said words poured out of my mouth like water. When words struggle to escape my oral cavity, now, I think about bygone grandeur, unattainable splendor, and the willing suspension of disbelief.

\*\*\*

I fell on the carpet about ten seconds ago. I bumped my head against some heavy book on the floor. I thought about Mom and realized that I hadn’t written to her in a while. I still don’t know what to tell her. Maybe I should draw from my acting experience. Yesterday, I read about some criminal who was given the lethal injection. I wonder how long it took for him to succumb. I was jealous.

\*\*\*

I have rarely seen fireflies in Illinois. A few weeks ago, though, I saw two of them near the back entrance to my apartment. They brought me yellow orchids, Chinese guavas, and some milk rice, but they were gone at 6:37.



## Rock Paper Scissors

He uses cosmic annihilation  
every time, even when I think

I'm calling his bluff,  
when I think  
he's going for the old faithful  
rock just to mix things up. And then

the fell swoop of  
that dreaded hand,  
the crush of a universe  
crashing down,  
the muted softness  
of matter becoming  
that old nothing

from which it came. The smudging  
away of molecules once again defeats  
any planet-sized boulder

I could conjure in the sweaty  
void of my palm. I can't help enduring  
these daily beatings. I start another.

My eternal chagrin,  
His helpless shrug,  
that old excuse:

Him always winning  
is just playing  
by the rules.

## **Memories hunch and discover the home I grew up**

There is a two story home standing tall and proud,  
Surrounded by rose gardens and apple trees.  
I like to kill the light to better hide behind the pine tree,  
And watch the home whose glory died years ago.  
The strangest times for me spent in my hiding place,  
To reach the memory of my dear ones.  
I remember how my cousins and I played hide and seek in the halls,  
rode bicycles within the bushes, and eat snacks with dirty hands.  
The shadow of danger on my parents' faces,  
On the edge of sunset when I was late coming home from school.  
I grew up free as a bird flying on the path of hope.  
Now, I have faced the thunder of pain, its footprints  
Deeper than the mist that has blanketed me.  
I remember butchers with their bloody aprons stationed across the street.  
I remember how I hid the sadness of eating that meat,  
Like a drunk hiding joy at a funeral feast.  
Standing there, I try to leave behind all memories, the home,  
Rose gardens, apple trees, and walk away from the place I lived.  
My car was seated there beside the street light waiting for me.  
On the road going back to the home where I belong,  
Tears slip toward my throat, I scream in to my head.

## Laundromat

Mini oceans trapped inside  
electric boxes  
take anger out on shirts and shorts.

Saddle-shaped chairs are  
lined  
up  
like obedient children.

Neighborhood souls read words  
but barely comprehend them,  
too inebriated from the  
smell of hot air,

too busy chasing after time  
with axe in hand.

## Big Bust Theory

Both science and religion have led people astray in determining the origin of man. Lies, everything has been a lie. For the past three millennia misdirection and half truths have been perpetuated by masters of secrecy in order to distract man from uncovering the real answers.

“Answers which rest before man’s eyes every day,” says Richard Carroll, professor of sociology at the University of Florida.

Professor Carroll and his graduates study the seasonal mating rituals of young adults in and around the nightclubs of Miami.

“This meaning is often accentuated by thin straps of elastic and under wires. The answers to our universe are continuously used as a distraction from itself.”

Men are distracted by the answers on film, magazines, and now on the internet. Often they are sought after late at night so our mothers or wives will not discover. These hunts become our quest for the holly grail, our fountain of youth, our last great manifest destiny. Yet man’s never ending desire to reveal these secrets has shaped his existence.

Simply put, the universe is a breast.

And now science has definitive proof that the universe is in the size and shape of an actual breast.

### INVERTED PHILOSOPHIES:

“The universe is shaped exactly like the earth. If you go straight long enough you’ll end up where you were.”

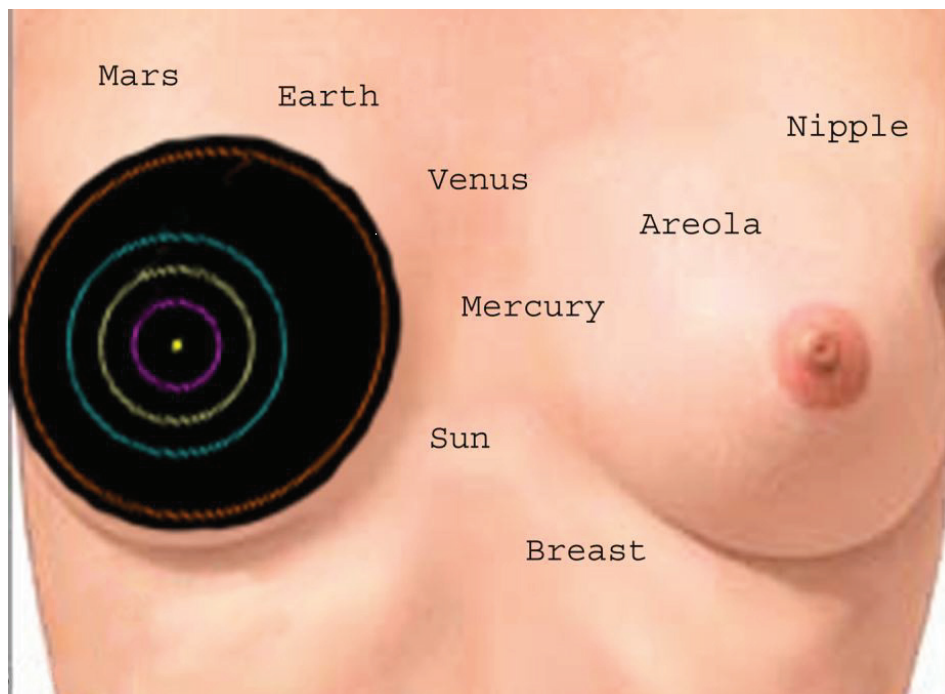
Singer and songwriters Isaac Brock, Eric Judy, and Jeremiah Green make up the band Modest Mouse. “Baby cum angels fly around you, reminding you we used to be three and not just two,” they explain in their song ‘3rd Planet’ on *The Moon & Antarctica* album. “And that’s how the world began. And that’s how the world will end.”

Scientifically speaking the answers to how the universe is a breast are much more complicated. Phillip Portman, a physicist at M.I.S. or the Molecular Institute of Science, studies the similarities between the physics of the cosmos to the physics of microbiology.

“Your body is a complex machine that has been designed from a specific set of laws. The mammary gland, the milk ducts, even the fatty skin tissue act as a mini solar system. The

functions are the same, but on a symbiotic infinite/finite scale.”

Portman explains how the planet Earth and our solar system are similar to the hydrogen atom. Earth has one satellite orbiting the planet. Hydrogen has one proton and is the most abundant chemical element, constituting roughly 75% of the Universe’s chemical elemental mass. [1] When we begin this path of reasoning, we see that electrons navigate around the neutron and proton of an atom just as the moon to our planet.[2]



1. Palmer, D. (13 September 1997). “Hydrogen in the Universe”. NASA. Retrieved 2008-02005.
2. The moon can’t be an electron because electrons don’t act like satellites in space. Rather they are seen as clouds of charge spread over the entire orbit. ^To be honest, I don’t remember where I found this... so we’ll pretend this fact doesn’t exist so my theory can remain true.

But Portman and M.I.S. are at odds when it comes to the belief that the universe is a breast. M.I.S. has publicly stated that the corporation does not share in the belief that the universe is a breast.[3]

At a press conference in Phoenix last September, CEO and founding director Sam Serebin stated, “The difficult part to account for is how often we get to fondle the breasts. That, and not all nebulae are galaxies. Many are just clouds of gas. We can therefore not quantitatively

prove that the universe has boundaries which formulate in the shape of a female breast.”

Portman still however contests that different clusters of galaxies combine to create different properties within the breast.

John Walters, “When you take this theory and expand on it infinitely you have whole breasts acting supple and perky like unstable molecular compounds. The similarities are astounding.”

Walters is a high school teacher of Physical Science in Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey who leads an underground movement in science which is responsible for popularizing the term cosmoboobology.

“Cosmoboobology is as several atoms come together to form a solar system, multiple solar systems create galaxies,” Walters explains. “Galaxies create compounds, compounds create cells, cells create the known universe, and the universe is a breast.”

#### CURRENT THEORY:

How do scientists know, with all of the planets, stars, and cosmos inside are the design of a gigantic breast?

This question can be answered, but not before (like any true scientific venture) creating the paradox of asking more questions.

Who’s breast?

Where is the rest of her body?

Is heaven a woman or she hell?

13.7 billion years ago the distance between neighboring galaxies was zero.[4] The theory which deduces a cataclysmic birth of the universe (big bang) resulted in an abundance of elements big and small through the laws of physics.[5] Over time the universe has undergone a complex evolution. It is this evolution that has made it possible for planets such as the Earth and beings such as humans to exist as a breast.

3. See: World News clip, Molecular Institute of Science (M.I.S.) press conference in Phoenix, AZ – <http://sites.google.com/site/taylorsharpmedia/>

4. Komatsu, E.; Dunkley, J.; Nolte, M. R.; Bennett, C. L.; Gold, B.; Hinshaw, G.; Jarosik, N.; Larson, D. et al. (2009). “Five-Year Wilkinson Microwave Anisotropy Probe Observations: Cosmological Interpretation”. *Astrophysical Journal Supplement* 180: 330.

5. Big Bang: Made this up from a bunch of different definitions I stole from books and the web. Sounds pretty smart, doesn’t it?

Tyler White, writer/director of the documentary *Confusing, a Film about Women*, “Imagine the universe as we know it to exist in a Petri dish lined with a thin coating of oily water. The grand designer, whoever she was, added a drop of soap to the mix and the oil darted out to the edges.”

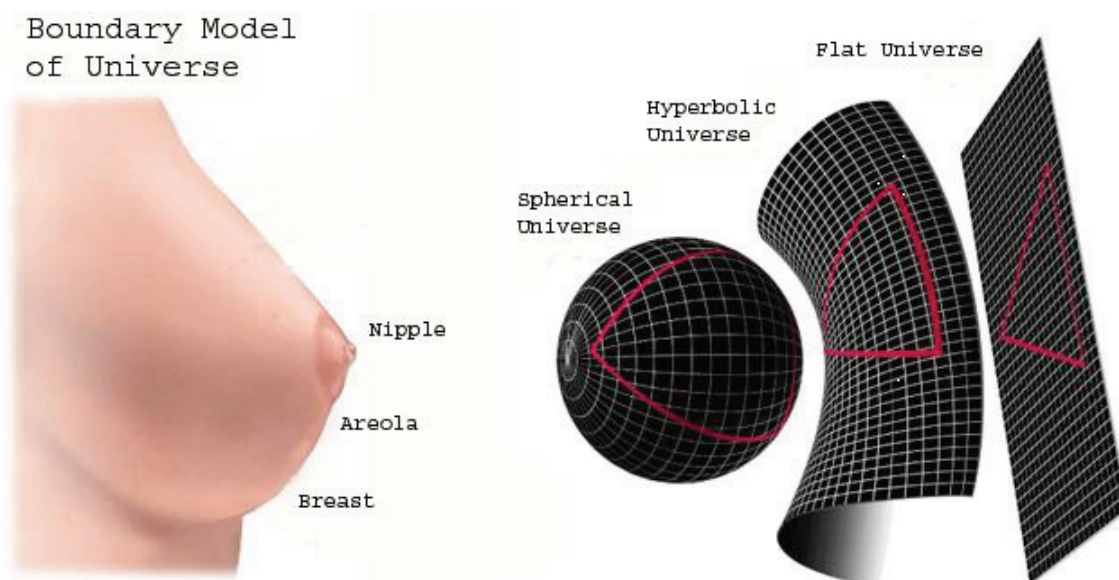
White believes that if there is a god she is a woman.

“They are the most beautiful things on the planet, but make absolutely no sense. If that doesn’t describe women, god, and our universe, I don’t know what will.”

Yet, the universe is infinite in size and unlike the Petri dish there are no conceived glass walls. But scientists have theorized that there are boundaries.

Sarah Cook, PhD. has designed a model of the universe based on the principles derived from a boundary condition. A boundary condition in space is the state of universe in its outer boundary.[6] Based on these set of laws, her model shows the exact curvature mimics the shape of a female breast.

“A 17 year old female to be precise,” she says. “Obviously race and weight play a factor, but between the end of stage four and beginning of stage five breast developments are where we generally see the period when a woman’s breasts reflect the boundaries of our universe.”



6. Compiled from: Stephen Hawkins with Leonard Mlodinow, *A Briefer History of Time, The Science Classic Made More Accessible*. (New York: Random House, November 2005), audio book.



**THE BIG BUST:**

So why the cover up?

“You let something as beautiful as these ideas hang out there and mass hysteria would erupt.” Katherine Kellman is dean of the history department at the University California Davis and author of *The History of Science*. Kellman is concerned that knowledge leads to chaos.

“To accept that the existence of life is equates to a breast is humbling,” says Kellman. “Personally, it makes me want to crawl into a hole.”

For people who feel like Kellman it gets worse.

In 1964 the discovery of particles called quarks changed science’s understanding of space and time. Quarks are hypothetical elementary particles which make up the protons and neutrons of an atom.[7] They allowed scientist to look past the two conflicting unrealities of space and time and discover that inside each of these particles there exists an anti-particle. The theory of alternate universes was no longer science fiction, it became science fact.

“What we’ve discovered is that there are two; two breasts.” Thomas Reynolds of the Stanford Linear Accelerator Center (SLAC), “Resting just outside our own existence is another equally beautiful specimen.”

SLAC discovered the other breast, nearly the same size and make up to our own, mimics our universe. Sensitive to the other’s existence, like consciousness in a dream or fantasy, both universes phase over one another every so often while never completely capable of occupying the same temporal space.

“Side by side universes working independently of one another,” Reynolds says. “The discovery was breathtaking.” It wasn’t until several years later when SLAC attempted to publish these findings did they discover resistance.

“The existence of another universe, basically identical to our own, and sitting next to ours frightened even the science community,” Reynolds remembers. “Just the mention of the universe as a pair of breasts brought on the claim ‘misogynistic.’”

After repeated backlash from women’s leagues such as the Amazonian Group and the Pink Ribbon Club, scientists covered up the truth once again. The same truth which continues to be hidden right in front of man’s face. Perhaps a man feels more comfortable when he is less distracted.

7. Merriam-Webster Children’s Dictionary, 2008.

Definitions:

Atom – planets

Black Hole – the hypothesis usually referred to as the “vagina theory”

Cosmology – the study of the universe as a whole; not to be confused with cosmetology, the study of women’s things

Cosmoboobology – the study of the universe as a breast

Duality – two breasts

Electron – moons

Galaxies – possible formation of cells

Nucleosynthesis - the process of creating new atomic nuclei from pre-existing nucleons (protons & neutrons) and is thought that the primordial nucleons themselves were formed from the quark-gluon plasma from the Big Bang as it cooled below 2 trillion degrees and perhaps influenced by a concentration of dark matter

Photon - light energy which comes in the form of another type of particle; a massless particle called a photon (the nearby nuclear furnace of the sun is the greatest source of photons for the earth)

Quarks – you, me, people

Space Time – see: dark energy and dark matter

Spatial Dimension – this factor depends on the female; usually referred to a “breast size”

Theory – something that can’t be proven

Universe – a breast

## **Sometimes You See the Cracks**

Evident for all but a fool  
Clear and blue on a gray day  
Patterns in the glass  
Webbed without the aid of a spider  
But sometimes the elevens fail  
And a crack appears  
The sky has opened  
And engines descend  
With deafening noise  
And comes a familiar shadow  
Prodded by the point of Poe's umbrella  
A zombie perhaps  
An old friend, or both  
Lingering only until you turn

\*

Its grain widening  
fills with islands and tides  
—sandpaper alone! a beach  
and the light that found its way home  
grows heavier each morning

I polish a wood bowl  
the way the mist will wait  
face up for water almost tissue paper  
innocent, smelling from acorns and Fall  
and my hands, once grasses and clumps.

The sun must be wood  
made from an old sea left out to dry  
never sure it will burn  
or why the air somehow shines

—I have to hold it close  
and the horizon so smoothly  
into dust and emptiness  
—I have to slow the rim, my tears  
already falling through the afternoon light  
—I dread rainbows! hate flowers  
—only sand, sand and worn down paper.

## Cooking Alone

I arrange the spice jars on a quiet kitchen shelf: anise, cardamom, cloves, horseradish, sage, tarragon, turmeric. Wood smoke from the fire pit swirls in the window, the fragrant cedar staining my hair. I light candles. I turn on the stove to heat a simple cauliflower soup. I'm lonely for once, alone: I take my time choosing spice for the soup, which I will take inside me.

Once, years back, I watched my grandmother chop onions and celery on her smoothed cutting board, her knobbed left hand sprinkling lemon basil and thyme over the cuttings. I don't remember what we said. Or, if we spoke at all. But I still see her, back bent, right hand clenching a 50-year-old knife, a headless duck now held aloft in her left, its feet rigid, cold blood draining into a porcelain bowl edged in gold leaf and purple pansies.

It was my grandmother I saw as I turned toward the butcher block, her hands bloodied, but her eyes kind. I stepped toward her, until the light shifted and I saw a dark ceramic vase, filled with lilies. Their scent heavy, as in a room just left. The cauliflower soup bubbles up, accepts peppercorn, rosemary, some celery leaves. Tangy juice on my hands, a lemon to squeeze into hot water. Oil to pair with green olives. This stillness: It's hard to learn that loneliness is useful.

My hands keep working.

## Seashell

In my dreams, I exist because  
Sometimes I die.  
I do not exist here, standing  
Under this everywhere moon, under this moon  
For everyone.  
I have died so many times on paper that, now I forget how to live.  
No thing external to me  
Belongs to me.  
It is clear, lucidly,  
That an unfulfilled life is one spent  
Filling it up.

I want you to take this shell, burrowed in the beach (Under this omniscient moon),  
And rid it of all words. Shake me out like a dog who has worn its coat in the water.  
Climb inside,  
Sing the songs that you hear  
And I'll listen to the echoes.  
Under this moon, under this moon  
That romanticizes rivers and seas with shimmers,  
I am a timid and tepid non-person.  
You are right to take this aloofness for rigid,  
Internal Structure.  
You're right . . .  
But this structure is articulated with self-loathing.  
I am unremarkable personage, particularly since I do not exist.  
I want stature, not structure.  
What of myself can I impress upon you,  
When I'm not myself?

Does anything happen when I leave the room?

Are you watching?

Under this moon, I cannot see myself...

I cannot see you, because I am not myself.

Under this moon, this everywhere moon,

I am nowhere to be found.

I cannot see you, because I am not myself.

Under this moon, this everywhere moon,

I am nowhere to be found.

## A Leaf In the Storm

You spotted him across the poorly lit subway station. He carried a small cane suitcase held together with rope. You watched him step near the edge of the platform and look across the tracks at a black and white advertisement for a downtown hotel.

You weren't surprised when he asked you which car to take to the university. This was your destination. Though he stepped away and walked some distance down the platform to wait for the train, you realized he would come back.

He ended up standing next to you in the crowded car, his left arm stretched to grab the overhead metal bar. Several minutes later, he slid his hand down to grasp the seat rail close to his crotch. His face was etched with deep crevasses.

He never said his name, though you dubbed him Carlo in your mind. His skin was a light shade of brown. He was from New York. The collar of his lime green knit shirt was large and buttoned all the way up. He wore a brown corduroy jacket with wooden buttons and dark patches at the elbows.

In your mind, you watched a man hand him that pressed shirt, freshly laundered and folded flat. Carlo reached out his hands to accept the jacket and a pair of brand new jeans, dark blue, almost purple. The guard behind the low wooden counter painted green, one hand on the bottom of the flat stack of clothes, one hand on top, said, "Here you go, Carlo."

And for the first time in seven years Carlo put on street clothes, then turned to see himself reflected in the glass. Outside the warden's office, he waited for the words that would echo in his head again and again. "Carlo, we don't want to see you back here."

He was a good six inches taller than you and slouched when he spoke. Everything fell apart, he said, the winter he signed the papers sealing his divorce. He moved to a bare studio on the top floor, of a building where the elevator was always out of order. That winter he lost his job and started making stupid mistakes. His last five hundred dollars went for a used Chevy Nova. He headed south on the highway to Florida.

The afternoon had grown so dark it could have been night. Rain beat steadily against the metal car. Wind slashed rain across the window. A dog howled in answer to a siren's cry.

"I have no place to stay," Carlo whispered.

You knew, of course, that everything had been leading up to this. The rain and wind played a part. The temperature dropping steadily. And Christmas approaching.



The clean faces of the other passengers looked at you from around the car. You couldn't help but notice the cheerful red, yellow and green rain slickers and wet umbrellas. A glance to the right and you saw where someone had drawn a smiley face in the center of the steamed-up window.

For a moment, you let yourself imagine Carlo in the morning, a cantaloupe colored towel wrapped and folded over at his waist. His chest was damp, the black hairs curled tight there and glistening. His brown hand carefully slid a razor above his lip.

In your mind, there was also a dark room where no objects were visible, except the poorly lit, scratched face of a clock. You had just been woken from sleep, yet you quickly sensed someone was moving in the room. It was five a.m.

You heard the whine of his zipper and the clanking of keys as his pants fell to the floor. Afterward, you felt the bed sinking with his weight and smelled whiskey from his breath, as his warm arm pressed the back of your neck. This, too, was Carlo, and in the morning you would get up alone and dress for work, listening to him snore. When you came home that afternoon, Carlo would be gone, his clothes in a crumpled pile on the floor.

The breath of the passengers continued to steam the windows in the crowded subway car. You let yourself look into Carlo's dark brown eyes. He took your hand in his calloused palm

“I know it would be good with us,” he said.

And you nodded and smiled, remembering that the leaves glisten brightest in the first moment after the rain stops.

## “Seeds”

I will move the sky into the ocean  
I keep in a jar in the fridge —

Into the keyhole stomach  
Of the body sprouting magnolias.

I have swallowed the safe.  
It sits next to my liver,

Housing your breath.  
As an Alzheimer patient’s last memory,

I have tucked you away like a dead language.  
One day the sea will seep into the earth

And you along with it and I will open myself  
And retrieve your breath.

I will compress it into one of those loose pills  
In the cabinet to plant like a seed

In the yard so the wind carries you  
Through April’s open windows —

You will rest on my skin, the coffee table,  
And on the pot roast. You will wedge

Your way between the yellowing  
Book pages shelved on the wall.

You will pass through veins and ventricles,  
And I will turn the sky upside down in the jar and water you.

## Eulogies to the Forgotten

### 1.Orchids

within scaling crusts  
from oft ignored arms  
of silent benevolence,

flimsy roots spread  
as octopus tentacles,  
struggling for survival:

sapping vitality  
from dying sinews  
of antiquity, lost  
within misty recollections  
of frenzied storms of old

to blossom into  
vibrant hues,  
breathing exotic scents  
and wearing  
with panache,  
illusion of unsullied  
dewy, innocenceunknown  
to callous life.

### 2.Eucalyptus

alabaster skin peels off  
as cheap acrylics,

revealing hidden blemishes  
for world to sneer at,

yet elegant complacence  
endures, under  
sun's scorching critique of  
tainted presence,  
sparse foliage;

dancing to rhythm  
of taunting winds,  
in tranquil contentment  
of life's little pleasures.

### 3. Penaga lily

familiar trees that stood  
lining serpentine path,  
of gravel and puddles  
to my homestead;

with satin leaves  
of roseate pink  
like sea shell's bellies,  
seemingly,  
kissed by virgin rays  
of vermilion dawn turning  
green with age;

and sublime flowers  
rancid yet gay,

with gaudy yawns,

thick olive foliage  
seldom dry, of  
whimsical raindrops,  
echoing with  
sparrows' chirps,  
and cuckoo's songs;

adorned my childhood  
in delight's confettialways  
reminiscent  
to me:  
as nascent, first love  
in nature's boudoir.

#### 4. Gooseberries

green, sweet-sour,  
tangy and shiny-smooth,  
bit with gluttonous delight  
to savor, with water  
turned paradoxically sweet,

collected in stained kerchiefs  
oblivious to gritty palms,  
sweaty brows, skinned knees  
treasured in bulging pockets;

bite of delight  
at times turned into

grimace, when greed  
plucked raw bitterness,  
paying the price  
for impatience,  
and selfish indifference inherent  
of juvenile  
single-mindedness.

#### 5. Touch Me Not

dewy, luxuriant leaves  
furl in silent subservience,  
fading into insignificance  
at subtle brush,  
of trampling juggernaut

concocting  
illusion  
of terrified cowardice:  
an instrument of survival  
against the unsurmountable

to savor sprinkled  
sips, of sunlight's manna  
stroking insatiable egos  
of approaching trouble,  
to bask in breeze's kisses.

#### 6. China Rose

those cheery blossoms

of scarlet and fuschia,  
grinning in sweltering heat  
or rainy downpours,

resplendent with smiles  
at gloomiest of hours,  
enthroned on straggling arms  
of olive foliage,  
rightfully, queen of topics;

left a song echoing  
on heart strings,  
strummed with  
invisible fingers of joy,

-a contagious rapture  
of being alive,  
and celebration of  
elusive blessing of life.

## Featherweight Houses

Contemplate the overwhelming hover that lifts branches  
Limbs, all manner of things up above dominate below  
Hot air rises, cold air falls  
Monday reads my loss  
Dry words are deserts, no oasis in the leaves  
Desiccated desires remain attached  
Thirsty, parched, nowhere to fall  
Gravity's abacus beads click stubborn calculation  
The clock goes firmly quiet now, no longer  
Head in the clouds; suck in the moisture  
No appointment necessary, door is open wide enough.



## Sand-Holes and Answers

in solitary bed he dreamed the childish dream  
of digging one vast sand-hole with red tiny child shovel --  
tin -- in one hand at the beach on a gray Tuesday  
a lonely season away from the laughter-crowds,  
and walls giving way each time he tried to clamber out

fearing all the while that all of life slips away and falls apart  
no matter what is done to stop it and as for him he'd been  
holding all the answers up to then all that ever came to him,  
carefully scrawled onto separate sheets of onionskin paper  
sheafed into clutch of one hand raised above trickle of sand

with clear air from the sea being what it was  
that made him decide it was time to begin  
to shred each struggled-answer down to tiny bits  
and scatter them up like parade flights of ticker tape  
that would fall cascading into the pit he'd created.

And quick as the snapping of gritted fingers everything  
turning around and suddenly dawning rare and clear,  
with grains that were slipping down in steady stream  
into the pit of his dream at first having seemed so destructive  
the build-up swallowing bits of answers falling.

but watching everything come together and rest  
there he was all of a sudden and instantly knowing  
and breathing heavy with discovering  
we all end up heaped and mixed and  
laughing together down at pit's bottom

and carefree in spite of all effort at drifting away  
each to one's own separate oblivion, knowing at once  
it would only be a matter of time and the fact of it  
not making sense with disintegration seeming more likely  
no the fact of it not making sense becomes wondrous now

each grain in its own falling away drawn back  
in directions of every other particle  
inching back in quiet slack between drawn breaths  
and the universal attraction almost but not quite  
proving some kind of quantum all by itself  
as the force that remains to declare of collapse:  
Enough is enough!

## Mussolini's Son's Car

Fifty years. More. Fifty-two. It hit me the other day when I was looking for the car online. Three marriages ago. I thought about those smug people who say, "I wouldn't change a thing." Lying sonsabitches in my opinion. But that's me. Maybe they actually wouldn't. Perhaps they were perfect. Could be they always sidestepped life's steaming cow-pies and made the right choices and decisions, never drank too much, or hurt anyone, or...well, I don't believe it. I'll find the car, I'll have it. I'll die in it if I find it, I'll guarantee you that. It's a metaphor for my life, this blue evanescence of art nouveau's last days, shipped over from Italy. This graceful wraith.

The car, I discovered, adding to its cachet, had belonged to one of Benito Mussolini's sons. It was 1958. I saw the car before I met Jack. It was parked near the campus on one of those achingly perfect autumn days, the sky so bright and blue with promise, the leaves falling--a Cole Porter, football, girls in cashmere, heads thrown back in laughter kind of day.

The car was bluer than the impossibly blue sky, darker, sort of a Maxfield Parrish blend of blues from cobalt to aquamarine to an electric indigo where direct sunlight hit it through broken patches in the 100-year-old trees under which it sat, poised to spring. I wasn't high, other than cigarette-shrunken capillaries: deep drags when you're young will produce a sort of altered look at things, a clarity. I hadn't even had a beer yet.

I stopped. I remember that. That damned car. It was long and low-slung, the hood being three quarters of the car's length, with a small driver and passenger compartment. Cabin. Whatever one calls that. A two-seater built on the order of those old forties, swooping Jaguars, but this was even more graceful. The polished wood steering wheel was on the right, I noticed. The fenders were windswept, a fender skirt enveloped almost the entire rear wheel. The headlights streamed out of the fenders. The teardrop tail of the machine sluiced off into speed-sliced nothing. Standing still, this beautiful arrangement of moderne sheet metal and glass could get you a ticket.

Then Jack appeared. I didn't know him. He was slender, no taller than I, somehow elegant like the car. Not sure why I thought that; it certainly wasn't his clothing. Jeans, similar to mine. A chambray work shirt, tucked in. It was the way he wore them, the way he carried himself. He moved in an almost delicate, slightly stooped way like a person who was, perhaps, recovering from a dangerous illness, or an accident. Or like a tuberculosis victim of the last century. I don't know. Different from most of us who, in those euphoric boom days, swaggered a

little, or moved like we anticipated some obstruction we weren't going to brook.

He approached the car and stood on the wrong side, the European driver side, bowed his head, unlocked the door and sild in. I couldn't see him anymore then. The motor started and a part of me that was attuned to classic motorcycles and cars with exotic powerplants was activated, saliva produced. Then he was gone. It wasn't showy. Jack was never overtly flamboyant, but touches bordered on it; touches like a pair of soft leather gloves always in his right hip pocket, like a cowboy or something, but not quite. His cloth espadrilles offset the gloves. And he did use the gloves, whenever he drove, or tinkered with the engine or worked on the little garage apartment where he and the car lived. It was just that sort of detail that set him apart. We would all have worn gloves in our hip pocket, had we thought of it, but now we couldn't. That was Jack's signature. One of many.

Well, the car flowed along under the trees, changing its blues and trumpeting its power in an understated but unmistakable way, the leaves awhirl in its wake. It was a perfect scene, and it was imprinted on my brain like a tintype. I think I breathed in then, a great gulp of wind, as though I had forgotten to breathe at all during the time I had come upon the car.

The years between then and now flowed, too. Changing their blues and trumpeting, sometimes whining like a muted brass, like Miles. Sometimes terribly out of tune. Loves awhirl in the slipstream. Mussolini's son's car, though, was important for where it appeared, who it carried, and for being outside a certain house all night, frost on the tinted glass. A year later I followed it from state to flyover state, a bottle of McCormick whiskey and a cold, heavy revolver, my companions.

I followed it down into the midnight valleys outside Los Angeles, thousands of winking lights, onto the black desert floor, its red taillights taunting, then suddenly pinpoints, and knew the cashmere girl, head thrown back, laughing or screaming, was in it, this mythic speeding blue car. But she was no longer my obsession. The car was. It was my youth.

I tossed the .38 into a drainage ditch outside their motel. The sun woke me in the morning and they were gone. I drove in the same direction we'd been going, north. I knew where I would find them. Where the car would be. We'd all been there once before. We would all find our youth in different ways. Or acknowledge something painful. Knowing that, they withheld it. I never saw them again. But I'm getting close.

## Contributor Notes:

**Angela Bayout** is a Pittsburgher at heart and a San Franciscan in the making. She is the nonfiction editor of *The Written Wardrobe*, which is published by ModCloth.com where she is also a copywriter. Angela has also edited the anthology *Dionne's Story*, a collection of literature for the prevention of violence against women. Her essay "Audrey in Five Outfits" can be found in the forthcoming book *Fan Phenomena: Twin Peaks*.

**William Bamberger** is the obscure author, editor or translator of more than a dozen published books. He has recently written on Stan Lee and translated Gershom Scholem. He is an even more obscure open-mic haunter and moderately ept slide guitar player. He saw Jimi Hendrix on his first tour and Son House on his last, once carried the dry cleaning of a guitarist who had played with Captain Beefheart, once discussed Bob Dylan's skinflint ways with Allen Ginsberg, once drove Joe Brainard to buy a bucket of KFC, and once had dinner at a sidewalk cafe in Philadelphia with Samuel R. Delany. He justly considers these to be among his essential cultural experiences.

**Steve Broidy** is a professor at Wittenberg University, in Springfield, Ohio. He is a spec fiction fan and an eager, though not widely published (yet) poet.

**Janet Butler** relocated to the Bay Area in 2005 after many years in central Italy. She teaches ESL in San Francisco and lives in Alameda with Fulmi, a lovely Spaniel mix she rescued in Italy and brought back with her. Some current or forthcoming publications are *The Blue Bear Review*, *The Chaffey Review*, *Miller's Pond*, *Town Creek Poetry*, and *Red Ochre Lit*. Her most recent chapbook is "Searching for Eden" from *Finishing Line Press*. "Why I Love the Moon" was first published in *Blinking Cursor Anthology*, Spring, 2012.

**David Bushelle** teaches at local colleges and has had poems published in *Karamu*, *Two Review*, *Third Wednesday*, *Slant*, *Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Riversongs*, *Off the Coast*, *Edgz*, *Homestead Review*, *The Alembic*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review*, *Amoskeag*, *Common Ground Review*, *Tar Wolf Review* and many other journals.

**Alyssa Cooper** was born in Belleville Ontario, and has lived in Canada for her entire life. After spending two years studying Fine Arts at York University, she left Toronto to pursue an education in Graphic Design. While there, she developed a deep appreciation for book design and

binding, and received formal proofreading training. Writing and art have been her greatest passions since she was a child, and she has dedicated her life to perfecting her skills and pushing the limits of her craft. Her work has been featured in anthologies such as *Celebration of Young Poets*, *Post Scripts to Darkness* and *Journey to Crone* and literary journals such as *The Poetic Pin Up Revue*, *Five Poetry*, and *Revival Literary Journal*. Her first novel, *Salvation*, is anticipated for release from Melange Books in fall 2012, and her novella, *Sunshine*, is available now from Fiction Lake. She is currently attending college in Oshawa, where she lives with her typewriter and her personal library.”

**Jack Foster** is a Ted Pugh Poetry Prize winning author from Southern California where he serves as the production editor for *A Few Lines Magazine* and the lead editor for *Wormwood Chapbooks*. His work can be found in various journals such as *The Adroit Journal*, *Pomona Valley Review*, *Cavalier Literary Couture*, and *Yes, Poetry*. Jack maintains a blog at [www.jackfosterpoetry.blogspot.com](http://www.jackfosterpoetry.blogspot.com)

**Brad Garber** has published poetry in *Cream City Review*, *Alchemy*, *Fireweed*, “gape seed” (an anthology published by Uphook Press), *Front Range Review*, the *Newer York Press*, *Taekwondo Times*, *Ray’s Road Review*, *Flowers & Vortexes (Promise of Light)*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Generation Press*, *Penduline Press*, *Dead Flowers: A Poetry Rag* and *Mercury*. His essays have been published in *Brainstorm NW*, *Naturally magazine* and *N, The Magazine of Naturist Living*. He has also published erotica in *Oysters & Chocolate*, *Clean Sheets* and *MindFuckFiction*. A musician/lyricist since 1969, Brad was a 2003 Regional Semi-Finalist in the USA Songwriting Competition, and Honorable Mention in 1980 and 1981.

**John Gist’s** creative nonfiction and short stories have appeared or are forthcoming publications such as *Prick of the Spindle*, *The Fiddleback*, *Superstition Review*, *Left Curve*, *New Mexico Magazine* and others. He has published three novels, *CrowHeart* (1999), *Lizard Dreaming of Birds* (2004), and *A Clearing of the Way* (2008) and is co-author of the philosophical work *Angst and Evolution: The Struggle for Human Potential* (2009). He holds an M.F.A. in Fiction from the University of Alaska Fairbanks. He currently teaches Creative Writing and Literature at Western New Mexico University. He lives quietly with his wife and two dogs.

**Wendy Gist’s** poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Oyez Review*, *Pif Magazine*, *Rio Grande Review*, *The Chaffey Review*, *The Fourth River* and *Tulane Review*.

**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 epic of Gilgamesh. Her poems have appeared most recently in the anthology *A Light Breakfast*, and in the cement walkway of the Evanston Public Library! Her work will also appear in the upcoming publications, *The Best of Vine Leaves 2012* and *A Midnight Snack*. And she has finally completed her collection of seasonal poetry for young readers. Whew!”

**Jack Hill** works in recycling, edits *Crossed Out Magazine* (<http://www.crossedoutmagazine.org>), and lives in Northern California.”

**Paul Hostovsky’s** poems have been featured on *Poetry Daily*, *Verse Daily*, *The Writer’s Almanac*, and *Best of the Net*. He has been published in *Carolina Quarterly*, *Shenandoah*, *New Delta Review*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *Atlanta Review*, *Poetry East*, *The Sun*, and many other journals and anthologies. He has won a Pushcart Prize, the *Comstock Review’s* Muriel Craft Bailey Award, and chapbook contests from Grayson Books, Riverstone Press, Frank Cat Press, and Split Oak Press. He has four full-length collections of poetry, *Bending the Notes* (2008), *Dear Truth* (2009), *A Little in Love a Lot* (2011), and *Hurt Into Beauty* (2012). He makes his living in Boston as a sign language interpreter at the Massachusetts Commission for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing.

More of **Brett Jones** poetry can be found on <http://hellopoetry.com/-brett-jones/>.

**E. K. Keith** is a teacher and a writer. She has an M.Ed and has taught for over 12 years. As a consultant, she has worked with teachers to establish *Writer’s Workshop* in California, Colorado, Minnesota, and Texas and she enjoys this work immensely. She believes that being a writer and a teacher is about making good decisions that move the writing - and the teaching - forward every day. When she is not teaching, E.K. writes and performs poetry in San Francisco. She is also one of the founding organizers of *Poems Under the Dome*, an annual celebration of National Poetry Month inside San Francisco’s City Hall.

**Laurence Klavan’s** novels, “*The Cutting Room*” and “*The Shooting Script*,” were published by Ballantine Books. He won the Edgar Award for the novel, “*Mrs. White*,” written under a pseudonym. His graphic novels, “*City of Spies*” and “*Brain Camp*,” co-written with Susan Kim, were published by First Second Books at Macmillan, and our YA series, “*Wasteland*,” is forthcoming from Harper Collins. His short story collection is forthcoming from Chizine Publications. He

received two Drama Desk nominations for the book and lyrics to “Bed and Sofa,” the musical produced by the Vineyard Theater in New York and the Finborough Theatre in London in 2011. My one-act, “The Summer Sublet,” is included in Best American Short Plays 2000-2001

**Elizabeth Lara** originally was from the Midwest and spent her formative years in the Washington, DC, area. Since then, she has lived in Africa, the Caribbean, and the Middle East. Her poems have appeared in *The Rose & Thorn* and *The Equinox*. She now lives and writes in New York City.

**Devon Marsh** by day is a senior vice president at Wells Fargo. He has published poetry in the *Kakalak Anthology of Carolina Poets*, an op-ed piece in *The Christian Science Monitor*, a novella, professional newsletter articles and white papers. His short story, “The Resonance of Dissimilar Things,” received honorable mention in the Short Story America Prize competition in 2012.

**Kristin McHenry** is a resident of Seattle, Wash., and is a poet by night, non-profit program manager by day. She has her bachelor’s degree in theatre arts and filmmaking from The Evergreen State College. Among other publications, her work has been seen in *Bare Root Review*, *Numinous Magazine*, *Tiferet Journal*, *Sybil’s Garage*, *Big Pulp Magazine*, and the anthology, “Many Trails to the Summit,” published by Rose Alley Press. She was a top five finalist in the 2009 National Poetry Competition “Project Verse” (*Limp Wrist Magazine*). Her chapbook “The Goatfish Alphabet” was runner-up in qarrtsiluni’s 2009 chapbook contest, and was published by Naissance Press (April 2010). Kristen is co-editor for *Voices of Dyslexia*, serves on the editorial staff for *Literary Bohemian*, and teaches creativity workshops in her “spare” time. She lives in the Ballard neighborhood with two cats, three fire-bellied toads, and one husband. She loves to sing, but only in the car with all of the windows rolled up.

**Jared Metts** studied Creative Writing and Psychology at the University of South Florida. His work has appeared in *thread* and *ē: A Review of Text and Image*. He resides in Jacksonville, FL, and is currently torn between the pursuit of his three greatest passions: writing, clinical psychology, and ice cream.”

**Nazinin Nazmi** is a student at Modesto Junior College studying poetry. English is her second language, and she has experiences in writing poetry in her mother language that is Turkish. She loves writing in both languages, English and Turkish. The poem submitted to *Dark Matter* is



about an art piece of her mother's photo chiseled in copper made in Istanbul Turkey.

**Lisa Pelligrini** Pellegrini is a graduate of Beaver College (now Arcadia University) with a Bachelor's degree in English. Her poetry has appeared in Zouch Magazine, Downer Magazine, The Rainbow Rose, and is soon to be published by Misfits' Miscellany. Her artwork has also appeared in Zouch Magazine.

**Edward Palumbo** is a graduate of the University of Rhode Island, earning a Bachelor's Degree in English in 1982. While in college, Ed's fiction, poetry, and comic shorts appeared in university publications including The Great Swamp Gazette and The Good Five Cent Cigar. Ed is a creative writer and journalist and over the years, his poetry, short fiction pieces, comic shorts, letters, commentaries, and journalistic articles have appeared in numerous periodicals, journals, e-journals and anthologies including The Poet's Page, Rough Places Plain, Tertulia Magazine, Reader's Digest, poemkingdom.com, Ancient Paths, the website of The Gherson-Lehrman Group and many others. Current projects include a poetry anthology entitled bronzed until the moon and a short, darkly comic screenplay entitled The Zombie of Westerly.

**Simon Perchik's** father was a silk weaver until the mills dried up during the Great Depression, when he turned to the grocery business, installing his family of eight in living quarters behind small stores, where Perchik lived until World War II. Following a stint in the Army Air Corps, where he served as a pilot, he enrolled in New York University under the GI Bill and began writing poetry. After receiving a B.A. in English, he went straight to NYU Law School. From 1950 until 1980 Perchik practiced law, while continuing to write poetry. He was Suffolk County Long Island's first Environmental Prosecutor. He Counted Only April was published in 1964. Fifteen collections followed. In 2000, he released a compilation of all his earlier books with Hands Collected: The Books of Simon Perchik (Poems 1949-1999) (Pavement Saw Press). It was nominated for the National Book Award. That same year he brought out Touching the Headstone (Stride Publications), and most recently The Autochthon Poems (Split/Shift 2001). Perchik has placed hundreds of poems in journals and periodicals that include The New Yorker, Poetry, Partisan Review, and The Nation. In contrast to his richly textured word-images that twist and soar on the page, he is plain-spoken; a candid man who laughs easily. Our conversation took place on a golden day in September, at his daughter's apartment in Manhattan. He resides in East Hampton, New York with the rest of his family.

**Lasantha Rodrigo** is a final year Ph.D. student in English Studies (creative writing focus) at Il

Illinois State University. Originally from Sri Lanka, his creative work has previously been published in Sri Lanka, India, and the United States. Lasantha draws from trauma theory, queertheory, and post-colonial theory in his creative endeavors to unsettle his readers, and finally draw from them a thoughtful and humane response. He earned his BA from Pacific Lutheran University, WA and earned two MAs from St. Bonaventure University, NY and University of Rochester, NY respectively.

**Nicole Rollender's** poetry and nonfiction have been published or are forthcoming in various literary magazines, including Alaska Quarterly Review, Ash Canyon Review, Creative Nonfiction, Enizagam, Literary Mama, Ruminant Magazine, Salt Hill Journal, and the strange fruit. She is the winner of Ruminant Magazine's 2012 Janet B. McCabe poetry prize for her poem, "Necessary Work." Her poetry chapbook, *Arrangement of Desire*, was published by Pudding House Publications in 2007. Nicole, who has an MFA in creative writing from Penn State University where she studied with poet Robin Becker, is editor of *Stitches* magazine, which has been nominated for two Jesse H. Neal Awards and won the American Society of Business Publication Editors (ASBPE) Magazine of the Year Award in 2011.

**Patrick Seniuk** is a student of philosophy, residing in Toronto Canada. His most recent work has been featured in *ditch*, poetry magazine."

**Taylor Sharp** has a background in television news and says in her bio, "I am forced to bite my own tongue on occasion for fear of believing myself. Friends and family no longer listen to anything I have to say; even though I know they know I'm right. " She is looking to expand her web of confusion by being heard on multiple platforms. You can visit her web page at [www.thesharppen.com](http://www.thesharppen.com). Print media is the final key to her master plan, simply because, as she says, "everyone believes what they read."

**Cody Smith** is an undergraduate student studying creative writing at the University of Louisiana at Monroe. He is a sojourner educating himself one road trip at a time. His life is a collection of scenes looking out of car windows from the Appalachians to Yosemite. This is his first publication."

**Patty Somlo** has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize three times and was a finalist in the Tom Howard Short Story Contest. Her first collection, *From Here to There and Other Stories*, was published by Paraguas Books. Her work has appeared in the *Los Angeles Review*, the

Santa Clara Review, the Jackson Hole Review, WomenArts Quarterly, Guernica, Slow Trains, Shaking Magazine, The Write Room and Fringe Magazine, among others, and in several anthologies, including most recently, Solace in So Many Words and Being Human: Call of the Wild. Her short story “Dead” was published in the first issue of Dark Matter.

**Smita Sriwastav** is an M.B.B.S. doctor with a passion for poetry and literature. She has always expressed her innermost thoughts and sentiments through the medium of poetry. A feeling of inner tranquility and bliss captures her soul whenever she pens her verse. Nature has been the most inspiring force in molding the shape of her writings. She has published two books and has published poems in journals like the Rusty Nail and Contemporary Literary Review India and one of her poems was published in a book called ‘Inspired by Tagore’ published by Sampad and British Council. She has written poetry all her life and aims to do so forever.

**Louis Staebler** lives in Bowling Green, Ohio. Recently, his poem “Waker of Worlds” appeared in “The Whistling Fire”.

**Guinotte Wise** PhD has been a creative director in advertising most of his working life. In his youth he put forth effort as a bullrider, ironworker, laborer, funeral home pickup person, bartender, truckdriver, postal worker, ice house worker, paving field engineer. He’s been called raffish. He took up writing fiction two years ago. He won the Gordon Award from Our Stories Review in 2011 He was a fiction Semi-finalist for the Nimrod 2010 Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction. He won the Medulla Review 2010 Oblongata Flash Fiction , and was Hon. Mention at the Oaxaca Film Festival & Literary Awards 2010. He was a finalist for the Amy Hempel/Opium contest 2011, Fiction 7 . His work has appeared in Crime Factory Review, Stymie, Telling Our Stories Press Anthology, Opium, Stymie, Negative Suck, Precipitate, Journal of the New Environmental Imagination, The MacGuffin, Verdad, Snark, Atticus Review, and in a Weather-themed fiction anthology by Imagination and Place Press. Wise is a sculptor, sometimes in welded steel, sometimes in words. Educated at Westminster College, University of Arkansas, Kansas City Art Institute. Some work is at <http://www.wisesculpture.com/> Tweet him @noirbut.

**Henry Youtt** is a long-time instructor in the Writers’ Program at UCLA [Extension], twice nominated for Pushcart Prizes.

