

RED CEDAR REVIEW



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Vol. XIV No. 2

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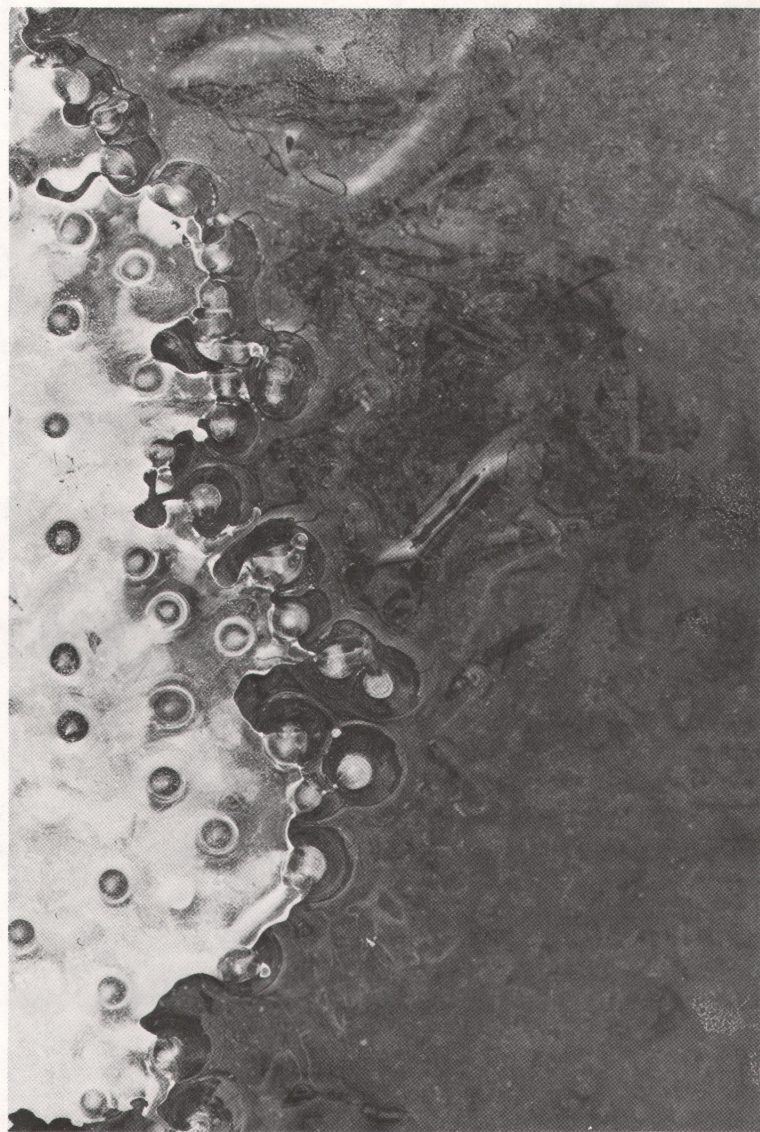
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Robert Turney

BAR ROOM MIRROR

Ilmars Purens

Are you scared of the crow
are you scared of the crow

MOVING IN

Mark Scantlebury

The curtains splayed on windows suggest
death in a field giving dust
birth. Light dissolves a begonia weary
of photosynthesis, depressions engrave
couch cushions split open
by their own tidal foam, clocks grind gears
again rewind. I inherit the mattress
yellowed by a generation of contours. The box spring spits
clots of hair, rusted metal. I keep the map of Kansas,
the unused postcards from other states, tear out
the plastic taped over the fireplace, try opening windows.

We are the last ones. From stranger to stranger
the houses are passed down with nothing thrown out.
But they will come down, leave us homeless,
fuel fire. I wait staring into shelves of glass jars,
each filled with seashells, ocean-smoothed pebbles, stare
at the ceiling bearing the imprint
of their collector's eyes, look long at the choked
garden, its lot to grow
regardless.

TRAVELING ALONE BY CAR

Mark Scantlebury

You don't even try, have even
gradually stopped participating
in your own dreams. Every night
a more distant bystander. Strangers walk
with friends down streets you could name, they say
things you would expect them to say whether you were there
or not. Not dead.

When you awake relentless windshield yawns
morning sun, something fades you can't remember,
always keep asking about, wondering what were
their faces that their words could be
so ordinary, their actions, gestures
so commonplace, your own absence
so nagging.

THE IDIOT IN THE CORNFIELD

William Hoagland

He is squatting between corn stalks,
chewing his fingers
and humming black words
to the song played by telephone lines
whenever thunderstorms come over the hill.

His fingers are sprouting in his mouth.
They are ideas.
At midnight they will tassel.

Naked and sweating,
he shovels clods with his big toe
from the roots of stalks,

and all the roots have teeth,
and they suck the guts
from hairy kernels that failed to germinate.

THE IDIOT AT SLAUGHTER

William Hoagland

Buckets of blood,
chainsaw, sledge, knife.

Hides and hooves,
flared nostrils and urine.

Humpbacked and frothing,
pigs gnawing each other.

A pig herd squealing,
an idiot moaning.

His nose to a carcass,
his hands in the entrails.

He thinks of the mare
giving birth in alfalfa.

He thinks of the nest
in the loft, pigeon's eggs.

He thinks of the kittens
in the sack in the farm pond,

crying for his help to get out.

CONSERVATION PRACTICES

Bruce Bleakley

Each day he is in the fields
like the plow, like the hayrack—
until he is almost there
like a building.

His neighbors think him too quiet.
Many suspect he has his
ass up over something;
there is talk.

He never mentions his stay
at the hotel; of how monstrous
the slammed doors and voices in
the hallways were.

He only stayed there one night.
It was enough; by the time
he went back to his farm, the spell
had been worked.

Now when he spoke to others
he could not remember later
what he had said. He became
afraid to speak.

He suspected his words were
being taken to that hotel;
eventually all his mind would
jabber in its hallways.

Sleeping, he saw bags of seed
broken open. The seeds hissed
as they ran down a stairway
to linoleum.

Later, he realized the seeds
were his words; perhaps, he thought,
if I speak out in the fields
no words will be lost.

On his tractor, the muffler
is his harmony. What he says
to the furrows and the kildeers
he remembers.

His neighbors often visit
the hotel. From under the hoods
of their cars, the sound of blackbirds—
trapped, frenzied.

NO NEED TO SMILE AT ANIMALS

Bruce Bleakley

The raccoons did not run from the shape.
With its touch light fell
from their brows.
Share this with a man, it said.

In their grasp the light felt better
than creek water at noon.
They were beckoned
by the river; instead they climbed a tree.

Far off, they saw a man asleep.
They descended from the tree
with the sound
of a winch turning above a well.

The man's dog let them in the house;
it had met the shape, too.
In its mouth
light shone like a sunrise wrapped in grass.

After waking, the man complained—
How can I eat this
turbid, muddy light?
It seemed he would never shut up.

Finally they all ate from the light
and closed their eyes.
They whimpered,
they kicked, some fell for miles (it seemed).

The shape watched, which had hours before
slowly spun in space;
a mirror
to be fogged by the sun's breath.

The shape admired this subtler flicker,
of the light moving
in the flesh—
like wasps straining against white curtains.

Near sunrise, the dog stopped flapping
its paws. Its master sprawled
across his bed
like a fungus on a log.

The raccoons crept from the house.
Sensing the shape had
gone elsewhere, they washed
what remained of the light in a stream.



Robert Turney

OLD BARN

Markham Johnson

Old barns have come apart forever
Holes in their sides
pour rainwater and hay

And children testing wings

Holes above
for swallows
sailing through rafters
sudden blue rising
from toothless shingles

At midnight
in unspecified fields of corn

Old barns like fat men
float the way fat men float

Bellies, unequal planets
Unspoken constellations
Tethered to the dock of the moon

RIVER COUNTRY

The Navarro

Hadassah Stein

The river's air
offers the branch-borne moss
a rich living. Trees lean to earth
tassel and lace encrusted.

The river places
Boonville and Philo
digest themselves, mud glutted
in the affluence of the spring rising.

Why are the river people poor?
Their one-room huts sink nostril-deep
in bacon and beans, smoking kerosene,
mildew that lingers from a flood.

Over the windows of the general store
now lidded blind
someone nailed upside-down the relic of an old sign
that offers: Live Minnows, Dirt Cheap.

POEM FOR MY FATHER

Hadassah Stein

The sepia photo, stiff in its cardboard mounting
shows him boyish, younger than my son
as he holds me solemn on his shoulder.
His closed lips shape a camera smile
and below wavy hair parted in the middle
the unlined eyes are not yet burdened
with their honey wit.

Behind him, the crossing in the steerage
three weeks of storm endless toward his new world.
Behind that, crossing the border by night
in a wagon of potatoes, his soles pricking
to get out of the Czar's reach.

And behind that and behind that—
prints, memories. Zayde: between your silken black crown
and white beard, your eyes draw mine back and back.
Bubbe: as round and small and hard as a hazelnut
with your tight top-knot and eyes that keep their distance.

Both of them left behind
with the buckwheat bread of poverty.
He meant to bring them later.

Once I heard avalanches of sound
in a voice I didn't know
that was my father's voice.
A new game, I thought, a shouting game.
I would have run in laughing.
But they kept me out: Grandpa's dead

Heavy with labor, my father would come home
without words. The water ran black from his hands.
He sat after dinner with Mother between beets
and peonies past sunset in the healing air—
singing a little, sometimes.

On brittle legs, his feet cautious with pain
he takes the stairs in twenty minutes. Now,
behind the little house, he sits in the sun
telling the neighbor boy where to plant zinnias,
where tomatoes. Not to be afraid
to press the roots hard into the earth.

At the table
we can talk together if the room is quiet
and I speak distinctly, toward his left.
Then nothing gets past him: his humor
cradles the world, unreadies me
for winter.

HIGH SIERRA

Hadassah Stein

The sun's suicide
comes early here—
a fall into
the pikes and spurs
of shadowed crags
chills the dusk
with grey shafts.

I have come up
to diminish:
the sniper staring
from the balcony
the pastor's nephew
baptising Sunday
with gasoline.

But who knows
what's behind
the week-long stubble
of the lone
black-leathered
motorcyclist
roughing the trail?

Below black pinnacles
unsound snowfields
beyond steep ridges
a narrow sky.
Dictators
gnaw the bones
of their suspects.

At one time
I could not look
these mountains
in the eye
without flinching.
Now children tell me
all is cool.



Arthur Cislo

THE REST OF HER LIFE

Maria Holley

Dear Valerie,

I turned thirty today. I stripped myself naked in front of the bedroom mirror and stared at my body. Do you remember those up-right breast tests we used back at the dorm, the ones I always used to fail. You know, the one from *Seventeen Magazine*, where you had these two pencils and if you could secure them underneath your bosom you were destined to a life of saggy breasts and underwire bras? You and Margaret put the pencils underneath your perky chests and they dropped to the floor. I remember both of you breathing a sigh of relief. Of course, when it came my turn, I not only held up the two pencils, but your snack banana, and Margaret's copy of *Portrait of An Artist As A Young Man*. You both laughed. In fact, you became hysterical. I knew I was doomed. A vision of my grandmother flashed before me, standing next to her white enamel stove in one of those Molly Goldberg housedresses, sipping from a wooden spoon, with her supple bosom hanging firmly at her waist. Well, that vision came true today, and now at thirty years old I've graduated from pencils, bananas, and slim novels. I think I could take on *Websters Complete Unabridged Dictionary* without blinking an eye! To make matters worse, I edged closer to the mirror and saw several off-white stretch marks etched on my midriff along with that deep pink Caesarian incision that threaded a highway across my abdomen. The stretchmarks and scars were like ancient battle wounds embedded in the very fabric of my being. I just stood there turning from side to side analyzing my misshapen profile. I also noticed these spongy fat globules which had invaded my arms and upper thighs. I pivoted, they jiggled and sent silent waves over my skin. I don't know how they got there. Were they secret night invaders that took up residence while I was sleeping unawares, only to emerge triumphantly on my thirtieth birthday, trembling sadistically at every one of my appraised movements? Val, do you have grey hair yet? My doctor says it's stress. Stress will give you grey hair and those deep blue halfmoons that settle below your eyes.

We never thought of having grey hair when we were young, did we? Weren't we both fifteen when we met? You were with that guy Ricky, whose face was all smile and freckles, and he had his arms folded around you. I can remember you sitting under that blue pine in the arbor, your hanging loose to your waist, your slender fingers polishing your guitar with rose oil. You sang those mournful Welsh ballads about long lost loves, rakes and ramblers, fair maidens. Your voice was so clear, so sweet, so full of purpose, I had to sit down and listen. I loved "The Wagoner's Lad," you know the one Joan Baez used to sing acapella:

Hard is the fortune of all womankind,
She's always controlled,
She's always confined,
Controlled by her parents,
Until she's a wife,
A slave to her husband,
The rest of her life

We became fast friends after that, sharing in those big dreams that fifteen year olds are prone to, you the dynamic folk singer turned lawyer, I the serious novelist who on her first try writes the Great American Novel and ends up on the cover of *Time Magazine*. We did have high standards, though. You would only sing Welsh and Celtic ballads, and I would refuse to sell the movie rights to my novel because they would probably give the male lead to Troy Donahue.

We did digress from the totally serious, didn't we? Remember you decided to do my nails for the prom. You didn't care that they were ravaged and bitten and my hangnails were red and swollen. You decided every inch of me was going to be perfect. We went to Cunningham's and spent a good hour selecting a respectable pink lacquer and you earnestly set about to do my nails in the most careful manner. I remember we were in your mother's bedroom, filled with lace and the scent of violet, and we kept laughing and laughing and you kept smearing the thick goo all over your mother's vanity. You kept missing my nails. Suddenly you stared me right in the eye and said to me in your perfect rich bitch falsetto: "My deah, are you familiar with the celebrated list 'HOW TO GET A BOY AND KEEP HIM'?"

"At the top of the list," you began, "Is the most important rule

known to any modern woman.”

1. BE MYSTERIOUS—Keep him guessing, never let him know what you’re thinking, don’t lay all your cards out on the table, be aloof yet alluring.

(I personally thought that was a little like being constipated all the time.)

Then there was number two:

2. DON’T MAKE WAVES—Keep everything on an even keel. I loved that one, and it was the hardest for me to control, I suppose. I was always mouthing-off and getting into some kind of trouble at school. Remember when I yelled at old man Weber in 10B English for teaching out of the Cliff Notes for *Moby Dick*? He hadn’t even read the fucking book, and he’d say things like “Let’s see, on page four of the helping guide it says *Moby Dick* chronicles the classic struggle between good and evil,” and then he’d look up and blow his nose. After a few days of this, I snarled at him, “You’re really insulting our intelligence by trying to teach a book you’ve never read.” And that old fart kicked me out for three days. My mom was mortified. She told me, “Don’t rock the boat, don’t make waves, keep your mouth shut.” Applying the “Don’t Make Waves” principle had much greater implications when it came to male-female relationships. If he wants to see a Charleton Heston movie, and you’re tired of religious epics, you say nothing. Even if you’d rather see “Splendor in the Grass” and watch Natalie Wood and Warren Beatty heat up the screen, you’ve got to settle for “Ben Hur,” even though you’ve seen it three times and you know all about the leper colony and the chariot race.

All right, can you remember what number three was? We were laughing so hard by this time you had nail polish all over your upper lip and you tried to wipe it off with your sleeve.

3. BE FEMININE—Drag out that old mystique, dust it off, be gracious, ever so alluring, talk in a soft sultry voice, and by all means . . . OOOZE

Ooze. I loved it. Val, do you know I even practiced a lisp at home to use on my dates to appear more helpless, sweet. God, when I think back, I get embarrassed just thinking of myself lisping all over that guy at the dance. He was taller, I recall, and I looked at him and lisped that I wanted some punch, then lisped that I wanted to dance, and then lisped that I had to go to the bathroom. It was disgusting. But you know, I can’t for the life of me remember number four? I’ve

tried to remember, but I can't, I really can't.

Did I ever tell you you did a shit job on my nails? Ah, the truth comes out. But you were superb at the prom. I mean, your hair wasn't ratted in that obligatory "flip" and you wore that black silk gown with the spaghetti straps. Lillian Van Dusen, you know, the one we called "Miss Wasp," said she had never heard of any color other than pink and aquamarine ever being worn at the prom. You were dazzling though, even if nobody would speak to you at the punchbowl. It was those high top basketball sneakers you were wearing, God, what a scream when you lifted your dress, of course by that time, your date Chuck had done a wheelie on his skateboard into the Doctor Zhivago Ice Palace.

There I was in my pale pink organza with my pale pink Capezio pumps, and a contrasting pink satin evening bag, hiding my nails and smiling. God, I might have even been into my lisp at that point, I don't remember, and I hated the boy I was out with. His name was David and he kissed wet and had a brown smile, and was two inches shorter than me before I ratted my hair. And that little shit had the nerve to stick his disgusting raw hand down the front of my dress and gave me what he termed a "love tweek." I think he expected me to cream my pale pink one hundred percent nylon panties that I had bought especially for the occasion. I just stared at his brown smile and grinned. Where were you when I needed you? You were probably helping Chuck disentangle himself from the styrofoam icicles, I guess. I know what you would have said to the "phantom tweeker": "Touch me there again, and you're a dead man."

I don't remember how I got through that evening or why I even went. My mother told me every girl should have a prom memory, and so when David asked me, I guess I was doing it out of respect for some future prom memory or something. So I went with David with the scrubbed pimples and Vitalis residue, and let his greasy hand slide under my dress during the ride home. My mother writes me now and says this David guy, David Holmes, owns two furniture stores and a car wash and has a big home in Grosse Pointe and still isn't married. She's implying, "See, see what you could have had!" Of course, I never told her he made me vomit when I got home, I entered the safety of the bathroom, sank to the procelain bowl, letting my pink organza smudge against the cold bathroom tiles. I pulled the seat, hung my head, and vomited a deep dark bile.

My mother was visiting last weekend. She hardly ever comes up. She claims she can't stand the way I keep house, and it makes her nervous to come. I had to go out on an errand Saturday (I didn't want to be caught without food in my refrigerator before she came. She always claims I don't feed Gretchen or Timmy right.) When I arrived home, laden with groceries and a bouquet of chrysanthemums, I entered my kitchen which had been properly scrubbed with a disinfectant the night before. There, out from beneath the refrigerator door peeked two tiny slippered feet which could have only been my mother's, because she's the only person I know whose pastel slippers look just like hamsters. I heard a curious scraping sound and asked my mother what she was doing, and she announced she had seen something moving in my refrigerator. She was convinced there was something alive and mobile in my meatkeeper. I assured her there was nothing remotely alive in the meatkeeper, and the only thing left in there of a suspicious nature was a small bowl of prune yogurt with a scummy film over the top. Then she started in on me on how was I ever going to keep my husband with my place being a mess all the time. You've got to remember I had spent most of the night cleaning. I had dusted everything, washed the kids' hair, cleaned the junk drawer and arranged my bath towels in nice little rows, and this woman finds a stray piece of pepperoni, long forgotten, shriveled into a ragged stringy mass that was hidden between the bologna and the breakfast sausage. I wanted to show her the rejuvenated junk drawer, or the neat rows of color-coordinated towels, or the dusted tops of my tiffany lamps, but I just put away the groceries and arranged the chrysanthemums and smiled and listened to her stories about her migraines and her water retention. She even had the nerve to feed my dog. She said he looked underfed and malnourished, even ravenous. Val, have you ever known a cocker spaniel to look ravenous?

She bought Gretchen a pair of those Gloria Vanderbilt designer jeans and gave Timmy a Tonka steam shovel, and got Roger a large can of unbroken cashews, and she gave me a stack of new washcloths and a quart of Murphy's Oil Soap, no shit. Of course Roger and her get along so delightfully, it's as if I'm not around. He's always mentioning my failings, like his socks are never properly matched, there are mouse droppings on top of the refrigerator, and I let my plants die. She sits there and sucks it all in, and makes these pathetic clucking noises, and oozes sympathy and laughs heartily at his stale joke on how

there should be a housekeeping school for women with masters degrees.

I get very nervous when my mother comes here. Things become out of focus, I get tense, I can't explain it really. I feel a panic, my head reels, I become compulsive. Gretchen had told my mother I made her buy J.C. Penney jeans and wouldn't let her have any jeans with a name engraved in leather on the rear pocket. My mother glared at me and then pulled out these Vanderbilt jeans with the embroidered swan and I swear Gretchen swooned. She glanced at me with a triumphant smirk and ran quickly to her room to try them on. Timmy, as if on cue, marched up to his grandmother and gratefully accepted his Tonka steam shovel and wandered off into a corner somewhere muttering that Mommy had also refused to purchase this particular toy because it was too expensive. Roger, of course, had to get a gibe in that he never buys expensive cashews, because I'd probably eat them all or let the kids eat them, and my mother told him to hide the can.

That night when the house was quiet, and Roger had gone to a meeting, and mother was sleeping soundly in the guest bedroom, I sat alone in the living room sucking in the stale, grey air. I could feel my mother's presence and her sense of disapproval. Her lack of faith filled my nostrils like a thick, dense fog, and all I could feel was a small deep spot at the center of my soul. I grew sick and queasy. I traveled up to Roger's and my bedroom and found the can of cashews, unhidden, on top of the bureau. I swallowed each one whole, like a bitter pill.

Roger left me once for a slim blonde in his office named Bambi. Bambi, do you believe that name? I swear she made it up. Anyway, she was a size three. Now nobody is a size three, but she was, and before she ran off with Roger, she told me she had to buy all her clothes at a pre-teen shop. She was a friend of mine, or at least she weasled her way into my confidence. Once I had her and her husband, Walt, over for lasagne, and Roger told me after the whole affair was over that she had her foot on his zipper all during dinner. My God, a guest in my house was giving my husband a foot job while I was serving up baked lasagne. First of all, I don't see how she could have managed it. I tried it the other night and knocked over the table. Anyway, he lived with her for a while, and all she liked to do was go shopping and watch television. She hated to cook and had four different brands of mascara. Roger found out she dyed her hair and didn't

throw away her dental floss.

I was at home with Gretchen and Timmy then. They were so little then and really didn't know what was going on. It was a difficult time for me. I spent a lot of time huddled in a corner, almost catatonic, waiting for Roger to return. I would beg him and make a fool of myself every time he came over to see the children. Sometimes I would deliberately look destitute, or suicidal, or schizophrenic, whatever I thought would work to win him back. He often would find me in that corner, uncommunicative, forgetting to feed the children, and unable to eat or urinate. Other times I would throw tantrums and rage and demand that he give her up, not knowing he had done just that months before. Finally, I said nothing when he came, preferring to stay in my bedroom until he left. I must have pushed all inside of me once again, because I began to feel nothing or want nothing.

Roger came home about six months after he left. He just walked into the house, brought his suitcases upstairs and went to bed. He got up the next morning and ambled down for his usual breakfast of sausage and eggs and never said a word about it. We have never spoken about it since. All I know is that I never want to feel that bad and that numb again.

Jesus, I'm not going to think about it; I can't. Hey, remember the time you saved me from becoming a fallen woman? What a nightmare with those three fraternity boys who cornered me at that party. I could feel their hot liquored breath surround me, almost suffocate me. And their coarse mechanical hands, and the stifling heat that hung low in the air. I think I was hypnotized by their low murmurings and the sweet wine, and the urgent loud music that drowned out the humanity of the room. Somewhere off in the distance, through the heat and laughter and the thick music, I heard your voice, your screams, and I saw you jump this one guy and pummel his back and then you pulled at me. All I can really remember after that is you dragging me out in the summer air and lecturing me on not letting myself get into that same position again. Did we ever talk about that night again? If I didn't apologize, it's because I placed the whole episode back inside of me, where I place everything that is painful, and it lays there cool and hidden, like a smooth lost stone.

Margaret, dear Maggie, left her husband. You know, the guy who drank a lot and always turned off the Joni Mitchell records. You predicted she would leave him. Well, one night he got to drinking, and

becoming vulgar, and he nailed her into the bathroom. She just stayed that way for seventy two hours. The fucker got up the next morning, got dressed, and went to work, and he just left her there. She, of course, became violent, and pounded the door, and shredded the toilet paper, and screamed for two solid days and then he remembered to let her out. Margaret has a lot of class. She just walked calmly out of the bathroom, picked up her cat Felicity, and walked away from the house. She ended up here after driving all night without a litter box. We had a long talk. She didn't stay long because Roger can't stand her. He says she makes him nervous. He says she always has an opinion about everything. Remember the time in college he actually forbid me to see her? He said she was a bad influence on me. I guess I had more guts back then because I told him to kiss off, which infuriated him. I didn't see him for two weeks. I think he took me more seriously back then, because he relented and never spoke of it again. I'm so glad she's finished with Clayton. She got the cat and the orange Corvette and the English clock. He got the house, the stereo and the good stainless. All these years and she never said a word. Do you know he dumped pancake batter on her head and sent her to the hospital with four broken ribs? All this was going on for years and she never said a word. She said she was carrying it around with her like a corpse chained to her heart.

Valerie, the doctor says I am under a lot of stress, and I've really got to relax. I can't sleep at night. Roger says I need a job, to keep me busy, you know, but I can't seem to summon the energy to get dressed and leave the house. I'm not sure I'd find anything I'd really like, I've been out of it for so long. So I hang around the house and stand naked in front of mirrors staring at my misspent body, and lament over silver hairs and my ethnic breasts. I can't seem to close my eyes at night. The pills don't seem to work. I lay awake at night staring at the darkness, letting it surround me, letting it fill me.

I can't seem to get things moving or together. Last night Roger came home and the dinner wasn't even on, and the table not set, and he came up to ask me why the chops weren't frying in the pan. I cracked what I thought was a clever bit of repartee and said: "I don't know. Why don't you ask them?" That pudgy round face of his exploded into several shades of red, and I could see that line of perspiration bead above his upper lip. He looked just like Richard Nixon when he gave his "I am not a crook" speech. Anyway, he announced quite

loudly: "I'm not going to eat any of this shit!" And that is when he flung the chop. He picked it up deliberately with his hand and aimed the pinkish meat at my sternum. The pork chop smashed against my white quiana blouse and bled into what resembled a map of equatorial Africa. The blood of the meat trickled into my bra, staining my hidden flesh. From that dark lost place within me I felt stirrings, and as these feelings rose, my abdomen and my chest began to quiver. The hidden energy reached my throat and I howled. I surprised even myself. I felt woozy and out of control. I reached for this open jar of olives sitting next to the stove, and poured them all over his three-piece suit. I can remember Gretchen and Timmy giggling somewhere out of my vision and I can remember the look of supreme horror on Roger's face. He yelled that I was sick and crazy and fled the room. He threw the damn pork chop first, for God's sake. Well, he hasn't spoken to me at all today. I got up this morning and put on his coffee and his usual sausage and eggs and he walked right by me and out the door. He left his favorite suit crumpled in a pitiful mass next to our bed. It smelled of olive juice and pimentoes. I went to the window and opened it wide, letting the cool October wind enter. Since he has left, I have been cleaning like crazy and getting everything in order. I planned a perfect dinner. I don't want anything to set him off tonight. So I've cautioned the kids to be quiet when their dad gets home, and they've got to pick up their messes and not fight with each other.

My head really aches now, and Roger still hasn't come home yet. The pot roast is overcooked and stringy by now, and the potatoes have crumbled into a pasty mush. The kids were hungry, so I gave them some sugared cereal and put them to bed. I don't have the energy to check the pot roast any more. I'm still here in my bathrobe and my hair needs washing. Where is Roger anyway? I'm all out of my prescription, and I need it, but I'm afraid if I leave the house, and Roger comes home and finds I'm not here, he'll be upset with me. He's punishing me, I know he is, because of the olives, because I got mad and directed my anger at him. I wasn't thinking straight, I'll explain that to him. He's got to come home; it's my birthday today. I should be happy on my birthday.

Valerie, this is the fifth letter I've written you and you never write me back. Why don't you ever respond to my letters anymore? I

know you're a big lawyer now, and you're probably busy, but it's my birthday today and I deserve a letter. Don't I?

Your friend,

Dorrie

HUNGER

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Silks cling to my appetite.
I husk corn at the harvest table
and imagine the kernels exploding in my mouth.
I don't swallow. I have no desire
to make them disappear, just this hunger.
And for me, there is no satisfaction.

There is no longer room at my table
for you, your bountiful mouth,
your extravagant habits. Desire
is in the past. There is no hunger
for which you are sole satisfaction.
Leave me and my spare appetite.

I have taken you into my mouth
and swallowed but this is desire
without want. Tell me which hunger
in my body is your final satisfaction.
You have stolen my appetite.
My eyes push you away from the table.

We met in the summer of desire
our bodies lean, all hunger.
We ate ourselves into satisfaction.
I could never imagine not having appetite
for you. We lay on the table
with the lunch; me, biting your mouth.

No man could meet all my hunger
and come away with self-satisfaction.
I must live with my voracious appetite.
I am condemned to an empty table
an empty bed kissed by my hollow mouth.
Face to face, I have become my desire.

I shape and take my own satisfaction.
I have learned to maneuver my appetite
to the place at the head of the table,
the words pouring out of my mouth
like wine. This is more than desire.
An orphan, I am characterized by hunger.

You may not hunger at my table.
I have eaten your appetite for desire.
Your mouth came closest to my satisfaction.

LOST WALLETS

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

I take lost wallets to the Police Station
on my way home from work
as many as three in a week,
blushing when I must open them
to search for the owner's identity.
I avert my eyes from all data
except photographic ID but become curious to see if
there is secret cache
a lock of hair, an antique signature
sandwiched between charge cards
or a phone number scribbled
on a scrap of hankie gliding out.
The smiling faces wait silently for my inspection
as if I'd buy them.
My fingers scan the crease
finding a crisp bug
and a picture clipped from a magazine
of an ideal nose.
I call the owners' number but
there is no one home. A stranger
depends on these five specific keys
and though it's out of my way
I've dropped lost wallets
at the Police Station
and never taken a thing.

COATS

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Girls needed coats to keep their bodies warm
Awnings held the winter in all year
The perfect home is 98.6

No guests or shoes allowed into the house
The fireplace kept track of magazines
Girls needed coats to keep their bodies warm

Trips to Canada were like hot baths
They swam until the purple left their hands
The perfect home is 98.6

Dry ice or spinsters' ghosts seeped through the door
No icicles of love were ever formed
Girls needed coats to keep their bodies warm

Kids envied that the sisters had 8 coats
Each wore hers all at once and still was cold
The perfect home is 98.6

Storms of words like snow hung in the air
This climate and these girls forever mixed
Girls needed coats to keep their bodies warm
The perfect home is 98.6

RECKONING THE COST OF LOVE

Mary Tisera

Instead, I picked the silver
spurs glinting gold in my eye.
His lips, how they lapped
away my last defense;
his lashes, as innocent
as sprouts on a newborn head.
And when he lay with me
the sun rode down to make
himself to home,
my limbs becoming red
rivers of light.
His member, his mouth,
just one more wildfire
I had no desire to stamp
with feet as bare
as on my birthday.

Always the gentleman,
he took off his boots
before bedding me down.
How was I to know
the boots stayed on
in the crook of his smile,
in case he needed to make
a fast getaway, pull out,
unlike the Frenchmen
for good.

How was I to know
the wisps of hair on his chest,
the delicate hollow at his throat
harbored a weapon aimed
at anyone who fancied
that moving target
he called his heart.

How was I to know
when the ranch claimed
too much of his time,
the children wheedled
for more of his soul
the sun would go out
in his eyes;
the spurs unearthed
from my hope chest,
the horse saddled,
the hat tipped:
a gentleman
to the last
goodbye.



Arthur Cislo

APPREHENSION EVE

Gary Fincke

Just before midnight
I am wrapping gifts

Like the knife for Sara
To press against her skin,

Like the weight for Jeanne
To carry while swimming,

Like figurative death
Crawling up the stairs,

Its feet bent inward;
And outside a tree shrivels,

Sheds its brown leaves
Into the window-wells

Where they collect like
Subversives shot before dawn.

In the morning I will lay
These presents by the stump,

And the roots will draw
Them into the Earth, convinced
They are carrying water.

THE MINIMUM WAGES OF SIN

Elizabeth Martin

Esther was layered in white.

Entombed, it seemed: white walls, white sheets wrapped around her like the layered webbing of a cocoon, white lights, the white, monotone of an electrical humming. It was the humming that had awakened her, droning subliminally, boring her through some long tunnel of damp greenness, boring her through silence and then she could hear vaporous snatches of sound—quick footsteps coming almost to her and then receding along a narrow, straight path. She opened her eyes. There was a yellow blob off to the right. A window. It was early morning, she felt, because of the soft, unsolidified nature of the sunlight. Then she felt the scratchiness of the sheets and as she began to feel her body inside them, she realized she felt like she was choking. She relaxed her fists; wads of sheets fell out of them. Was she choking herself in her sleep? She couldn't remember.

Esther shook her wrists hard to get the sleep out of them. They began to tingle and then hurt, as if they were frozen and were receiving pain through a thick layer of ice. She flexed her fingers, watching the skin of her knuckles wrinkle and smooth.

"My fingers," she said.

A white hat popped into the doorway and she noticed for the first time that she was in a hospital room. There was a vacant bed next to her, a fake wood door on the far wall, a chrome footboard on her bed, a television suspended in mid-air about seven feet in front of her. The television was turned on, without volume, but giving off a low, monotone drone. A man's face was on the screen; the face didn't have any beard stubble, bags under the eyes, creases of skin. It looked happy, it looked to be happy, it looked trying to be happy. A water faucet with a cylindrical filter attached to it was next to the man's face. He smiled at it and clean, bubbly water sprang out of it. The man looked back toward Esther.

"Smile," the face ordered.

Esther looked back at the faucet; it was thin, hard, clean.

"Smile," the face said again, "or they'll kill me."

Esther wondered why they would kill him. She tried to smile. The white hat moved closer to the bed.

"Good morning?" it asked.

The hat was suspended above a white dress which itself seemed suspended about two feet above a white pair of shoes. Then Esther noticed there was a thin, blonde body inside the costume and two, clear-blue eyes in the face. Esther looked at the eyes, feeling she was looking into some kind of a mirror. She wondered if she really was awake, still sleeping, or if she had been changed during her encounter with the goat. The goat? She remembered falling out of a car, falling down a grass cliff, falling into a river, falling at the feet of the goat. Had she been dreaming? She couldn't remember. It seemed there had been an accident. Was there an accident? Something told her yes. Was she dead? No. She remembered falling into a river. A stream? A trickle in the bottom of a ravine? Yes. That was it. They hit a goat truck? A truck of goats and she fell out of the car into the ravine. Her father must certainly be dead. Why? Was she ungrateful? She didn't care. But the question was, was she dead? She remembered the man's face on the screen. He couldn't have been death; he was much too unbelievable. Why would she need filtered water if she was dead? She must be alive.

A hand touched her lightly on the shoulder. She looked back up at the nurse, standing there in her quiet, white package.

Esther had never felt herself packaged quite that cleanly, standing in so small and white a space. She had often felt herself nearly panic with claustrophobia during family dinners at Easter and Christmas when she had been made to sit, with her knees properly placed together, and her hands folded reservedly on her lap, at the table while she waited for the pickled prunes and the sliced turkey to be passed and served to her by her uncles and aunts.

Esther looked back on this old self in her mind, and then she opened her eyes and looked directly and defiantly into the barely-blue eyes of the nurse at her bed. The irises seemed to be floating like empty grape skins, or like the dead petals of a sweet-pea flower after the indigo has drained out of them. The iris didn't even have a darker ring of color around them. Esther wondered who had squished the fat grapes out of the nurse's head and left just the skins floating there like

that, watching her. She reached up and swatted at the face as if it was a bothersome fly. A thin, blonde hand grabbed her wrist.

"Do you want something to eat?" the face asked. "I can get you something cool, like sherbert, or you can have some hot broth . . ."

"Sherbert," she said. The costume quickly dissappeared back out the door.

Esther hadn't said broth mainly because the thought of something hot and wet made her realize she had to use the bathroom. She was ready to swing her legs out over the edge of the bed and stand up, all in one smooth motion like dismounting a horse in front of the judge's stand at a riding contest. A sharp jerk shot through the inside of her knees, as if they were attached to some object that wasn't part of herself and refused to move with her. Esther yelled. The white cap popped back into the doorway.

"I'm sorry," Esther said. She wasn't sorry at all. She had hurt. She scowled, hoping to shoot the face back out the door as quickly as it had come in. She felt spied on. The face smiled. Then it laughed. The nurse came over to the bed, carrying a small bowl of orange sherbert. The same blonde hand reached out and touched Esther's knees. Esther wanted to say something; what should she, what could she say to a costume?

"You're not gonna help me by patting my kneecaps," she scowled.

"We'll have you up walking in no time," the nurse said. The nurse watched Esther's face. "It'll be all right," she said. "I'll help you."

Without her legs she couldn't run behind her father on the tractor. She couldn't feel her toes squish down into the loosened dirt, making deep imprints in the new furrows. She couldn't climb up the sidewall boards of the barn her father was building and spit down at her brother Bart, yelling and singing taunts at him until he'd have to come up after her with a stick. Then they would duel up on the roof, screaming and cussing at each other until they'd fall down on the roof laughing. She couldn't imagine Bart having advantage over her, legless, in a spit fight.

The nurse set the sherbert down on the mobile tray next to Esther's bed, and then she disengaged Esther from the thin, tight layers of white that were drawn up around her.

"I'll prop you up," she said. "And you can see for yourself

what was pulling at your knees.” She reached over the side of the bed and pressed a button. The top of Esther’s bed raised so that she could see all the way down to her feet. Esther felt again like she was somehow submerged, as she had felt when she was waking, as if on the edge of the tide, lolling naked just inside the reach of wave-tips that came up on the sand, pushing against her skin. Was she being pushed away from the water, or out toward it? Toward the hot sand that would burn the bottoms of her feet as she ran toward her uncle’s house, or out toward the deeper water where she knew the undertow was stronger, churning up alewives, seaweed, broken pieces of lavender and blue shell . . . she turned her face toward the blue eyes. She felt herself rolling along like a water balloon. She shut her eyes, she opened her eyes; the nurse came, the nurse went.

“Come back,” she said.

“I’m here,” the white face said. Esther opened her eyes. The nurse was there. Because she had a sudden need to see her own face, Esther said, “I want a mirror.”

The nurse walked through the fake-wood door into a bathroom. She came back carrying a small hand mirror.

“Your mother thought you might want this,” she said. She handed it to Esther. Esther looked into it and wiggled first her lips and then her eyebrows and then her nose and then she made one big, nasty face, using all of her face-parts together. It was her, all right. The nurse laughed. Esther dropped the mirror on the floor. She heard it crack. She felt better. Would the nurse be angry? Esther watched her pick up the mirror and put it in the wastebasket. She had thought she was angry at her, or at the mirror, or at herself. She didn’t know. Angry at her father? She felt it coming up her, hot and hard.

Now she was wide awake. She knew where she was. She was in a hospital room. She knew who she was. She was Esther. But she didn’t know how she’d gotten there. Had she known a while ago? It seemed she was familiar with a story of how she’d gotten there, but she couldn’t remember it. She threw her sherbert dish. She pushed the tray away. She tore her pillows. She fell asleep.

* * * * *

The nurse was gone.

It was probably after midnight, Esther thought. Someone had

said, "Your mother will be here," so she had woken up. She must have slept all day. Where was the nurse? A plastic tube was attached to Esther's left arm. It went into the inside of her elbow. "They've got me now," she thought. There was nothing she could do. She looked at her knees. Steel rods went through her knees and hung her legs from a bar above her bed. She was hung like a monkey on a trapeze. There was nothing she could do.

She noticed a delicate, silver bedpan lying on the bed next to her. It looked like a chrome vase. She knew better. She knew what it was for; she'd seen one in a rest home when she had visited her old Aunt Annabelle. Silver. It reminded her of the fenders on Hal Sweeting's car. Hal was her brother Aaron's friend. She thought about Hal spending all of one Saturday cleaning and polishing his old red Ford until the chrome fenders flashed and the black vinyl roof looked as deep and rich as Esther's leather saddle.

"This baby can really open up," Hal told her. "Wanna go for a spin around the parking lot, or is little-sister chicken?"

She was all of 11 and in sixth grade, and she wasn't about to let Hal Sweeting think she was too young to appreciate the glint of fender and the way it felt to laugh or scream, letting out a rush of sound as the old Ford rocked around in a tight, fast circle on the gravel of the school parking lot.

"Of course I'm not chicken," she said. She had climbed in the door on Hal's side of the car, running her fingers over the steering wheel as she passed it, and feeling the sunlight come sharp and clear through the window onto her legs. Hal always locked his door, so she locked hers, too, and then rolled the windows down in the front and the back while he rolled his down. She loved this ritual, getting ready for the air to come through the car. They would turn the radio on and Hal would sing along with it, "Juli, Juli, Juli do you love me?" and Esther would shout back at him, "Juli can't stand your guts, but Esther loves your car," and then Hal would press his right foot down on the pedal and Esther would feel and hear the rush of gasoline into the engine and they'd be flying down Towner road, leaving the asphalt for a second after the mount of each small hill . . . Esther looked down at her knees. Then she thought about the bedpan and how much she wanted it. She wondered if she had wet the bed, flying over those hills with Hal like that. Even if she had only been imagining it. She reached under the sheets. She reached between the white, white sheets, feeling

guiltier and guiltier. She felt a rubber tube coming out of her. Coming out of her *there*. She was suddenly frightened. She was hooked up to a thing she'd never seen before and it was in her body, *there*. Was she being punished? Of course, of course, it was all her fault about her father and about the accident and she was being punished. They had found her out. Maybe she was all rubber down there now; maybe there was none of her own skin left. Just as she was ready to yank the thing out, she hit a familiar spot. Was she complete? Did she have everything she had before? Yes. She rested, but looked longingly at the silver bedpan.

She could barely see her knees in the dark, hanging from the steel wires. Her mother would probably be there any minute, holding an oblong, floral-printed purse to her stomach and walking in small, strenuous steps. Esther thought her mother always looked, when walking, as if she was trying to hold her chest and her stomach and her legs onto her body. She took little, deliberate steps that made her whole body twist and lurch stiffly, as if upset by the motion in her hips.

Esther threw one of the white pillows across the room, hoping it would shred like great-grandmother's feather pillows, filling the air with downy fluff. At least it would look like winter, like snow coming down, with all the rest of the white in the room like a ten-year ice storm had been through. But the pillows were some kind of foamy, solid stuff and refused to tear or shred. Then she shut her eyes and felt herself, unbound and floating in the waves, feeling the sand come up and meet her in the small of her back . . .

II.

Convalescence. That's what Aunt Sophia had called it. But as Esther sat on the back patio of Aunt Sophia and Uncle Rhama's beach house, she knew her body would never be able to heal itself.

Esther had seen old ladies and men in the rest home. Many of them were attached to tubes and machines and had coarse, wrinkled skin that looked incapable of feeling the needles, blood pressure machines, or even the occasional caresses that were measured out to them during the day. Esther knew what happened to the body once it started to die.

She hadn't been allowed to stay at home, partly because of the funeral arrangements, and partly because of something Aunt Sophia had said about Esther's mother and a "temporary emotional disorder." Esther's mother had evidently developed the habit of piercing herself with her sewing needles and stringing black and red threads through her skin. Black and red; why did Esther think they were black and red? No one told her that. She also knew where her mother was sewing herself up; she knew her mother's breasts were laced with little ribbons of thread. Esther thought about the apologetic way her mother's hands went up like loose wings over her chest, excusing the obtrudances, whenever she was talking to Esther about "those things which young women are Christianly responsible for." Namely: how to wrap a used Kotex; how to wear a good, camouflaging bra.

It didn't seem at all odd to Esther that the body of her mother should accept this new kind of discipline. Stoicism, Esther thought. Her mother had often raised the virtues of not crying, of keeping peace, of avoiding arguments and scenes. She was probably sitting tight-lipped and serious right now, fighting the impulse to cry out in the pain of flashing needles, in the pain and the beauty of the colors, in and out, in and out.

Ah, convalescence. It was entirely too much to think about.

Esther leaned back in the chaise and watched the waves. She tried to avoid thinking about her nightmares, too. First it had been just herself, or her mother, or her father, or one of her aunts or uncles, trapped under a huge bowl that no one could lift. Someone was preparing to eat them. Was it herself? Was it God? They could never escape. Esther would always wake up just as someone's huge hand was about to lift the bowl. Whose was it?

But lately her nightmares hadn't been that reserved. Lately she'd gone in for the whole shebang. No more specific, exclusive candidates for the death bowl. Lately her nightmares had been apocalyptic in their catastrophe. Car crashes at the intersection of Michigan Ave. and Towner Rd. Car crashes where the whole town had been on its way to work, arriving at the intersection all at once . . . the cars blobbing along the street, their drivers asleep, the red lights broken; each car had a green light into the intersection and the collision was a massive squash. Everyone she knew was in it; everyone except she herself. Why was she let live? They all died and she was still alive. They had paid for her

life; she was alive and her life had been saved, because they were dead.

The first night she was at Aunt Sophia's she had woken up screaming.

"What's wrong?" Aunt Sophia had said. Had asked. Had demanded. She came in so quietly Esther hadn't even heard her.

"Get out," she said. "Get out, get out!" She knew that Aunt Sophia would have to die, too, if she stayed. One death was enough; Esther wouldn't take anyone else's life. But Aunt Sophia had stayed, stroking her face; had stayed in the dark with her and she slept and didn't have a nightmare again that night.

The second night she woke up crying too and then she quickly forgot her dream and then after that it was hard to remember the dream ever again, but she knew she had it almost every night. But now she recalled it. She listened for the waves every morning; she watched them all day; now she was sitting by the waves; for the first time she was outside and sitting by the waves and letting her nightmare out and the waves, the sound of the waves, were cleaning her mind off.

She bathed herself a lot lately with a soapy sponge. She couldn't wait until the casts came off her legs and she could get in the shower. She just couldn't get clean enough. She had asked Aunt Sophia why she had felt so dreamy and lazy in the hospital after she had been awake that first day. Aunt Sophia said it was because of drugs they had given her; Esther wanted some more drugs now.

For three days, Esther had saved the mild pain pills her Aunt gave her. She took them on the fourth day. She put them as far back on her tongue as she could and then tipped her head back quickly and swallowed a glass of water. Then she lay down because she was very tired and the next thing she knew she was awake and the clock said three-o'clock. Since it was dark, she knew she had slept all afternoon. It made her angry to think she'd been catatonic all that time instead of being awake, even if awake only to feel the pain in her legs and the sweat and dirt on her body.

Having slept without dreams was what actually scared her the most; she felt as if she had completely lost five hours of her life. After that she didn't take any more pills. Her nightmares became a ritual of assurance; they were hers and she knew she'd had them and they were just simply hers. That's all. They were. She was. That's all. She would never again try to forget them.

* * * * *

Her dreams got better. In fact, she felt that if it weren't for her dreams, she'd have no idea who she really was. Awake, it was so hard to know how to be, day to day. But at night, she was a gypsy: dark and fleshy and gaudy. Another night she was words, folded within the layers of white space and ink in her books; folded in the same space with the Velveteen Rabbit and Charlotte and Pip and Richard III and the Little Prince. One night she was Old Man Parsons, the family mechanic, wearing dirty blue-jeans and carrying a pack of Marlboroughs in her shirt pocket and swearing like a mechanic swears. Then another night she was small and dusty-colored and wore grey gloves and met a man who would buy her a car and she smoked from a thin, black sharot. Would she let him buy the car for her? Would she haughtily refuse it and buy herself one much more trim and beautiful and fast? Would she just tell him to blow off and not even bother to buy one? It made all the difference in the world to her where the car, her car, came from. In fact, the only man Esther would really accept a car from was her father, and she knew that. An anger got her. She sat on the patio thinking about this dream and an anger got her and she threw a crutch over the porch railing, watching it bounce end-to-end, jerking through the weeds and leaving little sprays of sand here and there in the sharp grasses. Esther hoped it had knocked a few sand-spiders off on its way down. Then she took the other crutch and beat it on the railing until the railing splintered. She watched the railing splinter apart and a slow dent finally begin in the metal crutch. How could Hal Sweeting's chrome fender be so beautiful and this damn crutch be so indestructably ugly? She hated it; she hated her legs, bound in plaster; she hated the hot, noon sun, which she couldn't escape because she'd thrown one of her crutches away; she hated the chaise that made her rear end tingle and go numb, because she couldn't move much in it; she hated she hated she hated.

And her father's funeral was tomorrow.

The minister had talked to her. Said her father was going to live with god. Said the bricks there were rubies and gold. Said about sins: big sins, little sins, acted sins, thought sins. Sins you knew about when you did them, such as hitting your brother in the head with a spade (how had he known about that?! How! And it had been an accident!);

sins you thought, like hating someone, wishing for someone to die; sins committed unconsciously—sins of “human nature,” he said. Esther didn’t remember his words; Esther knew she had committed them all. God had seen her letting out all of those offensively private thoughts at night—all those deaths, all those wishes, all of those fears.

She wondered if God would make her father so clean that he wouldn’t smell like himself anymore, like the fields and the barn. If he wouldn’t have a sunburn on the bald top of his head or hang a pipe out of the corner of his mouth. It was bad enough that her father was out of place; it was too much that he was out of person. She screamed at the pastor; she told him he was a pimp; and when she got done she couldn’t do anything else, she couldn’t even cry. She went to bed. She tried very hard not to feel the sheet against her skin. She tried hard not to smell the lake outside her window. She tried hardest not to think about what not to feel. The more she tried, the more she felt the cool air, the more she smelled the lake, the more she heard the crickets and the wind in the sand grasses. What could she do? How could she stop herself? What could she do? She had to tell someone. She went to the kitchen.

Aunt Sophia was washing the dishes. Uncle Rhama was putting them away. He had on fat, burgundy slippers. He was smoking a long, brown pipe. She stared.

“I want,” she said. What did she want? What didn’t she want?

“What is it, liebkin?” he asked. She didn’t want to want anything. Ever again.

“I want my mother,” she said.

Aunt Sophia came over from the sink and brushed back Esther’s hair and said something in Russian to her and then she kissed her forehead and held her face. Aunt Sophia walked over to the stove. Esther felt hugely naked. Should she sit down? Was she too big for the chair? Was the chair too big for her? Would she fit? Where would she fit? Where should she place herself? Aunt Sophia came back from the stove with a bowl of lamb stew in her hands. She put it on the table. She pulled the chair out for Esther. Suddenly Esther was very hungry. She sat down in front of the soup. She remembered the nurse with the grapeskin eyes and how much she had wanted the cool sherbert. She remembered having found that her body was all there, at least the worst? best? parts. Then she thought about the accident. She remembered her father patting the car seat next to him and asking

Esther to curl there like a little child, waiting by his lap, waiting for him to tell her she could get out of the car, could speak, could wonder, could breathe . . . but she didn't, she didn't, and he scowled and pouted and said "watsamatter with my little girl" (and after all, she was 11!) but they went around that fast corner with the trees coming out at it and then the cattle truck full of goats and there she was on the ground and then the hospital

Her hair was in the stew and she felt untouchable and unspeakable. She didn't even want to think her name.

"Esther," Aunt Sophia said. Then Aunt Sophia rambled off into some Russian which was all tongue and throat sounds to Esther and then Esther felt insatiably ready for the sound of that voice, those words, the soup, and Aunt Sophia helped her get her hair out of her bowl and when she picked up her spoon she was hungrier than she had ever been.

* * * * *

III

Her mother stood in the corner behind the rectangular table, doling out sugar cookies and punch. There were also finger sandwiches, candies, a relish tray and nut cups. Her mother stood rigid and sentential at the table, wrapping and allotting each guest one parcel of food—a napkin containing one sandwich half, one relish, one sweet. She measured exact half-glasses of punch, intermittently measuring with her fingers whether the bowl was maintaining the right quantity of liquid. There was smoked trout and a big kettle of chili in the kitchen. One of Esther's aunts, thru her father, stood at the stove, stirring, tasting the chili, turning the trout, testing it. There was a big bed in one of the bedrooms and the nieces and nephews were sprawled on it, pulling each other's hair, tickling, fingering each other's sandwiches. Some of them were not much younger than Esther herself. The youngest was hovered over by a sister who occasionally caught her by the bib-overall suspender and pulled her back up over the edge of the bed.

It seemed to Esther like a typical family reunion.

Esther watched the left side of her mother's face twitch periodically, the outer edges of her eye and lip squeezing toward each other in a grimace. A grin? Esther didn't know whether the grimace was purely involuntary, whether it was an intentional smile, or whether it

was something spilling over that couldn't be hidden. Was her mother crying? Unpredictability. That is what Esther had decided about God. One just couldn't know. One couldn't know if God was smiling, grimacing or sneering either. But she wanted so much to know; despite it all, she wanted to know.

She remembered her father's hands, clenched yet smooth, controlling the head of a nasty Welch that had thrown her again and again. She remembered too, his hands patting the car seat next to him and his asking her to be little and content and curl up by his thigh, wanting him to save her from all danger . . . She squeezed her eyes and her forehead very tightly and tried to see in her mind if she knew somewhere inside of her, somewhere past the ability to figure things out, if anything else absolutely basic had happened to her. She remembered her mother sitting in the small, tan chair by the dining-room window, the silver needle in her fingers. She was rigging up hems, closing the holes in faulty blouses and skirts, attaching displaced buttons, altering darts, cuffs, pockets. Esther also saw her mother guarding the stove and canning tomatoes, scowling into the steam and fighting against the hot Mason jars, her hands gauzed and taped because of burns. Esther felt a prickling revulsion from her mother's hands. She wondered how she could long for them so much, too.

Were her parents' hands God? And if God did have a body, whose was it like? Hers? Her father's? Billy Sauter's? Did we become God's body after we died? Was her father somewhere in God's body? Looking out of His eyes? Feeling the taste of things on his tongue? Suddenly Esther giggled. She thought of the catheter. Was she guilty? Was she not guilty? for having had plastic there? For having peed freely and unrestrained? Was this wrong?

"What're you laughing at?" Aaron asked. He sauntered over to her, carrying a little parcel of food. He was wearing the same burnt-orange shirt, green tie and grey, polyester pants he had worn for three weeks straight.

"You're a mess," she said affectionately. She liked Aaron for having the nerve to dress so hideously and not even be sorry or showy about it. He was wearing an old work-shirt of their father's. It was a man's size 42; Aaron was 13 years old. He had said to her, when he first wore it, "I'm going to wear it until it fits me." Esther knew that if

Aaron wanted to fit into a size 42, he could certainly do it sooner or later.

"Obnoxious, isn't it," he said, smiling fondly at his outfit. He raised one pant-leg, revealing a frayed, flannel boot-liner from their father's old farmboots. Esther was impressed.

"You gotta lotta nerve," she said.

"Yeah, but they're kinda hot," he said. He walked over to a cupboard in the corner of the kitchen, turned his back secretively against her, opened the cupboard door, put something from it in his pocket, shut the door and walked outdoors via the breezeway door, motioning for her to follow. She did, of course. Outside, the sun was hotter than it had been yet that summer. Her legs itched under the casts as sweat trickled down her thighs and into the top of the plaster.

"Whatcha got?" she asked. She wondered if this would be God, too.

"Schnapps," he whispered, glancing over his left shoulder toward the breezeway door. "Aunt Sophia's. She puts it in her coffee."

"You've had it before?" Esther asked, staring hard at the clear bottle and its equally clear contents. Since the fluid seemed invisible, she suspected it must be potent. Aaron produced two coffee mugs from inside of the flannel boot liners.

"It helps to wear bell-bottoms," he said. He disappeared into the house for a minute and returned with two half-full mugs of coffee. He poured schnapps into the coffee until the cups were full. It looked like a good half-cup to Esther.

"Is this going to be enough?" she asked. She remembered once, when she was babysitting for the neighbors' infant, having drunk three big swallows from a nearly empty beer can. It hadn't affected her except for momentary nausea.

"I think this should do it," Aaron said.

Then Esther remembered the pills that had made her sleep. She didn't want to knock herself out, either. But then again, the thought of missing out on the post-funeral picnic inside didn't seem all that bad.

She put her lips to the rim of her cup and let her top lip drop slowly into the fluid. She took a big slurp. Her head jerked back quickly; coffee and schnapps dribbled down her chin and she was coughing. The minty fumes were still in her nose. The drink was awful. She didn't look Aaron in the eyes, but buried her lips in her shoulder, wiping her tongue covertly across her sleeve to get rid of the

sensation of fumigation. Her eyes and nose burned, too.

"You're not supposed to meditate over it," Aaron instructed. "Just wash it down."

It was true that she had lingered over the rim of the mug, feeling the warmth and smelling the noxious odor of the alcohol. Maybe one was just supposed to slug it down. Yet it had almost seemed pleasant, now that she thought about it, her eyes and nose burning with the hot vapors. She put her face over the cup again. She wanted to feel the burn.

"Hey, are you weird, or what?" Aaron said. "And for Chrissake, what're you cryin' for?" He dug a purple hanky out from the depths of his polyester pocket and handed it to her. A nudie playing card, a corkscrew and a pair of hangnail clippers fell out of his pocket when he did so. She recognized the clippers from her father's shaving kit.

"Promise you'll never leave me," she said. And then, while Aaron was uncomfortably picking his fingernails, she added, "I'd marry you if we weren't related, you know."

"Oh jeez," he said, ripping off a hangnail. "Drink your booze." She tipped her head back and dumped the coffee in her mouth. She swallowed. Her throat constricted into a pin-tight tube. She swallowed, she swallowed; would she ever quit swallowing? She swallowed. She choked. She gasped. Aaron started thumping her on the back. She coughed more; it seemed her tongue was swelling into her throat. She forced each breath in. Aaron hit her harder.

"Speak up!" he ordered. "You O.K.?"

"You're pounding the air outa me!" she finally yelled. He quit hitting her. She breathed normally again. She could feel the absence of his hand on her back. Hitting her felt bad, but when he quit, it was almost worse. She almost asked him to hit her again, just to make sure he was there. Just to make sure he cared whether she was choking or not. Just to make sure. All of a sudden it clicked. She realized what she'd been looking for. She'd found the answer. She laughed. She couldn't help it; it was too funny.

"What's so funny?" Aaron asked. But he was giggling too.

"It's just like God," she said. "Don't you see, it's just like God! Can you hear me?" she shouted. She didn't know if Aaron could hear her over her laughter. How could she have missed it for so long?

"Hit my back again," she said. He hit her, a little.

"No, really hit it!" she said.

He hit her some more. That felt better.

It didn't matter that this was the funeral picnic for her father. It didn't matter that her mother was sewing herself up with needles. It didn't matter, nothing mattered except Aaron was hitting her.

"Laugh!" she ordered. Aaron had quit hitting her. She felt all alone suddenly. He shrugged his shoulders and finished his coffee. "Want some more?" he asked.

How could he be so calm? She felt anything but casual right now. Didn't he understand it, too?

"It's not a joke or anything," she said. She reached up for his arm, but he was already standing, and then he was gone thru the door. The screen door swung shut.

"Shit," she whispered. Nothing happened. Then she said it louder. "Shit!" Aaron still didn't come back. Then she yelled it, this time just for herself.

A black dress appeared at her left horizon. It came thru the door and crouched down beside her.

"Got to let it bleed," a voice hissed. It was low. It was alarming. Was it exciting? Esther didn't recognize the voice. Esther did recognize the voice. She turned to see the face with the dress. She could barely move her head. She could barely move. She could barely. She looked. Her mother was squatted down behind Esther's shoulder. She was chewing on a piece of yellow thread, gnawing at it. She brought the thread-ends up close to her eyes, then put them back in her mouth, sucked on them, inspected them again. She tried to form the frayed ends into a single thread. She tied the ends together.

"Got to let it bleed," she said again, only this time in a speaking voice. Esther leaned back and shut her eyes. She wondered if her mother was going to sew her up. With yellow thread? With black thread? She wondered apprehensively what it would feel like. She knew she couldn't escape now. Did she want to? "Yes," she said to herself. "No," she said to herself. She wanted Aaron. She wanted to see his baggy red shirt and smell his familiar scent of Estes rocket fuel. She knew she would sit quietly while her mother sewed her up. She deserved it. Hadn't she killed her father? And wasn't that why her mother was crazy?

"I'm ready," she said. She sat perfectly still.

"Got to be brave," her mother whispered.

"Yes," Esther said.

She held out her hand, waiting for the needle into her fingertips. She felt her hand taken. Moved and grazed across something firm but soft. It was her mother's chin. Then Esther felt the hollow of her mother's throat be brought against her fingers. "You were such a sweet thing when you were born," her mother said. "I remember giving you your first bath. It was a Saturday and we'd only been home one day. You peed yourself silly. I had to get you cleaned up before the family came over to see you. I never could keep you dry," she finished.

"I'll never do it again!" Esther said. "It was an accident!" Her mother started rocking herself and scratching her neck. "I said I was sorry!" Esther yelled.

Then Esther's hand was squeezed and her mother was pressing her face, wet and heavy, into it.

"The wages of sin is death," her mother said. "Spare the rod but treat the child with vinegar and myrrh. Purge the sin. Clean the pee." Her mother sagged forward, her head suspended over Esther's thin lap. Esther wondered briefly whether her lap would hold all the weight of that frazzled, grey, weeping knot falling toward her.

Her head fell in Esther's lap. Was she drunk? Was she seeing three heads? They seemed so heavy. "Got to let it bleed," the heads cried. "Sorry," they said. Was this a confession? Esther didn't know how she could possibly have the power to forgive her mother. To forgive those massive heads in her lap. Then again, she hadn't thought her lap could support the weight of all of them. Maybe she could.

"It's all right," she said. Her other hand touched the grey hair. She leaned back against the metal railing, feeling the bars.

IV

Esther watched her face closely in the mirror. She watched the pupils contract and dilate; she watched the nostrils flare and relax; she watched the cheeks for twitches of muscle, for large pores, for wrinkles, for freckles. This morning, she washed her face for the first time in a month.

At Aunt Sophia's, she had first noticed the little black-heads and red bumps. Something was growing on her face. She hadn't put it there but it was growing. She had washed her body at Aunt Sophia's, but not her face. How did she have the right to disturb whatever it was

that was taking on a separate identity in her skin and living there? But this morning, without even thinking about it, she had gotten out the wash-cloth and a fresh bar of soap and turned on the hot water. Without as much as a flinch, she had scrubbed her face down three times and then she had rinsed it in cool water, and then she had held her whole face under the faucet and let the icy-cold spray chill her. It had felt good.

She walked over to the mirror on the bathroom wall. She was not sure about looking at first. Maybe she wouldn't recognize her face. Maybe her face wouldn't recognize her. So when she turned the light on, she opened her eyes a little at a time, looking first at the lips, then the eyebrows, and then the nose. Then she blinked quickly and caught the whole face. Then she looked at it all slowly. It recognized her. She could tell. There wasn't a smile, but that didn't phase her. She knew herself better than that.

"You old son of a bitch," she said. She'd heard Hal use that phrase on his car many times; she knew Hal loved his car. He didn't go anywhere without it. She went ahead and smiled at herself. She wasn't sure she'd ever seen herself actually smiling before, at least not in any pictures she'd seen of herself. But somehow it didn't seem too unreasonable. Too unfamiliar. But she knew she had to take it slowly; too many things were changing, and quickly, lately. So she smiled just a little and walked out of the bathroom into the kitchen. Aaron was sitting at the kitchen table, his head lowered nearly into an open carton of ice-cream. He looked up at her.

"You're grinning like a baboon," he said. He pulled a soup spoon full of Rocky Road out of the carton. His hand was dripping with little chocolate dribbles.

"Want some?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. She sat down with a spoon. She took a big scoop of ice-cream and shoved it in her mouth. It hurt her fillings with cold. It froze her tongue and she couldn't even taste it. They ate the whole gallon.

"Sure is good," she said. She didn't know where she'd gotten her appetite lately. She got up and walked into the dining room. Her mother was sitting in the tan rocking chair in the corner, her hands folded in her lap. She was staring out at the overgrown vegetable garden. No one had weeded it that summer. Carrots, onions, parsley and tomatoes were infested with crabgrass, pricklyweed and dande-

lions. Her mother watched the garden every day. Watched it grow over. Smiled at it. Sung to it.

Her mother looked slowly over toward her, focusing somewhere on Esther's mid-nose region. "Mmmm," she half-said, half-hummed, half-smiled. Then she looked back at the garden and rocked herself. The needles were all taken away by Aunt Sophia, but she hadn't even looked for them lately. Just rocked; her head bobbing to pull the weight of her body back and forth.

Esther walked outdoors thru the breezeway and sat on the steps. "Aaron!" she hollered.

He came and stood in the doorway. "Whadda ya' want," he asked, his voice coming muffled from inside the carton. He pulled his face out, licking his lips, and tossed the spoon and empty carton out on the lawn. He burped. Aaron had developed a lot of habits lately that were very unlike his nervous, theatrical self. It was almost like he tried to gross Esther out instead of please her.

"I think you're more yourself lately," she said. "A disgusting pig." He shrugged his shoulders. He certainly was comfortable and she sure did like him.

"You're not so bad yourself," he said.

She had a big question. She'd been wanting to ask someone for days. She couldn't stop it any longer; it had to get out. She had to know.

"Am I pretty ugly?" she asked. "I mean, not too ugly, but just pretty ugly?"

He looked her over. "Face is too thin," he said. "Teeth are crooked. Feet pigeon-toed." He paused. He looked at her face. At her eyes. "Possibly. Possibly it's in the eyes. Not too bad," he said. She was grateful. Her eyes were O.K. At least her eyes were O.K. Even her eyes were O.K.

"Are they just O.K., or are they good," she said.

"They'd do in a pinch," he said.

She went to the store and bought 15 mirrors. Mostly little ones. There was a small, red, round one for her purse, which she had also bought so that she wouldn't have to carry the mirror in her hand. There was the large orange one with the handle that she kept on her dresser, and the very large green one she put under her bed in case of an emergency during the night. She also bought a flashlight and kept

it beside the mirror. She just might have to check during the night sometime and make sure her body was all there, was all in order. There were other mirrors for here and there—under the couch cushions, beside the potted plants by the kitchen sink (she had to spend a lot of time there since her mother wasn't doing dishes anymore), under the seat of Aunt Sophia's car . . . a little one to carry in her knee-socks in case her purse got stolen. It had been hard getting them all distributed without being seen and questioned, but she had done it. It wasn't that she wanted to be sneaky or weird about it, it was just that she didn't think people would understand. She didn't even really understand it herself. But it was O.K.



Karen Rasco

THE SUN AND THE UPPER-CLASS

Craig Cotter

I wish I could stick my tongue
in the surface of the sun,
like into an orange.

Mick Jagger did it once
and it made his tongue red,
like a cherry.

VULCAN

Craig Cotter

Between the sun and Mercury
is a small hot planet called Vulcan.
God protects this planet,
and all matter of green plants and brown animals
live there.

Vulcan has two red moons
with high mountains
and orange clouds.

God used Vulcan to perfect salamanders.

SOMETHING ABOUT MONET

Craig Cotter

I've filled a bare place on my white wall
with a shredded water lily scene.
Without a frame the white border forms
a blue and green place behind the wall.

I have learned to read and speak Latin.
I have read Hemingway and have enjoyed it.
Bibles I can't say to understand
and I really can't speak Hemingway,

but I have read it. Anyway, the thing
to get at is clear, I think. Suppose
you were to walk into my white walled room.

OUTSIDE A HOCKEY GAME IN DETROIT

Craig Cotter

A group of legs
from the knees down
kicking an empty leg brace.

Kicking it through the crowd,
between legs.
It was on a leg,

then kicked off.
I thought maybe his leg came off,
but he was just wearing a brace.

It came off like a leg.

THANKING MY GREEN TORINO
FOR PROTECTION FROM THE MEXICAN MAN,
DRESSED IN WHITE, WHO REPRESENTS FEVER

Paul Murphy

In the gloom
on the living room couch
of 5 a.m.
on an April nineteen seventy-three day,
I was incubating a strep infection.

By 6:30 I was hallucinating.

A Mexican man,
wearing light white cotton trousers,
and a long sleeve matching pullover shirt,
slit down the neck,
and a great white sombrero with orange stitching around the
rim,
dipped to hide his face,
brooded cross-legged on my chest,
bending my ribcage into my inflamed lungs
until each breath
became a baby I had to pull from a burning orphanage.

He lifted his head and smiled through his yellow teeth
to confirm
that I was who he was
after
and that he hadn't mistaken me for some soldier of the
Alamo,
or one of Pershing's cavalry men.

I came to consciousness
and of course he wasn't around,
and of course I was still sweating in fear of his image,
and of course by now my throat was as swollen as a boulder,
and a hole had been punched through the muscle webbing of
my back,
and my skin was a thermostat frequently turning itself on
and off,
my stomach, a banana squashed by a big boot.

By 10:30 we had an appointment with a needle of penicillin.

And my family
had just bought you
a month earlier.
Nineteen Seventy
Green Torino
Station Wagon
the most beautiful car I
ever
owned.

You were dark green
and abrupt
as a cactus.
Not long and bulky
like the usual middle class station wagon.
Your left and right fenders
curled like fingers
over the tires,
the headlights,
polished fingernails.

And I would thank you for this trip to the doctor's,
for your bran-colored vinyl front seat, so firm and upright it
was

a second back for me
for your tight chest and lap safety belts; they were a new
musculature.
for your windshield admitting the sun like a warm blast of
shower

water,
for your stable retension of heat, absorbing my irregular
temperature

in yours,
for allowing me asylum in your body, when mine had turned
so rotten,

for bringing me to the needle/
half healed.

THE SPEED SKATER

Paul Murphy

Wound in a red mesh
of nylon
his left arm hung on his back
as a reserve sack of muscles
and oxygen
the speed skater sweeps over the ice
on blades
one and a half feet long
brilliant silver
razors
cutting trenches in the blue ice
rails of white shavings
on this elliptical mirror
His clumsy genitals
are lashed down
his hair matted
under a hood
leaving his body
sleek as the ice
below
in which no double
is caught

THE AMPUTEE OF TAMAULIPAS

Peggy Parris

misses his gangrenous leg
once inflated like an ascension balloon
& turned the thirty dolorous colors.
A village brass band of doubtful talent
played pain-marches thru his veins
the mayor beating time on the eardrums.
The saw was necessary to survival.

His missing leg
itches under rough sheets in the pocket of night
sensative to the sound of stars grinding their teeth
remembers kilometers walked
along roads the color of talc
up stone church steps & down again
toes that stroked the legs of his woman.

He wonders where is buried
that parcel of blood fascia & bone?
Why wasn't he told of the funeral?
Did the priest in yellow vestments
say the Mass of the *Miembro Separado*
surrounded by fat candles fistfuls of roses
daisies & lilies in fruit jars?
Does it sleep in a white baby casket
lined with cool satin like a communion dress
smelling of lemon blossoms?

In the cemetery on the road to Los Ebonos
he prays for the repose of severed limb & orphan toes.
Limestone cherubim guard
dry grasses weaving whispering
plaster effigies dissolving under yellow winter sun
bleached wreaths flowers the color of bone.
One cherub has suffered mute decapitation.
The longing to carry away gently
the serafic head is resisted
for gray & gritty fear of the dead
so real he feels it between his teeth.

Dreams: his lost leg genuflects
before the flickering altar of the cathedral
in company with martyrs & *Christos* in exquisite agonies
an acolyte rings the golden bell
signifying beatification as *Santo Pierno Perdito*
dances in rose tights with the *Sinfonia Nacional*
wins foot races at the fiesta
while young girls wet their lips
wave fistfuls of yellow narcissus
grows toes like pianist's fingers
that stroke a woman's body with virtuoso touch
braid forget-me-nots into her hair
softly pinch her rosy nipples.

He wants to believe his stump
will grow again like a mermaid's tail.
In the market at Reynosa an old man sells
tiny copper hands hearts arms eyes.
Suffer clouding vision carry the amulet
soon the eyes mend themselves
the vendor tells the tourists.
A muscular leg flexed like a carnival tumbler's
on a strand of knotted blood floss is palmed
& he hurries away bobbing down the street.

WELCOME WAGON

Virginia Bensheimer

Little men with green noses
and small, fluted mushrooms
where their eyes should have been
moved in down the street.

Mrs. McGurk, their landlady,
said they talk nice
and pay in advance.
Their funny accent don't
hurt her none, she said.

The neighborhood kids
toss rocks at their windows,
which don't break.
Late at night, we can all hear
some talk show on their TV,
real clear.
Little lights blink
onoff onoff onoff
from the top of their big antenna.

Randy next door
has been missing his cat
since they came.
He says they ate it,
picked their teeth clean
with those long claws
and burped sodawater.

I think the cat
got tired of Randy's whining
and just left.

WALTZING IN THE INTERSECTION

Doug Crowell

After a night of speed
and constant forward motion,
after a night of you
and I together, waltzing,

those cars come
halting to a stop.
They don't want to,
they have to come
screeching to a halt.

You and I, we began
waltzing smoothly out
from the northern corner
where the deli sits, waltzing
to the music of your lead.

We dipped to the east,
the west, raised back up
and whirled
in our hemisphere's direction,
in the center of the intersection,
beneath the traffic light, waltzing.

Those cars seeing red
sit watching, amused, us waltz,
those seeing green sit honking,
the music of their horns leading
us, as we dip, whirl faster.

TO BE A WITNESS

Scott C. Cairns

as a man set to flame,
his words caught up
in that translation from flesh
to ash, which is air, which is
the beginning of communication.

To be changed as a man is changed
when his hand, caught
in machinery, is drawn from him.

To be convinced of anything,
any real separation.
These images given
to shape a clear statement
of trust, the gathering
of the martyr's remains,
which are ash, which are the last words.

BOOK REVIEW

Albert Drake

The Best American Short Stories 1980, Stanley Elkin, Ed. (with Shannon Ravenel). Houghton Mifflin Co., Boston, MA. 1980. 474 pp. \$12.95 cloth.

This anthology, which has appeared annually since 1941, has become an American institution. For many years it was a book that I looked forward to, a bountiful gathering, la crem de la creme of the American short story, a pleasure to read and a way of keeping in touch with new writers and living masters. I have copies of the paperback edition from the years 1953 to 1974, and they're wonderful reference books. I made a point of using the book one term a year in my classes, feeling that students should be exposed to the "best" writing, and it was always an excellent teaching tool.

Then something happened: the book became unavailable. I never saw it in book stores, and when I ordered it for my classes I'd get a card from Ballantine indicating that it was "unavailable." There was no explanation, and after three tries I assumed that the anthology had been terminated—Martha Foley was getting on, her son, David Burnett, had died, and, anyway, American institutions were being toppled every day. Then I realized that the book had been coming out each year but only in hardback—something that Ballantine didn't want to admit, I guess.

That the paperback version of this popular anthology is unavailable is only one change in a project that seemed unchangeable. Martha Foley is gone, and the new editors are Stanley Elkin "with" Shannon Ravenel. The extensive lists of "Distinguished Short Stories" and "The Roll of Honor," which were fun, informative, and indicative of Martha Foley's wide-ranging reading habits, have been reduced to "100 Other Distinguished Stories." Two major changes, as noted on the dust-jacket blurb, have to do with the centralization of power: eight of the twenty-two stories in this collection are from one magazine, *The New Yorker*, and two of those stories are by the same author, Mavis Gallant. While Martha Foley might have approved of those changes in particular—she was always partial to *The New Yorker* and to the work of

Mavis Gallant—I think she would have objected in theory. She often chose more than one story from a magazine, but they were less well-known journals, such as *Virginia Quarterly Review*, or even obscure publications like *Occident*. Past collections reveal how democratic the process was; faces became familiar, but there were always new faces, their work culled from the pages of small literary journals and odd-ball magazines. Martha Foley described the collections as “eclectic,” and it was this quality that made them exciting and, to a writer, *possible*. I know that I had that feeling each year, and while I was immensely pleased to have a story of mine included one year, I was not really surprised, because I felt that Martha was reading the quarterlies and that if I continued to write well it was only a matter of time before she would notice my work.

I don't want to get involved in that old argument that revolves around whether these are the “best”—I have no way of knowing, since I have not read *all* the stories published in English during the year 1979. Nor have the editors. We're told that Shannon Ravenel read 1,500 stories for this collection—a goodly number, but a drop in the bucket when you consider how many stories are published, even in these depressing times—and Mr. Elkin reveals that he was “only required” to read 125 stories. Judging from the results I have to believe that both editors prefer to read the obvious, well-known, “reputable” magazines: *New Yorker* (eight stories), *Atlantic* (two stories), *Esquire* (two stories), *Playboy*, *The Paris Review*, etc. Those magazines do publish some fine fiction, even though *Esquire* and *Playboy* do not read unsolicited material and the others are pretty much closed markets. But I believe that most of the finest fiction appears regularly in literary journals and little magazines; approximately 150 such publications are listed at the rear of this anthology but only two are represented here.

The authors have gone to obvious sources for the work, and to obvious authors: Mavis Gallant, Issac Bashevis Singer, Peter Taylor, John Updike. Those names have appeared regularly in *Best American Short Stories* over the past twenty years; only Joyce Carol Oates and Bernard Malamud are absent. As if seeking familiar touchstones, the editors have resurrected William Gass, *Ascent* and *Kenyon Review*. But what is lacking is the range of content and the presence of unknown writers, the odd quirks of editorial authority which Martha Foley exercised.

If you accept the notion that these are the “best” stories, and

that the process by which they came to be chosen was critical and democratic, well, then, you will enjoy the collection. Even if you don't accept that notion (I don't), you may enjoy the book (I did). I rarely read *The New Yorker* and so the eight stories reprinted from that magazine were new to me. I avidly pursue magazines that publish experimental fiction, but was able to only skim Donald Barthelme's story; in other words, I think I showed as much interest in that story as *Esquire* generally shows in experimental fiction. On the other hand, I found myself drawn into the longer traditional stories, especially those by Mavis Gallant, each of which runs to forty pages.

I must admit that over the years I have *never* been in complete agreement with Martha Foley's choices, but each year I would find at least two stories in the anthology that I suspected were in fact "best"—stories that were stunning, energetic, beautifully written, stories to which I return often. There are two stories in this collection that are outstanding; you decide which two.



Robert Turney

RAPTURE OF THE DEEP

Theodora Todd

At night your dreams will be like work.
You will argue all night
to make a point, never seeing
the face of your adversary.

You will fall,
your body breaking the water
like a scream.
The water's weight will hold you down.
It will fill your face with thickness.
You will struggle,

awaken suddenly. For a long time
in the night your eyes will
be like a dead man's, open.

You will write a list
on the grey paper inside your head.
On it every chore, every phone call
that will have to be done in the next four days.
The grey monks will murmur,
repeating each task.
Each task will become a weight
attached to your waist.
You will sink again into the ocean,
into the living coral.

But this time the corral are trees;
the trees waft you into the sky.
See the patched farmlands
as you swim! You swallow air
to stay aloft. You don't want to wake,
to sleep.

ANOTHER MORNING

Theodora Todd

Somewhere, behind the clouds
the sun bleeds into a new day.
The birds scream at the light, as if it
really touched them, as if it would dissolve
their feathers into dust.

The rain wishes us back to sleep.

But we will go out. Again.
The water will hit steadily, and deepen
the lines in our cheeks;
it will rest beneath our eyes.

Here. In this room. The odor
of you, still asleep, is that of our sex.
Your genitals sleep
heavily, curled in crevices,
like cats.

I will go out. It will take twenty minutes
for the car to warm.
I will race into the railroad crossing
as the arms come down, lights blinking
red as the missing sun.
The train, close enough to fear
is angry, wet, hung over,
hurrying to work.

I could crawl back in so easily.
But the dusty night is quickly settling
onto the bookcases, the tables.
I run my finger through the dust, think of days.

Up there somewhere, the sun
blinks rhythmically, once, once
again. Once again. Once again.

ALICE TO DOROTHY

with apologies to Melinda Mueller

Frank R. Maloney

It could be spring back in England
If that's the direction; for all I know
It's just around the dog-leg in this road,
This road that doesn't seem to know its mind.
Perhaps behind a bush.
I try not to step on things.
England might be under a dry leaf,
Buried in the whorls of a smoking snail,
Or it may never have happened at all.
I get muddled when I try to think,
But one hears rumours. I'm sure you must.
How we both got back —
I read it in a book I found here.
Seems I was real and you a character,
But as for that I think we both behaved well.
I grew up, married & died; you came back in sequels.
Yet here I am; I know I saw you once
Across a hedgerow. I tried to wave,
To catch your eye; the air's as thick as boxwood.
I felt we had a lot to talk about.
I imagine you were busy with some adventure.
In any case, you did not see me or choose to wave.

Please answer this letter. I am lonely rather.
They didn't let me take Diana
And cats can be such a comfort.
You have Toto and dogs such great company.
And your friends. They don't make good friends here.

It is a pretty place once you get used to it.
Things are much more *here*
Than they ever were back there.
A queer sort of hereness that makes them
Thicker, taller, brighter, faster.
Sometimes I feel all shadows & cobwebs.
Just as if I were a puff of smoke
That everyone wanted to blow away.
But I cannot. I cannot ever go away.
I am beginning to doubt there is anyplace to go.
Wonderland & Beyond the Looking Glass
Are the same place, like some great country seat:
Wings, floors, towers, outbuildings;
The maze, the amble, the farms.
I know now it is all the same,
The same small place.

And you are off in another part of the house.
With your dogs and your friends.
Sometimes I find a bit of fur
Or straw. Just yesterday, a drop of oil
On the Cheshire Cat. He was not smiling.

When you read this, stop.
Don't let them push you down the road.
Yes, I hear stories how that Mr. Baum
Drives you all; the Rev. Mr. Dodgson wanted
A lot more from me, but I put my foot down;
I was quite insistent I had done my share.
Plant your feet and refuse to budge,
Refuse all enticements, all threats.
They shan't harm you.
Without you, where would they be?
Rusting in a woodlot yet,

Mulching the cornfield by now.
As soon as I finish this letter,
I shan't move again, not a muscle.
Then we shall surely sift together
Like leaves under some great ash.

Wait for me. I need to talk
To someone who doesn't know any riddles.

Your friend /s/ Alice

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*Editors' work may appear in the RCR only if it places in the anonymously judged Creative Writing Contest. Our 1981 judge was Ron Padgett.

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RED CEDAR REVIEW is a biannual magazine of the literary arts published at Michigan State University. Manuscripts may be submitted to 325 Morrill Hall, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI 48824. Please include return postage.

Our Thanks to MSU College of Arts and Letters, English Department, George Kooistra and University Publications, Albert Drake, and other friends. A special thanks to Jim Cash who funded our annual creative writing contest. Red Cedar Review is partially funded by the ASMSU Funding Board.

Back Issues of RCR	\$1.00
One Issue of RCR	\$2.50
One Year Subscription of RCR	\$4.00
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Vol. XIV No. 2

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