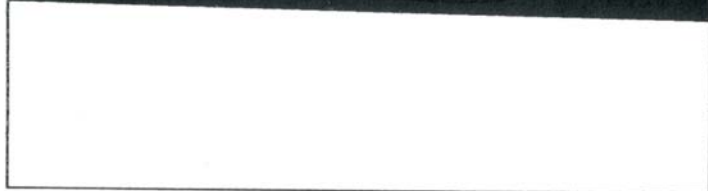
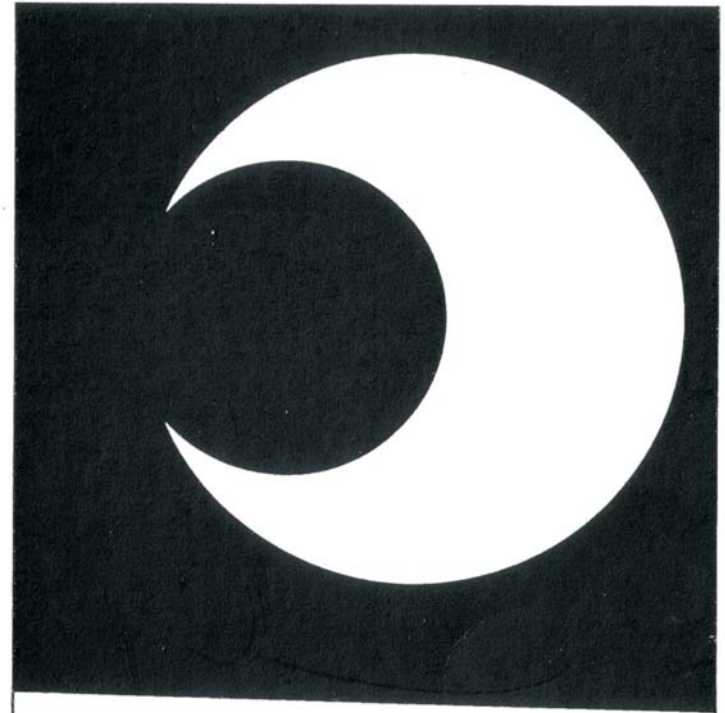


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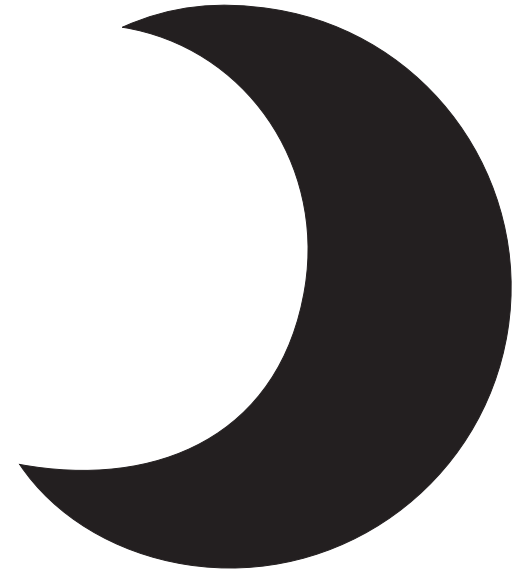


Parting Gifts

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For the Moment, No

Roberta Pantal

Dr. Bloom asked, "How long have you been taking sixteen Excedrin a day and had torn back muscles?"

I told him "It started in the fall when some wise guy said that my good looks would soon be a thing of the past. I insisted I had personality but this guy said he never saw personality featured in a *Playboy* centerfold." Dr. Bloom then said, "Wet heat."

"What?"

"Wet heat," he repeated.

"Okay, wet heat, too."

He said, "You don't understand."

"You're right. There are lots of things I don't understand and one of them is wet heat."

"Wet heat is better than dry heat. But so? What does that mean any way'?"

"What do you think it means?" he asked.

"Chocolate is better than vanilla. But still, so?"

"You still don't understand. I'll demonstrate what I mean." Dr. Bloom took out a water bottle and filled it with hot water, then placed it near my torn muscle. I sat for several minutes leaning against it.

"Was it comfortable?"

"Very."

"Good."

He then removed the hot water bottle and placed a blue electric heating pad next to my back and turned it on low.

"Is that comfortable?"

I nodded yes.

“Which was more comfortable?”

“The hot water bottle.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know.”

“You have to know. Or else I won’t be able to tell you why wet heat is better than dry.”

“Don’t worry, Dr. Bloom. I have faith in your opinion and as a matter of fact, I would believe anything you ever told me if only you promised never to say that wet heat was better than dry.”

“I agree on one condition.”

“What?”

“That you never visit my office again.”

Johnny always thought I had personality. He lives in Brooklyn now with his wife and five children. And even though he was skinny and had a big nose, he loved me. At the time I thought, “Well, he’s not Jewish,” but that was before I knew I’d be single so long. Johnny’s mother was fond of telling people that I was half Italian and that I looked more Italian than Jewish.

She said, “There was never any question about how her Johnny looked. Everyone knows that his big nose is Italian.”

I told her, “People on the street wouldn’t know that.”

“Well, he wears a big Catholic cross,” she responded.

“I know,” I said, “but Johnny’s nose is bigger than his cross.”

What I didn’t say to her was that Johnny used to tell me he had something even bigger than his nose.

I’ve decided to approach life as though I’ll never have sex again, thinking if I’m not expectant I won’t have that hungry look on my face. I have friends who when they have a date with someone they like, go out and sleep with someone they don’t like just so they can be casual with the new man. It’s like cleaning your house before the maid comes so she’ll think you’re neat and clean.

Paulette says, "The ideal situation is going out with two men at once."

"It's difficult enough to find one, how do you expect me to find two?"

"That's the point. They have to believe that you're not always waiting for them."

My relationship with Kevin was like that. Even now I still torture myself thinking if I had worn dark glasses and slinky black dresses, I might still be seeing Kevin who became interested because I was aloof, not available, busy with this and that, running around. When he asked me out, I said, "No." As soon as I no longer felt casual, everything changed. He became busy with this and that, running around.

I complained, "This once a week business is for the birds."

"Now that I'm divorced, I want to explore bachelorhood, take a trip to South America for a year.

"You just want everything your own way."

"You're right."

I bought six pounds of melon-colored stationery and sent Kevin a melon-colored note. Would he like to have a beer sometime? I

thought he might say yes. Once I called and asked, "Would you like to get together?"

He said yes. But then he called back and said no.

Two days later I called and asked, "What happened?"

He said he told me no.

"I know you told me no, but I don't know what you meant."

"No meant no."

"Frequently no meant other things. Like: maybe, perhaps, and even yes. In Israel when people said no, they made a little clicking noise with their mouth, and in Greece they clicked as well as nodded their head up. Sometimes it got very confusing."

"My no is the standard kind. The one where you make no noise with your mouth, but just shake your head from left to right."

"Was your yes the standard kind, too?"

“What yes?”

“The yes before you called and said no.”

“You’re trying to confuse me and right now I can’t think straight and need to be left alone.”

“I have two Excedrin and would be happy to bring them over.

He said, “For the moment, no.”

I told Paulette, “I’m worried because after menopause if a woman doesn’t use her vagina it will atrophy.”

“You have many years before menopause and I don’t understand why you’re worrying about the use of your vagina in your fifties, when you aren’t getting much use from it now.”

“Just because you have a boyfriend and are getting married doesn’t make you better.”

“I don’t think I’m better. In fact, right now I feel worse.”

“What do you have to feel worse about? You have a wonderful guy who loves you. How could that be worse?”

“Just because someone asked me to get married doesn’t mean I have to be grateful. After all, people get married every day.”

“In what country did this take place?”

I don’t think it should be so hard to connect with someone. When I’m on the beach and smile at a man who has been giving me admiring glances, he shouldn’t ignore me. And I shouldn’t have to try and like someone. Try and get accustomed to a man who kisses with his mouth open but refuses to stick his tongue in my mouth. It seems unlikely that he could use any other protruding organ in a successful way. A friend tells me she met a doctor, a nice man. Likes to do things, go places. Has a pool and a Jaguar. But she says he’s short, and ugly, and fat.

Max had a protruding organ that he very much wanted to introduce me to. But I resisted for a long time because he shared it with someone else.

Even though it was the middle of winter, most of the snow had melted in a January thaw. But the grass that reached up to his chest in the summer was still weighed down, so his walking was easy. Oak trees, holding onto clumps of wrinkled leaves, shadowed snow archipelagoes that molded the men’s tracks.

When he sighted the blue jacket, he brought his binoculars up and immediately saw he’d been mistaken. They didn’t have guns, and they surely weren’t men. They were loosely holding onto walking sticks and were lightly pushing each other, like brothers who didn’t want their affection to show.

He dropped the log in the wet snow. He heard the breeze scratching brittle oak leaves, and then a freight’s whistle, still far to the west of them.

What met him at home was a silence he had not for days thought possible. His wife slept on the couch, her hands tucked under a pillow. The baby lay on a plaid blanket spread over a thick green rug. When he saw his dad, his arms and legs squirmed with delight, and his mouth curved up in a smile.

Then something on the soft TV caught the man’s attention.

Someone in overalls and a country shirt was planing a board locked in a vice. After the plane ran over the wood a few times, fingers ran over it, feeling for smoothness, and eyes came down to check level and depth.

The father bent down to his son and, into the healed ear, whispered a promise that would not be remembered, but would perhaps be fulfilled.

He wanted to take the wood downstairs and pile it neatly beside the other pieces drying. Seeing it all together would help. But now he had his son.

“I’m going to nap,” she said. “I can’t take this a minute more.”

He heard her climb the stairs and heard the sound machine turned on. Waves rolled through the house like an ancient ocean coming back to cleanse the continent. He half expected one morning to find trilobites, clams, snails, and sea lilies spread over the bedroom floor like forgotten treasure.

Then he wondered if the apple wood would dry in time to border the dictionary stand.

“Come on down!” Bob Barker yelled to someone in the audience.

The pediatrician had told them the pain in their baby’s ear could not be helped; it had to run its course. Over the baby’s screams, the man tried figuring out how much the refrigerator was that filled the TV screen.

When he passed the picture window he saw the two men with rifles crossing the run-off creek on the valley’s pasture side. He set the baby down and pushed down the button on the intercom to tell her they had trespassers. The sound of surf crashed through the plastic box, spilling into the TV room, her voice floating along like a corpse. “Give me five minutes more,” it said.

“By then they’ll be gone,” he told her. He’d already lost sight of one, but he had the other’s blue jacket held against the tan grasses and pods. They might be after beaver, deer, or fox. “I’ll be right back.”

The ocean receded. He heard steps drifting over the bedroom floor to the landing on the stairs. He wanted to tell her everything both he and she already knew. Instead, he said, “The baby’s on the floor.”

Outside the door he picked up a log from the pile of apple wood he hadn’t yet had the chance to take downstairs.

And then one night he said, “I want to make love to you.”

I said, “Okay.”

He said, “Okay? You know I’m still involved.”

I said, “I know. And I’m still single.”

There is a woman in my building who used to be a lesbian. Today she has a boyfriend. I don’t know when or why she made the change she did, but I think her former girlfriend is far better looking than her current boyfriend.

I think of trying old boyfriends again, giving them one more chance, but then I realize the ones I want to try with are the ones who left me. There is one other man. He calls in the middle of the night and says nothing. I just listen, wondering if he is anybody I know.

budget hearing

this city
smiles
& screws
its littlest
into
the ground
builds
monolithic
luxuries
with small bones

shake
this city
hear it
rattle

Andrew Gettler

Hunter Without a Forest

“I’d screw around a lot more--
that much I’m sure of.”
“I’d screw around a lot more, too,
for sure.”

Two women in the front seat:
one has been married for thirty years,
the other has never been married.
We are friends on our way to the movies.
I am lying down in the back seat listening to them,
pretending I am not too tired to go to the movies,
and wondering if I would feel any better now if I had
screwed around a lot more.

What about abortions? Diseases? Betrayal?
Those nights of sobbing so hard, so long,
you have to keep getting up to vomit?

How can you make your ears forget
the voice of your lover saying
that to touch you now
to touch you there
would leave a smell on those hands
which could not keep from touching you
just a few weeks before?

Easy to think of missed chances:
to feel the sap running, spring again, eternal spring!
We need to get some old slut to tell us her story;
faithless husband, abusive pimp,
the cigarette burn on her stomach that wouldn’t heal,

Apple Wood

Richard Holinger

Almost through, the handsaw caught on the last white muscle
holding the wood together. He took the shorter piece in his small,
delicate hand and twisted the fibers apart, the cold air helping give a
clean break.

He should have fenced the tree. After beavers felled it, muskrats
and porcupines gnawed it smooth. New teeth marks wreathed the
second apple tree, which meant his father’s entire orchard, both trees,
would fall within the year. Not that the trees’ crop--one or two apples
a year--ever warranted the time and hose lengths his father used to
bring water down there, though his father wouldn’t have been happier
using either another way; what made him sad was to see his dead
father’s promise being eaten away.

The apple wood, when dried, would complement the pine he
used in most of the projects he made in his basement shop, his tools,
his father’s, arranged on pegboard from memory. He brushed the fine
sawdust from the log’s cut surface and smelled the musty, moist
fragrance, its dark brown circular interior the color of the sun without
light: some twenty years ago, in Maine, when safe for his eyes to
leave the rounded shadow in the cardboard box, this was what he saw
in the sky.

He’d been gone two hours. All she did was look at him as she
crossed the room, back and forth, the baby’s arms reaching for
nothing, the screams as loud and insistent as when he left. A game
show blared on TV.

“Maybe he doesn’t like ‘The Price Is Right,’” he suggested.
“Turn it off,” she glared. “A lot of good that’ll do.”

The Price of Eggs

4 x nothing
is still nothing.
Tells us of the void.
It's too much.
Zen. The nose of a horsefly.
A cat's testicles.
Mud pies and salami.

I will be enlightened.

I mix a little rum
with Kool-Aid
to still my brain.
I blaze awake
with a red dye #9 smile.

Belinda Subraman

children, missing or dead.

Christina Stead, profiled for the Sunday paper:
"A woman is a hunter without a forest.
There is a short open season and a long closed season,
then she must have a gun license, signed and sealed
by the state. There are game laws, she is a poacher,
and in the closed season she must poach to live."

What woman's choice can guarantee that she will get what she wants
forever, or that she will keep wanting it?
Self-hatred just as possible--to mourn the wasted life ~
in looking back on too much screwing. Accommodations,
perfumed hypocrisies, having watched the banalities issue forth
from all those mouths framed by your own false eyelashes.

What we had thought was a tunnel turning out to be a cave...
getting smaller, damper, and darker.

June Hopper Hymas

Vegetable World

Excerpt from "The Story of Jan Milkowski"

I heard my mentor's voice.

I thought of him kneeling in his garden at home, in Cracow, pulling weeds out by their roots. I saw him chopping up carrots for a raw salad. He was a vegetarian, who had an elder brother named Jan. His garden floated before us, bearing thorns, as he tapped my shoulder.

"I didn't mean to drive you out of my office," he confessed, his apology full on his lips, smelling of onions.

I saw him sleeping in a lettuce bed, the harvest moon blanching his bones. Insects plagued him, but he would whisper a prayer in Polish. Our bugs didn't understand Polish, but over there they knew what he was saying. In some areas of Poland, by the Baltic Sea, whole towns had been closed because of pollution. He dreamt of himself as a Galician savior.

I told him, "Much studying to do."

"I'm not driving you from the seminary, am I?"

I glanced furtively at my tomato plate.

A leafless two-branched tree rose in my memory. This was the first tree I had ever climbed, It shaded half our neighbor's yard. I remembered climbing into its crook and observing the older son of the Schacts kneel to the grass and strangle our cat.

Russ Thorburn

A flash of insight, I had seen it.
Death, it isn't you I fear
but life. And like all else
you are neither more nor worse
you are merely here
alive until
I'm dead.

Peter Spiro

Air Head Said

he used to pick up
extra cash on slack
times flying gunner
with the copter boys
down South Said those
guys knew how to do it
up right Drank Jim Beam
right out of the bottle
Told him if it moved he
was to shoot now and
answer questions only if
asked Hell they had
quotas to fill just like
everybody else so I shot
just like they said to
What the hell else was
I supposed to do?

Ray Catina

The Lesson Under Fire

It wasn't the turpentine poured
over my head
the rocks flung at my back
or the fork jammed in my ear
that makes me love him.

It was that one Christmas morning
when he wedged me between the tree
hate streaming from his eyes
as he loaded the moonrockets
on their launchers.
and the radiator
I stood there helpless
terrified, bowels burning
caught in a blaze of flickering
red and green lights
mirrored in the tinsel and foil
paper surrounding me.

And as he pumped the handle
and prepared to fire
I suddenly stopped screaming.
Instead I stood there giggling.

He stopped. I pleaded with him
to fire double salvos into both eyes.
Death, bring me death, I yelled.

He stumbled backwards, away from me.
His hate now turned to fear, weak and
paralyzed while I grew
monster large.

relativity

five A.M., and the cat on my pillow
is not my cat. the pillow is not my pillow.
i've awakened in a room i do not know,
palm on breast, no movement or.

we know what it is to fall---
we dream of it, the giddy tumble
and anticipation of ground
rushing up the way a camera zooms,

but what of years' gradual descent,
our easing into love, toe first,
testing the water, then gliding in,
the way a keel cuts the wake, razor clean?

without a frame of reference, all is still,
and i don't know where we are, tracing
flesh's blue-veined paths,
heart to hand, "in trying,
we've come."

Andrew L. Amster

Rained On

The leaves
are nearly all
November ground

except
for a few
hold- outs

A November
six years ago
I wrote

'understanding'
in journal leaf words
his need

to be free
mine- this awful
owning to hold.

On the street
brown soft
mush

like cereal
near the fountain
mushrooms

flesh breasts
and buttocks
suck earth for dear life.

Joan Payne Kincaid

Day Dreaming

You're dozing in the sun
soaking up the all over
rays and they blow out
all at once It's like
everything North of Da Nang
has been A-bombed into the
next world and they're
working their way South and
it's way past too late
somewhere else to go shit
yeah I really am going to die

Ray Catina

a tour of duty

I held onto the rail with both hands
my daughter lying beneath dwarfed
by an adult's hospital bed
the bruises
from countless IVs ran up her arm
& straight back to Vietnam
where I watched the dioxin
cut the jungle
& eat the children
of the Viet Cong

then devour
mine

Bill Shields

London Weather Forecast

History plays havoc with the climate.
You can feel it, touring
the Tower of London. Even on mild days
a wind can make you shiver
like Raleigh awaiting the axe.

You grow warm standing
in the attic of Dr. Johnson's house
when the tour guide points
to the blackened beams and says,
"This is one of many things
the Germans tried to burn."

London is not like Iowa or Kansas:
burning summers, freezing winters,
a logical progression of seasons.
Climate attends the past,
like an ambassador seeking audience
with a capricious monarch.
You can hear the centuries breathing,
old men fitfully sleeping.

Robert Cooperman

Fried Spaghetti

Kit tells me
her ex-mother-in-law
used to throw
a strand of spaghetti
onto the ceiling
to see if it was done,
and her ex-husband
used to eat
fried spaghetti
for breakfast. She holds
a limp strand of spaghetti
and smiles evilly.
"It reminds me of Mark,"
Kit says. He also drank
one Pepsi after another
and watched Tarzan movies
all night long.
"But my mother still wonders
why I divorced him."

Arthur Winfield Knight

More Beautiful in Firelight

morning. I make love to myself with my hands
pretending you are here and loving me
and I surprise myself by calling you honey
honey, I say, over and over
the sweetness of it, honey
endearingly honey, honey, honey

now I remember Johanna Rohrmeir
her yellow ringlets, strong sturdy legs
the beautiful clothes of an only child
and how they called her Honey, we all did
it was her name

She betrayed me over and over
left my new crayons
in the sun to melt, preferred
other companions, sneered at my braids

honey, I cry out, honey
wanting to remember the trust I felt
in that firelight
wanting to write it down.

June Hopper Hymas

and my toes, loud and high enough
to shatter the wine glasses
saturating the table cloth
red as our common bond
and my song was forgiveness
and the notes were all out of tune.

Peter Spiro

The Mystery of Life

After a long walk in a philosophical mood, trying to
comprehend the mystery of life, I asked a garage attendant how to get
to the ground floor, where I'd parked. Okay, I made an error--I meant
the basement.

He jumped right on it with a glint in his eye, saying
sarcastically, "You're there already. All this is the ground floor."

I could see he'd been firing himself up with the attendant
standing next to him about how stupid people are. Middle aged,
strands of gray hair blew around his bald head. All the wrinkles of
irony came into play as he tried to understand how anybody could
have made such a mistake. His gnarled, discolored lips parted to let in
extra oxygen to service the intense scrutiny.

"Don't you see the number 1 there on the pole?" he asked.

His eyes, nearly hidden by folds of skin, burned into me as he
tried to comprehend how people could be so god-awful stupid.

Tim Coats

Tone Deaf

It was a remark passed
like the breeze on a muggy summer's
night you never notice
but I did, like ice
so cold it bums. She said I always
sang out of tune, that I was
tone deaf, with a chuckle. But to
me it meant the key I wore around
my neck, the t.v. dinners,
the strange men who'd wake me with a
flush late at night, the naked bulb
in my room and the cold
plaster walls,
the cold plaster walls. I
cringed with hurt then uncoiled
like a cobra and stung
hard and without mercy at her most
vulnerable part around the belly
button closest to the womb. My words
loosening the dry skin around
her jaw and her ears reaching
for the sky like bad guys, I give.
She slumped into the same wadded mess
my father used to beat her into
with the leg of a chair or
his hand. She began biting
her bottom lip raw, tasting the blood
and enjoying it while her top
lip trembled like the reed of a flute
playing the same sad tunes,
the dirge of my childhood. And so I
sang to my mother, sang with my bones

Airman

His job as big as rain in the summer of drought:
one brave biplane seeding clouds.
Below the farmers' tears snatched by heat
before they fall.
Cracked skin around weathered eyes
Earth waits, a thirsty place.

How can one man flying into all this need
possibly make a difference
merely one contraptioned man
towing dream banners
making hope chests sigh
carrying the kernels of Centennial Farms-to-be
and his own hero sandwich in a brown bag?

He hoists trust into space
each time he leaves the ground.
Low over fields, lover of crops
this pilot/husbandman pursues the rush of danger:
 A Bermuda triangle
 luring him like Sirens.
 Strapped in the cockpit, breathless,
 he rides his craft willfully
 into her dark mouth of death
 and resurrection
even as he simply seeds the clouds
above the parched Midwest.

A puzzle piece of aviation
flies in the groin of every man,
the Earth a patched ambivalent table
of greenblues, scored and aging
scarred, changing, grim
but always
always under him.

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Geranium Ivy

white spattered
with lavender
the petals fall
like dust
of old roses
pollen in the
black of a tulips
heart if you move
the white collapses
falls into itself
a deer caught mid
air studding
snow with a
wreath of
wet rubies

Lyn Lifshin

Late Summer Thunderstorm

Leaves and drums, the whoosh
of green
whisks upward,
shows silver
to a tarnishing sky.
Between clouds a lane
of patina erupts,
to the sound of rimshots
and rolls.
Birds dizzy with
indecision, ditching
and swerving,
as if
to roost on bat-diving
twigs. And the build
and the burst,
bb's blackening the sidewalk,
cars dragging
curtains of rubber
soaked down the street.

After, the bees
come back
from wherever they go,
black bumbles
bending white clover
to their small
immediate wills.

Harry Calhoun

from a batrope. Then I wondered
if he was bored. Someone asked
where Robin was and West said,
coolly,
“Waiting in the car.” It seemed
everybody wanted to know
about Catwoman. West said,
“She gave me strange stirrings
in my utility belt.” And I could tell
his answers were almost scripted,
but it wasn’t West’s fault.
Like George Orwell,
the natives absolutely expected
Adam to kill the elephant.
Then someone wanted to know
where Gotham City was
and he said it was a midwestern city
by a beach; and someone yelled,
“Ketchum.” West’s family
lives in Ketchum, Idaho.
Then West said, “You know
about Idaho, don’t you?
Some people don’t.”
I knew Ketchum was where
Hemingway put a shotgun
in his mouth in 1961
and fired.
I thought it was a pity
Batman hadn’t saved him.

Kit Knight

Wet Streets

Lost in a maze of streets
in a familiar city, I make
my turns by instinct.
Buses are leaving
for the mountains, but I
wear immovable shoes and watch
them depart on their cold journeys
while I feel for a number in my pocket.
My coat belongs to someone else
and the name I must locate
appears in no directory.
Rain begins.
The wheels of buses spin on polished
The person I am looking for
would not know me dressed like this.
her office, she is watching
traffic stop and go,
growing bored with its rules.
Everything I know is out of reach.
As I duck
beneath an umbrella and run,
my footsteps turn to water.

David Chorlton

Lint Gatherers

Drones shuffle into the washerette,
white shirt proud
with frayed collar rage,
scrubbed thin at the elbows,
patched and repatched,
to rinse away the red clay of the fields.
Always the red clay wins.

Quarters clink in the steamy air,
then chink-a-chink in the esophagus
of the Coke machine. Others get levered
and locked into greedy top loaders
that shake and rattle bones in odd blues,
spewing suds like spittle from a slack drunk's mouth.
Scat of small talk drifts above soggy baskets:
"What's happenin? What's new? He be... She be...",
a soft and lonely melody to the sour swish of
Gramma Dorene's mop across the concrete floor.
A train whistle calls the children to the window
and through the cracked glass and the door
they watch trains they'll never ride to Charleston.
Dorene, she warns them of slick dangers
and digs for quarters in her apron pocket,
doing what Mr. Charlie pays her for.

Carolyn Page

Christo's Hand

Your left wrist flops over the steering wheel. That's all the pressure
needed to hold a Pinto on the road. You're tired, maybe stoned. It's
about ten o'clock on a summer night. Ahead you see a man walking
too near the highway. Both hands move to the wheel. You squint.
Raise your foot off the accelerator and coast, hoping he won't run like
the suicidal beagle into your right front fender. Why your fender?
You're getting closer, losing him in the headlights, finding him in the
dark when just as you think you should be seeing his crazy, careening
eyes, your world redefines itself into a stunted fir tree, a garbage bag
waving frantically blown into its arms by semis.

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Batman Comes to Appalachia

Adam West was going to be
the grand marshal of
the homecoming parade in
a tiny college town
in the Appalachian Mountains.
The Batman movie was shown
before his talk. And I wondered
if he'd bounce on stage wearing
his bat suit. But he was dignified
in a suit and tie. His first remark
was that he still fit
into his costume. And it was true.
Batman looked great.
His hair was a bit thinner
and Mr. West wore glasses.
But I could see that he still
could swing