



Fall-Winter 1998

# REDCEDAR

R E V I E W







RED CEDAR REVIEW

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# REDCEDAR

## R E V I E W

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# REDCEDAR

## R E V I E W

M. RUKMINI CALLIMACHI

*Undressing*

**8**

THERÉSE HALSCHEID

*Mimicking the Old Nature*

**9**

TODD BALAZIC

*interpretation of a given phase*

**10**

BARBARA SIEGAL CARLSON

*The Weaving*

**11**

ANNE SHEFFIELD

*Double Exposure*

**12**

ELIAS THORNE

*A Way Home*

**16**

KARENMARY PENN

*Book of Sean*

**27**

SARAH SWORD

*Driving Into Orion's Belt*

**40**

PETER VERTACNIK

*The Pine*

**41**

CARRIE J. PRESTON

*Caduceus*

**42**

G. SCOTT HUGGINS

*Christmas*

**44**

HOWARD LINDHOLM

*Stargazing*

**46**

CHRISTINE McMAHON

*A Dream of Cheese*

**51**

ARI KOHEN

*Today*

**57**





Poems



# Undressing

First, I teased you with my hair band,  
    putting it on to hold my shaft of blue corn,  
scraping the last curls behind my ear,  
and when you thought I wasn't looking,  
I undid the black ribbon  
and uncoiled the brown,  
the black, the bluejay feathers.

And I think I saw you look away  
    the first time I did this:  
as this is magic, brother,  
and I put my hair in a tight chignon,  
ready to spring like the Diamond Back  
of the Carolinas, like the blue-eyed Cobra  
of Bangkok - I have a headful of snakes,  
my dear, and if you look my way,  
I might just turn you into stone.

And I lick you with my gaze  
    making you look sideways  
as the leaves of my bangs  
come undone. This is the way  
the harvest comes, with the falling of leaves,  
with the shredding of corn, and in Ojai  
the rattlesnakes undo their skins,  
leaving their bodies black  
and naked upon the open land.

# *Mimicking the Old Nature*

the ending season,

limbs on the trees are old hands  
in the yard

that long ago  
held sprigs  
that fell then seeded —

unsettling sweet grass and rock which stretched beyond

this tiered stone walk  
way down  
into the ravine

where there are several —  
more

wooden arms with curved wrists  
and gnarled fingers

so many hands  
raised to the sky like i have never seen

maybe once

in a photograph of masses of people of varying color

all their arms raised

all the tones and shades in their autumn arms  
lifted upward

for a rounded bowl yellow as sun

the clear rice as spilling rain.



*interpretation of a  
given phase*

The moon is thin,  
made of ash and gravel.  
It comes through the atmosphere  
like a patient trying to breathe.

It takes up so little room,  
though you try to make more  
with your body,  
stand tiptoe

and suck in your gut,  
arms tight at the sides  
to fit between this night  
and the next day.

## *The Weaving*

Elizabeth & I wandered along  
the shore today, seagulls meowing  
and clucking, lifting as one  
white rose blowing apart.  
Tall grasses glistened behind us  
in the brittle autumn light.  
We found dried witch's hair  
splayed on a rock, mosses  
softened in seawater  
below the hawing, crackling  
wailing gulls. Elizabeth sang  
"It's A Small World" in a loud voice,  
called the pearly lining of a mussel shell  
an angel's fingernail. Seagulls bobbed  
on long shimmering hills.  
Our footprints mingled with theirs  
till we lost them  
on stones that darkened,  
a cloud's huge wing enveloping us.



## *Double Exposure*

When she gets back her prints,  
she realizes her husband shot the film first —  
so their daughter pumps a long rope swing  
over her brother's football team like an autumn goddess,  
her friends' faces at her fifteenth birthday party  
smile through yellow and black numbered uniforms,  
knee-pad legs are heaps of leaves the girls jump into  
weeks later without realizing, boys rush a ball down  
a green field of girls with their feet in the air as they leap —  
the giant dog has an oak leaf stuck to his nose  
in the middle of a lilliputian huddle; and here she is, mother,  
part Chinese restaurant, part stretched on the bed.  
Her daughter trails long blonde lawns of sunbright leaves  
down both sides of face and body like a veil and train,  
and the family portrait is all raked up in a pile,  
starting to blow away.







# Stories



# *A Way Home*

I do not know how long I have been laying here, but it seems like many hours. I breathe slowly, and the wide, bendable weight of the blankets is a good feeling on my chest. Inside the room there is a metal desk which looks black like a hole through the darkness. The room is a study, in a house that belongs to my grandma's closest friends. They are a couple who came to meet us at the airport yesterday, and they are letting us spend the night here. My grandma says if it were not for them we would be in a hotel. These friends gave me sandwiches and milk when we arrived, and said they were happy to do it. After I had eaten, the husband brought a folding cot out of the cellar and opened it here, inside the study. I wanted to watch him set up the cot and see exactly how it worked, but my grandma would not let me. She said I smelled like a dirty goat and needed a bath before going to bed. My mother would never make me take a bath so late, I told her. I said it because I thought this might allow me to see the cot. But my grandma answered back that my mother had not known much of anything about baths.

There is just one window in this study, facing the back yard of the house and a line of trees. Beyond these trees, the sky has a pale-colored strip at the bottom, right where it touches some mountains. I have been watching this strip while I lay in the cot, tracking its progress. I know it is the dawn. I have been waking up this early for several days now, seeing the sunrise always begin the same way, as a pale blue light in the sky that I cannot take my eyes away from. There is something of a beautiful forever in how it rises behind the stars.

Through a wall of the study I hear several noises: water rushing in a pipe, my grandma walking in a rhythm next door where the kitchen is. She has been awake for almost as long as I have, walking and stopping and clinking dishes together. Twice I have heard her talk out aloud to herself. Before I began this watching and listening, I was at the end of a dream that I do not remember anymore. Everything but a feeling of this dream slipped away from me as soon as I opened my eyes, and I cannot know what it is about. There are no pictures, or no words to help me think. There is only the way it left me laying here after it had gone, the sense of being hot and open-mouthed and slow and somehow paralyzed in my voice.

A crack of yellow light appears as the doorway splits apart, growing wider until the shadow of my grandma steps inside. Her shape is curvy, and



the fabric of her nightgown looks like fur.

"Jonah," she says. Her voice sounds close and crispy.

"Yes?"

"It's time to wake up."

"I'm awake already."

"Then you better get up and get dressed."

"Right this minute?"

"Yes."

I look over at the clothes which I am to put on. They are hung across one corner of the metal desk.

"I'll get up," I say.

"Do you want me to turn on the light for you?"

"Wait until I close my eyes first."

"Of course I will."

I shut my eyes then say that I am ready, and my grandma flips the switch. I watch many golden circles explode from everywhere under my eyelids.

"Alright now, Jonah," says my grandma's voice. "You need to get dressed. Your clothes are on the desk."

"I know." I keep watching the golden circles.

"When you're ready, you can come into the kitchen and get some breakfast."

"Do I still have to wear the necktie that we bought?" I ask.

The tie is blue, with a metal clasp for holding it to my shirt. My grandma already knows I do not want to wear it.

"Yes. You have to," she says. She tries to make her voice sound nice, but I do not think that it works. I keep my eyes shut, never answering her. For a while there is silence so that it seems she might have left me. Then her voice comes again.

"Jonah, let's go," it says. It is harsher now because I have done nothing. "Jonah?"

"Alright," I answer slowly. "Would you shut the door?"

"Only if you promise to get up immediately."

"I promise."

I hear the door bump closed, and afterward my grandma walking away. I open my eyes and climb out of the cot. The air is cold in the study as I slip off my pajamas. I start to put on a pair of dress pants, and a shirt with a stiff collar, and a dark blue cotton jacket. I can hurry through it all, since I have practiced getting into these things twice before. Only the buttons take me a little time. Coming through the walls I hear my grandma's voice in the kitchen again. Her words are clear. She is talking with her friends who own this house about the easiest way to the funeral home.



The viewing room of the funeral home is square and plain except for a golden curtain hanging down by one of the walls. This curtain ripples on a stream of air that blows from a vent in the floor. I am standing beside a rack of purple flowers, at one end of my mother's open coffin. The lights are dim and grainy here. The funeral people have set them low on purpose, so that you cannot see my mother's faded color. She is yellow like a piece of old newspaper, in spite of the makeup on her body, and you can tell right away that she died without any blood in her. It does not even matter that a silky long-sleeved dress covers both her wrists. I touch the casket, watching the stillness of her. It is awfully strange for her body to be that still instead of folding its arms, or clenching a fist, or dropping its chin to stare at me. She does not look asleep. The way she lays in the coffin it seems that her muscles are flexing tightly to keep her dead.

I turn away from her eventually and look at the rest of the room, where the people are gathering. They were invited here by my grandma, and except for the man and woman who we have stayed with I do not recognize any of them. They are mostly as old as my grandma, and they mix easily together, shaking hands or sometimes smiling while they look at me. They do not look at my mother. Their faces get eager and very overbright if they notice that I have caught their eye. My grandma walks through them, telling all of them thank-you for having come. Then a music begins to play from several speakers in the wall and the people start to gather at one side of the room. The music is slow and makes me feel heavy. I was there when my grandma asked the funeral man to play it, and when he told her that such music was not often good at a viewing. My grandma continued to ask for it, though, and the funeral man seemed glad to let her win. He said 'Of course' very softly. Every time that I have seen this man he has always acted softly. He says my name with a soft voice, puts a hand on my shoulder softly. I wonder what could have made him so quiet and concerned for me. He was especially soft when he brought out my mother's paintings and displayed them in the viewing room. There are two of them on a table that you see as you come through the door. They are another request of my grandma that she made along with the music. They are paintings that were found in my mother's closet by some people who came and searched through all of our things. I had never seen them before. One is a picture of my mother sitting naked in a black chair. Her hand rests on the round part of her belly, and her legs are wide apart. The face of this painting is not finished. Where the nose and mouth should be there is no color of any kind, just some sketched-in lines from a pencil.

The second painting shows a cake with some candles in the middle, and there is a title which my mother has written along the bottom: "Jonah's Birthday." When my grandma saw this picture, she said it was strange to paint a cake. I do not know if this is true. Whenever I look at the cake it makes me feel like screaming. There is something of the way my mother talked to me



and touched me in this painting, and it reminds me of her more than anything else at the funeral, even her real, dead body which is lying in the room.

---

I run my fingers along the metal under the window, feeling it smooth and warm in the sun.

"Do you want some air?" asks the woman driving the van.

"I'm okay."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"If you want to open that window, use handle in the middle. It might be good to get some air."

"I don't really need any."

"Well, it looked like you were trying to open the window just now."

"How did you see that?" I ask.

"I can watch you in this mirror above my head. Here."

I look up to the front of the van, where the woman sits in the tall driver's seat. A rectangular mirror hangs above her face, and it holds a reflection of her nose and eyes. The eyes flick up to watch me, wrinkles growing at their edges.

"Can you find me?" she asks.

"A part of your face. It doesn't show your mouth."

"If you want some air, just push on the handle."

"I probably will."

I make the pane of glass slip out away from the side of the van. A rush of air flows in through the crack, much colder than I expect it. We are climbing into the mountains now, and although the sun is shining the day is chilly. The van makes a sharp turn, pulling my seat belt very tight across my waist. I grab for my duffel bag to keep it from sliding away from me. The turn lasts a long time, and the pressure of the belt against my stomach makes me grunt.

"Are you okay, honey?" asks the woman driving. She has told me her name at the beginning of this ride, but I have forgotten it.

"I don't like sitting in back." I say.

"I know," she answers.

Her voice is very kind, and I feel bad for what I am going to ask her again.

"Can I come up front?"

"You know the answer, Jonah. I'm sorry. I don't really want to make you sit back there, but I have to. Those are the rules."

I look at the passenger seat beside her, big and padded. It has a motor inside which tilts it in every direction. I think of how it would be to sit there.

"But I won't tell anyone if you let me in front." I say.



"I know. But you're not big enough to be safe up here. The seat belt isn't made for kids. I'm sorry."

"Please?"

"I'm sorry."

She makes another sharp turn, and I go against my seat belt again. We are following the winding of a river. I can see it to the left, below the road, with darkened pools and silver spray around the boulders. It weaves between the edges of the mountains, which come one after another like a row of teeth. Both its banks are thick with trees and fields of smooth grey of rocks.

The woman shifts our van to a lower gear as the road grows even steeper.

"How much longer until we get there?" I ask her.

"Not too long." She rolls up her window slightly. "Have you ever been to your grandma's house before?"

"No. The first time I saw my grandma was when she came for the funeral."

"Oh. Really."

I see the woman's eyes in the mirror, and they look a little upset. Then they notice me and get wider.

"You know," the woman says, "your grandma is a very special lady."

"Some of the people in the hospital already told me that."

"Her house is on an island, in the middle of a lake. All by itself."

"Have you seen it?" I ask.

"No."

The woman's eyes turn back to the road. I use the greasiness of my finger to write my name across the glass of the window next to me. I draw the letters in fat, smoky lines, and after that I write the word 'mom' as well. I sit for a moment thinking of how to spell 'grandma,' but do not try it on the glass. When I am finished, I watch the country going by behind the smudges.

We pass through a section of the forest that has been burned. For several miles there is a dry powdery blackness on the branches of the trees, whose shapes look twisted without their needles. Most of the smooth rocks by the river have also been darkened by fire. Only some patches of grass have escaped, and stand out brightly in the middle of it all. I watch the blackened land go by until it ends very suddenly at a sharp curve in the road, and the mountains level out in a valley between two peaks.

I see the woman's eyes come back to me in the mirror.

"Are you nervous about going to your grandma's, Jonah?"

"No"

"You're not? Wow. I think I would be."

"I don't think I am."

"That's very brave." she says.



I look out the window for a moment.

"So is this your job, to drive kids?" I ask.

"Yes. Sometimes it's a part of it."

"Have you driven a lot of kids?"

"Yes."

"Were they going to live with their grandmas?"

"Some of them were. And some were going to other places. Has anyone told you about what's happening?"

"Yes. I already know about that."

"Do you have any questions you want to ask me?"

"No."

"You can ask me whatever you want. I'll try to answer."

"Can you go faster?"

"No," she says.

"Do you know why my grandma didn't drive me herself?"

"Your grandmother had some business that wouldn't let her be at the airport. But I know that she'll be waiting for you at the lake when we get there."

"Yes, I knew that. I just forgot it."

"You are a brave boy, Jonah," she says, and these words make me feel both good and bad at the same time.

The sky is becoming cloudier and windier as we go up over the valley toward the lake. Its blue color changes to grey behind the mountain peaks, and soon it is blocking the sunshine. The woman driving tells me to look ahead at where the pine trees begin, and she shows me where the main street of a town runs off through them. We turn and follow this, going down toward the edge of a dark blue lake that is lined with shops. The fronts of all the stores look like old western buildings. We turn right at a stop sign, then pull off into a parking lot where many boats are tied to a dock at the edge of the water. As we slowly come to a stop the gravel of the lot makes a crunchy noise beneath the tires of the van. My heart is pounding very hard. It thumps loud against my chest as the woman tells me we have arrived. Through the opening of my window blows a cool, moist air that does not comfort me.

---

"Would you like an ice-cream, child?"

My grandma's scarf is very long. The ends reach almost to her waist.

"Yes. I would."

"Do you say thank-you?"

As she finishes these words, we both know that they sound just like my mother, but my grandma does not admit it. Her eyes look straight at me.

"Thank-you," I tell her.



"You're welcome."

She goes to the window of the small ice-cream hut without asking me what kind I want. I look over at the long white van that has brought me to this place, parked several feet away. It has black words on the side that I cannot read because they are big ones, and around them in the shiny finished paint there is a reflection of the parking lot. I stare at this for a moment so I will be able to remember what it looks like. I check the windows of the van, too, trying to find the marks I have made on them with my finger.

My grandma walks past the front of the van as she comes away from the ice-cream hut.

"Here, child."

She gives me the dark brown cone with the paper wrapper and a yellow scoop of ice-cream. It is lemon flavored, which makes my lips pucker.

"Thank-you."

"You should call me Grandma, you know."

"Alright."

She stands there, looking away for a minute, then turns back to me.

"Watch it. It's going to drip." she says.

A second later I feel it run cold onto some of my fingers.

"Oops."

She hands me a paper tissue.

"Lick."

"I am."

"Lick a little faster."

"Okay." I put a lot of the ice-cream on my tongue, which begins to feel a frozen thickness.

"Let's walk over here, this way." my grandma says.

She points to the edge of the lake, then starts to walk toward it, ahead of me. She is going over to talk with a man who stands a little in front of the water, wearing an old grey sweatshirt and floppy felt hat. He is waiting for us on the end of a wooden dock, holding the red duffel bag full of clothes that I packed myself. The bag is small in his hands, and I think of my two favorite shirts inside it, one with the small rip under the arm, the other with the rounded silver badge that my mother and I put on using a hot iron. Both are in between the pants and the folded underwear.

My grandma talks to the man now, but I do not listen to what they say. I am looking at all the boats that are parked at other docks running further down the shore. A small one has just come in from the lake, and a woman is climbing out to tie it up with ropes. Water is slopping along its hull. I see that a small dog sits inside the boat, its tongue wiggling up and down. I start to walk a little closer to them, but my grandma calls me back.

"Jonah."

"Yes?"



"Come over here, please." She motions to me with her arm, then looks back to the man who is holding my bag. "Why don't we do it here."

"Alright," the man says.

I see that he has a small black camera in his other hand.

"Stand here by me, child," my grandma says.

"Is it okay to have my ice-cream in the picture?"

"Yes."

"Well now, are you both ready?" the man asks, looking only at me. He backs up several steps, and says, "Here it goes."

A click comes out of the camera when I am not ready, and I smile after the photo is already over. I take another lick of my ice-cream so that it will not drip again. The man is putting a cap on the lens of the camera now, while my grandma talks to him.

"We'll get it developed tomorrow and send it to the agent."

"Sure," he says. "The boat is ready if you want to go."

"Good, did you pay them?"

"Yes ma'am."

We all walk down the longest dock to where there are three or four gasoline pumps standing upright like the ones used in a gas station for cars. There is a small yellow boat tied next to them.

"Is that our boat?" I ask my grandma.

"Yes. It has a name, too."

"What is it?"

"*Endymion*."

"Oh," I lick my ice-cream again. "Is this whole thing a place to get gas for boats?"

"That's right."

The man with the floppy hat has reached the side of our boat. I can hear him whistling softly while he checks the rope that runs from it to a large brass hook in the dock. He puts my duffel bag down on a seat.

"Are we going out to the island now?" I ask my grandma.

"Yes. That's where we live."

"I know. Is it far?"

"No. It takes about ten minutes."

We stand by the boat, and my grandma holds my hand, and we watch the man in the hat step down aboard it. The wind is harder here, and wet, with smells of gasoline. I am taking the final licks of my ice-cream, getting deep inside the cone. The paper wrapper sticks a little to my palm.

"Grandma, I don't want the cone part."

"Alright. There is a garbage sack in the boat," she says. Then adds, "Here, give it to me."

I hand it up to her.

"Have you ever been in a boat before?" the man asks me.



“No.”

My grandma is climbing off the dock by placing her foot on top of the nearest seat. I can hear her breath escaping in a squeak as her legs go apart. Then she steps into the bottom of the boat. She leaves a dark sandy footprint on the leather of the cushion that the man in the brown hat wipes away.

“Grandma, may I jump?” I ask.

She nods, looking out into the lake where the wind is blowing tiny white waves. Several coal black birds turn circles in front of the mountains. Both my grandma’s hands are folded in her lap.

“Just be careful.” she says.

“I will.”

I land between the two front seats, and feel the impact up my ankles. I turn to the man in the hat.

“What’s your name?” I ask him.

“Edward. But you can call me Captain Edward if you want. What’s yours?”

“I’m Jonah. You don’t look too much like a captain.”

“Well, I am one. Of this boat. I just don’t look like it.”

“Oh.”

I see that Captain Edward has the key to the boat, and he holds it up, smiling at me. I can smell a sweet-ish odor, almost like licorice, that comes from his hands.

“You can’t always tell with us captains.” he says to me.

“I guess not.”

Our boat is rocking now.

“What did you say your name was?”

“Jonah.”

“Jonah.” he says again. “Have you ever been swallowed by a whale?”

“No.” I look back at my grandma, and see that she is writing something down in a small paper tablet. “That doesn’t really happen, does it?”

“Hold on, Jonah. I’ve got to start the engine now. Sit down there in that seat.”

“Okay.”

I sit down in the front passenger seat. Captain Edward turns the key, and the motor starts with a chugging that is much deeper than a car’s. He pushes down on a silver lever and we pull away from the dock, out into the lake. I sit in close behind the windshield of the boat, hearing air rush over my head. I catch some drops of freezing water on my skin as they jump up from the side. Along the shore, we can see a line of dark green pines up past the docks, and above these are low clouds which the mountains wear like collars.

“Is this too fast, ma’am?” Captain Edward shouts over his shoulder.

I look back and see my grandma shake her head. Her eyes are closed



and she has crossed her arms in a knot. The hands which come out the sides of this knot are holding the two ends of her scarf.

Captain Edward nods.

"Have you ever seen any whales?" I ask him.

"What?"

"Have you ever seen any whales here?" I say again.

"No. Never one. Some awfully big fish, though." He turns the boat's steering wheel to the right. "Do you like fishing?"

"Yes. But I've never fished."

"So how do you know if you like it, then?"

"I just do."

I look over the side of the boat where the moving water jingles and some tiny bubbles skate quickly away on the surface.

"Okay then." says Captain Edward.

He pulls the brim of his hat down farther over his forehead.

"Do you know if whales really swallow people?" I ask.

"Not that I've ever heard about."

"Then why did you ask me before if I had been swallowed?"

"There's a famous story where it happens to a man named Jonah."

"Is the story true?"

"Some say it is."

I look over the side of the boat again, leaning farther out in the wind. It pulls very hard at my hair, and leaves me feeling almost wet. I try to get my face down closer to the racing sheet of the water underneath us.

"The whales swim deep." I say to myself, and the words get lost inside the bigger noise of the engine. I am leaning on my stomach, and the blood begins to push up into my head. I feel it collecting behind my eyes and puffing the skin around my face. I want to be swallowed by a whale, I think. I want it without knowing why. My left arm is heavy as I lift it past me, out toward the speeding water. I imagine the tubular back of a whale, and the crack of its mouth opening for me.

"Hello whale." I say.

Hello.

A roll of water passes underneath the boat.

"You are going to swallow me now."

Yes.

"And take me deep."

My eyelids are full of blood. I do not close them. I hear my grandma's voice above the chopping noise of the engine. It comes in a slip of air along my neck. A hand touches my back, and the shirt I am wearing goes tight beneath my arms. I push with both hands against the side of the boat, my toes curled up inside my shoes, and I drop back into the passenger seat behind the glass windshield. Captain Edward is holding a knot of my shirt while he



steers the boat with his other hand. His floppy hat has slipped back off his forehead, showing a band of creamy white skin above the line where the sun has hit his face.

"You'd better not lean." he says tightly.

"I'm sorry." I answer.

"No harm done."

He almost smiles, but his hand does not let go of my shirt. He keeps the fabric pulling closely at the edges of my chest. Our boat is rounding a place on the lake where a side of the mountain comes down steeply to the shore. Several boulders have tumbled out into the water here, sitting bald and smooth among the waves. We steer in behind them, near the land, where the roots of pine trees curl in the dirt. The trunks of the trees make long faint shadows across the water.

Our engine slows.

"We're almost there." says my grandma from behind.

I turn back toward her. She sits the same way that she has been since the time we left the dock. Her eyes are still closed.

"I'm glad that we live on an island." I say to her.

"Yes, it's beautiful there."

# Book of Sean

If God had ever gathered my family together and asked us to choose someone to spread his message, I wouldn't have garnered a single vote, not even my own. I was utterly inconspicuous as a boy, always the child most likely to be left somewhere. If I didn't materialize at a family gathering, it was always assumed that, like a stray sock, I'd turn up eventually.

Yet the Pope himself led me straight to God. He was to say mass from the balcony of the Cardinal's mansion in Chicago, and I'd been asked to play *Ave Maria* on my violin. I was chosen less for being a religious standout than for being a bishop's nephew. In fact, like most boys of ten, I considered church services to be punishment for no known crime. (Two decades later, a marriage-prompted defection to the Methodist faith has done little to alter that impression.)

On that day, people crammed the streets and sidewalks surrounding the Cardinal's home, holding glossy posters of John Paul II as if he were running for office. Snow flurries blew in from Lake Michigan, swirling in gusts of February air. I shared the balcony with two altar boys and several priests in lushly colored robes who glided about, fiddling with microphones and rearranging lilies. The altar boys dragged on invisible cigarettes, exhaling frozen puffs of breath. I tried to join them, pretending my bow was an extra long stogie, but they ignored me until I stopped. I included that detail for its illustrative value. As a child, I often felt that the entire human race lived behind an invisible wall that I was continually on the wrong side of. My attempts to sidle up to the residents of the illusory city were rarely successful. My brother Josh explained to me once that I was just so peculiar that no one knew how to talk to me, so they simply didn't.

Glowing orange space heaters lined the front edge of the balcony. I held the violin in front of one to protect it from the cold. It was only a few years old, three-quarter sized and hand crafted by a German violin maker. I'd always considered it inferior to others because it was small and not especially striking. Every other violin I encountered seemed more remarkable, richer in color and tone. I hated its flat apricot hue. Once, I told my mother that I would've preferred a flame wood back with shadowy bands fanning across it. She replied that she would've preferred life as an heiress but we all have to play the hand we're dealt.

All seven members of my family were clustered around a blue mailbox half a block away, stomping to keep their feet from freezing. None of



them looked in my direction. My mother had zipped the baby into her jacket. His fuzzy red hat bobbed below her chin. She prowled around my other siblings the way a dog might herd a flock of witless sheep, shielding them from the evils they'd never encountered in the suburbs: pickpockets, perverts, Seventh Day Adventists. Matthew and Luke clutched the ends of a banner made from an old bed sheet. Painted crosses and chalices hovered around letters cut from green felt. It read: *John Paul II, We Love You!* A glitter dove soared Heavenward with an olive branch (leftover sprig of mistletoe) stapled to its beak. I would rather have been on the ground with them, blending into the crowd. Despite my yearning to discover that which made me special, I'd never wanted it badly enough to risk casting off anonymity.

My father, who called himself a recovering Catholic, rocked back on his heels with his arms folded, staring up at a cheerless sky. When charged with the responsibility of giving us our weekly dose of religion, he carted my siblings and me to the Lithuanian church on Sixth Avenue: home of the twenty minute mass. I didn't know my father well but I shared his distaste for organized religion. Only much later did I realize his reasons were more reflective and profound than mine, which centered around boredom.

When the Pope finally stepped onto the balcony, a thunderous cheer erupted. His ivory robes grazed the wooden planks. "Thank you for coming," he said. The throng started whooping again. He held up his arms and they immediately stilled. That power awed me.

If my very life had depended on it, I couldn't have parroted back one word the Pope said. Terror had clamped down on my brain when I realized I could not recall how to play *Ave Maria*. I squinted at the music stand beside the altar. The black notes bobbing across the sheet music may as well have been hieroglyphics. That part of my brain which knew how to read music had burrowed into the gray folds that didn't. My hands seemed to belong to someone else. I wanted to flee but the scarlet robed Cardinal blocked the door.

Before I could explain my situation, a priest put his hand between my shoulder blades and propelled me to the music stand. The microphone glared. I pressed my fingers to the strings, lifted the bow which felt as awkward as a shovel, and prayed, Please God. Help me. The strings gnawed the tips of my fingers. The Pope stopped talking, smiled at me and nodded. I'd planned to dazzle him with a flawless performance. I had practiced *Ave Maria* for hours, weeks. For years, people had been telling me that I'd been blessed with a glorious musical gift, but I'd often wondered about a gift that often seemed more burden or chore. If this talent was indeed God-given, why did He award it in such a crude state, so that many days it seemed preposterous to try and coax music from wood? Shouldn't an inborn talent come as easily as breathing?

I don't know how long I stood there, poised to play, but I heard giggling, and then the Pope was standing beside me, covering the round head of



the microphone with his hand. The cold had reddened his nose and ears. A sob gathered in my throat.

"Don't be afraid," he said. "God is with you."

I blurted, "Thank you, your majesty!"

"I'm not a king." He patted my cheek. "Won't you play for us?" He tilted his head toward the sea of waiting faces.

I had never considered anything habitual to be a sin, but I feared God might be penalizing me for my bad acts at the worst possible time. A confession gushed. I admitted to pinching a significant number of quarters from Josh's Snoopy bank and to saying God Damn It that morning after I dribbled orange juice on my tuxedo shirt.

The Pope held up a hand. "I've heard worse," he said. He winked and bowed his head.

When I lifted the bow again, it had become almost weightless. The calm I felt inside was as exquisite as a lake at sunset when it was glass flat and coppery. My fingers blazed with warmth. The violin came alive, radiating such a rich, mournful tone that it seemed to shed teardrops of music into the air. I didn't look at the music once, yet my fingers flitted along those four silky strings without tripping over one perfectly ripened note.

Every person has a moment when he knows he's the best he'll ever be and that was mine.

As soon as I played the final, tremulous note, though, I knew I'd never taste that kind of magic again. I could barely bring myself to lower the bow. I'd enjoyed a spike of sublimity and was none too eager to return to my usual beige existence.

I backed away from the podium, turning the violin over in my hands. It seemed so much sleeker that I could barely believe this was the same dull instrument. That unremarkable color had matured to a glistening chestnut. The wood radiated so much light that I was forced to squint.

Four news stations carried footage of my moment with the Pope. My mother had me recounting the story at the grocery store and the gas station. I embroidered a bit, improving the dialogue so I wouldn't appear dim-witted, faking this detail about a warmth that spread through me when the Pope touched my cheek. Several people inferred the involvement of a higher power in my performance.

My celebrity really bloomed following the incident with our neighbor's St. Bernard, Harvey. He got hit by a UPS truck and everyone on the street playing kickball thought he was dead but when I walked over and touched his soft shoulder he scrambled to his feet and trotted home. He'd only been stunned but I invented a story about a halo of white light emanating from my fingers when I reached for him.

It all took place so long ago that any explanation of my motivation would be largely invention, but I meant no malice. More likely, I enjoyed



the attention. The magnetism of the spotlight bedeviled me. I'd unwittingly tapped into that age-old human craving for affirmation of a greater power, for a celestial plan that lends reason to life's misery. I took advantage of spiritual hunger.

Then, within a week or two of the dog's resurrection, I began believing in my own blessedness. In a stab at martyrdom, I crept downstairs to sleep on the floor of the garage every night after my family went to bed. Joan of Arc burned at the stake. Saint Stephen was stoned to death. I slept on cold concrete in a pinging, creaking place that reeked of motor oil and possibly a dead rodent. Each time my father shuffled into the garage to scoop me up and redeposit me in bed, I continued snoring until he'd padded out of ear-shot. Mornings I explained to God that my sufferance was being thwarted by my parents.

I hadn't played my violin since playing for the Pope, but I continued to carry it with me wherever I went, tucked under my arm like a ukelele. The black case that had once supplied safe haven had become a restrictive and smothering nuisance.

Under the other arm I packed a Bible, less for spiritual guidance than for pithy passages which I memorized then launched at souls in need of guidance. Fortunately, my grade school was overrun with skeptics and sinners, begging for ministration.

For example, our school bus driver, Mr. Wempler, had the twisted limbs and jerky gait of a polio victim and I suspected his condition to be emblematic of sin. On a crisp, spring day, I positioned myself in the seat behind his to share the story of Jesus healing the paralytic. "It's funny how you can be right in the middle of a parable an not even realize it," I said. He looked blank, so I added, "Rise, take up thy bed, and walk."

He frowned. "What bed?"

I urged him to repent and he recorded my name as a troublemaker on a pink note pad. The public didn't always recognize my ethereal aura, so I bore such punishments without complaint, anticipating lavish Heavenly reward. Sunlight glinted off his silver pen as he slashed my particulars across his report.

"All who draw the sword shall die by the sword," I told him.

"I'll take my chances kid," he said.

Angus McMullen, who'd never before spoken to me—not once—shyly approached me in the lunchroom and asked me to touch his baseball mitt.

"God is very economical with divine gestures. It took a miracle to bring Lazarus back from the dead," I told Angus, spreading my arms wide. "But not to roll the big boulder away from his grave. Jesus told the disciples to do that."

"Are you going to touch this mitt," Angus said. "Or am I going to stuff you in a locker?"



When he went on to pitch a no-hitter, I was inundated with requests to touch everything from pencils to cleats to saxophone reeds. Initially I tried to be selective, passing over obvious sinners and Protestants, but I realized that with each successful test I attracted a new member to God's clique, and enlarged my benediction base.

I'd spent my early years trying on identities as if they were hats and this was the first Sean that wielded any power, and it was corrupting. Nowadays when I see a Pentecostal minister on television, galloping across the stage and barking the scriptures at a room full of believers, I wonder if the power has already elbowed his former self aside.

For the first time in my life, my mother doted on me, in those subtle ways to which children in large families are so sensitive. At dinner, she'd serve me the least-charred of the grilled cheese sandwiches. She woke me for school last, even though my bed was closest to the door. My siblings resented my ascension to the top of the family food chain but, with the exception of Luke, they treated me with the wary respect one might accord a domesticated wolf.

Luke tested every boundary he encountered, usually to his own detriment, and my new religious fervor made me a willing target in his eyes. In my younger days I feared and disliked him, but as an adult I admired his willingness to kick in the rotten boards of status quo, even if he was less young visionary than juvenile delinquent.

He placed a twelve inch ceramic Buddha in our bedroom closet and knelt in front of it to do incantations and offerings. One afternoon he set a Dixie cup of chocolate milk in front of the Buddha while I lay beside our bunks like a human cross: face down, arms and legs extended straight. I'd placed the violin, string side down, beside me.

"Luke," I said. The carpet smelled of chemicals and fibers were tickling my nose. "Did you know God turned Lot's wife into a pillar of salt for her religious rebellion?"

"Sean," he said. "Did you know you're making an ass of yourself?"

I said, "Do not judge, and you will not be judged."

Luke grabbed his crotch with both hands. "Judge this."

"You are trying to stifle my holiness," I said. "But I forgive you."

"I'm sure you know where you can shove your forgiveness."

My father slid the picture of me and the Pope from the *Tribune* beneath the glass on his nightstand. The only other thing under there was a picture of him with a cotton-headed Leonard Bernstein in Prague: my father holding Bernstein's baton by the pointed end; Bernstein with my father's violin tucked upside down beneath his chin.

The day I begged him to get to know Jesus was the day he began avoiding being left alone in a room with me. When I have reflected on those times in my life that toughened me up, or, more accurately, that calcified around



my heart, the one that juts most uncomfortably was the afternoon I discovered the *Tribune* photo crumpled in a ball beside my father's trash can, which I responded to by cutting the photo of him and Bernstein into minute slivers that I flushed down his toilet. He never questioned me about it but I've often wondered if that flush failed to purge every shard, for a tension arose between us that persists to this day, and I've never shaken the feeling that his belief in my basic goodness had been blackened.

My mother's reaction to my odd behavior was muted. She didn't comment when I quit the violin, though she did express concern for the safety of the instrument, pointing out that it wasn't a telephone pole, designed to face the world on its own. She said this while kneeling on the family room floor, tracing the delicate curves of my violin's spruce belly, rubbing its maple neck with her thumb. The tenderness of her touch embarrassed me and I snatched the instrument away.

She brought me to mass before school every morning because she thought I enjoyed it. The services remained lusterless, but I liked the way she squeezed my shoulders while we stood in line for communion. For once our conversations extended beyond whether or not I'd been a bit flat on the Mendelssohn concerto during rehearsal. Then one day, at a stoplight, she admitted she went to church so often because her religious beliefs were drying up and drifting off like dandelion seeds. Her knuckles whitened atop the steering wheel.

The realization that I'd become her confessor delighted me until I realized she wanted guidance that I was unequipped to provide. I struggled to think allegorically, which came about as naturally as thinking in Cantonese. In truth I'd never been much of a thinker. I ambled through my life in an unreflective fog.

"Dandelions are very tough to kill," I finally said.

By April's end, I wanted to legally change my name to Samson. He was an ordinary man who became imbued with the Holy Spirit. This lent him miraculous powers. Samson annihilated a thousand Philistines with a jawbone, ripped a lion to shreds, snared three hundred jackals with his bare hands.

I presented the name-change idea to my parents in the kitchen. The salty aroma of baking ham has long reminded me of that day. They perched anxiously in their chairs while I paced before the hot oven door. The violin lay in the middle of the table with its scroll propped on a stack of napkins. My mother's hand kept flitting nervously toward it, stopping just shy of touching it. I knew she wanted to settle it back in the case. She resisted my father's attempts to grab her hand. Many nights they argued over the roots of my religious mania (she blamed genealogy, for he had two institutionalized uncles in his bloodline; he pronounced me mentally soft, a condition brought on by her continual coddling) and how best to handle it. (Him: military boarding school. Her: modern psychiatry.) There were slammed doors and tears. My



mother died a year and a half later, long before it occurred to me to apologize for the distress I caused.

Together they resolved that I should keep my given name. And get more fresh air.

My father spent most Saturday afternoons casting lures into the murky depths of Lake Giappa with Matthew, Luke and Josh. I never joined them because I considered fishing to be monotonous. I experienced no joy or even satisfaction when a fish struck my line. Also—prior to deciding that such gigs were beneath me—I'd played my violin every Saturday afternoon for a bunch of barely-sentient seniors at St. Vincent's Convalescent Home because Father Ricci believed that I had a duty to share my musical endowment with the public.

After two hours of sitting silently in the bow of the boat, listening to lures plunking and reels clicking; after two hours of baking in the sun without so much as a nibble, I dropped my bare hook into the water and pulled out a book of Psalms that I'd tucked into my tackle box.

"Behold the beauty of the Lord," I read aloud. When I looked up, everyone in the boat was staring at me. Josh cleared his throat nervously. Matthew shifted his gaze to my shoulder.

"This isn't exactly God's country, Sean," my father said. "It's a man made lake."

I planted my nose atop the musty fabric of my life vest and watched the sky darken. Thick, bruised clouds surged in from the east. The *chirrup* of frogs was getting louder but the dragonflies and mosquitoes which had been buzzing around us since we left the docks had vanished.

"So, Sean," My father jabbed my shoulder with the tip of his fishing rod. "What do you think of this togetherness crap?"

I pointed at the boats heading toward the docks and suggested that we follow suit. He clipped a sapphire blue feathered lure on his line and explained that fish are drawn to drizzle. "They think it's bugs skimming along the water's surface."

"What's the matter, Sean?" Luke snorted. "Won't God take care of you?"

In my most prophetic voice I assured him that God was, in fact, sovereign over nature.

"What are we going to do with you Sean?" My father removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose. His thinning hair and drawn face gave him a fragile, hatchling look that I'd never noticed before.

Lightning ripped through the sky, followed by a rifle shot of thunder. Soon fat raindrops were pelting us. My father slid his pole under the seat and told me to pull up the anchor. Sooty clouds roiled and growled in the sky. Waves slapped the aluminum boat, tossing it from side to side. Matthew put one foot on the motor to yank the starter cord with both arms. It sputtered, coughed blue smoke, and died. I prayed for the motor to start and for abso-



lution for Matthew, who kept taking the Lord's name in vain.

Rain pounded down in torrents. Josh slid off his seat onto the bottom of the boat, sobbing. I couldn't see the shore any longer, only brown, choppy water and fog. Wind twisted and spun the boat. Matthew ripped the cord violently and I vomited over the starboard side.

"You're flooding it, Matthew!" my father said. A huge wave slammed into the side of the boat, dumping foul smelling water on us. Luke emptied the worms and dirt from the bait can into the lake and started to bail frantically.

When my father stood to help Matthew, the boat bucked and pitched me, head first, into the coldest, blackest water imaginable.

Freezing, churning darkness sheared the clothes from my body. Slimy plants wound around my bare arms and legs, tightening their grip when I kicked or thrashed. I coughed and gagged as water trickled into my lungs. I would've done anything to draw a breath.

The lake turned tranquil in a matter of seconds. Plants unraveled from my limbs and drifted out of sight. I tried to swim to the surface but my arms and legs dangled uselessly. I descended far enough for my ears to pop.

Even though there was no white light, no pure serenity, I felt certain I'd died. (Many have suggested that I did die.) The sediment whipped up by the storm settled suddenly and completely. My frantic need for air vanished as though I'd learned to breathe amniotic fluid again.

I wondered if the Lord had a hand in the storm. Was this retribution for exaggerating my own divinity? The calm which so closely followed my plunge into the lake led me to believe the squall had been my fault. I could see the bottom of the boat and my brothers' pale faces peering over the side but no sound came out when I tried to yell. The afternoon sky had already brightened to blue. The shifting filter of water bent and twisted the shapes above me.

My toes sank into silt. It was like standing on the back of a monster and I pleaded, unabashedly, for mercy.

A crash, then my father was swimming clumsily toward the life jacket floating near the bow. He dived beneath the boat to search for me. Emotion swelled in my chest when I heard him shouting my name. I tried again to yell back but thick liquid arms twined around my body and towed me away from the boat.

The underwater world snapped into sharp focus. I wore no mask and yet I saw largemouth bass fifty yards away suck down tadpoles in great, yawning gulps. Beyond that, a dozen silvery perch hid among swaying stems of wild rice, their gills flaring pink. My fingers grazed the slick scales of an enormous northern pike.

The eerie part was that I could *smell*. I caught sweet whiffs of lily pads and the spicy scent of an unhurried turtle. I coasted through a cold pocket of



water and gagged on its briny stench. People toed the line of righteousness their whole lives, I thought, for *this*? The afterlife I'd always imagined was a place filled with translucent, radiant beings that floated in the air, not a lagoon populated by cold-blooded fish.

I felt a tornado of water and bubbles, then something solid brushed my skin. Spikes raked my arms and legs before everything went dark. I was squeezed, starting with my shoulders; a descending bear hug that coated me in oily fluid and advanced me further into blackness. Water sloshed against my face with each forward lurch so I knew I was out of the lake. Whatever was pressed against me had the texture of a raw chicken breast. I struggled to propel myself backwards, but could do little more than wiggle my fingers, which were lodged behind my back. The sickly sweet odor of decaying flesh was overwhelming. I vomited lake water.

The walls, floor and ceiling of the place I ended up were rubbery, moist cushions. Warm liquid gathered in the soft dent where I knelt. It fizzed like soda pop.

What terrible thing did I do to be sent here? Was this the consequence of exaggerating my own blessedness? I didn't ask to be born a diluted soul, forever in search of my own singularity, perpetually uncomfortable within my own skin. I begged for forgiveness, wept, pleaded for mercy, cursed. None of it advanced my cause and my throat began to ache from the effort. I began to gingerly explore my squishy prison, certain that something awful would lunge out of the darkness and do me violent harm. The floors and walls gave way when prodded with an elbow or knee. I repeated Hail Marys until the words made no sense. I encountered so many curved shells, fishing lures, and pebbles that I figured I must be in an underwater cave, but the only two openings that I found were barely large enough to fit my fist through, and I'd have sworn on all that's Holy that one contracted around my wrist.

I grasped what felt like a large bone fragment and tried to punch a hole in the floor with it, causing my world to buck and twist violently. I bounced off the walls until the turbulence subsided, then lay curled in a ball with one cheek pressed to the floor and listened to a muffled, rhythmic thumping until sleep descended.

I awoke with my head throbbing and my hands shaking from lack of food. The water that collected in the spongy pockets of the floor smelled corrosive but tasted fine if I pinched my nostrils. At some point, the cave gurgled and swayed, and a live fish shot through one of the openings. It landed with a wet slap. I listened to it flip and gasp to death before devouring it raw, head to tail, bones and scales. It was the most odious thing I've ever ingested. I can still feel that eyeball adhered to the back of my throat like a stubborn aspirin.

The cave quivered, then shook with enough force to rattle my teeth. I heard the low rumble of water rushing in long before it crashed on top of



me, but there was nowhere to go and nothing to grab. A swell propelled me through these slippery tubes until I heard a thump and then release. Into light!

A crush of bubbles sped past me to the surface, where I drew the sweetest breath of my life. I dog paddled a hundred yards to a narrow beach on an undeveloped part of the lake. To my disappointment, no boats were searching for my body, dragging the lake with large silver claws. I hauled myself onto the scorching sand and crawled into the shadow of a fallen pine. It didn't provide much shelter but it beat roasting in the sun that was burning fiery white in the sky.

I made no further attempts to better my situation, figuring that if I played possum the Lord would pass right over me and find someone else to humble.

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Luke spotted me huddled against the base of a spruce. He said he would have hiked right past were it not for the sunlight glinting off the thousands of tiny fish scales pasted to my skin. After poking me with a stick to make sure I hadn't expired, he said, "You look like a goddamned Martian, Sean."

Life quickly returned to normal following the tears and ballyhoo over my safe return. My fame evaporated in a few short weeks. No one believed I'd survived inside a colossal fish for three days. A more widely accepted explanation reduced my experience to a shock induced hallucination. I stuck to my version of events, albeit quietly, and wondered what others did when they found themselves in the belly of a miracle. But, time and life have always had a way of whittling down the experiences that shaped me, and time and life gradually gutted my miracle.

It has occurred to me that not everyone received a golden moment of grace. Most people may only be allowed a glimpse of glory, of how it feels to be better than ordinary. It might have been the day you clobbered a roughneck in a greasy t-shirt who'd been frightening an old man in the Walgreens parking lot: that moment of elation when your sloppy punch landed and blood spurted from his nose, that split second before pain and fear of reprisal set in. Perhaps yours took place in an unnaturally bright delivery room, full of blood and antiseptic smells, where you heard this purplish, sticky baby start to wail, and you looked at this woman laying on the bed, this spent woman with dark circles beneath her eyes and sweaty, blond bangs pasted to her forehead, and, unexpectedly, you realized that you'd give your life for either of them. Maybe it was the day you lifted your violin from its dusty case and played *Ave Maria* to a crowded church and a sleek white coffin and you expected to sound stale and hollow, but somehow you shined. You just never knew when you'd cross paths with grace, so all you could do was keep pulling the bow across the strings.







# *Contest Winners*



# *Driving Into Orion's Belt*

This is a planetarium night. I slide low in my seat  
and shoot along I-96, ignoring the black paper  
houses at the bottom of the sky.

Orion is my target, and his belt stretches straight  
up through the eastern horizon. I wish to fix him,  
to thumbtack him, to be sure of him.

But he rises. He rises out of my range,  
out of my sight. I have to ask:  
what is it I am driving for?

Twin moons appear behind me. Artemis appears.  
She flashes her lights as if to say: He is within  
my bowshot, and besides, I have hit those stars before.

She launches me. I tear through the night, I drive on

towards Elysian fields,  
towards home,  
towards dawn.

# *The Pine*

You stand, a late shade  
of summer dusk, blue;  
the blue of fresh snow  
in star-sharp winter; blue waist  
of branches my small hands parted;  
my body a slim incision of breath,  
pink in your side.

Tonight the wind is faint, just able  
to taste your intricate shape.  
The long-vanished presence of  
my quick limbs upon yours returns,  
tracing those wobbly steps  
as I climbed through rooms of spruce air,  
my skin thick with your black balm.

Remembered is the scent of burnt August beef,  
stubbornly clinging; of how halfway up  
and unable to get down I let  
a scream crease your soft needles,  
like the screams found beneath a broken streetlamp;  
how my ribs pounded against you — I grasped  
as far as fingers could dig.

And how you spoke in slow, steady tones,  
each syllable an instruction  
to a hesitant foot, an awkward arm—  
you would not let me fall.  
On that heat-heavy evening  
you would reach out to hold me with  
warm and trembling arms.



## *Caduceus*

Climbing each other up Mercury's winged staff,  
Two snakes bound in a twisted helix,  
    like tendrils of my thin hair that were always slipping  
    from Jodi's careful braids.

And I thought, yes,  
    we grounded creatures,  
    crawling on our stomachs, eating dust,  
    must fly.

And I announced that I would be a doctor,  
    remembering that Mercury was Zeus' favorite,  
    forgetting he was the Divine Herald  
    who guided the dead to the underworld.

The profession slithered up me,  
    tangled about me like leafless brown vines.  
Its long muscles slowly  
    contracted around my neck.

I watched it digest my body, a round lump  
    pushing against the shingled skin,  
    but being moved methodically through its length.

Each time my parents introduced me as  
    their little doctor -  
    a contraction.

Every graduation card addressed to Dr. Preston -  
    a contraction.

The Waterman pen and pencil set  
    I was to write prescriptions with -  
    two narrow staffs that began to squirm coolly  
    about my fingers as I held them.

But I thought I was an Indian charmer  
    who would learn the right melody  
    and the snakes would dance for me.

When they left me with Jodi, my beauty school cousin,  
    at the hospital

I thought I would be fine.  
Mercury had tapped me with his piper's wand,  
I was charmed.  
I expected her to be  
like the snakes by the side of the road,  
intact, except for the imprint of tire tread  
over their tails.  
But there was her jawless face,  
swollen like an inflatable doll head  
the moment before it explodes.  
Her eyes - two bleeding stoplights.  
The tubes entwined about her body  
like pale worms.  
The rhythmic gulping of the heart monitor.  
And the sterile air, every molecule disinfected,  
stripped of its nutrients.  
I suffocated even as I breathed quickly,  
as if they had added an element while cleaning it,  
making water.  
I felt it dripping from my face  
and I was drowning,  
water filling me but not satisfying,  
until I too was a doll about to burst.  
I fled the emergency room, but the sick  
were following, expecting me to guide them,  
I didn't know the way.  
  
Outside, staring at the Caduceus,  
it began to spin,  
the snakes spiraling around each other.  
And I saw red and blue, like the pole outside the barber shop  
where Jodi and I used to have our hair cut,  
And it was the dizzy reflection of an ambulance  
against the glass doors.  
  
That skin was nailed to me, like shingles on a roof,  
tight, dry on my scalp,  
just as when Jodi finally used enough gel and spray  
to make my hair hold a braid.  
I shed that skin, as a surgeon peels away gloves,  
but it looks so alive,  
it might uncoil and trace incomplete circles in the dirt.



# Christmas

Old Jesse still talks about it  
in his cicada-edged croak that  
races to a meeting with entropy.

That night with all the *lights*  
he calls it and the others nod  
muttering in the code that old people use  
that once squeezed puzzled glances from dead parents  
back at the dawn of time.

It gets no better name from him.  
Perhaps these sheep have eaten his vocabulary  
away over the years —  
so much fractal grass,  
leaving a gritty stubble of sentences.

That night with all the *lights* oh, yeah  
they murmur, traceless now of trackless terror when  
darkness turning inside out around us  
left only a dozen frightened shepherds facing  
the choir of storms.

Somehow the sheep (damnedest thing)  
just raised their heads like everyday and  
we, our faces in grass and toadstools prayed  
living wool to be a shield against lightning.

This same staff I hold today in my hand  
twisted like it wanted a better look, and even though  
Light was all the universe, I was sure I could hear  
grass weeping under the starving weight of my shadow.

Fear not? The memory of impossible words  
from somewhere inside flashing wings, so calm.  
Instinctively believing I dared to *look* and

Some days I can still see the afterglare:  
Elusive purple feathers

That night with all the *lights* they charged us  
wielding soft, impaling words. Fifty stars grew faces:  
    Glory to God in the Highest.  
    Glory to God in the Highest.  
        The Highest.  
        The Highest.

Caught between heavens and earth, just listening —  
of all the kingdoms only we were not yet part.  
Eighteen different notes of light crawled up  
my spine a sounding board. Gone

so quickly I almost thought  
I dreamed if I had not  
heard the rocks sustaining their final note  
*basalt profundo*  
and known (not knowing how)  
where to see the child.

God, I'd rather see the angels again than take that.  
All the lights shrunk to nothing to him,  
the One Who.

I woke in a cell in the city; fined ten shekels  
for shouting in midnight streets something crazy  
about a King.

I don't shout any more; the sheep need feeding,  
but sometimes when all the others are out on far hills  
I imagine myself again before those eyes in a grown  
Man and in my lone and windcracked throat far from  
any stage

I sing.



# Stargazing (Kramer vs. Kramer)

I put a squirt gun against Grandma's temple and pulled the trigger. She didn't stir, and I sat next to her for a while as water drooled down her blue cheek. Then I went to the living room and lit a cigar. Christie was still asleep on the couch with a thin Nogales blanket crumpled beneath a sagged breast. She wasn't unpleasant-looking. No, she wasn't ugly like Grandma had said. With that grey mid-day light and her eyelids shut, she might have been Meryl Streep's twin sister. There she was: Meryl Streep perfectly playing the role of a swap-meet girl, sound asleep yet golden on Grandma's ragged olive couch, probably dreaming she was elsewhere, dreaming of some electric horseman Redford stealing her over the California border. It was ridiculous to imagine. Me naked on top of Silkwood Sophie. What good did it do to imagine I was sleeping with Meryl Streep?

She always woke up by noon, and there I'd be as if in a staged position, cigar and The Weekly Globe staining my hands in ink and gin. I often wondered what it must have been like to wake up to my face, this neglected smileless face. I was a coward of sorts in Grandma's eyes, never letting my beard go one way or the other. Always rough yet patchy. A face darkening yet still pale. After months of waking up to me, Christie was numb to my appearance. I was no longer handsome or ugly; I was familiar just as the poster on a bedroom wall becomes invisible after months of admiring it. No longer appealing or irritating, just colorless.

She was always up in time to watch *The Twilight Zone* and fix us a drink, usually something mixed with Gibley's since that's all Grandma ever bought. Grandma usually had her drink in bed, but sometimes she'd come out of her room of blankets and join us. It was on these days I was nervous. The three of us there, waiting. I glanced back at Christie, her body broken in ninety-degree angles. Her bare breasts, colorless against her tan, lay as if dying, barely heaving and slightly rolling a sweat tear up and down her sternum. These were the moments one saw things as they really were, these quiet seconds of unconsciousness when one can safely observe the world at close range. I watched Christie like a biologist, like a timekeeper. I stubbed out my cigar and touched her throat. Lower. I squashed the bug of sweat which lay in wait of either absorption or evaporation between my fingers and rolled its warm remains until they were gone. Then I stood above her to see her from a different angle. I pointed the squirt gun at her nose. She was still Meryl Streep's twin, dead and elsewhere, at my knees. I closed my left eye and



squinted at the sleeping curve. Still Meryl. I tried the other. The same. I was excited by the possibility. What if she had miraculously changed over night? What if this was no longer Christie, but was now Meryl Streep. I wanted to see her like this all the time. The lieutenant's woman. Sophie choosing me. I turned sideways and tilted my head until she was upside down. Water in the gun shifting. Meryl's breasts hung upwards. The soft darkness of her nose whistled slightly. Then, as if the miracle had gone too far, Meryl's eyelids disappeared, and I saw Christie's brown and red eyes staring up at me. The bored eyes of a cat.

"What the hell are you doing?" she said slurred with sleep, frowning at my upside down face.

"Nothing," I said, a rocking-chair falling with my weight.

She examined my flushed face for a moment, then realizing it was not worth the trouble to search for this momentary peculiarity in my behavior, slipped into a tank-top and disappeared into the kitchen. I turned on the TV—for that was all that was required of me in our daily ritual—and listened to the clinking of bottles in the kitchen. She returned with two gin and cranberries and flopped down next to me on the floor. This floor of old newspapers.

"Where's Grandma?" she said.

"She always sleeps in on Sundays."

"Did you check on her?"

"Yeah, she's sleeping."

"What time is it?"

"Your show hasn't started yet," I say. I wondered if Meryl Streep watched *The Twilight Zone*. I wondered if she loved anyone, or if she slept until it was too hot to sleep anymore, and woke up angry at the first person she laid her eyes upon.

"Here. Don't you want your drink?"

I took the glass from her and set it next to my knee. My tongue wasn't ready for the taste. Then we heard the opening theme and Rod Serling, and she ritually shut me off. Silence and TV. She closed my existence out as easily as when she slept, only it wasn't the same. I no longer stood on my brilliant observation deck as I had while she was sleeping. No longer able to observe the harmless stars of her sleeping transforming face. Far off yet point-blank stars. Meryl Streep-like sun, alive and impossible to observe with the naked eye. Hovering. Ready to fall.

She cut me off during her TV time, leaving me to find something to occupy myself with until she came back. Grandma set the timer on the stove. The Weekly Globe, if I read the same sections, took exactly thirty minutes to cover, and so I began when she began. I glanced at an article about the pigeons and their inability to walk and see at the same time. Blind movement. The personals seemed to flip themselves open. I read through each carefully, attempting to conjure up pictures of the ad-placers who had only twenty-five



words allocated to them. I tried hard but failed to envision a dimpled 5'6" blonde with brown eyes. What did it mean that she adored skiing and moonlight dinners? I thought of snow and mashed potatoes. Twenty-five words were given to sum up and sell a person as if one were dealing with a mere tinker toy of organs and limbs. Words mislead, misinform, mistreat. A photo wasn't much better. Just a dead fossil likeness, capturing something less than a breath, nothing of the human essence. So what, I asked myself that queasy Sunday, might capture the essence of a human? I leaned over to Christie and asked her. She didn't answer. Maybe sleep was my answer. Sleep told stories. I learned more about Christie when she slumbered than the billions of conscious meaningless words bumbling from her cigarette mouth could ever reveal. When she slept, so did her mask. When she slept, that stretched angry, then indifferent mask fell away after a long day's use.

"I want to leave town today," she said abruptly when an airline commercial came on.

"Where to?" I mumbled still lost in my sleep theory.

"To a farm. Somewhere quiet."

"A farm? Who do we know with a farm?"

"We don't know anyone. That's the point," she said with a sip of gin. "I want to go where we are unknown. Take me driving."

"But we're pretty much unknown here." And I knew that by my owning the car, by my deciding where we would and wouldn't go that day, I could keep her on the couch here with me. I was the means of transportation.

And because of me we stayed in that day and drank gin with Grandma, who told us the earring story again. She made long pauses for suspense as if telling the story for the first time and looked at us with wide eyes as if she'd forgotten we knew the whole story by heart.

"Your grandfather wanted to pierce my ear the day we were engaged. I was afraid, but I let him. I trusted him. He used a sewing needle and ice and told me to take a drink from his flask. But my ear lobe was too thick, and he had to use lots of muscle. Your grandfather had lots of muscle. It must've been twenty minutes til the needle went through and I bled all over my cheek. Then he put a pearl earring in. I wonder where that pearl came from."

She stopped and looked out the sun-filled window, and Christie and I watched the tv. Then she began again.

"The next morning I went to the mirror to see my earring and I saw he had practically mutilated my ear. There were two other half-holes next to the other one." She made two pinpoints in the air as if for the first time.

"And my ear turned dark purple, purple on pink, and it hurt all day and especially all night, but it didn't bother me...I suppose because I was in love."

Christie sighed for my Grandma as if hearing all this for the first time. Grandma, with her thick, no longer punctured ears, sighed too, and then she concluded the story.



“Two weeks later he told me he had once pierced another woman’s ear, another woman he had loved before me, up in Phoenix who had just up and disappeared on him one morning, and after that my earrings didn’t mean much to me.”

Christie fell back to sleep in my arms as Grandma set a tray on her lap to make herself another drink. Somewhere beneath Christie’s pile of sheets were her feet. I shovelled for them. I needed to find them—the base of her frame, the pillars of her stance. She was asleep and unravelled. I had never seen her feet before. I had touched them with my own, squeezing a small toe between hers, but she didn’t want me to see them. She concealed her body, assured that my blind toes and fingers couldn’t translate her shape into a vision. Grandma’s drink slipped from her dozing fingers as I found Christie’s baby-like toes uncurled, relaxed like a kitten’s retracted claws. And there were her feet with those rough scaly soles I’d felt with my own. There was her foot in my hand. Kramer returning to Kramer. I moved upwards along her white legs as her stomach revolved into her back. Then she rolled over, rolling like droplets of gin on the newspaper, rolling towards the sun coming through the drapes, under the mixture of blue sheets, and then quietly the sun went, and her feet disappeared.

I stayed in until the water went cold, until my skin was white and numb, until I was exhausted with figuring things out. Off to work she would flit in the evening, locking her doors, zipping her coats, placing gold hoops and hiding her teeth. Off she went into the cities, into the trees, into the silent world of birds while I unplugged the stopper. Spiral retreat into small dark holes. Water and cats running off to better things. The end of baths. I filled the water gun again.

It is impossible to swallow one’s own tongue, The Weekly Globe said in a discussion of epilepsy, and yet she had me gulp down my stuttering trout-tongue until I twittered in silence. Dead useless silence like the clouds. Clouds standing firm against nothing but light, knowing full well that any half-confident airplane could pierce right through them. I couldn’t swallow it, and it wouldn’t go away until she decided it was time for me to shut up. I floated in a bath, supported by water and spine, and drifted beyond the past, the chronological illustrated time-line of which I was the creator. I was my own historian, a master of highlighting and downplaying. I was the means of transportation. The observer and participant in retrograde motion.

It was Sundays I began to write the history of my tongue, beginning with its first utterance: “Mapa.” However, tracing certain important utteral events such as my first “Fuck” or “I love you” or “Help” was proving to be difficult. When did I first say “Christie”? When did we first whisper while we had sex? What did we say? What did we want to say? What have I said? When did I last reveal this sorrowful organ, my tongue to her? When did she stop being Meryl Streep? Maybe there was no time-line. Just crude illustra-



tions scattered across an unmade bed. Undecipherable star maps.

Grandma and I stared at this picture of her. I dripped onto it, and Grandma left the room. It was that one I took years ago, a bottle of Harps in her fingers, and that torn Hemingway print in the background. And she was smiling, proud Armenian smile in her blue sweats, smiling at me, the photographer, the illustrator, the watcher, the storyteller.

Everything began.

Smiling, I suppose, because she loved me as the flash burst across the room. Meryl Streep beautiful in an explosion of war. She was at home in the picture. At rest. Stopped. To feel at home. Where was home? And I recognized that old maroon electric blanket wrapped around her thin feet. Maroon on blue. What did her feet look like beneath that blanket? Were the toenails painted? To where had they walked that day? On what had they stepped? She began to deny me the luxury of memory. My memory was out of my control.

Everything began in the morning. The cupboard opened in the kitchen.

Memory played with me, holding back, serving up my fragmented tongue. I remembered childhood surgeries and illness. Deaths and quiet running away. But where had everything else gone? Did anything else ever happen in the morning? Grandma didn't answer me.

Maybe it was all a matter of colors. I was green while Chrisite was white. I was black and she was green. Me in purple, her in pink. Me white, her blue. Black, white. We never corresponded.

Grandma brought drinks on a red tray.

We were always a twirling baton. With her on one end, me on the other, never touching, yet endlessly connected, flying, flipping through the air up, upwards then gravity stopped its teasing and reeled us down until one of us hit the dirt. Thrum. Grandma wanted to tell a story. One of us must hit the earth first, then pull the other down too. And down we went. Blind movement. Thrum, thrum, vibrating aluminium, and one of us reverberated off the dirt then bounced and the other followed. Bounce, bounce, until we finally settled into a silent equality in the supporting soil. Grandma wanted to tell a story. Had we hit the earth, Grandma? Or was gravity grossly allowing the joke to go on beyond its humor? Moons with nowhere to go. Were the cameras still rolling? Stopwatches on? Grandma had a story. Was it true that everything that rises must converge?

Grandma wanted to tell. Her tongue was alive and moving. I wondered these things as I looked at the nothingness of sky between the birds. I no longer understood the stars. No longer saw the shaped constellations that used to capture my eye. Orion and Cassiopeia were nothing now. Dead blotches of light. Everything must fall from the sky. Everything must rest. Grandma was speaking. The electric horseman stopped, short-circuited. The stars fell and slept while I stayed awake, waiting for them to return.



# *A Dream of Cheese*

She wanted Russell dead and he could see it in the way she spooned his applesauce. He saw it in every clean pair of elastic-waisted trousers she brought him. And his pillow: how her plump fingers lingered over his pillow at nap time. He silently counted the seconds that she fluffed it. One second...two seconds...three seconds... For God's sake didn't she even have the decency to slay him quickly? to come upon him suddenly as she slipped the pillow over his face? No, the blatant fluffing continued.

Until the day of the dream, he'd come to accept the murderous longings of his daughter, Cindy. He was a rich man, after all, and he'd always known that, one day, someone would extinguish him to get to his bank account. Still, when the expected day finally arrived, he was surprised to find his terror untempered by the months of premonition.

It started out like so many days in his daughter's home: his jaw comfortably slack on the over-fluffed pillow, creamed spinach soup swimming sweetly through his veins and, in his stomach, smooth fiber-rich Metamucil working its gentle, overnight magic. Then came the dream. It was set in the downtown Bertha P. Terwilliger Center for Seniors, but it wasn't the Bertha Center Christmas dream, where craft time suddenly frees his fingers from the tremors of Parkinson's and he's able to sculpt a Santa Claus figure so life-like, so exquisitely detailed, that he's jetted to the Smithsonian Institute to display his work. It wasn't the bingo dream, either, where he wins Bertha Center bingo so many times in a row that the nurse's aides take him to a private room and, to his amazement, show him—Well, the dream wasn't either of these, but it started out just as benignly.

It was lunch time and the center was serving a special meal, presumably to commemorate Flag day. A long line of white-jacketed waiters paraded into the room, each carrying a silver-domed tray of gourmet fare. They filed past Russell's wheelchair, lifting the lids from their dishes and letting moist smells waft into his nostrils: filet mignon, artichoke hearts, baked Alaska, lobster claw. One of the waiters was different. He was stockier and his white jacket had a pinkish hue, as if accidentally washed with a red sweater. Grinning, he took his time sliding back the lid to reveal...a cheese sandwich.

Russell awoke screaming. The specter of Denny Hudson's solemn, lumpy face lodged itself in his mind. Only last September Denny had dreamt of cheese: mozzarella, heavenly mountains of it. He'd never dreamt of cheese before. There'd been no reason. At lunch Denny had talked nonstop about



his dream. By supper he was dead of a stroke. Now Russell had had his very own dream about cheese and he was convinced a similar fate awaited him. Clearly, unless he somehow outwitted her, Cindy would murder him today. As moonlight traveled the length of his sweat-beaded skin, he wracked his brain for a plan, but when the first rays of sunlight drowned his wrenched and knotted sheets, Russell remained uninspired. He heard the doorknob turn and struggled for composure.

Cindy, in a red-and-white-swirl sun dress that made her look like an enormous jelly roll, lumbered into the room smiling. Crafty. It made Russell determined to match her innocent facade. He twisted his feverish face into an expression even more saccharine than hers. "Good morning, Dad," she sang, placing oatmeal and juice on the faux-oak TV tray beside his bed. "How much sugar?"

Did she give him so little credit as to think he would miss the flavor of poison under a layer of sugar? "None today, dear," he answered.

She said nothing but her left hand fluttered. Not enough that just anyone would see it. Yesterday, even he might have overlooked it, but today, his survival at stake, Russell's senses were heightened. Yes, a flutter it was, suggesting surprise, dismay maybe. Exactly the kind you might make when you fear the poison you've put in the oatmeal might be detected.

When Cindy lifted a teaspoon of the runny gruel to his mouth, Russell's lips pressed together like two stretched-out earthworms, allowing only a trickle of the pernicious fluid onto his tongue. Enough to taste, not enough to kill, he supposed. Had his senses been less sharp, his mind less alert, he might have thought it tasted exactly like the oatmeal served other mornings. Today he detected something more: a foreign flavor, only a trace. He couldn't place it at first, then couldn't taste it at all. But there it was again: earthy, bitter...cinnamon. Yes, cinnamon definitely tainted his oatmeal. Hadn't he heard that poisoning victims often report such a taste seconds before collapsing? Arsenic, strychnine, he couldn't remember which. He pushed the spoon away.

"You feeling sick, Dad?" Cindy asked.

"No. Do you think I need more oatmeal?"

Cindy cocked her head to the side and looked searchingly at him. "I don't think you need to eat it if you don't want to," she finally said. "How about some bacon, then? A nice stack of pancakes?" Russell shook his head. "Suit yourself. I was going to have some eggs but I might as well eat the oatmeal, if you're not going to." She carried Russell's bowl to the love seat, sat down and began talking about her managerial job at Rita's Gifts while shoveling in the oatmeal.

"So anyhow, this little redhead with skinned elbows came into the shop yesterday," Cindy said between mouthfuls, "not the kind of redhead with fat freckles all over her forehead and neck—this was the curly-type redhead with



only some light freckles on the nose—and she was wearing this candy necklace that looked like it had been sucked on for a good forty-five minutes already so the different colored sugars were all melting into a sort of green-gray syrup that seeped into the little pink ruffles on the collar of her dress...” Cindy gulped spoonful after spoonful of the fatal potion as she chatted. Could she be so obtuse as to have forgotten about the poison? She seemed surprisingly cavalier for a woman driven to suicide by a foiled murder plot. “So then the gimpy seeing-eye dog spots the redhead from way over by the blown glass and quicker than you can...” Cindy didn’t stop her cheerful prattle until the bowl was empty, then she pecked Russell on the cheek and stumped out the door.

Russell listened to her feet thump the length of the carpeted hallway. He pressed his ear against the wall by his bed. He heard shells cracking and the sizzle of oil on a frying pan: Apparently, the oatmeal had left some room in her stomach for eggs, after all. Then he heard the splashes and muffled metallic clanks that usually accompanied Cindy’s after-breakfast clean-up. Sounds caused by dishes being rinsed, cupboards opened, canisters moved. He didn’t hear the thud of her lifeless body on the linoleum.

Then the house fell silent. Russell leaned closer against the wall, letting his cheek spread flat onto the cool surface as he inhaled the dry odor of the lavender paint, but he heard only his own breathing. Perhaps Cindy hadn’t thudded. Perhaps the lummoX had drifted noiselessly to her death as the final graceful counter to a life of ineptitude. He couldn’t wait all day to find out if she was dead; he hadn’t even had breakfast. “Cindy!” he yelled.

He heard her clump, clump, clump down the hall again as the floorboards strained under the weight. She swung open the door and appeared before him, carrying the television. “Yeah, Dad?” she said.

“What are you doing with the TV?”

She didn’t even put it down while she spoke. Her skin looked healthy and flushed. “I was thinking: This TV’s got a large screen and there’s so little wall space in the living room and I just bought that cute picture of two chipmunks that I didn’t know where to hang...”

“Did you put cinnamon in my oatmeal this morning?” Russell demanded.

“I always add a pinch. Did I put in too much today? Is that why you didn’t eat it?”

If poison hadn’t been her plan then a different method of murder, perhaps even more heinous than oats, still awaited him. His stomach rumbled and he briefly meditated on the virtues of a steaming bowl of cinnamon oatmeal. He would need nourishment if he hoped to outwit her. “I wasn’t hungry until now,” Russell said.

“Well, the Bertha Center is holding a special Flag Day lunch today,” Cindy said.



Joe Waszac crammed his pockets with Swedish meatballs, as usual. Harley Ruppert, who never remembered the plastic baggies to line his pockets, had to be content with fistfuls of cheddar chunks. Both took a break from their looting when they saw Russell being wheeled through the Bertha Center's entrance. Russell was more delighted at the absence of white-jacketed waiters than at the presence of his friends. There was the usual Thursday choice of all-you-can-eat meatballs or tuna melts. In honor of Flag Day, the center skewered the tuna melts with toothpick American flags and offered red-white-and-blue-frosted sheet cake instead of cherry crisp.

After a trip through the meal line, Cindy settled with a plate of tuna and peas into a wing chair, leaving Russell with his friends. "Hi Harley," he said. Harley smiled a return greeting. "How you feeling, Joe?" Russell asked.

"Feel like a horse kicked me in the gut, if you want to know the truth. It's the damn hip, mostly. Can't take any medicine for it; the old stuff made my ears swell up. Dr. Parker tells me there's no way that the drug he gave me made my ears swell up. So I say to him, 'See this coat? I've had this coat since the war and in all the years I've had it, I could always cover my ears with the collar when it got cold. Now, I start taking this medicine that you give me and, all of a sudden, the coat doesn't fit over my ears anymore. How can you explain that?'"

"How could he explain it?" Russell asked.

"He couldn't," Joe said. "So I tell him if he's got all those fancy degrees and he still can't explain the simple fact that a man's collar won't cover his ears, well then, I can manage just fine without his so-called expertise."

Harley grinned at his friend's victory, but Russell's mind was elsewhere. "This is good cheddar," he said. Harley smiled in agreement. "You guys ever dream about food?" Russell asked.

"Oh, sure," Joe said. "Just Tuesday night I dreamed I had a pretty little French chef who baked me a special pan of meatloaf."

"How about cheese? You ever dream about cheese?" Russell asked. Harley's smile vanished as he sucked a quick mouthful of air.

"You kidding? If I did, I wouldn't be standing here talking to you," Joe said. "Don't tell me you've forgotten Denny Hudson, how he kept going on about his dream of the piles of milky-white Swiss cheese..."

"Mozzarella," Harley said.

"Yeah, all that beautiful mozzarella and a few hours later he was sprawled out on the ground like yesterday's lasagna. I hope I have a couple more good years in me before I dream of cheese."

As soon as Cindy stepped out of the house that evening to go to a movie, Russell realized that the murder weapon must be in the room with him. His room was the only place where the weapon would be out-of-the-way enough



that company wouldn't stumble upon it, but convenient enough that she could get it quickly, leaving him little chance of escape. Russell scanned the items lining the shelves of his bedroom; a giraffe of interlocking glass strands blown thin as spider webs, a two-inch amber plastic fawn, a stuffed rag angel with feather wings, a troop of red-capped cardboard gnomes. It would take Cindy a long time to bludgeon him to death with a cardboard gnome, even considering her husky frame. Of course she could always stuff the feathered angel into his mouth—No, then he'd still be able to breath through his nose, unless it was plugged up. And she planned to kill him tonight; she didn't have time to wait for him to suffer an attack of nasal congestion.

She'd obviously hidden a more effective weapon, and he would have just enough time to find it before she returned. He pulled himself to his feet, a quivering arm braced against the bed's metal railing. When the rush of blood to his head stopped, the love seat melted into focus before him and he moved toward it. He took one hesitant step then another, without lifting his feet from the plush carpet. When he'd shuffled to the love seat, he knocked one of its floral velour cushions to the floor. He reached deep into the upholstery in search of Cindy's weapon.

At first, he felt only lint balls and grit jamming under his fingernails. Then he touched something hard like a knife handle, rounded like the barrel of a revolver. He should have guessed he'd discover the murder weapon in the love seat. Hadn't he always loathed the love seat, even three years ago when she'd bought it, perhaps sensing that it would play a role in his demise? Hadn't he told her that its colors might fade unattractively? But she'd ignored his warnings, no doubt looking forward to the day its dark crevices would cradle her tool of destruction.

The weapon was stuck. It was too small and smooth to grasp firmly and his hand trembled fiercely from the Parkinson's, but when he finally pulled his arm from the couch he held a tube of lipstick. He stared at it for a moment, then decided Cindy had planted the tube to throw him off track. He tossed the lipstick aside and reached back into the love seat.

Within seconds, his hand brushed against something wispy, sleek, barely tangle. It might have slipped unnoticed past the fingertips of one less alert, but Russell took firm hold and yanked. He gasped when he saw it. It was the blue silk scarf he'd bought for Cindy's birthday eight years before, when he could still drive the brown Buick and shop for surprises without being pushed in a chair. For her to tighten that scarf, bought with love, around his neck!

Surely it was a mistake; even Cindy could never be so cold. Surely a more humane weapon lay wedged in the love seat. He frantically dug into the upholstery but uncovered only a dime, two paper clips and a Kleenex. With the unwanted confirmation of her disloyalty in hand, he sank into the cushion that remained on the love seat. Maybe he shouldn't even fight it. He was an old man. Maybe it was best to die while he still knew a few people



able-bodied enough to attend his funeral.

Harley would come to his funeral, of course, and Joe would be there, stuffing his powder-blue funeral suit with green bean casserole and lemon squares. Cindy would arrive bearing platter after platter of her favorite mini pecan pies, bought with his money. Sunglasses would mask her glee and the donut-esque figure would be flattered in a new satin gown dyed to match the freshly-used scarf flowing from her neck. Russell tightened his grip on the scarf until his gray fingers pinkened. He wouldn't let her get away with it.

He shoved the scarf into his pajama pocket. He opened the end table drawer and pulled out a sheet of Cindy's kitten stationery and a pen. In his mind, he composed a devastating note. *Dear Cindy*, it would begin. *You are very, very evil*. No. Mordantly insightful, to be sure, but it needed more zest, more authority. *Dear Cindy, you thought I didn't know what you were up to. You were wrong*. Perfect. *I have outsmarted you. Guess what I found? I found your blue, silk scarf. I cleverly hid it and you will not murder me today*. He recited it aloud. Yes: Exactly the right cadence and bite. He reached for the pen and his hand resumed its wild reverberations. After a struggle, his white-knuckled fist wrestled something discernible onto the paper; it was the letter 'I,' scratched the size of a gnat's leg. He saw that the note would need to be more concise.

Cindy lifted it from the blue Formica table. A note from her father? He hadn't gotten out of bed by himself in months, let alone written to her. She held it close to her face and turned on the reading lamp, but the miniature letters of Parkinson's were undeniable. It read, in letters barely legible without a magnifying glass: *I found your blue, silk scarf*.

The scarf he'd bought her years ago for her birthday, that she thought she'd never see again? Was it possible that under the curt sentences of dementia he still harbored affection, consideration? It was after midnight, but she tiptoed into his room to gaze at the father she hadn't dared hope would return. She knelt to gently kiss his face. The hall light shone on a different face tonight. Not the usual blank mask of Parkinson's: His jaw had resolution, his lips curved in triumph. It was the face of a survivor.



# Today

"I killed a bee today. At least I think I killed it. From where I'm sitting, there isn't really any way to tell. I think that's the most distracting part, the idea that the bee might still be alive." Pause. Then, the sound of a throat being cleared. *Yes. Ready.*

The little red tape recorder is switched on. Click. "Test. Test." Rewind. Sip of water. The quick, buzzing noise as the miniature tape fights against its constraints, trying to go back past its logical beginning. Play. "Test. Test." Slightly metallic, but his, unequivocally his voice. A deep breath is taken. *Speak slowly, clearly.* "I killed a bee today. At least I think I killed it. From where I'm sitting, there isn't really any way to tell. I think that's the most distracting part, the idea that the bee might still be alive." Pause.

"The bee was a little bee—not even as big as the nail on my big toe. Usually bees are larger than this particular bee. Also, most bees have a purpose, which I've read about in books about bees. Some of them are supposed to fly from one flower to another, pollinating. Others are just meant to guard the hive and look after the Queen. They all get orders in their little brains telling them exactly what to do. This one seemed not to have anywhere to go or anything to do, though. When I came back to my room it was on my bed by the pillow with the race car on it. I have only seen bees land on flowers, and even then they only stay there for a second or two. This bee was in the same spot for a long time; even when I sat down on my bed and put my face up close to see if it was alive or not, it stayed still. Maybe it was resting. Or else maybe trying to trick me. I was afraid that it would sting me as soon as I got close to it, but it just stayed very still." Pause.

"It had a stinger and little legs and eyes. I think I looked very tall to the bee. Especially when I moved in very close like I did. The next thing I did—" Click. The tape reaches its logical end-point and refuses to go any further. Rewind. Sip of water. Play. "little legs and eyes. I think I looked very tall to the bee. Especially when I got up very close like I did. The next—" The tape stops at its end again. Eject. Flip and insert. "Test. Test." Rewind. Sip of water. The quick, buzzing noise as the miniature tape fights against its constraints, trying to go back past its logical beginning. Play. "Test. Test."

"The next thing I did was take the cup from my breakfast tray and make sure the lid would stay on. After that, I just scooped the bee into the cup and put the lid on. The lid is see-through so you know what kind of juice is inside. But I could see the bee because there was no more juice. Inside, the



little bee was walking around, looking at the new room and drinking the little puddles of apple juice I had left at the very bottom. One time it looked up to say, 'thanks for the juice' or 'why did you put me in here?' I looked at the bee and talked to it for a time. Then I put the cup into the garbage can in the corner. That's how it goes, little bee; you need to follow those orders or you wind up in the trash. That's what I think about bees. Right now—"

The heavy door swings open. A tall, dark-skinned man in a white jacket fixes himself in the entrance. He wears horn-rimmed glasses and a thick moustache. "Pretty late, Gerry," he says. "Time to get some sleep now. Why don't you stop that tape." Inside the little red recorder, the tape continues to spin. Gerry stares at the spinning tape as it humbly weaves its way from the wheel on one side of the cassette to the other. He turns to look at the man in the jacket and blinks rapidly, as if failing to understand the meaning of his words. The man nods slowly. He is new at this job, having recently graduated from Cornell. With only two weeks of this job behind him, the man has only experienced people like Gerry in a thick textbook. His colleagues offered advice at the last meeting, which he has decided to reject on this trip down the hall. Rather than feigning interest and patience, as the others might, the tall man knows that respect is the most important tool for this job. He repeats himself firmly: "Why don't we turn off that tape now, Gerry?" Sitting on the floor, his head turned to stare at the white jacket and his body inclined toward the recorder, Gerry rocks forward and backward, back and forth, slowly. His face bears a placid expression, a gently flowing river on a slow, inevitable trek toward the sea. When he finally speaks, it is with a slow and measured calmness that always surprises the man behind the glasses and moustache. Gerry says, "I'm not finished yet. I can't go to sleep until I've finished." Having finished his part of the conversation, Gerry returns to studying the slowly winding tape. His hand smoothes a few of the wrinkles in the right leg of his black pants. The taller man, however, will not bargain; his appearance must remain a daily *deus ex machina*. He steps quickly into the room, infuriated by the absence of Gerry's worship, and snatches the very object—the little red tape recorder—that has taken his place.

In one move, Gerry rocks forward harder than before, grabs the white-jacketed arm, and draws its hand into his mouth. His teeth sink deep into flesh. Dropping the bright red idol, the tall man roars—the fury of a lightning storm—and lashes out with a powerful fist. Gerry falls back to the floor, clutches the recorder like precious, stolen fire. The door slams shut, a lock turns without.

Gerry slides to a far corner, almost out of the overhead light's reach. The naked bulb, high above him, fascinates as it illuminates. Its controls are out of his control; the bulb turns on and off, morning and night, as if by divine intervention. He wipes blood from his mouth, muddying the intense yellow of his shirt. A deep breath is taken. "Right now, I can see the cup, up-



side down, in the garbage can.” His voice is a whisper now, a hoarse, thirsty finish to a marathon. “On Monday, Mrs. Grey takes my garbage away. She will come to collect the trash, and the bee will go with her. Goodnight. Love, Gerry.” Sip of water, as the tape fast forwards to its end. Pressed into the far corner, Gerry sleeps.

He wakes later, wearing only a white shirt and underpants. From his position on the soft floor, his eyes blink up at the unfamiliar light, unfamiliar walls. He retreats quickly to a corner, blinking in the harsh white emptiness. No calendars, no shelves, no tape recorder. He tears at the clothing—starched shirt, starched underpants—and moans, low. After hours or days under the unchanging naked bulb that is a glimpse at heaven and hell, Gerry shuffles from the soft, padded corner to the imposing metal door. He raises himself onto his toes and peers through the tiny window. Eyes stare back, wrinkling around the edges. The eyes speak in a soothing voice, as eyes might:

“So we are awake, are we?”

“Is it Monday? What time is it?” Gerry’s voice conveys all of his shock at finding himself in a strange room without tapes or calendars.

“Gerry, you must tell us why you bit Dr. Ryan. That type of behavior is unacceptable here, Gerry.” Wrinkles develop around the eyes, and the voice sharpens slightly before smoothing out again.

“Where is my garbage can. I need it.”

“All in good time, Gerry. We’ll bring you some food and replace those clothes you’ve torn. After that we can discuss what to do about this latest fit.”

“Where is my tape recorder? I need it for today. I need it!” As a sense of hopelessness at his situation begins to invade, Gerry breaks to hysterics. At the first fall of tears, the eyes back away from the door. Dr. McIlrath speaks to someone else in his soothing voice. “He’s not cooperating just yet, Judy. We’ll try again tomorrow. Switch off his light for now.” Judy flips a switch by her monitoring desk, turning off the overhead bulb in the observation room. Inside, the patient screams. Judy clicks her acrylic nails on the surface of the desk. In her report that evening, she will note that he screamed until he fell asleep, arms folded and legs crossed, in the corner.

For days, Judy and the doctors watch as Gerry wakes with the bulb and attempts to go about his day, within the confines of the tiny room. He eats the food they bring him and uses the toilet that is partially hidden by the bed. Then, after hours of talking aloud to himself, the patient searches frantically in the corners of the room. Finding nothing, he begins howling about garbage cans, calendars, and tapes. Finally, after exhausting himself, he sinks into the far corner of the room and waits for the light to shut off again. After everyone leaves in the early evening, Judy is left alone at her desk. She peers at Gerry through the window on the hour and is intrigued by this man’s plain features, relaxing slowly between fits of hysteria. Once she says: “Why can’t



they help you?" Later in the week, the doctors decide to move some of Gerry's belongings into the room. Although they tell him, "We're going to bring your pillows for you, Gerry," he pays little attention to them.

In the afternoon, Dr. Ryan unlocks the wooden door to Gerry's old room and takes a deep breath. The room is already in need of dusting and the trash has not been removed since Gerry's departure; a faint, musty odor lingers in the air near the garbage can. Ryan curls his hand into a fist as his eyes pause on the tiny red spots on the floor, marking the location of his attack. He walks to the bed and grabs two pillows and the race-car bedspread. It is not until he is about to leave that he stops to notice the far wall, which is a lively mural of calendars. Each brightly colored picture—fixed to the white wall with little bits of clear tape—signals a different month; each month has three or four calendars devoted to it. Upon closer examination, Ryan notices that every day has been meticulously crossed off in a dark red marker until the pattern is halted with the day Gerry was moved into the new room. He briefly tries to recall lectures about mania and routine before returning to his investigation. Below the calendars is a small bookshelf, filled with micro-cassette tapes. The doctor picks one tape, opens it, and finds clear handwriting indicating the date of the tape. He picks another and another. The cassettes are stacked in rows, three deep, by date. Turning, he sees the little red tape recorder lying on the floor near his dried blood. His hand flexes and he drops two of the miniature tapes to the floor.

A moment later, Ryan inserts the third tape into the miniature recorder and presses play. Gerry's voice seeps from the machine, coating the doctor. "I ate lunch and dinner today. Lunch was Tuna Noodle Casserole and dinner was Fish Sandwich. I didn't like Fish Sandwich, but I had to eat the whole thing because Dr. McIlrath said I would be hungry later if not. Also, I had broccoli at lunch. In between, I looked at my calendars. I've been here for three years and forty-eight days. I bet I'll go home pretty soon or else my Mom will come to visit me. People are nice to me here like Dr. McIlrath, but I would rather be with my Mom and my hamster at home. If I keep thinking about that, I can be very happy and not worry about what I'll have for dinner tomorrow. At least I know it won't be Fish Sandwich—" Ryan stops the tape and presses rewind. When it finishes, he returns the three tapes to their shelf and decides to read Gerry's file, wherever it might be. He shuts his eyes tight for a moment.

Down the hall, the patient is screaming again. "What day is it? Did she take the trash yet?" Soon, his screams break into sobs, deep and frantic. Secure in his white jacket and horn-rimmed glasses, the doctor imagines a world without light and stares at the trash can across the room. On the lip of the black garbage bag, a small bee stands perfectly still.







# Contributors



M. Rukmini Callimachi is currently a doctoral student at Oxford University where she is studying theoretical linguistics, with an emphasis on Sanskrit, Italian, French and Romanian. Although she was born in Romania, her family fled the totalitarian regime in 1979 and now reside in Ojai, California.

Barbara Siegal Carlson has recent poems in *Flyway*, *Tar River Poetry*, and *Nebraska Review*. Her chapbook, *Between This Quivering* was published by Coreopsis Press. She lives in Carver, MA and teaches at Quincy College.

Thérèse Halscheid teaches creative writing for Atlantic County Community College and The Wetlands Institute in New Jersey. Her writing has appeared and is forthcoming in various magazines including, *Rain City Review*, *Defined Providence*, *Footwork*, *the new renaissance*, *The Midwest Quarterly*, and *Earth's Daughters*.

G. Scott Huggins got his B.A. in Russian and English at Kansas State University before coming to MSU. He spends his time trying to convince his friends and relatives that he does have a job.

Ari Kohen is a fourth year student studying international relations and political theory at Michigan State University's James Madison College. His poetry has appeared in *Eratica* and is forthcoming in *Etcetera*.

Originally from Los Angeles, Howard Lindholm has degrees in English from the University of Southern California and the University of Glasgow. He is currently working on a Ph.D. at Michigan State University, where he has also taught several creative writing and contemporary literature courses.

Christine McMahon won second place in The Glendon and Kathryn Swarhout Literary Prize in the spring of 1997. She is a senior at MSU and works at the Lansing State Journal. She plans to major in creative writing in graduate school. She lives in East Lansing with her husband, Boone.

Carrie J. Preston is a third year English and Dance major at Michigan State University. She won third place in the 1997 National Society of Arts and Letters state competition for writing.

Sarah Sword is a Ph.D. student in the mathematics department at MSU. She received her B.S. in mathematics at the University of Chicago, and is now studying Commutative Algebra with Professor Christel Rotthaus. She has also studied writing with MSU poet-in-residence Diane Wakoski.


## CONTRIBUTORS

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Peter Vertacnik is a junior majoring in English. His hometown is Saginaw. After graduation, he hopes to pursue a career writing fiction, poetry and children's books.

We were unable to obtain biographical information for Todd Balazic, Karenmary Penn, Anne Sheffield, and Elias Thorne.





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IN THIS ISSUE:

**POEMS by** M. Rukmini Callimachi,  
Thérèse Halscheid, Todd Balazic,  
Barbara Siegal Carlson, Anne Sheffield,  
Sarah Sword, Peter Vertacnik, Carrie J.  
Preston, and G. Scott Huggins

**SHORT STORIES by** Elias Thorne,  
Karenmary Penn, Howard Lindholm,  
Christine McMahon, and Ari Kohen

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