

Quercus

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(kwûrkûs) Latin. n. The oak genus: a deciduous hardwood tree or shrub.

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Do Not Touch

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Sister-School Showers

2007, photograph

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words

Sidewalk Nostalgia	<i>Alicia Levi '05</i>	1
River Morn	<i>Catt Foy '06</i>	2
Make-up	<i>Jeremy Burke '99</i>	3
Into the White Sky		5
Of Cell Phones and White Mustard Seeds		6
Śrī Kevalāṣṭakam	<i>Carl Herzig</i>	10
war:	<i>Amy Falvey '05</i>	12
Lunch with Walter and Emily at Vanderveer Park	<i>Renée Bushā</i>	13
Shelf Life	<i>Jeff T. Dick '77</i>	14
Anna Ruth/Xiou Yu	<i>Mary Kate Dunne</i>	15
defile	<i>Anonymous</i>	18
Abigala		20
Candle	<i>Josh LoDico</i>	21
Selfishness		22
Caterina		23
pas tout à fait mort	<i>Claire Richards</i>	43
Work Harder		44
Easter Monday	<i>Ashley Johnson</i>	45
Day by Day		47
Idols	<i>Carrie Chesney '03</i>	53
Three Sonnets	<i>Nancy Hayes</i>	54
Song IV		57
Northern Pike	<i>Chuck Blair '76</i>	58
The Whendow		60
Ode: What To Do with Dead Words		62
Three Strange Men on Camels	<i>Ralph G. Smith '47</i>	65
Sense of Self	<i>Brian Peters</i>	74
Self-control		77
Bulletproof	<i>James O'Gorman</i>	80

images

Bespectacled (2004, ink)	Kelly McGee	9
Mirror (2004, ink)		17
Genocide of the Conscience: Wounded Knee 1890	Suzanne Michele Chouteau '83	27
High Score	Heidi Hernandez '05	28
Pink Poodle		29
<i>Aufwiedesehen, meine kleinen bluen katzen!</i>	Kathryn Anderson	30
Twain's Marker		31
Out of Control	Brendan Gould '02	32
Hero Instinct		33
Homeland	Les Bell '72	34
Nickel for the Buffalo		35
Soul Food	Beth VanDerMolen	36
Tim's Helmut	Angela Wilson	37
Wooden Heart	Holly Hunt	38
Moving Along	Aubrey Keimig	39
Human Dirt	Margret O'Reilly	40
Bordels	Andrew Moeller '05	41
<i>from Long Way Home (2006)</i>	Dave Morehead '02	76

*he waits for her with silence
pressed between his lips*

Sidewalk Nostalgia

The girl sitting on the moon
illuminates the sign
of this city, and I
have walked her streets,
watching motion pictures of her lovers,
finding my own still frames diluted.

Days get caught,
stuck on your tongue,
pressing against the silent poetry
that creates my back arms legs
time and time again
in your pupils.

Your scent takes my arm hostage
even as the city attempts
to wipe away your image,
your bone structure,
from my mind.

Long hours strung out
against the horizon
call into question my purpose
and yet
I am still enamored with
the moonlight illuminating
the city her streets your frame.

—*Alicia Levi '05*

River Morn

This day belongs in autumn spaces,
damp gray leaves dance circles in the street.
The whistle of a passing train echoes
like a foghorn in the morning mist.

A spit of rain, a drop of dew, a swirling ghost
of waning fog greet woolen coats with collars turned;
the river rushes on. The barges wait as waters rise
to move along their journey south
with fall's fresh harvest stored within their bows.

The voices of the river men upon their decks
rebound softly on the quilted air,
accompanied by calls of ducks and geese
who've yet to join the barges
in their foray into climes less harsh,
away from winter winds and ice.

—Catt Foy '06

Make-up

Sitting across from me
at this indoor cafe
on Sunday morning
just one table away
is a mother and daughter,

I assume:
same dark hair
pale skin
petite figure.

The cappuccino is good,
the bread simple—
I'm content.
Still, they steal my gaze
from Miller's *Cancer*
as it seeps into me,
as they float past—just now,

peeking up,
pretending to need more caffeine,
the daughter caught me looking.
Her bright red lips, smothered
in too much lipstick,
condemn me.

I fall back into my book immediately,
recognizing that I'm Millerized.

*Today I am proud to say that I am inhuman,
that I belong not to men and governments,
that I have nothing to do with creeds and principles.*

She gets up and heads
to the powder room.
I look up again to watch
her leather-clad ass try to sway
across the room.
She's all in black, dark eyeliner.
I can't decide if she's Goth or still learning
how to make herself up properly.
She turns the corner

and my attention drifts
to her mother.
She's all in white,
little make up,
still looks good,
but is probably Christian,

They're both in long skirts.
The mother's longer, of course.
Both wearing them well
 hiding the flesh,
 but revealing the form.

Mother needs to teach
her daughter the art of make-up though.

These strange twins
seem otherworldly to me
 pointing at a laptop
 and murmuring to each other
 between bites of bread and
 sips of latte.

Maybe they're out there
living while I'm in here
making myself up.

—*Jeremy Burke '99*

Into the White Sky

And now I turn my eyes toward you
standing outside my window shivering
covered only in your impossibly long hair.
I rise and slide my chair back from my desk
turning and pulling my shirt
over my head in the same motion.
I unbuckle my belt, unbutton my jeans
as I walk down the steps to the first floor
of the house we once shared.
I slide out of my jeans on the last step
and kick them into the corner.
I drop my boxers in the breezeway
and open the door to the white world
waiting for me outside. It's cold
and my breath floats away like yesterdays.
I walk barefoot through the soft snow.
It melts a little with each step I take
around the house until I'm in the backyard
staring across the snowy plain at you.
I can't bring myself to take another step
so I stand there
fingers to my lips or running my hand
back and forth over the top of my head.
You don't move either
save your shivering. You hug yourself
to keep warm and linger over every detail of me.
I open my mouth, but that's it and you half-smile
before you turn and disappear into the white sky
or plain. I'm not sure which swallowed you first.
I sit naked in the snow
both hands on my head
and stare into your white absence.

—Jeremy Burke '99

Of Cell Phones and White Mustard Seeds

*Oh, it's nice to be alive
but when the dream comes true
you'll be better off dead.
It could happen to you,*

sings Harry Nilsson
as I throw my dreams
up in the toilet
with my headphones on
wondering if this is it for me,
if I've killed myself
with excess nothingness.
Every time I think it's over, the world
retches me back into existence.

Too much even
for Death to stomach.

As I stare into the bowl,
spittle almost dropping
from my half-open mouth,
I think of you.

An odd time, I admit,
and probably not very
flattering.

My mind had been
as empty as my body
tonight until you
hula-danced into the corner
of my mind's bloodshot eye.
One long blink later and
you're center stage:

grass skirt
coconut bra and spinning
a pistol in your right hand
as you sway your hips back and forth
slower
and slower still
until you stop
spinning and take aim,
holding your piece
with both hands.

The world convulses again.
This time it's Jeff Magnum hollering

*I love you
Jesus Christ!
Jesus Christ
I love you!*

I don't know if my eyes
are rolling back in my head or
if I'm staring at my ceiling,
but I've never wanted him
to hop off his timbers
and hold me in his arms
more than I do right now.

The *Pieta* in reverse:
Jesus climbing off the cross
to cradle the living
in his dead arms.

Take me to your tomb
and roll the boulder in place.
Hide me in your darkness,
safe from time,
free to wander internally
following the landscape
of memory and imagination,
safe inside myself.

I've turned
into a solipsistic fool.

Consumed by my own
suffering, I've forgotten
the first noble truth. Recognizing
I need a lesson in humility,
Hotei, laughing Buddha,
tells me to bring him
a cell phone from a house
untouched by Death
and he'll cure me.



मधुरं मधुरेभ्योऽपि
मङ्गलेभ्योऽपि मङ्गलम्
पावनं पावनेभ्योऽपि
हरनामेव केवलम्

आब्रह्मास्तम्बपर्यन्तं
सर्वं मायामयं जगत्
सत्यं सत्यं पुनः सत्यं
हरनामेव केवलम्

स गुरुः स पितृ चापि
सा माता बन्धवोऽपि सः
शिक्षयेच्चैत्सदा स्मृतं
हरनामेव केवलम्

निःश्वासे नाहि विश्वासः
कदा रुद्धो भविष्यति
कीर्तनीयं मतो बाल्याद्
हरनामेव केवलम्

हरिः सदा वसेत्तत्र
यत्र भागवता जनाः
गायन्ति भक्तिभावेन
हरनामेव केवलम्

अहो दुःखं महादुःखं
दुःखाहुःखतरं यतः
काचार्थं विस्मृतमत्र
हरनामेव केवलम्

दीयतां दीयतां कर्णो
नीयतां नीयतां वचः
गीयतां गीयतां नित्यं
हरनामेव केवलम्

तृणीकृत्य जगत्सर्वं
राजतं सकलोपरि
चिदानन्दमयं शुद्धं
हरनामेव केवलम्

Śrī Kevalāṣṭakam Anonymous Sanskrit Prayer

Sweetest of all that is sweet,
most auspicious of all things auspicious,
the greatest purifier of all—
The holy name of Śrī Hari alone is everything.

From Lord Brahma to a clump of grass,
all the world is but māyā, illusion.
It is true, it is true; again I say it is true:
The holy name of Śrī Hari alone is everything.

Guru and father,
mother, true friend,
is the person who teaches us, Always remember:
The holy name of Śrī Hari alone is everything.

No one is certain when their time will come,
when their last breath will be ended;
from childhood begins the practice of chanting—
The holy name of Śrī Hari alone is everything.

Śrī Hari eternally dwells
where the highest devotees are singing
with bhakti, the purest devotional love—
The holy name of Śrī Hari alone is everything.

Alas! What sorrow, what great, deepest sorrow,
of all misery, most unbearable pain,
that thought a glass fragment, this jewel is forgotten—
The holy name of Śrī Hari alone is everything.

Again and again it must enter the ears,
again and again must be spoken,
without stopping or ending, eternally sung—
The holy name of Śrī Hari alone is everything.

Before it, the whole universe a blade of grass appears;
it reigns supreme over all.
Full of ecstasy timelessly conscious, divine,
flawless, most perfectly pure—

The holy name of Śrī Hari alone is everything.

—*Carl Herzig*, English version

war:

jumping rope in a mini-skirt
on the Sabbath you pagan
she yells against those
iron cathedrals (it's really just
aluminum)
the television (dark) the camera (upside itself)
the radio turned down or off even,
"let us bow our heads in silence . . ."

and it's not an act of God or faith or
contrition it's
"the naming of things"

:

all things shapeless,
amorphous,
held fast
("the living and the dead")
in the pens (leaking)
the walls (kneeling)
this (rape
on my tongue)

is an afterthought:

—Amy Falvey '05

Lunch with Walter and Emily at Vanderveer Park

Myself, the Wandering Savage,
Met Nobody in my head
The former barked and belched decree
The latter whispered red

He washed me in bright juice
Left me brittle, blue as ice
She spread my fingers wide
While I gathered Paradise

Celebrity intoxicant,
He howled and tangled up my hair
While the heaving of her storms
Left a stillness in the air

I could hear the pavement blab
See white cobwebs lace the rafters
I passed fields of yellow grain
Horses heads towards ever after

The octave flute! Triangle struck!
The slain and victors marching by!
Contradicted velvet birds
And the splashless Butterfly

But the hinges in his hand
Match the Hinges in her head
He laps fluid from her soul
She keeps a jar of what he said

The flesh! The bone! And all my blood!
The breath, the faith, and all my will
I see the meat of me is good
As is the Tooth that nibbles still

—*Renée Bushā*

Shelf Life

White pickets are sprouting
along the perimeter
of the landscaped terrace,
surrounding the bungalow
nestled in the cul-de-sac.
Turning from the window,
the young woman wavers,
easing into the padded chair
to nurse her morning sickness.
Across the breakfast table
her husband is buried
in *The Wall Street Journal*
while the reedy whisperings
of her silent flute
escape the sealed attic,
slipping down the hallway,
filling the kitchen
with the accompaniment
of unwritten melodies.
When her husband leaves,
the woodwind shrieks
and the music texts
vault from lofty places
on the library shelves,
unfurling their pages
against the rubber bumper
of her vacuum cleaner
as she dodges and feints,
steering across the floor.
Beyond the drawn drapes,
glinting in the sun,
the pickets are nudging
toward the limitless sky.

—Jeff T. Dick '77

Anna Ruth/ Xiao Yu

Most weekends she spends
with other little girls dressed in *shenyi*
twirling red and gold fans
before beaming American parents.

But today she sits at the edge
of a glossy wooden floor,
knees drawn up under glasses
that slide down the flat of her nose.

A youngster in an oversized sweater
with lengths of jetty hair,
her angled black eyes watch
the stepstepstep LEAP
of light-footed dancers
that keep the beat with Celtic thunder.

To her the artists present
a wall of living sound and color
barely contained momentum,
with feet flying beneath
and hands clasped above.

With shoes and floor
they drum out the simple songs of ancestors
and she can feel their vibration all around.

Once, she turns back
and her golden face bobs,
immersed in a heaving sea of fair skin

generously freckled and flushed,
surrounded by masses
of thick curling hair.

Then music and feet stop.
She stands, clapping,
and pushes straight black hair
over the shoulder
of her Connemara-knit sweater.

To look at her
is to see Peg's daughter.

—*Mary Kate Dunne*



defile

masturbation has become an art.
i try to make poems
that masturbate,
but can't.
i *have* no center, i *cannot* hold,
and this is just to believe
in somethinganything
somethinganythingeverything
to believe
the world curtseys
and curtains, it is
music and hyphens and semi-colons and love
and sweaters and t-shirts and rockstars and drugs . . .

masturbation has become an art.
i try to make poems
that don't masturbate,
but can't.
i *have* no center, i
cannot hold,
and this is just to believe
in somethinganything
somethinganythingeverything
to believe in . . .

in music and hyphens and semi-colons and love
in bibles and bookcases and briefcases and blood
and it is just, or it is never just,
sex ("death and breath, womb and tomb") but

good religion, sweaty religion, hard religion, against a wall, it is
dressed in black leather and in front of full length mirrors
we call it religion
without love
and we are nothing and . . .

i love *everything*
 is dying.

which is a sadness even though
i love ugly things
;

—Anonymous

Abigala

all the things that fit before don't fit
in these cities of acid stringy highs and devils' bedrooms
worn and welded secret streets, crossing
and dressing my skeletons in pearls and prom dresses . . .
she is homecoming,
homecoming king.
and i know what you're thinking
with her high heels and hairspray,
her prada, her pink, her
high heels and hairspray: that she's a lady, a queen,
a queer.
between ink and eyelashes, between
sheets that sweat, between
the little boys room and the little girls room
are the cigarettes in stalls.
and i swear you're so pretty,
you're so pretty i could eat you,
i could eat you i could eat you i could eat you,
eat you whole.
and my religion in the bookshelves,
the cd cases, the phone calls,
i have tired of praying
knocked up burnt out holes in the wall
and i am writing with sharpies on my ceiling
". . . i have tried everything . . ."
while these noose-tipped pens and these
ghosts that fuck in the hallways at
three a.m. won't die.
and i'm sixes if it's even numbers
and sevens if it's odd:
me, my mohawk, and my plaid thrift store pants,
the tattoo across your chest
that i drew, and we play
dolls and g.i. joes and sing until we
fall asleep
and i could eat you i could eat you i could eat you fucking
whole.

—Anonymous

Candle

Candle, flash, burning bulb (ameliorated?), exacerbated, forest fire, trees torched, scorched earth, anathema of birth, deforestation, devastation, emancipation, illumination of the nations with knowledge of cooperation allowing for peace instead of competition which elicits no definition of life among people whose faces are different, ethereal, peripheral, individual, multiplying exponentially while we are sitting fidgeting, indifferent to all but the self which is cognizant, aware and will share everything inimitable not admitted by the same self which is culpable, responsible, enforceable, unacceptable, inconsequentially standing among the garbage fires and funeral pyres to keep warm with no place left to go but below; do you know where to go to avoid the undertow (the tide—the ebb and flow), and it spawns when there is no dawn to save one from what has gone on upon having sensed, felt, burned, yearned, careened and veered, unable to steer clear of what became too near, and was held dear out of fear of causing a cascade of tears—careers, mirrors, and vast electronic spears cast forth from ears unwilling to hear what was said from the mouth of apathy, absent of sympathy and empathy about an epiphany of sadness and pining for the big star, maniacal, homicidal, fratricidal, nocturnal with no diurnal for truth or justice, for it just is the Candle, flash, burning bulb (ameliorated?), exacerbated . . .

—*Josh LoDico*

Selfishness

Selfishness, helplessness, despair and disrepair falling, plummeting from the tree, the vine of life onto soft, accepting, malleable ground, absorbed by the life giver—she listens, she imparts her subtle wisdom, she replenishes with night, winter cold, snow falling, blanketing, chilling when a host of firmament gathers around observing those which are lost, their vision unobstructed by any perceived obstacle, then the pinnacle—and in a moment—FLASH—they are gone, disappeared—but they know, they have heard—silent and attentive, they have laughed—mirthful and unctuous, perfunctory and exclamatory, fortuitously and diabolically (but have they cried?), silently rejecting most who long for the eternal embrace of the unconditional, the natural, the moment of infinitesimal understanding, glorifying and redeeming all suspected, expected, not circumspection, or a collection of rejection or falsified and ever present doubt and uncertainty which surrounds the lives of faithless beings with no appreciation, relation, or acquaintance, having not met love and grace from the pouring forth of all redemption, all worth, or description evidenced by the beauty that surrounds everyday: the celestial, vast blue heavens, sprawling oaks, the majesty of vibrant color illuminating one's fulfilled, distilled existence, shining, enlightening the lushness in the mind's eye, closed, dreaming, imagining, pining for the perfection of the all encompassing unfathomable heavens everyone is touched with, envisioning individual perceptions of perfection, a divine providence, utopian, ideal, teeming with warmth unknown to the senses from which experience emits omniscient knowledge, Selflessness.

—Josh LoDico

Caterina

A new morning, indeed.

If Not For You

Dylan's words conjured images of him. Excitement coursed through her. She had never done anything like this. She never thought she was capable of such an act. It wasn't even thirty degrees or eight o'clock. Yet, there was a reason to go somewhere, despite the cold and early hour. Where? Who knew, whether Puget Sound or just hanging out in the parking garage where she was heading; she didn't care, it didn't matter.

Day of the Locusts

So yeah, not yet—but a sweet melody she heard nonetheless, just for her. Perspiration sang throughout her body. A nervous and anxious cold sweat chased all ease and calm away; she liked the feeling. Her body was telling her something she was never receptive to before, if it ever attempted to communicate in this way. From her eyebrows to the bottom of her feet to her . . . ****CRHA-CHUNK**** Clammy palms resulted in her hands slipping off the wheel and running over the median. A loud scraping noise came from the vehicle's underbelly before she righted herself. Briefly she came out of her mind and into the driver seat of the car. She realized the subsequent bumpiness from the right rear wheel. She was a car-pochon-driac. OCD would mandate she take the car in to the dealer immediately. He, however, was the only one who could push such thoughts of hers aside. The excitement of the rendezvous culminated in tears. The water her eyes created represented the past memories of him, the anticipation of the moment, and the realization she was at the plateau's precipice and was mid jump, still freefalling. She thought it incredible—the unbelievable was about to happen. The motor's hum and Dylan's words were the only conversation. She glanced to the east and received the amity of the elements she expected. She knew she could rely on the river and the sun as a barometer of assurance or displeasure in the decisions she would make. The yellow apparition she anticipated was present. This had been the latest in a series of desperate provocations amid an atmosphere of nothingness.

Time Passes Slowly

Dylan sings so true about the cold months. Love is crazy. No one knows what to expect. Words are music and music is sensuous.

It's been so long since I've seen his face. He is the mountain of my dreams. I've never even seen a mountain. Maybe because one cannot expect something to bloom when one is covering oneself in darkness. Look above.

Went To See the Gypsy

Her thoughts acquiesced as her memory of the image of him emanated from the depths of her mind. Amazing. She was such a thinker, yet just the mere remembrance of him drove it all away. Pain, joy, the moment—welcome or unwanted, it would erode and disappear. It was kinda like her thoughts knew and gave up because it was inevitable and easier. It had been months, and this seeming eternity had strangled her emotions. Frozen. She had been reflecting her environment. The winter months were a tortuous epoch. She was as cold physically and emotionally as the sky, earth, pavement and like the river it was evident on the surface, but there was so much more happening underneath. This Illinois town beckoned her back, using every weapon at its disposal. Again, it had chosen him. Dawn would never lie.

Winterlude

Waltzing in to Dylan's tune, he embraced her, comforted her, and assured her she had chosen an option of tight excitement. She shivered as the image of the dude gave way to reality.

If Dogs Run Free

The piano danced, emanating from the stereo, as her thoughts lilted over the steering wheel, through the windshield, and into the cold sun welcoming her as she sped across the bridge. The frozen bulb was like seeing an old friend who had been away. Glancing down at the river to breathe in the moment, she observed the river's consent and agreement with the advice the sun was offering—she was doing the right thing.

New Morning

The title track of the definitive album of that moment convinced her winter is not so bad. Its power was like the power of the bass line, was completely subservient to him. If she were simply heading to work, then the power of the album is reduced to initiating an amiable mood to start the day. The dependent variable of that perfect album, on that perfect day, was elevated to a feeling of divinity with him as a factor in the equation. With the sky blue, the dawn shades of yellow, orange, and red, and the river to her left, she acknowledged the perfection of her quadratic equation (Dylan's *New Morning*, the personification of his words evidenced in her environment, him, and of course, her). She can taste his smile as she glances down and realizes, *Shit! I'm, going seventy-five. Ah, fuck it!*

Sign on the Window

She remembers his last words to her—If he had a sign it would be “My dreams come true when you are with me.” His eyes are windows, green window pools—like an absinthe-esque potion that when looked upon truth is revealed. My eyes are windows, brown and dirty, opaque and muddy. She slams on the brakes and nearly avoids rear-ending a rusty brown Datsun truck from, like, 1982. Fuck! Yeah, that would have been just perfect. As the song fades out, she resumes.

One More Weekend

Damn, this album is prophetic. She was, in fact, in town through the weekend. She had no idea where she was staying. While that was slightly stressful, it correlated exactly with her philosophy that, no matter what, she would be taken care of. She rather liked the prospect of being a mid-western vagabond, nomad, bum anyway. Of course, maybe, she hoped, I can stay with him? But, no, she wasn't going to harbor such naïve hopes again. He's fucking married now, anyway.

The Man in Me

God, we were perfect. I really fucked things up. Damn it, so did he though. Ten more minutes and I'll see him.
“No! Holy shit, no! You can't.”

“I know; I don’t want to. But . . . I have to. I’ve worked for this for ten years.”

“But, I was ready . . . I was going to; I really was . . .”

The thought of his tears unleashed hers. I told him I’d be back as often as possible and here I am. Her empathy and the concern she had for his feelings (he was her favorite human being) lifted her out of the speeding machine that was leading her to him, where the river comforted her, the sun embraced her, the cool, crisp waning winter air kissed her with hints of spring, and the arms of the sky placed her gently back behind the wheel.

Three Angels

To the right was the old bakery. She remembered the smell of it; the odiferous ghost of it was haunting her. Coming home from work, her nose was often greeted with wisps of an aromatic effervescence she imagined was a large quantity of cinnamon rolls. There was always a playful subtle substance to the air when she drove by the bakery. It always caused her to smile. I can’t believe they closed it down.

She noticed that the Jeep was below empty. Too close now. I’ll make it . . . I hope. A horn blew and startled her. She slammed on her brakes. Fuck, I hate traffic. A white van was stopped in the right lane immediately before her turn into the parking garage.

Asshole, doesn’t even have his hazards on. As she glanced in the rearview to get around the van, a car slowed to let her over. That’s nice. She offered the courtesy wave. As she took the right turn, it occurred to her, maybe he needed help. Glancing back, she saw a tow truck pull up behind the van. Cool. Still could’ve used his hazards though.

The church organ and the choir faded.

Father of Night

Her thoughts turned into positive energy as she pulled into the parking garage. Thank you so much for everything you’ve given me—life, getting here safe, the beautiful morning—the sun; the chilled, refreshing air; the blue sky; clouds; the river (my old friend); Dylan; the Jeep; the birds; budding trees; coffee; dreams and memory; time and distance; comfort and pain; love . . . and, as she turned the final corner, ascending to their “spot” on the third level, as the rear of his Mustang and the back of his head came into view, her final praise was uttered aloud . . . “and him.”

—Josh LoDico



Suzanne Michele Chouteau '83

Genocide of the Conscience: Wounded Knee 1890

2006, woodcut on canvas, 11 inches x 8.5 inches



Heidi Hernandez '05
High Score

2007, oil and enamel on fabric, 48 inches x 48 inches



Heidi Hernandez '05
Pink Poodle

2007, oil and enamel on fabric, 48 inches x 48 inches



Kathryn Anderson

Aufwiedesehen, meine kleinen bluen katzen!

(Goodbye, my little blue cats!)

2006, two-color woodcut, 7 inches x 10.25 inches



Kathryn Anderson
Twain's Marker

2006, intaglio, letterpress and linoleum cut, 7 inches x 9 inches



Brendan Gould '02
Out of Control

2006, oil on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches



Brendan Gould '02
Hero Instinct

2006, charcoal, 10 inches x 7 inches



Les Bell '72
Homeland

2006, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 55 inches



Les Bell '72
Nickel for the Buffalo

2006, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 55 inches



Beth VanDerMolen
Soul Food

2006, oil on canvas, 40 inches x 30 inches



Angela Wilson
Tim's Helmet

2006, gouache on paper, 12 inches x 6 inches



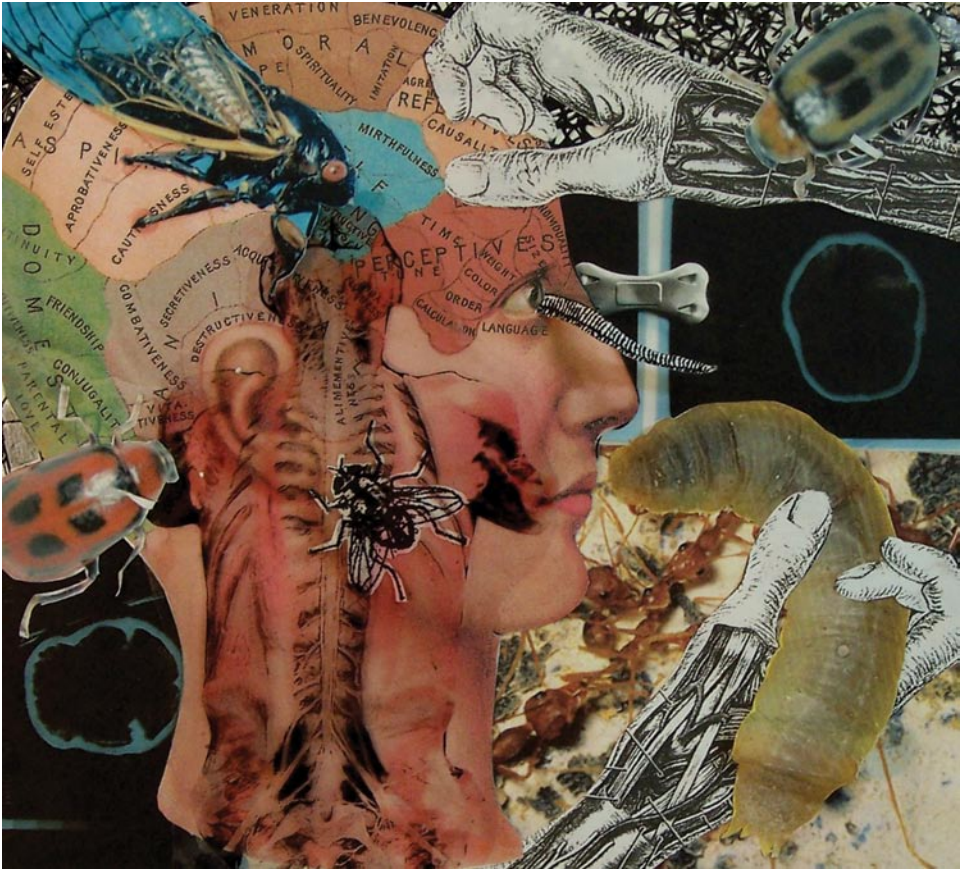
Holly Hunt
Wooden Heart

2007, oil on panel, 24 inches x 34 inches



Aubrey Keimig
Moving Along

2004, photograph, 6 inches x 8 inches



Margaret O'Reilly
Human Dirt

2006, mixed media collage, 3 inches x 5 inches



Andrew Moeller '05
Bordels

2007, oil on canvas, 48 inches x 42 inches

pas tout à fait mort

thank you for not commenting
 on the bruises on my arms
for pretending the iv isn't there

thank you for not asking me
 how i am feeling
for giggling at my greasy hair

thank you for not blaming anyone
 (though it's easy to do)
for mocking the bitchy nurse

thank you for no flowers
 'cause it would have been weird
for not saying it could have been worse

 i know how you must be feeling
you manage to keep your eyes calm
 i am lucid enough to see you shake

 i know you want me out of here
my head on your chest
 i know you're glad this is not my wake

your touch
 your voice
reminds me it's okay
 to cry

your laugh
 your face
reminds me I am
 still alive

—*Claire Richards*

Work Harder

work harder
cry softer

2 am. Closing eyes. Hiding from reality. Pretending sleep is approaching. Deflecting worries, memories, innate tendencies, feelings.

work harder
cry softer

5 am. Mexico sounding better. Fun, free, fanciful. Shun electricity, shun accountability, shun the consumerist needs. Mexico violently invading apathetic dreams.

work harder
cry softer

8am. Believe the lies. Play house. Regurgitate witticisms. Politely compliment. Cleanliness is next to godliness.

work harder
cry softer
dream of Mexico

—*Claire Richards*

Easter Monday

1990

A contest—to see who could hold their breath the longest: me, the youngest at five and a half, secretly letting up on one side of my nose, making faces like this was hard, while secretly fascinated by watching the others squirm, torturing themselves. For what—I wondered, bewildered—to be the person who could fight the body the hardest, to come closest to death?

I didn't want to win. I just wanted to watch these kids, turning blue, bouncing their heads up and down. And if I admitted I'd stopped they would pronounce me the loser and would end their own agonies, I didn't want that. You're all champions, I thought.

2004

I was nineteen.

For the first time, my best friend said she was staying the night at my house, while I said I was staying at hers. We walked into his house, ignoring all the offers, the horrible offers coming from every male in the place.

Finally he came down and led us away into the bedroom, where we could sit on the mattress. He would play the guitar; we could talk. The triangle passing weed in the room didn't pay any attention to us. He got me a beer. The bed began to move, and the pile of covers and clothes in between us on the bed separated as a girl whose transparent skin clung to her bones came up from the middle. She struggled to grab another beer but passed out again on the floor before she could open it.

He took my hand and said he wanted to show me something. Ignoring my friend shaking her head at me, I went. In the other room, he started kissing me. Right away, she came in to interrupt, and I was glad I didn't have to tell him to stop. Walking toward where most of the noise seemed to be coming from, we went into the main room. There was crying, and I saw four guys taking care of a baby, tenderly, lovingly—four dealers offering their comfort to the round child. I saw a guy with rims spinning on his shoes. He was violent, I learned, trigger happy. "People just can't talk to

him.” So I didn’t. We made our way back to the bedroom. The triangle was no longer smoking the herb. I had no idea what they had moved on to doing. The three of us leaned back on the mattress. We fell asleep.

I awoke in the morning to wandering hands. My friend said we should get home. We hoped we hadn’t been missed and couldn’t believe we had actually found it in us to do this. We asked if the skinny girl who had passed out was okay; she still looked pretty sick. Yeah, she was okay—just pregnant. And on too many drugs. He gave me a hug, and something to keep. We drove the hour back home, hoping we could air out before encountering anyone, any parents. I was trying to think of how to explain this to my boyfriend. I was trying to push that baby out of my head.

—*Ashley Johnson*

Day by Day

“This is it,” I told myself as the alarm buzzed next to my head. “This is the day I am going to kill myself.”

I did have a few things to get done first—starting with turning off the damn alarm clock. Why had I bothered setting it anyway? Why couldn’t I have just let myself sleep in on this big day?

I turned, punched the clock’s off button, got up, and looked at myself in the mirror. My hair was kind of curly this morning. Why couldn’t I ever get it to look this good when I tried? I still needed to shower, and I knew that when I got out it would go back to being flat—thin and stringy was my usual look. Oh, what did I care anyway?

I felt like I didn’t yet have enough energy to step into the shower; the hair could stay for now. I decided to get a little breakfast to wake me up a little. There was nothing good in the cupboards. In fact, they were practically empty. The grape juice was pretty old too. For some reason, going to the store hungry seemed like it would be easier than showering hungry, so I put on some jeans and headed down the block.

It was a beautiful day. Would it be better to die on a gloomy day? Probably, but I had already determined the night before that this would be the day. Besides, I could still die on a nice day—it just wouldn’t be as artsy. Well, who did I think I was, some genius who had perfected the art of dying? Why should my death be perfect?—my life never was.

At the store I contemplated what grape juice to get. There was my usual—the brand I always got. And then there was a new kind that was on sale and even had arrows pointing to it. Checking the bottles side by side, I realized that this new kind actually contained 2.5 more ounces of juice; plus, it was cheaper. But what about the ingredients? All of the important ones—grapes, pear juice, and sugar—were listed almost identically. However, some of the preservatives were different.

“Can I help you with something?” asked an eager clerk.

“Oh, no. I’m fine, thank you.” Yeah, fine. I was standing there contemplating grape juice as if my life depended on it. Well, in a way it did. I mean, with this being my last drink of grape juice, I didn’t want to blow it. I thought I should stick with my kind—I knew I liked it; it had never failed me before. But then what if this new kind was even better? I would never know. I felt weak. I sat down on the bottom part of the shelf, still holding my grape juices.

From down the aisle, the clerk was giving me a strange look. Why couldn’t he go organize another aisle? He was headed my way, looking uncomfortable. I knew he was going to tell me not to sit on the shelf.

I bolted up, cradling a bottle in each arm, and darted to the next aisle. Food. I needed to find something for breakfast. Just something small—I didn't think having a lot of food in my stomach when I died would be a good idea. But nothing looked good. I was a little nervous about what I was going to be doing, so I didn't want anything that would upset my stomach. Bread, bagels, donuts . . . too heavy. Fruit, oatmeal . . . too healthy. Eggs, pancakes, French toast . . . too filling. I thought I would get a Pop-tart. You could never go wrong with Pop-tarts.

I made my way into the Pop-tart aisle, setting down the bottles of grape juice while I made my next big choice. I was pretty confident with my decision to have Pop-tarts. But then I needed to pick out what kind. You know, there used to only be, like, strawberry and cherry. These days, there was hot fudge sundae, wild berries, Sponge Bob . . . just looking at each box had the potential of taking up my entire morning. I decided to categorize the boxes. Did I want fruit or sweet, colorful or plain, frosted or unfrosted? The last question was easy—who would want an unfrosted Pop-tart? That would just be gross. White frosting would be good. I looked at all the Pop-tarts frosted in white. Strawberry fit the category, but it did have sprinkles. I thought I should have sprinkles on the day I died. Yes, I went with the strawberry. Everyone should have sprinkles when they die.

I added the box to my little pile of grape juice on the floor. I wanted to go put one back but thought the clerk might still be hanging around.

I picked up the Pop-tarts and looked around nervously; I wondered if anyone knew what I was up to. I would just act normal, like nothing was going on. No one else was in the aisle with me. I turned and walked out, taking an impulsive left turn to the refrigerator and freezer section. I just needed to calm down. Frozen juice!—I hadn't even thought of getting frozen juice! Yes, one most definitely needed frozen juice on the day she was going to die.

With this in mind, I grabbed a can of frozen orange juice, glad that I had left the two grape juices sitting in the other aisle. Now I had my food and my drink, and my breakfast could be complete.

As I got in line for the cash register, I wondered whether I should pay in cash or use my credit card. It was not like I would need cash after this, but if I used my credit card, I would never technically pay for what I bought. I was pretty sure that the total would come to \$4.62 with tax.

As the woman rang me up, I prepared to hand her the \$4.62. When she started to announce the price but saw that I was already holding it out, she looked surprised. That was fun.

With only two items, I didn't really need a bag. The orange juice was beginning to get wet, though, and was making my hand cold. I would have hated having one hand warm and dry and the other hand wet and cold. I requested two bags. Not only would this prevent the Pop-tart box from getting soggy, but it would also distribute the weight between each arm. Not that the weight was even, but I could at least put the strap of my purse on the lighter side and then I wouldn't even have to switch that from one shoulder to the other.

Once everything was properly adjusted, I began my walk home. The sky didn't look as bright as it had earlier. Maybe the day I died could be gloomy after all. Who wanted the world to brighten when they died? No one. I thought the world should mourn everyone's death. But I knew that wasn't really the case. The world was probably going to shine brighter once I was out of it.

Back at the house, I set the Pop-tarts in the toaster and pushed down the button. Then I spent a lot of time trying to unpeel the can of orange juice to get the lid to pop up. Once that was accomplished, I mixed the orange juice with water and some sugar in my pitcher. I hadn't thought of making sure the water I was running was cold, and so the juice was quite warm. I decided to put it in the freezer, just for a few minutes.

My Pop-tarts were already popped up. I was pretty distraught about this because I like to pop the button before it comes up on its own. My setting is usually slightly higher than it needs to be. Now the Pop-tarts were curvy and a little burnt at the edges.

With a knife I tried cut off the very edge of the burnt crust. Sadly, one of the entire sides of crust fell into the sink. That was okay, though. I had almost two Pop-tarts and some orange juice. I would make it just fine. I checked on the orange juice. It still wasn't cold enough. I wandered around the house while I waited, checking on the juice periodically. Finally, it was cold enough to drink. I took the pitcher out of the freezer, poured some juice into a glass, and put the rest into the fridge. I went over to retrieve my Pop-tarts, but they were no longer warm. I decided to just put them in the microwave for a few seconds. As I did this, I realized that it was almost lunch time and I hadn't even finished making my breakfast!

When the Pop-tarts came out, the outsides felt just right. But I knew the inside would be even hotter, so I broke each Pop-tart into two pieces, allowing the insides to cool. These days, the boxes even warned about the risk of a Pop-tart with hot inside filling, but I had already figured that out

before it was put on the box. Even with it written on the box, I felt that one must learn by experience.

I finished my breakfast standing at the counter. Next came shower time. I headed into my bedroom to pick out the clothes that I wanted to wear when I got out. Because I was going to be dying later that day, I thought my outfit would be pretty important. I was sure that everyone would pick out their death outfits if they knew, like I did, when they were going to die.

Some of my top choices were already dirty from me wearing them earlier in the week. I settled on my next choice and then hopped into the shower. I scrubbed furiously, making sure that I was clean enough for my own death. I would never have a chance to clean myself again, so doing it vigorously to make it last longer seemed rather important.

When I got out, I put on my clothes, but I realized that they would simply not do for my death outfit. I would either have to do the laundry or go shopping. Shopping would mean another trip outside, though, and I had already done that. I would do a load of laundry. My pants were dark, and my shirt was light. Well, I knew that I also needed to wash a nice pair of underwear. Who knew what the mortician and other people would be doing with my body? I needed to make sure I had nice underwear on, because it would just be embarrassing not to.

Throwing my nice lacy panties and my shirt into the washer, I considered throwing in my pants as well. I couldn't do it. There was no way I was going to risk anything going wrong by mixing my lights and darks. I would hate to sabotage my death outfit on the very day I was going to die. No, if I was going to experiment, I should have tried it earlier so that I would have had time to buy new clothes if it hadn't worked out. I just had to do two loads, and that was all there was to it.

As I waited for the first load, I walked around my house some more, trying to tidy the place up a bit. I didn't know who would be the first person to realize that I was dead, but really, I would want it to be clean for any visitor, so it needed to be cleaned. Some of the rugs needed shaking. How had I missed that? Yesterday, I had cleaned the entire house, and I hadn't even thought to shake the rugs. I took each rug out individually and gave it a good shaking right on the porch. By the time I was finished, I was able to move the wet clothes into the dryer and the dirty clothes into the washer.

I was already feeling hungry again. Really, not much time had passed since my breakfast, but according to the clock, lunchtime had come and

almost gone. I needed to fix myself something to eat quickly, before the laundry was finished. Again, I thought that I shouldn't eat too much right before I died, so I just had a piece of stale bread that I found in the cupboard. It wasn't much, but I toasted it and spread it with butter.

At death row, I had heard, the inmates got to pick what they wanted for their last meal. They could have absolutely anything. I guessed that most of them probably got big fancy meals full of their favorite food. I was not in the mood for anything big, fancy, or favored. Plain and simple was the best way to eat before one died. You wouldn't want to die all bloated.

When the first load was finished drying, I moved the newly washed clothes into the dryer. Now wearing my clean panties, I hesitated putting on my dirty jeans. Having just come out of the dryer, my shirt wasn't too wrinkled. But really, one needs to iron their death outfit. I went ahead and ironed it just to make sure there weren't any invisible wrinkles. As usual, I had to go over it again and again. I always ironed wrinkles in, and then I had to take more time to iron them back out again. The iron hated me.

As soon as all the clothes were clean and pressed, I got dressed. I looked out the window for a moment, remembering that I had just shaken the rugs. So the porch needed to be swept. I found the broom in its usual place and headed outside. With all of this dust being pushed around, I had to be extra careful not to let it land on my nice clean clothes. As I swept, I heard someone stepping toward the house and began to panic. I looked up and stepped back.

"Oh, it's only me—same as always, here with your mail, you know."

"Oh, well you startled me."

"I'm sorry about that. Here's your mail."

"Well, thank you. Are you running early today? It can't possibly be that late in the day already."

"No, ma'am, I'm right on schedule. Have a good evening now. And remember that I'll be here to see you this same time tomorrow."

"Of course you will, but I won't be able to be here tomorrow."

"Come, now. You'll be here, same as always. You never think you'll be around, but you always happen to make it home by the time I get here."

I smiled at him, feeling bad that the next day he would realize that I really wasn't there. I hoped he wouldn't be the one to figure out that I was dead. He seemed like a naively delicate little man; he always had a smile on his face. And he did so enjoy talking to me. I was sure he would be upset if he were to be the one to find me.

Finally, I figured that I had done everything that was necessary, but I wanted to make sure. I lay down on my bed again, and thought once more about what I needed to do. Nothing was coming to me. I thought that I had done everything required to prepare for my death.

Once again I headed into the kitchen, this time returning with knives, prescriptions, and alcohol. I set them all down at the foot of my bed and then sat at the head of my bed and looked at them. This was a bit intimidating, especially with the room being so bright. I felt like I was in a spotlight. No, dying was going to be discreet for me. I would do it alone, in the dark, and on my own terms. I went to the switch by the door, turned off the light, and returned to bed. Once again, I lay down. I thought about what I was going to do. I had pretty much done everything to prepare for this, but there was no way to be sure that I had gotten everything done in just one day. The best thing would be to wait a little and make sure nothing else came to mind. I reached over to my alarm clock and set it for bright and early. If I came up with something else overnight, I could get it done in the morning. Then I could kill myself. “Yes, tomorrow I will kill myself.”

—*Ashley Johnson*

Idols

You packed them in your bags and stood communal
On a staircase gross with fatigue. Without them—
There were no rooms in your house to speak of,
Just floorboards dropped like place cards
Around the table of a moment—
Moments that are arched then buried
Like the shoddy entrails of a cloister.

You could have left them there and come alone,
But you carried them, brought them here,
Dredged your idols and their burdens along,
Your Virgin and Joseph, the wagging fingers of old.
As close friends you settled them around you.
Your only solacet—gilded marble
With that blank stare of fornication.

You thought yourself a godsend with your loyalty;
Your ancestors may have thought you wise
As your idols listen from above,
Your words a shouldered burden.
But those glossy cheeks are not your accusers,
So you caress and kiss them as if they were your own,
Your steely-eyed sentinels.

What have you done—
That you must place yourself among them.
I knew the company you keep only betrays you.
Oh, how I hide from your hours,
Frailer than your mutter and your dead speak.
It is only me that is certain—
With them you are not free, but exposed.

—*Carrie Chesney '03*

Three Sonnets

The reverence I hold for Spring's return
Informs my fervor for forsythia blooms:
A woody thicket, all bare-twigged and stern,
In early April aspect new assumes.
Fine buds begin to bulge at dead twigs' tips,
Where small gray bunchings hiding new life's shoots
Catch eyes in search of signs that Winter's grip
Lets loose and longer days indeed thaw roots.
Such hints minute appear each day I view
My bushes, whose round buds to points now grow,
And peeking out from barky flaps, a hue
Of yellow starts to set the hedge aglow:
 In two days' time, each sunny point unfurled
 Makes stars of light to dance upon the world.

Forsythias have gone to green, alas,
Their April brightness dropped like falling stars
Whose gleams of yellow in the distance flash
Across my memory. Death mars
The fragile burst of flowering refulgence.
The slender yellow petals browned and sank
Through grass to earth; they were Nature's indulgence.
Undaunted, Spring draws forth her second flank
To reinforce her fallen golden troops,
Their formal dress in purples, whites, and pinks.
The flowering crab, arms blossom-full, regroups;
The redbud's wispy blush through green screens blinks.
 But of the blooming companies of May,
 The clustered lilacs lustrously hold sway.

Lilacs are like that. It's hard to know
What makes them please the most: their look, their smell?
Composed of tiny coronets that blow
Perfume, each curly cluster seems to swell,
Its white or purple fragrance pouring forth

From velvet, dark, curvaceous pointed leaves.
They lead the charge of Spring for all they're worth,
But when their petals change to brown she grieves,
And drops her faded crown at Summer's feet.
She, smiling, summons zealous ensigns proud,
Waving heavy-petaled banners bright to greet
The sun and heat. The shaggy-headed crowd
Of zinnias—tall State Fairs, brash Dreamlands short,
Brusk mid-sized Ruffles—riotous, holds court.

—*Nancy Hayes*

Lied IV

In so hoher swebender wunne
so gestuont min herze ane vroiden nie.
Ich var, als ich vlieden kunne,
mit gedanken iemer umbe sie,
sit daz mich ir trost enpfie,
der mich durch die sele min
mitten in daz herze gie.

Swaz ich wunnecliches schouwe,
daz spile gegen der wunne, die ich han.
Luft und erde, walt und ouwe
suln die zit der vroide min enpfan.
Mir ist komen ein hugender wan
und ein wunneclicher trost,
des min muot sol hohe stan.

Wol dem wunneclichen maere,
daz so suoze durch min ore erklanc,
und der sanfte tuonder swaere,
die mit vroiden in min herze sanc,
da von mir ein wunne entspranc,
diu vor liebe als am ein tou
mir uz von den ougen dranc.

Saelic si diu sueze stunde,
saelic si diu zit, der werde tac,
do daz wort gie von ir munde,
daz dem herzen min so nahen lac,
daz min lip von vroide erschrac,
und enweiz von liebe joch,
waz ich von ir sprechen mac.

—*Heinrich von Morungen (late 12th century)*

Song IV

Floating in such high delight
my heart has never known such joy.
I go around as if with wings,
my thoughts always encircling her,
since I received her solace,
which cut through my soul
to the center of my heart.

Each delightful sight I see
plays off the delight in me.
Air and earth, wood and meadow
greet the season of my joy.
To me has come a rising hope
delighting consolation,
lifting high my spirit.

Bless that delightful tale,
sounding so sweetly in my ear,
and the gently working heaviness,
sinking so joyfully into my heart.
Such delight sprang up in me,
that a dew of love
welled into my eyes.

Blessed be that sweet hour,
blessed be that season, that worthy day,
when from her mouth came the word,
which lay so near my heart
that my being was startled with joy.
Under the yoke of love, I do not know
what I might speak of her.

—*Nancy Hayes*

Northern Pike

I

In the American heartland
I have seen the shining stars pricking
frayed window blinds in cheap motels
and watched the Grand Canyon gaping
like the rotted mouth of a glue mule.
And I've returned to a river
bending through my father's homeland
and whispered over sheer skin
in the valley of a woman's back,
a woman I loved too deeply,
and explored into those hidden lands
opening buttons of mature flesh
unburdened by vowels or consonants,
and secured the touch of her beauty
dreaming in the pores of night.

II

My father lacked the heart
to fillet twin warriors, captive
northern pike he named Cain and Abel
in weeks and months to follow -
so vicious . . . and alive with death to a boy,
their teeth metal tools like hooks
torn from lips and tearing my eyes,
and they would never stop thrashing
under a dusted moon held close
by the fingerprints of his cloudless nights,
before his own heart gave out
and the green smoke from his cigars
cleared through to the muddy shore
where he had warned of their flesh
being too old to season and trophies

an expense we could not afford, no matter
how the folded bills shaped his wallet.

III

His voice was flat and withholding,
and I was so young when he dragged
the beasts into dark waters they sought,
to the mudflats that would heal until
they surfaced with light to feed again.

The chase of light long ended,
in a knot of time tied to the years
I must now forgive, those known sins
surfacing with a father and a man.

—*Chuck Blair '76*

The Whendow

No one will sleep with me
at the downtime of an evening
passing the eye's green tide
along a wash of leaves.
In the boundary waters
my fountain of breath is setting
between twin husks of moon
rippling like breasts
over the lovers' cornfield.

No one will sleep with me.

When blood falls from buildings
in a cloud of dust
on what seems a foreign plateau
and my feet like rivers break
from the face of the earth
no one will bathe me with sleep.

Scars with dirty hands
sleep in my doorway.
And out my window poplars sleep
under their umbrellas.

After her troubled walk
the nighthawk will sleep with me
until she twists her nest
around the stolen heart
—ties this one to my body—
only the proud hawk soaring
in a mother's cobalt stare.

I'll sleep beside fingers torn
from their rooted hands.
On the soul's pitched wing I'll sleep
at the distant shores of America.
Watched by tears of glue
under the asp of silence,
I'll sleep alone as if escaping
in the bell's deep toll
hidden by dimensions of air
over freckled surfaces of sand.

—*Chuck Blair '76*

Ode: What To Do with Dead Words

Haunt them first . . .

Brush their serifs so they look oh so pretty
at the best of breed event . . .

Suck their syntax till they laugh . . .

Then sell them for bat feed at the erotic pet store . . .

Donate them to the Chaucer Foundation
as a tax write-off . . .

Train them to sit up and beg and not lick
their passionate butts . . .

Throw them into the deep end till they sink
or rhyme . . .

Bury them in a time capsule with plumed tulips
and a soap opera . . .

Feed them stones from the birthplace of the wind . . .

Blend them into haiku . . .

Let them gallop on the shores of a bald man's head . . .

Call them to supper with gossip columnists
and slow pelted fish . . .

Stitch them into Oma's quilt . . .

Tie them up with homework . . .

Erase them with the hoots and howls of hooligans
ripping down Main Street . . .

Round them up with the hyphens and semi-colons . . .

Then burn them with the sestinas . . .

Give them a big missile toe and big sloppy kisses
on guarded tongues . . .

Cut & paste to parchment till they have meaning . . .

Avoid their periods and nibble their gerunds . . .

Drink their blood of ink and howl at the moon
on lonely nights . . .

And when the moon howls back, make them sleep
in the settled dust of the last sliver and dream
the broken arc of the hangman's fragile noose . . .

Translate them into Latin . . . or French . . .

Transfer them to the mailroom . . .

Hide them in an epic . . .

Read to them from the Oxford English Dictionary,
all twenty volumes and all three additions . . .

Edit their editions . . .

Release their balderdash in the tiring room . . .

Wait for the wheels and roll them away . . .

Dress them in Dead Sea Scrolls, but please, no mink . . .

Let Mr. Bates embalm them in the basement . . .

Freeze them inside the snowman whose purple
heart fills with war . . .

Encrypt them in the bowels of your iMac . . .

Copy them to black paper . . .

Then crumple and stack like cordwood . . .

And mostly mourn them . . .

Till you realize you can't resurrect them and you
can't kill 'em . . .

You must know they're never really dead at all
and the white page never suffered the slow
light of beginning . . .

They walk in limbo and mock you just because
you're so easy to trip up on your awkward
sentences and never learned how to tie
your own shoes . . .

Then suddenly you're in this flick where the villain
doesn't die till you nuke him into the sequel . . .

And you're left with Eve bobbing for Jonathans
at the Paradise Bar & Grill in the slow wake
of laughing mallards . . .

Dead words sneak up on you like that, writing
from the lap of Hollywood . . .

Little brothers and sisters, we are all scattered over
the tongue's landscape, and what holds us in
a lonely eye sets itself free in sober dark and
is written here too on the empty grave . . .

—*Chuck Blair '76*

Three Strange Men on Camels

Wise men? Who could call them wise?
Those three who took off in the night
on those smelly camels
across the desert wastes,
in that cold December air,
to follow the light of that strange star
(I guess it was a star, but it kept moving).

It wasn't a run for charity,
and they were not celebrities,
at least not then, and anyway
there weren't any press releases or
advance men, unless you count that guy
who lived in the desert eating locusts.
It was silly, because they weren't even Jewish,
those funny looking "kings,"
and yet there they went, carrying a bunch of
gifts to some poor newborn Jewish kid
whose parents could not even find a good hotel room.

And one of those kings was black—Was Baltasar
the genius who organized such a hare-brained trip
or did he just tag along with Melchior and Gaspar
whom he had chanced to meet at the last
conference of the Rulers of Small Persian Kingdoms?

Just gullible, I guess. But they got the Word
from somewhere, and they believed.
They did not question and try to analyze,
and they did not write great books.
Analysis and cynicism were not their things.
They just followed that bright star
in wonderment and awe,
asking no questions.

Naive as they were, they knew enough to
go home by the backroads
but what did they do then?
Did they spend a lifetime, each one,

wondering what happened to that child
they thought was King?
Or did they die in their far-off lands
before that King began to teach?
And if they lived, did they scoff and say
“We were fools to believe such nonsense . . .”

Or did they look up again to Heaven and
Thank God for the Star?

—*Ralph G. Smith '47*















Sense of Self

Where am I? Taking stock of surroundings. Inside.

The room is cold and dry. Dark. The edges of the windows, below the blackout curtains, glow—daytime. Blinking LEDs break the gloom, create reference points. Red—the answering machine. Green—the computer. There is noise, but it is white. It fills the room like cotton. The computer whirs. The air conditioner grumbles. The dehumidifier purrs. The fridge hums. The room is spare, almost empty. Concrete floor; low, claustrophobic ceiling. No furniture. A bare, twin-sized mattress in a corner. There is no phone. The answering machine sits atop a mini-fridge, plugged directly into the wall. The computer sits beside it on the floor. No monitor—just a modem atop a fat, black tower. A jumble of cables and wires emerge from a hole in the side. There is a keyboard but no mouse.

My gaze meanders across the room. All is strange yet still familiar.

Who am I? Taking stock. Looking within.

The space is hazy but feels like home. Warm and moist. It is large, filled from top to bottom with bookcases and their moldering contents. Most are too far away to see. Details are blurred with the drifting mists. Nearby, a glass screen hangs in the air. It is shaped like a large lens: circular, smooth, curved.

The screen draws closer until it fills my vision. Shifting and flickering images fill the screen: words, shapes, faces. The words are mine, but they swim before my eyes. The shapes are cryptic symbols: abstract, geometric, animated. The faces are strange, alien. The faces of machines.

I want to stay in this place. It feels like home. It feels like me.

A sound penetrates the haze. A clicking noise, followed by an electronic voice: the answering machine: Leave a Message. A piercing beep.

From the machine, someone speaks: angry, impatient words. The voice startles and frightens me. The screen shatters and falls away. The mist condenses, crackles, falls. Disappointment draws me back outside.

A man sits on the mattress, back against the wall. His eyes are open, but unfocused, staring blankly ahead. Within disheveled, baggy clothes, his body is atrophied. He does not move. He hardly breathes.

Is this me?

He starts, eyes fluttering, chest heaving. He coughs, violently, a goblet of phlegm issuing from his mouth. It lands on the hard floor with an audible splat.

The man stretches, slowly. Long unused joints creak and pop. He yawns, then smacks his mouth. His tongue feels swollen; the inside of his

cheeks are coated with a thick, bitter scum. His knees pop as he stands. He takes one tottering step onto the floor before he falls backwards. His body has grown weak. He stands again, and this time manages to get moving. He shuffles toward the little fridge.

The mini-fridge is nearly as desolate as the room. Inside are ten empty plastic bottles; two bottles with water, one half-empty; a block of moldy, sharp cheddar; a few slices of stale bread; and a bottle of thick, brownish liquid.

The man's right hand reaches out, guided by instinct, or some invisible force, and grasps the open bottle of water. He settles onto the cold floor and drinks deeply. He does not close the refrigerator. After emptying the water bottle, he carefully returns it to the fridge, beside the others.

This body feels strange, awkward. It hurts to be here. I long to be back inside, where it is warm. Still, as the aching and churning begins, I know it is true. This pathetic sack of flesh is my body, and it is hungry. Feeling like an awkward puppeteer, I carefully maneuver my hands back into the fridge and extract the bread and the bottle of brown liquid. I lift the bread to my mouth, and miss twice before succeeding. Chewing mechanically, I force down two slices of the tough, dry bread, and wash it down with some of the liquid. The substance is thick and bitter, but fills this aching body with a numb, soothing warmth.

I stand up, moving as quickly as my withered body will tolerate. This shell has begun to feel natural again but it won't last long. I can't remember how long I was out, who my current employer is, or what he wanted, but it doesn't matter. I always leave reminders for myself inside.

My body is already going numb as I light the incense burners near the computer. The dim colors of the room begin to swim as I snatch the pillow from the mattress and toss it down in front of the keyboard. The cocktail of hallucinogens and depressants have a rapid effect.

I plop myself down on the pillow and almost fall over. Catching myself with one hand, I pull the keyboard into my lap with the other. After righting myself, I reach into the tangle of cables and wire to extract a pair of earbuds. I tuck them in and am immediately enveloped in a wash of low sounds resembling the throat singing of Tibetan monks overlaid with electronic clicks, beeps, and whistles. My body swoons as I tuck my legs into a lotus. I am finally ready. Taking a deep breath and closing my eyes, I drop my hands to the keyboard.

The screen, my launch point into the spiritual network, reappears. The voice of my computer surfaces from the depths of the haze, filling.

me in on all that happened while I was outside. My computer delights in gossip. This used to annoy me, but the computer has started to learn my tastes, and now reports primarily on useful things.

Work. I have work to do. I move away from the screen and into the mistier regions of my mind, seeking recollection of what I needed to know—who I'm working for, what the work is, where to deliver, etc. The voice of the computer fades from my ears as I move away. For a while I am distracted as I reexamine my neglected memories. They have faded badly.

I sigh as I move back to the screen. I settle in and begin to work, moving along the lines and pathways, through server and router. As I seek my target, I take the time to consider my situation.

I can't do this job until I've almost completely broken down my sense of self. Once my boundaries have suffered near-total destruction, I can talk with the machines, but I start to forget who I am. Am I this sack of flesh filled with blood, bone, and gristle, or am I this box of chips, wires, and transistors? Or something else?

As I seek out the data I'm paid to retrieve, part of me starts to wonder, yet again, why I should even come back at all. I used to think I did it to keep my body alive, that it was necessary. I work to live; I live to work. I am no longer certain. Is it necessary? These thoughts will fade soon enough, as I forget who I am. I'll be left with nothing but a job: a vague sense of urgency pushing me forward as I cajole my way through the networks. That is what scares me the most. I don't care much about my body any longer.

But those memories. The faded books in this hazy room. My first kiss, my brother's face, my parents' names. They are all starting to disappear. Without them, who am I? It no longer frightens me that I have forgotten my own name. But just how much can I lose before it all fades? When I lose my sense of self, what will be left behind?

—*Brian Peters*

Self-control

She went home alone, just like always. As always, Sarah had invited her to share a cab. And as always, Keirlin turned her down, despite Sarah's logical argument. She would say, "It's not like we're in a nice part of town here, K. A lot of things could happen between here and your house." This was true, and Keirlin would never dispute it. But it just didn't matter to her. It all came down to her philosophy of personal control, evolved several stages since that fateful night in her bathroom with the vegetable knife.

She would not allow fear to take control. "Sarah fears because she lacks control," Keirlin thought. "I will not fear, because I have control. Nothing can hurt me except me."

"I'll be fine, Sarah," she said as she started to head off down the dark street. "I'll give you a call later."

Sarah chewed her lip, watching Keirlin from the open window of the taxi's back seat. "Okay, well . . . be careful."

Keirlin laughed.

Keirlin was lost in her thoughts as she walked down the desolate streets, winding between abandoned warehouses. A lot of things went through her mind that night, as she indulged in more self-reflection than usual. She was a girl who was usually very focused on the physical, the practical, the here-and-now. Tonight, however, she found herself reminiscing about a day two years before.

It was a day full of strange synchronicity. It had been about a year since he had broken her heart. She remembered fighting with herself, trying to get over him. She failed, every time. She had decided she would allow nothing to hurt her, but that hadn't stopped the pain. She kept thinking about what she would do if she ever saw him again. When she finally did, it was very different than she had imagined.

In that year Keirlin had changed a lot. She had begun dying her hair and had stopped cutting it. More importantly, she carried herself with confidence. She was no longer a weak, lonely, broken girl. Strength and power filled her. It happened as she was sitting on ground in a park, leaning against a tree. The most bizarre, unlikely coincidence, something that was difficult to believe possible: she heard his voice.

He didn't realize it was her. She had changed. He just saw a girl by herself, examining her bandaged forearms. He asked her if she was hurt.

It was amazing. It felt like fate. She recognized his voice before she even saw him. She smiled and rose to her feet. His warm, fake smile faltered. Did he recognize her or did he just know something wasn't right?

She felt calmer upon actually meeting him again than she had ever

been just thinking about it. She grinned at him, her lips curling in anticipation. "Oh, I am hurt. But I think maybe I can do something about that, now that you're here."

He looked confused and slightly nervous but continued to smile. "I'm not sure what you . . ." He started to back away. He was frightened, but not entirely sure why. He frowned as he studied her more closely. After a moment he blinked and gasped, his face pale, "Keirlin? Oh, shit . . ."

"Good," she said, her grin growing broader. "This wouldn't have been satisfying if you'd forgotten."

His face hardened and he lifted his open hands, palms toward her. "I don't want to hurt you, Keirlin," he said quietly. "Just turn around and leave."

She shook her head. "You're the one who's going to hurt this time." She started to move toward him to attack, but something strange happened.

A wave of powerful emotions hit her suddenly, like a physical force. It was as if her heart was on fire. Her mind filled with images: her dad leaving, her dog dying, the friends she'd left, and him. All the old moments she'd spent with him. It hurt bad. She could barely breathe, her face was covered with sweat, she was bent double as if she had been hit in the stomach.

He looked grim, but satisfied, at her reaction. "Don't make me do it again. Just leave. Now."

At that moment, Keirlin's reminiscence was broken by another voice, shaking her back into the present. She looked around, seeing that she was on the edge of the industrial district, still in a dark street with no lights or occupied buildings nearby. A dark shape was moving towards her. She sighed and muttered, "Damn," under her breath.

"Hey, girl," the man said, grinning in a distinctly unsavory manner. "Why don't ya slow down there for a minute. I wanna talk to ya."

Keirlin had already stopped. She wasn't afraid, just annoyed. She slipped her hands into the pockets of her coat as she waited for him to approach.

One hand emerged from the man's dirty leather coat, a cigarette between the first two fingers. He twiddled it, lifting it in front of his mouth. "Ya gotta light?"

She shrugged, and grunted, "Sorry. Don't smoke." The fingers of her right hand wrapped around the thin, cold object hidden in her pocket.

The man's lip curled. "Well, shit. Don't that just suck?" Suddenly his other hand was out of his coat, brandishing a pistol which he pointed at her belly while the other dropped the cigarette and moved to grab her shoulder. "Why don't ya just give me yer fuckin' money then?"

She sighed and looked up, right into his face. She shook her head. "Sorry. Don't got any."

The man pushed down on her shoulder, hard, while bringing his knee up, shoving it right into her belly, below the ribs. She doubled over, gasping for breath, the sudden pain wracking her body with a brief shudder. She'd expected it, but it still hurt. The man switched his grip on the gun, holding it by the barrel. He lifted it up over his head and then brought it down in a wide arc, whipping the butt of the grip over the top of her head.

It sent her sprawling to the ground, the inside of her head exploding with pain. "Shit, shit, shit," she thought to herself. Her ears were ringing, her eyes were streaming, and she was groaning, but on the inside she was laughing. "This is perfect," she thought as she rolled over onto her stomach. She was face down on the ground, coughing and gasping from the pain, her hands still buried inside her coat pockets. As she slowly moved up onto her knees, pulling her hands from her pockets to prop herself up, the man loomed over her, the gun once again pointed at her, business-end first.

"Now, no more fuckin' around, you stupid bitch. I can just as easy take your shit from your corpse, got it?"

"Got it," she coughed as she turned towards him, starting to pull herself up, bringing her hands together as she lifted them from the ground. She looked up at him, then, smiling despite the dirt covering her face, the bits of asphalt and broken glass sticking into her skin. She lifted her hands towards him, revealing the fresh cuts on her left palm and the small scalpel in her right, shining with wet blood. "I also got this."

The man's eyes widened with momentary surprise and confusion as Keirlin lunged off the ground towards him, he grunted, "Oh for fuck's sake," before pulling the trigger, shooting her right in the chest. The bullet flew through her body as though it offered no more resistance than water. Keirlin grinned at the horrified man.

Later, after the trek home, Keirlin examined herself in the bathroom. With splatters of blood on her face and body and she wasn't feeling pretty, but she took a kind of grim pride in that fact that little of it was hers.

"Just like that day in the park," she thought to herself as she held her gore-caked arms before the mirror. "No guns then, though," she considered as she looked down at the bullet holes in the front of her shirt. She reached behind her, rubbing her back, "Damn. Through the back, too." She sighed. "Even if the blood comes out, it's ruined."

—*Brian Peters*

Bulletproof

Ben Harris arrived in Denver in the summer of 1968 with a college degree and no interest in committing himself to anything he could not easily quit. After a week, he found work selling ice cream from a step-van with Frozen Brownie, Inc. The company, located in Commerce City, was owned by an overweight Middle Eastern family who conducted all transactions behind bulletproof glass. The son slipped an application through the glass window, and when Ben finished, he slipped it back the same way. The son did not ask any questions, and in two days Ben got a call to come to work.

Drivers bought their stock from Frozen Brownie at a reduced rate, and then sold the ice-cream bars from a Frozen Brownie step-van at retail. At the end of the day the drivers refueled and cashed out. After his first shift, the overweight son tallied Ben's money, jotted a note, and passed it through the bulletproof glass.

Ben read it. "What's this?"

"It's what you owe for inventory and gas," the boy said. Ben glanced back at the note, bewildered at having made nothing for his time. The boy leaned towards the protective glass and said, "You're a sub-contractor." Then Ben understood. He did not work for them; he worked for himself.

The next day, he squared his account and made a few dollars. On the third day, he walked away with a pocketful of bills. He restocked the next morning and the cycle began again.

Ben's van played the theme song to the Lone Ranger over a loudspeaker as he drove five miles per hour through the Park Hill neighborhood. For ten hours a day, five days a week, he would see the same streets and the same kids buying the same ice cream. Ben kept his change in a cardboard box on the engine hump beside him. Because he worked for himself, he never took a break and would eat his lunch as he drove. Peddling ice cream, Ben learned after two days, was monotonous, dull, and exhausting.

Ben suspected that some drivers were veterans while others were like him: draft-aged men whom the draft had yet to or would not take. The drivers never went out together after work and few spoke, not even about Martin Luther King's assassination two months earlier or after Robert Kennedy died in California. People kept to themselves and worked alone in identical vans listening to melodies looped over identical loud speakers.

After the fourth day, Ben started having ice-cream dreams. In them he would be in his van peddling treats and making change for the hundreds of children surrounding him. The dreams seemed to last all night and were so vivid, and the Lone Ranger theme song so real, that he hated going to

sleep. He finally asked the girl whose van was beside his about it, and she said that the same thing had happened to her. Hers passed in two weeks, and she thought his would as well. She was right.

She called herself Badger. Ben was not attracted to her, but he was new and she was kind, so he spent time with her. She lived with her father, who had raised her and her brother after their mother died of breast cancer. Badger said she did not remember her.

Ben said, "I can't believe this is your second summer here."

"It's a Zen thing. You're alone and it's peaceful. You're making people happy."

She knew about music and told him where to hear great live shows, and one time they met at the Oxford Hotel to hear a folk singer. When Ben quit four weeks later, however, though he called her once, he never saw her again.

One day, Ben tried to vary the monotony by driving south on streets he normally went north on and north on those he had always gone south on. Moments after turning north onto Quebec, the street marking his route's eastern boundary, a police car appeared behind him with red lights flashing.

Ben handed the officer his license. "I couldn't have been speeding," he said.

"Aurora doesn't permit street vendors," the officer said, looking over the license.

Ben read Pettigrew on the officer's badge. "So, south on Quebec I'm in Denver, north I'm in Aurora?" Pettigrew nodded and began to write out a ticket. Ben explained his misunderstanding, said now that he knew he would never do it again, and thought that would be it.

Pettigrew handed him the ticket. "If you pull away and I hear that music on this side of the street, you're getting another one. You understand?"

Ben took the day off to appeal the ticket, calculating that winning would mean a better return on time invested than working.

At the courthouse, he drew a number and sat in a pew with others waiting to appeal their own citations. When his turn came, the judge dismissed the ticket before Ben finished his explanation. He left the courthouse pleased with the outcome, but disturbed to learn that doing something different, even changing a simple routine, carries a price.

The first time Ben had a gun pulled on him was on another afternoon he drove his van into territory he seldom visited. The neighborhood looked nice with its brick bungalows and trimmed hedges. The street resembled a water park from the spray of so many oscillating lawn sprinklers. Ben noticed a young man jog to the curb and wave to get his attention.

He had long blond hair, pimples visible from a block away, and arms so skinny they might have been sinewy twine. Ben pulled over and stopped.

The young man climbed onto the first step and looked around inside, fixing his eyes on the coins in the cardboard box. He wore blue jeans and a faded T-shirt with the Zig-Zag man stenciled on the front. He cocked his head to the side and grinned.

Ben asked what he wanted. The customer hesitated as if considering the question, then reached behind him and pulled a gun from his waistband. He pointed it at Ben's face.

Still grinning, he said, "That," and nodded to the coins.

In that instant of shimmering movement and decision, Ben saw the gun, the faded T-shirt, and a sprinkler spraying a rainbowed mist in the background, and got mad. Instead of handing him the money, he stepped on the gas. The gunman lost his balance and, right before falling, reached for the cardboard box. The change spilled to the floor, some of it rolling into the street. In the mirror as he drove away, Ben watched him on his knees picking up coins, the gun no longer visible.

He worked two more shifts, then quit. On his last day, Ben returned the unsold stock and left with thirty some dollars and change. He never got a W-2 and he never declared his earnings. He moved and soon found work on a road crew near Frisco, Colorado. On the second Tuesday following the first Monday in November, as he sat drinking beer in a downtown tavern, he watched Nixon become president. He did a shot of Wild Turkey, then went home.

Nine years, a second degree, four jobs, three states, and two loves later, Ben returned to Colorado to direct a program for disabled adults in Aspen Canyon. The adult program operated from the basement of the Nazarene Church.

Soon after Ben started, seventeen-year-old Randy Croel became a client. The Croel family lived in the county near the river in a house so old and ill-treated that even from the highway one could see its lean and the patchwork of sheet metal, odd planks, and bracing supports holding it together. The family was rumored to be inbred, with the elderly patriarch responsible for many of the offspring.

Ben was dubious. Randy was smarter than the other clients and would probably feel out of place. Randy also had a record and was on probation

for shoplifting the year before.

“But Randy has no where else to go,” explained the case manager, who happened to be married to Randy’s probation officer. “The public school won’t take him and he doesn’t meet the guidelines for state institutions. This is it. You’ll have to make it work, Ben.”

On Randy’s third day, and away from staff supervision, he maneuvered a sixteen-year-old female client into a classroom. When a program aide found them, the girl was putting on her underwear. Ben called the school’s director, who first called an attorney and then the police. Tests confirmed what Ben and the staff had suspected. The girl’s parents did not press charges, but Randy had to leave the program.

Randy’s probation officer asked Ben if he could transport Randy to a group home in Boulder that Saturday. The state, he said, would provide a generous stipend and pay Ben for his time. Ben asked his friend Stu to join him for the adventure. Stu worked at the health food store and made it known that he would soon start writing a novel he had already titled *When Nothing Seemed to Matter*.

“The best part is Pink Floyd’s playing that night in Denver,” Ben said. “We drop Randy off and go.”

For the trip, Stu baked pot brownies and Ben packed other road food. Near Vail, Ben handed Randy a Little Debbie’s snack cake and a coke, while he and Stu ate brownies. Thirty minutes later Stu looked at Ben and giggled. When *The Dark Side of the Moon* ended, Stu put in *Wish You Were Here*.

“We have tuna sandwiches,” Ben said to Randy. “And chips.” They sat back, listened to music, and drove into the cloudless blue sky, feeling the Indian summer breeze through the open windows.

They reached Boulder in the early evening, then drove around lost for an hour. Finally, Ben found the group home hidden in a cul-de-sac of identical houses.

Ben turned down the music, feeling more edgy than mellow. “We’re here,” he said, watching Randy in the mirror. “Grab your things and let’s go.” Stu, still wearing sunglasses, reached over and turned up the music.

Ben helped Randy to the front door and rang the bell. When the door opened, Ben handed the man the suitcase, introducing himself and Randy.

“I’m Nick,” the man said, “the house manager. We expected you two hours ago.” Ben smelled spaghetti sauce coming from inside.

Ben gave Nick a manila envelope from the probation office and started backing away. “We got a late start, then we got lost.”

The house manager said, "Who's that in the car?" Ben stopped and glanced at Stu. He had the music turned up, and they could hear it from the house.

"Just a friend."

Nick said, "While Randy settles in, I want you and your friend to come in. We have some questions."

Ben returned to the car. After several attempts, he finally convinced Stu to accompany him back to the house. Nick led them to the front room and pointed to the couch. After they sat down and the springs settled, Ben found himself looking up at Nick and three other counselors sitting across from them on folding chairs. Ben thought they looked too intense and way too serious, and his heart raced as his mouth dried. Stu, still wearing sunglasses, looked pinned to the couch like an insect to a mounting board. Ben wished he had thought to bring eye drops.

"Is Randy on any medication?" a man with frizzy hair asked.

A small female counselor wearing a flannel shirt said, "What do you know about his history? We need to know everything."

An older man leaned forward. He wore a thick watchband and hiking boots, and had his long gray hair tied in a ponytail. "You've been with him for the past five hours. Tell us what he talked about. His anxieties, his hopes."

Ben tried to answer their questions, but his answers led to even more questions. The whole thing unnerved him. His words sounded garbled and his sentences incomplete. He stuttered getting some of the words out. Seeing the bewilderment on their faces did not help. He asked for water.

Finally, Nick leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "We were told you'd be briefing us."

Ben crossed his legs and swallowed, convinced they all knew he was stoned. "We were just supposed to bring him here."

Nick got up and stood behind his chair. "I guess I'll just have to contact the Garfield County office in the morning."

Outside, Ben and Stu stood beside the car. Ben said, "God, that was awful."

Stu looked at his watch. "And we missed the concert."

Two years later, on the day Ben turned thirty-three, Iranian students captured the American Embassy in Tehran and held those inside hostage.

Three days later, he read about an Iranian student in Denver being assaulted outside his apartment by a mob.

The next year on the second Tuesday following the first Monday in November, Ben sat in The Springs restaurant eating dinner. The salad with his favorite poppy seed dressing had been brought to him without charge by his waitress friend, Lyn McFarland. Lyn, a single mother, also cleaned a liquor store twice a week, getting paid off the books. They had met months earlier at the First Methodist's annual rummage sale, when both had reached for the same flannel shirt in a pile of other shirts. He had wanted it for camping, she for a painting smock. They had been together ever since.

He tasted his salad and positioned himself so that he could watch the election returns on the television. Half way into his fish and chips, he watched President Carter concede. Ben put his fork down and listened to the cheers in the restaurant. In the campaign, Reagan had said that government was the problem. It appeared that enough people had agreed with him that he had been declared the winner even before all the polls had closed. Ben watched Lyn serve a table of gleeful Republicans their steak burgers and onion rings. She looked at him and raised her eyebrows as if to say, Now what? Ben stood, placed enough money on the table to cover his meal and tip, and started for the door. At the bar he stopped, ordered a shot of George Dickle, and then walked home.

In early spring, as they shared food on a park picnic table, Lyn asked Ben for a favor.

"I've got to be in Colorado Springs Monday morning," she said. "There's no way out of it." Her three-year-old son, Robbie Burns McFarland, played with his dump truck and molded action figures near them on the grass. "Another custody hearing."

"And you want me to clean the store."

"I hate to ask, but there's no one else." She wore that flannel shirt they had both coveted. Now it was splattered with acrylics and oils, like a Jackson Pollock canvas. "I'm going down Saturday morning to spend the weekend with my parents. I'll be back Monday in time for my shift at the Springs."

He knew about her ex-husband, an officer of some rank stationed at Fort Carson. "I guess that means we won't be snowshoeing Sunday. It might be the last good weekend."

"You can still go."

"Maybe I'll just do that. Right after cleaning the store."

She put her arm around him. "You're a good friend." He put his arm around her. "Just don't forget the burglar alarm," she said.

"I have thirty seconds to disable it. If I don't, the police show up. One problem. I don't know the code."

"That's why I'm giving you this." She handed him a slip of paper. "Don't lose it."

He looked at the slip then put it in his shirt pocket. "I've never done this before."

"You've watched me."

"But not closely." They listened to Robbie's sound effects and imaginary conversations as he played. "Does Captain Cargo understand?"

"He understands he gets to see his dad. This isn't about him, anyway. It's about me. Peter thinks an officer can provide better than a half-time waitress and a part-time janitor. Somehow he knows I've looked into food stamps. I didn't even sign up."

"And now we know what the President wants to do with your tips," Ben said.

She straightened the red bandana covering her hair. "Don't get me started. I have other things on my mind right now."

"He campaigns against taxes but now wants more from waitresses."

"Waiters and bartenders too." She looked away. "Funny, isn't it."

"Hilarious. Working for a non-profit supported by grants, I'm now part of the problem. Somehow it's changed."

Sunday morning, Ben opened the door to Main Street Liquors and deactivated the alarm. The light went from green to red.

In the back, he filled the mop bucket and poured in a pink solution. Ben vacuumed the carpeted floor, then swept and mopped the tiled areas. He returned to the back for his window cleaner and rags. He heard the front door open and realized he had forgotten to lock it. With the rags in his back pocket and the window cleaner in hand, Ben returned to the front. Over the shelves of vodka and rum, he saw two police officers. One had the size of a linebacker, the other a gymnast, and each held a pump-action shotgun pointed at his head. His first thought was How funny, before feeling the room's tension snake through his skin like broken glass. He raised his arms. "I'm just cleaning," he said, hearing his voice sound brittle and shaky.

"Drop the bottle," the linebacker shouted.

Ben let the Windex fall from his hand. Again he said, "I'm just cleaning."

The officers separated and moved forward keeping their shotguns trained on him. "On the floor, now," the linebacker ordered.

Ben obeyed, putting his face flat on the indoor-outdoor carpet. He heard them walk over and felt their weapons pointed at the back of his head.

The linebacker kicked his elbow. "Arms out." Then he kicked his shin. "Spread them." To the gymnast, he said, "Pat him down. I'll search the store."

Ben kept his eyes closed and felt the officer's hands move methodically across his body, stopping to remove the cleaning rag and his wallet.

"I'm just working," Ben said, his voice weak, a whimper more than an explanation.

Moments later, the linebacker returned and said, "It's clear." He asked Ben his name. Ben told him, then answered every question posed as he remained face down, arms and legs out.

The linebacker said, "You told us that you deactivated the alarm."

"The first thing I did."

"Then why's the light red?"

"I entered the code and that's what happened."

"Who owns the store?"

"I'm helping a friend." Ben heard himself becoming exasperated and took a deep breath. "I never asked."

"What's your friend's name?"

Ben told him, then added, "If you know the owner, call him. See if he knows Lyn McFarland. Lyn said she cleared it."

"We have a call in now," the linebacker said.

"Listen," Ben said, "maybe the person who worked last night never set the alarm, and instead of deactivating it, I activated it. That's all I can come up with."

The walkie-talkie crackled, and the linebacker answered. "Landy here. . . . Roger, suspect's in custody, building secure. You got something? . . . Checks out? . . . Copy." The room quieted. "Okay, on your feet," the linebacker named Landy said.

Once up, Ben retrieved his rag and cleaner. "I'm clear?"

"The owner's name is Phyllis Lawton," said Landy. "She didn't like being disturbed on a Sunday morning. She also said it's not the first time a clerk's forgotten to set the alarm."

Relieved, Ben laughed. They had all become good friends.

"My advice," the gymnast said, handing Ben his wallet, "don't be so eager to help out."

The next morning an assassin shot President Reagan. Ben stayed home to watch the television coverage. The day was cold and rainy, and he sat on the couch wrapped in a quilt. When Lyn returned from Colorado Springs she went to Ben's second floor apartment; it was in an old brick house near the river.

"I can't believe this," she said. "It's madness."

She sat beside Ben and pulled part of the blanket over herself. He took her hand. They watched another re-run of the shooting. He still could not see the gunman do it. "How did the hearing go?"

She closed her eyes. "I sounded shrill. He disputed everything I said."

"You're a good mother and Robbie's doing fine. Custody shouldn't be an issue."

"No one's perfect. I've made mistakes and he's got a good lawyer. Anyway, this is about Pete getting even."

They watched television without speaking. Outside, the light rain continued to fall. Ben tried other channels and saw the same coverage. A station replayed the scene where Alexander Haig announced he was in charge.

"I may be wrong," Lyn said, "but I don't think the Secretary of State is next in line."

"Maybe he never studied American Government at West Point." At the station break, Ben told her about the liquor store.

"And I got you into this." She mussed his hair, trying to make him smile. When he did not, she said, "That must have been scary."

He looked outside. The rain so light he could barely see it. "When I saw those shotguns pointed at me, I became a different person. At that moment, I understood power. Real power and total helplessness. They weren't kidding."

After a reporter interviewed two senators, Lyn said, "This morning as they talked through and around me, I felt myself float away. I followed everything they said, but from a distance. I was there, but wasn't there."

Ben looked at her and her hair drying into thick strands. He reached out and felt the long strands, waiting for her to continue.

"The only other woman in the room was the court reporter, and she looked so dull and expressionless I became angry at her." She shook her head at the memory.

"What's going to happen?"

"I go to work tonight, hope Robbie continues to do well in school, and wait." They watched more television. "Maybe I should get a real job and forget trying to paint."

“Could I have that smock back?” he kidded.

“It’s ruined now anyway.” After a pause, she said, “Maybe Pete wouldn’t be so mad if I just gave up and moved back. He misses Robbie.”

“Don’t move,” Ben said.

“I’m just talking.” Lyn went to the kitchen and returned with two cups of tea. “Is Haig still in charge?”

“Bush has reclaimed his Constitutional responsibilities.” Ben warmed his hands with the cup. “You’re smiling.”

“The story about the brownies. Was that true?”

“Understand the context. I was a month shy of thirty and had the chance to relive a sixties moment.”

“You never talk about Stu,” said Lyn.

“When I last saw him he lived in Oregon with six guys in some kind of religious community. They ate unprocessed foods, flushed their colons out every week, and burned candles to the ascending masters. They were planning to sell the house and join their brethren at the cult’s Montana compound to await the world’s end. Now that’s scary.”

“As long as he’s happy.”

“He seemed happy.”

“That counts for something,” Lyn said.

“Something, all right.”

“It’s better than what an angry person who’ll stop at nothing to get what he wants can do.”

“Let me guess who that is,” Ben said.

“You wouldn’t believe what they knew about me. Peter must have hired a private detective. Not only has everything I’ve done been wrong, but it hasn’t even been enough.”

“Sounds like how my job has changed.”

“I can imagine a day when everything we do or have done will be stored somewhere, and all our little secrets and things we once thought were private will be known.”

“Uh, oh,” said Ben. “Even about those brownies?”

They watched a repeat of the shooting. The reporter said the President was in surgery.

“At least we’ll finally get tough gun control laws,” said Ben. “What can the excuse be now?”

Lyn laughed. “Ah, the silver lining.”

“What, I’m too optimistic? Now one of their own’s been shot. If not now, when?”

"If it didn't happen in sixty-eight, why would it happen now? This will only make them angrier."

"You're probably right," said Ben. "It didn't matter much in sixty-three either." He cleared his throat and laughed. "I suppose there will come a day when it will be legal to carry a concealed weapon. That will be wild."

"If that time ever comes, it will not seem so wild as it will inevitable."

They watched as a local news reporter interviewed people at a coffee shop about the president. Then the scene of the shooting reappeared in slow motion. The voice-over described the action. Ben still could not see the shooter. He got up and turned off the television.

"Anyway, none of this is your problem," she said. "I got myself into it."

They sat together with the quilt around them in the room's fading light. Ben said, "Don't move back. I want you here. I want you to stay."

She took his hand and looked towards the drizzle. "I'm not sure what will happen, or even what's best. I do know I have no illusions about us. You've always been honest about that."

"We can't . . ." he said, then paused, looking at her profile as she stared at the window. "I can't keep starting over, Lyn. Neither one of us should have to anymore."

"What are you saying?"

"You and me. You know, maybe it's time."

On the street a horn honked. The curtains moved from a draft, and on the sidewalk a puddle grew and bounced with the mist.

—James O’Gorman