# The Muse

*The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College*



**Cover Art**

"Gladiola in Morning Dew" by Gail Doerr

HOWARD COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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# Text

There would be a need for a gentle push
in the way of adoration—to advertise for affection
with that energy spent on enamor.
To you: I would write, for voices quaver.
We would exchange these inked things
supplanting the most cautious stares.
Through the initial, the beginning,
we would spin our connections,
as nothing is predetermined. Nothing
moves beyond the soft non-reality
of expectation. And the best
we would allow ourselves, as two points
in a similar dark, independent from concern,
is for this gradual peak to rise
with us as two bodies at its center,
two bodies pushing together toward
the highest space.

# A Day at Sea

Freedom and desolation in the break of every wave,
the cry of every gull out lost at sea, sorrowful lullabies.
Sails curled billowing push top pinnate points the way,
sea green curls and foam flecks pearl under golden gaze.
Sea and seal fish and whale to no destination bound.
Up on waves down in deeps all paths found when none are.
Compass spins to show the way, wooden tiller turns
sharp prow cut lead the way chasing yonder cloud.
Dance of block and tackle, haul of rope and chain.
Endless tessellations, green silks flaps and strain.
All patterns flow but no day is the same far from
pressing crowd. Voices shouted, fade away framed
by silence deep. Water, wine, salt, and pork swaying in the
larder. Yellow eye blinks pale, casts soft shadows on water.
Little fire sparks round pan to sing, spices from the garden.
Garlic onions and powders red mixed with salted chicken.
White rice boils and mounds up high, keel bobs in the breeze.
Golden port glows lonely, fiddle sings laughter on the water.
Silent craft sails under twinkling lights, stars on empty waves.

# After 9/11

Before, she was looking forward to the last class of the course she taught at the college, to celebrate the beginning of a new life for her students, but not now. A new life was a concept she had cherished for the last seven years, and mastered in teaching. She had taught her students how to articulate this concept in clear intentions and how to anticipate the results with assurance. But not now. The terrorist attacks have changed everything. Suddenly life became more than life, it lost its frame and spilled over beyond measure.

On that day her students waited for her the way they always did, but it wasn't the same. For the first time the classroom was strange. The air burst with echoes, but there was no sound. The happening was contained in the gazes turned inward, eyes transformed into deep wells. The sudden past came to be the present—agonizing rapture, a split of ground that carried massive trees downhill.

The students came to the class in habit of coming. They came to stay away from the news for couple of hours. And perhaps to seek shelter from nightmares that wouldn't end with the waking of a new day—that replayed themselves over and over, imposing images that gripped minds with iron clasps. They came with questions they couldn't formulate. All came with hope, just in case something could be explained or maybe even changed.

Great emptiness wrenched her heart with a loss she couldn't fathom. She hated the hijackers with all her being, and she hated herself for hating them, and before she could even think the thought, she was back in hating them again. Stopping the struggle was impossible. She was locked in a small place of her own skin, separate from everything else. Every time she tried to reach beyond, she was pulled back. It was a cage she couldn't escape because she was the cage. She moved on her seat slightly from time to time encouraging the adequate thoughts, but nothing happened. She cleared her throat cautiously to attract the words, but they vanished before being spoken. She was lost in waiting, forgetting it was not for her to wait.

Usually she talked without stopping, walking and gesturing. Every lecture was a dance of soft-spoken testimony spun out by a fluid body. "Fundamentals of Spiritual Awareness," the name of her course, "will enrich your lives by expanding your understanding of who you are,

who the person next to you is, and how we all relate to each other," she said, introducing the class in the beginning of Summer 2001. "Humans are magnificent beings," she said with excitement that easily spilled over into her students. "Humans are divine," she said, closing her eyes, soaking up the feeling of peace and grace that comes with the sound of sacred words. She seemed to come from a different plane of existence, one that feels strange and inviting at the same time—an exotic place that everyone longs to visit and experience but only some want to live there.

Everything she said during the course suddenly ceased to exist, being replaced by the inconceivable reality of the terrorist attacks from two days before. The testimony of her course became irrelevant. To go back to the original thought was impossible. The new day was born without hope, against all longing, against faith and the joy of life, against new beginnings.

The attacks made everyone numb. No one could imagine the days ahead, but all knew they were suddenly given a different life. The order of days was changed—the food became bitter, the sound of the street abrupt, even hurting, the smell of fire turned everyone inward, to escape.

"We should hunt them down," Matthew said, clearing his tightened throat.

The entire class nodded in unison, not for the idea, but to follow the raw instinct against hopelessness.

"We should kill their wives and children, so it will never happen again," he added, encouraged by the awaiting silence.

Deep inside, in the blind pit of the heart, they wanted it to be the welcomed solution; fast and decisive like a surgeon's cut that can free an ailing patient and save his life. Nonetheless, it wasn't the answer. The words rung falsely, but they were the only ones that seemed courageous enough to face the unbearable.

Matthew was the youngest in the class, seventeen. His petite figure and a small face of soft features made him look even younger. His clear blue eyes and long wavy blond hair resembled that of angels on Christmas cards, the ones in flowing gowns, touching flutes or harps with long and gentle fingers. He was a child, really. She thought he

could have been her son. She would have been sixteen, a bit young, but it happens all the time. She even imagines him in her arms as a baby, his skin smelling of milk. She strokes his head and presses him softly to her breasts. He closes his hand on her finger. But not now. Not now, because now doesn't exist anymore. The sudden past is all there is.

She lowered her head in shame at Matthew's words, knowing they were the words she wanted to scream out loud. Without disgrace or remorse, she wanted to join the message of revenge, a new solution for new times. She stopped and closed her eyes, shutting herself off from her own thoughts.

"No, no, no," she whispered.

"Yes, he is right," Daniel, Matthew's best friend, pitched in. "Life is life, professor White, nothing more and nothing less. Do you think we should talk about spirituality while they are killing us?"

Daniel followed Matthew everywhere and in everything. Just a couple of weeks into the summer semester he suddenly changed the way he wore his jeans and started drinking Coke in every single class, just like his new best friend.

"This is precisely the moment we should talk about spirituality," she said with painful sadness, overcoming her own thoughts with effort. "Haven't you learned anything in the past semester?" she asked, raising her open palms, begging for the right words.

"Obviously not, because it doesn't make any sense to me now," Daniel said, huffing, looking at Matthew for approval.

"Yeah, man, it doesn't make any sense to me either," Matthew agreed, smoothing his long hair along his angelic face, a sign of contentment. "Professor White, you won't tell us that the hijackers are divine beings, will you?" he added with angry sarcasm.

"Let's go back to the basics." She tried to rescue her students and herself against all odds. "Let's ask ourselves why we are here," she said, getting up from her chair. The movement of her body was rigid, not flowing as it usually was. She struggled in the space like a broken wing spiraling down.

The students didn't exhibit any interest. No one wanted to engage in conversation that was withdrawn from the new reality. No one wanted to go back to the basics that had nothing to do with the world that was unfolding in front of their eyes.

"Robert, why are you here?" she asked.

Robert was a car mechanic who had been attending AA meetings three times a week since he was a young teenager.

"I thought there is more to life than fixing cars, and I wanted to know," he answered.

"And do you feel this course is helping you in your search?" Her question was overwelcoming.

"I don't know," Robert said, rubbing a callus on his hand.

She didn't want this to be the answer, but she knew it was the only true one. It was better not to know than to know now. What was there to know? They are killing us, and they are evil. We must defend ourselves. We must do something to get back at them. She let her thoughts roll over her mind before she asked again.

"Deaun, why are you here?" She stepped into a different world and smiled. Everyone who talked to Deaun smiled, because her face was like a flower. She, herself, smiled always, even when talking about mistakes she made every day, and struggles that always sounded like a gentle rain, subtle imperfections. Deaun was an exchange student from Vietnam.

"I am here 'cause I am Buddhist. I want to learn other religion," she answered sweetly and nodded couple of times. Her constant nodding and bowing made her exotic. She carried her body with mindfulness, consideration of space and others. She was one with everything around her; just touching her cast a spell of grace. "Professor White, excuse me, can you tell us why you are here?" Matthew asked looking at her.

Her body straightened in alertness. No one would dare, she thought, but it was too late. He had already said it, and in an instant she was back in the reality of the attacks she saw on the TV screen. The orange ball exploded in midair, turning the sky black, devouring metal like paper, turning lives to ashes and thick air. She closed her eyes and lowered her head, not knowing what it was that she wanted to escape. The images? The question? The classroom?

Why am I here? How can I define my purpose? How can I define myself? I was born and raised in Poland. It didn't matter now. I immigrated right after college. It didn't matter now. My home in Poland had a garden with a thick wall of yellow and purple irises my grandfather planted as a young boy before the Second World War. It didn't matter. She didn't know anyone who died in the attacks, but she

felt like she knew them all. She knew the man who decided to jump. His flight down was long.

I see him hanging in the air suspended between the blue sky and the Earth, his tie pointing up sharply. I stretch my arms. Do I want to catch him? To save him? My mind repeats only one word—no! I want to scream to the ones in the towers—Don't jump! And then the black smoke catches my hair, enters my skin and fills my lungs, I can't breathe anymore, and I suddenly know that the only way to escape death is to die. The man on my screen is still in the air. He feels relieved; his last decision doesn't burden him anymore. This is the last time he sees the perfectly even firmament stretched over the city, falling away, all the way to the distant horizon.

I know the couple holding hands while falling. They are lovers, supposed to be married in twelve days, in a small chapel on the hill. They hold hands to remember the feeling that carried them through the days when life was rich, unfolding. To recapture the moment when their child, Ava was born a year before, and they both touched her skin covered in yellow substance, still warm from the womb. Vernix caseosa, said the man proudly, prepared for his first child to come into their lives.

I am still standing in front of my TV screen, unable to sit down. Am I paying my last respects to the people in the towers or am I stuck, scared to move, hoping I can hold on to the life I knew before?

She opened her eyes and looked up.

"Why?" Matthew lifted his eyebrows and smoothed his hair. "Do you remember who you are, professor White?" he repeated the question she liked to ask the most.

She felt tears filling up her skin, overflowing, drowning, suffocating, and dying. Dying again.

"I just wanted to change my life by helping others to change their lives, that's all." She wasn't sure what she was saying. Her words sounded strange to her. She didn't lie, but in the new reality her life suddenly didn't matter to her at all. Nothing mattered. Nothing could be saved because there was nothing to save anymore. The miraculous life she believed in ceased to exist. "Did it ever exist?" she asked herself.

"And you, Matthew, why are you here?" she asked in a high-pitched voice concealing her tears, hoping to pick up the pace and force Matthew to conform.

"Because it was supposed to be an easy credit and an A for my GPA," he said without flinching, lifting up his chest and smoothing his hair again. He liked to see her losing ground.

No one laughed, and this in itself was proof that everything had changed.

She ignored the sarcastic remark and started pacing the room, looking for someone who could carry her through the unknown terrain. Her body moved with great difficulty, cutting through a thick air, with weight pulling down, collapsing her inside.

"Melanie," she said, stopping in front of a girl with long raven black hair, "tell us why you are here."

"I don't know, I mean," Melanie shrugged her shoulders energetically. "I am from nursing. I just wanted to learn more about my patients, I guess, so I can be a better nurse." Melanie shrugged her shoulders again, her intense blue eyes peeping from below her long bangs. Her desk was empty for a change, usually it was filled with food; cookies, miniature sandwiches, crackers, chocolate milk and ginger ale.

"Good!" The praise came with forced excitement. It was the first time she was enthusiastic about an answer from Melanie.

Melanie smiled.

"Ina, why are you here?" she asked quickly, not to lose the momentum.

"Should I be dead instead? Like my son?" Ina answered defensively, her slim, perfectly erect body tensing like a string.

The atmosphere became heavy in an instant, and it was welcomed. Any answer was better than none, but the students didn't understand why she brought up her son, so they looked at each other confused, waiting. All they knew was that he died at a very young age. That's all Ina ever shared with the students, but she shared the truth with her teacher (her son was killed by a suicide bomber in Tel Aviv). Maybe death seeks death? Every death retains every other death? The sorrows, the emptiness, the farewells that never end come together in a place of constant remembrance.

Ina is Jewish; she and her husband, John, lived in Israel for several years and moved back to the States in March 2000 after their son, Josh, died.

Ina is the embodiment of loss. Her life carries the deepest rapture

of spirit. Even when she moves swiftly through her days, she remains in a space beyond time, in the moment that claimed her child and took him away from her.

"Najad why are you here? You are Palestinian, aren't you? You said you left Palestine forty years ago or something like that, after college?" James, the bearded hippie, asked almost happily. He was idealistic and ever searching for a change in the society, and was known for offering simplistic solutions. His question, that before the terrorist attacks would have been just a sign of curiosity, suddenly sounded offensive.

They all looked at Najad. Najad looked at them, one by one, reading their faces with affliction and then he lifted his hands the way he always did while talking, with straight fingers pressed together as if trying to catch something small in the air.

"I am here because I wanted to learn who is the person next to me." Najad said, looking at the floor. "Now, I am not sure if I want to know, and I don't think you can teach me that, Miss White," he said quietly, and, not waiting for any reaction, he left the classroom.

She looked at Najad walking out and saw the man in midair on the TV screen again. She wanted to reach, to extend her arms and embrace him. She wanted to scream, "No!" She wanted to stop him and say, "Stay, just stay with me, maybe something can be changed." She wanted to move back the time and close the rapture between Najad and herself, but he didn't pause, he didn't look back. Her body turned into solid rock that anchored her to the floor. For the last time she wanted to believe that something would be saved, but she couldn't.

Later that day, in retrospect, she held dear the memories of the day when her students presented their Intention Boards. She wanted to treasure every smile she remembered, every moment of excitement, every second of hope. There was silly Melanie with her yellow board with a picture of a diamond ring in the center. "I want my boyfriend to marry me and want him to give me a big diamond ring!" She laughed her big laugh, shrugging her shoulders. "And I want a house with a big backyard for my dogs." Melanie moved her hand from picture to picture explaining vigorously her intentions. And then there was James holding a green board in the shape of a circle above his head. "I want to save the planet," he said. "I want people to stop being greedy and I want them to become more aware of everyone else." Everything on his board either came in green naturally, like broccoli and grass,

or was colored green, like houses and cars. "We, as people, have to become green and we have to become family. No wars, no hatred, no stupid, sorry, unmindful consumption. Love, love is the answer." He spanned the circle in midair and caught it before he bowed." He is such a lovely big child! Najad's intention board had faces upon faces of children. Just faces, nothing else, mixed in a huge collage. "This is who we are right now, and this is what I want to change," he said. "Just look at this." He waved his hand in front of his board. "I don't have to tell you where the children live, you can guess it for yourself easily, and this is something that should be changed." It was a beautiful board, and he was right. "We should look at a face of a child and be able to ask: 'Where are you from, my child?' But we don't have to ask, because in today's world we can easily guess. You see the starving faces and the big empty eyes, and you can say, this child is from Darfur or Somalia or a refugee camp somewhere in the world. Africa comes to mind first." He was right. "Look at this child." He pointed his finger to a white boy with a big smile and braces on his teeth. "We see only his face, but we can all imagine his home or his day." All the students were impressed with Najad's vision. "I want to do something to help the children." This is what he said. Ina's board was empty. "My boards, imaginary boards were always full. I had so many years planned ahead. There were our trips to all the different countries I wanted to visit, places to live, books to read, people to meet, foods to taste. Now, after Josh is no longer in my life, I just live day after day. I don't want to plan anything anymore." Ina wasn't sad, she was just truthful. "Miss White, sorry to disappoint you, but I don't believe in intention boards. Maybe one day, but not now."

Before, she didn't understand Ina. She thought everyone had dreams of the future. Everyone wanted something, either to have or to happen or not to happen. But not now. Ina's empty board became the symbol of life. A blank page with no one ready to put the first mark down, because no one knew what it should be. Ina's blank intention board became her own.

Usually she was full of words, it seemed she knew them all. Words to console and words to inspire. Words to quiet the storm and words to bring the thunder. Words to heal and words to make it sick. She understood the power of words. She knew words created life. Throwing a word into the air was creating something anew. Sharing a word

with another was beginning a new life for all. But not now. All was suddenly changed and she didn't know the word that should come next. Life became mute from too much sound. It became still from too much movement. Life became empty from too much that it suddenly contained. Saying nothing was expressing the void that was formed violently, without a warning.

We tell our lives to ourselves and than we tell them to each other, and in this telling of life, in this sharing we try to understand who we are. Tell me who you are and help me see who I am. Tell me who you are to help me understand myself. Am I the Angel I have been constructing so carefully throughout all these years? Or am I the monster I can't vanquish? Tell me who you are. I want to know who I am.

The same day she called her division office and resigned.

"Why would you do that?" the head of the division office asked.

"Because I can't teach it anymore," she answered in a whisper.

"Why? What happened?"

"I don't believe in teaching the message anymore."

"Is it because of the attacks?"

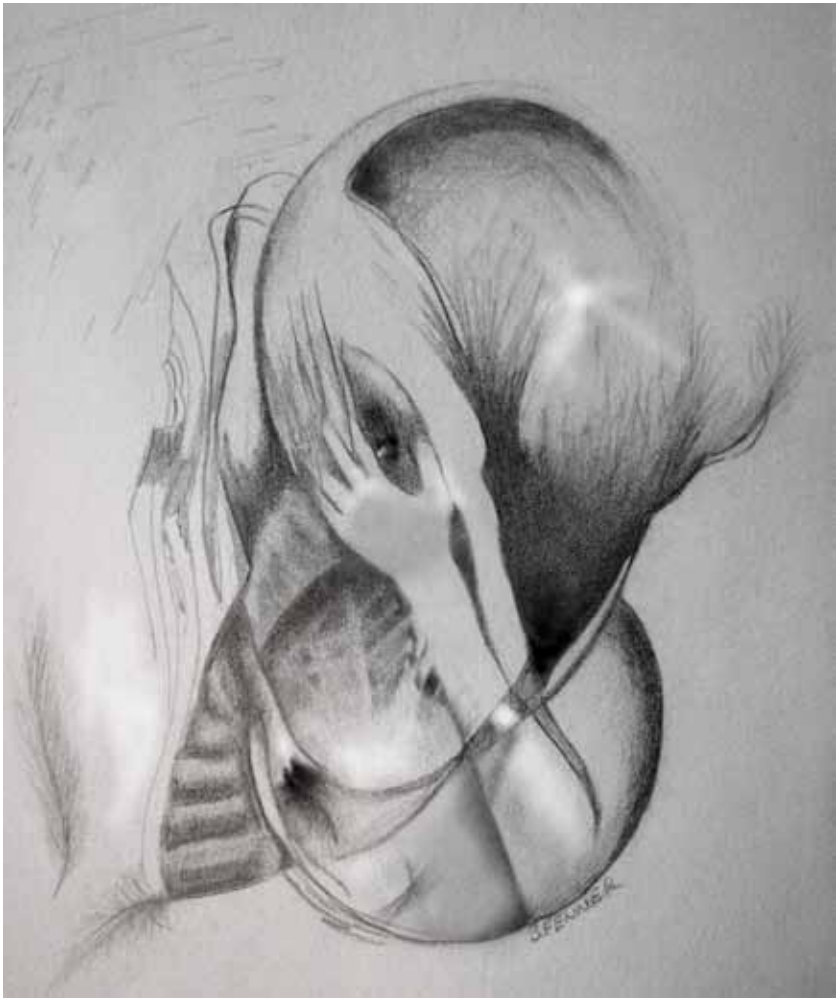
"Yes."

"I want you to call me before the spring session next year, and if you still feel the same we will take it off the schedule."

"Okay, I will," she said just to be done talking.

She thinks she will never come back.

# Gray Paper Grief



James Karantonis

# What I Learned in Creative Writing

*with Apologies Ode to my Professor**

A monometer consists of one foot
Fortunately that rarely occurs
But when we see
it
We have a hard time averting our eyes
As the word passes us by

There's verse that travels in a processional on an interstate for miles
and miles,
then turns sharply to a short street,
sometimes losing its way zigzagging through the city looking for an
escape,
then pulled over by the police,
the obsessive compulsive driver hits his head on the windshield and
screams,
"Nonmetrical verse is curse!"

I'm confused
Should a poem rhyme?
Take couplets
Try rhyming that.
Hat, cat, sat, mat, pat, bat, spat,
No, not that,
Couplets

Poetic rhythm:
You can love the words
But like a song
When it's wrong
You can't dance to it.

Come on, seven syllables
How/ long/ wind/ed/can/ you/ get?
Cut it to four
Why not three
Two works
You/son/of/a/sev/enth/son

There once were some folk from St. Ives;
Who broke out in a bad case of hives;
They scratched where they itched;
And had to be stitched
To their limericks for laughs to save lives

What do you know about poetry?
I know what I like.
Sonnets or Sestinas?
I know what I like.
Metaphors or Similes?
I know what I like.
Free Verse?
I know what I like.
Example please?
Roses are red.
Oh no, not violets are blue?
Fuck you.
So you like to rhyme?
I did this time … because I know what I like.

* *Thank you to Lee Hartman and his Creative Writing class.*

# Shifting Constellations

Will's wife, Myra, sat in front of him with her fork clenched in her hand. She moved it slowly to her mouth and let her teeth crunch the food little by little. "Have you ever felt like you were being watched?" Will did not immediately receive a reply.

"Sure, sometimes," she said nothing more. Will's eyes flitted back and forth from the clock, hoping that its constant ticking could fill the many moments of silence. Every dinner was like this since the day they moved into their house on Cherry Orchard Court. They had been content to live simple lives. Will went to work every day at the post office just two streets away. Myra would stay to tend to the house; some women in town worked, but she did not want to. She could not stand the sight of dust in her house.

"But that's really not important, is it?" said Myra.

Will had begun asking Myra questions, questions that became stranger as he thought harder about the small town in which they lived. Myra thought that questions were dangerous things that were unsuitable for her, as well as the neighbors, to hear and think about. She did not want to talk to Will, for her mind was heavy with her own thoughts and answers that she did not want to say for fear of them coming true.

"Curious things have occurred. Yesterday, a dog wouldn't stop barking outside. I don't know whose dog it is. I didn't think any of the neighbors had dogs."

"Anyway," Myra urged.

"Last night I looked outside to find this dog. I found something much stranger, something so majestic that I was in awe for some time. An array of stars illuminated our whole court and transformed it into a moonlit sea. I've never seen the sea but I've heard enough about it to know our yard looked like one. And that's not all."

Myra stood up and began clearing the dinner table. She checked the clock and turned on the water, quickly withdrawing her hands away from the steaming sink. For as long as Myra and Jim had lived in the Cherry Orchard Court, they had kept the water on cold. The hot water made Myra's skin burn and flake off like the paint on their railing.

"It's the neighbors, Richard and Kimberly. They had one, no, two

kids. No they only had one. Anyway they're gone, and I know they didn't move. Myra, I was outside and I know I saw one of their kids."

"Please don't do this to yourself."

"The kid disappeared right in front of my eyes!"

Will watched as she straightened her back and took a dish out of the strainer and began washing it again.

"I'm not crazy, Myra."

"And what happened next?"

While another clean dish was added to the strainer, and a twice cleaned one after that, he spoke softly, "I ran to their yard and, I know you won't like this, but I went into their house and began to search for them. They're gone. I've been thinking that their disappearance may be linked to the shifting objects in our house."

Myra clenched the dish in her hand while she let the water run. The water began to fill the sink, Myra's contorted face reflecting and sinking in the murky water. Will looked at Myra as he waited for another reply, another question or smart comment, but he received none. This of all the subjects Will brought to her night after night, was the worst for her to hear. Biting her lip, she promised herself that she would listen before she spoke back.

He was used to her silence, to her sunken eyes and her face pink from crying. Still he pressed her, "My watch was moved. I woke up this morning to find my watch moved from being closer to my clock to closer to the lamp. It happened before a moment had passed," he halted long enough to try to catch Myra's eye, but her back was still turned.

"Last week I saw the picture frame on our end table move just as my watch had. It shifted so slightly that I thought my eyes were playing tricks on me. I was reading, so I had my glasses on. What I saw was no mistake. The frame moved. And when I had looked up again from my book I saw that it had been replaced by another frame. It was another frame with the same picture."

Her hands still were blotched with soapy bubbles, Myra pushed open the kitchen door to the living room and brought back the frame. "This is the same frame we got from your mother for our anniversary."

"No it's not, Myra. It changed in slight variations but still it is a

different frame. They just don't want you to know."

Myra returned to the dishes.

"Would knowing why the furniture is supposedly being moved, or knowing where our neighbors went, really make any difference to you?" Myra turned around and held a plate firmly in her hands. The soapy water dripped slowly onto the floor as the plate was held in suspension. The Coo-Coo clock hanging on the kitchen wall suddenly awakened from its hourly slumber; it tweeted noisily to the hanging silence of the room. The doorbell rang and Will and Myra were reminded that Jim and his wife Susan were coming for cocktails.

Myra tossed the soapy dish into the sink and wiped her hands on her apron.

"Am I late?" asked Jim. Mr. Maddings, or Jim as he liked to be called, was a man of medium height who looked almost exactly like Will. They often joked that if one changed his hair color they could be mistaken for one another. Their wives laughed at this and begged them to remain themselves.

"Jim, where is your lovely wife this evening?" said Myra.

"Well, she's had a very long day taking care of the kids and everything. I called up to her but she didn't answer; I suppose she was taking a nap—you look good, Myra."

Will, putting his arm around her, said, "I think it's because of all the cleaning she does. She's always moving. She has the highest intolerance for dust."

"Then that's what I'd best do," said Myra. "Send my regards to Mrs. Maddings."

"Your usual?" Will asked, and poured Jim a scotch cocktail.

Will immediately began to ask Jim question upon question, to try to validate his claim that he was seeing not only objects, but people, disappear before his eyes. Jim was someone safe he could talk to, someone who could hold his secret.

"There are days when I wake up and look around, only to find that something isn't where I last placed it," began Jim. "It's like someone came into my bedroom, shifted my dresser to the right, and left without saying a word."

Will laughed but his eyes were replete with curiosity. "Are you certain? Sometimes I think I'm the only one who is seeing things move but not disappear, and people disappear without moving."

They were interrupted by Myra with a plate of cheese and crackers. With her back turned to Jim, she eyed her husband, who tried to avoid her. "Are you full now? Would you two like a snack, or have you had enough?" she asked.

Will looked at her, saddened. Ignoring the meaning in her words he thanked her and took some cheese and crackers. Jim continued talking with only himself to hear his words. Myra left and began to dust the portraits in the foyer adjacent to the living room. She hummed, sometimes louder and sometimes softer, while the men continued their discussion.

Jim noted Myra in the foyer and leaned closer to Will, "You're not the only one, Will. I also notice that things aren't as they should be. Just last week I was outside fixing the kid's swing set. There I was, just fixing and growing tired when I looked over to the neighbors' yard and saw Daisy walking in the front yard. Just walking. I wondered what she was doing."

"Daisy—such a nice lady. She's a good friend of Myra's," Will said.

"Some say they moved. But I know what I saw. Will, she vanished before my eyes."

Gripping her feather duster, Myra walked to the door and brushed the small curtain away from the window. Daisy Wilson lived across the street. Every Wednesday Myra baked cookies and brought them to Daisy's home. And last Wednesday Myra went to visit, cookies in hand, only to find that she was not home. She looked behind her to and found their absence credited to a "Sold" sign in the front yard. Being such a good friend with Daisy, she was surprised that they had made no effort to say goodbye. She had decided not to tell her husband. Because of the strange thoughts he shared with her, she had become worried that he was becoming odd in the head. And good things never came to those who were not right in the head.

Myra unlatched and unlocked the door, letting it open slowly. The door creaked open so loudly that she could not believe that the men had not noticed. The light spread across the foyer as rapidly as spilt water. Kneeling down, she put her hands through the light.

Never before had she seen so many stars in the sky. Constellations transformed the dull, five-house court into a moonlit sea. She could see behind their court into the greater world, and the mounds that rose in the distance like mountains. Her heart leapt, for fear or

for joy, to see a world she had never seen before, even during the day. But something heavy sank inside her when she looked across the court. Daisy's house looked forlorn and abandoned. The porch swing mournfully sang its creaking song as it rocked back and forth. Determined to see if Daisy was really gone, Myra ran across the court and walked straight to the front door. She found the door unlocked as usual. When she opened it, starlight filled the foyer and illuminated the inside. Her heart pounded within her chest as she let out shortening breaths. "Oh, Will," she whispered.

"Did you hear something?" asked Jim. "I thought I heard something. It's probably just Myra. Do you suppose that these objects moving mean something? Does it have to do with the disappearances?"

Will looked at the heavy curtains behind Jim's back. He was quiet, as if listening to the thoughts calculating in his head, in which nothing added up. Even Jim's questions boggled his mind so that nothing he thought could be clear anymore.

"In this game, it seems like the pieces are always moved before the people disappear. What can we do to stop this? I want Myra to know what's happening. It's hurting her more and more. Where did she go, anyway?"

Will called her name, but there was only an empty house to answer his voice.

And in an abandoned house Myra stood. Behind every dark corner was a shelf, a book, or a picture looking upon the lone and tall woman in the foyer. They looked at her, eyeing her from their lofty shelves. They waited for her to move, for her to dare to take one step closer to the dark reaches of the empty house. Upstairs Daisy's rocking chair creaked back and forth, back and forth, pushed by the wind through the open window. She stretched out her quivering arm to the wall, madly hitting it in search of the light switch. The darkness fled. A gust of wind flew through the open windows and slammed the front door shut.

Daisy and her family had not bothered to take their belongings before they left town, just as they had not even bothered to say goodbye. Toys scattered the floor and the newspaper pages fluttered on the kitchen table. When she looked around her, things were not only moved slightly, but replaced. The blue kitchen, with the matching china, was replaced by a bubblegum pink refrigerator, sink, counters,

toaster, and china. "Someone wants us to become crazy," she thought. And she could think no more, such was the terror that beat her heart in heavy repeated strokes.

Myra began to walk deeper into the house. Ashamed that she had turned on the lights, she immediately turned off the switch. The door was shut; the only light came from the few windows that had been left open. She stepped forward, ready to walk into a place she did not know, until she heard a sound that she could not deny as the creak the door made when it opened. She froze, holding her breath. About to turn, she was stunned to find two arms wrapped around her stomach and pulling her into the open air.

Held up by Will, Myra stood shivering and crying. She shook terribly while Jim stood by and watched on, not knowing if Myra had found out what he and Will were searching for. Will, without saying a word, led her back to the house and sat with her and Jim on the sofa.

"What happened in that house, Myra?" Will asked as he steadied her shaking hands in his.

Her face was empty of color, and it seemed to have grown older in the last fifteen minutes. She was strangely calm and talked peacefully, though her body trembled. She avoided Will's eyes, though he tried to penetrate her stolid face. They sat saying nothing while Jim tapped his shoe on the thin blue carpet to the beat of the clock.

"It would be good if I got some rest," she said, looking beyond Will's steady eye. She placed Will's hands off of her hers and walked upstairs, looking ahead into a nothing that only she could see.

Jim turned to Will as Myra closed the bedroom door behind her.

"What happened?"

"She was listening, all this time," said Will.

"But what happened?" asked Jim, as he played nervously with his watch. "I know Mr. Wilson would never admit anything strange happening in his home. I suppose it got to him and he had to leave. Funny—he would rather leave the court than talk to us about what was going on. Alright, Will, take care. I'll send over my wife tomorrow morning to see how Myra's doing." Jim gripped Will's shoulders and then left. Will heard the echo of Jim's leather shoes in the court till all the stars had sunk into the darkness, and all had become night.

With heavy footsteps Will went upstairs to the bedroom, and found his wife lying as calmly as the dolls he had seen Jim's kids put

to sleep. He proceeded to sit on a chair and stared out into the court, where he heard barking but did not see a dog. He was afraid to go to sleep because he knew every moment his eyes were closed something dear to him could not only be moved, but be taken away into forever, to a place where he did not know and could never find.

Myra woke with the early morning light in her eyes. She gently kicked off the covers and let her feet touch the soft carpet. When she saw Will's wristwatch lying on the nightstand, memories of the night prior flooded her brain, and her eyes began a frantic search for Will.

"Where are you, Will?" Her voice lingered in the air, unanswered, though she called more than once. His wristwatch was left in its usual place on the nightstand. Picking it up, she gripped it in her clenched hand and immediately began to search the house. Will was not in the house, and he was not in the court. He would not be at work since it was a Sunday morning, and all the shops were closed in town. Will's shoes were put as neatly by the front door as they had been every day for the past five years of their marriage.

Frantic, she pushed the kitchen door open. It slammed into a large wooden radio that yelled out cheerfully:

"Good morning! It's 8:30 a.m., Sunday, May 17th, a warm 75 degree day."

Her foot in the kitchen, Myra stepped forward and jolted back when the voice croaked from the speakers. The radio did not belong in the kitchen. But there it stood, right next to the tall lamp that was usually in Will's study. She pulled the kitchen door towards her and looked into the living room. There were silverware and plates lying neatly on the floor. Being too fearful to scream or cry, she navigated around the misplaced objects and grabbed the telephone.

"Jim, please be awake," she breathed heavily as she clenched the phone.

A great yawn greeted her on the other end.

"Is Will with you?" said Myra.

"It's a Sunday morning . . . are you alright, Myra?"

"His shoes are here. I thought I had dreamt last night … but now my husband isn't here, Jim. Where did Daisy go? Why did they leave, and who moved their furniture?"

"Don't do anything. I'll look for him."

The phone began to slip within her sweating palms, but she caught

it before it fell. A dial tone vibrated through the receiver.

Tossing it to floor, she ran to the door and peeked out of the small window. The mystery of last night clung heavily to her. As much as she desired to open the door and run searching for Will, all her hand could do was grip the doorknob. Jim stood in front of the window, and brought his clenched hand down when he saw Myra. Still in horror, she would not open the door but stood looking at Jim's blurred face in the window.

"Myra? Let me in," he said.

All she could do was stand at the door, trying not to faint.

"If you're not going to let me in, I just wanted to tell you that I don't think we can get Will back." Jim's voice continued, but she could not hear. Everything was hazy and dark before her eyes. She sat down on the floor and put her arms around her knees, listening to her voice reassuring herself that Will was not gone. The wristwatch, still tightly wound in her hand, ticked loudly. Myra looked through the window and saw Jim walk back towards his house. She did not know that eyes other than hers were upon him as brightly as the stars that shone in the night sky.

Every detail of the neighborhood was made to match. Every court, tree, shop, and lamppost was perfectly constructed and simulated to match his small town. Everything except the stars. For years the craftsman wondered why his little town never come to life, why they were just mindless dolls. When he began to heat the village and blow air into it, his creatures began to move about with some purpose. Still, they were imperfect, a touch of genius, but not quite finished. He did not know that what he had forgotten was above him all the time, little glimmering lights that lit the world at night, and were outshone during the day. Day and night he crafted bulbs small but bright enough to light the entire town. One night he noted that one of the bulbs had broken, and no one in the town seemed particularly lively or thoughtful. But when they were all fixed, the town became alive; the little dolls thought and acted on their own accord. He made this old barn alive yet dead, awake but still sleeping.

His one problem was Cherry Orchard Court. They were his first creation; he liked their streetlights in particular. They were still stuck in the fifties because that was when he made them. These people seemed to have peculiar thoughts, and when they looked up, he thought they

could see him. So he decided that they needed an update. He began to move around their furniture and replace it with more advanced items. He was particularly enthusiastic to find a woman's delight in seeing an electric vacuum cleaner. When the people began to get an idea of where and who they were, he simply took them away. But sometimes there was a special case, he thought. Sometimes he would make exceptions.

Myra felt something push her back. She woke up, and opened the door. The door opened to reveal a man in a suit, indistinguishable against the declining sun behind his back. Myra, who had fallen asleep on the floor as she waited for Will, could not see clearly. All she could discern was a hunched figure, who looked to Myra as someone familiar, but changed. She smiled a weary smile as he clasped her hands and pulled her up from the floor. "You left your watch, Will," she told him.

## The Brick Path

The red ways of learning,
Instructions are thrown like bricks.
They hurt when they land,
They shatter the windows of hope.

From birth it is predestined
That I shall lead a life of valor,
That I shall lead a life of honor.
The path for me has been marked
By the ones who have birthed me.
Confined to the path means my success,
Like some obligation.

But as the days pass, I grow less,
For my restless ways itch to move.
Yearn for a different path,
Long for an unmarked way.

Freedom to stray is the freedom to choose.
Turn your back on those that refrain you.
The pastures may not be greener,
But wouldn't you like to find out
For yourself?
What is there to lose?

# Green Bottle

## Squalor

I have known the subtle beauty of squalor,
scattered carefully in crowded rooms;
all the ironic emptiness of a city street
at night: the trashcan overflowing with
the loneliness of empty bottles,
a windowsill decorated by wilted flowers
in a long, dry vase whose decaying
scent overpowers a daunted face.
And I have seen the films of debris
that cover our floors and our walls
and wondered at careless arms that placed them,
perhaps splashed with red guilt or green lies;
wondered at the faded color of the clutter of our lives.

# Kathmandu in Monsoon

June, 2006

I would think the Gods would tire of their thunder dances and rain songs; I would think dark, pregnant clouds would dump their last drizzle into the valley cradled by rugged mountains. But the rain comes down in drops of one, two, then a whole series of showers for hours, days, and even weeks. I doze off to the sound of pitter patter on tin roofs and on swishing corn stalks, and wake up to the sound of gushing gutters and dripping eaves. Doves coo to one another, bobbing their heads and blinking their red-rimmed eyes at the faint streak of dawn that cuts through thick blankets of clouds.

The air feels moist; the bed is damp. Yet humidity drapes over me like a shower curtain, impenetrable, impervious to the random breeze that rustles through the bougainvillea on the windowpane. The air is stagnant. How can anyone exist in this humidity? From the kitchen I can hear spices sizzling in hot oil. A soft voice sings a morning hymn merging with sounds of cooking. A child's voice joins in the hymn. It is ten o'clock; a lunch of rice, lentil soup, and chicken curry smothered in garlic, ginger, cilantro, cumin and red chili peppers is being prepared. I've overslept. It is only my second week in Kathmandu; jetlag takes a long time to get over is my excuse. But today is different; today I have resolved to cross the threshold into shuttered memories—something I have avoided for ten years.

I step into the veranda—smells of wet fur, moldy bricks, damp clothes, and jasmine flowers waft through the damp air. *Bhote,* the massive Tibetan mastiff, lies in deep slumber—his thick, black fur in uncombed clumps. The walls of the porch are crisscrossed with nylon ropes upon which hang freshly washed, wet clothes. They drip on the prostrate dog.

Down the garden path onto half submerged flagstones I step, trying not to get my feet wet. White gardenia flowers dump their small pools of fragrant water onto my toes as I pass their bobbing heads on either side of the path. I step on an unsuspecting slug that leaves a sparkling trail across my path. Yuck!

I pass a *Shiva* Temple beyond the garden gate, past the sandy trail. Its pagodas glow golden against the weak sun barely breaking through the clouds. Moisture drips from carved wood and fornicating bronze

statues guarding the entrance to the temple. The *Shiva Linga,* a phallic symbol of Hindu Godhead, stands within the inner sanctuary of the shrine. Devotees have revered the stone with offerings of fresh flowers, fruit, uncooked rice and vermilion powder. They have offered their morning prayers full of unrequited desires and devotions to the *Linga.* Lighted oil lamps twinkle in the dark interior. Nearby, an old goat and a shaggy ram munch contentedly on flowers and rice strewn upon the idol. They are the unofficial tasters for the Gods as they graze.

Walking past the temple, I see the unpaved side road I've avoided for the past ten years. A house exists at the end of that road, a house whose existence I've ignored with little success. Clumps of weed grow on the dirt path which ends at an iron gate. The one-story, white house looks the same as it used to—showcased by a green yard and surrounded by a low brick wall.

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November, 1994

Bruised petals stained my fingers as I threaded vibrant blossoms into long garlands—two for the front and back doors and four shorter ones for the windows of my house. I sat with legs crossed. Bright orange and yellow marigold blooms filled the crescent shape of my lap. My three-month-old baby slept nearby on a hand quilted, cotton cushion. She was torpid—full of breast milk and warmed by the morning sun. I sat on the verandah of the rented bungalow, surrounded by a garden of *sayapatri*, marigold—flowers with a hundred petals. Pungent perfume from those fiery blooms lingered everywhere—on fingers, on the pale blue dress I wore, and on the handle of my tea cup.

It was *Tihar*, festival of lights. The celebration was for the Goddess *Laxmi*, deity of good fortune. She would visit those who worshipped her, and shower them with good fortune. When *Laxmi* visited, she brought prosperity for the homeowner. My neighbors had an early start—they'd already strung marigold on their door frames. They were ready for the evening festivities to start. I was running behind while I hummed and talked to the baby every time she cried for attention, fed the two dogs that lay in the warm October sun, mopped the concrete floor in every room, and swept the yard, picking up dog poop as I

walked along.

In another time, another life, I lived in that house with my husband and baby. At twenty five, already married for seven years, my life spread before me like a well designed quilt, patch-worked by dreams of becoming a renowned artist, a successful economist, a world traveler, and a fabulous storyteller. A quilt that included my husband's dreams of owning a booming business, a comfortable home without mortgage payments, and a lifestyle that allowed hours spent strumming the guitar, listening to music, and reading James Michener. A quilt that encompassed a multilingual education (I was obsessed with learning French then) and loving guidance for my baby.

At dusk the sky was clean, wiped clear of all monsoon clouds. It was a new moon. But in the pitch darkness, my house shimmered with many tiny oil lamps lined outside the door, on window sills, on the brick wall, and on either side of the brick-paved driveway going up to the front door.

The baby grabbed onto my shirt as I placed her on my left hip; she was small—she had been born at thirty-five weeks. I went from lamp to lamp with a burning candle, lighting each wick with care. Inside, I switched on the fluorescent lamps in each room. I had not cooked dinner because we were invited to my parents' home.

A thin thread of smoke uncurled from burning incense offered at the altar of Goddess *Laxmi.* I had adorned a small picture of the Goddess with more flowers and vermilion powder. An unlit oil lamp stood at the foot of the frame. In the picture, *Laxmi* was dressed in a red and gold silk saree. Her smile was one of benevolence as she stretched a hand, showering her devotees with gold coins while she blessed them with the other. The alter was ready for worship. When my husband came from work, he would light the lamp and offer prayers for a prosperous year and good health. The ritual would be simple.

It was seven o'clock, and I changed into a lavender *kurtha*; the loose outfit was perfect for my postpartum body. My baby gurgled in contentment while the dogs chomped down their rice and meat gruel. He would be home soon.

An hour later, I glanced at the wall clock because I felt hunger pangs. Breastfeeding and an empty stomach made me irritable. I felt annoyed that he was late. Perhaps he went to visit his friends. Or

perhaps he went to visit his parents. I didn't have a phone because we had just moved into this house, so I kept guessing. The guesswork chipped away at my joyful mood. I blamed it on postpartum depression.

I went up to the terrace and looked into the night. The neighbors' houses glittered in the dark. There was laughter and loud music coming from those homes. The smell of marigold was strong in the air. Groups of children went from door to door singing *Tihar* songs, asking for money and sweets—like Christmas caroling. Fireworks exploded into a million tiny lights as people in Kathmandu celebrated the coming of *Laxmi*. Time seemed immeasurable in the dark. The dogs pressed against me for comfort and whimpered at every crack of firework. I scratched the smaller one under his ear, trying to soothe him while the big one lay at my feet with his nose tucked between his paws. Eventually I took them downstairs, away from the noise, and made myself a cup of tea. The Darjeeling brew was strong and sweet with more sugar than usual. The scalding liquid warmed up my belly, and for a moment I felt comforted.

Back on the terrace, I watched fireflies as they competed with oil lamps. The sky looked as if someone had carelessly poured silver glitter into the deep navy celestial bowl. A cold breeze blew as the night turned cool. I shivered. One by one, the oil lamps burned out in my yard. Neighboring houses turned quiet as people settled in for the night. In the distance, the last of the fireworks petered away. Dogs barked in the distance. My hunger was replaced by a knot in my stomach as the baby stirred under my black *pashmina* shawl. She screamed—she hadn't been fed in a long while. I'd lost track of time.

I struggled to feed the baby but she was inconsolable. I glanced at the clock again. It was one o'clock in the morning. I walked up to the clock to verify. My husband had not come home.

The knock on the solid oak door was loud and urgent. I ran to open it. My father stood outside, his face grim, the lines on his face prominent, the grey on his hair whiter than usual.

"Your husband was in an accident!" he said. "His car ran over a woman … she was drunk … she is dead."

The inky blackness of the night suddenly enveloped me, the chill creeping up my spine. The marigold scent rendered me nauseous. My first thought was of him lying dead. I dared not ask…

"Where is he now?"

My father's silence made me want to shake him. His eyes looked away.

"Karu … Karu … look, things will be fine."

I wanted to scream, "Just tell me … where is he?"

"In jail." He replied. "A mob formed around his car … people were drunk and wanted to beat him to death. So police came and took him away … for his own safety, they said. He called me from prison … it will take a week to sort things out … government offices are closed for the next five days. I came to take you and the baby home."

I stood staring at my father. I couldn't cry and the baby wouldn't stop crying. "He killed a woman!" "He is in jail!" was all I could remember of that moment. My knees gave in, and I lurched onto the concrete floor. I remember my father's shaking hands steadying me as I whispered "No! ... no! ... no!"

I didn't want to go to my father's house because I believed he would come home that night, as I believed *Laxmi* would. They both didn't. Not for a long time. Not until it was too late.

The next day, at my father's house, I prepared a meal of flat bread, mutton curry and fried potatoes and packed it into a three-tiered stainless steel, multi-layered lunch box. They said Kathmandu jails did not provide edible meals. My father drove me to the old jail in the middle of Kathmandu city. The sun was warm but I pulled my *pashmina* shawl tightly around my shoulders. The smell of firecrackers from the night before hung in the dusty air.

Inside, I passed tiny, grime-caked cells that held disheveled-looking inmates. I followed the warden down the corridor. It was dark or was it poorly lit—I don't remember. I blinked to adjust my eyes to the darkness. A rancid stench of urine and sweat assaulted my senses. The cells looked like animal cages. Green mold grew on grimy walls and the floor was made of concrete broken in places.

"Hey whore, wanna fuck?" yelled a man with his face pressed between the bars. Another man shot out his hand to grab me. My father raced up from behind to shield me. Clutching the food to my chest, I walked on looking at my feet. I felt shame and fear.

I came to his cell where he was crouched on the floor with his head on his hands.

"Baboo, dear one …" my father whispered to him because I

couldn't. Tears dripped down my face and bile rushed up to my mouth.

He recognized his visitors only after a second call. Slowly, he uncurled his body, straightened up, and with hands clenched at his sides, walked up to the bars. The iron bars look old with flecks of rust on them.

"Hey, I wanna screw your wife!" someone yelled across the room.

My husband struck the metal with his hand, his face an unrecognizable mask of pain and fury. I handed him his freshly cooked meal.

"I'm sorry…I'm so sorry," he whispered with his eyes shut tight.

"Don't ever come back here again. Promise me you won't," he said and walked back to the corner, refusing any further contact. I never visited him again.

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When he did come home on bail a week later, he didn't exist—he was a zombie, an automaton. The crash, the woman's death and his own imprisonment seemed to have sucked out his life force. He didn't talk to me. Didn't hold the baby. Didn't eat. Didn't sleep. Didn't pick up his guitar. Didn't listen to music or read Michener. He couldn't. I talked to him, cajoled him, coaxed him, screamed and even railed at him to please come to his senses, to please resume life as before, to please forget it ever happened. I wanted to forget it ever happened.

Long after he was released from jail, long after he was acquitted for involuntary manslaughter, long after the case was closed, he packed up his bags, put the dogs in the car and drove off without looking back. He said, "to leave a life of guilt behind." Our marriage didn't survive the night when *Laxmi* didn't come to my home.

I left the country to pick up the pieces of my own life—to go back to school in America, to pursue a degree in teaching, to get a self sustaining job, to bring up my little one far away from the memories of that night, to start over again.

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June, 2006

I squeeze my eyes shut. I am surprised by sudden tears. Ten years later I still smell the marigold in the air. I still feel the angst of waiting. I still don't celebrate *Tihar*. It took that long for me to walk down that dirt path to the iron-gate. I seldom come home to Kathmandu because home for me is elsewhere.

With a deep sigh I turn back. A light drizzle has started. I step into a mud puddle with my old *BATA* flip-flops made of rubber and plastic. Slimy, putrid dirt seeps into the crannies between my toes. And as the ground moves, I shift my weight forward, fighting with the suction of the slush while the flip-flop resists. I step over rivulets, meandering around *WaiWai* noodle wraps, bits of straw and plastic flotsam. I look for a flat piece of stone to step on, anything to salvage my frayed denim hems from the muddy ground. And as I curl up my nose in disgust and look into the sky, another pail of rain showers down on my face, neck, t-shirt, and disappears into the weaves and folds of fabric and skin. With a final heave, I yank my foot out of the mud, leaving a broken thong in the grips of the slush. Shivering and cursing aloud, I wonder why in the world do I return to Kathmandu in the Monsoon season. I wonder why I return at all. Just as I bend over to salvage the mangled footwear, an auto-rickshaw, a rickety old three-wheeled contraption, rumbles by, splashing my rear end with muck. I straighten up to shake a fist at the auto driver but pause in mid-motion, and just for a moment, I forget the insolent driver, the decaying carcass of the dog lying upstream, bloated and ignored, even the house at the end of the dirt-road. Just for a few seconds, I inhale the strong aroma of corn roasting on open grates seeping into my nostrils from yonder. I know there is more to Kathmandu than the night of *Tihar,* much more than my broken marriage.

The monsoon conjures images of an open grill, and burning coal reminds me of all that is familiar, of that sweet voice singing in the kitchen, of my mother preparing my meals, of my father taking me for long drives, and simply, of my childhood—now a part of my daughter's childhood. And I know why I return.

# Cherry Blossoms

## Possessions and Positions

Ivan Ilych died a tragic death
because he lived a life of the meaningless.
He got caught up in power, privilege, and prosperity
and lived for all the wrong reasons.

An American is an overworked animal,
trading in vacation time for overtime.
Herded through a spending game
of infinitely more, more, more.
Don't let an office become your existence.

The happiest people
have the strongest relationships
with family, friends, and the people around them.

If you could, what would you do?
Get to work writing that novel;
finally begin building that cabin;
or just take a walk with someone you care for?
It is more important how you spend your time
than your money.

# Paper Clip

three curves of twisted metal
one twist closer to breaking

metal fatigue destroys that which
binds us. the faint shine distorts

to cracked black, sharp to the
touch but warm to feel, symbol

of resistance dismantled.

# When the Wind Blows

July 20th was the day they cut down the triple-trunker. The fat lady across the street saw most of it. Well, the 20th wasn't actually the first or last day of cutting—and the fat lady had known it was coming—knew the trimmers were coming at least. The owner of the tree had warned her weeks ago. Later, when she tried to tell her husband the news, turned out that she hadn't heard the name of the tree service exactly, and she couldn't remember the date. But when they came on the 20th, the company name—Red Robbins—was painted right on the truck. No picture of a bird or anything—just the name lettered kind of small in red. The fat lady thought that name was funny, but it turned out to be the name of the boss too—at least the "Red" part. She never actually heard anyone say his last name, but he looked like a bird—a rooster maybe—skinny, with red feathery hair—and cocky. He hopped all around—in the tree, on the neighbors' roof—even on the ground.

They came around 7:00 a.m. The fat lady's husband said that was the standard time. By nine o'clock, she knew all their names. She knew Red before she even knew the name of the truck. The day before, when she didn't know his name yet, she watched him climb up the tree just to check things out and cut a few small branches. Then on the 20th, she heard his name before she was even out of bed. All the other men ended every shout with it: "Watch your right foot, Red." "Car commin, Red." And Red called them all by name too: Anthony, Sonny and Big Boy. First she mistook Big Boy for the large black man who was always laughing. Turned out, though, that Big Boy was the skinny white teenager with a designer shirt. The fat lady thought it was funny that Big Boy was smallest and youngest. Not as funny as the name Red Robbins, though.

She decided to watch the tree cutting show in bed with a cup of coffee. Her husband brought her up some toast and cheese on a tray. She hadn't planned on eating that kind of a breakfast because she planned on a diet milkshake instead—which she did end up eating—with the toast, but not the cheese. Turns out she couldn't see the tree stuff from bed, so she watched from the bedroom window in her sleeping clothes, a tee shirt over panties. She listened carefully—with her coffee hand propped on the sill of the open window—except

for the trips she made into the bathroom to report the action to her husband who was getting ready for work. "This is the way you should report the news," she said. "Use this as a model." The fat lady was always trying to get her husband to come home from work with something important to say.

Red had a lot to say. He didn't like how Big Boy was controlling traffic. "You gotta stop them cars!" he shouted—way from the treetop, through the leaves—almost in the fat lady's ear being that her window was a second story. "I don't care if you gotta get out there with a rake—you stop them cars!" "You gotta learn!" The fat lady wondered if she could stop cars better than Big Boy. Her husband told her she could stop cars real good dressed like that.

Sometimes Red looked more like a cat than a bird. The fat lady thought he might look like a puma—stretched out on the branches that were bare already—and then disappearing back into the leaves. Or maybe he was more like a leopard. Her husband had a magazine article about leopards in Africa—the way they were everywhere—though almost invisible. Turns out leopards were not becoming extinct.

Then right when she thought she heard the leaves murmur a profanity, she saw Red Robbins' hard hat fall to the ground—maybe eighty feet. She wasn't good with measurements. The crew just sent it back to him on one of his ropes. The fat lady didn't know about that—didn't know if it was safe. She recently heard her husband telling someone that motorcycle helmets crumpled on the inside during an accident. Afterwards, they felt just like rubber. Red Robbins seemed more like wire than rubber, and he had a lot of ropes. Her husband just missed seeing him—Red Robbins—slide straight down one. He—her husband—came into the bedroom just after Red swung down like Tarzan. It wasn't something you could explain afterwards. Anyway, she thought it might be a relief when he—her husband—left for work because he said that the whole thing was sad. The fat lady herself liked most kinds of hubbubs, and her husband had said this classified as one.

The hubbub included lowering limbs the size of trees themselves—lowering them maybe more than eighty feet—she wasn't sure. Red Robbins would holler "180"—or some number—and Sonny, the big black man with a bandanna headband, would haul real hard

on one of the ropes—not Red's sliding rope—the other one. And that limb would come down like "slo mo" on television. Falling down like a baby in a cradle. It was all so gentle looking that it reminded the fat lady of a kind of dance. And when anything fell on the roof, Red Robbins would pirouette right up a ladder—well it looked like leaping—and use a leaf blower with no trouble. Then, he looked just like a housewife with a vacuum—except for blowing instead of sucking.

Big Boy got better with the traffic, but Red still did plenty of yelling. He always knew just what to do—was always thinking. Even though he was up in a tree with a power saw, he was the one who had to remember how much wood to save out for the owners' firewood. "How many wheelbarrows full do we have round back?" he would holler. "One," answered Tony, who also had a bandanna headband but looked more Italian than black. "Well we need two more ..." Or Red would say ... "How many logs you cut?" "Thirty" Tony would answer. "Well we need thirty more ..." Tony was also the one with the wristwatch. "What time is it Tony?" "Nine thirty, Red." "What time is it now, Tony?" "Nine thirty-five, Red." The fat lady liked the way the trimmers called each other by name.

Later, though, it did get kind of sad. Red Robbins left the rest of the crew feeding tree limbs—leaves and all—into that machine that makes the sick little chipping/chirping noise when everything gets shredded. The fat lady was on her sun porch in a tee shirt and jeans eating a hotdog salad—something she invented from a leftover restaurant salad in a styrofoam box and a leftover hotdog from the 4th of July. The fat lady's husband had cooked it—the hot dog—on the grill, but it turned out to be extra, and the fat lady saved it in the freezer for the right moment to recook in the microwave.

Meantime, Big Boy was sitting on the fat lady's lawn in the shade—which she didn't mind—and blowing smoke from a cigarette right through the open window—which she did mind. The fat lady saw the smoke landing all over her hot dog salad. She wondered if it was dangerous—not the smoke—but the possibility of something going wrong with the trimming. She imagined the whole tree smashing across the street right into the sun porch on top of her salad. First it would fall in slow motion—like Sonny's logs—then kind of hover before it crashed—wham!

Just then, Red Robbins came back in a new truck that had a big double-toothed shovel on a cherry picker thing that the fat lady thought looked like the "jaws of death." One third of the tree was on the ground and two thirds without any limbs or leaves was still sticking straight up in the air like a huge bare baby bird. Red used the jaws of death to pick up the limbs on the ground that were too big for the shredder. He hopped down from the control seat into the truck bed where Big Boy was throwing small stuff right in the way of Red's jaws. "You gotta learn," he shouted past the roar of the truck and shredder.

Then, when Tony told Red it was two o'clock, they drove everything away. The fat lady wondered if that was also "standard time." Big Boy shuffled to his white pick-up truck and grabbed a soda. Tony and Sonny hobbled over to the truck that was pulling the shredder. Even though the ground crew was barely walking, Red Robbins was almost flying all the way down the block to where he had parked the jaws of death. "You guys sure look stiff" was the very last thing the fat lady heard him yell before she noticed the breeze—a sudden gust which was blowing leaves of the trees all around the bare stump which just stood there not moving. It was still maybe one hundred feet high or more—she wasn't certain. The absence of truck noise left a little sighing in the leaves. The fat lady imagined her husband saying that the trees were crying. Well maybe not crying, but maybe they were talking. What were the trees thinking?

When she squinted real hard, she could see a kind of a haze looming all over the bare bird tree. The fat lady remembered something from a book she once read. She wondered if the haze that she almost saw now could be a group soul—whatever that was. The book said that animals and plants had one. That was why a whole flock of birds could turn at the same moment and move like one animal. Maybe these neighborhood trees had a group soul that mourned together. But maybe the survivors were just crying in relief. Maybe the squinty shimmer wasn't a tree soul, but a character from another book she remembered—a kid's book with a "lorax" who spoke for the trees... Turns out that character thought that trees could become extinct. Well, maybe the loraxy haze was like God even! Most of all, the fat lady didn't know about that. She hoped maybe her husband could tell her when he got home.

# Craftshop, An Icarus Sketch

To make feathers, Icarus
Takes the glass of accident—

car windows, what the fly ball
made of an upstairs room,
a brandy snifter, mirrors,
that aging skylight, some
crystal wedding gifts

—etches all the words
His breath has lifted
Into a frost. On every facet,
In each shallow of design,
Light rests, telling stories.

It is a frost any morning
Could melt. The hieroglyphs,
Over each and every feather,
Already singing this to the wind.

# Pandora Speaks to Dickinson

It is not the thing with feathers
though it grows wings and flies—
this ill that is last to crawl
from the jar and crest the rim.

Into the brain matter it climbs
and there makes its chrysalis
and stirs with wings of black lace
that flutter and sing in the dark

and flies toward the warm glow
of a lone lighted wick that is blue
at the base and kindly numbs
when it kills with hot wax.

# Mr. Wilkes

I missed the bus that day. I ran right into its big old diesel cloud and chased it for half a block, but that can on wheels was just having fun with me that morning. So I stood there in the street huffing, my hands on my knees, blowing the smoke right back at the old bus. When I stand up, the whole city gone reeling—I not so young even back then—fifty something at least and I always been strong but not in my lungs, you know? Been living in the city for too long. Air ain't been in your lungs for since you a kid. And that's if you're lucky.

Me, I lucky when I a kid. My grandmother got a house just outside the city. She got a yard with a fence and flowers all around. One summer, my sisters go out with old rusty shears and a bunch mason jars and they cut every rose out the yard that summer day. And my grandmother holler and smack they hands and they backsides and she put them shears top the icebox. But I see her in the kitchen later and she looking at each those flowers and she smiling 'cause they all perfect, each a one. And that night we all have a big old bowl roses next our beds. And little cup them sitting on back the toilet. I young and I not caring too much about flowers one way the other, but I laugh when I see those roses on the toilet. I thinking they smell so nice but they gonna have all they petals fall off if my big brother come in here next day. And then I stop laughing 'cause they look so pretty.

When I older, I working outside the city doing odd jobs in the big old houses some people got. I fixing they gutters hanging off, and they sinks from dripping and I go into this lady's powder room in they downstairs and the lady got the same roses in a little teacup, just like my grandmother, sitting top they toilet. And I just stare at them for long time before I even go into the room. When I got inside I leant down to take a breath of those roses and I see they just made of cloth, real pretty painted, but they don't smell nothing. And I open the cabinet under the sink to get at those pipes and there a little can of spray under there. It got flowers all over the whole length of it and I give the button a squeeze. It spray out with a little whoosh and I smell my grandmother's house the night with roses all over in they bowls. And I sit down on that lady's pretty floor, and I laugh. It a good thing she gone out to talk with her neighbor over the fence she got, 'cause she heard me laughing on the floor near her toilet, she'd've got me out

for sure, thinking I gone in my head.

Oh man. So I in the middle of the street thinking how sick the bus coughing all over me making me feel, and I thinking how I got myself late and how the boss ain't gonna give me another chance 'cause he got to get rid of some people anyhow seeing how the season is almost over and it slowing down early that year. And I know, standing there in the middle the street, I ain't got no job no more.

I see another bus coming, going the opposite way out the city. And I think, I gonna go see my grandmother's house. So I move to the side and let the bus come past me to the stop and I get the smoke on me again and I feel it going down my throat and of a sudden it be the nastiest thing I ever had inside my body. And I think, there no way in all God's green earth that I getting on that thing. So I just start to walk.

It be one those days when you see the heat in the air, like little waves in the harbor. Nasty hot and fulla wet. I not thinking much, just looking around, watching people go about, just walking. Actually, I trying not to think about my Ruth at home. She be mad when I get back, but maybe not so much 'cause she know I getting let go soon. Got a couple things lined up for the next month, but she still be looking at me sideways.

So I trying not to think about her and as I go past the university, I see some little VW Bug some those kids got all painted up like a rainbow and they got one those cloth roses attached to the antenna. That make me think about my grandmother again.

She had six kids and my momma's one of them. My grandfather die crossing the street down the city but not before he bought them a nice little house outside the city where my grandmother can have a garden and all. Got hit by a bus, he did, down the city. Maybe has something to do with why I can't stand those damn things.

My momma growed up at that house and my biggest sister, Jackie, she born there first, then most of the rest of us too since it the Depression and it be a while before my father get us our own place in the city.

My father, he built outta stone. He always taking us down the city when we real little and showing us a university building he built, an

office building, a library. When I ten, we had a house in the city. My father used to stop us walking to school when he on a job close by. He make us come stand next a half-built wall, and lean against it, run our fingers over the mortar in between some big old stones.

He passed way when I just seventeen, before I marry my Ruth and have any grandkids to show for. I remember before his funeral, I had a smoke outside the funeral home, leaning against a hot stone wall, and I run my finger long the mortar and wonder if my father put it there.

Man. That day I walking, it so hot and I pass six buildings my father built before I get out the city. Soon the sidewalk's got grass between it and the street and houses coming to the street instead of gas stations and little restaurants. My grandmother's house ten miles out the city, but I walking fine still. After another stretch though, I still passing houses and I start wishing for a store or a restaurant so I can get a drink. Sun sapping all the water right out my skin.

I pass houses with yards kept nice, some with roses too, but not one pretty enough like my grandmother's. She got a little picket fence like everyone always talking about wanting. What those folks don't know is that you gotta paint the thing every summer. I done that plenty times before we move to the city and after too, when my grandmother call us up to stay a few weeks. Book I had read to me back in school was Tom Sawyer and I know right away what he feeling when he don't wanna paint that fence.

So none of those houses got fences at all, and I keep walking. I figure I'll get there close on lunch time, and I know there an ice cream shop right after my grandmother street and I think about how I gonna get a rootbeer float instead of lunch. My grandmother the only lady I know when I a kid who make rootbeer floats, with vanilla ice cream and all. She even had those long spoons to get at the lumps in the bottom. That was only in the summertime too 'cause she send one us up to the next street and they hand-scoop just enough fresh vanilla ice cream for all us kids. My grandmother, she ain't got but a small icebox, can't fit a tub of ice cream inside it, so she send us up and when we come back, she go down to under the cellar steps where she got a crate of rootbeer bottles. She buy one every summer and we finish last couple by Labor Day. She only let us eat those floats at the kitchen table 'cause she use big old glass mugs and my brother broke one them on the porch, so she make us sit in the kitchen. She sit with

us and trim green beans or shuck corn. When we done we rinse those mugs real careful and put them in the sink. And we each one kiss my grandmother on the cheek to say our thanks. It get so if you the last one, her cheek be shiny and a little sticky from all those kisses after ice cream and root beer.

Mmm. So I finally go to where I recognize some the houses. I walking past the green and white one they use to had and the empty lot next to it where we all play catch and half-field football. The house still there and it got a sign for cutting hair in the window and the lot is half paved with one those snowball stands that really a shed on it. And I almost stop 'cause I real thirsty, but I think about rootbeer and keep walking.

I walk for a while, and I cut through a few streets so I can see my grandmother church. When my grandfather get hit, the church pour out all over my grandmother and her kids before the insurance could come. She never forgot that. She march us there every Sunday, washed and ironed so tight you could smell it. And she stay after and teach Sunday school and cook for those got in a situation like she done back then when my grandfather got hit. They pay her electric and fix her porch falling down. She pay them back, though. She make afghans and get big old crates strawberries and make preserves. And they sell them at bazaars. She get us boys out with trimmers for the cemetery when we up for a week to visit. And every Sunday there was a big old vase of roses in the church, straight from her yard.

I come up on it and, I tell you, there nothing exactly I can put my finger on, but it ain't the same. Look like it sag in on itself just a bit, and it peeling here and there. But ain't just that. We come rake leaves for two big old trees they got out front, but they gone. Got a weedy pot of flowers setting on each stump, but they small. Grass gone too, a lot of it. Brown. Cemetery still look okay, like someone be out and there a coupla flags from Fourth of July or Memorial Day. Then I see there a sign on the door. I thinking it say when service be held, even if everyone know it be 10:30, Sunday school at noon. But when I go right up to it, get myself under the awning where it cool, I see it a plaque from the Historical Society. I read the church been there since before my grandfather born, little typed note beneath the sign give a number for tours.

I sit down on those steps and wipe sweat out my eyes. Not sure

I want keep walking then. Know how you sit and realize you're tired when you didn't feel it before? Well, I get up, not for the rootbeer float, but 'cause wasn't much else to do. Least the trees back in there on those streets was big and old so the shade nice. I walking the sidewalk we used to come by home. I remembering the supper my grandmother make for us every Sunday. Always a whole chicken and cornbread with bits of corn and dripped in bacon grease. Stewed apples and in June they was strawberries. And green beans we always had from where the vine grew up straight the side of her back porch. Sweet lemonade or hot milk in winter. And pie or pudding, maybe cobbler.

My grandmother buried in a plot other side the city. Bus company bury my grandfather there, and give him a big old headstone and a plot right next him for my grandmother. I only been there half dozen times. Bus line stop going out there after they buried my grandfather. When her neighbor go visiting family out there, they offer her a ride, and drop her at those high black gates and I guess she just sit there with him for coupla hours like her neighbor do with family too. Trimming done for them at that place. Big mowers come long and do it all.

I walking and not looking at much, just going the walk to her house. And then the sidewalk end of a sudden and I on tarmac, on street just like back the city. I look up and somehow I at a gas station. Got a little store and about fifteen pumps. Joins with the street and the sidewalk rolls right into it.

I turn round 'cause I think I must gone wrong somehow, but no, I passed about six houses I know good, been inside each one, feet wiped and hanging off some lady's sofa while my grandmother drink strong coffee and gossip.

Gas station so big it take up half the block and spill over to the next street. Cross the street sit a bank, right where about four houses use to be. Behind the store there, through some sick, dying trees, they got backhoes and a loader going, pressboard going up in shape of big new houses.

I walk cross the tarmac and it so new, it feel like it gonna give way beneath my shoes. It still smell new too, deep and smoky like the bus exhaust in my lungs. I walk a ways across and see a minivan pulled up to the pump that say twelve. I stand right there and I think that minivan about where my grandmother's dining table supposed be.

I pull open the door of the store and the air hit me and I shiver more than maybe I need to. Kid there ask me, "What pump?" and it take me a minute. I shake my head at him and ask him if he got ice cream. He point at a case there next the counter. But everything all done up with sticks and plastic. I walk through and there a big slush machine and I look and I see they got rootbeer flavor. I pay for some that and I go outside again and the hot, wet air hit me and I take a sip the rootbeer slush and it tasting like nothing that ever seen sunlight. But I drink it 'cause it cold and sweet and I walking back now.

And I stop on the way, some place inside the city, and I buy Ruth some ice cream and roses.

# December Tree

Crooked wooden arms
reach above
where the blackbirds
will eventually return.

The lonely old man
taunts the gray north
with his snow covered limbs—
dancing with roots
four generations deep.

The worn tire
sags
from the tattered rope
gently swaying
in the breeze.

Letters carved
in icy,
gnarled skin—
remnants of
summers spent.

The white will turn to green
and the emerald to
crimson,
ginger
and gold—
the colors will depart
for the cooling ground
like the crackling legs
of a July firework
disappearing from the sky.

But until then,
the old lonely man,
shivers
and waits
for Spring.

Georgianna Spilman

# Reflection of my past

## Climbing the Villanelle Everest

Do not fear to climb the heights,
Tho' veiled in shadow like a dream,
Climb on, climb on into the light,
For tho' this mountain has its plights,
Still above, the reward gleams,
Do not fear to climb the heights,
See it shining there so bright!
Closer, closer does it seem,
Climb on, climb on into the light,
For a poet at such times must fight,
For such a bright celestial beam,
Do not fear to climb the heights,
For soon day will turn to night,
And bring to life this fair dream,
Climb on, climb on into the light,
See now, how it is in sight!
Unfurling is this treasured ream,
Do not fear to climb the heights,
Climb on, climb on into the light.

# Soldier Invisible

"Dr. Lane's ordered Huffman to the open ward," Sarge read from a memo and then dropped it on my desk. I sat at the small corner table filling in the detail schedule for those same open ward patients. Officially, I wasn't only a medic; I was a psychiatric technician, dressed in white pants and white smock that announced I was one of the caring and sensitive soldiers in the Army. We techs emphasized the words psychi-atric, believing it made us sound more intelligent than the average medic.

"Huffman? Which one's Huffman?" I asked.

"He's putting his things together now," Sarge said. "Take him over. Assign him a bed."

I wracked my brain playing word association to put a face to the patient. Obsessive Huffman, no; Paranoid Huffman, no; Smiling Huffman, no; Shaky; Angry; no, no.

"I can't take him if I don't remember who he is." The guy was invisible, I thought. "I've got it!" I said. "The Invisible Man … Huffman! The Colonel's role model, you don't even know he's here."

You couldn't blame me for not recalling Huffman. After all, he was invisible. At least that's what I told myself later to justify my own failure. Why couldn't he have been more like me? Even back in grade school I made certain everyone in class could see me. And if they couldn't see me, they heard me. Like "Show and Tell." Five minutes to show and tell about something brought from home. Some kids would get up front, say a few words about a toy or photo, and then sit down. You could barely hear what they said. They'd mumble through their time never even looking out at the class.

Not me. It didn't matter what I would show. I'd say it loud and clear. I'd stand on a chair in front of class and proclaim, "Here is my favorite pencil. It can perform all kinds of things!" I'd be on stage for my full five minutes or more depending on how long it took for the teacher to get me to return to my seat. And then I'd sit there in judgment of the other students who failed to use even a minute of their time. What was wrong with them? I could have used the extra minutes. I guess that's how I felt about Huffman. What was wrong with him?

"He's never trouble and does what you ask," Sarge said.

"Yeah, quiet and follows orders; I didn't know that was a sign of mental stability."

"If the doc says so, then it's so. I'm a Sergeant—"

"Yeah, and the doc's a Captain."

Sarge shrugged. "For soldiers going back to duty or going home, first stop, open ward."

I rose and moved to the board where we listed the patients and the ward. There was Huffman's, left column, thirteen down. The space next to his name read Closed. I wiped off Closed with a dry cloth that needed a washing and wrote Open.

"Ready or not," I said, "here he comes."

Huffman had been on the closed ward for several months. He rose in the morning, made his bed, dressed in his patient blue pants and shirt, took his meds, stood in line to the mess hall, sat at tables with the others, exercised in the activities room, and slept on the ward. He was there every day. And yet, during those summer ballgames, when Huffman would come to bat, techs and patients would get quiet as he took his swings. We'd watch him closely, trying to recall who he was and when he had become part of the team.

I turned back to the Sarge. And there at the doorway was a little guy with a round face and cheeks an aunt would want to pinch. His stubby fingers clutched a shaving kit and other personal items to his chest.

"Whoa, speak of the devil," I said.

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Huffman followed a few steps behind me and we headed down the hallway. I congratulated him on his promotion to the open ward and he nodded what I took to be a "thank you." I had seldom heard Huffman speak in the months he'd been on the ward. Of course, I had seldom spoken directly to him.

"Huffman, are you heading home or back to duty?"

He shrugged what I took to be "not sure."

"Do you have a preference?" This was my trick question to test a patient's sanity.

He shrugged again.

The last room on our left before crossing over to the open ward

was the Family Visiting Room. It was empty but for its furnishings: long green couch, several chairs, coffee table, and a small TV with rabbit ears. Heavy green drapes that somehow failed to blend with the green couch substantially blocked the view from the sole window made even more useless by the thick wire screen that slashed the horizon. As we passed the Family Room, Huffman stopped. He seemed to stare into the Family Room.

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The nine-year-old boy sat astride the chest of his mother as she writhed on the floor hitting herself in the face with her balled-up, arthritic hands. He was a child bronco rider and struggled to stay on top. His hands not large enough, nor was he strong enough, to hold her arms so he reached and grabbed hold of her vein-lined wrists. He couldn't stop the blows. Her fists, left and right, punched her face, her nose and lips bloodied, bulbous bumps rose from her forehead.

The young boy had never seen anyone act this way, never. He recalled a science fiction movie about robots that came closest. That's it, he thought. My mother is a malfunctioning robot. Her arms pumped with a piston-like rhythm striking her face and returning to her sides before rising to strike again. And with each punch, she hissed through bloodied lips, "Keep your mouth shut, don't talk, don't say a word, don't speak, don't talk, don't say a word, shut up, just shut up, don't talk."

Another blow struck the face of the little boy's mother. And he cried, "Mom, Mommy, stop, please, Mommy. Help! Somebody! Help me! Help!"

She stopped. Her hands fell to her sides. Exhaustion had saved this day. The boy moved to his mother's side. He put his arms around her. He cradled her bruised and bloodied face to his small chest, and he rocked her as she had done for him when he had his nightmares.

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"Hey Huffman, are you coming?" I crossed to the open ward and waited for him to catch up. "Get over here!"

Huffman caught up and we passed through the recreation room with its pool table and television. We entered a ward that was identical in layout to Ward 2A. Beds with dark blue blankets lined both walls separated by brown nightstands. Light streamed from windows lining one side of the room. On the open ward there were fewer patients,

never more than ten, and the Nurses Station was locked and empty.

Because it was still morning, the ward was empty. The patients were at or should have been at the base details I'd assigned them. I walked to the rear of the ward with Huffman trailing behind. I selected an empty bed and nightstand.

"Is this bed okay?"

Huffman nodded. He began putting away his belongings.

"Everyone's out on work detail. I'll give you an assignment tomorrow. On this ward, you can come and go, but always pick up your meds and don't violate curfew."

Huffman nodded.

"Best of luck."

Huffman nodded.

"You don't talk much do you, Huffman?"

He shook his head.

I considered whether or not I should try harder to engage Huffman in conversation. But if he talked, or if he didn't talk, I really couldn't see how that could possibly change the most important thing in his life, like Huffman's orders. He was going home or back to play war games. Getting him to talk wasn't going to change that.

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Had Huffman talked he could have told how much he respected medics for helping sick people. How he had to be a medic to his own mother. How when he was just seven years old he had watched his mom's sister, his Aunt Flo, place a paper bag over his mother's mouth, hold it tightly as his mom lay on the floor struggling for breath. How his aunt reassured him it was for her own good, it would stop his mom from hyperventilating. And his mom's gasps for air slowed and returned to a familiar rhythm of inhale, exhale, inhale, exhale.

Huffman could have told about the day when he held the bag. How afterwards, he phoned his Aunt Flo to tell her. "Mom was hyperventilating. I used the bag. She's okay now." And how he needed to know so he asked, "What's hyperventilating?" And from then on he made sure bags were hidden in every room of the house, just in case.

But the boy never talked about what went on. And the more the boy's mother acted out, the more the boy retreated into himself.

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Less than a week later in the clerk's office of the psych building,

two MPs, one white and tall, one black and short, stood like mismatched bookends on each side of a very dark, black man. His skin color matched the holsters at the sides of the MPs. The thrust of his chin and sharp glare of eyes gave him an angry bearing. The clerk opened a folder and perused the papers. Huffman entered the room carrying a bucket and cleaning supplies. He proceeded past the MPs and the clerk into the Colonel's office.

The clerk scribbled a name and date of entry of the new patient on a logsheet that sat on the corner of the desk. He rose and tucked the patient's folder under his arm.

"Okay, let's take him to 2A," the clerk said.

In the adjoining office the patient Huffman sprayed clear liquid cleaner on the side of a dented, gray file cabinet. He wiped it down. He took extra care with the front drawers where the handles had accumulated a week of smudges.

"First, let's store the weapons. No weapons on the wards, only for emergencies or on Colonel's orders."

The MPs followed the clerk into the Colonel's office where he opened the bottom desk drawer, and the MPs deposited their weapons. The clerk locked the drawer. The four left the office to deliver the patient to his new home.

Huffman finished wiping the dust from the small two shelf metal bookcase filled with Army manuals. He then moved to the desk. He moved folders and an in-box from one side of the desk to the other. He wiped the side clean, moved things back and wiped the other side. Satisfied that everything was in proper order, he sat.

Huffman opened the top drawer. He took out a letter opener in the shape of a cavalry soldier's sword, the Colonel's wish for a more meaningful military past. Huffman slid the opener into a slot above the bottom drawer. The lock snapped. He removed a firearm. It was heavier than he expected. He located the safety and released it. He carried the weapon with two hands as if the weapon were fragile and walked to the front of the desk. He recalled something he learned in training. This is my weapon, this is my gun, one is for shooting, one is for fun. This is my weapon, this is my gun, one is for shooting—his mother's voice interrupted, "Michael, get a move on, you'll be late for school. Michael, Michael."

In the corner of the room to the side of the desk was the nation's

flag. Huffman faced the flag. He put the barrel of the weapon in his mouth and pulled the trigger.

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"I gave him the detail then forgot him . . . Sarge, did you hear me? I forgot him."

The Sarge looked up from his paperwork. "Who could've known?"

"The doctor could have known," I said, "he—"

"You're looking for someone to blame but—"

"I blame him, I blame me, I blame the Army." I said.

"Pass the blame around, it won't change things," Sarge said.

"I, I didn't know Huffman. Maybe if I'd taken time to listen . . ."

Sarge was quiet. He looked at me and seemed to recognize something. Maybe he recognized himself. He looked out the office window to the ward. They knew what happened, that's why it was especially quiet today. Did they speak of the suicide? No, too threatening. The table of regulars played cards. Others wrote letters; sat quietly at tables smoking cigarettes; a couple worked a jigsaw puzzle; one read a Bible. The Sarge didn't turn back to me when he spoke; he spoke to them.

"I used to listen. I've listened and still not seen it. Gotten to know them, the part they're willing to tell, about mom and dad, a wife or girlfriend, sometimes kids, and then one of them will go ahead and do it, kill himself."

A quick shudder, Sarge cleared his throat and turned to me. "Trust Sarge on this, it's better not to know. 'Cause you can't stop the most important thing . . . when they die."

Sarge left the office, and I pressed Home on my cell phone.

"Mom?"

"Son? Is that you?"

"I wanted to call and … see how you're doing."

"Is everything all right?"

"Everything's … okay. How are you? How's dad?

"Son, are you sure everything—"

"Mom, is dad there?"

"He had a late night son, it's not a good idea to …"

"Okay, I just didn't get a chance to say good bye when my leave was up."

The chance had been there but my own stubbornness of denying I even wanted the drunk's attention kept me from seeking it. All I had

to do was walk to the corner bar where dad spent most of his time consuming the beer made by a local brewery. He no longer drank hard liquor; his stomach had gone on strike and now only permitted the foamy suds. Saying goodbye to me wasn't as pressing as his desire to drink.

"Is there something you wanted to tell me? Has something happened?" Mom asked in that tone of hers that expected only the worst news.

"Everything's fine," I said.

Then she gave me some advice, every mother's hope. "Be happy, son," she said. And then with a somber tone, "I just want you to be happy."

My mother suggested that "happy" be my objective in life ever since I went off to first grade and every grade thereafter. The most recent "be happy" counsel was a year ago when I enlisted in the Army and departed for basic training. A smile never accompanied her "be happy" advice. And she repeated it so often I knew she was wishing it for herself as much as for me.

She needed to hear me say it so I did, "I'm happy, Mom." I hung up the phone wondering if Huffman's mother had wished him the same.

I erased Huffman's name from the board.

## Ypres, Belgium 1916

Woods thick with poison
Bullets of brass shatter limbs
Death, snared in barbed wire

## Harvest

Through ripe grains and fruits
Mother Earth breaks her water
Through womb of dirt

# Virginia Tech

Oh, God,
I hear ringing in my ears
like the cellphones
of murder victims.
Someone should answer
but what could be said
that would not reveal
the lack of life.
I will not be
the bearer of bad news
causing devastation.
Despair,
a powerful force
that weighs heavy
when no one answers.
In my head
I hear popping
like bullets
molding metal
or shattering glass.
Holes inside me,
in my brain,
in my heart,
in my soul.
Grief,
closing in
turning everything black.
Spreading,
seeping,
cloaking me.
I am unsure of myself.
Helpless,
a savior
with no one to save.
Remaining wounded
until the day

someone answers
and the ringing,
oh, God,
the ringing,
no longer
permeates my mind.

Lauren Hess

# Volcanic Resentment

The island always hated the ocean
Never able to reach its endless mass
Erupting in a fierce surge of motion
She was cooled, hardened with a fleeting pass.

The bright orange of her tears flowed with envy
Cascading down her charred and rocky cheeks
Blemished from tantrums held in self-pity
And left to settle below the steep peak

But despite the abuse and ceaseless nag
The ocean stayed calm with rare objection
Letting itself be her lone punching-bag
Knowing the empty threat of rejection

Without the ocean, island undefined
The two necessarily intertwined.

# Annuit Coeptis

# Mao Returning in the Rain

Everyone thought Xiaoshu a fool for giving the old woman the money. That her parents thought this was no surprise; they had formed the opinion of her long ago.

"You have a big heart and a soft head," her father had once said.

He had spoken those words when Xiaoshu was ten and her mother had sent her to market with a purse of coins and list of vegetables to buy. Along the way she met a man in rags with legs that tapered to stumps just below the knees. She gave him the money and went home without vegetables or coins.

"But he was hungrier than we," she said—a view that made perfect sense to Xiaoshu, and to no one else.

Now, ten years later, her father shook his head when she told him about the old woman at the train station.

"Everyone grows older," he said, "but only some people grow wiser."

It had happened like this. In the morning, Xiaoshu left her dormitory in Wuhan to catch the train home for Spring Festival. Outside the station, hundreds huddled in the February chill, waiting in long queues. Xiaoshu noticed her shoelaces flapping on the street and sat on a low wall to tie them. An old woman was seated beside her on the wall. A red scarf wrapped around her head and framed her wizened skin.

"Aiyi," Xiaoshu said, "are you going to visit your family for the holiday?"

The old woman told her that she had come to the station to buy a ticket. She wanted to see her son and his family in Xi'an, but the ticket cost more than she had—forty-seven yuan more, in fact.

"Aiyi, if I give you the money, will you pay me back someday, after the holiday?"

The old woman smiled a warm and toothless smile and said she would. Xiaoshu tore a page out of her notebook and on it wrote her dormitory address. She pressed the paper and a fifty yuan note into the old woman's hand.

"You will never see that money again," her mother said. "Is this what we pay for you to learn at college?"

Soon, word about what Xiaoshu had done spread across the

village. Throughout the holiday, children hobbled up to her on the street, playing the beggar's part in jest. Xiaoshu couldn't wait to get back to school, where surely she would find more sympathetic ears. Her roommates would be more understanding than anyone in her backwater village.

But Xiaoshu's roommates did not understand. In fact, they saw the matter more or less the way her parents had.

"You are too kind-hearted," Ming told her. "People will take advantage of you. A smart girl learns to harden her heart."

For a while, they joked about it, saying things like, "Will your old woman be coming to see you today, Xiaoshu?" As weeks passed and turned to months, the memory faded, and they mentioned it no more. But Xiaoshu had not forgotten. Whenever she thought of the old woman, Xiaoshu felt an aching in her heart and wondered if this is how a heart feels as it turns firm.

One day in June, as Xiaoshu studied for exams, a storm came, full of thunder, bolt, and rain. Above the sound of the storm, Xiaoshu heard someone knocking. She opened the door and saw the old woman standing in the hallway, with her red scarf darkened by the rain and in her open palms a fifty yuan note. Beads of rain had gathered on the bill and dripped like tears, as if Mao himself were weeping.

## Me and Charlie pilfering fruit trees

Me and Charlie
Two years apart
My sister with a boy's name

Florida Summers are humid
Spending our days in palm tree lined neighborhoods
Two enemies, two allies

Tree branches grew heavy with fruit
Pecans, oranges, kumquats
We'd steal ripened ware

In large wooden bowls
On the dinner table
Our plunder sat

Small brown nuts
Oranges round and juicy
Furry little bulbs of fruit

In North Carolina
The rolling Blue Mountains rise above emerald valleys
Bushes speckled with berries

Hidden in the forest underbrush
Bulbous, seedy blackberries
For eating or ink

Almost invisible in the grass
Tiny wild strawberries
Rare and a flavor as unique as its untamed-ness

Seedlings hatched
In bursts of sunshine
And summer afternoons

Wild berry juice
Dripping from our lips
Reddened from pulp

Tiny white flowers
Vining in towers
Sweet honey centers
Plucked from bushes
Droplets of nectar
Barely deciphered as taste on the tongue

Me and Charlie
My sister with a boy's name
Two enemies, two allies
Spending our summers pilfering fruit trees

# Famous

Rain is famous to the farmer.
Bees are famous to the honey-dipper.
Sun is famous to the sun-worshipper,
    to freckles on the nose,
    to shell-seekers, beach-combers,
    and to lovers in the dunes.
Rhythm is famous to the loose-hipped,
    a tranquilizer for the high-strung,
    an upper for the low-down,
    a lullaby to the fretful.
Laughter is famous to the comic,
    to solemn, suit-filled rooms,
    to twitters beneath the hand,
    to silly, secret words whispered in bed.
And I, I would like to be famous as one who listens,
    Who can say she is sorry
        First
    And try to do better.

# Autumn

we were only kids.
the air was orange
and the sky smelled sweet.
the trees matched
the sight and scent. we played
on branches and ran from shammy,
the sheepdog that lived
at your first house. the one with white curls.
he would always eat the bubbles we blew.
we raced our bikes
down my long gravel driveway.
the wind rushed past us
as we rushed past the dying apple tree.
you were the only girl
besides my older sister
who ever beat me at anything.
we caught fireflies in the summer
when the sun fell behind the trees,
before the winter stifled those flames.
back when my yard seemed so big.

# Sunset

# A Woman's Cataclysm

You would think that my husband would look at me every now and then. We have been married for years but what now seems like centuries. I miss him. I miss looking at him. I miss him looking at me. I miss his touch. But we don't even communicate. When I cook he simply stares out the window. Ever since he came home from constant cataclysm on the battlefield he does not show me any interest at all. I remember the day when he came home: torn and battered. I remember the day he left in that Army Humvee with all his gear—he not only left me physically but mentally as well. For some reason, in the back of my mind, I thought that he would return to me with some semblance of happiness. Our conversations are always one sided now, our dinner's quiet, and our quality time shattered. Every menial or frivolous thing I do makes him transform into a wrathful and angry man that I don't even recognize. I simply pick up a spoon and he looks as though he is ready to shoot me dead. Our nights are no longer calm, for he awakens in a hot sweat of pain for fear of being attacked by the enemy. He now sleeps with a knife along with a '45 pistol under his pillow for protection. I have to walk as silent as a spirit when I travel within the middle of the night for many a time he has pinned a gun to my head with eyes as red as fire. When your partner leaves you for war and comes home, you feel helpless because no matter how many therapeutic talks or how much comforting human contact, it can never bring back the blood of those my husband has lost. He and I were happy together within our Utopia of love, but now he lives within his own world, lonely with unimaginable despair. Just as he has his own Utopia, I have mine where I pray that my husband will return to me, not just physically but mentally as well. Sadly, since then he never looks at me and he never will; I am simply the enemy.

# In the Darkest Smoke

The sunset broke over the top of shattered Naples. Faint wisps of smoke issuing from the lopsided chimneys curled and cindered. Then the light smote the city. Windows burst with light and the whole of the city seemed to be ablaze. Craig turned away from the window, the last ray of light caught in his glasses, pooling like blood. On his bed, curled, lay his nurse Jessy. She had fallen silent during their conversation and now lay still, too worn even for dreaming. She looked so peaceful, completely asleep after many weeks running. Leaning awkwardly on the side of the bed, one hand braced firmly on his crutch, Craig untwined the stethoscope that was still wound around her neck.

Letting her sleep, Craig eased his way out of his hospital room Jessy had secured for him and began his nightly prowl. Every step with the crutch was agony, every hoping step a fire in his hip, every lurch of the crutches a fist under his arm. But he pressed on, growing strong for her. He meandered through the twisting corners of the labyrinthine hospital. Each corner he came upon he vowed would be his last. Each corner he passed he dedicated to her. Delaying the dream he most wanted, he returned to her still asleep on his bed.

As he walked, other dreams mixed with memory came. He dreamed about the sound of a hundred German bombers and how the sky broke from sudden night to blinding day as the ambulance that bore him away crossed from under the smoky turrets that ringed the ruined city of Verdun. The ambulance rattled over every bump on the shattered road south and east. Above, a white IV line softly swayed, leaking precious drops of morphine. He focused on the beating of his heart, slow and rhythmic against his chest. He felt the tourniquet grow tight upon his leg, but that did not trouble him; everything below his thigh had long since grown cold. Sleep loomed high, but Craig concentrated on his heart and on staying alive. The bombs had fallen, but his dreams still stood.

He dreamed he awoke to plaster walls of soft pastel. A constant murmuring of voices was in the air, but none were raised high enough for him to catch hold of. He became friendly with one of his nurses. She was older than he, and the stress of the war had left too great a mark to call her beautiful, but she was honest and she was kind.

She did the jobs and worked the shifts no one else could stand. She contrived to get his bed moved closer to the windows so he could tell her more about the birds and the stars. Never for long, for Jessy always had duties and he was frequently weary, but when they had time their conversations would wander far from the hospital's confines. To call it love he was not yet ready, but she was what bore him on.

Most of all he dreamed about Jessy requesting the night duty and for three months remaining at his side, cheering him on after long days of rehabilitation. Everyone was pleased to have Jessy working the night shift. Her warm affection buoyed many spirits after long dreary days marked by agonizing exercises and boredom enough to crack the sanest minds. They had taken to going to the roof and looking out on the warm Naples nights. Stars in the sky and on the ground wheeled as they spoke.

But, war and dreams get along as well as cats and mice. The mouse isn't just killed, it's mangled into little bits strewn across the floor. And you never find the last piece of the mouse either. There is always one last piece waiting to seize your heart.

Craig's awareness returned to his trek. The plaster walls had failed to masonry. The masonry had failed to slatted wood, and the cold breeze through them flayed the leg that was no longer there. Resting against the cool wall for a time, he resolved to go back. He had come back two corridors, almost back to the masonry super structure when the air raid sirens began their wailing dirge.

Normally hospitals were off bounds, verboten, but the war itself was over in all ways except the silencing of the guns. If this was a German air raid, then it was to punish the Americans for being the victors, an allied-held city in the axis Italy. A final blow struck for the fatherland.

He tore down the hallway back towards the infirmary. His breath caught in great hiccups and a dangerous stitch burned its way up his side. His one legged gait was decidedly drunken in haste.

Bombs don't whistle when they fall. He was on his back before he realized the first concussion had reached him. One moment he hop-raced past walls of slatted wood, the next he was engulfed in a nightmare of jagged splinters and twisted hallways. Half the ceiling

had caved in, forcing the hallway to bow, filling more than half of it with debris. He could see the fire alarms flashing but the ringing in his ears silenced the alarm. He could feel the thump of other bombs striking home elsewhere in Naples as they translated through the floor.

Pushing his crutches ahead and pulling himself behind, he forced his way through the opening and limped down the hall. His wrist trembled weakly each time he bore down on the crutches but he made his way forward. Slats gave way to plaster, plaster to masonry around the corners he had counted off so diligently. Pleading silently, desperately, to all that is holy, to all that may or may not exist, as one is want to do when all other hopes fade. Pleading that his ward had been spared. Begging the bombs to have spared his dream.

Around the last corner then, and back toward where he had begun, masonry gave way to smoke, smoke to flame, and flame to nothing. War and dreams get along as well as cats and mice.

# Autumn Seas

What is a leaf to you?
Just another thing to Fall?
Across the rivers edge,
There is such a leaf,
Waiting, just to fall.

And as that leaf descends
I find it the most beautiful end

Something I find in myself.

In all reality,
This leaf is my heart,
Ensnared by the spiral bound,
and wearing the most,
Bloody shade of red,
Now falls here in,
This sea of souls,
Transparent souls,
Filled to the rim,
With somber dread.

# Hit and Son

Someone definitely saw me. It's only four in the afternoon, and I'm pretty positive somebody saw me. It's not too late, I could probably turn around, leave a note ... yeah, maybe I could go back. But I'm sure someone saw the whole thing. I'm sure they're explaining to a cop right now how I turned the corner of Maple and Bristol Street, maybe a little too fast for a quiet residential street, and how I wasn't paying attention to the road or how I was a drunk bum probably leaving the bar after drinking for a solid twenty-four hours. I'm sure they went on to say I seemed to intentionally swerve right into the navy blue Camry. People can be such snitches, such assholes.

My heart is racing now. Is this how a panic attack feels? Jesus. My speedometer says 74, but the speed limit on the freeway is only 55. A speeding ticket would be all I'd need at this point. I need to go somewhere, just think. In 2 ¼ miles there's a rest stop right off the road. As I drive toward the destination, I go over the facts of how things actually happened. I reach for that tiny ripped off sheet of notebook paper that I had scribbled on as the woman from the agency had given me directions to 2614 Bristol Street. She had a thick southern accent so the numbers I had written down weren't all that clear. I had written both 2614 and 2640, because I wasn't entirely sure of the address. It wasn't until I circled the block a few times that I realized there wasn't a 2640 Bristol Street and my search had been narrowed down.

I got in the right lane, winded off into the exit and up a small hill to the small brown building fully equipped with one unisex bathroom and an "OUT OF ORDER" vending machine. I got out of my '92 Pontiac, and for some reason it felt like I'd been in that car for about three hours. Actual time: forty-three minutes. I sat on the tabletop of a near-by picnic table and tried to process everything. I couldn't believe this was happening to me. For the past twelve years, since I first found out, I had imagined the moment, the entire scene. Everything was supposed to go perfect. I wasn't supposed to drop my slip of paper, look down to the passenger side floor for a second, and accidentally swerve into their car! This was a nightmare.

I pulled out a Camel Light and matches and took a few deep drags while considering my current options. Thinking rationally, there

actually was a good chance the police were there gathering tidbits of evidence from any witnesses to the crime. However, I don't remember seeing anyone around, so maybe nobody did see me. I don't think the crash was too loud, and I remember seeing the minimal damage to the back corner of the bumper in my rear-view. I have to go back. I feel it won't end well either way, but the guilt I would feel if I let this go and did nothing would be worse than any consequence.

The minutes back to Bristol Street flew by. My mind was racing almost as fast as my heart was again. My palms were greasy on the steering wheel. God, let's hope I don't fumble again and hit another car. As I reached the stop sign at the end of Maple, I slowly looked to the right expecting the obnoxious blue and red lights to blur my concentration. Instead I saw the navy blue Camry with a decent scratch on the left side of the bumper. No one had seen me. My heart rate returned to normal. My hands were suddenly dry. I parked behind the Camry and scrounged up an old napkin and a magic marker to begin writing a note. Halfway through the word "sorry" I balled up the napkin in my hand and threw it on the floor. How was I supposed to do this? I just imagined knocking on the door, saying the speech I had prepared for months and waiting for a reaction. Never did I imagine this would happen.

It was time to face this like a man, I decided. I got out of the Pontiac, glanced at my reflection in the window, smoothed my flannel shirt and began walking. I wasn't exactly sure how this would go, but I am their son, they are my biological parents, and I owe it to them to explain what happened. I take a breath and then knock on the door.

# When We Were Men

We used to climb on top of this old abandoned building
and smoke stolen cigarettes from his mom's purse.
We told ourselves we were men
as we stared at the faded concrete below,
spitting on the passersby walking to and from
office buildings,
squandering their lives in eight-hour shifts.
A few would scream at us,
"You little bastards!"
but most kept walking,
too afraid to look up and see where the spit was coming from,
maybe thinking it was God spitting on them
like he does to all of us from time-to-time,
peeking through the breaks in the clouds.

# Still Life with Corn, Light, and Wood

# Poem

Thought forms
and rises from the sofa.
Desire, Imagination, and Memory enter,
lift the blinds, and light streams in.

They go into the kitchen together.
It is small and white and smells of lemons.
They take down a bowl from the cupboard, a large blue one.
They add sky, wind, breath, and a persimmon.
It is dusky orange and bittersweet.
They add spices—
    clove, cayenne, and vanilla—
and stir.

The aroma of the baked bread is heady, irresistible.
Neighbors flock together, laugh and meet.
Gathering at the table they are each served a slice.
At first taste, gasps of surprise—
for some it is the bitter; for others, the sweet.

# Poetry Reading in a Lobby

Women in cocktail dresses
swish fabric and wine as they follow
starched-jacketed men around the lively foyer.

The poet in the corner strains his voice
to clamber over the clamor: swooshing electric doors,
grinding coffee makers, clicking heels on hard linoleum.

The lobby elevator intermittently sounds its bell,
adding profane punctuation. What happened
to the marred metaphors? Did the lost words
band together? Stomp over to the elevator?
Ride to the fifth floor? Sweep past janitors?

Maybe that's why the late-night copy editor
sitting at his desk suddenly imagines a grizzled
beard in the window, and under Whitman's
steady gaze, the lobby, the office, and all the flesh
within it becomes a great poem.

The text of *The Muse* is set in Adobe Caslon Pro. This font was designed by William Caslon and based on seventeenth-century Dutch old-style designs, which were then used extensively in England. The first printings of the American Declaration of Independence and the Constitution were set in Caslon.

The headings of *The Muse* are set in Gills San MT. Gill Sans is a humanist sans-serif typeface designed by Eric Gill, a well established sculptor, graphic artist and type designer, in the 1920s.

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