

# Minority vs. Majority

Issue 12, Volume 6



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New Issue 12: Minority vs. Majority

Ana Paula Dias

Ana Paula Dias lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she studies Digital Media Design at the Pontifical Catholic University. She recently spent five months at the University of San Francisco studying Graphic Design and had her print *ÔSiennaÔ* shown at the 11th Annual Thacher Art + Architecture Student Showcase. She's currently working with Mobile Marketing.

*Artist's Statement:*

I've always been an observer. Details are very important to me. I feel that carefully considering colors is really important in arts. It can be colorful or black and white, but you have to think about why you're choosing those colors. As a Graphic Design and Digital Media student, I try to blend techniques. For these artworks I did some sketches before starting to work on the computer.

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# Meeting Faith: An Interview with Faith Adiele

Switchback staffer C. Ad n Cabrera sat down with Faith Adiele on a sunny September afternoon at the University of San Francisco to discuss her book, her thoughts on the creative life, and her writing process.



Photograph by G. Cole

In a lot of ways, Faith Adiele inhabits the boundaries. Racially, spiritually, creatively, Faith has created an identity all her own that is a mixture of many different categories. She is, in many respects, also a trailblazer, the most prominent example being her temporary ordination as Thailand’s first black Buddhist nun. Her memoir details this unique experience in her life. Faith is the author of the memoir *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun* that won the 2005 PEN Beyond Margins Award for Best Memoir. She is also the co-editor of *Coming of Age Around the World: A Multicultural Anthology*, which contains 24 international stories ideal for college and high school classrooms. Presently, she is the Distinguished Visiting Writer at Mills College.

**Switchback:** Thank you, Faith, for joining us. To begin, I’d like to ask a huge but important question: why write? What role does writing play in your life?

**Faith:** I’ve always written, and my mom thought I was going to be a poet. We were a minority in our small, conservative town on many levels and on many levels we were at odds with what was going on. My mom spent her entire time escaping in books. I learned to do the same when, at a young age, I felt that no one was really like me. I learned early on that books could save your life, and that’s a conversation I wanted to be a part of.

**SB:** The idea of books saving your life is really fascinating. Can you expand more?

**Faith:** I had conversations with books that I couldn’t have with people in my hometown. If I listened to those folks, they’d say that I was going to go to hell pretty soon! (*Laughs*) I wasn’t represented in school, or in what I studied. Politically, racially, culturally   none of that was represented there. Books sustained me so that I could get out to a place where there were people like me. In the absence of my father, I had my father’s friend and tribesman Chinua Achebe, Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka, all those writers who could talk to me and teach me what it was like to be Nigerian. I could read Toni Morrison and find out what it was like to be a black woman in the absence of any in my town. I needed these authors to mentor me. As a result, I wanted to create work that did just that, that spoke to people, that could save at least one person in the room. I’m not interested in  art for art’s sake  necessarily but am more interested in how art can change lives.

**SB:** Would you say, then, that you write with a mission? How did this worldview influence your decision to write?

**Faith:** I’m wired to think in terms of writing. I’m interested in metaphor, image, historical connections. When I went to university, I thought to myself,  Wow, that’s impractical, I should learn something that’s useful  to contribute to the community and continue the struggle of the civil rights movement. I did a lot of nonprofit work initially, and wrote on the side. I applied to graduate school on a whim and I thought that I couldn’t go. I thought I couldn’t leave good work, that I couldn’t leave community in order to pursue something as selfish as art. My best friend told me to consider, though, that perhaps my role is to contribute to the struggle through writing. That gave

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me permission to then return to my age-old love and to then see it as my work.

**SB:** That perspective is really interesting, Faith. As you know, writing can be a very selfish and lonely act, and what you’ve just said of writing serving as a tool to effectuate individual and then social change is really refreshing. It’s also interesting that you feel you needed “permission” to write. Did you find this to be true for anyone else in your life?

**Faith:** I find that obstacle a lot with the people of color who take my memoir workshops. Memoir is seen as the ultimate in selfishness sometimes, and people of color or first-generation college immigrants have been told that writing or talking about yourself is selfish. But I sincerely believe that writing a memoir is actually one of the most political things you can do. If you put a memoir out there that goes against the master narrative and that in itself is a political action. A personal memoir is actually a public event, a very politically forthright thing to do. You have to give people permission to do that.

**SB:** You experienced many things while ordained as a Buddhist nun. You slept only four hours a night, meditated the other 20, had one meal a day, and were forbidden all the usual pleasures of American life. How did you perceive the U.S. after such an experience?

**Faith:** I had moments of clarity later when I was writing and I could make meaning out of my experiences. America seemed very young and green and brash. Everyone also smelled like meat and milk when I got back (*Laughs*). Being away from the dichotomy of black and white, I realized that for the majority of the world, that binary wasn’t a central preoccupation. I thought a lot about impermanence. I went back to Boston (where I was attending university) at that time to get the best of what they had to offer, which wasn’t everything. I knew that I could leave for somewhere else for the next opportunity.

**SB:** Now perhaps is a good time to turn to the memoir itself. *Meeting Faith* is in some ways a hybrid of genres. You detail your life living as an ordained Buddhist nun in a remote part of Thailand, and you discuss your challenges, doubts, frustrations, hungers, etc. There are also elements of fiction in your careful attention to create vivid and compelling characters and you do wonders at creating scenes that place the reader in the middle of that forest with you, chanting along with the monks and nuns. This seems like a lot to orchestrate! Can you tell me a little bit about your process of writing this book?

**Faith:** I never thought that I was going to write about it, I hadn’t gone back and read the journals until I felt the desire to write. I had sent some journals that I’d written during my time as a nun to an editor at Norton for a collection they were putting together. Shortly thereafter, Ms. Magazine did a piece on me to publicize the anthology and that’s when I started to realize that there might be a public place for these nun journal entries.

**SB:** The book is also interesting in terms of structure. In addition to the main text, you also include journal entries in the margin, photographs of different moments in your ordination, and even a list of your progress in your meditative practice. Did you always envision this structure for your book?

**Faith:** Initially I thought it would just be a slim volume of my journals so at first I just transcribed them. When I started graduate school, I met with an agent. After seeing my journal entries, she suggested that I rewrite the entire book as a memoir. I didn’t agree with this at all! (*Laughs*) So I ran away, drank heavily for two weeks, and then by week two I realized she was right. (*Laughs*) Next thing you know, I ran into poet Jen Hofer, whom I’d met only once before, in a bar. As soon as I saw her, I knew she could tell me how to write my book and I begged her to read my journals. A week later she had me over for lunch and returned my 400 pages with recurring themes marked in green ink. She also told me she heard many voices in the manuscript and suggested I add even more and come up with a structure that made this a strength. I kept turning in chapters written in two separate columns while I was in grad school and my classmates couldn’t see their function. Finally, I realized that I could have the journal entries describe the internal meditative experience in a way that couldn’t be expressed in the main text, but that needed to be represented in that voice. Then I became clearer with the way that things needed to look. I wrote each chapter then according to theme. Once I had all of the chapters, I tried to connect them in some sort of narrative arc and the meditative portions gaining deeper as memories of my childhood also resurfaced, for example.

**SB:** I know that one of your degrees is in fiction. To what extent did you use the techniques of fiction in writing *Meeting Faith*?

**Faith:** I do in general. *Meeting Faith* was my nonfiction thesis in graduate school. In both genres, imagery is really important, as is metaphor, scene, setting, dialogue, etc... I got the fiction degree to learn how to use these techniques and apply them to my nonfiction. I’m not interested in writing stories or novels, per se, but am interested in using those techniques to make my nonfiction more colorful, more narrative. Any art form is fiction once you’ve got it two dimensionally on the page, but any art form is truth too if people can relate to it because you hit on human truth. I like the limitations of nonfiction, though. If you can make metaphor out of nonfiction—it’s like trying to write a poem as a sestina. You have limitations, but you have to create art out of it.

**SB:** What advice do you have for writers of color who are struggling to find their own voice? How did you deal with the very real anxiety of giving yourself “permission”?

**Faith:** You have to figure out why you write. My goal was never to be in the New Yorker, per se. I wrote because I wanted to start conversation with folks that I was interested in talking to. I didn’t hear people discussing the

complexity of my particular perspective. I wanted my work to spur these types of discussions. That’s why I write, not for other things. If you work on your craft so that your work is so damn good that no one can deny it, it kind of just opens the door. In *Meeting Faith*, until I got the right structure, people kept telling me that I couldn’t talk about certain things in the book. Once I got my craft down, people shut up. Work on writing the best damn story that story that you feel most passionate about and that you have the most authority to write about and that would really be speaking to who you would wanna be talking to. Everything will come from that. You can make it happen by just making it being true to yourself, and to your art.



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Christopher Jenner

Christopher Jenner is a recent graduate of the University of San Francisco's MFA in Writing Program. He resides once again in Evergreen, Colorado, a lovely mountain town that's been Californicated. He teaches composition in the ESL program at the Community College of Aurora, where he tries to get students to agree that subjects and verbs must agree. He writes from the left brain, the right brain, and sometimes in a Rocky Mountain brainstorm.

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Prologue

The End of 2008

Last day of 2008, the intersection of Monaco and Evans, Denver, Colorado. I’ve seldom driven through this intersection in the past twenty years. Nothing here you wouldn’t find in any strip mall: Chinese takeout, Wendy’s, Starbucks caffeine jolt, a Laundromat, King Soopers. But there is a Walgreens too—different than all other Walgreens—and I’m on a mission: 1) buy sensitivity toothpaste for my aching teeth (I’ve been grinding them—stress?—this never used to happen), and 2) take a trip down memory lane. Dad is riding shotgun.

Over the years when I happened by, I saw the old marquee, towering high above the street on two sturdy steel pillars, that still reads: “The Rainbow Music Hall.” The building was first a three-cinema movie theater until Barry Fey, Denver concert promoter, decided to knock down the walls and create a 1,400-seat concert hall—a place for music’s up-and-coming acts—which opened January 26, 1979.

As Dad and I enter through Walgreens’ automatic doors, the scene is what I expect from the drugstore chain monstrosity: antiseptic aisles, tile floors, textured ceilings, and a lot of the color blue, in bright, nauseating splendor. Rows of fluorescent lights threaten to suck the vitamin D out of your skull. Want mouthwash? Batteries? A card for your uncle on the occasion of his retirement? Blue signs in neat sets of six hang above each aisle, guiding you to the major items, but never the one, it seems, that you’re looking for. Good luck! Walgreens is a collection of meandering zombies, searching for something that isn’t there.

This morning I read, in an online article from the March 11, 2008 *Rocky Mountain News*, that this building was to be torn down and rebuilt, but would remain Walgreens. According to the article, upon hearing of the impending construction, Barry Fey said, “Aw, (expletive). A lot of great memories in that building.”<sup>1</sup>

Up and down the aisles, Dad and I wander, searching for dental supplies.

“These pillars look different,” I say. “Thinner. The old ones were bigger, and square.”

I finally locate a small tube of Sensodyne. Dad grabs a tube of Tom’s of Maine. “My contribution to the Rainbow,” he says. We look for and can’t find shaving stuff, but I know it’s here, and that’s why I hate Walgreens. Why can’t they post a sign: *Hey dumbass, your razors are here!*

I decide I don’t need razors and we head for the register. The Muzak<sup>®</sup> blasts Ambrosia, Juice Newton, and Air Supply, ruining my memories of the Rainbow’s great music. Gotta get out of here, before I starting humming.

At the register we chat with a clerk whose nametag reads “Elaine.”

“Do you know if they tore down the old music hall building?”

“They’ve been sayin’ they’re gonna for years,” replies Elaine, picking up my Sensodyne, “but they never do. I’ve been working here sixteen years—always the same. The owner of the building doesn’t care.”

Elaine hands me my change. Dad puts his toothpaste on the counter’s blue pad.



ÒBack when it was the concert hall, my friend lived right over there.Ó She points over her shoulder. ÒSaid she could hear the music.Ó

ÓI came to several shows here,Ó I tell her. ÒBut I havenÓt had a reason to come back since the eighties.Ó

ÒYou can get toothpaste anywhere,Ó says Elaine.



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The End of the Rainbow

Christopher Jenner

The End of the Rainbow

I miss the Rainbow Music Hall. On the boring eves of my teenage years in Evergreen, Colorado—when you cruised down to the 7-11 to see who was hanging out, who was seeing if you were hanging out, till one said, “Let’s do something!” and the other said, “What should we do?” and the first said, “I don’t know!”—an ordinary building in a suburbanized corner of Denver became a beacon of rockin’ musical fun. It gave us an alternative to Red Rocks, McNichols Arena, the Auditorium Theater, and the Paramount Theater. We can’t choose the times in our lives when the saying “All good things must come to an end” will come true, and so it was that when I heard about the Rainbow’s closing in 1988—that it had become a Walgreens!—I’m sure I gasped as convincingly as an early twenties *got-more-important-things-to-do* guy could, not realizing, fully, what we had lost.

I can’t be the only one who found himself in the first few rows, almost able to touch the stage, wondering how I could be so lucky. Four shows I went to, never farther than twenty rows back. Fourteen dollars or less per show to ram into other bodies in a sweaty slam pit for the Blasters; to dance in a cannabis haze to the reggae of Steel Pulse; to gaze at the guitar, banjo, mandolin, and fiddle feats of virtuosos Doc Watson, David Bromberg and John McEuen; and to hear Arlo Guthrie’s twenty plus minute rendition of “Alice’s Restaurant,” in which Arlo implored the audience to rise against the injustices of the world by singing a bar of the song, then chided us for singing so sheepishly: “That was horrible—If you want to end war and stuff, you gotta sing loud!”

We all experience a rainbow’s majesty from our own perspective. If I gaze at the light passing through water drops in the air, I observe a beauty unique from that which you observe, though you stand only a few feet away. I would dare to say that everybody’s Rainbow Music Hall experience was singular, notable, remarkable. Some concertgoers loved the metal of Stryper or Judas Priest. Others rollicked to the eighties sounds of The Fixx, The Cure, or Def Leppard. Many enjoyed the comedic genius of Andy Kaufman, Cheech & Chong, George Carlin, or Robin Williams. But we all felt like we were in on a secret—Na special, once in a lifetime treat.

Dammit! Are they really going to tear it down? I’m back home from San Francisco, spring vacation, 2009, and Dad says they’re going to construct a “new and improved” Walgreens in its place.

I have to check it out. Sitting in bed, I’m rereading the bookmarked article from the March ‘08 *Rocky*. Black and white photos taken in the darkened music hall load onto my computer screen. The first is a side shot of Bob Dylan at a 1980 performance; another evidences the lobby’s loudly patterned carpet; and a third displays the simultaneous march of history and blight of progress: the *Rainbow Music Hall* words are scribed proudly atop the original sign, yet *Walgreens’*—in ugly cursive letters—loiters just below, and the marquee reads:

Folgers coffee - two for \$5

Flu shots available

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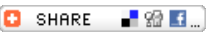
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Sickening.

Below the article, comment posters riff on each other's memories of the Rainbow's greatness, especially the two-dollar tickets to see up-and-coming acts. Imagine seeing U2 two feet from the stage for two bucks! U2, a band who, on their first outing, the crowd adored, who apologized for repeating songs in their encore, promising to play new stuff the next time they came to town. With memories of so many bands in so many genres, individual posters don't favor any one genre exclusively. They mix it up, just like my friends and I did in our choice of shows. People who worked for Barry Fey write their stories of arranging acts, collecting money for tickets, hanging with musicians, and breaking up fights in the lobby.



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# The End of the Rainbow

I have to see the Rainbow. I imagine the puzzled looks of construction workers as I ask them if I can see my beloved music hall one more time. To them, I'm the family member of a dying man—a man who was dragged off the street and patched up by medics, who no one can identify, who can't prove that he was once loved.

Driving down Monaco, I hit my stereo's presets, trying to hear music, trying to avoid the onslaught of commercials. I get a DJ on KBCO after a U2 song. He says the band just announced a tour that will start in Barcelona in the summer and move to the States in the fall. "They have a history with the area," the DJ continues. "A lot of people remember their early performances at the Rainbow Music Hall."

I remember pushing open the heavy doors—were they made of red vinyl?—into the dark, smoky room. If the rows of seats weren't holdovers from the building's movie theater days, they might as well have been. The ceiling seemed too low, and the place looked so boxy inside and out. But if you doubted this could be a concert hall, you were soon convinced by its lusty sound.

As I approach the intersection, my heart thumps harder. I spot Quiznos sub sandwiches and a rush of panic shoots through me before I remember that it's not the Rainbow building. Stopped at the light, I glance to the right and see bulldozers in front of the Rainbow. Not moving, it's Saturday and large mounds of dirt. A chain-link fence will block my entrance to the parking lot, but the building and its sign are still there. Phew!

I pull around back after driving through the parking lot of the adjacent strip mall. No chance of going into Walgreens now. It's quarantined. A sign on the side of the building, in white with blue letters, reads: "Available 8 303-771-5155."

Is it available for lease? Maybe Walgreens gave up. Maybe a new, larger building will house more businesses. Or, maybe the Rainbow building will survive. My cell phone is out of my pocket; I can't stop myself; I'm calling the number.

What am I *doing*? Am I going to lease the Rainbow? Only if I win the Powerball jackpot! Nearly a hundred million.

With my newfound fortune, IÖd buy the building outright. IÖd demolish all evidence that Walgreens ever infected the space. IÖd call my friend Ed, my former neighbor from my Maui days, who played acoustic guitar in the Front Street bars, who played James Taylor better than JT himself. IÖd sell two-dollar tickets. IÖd tell Ed heÖs opening the *new* Rainbow Music Hall, just like Jerry Jeff Walker opened the old one thirty years ago.

*If you reopen it, they will come.*

The phone rings once, twice, three times, four, and I hope no one will answer. What am I going to say?

ÒUh, um, can I ask who is leasing the building?Ó

◊Who is this? Can I help you?◊

ÒSorry,Ó I would say, Òdialed the wrong number.Ó

Even if the new building is bigger, can Walgreens really improve? It's Walgreens! Same shit, different

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place. What could they make better? More aisles for me to *not* be able to find razors in?

And when I found razors, I would wonder why I bother to shave. Why not become some bearded Amish-looking hippie concert following fool? Find myself a woman who digs shaggily bearded men. Buy a VW minibus and equip it with an antiquated stereo cassette player and install some bitchin' speakers. Get my box of cassettes out of storage and throw them in the back seat, along with two lawn chairs (the kind with cup holders—now that's progress!), a hammock, and a cooler. I'd putter around the country, up and down mountain peaks, over river rapids, through sunny meadows, listening to Arlo Guthrie, his dad Woody, Pete Seeger, and Bob Seger! I'd dig out my old *Night Moves* tape, the one whose repeated playings drove my little sister to Bob Seger-hating madness when we were teenagers. While cruising down a two-lane road in the bus, Stevie Wonder's "Isn't She Lovely" would come on the radio, and my beard-digging woman would say, "I like this song," and I'd say, "Stevie Wonder and Bob Seger should have a contest to see who can sing the never ending song," and I'd mockingly sing, "Isn't she lovely!" over and over, louder and louder, until my beard-digging woman took off her Birkenstock and threw it at me, making me swerve the minibus onto the crumbling shoulder of the country road. I'd smile and wink, and we'd travel onward to the next show.

They've torn down so many places. And who are *they*? The moneymakers, the movers and shakers. The takers and fakers. Not the wake 'n' bakers. Not the dream makers. *They* have demolished McNichols Arena in favor of the Pepsi Center, Mile High Stadium for Invesco Field at Mile High, the Cooper Theater to plop down a Barnes and Noble, and the old Cinderella Twin Drive-In to put up some crappy apartments where a large sign reads, "Lease the Dream."

I don't want to lease their dream. My dreams are enough.

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<sup>1</sup>Brown, Mark. "Rainbow Music Hall about to take its last bow," *Rocky Mountain News*, March 11, 2008, <http://www.rockymountainnews.com/news/2008/mar/11/the-last-waltz-for-site-of-rock-history/>.



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Faith Adiele

Faith Adiele is author of *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun* (PEN Beyond Margins Award for Memoir); writer/subject of *My Journey Home*, a PBS documentary about her Nigerian/Nordic/American heritage; and co-editor of *Coming of Age Around the World: A Multicultural Anthology*. Her essays have appeared in *O Magazine*, *Ploughshares*, *Transition*, *Ms.*, *Essence*, *Fourth Genre*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Indiana Review* and numerous anthologies. She has taught memoir at VONA: Voices of Our Nations in San Francisco and in Accra, Bali, Geneva, Johannesburg, Chautauqua, Iowa, and Whidbey Island. She is currently Distinguished Visiting Writer at Mills College in Oakland.

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Great Afro-Americans in History

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WHEN I OPEN the door and see them standing there, I have to fight with myself not to slam it shut. There’s something familiar about the family on the other side of the screen door, but not in a reassuring way. The woman is young, only in her twenties, with gray teeth and a dull lank of butchered hair. Her thin, striped tank top reveals small, sagging breasts. A sallow, pinch-faced child flanks her on either side, while a third, a giant toddler with a broad, flat head, clings to her hip, causing her to list to one side. All three kids stare with bulging eyes. They look hungry.

The woman mentions our newspaper ad for free kittens and ventures a ragged smile, wincing a bit as if she expects to be swatted. I find myself wincing back.

“Uh-oh,” I stall. I crack the screen door and try to look pleasant, the way I imagine Harriet Tubman would’ve welcomed a skittish passenger on the Underground Railroad. (Despite a Nigerian father and a white mother, I’m deep into my Great Afro-Americans in History phase.) “That litter is gone.”

I wonder how she plans to feed a pet.

Not for the first time, I find myself wishing I had an easier mother. My friends who live on the Hill simply march to church Sunday mornings and then retire to ruffled, pastel bedrooms with their private phones and stacks of glossy teen magazines. They don’t suffer embarrassing mothers who boycott church but construct elaborate lessons on the tenets of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism *and* Paganism, who run their own Afro-American History Month at home (since the local school district “doesn’t do shit”), who carry on as if white lies and sins of omission are tantamount to real lying and sins of commission.

My tongue is trained to tell the truth. “We only have one cat left, and it’s quite a bit bigger.” I hope this sounds discouraging.

I think about Akhmatova out in the cattery. She’s been with us a long time. Tabbies are difficult to place, and she’d already passed the cuddly kitten stage by the time we found her, rail-thin and hoarse from crying, in the irrigation ditch. It had taken weeks to clean and fatten her up, though she needed no taming. As family after family arrived in response to our kitten ads, she would scamper up the climbing trees and wave frantically until they approached. The visitors would laugh, rub her eager, adolescent body, and then bend down over the latest box of newborns someone had dumped on our steps once word got out about The Cat Lady. Still she wove in and out of their legs, purring loudly, eternally optimistic.

Some people had no intention of taking a cat at all. They came to hold ours, and to talk. As soon as we heard a car pulling up to the curb, The Cat Lady would peek through the blinds—the only covered picture window in the neighborhood—to check. If the car were unfamiliar, she’d grab her pot of tea and a book and head for the garage. She claimed to be “working on lesson plans.”

That left me to walk the visitors, usually women, through the backyard and out to the cattery, where they would ooh and aah at the carpeted interior and screened porches Old Pappa had built, his farmer’s disdain for fancy cat living eventually giving way to his inner carpenter. The women would wander from room to room,

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Akhmatova trailing them, and tell me about how much they loved cats and how their husbands or fiancŽs or boyfriends were allergic or didn’t trust cats or their lease didn’t allow pets.

Fully aware that copious amount of tea, combined with a pea-sized bladder, would eventually make Mom’s garage hideout torturous, I encouraged the women to linger. I dawdled along the flowerbeds of floribunda and bachelor’s buttons, the sky clear and round as a bowl above us.

“She sure is a nice kitty,” they’d eventually say, handing Akhmatova back. “Wish I could keep her.” No one could fail to be impressed by her personality and the effort she threw into each encounter; however, they invariably left with a kitten, or nothing at all.

“CAN I SEE the cat?” the young woman on the porch asks. As she speaks, the toddler reaches out proprietarily and swats one of her pointy breasts. The woman flinches momentarily, but otherwise does not react. With a sigh, her body seems to shift and settle to accommodate the child’s rough clutch. I want to turn away. It feels like I’ve just witnessed her naked.

“Uh, sure.” I glance around, wishing Mom didn’t love the masses quite so much in the abstract and then disappear when they’re actually on our doorstep. I need someone to stop me. I need the eloquence of Frederick Douglass rousing an Abolitionist crowd to action. I consider saying, *I have to check with my crazy cat-lady mother*, but I’ve been doing this for so long myself that I’m afraid she’ll see right through me.

“But, like I said, we just have the one cat, and it’s nearly grown.”

“That’s fine.” The woman says, and I find myself outside, allowing her desire to lead me around the side of the house, past the orange honeysuckle vine with its riot of feelers, and into the backyard.

THE WOMAN DOESN’T even look at the cat. As soon as Akhmatova steps out of her carpeted cubbyhole, stretching and blinking sleepily, the woman scoops her up and flattens her to her chest. “I’ll take her!”

This has never happened before. For a few minutes the world moves as quickly as the landscape of my childhood viewed out the window of Old Pappa’s Chevy pick-up: smudges of hops-asparagus-sugarbeets, the Hill a blur of cherry-peach-apple-pear orchards, wire fences like lines of static along the irrigation canal, the lone horse-coyote speeding in pastures alongside the sky-blue truck.

I grip the Formica counter and try to slow it down. “I’ll get you a box for the ride home,” I offer. The boxes are in the garage where Mom is drinking Earl Grey and probably singing along to Buffy Sainte Marie on the stereo.

The woman shakes her head, insisting the cat will be fine in the car. She seems to have an instinctive fear of anything that will slow the adoption process. She clutches Akhmatova hard, as if someone plans to pry her away at any moment. I am scheming hard how to be that someone. Akhmatova squirms in her grasp, both of us gasping for breath.

Averting my eyes, I mumble our agreement with Old Doc Querin: when any of our strays is old enough, he’ll spay or neuter it and charge it to Mom’s account. He’s a gruff large-animal vet who for some reason has agreed to see our cats. Farmers quail in his presence, kneading their caps in wide, scarred hands as he silently pokes and prods their ailing livestock, but I once saw him cry because one of the strays we’d brought to be spayed turned out to be pregnant. He stood in the waiting room in his wooden clogs, tears running down his weathered cheeks, and yelled at me.

I’d reported this to Mom, more amazed than upset. Why, since that time one of our ferals bit off his knuckle, he only laughed and called me “Darlin’?”

She’d shaken her head. “You have to understand—he had to abort the kittens. He’s not angry at you.”

She wrinkled her nose. ÒApparently heÕs a big softie.Ó



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Great Afro-Americans in History

Faith Adiele

THE WOMAN BREATHES two sharp syllables at my offer of free spaying. ÒFor real?Ó Her head snaps up to stare at me.

The kids, each clutching a fistful of her shirt, duck out from behind her legs to flash me the same look. The girl, a bony ten-year-old, now hefts the giant toddler, nearly doubled over backwards beneath his weight. A milky river of mucus runs from his nose to the tip of his chin, forming a glistening goatee that shakes as he whines at being displaced from his motherÕs hip. He waves both hands in the air, trying to reach the woman with the kitten pressed to her breast.

The woman begins to talk about how growing up, she always had cats. She has never been without one. This is the first time. We are stumbling towards the front of the house, past the flowerbeds, trailed by the kids who dart silent, furtive glances at the regulation-size jungle gym Old Pappa welded for me after I became obsessed with the crossing bars at school, at the cherry print curtains at the garage windows hiding MomÕs private Native American cabaret, at the redwood Adirondack chairs on the lawn. I can hear the bittersweets strains of ÒSweet AmericaÓ through the garage door as Mom and Buffy really lean into it.

As we near the front porch I see their carÑlong, beige, low-slung, scarred with a design of rust and dents. A hulking man with ratted hair slouches in the driverÕs seat wearing a grey undershirt and Confederate soldierÕs cap. Dark hair and tattoos swirl over his beefy arms and shoulders. One arm tensed out the window, he smokes impatientlyÑhard, raspy drags.

Instinctively, I step back and flatten myself alongside the house, fighting the urge to duck under the honeysuckle vine. IÕm not at all like Ida B. Wells standing before a lynch mob, prepared to die if necessary. IÕm terrified of what will happen if those red eyes catch me.

Now I remember why the family looks familiar. Last Fall IÕd gone with Old Pappa to an auction at the stockyard near the train tracks. IÕd been amazed at how many people showed up to bid on broken-down household items. ÒThat stuff was real crap!Ó IÕd marveled afterwards to Mom, as we worked on our makeshift *sukkah*, arranging maple branches and spruce fronds according to the picture in the Time-Life article on Jewish festivals.

The real merchandise were the farm implements and machinery parts, so while the men assessed rectangular balers and disk harrows, women and children pawed overstretched-out sweaters, warped phonograph albums and green stamp dishes. Many were clearly regulars, and they all looked strangely similar. The kids, tow-headed and undersized, clung possessively to the rare junky toy.

When we got home I demanded to know who these people were and why IÕd never seen them around town. Why did they look sick and act wild? Why didnÕt anyone help them?

Mom had peered up from Religions of the World, blue eyes blinking. ÒOh,Ó she said with a quick grimace, cheeks pink. ÒWell, just so you know, the rude name for them is Òwhite trash,Ó which you under no

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circumstances are ever to say.

From the tightness of her jaw, I knew that this fell under the category of Things She Didn't Want To Have To Tell Me But Felt That She Should For My Moral Edification. But there was something in her tone slightly less charitable than when she spoke about hungry kids in Ethiopia and Vietnam. It was almost like the way some of the teachers at school tried to be nicer about the Chicano students, referring to them as "Spanish", which though not the shouted (or whispered) slur, "Mexican", still sounded like the verbal equivalent of handing someone a bag of used kitty litter.

As we built our Sukkoth bower in the dining room, Mom explained that they probably came from Appalachia or Down South - the latter a frightening, amorphous place that among its many crimes claimed the birthplace of the Klan and the assassination of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Oddly enough, my father had gone Down South and lived to tell the tale. Mom shook her head, cowlicks askew, and marveled. "Your poppie spent a year at Tuskegee in Alabama and loved it!" This was clearly a stroke of amazing good luck.

Their yellowish skin and feverish eyes were the result of being impoverished for along time and having poor nutrition. "Remember how Rita's mother used to fry the entire meal?" Mom asked, snapping her fingers for more twine as the fronds started to slide. "The meat and the vegetables and the starch?" We exchanged looks of mild horror, guiltily.

But the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. had waged a war on poverty too, and so after the lesson on Sukkoth I emptied out my toy box and bureau and Mom cleaned out the garage and wrote a check and the next time Old Pappa was over, I had him load up the boxes and the money and drive me to Saint Vincent de Paul.

I REGARD THE three kids rooted unblinking, noses running, to our porch. I imagine their confusion at coming to ask for something free from a black person. I wonder if they're fighting the urge to nudge each other, to whisper *nigger* softly, almost a question, as one boy at the auction had before I ran to find Old Pappa.

The woman maintains her tight hold on the cat. Her fingers must be cramping with the effort. Akhmatova wriggles to find a comfortable position and gives a faint mew, still optimistic. I lock my fingers behind my back and try to imagine what Sojourner Truth, abolitionist, preacher and women's rights advocate, would do.

"I've always had cats," the woman says in a rush. She stands fixed to the front step, repeating it. "Always." She seems desperate to reassure.

"Omoni!" the man bellows from car, his roar like a punch to the back. "Ya got it, didn't ya? Let's get outta here!" He stares straight ahead, choking the cigarette in his fist.

The woman shivers a bit but does not turn towards him. "Always," she says in an earnest voice. I nod weakly.

"Omoni!" His anger rattles the screen door. The kids turn their heads slowly, watching him through slit eyes, as if from a great distance.

Finally the woman smiles awkwardly and turns and walks down the steps with Akhmatova. As she and the kids approach the trembling car, the man, never once looking our way, guns the engine, and before they can even shut their doors, tears off in a cloud of exhaust, tires squealing, laying down a track of burnt rubber back to their side of town. For a full five minutes after their departure, I can smell the acrid fumes.

IN A FEW years Mom will deem me old enough to know the truth of my birth, our own little civil rights battle. We will sit in the living room with its stark African masks and textiles and she will explain everything - how Old Pappa, when he found out she was pregnant by a black man, tried to force her to get a back-street abortion and how he settled on throwing her out when she wouldn't, how she fled to the Salvation Army (weird-as that they are!) and had

me in a home for unwed girls, how my father was in another country and she had to fight the social workers and the Salvation Army and her parents all by herself to keep me, how we lived in the projects on government cheese but eventually came home because she wanted me to have grandparents, despite what Old Pappa had done.

But for now I am young and throw open the door to her garage sanctuary, the stench of burning tire mingling with Buffy’s powerful wail to “Free the Lady” (which is almost too perfect except for the fact that Mom always plays “Free the Lady” and “Starwalker,” the one with the Cree chant chorus, over and over). From her rocking chair, she winces at my descriptions of the woman and kids, of the man in the car, but when I begin to cry because I’ve done a bad thing, she shakes her head.

“I know how you feel, punkin, but other things can be more important than food.” She puts her arms around me. “Just think how much Akhmatova will be loved.”

And eventually I find myself leaning back into her, the two of us rocking in time to Buffy and butchering the hell out of *Ay hey way hey way hey*. She’s as calm as Shirley Chisholm announcing her candidacy for president and calling for racial and gender equality. She whispers with a conviction I don’t yet recognize as earned: “Akhmatova might be the only thing that’s hers.”



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Excerpts from the Daily Rumpus

Stephen Elliott

These are kind of random, and not chosen because they're the best or most representative. The Daily Rumpus is an email I've been sending out roughly five times a week since December 2008. It's kind of an experiment in literary writing as an ongoing email correspondence. 3,400 people currently subscribe. You can subscribe to the Daily Rumpus here: <http://therumpus.net/subscribe>.

August 12, 2010

Subject: P.S. 2

The time before last when I hopped a plane to New York it was like a fit of madness. I was back in San Francisco and I thought, no, it's too soon. I had second thoughts three hours into the air. What was I going back to? Where was I leaving? I'd been kind of dating someone much younger than myself. She'd said, "When we first met I thought you were creepy, a thirty-eight year old man hitting on a twenty-four year old. But you're not creepy. You're nice." But I was creepy, and she was beautiful. She was like candy you can see. Have you noticed, when you're in love, the sound of the person talking is like a stream, and when you're really in love it's like you've taken mushrooms and you're lying on a large branch above the river, smiling to the point of laughing, and the noise escaping the water floats above you in colors? It was the beginning of May, I wasn't in love, I was tunneling down a mountainside grasping for roots sticking horizontally from the earth. In the chute it was clear I had to stop traveling. I had to choose a place, a piece of carpet in the middle of a room somewhere, and sit in that spot for six months to a year. Before that I was walking with my roommate above the park. Dolores Park is perfect, grass like gold. I explained everything as we climbed the stairways built into the side of the hill looking for his old car, a BMW he'd bought for five hundred dollars. The power steering didn't work, there was no AC, the windows didn't roll down. You got in one door and out the other. The stereo was fantastic and I was surprised no-one had removed it with a crowbar as we drove past the inlet bordering the 101 toward the airport listening to Neil Young's Tonight's The Night. When it's over, losing your mind is just a story to tell.

July 5, 2010

Subject: Peter Pan

What happens when Peter Pan only kind-of grows up. Instead of having children, getting a job, owning property, he and Wendy join an artist co-op. The people living in the co-op all have shadows sewn to their feet and they've been there a long time. Studio space is rarely available. The artists cook on hot plates with their doors open, the hallways are filled with paintings and sculptures. The bathrooms are shared. Some of the lofts don't have running water, but it doesn't seem to matter. Some of the artists have dogs. Many of the artists have lived in the building more than twenty years, some almost forty. Peter Pan is older too. He still wears his green outfit, but it's not as bright; it's the color of grass when there hasn't been rain in a while. He's still thin, but he's no longer taut. He's relatively happy, but there are bags under his eyes.



Peter and Wendy went through a period of seeing other people; fairy tale polyamory, but they gave up on that, they settled on each other. The children Wendy used to tell stories to, and Peter's Lost Boys, have become adults. Never Never Land, it turns out, was just one more way of looking at America's melting pot of dreams. One of the children became a Republican State Senator. Another runs an internet porn company. One is gay and married in San Francisco with an adopted child. One joined a civilian militia guarding the Arizona border. The rest live in Middle Never Never Land: homeowners, tax payers, voters. The gay child sends Peter and Wendy a card every year with a picture of his son. The kid is as dark as a blueberry. The others are not in touch.

Wendy cut her hair short. Sometimes she uses the wi-fi at the cafe across the street. She spends a lot of time on Facebook but doesn't understand Twitter and doesn't want to. Peter is unpredictable, self-involved, but solid in the ways that matter most. When Wendy went in for her operation Peter brought flowers to the hospital and sang her to sleep. He's still more comfortable in groups than intimate conversations. Sometimes he stares out the window. Sometimes they don't talk for days. They have no walls in their loft. His desk faces one way, hers the other. They attend the meetings and draw water from an industrial sink wheeling it back to the studio in a shopping cart.

Wendy works part time at the Queer Youth Outreach Network. Peter performs at fundraising events for male sex workers at the CSC. They keep their expenses low.

One day Peter says, "I could have done more, but I could have done a lot less."  
One day Wendy says, "You promised we'd never grow up. But I didn't understand what that meant." Peter stands in his faded outfit, hat tipped, tights hiding varicose veins, neither reaching out nor pulling away.

**May 11, 2010**  
**Subject: Sunny**

It made me wonder how that kind of morning could lead into that kind of night, and what we mean when we say the difference is night and day. What I mean is what's more likely: crying for four hours on a park bench or dancing in a bar as it's emptying out, someone's Motown CD not even at full volume, already the bartenders pushing the chairs to the side, a man dressed like a clown, the door open to the street the entire time? The streets the same as they've been for years. I thought, if I never go to sleep this will never end and that would be fine with me.

**March 11, 2010**  
**Subject: Anonymous**

Answers to your questions:  
You gravitate toward motherless boys because you're nurturing, innocent, some would say naïve, but that's because they're cynical and unable to accept that what you really are is kind.  
Editing is just reading and re-reading hundreds of times until you find yourself skipping certain parts you don't want to read again. Then you cut those parts. Also, you question the sentence, ask if there's a better way to say something, a verb that gets there quicker, says more. Can you make one sentence do the work of two? Three? Editing is a separate skill. Different from storytelling. Some people are good at making things up, creating fictional worlds, and other people are good at crafting sentences. Some people are good at both. Some people are able to take a hard look at who they are and write about themselves with a breathtaking honesty that illuminates not just them, but us. Some people have a strong understanding of narrative and tension. Writing is made up of many skills working in concert and writers gravitate frequently to the style that highlights what they're best at.

August 21, 2009

Subject: I Wish I Wish

I was thinking this morning, while listening to the Harold and Maude soundtrack, how far are we away from a world divided between people who live online and people who don't? I think you know what I mean. Not that people online don't meet for drinks or go out to eat. But there will be a split, where the Internet is no longer a phenomenon, it just is, and there will be people communicating online and there will be people who aren't into it. We have this belief that everything is going online, but that's going to stop at some point, like a neighborhood that was gentrifying just before the bubble burst, and so the Google employees learn to live with the artists and the immigrants and nobody really talks about why there's a dollar store on one block and a hamburger costs \$13 on the next.

April 29, 2009

Subject: Be Brave

Yesterday I was talking with an editor. He said he could imagine a time in the near future where bookstores didn't exist. I don't want to imagine that time. But I have to admit, I've read fewer books since I started editing [The Rumpus](#). At the time of our conversation I was in the male green room at [Kink.com](#) (NSFW). It's on the second floor of the San Francisco Armory and men were walking around naked or with towels around their waists. One beefcake said hello and then laid his gym bag under his head and went to sleep on the floor. Usually there's a couch, but they were using it for something else.

I was reading through Kink's documentation, thinking of how to add narrative structure to a porn site about things that I'm not even into. But maybe that makes it easier. I need story because I'm into other things. Actually, I have no idea what I'm into. I got into that with [Daniel Berger on The Rumpus](#) a month or two ago. He said, "For all of us, lust is part of love." But I'm not sure I agree with that. I don't see what's so great about passion, about fantasizing about someone, remembering the way they smell, being unable to concentrate. Isn't it better to spend time with someone you actually like? What's wrong with comfort? And don't write me about "having both." Because we all know lust makes people lie to themselves.

Anyway, the comment about bookstores ceasing to exist made me sad.

April 24, 2009

Subject: let's say you're in bed with someone...

Let's say you're in bed with someone. It's early and she's taken her first shower at your place. Her hair is wet and she turns and asks about that other woman, wants to know what your plans are with the ex. A strand of hair sticks to her neck. You can feel how cool the pillow is even though you're half an inch away from where it's damp. And you say, Plans? It's like asking what your long term goals are for your heroin addiction, or how you feel about smoking crack when studying for the bar exam. Ten years from now, will the needle still make you happy? Will it matter that you're sleeping in a box near the highway?



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Garin Cycholl

Garin Cycholl's recent work includes a forthcoming collaborative long poem with Bill Allegranza, "Aquinas on the Mississippi," and "Hostile Witness," a book-length poem on mold, boxing, and Illinois politics. Since 2002, he has been a member of Chicago's Jimmy Wynn fiction collaborative.

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William Allegrezza

William Allegrezza edits the e-zine *Moria* and the press Cracked Slab Books. He has published five books, *In the Weaver's Valley*, *Ladders in July*, *Fragile Replacements*, *Collective Instant*, and *Covering Over*; one anthology, *The City Visible: Chicago Poetry for the New Century*; seven chapbooks, including *Sonoluminescence* (co-written with Simone Muench) and *Filament Sense* (Ypolita Press); and many poetry reviews, articles, and poems. He curates series A, a reading series in Chicago dedicated to experimental writing. In addition, he occasionally posts his thoughts at <http://allegrezza.blogspot.com>.

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accommodation was not possible.  
so many heaped surfaces touched with dust and  
scarred by hands. mirrors are rhizomes that  
turn genetic powder into arias for  
dark corridors where pisan cages rust.  
*I never mean to impinge, but I/Ove*  
*overheard the words and imagined songs.*

<sup>a</sup>To over three dozen, according to reports in *Tropics*. The patrons of this show-stopping included Suarez, Sevada, and Howard. Even old Ginger himself.



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Before I Was a Savage

Kristin Abraham

He knew there would be problems, since this was the beginning, *frontier*. But Òit smelled like the end of something.Ó Those were her words, once, before she was stolen. And she was right, right and she knew it, proved it over and over: stomped a lot of foot and tossed a lot of hair, smugged up her face like a cat with a mouthful of feathers and accused: dead horse there, bloated dog here, rattler in the trough. Misery comforts misery, he knew, and it expanded mostly in dust storms, the way the laudanum ran out before the next trip to town. She missed the circusÑnew beginnings every two daysÑthe way he threw knives while she spun on the wheel, sent her into memory. She died differently then. And yet, every time her foot plantedÑa new carcass, turkey vulture, worms in the mealÑthe questions were evident: ÒWhat makes us so stitched together?Ó ÒWhy do my reasons pour out?Ó The answers, he kept telling her, must be yet.

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Candy Shue

Candy Shue's poems and stories have appeared in *The Collagist*, *Washington Square*, *Paragraph*, *Pllf Online*, *Poemeleon*, *follymag.com*, *Switchback*, *The Rambler* and other journals. She is an MFA candidate at USF, where she was inspired to write "Life in Necropolis" based on an exhibit of contemporary Terra Cotta Warrior statues by the Chinese artist Wanxin Zhang, on display in Kalmanovitz Hall during Fall 2009.

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Life in Necropolis: Four Letters

Candy Shue

Dear Farmer,

Are your fields haunted?  
Did one clay distinguish  
itself from another?  
This clay fertile, that clay  
ghost? So many souls  
adding their mercury  
blood to your soil.  
Were you angry when  
the shovel’s tip stuck  
fast in the ground?

A rock deep in the dirt  
and hard. Did you  
watch the sunlight’s  
fast fading? Your skin  
knowing before your  
eyes\Earth, but a harder  
alchemy\an army laying  
claim to your home.

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Life in Necropolis: Four Letters

Candy Shue

Dear Immigrant,  
(Official Transcript)

What is your name?  
Are you known by any other names?  
When were you born and how old are you?  
  
What is the name of your village in China?  
How many steps lead to the front door of your home?  
How many doorways are in your house?  
  
How many chairs surround your kitchen table?  
What are the names of the people who sit in each one?  
Who was the first person in your family to leave China?  
  
How long has he been gone?  
Where does he live now and what does he do?  
  
Are you the son of the man you say you are?




Dear Ancestor,  
(Smell of incense and peaches)

Transplanted.  
Dispersed by wind.  
Roots fed by the dead.  
Grow straight into stalks.  
Search for water, light.  
Harvest unknowing.

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Life in Necropolis: Four Letters

Candy Shue

Dear Honorable Wikipedia Visitor,

The **Terra Cotta Army**

([simplified Chinese](#): [兵马俑](#) ;  
[traditional Chinese](#): [秦兵马俑](#) ;  
[pinyin](#): bīngmǎ yǒng;  
literally "[soldier](#) and [horse](#)  
funerary statues".  
[Qin Shi Huang](#) the First [Emperor of China](#).  
Dating from 150 AD  
discovered in 1974  
by some local farmers  
near [Xi'an](#), [Shaanxi](#) province  
near the Mausoleum  
of the second Ming Emperor.  
([Chinese](#): [秦兵马俑](#) ;  
[pinyin](#): Qín Shìhuáng Bīngmǎ Yǒng).

The figures vary (183Ð195 cm  
or 6ftÐ6ft 5in), according  
to their role, the tallest  
being the generals.  
Figures include strong  
warriors, chariots, horses,  
officials, acrobats,  
strongmen, and musicians.

Current estimates  
are over 2,000  
soldiers, 100 chariots with  
400 horses and 300  
cavalry horses, the majority  
of which are still buried in the pits.

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Dilruba Ahmed

Dilruba Ahmed is the author of *Dhaka Dust* (Graywolf, 2011), winner of the 2010 Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize for poetry. Her work has appeared in *Blackbird*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Cream City Review*, *New England Review*, and *New Orleans Review*.

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Dilruba Ahmed

The only laundromat is on the white side of town, so you wash your clothes in the hotel sink. Below your window,

an industrial park flat as a runway,  
scattered with rocks and shattered glass.  
Even the prison, you hear,

folded a few years ago. The best jobs  
are north of here: 50 miles, Tunica,  
riverboat pay. By moonlight you drove

that open stretch of 61 where  
a stranger warned, *don't pull off the road*.  
Because the yoghurt and salad

you'll find on sale are a week  
into rotting. Because the cashier  
won't return your change

or smile. Because the boy who stops  
by your window in the parking lot  
is no more than nine. He asks

for change to buy a burger  
and you worry that some teens  
put him up to it. Alone beyond

the pale circumference of lights,  
you whisper, *I'm sorry, sweetheart. No.*

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Danielle Blasko

[Danielle Blasko](#) is a Detroit native currently enjoying life on an East Coast beach. She is a Senior Fashion Writer at Eida Lush, a custom design shoe company based out of Chicago. Danielle is the editor-in-chief of The Feline Muse Literary Blogzine and her poetry has most recently appeared in *The Legendary*, *Escarp*, *Short, Fast, and Deadly*, *Gutter Eloquence Magazine*, and *The Moose & Pussy Magazine*.

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Market Is Stumbling but You Don't Have To

Danielle Blasko

They don't want you to fill up on empty so you fill up on tap beer at \$7.40 per plastic cup.

Maps of Super Tuesday flash across the screen above the small square-shaped bar

where everyone stares into papers unfolded but not being read, left on the bar by the men before who drank whiskey at \$9.50

per single shot and left \$4 tips. In the midst of all this, someone actually pays the bartender in change.

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The Choice Between Someone & Somebody

[Kristin Abraham](#)

It took him 30 years to vanish into thin air, that place under the beef of his breath. First, the God-fearing eyes, thumb like a bolt. Then, his scars, a cow-skull pelvis, the bone-space between his legs. The ads the town placed just a few years in were for a proper rogue.    Ours is torn and faded.    OLike harp strings, the thin spots in cloth.    OThe wind here is full of wind, and heŐs becoming like air, not air, air.    O They were right: Each day more like a corn-husk mattress rustle, the space of a tumbleweed. Then that part of him that was wizened, mule-faced, went like the Rapture, holy sweat-and-shake. He left a small warm spot in his stead.

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Dilruba Ahmed

(on a painting by Gauguin)

What brings you to the clearing? Our fruit,  
our flesh! Is it as you imagined?  
Ah, but the fruits you paint are brighter, bigger  
than any we find here, the blooms more bold  
and varied. This tree, not so dark as black-  
skinned avocado; more like green young breadfruit.  
Sweeter in the mind than on the tongue, as they say.

Do we seem untroubled? Do we seem pure?  
I know what the others say: that you left  
in Copenhagen a wife, one child  
for each finger on your hand. That your hands  
which now, with care, place an urn  
in my palm—None bloodied her face. Or twice.  
But who am I to judge? Lounging here all day  
with the others, clustered like tree snails.

And her flesh, her face—is it as you thought?  
You know she doesn’t like that dress, the one  
with blanché banana leaves flanking her neck—  
that collar—see how stiffly she sits.

When your boat first approached I thought  
a white bird was rising from the water\at a distance  
and in the sun, it seemed a great chunk of salt  
to wipe away my mother's fever. Everyone said,  
*here comes another, this one with a brush  
instead of a book, or rope, or whip.*

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Rich Ives

Rich Ives is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Memorial Poetry Award from *Bitter Oleander*. His story collection, *The Balloon Containing the Water Containing the Narrative Begins Leaking*, was one of five finalists for the 2009 Starcherone Innovative Fiction Prize.

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Acceptance

Rich Ives

First I walked outside and  
then I got up walked outside

frightened myself  
and frightened myself

reluctance shook my hand  
a bundle of possibilities

soon I had gathered  
thorny with anticipation

a crippled storm limped over my island

the inevitable opened its mouth  
no doors windows glazed

and I went in  
opaque with fear

the only way out was ignorance and  
indulgent fearlets of tears

I had lost it  
I remained amiss

bliss-whipped but here among the swollen

even the sky is big  
here is what I have won:

and desirable  
instead of windows mirrors

instead of weddings  
uncomfortably warm

a small brown animal  
with suspicious desires

instead of clothing  
instead of innocence

a general terror of clouds  
a round cool panic

IÖm offered a newspaper I feel lightheaded

I walk into the woods  
a conclusion that looks like

I find myself I arrive at  
a chair with the lid down no doors

if I name it  
now I live in the light

it might get smaller  
and the dark

and the light  
evidenced invited

and the dark  
contagious holding

the damp skin of a love letter  
my invisible cane

IÖm waving  
at the blind white curb of contradiction

while the world achieves my limitations

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Cassandra Passarelli

Cassandra has run a bakery, managed a charity and sub-edited. She's travelled in the Middle East, Africa and Sri Lanka. And studied literature, journalism and creative writing. These days she runs a grass roots library project in a Guatemalan rainforest village with her family (caldopiedra.blogspot.com) and is practicing to become a yoga teacher.

She's published in *Writers' Forum*, *Text's Bones*, *Earlyworks*, *Cinnamon Press*, *Pulp.net*, *Salt River Review*, and *Litro*. Skrev Press published her novella *Greybill*. She won the Traverse Theatre's Writers Debut Jam and has been shortlisted for Happenstance, RRothe Trophy, Cadenza and Aesthetica's Creative Works Competition.

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Girl in a Suitcase

[Cassandra Passarelli](#)

The sky’s a bowl with a lid of clouds. Palop is close to the brim: some days our heads touch heaven.

During rainy season, when our streets turn into rivers of thick red mud, the lid is tightly shut. In winter, fog descends at midday and no one leaves their house. Only in November the sun breaks through, hardening the mud, warming skin and drying clothes. Then we smile easily, wash our hair and visit neighbors. My name is Jasinta, after my uncle, Jasinto. He disappeared north, along the mule path leading to Mexico and the world, before I was a twinkle in Mami’s eye. He returned from Florida when I was still in nappies, with stories of slave-driving gringos and thieving Negroes. And a gray vinyl suitcase full of gifts. He didn’t bring me anything I didn’t know I’d been born. So he gave me the suitcase.

Our yard is full of animals. My puppy Sochi is round, fluffy and black: she chases the chicken, head lowered, squawking for her life. Sochi’s terrified of the turkey. The black sow, tied out front, eats slops and gets on with everyone. The sheep used to be out back, but he was slaughtered. I have five sisters. Jasinta the Elder is married with five of her own. Cecilia left for Washington three years ago. Elena the Elder has a sharp tongue. Maria, the prettiest, is seven. Then there’s me, followed by Elena the Smaller who can’t speak yet. And two brothers; Juan and Pedro. There were two more, but they died. Juan works with Papi all day and Pedro never sits still: always fighting, yelling and throwing himself down the slope among goat droppings, with my cousins, hair-lipped JosŽ or Diego, the wrestler. Pedro wears the leather jacket Uncle Jacinto brought him, full of zips, embroidered with Yanqui flag and eagle I he only takes it off to sweat in the *temascal*.

Before the stranger arrives nothing much happens. We wake before sun-up, Mami builds the fire and smoke fills our hut. Light filters in through gaps in the slats, while smoke leaks out the corrugated roof. Elena mills coffee. I bring water from the *pila* outside. It’s tricky: just before you reach the front door there’s a muddy pit and over the threshold a volcano of earth. Our floor is as bumpy as the mountains about us, everything balances just so: we know the curves like our own. Mami makes eggs and *tortillas*. Maria passes down enamel cups hung on nails and pans slung on a small bush. I hand out bowls from a cupboard and count spoons from a bag dangling from the rafters. We sit on stools, the bed or squat. After breakfast we play. Boys jump on the bed, fight, throw clothes about. Big girls roll smaller ones into hammocks of blankets and sing:

ÔVamos a la vuelta, del toro toro gil,  
A ver a la rana comiendo perejil...Ô

My favorite game, mine alone, is climbing into Uncle Jasinto’s shiny gray vinyl suitcase. Maria or Elena the Elder push me, bronze wheels bumping over the stones, eyes peeking above the metal zip, and I cry at the top of my voice:

ÔTake me to la Capital.Ô

ÔTo the stars,Ô or:  
ÔOut of the bowl!Ô

We get in trouble if we disturb Papi, snoring in through his flat nose and out through fat cheeks. He and

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Juan walk early-early in the night to our land, half-way down the valley and around three bends where we keep three cows and grow maize. They bring home firewood in nets belted around their foreheads. On Sundays they hunt for deer. Pedro wants to go, but he's too little: at each gunshot he looks up, wistfully.

We girls stay home; help Mami cook, scrub clothes, wash dishes and weave black, red or white *huipils* embroidered with parrots and horses. We hang the cobs Papi brings home from the rafters to dry and, every eight days, we fill a sack and bash it till the grains are loose. They're washed in a huge basket and brought to the boil in a cauldron with water and a cup of lime, golden kernels hidden beneath thick layer of scum, till bubbling, they break through. Once they cool we rub them till translucent husks fall away and grind them to a clay the color of sunflowers. At each meal the moon-shaped *comal* is coated with wet lime and put on the coals. As it heats, continents and oceans shimmer and disappear like those in my dreams and slapping *tortillas* begins. Over the smoking fire, strings of lamb, tied to the rafters, cure more each day.

The buses stop just below our house. Two leave for Nebaj before dawn, horns echoing across the mountains. They return in late afternoon bringing villagers from the market, chickens bound by the feet, crates of fizzy drinks and foil packets of fried *platinos*. They tie bundles and crates on donkeys to bring them to the shops. Behind us lies the school, with its slatted windows and barbed fence. From our front yard you can see the valley with its green crescent of lake, like the fragment of mirror we comb our hair in. Cows and sheep graze in the sloping fields marked with posts and barbed wire. New roofs shine silver in the sun, while thatched and rusty roofs soak it up, camouflaged. Smoke eddies all day from one house or other, painted pink or green. Waxy white lilies, yellow *flor de muerto* and violet bells of *jabor* fill the yards.

One day the bus brought the stranger. He was tall and thin, hair like dry corn leaves and skin pink as *carrot* seeds. He carried a bag with clothes, a box with a glass window, some books, drawings of mountains and an exercise book. On top he'd tied a rolled mat and house of folded sheets. He stayed in our yard for a month, learning *ixel* from my sisters. He gave Mami *quetzales* to feed him and got Papi talking about the future.

Papi translated. In his country, people had only two or three children. We never understood how, but Papi reckoned it was something they ate. Papi told him the Church said it was a sin but the stranger didn't seem to think so. Some people had no children at all, he told us. What did they do with their land if they didn't have children, asked Papi? The stranger said they didn't have land & they rented rooms, one on top of the other, like a honeycomb. So where did they grow their vegetables? They got them from shops that bought them from big farms. Papi thought about this a while. Then he asked if they were happy. It was the stranger's turn to look confused.

The stranger said there were others like him who wanted to come to Palop. The mountains, he said, were a marvelous treasure and the *Cooperacion* would build a path to connect one village to the next. Papi said there were some already, but the stranger said they needed signs and special huts. Palop would be a fine place to build one. But they needed a certain type, not like ours, all black with smoke, its floor lumpy, mattresses heaped with dirty clothes. No, they needed a hut with wooden beds, new cupboards, a flush toilet and a hot shower. Oh, and electricity. Papi scratched his head.

The stranger told him that the *Cooperacion* wanted to help mountain folk hit by the Civil War. When Papi told him Grandpapi's house had been burnt to the ground by the army, he seemed pleased. He offered to build the hut if Papi would let him use his land. Visitors would pay a fee and, after Papi paid the *Cooperacion* back, we could keep the hut. Papi explained this to Mama, who said nothing, till the stranger had gone to his tent. Then they discussed it for hours and called Uncle Jacinto over to get his opinion.

Made of pale new wood, it stands on red painted cement, under a shiny roof. It has a wooden door, shutters and wires, switches and bulbs for electricity. A dozen beds stand inside with new mattresses, a huge

chest and cupboards. Below, a shower room and flush toilet. Three men in green shiny jackets built a trail. They told us to be patient: trekkers would come. Rainy season cleared into a bright November. Clouds dissolved into storms again. Papi put chickens into the attic, stored bags of feed on the floor and kept his saddle on the chest. When we killed sheep, he hung skins from the rafters. Mami stored things: coils of barbed wire under the beds, white plastic chairs, school books in the cupboards. For a long time we weren't allowed to play inside, but when no trekkers came, Papi didn't bother shoing us out, nor the dogs, any more.

The year I became too big to cram myself into the suitcase new strangers showed up with hair white as maize. They carried strap-on bags and heavy leather boots, the women wore trousers. Their youngest laughed at my plastic sandals. The grown-ups were upset about chickens in the hut and cold water. More arrived in the weeks that followed. We were kept busy making coffees, *tortillas*, washing sheets and cleaning up.

They stopped coming in rainy season. But when the rains cleared the hut was full again. We were the first in Palop to put electricity in our house. My sisters bought a stereo, my brothers a TV to watch wrestling. Papi bought Mami a gas cooker. Everyone was happy. We had everything we'd ever dreamed of. And many things we hadn't. Elena, the Elder, followed in Cecilia's footsteps: she got forty thousand *quetzales* together and crossed without papers. Maria married and went to work in a dentist's in Nebaj. Elena, the Smaller, the first to finish secondary school, became a teacher in Xalbal. Pedro became a traveling salesman, bringing Tigo mobiles with a hundred and fifty *quetzales* of credit and a free wind-breaker to Quich'Z'. Mami was proud but Papi never understood why they'd left. Only Jasinta the Elder, for whom good fortune came too late, stayed and Juan who worked the land with Papi.

I fell in love with a straw-haired Frenchmen who came from a village near Dijon to trek. Jacques wore leather shoes and carried a huge gray vinyl suitcase with a silver zip and four bronze wheels. I almost fit inside: no wonder I fell in love. My Spanish was good enough to let him know. His was good enough to give me his word he'd come back for me. He packed his clothes in a Hessian sack and left the suitcase as his guarantee. It took him three years to finish his studies, find work and return. I'd nothing to pack in the suitcase but my toothbrush and a *huipil* Mama wove for my wedding day. Papi and Juan gave me hard hugs before they left to work. Thumping along that winding, craggy dirt road, hawks circling, I escaped the bowl for good. As I looked back at Mami through the greasy rear window, fog swallowed her up. She was still waving.



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Jamey Genna

Jamey Genna teaches writing in the East Bay area of San Francisco. She is a graduate of the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program at the University of San Francisco. Her short fiction has appeared in many fine literary magazines both on-line and in print, such as *Iowa Review*, *Georgetown Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *Storyglossia*. You can find her at [jameygenna.blogspot.com](http://jameygenna.blogspot.com).

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Jamey Genna

Reyna is outside somewhere crying. My student-aide Khala comes into the classroom and tells me this and I say, "Go get her." Reyna is an up-and-down kind of girl whose parents don't have a clue how to handle her. They only make matters worse after they take the knife away from her, saying she is stupid and that they are not going to give her a Filipino coming-out party for her eighteenth birthday. She was hiding under the kitchen table threatening to leave them, one way or the other. She tells me all this. I listen and give her a big strong hug, reminding her that she will one day move out and go away and her parents' opinion won't matter. I say, maybe she will get a job in the mall and just go to community college like my kid is going to do and that is okay; and my kid's not getting any coming-out party either. Reyna laughs finally and quits crying. Reyna and my teenager are like twins that way. Not that I know how to handle my own, because if I did I could end her arguments with her boyfriend on the phone and solve her crying jags when she's got PMS, and she would feel more comfortable getting a big strong hug from me, and I wouldn't be tempted to laugh like the idiot I am when she is crying.

My friend Pam, after school, on our walks, picks up pennies from the asphalt. She doesn't care if the tar gets under her fingernails. It's a habit of hers that I find rather sad—that some part of her is tuned all the time to the pavement looking for the glint of dull copper. "The metal in a penny now is worth more than the penny itself." This is a worthless fact my other friend Claudia's boyfriend told me at a barbeque. Even though the fact has no value, I am always impressed that people find these things out. I never know stuff like this. I prefer to find out how and why the latest actor or singer died and exactly what drugs he took, or why that other man shot into a crowd of college students, or guiltily, I want to know what is going to happen to Britney next, even though I'm sick of her problems and wish they'd let her be a common citizen like the rest of us. I never listened to her music and neither did my daughter, who has some taste, and I know where she gets it. I try to listen to public radio in the morning to remember one fact of intellectual value that I can use in a conversation at a barbecue with doctors and writers and lab technicians, even though I don't donate any money to the radio station when they have their fundraising marathons four times a year. Pam keeps trying to get me to go back to teaching aerobics, but I don't want to now because I have too many sore bones and don't want to stick to a schedule of exercise, and I hate yoga even though everyone is supposed to love it. On our walks, Pam talks about the man she has been in love with for twenty years who is not her husband. He's a doctor that Pam went to see when her kids were little and she had a lump inside her nose, but he said it was just stress. I guess he was helping her with it. He is married, too, and has a new girlfriend now. Pam and he no longer see each other but remain friends, and Pam is allowed to leave notes in a post office box for him.

My sister told me the other day that her daughter's—my niece's husband is over in Iraq flying helicopters. He signed up to get his flight hours, but he has always been pro-military, all the way. My niece is lonely and finishing

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vet school. She’s only been a bride for a couple of months.

My friend Phil, the teacher’s aide to the blind kids, killed himself military style by hanging himself with a hood over his head and tying his feet together. He did it from the railroad bridge in sight of the Hernandez Park swing set, but I don’t think any children saw him hanging there because it was too early in the morning. I was one of three people in his will, but I had distanced myself from him some time before that because I could see I was of no help whatsoever to his mental condition. A while after the funeral, another teacher’s aide told me that he told her he was going to marry me after I divorced my husband, and that our daughter was mine by another marriage. Both were ideas that he had in his head and are not true. I love my husband, that’s a fact, and our daughter is our daughter, but that is weird Phil thought that, because people are always thinking my daughter is just mine and not my husband’s. That’s probably because I always say, “My daughter,” when I’m talking about her. Apparently, Phil had run out of the good medication a while ago and couldn’t get the military doctors to put him back on it because it was too expensive. I saw him kick the garbage can in the lunch room one day right before Christmas.

He liked my daughter who was thirteen back then, and at the funeral, where Phil was in an urn from his cremation and then buried in the ground, his father told me Phil had always had an eye for young girls, a fact which made me feel like I had done the right thing by avoiding him.

When my daughter said, “Why didn’t you do something?”

I said, “He was sick, honey.”

He used to go see her in plays at the middle school, so when he gave me a rose in a miniature whiskey bottle, a rose he got every Tuesday on a free voucher from the local florist, I stopped being in my room on Tuesdays after school, even if he did tell me interesting things about his first girlfriend. Phil said she was on the highway back in the seventies hitchhiking while he was in Vietnam, on some tour of duty where he didn’t see any action, and she had been murdered by someone who picked her up and that he wished he’d “fucked her” when he’d had the chance. He was twenty-two then and she was in high school, but his story was so garbled I began to believe things about him I didn’t want to. “Like maybe he was really the one who had picked up a sixteen-year-old girl hitchhiking, raped her, and stabbed her to death.

In his will, he gave me a statue of a man standing in something like poet’s garb, with a big hat, or it was something like a standing-Shakespeare, and he gave me several paintings that were scary homemade things, possibly by somebody else he knew or had been friends with. He gave them to me because he knew I liked paintings. They had the wings of hummingbirds stuck in them and pieces of bones. Phil gave all his military stuff to another teacher who had actually seen action in Vietnam and, also Phil had a thing for learning how to fence onstage. I had to wonder about the guys who collect war memorabilia.



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If It Hasn't Already

Jamey Genna

My friend Laurie never told me until two months after it happened, that she and her husband Reese had had a major argument and that he’d slept in the coaches’ office for three days at the private high school where he taught history and coached the J.V. basketball team to championship every year. She apologized for not telling me by saying that she was sorry but “some things are between a husband and a wife.” I wondered then whether there was a time limit for telling. And I was thinking, too, about the personal things that she had maneuvered out of me about my first husband and me fighting while we were still married—stuff about his near suicidal temper, where he worried me telling me he drove his motorcycle around a curve a hundred miles an hour or so. I sent her a Christmas card from up here in northern California where I moved with my husband that I’m married to now, and the card came back that they had moved, too. I guessed right when I figured out the friendship was all imbalanced and meant something more to me than her, but I still love her. I’m sure it had something to do with the fact that when I got married again I had a baby and she didn’t. Or maybe everything really is all about proximity.

I heard on the radio where the vets who have the highest incidence of suicide after returning from the war are guys who enlisted in the National Guard before the war started, and then got sent over. My guess is because they weren’t expecting to have to kill anybody when they joined up.

One time Sandra and Ana gave me a hard time at the beach because I didn’t want to lie on the sand close to the garbage cans. The cans smelled rotten like a dead seagull. I had introduced the two of them, Sandra and Ana, to each other and had given them a ride to the beach, too, in my white Honda Civic, because neither of them had a car. The beach was down in Capistrano and it was the first warm day of spring going into summer, but they ganged up on me and sat down on the blanket by the stink. I got up and went for a walk by myself. But later, I found out I was pregnant, so if I was being cranky that is probably why. Ana was from Panama and Sandra was an Italian girl with a big nose, but they were both ten years younger than me. Somehow I am almost always finding friends who are ten years younger than me or ten years older.

My youngest brother died of SIDS.

I heard on the news the other morning that younger and younger children are blowing themselves up as suicide bombers, and I think about that.

My friend Amanda from college calls me from Casper, Wyoming, which is a town that has the highest winter suicide rate in the country, a fact I once heard on the radio. Amanda is always wasted, much like my oldest sister, who calls me from Texas when she is drunk. I want to say to both of them, “Quit calling me unless you are going

to quit drinking, but I know that self-medication is better than suicide. Amanda has a husband who raped her anally after six years of marriage and she took the panties down to a rape station where they were kept as evidence. But she didn't leave him and the two of them have been together now, as she says, "twenty-fucking years."

"Commitment" is her answer when I ask her why she stays. I met her husband before he raped her, and I didn't like him then either. We were playing the board game WAR, and he was so intent on winning that it was no fun. But I don't guess I'd like that game anyway, no matter who was playing it.

I try to tell my friend Amanda there may be no afterlife and to convince her that she is pretty and smart and will find someone new or that maybe, just maybe, she could be happier on her own and that this may be the only life she'll ever have. But they have a timeshare down in New Orleans and she says she told him they are going down there one more time to hear the jazz that flows out of the doorways and to eat the food that's so wonderful.

And "anyway" is her favorite word.

I can't get my head around the different countries and the different sects in the Middle East—it's a memory thing. I only know my daughter's friend Sean was deployed there and he's just a boy fresh out of high school who couldn't find a job. He liked to go over to church in Martinez every Sunday by himself when he was in high school and he was always kind of quiet when he came over to our house, and sweet and helpful. I thought he was going to be a minister or that maybe he was gay, but my daughter says no. I can imagine him in a uniform and I can imagine him taking orders in boot camp where they try to break you, but I can't imagine him defending himself against a child with a backpack coming around a corner.

My daughter says she was affected by 9-11 and that's when she started cutting, and I don't understand why middle school teachers would show that clip over and over again to kids in sixth and seventh grade. It makes me mad, but I know I am always looking for somebody to blame outside of myself. And I can't get my head around how that event could affect her so personally. The other day my daughter told me that she was going to have a drink again when she had her graduation party, and I said, "Not in my house."

I made sure to hang up the picture on the wall at the foot of her bed that she herself painted of the broken bottle, the raccoon, and the rock she hid behind, the time she got drunk at homecoming her freshmen year and ran away from the principal when he said, "Come here!" She was suspended for three days from the new school she transferred to after trying to escape going to high school with me where I taught and where I could've kept an eye on her. But she says, that's just high school, and I wonder how many high school parents had to sit at the foot of a hospital bed on two separate occasions while doctors decided whether you were a good parent and whether or not to commit your kid on a 51-50.

I saw a picture in the paper the other day of a young black kid from Oakland who came back from the war and his face had been burned off, so that there were patches of pinkish-white all over his black skin, on his cheeks and the bridge of his nose, and he was getting a medal for his bravery from the mayor. And he looked confused.

I am trying to find some new friends here because all the ones I have live elsewhere now or are, like my family, peppered across the United States. Or else I'm not the same person. The wars are still going on, but my daughter, at least, is going to graduate. I think she'll make it. But I don't want the number on the public radio to go over five thousand, when they say, "And now here in silence, are four more." If it hasn't already.



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Jennifer Spiegel

Jennifer has an MA in Politics from New York University, and an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction) from Arizona State. Her work has appeared in several anthologies and journals, including *The Gettysburg Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Nimrod*, and *The Seattle Review*. Dzanc Books will publish her collection of short stories, *The Freak Chronicles: Stories for Freaks and Their Friends*, in 2012.

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Lemon Fiction

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Lemon

Jennifer Spiegel

Tess gave two black boys French fries in the Cape Town airport parking lot.

She paid them with Wimpy’s chips to watch the company van. On that first balmy sub-Saharan night in 1998, she looked exactly like Margot remembered her from their years together at Northwestern—except for the tan. Same long hair, same long legs—but amazing bronze skin. “Guess which car is mine,” Tess said. She worked for an AIDS nonprofit that did a lot of grassroots work in the townships. Her boss was a gay ex-Anglican priest from a groovy part of England.

Two kids ate fries by a Combi with a bumper sticker on it that said, “Condoman says, *Use Condoms!*” “Um, *that one?*” Margot said, pointing to the van.

This would be Margot’s first memory of South Africa: children guarding a Combi, fried potatoes for currency, “chips” instead of “fries,” Tess with a tan.

*Dear Ben,*

*I’m somewhere over the Atlantic; I’ll be in Miami by dawn, Vancouver by dusk.*

*Ben, this is for you. I tread lightly over the details. I do so for you, you burly Afrikaner ex. We ended badly; we ended well. I tread delicately, desiring no vengeance, harboring no hatred. Ben, old friend, I never gave you anything except that carved wooden chess set I bought for your birthday on Greenmarket Square at St. George’s, the same place I bought that cheap beaded necklace I wore every day for a year and Zulu Fire Sauce for my dad. You didn’t even like it—you didn’t even like the chess set; you only wanted to return to the humdrum, you-win comforts of your beloved backgammon. No, I never gave you anything.*

*Both of us were aware of clashing sensibilities, aware we never felt strongly enough about one another to overcome contradictory convictions, aware that—when it came down to it—we were better patriots than lovers. Even then, both “patriot” and “lover” struck strange chords in my internal organs. The former suggested a sentiment I scorn; the latter, an arrangement I despise.*

*Inevitably, we would leave each other.*

*Just the same, this is for you.*

Things happened quickly. Margot was not exactly a backpacker, nor was she a squatter—though she traveled with a backpack and without money. On the cusp of turning thirty, she came to South Africa to live, for a while at least. She liked when people called her an expatriate, but *she* wouldn’t call herself that. It sounded pretentious, though conjuring up images of Hemingway pouring back red wine from wineskins was perfectly desirable.

In no time at all, she moved out of Tess’s Camps Bay bungalow and into a small home in Rondebosch with her new Afrikaner boyfriend, Ben. Tess, doing her own expat divinations, pushed her out the door with a quiet warning. “Even though no one truly knows the real you in this country, there’s only so much escaping you can

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do. With that, Tess turned Margot over to Margot's new flame.

Margot had been dismissive of the counsel, waving her hand and snapping her tongue against the roof of her mouth. Later, when Tess's role in Margot's life had diminished considerably, she'd remember her college friend's words. She'd regard them as among the most memorable she had heard.

Ben was, he said, "A New South African." In other words, knowing that *Apartheid* had to go, he touted democracy.

Like most whites, however, he had a maid. So, really, Margot had a maid, too.

Once, she lost an earring, a little dangly thing with a blue gem hanging by a silver wire. Ben, wearing a bikini swimsuit, entered the living room from the backyard. "I can't find one of my earrings—did you happen to see it?" she said to him.

Ben, still dripping from the pool, took on this stern, composed, bulldog look. "Let's go into the bedroom."

"I'm sure I just misplaced it—it's probably in my purse." Margot trailed after him. "For God's sake, put some clothes on."

Ben led the way down the hall. Passing the kitchen, he said to the maid, "Patience, follow us." A half-naked Afrikaner, a Canadian woman, and a young Xhosa woman in an apron paraded down the hall in single file. Many maids had names like *Patience, Justice, Joy*.

Margot knew next to nothing about Patience. She didn't know if Patience were married, if she had children, what she did on weekends. Patience was a black woman, maybe around Margot's age, rather pretty. They moved by one another like apparitions. Margot lifted her legs if she sat on the couch when Patience vacuumed. In the kitchen, if Patience chopped while Margot sliced, Margot thought about talking to the maid. Then, figuring herself white, and thinking that Patience might view her disruptive attempts at discourse as feeble, false, and impossible, Margot stopped. She said nothing. Margot sliced while Patience chopped.

Ben walked directly to Margot's jewelry box on the dresser. "It was here last?" He fingered pearls, some trinkets.

"Yeah. I can't find it," Margot answered. Ben stood before the two women. He was the opposite of Margot's usual romantic fare. No lanky body, no wire-rimmed glasses, no boyish charm, no political agendas. Ben was solid, cocky, tough, and he seemed like he'd be good at keeping one warm around a campfire. He could definitely build the fire himself. Where Margot was from, the boys had *heard* one could start a fire by rubbing two sticks together, but, thankfully, everyone had a lighter.

Patience, wiping her hands on her apron (she wore a uniform straight out of American sit-com TV in the fifties), had to know what was coming next. Suddenly, Margot did too.

Ben turned to her. "Patience, have you seen Margot's earring?"

Margot was paralyzed.

Patience, full of poise, didn't seem to notice Ben's bikini. The two women weren't even looking at the same man.

"Miss Margot lost her earring? She always called Margot Miss. When?"

"I wore it yesterday." Margot couldn't meet her eyes.

Patience did what she had to. This tall, graceful Xhosa woman sunk to her knees, wearing her pink dress and white apron, and she ran her hands over the carpet. "This it?" She held up Margot's earring.

"Yes." Margot reached for it. For a second, the two women's hands touched.

"Thanks, Patience." Ben smiled, his hands on his hips.

Patience left, no doubt relieved she could still feed the babies, the husband, maybe an ailing mother.



Ben walked over to the bed and sat down. He pointed his finger at the doorway out of which Patience had just walked. "That girl doesn't steal." "You didn't have to do that," Margot said in a loud whisper. "Do what?" "Accuse her of stealing." "I didn't." Margot fiddled with hairbrushes, combs. "You did. And now you're making it sound like it's a lesson for me." Margot looked into the mirror over the dresser; she looked at herself. "That girl doesn't steal." She caught his eye. "Do you even care about Patience?" Ben looked straight at her. "Of course I do. You don't occupy the same space as someone without caring." Walking to the door, he asked, "Do you not care?" Then, leaving the room, he said, "I care more about Patience than you, my sweet, ever will."

*For the life of me, I can't remember Patience ever using the bathroom.*  
*I suppose she must have. I mean, she had to.*  
*Ben, where did the black woman go to the bathroom? Was she allowed to use our bathroom?*

In the spring, Margot went on a jaunt alone, a safari-and-camping spree—a organized tour involving binoculars, big animals, and campsite showers. Though she had a job as an admin assistant, she still took off at a moment's notice. Her responsibilities abroad, she knew, were minimal. If she needed a little time off, she'd take it.

On the trip, she met an English guy who told her African travel tales which he wove together like *The Thousand and One Nights* with magical Xhosa equivalents to Aladdin, Sinbad, and Ali-Baba. "You should go to Coffee Bay in the Transkei," he said. He was refreshingly First World with his buzzcut and penchant for granola, raves, and alternative rock. "It's gorgeous: rolling green hills, black people, red sunsets, the ocean." He wanted to kiss her, Margot could tell, but she felt committed, even if mildly, to another. There were subtle things that made her less backpacker, more transplant: she *did* hold down a job, she *did* have a monogamous relationship, she *did* live in a house. This English storyteller was looking for backpacker experiences, romance on the road. Margot considered, but found herself more interested in Coffee Bay.

Coffee Bay was a seaside Transkei town along the Wild Coast in the Eastern Cape Province, largely populated by members of the Xhosa tribe. Legend had it that a shipwreck littered the beach with coffee beans; hence, the name. It was probably as true as *The Thousand and One Nights*, but the image of white sands bejeweled with coffee beans filled Margot with inexplicable longing.

"It sounds like real Africa," she said. They were sitting together on a tour bus driving through Swaziland. His eyes were wet and dewy. "It is," he said. "Thanks for telling me." When Margot got home, she announced to Ben she was going to the Transkei next month. "Alone. I'll hitchhike, take the bus, whatever."

"You don't want to do that," he said. "You don't want to go there—it's not safe." "What do you mean?" Perhaps *this* was the real Africa: arguing with a white man about the rest of the continent. "Car-jackings, murder. White people only go there for one thing."

“What would that be?” She squinted at him.

The pot. Best in the world.

It’s supposed to be beautiful.

It’s not safe for a white woman, Margot. He put his hands on her cheeks, pulled her over, and kissed her on the lips.

“I’d like to see real Africa.”

*Ben, do you remember when I first arrived? How we met at cafés downtown and I asked you one question after another?*

*I’d ask you anything. Who are the women you’ve loved? What do you think about Mandela? Are you going to leave the country? Where will you go? Who do you love, Ben? Have they loved you? What can you tell me, Ben? Tell me about love.*

*It amused you—I amused you. Our relationship was built on the enchantment of difference. We had no commonalities, none at all. My wide-eyed, no-holds-barred questioning charmed you; I was enthralled by your blunt answers. Never before had I encountered a man so willing to answer my silly questions, so willing to entertain my absurdities and eccentricities.*

*We sat next to each other at cafés, both of us very serious. I asked, “Do you take advantage of the fact that Dutch, Danish, British, and American girls are coming to your country in droves now that Apartheid is caput?”*

*“Only four times,” you replied, seriously.*

*This amused me, Ben. You amused me.*

Once upon a time, South Africa had designated “homelands,” pockets of land “reserved” for blacks. One needed a visa to get by border control. Homelands were Third World sites within an industrialized, Second World country. Often, black men would go into the cities for jobs, leaving behind wives and children for months and months—maybe years, lifetimes. Back home, in rural wastelands, families would flounder under the weight of extreme poverty.

But despite its want, the Transkei, one such place, was supremely beautiful with endless lime-green hills and a blue sky ripe with billowy white clouds. *Kraals*, pastel-colored circular huts, spotted the ground. When the sun set, the world was golden, like an African Van Gogh. Before Nelson Mandela became a Johannesburg African National Congress outlaw, before he became a political prisoner on Robben Island for twenty-six years, before he won the Nobel Peace Prize, and before he became the first democratically-elected president of post-*Apartheid* South Africa, he was a child in the Transkei. Also called the Wild Coast and the Shipwreck Coast, the Indian Ocean flanked the geography and sharks lurked in dark waters. The terrain was feral, lovely, simultaneously blessed and cursed.

Margot went to Coffee Bay because she liked its name.

Getting off the Baz Bus, the backpacker mode of transportation that journeyed between Cape Town and Johannesburg, she was surprised. Most people didn’t bother moving from their seats when the bus stopped. Right in the middle of a country of wineries and resorts, a shocking African world spread out under an endless sky. Everyone was black. Their faces were painted with clay to stave off sunrays. Women washed clothes on the roadside. Some sold pineapples. Many carried huge bundles on their heads. Cows and sheep, bone-thin, wandered aimlessly. Burned-out, rusted, and wrecked cars had been dumped everywhere, maybe casualties of carjacking.

This was the Transkei; she was used to croissant sandwiches at CatŹ Bardelli in Cape Town served by women about to launch modeling careers.

ÒThe manager of Coffee BayÕs youth hostel will meet us here,Õ said the driver, also not moving from his seat.

ÒHere?Õ Margot asked. ÒOn the highway?Õ She twisted around, looking out the windows.

ÒYeah.Õ

Margot took a deep breath, preparing to exit the bus and look around. Another woman, Central European, would be getting off to go to Port St. Johns a bit further north. She hesitantly joined Margot in checking out the surroundings. Together, they stepped onto the edge of the highway.

Xhosa children and an old woman immediately approached the two women, asking for money. They didnÕt understand the language, but a rampant clicking of tongues escaped Xhosa lips: the sound of bottle tops popping off. A click, click, *ng, nd*. The old womanÕs face was painted white. Hands stretched out to the white women like they had something to offer. A click, click, *nt, ny*.

Margot looked at the Central European woman. There was panic in the womanÕs eyes. ÒIs this what you expected?Õ Margot asked.

ÒNo.Õ The woman smiled weakly but bravely, too.

People had warned Margot about traveling alone. She was a woman; she was white. She hadnÕt listened. Turning her head, she looked off into the rolling green hills.

*Once, when we were already relationship-enmeshed, when my life in Cape Town was more than a big vacation, you were in the backyard, minding the ubiquitous braai fire.*

*Those crazy braais! The BBQ times one hundred! An impossible amount of red meat!*

*In my case, the braai involved Afrikaners drinking beer and lapsing into Afrikaans.*

*Your mom and sister were visiting, and I was helping them in the kitchen. ÒWhat are you making?Õ I asked your mom.*

*ÒVetkoek.Õ She was rolling dough before frying it. ÒDo you know where the word vetkoek comes from?Õ*

*ÒNope,Õ I admitted.*

*ÒVet is ÒfatÕ and koek is ÒfannyÕ or Òcake,ÕÕ she explained. ÒÕFat fannyÕ or Òfat cake.ÕÕ*

*Your sister handed me one: bready, fried, goodÕsomething to eat at a state fair.*

*Imagine, a fat cake that causes a fat fanny! ÒThatÕs the cutest thing IÕve ever heard,Õ I laughed. The two women nervously giggled.*

*I went to find you, knowing you were getting excited about all the red meat youÕd soon consume. When I found you prodding the fire, I danced around breathlessly. ÒI just heard the cutest word, Ben: vetkoek. Fat fanny.Õ I slapped you on the butt. ÒWatch your koek!Õ*

*You abruptly stopped playing with fire. ÒThatÕs not your koek, Margot.Õ You pointed between my legs. ÒThatÕs your koek.Õ*

*Horror traipsed over my features. ÒWhat does ÒfannyÕ mean?Õ*

*You searched for the words, settling on some. ÒFemale genitalia.Õ*

*I blushed. ÒNo! YouÕre kidding! ItÕs a cute word for butt or bum back home.Õ I was stung. ÒYour mom and sister didnÕt tell me.Õ*

*"They probably didn't want to embarrass you."*

*None of us really understood each other.*



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Lemon

[Jennifer Spiegel](#)

When the seriously-pierced British guy picked Margot up on the highway to take her to Coffee Bay, she asked him, "Do you remember another Brit with a buzzcut who came by here a few months ago?" The one with *The Thousand and One Nights*? she thought. "He told me to come here."

Lee, the seriously-pierced British guy, looked her over: another American/European/Canadian girl on the run, probably from love or student loans. He furrowed his eyebrows. "The diver?"

"No." She shook her head. "He wasn't a diver." Dave was a well-traveled English guy. He read good books and wore turtlenecks.

"Yeah," Lee nodded. "Worked in Hong Kong. Had short hair, a goatee."

It was Dave. A diver? They had been campfire confidantes for about a week. They had seen giraffe together! Rhino! Dung beetle! What else didn't she know about him?

She stared at Lee, punk rock ŽmigriŽ: sick fascination with the deviant.

About Dave, she said, "Spend a week with someone and think you know him."

About the clay on the Xhosa faces, he said, "It's calamine lotion nowadays."

"So, is it true that everyone smokes pot in the Transkei?" she asked.

"Yeah, it's true." He peered over, holding onto the steering wheel. "You smoke?"

"No."

"Have you tried it?"

"For four years," she lied. "Straight," she added. She had no idea why she said this.

*You approached outings with my foreign friends with dread—Even if you liked them.*

*You liked Michelle and Don, two Americans from Jersey. They invited us to their Woodstock rental, and we ate humus, French bread, and grapes. It comforted me: the lack of meat, the presence of chickpeas, their accents. We told silly stories, like the time Michelle was in high school and she and her friends ditched class, dressed up someone's senile grandmother like a cheerleader, put her in the middle of the front seat of the car, and drove to a drive-thru liquor store where they bought booze without IDs. No one carded them with the senile grandmother dressed up like a cheerleader in the front seat.*

"That couldn't have happened," you later said.

"Sure, it could've."

You were suspicious. "You guys always tell these crazy stories."

"But, Ben, postal workers really do go bonkers and try to knock off entire small towns." I looked at you.

"What do South Africans talk about?"

"We shoot the shit."

"Well, we do, too. That's what we were doing."

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*ÓIn your world,Ó you said with a straight face, Ónonsense happens.Ó*

To get to the hostel, Margot and Lee needed to cross a running river on foot. Lee took her backpack, and a stoned guy in a sarong held her daypack.

They crossed the river, their legs wet: girl on hostel lawn holding puppy.

They entered the house, their arms full: guy at table rolling joint.

The Coffee Bay hostel looked like a frat house. The puppy had issues with that carpet. Another guy sat on the couch, staring at his lap, sucking on a joint.

Following the grand tour, which included a main house and several ÓcottagesÓ in back, Margot went to the store, a ramshackle, dusty-shelved shop, where she bought bread, peanut butter, water, and fruit cocktail. She hated fruit cocktail.

Back at the hostel, she talked to a few people.

But she was scared; she wanted to be alone. If she left this town, sheÓd be the only white person within miles. If she stayed, sheÓd be the only one not stoned. Escaping into her dirty bedroom to write in her journal, she realized some things: she wasnÓt adventurous like Diver Dave; she wanted Cape Town and the model crowd.

Even worse, it occurred to her that she was a hypocrite, a pretender, a poser: She liked the idea of being a free-spirited, tie-dye garbed, wild woman at home among indigenous peoplesÑbut, in reality, she liked it when beautiful black men *adorned* her white world. The Transkei, with its bruised history, frightened her. Suddenly, despite her professed ideals, she yearned for the First or Second World in which people campaigned against drug abuse with pat-phrases like *Just Say No*.

ÓI want my MTV,Ó she wrote in her journal.

*ÓIÓve been in love with soulful men before, Ben. Men with whom conversation eventually ceases because they donÓt feel like talking about the things of this world, relationships in which paying bills seems silly when questions like Is There A God? are still being asked. ÓIÓve had this before, and you, you, with whom I almost fell in love, were not a soulful man.*

*You were so utterly grounded in this worldÑready to jump down the throats of those around you in heated conversations about Apartheid, South Africa, Nelson Mandela, and paying taxes. You were so utterly grounded in this world, this world where schoolgirls eat meat pies and schoolboys wear socks pulled up to their knees.*

*ÓYouÓre very witty,Ó you said to me the first time I went back to your place. You put your hand on my thigh.*

*ÓSo are you.Ó I looked at your hand. ÓDo I also radiate intelligence?Ó*

*You considered. ÓNot really.Ó*

*ÓHuh.Ó I twitched my nose. ÓUsually, I do.Ó*

*When I think about us apart from our politics and everything else, I still smile.*

Waking at six a.m., Margot stumbled into the bathroom, wary of a Kermit-sized toad she had seen in the night. No frog appeared, but the backdoor glass had been broken and the kitchen garbage was strewn across the floor. She climbed a hill to watch the yellow sun lift over cold water, stretching its arms through theatrical white clouds. Soft green grass warmed under sunbeams. Ocean foam hit jagged black rocks below.

She contemplated her next move. She could somehow find a way back to Cape Town. She could go on Ñmaybe getting to Port St. Johns, another Transkei town. ThatÓs where the Central European woman had been

headed.

The sunlight bathed an emerald coast. Hadn't she proven she wasn't a poser? Wasn't it enough she went without showers, looked like hell, slept in dirty sheets, showered in basins that bred skin disease, ate from dishes that had simply passed under a flow of lukewarm water, carried a backpack across foreign terrain, and even had secrets with strangers who dared to keep vital information from her like their diving histories? Plus, she had practically gotten stoned on secondhand smoke.

Back at the hostel, Mavis, the maid, pushed garbage across a dry floor, her feet bare. Margot sat outside with the potheads, drinking coffee out of dirty cups and talking about pot (where to get it, if it was policed, how the drug dealers stood around like dealers in 1970's movies, how one guy raked all day when stoned).

She didn't want to be a person who only wanted beautiful black men punctuating a chic white world. "I'm going on to Port St. Johns today," she announced to Lee when he came out of his cottage at eleven, stretching and yawning.

He didn't even flinch. He didn't ask her to stay or have some pot or anything. "Be ready to go at 12:30." He was taking two kids into Umtata, a city with mini-taxi depots; he'd take her too. "You can pick up a Combi to Port St. Johns."

Suddenly, there was a shout from the hostel. "Anyone wanting to go to the Hole in the Wall, come on!" someone shouted from the hostel.

The Hole in the Wall was a bizarre rock formation that sat in the ocean off the coast about a half-hour away from Coffee Bay. Shaped like a croquet wicket, it was the major tourist attraction in the area.

Margot grabbed her camera and jumped into the back of yet another pick-up truck.

It all happened within a matter of seconds.

They were white. And that was the only thing she knew about them.

The guy driving was about thirty, big and beefy. Next to him in the cab was his girlfriend. She wore blue jeans that tightly hugged a puffy abdomen. That abdomen depressed Margot.

A local guy sat with Margot in the back. He looked washed-up, like he'd done too many drugs and he wasn't even an artist, like he found himself living in the Transkei not out of love for an oppressed people or a damaged country, but because no one bothered him too much when he was in the African backwaters.

The beefy guy kept throwing empty beer cans into the back with them. The grin on Margot's face froze as she realized everyone was drunk. Beefy, intoxicated and red-faced, sped recklessly around blind turns, along dirt roads. A pair of flip-flops joined the beer-can toss; he had stepped in crap and he didn't want the cab to stink.

At one point, he stopped the truck and blasted the radio. He called back to the Washed-Up Guy and Margot, "This is Afrikaner music." It was some kind of techno, hip-hop, rap imitation club music with a distinctly 1980s sound.

*It's shit-for-music*, Margot thought.

Then, on a beer run at the local shack/store, Beefy hopped out of the truck and did this arm-and-fist gesture commonly done by grown men at football games—the white boy jive to very bad Afrikaner techno.

"Nice," Margot said. "It's good," she lied. She was becoming quite the liar.

Beefy stood by the vehicle and turned his back to her when Washed-Up Guy went to purchase beer. The girlfriend was still in the cab. Beefy unzipped his pants and proceeded to urinate on the side of the road.

Turning towards Margot again, he put his hand on her ankle and moved it slowly along her calf. "Do you shave all the way up?"

She flinched.

Thank God, Washed-Up Guy returned just then.

In the car, Beefy pretended he was going to hit Xhosa kids walking along the road, dodging them at the last minute. The children fled, scattering like spooked animals. He threw a beer can at them and laughed wildly when they chased after it.

*You're a pig*, Margot thought.

They raced up and down hills, and Margot hung onto the truck, beer cans rolling around next to shitty thongs. She prayed he wouldn't kill any kids.

Meanwhile, Washed-Up Guy said, "The Xhosa are a lousy tribe, unlike the Zulus. The Xhosa don't want to work; they're lazy."

Finally, they made it. Beefy attempted to park perpendicular to a hill; Margot fully expected the truck to tip, tumbling into the sea. They would surely perish on the rocks below.

She jumped out of the truck the first chance she got.

"What's wrong with you?" Beefy asked.

"I want to live," she answered.

After he managed to park, they marched down the path to the obviously overrated Hole in the Wall.

Margot trailed behind with the girlfriend. "We met in Namaqualand eight months ago," the girlfriend explained. Namaqualand was in the Northern Cape Province. Though blanketed in blooming purple, orange, and yellow wildflowers in the spring, at the end of summer it was brown desert. She continued, "At a meat festival."

*A meat festival?*

"This is the first time we've seen each other since," she said. "I live in Port Elizabeth; he lives in Cape Town."

A meat festival must be equivalent to those odd American events at which big trucks roll over little trucks within coliseums containing men with beer bellies and women wearing tank tops sans bras.

Finally, the Hole in the Wall. A rock formation!

"Damn!" exclaimed the girlfriend. "I forgot my camera in the truck."

She left to retrieve her camera. Washed-Up Guy wandered off. Margot was alone with Beefy.

"So you shave all the way up?" he said.

Margot pretended not to hear.

"You're crazy for going to Port St. Johns alone, unless you're into getting raped," he said.

"I'm not."

"Look, I'm dropping her off in Port Elizabeth. I can take you back to Cape Town."

She pretended to think about it. "Probably not." She changed the subject. "Your girlfriend tells me you met at a meat festival?"

"Yeah." He became very excited. "This one night, I got so drunk I passed out in the back of my truck. When I woke up the next morning, there was a body next to me. I reached over to see if there were breasts. There weren't. I reached down and this guy was harder than me. I shouted, 'Get the fuck out of my truck!'"

*I'm in danger*, she thought.

"You should see the crayfish in Mozambique. If you were to lay one on top of your breasts, its tail would curl up between your legs."

*Shit.*

Margot *desperately* needed to return to Coffee Bay for her ride out of there. After the girlfriend showed up with her camera and took pictures as if she were a *National Geographic* photographer, Beefy suggested a drink for the road.



By the time they were in the truck, it was noon. This time, she sat in the cab with them. A madman, Beefy whipped through the Transkei, spinning tires and raising dust. Washed-Up Guy stood in the rear and held onto a bar on the roof as if he were surfing, as if he were a dog with the wind blowing back floppy ears.

Beefy, looking over at a frightened Margot, said, "What's the matter? You a virgin?"

What do you say to a guy like this? Margot thought that, perhaps, if she engaged him in conversation, he'd slow down. "So, are you two in love?"

The poor girlfriend stiffened.

"Just dating right now." He was shaken.

Margot turned to her. "Well, this oughta make you think."

With the desired effect, Beefy drove on in silence.

They arrived, alive.

*You and Tess didn't like each other. She found you to be a redneck, a little too Dutch. Similarly, you found her obnoxious and American. She couldn't believe I was dating you, an Afrikaner. You couldn't believe we were even friends.*

*Remember when we went to a movie together? Tess, some guy she liked, and the two of us? You insisted we take separate cars.*

*We went for drinks first: lines were invisibly drawn? Girls and boys, foreigners and South Africans, Afrikaners and English. You drank beer; the English South African guy drank wine. You wore a pullover sweater; he wore a dress shirt.*

*As the theater filled, a friend of theirs met us. He was a black man, and this was another difference? They had black friends.*

*You got to your feet, scooted over, and beckoned me to move.*

*"What are you doing?" I asked, slightly dense.*

*This is what you said: "Making room for the brother."*

*Oh, Ben!*

*Later, I told Tess what you said. She nearly spit her drink out of her mouth, repeating those words, "The brother!"*

*The brother.*

*The truth of the matter was this: despite the archaic language, you were the first one to get up and make sure there were enough seats for the black man to sit with us.*

*I noticed this. Ben, don't think I didn't notice.*

Margot journeyed to Umtata and made it to Port St. Johns, named after another shipwreck. She talked to world travelers and Xhosa holy men, read a Tom Robbins paperback in a hammock, and walked on trails through sub-tropical jungles.

When she thought about Beefy, she was ashamed for having jumped into his truck only because he was white.

At the week's end, she hopped a Greyhound bus in Umtata to return to Cape Town, staggering from Africa.

They stopped at 4:45 a.m. in Swellendam, where she had to switch to a new bus. Margot had been to the town before, and it reminded her? In daylight? of Switzerland. The mountain ranges were towering, luxuriant, and shrouded in thick green vegetation; the architecture was quaint and starkly white. The town looked like a grid

of Puritan main streets with a continental tinge. Rising above the sweetness of the streets, South African Alps hovered. The place was so clean it nearly glowed. The townships weren't even visible, concealed within cliffs; they were put away, like secrets; everything was sterile. This was a Dutch Disneyland, an English shire.

Now, 4:45 a.m., she waited for the transfer to Cape Town. Feeling a little chilly, she sat on a bench outside a hotel on a desolate street. She was nervous and alone, except for a young black woman sitting nearby. This woman, too, had gotten off the Greyhound, probably waiting for a ride or a transfer as well. Together, they had watched the bus drive away, its lights gradually fading.

The streets were empty. In towns this small, no one was out before dawn. The two women looked shyly at each other. They looked at their hands. They looked at the ground. There were a few stark streetlights that hit them like spotlights, and they both seemed to be pretending they weren't scared.

But it was scary. No one was around. No cars passed. Swellendam was dead. Already, Margot loathed this town for its whiteness, its barrenness before daybreak. She felt for this woman, black the same way Margot had been white in the Transkei.

Margot pulled out a package of lemon cookies she had bought on the road. She looked at the young woman, an outsider in this Swiss South African town. She began to unwrap the cookies, the plastic wrap making disruptive crackling noises in the early morning. Finally, the wafers free, their yellow icing was revealed. Margot looked at the cookies in her hands. She pulled the wrap back and took one in her fingers.

Then she held the package out to the black woman. "Do you want some? Do you want some cookies?" She pushed them into the other woman's palm.

The black woman accepted them. She nodded kindly at Margot. Without a word, they ate lemon cookies together before dawn.

*Sometimes, I tell anecdotes which reflect poorly on you, on your country.*

*I don't know how to talk about the times you drove Patience back to Khayelitsha yourself; I don't know how to tell people what that meant.*

*I talk about how beautiful Cape Town is. I say there's a price to pay for that beauty: internal dissonance, an uneasiness of the soul.*

*I never asked you if you felt that dissonance, that chaos. Maybe I was afraid to hear what you'd say.*

*I feel guilty too.*

*For my assumptions, my labeling, for a lot of things.*

*This is my confession: you are a South African man and I judged you—I judge you. But internal dissonance and uneasiness of the soul are not spots on any map. It's easy to point a finger at a place on the globe; it's easy to condemn a regime. But dissonance can be packed, rolled up tightly, stored in a sleeping bag. You can take it with you wherever you go.*

*Ben, I had it in my backpack the whole time. Like my passport, I never let it out of my sight.*



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Donna Laemmlen

Donna Laemmlen is currently pursuing an MFA in Writing at the University of San Francisco. She teaches Screenwriting and Storytelling in the Motion Pictures and Television Department of the Academy of Art University. "Chimera" is her first published story. A second story is forthcoming in the March, 2011 issue of *Slice Magazine*.

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Donna Laemmle

-- John Donne

Nina had just arrived at our campsite, nestled at the edge of a redwood forest. Along with her mother and two sisters, she was joining our family for a Fourth of July barbeque. Though we had never met her, I wasn't surprised by her immediate connection with Ben. His gentle face and devilish blue eyes were an irresistible combination, one that I myself had succumbed to long ago.

Nina looked to the forest and pointed, even though she had yet to set foot there. Our excitement was immediate. Lately, I had been warning Ben, telling him not to rely on my memory of Sevens anymore; I could no longer be trusted to remember for the both of us. And without children of our own, these opportunities were dwindling.

I was envious that Nihla hadn't chosen me, but it was comforting to see Ben so optimistic. He winked at me as they slipped off before anyone could object. It was remarkable how upsetting such a quest could be for non-believers: though they had let their own ability slip away, they could still be jealous or suspicious of those of us who weren't ready for atrophy.

I studied the photos while I kept an eye on Ben and Nina. I could see them hunting between the fiddle neck ferns and the cottonwoods, ducking then reappearing, over and over, exchanging riches plucked from the trail. Their laughter was faint but unmistakable, and the sanguine smile on Ben's face was evident despite the distance.

It didn't take long for the family gossip to start. In case anyone hadn't heard, Lila's sister, Grace, also a mother of three, was married to a class-A jerk. "She does all the cleaning, all the laundry, all the cooking. He never helps her with a thing. Not even the dog."

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Everyone nodded in sympathy, except for my dad, who relaxed in a beige lounge chair, his lanky frame dressed in Patagonia and L.L. Bean. In his lap, a copy of Make magazine was open to a story on how to make your own nails. “Is he still farming Thompson seedless?” he asked. “That can’t be too easy anymore.”

Lila continued, uninterested in agriculture. “At least he bought her a motor home, a brand new Commando.”

A hush settled over the camp. My mom cast an eye toward their aging twenty-seven-foot Aristocrat. “How long is it?” she inquired, as she set citronella candles around our site. The ritual guaranteed a mosquito-free happy hour, but the cloying smoke hung in our clothes for hours.

“It’s thirty-three feet.” Lila brightened at the thought of it. “Where’s yours?” she suddenly asked me, spinning her head around our campsite. I nodded toward our new ten-foot Coleman tent, plopped to the side of my parents’ RV. Just that morning I had decorated it with a strand of pinecones, buckeye seeds and wild iris gathered from the previous day’s hike. “Oh,” she said. “I mooch off of my parents sometimes, too.”

I forced a smile and looked toward the forest again, but Ben and Nina had disappeared. My adrenaline surged. How long before someone realized they were gone? No doubt Ben had convinced Nina to forage deeper into the woods. He always preferred mystery to any marked trail, defying my mother’s belief that he was the more sensible one, and now, with last night’s news, he had the perfect accomplice. Our dear friends, Annette and Harold, a sculptor and a painter who lived down the mountain in Santa Cruz, had come by to tantalize us with the tale of a Seven living in the hollow of a giant redwood. Only a rumor, mind you, but such an exciting one! If you were lucky enough to find a Seven, it meant the possibilities would be endless.

My mother returned from the Aristocrat with a tray of Bombay Sapphire martinis. The olives were skewered on toothpicks that sprouted tiny American flags. “Happy Fourth of July, everyone,” she said, toasting as she served. She winced slightly as she sat down in her matching lounge chair, knee pain from years of standing all day, teaching. Suddenly, she sat up. “Did you see that?” She pointed with her toothpick. “I think I saw that homeless guy who’s living in the forest.”

We all strained to see him, but only caught glimpses of mountain bikers whizzing by on a nearby trail.

“Homeless?” I asked. “Couldn’t he just be camping? Or hiking through on one of the trails?”

“Obviously, you didn’t see him. He’s no camper.”



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Chimera

[Donna Laemmien](#)

I tried to contain my annoyance. She had been such a gifted storyteller when I was a kid, creating captivating worlds full of exquisite detail and enchanting characters. Now she was lapsing into unreasonable generalities.

“We shouldn’t reserve this campsite anymore,” she continued. “It’s too close to the forest.”

“Mom, how can you be too close to the forest?”

“Well, you know that man who works here, the one that looks like Kenny Rogers? He said he saw an honest-to-God chain gang walking along the railroad tracks just last week. Everybody dressed in orange jumpsuits, smiling and singing as if they weren’t some kind of criminals. Who knows what could happen out there?”

No one argued with her. Or agreed. Her words simply evaporated. I looked toward the forest, hoping Ben and Nina would return soon, and return triumphant. That would be the only way to get her attention now.

“How’s Jake?” my dad asked Lila, even though we already knew the answer.

“He’s a good dad. The girls love him.” She hesitated. “But, you know, he’s an asshole.” She smiled sweetly, and then added, “We should all go camping together sometime.”

I wondered if Lila ever saw Sevens now. When I had last seen her, right before Nina was born, she had decided to abandon Sevens altogether, at least until her children began to beg for the stories.

“I’m tired of them not adding up,” she had lamented then.

“But that’s the key,” I had reminded her. “You don’t want them to add up.”

She had stared at me blankly. “But that’s what numbers do, and the sooner you realize that, the sooner you can get on with your life.”

I was so saddened by her comment. She had shown such promise when we were young, favoring words like jillion and zillion and umpteen, but with an attitude like that, I doubted she would ever be able to find Sevens again. Worst of all, I shuddered to think of the stories she would eventually tell her daughters.

I half-listened to the pros and cons of being a stay-at-home mom. “I always thought I’d go back to editing after the children were born, but who am I kidding? I’m a housewife,” she said, nibbling on a handful of pretzels. “Working with writers can be great, but they’re so fragile. If I’m going to baby-sit anyone, it’s going to be one of my own kids.”

And there it was, the faulty stone in her calculus. Some people couldn’t see it any other way. Artistic fragility should be diapered rather than nurtured. I was about to challenge her when the campground suddenly darkened. It was one thing to hunt for Sevens during the day, but if you were caught in the woods when that last bit of light had fallen behind Sutter’s Ridge, Sixes could be a problem.

“Girls? Where’s Nina?” Lila looked to her other daughters, who were playing Uno. They shrugged their shoulders in unison.

A quiet panic laid into the camp. My mother looked directly at me. “How long has she been gone?”

Lila stood up from the table. “She’s gone.”

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I wrestled with how to mitigate their concern, wanting to give Nina every chance to find her Seven, but I worried that Ben and Nina would disturb a horde of Sixes suspected of living down by the river in an abandoned teepee made of branches and bark. Sixes were notorious for ganging up and prowling in the dark. They were the only numbers to calculate at night, fueling intense rumors about their occult status, and they were trouble. If they found out about the Seven, well ð it was too much to imagine. Ben knew what to do in case of a numerical haywire; at least, I hoped he still remembered. Branches of pungent bay leaves would protect them against most sudden clashes, but only if they reached the sanctuary of the Cathedral Redwoods by sundown. If I were to lose Ben to a haywire, I could always take solace in knowing he went willingly. But Nina wasn't ours to lose.

ÒMaybe twenty minutes,Ó I answered, knowing full well it was closer to an hour by now. ÓDon't worry. She's with Ben.Ó I knew that would calm everyone down. Who didn't trust Ben? He was the grounded one, the reasonable one, everybody's go-to guy. He made everyone feel safe. They assumed this about him because of his steady years in hotel property management. Little did they know how desperate the fire drills and overflowing bathtubs had made him.

ÒAnyone getting hungry?Ó my mother asked. Eating was her lifelong remedy for calming nerves or any other volatile situation for that matter. Out came the ribs, the salmon, the corn on the cob and the watermelon. ÒNina will be fine, Ó she said, mostly to herself. ÓIf I was going to traipse through the forest again, I would want to be with my son-in-law.Ó

Though I, too, would want to be with Ben, I still seethed when I heard this slight. It was no secret the whole family considered my perception of things to be unreliable, a result of having devoted my life to the Ófinancially unsound pursuit of the indefinable,Ó and I often had to restrain myself from challenging them with mathematical countdowns.

Lila fidgeted with her cell phone, which was useless out here, but I waited quietly for her to figure that out. ÓShe's looking for a Seven, isn't she?Ó she said finally, biting her cuticles.

Had Lila refused to help her daughter?

ÒWhy are you worried? Don't you remember? When we were kids, Seven was always the hardest to find, even though we knew it came right after Six.Ó



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Chimera

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Her eyes drifted away and flickered for a few bright seconds before fading. ÒI canÕt remember why Seven was so special,Ó she said, almost in tears.

I wanted to grab her and say, ÒQuick! Run out into the forest! You have a few minutes of daylight left,Ó but I knew better. She was too cautious now.

ÒMaybe you should ask your daughter.Ó

An awkward silence enveloped us and I almost felt a tinge of regret, but then my own faith in Sevens faltered again. My visions had been sporadic and dim, as of late, and I wondered how much longer I would be able to hang onto them. If I were to lose them now, my family would have been right about me all along. What if Nina wasnÕt okay? What if Ben had taken the train trestle over the river instead of the suspension bridge, hoping to save a few minutes of daylight? Such a reckless decision would have dropped them within twenty yards of the horde of Sixes, a good thirty-minute hike from the sanctuary.

Just then, Ben and Nina strolled into camp, the last pockets of sunlight closing up behind them. Nina led the way, dragging a long stick behind her. Lila rushed to give her a hug just as Nina raised the stick into the air. It stood at least three times her height, shooting straight up like a beanstalk, and the very top of it took my breath away. There, at an imperfect right angle, the stick veered horizontally, forming a giant Seven. It was obvious to anyone who would look: a giant Seven was standing in our campsite.

I trembled for a moment, excited by the implications. I glanced at Ben for verification but he stood awestruck. The rest of the family chuckled that their brief ado had been over nothing more than a silly big stick.

ÒWhat is that?Ó my dad asked. ÒManzanita?Ó

I stepped closer for a better look.

ÒI didnÕt see it,Ó Ben blurted, and then he sat down in a slump.

This wasnÕt the best of news, of course, some would even say reason for concern, but my certainty was back on track and, for the moment, I was overjoyed.

ÒBut you see it now, donÕt you?Ó He nodded yes, but refused to look me in the eye.

I knelt in front of Nina. ÒWhere did you find it?Ó

ÒBy the river,Ó she said quietly. Then, ÒMommy, take a picture!Ó

Lila reached for her camera. She snapped a photo of all the girls together, arms slung around each other, their faces so clear and so bright. When the older girls rushed back to their game, Nina remained. ÒTake one of just me,Ó she said. Her tiny stature was even more impressive as she stood alone with the Seven. It should have been enough to convert even the most defiant of non-believers.

ÒYou donÕt get enough attention, do you, sweetie?Ó Lila said. She smiled and framed another photo.

ÒHow about one without the stick?Ó

I rubbed the back of BenÕs neck, wanting to ease him into my next question. ÒIs it from the teepee?Ó

His hands batted the air. ÒI canÕt believe it. She just walked in there and came out dragging the stick

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behind her. But she never saidÉ

I studied Nina as she posed. Her dress. Her hair. Her skin. She didn't show any signs of a struggle, only extreme pride. Did you see anything in the forest at all? I asked. Ben just shook his head gravely. A rush of real disappointment took hold of us then, and we sat quietly, calculating. That was as good an opportunity as he was going to get. I took his hands in mine and squeezed them tight. Even after twenty years of marriage, I wasn't ready to lose him just yet, so I did what I had to.

Annette and Harold came by while you were gone, I said. A colony of Sevens was spotted upriver at Horseshoe Falls.

Ben rebounded at this news. A colony? He swiftly pulled a map from his daypack and studied it. Tomorrow, we could go this way, he said, pointing to a trail that followed the river past the teepee and the suspension bridge, past Buckeye Beach and the swimming hole, to just below the falls. He stopped and looked at me, smiling wide-eyed. That could explain why the hollows were all empty and black. They're covering their tracks.

I think you're right, I said. Sevens are a tricky lot, you know.



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Joseph Celizic

Joe Celizic received his MFA in fiction from Bowling Green State University. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Unsaid*, *Windsor Review*, *Redivider*, *PANK*, *Stickman Review* and others. He has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

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know anyone that well because in nine months itÖll all be over. He always thought heÖd be sad to leave because he used to like the job, the men and the angry sound of engines. But he canÖt wait to go. For the last five years, heÖs hated it.

\* \* \*

Five years ago, Kilroy helped repave the Broadway Bridge. It rose out of the perimeter of the city and met with a state route that hunkered into the rural landscape. The job started two weeks after his son, Derek, was incarcerated for robbing GaryÖs Liquor Emporium over on Crew Lane. He watched his son in court. He made prison visits to that open room with the uncomfortable plastic chairs, handfuls of guards all around them. He always left angry.

Smelling the nauseating petroleum of asphalt on the Broadway, Kilroy gazed at the countryside and the city side-by-side for the first time. He saw clouds in the East shadow the city, etching themselves between skyscrapers. In the West, the country, multi-acre plots were lavished with manmade swimming ponds, silver in their reflection. He saw golf holes built right onto their property, greenhouses lodging peach trees.

HeÖs read about the wealthy in The Local Courier all his life, the Morellis and Bidwells. HeÖs sure that anyone who works for a living could care less about them, even though he himself cannot stop reading.

Now, whenever Kilroy drives up the busy interstate in his F-150 beater, he can smell the difference between his yardless burnt-rubber neighborhood and their catÖz mocha suburbs. HeÖs been running steamrollers and cranes for their SUVs with nothing to show for it but a convicted son, bad knees, and a two-bedroom, one-bathroom hole in the street where police sirens ring all night.

\* \* \*

The I-15 job began as a simple resurfacing, a quarter-mile cakewalk. They filled a few potholes, corked the craggy hollows with hot, black mix. Then they sealed the cracks, two men on the hoses, the rest acting busy. It turned out the stretch of damaged road was longer than Ray had thought, and he realized he needed to block off the lane for a fifty-yard stretch.

Now, just past the top of the hill, the two-lane interstate is detoured out to the shoulder, the closed lane barricaded by a diesel arrow board. Segmented concrete Jersey walls cut between the men and the operating lane. They smell the exhaust of traffic as cars flee the scene of working men. Kilroy watches BMWs cruise past, their tires hiding behind the three-foot high concrete.

When Ray had brought in the concrete dividers, Lopez, the mustached nomad from San Diego, called them K-rails. He told Kilroy that he once saw a Ford Escort bore straight into a line of them and the dividers had pushed each other back like stubborn dominoes. When the car was done, driver dead and bloodied against the inside of his own windshield, the K-rails were staggered like crooked teeth.

Kilroy told Lopez those scenes were reserved for the coasts: he was in Bedmont now. Inside, though, Kilroy thought of how guilty he wouldÖve felt if he had been the one to put the dividers there, how ugly that body wouldÖve looked to him, his fault or not.

\* \* \*

Kilroy doesnÖt think about the dividers anymore. He just breathes and watches the men. Guys like Higgins try to flatten the asphalt a little with the backs of their square-faced shovels, but Kilroy knows better. He knows what the new HCC Navigator can do, the power and weight of the roller, the futility of getting his pants twisted over uneven spots, things he canÖt change.

Keeping their distance, Lara and Ray chat and let the men finish up. Kilroy imagines he is his son in prison and they are the guards, the barbed wire fences too thin to be seen.

\* \* \*



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tired, deflated.

\* \* \*

Higgins finishes and parks the Navigator while headlights continue to sweep over the hill, a few cars and semis. Kilroy notices the darkness creeping up on the interstate, everything hazy in the twilight. In the West, shadows hide behind the city buildings. He tells Higgins to turn on the arrows.

Higgins walks with a firm back, a swagger in his steps Kilroy hasn't seen. When he gets to Lara on his way to the sign, he stops and talks to her. It takes a minute, but he eventually makes her laugh loud enough for Kilroy to hear. When they split, it's Lara who dashes down toward the arrow board while Higgins struts back and points over his shoulder.

Kilroy feels jealous for something, but he can't name it. In his mind, he replaces Lara with his son, Derek, and pictures him running toward the sign. Kilroy wonders if Derek and Higgins would've gotten on alright, if the three of them would've gone to bars after work, maybe somewhere in the city where they'd visit enough to be called regulars. He wonders if Higgins would've made them laugh too, loud and unashamed, making so much noise that other lonely saps would turn their heads to see what it was all about.

Some of the guys walk by shovels resting on their shoulders like rifles and load them into the trucks. The darkness thickens and the stars rise like a pestilence.

Kilroy looks back, the dotted arrow still black and silent. Lara hasn't figured out the sign yet, maybe can't find the simple switch on the back. But he'd give up his pension before jogging over and doing it for her. Let her feel stupid for awhile.

A car passes over the hill, luckily with headlights on.

Ray's niece ever turn on a light before? Kilroy asks Higgins.

Higgins doesn't laugh or speak, just holds up his hand like he's directing traffic, letting Kilroy know it's not his turn. Kilroy wants to ask him why he's defending her, why he can't see who she is, explain how people like her and Ray are the reason the two of them drive over potholes to get here by sun-up and drive back in darkness.

And that's when they hear the screech, the sick pop of the impact.

Kilroy turns his head just in time to see the headlights go out, the outline of a car slammed into the concrete dividers, knocking them sideways like overlapping teeth, sparks raining sideways. He runs to the sound, the embers of headlights green on his retinas. With three guys in front of him, he knows he's too late to be the one who calls for an ambulance, the one who inspects the injured driver, or the one who turns on the arrows to prevent another accident. But he keeps running, his knees stabbed repeatedly with the pounding impact. There may be more he can do and he wants to see it. In his thirty-nine years, he's only witnessed one accident, a poor widow in a conversion van who had been protected by the bulk of her vehicle as it hurled orange barrels across the freeway. This car doesn't look so lucky. Closer, Kilroy smells hot rubber, radiator steam and airbag gas.

A petite figure comes running toward him through the dark. At first it looks like it has no arms. Then he sees it is Lara holding her face in her hands. She snorts exactly like Kilroy's wife when she cries in her sleep, when she sees things she wishes she hadn't, tragedies that every once in a while come true. Lara, half-blind to her surroundings, runs straight into Kilroy's chest.

One of the guys turns on the arrow, says, "Here, moron," while Lopez pulls out his phone to call an ambulance. Higgins is already on the wrecked Honda, peering in the windows, pulling on the handles, shouting, "Man? Are you alright?" Steam pours out of the rolled-up hood.

Kilroy holds Lara as she lets herself weep with guilt, muffled in his shoulder. He looks over her black hair as it flies up, tickles his cheeks, gets caught in his own gray. In the orange glow from the arrow, Kilroy cares much

more than he wants to. He imagines how she feels, what it’s like to be responsible for an accident. He wonders what it takes to repair a conscience sustaining that type of injury.

What Kilroy doesn’t know is that this will be the last time he ever sees Lara. After this night is over and her tears have dampened the shoulder of his shirt, she will quit, unable to deal with what she’s done.

But in this moment Kilroy can’t stop thinking about the next nine months, envisioning a future that will never be. He pictures him and Lara working side by side, shoveling or taking turns on the ten-inch paver. He would explain the power of the Navigator, even take the blame for her mistakes until she could trust herself again. With that much time, he thinks, it’d be just long enough to teach her.



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New Issue 12: Minority vs. Majority

Danny Bracco

Originally from Thousand Oaks, California, Danny Bracco moved to San Francisco to further pursue his writing education. He is currently a second-year graduate student in the University of San Francisco's MFA in Writing Program, and working on his first novel.

Danny graduated from the University of California, Davis, in 2008 with a B.A. in English (Creative Writing emphasis) and a B.A. in Psychology, receiving Highest Honors in English and Honors in Psychology. In 2008 his short story, "Growing Sideways," was published in UC Davis's annual literary magazine, *Produce*.

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had picked the house and the town—Sand Coulee, dead-center Montana. A town away from the disappointing big city life she grew up in. But still, early in their marriage she felt as though she were somehow failing the women in her family before her who had fought so hard to carve a place in the workforce. When she proposed the idea of teaching, Ed was only too happy to quit his job at his brothers’ mechanic shop and take responsibility for maintaining the house and land.

Sand Coulee boasted one restaurant, one post office, three schools, and four bars, the latter accounting for the dozens of small, white crosses on nearly every street. The bar closest to their home typically had milk and bread available to buy, but Ed and Edna got into the habit of driving to Great Falls together every Sunday for their errands. They would leave early in the morning and get breakfast at their favorite diner on the outskirts of the city before parking in the middle of town and walking hand-in-hand to wherever they needed to go that week—in barbershop, hardware store, mall—before finishing up at the grocery store. But this week Edna had wanted more time to plan out her first class so she and Ed separated—she went to the mall for her annual house gift, and Ed went to the grocery store.

While Edna fed the dogs and reviewed her class roster for the year, Ed went out to the side of their back patio to his vegetable garden. They had been enjoying Ed’s harvested vegetables all August, but Ed paid more attention to his latest plantings than the ripening vegetables. Planting was his favorite part—inserting something organic into the earth and cultivating it into life. He loved each moment of this weekend with his wife, especially knowing school had returned to steal some of her attention, but he cherished these moments of solitude between him and his earth.

Ed shifted his glance up to the side of the garden, to the raised area where his onions were growing. Onions were supposed to be an easy vegetable to grow, but one Ed had never grown before as Edna wasn’t a particularly big fan of them. But he had been eager to try something new, and he planted the first seeds earlier in the year. Onions took longer to harvest, and were supposed to become full, edible bulbs by the end of this month.

As it turned out, he had been too eager. According to their neighbor, Old George, Ed had over-fertilized the seeds. Ed and Edna had always been friendly with their nearest neighbor, who lived a mere mile down East Hunter Road, but they didn’t exactly mind that Old George liked to keep to himself. He had been a widower since Ed and Edna had moved to Sand Coulee and he helped them clean out their house and landscape their half-acre of land. Edna had seen him watering his front yard while she was taking the dogs for a walk one afternoon and had invited him for dinner. While struggling to make conversation, Ed took him to see his garden.

“You’ve got an awfully thick stem on those onion plants,” he had said.

“Thank you.” Ed had misunderstood.

“They’re gonna bolt.”

“Pardon?”

“They’re gonna bolt. Bolting. They’re gonna grow flowers.”

“The onions?”

“Yep. The onions. They’re gonna grow flowers and make the onion bulbs small. You’ll still be able to eat them, but they’ll be smaller. Not as good. Too much Ammonium nitrate, I suspect.”

He proved to be right. The onions, fueled by excess fertilizer, had grown too vigorously too early on, and flowers were beginning to tower over the small bulbs. Next to his successful crops of summer squash, carrots and cucumbers, the diminutive and flowery onion bulbs looked somehow less natural than the rest of his garden.

“Old George was right, the onions bolted,” he said as he walked into the kitchen, wiping his soiled hands together authoritatively.

“They what? And wash those hands of yours before you get dirt all over my kitchen.” Even though Edna

faced away from him over the sink, he knew she was smiling.

“They’re bolting!”growing flowers over the bulbs. We have to eat the onions now. They’re about as good as they’re gonna get.”

“You can’t just cut the flowers off?”

“I guess we could, but it won’t do any good. What’s done is done,” Ed said, adding a twang to the last part in a friendly impersonation of George’s dialect.

Edna turned to face him as she laughed at his accent. “Get yourself clean for dinner. And wash your face, too, you must have wiped your face with those hands—that scar of yours is caked in dirt.”

Ed walked up the stairs, through their bedroom and into the bathroom. His face did have a patch of dirt right over the one-inch scar above his upper lip. He washed it roughly. Edna would occasionally bring up the scar without thinking much of it, and for this he could not blame her. It was the only thing he had ever lied to her about. Although he lied to everyone about it. A bike accident when he was eight; that was what everyone had been told. It was the best his father could come up with, panting and wiping the fiery sweat from his forehead, still clasp ing the bloody wrench in his hand, the wrench that had been meant for Ed’s lips, and had only missed by mere millimeters.

Edna prepared the carrots and squash Ed had pulled for dinner along with a roasted ham and store-bought rolls. No time for her homemade bread this week—probably not for many weeks. They ate slowly at the table while Edna went through her class roster with Ed, and they discussed how she would handle the Allen twins.

“I get Billy this year, Donna has Brian. I lucked out.”

“You had your turn last year,” Ed said, raising his wine glass in memory of the evenings Edna would come home flush with anger that she couldn’t strangle the little turd.

Edna took that as an opportunity to give Ed a little more wine. He didn’t object.

\*





do anything about it. She hadn't been unhappy, just not excited. She didn't know what had changed from the last few years to this warm, bright feeling she now had, but standing naked in her kitchen, she knew it was Ed who brought on the change. She looked down at her body, a body she had grown discouraged and angry with ever since it forbade her from having children, a body that had let her breasts sink and hips widen anyway, and saw something different in the light that poured in from the kitchen window, as if honey coated the entire room. She saw skin that, in spite of her breasts, remained fairly tight and a stomach that had stayed put since her late twenties. She gave herself a small hug and thought of her husband's lovemaking that had taken place only hours ago, and she knew the gears had shifted again, only finally, welcomingly, they were shifting higher.

She made the coffee, cooked breakfast and tidied up the wine glasses and dessert plates from the night before, delaying the thought of showering and dressing herself up to become a teacher once again. She ate alone in the kitchen, keeping Ed's portion warmed on the stove. The dark wood chairs were still cold from the hours without sunlight, and her backside tingled with small doses of pain and pleasure when she sat down to eat. When she finished, she made a plate of food for Ed and brought it back up to their room, where he was still sleeping, the sheet wrapped tightly around his body. When she placed a hand on his shoulder, he jerked awake and motioned to get out of the bed.

"No, Ed, stay. Relax. Breakfast in bed. Enjoy your morning. You can have one more day of summer." She leaned down and kissed his lips, swollen from their hours of kissing just as hers were.

"I love you," he said.  
"I love you, too. Wish me luck."

Ed knew half the day had already passed by watching the light change on the bedroom walls. The bright yellow from mid-morning had relaxed into something tamer. Ed hadn't yet found the motivation to get out of the sheets that lay twisted over his body. With every slight turn his body made, the sheets tickled his skin. His skin felt sticky and rough from the layers of sweat that had dried over him. He had been in a state of partial arousal all morning. He thought of staying naked in bed all day, waiting for Edna to come upstairs asking for him so he could pull her into the bed once again.

The bedroom window Edna had left open since last night filled the room with crisp morning air that hadn't yet warmed up in the early afternoon. Around what was usually his lunch time, Ed was forced to get out of the bed to relieve himself, and he wrapped the sheet around his body as he made his way to the bathroom.

When he walked back toward the bed, he caught a glimpse of himself in the full-length mirror in the corner of their room. He looked again, sure that he would look ridiculous wrapped in this floral sheet. The sheet draped over his body asymmetrically, with only one of his shoulders covered. It dipped on one side all the way to halfway down his hip, exposing the top of his buttocks. He stood frozen in front of the mirror, trying to get himself to move. All he could do was turn to face the mirror straight on, and he studied the shape the sheet had taken against his body. His stomach began dancing again, faster than before. The sheet dangled close to his skin. His body hair, dark and thick on his legs and chest, small and wispy on his back and buttocks, stood straight out, desperately reaching for the sheet where it was just out of reach, sending a universal itch across his skin. He tore the sheet off himself and threw it onto the bed. He felt his skin cool and his hairs relax under the complete force of the sunlight. He showered in cold water.

He had trouble focusing the remainder of the day. A woman who lived a half-mile down the road had brought in her truck the week before for him to look at over the weekend, and he had successfully avoided the task until her phone call that afternoon. He explained that he had been sick over the weekend and was only attending to it now and would call her this evening with an estimate. He opened the hood and stared at the metallic interior. He always felt as though he only knew about cars on a surface level—which was usually enough to get the job done.

But he couldn't put the details he knew into the bigger picture of how a car actually worked. If a five year-old was standing with him and asked how the wire on this side worked with the pipe on that side to make the car go fast, he wouldn't have known what to say.

He would have known the wire was the high pressure fuel injection line, the pipe was the glow plug harness; he knew how to fix them, what they connected to. He could draw the kid a diagram of a car engine from memory. But how did a car run? He didn't think he knew.

As he tested for the various common engine faults, his fingers rejected the icy steel of his tools and the rough black parts of the truck's engine. His mind crept back to the sheet, to the shape the soft material took on his body. Finally, Ed solved the puzzle's busted cylinder. Fifth on his list of things to check. He was relieved—it was a job he could not do from his own garage. He called the woman, said there would be no charge for his delayed inspection, and gave her his brother's contact information and shop address in the city.

Edna would be home soon. He went to the garden to pick tomatoes and more squash. He saw that the flowers growing from the onion plants further bloomed, and darkened in their lavender color. He skipped over the onions as he watered and fertilized the rest of the vegetables. They were a lost cause.



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Dancing Pink Roses

[Danny Bracco](#)

Later that afternoon, Edna waved Ed in from his garden. He held up the tomatoes and squash to make sure he had pulled enough.

ÖLooks good,Ö she shouted.

By the time Ed came into the kitchen she had poured two glasses of wine.

ÖWine already? IÖm afraid to ask how your first day went.Ö

ÖIt appears as though Billy and Brian have switched roles this year,Ö she said, and she buried her face into her hands. She laughed about it now with Ed as she took her first, long sip of chardonnay, but she had almost cried in the car. She hadnÖt expected a smooth yearÖshe knew better than that. But she wanted a smooth first day. Billy had already found a group of younger boys to follow him blindly in crafting paper planes and passing rude notes to the older girls in the class.

Ed hugged her from behind. ÖIÖm sorry, honey.Ö

ÖItÖs okay. IÖll survive. He may not, but I will.Ö They clinked their wine glasses together. ÖHow was your day? Did you get a chance to look at that womanÖs truck?Ö

He explained that the problem went beyond his capabilities here, and put forth no effort to hide his relief.

Edna smiled. She was sorry she had ever told the parents at school that he was still willing to work on local car issues. She had thought his role as househusband would wear on him quickly, and wanted to build in some paid work for him to do, too, never imagining that he would be truly happy working on his garden and around the house ten years later.

As she took another sip of wine, she realized she was still in EdÖs arms. He rubbed the sides of her torso, and her mind left the school day and went back further to her moment alone in the kitchen and to the night before.

She hugged him back, and wondered what would happen when they went to bed together tonight.

She told Ed more about her day over dinner, but her mind kept wandering elsewhere. She wondered if Ed had retrieved the underwear he threw out their window. She remembered the look on his face when he did it. He looked like a twenty year old streaking on a dare by his friends, full of energy and without a trace of inhibition. She wanted then to stand up and throw her shirt out the kitchen door, but she remained on the chair, talking about her day. They hadnÖt had a night like that in years. She didnÖt know what caused it, or what could take it away.

The rest of the evening played out more typically, ending with Ed washing the dishes and passing them to her to dry. She made her way up the stairs to go to bed when she heard the feet stomping behind her. Before she could turn around, Ed swept her up in his arms and rushed up the last few steps and into their bedroom. She burst into a laugh, and thought she even heard herself cheer. Ed was already naked, and he tore through her clothes to free her from them.

Edna woke the next morning feeling even more rejuvenated, knowing it was her that had caused this

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change. It wasn't the last night of summer, or a successful car fix, or any other silly cause for celebration she had considered yesterday.

She pulled on her nightgown, still in the same place on the floor from two nights ago, and went to make breakfast again. She wanted to keep this going, whatever this was. She again warmed a plate for him and brought it upstairs. When she woke Ed, she saw the same look in his eyes she'd seen from him the last two nights. He pulled her down to him and tucked her under the sheets. His hands were moving up and down her nightgown at alternating speeds, even going under as he kissed her. He kept the nightgown on her for what felt achingly long she wanted to be pressed against him without a barrier, no matter how thin. Finally, he pulled the garment over her head and entered her.

Afterward, Edna got ready for work faster than she ever had, washing her whole body with shampoo to save time and putting her makeup on in the car. When she bounced out of the bathroom, Ed was still lying naked in bed, and she found herself desiring him still, and she smiled. She smiled while she kissed him goodbye, smiled while she gathered her school papers and supplies, and continued smiling when Billy and the rest of the students filed into the classroom.

Ed lay in the bed for an hour after Edna left, doing his best not to move, not to let any more of his skin touch the sheets. The breakfast beside him had lost its warmth long ago. He knew he should get up that he should shower, maybe even change out these sheets. But he couldn't get up. Dust circled up from the mid-morning wind into his nose and he sneezed his body jerked further into the sheets, and that was all it took. He leapt out of bed and grabbed the top sheet. He ran to the mirror and saw himself in the sheet again. He tried to remember the shape of it from yesterday morning, pulling it up over one shoulder and letting the other side fall to his waist. Once again, his hairs seemed to pull out of his skin to reach toward the sheet. The itch was incredible.

He pulled the sheet tighter on the side that draped over his shoulder so that the fabric pulled against his still fairly flat stomach, forming a curve between his chest and his hips. He turned his body again to see himself from behind, and maneuvered the sheet to hang just below the small of his back. The itching subsided, but he felt the sheet threatening to drop or shift at any moment. He tip-toed to the dresser beside the mirror, careful to not let the sheet fall. He reached into Edna's sewing kit atop the dresser and pulled out a handful of safety pins to keep the shape of the sheet on his body. Indiscernible music filled his head, blasting over any other thoughts that might have dared enter his consciousness. He placed one of the pins over the fold at his shoulder, and the others throughout his mid-section to keep the sheet tight around his waist but loose on his chest. Finally, he bent down to grab one side of the sheet that was still scraping the floor, and pinned it to a place high on his thigh. He took a step back to the mirror to see.

The loose material at his chest made it appear as though he had breasts, adding a new dimension to his reflection he had never seen before. His skin celebrated the cotton stretched over its hairs and pores by sending waves of warmth through his stomach and up to his head.

Ed stood rubbing the sheet curving tightly around his body until he could no longer ignore his stomach's plea for food. He then carefully unpinned his sheet and placed each safety pin back into the sewing kit. As he stepped out of the sheet, a rogue and opened safety pin scraped against his thigh, as if one of the roses had grown thorns. He plucked it roughly from the sheet and tossed it into the sewing kit.

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Dancing Pink Roses

[Danny Bracco](#)

Edna returned home that evening with an idea. She and Ed would go dancing. They would take an impromptu trip to town to Bordello’s, the restaurant with the small dance floor she had taken Ed to so many years ago. She had her outfit all planned in her mind. She would wear her black dress’she had worn it to a funeral before, but it fit her so well. She was sure she could still fit into it; it had been just a tad big on her before. She would pair it with her red high heels’sher only pair of high heels’sand Ed would wear his matching red tie. And they would dance together.

She met Ed, who had the flowered onions in his hands, clumps of dirt falling from their roots.

“Are those the ‘bolting’ ones? The bolting onions?”

“They are,” he said, matching her laugh.

“What’d you do, rip them from the ground with your hands? Throw those in the sink and hop in the shower. You’re taking me out tonight. To Bordello’s.” She threw on a hopeful smile.

She had hoped for more excitement from Ed about her idea, but also knew that dancing in public was not one of his favorite pastimes. But he was showering; he had agreed to wear the matching tie, and he had agreed to dance. She had no reason not to be pleased.

She drove them to town. He hated driving’sa quirk she had always found amusing. Halfway through their second glass of wine, a smooth sax solo got Ed to stand out of his chair and officially ask her to dance. Ed bumped into two other couples over the course of their three songs. The bumps were laughed off, but beyond that, they didn’t talk much. They simply moved together on the floor, more in sync than they had been when they danced here years ago, Edna thought. When the fourth song started, Ed pulled her close.

“You look beautiful in that dress, but I’d rather see you in our bed,” he whispered into her ear.

The sheets seemed to favor him more that night. They anticipated his movements with Edna, flowing freely out from between them, enveloping him from behind, staying wrapped over his body as he and Edna moved together in the bed. When his feet explored further reaches of the sheets, he quickly wondered if he would get pricked by another hidden thorn, but there were none. While they slept, however, he felt the sheet sliding smoothly between their bodies. The cotton soothed his skin, and Edna remained asleep as the sheet quietly inserted itself. He made no motion to stop it.

“Edna, I’ve never seen you like this. Ten years looks good on you,” Janet said as Edna walked into the teacher’s lounge for coffee. Edna kept on smiling. When her students weaved in between the rows of desks to get to their seats, she envisioned herself and Ed weaving through the older couples at Bordello’s. She only stopped smiling when she reached into her bag and realized she had forgotten the worksheets she was going to

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use after lunchtime at home on her desk.

Ed had overslept this morning. The three nights of bedroom activity had finally caught up with him. He knew there was housework that had to get done that day—the downstairs needed dusting and vacuuming, the front porch needed painting. But first would come the sheets.

He went downstairs naked to make himself some breakfast. Edna had slept in as long as she could and didn't appear to have made any breakfast for herself, either. He ate slowly, savoring the anticipation of his moment in front of the mirror. He cleaned each of his dishes before he ascended the stairs to his room.

He gathered the sheet under his arm and moved to the dresser for the safety pins when he saw the black dress at his feet beside the dresser, not yet put away from the night before. The red high heel shoes lay turned over by the mirror. The sheet scratched at his side. The hand holding the safety pins trembled. He let the safety pins drop back into the sewing kit, put the sheet back on the bed, and bent down to pick up the dress. The dress felt thicker, richer over his bare calves, hamstrings, buttocks and stomach than the sheet had. It pulled against his aching skin even tighter. He slipped his arms through the straps that now rested snug against the tip of his shoulders. He had kept his eyes closed this whole time, since he first pulled the dress over his feet. He turned around and opened his eyes to see from behind. The zipper stayed wedged toward the bottom, just below the patch of hair on his lower back, giving his back a sharp triangular shape.

Ed looked down to the floor at the red high heels. He pushed his feet into the shoes as best he could, his heels sticking out the back, bending the leather down. He kept his head down and closed his eyes. This was it. He was ready to face the mirror. He brought his head up and opened them.

He saw a man, a much younger version of himself, in the reflection of the mirror. A sleek young man dressed in an elegant black dress. The man looked radiant.

“You’re beautiful.” He heard his voice in those words, though he was not sure if they came from him or the reflection. Ed’s vision blurred. Tears streamed down the front of his face as he smiled. His body was humming with energy; tremendous blood and pressure circled around his waist. He breathed heavily.

He continued standing before the mirror, tall, lean, gorgeous in his red heels and black dress, and the tears stopped as he reached his hands up and down his body, over and on top of the smooth fabric before pushing a hand through the opening in the back of the dress and bringing it to the front. He felt the zipper rip further down as he took hold of himself. He smiled and moaned and danced and shouted and sang, climaxing into the dress and onto his body that stood that much higher from the ground than ever before. As sweat mixed with dry tears and his heart beat slowed, his hand lingered inside the dress. He heard himself sob again, but when he opened his eyes to look at himself in the mirror, he saw no tears on his face, only sweat.

Then he heard another cry and a sharp gasp for breath. Edna was at the bedroom door, her body leaning against the door frame. Her worksheets flew and shuffled around her feet. Tears and makeup slashed her face as she tried to pull herself from the room, but her body only went lower and lower until she was at the floor.

Ed rushed to pull the dress off of him, but his arm remained stuck inside the restricting fabric. He panicked. He saw himself in the mirror being taken out of this bedroom, out of this dress, and thrown naked into the garage of his childhood home. He saw his father holding his mother’s dress in his hands, the dress he had just ripped off of Ed’s eight year-old self. His father blasted a power-hose all over Ed’s body. He was spraying the queer out of him, his father said. The hose pierced his skin, electrocuting the soft, fuzzy hairs on his body. Ed had tried to run, but his ankle twisted when his father pushed him onto the garage floor and tore the dress off of him. The ankle throbbed under his weight. His father’s words drowned in the water in his ears. Ed knew his father wanted him to stop crying, but he could not. The lipstick still hadn’t come off his lips, even with the hose spraying inches away

from his face, so his father took a wrench from his pocket and slapped Ed’s face with it, ripping the skin above his lip and knocking out three lingering baby teeth. Lipstick remnants remained. His father grabbed him by the groin and Ed felt his stomach cave in. His father gripped him tight and said to dry off and come back into the house when he was ready to be a man, and to tell his mother he fell off his bike, or else.

Ed stood cold, wet and naked in the garage, shaking and shivering, but out of tears. He looked down at the blood that had spilled onto his feet, and saw that blood had turned into red high heels. When he looked up again, he was back in his bedroom, and Edna was gone.



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Amy Bitterman

Amy Bitterman has previously had short fiction accepted by *The Cream City Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Folio*, *The William and Mary Review*, *The Sand Hill Review*, *The Crescent Review*, *Kerem*, and *The G.W. Review*. She currently teaches at Rutgers Law School in New Jersey and is at work on a first novel.

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Feeding the Animals

[Amy Bitterman](#)

On the third waterless day at the Baghdad zoo, when the sun was directly over the monkey house, the keeper finally returned. The monkey’s ears rolled forward when he heard the click of the keeper’s heels on the stone path that led to the cage. Light bounced off the keeper’s white uniform and made the monkey blink. When he widened his nostrils and breathed in the sour smell of humans, his mouth watered.

The keeper reached into his pocket and pulled out a bag of almonds and dates. Honey and sugar filled the air. The monkey poked his snout out as far as he could. He stuck his paw through the bars and grabbed at the sweet smells. Then he brought his fist to his mouth, licked the salt on his fingers and screeched. His noise woke his sleeping mate, who was curled up in a corner of the cage, hiding from the heat.

"Patience, little fellow, I’m not going anywhere.”

The monkey’s ears rolled forward to meet the keeper’s voice. His mate raised her head from her belly, lumbered over to the edge of the cage and softly barked “oh-oh.” The keeper put the dates on the ground and stroked the mate’s fur. She rubbed herself against his hand; her head fit neatly into his palm.

“Poor things. Didn’t know there was a war on, did you?”

The keeper opened a bag of nuts and tossed a handful through the bars. Almonds and peanuts rained down on the monkey and his mate. They scrambled from one end of the cage to the other. When the last morsel was gone, the monkey leaned back on his haunches, scratched his head with one paw and held the other paw out for more food. When the keeper laughed, the monkey chirped. Laughter meant figs and walnuts.

“Not this time, little fellow. We have to save the rest. God only knows when I’ll be able to get more food.” The monkey hopped from one foot to the other in a move that had always been rewarded. Even the strangers who lined up against his cage threw peanuts and chips when the monkey danced. But the strangers hadn’t come for days and days, and now there was only the keeper.

“Sorry, my friends. Strict rations, these days. People will kill you over a few eggs. You’re lucky the zoo is such a dangerous area; otherwise, you’d be stewing in someone’s dinner pot.”

The keeper climbed a ladder on the side of the monkey house and picked up a pole that was lying on the roof. He pulled a banana from the inside pocket of his coat, tied it to the wood with a long piece of string and pried open a hatch near the roof’s edge. The squeal of the dry hinges hurt the monkey’s ears. He looked up through the hole at the top of his cage. The sun, hot and clear, stared back at him. He rolled around in the circle of light and warmth on the floor.

“Time for exercise.”

When the keeper dropped the banana through the hole, the monkey sprang up and swatted the air. The keeper moved the pole from right to left. With a flick of his wrist, he made a rainbow of smells over the monkey’s head. Sweat matted the monkey’s fur, but he kept running. He and his mate chased the sugar scent from one end of the cage to the other. The banana twisted and turned on the end of the string, always just out of reach.

The monkey climbed to the top of the cage, gripped a bar with his tail and legs and stretched his paws out.

Pinches, like little gnat stings, ran up and down his arm, but he still couldn't reach the fruit. He lost his balance, tumbled to the ground and landed on all fours. When the keeper laughed, the monkey rose up and beat his chest with two tiny fists.

"You're quite the little warrior today. Maybe we should give you a gun and send you out to fight with the rest of the animals."

A flash of light made the monkey blink. A thunderclap rang in his ears. He looked through the bars, but the sky was clear. He widened his nostrils, but there was no hint of the clammy smell of rain. Another flash of light and noise. The hatch snapped shut, trapping the banana on the top of the cage. The keeper tumbled to the ground and landed on his back. His head was a blur of pink, red and gray; blood pooled around his neck.

The monkey lumbered over to the edge of the cage, dragging his knuckles on the concrete surface of the floor. The salty scent of fresh blood mixed with the sugary odor of the dates that spilled from the keeper's pockets. The monkey smelled the sweet fruit turning to syrup in the sunlight. He grabbed a bar with one paw and stuck his free paw through the space between the iron rods. His stomach squeezed between the bars, but his bones trapped him. Pressing his ribcage against the metal, he swiped the air, brought his paw to his face, sniffed his fingers and whimpered.

His mate joined him at the edge of the cage. She reached through the bars and stroked the keeper's fingers. Pulling the hand through to her side of the iron, she held it up by the wrist and rubbed her head against the palm. When she let go of the wrist, the hand thumped on the ground. Vapor rose from the still warm, already decaying flesh. Something bitter mingled with the keeper's scent. She backed away from the smell until she reached the center of the cage. When she looked up, she saw the banana twisting in the air. Dangling from the broken pole, it was just a foot above her now. Resting her weight on her haunches, she rose to her full height. When she reached for the fruit, she lost her balance, returned to all fours and screeched.

The afternoon sun sank into the monkey's fur. He walked to his watering place on the side of the cage. The heat had lapped up most of the water. Wet fur and trapped bugs floated in the moist patches that darkened the bottom of the bowl. The monkey grabbed a beetle between his fingers, crunched through its hard shell and popped it into his mouth. Wings and legs scraped against his throat.

When the monkey and his mate woke the next morning, the keeper was still lying on the ground. The monkey pursed his lips into an O and hooted for attention. Slapping the concrete floor of the cage produced nothing but noise. Rushing up and down the trunk of his tree dislodged a few leaves. The keeper only ignored him when he'd done something wrong, like the time he bit the man's hand in his eagerness to get at the figs tucked inside it. Desperate, the monkey walked to a corner and pushed the three cartons stored there to the center of the cage. Carefully, he stacked each box on top of the other ð the keeper's favorite trick. Nothing. Then he noticed the flies buzzing in and out of the man's mouth and nostrils. Throwing his head back, the monkey shut his eyes, opened his mouth as wide as he could and howled.

The next day, the monkey and his mate woke up, shook the dew from their fur and lumbered over to their watering place. Then they sat on their haunches, wrapped their tails around their legs and waited. They picked the fleas out of each other's head and back hairs, rolled them between their paw pads and waited.

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Feeding the Animals

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The monkey poked his tongue around his teeth. The sweet, crunchy remains of almonds balanced on his tongue for a second and disappeared. Working his jaws up and down, he chomped on air. When a small bit of his cheek caught on the jagged edge of his incisor, he chewed greedily and swallowed the spit that coated his lips. His mate circled the edge of the floor. Just above her head, the banana fermented in the morning heat. Its overripe smell blanketed the cage. Her mouth watered; she stood on her legs and grunted at her meal.

Sunlight crossed to the middle of the cage, but there was still no food. Heat pulled at the monkey’s arms and legs. He brought his knees to his chest, bent his neck and closed his eyes, but the growl in his stomach kept him awake. Outside the cage, crows picked at the keeper’s eyes. His cheeks were the color of the concrete path, but the keeper’s lips were blue and his hand and wrist were purple. The monkey sniffed at the bloated flesh. Biting down on the rubbery meat, he pulled it across the bone. By the time his mate joined him, only the thumb was left.

Thunder made the monkey look up. His mate ran from one side of the cage to the other. When she reached the walls, she hopped up, touched her feet to the concrete and fell on her back. Breathless, she sat down and rested her head on her chest. The monkey cupped his paw over her skull, smoothed her wet fur, and pinched the lice out of her hairs. When his mate curled up and went to sleep, he nestled next to her until her racing heart slowed and her breathing studded.

The sky darkened. The rain was soft at first. Then it pounded. The monkey stuck his tongue between the bars. Mouth open, he pushed his head out further and further until the iron bars caught him by the ears. Water surrounded him, filling in the cracks in the soil, bouncing off the pavement, but the monkey couldn’t get a good drink. He licked at the moisture that veiled the iron bars and whimpered.

After the rain softened to a trickle, he heard the cries of the other animals. Howls, whimpers, moans, roars, hoots, meows. Giraffes, lions, owls, leopard, cranes slowly starving to death. The monkey drew his lips back and pushed his jaw forward, but there was no one to calm his fear with a pat on the head or a round of applause. The stink of uncollected waste filled the air.

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The wet patches left by the rain were gone by the next day. Thirst and hunger carved out a hollow space in the monkey’s stomach. He walked to the edge of the cage. The remaining patches of flesh on the keeper’s wrist and forearm were pale gray-green and shaking with flies. The keeper’s stench burned the monkey’s nose. He ran to the back of the cage and pawed the dry watering place. He pissed into the empty bowl and drank his sour, yellow water. The ache at the pit of his stomach pushed into his throat; his howls woke up his mate. When they groomed each other’s matted fur it flew off in clumps. Their coats were as patchy as a newborn’s. They scratched at the scabs until the skin peeled off and then licked the blood that ran from their sores.

The monkey wrinkled his nostrils to check for rain and breathed in a familiar, sour smell. He stared through the bars of his cage. This human wasn’t a keeper; keepers wore clothing that flashed in the sun. This man was



grass-colored. A moving bush. The monkey sat on his haunches, scratched his head with one paw and held the other paw out for food. When the man reached the edge of the cage, the monkey whimpered.

“Stupid, fucking animal,” the man said as he kicked the keeper’s bloated stomach with the toe of his boot. The flies that covered the body flew off, landing on the sores that ran up and down the monkey’s arms. He screeched and waved his paw over his head. When the grass-colored man laughed, the monkey chirped and stretched his fingers. The man turned and walked away from the cage. Mouth open, the monkey stared after him until his green and brown uniform disappeared.

Warm, thick air blew through the cage. The monkey stuck his tongue out to drink the breeze. Just above his head, the banana dangled back and forth in the wind. Its skin was black with rot and fruit flies, but its smell was still sweet.

The monkey’s mate climbed to the top of the tree in the corner of the cage and swung to its highest limb. She hugged the branch with all fours while it bounced up and down under her weight. When the tree was finally quiet, she leaned back on her legs and raised her arms. She leaped at the fruit, grazed its swollen skin with her fingers and fell. As she landed, her right leg slid beneath her stomach and cracked. She limped to a corner, cradled her twisted limb in her paws and howled. Instead of licking his mate’s wounds, the monkey balled his paws into fists and struck his chest.

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The next day, the mate’s right leg was twice the size of the left one. Flies buzzed around her bloated limb. Liquid ran from her eyes and stuck to her fur. The monkey ran to the other side of the cage, away from the sickness.

The sky was heavy with a rain that never fell. Warm air stuck to the monkey’s skin. He tried to lick it off, but the clammy smell clung to him the way a newborn hangs onto its mother. His back itched from the sores and fleas that burrowed into his skin. He stood on his legs and rubbed against the bars, but his fur slid on the smooth iron. His aching joints made his eyes run.

He lumbered to the corner where his mate was sprawled out. Her sharp smell teased the hollow in his belly. She pulled herself forward by her paws, dragging the swollen leg behind. The monkey circled her. When he stepped forward, she bared her teeth and hissed. He jumped back and circled her again. She retreated to the back wall. Ears front, eyes narrowed, the monkey paced in front of his mate, drawing a line with his body. Her head rolled onto her chest. She slumped back, wrapped her good leg around her stomach and screamed.

The monkey bared his teeth and hissed. He shifted his weight to his haunches and jumped onto his mate. She let out a bellow of desperation as he forced her to the ground. Sitting on her stomach, he cut off her air and reduced her screams to a low, steady wheeze. Holding her wounded leg between his paws, he bit through layer after layer of skin and tissue until he reached bone. By then, her wheezing had stopped. Her sightless eyes were fixed on the banana that rotted above her head.



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Noah hears his name and decides to break up our conversation.

“Finally,” he says to me. “Where the fuck have you been?”

We bump fists. A shot of tequila is passed to me and I take it.

“There we go,” he says as if nursing me with a bottle. Then he pulls me into a head lock and whispers,

“I know you had her first but you know I’m gonna hit that, right? Now take another shot.” I can feel the cold face of his large silver watch pressing into my cheek.

My disclosure to Patrick was not reckless. I knew he would tell Noah and that Noah would call me into his office and get straight to the point. He’d ask for the details, I would give them, we would bump fists, and I would be in D his favorite new pledge at Leighton Public Relations. He did, I did, we did and I was. I was in.

The most tragic part of all this is that Theresa Ramo is still nice to me, which I don’t understand.

I smile and shake my head in gentle disapproval. I take another shot, which doesn’t go down easily, but I play it off. I have gotten so much better at drinking since starting this job ten months ago. Noah always says the only qualification you ever need in PR is to be able to drink a lot and not puke, which I haven’t yet.

Noah and Theresa are now engaged in a conversation that no longer includes me, and I am left in an awkward space that I feel pressured to correct, but my phone vibrates. At first, I don’t look down. I just try to stay calm and stop my heart from beating through my neck.

*Hey*

Noah taps me forcefully on the shoulder and I jam the phone into my pocket.

“I’m sorry, what did you say?”

He leans his chin forward to talk and then raises it in the direction of Theresa with a subtle head nod.



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ÒI *said* itÕs too bad sheÕs wearing pants, huh?Ó

I try to think of a clever response, but thankfully I donÕt have to.

ÒMatttyÉwhat uuupppp kid,Ó says Patrick, while patting me on the back. Patrick is six feet tall, tan, and has amazing hair. Even I have to admit that heÕs exceptionally good looking. He gets any girl he wants and has already slept with half the office. He does triathlons and is starting to get really into what he calls ÒEastern philosophy and shit.Ó Patrick speaks with a combination of surfer sluggishness and cowboy charm, as if he was pulled right off of a beach in Malibu and dragged through Texas on his way here. The truth is, he was born and raised in an upper class suburb in New Jersey. When I found that out I ignored it. I like him too much to ask questions and honestly itÕs none of my business. ItÕs none of anyoneÕs business.

Noah puts his arm around me and whispers, ÒDid you get my room?Ó

ÒOf course. YouÕre at the W.Ó

ÒWhich one?Ó

ÒThe one in Murray Hill.Ó

ÒI hate that one.Ó

ÒItÕs the holidays. Best I could do with four hours notice. ItÕs under your name so you get the Starwood Points, but I used my Gmail account.Ó

Noah smiles, glowing through his fake tan. ÒLook at you, MattyÑyouÕre becoming a pro. DonÕt know how Leah found out my work password, but she did.Ó He is talking uncomfortably close, and I can tell he is drunker than he wants people to know.

ÒWell,Ó he says, Òat least my kids will be fucking smart, right? Right?Ó

Noah is the Director of Entertainment Marketing and I am his Assistant Account Executive. We basically throw parties with C-list celebrities, who for \$70K help us celebrate the launch of new and improved whitening toothpaste, or a long lasting gum, or a video game console, in order to get the press to pay attention for a nano second. The other part of our job is to read scripts and make sure the actress drinks Diet Dr Pepper instead of Diet Sprite when her character in the romantic comedy realizes that her best guy friend was really the one for her all along. People at the agency, who donÕt know any better, think our job is glamorous and that Noah is some kind of Jerry McGuire.

He is thirty-five with a beautiful wife, a beautiful daughter, well tailored suits, a fake tan and natural blonde hair. The last of which is his most prized possession.

ÒHa. No shit,Ó I say, and we pound fists again.

ÒYouÕre doing good bud. Did I tell you that?Ó

HeÕs always saying that IÕm doing good. He can be a great guy, sometimes.

I spend the rest of the party drinking Scotch with Patrick and watching the inhibitions of our co-workers

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melt under the white Christmas lights. We were told to wait for Noah while he went to the bathroom. Patrick keeps trying to talk me into going backpacking through Indonesia with his friends from college.

ÒDude,Ó he says drifting back and forth like a buoy at high tide, his hair swaying in an effortless current.

ÒMatty, are you listening to me bro? ItÕs gonna be me, Sloan, Sully and Morgan. What do you think?Ó

My phone vibrates again. I have been holding it in my hand so that I wouldnÕt miss the message.

*Now youÕre not gonna text me back?*

ÒYeah, bud, IÕm definitely gonna think about it,Ó I say before finishing my Scotch. Noah creeps out of the bathroom and points to us from across the bar. He whispers something to Theresa, and she exits stage right. He walks over to us, pumping up his chest.

ÒDidnÕt you see me pointing? WhatÕs wrong with you, Matty? You good? You lookÉ I donÕt know. You look antsy or some shit.Ó

ÒÕm fine. Just a little beat.Ó

ÒWell, man up. I need you at your best.Ó

ÒActually I need to go. IÕm gonna go meet this girl on the Upper West Side.Ó

He smiles. ÒNice work, little one, but just tell her to come along.Ó

ÒDo I know her?Ó Patrick asks with genuine interest.

ÒNah. Listen, IÕll fill you in tomorrow morning.Ó

I slip into the crowd before they can respond, which I know is suspicious, but I couldnÕt have stood up to their line of questioning. I break through the doors like IÕve pulled the fire alarm, and once I turn the corner, certain no one can see me, I begin to run.

I stop at 6th Avenue. My hand is shaking, and I make the call. I feel the familiar pangs in my stomach each time it rings. I unbutton my coat releasing the trapped heat into the dry, cold air.



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ÒHello?Ó Brendan says as if waking from a nap. He did this in college when girls would call him late at night. I am standing on the curb, hanging by my toes, back straight and eyes closed, like a diver on top of the platform.

ÒWhatÓs up?Ó I say in a voice lower than my own.

ÒNot much, dude. Saw that you called about ten times today. You gotta stop calling me like this, bud,Ó he says as if teaching his little brother an important lesson. I have no excuse so I just wait for him to continue. ÒItÓs cool tonight though Ócause Betsy is skiing in Vermont with her family.Ó

I remain silent, not saying that I saw Betsy in a bar downtown last week and she told me that she was going skiing—which is why I called thirteen times, to be exact. ÒÓm a little wasted,Ó I say. This is always the envelope to our invitations.

He says, ÒWe havenÓt watched a movie in a while, and I wanted to see if you wanted to.Ó

ÒYeah, I could watch a movie.Ó

ÒCool. Can you make the train?Ó

I rest against the frozen building and try to convince myself not to say yes; to go home and pass out and wake up and erase this phone call like a drunken memory that gets cloudy on the details. To tell myself in the morning that I was wasted and to keep telling myself that until it becomes a joke that I had ever even spoken to him. *How random? So weird to hear from him.*

These are the things I will say to myself at my desk tomorrow until the whole thing seems so ridiculous that it just could not have possibly happened the way I remember it.

ÒI donÓt know, bud. CanÓt you come into the city?Ó I trace the bricks of the building with my fingers and start to feel cold.

ÒI told you, IÓm only really coming into the city for Betsy now. You can still make the 1:53,Ó he says in a voice that my body recognizes.

There is something about the way he says things. He has this tone that IÓve always envied; this tone that he used when he wanted to sleep with the girls at school, which always worked. ItÓs deliberate but soft. I guess smooth isnÓt the way to describe it because it isnÓt only smooth, itÓs powerful. It is a quiet power that he used on girls to get them to do whatever he wanted. I always wanted that kind of power.

ÒNah, man I think IÓm just gonna go home and rub one out. Talk to you later.Ó

I hang up before he responds and step off the curb and onto 6th Avenue hoping to get home quickly, and neatly. I feel strong.

A cab pulls up, reaffirming my decision. Now I can go home and wake up feeling clean. I tuck my white dress shirt back into my navy blue sweater, re-button my coat, and then my phone vibrates again—pulsing against my thigh with a pressure that feels stronger than the wind and the traffic and all of 6th Avenue. I know not to look at the message until I'm tucked in my bed, after two Advil and two glasses of water. But I just canÓt. I pull it out of my

pocket.

*IÖm serious. I want your shit.*

ÖGrand Central,Ö I say to the cab driver, hunching my shoulders forward as if I can get us there quicker.

New York had made everything more complicated. It was easier when we were in college. Sophomore year, when this all started, when we shared a room, and even junior year, when we lived in the same house and we could crash into each other Æ drunk with one eye open, then we could forget it ever happened by the time the sun broke through the shades. Now though, especially since he has gotten serious with Betsy, I have to wait my turn.

I know the drill.

I get off at East Norwalk, the stop right before Westport, to make sure that no one he knows will see him. When the train doors open I canÖt find him on the platform. Headlights flash from the back of the abandoned parking lot, and I know it is Brendan even before I can make out the egg shape of his motherÖs silver Volvo. I tell myself to walk slowly.

When I get into the car, he doesnÖt say hello. ItÖs up to me to start the rhythm of our conversation before either one of us can back out. Awkward silences have stopped our momentum before.

ÖIÖm fucking wasted.Ö I say, tugging at a straw wrapper I find on the car floor. I pick it up because I need something to do with my shaking hands.

ÖMe, too,Ö Brendan says and adjusts himself. ÖI probably shouldnÖt even be driving right now.Ö

He is wearing a black cashmere topcoat that IÖve never seen before, a white undershirt, lacrosse shorts that have his faded number on them and flip-flops. His legs are tan, even in December, with the perfect amount of hair, and they still have that shape Æ defined even when relaxed, looking as if he still has practice every morning.

We drive slowly out of the parking lot, and I feel more nervous than usual.

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“I drank two tall boys on the train here,” I say with feigned confidence as I grab his crotch. He looks down and smirks. I decide not to make any more moves until he does. And I don’t until we get out of the car and into the house.

We never touch one another in the open, which was a rule we both followed without ever having to establish.

Brendan lives in a house that his parents are renovating. The house, on the outside, looks like it has been painted since the last time I was here, which was four months ago. The house had been grey and is now white. The front door opens to wood shavings and work tables. “Watch out. There’s tools and shit everywhere.” He rechecks the lock on the front door, and turns to me with heavy breath. We grab each other’s asses with slightly more affection than teammates and reach into one another’s pants as if it’s a handshake. Then he says to grab a seat because he has to piss.

Every room in the house is in some stage of reconstruction. The inside is stripped and wooden and covered tightly in a yellow plastic like hard candy. In the outdated kitchen, a TV rests on a large table, with two lawn chairs in front of it.

I sit on the blue lawn chair in the kitchen, staring at the turned-off television, with my legs pinned together like a nervous teen at the clinic. I hear him open the fridge and the clinking of beer bottles and I spread out as if I’m driving to my favorite song. He puts his hands on my shoulders and keeps them there after he hands me a beer.

Without saying a word he puts in the DVD we lovingly call “The Marathon Porn.” It is a greatest hits compilation lasting almost eight hours. One night sophomore year, Brendan decided he didn’t care if I was in the room; he “just really needed to jack off to some porn.” And that was how all of this got started.

“Thanks,” I say nodding at the beer, and we take long sips in unison.

He skips ahead to his favorite gangbang scene, in which a female Geometry teacher has sex with five of her students during detention. He sits down in his chair, and we clink bottles as if we’re watching the playoffs. I tell him I like his beard, lightly grazing my fingers over my own chin as if he needed someone to show him where it was. He says he doesn’t have any interviews until after Christmas so he figures why not. I ask how that’s going but he doesn’t really want to talk about it. “Something about his dad’s friend at J.P. Morgan being an asshole. Then he says one of the girls on screen is really hot, and we put our hands in our pants and start to stare at each other.

He asks me how my job is going, and I tell him how I met Carmen Electra the week before and I tell him how much I wanted to sleep with her. We have our pants and our boxers around our ankles now, and I tell him about Theresa Ramo.

He asks me if I fucked her and I lie.

There has been an evolution to this. We started taking our own clothes off about senior year of college, and we started kissing on the mouth right after graduation. At this point there is no line we haven’t crossed.

Nothing is different about his bedroom. The sheets, impossibly, seem crumpled in the exact way I left them.

It feels like something I can't quite describe. There is this kind of burn to it. Everything will be slow and breathy at first, and I like the slow. And then it will be fast and reckless, and I like the fast, and then we explode like cheap firecrackers, the ones you light in your backyard, shooting straight up in a flash of colored light, barely above the rooftop, falling quickly to the ground.

But right after, almost immediately, we'll start collecting the smoky remains so no one gets burnt. That is the last slow part of collecting the remains. When we realize what we've done, and the fall is sudden, and we put out our fire in different ways. And I always feel singed.

I head to the shower like I always do, filling my mouth with water and spitting it into the drain. There is a pink, plastic razor next to the Irish Spring and I pretend it doesn't exist.

"Hey, can I use your toothbrush?" I call out.

"Can you use my *toothbrush*?"

"Um, yeah, do you really care?"

"Ahhh. I'd kind of rather you didn't."

Sometimes we do it two or three more times and then I'll leave or he'll leave or we'll both check out of the room depending on where we are. One time we spent the entire night together, but it was only because we had passed out on each other in a drunken cloud. I know from his toothbrush answer that I'd be leaving soon, so I try to step out of the shower with flexed muscles.

Brendan had already put his boxers and T-shirt back on and he is lying on the shaggy green carpet that hasn't been pulled out yet. It looks like unkept grass. He has a fresh beer and a pensive look. I decide to stay defiantly naked, sliding in along side him, letting my knee curl up to his thigh, and I wait. We lay there in the worst kind of silence.

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ÒHey, Matty, I actually have an early morning. I have to help my mom get a second Christmas tree.Ó He pushes himself off the carpet crawls quickly to the top of his bed and encases himself in the covers. I am, now, extremely aware of my nudity, and I dash to the kitchen to retrieve my clothes. When I return, my mind searches for the perfect response, but I am too tired to say anything important and too proud to say anything casual.

I stand over him; he is ignoring me in a fake sleep, his eyes sealed like tombs and his head submerged in the pillow. He finally looks up and glances at me with surprise as if to say, I canÕt believe youÕre still here. He nudges his chin to the other room. ÒThe yellow pages are on top of the microwave. You can get a cab number from there.Ó I am too disgusted with myself to tell him that the earliest train doesnÕt leave for two more hours.

ÒAlright.Ó

ÒWell, um, listen. We canÕt be doing this much anymore, so IÕll just see you when we run into each other in the city. Cool?Ó

ÒOf course. No worries.Ó He has been using that line for over a year now.

ÒCan I take a piss first?Ó

ÒSure.Ó

I walk into the bathroom, run the water and then put the pink razor into my pocket before flushing the toilet. I shut off the bedroom light for him.

ÒThanks,Ó he says.

The man on the phone says it will be twenty minutes. I pour myself a glass of water and sit at the makeshift card table, legs open. The greatest hits porn is still on. I watch for a moment but I have to look away Ð it feels like getting behind the wheel for the first time after a car crash. The lights of the cab flood into the driveway and when I get up I think about shutting off the porn, but I donÕt.

I close the door to the cab, sealing myself in it, and I feel, for a moment, saved. This happens more often on winter nights, when the sudden halt of poor choices and careless movements pulls a blanket over it all.

ÒTrain station please.Ó

I watch the mailboxes flicker past as we drive.

ÒI thought you would be going to the airport. At this time of night, those are the calls we get,Ó the cab driver says.

I donÕt respond. I wish I were going to the airport, leaving for somewhere.

ÒWas that your house?Ó he asks as we turn onto the main road.

I finally turn to look at him. His skin is so dark it makes his wide, white smile glow.

ÒNo, no itÕs not my house. Do you live near here?Ó

ÒMe? Yes. Well, two towns over,Ó he says, continuing to smile in earnest. ÒDo you live in New York?Ó

“Yes.”

“So do you like it out here? It’s beautiful.”

“No, actually.” I pause, realizing this is the first honest thing I’ve said all night. “You like it here?”

“I am from Nigeria,” he says as he nods politely to me through the rear view window. “It is very different here. Do you like living in the city?”

I am tired of talking. I try to smile, for his sake. I take the pink razor out from my pocket and press my thumb against the blade. Dull from all its use, it doesn’t even leave a mark.

We pull up to the train station and the driver tilts his head towards his window to look at the early morning.

“Well, I think the dark is leaving.”

I want to tell him that is a nice way of putting it, but I don’t. I keep my mouth shut. I just give him the money and smile wide.



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Kristin Abraham is the author of two poetry chapbooks: *Little Red Riding Hood Missed the Bus* (Subito Press, 2008), and *Orange Reminds You of Listening* (Elixir Press, 2006.) Her poem "Little Red Riding Hood Missed the Bus" was selected for Best New Poets 2005. Additional poetry, lyric essays, and critical essays have been published in such places as *Court Green*, *Columbia Poetry Review*, *LIT*, *Quarter After Eight*, and *The Journal*. She currently teaches English at Ashford University in Iowa.

Faith Adiele

Faith Adiele is author of *Meeting Faith: The Forest Journals of a Black Buddhist Nun* (PEN Beyond Margins Award for Memoir); writer/subject of *My Journey Home*, a PBS documentary about her Nigerian/Nordic/American heritage; and co-editor of *Coming of Age Around the World: A Multicultural Anthology*. Her essays have appeared in *O Magazine*, *Ploughshares*, *Transition*, *Ms.*, *Essence*, *Fourth Genre*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *Indiana Review* and numerous anthologies. She has taught memoir at VONA: Voices of Our Nations in San Francisco and in Accra, Bali, Geneva, Johannesburg, Chautauqua, Iowa, and Whidbey Island. She is currently Distinguished Visiting Writer at Mills College in Oakland.



Johnny  
Ana Paula Dias



Photograph by G. Cole

**Dilruba Ahmed**

Dilruba Ahmed is the author of *Dhaka Dust* (Graywolf, 2011), winner of the 2010 Katharine Bakeless Nason Prize for poetry. Her work has appeared in *Blackbird*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Cream City Review*, *New England Review*, and *New Orleans Review*.

**William Allegrezza**

William Allegrezza edits the e-zine *Moria* and the press Cracked Slab Books. He has published five books, *In the Weaver's Valley*, *Ladders in July*, *Fragile Replacements*, *Collective Instant*, and *Covering Over*; one anthology, *The City Visible: Chicago Poetry for the New Century*; seven chapbooks, including *Sonoluminescence* (co-written with Simone Muench) and *Filament Sense* (Ypolita Press); and many poetry reviews, articles, and poems. He curates series A, a reading series in Chicago dedicated to experimental writing. In addition, he occasionally posts his thoughts at <http://allegrezza.blogspot.com>.

**Amy Bitterman**

Amy Bitterman has previously had short fiction accepted by *The Cream City Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Folio*, *The William and Mary Review*, *The Sand Hill Review*, *The Crescent Review*, *Kerem*, and *The G.W. Review*. She

currently teaches at Rutgers Law School in New Jersey and is at work on a first novel.

**Danielle Blasko**

[Danielle Blasko](#) is a Detroit native currently enjoying life on an East Coast beach. She is a Senior Fashion Writer at Eidia Lush, a custom design shoe company based out of Chicago. Danielle is the editor-in-chief of The Feline Muse Literary Blogzine and her poetry has most recently appeared in *The Legendary*, *Escarp*, *Short, Fast, and Deadly*, *Gutter Eloquence Magazine*, and *The Moose & Pussy Magazine*.

**Danny Bracco**

Originally from Thousand Oaks, California, Danny Bracco moved to San Francisco to further pursue his writing education. He is currently a second-year graduate student in the University of San Francisco's MFA in Writing Program, and working on his first novel.

Danny graduated from the University of California, Davis, in 2008 with a B.A. in English (Creative Writing emphasis) and a B.A. in Psychology, receiving Highest Honors in English and Honors in Psychology. In 2008 his short story, "Growing Sideways," was published in UC Davis's annual literary magazine, *Produce*.

**Joseph Celizic**

Joe Celizic received his MFA in fiction from Bowling Green State University. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Unsaid*, *Windsor Review*, *Redivider*, *PANK*, *Stickman Review* and others. He has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

**Garin Cycholl**

Garin Cycholl's recent work includes a forthcoming collaborative long poem with Bill Allegranza, "Aquinas on the Mississippi," and "Hostile Witness," a book-length poem on mold, boxing, and Illinois politics. Since 2002, he has been a member of Chicago's Jimmy Wynn fiction collaborative.

**Mollie Delaria**

Mollie, a native New Yorker, graduated with honors from Parsons school of Design with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in photography. Upon matriculating university, she moved to Tel-Aviv, Israel, where she explored her heritage. Mollie's work has been featured in *Spin Magazine*, *Cultcase*, *Women's Health Magazine* and exhibited in Australia, Israel, South Carolina, New York, and a solo exhibition in Great Neck, New York's Court house. She is currently based out of New York.

*Artist's Statement:*

Mollie utilizes the underlying consciousness of the mind, extracting forgotten thoughts deep inside and presents them to the viewer. The viewer is invited to participate in all the art works, as an investigation of themselves and their personal experiences.

**Ana Paula Dias**

Ana Paula Dias lives in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where she studies Digital Media Design at the Pontifical Catholic University. She recently spent five months at the University of San Francisco studying Graphic Design and had her print "Sienna" shown at the 11th Annual Thatcher Art + Architecture Student Showcase. She's currently working with Mobile Marketing.

*Artist's Statement:*

I've always been an observer. Details are very important to me. I feel that carefully considering colors is really important in arts. It can be colorful or black and white, but you have to think about why you're choosing those colors. As a Graphic Design and Digital Media student, I try to blend techniques. For these artworks I did some sketches before starting to work on the computer.

**Stephen Elliott**

Stephen Elliott is the author of seven books, including *The Adderall Diaries*.



**Jamey Genna**

Jamey Genna teaches writing in the East Bay area of San Francisco. She is a graduate of the Master of Fine Arts in Writing Program at the University of San Francisco. Her short fiction has appeared in many fine literary magazines both on-line and in print, such as *Iowa Review*, *Georgetown Review*, *Eleven Eleven*, and *Storyglossia*. You can find her at [jameygenna.blogspot.com](http://jameygenna.blogspot.com).

**Rich Ives**

Rich Ives is the 2009 winner of the Francis Locke Memorial Poetry Award from *Bitter Oleander*. His story collection, *The Balloon Containing the Water Containing the Narrative Begins Leaking*, was one of five finalists for the 2009 Starcherone Innovative Fiction Prize.

**Christopher Jenner**

Christopher Jenner is a recent graduate of the University of San Francisco's MFA in Writing Program. He resides once again in Evergreen, Colorado, a lovely mountain town that's been Californicated. He teaches composition in the ESL program at the Community College of Aurora, where he tries to get students to agree that subjects and verbs must agree. He writes from the left brain, the right brain, and sometimes in a Rocky Mountain brainstorm.

**Donna Laemmlen**

Donna Laemmlen is currently pursuing an MFA in Writing at the University of San Francisco. She teaches Screenwriting and Storytelling in the Motion Pictures and Television Department of the Academy of Art University. "Chimera" is her first published story. A second story is forthcoming in the March, 2011 issue of *Slice Magazine*.

**Brian Martin**

Brian Martin is currently enrolled in the University of San Francisco's MFA Program. He is the 2004 recipient of the Vival Nells Memorial Prize and has previously been published in *The GW Review*. He lives in San Francisco.

**Cassandra Passarelli**

Cassandra has run a bakery, managed a charity and sub-edited. She's travelled in the Middle East, Africa and Sri Lanka. And studied literature, journalism and creative writing. These days she runs a grass roots library project in a Guatemalan rainforest village with her family ([caldopiedra.blogspot.com](http://caldopiedra.blogspot.com)) and is practicing to become a yoga teacher.

She's published in *Writers' Forum*, *Text's Bones*, *Earlyworks*, *Cinnamon Press*, *Pulp.net*, *Salt River Review*, and *Litro*. Skrev Press published her novella *Greybill*. She won the Traverse Theatre's Writers Debut Jam and has been shortlisted for Happenstance, RRothe Trophy, Cadenza and Aesthetica's Creative Works Competition.

**Candy Shue**

Candy Shue's poems and stories have appeared in *The Collagist*, *Washington Square*, *Paragraph*, *Pif Online*, *Poemeleon*, *follymag.com*, *Switchback*, *The Rambler* and other journals. She is an MFA candidate at USF, where she was inspired to write "Life in Necropolis" based on an exhibit of contemporary Terra Cotta Warrior statues by the Chinese artist Wanxin Zhang, on display in Kalmanovitz Hall during Fall 2009.

**Jennifer Spiegel**

Jennifer has an MA in Politics from New York University, and an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction) from Arizona State. Her work has appeared in several anthologies and journals, including *The Gettysburg Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Nimrod*, and *The Seattle Review*. Dzanc Books will publish her collection of short stories, *The Freak Chronicles: Stories for Freaks and Their Friends*, in 2012.



# Staff

## Editors:

**Kelci Baughman McDowell** a.k.a. **Kelci M. Kelci** (Managing Editor) graduated from the MFA Program at USF in 2009. Since then she has been published in [Blue Moon Literary and Art Review](#), [sPARKLE & bLUNK](#), [Blood Lotus](#), and [BlazeVOX](#) and has built a run of 3 handmade accordion-fold artist's books called *She'll Be Your Resident Poet*.

**Colin Bean** (Tech Editor) is currently finishing his MS in Computer Science at USF.

**Stephen Beachy** (Faculty Adviser) is the author of two novels, *The Whistling Song* and *Distortion*, and most recently the novellas *Some Phantom* and *No Time Flat*. *Distortion* will be reissued any day now by Rebel Satori Press. He has been teaching at USF since 1999. Check out his website: [livingliely.com](#)

## Associate Editors:

**Aisha Ahmad** is a first year MFA student studying poetry. She obtained a BFA in Photography from Parsons the New School for Design in New York City. She really misses bagels.

**Karen Biscopink** is a second year MFA student studying poetry. File-folder alphabetizer by day and folk-singer by night, Karen enjoys searching for the perfect plate of macaroni and cheese. She collects zines and mixtapes made by/for other people. Karen hopes to someday participate in the SF roller derby using the name "Sylvia Wrath."

**C. Adþn Cabrera** is an alumnus of the MFA in Writing Program at USF. Adþn is currently at work on his first book entitled *Tortillas y Sal*, a bilingual collection of short stories.

**Jenny Chu** is currently a first year MFA student at the University of San Francisco. She writes both short fiction and poetry and hopes to study both as intensively. She is originally from Portland, Oregon. Her published work can be found in [MReview 200Z](#), *VoiceCatcher 3*, and most recently in [The Molotov Cocktail](#).

**Jorge Cino** has been a conflicted Argentinean expat since 2004, and that is all you need to know, for now.

**Margaret LaFleur** is a temp by day and a student/writer by night, though this is hopefully subject to change. She recently claimed her domain name ([margaretafleur.com](#)) but doesn't suggest you visit unless you need another source of cat photos and random YouTube videos.

**Jacques Li** is an MFA student at USF who is studying nonfiction.

**Libby McDonnell** often comes up with fabulously witty retorts several seconds too late. This is probably why she writes. She is a graduate of the MFA in Writing Program at USF.

**Alex Nemick** is a second year MFA in Writing student at USF studying poetry.

**Keith J. Powell** is a second year MFA student and Ohio native. His work has appeared in *Harcourt Textbooks*, *the BG News*, *Profiles of Popular Culture*, *Dramatics Magazine*, and [Playscripts.com](#).

**Lina Shustarovich** is a first year MFA student writing and studying nonfiction. When not writing at the nearest Starbucks, she is a marketing brand manager for a local shopping startup in Palo Alto and a private tutor. When



Jennifer  
Ana Paula Dias

she ignores her responsibilities, you can find her equipped with either running shoes or a yoga mat. She dreams of owning a giant schnauzer.

Founders:

**Rosita Nunes** (Founding Editor), a graduate of the USF MFA in Writing Program, has always had a hand in startups, transitions and turnarounds. She has held many titles over the years, and this one is among the best. Switchback is a project to be proud of, thanks to a continuing flow of talent coming together to bring it life with each issue.

**Alex Davis** (Co-Founding Editor) has an MFA in Writing from the University of San Francisco. His poems have been published in *Five Fingers Review*. He has a tattoo with hidden meaning.

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20x24 monograph on thick watercolor paper

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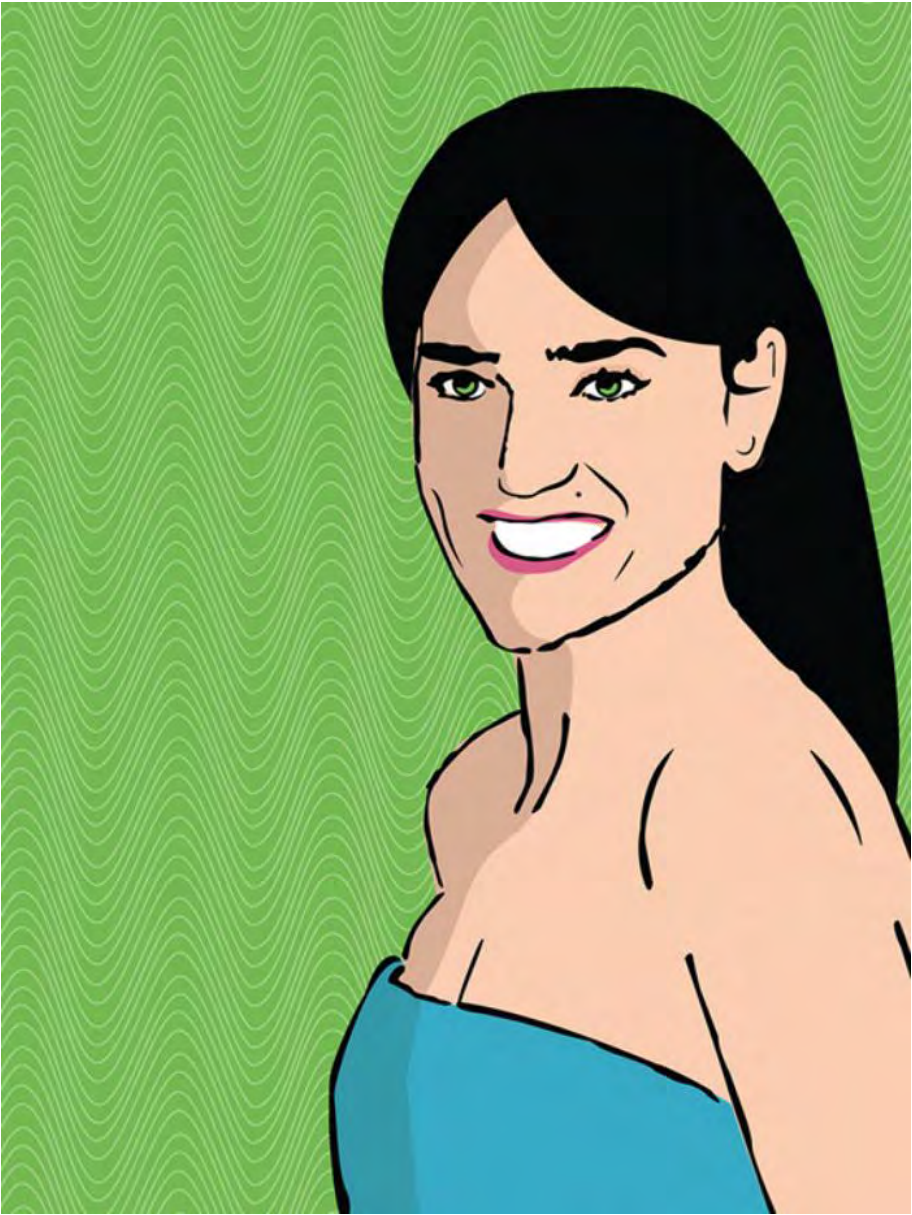
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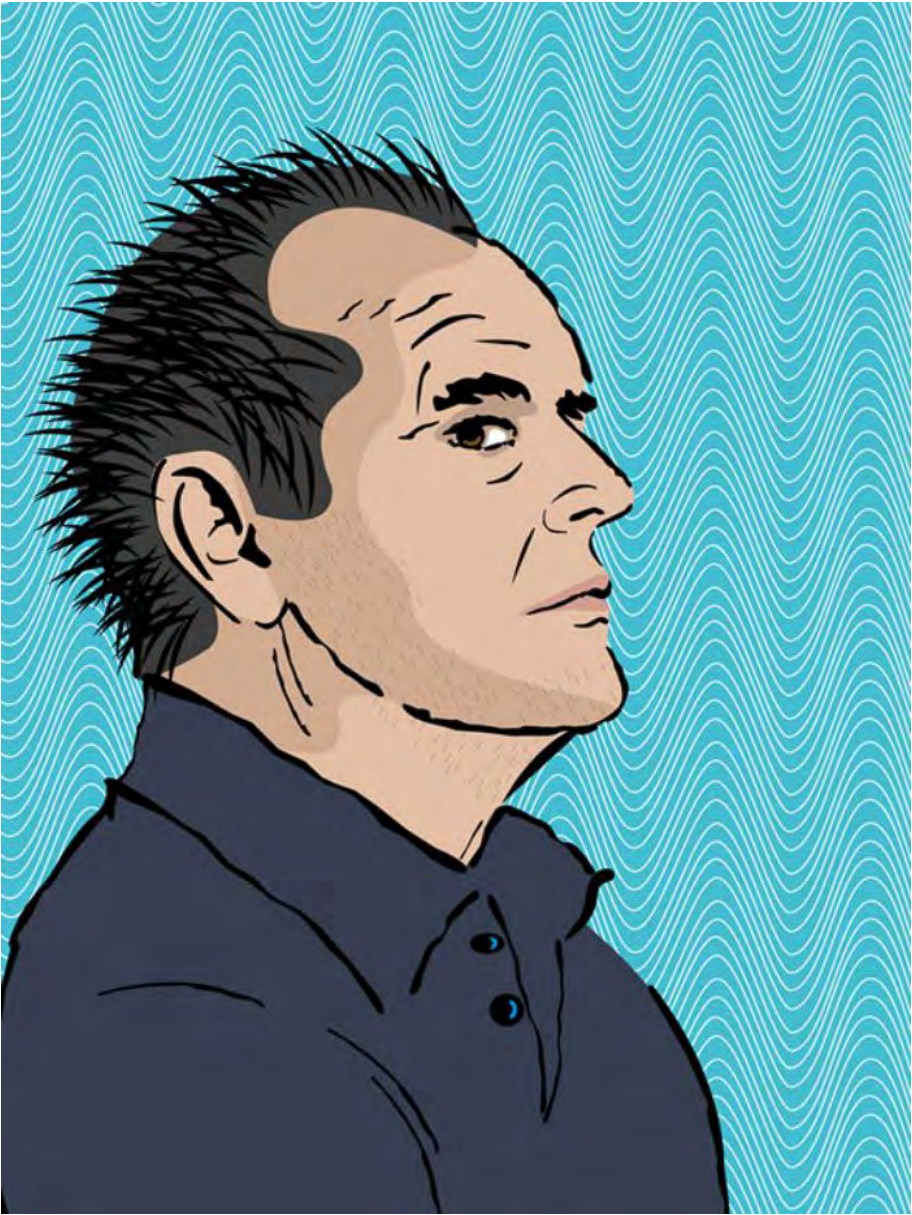
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