



Parting Gifts

summer 1998 vol. 11 no. 1

Index by Title

- #194/Ben Miller/61
#197/Ben Miller/9
#198/Ben Miller/61
#200/Ben Miller/62
#201/Ben Miller/62
The Accidental Elephant/Belinda Subraman/67
The Alchemist's Solitude/David Chorlton/20
Albatross/Marc Kipniss/5
Always Like This/Gayle Elen Harvey/2
Antlers/Hedy Habra/43
Anymore Perfect/David Breeden/37
Beatitudes for the Male/David James/40
Beautiful Wife/Paul Beckman/42
Becalmed/Joyce Odam/16
Bloodshed/Hedy Habra/24
Boy with Two Tongues/Michael Hettich/58
Bright Dots of Color/Marc Kipniss/60
Broken Glass Rattles in the Panes/Gayle Elen Harvey/4
Chomolungma/David Chorlton/19
Chords from the Lute/Philip A. Waterhouse/14
Enough/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/33
Exorcism/Hedy Habra/44
Fillet/Adam Burhans/51
Hats on the Ice/David Breeden/37
He Said the Bombing Had Started/Eugene Marten/53
History of the American West, Second Edition/Marc Bookman/21
Hotdog/Daryl Rogers/47
How a Log Sleeps/Belinda Subraman/68
Immolation for a Friend/Vincent Cioffi/39
In Our Forty-Eighth Year/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/38
In That Cool Water They Drink Marilyn Monroe/Russell Thorburn/11
It Might Matter Less in Another Language/Gayle Elen Harvey/2
Judas on the Donkey Path/Russell Thorburn/4
A Kind of Song, a Kind of Singing/Michael Hettich/59
The Knot/David James/24
Last Rites/Albert Huffstickler/3
Liquids Continue to Conspire/Eugene Marten/17
Living in Michigan/Redmond James/63
Lobster Pots/Philip A. Waterhouse/55
The Longest Train in the World/Michael Hettich/9
Lovers, in The Garden of Earthly Delights/Hedy Habra/25
Marble/Adam Burhans/51
Matisse in Near Retirement/Russell Thorburn/12
MCEA Notes from the Annual Meeting/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/30
Mixed/M. Rebecca Ransom/45
Moving/Daryl Rogers/47
Mythic Journey/Albert Huffstickler/65
The Paranoid Caravan Diaries Part One/Richard Davignon/56
Penis Art/David James/41
Planning Ahead/Albert Huffstickler/6
The Poet in the Park/Joyce Odam/13
Puerto Ángel/Richard Davignon/57
Ranchers Divorcing/Belinda Subraman/69
The Seashore Idyl/Joyce Odam/15
Silver Is Her Name/Philip A. Waterhouse/26
School Days/Philip A. Waterhouse/52
Solstice/Gayle Elen Harvey/66
Sounded Immediately/Gayle Elen Harvey/2
"Sunflowers"/Gayle Elen Harvey/1
Taste/Michael Hettich/10
Telling Time/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/36
This Is Not Self Service/Paul Beckman/27
A True Story/Paul Beckman/28
Twilight/Adam Burhans/18
Village Scenes/David Chorlton/49
Wellness Center, Bhar, India/Belinda Subraman/70
We're Going to Miss the Five-thirty Showing of *Take the Money and Run*/Russell Thorburn/7
When You Kick a Stone/David Breeden/32
Wilderness/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/34
X Marks the Spot/Daryl Rogers/48
Zen Bed/Belinda Subraman/70

Parting
Gifts
summer 1998 vol. 11 no. 1

Index by Author Name

- A True Story/Paul Beckman/28
Beautiful Wife/Paul Beckman/42
This Is Not Self Service/Paul Beckman/27
History of the American West, Second
Edition/Marc Bookman/21
Anymore Perfect/David Breeden/37
Hats on the Ice/David Breeden/37
When You Kick a Stone/David
Breeden/32
Fillet/Adam Burhans/51
Marble/Adam Burhans/51
Twilight/Adam Burhans/18
The Alchemist's Solitude/David
Chorlton/20
Chomolungma/David Chorlton/19
Village Scenes/David Chorlton/49
Immolation For a Friend/Vincent
Cioffi/39
The Paranoid Caravan Diaries Part
One/Richard Davignon/56
Puerto Ángel/Richard Davignon/57
Antlers/Hedy Habra/43
Bloodshed/Hedy Habra/24
Exorcism/Hedy Habra/44
Lovers, in The Garden of Earthly
Delights/Hedy Habra/25
Always Like This/Gayle Elen Harvey/2
Broken Glass Rattles in the Panes/Gayle
Elen Harvey/4
It Might Matter Less in Another
Language/Gayle Elen Harvey/2
Solstice/Gayle Elen Harvey/66
Sounded Immediately/Gayle Elen
Harvey/2
"Sunflowers"/Gayle Elen Harvey/1
Boy with Two Tongues/Michael
Hettich/58
A Kind of Song, a Kind of
Singing/Michael Hettich/59
The Longest Train in the World/Michael
Hettich/9
Taste/Michael Hettich/10
Last Rites/Albert Huffstickler/3
Mythic Journey/Albert Huffstickler/65
Planning Ahead/Albert Huffstickler/6
- Beatitudes for the Male/David James/40
The Knot/David James/24
Penis Art/David James/41
Living in Michigan/Redmond James/63
Enough/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/33
In Our Forty-Eighth Year/Elizabeth
Kerlikowske/38
MCEA Notes from the Annual
Meeting/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/30
Telling Time/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/36
Wilderness/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/34
Albatross/Marc Kipniss/5
Bright Dots of Color/Marc Kipniss/60
He Said the Bombing Had Started/Eugene
Marten/53
Liquids Continue to Conspire/Eugene
Marten/17
#194/Ben Miller/61
#197/Ben Miller/9
#198/Ben Miller/61
#200/Ben Miller/62
#201/Ben Miller/62
Becalmed/Joyce Odam/16
The Poet in the Park/Joyce Odam/13
The Seashore Idyl/Joyce Odam/15
Mixed/M. Rebecca Ransom/45
Hotdog/Daryl Rogers/47
Moving/Daryl Rogers/47
X Marks the Spot/Daryl Rogers/48
The Accidental Elephant/Belinda
Subraman/67
How a Log Sleeps/Belinda Subraman/68
Ranchers Divorcing/Belinda Subraman/69
Wellness Center, Bhar, India/Belinda
Subraman/70
Zen Bed/Belinda Subraman/70
In That Cool Water They Drink Marilyn
Monroe/Russell Thorburn/11
Judas on the Donkey Path/Russell
Thorburn/4
Matisse in Near Retirement/Russell
Thorburn/12
We're Going to Miss the Five-thirty Showing
of *Take the Money and Run*/Russell
Thorburn/7
Chords from the Lute/Philip A.
Waterhouse/14
Lobster Pots/Philip A. Waterhouse/55
Silver Is Her Name/Philip A. Waterhouse/26
School Days/Philip A. Waterhouse/52

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Wellness Center, Bhar, India Belinda Subraman

Many people are cured here
of mental illness.
Each nail in this tree
represents a cure.
Each cured patient
used her forehead
to hammer it into the wood.

Zen Bed Belinda Subraman

Queen-size bed,
half covered with books
permanently,
color T.V. for the
would-be sleeper,
CD player and radio,
foam-cushioned mattress,
goose feather blanket,
Siamese cat to sleep with,
a warm place to be—

All this and nothing too.

Contents

“Sunflowers”/Gayle Elen Harvey/1
Sounded Immediately/Gayle Elen Harvey/2
Always Like This/Gayle Elen Harvey/2
It Might Matter Less in Another Language/Gayle Elen Harvey/2
Last Rites/Albert Huffstickler/3
Broken Glass Rattles in the Panes/Gayle Elen Harvey/4
Judas on the Donkey Path/Russell Thorburn/4
Albatross/Marc Kipniss/5
Planning Ahead/Albert Huffstickler/6
We’re Going to Miss the Five-thirty Showing of *Take the Money and Run*/Russell Thorburn/7
#197/Ben Miller/9
The Longest Train in the World/Michael Hettich/9
Taste/Michael Hettich/10
In That Cool Water They Drink Marilyn Monroe/Russell Thorburn/11
Matisse in Near Retirement/Russell Thorburn/12
The Poet in the Park/Joyce Odam/13
Chords from the Lute/Philip A. Waterhouse/14
The Seashore Idyl/Joyce Odam/15
Becalmed/Joyce Odam/16
Liquids Continue to Conspire/Eugene Marten/17
Twilight/Adam Burhans/18
Chomolungma/David Chorlton/19
The Alchemist’s Solitude/David Chorlton/20
History of the American West, Second Edition/Marc Bookman/21
Bloodshed/Hedy Habra/24
The Knot/David James/24
Lovers, in The Garden of Earthly Delights/Hedy Habra/25
Silver Is Her Name/Philip A. Waterhouse/26
This Is Not Self Service/Paul Beckman/27
A True Story/Paul Beckman/28
MCEA Notes from the Annual Meeting/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/30
When You Kick a Stone/David Breeden/32
Enough/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/33

Wilderness/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/34
Telling Time/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/36
Hats on the Ice/David Breeden/37
Anymore Perfect/David Breeden/37
In Our Forty-Eighth Year/Elizabeth Kerlikowske/38
Immolation For a Friend/Vincent Cioffi/39
Beatitudes for the Male/David James/40
Penis Art/David James/41
Beautiful Wife/Paul Beckman/42
Antlers/Hedy Habra/43
Exorcism/Hedy Habra/44
Mixed/M. Rebecca Ransom/45
Moving/Daryl Rogers/47
Hotdog/Daryl Rogers/47
X Marks the Spot/Daryl Rogers/48
Village Scenes/David Chorlton/49
Marble/Adam Burhans/51
Fillet/Adam Burhans/51
School Days/Philip A. Waterhouse/52
He Said the Bombing Had Started/Eugene Marten/53
Lobster Pots/Philip A. Waterhouse/55
The Paranoid Caravan Diaries Part One/Richard Davignon/56
Puerto Ángel/Richard Davignon/57
Boy with Two Tongues/Michael Hettich/58
A Kind of Song, a Kind of Singing/Michael Hettich/59
Bright Dots of Color/Marc Kipniss/60
#198/Ben Miller/61
#194/Ben Miller/61
#201/Ben Miller/62
#200/Ben Miller/62
Living in Michigan/Redmond James/63
Mythic Journey/Albert Huffstickler/65
Solstice/Gayle Elen Harvey/66
The Accidental Elephant/Belinda Subraman/67
How a Log Sleeps/Belinda Subraman/68
Ranchers Divorcing/Belinda Subraman/69
Wellness Center, Bhar, India/Belinda Subraman/70
Zen Bed/Belinda Subraman/70

Ranchers Divorcing Belinda Subraman

on the phone
you hear her
sounding like
her barn is burning
and she's dancing
in its glow
looking for a partner
you feel
something's happening
here

then you hear
her husband
who's perfect
(he thinks)
just because he
hits her
doesn't mean he's bad
he's bought her
like the cows
he never milks
and tender is a word
has something to do
with veal
and veal comes from
killing a thing
before it grows

You accept them and bless them.
They seem to be happy.
But you are not.
You live with an elephant.
You are a liar.

How a Log Sleeps

Belinda Subraman

Oblivious
to the rain beating down,
to the dog which puts a leg up,
to the lightning that strikes and splits it,
to the fire that makes ashes of its whole long life...

"Sunflowers"

Gayle Elen Harvey

("His deepest concentration on still-life
covers the period from 1880-82,
after his wife died—")
—*Monet: Masterworks*

Night after night, the moon falls, breaking
in a stand of poplars. Earth is shattered.
I cannot see the endless folds of night
embracing her.

These rooms grow resolute with grief.
So is the household since she died,
my halved heart bleeding as I tend my needs
without her, while the world sleeps, cloistered,
its own misery held for a little while
at bay.

Inflammable, seductive, sunflowers warm my fingers.
I paint each petal like a small lamp, loneliness,
its own nocturnal blossoming.

Sounded Immediately

Gayle Elen Harvey

How lucid, after all, the heart with its cast
of strangers, sudden as a kick-boxer,
breaking into smaller fragments,
falling around you,
those things set to music
and lost.

Always Like This

Gayle Elen Harvey

There's never a place
for anything.
Flames shift inside us.
Roses are bleeding underfoot.
Chaos
like a brush fire—everywhere
secret, red lights.

It Might Matter Less in

Another Language

Gayle Elen Harvey

The train's wheels make difficult music.
Wrested from sleep, you begin raising your unburned house
from a village of ash—
Soldiers return, smelling of danger.
They will take nothing
but black-and-white photographs.
You persist with disguise,
face pressed against the window,
looking out—

The Accidental Elephant

Belinda Subraman

Let's say you're traveling in India
and an elephant in a Hindu temple
salutes you with his trunk.
You notice the designs and paintings
on his forehead and trunk
and move in closer for a look.
The elephant wraps his trunk around you.
He likes you.

Hindus crowd around to see the white boy
blessed by Ganesh, a favorite god of good luck.
Let's say they begin to see you
as a reincarnation of Ganesh
put garlands around your neck,
and bring you food, especially butter and limes.

Let's say you enjoy the attention,
the smiling admiring faces.
Then through an interpreter
you hear their prayers and pleas.
You learn they want their dying to be made healthy,
their destitute to be made wealthy,
their crippled to walk, their mute to talk.

Let's say you are inclined to give
the Sermon on the Mount and to bless them with platitudes.
You even perform healings but none of them work.
So you learn magic and wow them with tricks,
enough so they will believe in your godliness.
And they bring you even more flowers, butter, limes
and their hard-earned precious-few rupees.

what then?
Will things be less difficult?
Will that emptiness
that he nursed inside him always
vanish?
Will those eyes sustain him?

Solstice

Gayle Elen Harvey

Like a bright herd of clouds
in an ordinary room, summer dwindling
through thin walls of scarlet—
winter, caustic, established from a terrible distance.

Only tragedy here.
The pitch of long darkness, revisionist seasons.
There are no masks, rebellious—

We need the unsettling, undressing ourselves
in that crisp pall
like strangers.

Last Rites

Albert Huffstickler

I kept thinking there was a seagull flying along beside the plane,
a gray ghost (or was it a goose?) keeping pace alongside us.
I never really saw him but he was there, I felt,
and it was strange to feel him coasting along beside us,
feel him through the metal hull of the plane
matching our speed, effortless as a dream.
I hadn't flown in twenty years and it was all new,
the sudden surge as I lifted from the ground
and then the dreamy floating up there in the silence.
It was all silence somehow, even the throb of the engine.
And something womblike about it
with the stewardess moving down the aisle to make sure I never wanted,
and the umbilical plugged in my ear to feed me music—food of a sort.
My mother had died in Florida and I was flying home for the funeral—
only I didn't think about that because I was too entranced with the
journey itself.

And somewhere out there this goose was flying—or this gull—
a gentle creature of the air, very free, keeping pace with us.
I leaned back and dreamed out the window through the clouds,
very tired from my furniture factory job
and feeling blessed to be able to sit back and relax.
Outside was a great forest of clouds through which we drifted
with this very peaceful bird floating along beside us.
And I felt friendship for him through the metal hull
and longed to go on like this for all eternity with everything postponed.
Only it's never that way and even the great bird has to land sometime.
But I don't think he landed when we did.
I think he went on past us—I'm not sure how far—
but when we dropped into land I didn't feel him anymore.
I think he kept flying on for a while,
across the peninsula and then out to sea
(yes, I'm sure it was a gull)—out to sea where
finally, wings tiring, he dropped down to the dark waters
and, settling himself upon the silent waves,
slept.

Broken Glass Rattles in the Panes Gayle Elen Harvey

This is love.
The first thing you notice is
absence
like the whitest birds
passing through moonlight.
Powerlines are down.
Nothing but candles snuffed out
in the eyes, shoes filled with
emptiness, stories that go unaccountably
wrong—

Judas on the Donkey Path Russell Thorburn

Winding down from dry cold hills
where rock gets in the way
of feet and snow falls like petals
from a cold flower,
he says through his breath
warming a hand that shields
his face from wind, how this path
will take him back into himself
as he counts out thirty stones,
to wake the Fates perched in a tree,
that goddamn tree he sees wherever he walks
with its dream of money lost
to every dog barking its false memories.

Mythic Journey Albert Huffstickler

Say a man in his sixties
takes a journey
to the place of his birth
just to see it,
just to experience
the place of his origin
since he left when he was two.
And say the very building
is still standing
and he walks through the city
to stand before it
trying not to think.
And say, standing there,
he hears a sound
like wings beating
and the air
grows crystalline and still
and a face appears,
infinitely gentle,
infinitely loving.
And say he stands there
for a long time
staring deep into those eyes
that regard him
without doubt or question.
And say that he turns then
and walks back through the city
not looking back,
not speaking,
back to his room,
picks his bag,
gets on the bus
and journeys back
to where he lives now
and goes on with his life,

if she had or if she hadn't I'd still be an even bigger jerk for saying it. She had once reported, this particular sister, that one of her kindergarten charges had bitten the ear clean off another cherub and it turned out there hadn't been any bloodshed at all; the offending babytooth had actually made fleshfall upon the victim's shoulder, and there only briefly.

Clean off? I had said to my wife. Clean off? she had repeated into the phone, balanced between ear and collarbone, her hands engaged, stirring a cradled bowl of something good. Then, back at me, with a nod, impressed and outraged at the turns our world was taking these days: Clean off.

But none of that made me any less of a jerk and none of that kept the psychic from being right on the money and none of it kept my wife's sister alive past her twenty-fourth birthday.

I didn't get to go to the funeral. They buried her in March on a beautiful sunny day and by then my wife had changed her mind twice. She had notified me of a divorce and moved into her own apartment in a different part of Atlanta, then decided that this was too long and too little and she plain left town.

I had to call up to Grosse Pointe Woods, north of Detroit to see if she had gone home or if she had gone someplace else that anybody knew about. One of the remaining sisters told me Seattle and that seemed so very much beyond the realm of probability that I said thank you and got the picture. The older sister's voice threw me, though, on the phone that afternoon, the way she said hello and Seattle and everything. She would have been smiling, albeit sadly, there on the other end of the line, with compassion, in the quiet kitchen, just north of Detroit. Her compassion sighed gently through the line somehow, and made me think what the hell? What is it with these sisters?

I don't think she'd been told what a total jerk I was. I figured only that maybe my wife hadn't wanted to divulge the depths of my wrongness, and thereby the depth of the mistake she'd made in me. She left everyone in the dark, I suppose, wherever she had gone. Who can guess what will make things stop and go between married people, her sister would have likely assessed, with compassion, and of course she probably knew that you always have to play plus and minus with what a sister tells you, am I right?

But, in all honesty, I wouldn't know. I never had a pending ex-husband alone in Atlanta, or a large family with one dead sister and a few left over, living in Michigan.

Albatross

Marc Kipniss

There was a woman driving a pickup truck with a couch in the back—not a whole couch, only a part of a couch, a corner part, one that curved like the curved part of a sectional sofa—who had a certain way of walking. I noticed this after she parked and jumped out of her pickup truck and ran to buy a newspaper from one of those vending machines that sell them.

A man came up to buy a newspaper almost at the same time, but he didn't have to because the woman held the door open for him saying, "Go ahead...after you." The man thanked her and went in. It was smaller than he had expected, as well as darker. It also surprised him that she was right behind him with a candle.

He noticed she had a certain way of walking, and that there were thousands of love seats to choose from. One of them even matched the color of the woman's pickup truck, which seemed miraculous, for this color was an extremely rare type of mineral, such as alabaster, or an extremely rare type of abalone, or a third version, such as...

The first version of this story included a dove, a dove that broke apart and revealed something. Eggs. There were eggs inside the dove. And outside it. They were cracking and—

The man got off the love seat and blew things all into proportion by stepping on the eggs. He may not have meant to, but when the woman got off the love seat and stepped on the man's foot, it was on purpose, so she must have been enjoying herself or else why would she bother?

Why indeed? she thought, and shared an epiphany from her childhood with the man: "Once, a few times—oh, how I used to love to bury my shoes in the back yard every day!"

This made sense to the man.

"I always wanted to be a pirate."

This made a different impression on him, and he wondered, Did she still?

Later that night he got his answer, and they both fell asleep after they were done. Then, in the morning, through the window, they both heard a travesty of birds.

In the second version of this story, the woman walked the way she did because she was pregnant, not because she had something heavy around her neck.

Planning Ahead

Albert Huffstickler

The closer he
gets to death
the more she nags,
anticipating
that time when
he'll be
out of reach.



Albert Huffstickler
(photo by David Jewell)

Living in Michigan

Redmond James

I was a jerk when my wife's sister got cancer. That's the rap I got, though I didn't feel like it, really, but I guess, after all, I was. She died and everything.

At the time, though, in the early stage, when I guess you have to declare whether you're going to be a jerk through this or whether you're going to be something else, I had a hard time taking the thing too serious. She had it and then she didn't and then she had it again but wouldn't take a day off for the biopsy they wanted to do and who doesn't take a day off from student teaching when they've been told they have cancer? You go up to your mentor/teacher and you say "They think I have cancer and I'm taking the day off to go sit for an MRI picture and find out if they're right. Got it?" That's what you do if they say cancer and you think they really mean cancer.

But she didn't. She made an appointment for three weeks into the future—on a weekend when she could tear herself away—and then went to a psychic on a long lunch hour. The psychic saw grim things and reported them back to the sister who reported them back to my wife, and the report reached my ears one evening when I was on the couch with the TV on. She gave me the long of it, and I listened, there on the couch, and then after a while she went into the bedroom.

And then she got mad, somehow, my wife, mad as hell, because after she left the room a few minutes later I laughed. At the TV. At something they said on the TV. She came back in, mad as hell, like I said. And I was still smiling a little and that made her more mad, I guess. But I was still half-watching *Big Night*—only half-watching—and she wasn't saying anything when I laughed and *Big Night* is a pretty funny movie.

In the end, she was upset and I was upset and then she cried and I felt like the asshole and so I said sorry, baby, don't feel bad, don't worry. And my words of kindness, my comfort—to the tune of don't worry baby, your sister always adds a few degrees of drama—bounced right off my wife and picked up a few degrees of drama on their way back to the upside of my head. What was *that* supposed to mean? And I backed up poorly and clumsily and she stormed from the room a second time and I was back to being the asshole, a role I would not again relinquish. And I couldn't say well goddammit she's cried wolf before because it wouldn't make any difference

#201

Ben Miller

The defroster kicks in and an eye slowly opens above each dashboard vent. Through which I see our brick apartment house. That overstuffed dumpster in the corner of the parking lot. And then the paws of a dog, on the edge of the hood, shifting with indecision, fear of machine combating need for the warmth given off by it, then the face of the setter, gums jittering with crystals, nostrils buttered with breath.

#200

Ben Miller

Went to see former *New Yorker* editor William Maxwell at Ireland House at New York University, just south of the elegant alley that is Washington Mews. He was to read excerpts from his letters to short-story writer Frank O'Connor—a correspondence that stretched over a period of 21 years. Before the event began, I went up to Maxwell, who was leaning against the podium, and told him how much I liked his novel, *So Long See You Tomorrow*. His skin was pink parchment, those fingers bent like twigs, pupils scooping toward me like tiny servings of chocolate ice cream. I told him I was from Davenport, Iowa, near where he grew up, in Lincoln, Illinois. He said his father was a traveling man who knew my town, all the towns. Then Mr. Maxwell began to move from behind the podium, toward the empty chair next to his wife, Emily: *I'm getting tired. Can we talk after?* We didn't get a chance until much, much later, after I was home in Brooklyn, when I dreamed he had a new novel out. The word *Rock* was in the title. I remembered that upon waking. And the last three words—*shadow, no shadow...*

We're Going to Miss the Five-thirty Showing of *Take the Money and Run*

Russell Thorburn

Lieutenant Baker, who shouts at me to get somebody on the radio *didi mau*, doesn't know how to read a map. He looks worried as the scrambler crackles and the whole world, on the air or below it, waits for someone to napalm it to hell and gone. We crouch in the rice paddy without cover, while a storm showers rain from the east. How the wind flaps the radio antennae heavenward. My PRC fizzles then crackles with voices as if godsent, and Lieutenant Baker, Lieutenant Vonnegut because he's from Indiana and reads Kurt Vonnegut novels, takes off his helmet—this is gospel, I swear—and groans, “Oh shit, it's going to be a sad day.” I know we're going to miss the five-thirty showing of *Take the Money and Run* back at the base. We're going to miss more than that if Lieutenant Vonnegut doesn't get his coordinates straight which zone is going to light up like a goddamn birthday cake.

Blistered and chapped, fifty pounds of radio pack hunching me over, I shout, “This is Rialto Theatre and tonight the feature presentation is a creature feature from the black lagoon, and popcorn's ten cents and the first thirty people will receive a poster of the creature from the black lagoon.” And what does Lieutenant Vonnegut do next but pull out his copy of *Slaughterhouse Five*, and thumb to where his bookmark flies away, a napkin that says Hong Kong Charlie's Bar. The first bullet embeds itself in the paddy water. He swats at the second one, thinks it's a fly, but the third creases his forehead. The Vonnegut book tumbles from his fingertips. I swim through the rice paddy, screaming for back up when I hear God speak again, his dark voice saying my name, “Max Weinberg.” Then again, “Max Weinberg,” who never listened to his ma when she screamed, “Don't ever touch that gun.” We hauled that gun everywhere, admiring it in the Indiana heat, all blue. God explains it simply: we are to save a whole village of slope farmers, and I ask him like all others have, “Why us, Lord?”

Flat on our faces, we shout, “Jesus Christ.” Mortar shells disappear in the water and a cloud of rain drenches us. The choppers aren't anywhere but there's no napalm either. I look over and see Jules wiping mud off his glasses, strangely myopic and insignificant. Jake crosses himself, not knowing we're going to be heroes. Or, goddammit, saints for saving the

slope farmers in their bamboo hats. If a Jewish kid could become canonized by dripping mud. Jules points over to the deeper water, and I nod my head, watching our dear lieutenant dead and dragged through the rice paddy. Jules never liked to lose anything.

Then suddenly he rises from the water, emptying his M 16 into the trees. He's fighting phantom slopes, a rain cloud, a little sun adding to the eeriness of the afternoon. It's all a dream anyway, and the only thing that keeps me going isn't that biblical voice but Woody Allen at five-thirty. The little things like a semicold beer and comic books, a cigarette while Jules takes yet another photograph of us, our nineteen-year-old faces scrunched up tight while he says, "Cheese and beer, please." Then the letters from back home telling us about Jules' sister going to college or Jake's mom getting cancer, little tidbits of life that seem unreal when staring at the hill country or rice paddies, kicking loose someone's skull and sending it fifty yards, crying, "You sorry bastard," but not meaning it, because that sorry bastard could be you. News from home that sends the creepy- crawlies up your back or makes you laugh, but most of the time it's the creepy- crawlies because our correspondents back home from the same Indiana town believe you are ready for the worst; you can take any type of nightmare.

"Chopper at ten o'clock," Jules screams. I don't even look, knowing God has spared us already for a heroic act, and keep on thinking about Indiana, my father, Rabbi Weinberg, who said, "What would you do if you God chose you—?"

I don't know. I've never answered that question. Jake pulls me toward the chopper where everything heats up and our lives depend on those chopping blades. I've heard that question in the mosquito netting of the night, but the only real thing seems to be Jules still firing his M 16.

"Hey, stupid head," Jake yells back at him.

Jules acknowledges us with a wave, his M 16 stuck upside down in the mud. He grabs for the lieutenant and pulls him out of the water. We're up in the chopper, we're waiting for him, screaming, "Wait a minute," and the chopper pilot screaming, "Can't wait" And one minute becomes everything, the heat of those Indiana summers and our sweating in the backyard with my father's Colt Walker, my mother screaming again, "Don't touch that gun," but we were looking for our own glory in those days, waiting for something to happen to each of us.

Jake points his rifle at the chopper pilot and says, "We're not moving without him."

#198

Ben Miller

The day before labor she walked into emergency and said: *I will bleed now. Take out a half pint.* Always been the organized type. Why do tomorrow what you can do today? A trait I inherited from my own mother. Who did this very thing right before me and was fond of covering the guest room bed with the white sheet and then telling what happened on it while pouring a spiciful Chianti... The cowed attending got out a needle. And 20 or so hours later, as the baby was emerging dryly from the womb, *pale ball of sun baked clay*, the delivery room doctor blinked twice and lost consciousness, sure that he already had.

#194

Ben Miller

At Cheapo Taco on Sixth my name is pronounced loudly and I turn and see the man they canned last week after 24 years with the company. Sales Director Steve. Often the only other person on the floor at eight o'clock and with whom I shared many a pot of Maxwell House—slender, swaggering walk—form-fitting burgundy sweaters—bowl cut that did not move no matter how much the below of him did—access to the Internet and sometimes retrieved me data—crisp, bristly, formerly well-paid Steve. In front of him now is a Styrofoam container of pimento-flecked yellow rice. Wife, in another sweater, across the booth. *How ya been, Ben? Good to see you! What you been up to? Having a good holiday?* He grabs my hand and pulls it roughly, like a rope.

Bright Dots of Color

Marc Kipniss

I'm at the copy store. The machine I'm using sounds as if there's a kitten inside it. The kitten sounds hungry.

α

I'm making copies and staring out the window. There's a shopping cart hanging off the curb and a woman walking away from it. She has oven mitts on that are the yellowest I have ever seen.

α

There's a baby in the shopping cart, which is slipping off the curb and rolling into traffic. I run out after it. It feels as if I'm moving too slowly, as if I'm running in water, or in milk.

α

The oven mitts dwindle to bright yellow dots. This is what I see in one direction. The baby's screams are drowned out by the noise of all the cars and trucks, which are starting to have their lights on because it is starting to get dark. This is what I see in the other direction.

α

I'm catching up with the shopping cart. I can hear tires screeching, horns blowing, the baby's screams, which may be of excitement—what a ride!—or of terror, I cannot tell. I cannot tell if the baby wants me to catch up, if the baby is happy that I've grabbed the handle of the shopping cart, that I'm pulling it out of the street and up onto the sidewalk. The baby's mad at me, I think. Or just scared. I don't know.

α

I wheel the baby into the copy store, return to the machine I was using. There's still a kitten inside it. The kitten is black with white paws. It still sounds hungry.

α

I take the kitten out of the copy machine and place it in the shopping cart. I'll have to buy milk for both of you, I say. But then the kitten scratches the baby and there is a line of bright red dots on the baby's wrist. Now I know why the baby is screaming.

#197

Ben Miller

When I couldn't learn the cello in junior high, I was switched to a string bass—a bigger but less audible instrument. Sixth and last chair. Three concerts that year. Neurotic dress up things. A crisis for many to come up with the tie, white shirt, black shoes. I still see my classmates and their parents squeezed into clothing they had on but were not wearing. I still hear Vivaldi begging for mercy. And the applause, long and hard, another whipping.

The Longest Train in the World

Michael Hettich

The longest train in the world takes all night to pass. It is full of oddly shaped boxes and cattle lowing at the moon. Commuters in their cars, heading home from work, are backed up to the horizon, miles beyond miles. The train moves slowly. You wonder who sits in the car beside you, swaying back and forth to music from the radio. So you slide over into the passenger seat, open your window, and lean out: Excuse me, would you like to come into my car and talk, I think we might be here awhile. Smiling, she obliges. And soon the train appears to be a river and your car seems exquisitely comfortable; the full moon shines down on you, young lovers making music in the living dark, smelling each other up and down, making the air inside your old car thick with funk and deepest body oils. And when the longest train has passed, finally, you step out into the morning and walk hand-in-hand, half-dressed, hardly talking, abandoning your cars to the middle of the road, abandoning the narratives your lives have written up until now..

Taste

Michael Hettich

for Colleen Hettich and Johnny Vincenzcz

Your necklace hums against your powdered
neck, my tasty love, as you
lean across fragrances: appetizer, wine,
to fork exquisite tastes, exclaiming
pleasure, into my mouth, into *me*—

And I can't help a glance
down your dress as you lean,
to your perfumed throat,
to the breasts I know so
well but have never known
perfectly, and I

want to taste
your fingers, your salt,
the food you've offered—cell music—as I
glance up now, beyond your smile,
to the restaurant chaos: controlled, but *just*—

and I am overjoyed for a moment,
and I am overjoyed, and I am
overjoyed
for a moment, flooded
with being alive *right now*, and then

I lean toward you,
my love, to offer
a taste
of the pleasure
I've been served tonight.

A Kind of Song, a Kind of Singing

Michael Hettich

for Johnny Vincenzcz

Rare pleasure: the miracle
of taste, the beauty
in affectionate attention
to detail, to the subtle

resonating harmonies
in spices, in the way
a deft knife slices
mere sustenance into

experience presented
on a handmade plate:
a kind of song we take inside
our bodies, make into ourselves,

and live, for some moments,
at a high pitch of joy,
and live, for some moments,
as *singing*.

Boy with Two Tongues

Michael Hettich

Six centuries ago...men understood by realism
exactly the opposite of what we now mean.

—Raymond Blakney

...that old story of the boy with two tongues, who lived for years beneath his parents' house without anyone knowing: At night while his parents slept, he woke and pulled himself through some passageway, up into their house, where he walked around happily, watched TV, ate whatever he could find. Sometimes he dug through his parents' laundry hamper, trying on the soiled clothes he found there; sometimes he crawled beneath his parents' bed and whispered. He loved to listen to his parents breathing. As he grew older, he sometimes slipped into bed between his parents. They smelled like fur. If either of them woke up briefly in the middle of the night, he held his breath and didn't move. When he wasn't moving he felt as though he could easily disappear, really disappear. But hadn't he already been gone for years? Where was he? Outside were night creatures and the small birds that flew only in moonlight, with faces he recognized when he stood in that outside darkness, which was so different from the darkness he usually inhabited. All those animals were running and flying around, talking whatever languages they spoke in those days, and the boy could understand them, and he could talk back to them with his double tongue. That night-talking felt like magic; that night-talking felt like purest happiness. And soon the animals learned to recognize his voice, learned to understand his language; they came out of their own species darkness, and they gathered around him. And slowly but surely he became their listening.

In That Cool Water

They Drink

Marilyn Monroe

Russell Thorburn

After hours afield,
fighting sweat and flies, every rock
that's a burden,
they drink Marilyn Monroe, she on a stool
irresistible and free,

her thighs sliding across the soft rubber
in the sizzle of grease
and corned beef hash, as they envy
her for the way her hand
fusses with a curl,
limitless in the way they can be twisted
around a finger,
her wide, untested mouth
cool as the stream

where water courses, sure of itself,
the thousand ways it gurgles, then ripples
and disappears,
as if in its presence there was a soulless act
of drinking what they could never taste.

Matisse in Near Retirement

Russell Thorburn

All the colors suddenly bewilder.
He returns to that other life
of hard sunlight upon Greek tiles
in the garden where he entertained
the son of a Vatican prelate.
That ruined gazebo where he seduced
a whole dynasty of women in loose black silk,
the name of Anna whispered to a Persian cat
stalking field mice in high grass.
The bill for a grotesque Picasso canvas
where the women are nothing but sad architecture.
After hours in intimate reflection upon yellow,
its near cousins to the sun, its great aunts
of desire, he extinguishes the flame.
Maybe the morning wine will find another color.
The harsh express of his wife's voice
in the pantry will slow to a murmur.
A door opening will announce yet another unsettling
vision, for middle aged, bearded and stout,
he seems to be a stranger in his own house,
where the nude covers up her breasts,
apologizing for his Chinese brush sunk
into his malaise of half turpentine, half water.

Puerto Ángel

Richard Davignon

The dragon-spine of the Sierra Madre del Sur winds down into southern Mexico and into Guatemala, Puerto Ángel hugs the Pacific coast a few hundred kilometers from the Guatemalan frontier.

The Hotel Iguana lies a short distance south of the fishing village, a vermin-infested, palm-thatched sprawl of crumbling adobe brick. The proprietor, Nando Mondragón, a retired traffic policeman, had invested his bribes wisely. Hotel Iguana was now the final destination of those souls, exiled, damned, tortured, and lost, who came seeking a cut-rate refuge that blended into the earth between the jungle and the ocean.

It is night. Remove your sandals and let us enter silently to contemplate:

Obediah J——, former NFL punt-returner, who sprayed a nerve poison on his uniform and murdered seven Chicago Bears on a cold Sunday in December.

The Watson twins who placed turds in their sister's Christmas stocking. She has been in a catatonic shock since age six. They pass the remainder of their lives cheating at cards with Nixon, their pet chimpanzee.

The nameless bishop who sold his cathedral, changed his name to Ugo Quattropani and drove racing cars throughout Europe. Each day he limps along the beach watching frigate birds and making engine noises.

Doctor Green, the obstetrician who, at his last delivery, announced to an expectant father, "It's a baby!" He grows fine tomatoes and marijuana that he sells in the village on market days.

A cruise-ship captain who kidnapped 700 members of the New Jersey Bar Association and sold them all into slavery somewhere along the West African coast.

And still they come. Today, Nando gallantly welcomed a Danish ballerina, now in disgrace, who inadvertently ended the career of her partner with an accidental kick to a sensitive area as he descended from a *jeté*.

Thus pass the seasons at Hotel Iguana, amid old newspapers, insects, the rain and tropical heat, madnests (great and small) and the noise of jaguars coughing in the night.

The Paranoid Caravan Diaries

Part One

Richard Davignon

Pine-Sol in the Cook's fat-free brownies took care of Györgi plus eleven others. I have been reinstated into the band. However, a trumpet player from Culiacán continued to kick me in the ankle as we marched. I did an about-face and removed nine of his teeth with my trombone. He owed many people large sums of money and had halitosis.

The Committee has acted favorably on our petition to wear handguns. I have selected a .25-calibre Beretta automatic. Not a few have scoffed at my "pea shooter" but they do admit that the poison-tipped bullets are a big equalizer. Also the dried blood on the slide of my trombone commands respect.

Shot and killed a vampire that had crept into my tent. My comic book collection is safe. We are now halfway into Nebraska.

A farmer denied us permission to camp last night, in spite of the fact that we offered to share our supper of *coq au vin* with him and his family. He called us "spawn of the devil" and so we set his cornfields ablaze and moved onward into the night. The conflagration spread quite rapidly, fanned by a westerly breeze and, with luck, should reach Iowa in a few days.

Two helicopters have been following us for almost a week. We painted *PLEASE SEND US MORE BIBLES* in white paint on the highway and jumped them when they landed.

Finally we have reached upper Michigan and relative safety. The helicopters were traded for several truckloads of food destined for Detroit supermarkets. Our underground bunker is a welcome haven for the winter. The quality of our counterfeit money has improved greatly and is now readily accepted by the local townspeople.

We earn additional income by begging outside churches and cheating at their Bingo games on Friday nights.

First snowfall. How pleasant to pass the hours lying to each other and improving our card-cheating skills. The still is now in operation and produces enough whiskey for our needs. I enjoy my comic books. Superheros can inspire us all.

The Committee has decided that we will infiltrate the *Million Moron March* to Washington, DC in the spring. We are having *Boeuf Bourguignon* for dinner with *Tarte au Pomme* as dessert. My favorite!

The Poet in the Park

Joyce Odam

He bends like a sad whisper to the grace of her eyes. She is saying goodbye to him, there in the park, in the turbulent day, children all around.

He seems to need her, his vague melancholy upon him like a familiar thought for which he has no control. He is a mute gray in the catch of light

that finds him lingering; he will stay a little longer in the crowd—some purpose here that holds him; she will wander off among the others,

the children following, straggling apart in future directions. He will watch them from the shade of a tree awhile, then turn away—forgetting, or

remembering, this or that of himself, of her, of the why of anything he cares about, then turning to listen to the something else of himself that

is so quiet now in the family light that bears the summer down upon him. He sees her and the children disappear in the crowd as if into time, that mystery,

through which he suddenly feels so cut apart.

Chords from the Lute

Philip A. Waterhouse

Summer twilight, hostess for woman's
ages-old ablution.

She bends to the fold of lips with cloth
softened by soap, alternating

vigorous and museful strokes, then rinsing
before she pauses to graze
among people, places, things of the mind's eye,

rivulets collecting at her feet—
the silence of the ritual one other is granted

presence to witness. Then, to further parts,
and towelling, first again in the cleft

until she is all over finished, and leaves
and the other buries his face

in her thick, damp Turkish.
They will go out, or may stay; either course,
he will remember her resolute, and

day-dreamy soaping, and, to that point
and beyond, cannot decide

for his life, which is most choice,
watching her, or helping her wash.

Lobster Pots

Philip A. Waterhouse

Summertime travelers make faces,
close vehicle windows as they take
the North Shore Drive at low tide,
its stinking salt flats of raw
mother lode pools nobody might be here
in human form without, still absent
heads or tails instead of erectus,
the pools generating micro life
even as you stand at one breathing
only through the mouth at first, leaning
against one of the great boulders
exposed by the diurnal sea change, one
of which began its re-surge out there
hours ago, and in moments will start to
wash your feet and the ripe air while
you await the signal you remember
as a child—the first meager, timid
breeze to filter the stink and
trigger your run from the mass of stone
shrieking at the ocean with bravado
of gull or tern.

He told us what was going on in the world.

The kid wasn't happy about having her video game interrupted. We told her it was time to get ready for bed anyway.

Peter Jennings said, "Something is happening." In Jordan it was already getting light. The correspondent kept looking worriedly into the emptiness behind him. It was quiet now, he said, but who knew what these streets were going to be like when word got around. I know how he felt. I've often imagined myself being dragged from cars by angry mobs. The one in which I'm devoured alive by African tribeswomen naked to the waist gives me an erection.

I poured out a small pot.

"Where is everybody?" our daughter said.

"Only the buildings," my wife said.

"Why does it all get all black when it blows up?"

"Some electronic reason."

"I can't hear anything."

The drip seemed to be slowing, slowly. I emptied another pot or pan and replaced it with one from an area that no longer needed it. My daughter drew a picture of what she saw. She came to me with her crayon opinion. I crumpled it up and threw it. I told her to go to bed.

"It's like riding it down," my wife said. "The ground just comes rushing up."

"Then there's just snow," the maintenance man said, disappointed.

I was spreading paper towels on the floor. There was another sound to think about now, a soft crackling hiss that made me worry about wet, shorted wiring until I saw what it came from: my daughter's picture, balled up in the corner of the kitchen, slowly uncrumpling. I looked into the living room.

My wife sat on the couch next to the maintenance man. My daughter's head was in his lap. You could live in the lines of his face.

"Let's say," he was saying, "You were sitting in the fuselage of a B-17, or a 29, one of those, one of many about to go on a raid. Let's say you heard the thrum of all those engines, and felt it, felt them all in the hollow of your stomach, where the butterflies are supposed to go.

"Those are the heaviest butterflies in the world," he said.

The Seashore Idyl

Joyce Odam

(after Seashore Idyl by Heinrich Kley)

On that godforsaken, barren length of beach, there was nothing left to do but make the best of things. He was ugly, but maybe she could make him beautiful, for she believed in lies and spells.

"If I love you, will you become beautiful for me?" she would ask each time he came ashore. And he would say he would. She was happy after that, and each day at the same hour she would lean against her lonely sea-rock, and scan the gray length of the sea from one end to the other, and wait for him to come out of the water.

And he would lumber out and sit on the sand in all his grossness and sing to her with his loud and mournful voice which carried so far away it broke beyond their hearing. The sky would churn with stormy echoes then settle back to the flat and desolate gray monotony of this place. And he would droop his head again upon his chest in some old melancholy.

She would listen until he was through, then ask, "How can you be so sad when I love you—you who are so beautiful to me?" And she would turn aside and weep at her own boredom and sadness.

But he would sit on the sand in all his ugliness and he could not lift to her his heavy arms or his massive head, and he would sigh from his heavy heart and tell her that she must come with him, then, into the weightless sea, if she must have an answer they could both believe.

And she would lean against her old sea-rock and think of this and wonder how it would be if she followed him into the wide gray unknown water. Until the sun went down she would think of this, while he would bask in the low cold western light and make his impression in the sand for her, which she would later curl into and sleep.

Becalmed

Joyce Odam

They are the ones who will never arrive.
The fragrant water of their travel has
lulled them to such a half sleep they think
they are the dreams of their own creating.
They wait under the white patience of the sky
in the boat of silence. The winged fish
that pulled them have also slipped into
this lull of timelessness...

There are no tides or underwarnings. The
weather is perfect for their thoughts.
They are in a simple drift, so easy to
surrender to. They feel no omen in the
changing blue that is fading ever so subtly
on the horizon or note the single shudder
of the bird that has been resting on the
motionless rail like a carving...

He Said the Bombing Had Started

Eugene Marten

Back when we lived in the highrise I walked into the kitchen and stepped in something wet. You know the feeling. Something wet landed on my head. I got the medium-sized mixing bowl out of the cupboard and lined it up under the drip. Together they made a pretty sound. I went back into the living room and watched my daughter play her video game. I heard the drops falling faster, there was more thudding than splinging. When I went back to take a look the tile was getting wet again. I got out another bowl while my wife called Maintenance.

We had the whole set out under the ceiling by the time they sent their man up, and we still weren't catching everything. He was an old guy you'd see around but this was the first time we'd ever needed his services. He wore a toolbelt so heavily accoutered he needed suspenders. I still remembered the taste of his mouth. I'd found him at the edge of the parking lot gaping up at the sky like a landed fish, a sawhorse splintered beneath him, his footprints curing in the sidewalk he'd poured. "You're the one," a woman called to me from a high window. "There's no one else around." She coached me; she was a retired nurse. He never seemed glad to see me.

He watched the leak get worse for a while, then opened his mouth and caught a few drops on his tongue. "Dishwasher," he said. He said he'd be right back.

It spread across the threshold and over the carpet in the hallway. We put out everything he had—it wasn't much—even our daughter's old potty. On plastic the water clicked. The carpet was getting wet. The hallway was completely blocked and you had to leap over the pots and pans and get wet if you needed to use the bathroom. Our daughter kept having to go. I realized she was just doing it to enjoy herself and told her to knock it off.

The maintenance man came back in without knocking and said the woman upstairs was having trouble with her dishwasher. I'd seen her, this woman he mentioned, in the flashing red lights of the social gathering occasioned by the failure of his heart. He said she'd turned it off and was getting it up as well as she could. The dripping would stop as soon as it drained out. He told us she wouldn't use the dishwasher again until it was fixed.

School Days

Philip A. Waterhouse

Can do without
letters from fossils smelling
of older times, some best forgot.
Messages insisting we return
for one more (last?)
reunite with the (dwindling) decrepits.

A new shopping center
on the site of the old high school
football field cum bleachers
supposed to be enticing?
(Grass behind the seats was; however,
that's another fourth quarter story.
A mall's a mall).

Just forward photos, please.
Portray your present habitat
against memories we
can invoke at local grade level
in a winged armchair makes no sudden, fancy
banking turns at so and so thou feet.

May we close
with a request: not only do we seek
to avoid former allergies, but,
careless snapshots
of burial grounds as well?

Liquids Continue to Conspire

Eugene Marten

or: Driving drunk in the rain, I drove over somebody's oil slick—you could see the rainbow—went into a skid and slammed sideways into the curb. Both hubcaps on the passenger side popped off on impact, bounced over the guardrail, dropped out of sight into the ravine below the road.

Afterwards my life took various turns. People at work who never spoke to me used the bare rims opportunistically to learn my name. My views were sought. On the street, certain women and middle-aged men to the right side of my car began turning their heads in my direction. I started taking the bus. "Oh, no!" they said, before I'd even paid my fare. "Fuck you!" they said. "Kiss my warts!"

The car ran better than ever.

I wanted my old days back.

I scoured the junkyards but they couldn't help me—apparently the car's previous owner had had the hubcaps custom-made—so I pulled over onto the berm at the scene of the accident and proceeded to climb down into the ravine. I'd barely gotten started when I tilted backward off a ledge and fell the rest of the way. When I came to, the man who lived in the bottom of the gully was gingerly pushing the broken tip of my shinbone back into the jagged hole through which it protruded like a buck tooth. When I came to again I saw a huge bloodshot eye painted onto one of my hubcaps. He'd threaded a chain through the valve hole and hung it pendant over his chest. He was feeding me rabbit stew from the other, stringy and sweet. He told me the secret to running down a rabbit: when it made a cut, it stuck to it and all you had to do was catch up.

"Strictly a one-move mammal," he said. He showed me how to break necks humanely.

We also enjoyed opossum, raccoon, squirrel, frog legs from the marsh on the other side of the train tracks, the occasional fowl, and an assortment of wild greens. We washed it down with rainwater filtered through pantyhose, and wanted for nothing. Still, a mountain of recyclables rose in the glade behind his lean-to.

"Money in the bank," he said.

My leg healed crookedly but it was a relief not to wear his foul-smelling poultices. I tried to broach the matter of the hubcaps. He took off his hat and showed me the dent in his bare scalp where the first one had struck. "You know what I thought it was," he said, pointing up at the stars. One of them was moving. "Hundreds," he said, "at least." Some, often the products of inferior foreign technology, were slowly falling out of mismanaged, decaying orbits. Anytime soon, they would start reentering the atmosphere, bombarding the earth with flaming debris. He hadn't been able to sleep a wink until he'd found this—he tapped the painted hubcap hanging from his neck—the one that kept watch and never blinked. Finally he could shut his own at night.

I noticed them not opening again. In the light of day he began to smell differently than he usually did. I looked at the hubcaps and thought about my car—towed, impounded, probably sold at auction.

Twilight

Adam Burhans

That line in the sky appears on the sidewalk.
Over I step, then back, becoming an edge where the rain stops.

Beyond that split any day waits to live.
In our pockets a coin flips calmly, one side the moon.

It rolls the fabric, toward a color
Almost spoken, never held.

"Twilight's a tough time to see," Father once said,
The headlights against a crow becoming gull.

At my knees a child, or young wolf, groans
At the merging world. Over the line

We yearn, edges where the rain used to be,
Our side of the coin: glinting in headlights coming on.

Marble

Adam Burhans

I held the sea in that rock so steady I became glass.
I climbed forward through a day, slender, a weave in the uphill rain.

When I heard the world waiting to lean where I stood,
I fixed myself to that mountain, a final piece, a breath.

I listened as the sea held its curl in the stillness. But not for long,
And not forever, like a sky leaving our jaw.

I cupped my hands, steady and over, thinking:
Someday, you will be glass.

You will turn as I leave, striping you once in the center,
A whole world you must weave, at either end, uphill, in the rain.

Fillet

Adam Burhans

From the years a sky pulls back: *fillet*.
Rivers make a path

As evening slips into the glass of the world,
Alone from forever, pink, engaged

At each new bend, the feel
It gives you when you speak its name.

III

Rose by rose
the clouds unfold
above the village
toward which a traveler
walks with a suitcase.
He stops to wipe the sunlight
from his glasses.
He is bringing the cure
to whatever ails the spinster
who wrote for help.
The letter lay unread for years.
Springs and autumns
passed again
before he set out
with a red carnation in his lapel
and the creases in his trousers
sharp as knives.

IV

In the open coffin
on a bed of lace
flowers await their burial.
The pall bearers carry them
twice around the church
then lower them into a grave
from which no one has ever returned.

Chomolungma

David Chorlton

Pieces of the sky fly past
the smallest man in the world
who writes in the snow
with his boots

that he carries no flag to raise
as he leaves the final bivouac,
deposits his rucksack,
sheds part of himself,
checks the altimeter,
peels off a layer of fear,
takes ten steps and rests,
takes eight steps and rests,

casts away pride
to lighten his load,
takes six steps and rests
then crawls, then stands

for the last blinding stretch
until there is nowhere higher
to go, and sets
the summit he has carried with him
in its place.

He begins the descent

to the yak nomads
for whom light and dark are the same,
to the cloudy monasteries,
the hermits, the villages
of prayer flags and stone

and deeper into the valley
where diplomats wait to ask him
who he is climbing for.
My breath is an anthem, he says,

I myself am the country.

The Alchemist's Solitude

David Chorlton

An alchemist contemplates the weight of the sky
from his mountain pagoda
where he has not eaten for a month
yet feels himself grow heavier by the day
and sleeps the leaden sleep
of one who has begged the light to come down
and the earth to offer up
whatever is fired in its molten heart.
He is tired of invoking lightning
to heat the seas, and mixing cinnabar with mercury
until they are mud
boiling in the pot beneath a crescent moon.
The elixir no longer tastes eternal,
and all the streams he called on
to turn back toward the mountain
continue to thread their silver way
down between rocks where the lizards
are still green and never listen
when he tells them creation has no limits
and they could be dragons if they tried.
Even he is fated to stay human
and go back to his kitchen of secrets
until the day he spreads a potter's glaze
across his skin
and steps into the furnace.

Village Scenes

David Chorlton

I
With snow on the tip of each finger
a hand of smoke
opens. Birches
raise their faces from the ice.
A flame spreads its wings
and flies through the forest
bright as the single eye
of the villager
stumbling home
on his drunken feet.

II
A silent choir
mouths the syllables of a text
whispered down
through generations, from the death bed
of each to the next.
It is the song of the wolf
who lived alone
before the people came
and who will reappear
when they have gone
with the wind in his silver fur.

X Marks the Spot

Daryl Rogers

A Gas Company employee found the body after neighbors complained of a smell. The girl had been dead for a long time. The old woman and her two surviving children had rubbed the body with cremes evidently thinking she might recover. They realized something was wrong when one morning the mother touched the girl's arm and it caved in. The mother told investigators that her child had fainted, when the people dynamited the house.

Human waste was buried all over the backyard. The coroner wore an oxygen mask during the examination and reporters swarmed the outside taking pictures through the windows, while the dead girl's brother paced back and forth from a safe distance with a hunting ax in his hands. The living daughter howled the whole time until they carried her, her mother and brother away for observation, separating them for the first time in their entire lives.

History of the American West, Second Edition

Marc Bookman

"(W)e...no longer believe in the integrity of events; that is, we are no longer able to accept events at their own value..."
Don't Mean Diddly, *The New Yorker*, July 11, 1994

Nothing was certain. Something had happened on June 25, 1876, something shocking and altogether impossible to believe, but as the reports came haltingly back East the pieces fell apart. Perhaps it was the delay—no one outside the smallest corner of the Montana Territory knew a thing about the slaughter until the celebration of the Centennial nine days later, and when the story did break it was in the *Bismarck Weekly Tribune* of all places. By the time the New York and Texas papers had gotten hold of it, this much was clear: Custer was dead, and every Indian on the continent would have to pay for it.

But soon all sorts of doubts surfaced. First and foremost was the question of who killed him. Initially no Indian came forward to claim the deed, although the significance of this silence was overlooked for many years. Later, claims were made by Rain In The Face, Hawk, Two Moon, White Bull, Flat Hip and dozens of others. Who could really say? Then too, Custer had never been buried, and accounts about the treatment of his body by the Indians varied dramatically. One noted that he had been shot in the head during the battle, and then slashed once in the cheek to indicate to the other Indians that he was to be treated with respect. Other reports, though, had him scalped and left naked at the top of a hill overlooking the Little Bighorn River, and one soldier from Major Reno's brigade wrote an uncaptioned piece in a magazine called *The Real West* that implied his penis had been cut off and stuffed in the barrel of his gun. No one knew for sure. A year later, when elements of the Seventh Cavalry returned to the battlefield to give the bones a proper burial, the coffin marked for Custer turned out to have the remains of a Corporal Phillip Hundley, or so said the name tag on a decaying shirt placed ever so delicately into the same box.

Slowly, slowly new details came to light. A man named Giovanni Martini, a messenger who claimed to be the last man to see Custer alive and actually delivered to the authorities a note Custer had dictated just before the battle, professed to *Western Star* magazine that he had looked back one last time and saw Custer and an unidentified person *heading east*, away from the battlefield and toward the Black Hills. Then two traders came forward and said that they had been camped on the Powder River and a man who looked like Custer, but for his short hair, actually spent the night of June 28, 1876 with them. They hadn't asked his name beyond "George," and they hadn't come forward until now because they assumed it wasn't him even though there was a strong resemblance; then they read that Custer had cut his hair short before the battle! By the way, he was traveling with a woman, and without doubt she was Cheyenne. Letters to the *Western Star* in subsequent issues intimated that the woman was Custer's mistress, and responses to those letters speculated that Custer might be traveling with his daughter, borne of this secret relationship and acknowledged as his blood only after his decision to leave long-suffering wife Elizabeth.

In the early 1890s military analysts weighed in: the official accounts of the battle were laughably inaccurate, perhaps intentionally so. After all, hadn't Custer been sent West in the first place to protect America's interest in the Black Hills? The Treaty of 1868 had been a huge mistake, and it was absurd to think that Indians, who valued gold no more than any other mineral, would be allowed to remain on land given them only because it had once been deemed worthless! Custer had been sacrificed to the moneyed interests who needed a martyr as an excuse to take back the Hills without losing face. Or so said one school of thought. A group of young revisionists fresh out of West Point thought just the opposite. It made no sense to split up the regiment as Custer was alleged to have ordered, especially with General Terry's infantry not far behind—Major Reno and Captain Benteen had said as much at the inquiry only three years after the massacre. The General was erratic, to be sure, perhaps even the glory seeker his rivals made him out to be; but he was no fool, and he surely loved himself too much to be trapped without cover between Crazy Horse and Gall the way it had been reported. The battle simply had to have occurred some other way.

Moving Daryl Rogers

My next door neighbor is gone.
The door he tore of the hinges
is just propped against the jamb
so I squeeze through to have a look.

There is a bassinet
with a splintered headboard
against the walls in one corner.
Broken spindles are scattered on the floor.

Dishes and photographs litter the kitchen.
A partially burned Bible
is lying open in the sink
its pages swelled with tap water.

Hotdog Daryl Rogers

Thick round air. The sun
brightens the room with cold light,
which slowly grows more colorless and bright.
Before sunset the moon rises
like a white pockmark on pastel blue skin.
Is that Venus or a satellite?
A jewel accentuated by its isolation.
Snake-doctors hover over the flower bed.
Lightning begins to flicker atop the ridge
and the porch crackles with a sudden charge
as light rain falls from a deep blue sky.

This was one of the few and only times
we believed in resurrection,

and the rest of the summer we walked
carefully, aware of where pink newborn mice
nested under the stall mats,
their skin so thin
we could see how milk
gurgled into their bellies,
yet still praising the dogs for swallowing
fat, gray mice found running
in the grain room, for digging up
an old cow leg bone
one day in the woods, its joint
still miraculously intact,
swinging at the knee as they gripped it
between their teeth.

The ground, we knew, was mixed, littered,
and we wondered that our feet
didn't tingle when we walked,
that constellations of skin and bone
didn't echo up our shins,
the air vibrate all around us, shattered,
marked as it was by the dark slashes
of birds crossing the sky.

Now some of the facts that hadn't made sense earlier started to come together in a more logical fashion. If Custer's nickname among the Indians was Long Hair and yet he had cut his hair short just before the conflict, perhaps it was not so much a coincidence as a disguise. If so many claimed to have killed Custer and yet none had been able to validate the claim, if his body had never been found and a man going by "George" had been seen traveling with a Cheyenne woman near the battlefield, the reasonable conclusion was that he wasn't dead! And there was more: Custer had pioneered the Thieves' Road into the Dakota Territory, it was his report of gold that started the rush there, *and his last sighting had been in the direction of the Black Hills.*

But other sightings would follow. In 1887, a retired sergeant named Wecht, who had served with Custer at Fort Cobb, was panning for gold in Ditch Creek when the General passed not two hundred feet from him surrounded by an entourage of uniformed men. In 1891 a fur trader named Stone spotted Custer in the same area and followed him to a gated estate deep in the Black Hills. Rumors spread of Custer's "house of gold" and how he lived there with his Cheyenne family and a squad of armed guards. It was said that he never left the grounds, but the Warren family of Cincinnati swore that they had seen him when the door of a densely smoke-filled room swung open during a tour of the White House shortly after President McKinley was assassinated in 1901. Yet there was no photograph of him after the Little Bighorn. Until the summer of 1907, that is, when a slightly blurred picture appeared on the front page of the tabloid *Western World*. Two men stood in profile next to a huge white slab that was identified as the Custer Battlefield National Monument, and scattered white tombstones marked the foreground. Custer was 67 years old, still lean and wiry if a bit stooped over, still wearing his thinning hair long enough to be seen below the hat that partially obscured his forehead. But there was no question it was him. The other man, however, was more difficult to identify. He was younger, huskier, he had a very bushy mustache, that much was certain. He had lived on a ranch in the Dakota Territory, and it made perfect sense that he would have established a close relationship with the General, but no one was ever able to authenticate with absolute assurance that the man in the photograph with Custer was Theodore Roosevelt.

Bloodshed

Hedy Habra

Those two,
inseparables
dove-like
sparrows
are tearing
each other apart
gamecocks
in the arena.

Just yesterday
friends, lovers,
hand in hand,
those two
were Gods
spilling ambrosia
from a gold-rimmed
cup, seated in
the folded palms
of the stars.

Agony of a
slaughtered
fowl, their blood
splatters, gluey,
indelible ink
deep tattoo
painful carmine
carved veins,
severed tongues,
separated,
reunited,
vision blurred
by a burning
cloud of sand.

The Knot

David James

If it's love
that ties us
to this world,
then string me up.
I want knots
coming out of every
orifice, bows
hanging from limbs
like cobwebs,
caught up in my own
doing and yours.

Let's hang ourselves
in the name of love
and be real swingers.
Let's tie the knot
and promise to stay
together until
the end of twine.
Let's stop this petty
needling and instead
thread our lives
into a pattern
so intricate
we could never find
our way out.
And never want to.

Mixed

M. Rebecca Ransom

They left her when we shouted.
They were good dogs, after all,
despite killing the neighbors' rabbit
in glee on the lawn
the past winter, leaving white fur
scattered like fallen snow, guts spread
red and steaming on the cold morning grass.

There must be dozens of picture books
about children finding a dead bird,
burying it in a shoe box
lined with cotton,
marking the grave with a rock.
This was never our story,
though we found several swallows in the barn
each summer, tossing the bodies
instead down a gully,
not wanting to see dogs dig up and chew
tiny birds we had watched
growing under the roof, slim as sylphs.

The dogs left this one unmolested,
and when they were done sniffing
we were surprised
to discover she still breathed,
shocked but not broken,
white feather in the center of her back
rising and falling.
We left her in a pile of shavings
and a few hours later she was gone,
flown with forked tail
and boomerang wings,
blended up into blue air.

Exorcism

Hedy Habra

Feet glued to the wooden floor,
face expressionless, her hips jerk
at the haunting, atavistic drumbeat,
unreal contraption
sprouting from within the planks.
Her disjointed body fluctuates
she concentrates as though
stepping over a serpent's head,
harder, mixing blood with guts
in the tropical sand,
flattening the inert coil.
She kicks it into the woods,
keeps pounding the floor,
eyes closed, hears the incessant
sound of carnivorous ants,
roer's mandibles busying
around the offering, an infernal rhythm,
mini drums, echoing the ones
summoned by large, tan hands.

Lovers,

in The Garden of Earthly Delights
by Hieronymous Bosch

Hedy Habra

They have taken refuge in a transparent
sphere in the midst of nudes riding
unicorns, gryphons and camels, reveling
among gigantic birds and berries.

Seen through the slightly opaque screen,
their bodies seem ethereal, a silent
reproval of the orgy of sepias, pinks
and reds around them.

From a distance, the cracked glass recalls
a crystal egg about to hatch, a veined
butterfly's wing nestled in a voluminous
black flower.

Or are the lovers seated inside a dew drop
blown from a gold-petalled mouth, born
from a flower's heart?

In their greenhouse, they barely move,
fearful of tearing the transparent veil.

He stares to her right, his breath flowing
on the nape of her neck, a gentle stroke
on her belly, a wish or promise for a
child to come.

Eyes half closed, she dreams of bearing
his child. Her heart sings the Magnificat
at her lover's touch. Rejoicing he is no
Archangel, she rests a hand on his thigh.

They hide, still, cautious. Anything could
destroy the invisible net setting them apart,
the brightest spot in the canvas.

Words, even love words could have sharp edges,
distend the perfect shape. Their hands, lovers'
winged fingers, speak in a motionless caress.

Silver Is Her Name

Philip A. Waterhouse

Moss
among red cobblestones. Trying
to survive
one more summer moon, who knows tomorrow?

Girl
in the flat below
shampoos in moonrays for it, tomorrow.
In the natural
state, so say her shadows.

Walks among
the moss to dry in perfect, natural composure.

I would
be the moss. Though, cobblestones
would do.

I promise her them soft.

Antlers

Hedy Habra

In the center of the white
lace, two bronze deer
face each other,
antlers charcoal drawn,
branches in snow,
curves copied from Monarchs'
wings. Their necks bear
burning candles,
a cold flame casting
shadows on the bare walls.
Two gypsy dancers,
backs arched in a duel,
sworn to die for love,
prostrated in medias res,
delaying the ritualistic
holocaust.

Nearby, in candlelight,
two women speak in sign
language. Their bodies'
slightest motion falls, smooth
unstrummed notes
in a guitar concerto.
I wonder if one
should be deaf to listen.
If one should hibernate
to see a hand
extended in one's direction.

I turn to the deer,
the centerpiece
in that Christmas Season.
In the semi-darkness,
wavering chiaroscuro

instills life
to their immobile dance.
So much takes place
in shaded areas concealed
by the artist's pencil.
If only one could
guess what failure
lies behind
a brush stroke,
and sense what is lost
when lips, a pale
reflection of thought,
speak in a tongue foreign
to one's heart.
And who is to know,
what words stay in the way
when two lovers stand still
under the streetlights,
stiff in the icy night, their
clouded, bronze hearts,
unable to become
transparent.

What if a hunter
came, a lover turned hunter,
stealthily close,
face to face?
He knows where bone
meets bone, where the flesh
is soft. Like the dancer,
he calculates
his move, raises his arm
as my shadow leans
against the wall.

Beautiful Wife

Paul Beckman

In the parking lot of the racquetball club, the man I had just met in the tournament said, “My wife is very beautiful—you’ll meet her—you’ll see.” He spoke as a man who could not believe his own good fortune. “She is very tall—as tall as I am, and she has beautiful legs. They are very long with incredible calves. She has dark nipples. I love dark nipples. I especially love dark nipples under a nurse’s uniform. If only I could get her to wear a nurse’s uniform. She will do anything for me except wear a nurse’s uniform. I don’t understand her. Do you want to meet her? Come for dinner. She will make chicken and it will be terrible. She is a terrible cook, but she will insist on cooking for company. I usually do the cooking. I’m a terrific cook. What would you like? It doesn’t matter. She will grill chicken and it will be too rare inside and charred on the outside. That’s how she cooks chicken. It is the only thing she cooks, and she still can’t get it right. She is so beautiful you won’t notice the chicken.”

“I’ll come for dinner. When?” I ask, concentrating on dark nipples and long beautiful legs and not on raw chicken.

“Tonight,” he says. “Now. Come now. It’s already four-thirty. Follow me home.”

“Is this enough notice for your wife? Why don’t you call her first?” I ask.

“After eight years of marriage I know my wife,” he says. “It’s plenty of time. She doesn’t need notice. I’ll show you. Just to make you comfortable I’ll call and tell her I’m bringing a new friend home for dinner. OK?” He heads towards the pay phone in the parking lot.

“Sure,” I call after him.

“Listen,” he says when he returns. “Tonight is not good. My wife says she is not feeling beautiful tonight.”

This Is Not Self Service

Paul Beckman

The Fruiterie, a greengrocer’s store, occupies the same spot in Guilford Connecticut since the Banores family first open it some forty years ago. The current proprietors are third generation Banores greengrocers. Unlike greengrocer stores throughout the world, and especially the east coast, The Fruiterie does not put their wares on display outside the store. They are also not given to window displays.

Inside, signs are posted around the store:

This is not self service!

Ask for help!

Do not touch the produce!

To make a purchase, the customer stands in front of a crate of the desired fruit or vegetable and the Banores on duty asks questions in a tone more suited to a clinic than a grocery—“what day do you plan to eat this?”—“do you like your plums soft or hard?”—“is this going into a salad or will it be served whole?” The Banores then makes the selection accordingly. Time could be saved if each customer were given a clipboard and form to fill out upon entering the store. Perhaps the next generation.

Many people over the years have reached to pick up an apple or peach only to be yelled at from across the store. “The signs! Read the signs!”

When I was in high school I worked at The Fruiterie but I was not allowed to touch any unwrapped food. I moved boxes into coolers, out of coolers, carried bags to cars, swept up, made deliveries, and touched young Mrs. Banores—and she me, in the back room, while the rest of the Banores family was busy keeping watch on their precious produce.

A True Story

Paul Beckman

Last week I visited my mother in the Jewish Home for the Aged. As we sat in the solarium talking, little by little her friends came by and joined us. Pretty soon I was sitting with a dozen seniors, all women.

I was looking at these ladies-but it wasn't them I was seeing. I was imagining their daughters. It was their daughters I was undressing. It's not hard to down-age a person with some practice, and God knows, I have enough practice. A couple of the seniors had to have beautiful daughters. I could tell.

I'm not exactly your soap opera hunk. I am tall and well built, and a woman once told me that I had an appealingly soft smile. I liked that. Another told me I had a Will Rogers kind of smile. I guess they are the same thing.

Whenever there are three or more women around me I find myself picking and choosing which one will be my next lover. It happens. I couldn't not do it.

Selecting her is not a snap decision. I study each woman carefully until the cream rises to the top. This happens everywhere-in restaurants, department stores, funerals, bus stops, at Temple -anywhere there is a group of women around me. First, I eliminate the definite no chances, which is easy. Then I pick the positives. With a guy like me who's not all that discriminating-even in fantasy, the positives can mount up pretty fast. If there are enough positives to select from I don't even bother with the maybes.

The scene I play out doesn't change.

My shirt is unbuttoned halfway and my gold chain shimmers as it weaves through the thicket of my chest hair. I envision myself talking to the woman. I am charming her. I carry this all the way through to a bedroom. Then I do the same to the next woman and so forth. Sometimes, even often times, we never get as far as the bedroom scene. She'll make a gesture that I find unappealing and the fantasy will end. Why the hell should I have to put up with an unappealing gesture or expression in my own fantasy? If the chemistry isn't there, why bother to continue?

When I finally make my selection I proceed to attempt to fulfill my fantasy. It's not unusual for me to end up with a new lover for the night or

Penis Art

David James

"I will not make any more art with penises."
female art student, University of Michigan

It's time to stop dicking around.
I'm plain tired
of drawing nude men,
one flopping this way,
one flopping that.
How many penises
do I have to sketch
before others start to envy me?

As an artist,
I have to draw the line somewhere.
My picture of the afternoon clouds
ends up looking like floating scrotums.
I paint a forest
in upper Michigan
and the trees all have hard-ons.
This penis thing
has gotten under my skin
and just keeps growing.

So I've put my foot down
and made this vow before the whole world:
no more art with penises.
From now on, the models
will have coffee pots, mixers,
blow dryers, cookie jars, anything handy

where there used to be penises.
Books, sprinklers, shoes,
roses and tulips will blossom
between men's legs,
and I'll refuse to acknowledge
any kind of penis,
small, medium, or large,
anywhere
on any body
unless I can get both hands on it
and create something
meaningful.

Beatitudes for the Male

David James

with apologies to Jesus Christ

Blessed are the poorly dressed,
for women shall love them
for who they really are.

Blessed are those who mourn and cry
for they shall be called politically correct.

Blessed are the meek,
for they shall inherit the checkbook.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst,
for they shall become good cooks
and stuff themselves beyond comfort.

Blessed are the merciful,
for they shall have strength enough
to remain married.

Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall have the power
to see through any deceptive bitch.

Blessed are the peacemakers,
for they shall make a decent living
as marriage counselors.

Blessed are those who are persecuted
for acting like men,
for they shall know
the true nature of women.

And blessed are you when women
revile you, persecute you, utter evil words
against you, for you shall have
a fighting chance
of staying single.
Rejoice and be glad,
for beer and chips
and a big screen TV
will be your reward in heaven.

for a period of time by using this process. After all, I am pretty smooth, plus, I have the advantage of rehearsal. This is not foolproof and at times I go home alone. Sometimes, I never pursue - I just do the exercise. Who has the time to complete every fantasy? Besides, I *love* the exercise.

When it was time to end my visit I kissed my mother and said my goodbyes to the others and left. While I was waiting for the elevator one of the seniors came up to me. She was slender and wore a turquoise pants suit with the top three buttons opened. Her hair was red and curly. She was the mother of one of the gorgeous daughters. She said, "I know that look in your eye."

"Look?"

"That look you had in the solarium. Mine Milton, may he rest in peace, had that same look when he wanted my attention."

I watched her as she spoke and I envisioned her beautiful daughter standing naked in front of me unbuttoning my shirt and I smiled.

She looked into my eyes and smiled back. "Come to my room," she said, fluffing her hair with both hands, "and I give you like I gave Milton."

She turned and walked down the hallway. I pivoted and followed.

MCEA* Notes
from the Annual Meeting
Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Hello! My name is *Professor Spankey*
and he looks like he wants to be spanked
but that's not an academic thought
yet we have them all the time at the Language Conference
Brains walk around lying to themselves and each other
thinking life is years of research
and weeks before the keyboard
when it's intuitive body propelling us
through hallways to present session 6, #C
always searching for that tag that says
Hello! My name is *Your True Love*
I enter and see suits and smiles
but underneath we are the sum of our parts
raw pink urges the brain denies as the mouth says
"epitome of dichotomy" and gives a citation
Excitation is only a prefix away
A man sits down next to me
pushes my elbow off the arm of the chair
Hello! My name is *Dominance*
Everyone likes to be excited
Brains pretend they're solely interested in intellectual content
but now the hands begin to groom the hair
stroke the bearded chin
as if we all can't tell that's the panelist's pussy
in the moderator's wishful palm
Hello! My name is *Eat Me*
brings the session to its close
Polite applause
Wine flows from boxes

* Michigan College English Association

Immolation For a Friend
Vincent Cioffi

For Michael Plessner
1964-1981

I say night meadows
and night fields,
caves of the vast dark,
because as his body rose,
the hook through his left
arm pit, I thought I saw
in the water below him
fields of dark and caves,
meadows of dark
and singing. The Castrati
singing of love before
an audience of pierced men.
The Chiaroscuro of the everyday.
The enigmatic longing.

In Our Forty-Eighth Year

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

We used to think that coldest was
when snow was falling hardest
Now we know it's clarity that chills
Florid knickknacks litter window sills
We don't know how all the chocolate got here
Life has come and moved our things around
but we don't care
We know we can find new elephants
or make mittens out of sweaters
We trade our one-dish suppers for sonnets
and never feel hungry
The perpetual shifting of the flesh
the gravity that pulls us low
our voices falling to a different clef
and it's still just morning
What poems will the afternoon bring?

and even brains begin to see importance
in the buxom grad assistant's weak thesis

Hello! My name is *Like Doggies*

The glove of discipline an evil spirit
in the pockets of the true believers

Hello! My name is *Onan*

Yes, there are other events brains suggest
and bodies carry through

but eventually brains return
to the homeland between legs

Hello! My name is *the Marquis*

Hello! My name is *Are you done yet?*

Hello! My name is *Melting in your arms*

Eat sleep reproduce

Everything else?

Extra skin which must be stripped

before brains can rediscover bodies' pleasures

Hello! My name is *Great Big Dick*

Hello! My name is *Fuck me so I can write about it*

Perfect!

When You Kick a Stone

David Breeden

as I hang out the laundry
over and over

I stumble across the cat
rubbing against my legs

it starts and runs
then comes back

tentative yet driven
to try again

this has nothing
to do with you

the way I walk
I want to say

but it won't understand

Hats on the Ice

David Breeden

dark and felt
left by someone

out of the picture
the hats I mean

the ice is as
usual beautiful

beyond caring

Anymore Perfect

David Breeden

Top hat, umbrella,
suit by the sea.
Rowboat, velvet curtains,
flowers too.

Such a short time waving,
prompting in the scene,
pointless to be
any more than perfect.

Telling Time

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

There is no would be
No could be
There is
is
This coffee
This kiss
The clock erases the day
as quickly as we write it
Memory lingers
but does not predict
The present has no notion of tomorrow
Each daybreak begins the mystery again
Will I still love you
in an instant
in a decade?
Did I ever love you
or just myself?
The coffee warms my palm
as feelings cool
I didn't understand the present
until you gave it to me
Today it snows
and the streets are clean again
My tracks lead from your door
Wind or thaw
in an hour I am untraceable
Old man, you have taught me
not to dwell in tomorrow
Taught me too well
The door shuts
The lock clicks
Is over
becomes a dream

Enough

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

The disappointment swaddled in a thunderstorm
is that the lights may not go out
There may not be enough power in the sky
to plunge us into the darkness we so fear
What if the wind doesn't howl enough
to rip the shingles from the roof?
Roads will rise from their beds
like dreamers
Trees collapse into heaps
Lightning carom from transformers
snapping gray blue-green landscapes of electricity
Inside we'll huddle
breathing together awe filled
weather gnawing at the back door
What if life goes on as usual after this
no deafening sky fights
no house shuddering cataclysms no power greater than our own?
How will the animals left inside us know
that they have survived?
What if God's no longer great enough
to temporarily paralyze?

Wilderness

Elizabeth Kerlikowske

Scrubby pines next door to my grandparents' house
we called the forest
murky enough that we were never quite sure
what we saw
The ground smelled orange
spongy with fallen needles
Myrtle smothered the shaggy trunks
its glossy leaves another layer of elemental darkness
hardy purple stars comfortable
in the dusting of snow that sifted through the pine boughs
In the forest
my sister and I pounded out our poisons
from forbidden red berries of juniper bushes
Like pharmacists
we crushed them into a bloody juice
we daubed on stones to mark the boundaries of our woods
In the forest
we wept for our pets
We marked their graves with Petoskey stones
and began to understand
love was what made things holy
Among the trees and snug between two houses
we pretended we were foundlings
wondering how we would survive another night

We pressed our faces to the gentle windows
where the first lamps of evening warmed the darkness
We knew the steam that blurred our vision
smelled of bread and cookies
Would we ever smell that smell again?
The sweet ache of hunger stirred
in the pit of our self-imposed exile
Responsibilities left the forest alone
No grown-ups ever visited
No grass to mow
No flowers needing tending
No leaves to rake
Wild hidden fragrant
the forest belonged to us
We breathed it We swallowed it
We ground it into our knees and elbows
It's in us still