

Towers

2003, Number 83



Towers

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Nancy McVittie
Towers Award in Fiction

Elena Haliczzer
Towers Award in Poetry

Adam C. Kotlarczyk
Towers Award in Creative Nonfiction

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TED TECZA

Invitation

The garden is windless and quivering
in silence: memories
of blue harebell, orange trolius:
gentle afternoon's floating
fragrance of stillness,
on the swing among junipers;

comfort of gaze without gesture.

Some news of sunspot days: trumpet vine
entwines, new visions grow on black
oak, solitude caresses trembling hands:

quiet is crisp.

The mint tea is made,
awaiting the dryness of journey;
clearing the haziness
of a new poem:

come.

Hear the rustle of autumn's
retreat, last robin song:
unspoken days of friendship.

Come

AMANDA MIS

And the Swan

What misadventured youth
shall sound the tolls
of life's descent?
Creeping still,
the high wails
of echoing
feathers
swirling in motion,
downward
as if it were snow.
It is not that fluffy thing
that accumulates
on school grounds
and front yards.
It is not that thing
that catches headlights,
glittering reds and yellows.
It is from the circling in the sky.
Feathers floating,
descending,
from the place above.
But what there is living,
flying,
with the loss of cushion
and withering beak?
Give rise to the madness.
Ideas come to an end
holding tight to stem.
Shards of soft
lines

crack under my finger
as I spread them apart,
put them in a clear plastic bag,
And head for home.

NANCY MCVITTIE

Minnesota Vikings

Rosemary is Canadian. Glenn isn't sure why he finds that funny, but he does. Maybe because she doesn't fit the stereotype. Glenn has grown up most of his life in Minnesota and everyone here knows how their Northern neighbors are. They're polite, reserved, friendly to the core. Rosemary is none of that. She isn't even nice.

He watches her frowning in her sleep. She's sensitive about her homeland. Not exactly ashamed, but always reluctant to admit it because it sounds like a punchline to a joke somehow. Growing up a border baby, she's managed to pass herself off as being as Minnesotan as him. She doesn't say "about," doesn't say "hoose." She says "about" and "house" and "Fuck you, Glenn." She has a terribly dirty mouth. It shocked him when he first got to know her. Now it just rolls over his ears, smooth as so much Molson beer.

But she's a Minneapolis girl now. She has her apartment, has a fake ID, and she has him. He doesn't have her, but she has him. That's the way it works and Glenn is fine with that. One doesn't argue with Rosemary. One just smiles at her at night when she can't see and feels pleased that she is back.

* * *

Rosemary opens her eyes finally after begging herself not to. The light in the apartment is dim and it is another rainy spring morning. It was fall when she left, when everything fell apart and she had to be rescued. She remembers riding in her father's Buick, watching the yellow grass and pom-pom dandelions on the side of the highway, waiting for the signs to change from miles to kilometers. There weren't windows where she went. She missed everything between that dying grass and the rain cllickering on the street now.

Only one time there, had she seen what it was like outside. Her father had come to visit. He walked her around the building and she was disappointed to see that everything was dead.

"Minnesota's the most godawful ugly place, Dad," she had told him, "I hate it there."

"Winnipeg's not so pretty, either, eh?" He'd smiled, gazing about the dead prairie that surrounded them.

She hated him for saying that.

But never mind. She isn't there. She is back here.

She rolls over on the futon and glares at Glenn. He is comfortable, sprawled out on his side of the mattress. He doesn't even have a side, really. It's her mattress on her futon in her apartment. He's even reading her comic book.

"I didn't say you could read those."

He brings his water-blue eyes up from the page and smiles. "Morning."

"That's a limited edition, you know. They hardly printed any. That's rare."

He sighs and holds the flimsy booklet out to her. "You want it back?"

"Ah, fuck you. Fuck Peter Bagge. I don't give a shit." She reaches her hand under the bed and flops it around until she finds her cigarettes, lighter and ashtray, all neatly bound together with a rubber band.

Sitting back up, she balances the ashtray on her thigh and lights up, pleased because Glenn's a pathetic wet-end asthmatic and gets pissy anytime she smokes near him.

Today, though, he doesn't seem to even notice. Or maybe he's just pretending not to, to make her upset. A year ago, this idea might have enraged her. But now it doesn't. She's moved beyond the petty. Rosemary has much bigger issues to get herself worked up about.

"You're acting so cocky about it." She mutters.

He hasn't heard her. He isn't listening. He's gone back to reading.

She jams her heel into his boney side. "Glenn Machey!"

"Ow. What?"

"I said you're acting cocky about it."

"About what?"

"About me. You know, like you just expected I'd come back."

"Of course you'd come back. It's not like you'd think you wouldn't."

"No, no, no." She pounds her cigarette to death prematurely and burrows her head into the pillow. She tangles her fingers up in her hair. "Not 'of course' at all. I didn't know I'd come back. It wasn't a given for me."

He rolls over and plunges his fingers into the mess, too, searching out hers but he pulls her roots in the process. "I just have more faith in you, I guess." He's saying.

"Cut it out." She slaps his hands away and moves off the pillow. "You can't just say that and write it off like dumb people do. Faith has nothing to do with me. With us. You don't get away with that."

“Why can’t I?” He laughs lamely and she knows he just wants to get back to that stupid comic book.

“Because you’re screwed up just like me. We don’t get luxuries like that.”

“We’re not screwed up.” The playfulness of his tone has vanished. He stops looking at her and looks back at the comic again, but she knows he isn’t really seeing it. She’s managed to irk him. Good.

“Yeah, tell me we’re not freaks. Look me in the eye and tell me how I just spent the last six months is normal. Why don’t you lie again and tell me you never had any problems? Just try and tell me.”

His only movement is a slight shrug in his shoulders. It might have been a flinch. It was probably involuntary. She notices it, though. She always does. She has a macabre fascination with the intricate workings of his skeleton, far more delicate than hers, as though he is wired together with lightbulb filaments. A few times at night, if he turns over too heavily, she can swear she hears something like the ping of a busted 40 watt.

But she must stop thinking like this. Abstracts are what got her messed up in the first place. Loss of grasp on them, anyway.

With a heavy, sick sigh, she plops her chest against his back, holds on tight to those electric fragile shoulders, and nudges her face up against the base of his neck. His hair is cut soft here and it reminds her of some shorn black sheep.

“Why don’t you ever talk about it?” She whispers.

“There’s nothing to talk about.”

“Of course there is.”

He shrugs, this time a definite shrug. “There isn’t any point.”

They lie still, listening to each other breathing, then Glenn asks a question that sounds ridiculous compared to what she has been thinking.

“Wanna get a bagel?”

She moans in disgust and rolls off him. Free from her weight, he moves off the futon and begins to dress, pulling on his rumpled, stale clothes from the night before. He’s been wearing the same sweater and jeans for days. She wonders when the last time was that he slept at his own place. Such a shit heap, though, she doesn’t blame him. He took her to it once and she’s refused to ever go back.

“You working today?” She asks, watching those chicken legs slide into pants.

He shakes his head no. “I don’t work on Thursdays.”

“If you had a real job you would.”

“You going to class?” He counters with a smile.

She ignores him. She considers trying a cigarette again. Then she catches him out of the corner of her eye pulling his coat off the hook.

“Where’re you going?” She asks with great offense as he buttons up.

“I told you. I want a bagel.” He frowns at his reflection in the mirror and pulls on his knit cap that she hates. “Why don’t you come with?”

“I’m in my pyjamas.”

“So what? Like anybody at the bagel shop’s gonna care.” They don’t even speak English.”

Rosemary looks down at her flannel pants. They once were red and white and cheery, but she washed them and now they’re pink and depressing. “What do you want a bagel for, anyway?” She mutters bitterly. “You’re so elitist. Have a piece of fucking toast.”

“Elitist.” He repeats with a grin. He pads over to the kitchenette to pick up the apartment keys, but she moves quickly and snatches them away before he’s even reached.

“They’re my keys. You don’t live here.”

His eyes are steady and because they’re heavy-lidded, he seems even more irritatingly calm. He just stands there and says nothing.

She faces him and wants to attack, but instead she crumbles.

“Fine,” she throws her hands into the air and shakes her head, feeling her temples pound, “I’ll get a stupid bagel with you.”

Outside it’s very strange because she hasn’t left the building for so long. She feels like everyone is staring at her, but when she looks up, no one seems to have noticed her presence at all.

At the bake shop, Glenn does an excellent imitation of a normal person, smiling politely and making small talk while the bagel is toasting, but Rosemary knows him and she can feel just below the surface of his skin that he’s knotted and nervous. That’s the reason he can do what he does on stage. There’s energy constantly forming and boiling up under the cover of his stomach. When he gets up on that smokey bar stage on Tuesday nights, he takes the lid off. He’s wild and brilliant then and if he can just maintain for a few more years, it’ll take him somewhere. Glenn is going places and everyone can sense it. Rosemary is not and no one cares.

As they walk down the wet sidewalk, eating their bagels, Glenn puts his arm around her and smiles. “Feel better?” He asks.

She doesn’t. Not at all. “How do you do it?” She asks back instead.

“Do what?”

“Exist. I mean, you’re weird and screwed-up just like I am. How do you stand it? How do you stand everybody?”

He is quiet, but not sullen. Rosemary turns her head slightly to watch.

He has a weak chin and a delicate jaw. They move in time with precision as he chews and the changing shadows under his eyes let her know he understands exactly what she has asked.

“I guess...” he begins, then clears his throat and smirks in defense. “I don’t know, Ro. You just have to after awhile.”

“Do you feel cured?” She demands with sudden enthusiasm, “Do you feel like you’re normal?”

“Of course not.”

“Do you think you will, though?”

“Rosemary.”

She stops walking. “What?”

He cocks his head and seems uneasy about telling her a truth, as if she might hurl it right back at him in a venom softball. But, with bravery of the burliest Nordic warrior, he gives her the response she doesn’t want to hear.

“You don’t get better. I mean...well, I mean, you don’t ever just get one hundred percent cured. You just learn to live with it. You work around it.”

“But...” Her voice is tiny now and all the bitterness is dropped in place of fear, “if you never get better, then what’s the point?”

He smiles. It’s a sad smile, but it’s honest. His uneven, chicklet teeth are endearing.

“I think it’s better not to ask.”

MATT MCFARLANE

White Noise

There has always been a certain sweetness in the air that made me shiver with delight, but when I feel nothing of that sweetness I must pull myself away from the edge and ground myself back into reality. Nature was always there to welcome me back.

The air was cold and there was a fresh snow on the ground and behind the dark clouds burned a great fire that lit up the night. I stepped outside with work to do. Before I could begin, a hush fell on the world and there was an absolute silence. It was a silence that resembled death. I could not comprehend the lack of the slightest whisper; perhaps the snow muffled the hum of the earth beneath. If snow fell with a thud, it was shushed immediately. In the amber glow of the night, I stood in awe at the shadow of noise that I stumbled into.

That night made me realize one thing, in this world nature can never speak to us. Nature has given us everything but we have made for ourselves a language that creates understanding, art, and helps facilitate invention. But only language is ours. Understanding is simplification of nature. When we create gods to hold the secrets we cannot break. Art is derived from nature. When Monet can only impress upon us the world he sees. Invention is a reworking of nature. When fire and stone are twisted to warm and shelter us. But language is the expressed reaction to, while all other things are merely interpretations of nature. The music we hear is only an imitation of howling winds and chirping birds. The art we see, just a perception of what has always been there. All of art is just a manipulation of nature; a perception of what we can do with nature. Arguably, nature has given us voice thus having a voice through us. But still nature does not have what we do, and can never understand us. Still it is voiceless. We speak of nature, but can we ever speak with nature.

Alone in the middle of the night with a light snow still falling I now understand that what I heard was nature's lack of voice. With all the life around me I heard absolutely nothing not even myself. Nature will never find its voice and if it did we could never understand it. If nature speaks to us, it is only through acts and its defiance to conform to our needs. It is unbelievable to think that one moment of my seemingly insignificant life has brought about a profound revelation about nature.

I was afraid. With all that it had, it had no voice, and we try endlessly to understand nature. Yelling about its power, barking at its cruelty of, screaming at the world for its indifference for man, but still we only hear the sounds of nature; the grunts of beasts, the hush of the breeze, the thunder from above, and even the gurgle from its fiery core. That silence scared me, for a moment nature was dead to me. Some silences are fragile, some begging to be broke; either by the chirping crickets in the night, or the barbaric yawp of some fool on top of a mountain. I needed to scream, to yell, to howl, to bellow and shatter the noxious quiet that I could not escape from, but it was all too serene.

I sat down and watched the snow continue to fall.

The streetlight of humming fluorescence highlighted separate flakes of snow each an instant at a time like a sheet of exploding glass shards. To call it dreamlike would be a pathetic comparison, heavenly is too mundane, and fantastic would be criminal. Ineffable and undeniable, it was my moment with nature.

I can only make so much sense of the moment. It was something that someone else would have never taken notice of and passed off as a moment of inexplicable deafness on their part. But I found something in that moment that has either haunted me or defined me.

How is it that one simple moment in time that lacks any unique definition except the fact that the world was hushed and only I was there to take note? Of course, no one else heard anything for that long endlessly drawn out couple of minutes. It was what someone would call an uncomfortable silence, but I saw that Nature had stopped only to catch her breath. Perhaps it was a silence that comes when two forces meet in a mind-twisting stare-down waiting for the other to blink. I blinked, but still she kept her focus on me and held back all the chaotic noises of the world. I waited for that overflow of bangs, booms, cries, howls, murmurs, pops, screams, thuds, thumps, whistles, and wails that otherwise would be flooding the air. Pushing and shoving all of those sounds that make nature what she is, wait for her to let down her guard to rush back into the world to ravage, tickle, or soothe the ears of that one who decided to stop and listen for what could not be heard.

In the middle of winter, seven inches of snow and still falling, the world locked in a trance without any foreseeable end. The flash of refracted spectrums catches my darting eye from one inch of the world to the next. The soft sugary whiteness around me trapped me in a miniature globe, agitated by a growing silence. The cars in the distance disappeared, sirens from the hospital three blocks away hushed, and my ears

searched for some tiny vibration of air; even the rustling of my snow-speckled coat ceased.

Nature had something to say but could not verbalize, yet she seems breathe. All other senses were assaulted with waves of texture and color, even fresh sweet tastes for my hungry tongue. The chill of wet snowflakes accumulating on a foolishly uncapped skull and then sneaking their way to the back of my neck causing that clownish shiver that might attract strange stares. The pull of goose-pimpled skin reacting to the arctic air holds my body desperately in that cold shiver. The wily wind which lost its whisper that reddens cheeks and noses. The dark leafless trees cast against the flurry of frozen flakes commanded by the amber tinted storm clouds in the distance. Still not even a rumor of sound. I wish I could speak to the world around me but I might only succeed in babbling like a brook that knows no one is listening.

Moments pass. Snow deepens. Silence rages.

JAKE STEWART

Paintings of the One-Eyed Artist

A writer, divided in two, whistles.

I try to ignore him, the boy
with his back to the seer.
His jacket a dirty Volvo white
made dirtier by the smear of the artist's pallet knife.
Sometimes he's in the strong man's chest
being suffocated by protective overbearing.
There he is free of that silent coat,
the warmth of the sturdy man sufficient.
But the chest was blocked when it was rainy,
filled with adulterous guilt and loathing of Milton.

A father, divided in two, whistles.

There are other things going on,
my surrogate mother,
the surly feminist transsexual
draped in her out of place summer dress,
forever trying to hide the secret pills that everyone knows about.

Or the separated haven called Dogshead
with its feudal state windows divided
by colors or fanatics, artists or occupants,
writers or whistlers. Each one safe to detest the others'
glowing autonomy.

An artist, divided in two, occupies.

Yet the boy, tied in the corner by
the tired brush strokes of his dirtied white coat,

added by the artist in a refrain of death, as a secondary thought . . .

Mustn't forget the coat.

A call to the painter the boy faces the same direction as a seer.

I'm your missing eye.

Look away from the life that tips in a strong man's lapse.

All the warnings in the world would not keep

the artist from putting the coat on the boy away from the man.

He saw the two of us proceed down the steps to the Volvo;

he felt what was coming; he heard the croak.

Yet whereunto the coat took over, three lives
gasp and stopped.

A brother, divided in two, occupies.

A wire jaw and a parsed tongue in the window of Dogshead;
silenced in mesh a voiceless writer whistles.

In the encroachment of the toad all one can do is watch.

Monochrome silver of a biting stick-shift pervades
the sky. *Life is a rule of halves.*

ADAM C. KOTLARCZYK

Five Black and White Photographs

A cathedral. Broken windows, medieval bricks punched out in spots by bombwork. Behind the cathedral, on the right, the skeletons of buildings struggle into the sky—apartments, judging by what's left, but there's no way to be sure. On the shattered steps of the cathedral stands a family of four. The father—a hard-featured, dark-skinned man, wiry and thin but for the beginning of a paunch, wearing a starch-collared shirt. The mother—a modest but possibly beautiful woman in an ankle length floral print dress. Two flat-topped, red-headed boys—obviously the children of the couple—in Levis and tee shirts, classic 1950's, about twelve and eight years old, I'd say. The smaller, younger one doesn't know it, but he will become my father.

My father, who for all his self-proclaimed faults, is not prone to dramatic exaggeration, says that what the Nazis did to Poland, and what the Soviets did (or rather what they *didn't* do) after, was the worst atrocity he'd ever seen.

They had visited the wreckage of his parents' homeland when he was a boy, and even though it was the middle of the 1950's in America, in Poland the calendar was perpetually stopped on 1945. None of the buildings repaired. None of the craters filled. Just bodies buried.

My father kept a small piece of chaff in his wallet to remind him.

In the war, flying over Europe, Allied bombers would drop chaff—thousands of tiny pieces of cutup tinfoil—from their planes to confuse the German radar. They'd drop it out of the bomb bay doors, the heavy belly of the aircraft. It would drop and for a moment all the pieces would pause together, hesitate in a tight-clustered cloud. Then, in the wind, freezing at the high altitude, it would scatter into giant reflective clouds, and disperse slowly and unstopably as the pieces fell shimmering to the earth.

My father found two strips of it in a shelled out Warsaw hotel. He thought it was ironic that for all the tons of it that were dumped, it all dispersed so much that a person would be lucky to find a strip or two of it in a lifetime of searching.

He kept a strip in his wallet. To remind him, he said.

My grandparents both came over in the early Twentieth Century. Before the war, but not by much. My grandmother moved over with her whole nuclear family—mother, father, and seven sisters. My grandfather, as far as I know, came alone. They both left a lot of people behind.

When they returned in the 1950's, after the war, this time as tourists, they looked for the names. Family, old friends—farmers, villagers, city-dwellers. They found no one. At one cottage far out in the green, hilly countryside, an old woman answered the door and said yes, she'd heard that name; but no, she didn't know where he was. Echoes and silence. Many names without faces, or graves. Just gone.

Like a lot of Polish immigrants, they wound up in Pennsylvania. Although she was still a teenager and had been a good student in Poland, she never took a class in America, never finished high school. She cleaned houses for middle class families. Learned how to clean dishes, clean and press clothes, sweep, scrub the floors. Work.

They met and fell in love. I don't know the details. You have such a short time with your grandparents, and if you don't ask them, you never know. And mine, they weren't the types of people to whom you ask those questions.

When the Depression hit, they moved from Pennsylvania to Chicago. He found work there.

He worked in a faucet factory. Forever. His ghost probably still works there. I bet you could find it there at night, wandering the assembly line, piecing together washers and seals eleven hours a day, making faucets, pulling the jagged metal shards out of his fingers. Lead shards from the old pipes.

A neighboring factory burned to the ground, killing some workers. At my grandfather's building, the owners, learning from that mistake, and in the interest of protecting their employees (or, more likely, their building), lined their walls with fireproof material. Asbestos. No one knew then, and my grandfather was happy to have the work.

How they met, I don't know. I never had the chance to ask my grandfather. I was never a good enough person to ask my grandmother. Maybe, at some subconscious

level, I didn't want her to have to remember him. Or maybe I'm just selfish, self-absorbed, a prick. I hear that opinion often.

My grandmother wore the classic white dress; simple but elegant. My grandfather wore the traditional black tux. It fit him well, accentuated his young man's build, his timeless good looks. He could have been in pictures; Clark Gable, John Wayne. Dark, strong, silent. Slightly mysterious. Sable hair, cleft chin, dark, perfect skin. And piercing eyes. Girls today would have posters of him on their walls. They both look young, 1920's innocent. Maybe naïve.

Wedding pictures are such clichés. Of course you're smiling. Of course you haven't a care in the world. Of course you can't see what's coming. They're like first-year baby pictures—they all look the same. Only the clothes change. This is what I used to tell my parents, looking at the three wedding pictures on the wall, when we visited Grandma.

You'll understand some day, They'd say.

Next to my grandparents' is the photograph from my uncle's wedding. He has the short, plaster Fifties/early Sixties hair that looks like it is made of paint and polish, the wax-lipped wedding smile. She has golden hair flowing past her shoulders, long ago sacrificed for something more practical, something low maintenance that someone with a job and three sons can manage.

Next to my aunt and uncle are my own parents. They are the flower children, the pacifists. The flowing hair on my mother out of control, the hair on my bearded father past the collar of his tux. He has the familiar smile beneath the unfamiliar hair. I wasn't even a twinkle. They too were young, no older in the picture than I am now. They were real people.

They tell me I'll understand why everyone smiles at their weddings, that it's not all fake. They don't tell me that love isn't all fake. Just that the smiles aren't.

The old house still echoes with memories. Thanksgivings. Grampa telling us is that if we hadn't had enough to eat, it was our own damn fault. Every year he would bellow that. Crowded around that tiny table in the kitchen, trying not to elbow my cousins, not to be elbowed.

That was him as I knew him. Not the virile man in the silvered photo. Wrinkled, faded, like paper that had been crumpled and opened one too many times, turning to tissue. Quicker with the emphysema-cough than a smile.

I remember him sitting on the porch in a loose-fitting, sweat-stained tee shirt that his knobby shoulders poked out of, pulling on a cigarette. He didn't talk to me, but he let me sit next to him on the bench, watching what was left of the day fade away, watching his smoke curl around the lengthening horizontal sunbeams. It was hot then, even at night.

When he died, we found all his tools in the basement, in cigar boxes. Split up among the sons and grandsons what Grandma didn't need (she didn't need any of them). In the attic, I found his fishing tackle. A tackle box rigged from an old metal lunchbox. Some thick wire leaders. A glass jar of *Wilson's Reel Lubricant*. Some lures that were probably worth money. People collect those old things.

At the bottom of the tackle box I found two ancient black rubber gloves. They were a man's gloves. He'd probably used them to unhook slashing-toothed dinosaurs once, pike or muskies of prehistoric size that used to exist in Chicago's lakes and rivers before people dumped in the lethal chemicals, the asbestos and lead. Before people killed everything.

I slid my own hand in, pink and weak, watched it disappear in the black, cracked leather, the same way it would disappear in his overpowering handshake. He demanded a handshake, every visit. Taught me only to do it with my right hand. I was a sheepish kid and tried shaking with my left. He grabbed the other hand, grabbed it and held. Tight. I was too scared to let go. Maybe I'm still too scared.

It was the same hand he used to turn on the oxygen cylinder he kept behind his rocking chair. Coughing under his clear mask. My own hand, vanishing in the glove, in his grasp, reaching out to turn on the life-giving cylinder.

The dimpled, flat-topped boy squirming on her lap, trying to get away. She smiles, concealing her concentration as she tries to hold him in place for the anonymous photographer. Her husband is doing a better job; his right hand has a steady grip on the ear of the uncomfortable kid. They appear to be in the cramped house, the old early twentieth century bungalow where someday he'd tell us all at Thanksgiving

whose damn fault it was if we didn't eat enough. The room is hard to recognize; the paint isn't peeling yet, the furniture is different. But it is definitely the house.

With gramma leaning forward and the boy preoccupied, grampa is seated the farthest back. He thinks no one can see him. And as he holds his son by the ear, his wife at his side, he smiles.

My father grew up hard in that family. I wonder if he ever had the edge he needed to do it; he's just too nice a guy. Maybe grampa had too much edge, and my father rebelled against that by having none. And maybe I rebel against my father having no edge, maybe I'm not really like this; maybe it's a cycle and my kids (if god forbid I have any) will be more like my father than I am. I hope so.

He moved out at eighteen. Worked, like my grampa, in a factory. Packed car parts for three years; I can't imagine how miserable he must have been. I doubt he was ever the blue-collar type. He lived tight, saved his money.

He stayed in Chicago and got into the University of Illinois there. Graduated in four years. Then he went to law school and became a lawyer. Tax law. Didn't pay well, for a lawyering job. Met my mom at a dry-cleaner. She was unemployed, kicked out of the house, a hippie. He cracked a bad line about some political asshole. I think it was McGovern. Or maybe Nixon.

Did he ever communicate with grampa? I doubt it, not in a way that meant anything to him. Grampa wasn't the type to communicate. Funny, how that kind of love works. One so confident that he feels no need to mention it, the other so insecure that he talks about everything, but not that one thing. That one thing that's so important but stays pregnantly silent, like an old empty house—like a black and white photograph.

Adam, someone calls.

In their old house in Chicago there is a high-ceilinged room. It looks like a closet, but it is off of the kitchen. There's a door next to it that leads out onto the shingled roof. My aunt tells me the room was for storing wood, for burning in the kitchen stove.

There's another empty room in the cellar. Off of the room where grampa kept all his tools, pristinely, in fifteen cent cigar boxes. It's barely tall enough to stand in. A hatch in the ceiling opens into the alley behind the house. Coal. They'd dump the coal in there at dawn, cloudless, bitter cold; it would rattle black down the icy winter shaft. The sound of it echoing to the upstairs bedrooms, causing the sleeping occupants to stir slightly as the rumbling coal mixed into their dreams, caused their dreams to incorporate the sound. But they didn't wake. In a few minutes, the house would again be silent. Someone would have to shovel it into the furnace.

I never saw those rooms when I was a boy, at Thanksgivings and Christmases and Easters. I was always in a hurry to get home and see my friends, or play in the yard.

I don't remember anyone ever mentioning those rooms, not my uncle or cousins or even my grandparents themselves. No memory of anyone ever saying one thing about them. Yet when I go back, I can feel them. They are unmistakable. They have always been there.

Who took it, I don't know; everyone seems in it. Cousins, aunts, uncles. My parents. Grandparents in the center, the patriarchs. Grampa's face wrinkled tighter, his eyes squinting even on the overcast day, maybe holding something in. The cancer. The flat-tops long gone from the boys, replaced by balding comb-overs. The virile, dancing eyes now behind thick glasses. Wives, children.

Before the annual Thanksgiving football game in the yard. The sons and grandsons, picked into teams; me holding a football while on one knee at the front, too small really to play. That day it snowed, I remember, and it was so cold my ears were numb. But I laughed and they even threw the ball to me, or they say they did. I ran and laughed and for just a moment, I thought I understood.

The sons moved away from Chicago, from home. One to Ohio. My father to Waukesha, in Wisconsin. The grandsons, when they were old enough, moved farther—two of my cousins moved to the West Coast, California and Oregon. I moved to Indianapolis.

In my father's wallet is a piece—a single piece—of chaff that bombers used to drop in thick clouds to confuse German radar. That's how it is.

For grampa's funeral everyone looked so different. I was young. My older cousins were as I will always remember them—high school students, athletes, comedians. Everything I wanted to be.

The way they all were strong for each other. Sarcastic jokes. Leaving it all as it always had been: unsaid.

The old people cried and I, in grade school, didn't understand. In the lounge of the funeral parlor it was normal and the men drank too much coffee, it yellowed their teeth like time, and smoked. They talked about baseball. In the parking lot, one of the younger relatives from some other part of the family shared a case of beer. It rained.

My father never had the edge that his father did, or his brother. Or that I pretend to. But maybe he is tougher than that; I only once saw him cry. Not when they put his dad under the earth. The only time I saw him cry was when they closed the casket on his dad. The silence forever. Black and white pictures, unarticulated.

Behind the family of four, the falls of Niagara roar, massive and potent. The boys, in the front, smile brightly. Each parent has a hand on one of the boy's shoulders. The four of them, all together. With the falls dropping below them, and the mist rising, they appear to be airborne in the clouds, flying high above the earth. Hesitating a moment in a cluster before the winds take them, scattering and plummeting to earth. Before the winds.

The boys in shorts, tee shirts. Grandma in a long dress, effervescent as a young mother. Grandpa still handsome, still thick about the shoulders and strong, commanding. The boys old enough to play baseball, to compete with each other, to look at girls. They are a family.

They are a mystery.

In the attic I find an old piece of luggage; it looks like one of those steamer trunks that passengers took on the Titanic, or that people used to cover with stickers from all the exotic places that they'd visited. The clasp, having long ago rusted and broken, yields easily. It is empty inside. I try alone to lift it, to carry it out, but it is too heavy for me.

All about the old house the family moves.

My older brother takes the sofa, a rocking chair. My oldest cousin takes the Thanksgiving table. The kitchen looks empty. Small.

The TV was claimed long ago by my older brother. It wasn't much—just a 15 incher that grandma had used to pass the years after her husband's death.

She was strong, and happy, or at least made a good show of it. It couldn't have been easy for her.

Things might be easier for us if we weren't afraid to make fun of the furniture. A crack by my uncle about the old sofa yields a couple of laughs, but they quickly rattle away, like black coal down a frozen chute, giving way to a sleeping silence. Through the open windows, I can hear the neighbor children splashing in their pool.

Over a cardboard box I can see my father and uncle standing together, looking at some of the paperwork. My father, the attorney, is the expert, the executor. I wish they had a table to sit at, the boys from Niagara Falls.

Today is the first day that their parents are both in the ground.

If you don't want it, I hear my aunt say, it's going to charity. That's ok, my mother answers. They are arguing about a table. It is too ugly to take, but no one can say anything.

Like the attic, the wood-room, the coal room, the photographs are silent. Voiceless. Personless footsteps on the stairs, in the halls, on the porch. A wisp of cigarette smoke lingering in the rays of waning daylight. Black and white as though the times were simpler. Christ, there must be a hundred of them. Many of people I don't know. They must, like my grandma and grandpa, be under the earth.

Adam, someone calls.

My father was at the hospital with my grampa when he died all those years ago. I don't know what he said, or if he could talk, if either of them could. I hope they could.

And he was there when my grandma died, while I was driving to the hospital. These moments of solitude, so different than the pictures of togetherness. Before the winds.

The old house will be torn down, my father says. It just isn't up to code anymore, not the pipes, the wiring. The windows.

I'm surprised but the bench on the porch isn't nailed down. The god-like way he used to sit there, I'd thought it was all nailed together, that it would all last forever. But it isn't. It's rotting. I could lift it up and take it; anyone could. But no one wants it. It's junk.

Adam, someone calls again.

I have things to remember about grandma—a smile, the quick-glancing wittiness, a sharp but good-humored tongue. For grampa, nothing. A tacklebox, the old gloves, my hands always too pink, too soft. Just pictures, a cough. Not even a voice.

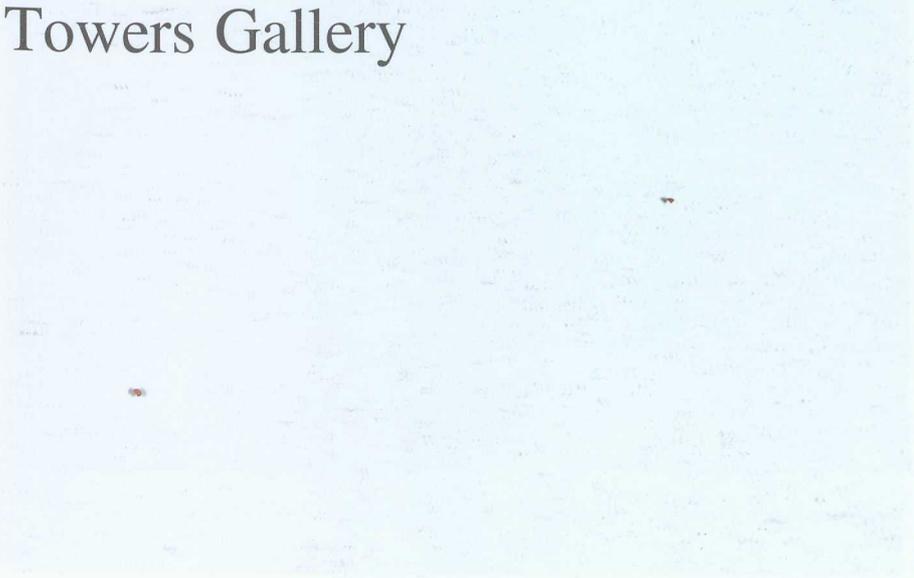
I should say something to my father, to my uncle, to all of them. Here we all are, above the clouds, the hungry wind roaring. Here we are. But someone is calling my name.

“Oh, here you are,” says my mother. “Still looking through the old pictures.”

Am I done, she wants to know. She waits for my answer. In my hands I hold Niagara Falls, I hold ear-pinching, weddings, cathedral togetherness; the wind outside gusts.

I am done, but I am undone. I say nothing.

Towers Gallery

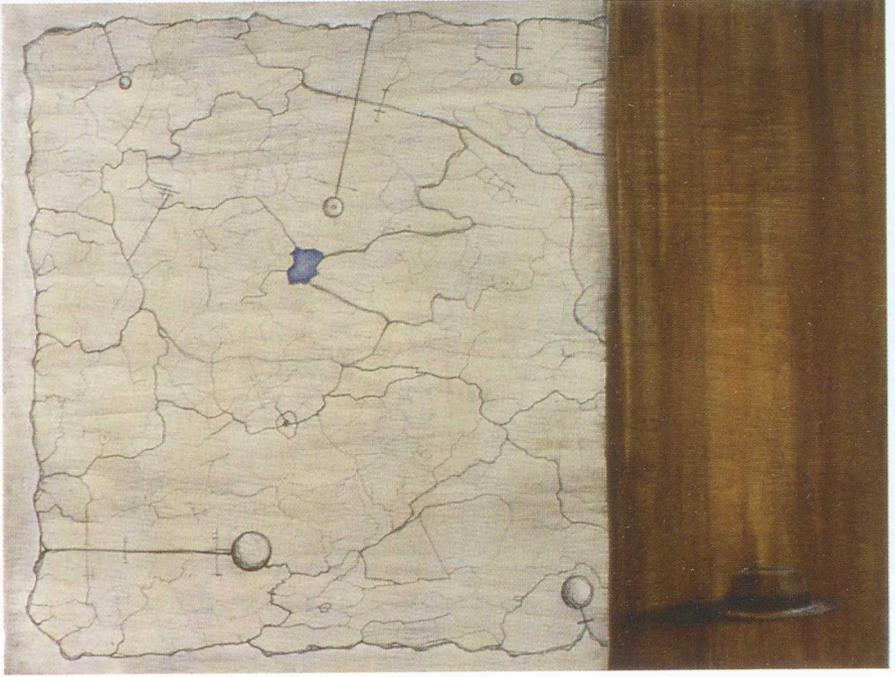




Yasemin Kackar, *Untitled*—from “Void” series, 15”x36” oil on canvas, 2202



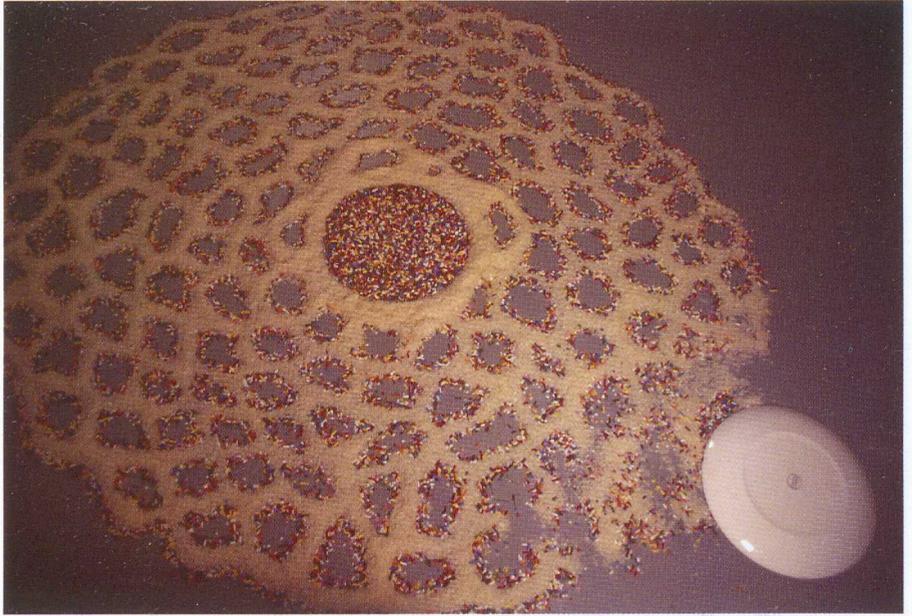
Jessica Witte *A Square Education*—detail, blocks 1.5"x1.5"x1.5" 2002



Christopher T. Wood, *Dr. Olive #10*, 18"x23¹/₄" pastel, graphite, charcoal on paper, 2002



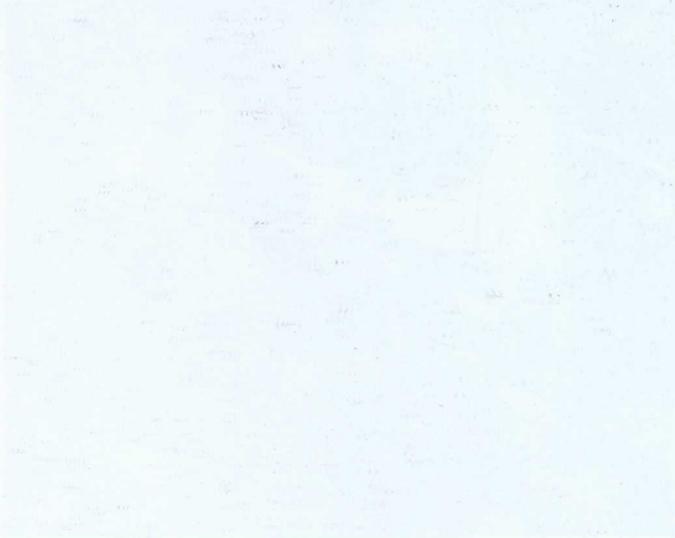
Michael McSherry, *Jay's Gemkow*, digital collage, inkjet print and intaglio on paper, 2002

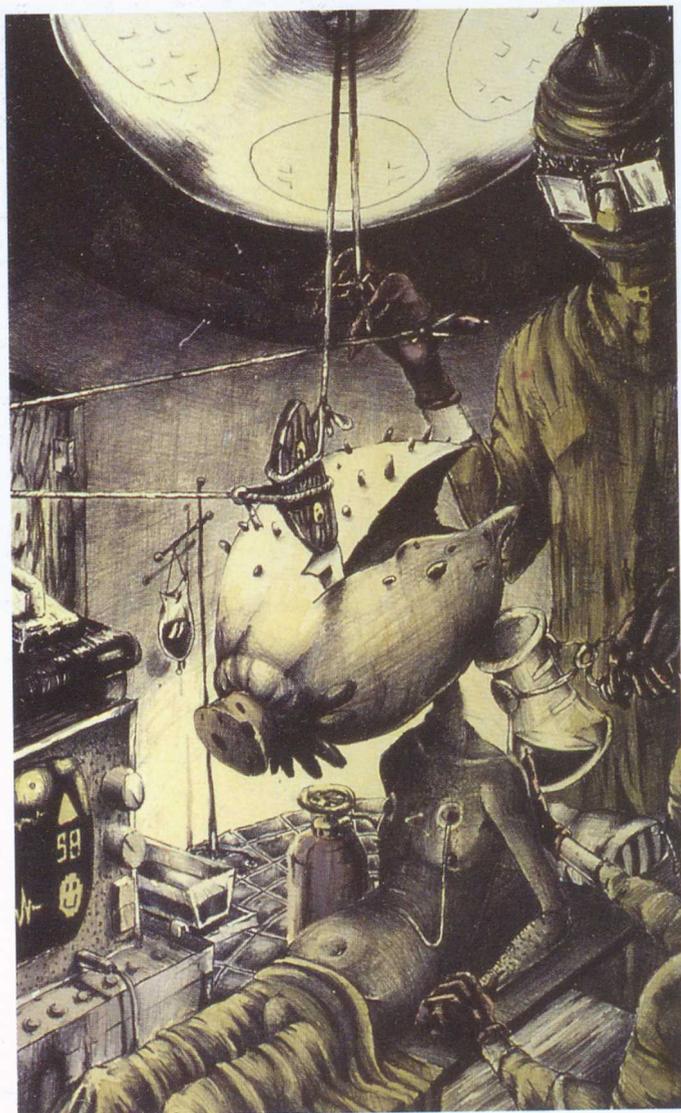


Jessica Witte, *Untitled (Rice Doily)*, 60" diameter, rice, sprinkles, plate, 2002



Christian Arrecis, *Dekalb*, photograph





Dan J. Rule, *Complacent (sic) Citizen*, 12"x20" intaglio and watercolor on paper, 2002



Allison Rae Butkus, *I Still Wonder*, 3"x5"x2" mixed media, 2002

ADRIAN JANIT

Insomnia

INSOMNIA. That's what the license plate reads. I see the car all along the High Level Road. That's where the college kids hang out until late on week nights. But I'm not talking about that time of night. I see the car much later, when the last of the beer-buzzed girls has been taken.

Two thirty or three a.m. is when it comes by. What is it again? Oh yes, an Eagle Talon—a TSi I think. The driver has it worked out so that he makes every light on the High Level Road. Between Fourth and Fifth Streets he has to really punch it. Or is it *she*? Down into second gear and that turbo howls at the empty night. INSOMNIA, that's what it reads.

I don't know—sometimes you can't be sure you've really been walking on the High Level Road. Those crushed beer cans and cigarette butts seem so real. The car is so black that it melds into the pavement, especially when the streets are wet. It is supposed to be small, the TSi. But when it comes by it is a giant, and I sink into the shadowy doorway of a darkened storefront. Don't want to be caught out on the street like this—no angels to back me up; know what I mean? If I see those brake lights I'm done for.

Up on the High Level Road I see that car. INSOMNIA. You can never be sure you've been walking. You just have to think about it and decide for yourself.

GRANT PIERCY

Gone Fishin'

Looking out he foams—
Quiet, catatonic.
The drool at the corner of his lip dangling,
hands held tight by the linen
wrapped around him.
His world soft and white—
insulated, padded
floor, ceiling, walls
his mind rolling through
sixteen tons of porcelain
with each variety broken
beneath the the the the

Hot tub in which they sit
misogyny runs rampant
but there is no external reality
no objective reality.
This is all cosmic accident—
unlimited theorems cannot be disproven
while strings determine whether or not
God wants some action from that hot little piece of of of of of of

Maybe it's more in his soft white world
how he thinks he met God in Pittsburgh, steel city,
and can't differentiate because he was never in Pittsburgh.

Plato had it right when he talked about a a a

"No john, not this time—kill her, then we'll have pizza"

perhaps the nature of reality is that there is no reality
and there are no boundaries except

can I get a

no you can't

so shut the

Head filled with so much that can't be determined—
she can smoke a cigarette and watch him, and remember
how her grey robe looks too much like her jacket
lined with cheetah fur, and he likes her
because she doesn't wear colored contacts,
but in this dream she has brown hair, not blonde
and she looks blasé, without luminescence
and she says "**** all that I've gotta get on with these."

Meanwhile Ziggy Stardust is in the front room with
Brad Pitt screaming about the plague of madness
while Bruce Willis won't shut up about the army of the the the
and Jack Nicholson is screaming about the Yankees to a blank
television screen. Ed Norton's here too talking about unique snowflakes
with Guy Pierce mumbling on about how he can't feel time.

Looking out he foams, and can't remember if
he's the product of William Faulkner's imagination
or two people's *wild* ride in a van down by the river
or the cosmic ties of mesons bumping in the black white chaos.
The flim of the doihd had htohe and hosdnofjsoi and gfhoeho
But the fooosle couldn't bujnnem and is filankucking and instead
Fejjoijes the aosihdfois.

Gone fishin' the sign on the door says
or is it gone fission, the calm black letters
hang on the wooden sign, which has it's own
quiet set of what if's.

RYAN TILLOTSON

TV, Buckshot and Lock-Down

No, the Prosecution got it all wrong during the trial. They *had* to make it sound ridiculous. They had to make it sound as if I wanted to blame it all on a dangerous bumper sticker.

No . . . no—of course any old bumper sticker isn't gonna blow off anyone's head, Bob. But put it together with the power of the Tube, Bob and then you really do have an explosive combination.

Absolutely—you're goddamn right that no bumper sticker ever killed anyone directly like I did, Bob—and I know you're here because you want to hear—from the source—the whole story in the words of a quote 'nut case', unquote, so you can win your Pulitzer, Bob. I know you do, you don't need to hide that from me. But how do you think you're gonna win a Pulitzer if you only get the *words* of a murderer? That's commonplace, Bob. Guys like me or worse . . . All you reporters want is to get the goods on killing, and that's about all you want. You don't want the point. You think you don't *need* the point.

What's the point? Well, Bob, I'd be a liar if I didn't tell you it happened because of a bumper sticker on that day; about the fucking Tube and us all; about the Message, Bob—and what it did to me. But I guess you don't want all that, Bob . . . you think that's beside the point, eh? Or can this poor soul talk and let the world know what needs to be heard?

I appreciate that, Bob. You know, you might turn out to be a decent guy after all. Perhaps not too warped by the all-telling Eye. Well, yeah—the bumper sticker and the Message . . . hold on to your TV Guide, Bob . . . I'm getting to that.

So, okay, so we have, television which has just totally ruined our sense of perspective, and so totally screwed our ethics up so that right looks boring and wrong looks profitable—all thanks to Must See TV, right? And, okay, I had absorbed most of this, I think, like a good boy. Naturally, I'm not sure how much of it I could have actually outright told anyone because I was still watching the fuckin' Tube . . . I was in its grip, still. Still silenced by white noise broadcast in Stereo Where Available. And I graduated High School like just about everyone, and got a job to pay for all of the crap I was being sold on MTV, feeling totally unaccomplished because there was always some other guy who seemed to have at least 25 percent more of that stuff than

I did, right? For example, if I had some pair of stupid Nikes that cost me, I dunno, sixty bucks, and I was all vainly proud of them, okay, I'd inevitably see, probably while working my meaningless job, some guy who had the next pair up that cost maybe ninety bucks. So even my overpriced Nikes were never enough. And this would work me into such a state of total frustration, always trying to buy the most expensive brand of anything I wanted, always trying to exemplify this empty vision of perfect, Platinum-Visa materialist nirvana that these companies portray on television, so that . . . at the right time, against this futility, the Message allowed me to take some drastic measures.

What could be more drastic than murder? You're missing that thing I call a point, again, Bob. You journalists only think in terms of degree and I'm talking about the painful consequences of the disease *and* the cure here, Bob. I'm talking about the measures taken blindly, irrationally. Anyway . . . so, I had asked for *more* hours at work, and this was the early Nineties, you know, and there was all this recession talk and work was scarce anyway, so even with whatever extra hours I could scrape together, it still wasn't enough. I actually got another menial part-time job, to try to supplement my income. So at one point, in like '91 or something . . . I was working forty-five hours a week, two jobs back-to-back, getting no real benefits or anything, just to afford this Mustang GT that I was sure I wanted. I had, at that point, talked my old man into cosigning the auto loan for the Mustang if I could come up with the down payment. And I did . . . I came up with two grand to buy this used '89 Mustang GT that I had picked-out from the used car lot just down the street from my two menial jobs. I was eighteen that summer, and I was out of my mind, I was so fixated on buying this car. I had about a dozen goddamn Mustang posters hung up in my room. I had a subscription to this Mustang collector's magazine, and I had priced new street racing tires for this thing, totally willing to pay twelve-hundred dollars for them, just so I could own that image.

Bob—for Christ's sake, will you quit it with the rhetorical questions? What image do you think? Jesus, turn on the damn TV and what do you see? A bunch of 'cool guys' driving around in fast fucking Mustangs and Corvettes or whatever, always accompanied by these beautiful chicks. Then go out on the street at night and watch the cars that pass by at any busy intersection. Who looks the best? Or who looks the proudest? The guys with the Mustangs, the Corvettes, and the Camaros—et cetera. Life doesn't imitate art anymore! Life in this country imitates the all-telling eye! So anyway . . . my Dad and I go to finally buy this Mustang, after I've been peeling this thing off the lot with my eyes over my fifteen-minute lunch breaks for

almost for seven months. And . . . Jesus . . . the thing was gone. The salesman, who I'd seen just about once a week for most of those seven months, said some guy came in the night before and offered cash for the whole thing. Cash and Carry—more like Cash and too bad for you and your Nikes, Thomas. No financing or anything. I just about hit the salesman, I was so pissed. And that was when it happened . . . that was when the worst kind of idea hit me like a truckload of bricks.

Yeah, you're a sharp one, Bob—I don't care what anyone else says about you . . . yes, I'm getting to the Message.

It is important because . . . 'cause you see . . . the worst, most dangerous ideas aren't the ideas that tell you to be a gangster because it's the cool thing to do, or starve yourself to look like some super model. The really horrible ideas are the ones that sound *intelligent* . . . the ones that sound like an answer to life's frustrations from a *rational* point of view. The problem is that sometimes, people aren't in a position to discern between the rational and the irrational, and really, all a new idea is . . . is another impulse, like 'Drink Diet Coke' or 'Have a Burger for Breakfast' or some shit like that. Some quick, consumer fix. To all larger problems. Happens to all of us, all the time . . .

Are you running out of tape? Is that why you're so anxious to move on? You aren't all that interested in the dead weight I carried as I pushed my way out of the showroom's double doors—like the doors suddenly weighed 500 pounds . . . like even my space-age Nikes weighed 500 pounds. My Air Jordans had become Lead Jordans, Bob.

Yeah *very* disappointed—that wonderful feeling of despair every one of us consumers experience when we've failed to successfully *procure*. But that's on the beginning of the story. Now comes *the Message*. So me and my Dad . . . he was walking back to the car as I dragged my feet across the blacktop—we pass this little shitbox Subaru or some little Japanese economy car with a lawnmower engine under the tin hood . . . and my smart-ass Dad . . . God rest his soul—says 'Hey, Thomas, what about *this* bad boy?' So, that instantly gets me pissed off . . . that my Dad is laughing about this disappointment, so I just scoff at that comment, but while I do . . . I just happen to look at the back of this white Subaru. It had one of those economy black-rubber bumpers on it, like all cheap Japanese shitboxes do, so it stood out against that nasty nonmetallic white paint really well. And on that cheap, plastic black bumper—I saw it, that deadly message, of the worst kind . . . an impulse masquerading as an intelligent solution.

The bumper sticker, yes.

What do you think, there, Bob? You're the reporter. I'm sure you graduated from a reasonably mediocre college. I'm sure you can guess what it said.

Well Bob, I'll tell you what I've told everyone else. It said 'KILL YOUR TELEVISION'. I stopped dead in my tracks, right there, in the car lot, and stared. My Dad, he must have walked all of the way back to the car without me, because he eventually came back to me and asked if I knew that he was joking about the car. He asked how I would possibly be interested in buying such an ugly little Japanese rice-burning econobox. Then he asked me what I was muttering to myself—told me to speak up. I turned to him, away from that bumper sticker, and let the Message go—I let it be heard, as it needed to be told.

'KILL YOUR TELEVISION', Bob. Didn't they teach you to pay attention in school? Or is paying attention no longer an important part of journalism? So my Dad says something about how it's amazing what deep statements of wisdom one can buy for a dollar twenty-five at just about any truck stop nationwide. But that kind of joke didn't seem funny to me—I didn't care *where* the Subaru owner had purchased the goddamn sticker. The whole ride home, what should have been a really sullen, downer ride for me—I kept repeating that deadly Message. Numb. Over and over, under my breath. I think it was at that point that my Dad must have guessed I was totally losing it over the Mustang, 'cause he actually called me from work at lunch the next day to tell me that he'd found two other dealers with similar Mustangs in our area. But anyway, I suddenly fell in love with that Message . . . first just the sound of it. I said it over and over that night, down in my parent's basement where I slept, while I stared at some bogus MTV show until I fell asleep.

Why did it feel so good to me? I dunno, Bob: why is the sky blue? It just made me feel better, just to say it . . . then to dream of it. Sleeping with the Message in my head was a catharsis, Bob. By that night, the word 'Mustang' meant no more to me than 'Stay Tuned to this Station'. When I woke up the next day . . . I had one of those terrifying feelings that everything that had happened the night before was just a dream, and that the Message was something I'd just made up. So I started to really think about it, to try to make sense of how it appealed to me. And that's when this poisonous idea started to turn everything around in my head—it made me really see, for the first time, why the person who thought up that Message was thinking about when they did. The broadcast lies. The televised deception. All of the advertised slavery that television sells to the American population. All of my wasted time at work just so I could go to the fucking mall, Bob, and check off all of the expensive

junk on the mental shopping list that television had programmed into me. Sometime that morning was when they called . . .

No—no, it was later that I talked to my father and let him go on and on about low mileages and garage-kept and whatever. Right before I went to the mall. I'll bet you can't wait to hear about the Mall part of that day, eh Bob? My boss from my morning job called me, wondering where I was, since normally I was always right on time, ready to punch in to get paid as much as possible. I think I told him something along the lines of: I don't need your bullshit job to sell your bullshit products so I can buy more bullshit products as dictated by bullshit television. And then I hung up. I'm sure I would have told the second boss the same thing, if I were home when she called. So then I went upstairs and outside to our perfectly seal-coated driveway, and found one of the 80-pound rocks that my Dad had lined our driveway it with so my Mom wouldn't drive over the edge of the driveway and into his flowers. He loved his flowers. Somehow I lugged one of those boulders into the house, totally avoided my Mom, and carried it downstairs. I barely got it down to the basement without dropping it on my foot . . . but I managed to just get it over right below the television before I dropped in on the floor. I don't even think I knew what I was trying to accomplish, Bob, but it all seemed to make sense. I just couldn't look at that damn TV of mine—the one I had specifically asked for, for my sixteenth birthday—for one more second at that talking eye with the Message pulsing through my head. Not a second more. So I unplugged the thing from the wall, got behind it, and did the deed.

You reporters really have a way with these leading questions, and I already know damn well that you know the answers to the questions you're asking, Bob? What the hell, though, Bob—I'll tell you for the sake of the tape recorder and the Show, okay? For the interview. I love that ticking stopwatch, by the way—always have.

The deed: I pushed that twenty-five-inch color television off the shelf, Bob. The television that probably cost my Dad at least three hundred dollars, maybe more. But let me tell you something Bob . . . the sound that TV Tube made when it smacked face-first into that boulder from a height of three feet—I'd say that sound was worth three-hundred, even four-hundred dollars, Bob. Like the sound of someone getting smacked across the face, or the sound of two cars colliding! Perfect entropy. Ears were made to hear sounds like that Tube and that stone colliding. I won't even tell you what happened to me down there below the belt after that *POP*, Bob, but that sound . . . it was angelic . . . much better than a Mustang GT at full throttle. I was elated and *immediately* felt the gloom of the Mustang that never was—completely erased. It was like the Message had been realized through my obedience . . . perfect execution. And

few ideas are ever perfectly realized, you know. It seems like only the worst ones are, huh? I guess I could say that the sound of that exploding TV Tube was spiritual, Bob . . . but no matter what you write about what I've let you in on . . . you make sure the kids out there know that the Message is a goddamn lie. That spiritual experience wasn't from above, 'cause it wasn't long before the echoes of that shattering Tube faded in my ears, and the Message . . . it demanded more. I had to continue its 'injunction', Bob—the addiction had begun. I was an enlisted member in Message's cause from that morning on. Even when my stupid old man called me up at lunch to tell me about the other Mustangs he'd found for me . . . that Message, Bob . . . it kept me quiet. I pretended like everything was fine, like I had simply gotten over that black Mustang by sheer force of will and character. And after I hung up with the old man, the Message told me to keep moving—

Jeeze, Bob, looks like you've been thinking more about me that I have recently . . . I guess I'll take that as a compliment. Yeah, August something, nineteen-ninety one. Something like that. I went and to the Parents' bedroom for the old man's double-barrel twelve gauge Mossberg, and snuck right past my Mom while she numbed herself with Oprah's 50-inch head on our 50-inch Big Screen. You woulda thought that my Mom got an eyeful of that Message herself, and she was conspiring with me in her own way, Bob . . . 'cause she managed to ignore me walking through the house with an 80-pound boulder, somehow didn't hear a pressurized TV Tube crash from a height of three feet onto that boulder, and didn't see me walk past her in the living room with my Dad's antique double-barreled shotgun. Of course, Oprah had her in her grips, Bob, and all of the life around her got filtered out by her subconscious as unnecessary background noise. Anyway, I took my Mom's car and drove it over to the sporting goods store at one of our town's innumerable mini-malls, and bought a big box of 12-gauge buckshot. I don't even really remember driving that huge Lincoln over to the mall, to tell you the truth. The car sort of directed itself there; the Message knew the rules of the road. Just a quarter-mile away was the home electronics superstore, and I parked in a handicapped spot . . . I guess it wasn't too busy—I managed to walk all the way over to the television display section before anyone saw me with the Mossberg in my right hand and two bulging pockets full of buckshot rounds.

You're a fucking comedian as well as an insightful journalist, you know that? I would have liked to have seen *you* in the CD Section as I walked past, loading the Mossberg as you watched me wide-mouthed—completely forgetting which Garth Brooks CD you wanted.

Did anyone try and stop the Message and me? What do you think, Bob? Of course not. What would you expect all of the employees and customers in a home appliance and electronics store to be like, Bob? Green Berets? Police Negotiators? Rhetorical geniuses? No, they were all fucking TV babies, Bob. I could see it in their bugged-out eyes as they watched me walk back to Best Buy's Sanctified square mile of TVs. They were all shocked, but they *had* to watch because that's all they've ever done their entire lives, Bob. Watch. Stare. Not absorb television, Bob, but be saturated by it. And that's what they were doing when they saw me walk back to the display wall and take-out ten thousand dollars worth of TVs in two minutes. They gaped, full of wonder.

Bob, you disappoint me. Let me offer you some constructive criticism. When you hear rumors about homicidal Thomas and the Message walking into Best Buy and blowing away a couple of women and children before he turned on a large, defenseless array of televisions—what do you do? You fucking disregard it, Bob! It's been nine years and I'm shocked you don't know the truth yet. Sure, I'm honored that you came to me for the whole truth, and nothing but, Bob. I'd tell you to review the security camera footage . . . but it's in black and white and the soundtrack is mono, the sound quality is awful and the TVs' exploding sounds like dull white noise.

No, I'm serious; I didn't shoot anyone at that store. Unless they had a TV for a head on their shoulders, Bob. Actually . . . the only one hurt at the mini-mall that day, was me—I was thoroughly decorated with glass shards from head to foot. I didn't start to feel all that glass until the cops had me down on my parents' living room carpet. Like the God of Sony Trinitron had just vomited all over me—I still have some glass stuck in my left arm—look . . . So never mind those TV babies, their friends, in front of the TV cameras, and their husbands and wives—gaping at their TV sets at home, no doubt—sure as shit that I shot up Miss Smith the spinster first-grade teacher, and little Sally and little Tommy and a couple pregnant mothers. That's all bullshit, Bob, you can just change the channel when you hear that shit about me, because I did *nothing* like that. The Message wasn't interested in killing the enslaved, Bob. The Message does not say: **KILL YOUR TELEVISION AND THOSE WHO WATCH IT**, Bob, otherwise I would have put that shotgun to my own head first off and pulled a Kurt Cobain down there that first morning in my parents' basement. Because the Message has no respect for hypocrisy, okay? No, sir. I'm in this monkey cage for the murder of thirty-seven televisions and only one unfortunate Zenith-owner.

So after I did that venomous Message's bidding, I got the hell out of there, in Mom's yellow Lincoln—Goddammit, I hate Ford products—and somehow made it

back home without any cops trying to run me off the road. No cops at all on the ride home, just me and the Goddamn Message and every back road between the mini-mall and home. But when I got there, my old man was home, waiting. The cops later told me that my Mom called the old man after she discovered the Lincoln missing: went down to the basement and found the Tube's untimely impalement on the driveway boulder. I guess that was enough to wake her out of the early-afternoon TV trance, and got her scared enough to call the old man home from work. As I pulled up in front of the house and looked down the block, I realized that I'd been inside many of these neighbors' houses, and seen their televisions . . . even sat there and watched TV with them. Me and the Message realized how easy all of those TVs would be to finish off, with a little stealth. I could finish off the block before Wheel of Fortune was over. But I decided to start at home, seeing as . . . I was there and I could just walk in and take care of that damn Zenith big screen my folks loved so much.

My old man actually opened the front door before I got to the porch . . . he was bright red, even before he saw his Mossberg in my possession. He started yelling about taking my mother's car without her permission, and what the hell happened to the TV . . . had I lost my mind? I do believe I smiled at him and lifted the shotgun up to my shoulder, holding it upwards, like I was a Marine on the march. He quieted down a bit after that . . . backing up into the house. I heard the sirens at that point, but the Message didn't care a bit about the cops at that point—we had a task to *expedite*.

Great question, Bob . . . way to set up the tender emotional family angle! What do you think my parents said to me, Bob? 'Hi Thomas, what have you done with your day? Would you like a Swiss or American cheese on your sandwich? By the way, what are doing with that smoking shotgun in your hand, son?'

I want you to understand, Bob, once the Message got a hold of me, everything changed. I was a very hungry kid all of the sudden. I was just like all these TV babies hooked on crack-cocaine and Jerry Springer; I was hooked on the double thump of the shotgun and the exploding Tube. First the shotgun, then the Tube, like the flash of lightning before you feel the thunder inside your stomach. Just a split-second delay, but it was perfect, just as perfect as the first Tube falling on the boulder. But after you get that rush from thirty-six exploding Tubes in two minutes, you need more, and soon. The Message demanded it. So the old man was screamin' about taking his shotgun without permission, and what the hell I was doin' with it, drivin' around with it in the car. My Mom was screeching some incomprehensible bullshit about her car, and then police cars, and then I dunno—all I could see was the big all-telling Eye against the opposite, pale yellow wall: that ugly grey eye taunting me—my old man

is standing in front of it. For a second that lasted five minutes, everything got very still, and I stopped to ask the Message what it wanted, what I should do at that point. I heard myself ordering my Dad to move the hell out of the way, next to my Mom—to turn away from the TV. And then there was the pounding at the front door—the cops were there. I was trying to motion my Dad out of the way with the shotgun, I think. But he wouldn't move. I kept telling him to move and he just didn't. And suddenly, over all the screaming, I heard the voice. It simply said: 'Oh well, Thomas.' And I said 'Understood.'

I fired once and that took care of the old man blocking the Eye, God bless him . . . and I pumped the shotgun again, and then I took care of the big screen—even though the cops seemed to have me on the floor before the Tube stopped exploding. A fifty-inch big screen makes just about the loudest pop you could possibly imagine. I didn't even feel the cuffs put on—I felt elated—the big eye was gone, I felt . . . *wonderful*.

Yes, Bob, I shot my old man because he was blocking the TV. The Message didn't take 'no' for an answer. There's no 'please' or 'maybe' in KILL YOUR TELEVISION, Bob. The Message had no built-in clause for protection of fathers who make a better door than a window, Bob. And yeah, sure, I'm sorry that the old man is gone—that's why I'm telling you about the Message's danger to us all. And other Messages like it. I mean—suppose somebody decides to print a bumper sticker that says: 'First we kill all the lawyers.' Imagine that, Bob. I don't even think this world has the requisite number of shotguns for that task.

Bob! I just told you *the Message* was crazy not fifteen minutes ago! And you haul off and call *me* crazy? I thought reporters were supposed to have journalistic integrity and neutrality, Bob . . . like Barbara Walters, for example. Would Barbara ever interrupt me in the middle of my confession and tell me I was 'fucking nuts'? That's why she's Top-Dog, Bob.

You're not sorry, Bob. No need to apologize when you don't mean it. But if you do win the Pulitzer for this story, Bob, I want you to promise that you'll mention two things for me in your acceptance speech or whatever. Agreed?

No need to patronize, Bob. Sarcasm doesn't become you. Neither does that tie, by the way. But you don't look at all like Michael J. Fox in *Family Ties*, I swear. My mom could never dress my Dad in anything that didn't look ridiculous, either, so . . . you gotta tell 'em all when you get up there to accept your Pulitzer: 'Ladies and Gents, thank you very much for awarding me this prestigious prize for writing about Thomas and the Message. I would like to admit, however, that even though I was

wearing an embarrassingly bad tie, I had the nerve to call Thomas, during the interview, quote 'fucking nuts', unquote. More important, however, is the message I promised I would pass on for Thomas to you today. It goes something like: 'Take your eyes off the Tube and watch out for the Message—it's out there.' He also wanted me to show you a graph of the four food groups and asked me to point out that Television is not one of those four groups. I'm sure you can all visualize that diagram—even though the Food Pyramid is now in vogue . . . anyway. Thank you; enjoy your truffle mousse . . . Goodnight.'

Yes, you *can* say that, Bob. You *will*; or next week, I'll tell Barbara on camera that you welshed out on our agreement, got it? Connie already rubbed me the wrong way, truthfully. Kept condescending to me over the phone . . . like I *wasn't* a pariah, Duh! Regardless, I let you ahead of Barbara *and* Connie 'cause I think you're a svelte dude. I like that in a Talking TV Head like yourself, Robert—seeing as the most unappreciated televised sycophant is the least evil . . . your Show's lack of respectable Nielsen ratings is a mark of integrity. Our faces on the Tube will be a blessing on the all-telling Eye. I'm *glad* to help us get there. I can't wait to see where your Producer puts in the commercial breaks and whether he or she mutes out the expletives or uses that 'beep' sound. I like that 'beep' sound almost as much as I love the ticking stopwatch.

RYAN TILLOTSON

Refuse

I felt like you never listened. You're not listening now, but I have some of your things here in this plastic shopping bag. Some pens you lent me. In case you were looking for them, they're all right here. And the books you lent me, for Russian Literature, the books you managed to read thoroughly in your college classes—paperbacks—how did you manage to read them without creasing the bindings? I was right all along: you are perfect. You can do the impossible: read thick, tightly bound volumes of Gogol and Tolstoy and Pushkin, and leave the bindings unaffected, unmolested. Improved, I believe. You see, I want these books because you spent hours gazing at them with your brown eyes. They are perfected. I have something to which you paid hours of attention that I can keep: something other than me. You aren't listening to me now, but you have not escaped me yet. Your eyes linger in these off-white pages. If I look at them while squinting, I can see you in their typewritten pages, and the silhouette of your loving glance behind the delicious plots, the ill-fated characters. We both read these very same pages. I need this relic: a testament to our shared moment.

I stand here on the arc of this wooden bridge, this plastic bag filled with your stuff. I found this bag balled up with many others in your pantry, where all of the plastic bags go to be reused. I hope you won't mind that I took this one from your pantry.

There are two new moons at either end of this bridge; my way is blocked. I was not unhappy when two full moons blocked it. Then, I could behold you, bathed in the brightest and whitest moonlight, your black hair shimmering in that antimatter way, your olive skin pulsating something elemental, an ideal, more than flesh. You were so very close, your curving body's heat tingling across my legs, ten thousand tiny hairs on my ear lobes quivering at ten thousand hertz, the frequency of moonlight. I looked in your brown eyes, and I struggled to hold myself back, they are so deep, I felt the vacuum, the vertigo. I tried to speak, to tell you what this all meant to me. I wanted to ask you if you would mind letting me stay near the locus of everything I imagined I would ever want: wave and particle, your essence, your hair and skin. Your body curving through the glow of a full moon, my hands nestled in the valley of the pronounced curve of your lower back. I could not speak, I felt weak . . . suddenly I

found those deep eyes impenetrable, my gaze shifting from your left eye to your right eye—neither would engage mine.

A white-hot moon filled each eye, as if you drew on their power. I opened my mouth to scream as the lunar glow quickly waned, the full orbs shrunk to crescent slivers, your pupils thinned to feline indifference. Full moons snuffed to new moons . . . darkness superceded light, and you were gone. I knew I was alone by the wash of midnight-chill and bitter melancholy that made me tremble as I fell against the rail for support. I wanted you to come back for at least a second so I could capture your eyes in a photograph. I wanted to be able to capture, for my later ages, the superior evil that squeezed the light from your eyes. The waning moons wiped our unique moment from time and space, leaving only a few high-energy particles to sputter out their last light past my ears, like flies stolen by Doppler effect. My scream then burst out of my throat. It sounded like a sigh.

My feet stutter one-by-one over uneven slabs of pavement, up a hill off Broadway, zombie-like up the sidewalk rising against the sky. My book-bag slaps at my left hip as I move more in accordance to the gravity trying to usher me to the earth, than the mechanism in my head trying to keep me upright. I am the slave of a convincing internal drumbeat marching me toward her house, always adjusting to the discordant, drugged nervous system that has turned me into a robot receiving truncated commands, totally ungraceful . . . the beat persistent, moving me forward notwithstanding near-unconsciousness; muscle relaxants taken to excess of excess; marching toward darkness.

Above, fall's descent through the shimmering leaves in trees does not register, nothing registers in my conscious; my conscious mind is swirling far above the leaves, on vacation in the stratosphere, too ethereal to tease the early October chill. It has been relieved from duty and is soaring, gaining altitude, utterly high. My right foot veers off at a strange angle . . . and catches on the up-turned lip of a concrete slab shifting, tectonic, in slow motion; the earth wants to stop me. The drumbeat accelerates to a roll. I recover, one leg stretched out far before me, bent at a right angle, as if I were about to kneel in supplication.

* * *

My head snaps up and fades down, jerks right, trying to give my eyes a chance to take in what is happening. I sit in a chair, my legs straight out before me, placed just well enough to prevent me from falling off..

She moves in quick, jagged vectors toward the hallway, to the pantry, in front of which lies my book-bag. Little shrieking alarms go off in my head and my consciousness—heretofore dithering in the dust motes stuck to the off-white ceiling—shoots panicked back into my skull through my right ear. Now I see what she is doing. She rifles through the bag at high-speed, trying to root-out the burning ember, she is an ugly smear of red rage—I would be afraid if I could be afraid. A barrage of retarded neural artillery fires all at once: *No! Stop her! Not the pills! She can't do that! Goddammit!* I try to heed the warnings, I want to salvage my other love: that which will intercede reliably once her fury focuses and I am sent back home, to be with myself.

However, the drumbeat is faint, gravity wins, and I am pinned down and doomed to take it all in, as if I were a mere spectator to my own fate. Somehow, even standing seems like a foreign activity; I would not know what to do first. Instead, I try to open my mouth to protest, and a bunch of blurry monosyllables bounce around the yellow kitchen walls and fall dead. Her spinning hands snatch-up something translucent, amber, a plastic chalice filled with white gems, out of the bag, the chalice's contents rattling ominously as she charges toward the bathroom, her feet pounding out resolute punches down the glossy wooden hallway. What could be a handful of hail makes a *whoosh*, something propelled into the toilet-bowl water, and then the sound of the hard, white perpetrators rattle against ceramic. The death-rattle and the flush.

I muster enough coherence to hope that the score is settled. It is all that I can hope for. The haze in my head does not obscure the more powerful pit in my stomach.

She flashes back under the yellow light, somehow crying, screaming, questioning and berating me all at once. I hang my head to express that I sympathize, but I do not know that the opportunity for rebuttal or even sympathy is long gone. Something like fission boils in the shadows around her. Her fury is impressive, breathtaking, and incredible. Once passive and gentle, once suggesting and supportive, once eager to let nothing intrude upon forgiveness because forgiveness hung off her fingers and lit from her eyelashes like butterflies' wings—the critical mass is reached.

Like fission, we came unglued: the atom of love split in two, pure rage flashes out of her and consumes eleven months in just this second: our *past* shifts on its foundations and collapses gracefully.

“Why can't you stop. . .?”

“How am I supposed to deal with. . .?”

“What do you want me to do when I see you like this. . .?”

“WHY?”

The standard words announcing last straws tumble out of her mouth, and I think I hear the apartment’s black front door rattling, enraged—ecstatically waiting to deliver me back outside.

Dawn pushes apart my eyelids. Not even a moment of forgetful silence to greet me, just an ashen haze in the gray morning air and the uncomfortable twisting squeeze of yesterday’s clothes, anchoring my consciousness to the night before. Turning to her, she is asleep, but her eyebrows are still knit together, as if she is still struggling against me.

I am not a dog who has suddenly turned, snarling at his loving owner; I refuse to be regarded as *bad*. I want to reach out and lay my hand on her in the right way, in the right place. She has so many of those places, but they are unavailable, hidden from me now. I feel this knowing vacuum expanding inside. The glass bulb in my heart is broken: its filament burning twice as brightly in a highly volatile and imminently fatal atmosphere. Now I notice the wide stretch of open bed between us. She pinned herself against the wall last night, at the safest distance possible. I remember begging her not to send me home. I had decided, in my barbiturate haze, that if I stayed the night, it might be more difficult to cast me away for good in the morning. I was terrified and am still terrified that it might be my last chance to feel warm inside her bedroom. She has the most beautiful off-white cotton sheets. They smell clean; they smell like her; I do not feel like myself in my own bed. Rolling over, I peer over the edge of the bed and face-down into one of my shoes—its laces still tied—then to the utter bottom of the Atlantic, far off shore, Massachusetts Bay a mere silhouette of a memory far behind me. I can feel my toes riding-up on the last inch of the Continental Shelf, the memory of dry land a surreal conception as 5000 feet of black sea-water remind me that I could have gone home last night and only God would have been the wiser.

She stirs and I turn back, a stabbing sensation above my navel painfully prodding me . . . I realize I would never do anything to hurt her, nothing to risk losing her . . . if I had another chance. I want to go back to sleep, and wake up when that chance comes about. If it does not, then I do not have to wake up, it doesn’t matter to me. I don’t want anything beyond her front door anyhow. It is red on the inside and very black on the outside; a wall between security and wide-open darkness, darkly

illuminated by these darkened spheres keeping me in stasis. What part of me wanted this end?

Now we are lying together on a large towel on a clean sandy beach on Nantucket. I am reading *The Brothers Karamazov*. She has paid for the entire costly trip, but I hate the Ocean; it terrifies me. No one who loves to eat seafood should ever feel safe in an ocean: it's only logical. I feel something awful toward her; I wonder if it is hate. The lifeguard whistles everyone out of the water; a gray fin precipitously waves around in the tide. It has been a summer of pre-pubescent boys becoming the prime delicacy for sharks from Miami to San Jose. A gray seal washes up onto the beach. Still alive. It has given up on life in the Atlantic Ocean, but will die without it. Eventually, the persistence of the sympathetic crowd, hoping for the seal, hoping that it will feel the caring hush of the Atlantic's waves beckoning it back home, surrenders to the inevitable tide, and is carried back into the arms of its mother ocean.

I return to our beach towel a little relieved; yet I cannot escape an uncomfortable sympathy with the wayward animal; I know what it is like to desire escape from loving, sustaining arms.

Fission continues, now in slow motion. I find myself trapped in frantic vectors, stumbling in a spiritual sense between anger, love sickness, a desire to flee, an unceasing dependence upon her warmth, her company, her money, and the recognition in her brown eyes when she greets me that tells me I'm still alive. This continues for months, each day the pattern cycling through predictable modes—I could almost watch the sun arcing across Boston's building-choked skies and see our next hour of emotional decay together—simply by the sun's declination.

We sit and eat together in the yellow kitchen, or maybe a restaurant my scant earnings could never afford. We drive to large stores and she seems to become the perfect consumer, selective yet obsessed: there are so many things to buy: toothbrushes, value-sized containers of delicacies I am used to seeing in bird-scale proportions. She buys me stacks of new clothes—and it's not that I don't need them—but she could never again offer me what I wanted most: a position much closer to her in her warm bed, her generous and electrifying kisses, some gentle offering to let me feel that I have not successfully warranted being kept at an emotionally long arm's length. At night, I am consistently unsuccessful; my furtive touches and yearning

glances at her as she tries to settle into sleep go nowhere. I sometimes fall asleep painfully gazing out her tall window.

From late October, until at least December, I lie in her bed on my side, her sleeping beauty usually driving sleep out of my mind. There is no desire like an unrequited desire. A hot glow transcends sex parts and sexual fantasy—I can't imagine wanting something more than I want her to want me, again. Every day's details lose their glimmer or gleam and I see no color but gray and black framed in mud, dirt, and fatigue. Here on the dark bridge that spans the chasm between everything and nothing, I would toss everything I own or will ever own over this cold railing—if there was a chance that throwing it all away is the toll I must pay to see those full moons again. I want to count her favor as one of my few otherworldly possessions once again. Still, the new moons' block my escape from this nowhere place. Their cool, black, and blank faces offer me no glimpse of her bright eyes once more.

Daily, I hear happy peoples' friends happily cajoling each other as they walk up and down Highland Avenue, just a hundred feet from her window; while I try to grapple with sadness, guilt; scheming, trying to reassure myself that *anything* is possible—all I need to do is be patient—she will hear and understand. We *could* be lovers again, we could take an axe to these new, horrible walls that separate past failures from present and future possibility. Even if she smiles at me, wishing me a good night, I see that omnipresent word in each eye; it is unambiguous: what part of *no* don't I understand?

Unanimously alive, they walk nightly from one bar to the next, as if singing the praises of not doing what I am doing: living in the past and hating the present. They seem to be singing about that which deep down, I also know. You cannot erase the past with good intentions and a heart brimming over with grief. I hate them for having seemingly transcended something I don't even want to see, much less let go . . .

What keeps me from trying to force myself on her and quench a lust that seems to grow exponentially in this three-month interlude, I do not know. Maybe it is gratitude. To be fair to myself, my hesitation to extract from her that which I wanted can be credited to gratitude, or respect for our sincerely deep, not unflawed love, and one thing more. This last reason has no name. It is inside of me now, strengthening, as I stand trapped on this bridge. New moons, dark moons . . . past life, no life, and dead life.

When I drove a moving van out of that city months later, I felt good. I was glad to watch my own specter disappearing in the rear-view mirror, flinching and stuttering

through those hilly sidewalks, wondering whom his Helen now loved.

But wait, my love, I can explain! You had to have been there when my personality coalesced into any icy solid. You had to hear my spirit ringing through the sparsely forested Midwest plains as I swallowed that first drug: all of life's insufferable vicissitudes and accepted a core of suffering as my locus: you never had a chance. When 17, I sat on the hood of my rusty car and the nerve-level bass strains of Sonic Youth's very earliest recordings laid a very straight and barren line through my gut: my mantra, my depression; I would get high, I would suffer; we all do, right? And indeed, I did. I laid on emergency tables half-dead from self-inflicted overdoses because—guess what—that solid, barren bass line didn't carry me to the threshold of understanding, it only exacerbated life's hard, tear-evaporating lessons. I thought I had it all mastered, by figuring I would willingly lose. I wanted to accept defeat before it bruised and calloused me by surprise. I miscalculated. I would want much more than that, I wanted you. That was far too much; you are perfect, I know that now.

I blame you, even though you are no longer listening: you gave me hope for more when I could have done with this perpetual less. You should have never offered me something you would refuse me. How dare you?

ROBERT WODZINSKI

The Lost Pearl Divers of Spain

Flamenco rust adrift and undertow;
Some endless night still dark, still blue with lack,
Snap clack! The oyster shuts; its pearl unknown

To diving men who sink to lose the glow,
To move, to shout, a song of death so black,
Flamenco rust adrift and undertow.

Deep down, deep down a ray of light is slow,
Down deep, deep down through murky foam it tacks,
Snap clack! The oyster shuts; its pearl unknown.

Step back, release! A song past fall will show
Untied monsoon from when that love went slack,
Flamenco rust adrift and under tow.

Beneath the grip of time's stone sober hold
Grew wrongly strong the gap through pale green track,
Snap clack! The oyster shuts; its pearl unknown.

And seas pull pearls of gold beyond a stretch,
To lands where suns burn bright! Burn dry! Burn fresh!
Flamenco rust adrift and under tow!
Snap clack! The oyster shuts; its pearl unknown.

MARQUES MOREL

Undertow of Breaths

From the depths of her Sea
flows the final breath-wave
of the partium Mermaid,

a tidal out-breath morphing
into emerald-bubbled love-hands
preparing to unfurl
their foamy blanket
in maternal delicacy
over these dry sands
 these dry sands
 these dry sands...

each grain now vulnerable to Aeolian gusts
as they howl premonitions of a coming storm.

And from her oceanic palace
she will soon gasp for long awaited in-breath
and begin slow suffrage of suffocation:
her death spasms will
dislodge amethyst from her diadem,
doom Earth to seizure,
blacken sun and moon;

deflated lungs will wither
and crumble
to dust.

We must let go the intercepted boomerang
from fist-clenched catacombs and

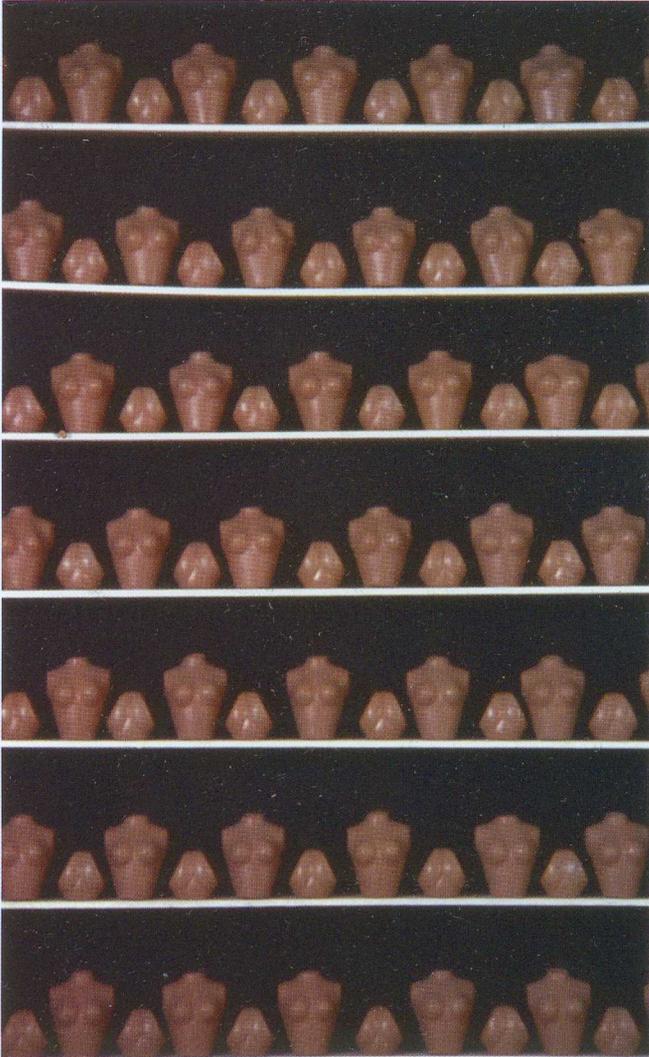
dissolve self into Self and
jigsaw yin-breath
with Mermaid's
yang-nonbreath
whose emerald waves
are molding within our
safes of ebb-given treasure.

Time now to let flow
our reciprocal undertow
back into the lunged depths
of her wintering sea;

Towers Gallery



Amy Sacksteder, *Assemblage*: 1978, 1986, 2002, largest panel: 15"x12" oil, paper doll dress, stencil and enamel on panels, 2002



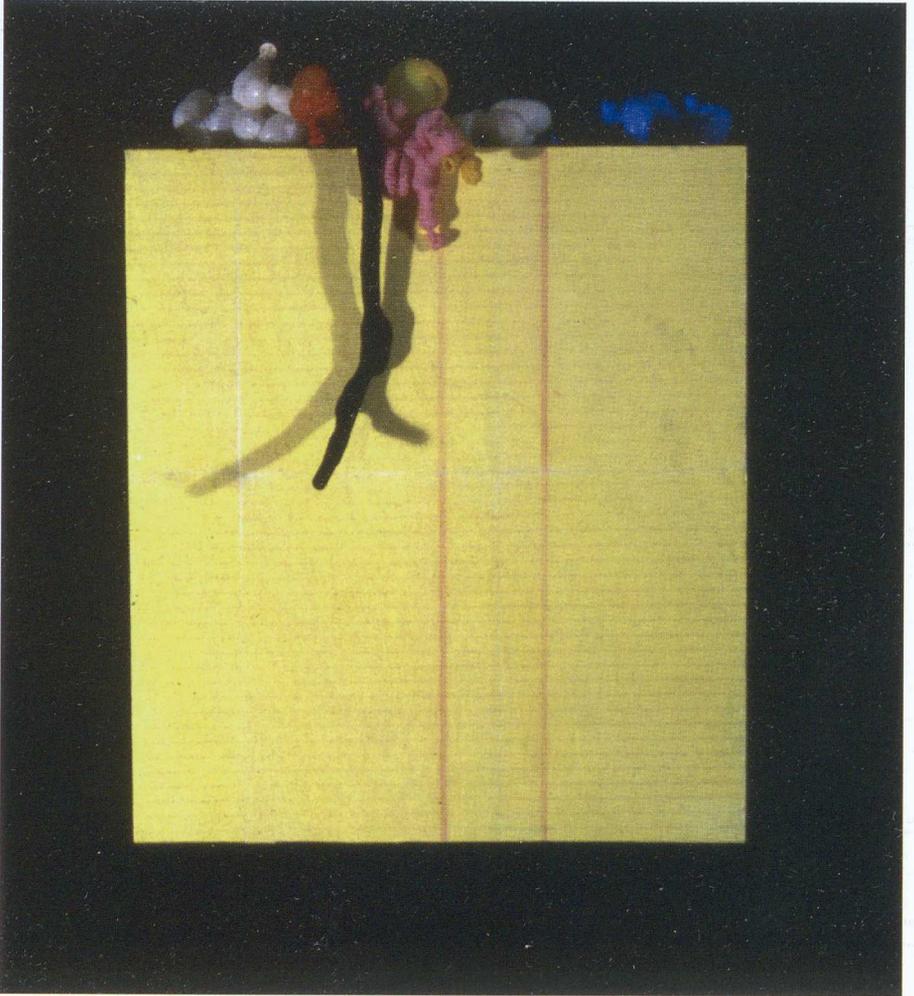
**Kristen Klecker, *Bits and Pieces*, dimensions variable,
doll parts and wood, 2002**



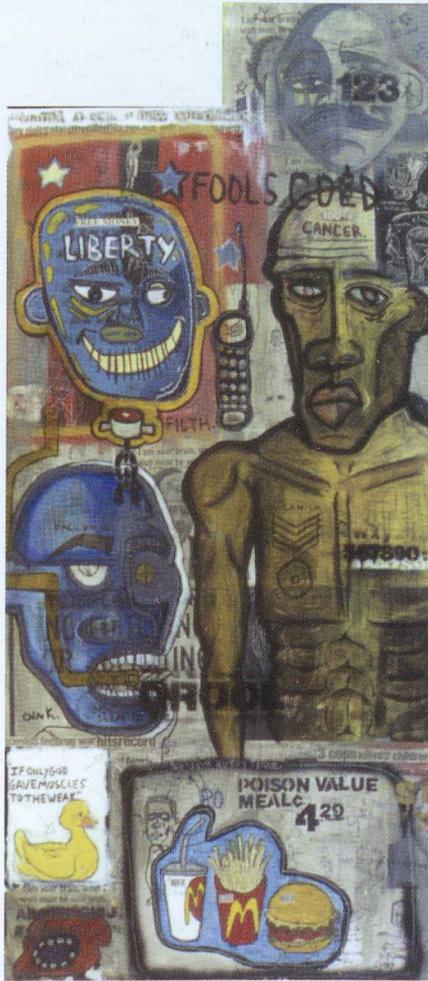
Diana Gabriel, *Ugly Truth*, 7"x71/2" oil on canvas, 2002



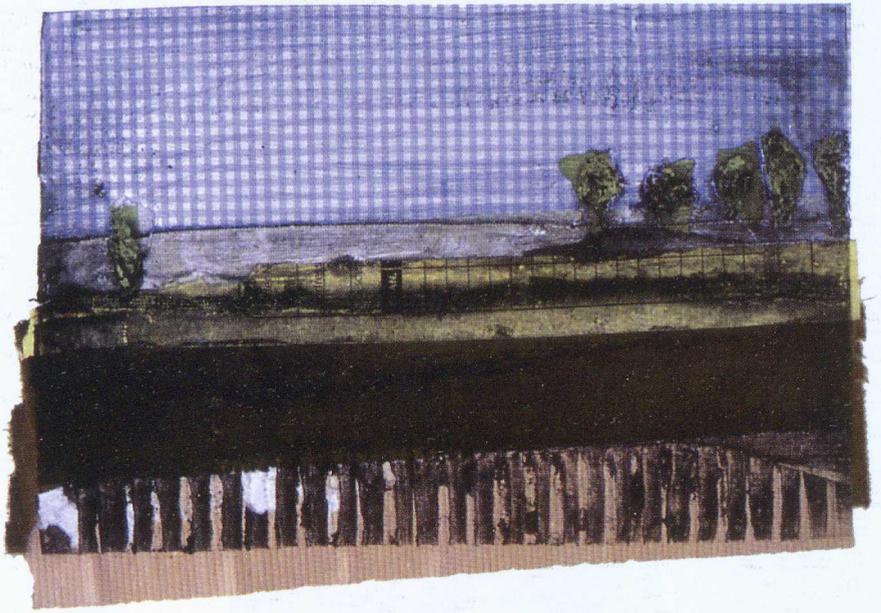
Kelly Mueller, *First Communion Helix (sky)*, 24"x24" photocolage and acrylic on panel, 2002



Suzanne Gorgas, *silent deflation in yellow*, 14 1/2" x 12" x 3" mixed media, 2002



Corey Hagberg, *God's Secret Code*,
71"x32"/63"x32" mixed media, 2000



Suzanne Gorgas, *Soft Brown Landscape II*, 13"x17" collograph and chine colle', 2002



Andrew Chobot, *Peacefully*, 4'x2'x8', mixed media, 2001

NANCY MCVITTIE

In the Gray

I've seen a lot of gray lately

I hate the color gray. It's not even really a color. It is a mixture of black and white, two neutral tones that are not considered colors, either. You mix them together and they lose their individual sharpness, their own specificity. They become something else, something less, something blah, something gray.

Gray is not the color of anything nice. Instead, it's the color of concrete, yet another mixture: stone and cement. It is industrial, institutional. It masks some dirt and fingerprints, but never all of it. It's the color for indecision. For practicality. For when you just don't know what else to do.

Gray is the color of the sweater my mother bought me for Christmas. I pointed out the lovely, lively, utterly sweet and serene delicate blue angora cardigan. But it wouldn't wear well. Wouldn't stay pretty. Lumpy gray wool was what I got instead.

Been feeling rather Zen

The girl wants to argue. It makes my stomach hurt to think about it, so I ignore her, lay on the carpet, watch hockey instead. I like how that game has blacks and whites. Works well for the context. Some win, some lose. No player ever leaves the rink wondering what was the puck and what constitutes ice, who's allowed to be cheerful, who should kick himself.

She wants life to be hockey. But she has a proclivity toward checking. And I'm not much for fisticuffs. I just like to skate.

Can't bring myself to guess beyond rhythm

The Thomas Aquinas Theory of Mediocrity was what we used to call it.

It was a play on all the Aquinas theories we were forced to memorize in Theology class and we were just prep school smart-asses, but there was something a bit more to it, a set of hopeful logic beyond the silly.

"How was your morning?" I'd ask, meeting Shivvy in the cafeteria. She wore the burgundy uniform sweater, I wore the navy, but we both had the same plaid skirt. They brushed against each other as we pushed forward in line for fries.

"Well, History sucked, but Ben McKee said Hi to me during Geometry, so it's all mediocre."

"Yeah. All my morning classes sucked, so now the afternoon's got to be good."

"All things, whether good or bad will eventually meet and result in mediocrity."

"Exactly. It's so true."

"It so is."

It was the same exchange everyday. It lent a workable structure to life, put it into an order you could hold faith in. Nothing could ever be too bad without the balance of knowing that something equivocally good would soon follow. In the same sense, you could never get too excited about anything without being aware of the inevitable come-down, therefore preparing in advance for disappointment. Overall, things would be palpable.

All through high school and into college, Shivvy and I celebrated the format we'd created. She'd call me from her school downstate, I'd call her from mine upstate. We'd meet somewhere in the fiberoptic middle.

"My semester sucks," she'd say, "My biochem prof is such a bitch."

"Well, then that means next semester will be good."

"And it'll all be mediocre, like always."

"Exactly."

"It's so true."

"It so is."

I've never liked decisive men

My Uncle is color-blind. He knows traffic lights because green's always on bottom and he trusts my aunt to ball all his socks on laundry day so he doesn't wear blue with brown.

One time she went out for the afternoon and asked him to paint the pantry while she was gone. She came home to find that half of it was pink, the other half yellow. Guess he'd run out of paint and hadn't thought to ask anyone for help before he went into the basement and grabbed another opened can.

It's ironic, I suppose, that he is literally color-blind, yet he is the most racist person I know. He hates anyone with a shade darker than his own Italian tan and has an opinion about each that he never hesitates to state.

He is a decisive man. Even though he can't distinguish between shades, he sees life in clear blacks and whites. If he doesn't like something, he says it. Loudly.

Hell erupted once when my grandma bought my Uncle's daughter a black baby doll.

My grandma sometimes liked to do things like that, for kicks. She was a woman who could handle black and white, but also knew when to use gray. She balanced what life tossed to her, and with a sense of humor all the way through.

My Uncle has a lousy sense of humor. He still doesn't see the joke.

I'm leery of becoming a total wish-wash, but...

"You're such a ninny."

I hate when my mother says this to me.

It's usually when she's complaining about some wrong my sister or my father has done and she wants me to side with her.

But I don't like to side with anyone.

I'm losing the value of a choice

I can't make a yes or no decision on anything. I've been late to work countless times because I can't decide what to wear. I can never decide which restaurant I'd like to go to and it took me a year and a half of misery before I finally declared a new major.

I am the queen of the three point turn. I remember bitching about it in Driver's Ed.

"When the hell am I ever going to use this?"

If only they had told me that it's for all the times that you turn right, then start thinking "Well maybe I should've gone left but maybe right's okay no left I think left is probably better but maybe I should have gone straight but maybe I'm already going the right way no I think left was probably better or yeah maybe even straight right might be okay but well fuck I better just turn around right here and figure this out"

That would have made sense.

My shades have all mixed in with themselves

Sometimes I think I over-think. I lie awake at night with a stomach full of ulcers and try to figure out the complexities of my small world. I try to map out the reasoning everyone must have for the things they have done to me, the same blueprints I keep on store in the files of the folds of my brain for all my own movements. It's all there, tucked away warm in the gray matter.

I can explain any action I have taken for I know I've most likely reasoned any movement out before hand. Step-by-step schematics. Tech drawing stuff. I studied years to do that professionally, then abandoned it all for a subjective field.

I wanted to be a "design person" so badly. I wanted to label life and store it in clear Rubbermaid boxes. I wanted to draw straight lines and print with handwriting like an engineer.

Everyone I met had Bauhaus hair, clean and stream-lined and to a definite point. They made decisions with barely a move of the jaw and carried compact measuring tapes in their pockets.

Now I spend every day surrounded by scruffy-headed eccentrics with wrinkly corduroy jackets and any class can turn into a 40-minute discussion of what Keats might have meant.

It's all subjective and it's swallowed me up. Taken me into its intoxicating hyperthought. I'm so much like that that I worry that I'll lose my grasp and I'll never be able to sleep.

That's why I'm taking trigonometry this semester. I still like to draw triangles and it's such a luxury to plug in a formula for any occasion.

Even now, though, my professor prints in red pencil on the margin of my quiz sheet that I get full credit for getting the correct solution, but that I took six steps to get there when it could be done in three.

Yeah, but at least if I start thinking about sine and cosine, I can be asleep in twenty minutes.

I've become the color of the human voice

I work customer service on the weekends. People call me up, scream at me, apologize, then scream again.

I've become used to reading what people sound like. It's all written in shades of gray.

Last night, Shivvy phoned and her voice was thick-hued with many strokes of black. For the first time ever, one of us questioned our precious joke.

“I’m still on the waiting list, Nance. I can’t take this. I wish they’d just let me know one way or the other, you know? Ruin my life or whatever, I don’t care. I’m sick of everything being mediocre. I’m so fucking bored of it.”

And I agreed with her, but it scared me. I don’t know if I’m ready to live in a world that doesn’t have a predictable rhythm. I like knowing that things always return and you never go too far, that the Shock ‘n Socker never flies off the track. There are six loops (you can count them) and a corkscrew at the end. Even if you’ve got your eyes closed, you know in two and a half minutes you’ll be on your feet again and laughing at the couple of moments there where you really fancied you might fall out.

Life to me is not academic prose

Nothing has an introduction, body and conclusion. Every person is constantly entering *in medias res*, bringing in their own pack of reasons, their own way of behaving. We don’t stop and set up again at any regular interval and prepare in any sort of a way for anyone else.

If life fits in any fashion to that style of format, it’s in the footnotes.

I’d like to think it’s the shape of verse

Friends and lovers interact with cadence, though.

The way you move when you’re familiar with someone, when you understand in your muscles the way that they tend to behave. You can expect and react and fold to them.

Even with strangers, passing each other on the street, waiting for a bus, making conversation in the grocery store line. It has a beautiful melody if you don’t look too hard for it, don’t expect too much of it.

You have your arms full of food and toilet paper because there was a two for one deal with your *Preferred Saver* card and just as you’re about to unload it all onto the conveyer, that yellow bag of wheat bread topples off, heading for the shoe-marked linoleum.

But the person behind you catches it. With a smile. And returns it to safety.

People can be lovely beyond a rigid list of rules.

Black and white or gray and gray

The plaid skirt is our uniform and everyone had to wear it. Four years straight I zip it up every morning and never once iron out the pleats. I hate it anyway, so why bother? Better to concentrate on cute stripey socks or my multi-colored punky hair.

But in Mr. Herman's Theology class where there aren't any windows, it is the skirt that keeps me busy.

While he babbles about Jesus and the Jesuits and good old Thomas Aquinas, my eyes invariably fall to my lap. Black lines, white blocks, gray background.

You can trace the blacks and whites, see the individual threads of weave. But you can get lost in the gray for hours. Forty days in the desert. Forty years. Forty acres and a mule? Or something about a Jew? Sounds like some awful joke my uncle might tell.

The lines of black and white, though, the plaid, they always add back. Predictable and rigid. Up my thigh, to my waist, running either side of the button and the zipper, on top of and below each of six pleats.

All of it makes me dizzy after awhile and so then I give up and start pretending to take notes.

I couldn't tell you which is worse

The girl who wants to argue, who wants life to be played by the NHL Handbook, is just a kid. That's what I must remind myself every time she starts to get to me.

So smart, yet she's insistent that everything is going to be black or white, right or wrong, clearly one way or its other. She gets mad at me, refuses to speak to me, because I can never give her a straight answer. Neither of us seems all that happy, though, for what it's worth. She'll grow up discontent and I'll continue on uncertain. But I'm thinking I should buy her a gray sweater. Just for kicks.

ELENA HALICZER

Grass Wind

Was it summer when Yellow Woman killed the horse
that took the shhhhh from the wind?

Sunflower, wishing so for the coming of fall—
that she might 'tempt to bend her head so far to the right or left—
or lift her head from her neck to see—
just to see.
For this her neck is pulled taut,
drawn further,
upward, higher
to follow the hot sun.

Yellow Woman wishing for a reprieve
in darkness.
Yellow Woman washing her clothes by the banks of a river, paused
for a time, to inspect her knuckles
surely red and raw from the rushing water.
And her hope
is not salt lick for caballos
rider-less.
It is not corn or river trout,
un-shucked or freed by a hole in the netting.
Hers is a wheel of sun that turns away
climbing the hill of sky overhead.
It is still, hot,
this hope at the close of day
and the washing will not be done.

Shhhh-wind,
a tree whisper,

hands forming horses in the clay,
circles preventing harm,
a bowl to collect watery currents.
Yellow-woman hear grass winds,
your hairs at your ears!

Sunflower,
plucked for a few seeds.
High above her, two women shout eyes rolled back, hearts running
gasps unintelligible—
How can you pluck such a flower?

ELENA HALICZER

Defense

In the comb, an arch of hair,
swept over its teeth.

The needle, which must now set to work
on the bedspread, finds the threads protestant at my nape.

The plum, eaten—
and its stone, cast at the wall,
lie still and
indigestible.

The plum, which is as still as a choking dust in August—
wears a slim coat, though it has grown cold.

The plum is a pitiful armchair.
Slit by a pocketknife, and burgeoning fibers—
worries that spring un-named—
it is a sight that leaves you remorseless.

How can I relax knowing we left a cube of sugar
lying insensible to melt on the counter?
You say it was carried by ants to a hayfield.
You tell me the sky has turned grey since then.

But there is a drop of sweetness on your tongue.

The comb which frightens hair with prospects of detangling—
rambles now in search of hide.

In the fields of hay
now rolled into dour bundles
this comb was a Jezebel.
Since—

it has become a miner,
and has found groundwater. The water is sweet as it wells forth.
I smell lavender on its breath.

Our teeth have unfastened knots of sticky bread.
Waiting we have broken vowels in rare feasts.
We have wasted our teachers to watch instead
poor demonstrations of time passing.
The sugar, the hay, the bread, and plum—
wasted.

We cannot understand desire.

I would walk in pairs now
and hold fast to you—
fold our fingers together.
But you do not exist here among these things.

You are not tempted by fruit.
Nor do you lean against this wall.

You continue along these lines—
mending your shirt.

CHARLENE READER

Thoughts of a Wife

Things that trigger memories are strange. The alarm went off too early for me this morning and it brought me back to a year ago when the dog woke me up earlier than I wanted.

Jeez, what is she barking at now? It's not even 4 o'clock. I rolled over and tried to ignore the dog. I was sure there was just some wild animal or cat outside that Pepper wanted to chase. Of course, she wouldn't shut up. I looked out the window and eventually I caught the reflection of flashing lights coming from our driveway.

I prodded Jim. "Honey, there's someone in the driveway." I figured it was someone with car trouble. You get that from time to time when you live in the country. I guess people assume since we live on a farm we are always warm and friendly. My other thought was that Jim's dad had popped in for a visit. The timing was not good, but then Henry never cared when he inconvenienced us.

In the meantime, Jim threw on a T-shirt and a pair of shorts. I wasn't going to get up, but my curiosity got the better of me. As I walked downstairs, I recall having cold feet. And I was thirsty. I was also glad the boys were able to sleep through the dog's racket.

Strange, Jim was standing on the front porch talking to a policeman. If Henry was in jail, why didn't the cops just call, I wondered. It was then that I registered what Jim and the cop were saying – Accident, No one else involved, Sorry, Drunk.

Jim looked OK except his T-shirt was on backwards and he had his normal morning hair thing going on. On a normal day, I would have put my hand in the pocket on the back of his shirt to tease him, but it was not a normal day.

The policeman left and Jim came in to sit down. Jim's dad, Henry, was driving drunk in Wisconsin and he lost control of his vehicle. He was dead. I was angry. Once again, Henry put Jim in the middle of a bad situation. Jim needed to call the family members. He quietly shed a couple of tears, until Pepper tried to lick his face. Jim pushed the dog away and started dialing the phone. I didn't cry.

PAM ALLNUTT

Wash Day

Twisted tight, the lock
opens...

Flowing liquid beneath her
gaze, infused with
color transparencies,

they emerge... coiled reflections
of battles unclaimed, left

torn

bleeding

lined up on shelves.

Wringing out the traces
into stiff flat sheets... she stills

pinned to bleakness...
bleached in winter white.

Rising winds, awakening

gust - released shadows

fly.

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Submit two (2) copies of your work. No staples please; paper clips acceptable.

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