

The Muse

The Literary & Arts Magazine of Howard Community College

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contents

poetry

<i>Beetles</i>	4	Monica Parker
<i>Indigo Flight</i>	5	Nicole Hill
<i>Aphrodite</i>	6	Steve Mandes III
<i>The Bride at the Bar</i>	7	Natasha Lopez-Fischer
<i>These are the years . . .</i>	9	Jeannette Spohn
<i>Consumption</i>	12	Lee Hartman
<i>Clean Up</i>	13	Sheharyar Sarwar
<i>If I Were a Dandelion</i>	18	Sheharyar Sarwar
<i>Moon Women</i>	19	Eva Granzow
<i>Paréntesis</i>	20	José Manuel Mendoza Campuzano
<i>Sunburn</i>	22	Georgianna Spilman
<i>Snow Queen</i>	23	Bert Jeffrey Hubinger
<i>The Red Phone Booth</i>	25	Prince Kwasi Mensah
<i>Storm Drain</i>	31	Casey Whitaker
<i>Reflection</i>	32	Mary Anderson
<i>Mujer Hecha De Muchas</i>	34	LaJuanda Johnson
<i>Falling Apart</i>	36	Melissa Preston
<i>Going Out of One's Way</i>	37	Lee Hartman
<i>Cat</i>	41	John Stapleton
<i>Preguntas sobre los templos</i>	42	Carleen Grossman
<i>Looking Back: The Right Way</i>	44	Jim Karantonis
<i>The Adventure Travel Agency</i>	50	Patricia VanAmburg
<i>Red Eye</i>	52	Jeeves Murphy
<i>Diminish</i>	53	Carrie Beren
<i>Poetic Tyranny</i>	54	Alanna Olive-Smith
<i>Chef Extraordinaire</i>	55	Shari Spearman
<i>Magic Baristas</i>	57	James Rosen
<i>Birth of a Reader</i>	58	Johnnie Simpson

nonfiction

<i>Can't Say No to Facebook?</i>	10	Petra Walton
<i>The Principal</i>	38	Monica Parker
<i>Not So Light Fingers</i>	46	Natasha Lopez-Fischer

fiction

<i>Curriculum vitae</i>	14	Danuta Hinc
<i>Color Wolf</i>	26	William Lowe

art

<i>Memories of Innocence</i>	8	Dominique Nikki Stephenson
<i>A Flash of Self</i>	17	Dylan Kates
<i>Reject of Heaven</i>	24	Dominique Nikki Stephenson
<i>Ribs</i>	33	Amberlynn Fenner
<i>The Mane Event</i>	40	Patricia Quinn
<i>Portugal Doors</i>	51	Stacy Korbela
<i>Cocoa in Cairo</i>	56	Erin Eitemiller

Beetles

Skating over jade green mold on fallen logs
To meet black pincers in a stiff salute,
They rear and wrangle, bumping watery shells.
Then thrashing in his wild struggle over wood,
One bungles in his stranglehold, and shifting,
Slips and falls into a numinous fog.

Indigo Flight

Crouching low and jumping high

The Indigo bird takes flight

His silver cerulean wings spread wide

The Indigo bird casts circling shadows in the sky

Swooping azure blur, not but catching light

The Indigo bird spots his prey

Hell and hunger in opaque cobalt eyes

The Indigo bird sinks his talons deep in soft chipmunk flesh

Sapphire salvia and warm blood dribble off the peak

The Indigo bird dines fine tonight

A swift dunk in still navy waters, washes the bits of gore away

The Indigo bird takes flight, into the blue twilight.

Aphrodite

Even while stacking dishes in the USC cafeteria,
Mitzy looked like Aphrodite,
her short, bobbed Grecian hair, hatless,
her apron, tied in half at her
curvaceous waist,
her height, towering above me
like a living sculpture.

After work, I'd run to the gym
and like Atlas, lift the world then flip
upside down for hours from gravity boots
while reading Greek Mythology

and on Darjeeling nights,
after protein shakes and a donut
I'd sneak into the other shower,
squeeze padded bras at midnight and
in the crystal morning,
look into the mirror and discover that
I was still a boy.

The Bride at the Bar

A red cocktail dress?
Perhaps a martini?
She sits
Staring at a haze of indigo lines-
tattooed on the wanton swimming flesh
of skin heads,
cowboys,
and pimps.
A satyr with cloven hooves,
frees himself from the stereo-
To dance in and out of the crowd.
playing country songs about:
God,
Country,
And women.
She has class-
as she sips her martini,
and allows drunkenness
to envelope her head in a veil-
making her eyes bright,
and her skin glow.
That is when life walks up to her,
in the form of a sleazy stranger-
He offers to buy her a drink;
“Something a little stronger?”
he purrs-
and she looks at him,
eyes bright with intoxicated tears-
“I do-”
she says.
He orders whiskey.

Memories of Innocence



These are the years ...

These are the years that aged into nonsense and so on
The road was dusty and rocky
We braved it barefoot on dares
Guarded by green gates never locked
But good for swinging
Days always smelled of rotten apples and honey suckle
Six of them
Two of us
A garden of tall weeds
A teepee made of old fence posts
Tied with rope and set with tea for two
These are the days that aged into years and so on
Three girls three boys
Two girls
Six of them
Two of us
All the girls had babies by the time they were 21
The boys still have none
These are the years that aged into nonsense and so
The nonsense of youthful adventures turned into a crashshoot of lives
What happened to the 'us' that could have been?
Maybe they had lasagna on the wrong day?
It somehow became the bringer of bad things
We used to think getting fat was the worst of all.
This is the nonsense that aged into fear and so on
We took our secrets by hand
Curled them up into fists
Palms unfurling
These are the fears that aged into revelations and so on
One of us was gay
One of us was addicted to cocaine
One of us was a cutter
One of our children's uncles was really their father
These are the years that aged into nonsense and so on
It was never really them and us
Just us

Can't Say No to Facebook?

I have a Facebook problem. A bad one. I am on it all the time. I tell myself I can quit whenever I want to, that I just don't want to right now, but the truth is, I am hardcore. I didn't know how serious the problem had gotten until recently.

I won't tell you exactly how long ago I graduated from high school, although if you look me up on Facebook, you will know, but still, why admit your age to strangers, unless they happen to have a Facebook profile too. In which case, the way I see it, I am not alone, there are others like me ... YOU are like me. You're on Facebook too. Maybe you started like I did.

MySpace is a fun happy place. You can write blogs, change your backgrounds, and choose a profile song. It is so fun! You can find all your old friends from high school on MySpace, and hey in my case, that is NOT just a figure of speech. I was seriously having fun just getting on MySpace every now and then. It was great stress relief. Then one of my friends told me, "If you like MySpace, you will LOVE Facebook. Besides, MySpace is for kids. EVERYONE has moved over to Facebook now, everyone." Well, I wanted to be cool, didn't I? Didn't YOU want to be cool too? Is that why YOU do it?

Facebook is an acquired taste. I admit the first time I got on Facebook; I didn't like it very much. I couldn't play music, there was really no place to blog, and I couldn't put up a Hello Kitty background on it. It was very bland, and so I got on very little, and continued to stay on MySpace, just every once and a while to relieve a little stress. Then some crazy things started happening on Facebook.

I was able to grow my very own Sea Garden. I was also able to make a Little Green Patch. Friends from all over were sending me plants and fish! Do you have a Sea Garden or a Little Green Patch? If you do, you understand that they are multi-colored and a lot of fun. So, who needs a Hello Kitty background, right? Also, music on your profile? NO WAY, I could care less anymore! I can crank my iTunes all night while I am on Facebook. I don't have to listen to the former head cheerleader's Celine Dion selection while I peruse her profile looking at her spare tires and getting smug. And, while I DO still love Morrissey, I don't have to hear the old Drama crowd's revival of the bad old days while not recognizing their pictures because they've all

morphed into semi-respectable looking people now. Best of all, I no longer feel obligated to post blogs anymore, as I used to on MySpace. See, on Facebook, I can post a long winded status update every half minute, so all my friends know EXACTLY what I am doing, how I feel, and where I am at all times. I am beginning to sound a little sarcastic aren't I? Maybe it's really anger. Maybe I am angry with myself because I am hooked and I can't stop.

What started out as something I did a couple of times a week has turned into something I do all the time now. In slow moments at work, I get on. In a long line in Target, I get on. Two-thirty in the morning, I get on. My car has a pretty sophisticated computer in it, but I know it is never a good idea to drive while on Facebook. Besides, there is no way to manipulate Ford Sync to do that. So far as I know. The problem is, if my status is older than like an hour, I start to get irritable. You do too, admit it! Come on! For one thing, it can be DISASTEROUS if you don't update regularly. For example, say you were really irritated at your boss and lunch, and you write, "____really thinks he's a dumb-ass." You know, being purposefully general, even though you and all your co-workers (who are all also on Facebook) know it is about the boss. Then, you go out for drinks with some friends later, meet a really hot guy at the bar, you exchange Facebook profile info, and as you are driving home you realize that you haven't changed your status from earlier in the day. Since you are planning on getting on Facebook immediately when you get home to check out "hot-bar-guy's" profile the second you can boot up the computer, you assume he is planning the same thing. Now, what if he sees the "dumb-ass" status? What if he thinks you booted up your computer the second you got home to check out his profile, because he had planned to do the same thing, and he thinks the "dumb-ass" status is about HIM! Yes, yes, we know there are time stamps. But think about it. What if you wrote the update at a little after one PM, and it is now a little after one AM. Is he going to notice? Would you? MAYBE.

Are you beginning to see how Facebook can ruin your life? If you are, please let me know, because I am not there yet. But, I am on Facebook ...

Consumption

Small poems
Are good for consumption

They take grief
Off our hands

Like small change
In the collection basket.

Clean Up

Let's not and say we did,
So they can starve
And she can burn
While he runs away
After lighting the match
And grabbing her jar of change.

Let's not and say we did,
So the sisters can work corners
And the brother can sell it by the ounce,
While just one needle loses its touch
And straws become too thin for the lines drawn
On a table once covered in coffee stains.

Let's not and say we did
Until their bodies twitch and shiver
And purple babies are born
While the corners are crowded
With the sisters of so many other men
And the prices have fallen.

Throw them out and claim our credit,
We cleansed the city of Whores and Bastards
And the city is with us,
While they starve in its outskirts:
All the attendees of a silent funeral.
Their procession lies still ...

Curriculum vitae

The details of life, they asked her to reveal, didn't exist without excluding the life she knew to be. She sat in front of a computer screen and watched her face in a soft glare. *Straight into my face, no angles makes me look younger*, she thought of the light. She tried to remember when it all started to change, her eyes drowning deeply into the sockets and the skin around them turning into parchment. She couldn't tell, *ten or twenty years ago?* Gently, she took a tiny fold of skin of the right eyelid between her fingers and pressed it for a couple of seconds, then watched the skin stay raised for a long time. *Dry, almost dead.*

They asked for her name, and she thought, *my name*, closing her tired eyes. On that winter day, when she was six, it was still early enough to hear another story.

"It will be the last one," her mother said, "and then you have to brush your teeth and go to bed."

She nodded, smiling, embracing her waist tightly and leaning forward in a green armchair.

"Your name was supposed to be Katherine," her mother continued, "but every time the nurse brought you to me for feeding, I would say Mary Magdalene, and the name repeated itself in my head many times until I decided to let it be."

They asked for her birth date as if such a thing can be measured with numbers. Is it the one expected by a doctor and written in a small column of a chart? Is it the primordial moment of pushing forth and knowing it has to be done without knowing what is it that has to be done? Is it the one filled with a sudden flame that opens the lungs? Or is it the moment of the first sound and the first touch that can be sensed through the walls of the womb, signaling the vastness of all life?

Marital status, she read the next column. Were they asking about the empty now or were they asking about all that she carried within? The first man died in her arms, white eyes turned backward and purple swollen lips that couldn't stop shivering even after the last gasp was long gone. She put her finger into his mouth; his tongue was coarse like a piece of wood. The second man drowned in the river during the

summer they spent together. He jumped; his perfect body still arches in the air on the background of full trees in the low afternoon light above the meadow where they left their bicycles. No one knew how shallow was the water and how rocky was the bottom. His eyes were open under the water, blue coins on the white bedrock. The third man came at night while the candle was burning in the window and lay down beside her. He was the one who with time became the flesh of her children. The one who touched her gently and opened her body with ease, causing the rivers to rush through her arms and legs, helping the wind to finally open her clenched fists and let go of all that needed to be released. His fingers traveled her skin to help her remember and then forget without sadness.

Children, she looked at the page. Her body absorbed the first one; she was told it happens all the time. It became her breath; the wave that carries her through the days from dawn to dusk. She doesn't have to remember to know that it is there. The second one was born in the pool of blood she saw with a corner of her eye while her body was thrown up in the air in convulsions no one could stop. The words spoken that day hung above her head like heavy grapes; we are losing her, but she couldn't understand if it was about her or the baby. The third one, a boy, came on a quiet spring day and sucked her breasts with the vigor of someone who was destined to live a long and healthy life. This is the one who told her, *I love you more*, and when he did, she knew he would carry her fears of water and fire into the future, believing in the end of the world and the Day of Judgment. The fourth one inhabited her dreams. It was a girl with curly dark hair that bounced with the smallest movement. She wore summer dresses and shoes with pink flowers propped around her ankles, and she was to remain four, in a space beyond simple time.

Education, her eyes wandered off the screen out the window where a thick forest hummed tirelessly, but all she could see was the face of the Latin teacher she tried to forget, but couldn't since forgetting in vain turns always into remembering. There was only the face with thick-framed glasses and a mole the size of a small cherry on the

lower lip. Every time the teacher spoke, the cherry moved forward and backward, almost falling off the lip, but always being caught in the last second. The thick glasses guarded expressionless eyes that when closed, made the face disappear, leaving only the restless cherry; you didn't pass, it said. With a knot in her navel, she closed her eyes again. The name escaped her, but she remembered his white wavy hair and an open face of a god. His hands traveled the air with open fingers, drawing fluid images with grace and conviction. We don't really know Jesus, he said, because all we know is what they chose to include in the Bible and this is only part of the truth. His palms turned upward and his fingers opened and curved to hold invisible apples. He weighted them for a while and then said; the Gospel of Thomas says Jesus was real, flesh and blood and he knew how to resurrect someone from the dead, but he also knew how to kill. And he did. There was a strange silence in the room; she could still recollect the sound of her own breath brushing the back of her throat. And he did, the god repeated his statement. Jesus, as a boy, killed another boy who, after heavy rain, was trying to stop water from running down the path. Jesus said, let the water run, but the boy didn't listen. Jesus touched him with a stick, and the boy fell to the ground and died. I am asking, said the god, who was Jesus? She opened her eyes and looked at the thick forest. *Who am I?*

A Flash of Self



If I Were a Dandelion

If I were a dandelion,
And the wind my lady,
And we the rulers of the lawn,
The grass blades our subjects
And my kingship as delicate as my crown
Of white hair,
And my death as eminent
As the gusty howls of my lady's temper,
I wonder:
Could she, a force of nature,
And I, a commoner,
Be joined in matrimony,
And live in harmony
Or am I a fool
And love a silly thing,
A dream?

Moon Women

We, the moon women, give birth
to womanity, alas
humanity seems
waning
where
when
why
we
w
w
we
will
while
waxing
new lives
before waning
again, womanity wants
the moon with humanity
and humility with womility

Paréntesis

Esta noche, me caí del altar de tus lamentos ...
y me convertí en aserrín liviano
de arbustos y abetos ...

¡ay de aquellos Dioses!
que derramaron lluvia varios meses,
consagrando maldiciones
a los fantasmas y tribulaciones.

Soy arrastrado por los vientos del pasado,
donde sólo ha quedado,
el olor a todo recuerdo maltratado.

¡ por la furia !
¡ por la inconsciencia !

Pero sólo busco la convergencia
de tu espíritu, de tu esencia.

Hoy la vida me ha regalado algo;
el saber que la distancia,
sólo es, otro camino que me lleva a ti.

Absolución.

Parenthesis

Tonight, I fell from the altar of your cries ...
and I converted into a light sawdust
made from bushes and fir trees ...

Oh these gods!
that have cried many months,
consecrating curses
to the spirits and tribulations.

I am pulled along by the winds of the past,
where it has only remained,
the scent of everything memory of mistreatment.

by fury!
by the unconscious!

But, I only search for the convergence
of your spirit, your essence.

Today, life has gifted me something;
the knowledge that distance,
only is, another path that takes me to you.

Absolution.

Translated by Stephen T. Shurgalla

Sunburn

It started out as fun and games,
dressing up to go to a festival,
me, wearing a long flowing
black skirt and corset top,
you in slacks and an open neck shirt,
both of us in boots.
We made a day of it,
roaming about the festival,
listening to the wailing of the bagpipes,
that constant rise and fall
of *Amazing Grace* and *Ireland Forever*.
Us laughing when we saw our
friend wearing that kilt of his,
his long brown socks
just shy of his knees,
and him, leaning against that
rickety wooden fence
smoking his pipe.
We danced then, me moving
my skirt in time to the music,
you laughing as I showed off my
knees and bare legs.
That twinkle in your eye
telling of mirth ... and something else.
Throwing back our heads and
spinning in circles remembering
our childhood, and falling
breathless to the ground
ruddy with smiles.
Then the ride home,
sleepy from all the sun,
my shoulders sore and throbbing,
and you stopping at the store to
buy me some aloe.

Snow Queen

In the 8x10 glossy, December 1942
You pose in a white swimsuit in the snow
In Indiana, before the man you love
Crashes his plane, before the cancer, the kids
The other disappointments grow—a pretty girl
At 17, an icy smile, a girl already too grown
The men at home shoot birds
A feathery bowl in the snow, a few red dots
A few small evergreens
The war just one year old
And you—their Snow Queen

Reject of Heaven



The Red Phone Booth

Incommunicado
With a broken down telephone
Broken down from too much use
Too much use from being too available
Too available from its brazen color—red

Red without meaning,
Red with promises lingering
Behind the rush of wind

And the trees are barren with icicles,
Their branches stoic in their suffering.

Incommunicado.
Perhaps words can escape to intended recipients
Intended to break the grip of frost
Frost that stops at nothing to shut down a town
Shut down anything save things with the color red.

Red without meaning,
Red with promises lingering
Behind the rush of wind

And the trees are barren with icicles,
Their branches stoic in their suffering.

Color Wolf

My mother had warned me to watch out for color wolves, but I did not believe her. Maybe as a child I had, when tales of the ghosts that walked the hinterlands still had the force to haunt my dreams. But at twenty-four, I thought of myself as a modern girl—a modern girl in a modern world. All that superstition was a part of the old China that we young Chinese had left behind. I no more believed in color wolves than I did in the ghosts of my ancestors. We might sweep their tombs on *Qing Ming Jie*, but no one under thirty believed that the spirits were really there. We might make nods to tradition, but the old ways had never set roots deep in our hearts.

I was a medical student in Suzhou that summer. The supervisory doctor needed somebody to go to Fujian province to collect some data on patient care in the rural hospitals. He picked me not because he had great faith in me. It was actually just the opposite. Dr. Li had ten medical students under his supervision. Seven were men, which automatically gave them the top slots in Dr. Li's mind. Of the three women I was the quietest, and this Dr. Li seemed to equate with stupidity. I think he sent me because he saw me as the most expendable.

"This trip will do you good, Zhang Xiaojie," he told me. "Maybe it will help you find your tongue. A doctor needs one sometimes, you know."

That only made it sound like punishment to me, but as with a prisoner who has just received his sentence, I didn't really have a choice.

It would be more dramatic if I could tell you it was my first time to take such a trip, but I had taken trains by myself many times. My hometown in Jiangxi province is about a twelve-hour ride from Suzhou, and twice a year during my undergraduate days I had made the long journey home, usually alone. The trips were typically weary but uneventful and certainly nothing to fear.

I had bought my ticket a few days before I left. The hospital had given me a little money for travel. In one way, it covered the cost; in another it wasn't nearly enough. As anyone who has traveled by train in China can tell you, the price of the ticket varies by the level

of comfort. If you've got enough money to get a sleeper berth, you can read for a few hours and then fall asleep and wake up the next morning near the place you are going. But if you have to spend the minimum, you end up on a hard seat feeling each shake of the train as it snakes its way through the night. The hospital gave me enough money for a hard seat. I didn't have the money to move up to a sleeper, so I bought the cheap ticket and braced myself for a long night. I've had foreign friends tell me that they would never travel this way, but for Chinese students, it is the usual way, and we only dream of the day we can ride in the sleeper.

The train was set to leave at 8:30 in the evening, and I arrived at the station just under an hour before that. Although the sun had nearly set, the June heat had not lifted, and the skin of the people sitting on the ground outside the building glistened with sweat. The guards herded the crowd through the security check, and I felt the warm flesh of so many bodies pressed together and thought of all the germs passing between us and of all the sickness in the world and of how little a doctor could really do to cure it.

The Fujian train came only a few minutes before the departure time, and all the people who had formed a line at the gate made a dash to the platform, knowing that the margin was slim. As I walked along the train toward car number seven, I saw through the window some passengers at rest on their sleeper car beds. I envied them.

The train began to move less than a minute after I boarded. Car number seven was crowded, with every seat taken and the poorest of travelers, seat-less, stranded on the metal floor between cars like a flock of birds with clipped wings. I found the seat on my ticket already taken by a man with weathered skin sleeping with a straw hat in his lap. I tapped him gently on the shoulder, but he did not stir.

"Dui buqi," I said and shook him with a little more force. *"Zhe ge wo de zuowei."*

He opened his eyes and stood up and joined the other lost birds on the metal floor. He departed with eyes downcast and the deference that had been instilled in him since birth.

That was when I first noticed the color wolf. He was in the seat

next to mine with a newspaper half-concealing his face. But his eyes were above the paper and fixed on mine, not on the page. They were wider than the average Chinese man's eyes and somehow darker, so wide and dark that I could see clearly the doubled reflection of myself in them. The sight made me shudder, though I didn't know why. He dropped the paper into his lap and smiled at me—a smile that was more mocking than friendly. When his thin lips parted, the teeth that emerged were oversized and stained from tobacco. I turned away and sat down and tried not to think of him.

Like so many who travel by train in China, I had brought a simple dinner along—a cup of noodles that could be cooked with the hot water available between cars. I got up to fill my cup. So many passengers were eating in the mid-evening that a noodle scent filled the air—strong enough to drive out the days' sweat and even the waft of cigarette smoke that floated in from the floor between cars.

When I returned to my seat, the color wolf had folded the newspaper on his left thigh, and he appeared to be sleeping. Yet when the noodles had finished cooking and I began to eat, I had the discomfiting sense of being watched. I looked a little closer and saw something I hadn't noticed before. He was in the same position, with his legs stretched out and his head back and his arms folded. His eyes were closed, but not fully so. There was there narrowest of gaps at the base of both lids. He was watching me through a screen of lashes.

I lost my appetite and only managed to eat half the noodles. Across the aisle, a group of six students were laughing as they played cards. That made me feel safer—to be in a well-lighted place with others nearby. But the color wolf's eyes stayed on me, burning like a low bulb that begins to hurt if it's held for too long near the skin.

Aiming for distraction, I took out one of my medical textbooks and tried to read. The words rushed through my brain and left as quickly as they came in, hardly making an impression. I stole a few glances at the color wolf over my book. He wore a short-sleeved white shirt, but it was not tucked in and bore a brown stain the size of a small coin beneath the pocket. His light brown pants were stylishly cut but frayed at the bottoms. He wore sandals rather than shoes, and no socks—something I had seen many foreign men do, but never a Chinese. On each big toe, a few hairs popped out over the leather. He was lean all over, but his

bare arms were muscular and showed that he might have surprising strength. His hair was a little long and disheveled, and above his lips a downy mustache had begun to grow.

Within an hour or so, the card game waned, and most of the players began to nap fitfully. The air in the car was heavy, and sleep floated about like a sickness. Soon, I too drifted off and dozed with my hands folded on the open book. I woke not with a start but with the almost imperceptible sense of being touched. The color wolf appeared to be sleeping beside me. His eyes were fully closed now, and his head tilted to the side, so near to me that his hair brushed lightly against my shoulder.

But it was not his hair that alarmed me, not his hair that stirred me from my sleep. Instead, the color wolf rested with his right arm stretched across his waist and his open palm cupping my hip. I tried to shift away from him, but something restrained me. No matter how much I willed myself to move, my body remained motionless. The color wolf opened his eyes and smiled at me—the same smile I had seen on him when I first took my seat. His hand began to move slowly, around and around my hip in ever widening circles and then down the outside of my thigh until it found the hem of my skirt well below the knee. I trembled all over and struggled to shift away, but I could not break the spell. I felt his fingers begin to crawl up the skin of my inner thigh like the damp legs of a spider.

Suddenly, the train violently shook, and the lights flickered on and off. Had we hit something on the track? The train steadied its course, but the shock of it had awakened the passengers, who now looked about with bleary eyes. The color wolf's hand had stopped high up my thigh, his fingers stilled by the commotion. The old woman sitting across from the color wolf looked at his hand and then into my eyes. Then she turned quickly away and kept her eyes on the floor.

I don't know if it was the shaking of the train or the shame that I felt under the old woman's gaze that set me free. I jumped out of my seat, surprised by the strength I had reclaimed.

"Jiuren! Ni zuo shenme!" I shouted. "Stop! What are you doing!"

The card players looked on with moderate curiosity, peering sleepily at what they probably thought was a lover's squabble. The old woman stared out the window into the featureless dark. The color wolf

smiled at me and twitched his fingers on his knee.

I grabbed my bag and took refuge on the metal floor. It would be the longest night I'd ever spend, standing and shaking through the night. But I could not go back there with the color wolf waiting in his lair. Discomfort was a small price to pay for safety.

The man in the straw hat waited for a while and then, seeing that I had no intention to return, reclaimed the seat I'd taken from him. We Chinese are a resourceful people; what one person discards another will surely treasure. And, as everyone knows that color wolves have little taste for aging men, what had he to fear? He had his seat, and I had my safety. We could both consider ourselves happy.

This is the way I have told the story the few times that I have told it—to my cousin, to my closest friend, to the Englishman who later became my husband. It is the way I usually tell it to myself. It is mostly true but not wholly so.

Maybe memory works this way, taking raw facts and reshaping them in ways that make it a little easier for us to live with ourselves. My mother warned me to watch out for color wolves, but I did not believe her. I do believe in color wolves now. I believe in them because one still lives within me. They cannot be driven out by something so simple as the shake of a train or an old woman's gaze. And once a color wolf gets inside you he will never come out. He is with me when I see a certain kind of man on the street—a man who has that look in his eyes, a man with a body that is hungry and lean. He is with me when my husband touches me, taking over my husband's body, taking over me. He is with me in my dreams.

The old woman's eyes could not break the spell, though she surely saw, the only one who knows besides the color wolf and me. And the shame did not come from the woman's eyes. It comes from within me, from knowing that I did not/could not/would not refuse his touch and that, intermingled with the horror was—and here I must pause for I can hardly think the words—something much too close to wanting to tell the story whole.

Storm Drain

The wrought iron portcullis,
Ever the gates are barred.
The crashing sound echoes,
Not of falling steel striking stone,
But rather water hurrying past the entrance
And onward through the castle's halls
To the court of Poseidon.

The locked gate holds back
The branches and broken brush,
Denying those bark-clad petitioners their audience.
These poor souls huddle together,
Banging the bars in protest,
Spurred to hostility by the free passage
Of the lord's favored subjects.

That gate, an unrelenting arbiter of fate,
Omnipresent and unyielding,
It lies in solemn silence,
The only break
In the ever-growing,
Ever-blackening,
Endless walls of asphalt.

Reflection

Wrung tight round my finger
Taut coils ready to spring
Approaching funnel
Tornado ferocity

Pushed to the limit
Tortured in texture
Coaxed to its highest peak
Volcanic eruption

what existed ceased
what defined released
life takes the place
of what covers my face

Vibrancy fades
Luster abates
Leaves fall
A silver streak tells it all

Ribs



Mujer Hecha De Muchas

Yo soy tsalagi pa'que tu lo sepa
No es todo y nunca olvídale
Soy japonesa, hispana, y negra
Mi gente son guerreros que han luchado
Con orgullo profundo, como los boricuas
Somos brillantes y más fuerte
Hemos llorado en las pista de lagrimas
Nunca se subestime
La energía de nuestra integridad
No soy mestiza ni estereotipo
Esta mezcla hermosa que es mía
A mi familia, digo gracias
Mi hicieron ¡una mujer hecha de muchas!

A Woman Made from Many

I am Cherokee just so you know
That's not all and never forget it
I'm Japanese, Hispanic and black
My people are warriors that have fought
With tremendous pride, like boricuas
We are brilliant and stronger
We have cried on the trail of tears
Never underestimate the power of our integrity
I'm not a half-breed or a stereotype
This beautiful mix that's mine
To my family I say thanks
Because they made me a woman made from many

Falling Apart

It was on a beautiful autumn chilled day that she told him she was leaving him. She knew how he would react. And that knowledge made it worse. He didn't look at her. Not when she said the words, not when the tears came fast and hard like a glass of water suddenly spilled, not even when her heart was laid open and bare. Pulsing and vulnerable, her soul aching and raw. He was closed off, an enigma. Distant and out of reach. His silence revealing nothing. Telling her everything. The leaves—burnt pumpkin, harvest gold, scarlet—rained down on them in a gusty flurry. The air smelled deliciously smoky. "Please say something," she begged. Pleading for connection, communication, a chance for them. "Does it matter what I think?" he responded. So that was it. The tree was stripped bare, the leaves decaying in piles around them. Bleeding their reds and golds.

Going Out of One's Way

When one stone moves an inch
A whole mountain
Must beg its pardon
And find comfort.

Living is sometimes easier
For a stone
Than man.

The Principal

The Principal was the blackest nightmare of every student from the lowliest kindergartner to the mightiest fifth grader. If you had to see his secretary it meant you were in trouble. If you were sent to his office, it meant you were in trouble, underlined and with a capital T. I had seen others sent, but I never thought I would have to go there myself. My first and only visit took place on the first day of first grade.

Standing by the glass doors of the school entrance, I realized I hadn't the faintest idea where my new classroom was. I'd already been down the flickering hall twice in search of it, but I hadn't been able to work up the bravery to knock on any of the imposing wooden doors. The tiny, deep-set windows were well above my head. Students milled around me, heading to their own classrooms. They obviously knew where they were going. How did they know where their new rooms were?

I avoided looking at the secretary's desk, which was rooted squarely in the middle of the main hall. For a moment I thought about asking where my classroom was. The idea was terrifying, and I quickly dropped it. You only went to the adults if something was wrong, and I wasn't about to admit that yet. I was fine—perfectly fine—I just had to figure this out. I stood at the blaze of the glass doors, racking my five-year-old brain for some clue of where I should be going.

"Hey, are you new?"

I looked up to see two girls staring at me. They had the unmistakable aura of certainty and were positively exuding maturity. These girls knew what they were doing. I was flooded with relief.

"Are you new?" The first girl asked again. The second chewed absently on a frizzy brown strand of hair, watching me with owlish blue eyes.

I was deeply offended. Of course I was new. Everyone had moved up a grade, including myself. Did they really think I'd been held back? They were, of course, asking me if I was a transfer student, but it never occurred to me that I might have misunderstood their question.

"Yes." I answered with certainty.

"Come with us." They said briskly, sandwiching me between them. My relief evaporated once I realized where they were headed. We stopped in front of the mountain of the secretary's desk, and she cast a tired glance over the three of us.

"She's new." They explained promptly.

The secretary rolled a terrifying eye down at me. “Which grade are you in?”

“Second grade.”

Did I give the wrong answer because I was too nervous to think properly, or was I genuinely confused about which grade I was in? I still don’t know. In truth I was entering first grade. But hasty logic assured me that if last year had been my first year in school, than this year was my second. Therefore I must be in second grade.

The secretary rose, thanked the two girls, and sent them off to their classes. She led me down the hall, stopping before an unremarkable door that looked exactly like every other I had seen. It swung open with majestic finality.

I looked dubiously back at the staring faces. These were not my classmates. I didn’t see a single familiar face. I looked up at the secretary and told her so, and a crease appeared on her forehead. We returned to her office, and I watched anxiously to see what would happen now. She knocked softly on a door at the back of the room. It was a door I had seen only at a distance, or in my nightmares. My knees shook furiously and my teeth clattered madly in my head as the secretary half led, half dragged me into the Principal’s Office. I shrank under the weight of my backpack, wishing for once that I were smaller so that I could hide under it altogether. We crossed the threshold. The room was small, nondescript, and a pleasant shade of cucumber green. The portly, smiling, dreaded Mr. Morningstar sat placidly behind his desk.

The secretary explained my predicament, and the Principal turned to me. What had I done to deserve this? I was so petrified that he had to repeat his question a second time. He asked quietly which grade I’d been in the previous year. Nauseous with fear, I answered faintly that I had been in kindergarten. It was as simple as that.

I followed the smiling secretary from the office, relieved at having been pardoned and unsure of what I had done wrong to begin with. Principal Morningstar was doubled up in his seat, laughing. Vaguely I wondered what he found so hilarious.

The Mane Event



Cat

Frisky feline.
Frantic furry
friend.

What thought
drives your claws
into
my wall? Or to
scatter your
food
on my floor?

What brings you to climb
my drapes eat
my plants claw
my couch

Yet win my heart
with a purr?

Preguntas sobre los templos

Cielo azul
de Teotihuacán
toca las cimas des
unos templos que son montañas.

Yo regalo una mirada arriba a las nubes
y pregunto porque templos así habían construido.
Más preguntas vienen a mi mente. Yo no conozco la razón
pero yo siento que el espíritu del pasado posee una energía que
es para siempre fuerte y vivirá más adelante. ¡La energía es profundo!

Questions about the Temples

Blue sky
of Teotihuacán
touches the peaks of
the temples that are like mountains.

I give a look above the clouds and
I ask why temples like this had been constructed.
Many questions come to my mind. I do not know the reason
but I feel that the spirit possessed an energy that is very strong and
that it will continue to live further onward in time. The energy is profound!

Looking Back: The Right Way

This would not
be a problem
if I were young
to look back at
what I could
have done.

Tie my shoes
the right way
eat my food
the right way
brush my teeth
the right way

Hello and please
always thanks
seen not heard
watch my mouth
bow and pray
the right way

Stand in line
sit up straight
salute the flag
pay attention
take direction
the right way

Throw the ball
swing the bat
play the game
run the track
give high-fives
the right way

Start the car
give it gas
not too fast
not too slow
press and brake
the right way

Shine my shoes
make my bunk
clean latrine
march in step
fire my weapon
the right way

Talk to girl
kiss the girl
touch the girl
walk the aisle
and divorce
the right way

Dance and sing
the right way
work and play
the right way
spend and save
the right way

This is not
a problem
if you are young
to look back at
what you could
have done

the right way.

Not So Light Fingers

I don't know what came over me, or why I tried it, or what possessed me—so to speak. I focused my eyes on some imaginary point somewhere in the distance, and let my hearing tune out as I repeatedly reached down the front of my dress, into that ridiculous training bra, and placed the almost-stolen items onto the cashier's counter. Through my self-induced haze, I could feel everyone's eyes on me: Karen's, Mr. Lund's, my classmates ... I knew that at this point my level of humiliation was so great, my cheeks weren't even red, instead they were chalk white, maybe even a little green ...

Perhaps the training bra was to blame. At the tender age of nine, there was certainly no need for me to wear one. However, my mother seemed to think differently when she caught me in the bath one night and decided that I needed to start wearing a bra. Looking down at my flat chest, I just couldn't see what she meant.

True to her word, she dragged me to the mall the very next day to buy me my very first "bra." I was less than eager to join her on this endeavor, and I looked wistfully at the carousel as I was pulled past it. Usually, when we came to the mall my mother would take me to the children's bookstore, and we would eat greasy pizza for lunch. Sometimes we would even stop into the Disney store, and I would stare at the humungous pile of stuffed animals in complete wonder and joy. Not today. Today we were going straight to one of the many maze-like department stores.

Women's apparel was located on the top floor. It had its own special corner, that was populated by strange contraptions. Straps and spandex stuck out everywhere, like the frizzy hair of a grizzled old lady. Rounded cones, as big as my face, protruded from every possible angle and like the grizzled old lady, they bombarded my exposed face with kisses as I tried to wind my way through them. I stared at the way their rounded tips compressed inward—they reminded me of eggs in some bizarre way, but they bended instead of cracked.

While I was making my study of bendable eggs, my mother was conspiring with the sales woman.

"Natasha!" she boomed, "C'mon, I want you to try this on!"

Grasping my hand, she led me past the sales woman, whose breasts

looked like overgrown melons with nipples that had been surgically implanted into her chest. I was deposited in a narrow cubicle with a full-length mirror and a broken lock. There was hardly enough room for both my mother and me, but by wedging myself into a corner, we managed.

My mother was smiling as she held up the thing that looked like half of a white undershirt, with a band of white elastic at the bottom. The elastic fit snugly around my ribs, but the top was puffy and loose over my chest. This was my training bra; I was told I would grow into it.

I was supposed to wear my training bra everyday. God forbid that my invisible breasts should suddenly appear, and I was caught without any support. I was quite sure that no one else in my third grade class had to wear a training bra, so I made up my mind that I wouldn't tell anyone that I had to wear one. Not even my best friend, Karen Lund.

Karen had become my first real friend since I had moved to Howard County from Baltimore. She was very nice, and she loved fantasy and adventure stories just like I did. Karen came from a big family, and since I was an only child, I liked to go over to her house and just observe what a big family was like.

Her family liked to observe me as well. Mr. Lund, Karen's father, was the bishop at the local Mormon Church, so her entire family was very religious. My grandparents were communists, and my parents were both atheists and liberals—to say the least I did not come from a religious background. Karen and her siblings always thought I was very funny and interesting. Mr. and Mrs. Lund also seemed to find me interesting, and they generally liked me, but they were wary of me at the same time. Mr. Lund always seemed to like me more than his wife did, so when I learned that Karen and I would be in his group for the field trip to the zoo, I was very excited.

Karen and I sat together on the bus. We giggled together over strange innocent things that our young minds came up with, and talked about which animals we wanted to see first.

Mr. Lund was a great chaperone. He let us run around, and he knew all kinds of interesting and gross facts about different animals

that made us laugh or declare “EW!” at the top of our lungs. I was having such a great time that I almost completely forgot about the secret I was hiding under my dress.

After we had explored the entire zoo, the kids whose parents had given them money wanted to go to the gift shop. In good humor, Mr. Lund shepherded us in that direction.

The gift shop was very bright, and gleamed slightly. Plastic key chains with photographs of pandas caught the light, while rubber snakes and pens that said “THE NATIONAL ZOO” sparkled like jewels in my eyes. I began to get a strange sensation in my fingers as I looked at these things. I felt giddy, and I wanted to laugh; my breath caught in my throat. The fuzzy face of a stuffed tiger stared me straight in the eye, and his stuffed monkey friend smiled in a silent dare. The decision to take what I wanted wasn’t entirely conscious. I felt feverish as I began stuffing pens and other small souvenirs into my puffy training bra. I felt wild as I picked up anything that would fit and stuffed it down my top. There was no fully formed thought in my head—there was just, “I WANT! I WANT!”

“Alright, kids! Time to go!” Mr. Lund yelled from up at the cashier’s counter. He was buying the smiling stuffed monkey for Karen. The cashier cleared his throat and motioned with his finger for Mr. Lund to come closer. Whispering into Mr. Lund’s ear, he pointed a very long accusatory finger at me ...

I sat alone on the bus ride back home. My classmates had formed into small groups and were whispering together. Karen sat holding her Father’s hand. Someone whispered a bit too loudly, “I think she was trying to STEAL!”

I felt myself trying to react for the first time. My voice was very high, and I yelled, “I WAS NOT!” I could feel my throat close, and I knew that now my cheeks were red instead of white.

What I dreaded most was facing my mother. I knew that Mr. Lund had informed her about what had happened. To my surprise, my mother was more understanding of me than anyone else had been. She saw the wracking guilt and humiliation I was feeling, and she decided that was punishment enough. My mother knew that I knew I had done something

wrong, and she trusted me enough to know that I would learn from my mistakes. Why I made that mistake was not the most important thing. I didn't deserve to be branded as "bad" because I wore a training bra or because I had tried to shoplift as a reaction to either stress or growing up.

I don't think I ever appreciated my mother's faith in me until now. We often hold onto the little embarrassments—we hold onto all of the unneeded training bras, throughout a good portion of our lives. I went through a great deal of my life believing I was bad, but if I had just looked past all of the insignificant dramas I had with my mother, if I had thought about these dramas as a whole, I may have seen that, in fact, I wasn't such a horrible person. Time really can heal, and in my case, it has proven that my mother was right about at least one thing; Even years later, I do learn from my mistakes.

The Adventure Travel Agency

For months, Aunt Agatha was ferried by a favorite niece. Rather the niece ferried a book-like box with a funeral parlor address on the spine and Agatha inside.

The car was a gift from Agatha and it gave them both a good ride—mundane errands—just the grocery store or dentist and back—the here and now—nothing lengthy or

unexpected—except for one errand when hoodlums copped Agatha out her trunk, and her niece thought that was the end—but we need more—some *deus ex machina*—some denouement

And so Agatha resurrected on a spring day months later—popping her head—or box—out from the daffodils and debris blooming in some unsuspecting backyard whose owners graciously rewrapped her

and sent her back to the number tattooed on her spine. Thus Agatha had a second (home) coming with her favorite niece who quit the taxi trade soon after she drove post

haste to the river where Uncle Johnny had been previously delivered. This is a good, true story—and it is a good river—though not the Styx—and a good round trip—return to sender.

Portugal Doors



Red Eye

Have a nice day's are exchanged.
He reaches for the double shot
Red eye with French roast,
A distinctive aroma.
Without a word, he appears
At the counter with cream
in hand and sugar by the pound.
Then leaves for another daily grind.
Everyday I've seen him,
And everyday it's the same.
What happens in our lives
When the bell rings,
When the door shuts,
When the cup runs dry?

Diminish

I have known the radiant relief of potbellied stoves,
Solid in their corners, steadfast in the supply of heat,
Heaped with logs and old newspapers,
Home in comfortably crafted kitchens,
Cream and gold tiles, walls, counters,
Cheerful copper pots shining on the wall,
Reminiscent of summer soups,
Fresh from the garden.
And I have seen coldness from the same kitchen,
More acerbic than lemons, sharp, more dangerous than knives,
Resentment sits, an unwelcome guest, at the worn wood table,
Silencing forgiveness on thin lips, understanding on drawn faces,
Solidifying distance and impeding understanding.

Poetic Tyranny

Dewy drops dripping into treacherous points
Frosted panes flaking into ferns
Celebrated in song
Made famous by feathery turns of phrase

What escapes poetic verse?
What avoids being painted profound?

From the mole underground to unseen stars in the sky
All have been touched, tickled and tempted into taking turns

Prodded into poems
Snipped up to be made suitable for song
Argued into art

What is still not there?
What still escapes ream, scroll, canvas, routine rigmarole?

I think it's that goddamn catch in the carpet
I always trip over
I hate that thing

Chef Extraordinaire

There's something about love,
when it takes root in food.

That's when the soul comes out,
from the collard greens,
to the Mac & Cheese,
down to the tatters, whose sweet
delights make one want to jump up
and holler, "Pass another round, of
meatloaf, if you please!"

There beneath the moon and spoon bread
lies the rise of flaky biscuits,
sun kissed by the dew of melons ripe
from the vine.

You whisper that it must be a Southern thang!
No, it's a calling.
Behind every mouth watering morsel,
that has been rolled, floured, sifted, and coaxed,
is the story of a heart that's true.
True to its nature, never skipping a beat.

Raleigh, around here isn't a destination, or a
place of note, but a man, whose philosophy could
be: "That anything worth making is worth making well,
and preferably with love."

No one who enters his kitchen ever leaves it wanting,
from hunger or thirst.

With Raleigh it isn't just about food, or a routine.
It's something above and beyond,
which his patrons' sense,
that leaves them clamoring for more.

And it is to this end St. Raleigh, Chef Extraordinaire that,
we send out to you their praises by the score.

Cocoa in Cairo



Magic Baristas

The magic coffee barista makes cappuccino delight
Drinks that wake you up after a long night
Energizing espresso gods fixing lattes with a smile
And double shot afternoons to go the extra mile
Syrup shots, with foam or not
Iced frappiccino when the day is hot
Mocha style for your sweet spot
Keeping regular drip forever brewing
Decaf for those who just like the flavor
Roasting bean combinations, ever perusing
Perfect aromas for you to savor
Calling out drinks making three at a time
Moving along quickly an eager line
Keeping the fixing aria filled and clean
For those who say yes to room for cream
Magic baristas will make tea if you desire
Tazo or chi whatever choice will inspire
How can I learn, and do you hire?

Birth of a Reader

My pudgy finger trudged from vowel to consonant,
and the constellation of letters, syllables, and punctuation
aligned, forming words, phrases, questions.
Words like raindrops spattering my head for the first time.
Perplexed, but thrilled. *Ecstatic*.

The dictionary was an accident. I thumbed my way
past thick words and thin sentences. *Perusing*.
Some of them I knew.
The familiarity of *dinner*. The excitement of *playground*.
Words fun to pronounce:
Connecticut. *Planetary*. *Harmony*. *Gymnasium*.
Words difficult to spell correctly, and the
glory when your test came back:
Aquarium. *Extremely*. *Octopus*. *Massachusetts*.

Sunday mornings my mother and I skipped church,
instead heading off to the library in a miniature Japanese car.
Lounging in plastic chairs: purple, yellow, green.
Enormous books, inflated letters, bold pictures.
Craning my head to better observe vertical titles,
and the first dull ache in the left side of my neck.

Things only got worse from there. Big books with small letters.
Like a heroin addict, each new story a new buzz,
a strange syringe bubbling with plot and subtext, fused with my own
curiosity. A mixture that I plunged deep into my cortex,
and shivered.

I seethe with jealousy. Selfish infants with nothing but newness,
a galaxy of fresh ideas and bizarre words.
What will they feel upon discovering *amanuensis*?
Rotunda. *Progeny*. *Photosynthesis*. *Languorously*.
And the shower of poems and novels yet to wash over them.
Lines they will someday commit to memory:

“Quintessence of dust.”

“Daddy, Daddy, you bastard I’m through.”

“All right, then, I’ll go to hell.”

How lucky they are, dozing lazily, or languorously,
unaware of the pleasant goose bumps they’ll get from
Heliocentric. Zeitgeist. Recalcitrant. Ampersand.

I know these words and characters intimately.

The introductions, like rain, can never be felt twice.

Bullfights in Spain, depressed princes,

Louisiana feminists and existential French murderers.

Salacious. Curriculum. Philharmonic. Juxtaposition.

All quietly familiar.

Prosaic is the word, I think.

A small tragedy not to experience
that hypnosis a second or third time,
even by masters whose plots and words swing
back and forth, back and forth, back and forth.
What other word is there but *nostalgia*?

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 1920's.

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