

Towers

2001, Number 81



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Jeff Ward
Towers Award in Fiction
“Encounters with Stallia”

Jaimee Joyce Jackson
Towers Award in Poetry
“The Hand I Hold”

Valerie Manos
Towers Award in Creative Nonfiction
“Ingredients: Peas, Green 132”

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JOHN GARCIA

Thanksgiving

On a wet road driving home
on Thanksgiving day

My gaze wanders to a drugstore
on the side of the road
—lone clerk
under the solitary stare of the store light
I gaze a long while at him
and the glare of the light he's under
looks right back at me

—driving further
to the woman in the tollbooth
her hands almost but not quite
touching so many hands

—now over the bridge
on route 1
and past the neon sign
telling of Jesus' return
I have a view of
the city and the lights
and I imagine people's happiness
and hope I'm right

—I finally turn on to my street
still thinking of you

—I climb to my apartment,
step through the door,
flip the switch
but the power's out on my street

—so I sit and wait
for the lights to come on
so I can sleep

JENNIFER VORIS

The Body Speaks

She began the morning by viewing her body through skeptical eyes and the unconscious words escaped her lips with a barely audible whisper — “the horror!”

Before she acknowledged the mirror, she was instinctively aware of a confidence that was strong yet light-hearted. She closed her eyes. She saw vast fields of rich, fragrant earth. She traveled through forests dripping with life. She heard the trees whisper in the wind and saw the translucent leaves proudly wave their vibrant greetings to the sun. She saw a chameleon fly across the dappled ground stopping abruptly to bob its head kindly. She struggled to find the words to describe these visceral wonders. Her thoughts whirled with sensations that were not crude in their elemental nature, but alive and instinctively thoughtful. As she began formulating theories and opinions about the world around her, the mirror emerged—a distraction—that whispered to her the language of her body. She opened her mouth to relay her experiences and articulate her hypotheses.

To her surprise, she spoke of dense wilderness, dangerous and brooding. She spoke of fertile land, waiting to be sewn. The words poured out of her mouth and circled around her neck, wrists, and ankles. She opened her eyes and saw glazed orbs peering back at her, that to all appearance seemed dead, except for a faint light that stirred ever so gently—like life underneath a frozen sea.

And yet, those eyes were hers as she peered gingerly into the mirror. Now she saw the gentle slope of her breasts that weren't quite high enough, the rounded girth of her hips that weren't quite narrow enough, and the soft curve of her inner thighs that weren't quite thin enough. She instinctively stepped away from the mirror with disgust, rebelling against the language of her body. And yet, the seeming rebellion was only a guise as she silently promised herself to eat less.

In order to recreate what the mirror whispered to her, she assembled a beautiful costume for her body. She searched through her closet frantically, maniacally, and whispered, “if only I had that belt—then my outfit would be complete.” As she searched through the jungle of fabric her eyes grew teary and her face burned with frustration. “Oh—there it is!” she exclaimed, and an immense relief swept through her. She donned her costume. She began with control-top panty hose that constricted

the plumpness of her thighs and the gentle curve of her abdomen. While the effect of the panty hose wouldn't visibly show through her skirt, the knowledge that her womanly figure was contained inside gave her a feeling of control. The mirror whispered its compliments. She then slipped into her high heels, which were terribly painful for her feet, but elongated her legs and she could swear they made her look thinner.

Confident in her attire, she leaned closer to the mirror and critically examined her plain face. She noted tiny blemishes here and there and contorted her face in disgust as if breathing in the stench of a dead animal. Leaning closer still, she subconsciously wrung her hands desperately as if struggling to rub away some awful impurity. With raw and shaky hands she habitually created her mask. Each stroke of blush and dab of foundation confidently cultivated the ideal of beauty that stood before her. She surveyed her face admirably and finished her creation by slowly twisting a tiny rectangular object. A striking magenta protuberance erected its proud head from the shiny tube. She brought the blasphemous red object close to her soft parted lips and rubbed it against them firmly.

She smiled with lips that suffocated under the pigment-altering chemical. She spoke with those lips. They spoke the language of the mirror. When she finished her creation, she looked in the mirror with confidence and her face glowed hauntingly, as if a benevolent but elusive figure held a torch before her.

TERRY HAYCOCK

Randy's Gardens

Litany

One of the gifts my husband offers our family is the annual creation of his gardens. The process begins in early February when catalogues arrive from Burpee and other seed houses. We take impatient turns looking at the colors and textures of flowers and vegetables. Like a child at the Passover Seder, Jessica asks the annual question, "What are we going to plant this year, Daddy?"

"What would you like, Jess?"

"Sunflowers and peas."

"We'll see, we'll see."

By the end of March it is time to prepare the earth. Lawn thatching begins. Sometimes Randy does this alone; often he employs men from the homeless community. (Little Pat is our favorite. A gifted, happy gardener, he sings to himself as he works.) The thatching rake, a mass of twisted metal on a stick, pulls out the dry brown winter grass from underneath new green blades. There is a metallic/organic sound as the men scrape and pull—a musical rhythm. As if by magic, our lawn is transformed into a spring-fresh, yellow-green carpet. *Scrape. Pull. Scrape. Pull.* I love these sounds for the prophecies they evoke.

We begin preparing the earth for the flower and vegetable gardens in late April. Randy is the architect, Jess and I the apprentices. This preparation is hard work. The cracked, clay-like winter shell must be broken and mixed with rich, brown soil and additives. Randy selects the ingredients for his recipe carefully, obtaining them from our favorite nursery in giant bags pregnant with possibilities. As we open them the contents burst forth, ready for infusion. I love the rich, loamy smell; this heavy, moist, earthy fragrance is full of promises fulfilled and those to come. Randy rakes his ingredients into the soil. *Chop, chop, chop. Blend. Back-and-forth, back-and-forth.* His face is carved with concentration and sheer pleasure; the sun transforms his auburn hair, graying with middle age, into a radiant silver halo of contentment. Jessica and I sniff the earth's perfume.

Invocation

We help with the late-May planting. Guided by Randy, we dig holes for the seeds and small plants, covering them carefully like mothers tenderly blanketing their

babies. This year there are cucumbers, tomatoes, peas, green beans, two kinds of lettuce, green, yellow and red peppers, basil, chives, oregano, and catnip. Twenty-five by six feet and bordered with wooden logs weathered from years of service, this garden is orderly. There are two rows of tomatoes planted on the south end, which receives the most sunlight. Then peas, beans, peppers, lettuces, and cucumbers. We plant herbs opposite the tomatoes in the shady, northern portion.

Randy instructs us once again. We are to water with a fine spray, gently sweeping over each section, so the seeds and earth are moistened, not saturated. The garden needs daily watering in the morning and evening. Since we all enjoy this task, we take turns. My favorite time is the early morning. It is an unusual treat in the spring and summer. I am nocturnal by nature, but there is something renewing about watering shortly after dawn. Peeping out from underneath my old straw garden hat, I see glimpses of golden sunlight through drifting gauze clouds. Chilled dew refreshes my feet as it penetrates between the straps of my sandals. Silence prevails except for the hum of an occasional car on the distant highway. My ears posture a brown study, listening for the mellow rap-tap-tap of the local woodpecker, the piccolo voices of sparrows, the harsh, ugly "CAW! CAW! CAW" of the crow. I hear the water gently sprinkling the earth; musky moisture graces my nostrils. A gentle breeze reverses the spray, sprinkling my face like a morning shower. As warm sunlight begins to cloak my shoulders, I listen more intently and hear my favorite soprano, the cardinal hiding in our lilac tree, singing his ancient mating song. The stopper has been removed from an exotic perfume bottle, spilling its contents onto the green velvet carpet.

I often marvel at these experiences in the early morning out-of-doors. We live in the city. I have always been a city girl, reveling in the close proximity to museums, art galleries, the opera house. But in the early morning when I offer life-giving water to the citizens of our garden, I am beyond my own preferences as I merge with something wonderful, natural, and ancient. These are the luscious moments of pure *being*, uncomplicated by conscious thought.

Retreat

The mornings I don't water I snatch one of my favorite mugs and step silently onto the deck. In the stillness, enveloping my mug with both hands, I sit at the glass-topped table under an unfurled umbrella, its bright pink, blue, and yellow floral family welcoming me to a new day, as do the friendly *Impatiens* that surround its stem. Somewhere inside my head I absorb the elixir of traffic purring in the distance, bird

choirs in morning voice, the freshness of dew-sprinkled grass, and the warmth of the sun, but I am not fully conscious of them. This is my time of private thinking.

The familiar aroma of coffee fills my nostrils as I plan my day, contemplate the lilacs, write in my journal, or mourn the loss of a baby rabbit snatched by the neighbor's cat. The wind chime I purchased on a trip to the Art Institute of Chicago—tiny piccolos suspended in air—hangs in the eaves, tinkling in the gentle breeze. A small fountain Randy gave me for Christmas bubbles in response. I look across the room at our conversation area furnished with chairs, tables, and pots of flowers with greens that cascade from atop glass shelving; it is designed for hospitality.

For in addition to being a place of contemplation, this outdoor room is also a gathering place for dining and entertaining. Tonight we are offering our friends the cold soup we make as a family project. Cucumbers from the garden, chicken broth, sour cream, garlic, onion, white vinegar, and a touch of white pepper are swirled into frosty, frothy creaminess through the magic of a food processor. We serve it in chilled summer crocks. Salads fashioned from other garden offerings are garnished by Randy's ginger dressing. As he grills chicken spiced with his own fresh basil, delicious steam rises, tickling and enticing our nostrils. Green beans steamed with sliced red peppers seem to dance in attendance. Hot, strong coffee and raspberry sherbert, cheese and chilled apples complete our culinary offerings. The CD player provides Mozart, Bolling, and the Beach Boys. These moments with old and new friends, good food, intimate conversation, mellow wine, and familiar music take us away from the concerns of our daily lives. Somehow, giving these gifts where there are no barriers—where the sky surrounds us and where walls do not exist—brings us closer to each other. As we share unguarded thoughts and ideas, we explore the world in a new way, experiencing a sense of wonder and a feeling of acceptance. We watch a diamond-studded sky replace the red-gold sunset; the air turns cooler, and mosquitoes nip our ankles. It is time to go inside.

Propitiation

The tulip tree was a focal point of the back yard. We lived in our house for ten years before we experienced its beauty. Guests would ask, "Why do they call it a tulip tree?" "We have never seen them, but the blossoms are supposed to look like tulips." One day I looked out the window over my kitchen sink and saw lovely four-inch tulip-shaped blossoms. Their velvety texture was tropical orange lined in satin sunshine yellow. A pleasant, slightly sweet perfume emanated from their bells.

When Randy removed the small, original deck, and built this new one for me, he was careful of this tree, whose branches hung over the railing. It always served us well, providing morning shade, a branch for the bird feeder, a place to tie clothesline for bathing suits and beach towels. But when it bloomed it was magnificent, sparkling with color and vitality. Strong softness. Graceful elegance. I remember serving lunch to my friend Waynoka under it while it bloomed that year. Our conversation kept coming back to the tree's beauty. A mural artist, Waynoka was transfixed by it. "I wish I had time to paint it. What a beauty! What a gift!"

Three years later it bloomed again, but the blossoms, while still offering their intense color, were smaller, their scent less vital. The next year it didn't bloom at all; it looked unhealthy. We consulted friends and gardeners, but no one could decide if it was diseased, or was not getting enough nutrients, or had been damaged by two difficult winters. We tried pruning, soil additives, and other methods to no avail. It died in spite of our efforts. When the tree surgeons removed its shell, we found that carpenter ants had ravished it from the inside out, sucking its life in greed, like avaricious pagan gods. When I close my eyes I can see the devastation.

I had never experienced the harshness of nature in such a personal way. That a plant could give so much joy and beauty was a wonder; that it could be destroyed so quickly by such tiny creatures remains beyond my comprehension. When I sit on the deck in the morning, looking at the place it called home—now an empty green grass plot—I feel its absence more than I felt its presence.

Offering

Below the deck on the north end of the house is the bird garden. Its outer edge curves in welcoming softness. The center offers a birdbath encircled by fuchsia, white, pink, and purple *Impatiens* reminiscent of Shakespeare's "daisies running riot." They are enveloped by a shiny, dark green ground cover called *Pachysandra*, which sports small, lacy white blossoms in the spring.

The noisy morning woodpecker, the brilliant red cardinal who nests in our lilac tree, numerous tiny sparrows, and an occasional regal blue jay all dip their beaks in the watering disk. Sometimes we converse, expressing appreciation and delight for the gifts we bring to each other.

Prelude

Of all Randy's creations, my favorite is the front flower garden. Our house sits back on the lot, a garage forming the smaller leg of an L. Flowers are planted between the garage and the walkway. In the center, a friendly round pond surrounded by flat

gray stones gurgles with delight from March through September. In the back of the garden, stately purple irises with yellow velvet centers join hot pink *Philodendrons* in welcoming spring guests, while the crabapple tree, heavy with fragrant pink blossoms, beckons from across the yard. In the summer, tall, regal, waxy, yellow and orange day lilies wafting sweet pungent perfume perform this pleasant duty.

A twenty-four-inch gray-white concrete statue of Our Lady guards the pond. Her figure is framed by an unpainted lattice—square at the bottom and round at the top—attached to the garage wall. Vivid purple-flowered *Clematis* vines climb its stairs. Spilling onto the sidewalk like tipped buckets of paint, pink, white, and fuchsia *Impatiens* pour out a friendly welcome. Throughout the summer Randy likes to experiment with this garden. He arranges and rearranges lacy white *Astilbe*, fragrant yellow *Alyssum*, and striking scarlet *Salvia*. I am never sure when I return home where I will find them.

His final touch is a large, mellow wind chime hung from the eaves over a black iron railing separating garden from porch. Eight pipes are tuned to a chant scale—Middle C to the C an octave above, with e-flat and b-flat. They offer rich mellow sounds followed by overtones that shimmer in the air and ear. Each time the clapper strikes the low sounds blend rapidly with these high overtones to create a self-composed symphony. Jessica and I like to ring these chimes whenever we pass them. Friends and visitors often remark on the pleasant combination of sound when water fountain and wind chime join each other in stereophonic welcome.

Our guest room overlooks this garden. It is our gift to those who visit us for extended periods of time. I like this room so much that I sometimes lie on the bed with my eyes closed, listening to the lilting chimes while breathing the fragrance of Randy's latest floral bouquet. I either fall asleep or feel inspired to do something creative. I hope our guests experience this same refreshment.

Meditation

This year we celebrate our twenty-third year of marriage and our sixteenth summer in this house. It is the longest time I have lived in any one place. It may be our last here, since Randy has resigned from the Episcopal parish he shepherds to explore other areas of ministry. The church owns the house, and it seems unlikely that we will be able to afford its purchase. I know that Randy has made the right decision; I celebrate his courage. But I love this house and his gardens. As I survey the beds newly prepared for next month's planting, I realize that we have infused within the soil, along with peat and other nutrients, hopes and dreams, tears and laughter,

disappointments and triumphs—the essence of who we have been during all these years. It hurts to think of leaving. I wonder, will the next steward tend these gardens lovingly? Or will they be ravaged brutally by time and vicious insects? Even as I anticipate this summer's offerings, I feel the simultaneity of presence and loss.

ALLISON HERBON

Peacoat

Lost inside its
navy blue arms,
two missing buttons,
where they landed...
I can only wonder.

I can smell the memories
in the thick wool,
trapped within the lining,
nested in the pockets,
are stories of times past:

The laughs and
tears weaved
inside of each
single thread.

The worn and torn
cuff that

The floppy long lapels

The crashing seas of Vietnam,
rolling green pastures
of Portugal, through the
the chilly nights of Spain.

A man lands on the moon,
while a young sailor dances
to the Stones, sharing a kiss
with his would-be wife.

brushed against their
clenched hands still,
lies ripped.

once beaded with sweat
from a nervous sailor grasping
a gold ring in his hand.

LOIS ANN DOWERS

Haiku VL

Rustling leaves crumble
Fine bones scattered on the walk
Snow and dusk melding

MICHAEL BOBBY

The Dismemberment Plan

Her eyes glanced over the book she was reading and saw Brian remove her expensive underwear beneath her skirt. She licked her finger and turned the page. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing." He tried to kiss her legs passionately, starting below her knees, his lips moving up slowly, slobbering. "Just want to help you concentrate."

Ellen Bonvallet never understood why Brian thought he could pass stupidity off as romance. When he lifted her left leg ninety degrees and kissed underneath the knee, she felt his awkward tongue circle her inner thigh. She laughed. It was not one of pleasure.

"You don't have to do this."

"But I want to."

"No, I mean, don't do this while I'm reading." He moved closer and pulled down her shirt, kissing her breast. "Brian, seriously. Stop."

"I'm just gonna suck on your toes for a while."

"Now you're insulting me."

"I'm serious." He grabbed her left foot. Each toe cringed.

"Stop!"

"All right!" He let go of her foot, and it scampered underneath the bed sheet. "Christ, I'm only messing around."

Her eyes dashed from her notebook to the textbook. "I'm not in the mood for sarcasm right now."

Brian mumbled something about frigidity killing their friendship.

Ellen looked up, pushing her glasses to her forehead. "Listen. It's important that I finish this." She went back to reading.

She put her underwear back on and took a sip of coffee. He sat at the edge of the bed, lit a cigarette, and sulked.

In the book there was a picture of a man looking slightly above the camera—*his face sunk into his shoulders, dimpled with soot and malaise. Behind him a flat land of devastated crops, a lobotomized life without color or sound, without any sense of happiness or sadness—only his communicating to dust, his bargaining for a volcanic*

squall in central Nebraska. Looking sublime with relaxed defeat, this farmer hurled a moment to the lens and shrugged indifferently with this immortal poise, unknowingly becoming art. Ellen finished writing and looked up, thinking and clicking her pen. *Implication. It needs implication.*

She shivered. "Have you ever noticed that in old photographs everyone looks so sad and determined? The children look like adults, and the adults look dead." She paged through the textbook. Brian was still sulking. He was vaguely paying attention, but she was talking more to herself than to him. "Even my family. The yellow pictures we've got of dead relatives—they look so, you know, miserable."

She was thinking of examples and only thought of her grandfather's funeral—his body dressed in a suit he would've never worn, his face was that of someone she never met. "Miserable, unrecognizable. Like they've been eating soap for a generation."

He was looking at her cashmere hat that she left on the dresser. He grabbed it, held it to his nose, and sniffed in the remnant odor of apple shampoo. "Probably were."

She looked up and her glasses fell to the tip of her nose. "You don't think they thought they were happy?"

"I don't think they thought it mattered."

"Really?"

He was whirling the cashmere hat in his finger. "You have to have time to realize if you're happy or not. Working too much without notions of self-help—goddamn, that's, you know. Back in the day living was worse than death. And without a lot of time for the activities we enjoy. You know: whining, whimpering. Our emotions, how we feel. Things got better."

"You're not making sense."

He put out the cigarette. "Why d'ja bring it up?"

The smoke made her squint. "Because I've got complicated aspirations." She returned her attention to the book. "Just wondering if I was going to, you know, look as antique as them years from now."

He stopped whirling the hat. "You don't make sense."

"I never said I wanted to."

Brian crept next to her and snuggled his chin between the crevices of her collarbone. Ellen nestled near him and flipped through the pages. He put her cashmere hat on her head; Ellen smiled, kissed his lips, and returned to her book.

She entered World War I. Mannequins with faces buried in mud or sleeping face up, almost serene. One-legged men hugging their hospital sheets, overanxious to die,

or wobbling through the open room too afraid to look at the camera. Under the reading lamp her silhouette was a forced Cubist scribble overlapping the glossy page.

"If you had the choice," Ellen said, "from an arm to a leg, if you could remove any body part, which one would you choose?"

"You're not proposing castration, are you?" he asked, lifting his head. He was going to laugh, but the stillness of her face made him tremble.

"No, I'm being serious. It's a serious question."

"It's a morbid question."

"Are you going to answer?"

He examined her face. "Ellie, you talking about your cousin?"

Her cousin had lost his right leg in a car accident four or five years ago when he lived in Oregon. During this time he had big ideas that he learned in college about social changes, political things. In short, he spent his better days as a hippie living outside Eugene, attempting self-exile with the passion of someone who believes he has the right ideas. Now her cousin sans leg is complacent and bored, believing all his misery has resulted from his reentrance into society. Now Pine Sol makes him sentimental for evergreens and the Pacific Northwest.

Ellen believed big ideas are a precursor to tragedy. Since the accident he's had a quiet life teaching American history at a high school in the affluent suburbs. Losing one's leg or teaching American history to apathetic students—Ellen has been weighing the results and could not conclude what was the more tragic fate.

But she wasn't thinking of him. Brian saw that in her face. "I don't know. Probably my right hand." Playing the game, "What about you? I could see you pulling a Van Gogh." He tugged at her right ear.

"No." She wiped his hand from her ear. "But I respect his conviction."

Ellen stopped reading altogether. All she saw were fragments of people's lives and deaths, fitting quietly in photographs and white paper. Dresden. Men in summer coats buried in the snow outside Leningrad. The liberation of Paris. The Cold War. Scorched bras and scorched draft cards. She realized she was living an uninteresting life in an uninteresting time. There would be few photographs to explain anything.

Brian was paging through a magazine. "You okay, Ellie?"

Ellen sat, motionless. "I don't know."

"Is that book depressing you or something?"

She shook her head and faked a smile. "No."

He put away the magazine. "Really. What's the matter now?"

Cropped bodies stared at her with insipid eyes: the children were middle-aged, their discontent suffocating their dead parents. "I don't know. If I did, I wouldn't know how to fix it."

There was a silence between them that Brian misinterpreted. Ellen flinched slightly when Brian stripped away her underwear again.

Among the photographs, Ernest Hemingway on crutches, gloating in Italy.

Ellen put out her cigarette on the bedpost. Its small fog lingered, standstill in the air, waiting for direction, and then disappeared in a stream. This stream would settle in the wallpaper, the bed sheets, the woodwork—a quick mixture of this stale tobacco with maybe a wilting bouquet of lilacs on the dresser, and the room would smell like her grandmother's house.

She misplaced the last two hours in that fog. The only thing she had to show for it was a poorly drawn sketch of a man pulling clocks out of his head. "This is a college education," she said aloud.

Since Ellen left for college her scenery has been this bedroom, that bedroom, his bedroom, a bar, a coffee shop, a classroom—her never wholly existing, never having an appropriate thing to say. She had few friends but still was somewhat happier than most people, she thought. The truly happy are lying anyway.

Still Ellen watched the stride she had when she was younger become a drowsy waltz. She was only waiting in what direction or the wrong one, moving without method and sequence, and sometimes, not moving.

In the mirror across her bed she could see the image of herself dim with the intimacy of a waterdrop. Her dark hair frazzled over the face that began to blush. Her eyes were obsidians, leaving a circular trail of ash and mascara above her cheeks. Today Ellen overapplied her make-up; her face was glossy, almost dripping off her skull in pink streaks. She looked like a moonstruck prostitute returning home, her feet dragging oblivion behind.

She smiled.

Her expensive underwear, her imperfect legs, bruised knees. Even in the mirror she could see her nine toes fold and unfold, the stump of her tenth fluttering without its head.

When she was a girl it became frostbitten. The doctors removed it and perhaps as a joke showed her the prismatic remnant of the former toe that turned into a raisin. Her brother would also joke badly that it looked happy as it left her body. Or say that

setting it free was Ellen's first act of bravery. But the jokes stopped after her cousin's accident.

She only wished that they had allowed her to keep the toe in a small box with gauze and ketchup. She would have opened the box to houseguests and asked them to judge the quality of this opal chipped with prepubescent nail polish. Every Halloween she thinks of this and sighs.

Regardless, the toe was another of Ellen's big secrets, and it astonished her that few people noticed its absence. Perhaps it wasn't a noticeable loss. Even for her it is a scar on which she rarely reflects.

Ellen saw herself yawn in the mirror and thought she looked like her mother. She always looked like her mother when yawning. She turned off the light and lay in bed, curling the sheets between her thighs. When she scratched the left thigh, its protruding dark hairs scratched her.

A pause.

Something heavy struck her chest. She felt lightheaded as if the blood was accumulating in regions she never used before.

Her breathing intensified. The word repeated on her lips, exiting with each breath: Implication.

Ellen turned on the light and sprung out of bed. Rummaging in her drawers, she found pantyhose, underwear, and a long discarded wire her roommate used for an art project. She grabbed the wire, feverishly wrapped the left leg until skin ballooned around the wire's edge, and pulled. She raised the immobilized leg upright, pulling tighter on the wire, hoping any remaining blood would sink into her torso. She felt her veins folding over themselves, knotting themselves. A path trickled from her bit bottom lip to her chin. The shaking of her arms, the numbness of her left thigh—she thought she was going to pass out.

The leg was discoloring. Her balloon skin crimsoned then blued. It would not die. She lost her grip and regained it—her eyes glancing to the clock. *Two minutes. It's only been two minutes.*

She could not finish. Its desire to live overpowered her tourniquet, and she let go, sweating. The wire dangled to floor. Blood pried its way back through its veins, sloshing the leg with its momentum. It choked and gasped. Ellen saw the pink plush washing the leg new. Her body dropped involuntarily on the bed, and she stared at the ceiling, wiping the sweat from her face, catching her breath. Between breaths she caught herself in the mirror again; hair covered her tilted head—her eyes peering

beneath two strands, the slight smile widening. She said aloud, "A boast at the butcher's blunder."

And then the smile disappeared. Ellen Bonvallet sat up on the edge of the bed, defeated, reflecting on where she went wrong, why she could not snuff out its existence. She sat on the edge of the bed, numb, clasping her hands, letting the leg breathe again. This abrupt, concealed passion terrified her.

She justified it in every way, knowing that it would be a natural transition in her life. Perhaps a slight overstep.

The entire leg was disproportionate to her small body. It was someone else's leg, a man's leg. The missing toe, the hair that seemed to grow faster there than on any other portion of her body—Ellen wished the frostbite had taken this leg as well. Of course there were more motives than its physical monstrosity. Ellen was not shallow. These were selfless motives driving her.

She knew the leg had overstayed its welcome. It didn't belong to her.

And it had to go.

Ellen made a promise to herself to finally delete the leg before the next year, and afterward she could live again as she was meant to live. Happiness has a price like anything else.

It would be an intolerable winter. Already each passing car coiled an oil harbor in the white snow until it looked malicious and permanent tacked to the side of the street. Tonight was warmer than the previous three. So the neighbors were outside again, getting drunk on cabernet. From time to time they would wander to the side of Ellen's house and piss on the bushes, stumble back to the party and talk loudly.

Ellen was home again—still intact.

She stood beneath the yellow light of her front porch, watching the snow cumulate and waiting for her cousin to join her.

Her shadow cast over the bushes. They cleaved her shadow in half, sent it spiraling over her mother's Christmas figurines and into the snow.

Her cousin opened the front door, and she awoke. "Where's your hat?"

"My hat?" She knew what he was talking about, but she continued to ask questions. "The cashmere hat?"

"Yeah, the one grandma got you for your birthday." He lit a cigarette and she followed.

Exhaling, "I lost it before I took the train home."

"Sorry to hear that."

He limped to the top step, sat down, and she followed. She said, "It's okay. I didn't ask for it anyway. I'm actually kind of embarrassed I still had it. It was just too expensive."

He snorted. "Even smelled expensive. She had to've sold off a maid to buy it."

"Well, I would've gotten rid of it if I knew I'd become attached to it as easily as I did. But when you've got something that long you don't recognize yourself without it. It made me feel strangely secure." Ellen smiled faintly. It was as if she had crimped all her memories in its lining, and now that it's gone she felt that she had left five years of her life somewhere at a train station. Though she didn't want to say that. "Honestly I wish there were more sentimental value to the hat than just how it made me feel. And I wish it left me with more drama." She held her braided hair in two hands. "Now my head feels lonely."

"I would like to have seen you wearing it in Vancouver with me."

"Vancouver?" she asked, perplexed. "What about Vancouver?"

His voice cracked. "What about Vancouver?" What you—are you? You mean you don't want to go now?"

"Oh! You're talking about—yeah, sure. Sure, I'll go. If that's still the plan."

"Course, it's the plan. If I say I'm doing it, I'm gonna do it. What's the point of getting yourself all worked up about it and not have it happen? *We are* going, Ellen. You can't fight it."

She laughed and exhaled a ring of smoke. "Kinda like destiny, huh?"

"It's better than destiny. It's Vancouver." He looked at her as if she had a deformity. "Christ, Ellen. Show some enthusiasm. For once in your life stop being so dispassionate."

"Hm." She changed the subject quickly before his rant. "Speaking of enthusiasm—"

"Yeah?"

"How's the, you know, 'revolution' going for you?" She laughed.

"Slowly but at pace. I figure in ten years we'll have the government at its knees." He snorted. "You know better, Ellen. I've changed since the last time you seen me. Quit all that shit since I left school." He smiled. "Besides I was only militant because I wasn't getting laid." He smoked his cigarette and smiled wider. "You can't revolt without a movement or without motivations. There was no movement and little motivation."

Ellen lay back on the snowy step and was silent.

While they smoked on her front porch, Ellen listened to her neighbors describe upholstery in excruciating detail. Explain their motives for choosing this storage unit. Why the bookcase with the glass doors added new dimension to the house. The dullness in their low voices as if confessing dark secrets echoed like the pitch and scream of bugs caught in the blue neon light zap. Ellen imagined similar discussions between her neighbors carried indoors with explicit descriptions of sitcoms and commercials—the TV merely feet away, fast food on the dinner table.

She imagined that there were millions of people simultaneously talking of new upholstery and television commercials, or buying Christmas figurines because they would be cute in the front lawn. This thought kept her awake at night. She didn't want this atrocity to follow her everywhere, but she was lacking big ideas. In the meantime, her desire to leave became a lazy response to her problems.

And maybe Ellen was actually jealous. Maybe she secretly desired to be part of that world that falls asleep earlier and grooms their pets with stupid haircuts and loves their husbands unconvincingly and has 11:30 luncheons, orders salads and ice tea, wears loud solids or pastels. Maybe she really wanted to spread her life out in an armoire, color-coordinated with the faux wood trim.

Ellen hoped she was wrong.

She smacked her cousin on the shoulder. "So, really, how've you been doing?"
"Hm?"

"How-have-you-been? Christ, I haven't seen you in a long time, and I can't believe the only thing you wanted to know was: 'where's your hat?' I implore—"

He laughed. "You're imploring?"

"Yes, I'm *imploring* you to have a real conversation with me. I haven't had one since you've been gone."

"Do you really want to know?"

"I didn't ask to be nice. Now: converse."

Her cousin shifted his leg. "Well, a kid came into the hospital the other day with a gunshot wound to his head. Self-inflicted, you know. Dead before they could do anything. Doctors probably stood bedside with their hands keeping the top of his head from falling off onto the floor. Thing was: he was alive after he shot himself. Probably for a few minutes, anyway: paralyzed, choking on his blood. This—this is the thing—I can't get this out of my mind. How many thoughts would rush through your head in that time? And I wonder of what." He took a drag on his cigarette, "Other than that unfortunate news I'm doing okay, I guess."

In the silence he smoked his cigarette and looked at the oil harbor coiled in the snow tacked to the street. Ellen cleared her throat. "I'm assuming you knew him."

"No, I didn't know him. But he was a student of mine." He scratched his head. "Spoiled children." Then put out his cigarette without looking at her.

"I don't think I understand anything anymore."

The dream woke her to Vancouver, 4 a.m. Nearly a year from the porch and into an ammonia-drenched hotel—Ellen thought it was America. The sun rising hued the room blue-violet, and she could hear a light rain. Since they arrived four days ago, the Bonvallets realized Vancouver always had a light rain. Unlike Illinois, where the rain Ellen experiences every May is crueler than gravity, Vancouver's rain was a familiar tug on a trespasser's sleeve, an unmusical whispering to someone she could not hear.

The TV was at the foot of the bed. The rest of the room hadn't come into focus yet. Her flailing arm scrambled for the remote control, and turning it on, she settled for the news then cartoons. Tom was chasing Jerry with a fireman's ax or vice versa. Ellen was vaguely paying attention.

She remembered when she was a girl and "bedridden" from losing her toe, she would watch Raggedy Ann in the morning, sipping on apple juice. Her sleep-dazed mother would cook her a small breakfast (she would yawn and Ellen would look like her) and never mention how she was glad Ellen had survived the frostbite. Ellen knew her mother would always feel partially responsible, even though it was nobody's fault.

There was an outline of light around the bathroom door. Her cousin's bed was made.

Ellen stepped out of bed and instantly had trouble with her balance; the left leg hurt from her sleeping on it all night. Heading to the bathroom, she dragged the leg as if it were a marble statue. Standing outside she heard the faint sound of a waterfall.

She slipped between the crack of the door.

The white lights above the mirror blinded Ellen as she entered. The bathroom was small with hospital white walls, and there was barely room enough for two. Green tile lined the floor—a plush white rug in front of the sink from which the toilet is adjacent, the white bathtub paralleling, and the starch towels. A yellow bag of disposable razors they bought yesterday for him was on the sink, a Ziplock bag of cut hair upright against the faucet.

Her cousin hovered over the bathtub in his briefs, running the bath water. His newly shaved head gleamed in the white light. Two red gashes scabbed above the

nape of his neck. His back was turned, straining, his hand cupping the water to his mouth. Its coldness sent a shiver down his spine.

His leg was pale, grotesque, stringy. The stump of his right leg was glazed chalk. Its bald etching surrounded a crisscross hatch of hair. It moved on its own ambition—the prosthetic shell on the toilet seat behind him, Ellen just three feet away.

Holding the towel rack, he strained and shuffled his body to the left and saw Ellen in the corner of his eye. His body shifted around like a closing door. Her cousin looked as if he had witnessed a massacre: his face was pliable, and her perplexed, silent gawk was folding it in half over and again. She saw the soap frothing from his tired lips.

The babble of the running water. Cartoon characters were killing each other in the bedroom. The smell of ammonia and methane gas.

Mechanically adjusting his joints while positioning his weight against the bar, his incomplete frame twisted uncontrollably, grinding against its shell container: torque and gravity, physics and mathematics working for and against him, cuddling him, convulsing him as if he were a mess of limbs stretched, outstretched, retracted, and stretched. He rested on the toilet seat. He grabbed his prosthetic leg as if it were a porcelain doll and set it against the bathtub. His eyes fixated on the hospital white wall, the thick shell-like paint. His hands folded, stately.

In a trance, Ellen disrupted the still life by sitting on the edge of the bathtub. She stared forward, stoic. She couldn't see him anymore; he was a linen cloth, a soiled towel overlaying the toilet.

This is how people disappear.

In a hotel mint-scented fog, they become embedded forever in a backdrop, the framework of a bathroom and pleated into its naked plumbing. There was no distinction between scenery and them anymore: it happened to the man in the photograph, the one-legged men waiting to die in the hospital; Brian and her cousin suffered the same.

They reached a stalemate. They communicated the same untranslatable language through every pore in the passing silence, creating a new rhetoric between them. This foreign vocabulary had unhinged her, murmuring, twining the cartoons and the water into one sound.

She clasped her hands between her thighs and thought of her obsession with the left leg so perfect with its imperfection that she had once tried to strangle it to death. She wrung her hands against the softness of her thighs, and then sat still, and smiled and breathed calmly, until there was only the air leaving and entering her lungs and the bath water flooding the floor.

JOHN GARCIA

Afterwards

sometimes
it's the butterfly's passing
that causes
the opening of the eyes
the unclenching of the jaw
and of the fist

sometimes
the beautiful forces sight upon us
sometimes
it has to be that way

VALERIE MANOS

Ingredients: Peas, Green 132

She's old enough to go to Condell now. As a minor, Annie always had to go to St. Terese during one of her manic downswings.

Thanksgiving at St. Terese was like cafeteria food. The plastic off-white trays with impressions for a main course, two side dishes, a drink (with the circle indented a bit further into the mold), and a dessert. Peas. Peas so green they can't be natural. Ingredients: Peas, Green 132. Mashed potatoes. The powdered kind. At home we always had fresh. The pieces of turkey were always equally the same thickness and shape. And that brown gravy that was the consistency and color of wood glue. Tasted like it too. Annie looked nervous as her dark, short hair sat flat against her head. Her normally dark Grecian skin, the color of kalmata olives was wan and green like green olives with bruises on it where the dark circles of insomnia enveloped her eyes. Her eyes, I don't really know what they looked like. I know they were brown, not brown like the wood glue gravy St. Terese served, but like homemade, with the real drippings of the roast with pinch spices and a bit of flour for thickness. But I never really saw them. She never looked at me. Her eyes never met mine. I looked and she was a statue, a picture, in image on a movie screen that talked at you, but not to you.

"We're getting' real food this week . . . Hamburgers, I think, from somewhere . . . I think they're ordering out," said Annie. Mom smiled her everything's-okay-smile.

We sat in the St. Terese cafeteria on school lunchroom-like benches. I didn't think. Void and empty and absent. I am sitting at home watching TV. I am sitting in my closet hiding. I am under the bathroom sink among the Drano and old bottles of half-used hairspray and mousse and shampoo and old cups with the crusty layer of old chocolate milk on the bottom. I am not thinking about Annie. I am not thinking about me. I am not thinking about my not-thinking dad. Where's dad? I am at St. Terese with my sister and mom and brother. We are here, but only Annie is here but she's not with us. We are not with each other. They are not with me. Where am I? I am at St. Terese eating my Thanksgiving dinner. Processed and plastic and peas. Fake green peas. The kind that are shriveled and don't have much of the mushy white inside. So small and plain you don't even taste or think about them. The kind that are frozen and thawed and thrown in hot water to cook. Then frozen. Then thawed. Then thrown in hot water.

My eyes. Mine are green. Like the peas. Ingredients: Peas, Green 132. Hers are not. I think they're brown, but I don't remember. Dad's are brown too. Where is he? Perfect, processed turkey, always the same shape and color. There's order in cafeteria food. Same veiny knot in every piece. Green 132.

From the top of the stairs you could see all the shoes at the door. Five people with at least one pair by the front door. Dad always straightened them before he went to bed. There had to be

No more than two rows.

Five pairs in a row.

One inch from the wall

Half an inch of space between pairs.

~~The remaining shoes were marked for trash.¹~~

(Oops)

The shoes are messy now. One of Mom's heels with Rick's soccer cleats. Annie's army boot and my patent leather Mary Janes. They don't match.

Shadow is new and exciting. Growing black ball of energy, she's just as a Labrador retriever should be. She's not my new dog; she's Annie's. Where is Annie? She's gone again. Condell now, she's old enough to be sick with the adults. She graduated from St. Terese to Condell on July 26, 1992, but she wasn't there then. She is there with the adults, I am here alone. Invisible. Where am I? I am in the workroom. I am in the tree. I am not with her. She is there and I am here.

Annie misses Shadow. Shadow's just a baby; she couldn't go to Condell, but maybe St. Terese. Annie can't go to St. Terese anymore.

¹. He began organizing the shoes by separating all of them into pairs owned by each person. Then, he would make two rows (one inch from the wall, half an inch between pairs) out of the shoes, only allowing two pairs each person's shoes to fit into the rows. Any shoes not used in the two rows were put aside to be picked up by the owner or thrown away.

Who is this man, this dad? Why does he show up to make order out of disorder? The shoes, like my words, are in their two neat little rows, perfectly spaced, but what about Annie? Is she perfectly and methodically put together or is she perfectly, methodically destroyed? The shoes are evenly placed in rows, so the family is in tact? But what about Annie? Where is she? Where did dad go? Did he take the order with him? Where am I? And what am I writing? Shouldn't I know? Perfect lines formally and logically expressing the illogical breakdown and confusion.

I am in the tree. I am on the porch. I am behind the dirt mound. Mom took Shadow and me in the car after she returned from visiting Annie at Condell. Her black Saab, a tank of safety drew us around to the back of the building where Annie was staying. The windows of the hospital's craft room faced the trees in back. The windows could be opened just far enough for Annie to squeeze one of her green olive arms through as we arrived.

I cradle Shadow in my arms and walk towards the building as my mom told me to. Standing on the grates under the window, I hold Shadow out so Annie's green olive arm could touch her smooth, hard jet-black coat. Wagging her tail and licking her hand wildly, Shadow bobs her head in satisfaction of seeing her friend. Annie smiles on the other side of the window as the dog licks and licks the salt off of her hand. The sun is bright and I can see the reflection of the trees behind me in the window and the inside of the craft room at the same time.

I see Annie standing in the reflection of the trees smiling. I see Annie standing in the adult craft room of Condell (since she was born July 26, 1974) with her arm sticking out the window petting her dog. And I see her still, straining to put her other arm out the window to hold her face and pet her dog her friend her shadow.

Peculiar, peculiar as Annie stands in the craft room of a hospital and in the trees again, the sun reflects off of the glass in front of her eyes so I can't see them. I can't see her eyes because the sun is too bright and concentrated in that one spot. She won't see mine.

Peculiar, peculiar, the shifting images of her surroundings. I see her in the trees. I see her in the craft room. Where am I? I am listening to a fight. I am in the trees. I am under the desk in the den. I am not with Annie. Annie is not with me. Where is Annie? In the trees- no, in the craft room. In the craft room-no, in the trees.

Shadow licks and Annie smiles; I stand with puke green peas for eyes (Ingredients: Peas, Green 132) and the sun reflects off the window between us. Where am I? I am under my bed. I am hiding behind the TV. I am in a suitcase. I am not with anyone. Where is Annie?

I see her in the craft room, I see her in the trees. I see her in the craft room. I see her in the trees. I see her in the craft room, I see her in the trees.

EMILY MYERS

20/20

I view bodies of water
in terms of height
instead of depth because
my father is an alcoholic fisherman

JEFF WARD

Encounters with Stallia

I saw fall from his lips a script of impressive sacrilege.

Eat me.

But I wasn't fazed. There was no element of surprise because I'd heard it before. From this very angle, times before I'd searched his steely face for the hint of some prophetic riddle. But all he gave me now was his violence. A hundred offenses he threw my way, each desiring no more, perhaps, than a reaction and some tension. I knew this, so I kept my wits and settled in.

He flashed his inky teeth of insult, over and over again.
He blasphemed my faith.
Launched aspersions at my mother.

Still I held my ground. I called out his name, I called him Poet, hoping our familiarity would drain his power. Able voyeur to his thoughts, I would not allow him to jolt me. After a moment of fluorescent silence, he made the admission.

I was here.

Then with unforeseen clarity he remembered the day.

9/27/99.

"It's been a while," I continued, curious to know the things he'd seen. "What secrets do you hold?" But the weight of his knowledge was too much. He could not speak, only explode:

22 Boyz Killaz.

Watch your back!

He resorted instinctually to deep themes of brutality in order to shake my confidence. He ranted on.

Spill the blood of 3G Thugs.

But violence spawned uncertainty.

Thugz.

Thugs.

He was weary and mad, manic and desperate.

Thugz, thugs, thugz.

He played with his affectation like one uneasy and unsure—unsure how to impress. Each brief moment of frail certainty was effaced by a doubt, leaving only the Star of David scrawled on his chest to provide constancy. All this graffiti menaced me, and my composure began to waver. But I sensed a lull in the fervor, so I held my tongue and hoped his angry pitch would soon transform to tunes of wisdom.

We rested.

He rested, I waited.

Suddenly, he sprouted feet, smooth wing-tips blanketed with jet black woolen hems. I feared he would leave me in this state—lost and ruffled and without relief. But these feet could not carry him away. They marched on with purpose—heels on tile, swinging hinges, fading echoes in the hall, then only the silent whir of an airshaft—leaving us alone.

Perhaps it was the sense of loss and dispossession that altered my adversary's mood. For a shy moment he tucked away his artillery and summoned a sweeter muse. He spoke of youth and time passing and homesteads, limericks of old men and New England origins too sweet to paraphrase.

There once was a man from...

And then of love. I saw her name, her memory scratched in a tear, his unsettled love for KP jagged like a pocketknife to his heart. Vestiges of DL and lovers of dimmer days had been smudged away, victims in a chain of rubscratchlove. Now he loved KP. He hearted KP. He loved her and hearted her and I felt relieved. This was a softer voice. My resting elbows left deep rosy impressions on my knees as I was lulled into passivity by his poignant tales of romance.

This is where I faltered. I let down my defenses and, like a bully overcompensating for an unintentional show of tenderness, he attacked with fervor, aiming to dispel my last inkling of clarity.

He let loose an arsenal of derogation with indiscriminate aim.
He questioned the virtues of women he'd claimed to love.
He cast laughter at the gods and stamped his brow with 666.

He hated.
Changed his mind.
Hated again.

*Eminem rules sucks.
You suck.*

Eddie V. likes to suck...

But I stopped him with a wave of my palm. I had heard too much, wrangled with too many fresh unknowns to consider revelations about a man I did not know. He called Mr. Wheeler an S.O.B. and I felt sympathies for a tarnished heritage. He charged me a bastard and, with my origins threatened, I stood to leave. I could not keep pace. This was his contest with himself, so I too gathered up my feet, left the stall, and let him be. Flushing water. Heels on tile. Fading echoes. I fled the stories behind the door, the lives that scratched themselves beneath his skin. I'd peeked into a diary of primal impulses, read the guestbook of the dispossessed, and it frightened me.

JOHN BRADLEY

The Institute of Nuclear Poetics

Before I was an institute, I grew tomatoes behind the garage.
Now I grow tomatoes and deduct all the expenses.

I share an office to help pay the rent. When the phone rings
I hear Dr. Strangelove on the calliope playing "Oh When the Saints."

A client from Sierra Blanca calls for a haiku to keep away
a nuclear waste storage facility. We laugh a low-level laugh.

When there's a lull, I read Kenneth Rexroth love poems
to the philodendron. The sandwich on my desk eavesdrops.

With each line I write, I pull the world back a little
from the edge. No wonder I sit and stare out the window.

The city owns my trees; I own the leaves. Is a maple ever homeless
no matter how far from Utica, or Omaha, or Cassiopeia?

I open the window and release another fool fly from captivity.
Has your hand ever tingled awake while you were asleep?

It's the silt of the century's confusion that collects, daily, nightly
on the windowsill. Some of it, too much of it, mine.

JOHN BRADLEY

The Uses of Poetry

In Memory of Muriel Rukeyser

1.

Their granary
bucking back and forth
on the clothesline,

sparrows, made
reckless by the winter
wind, dodge and spin.

2.

Break it, break the snow's
cold curve smothering
the seed, and the seed

will melt one day
back into song, song back
into birds, birds back into seed.

3.

This morning, Muriel,
after writing these words,
I threw myself into the embrace

of subzero winds once more,
breaking free the seed
a poem broke loose in me.

IAN STANSEL

Strings

*The idea, for example, that each particular erases
the luminous clarity of a general idea.*

—Robert Hass

When I was five my neighbor Peter told me how babies were made. He was two years older than me and I was inclined to believe him. A few weeks before he had called me a “turd,” a word I had never heard before. When he told me what it meant, I was shocked not only that he knew this scandalous syllable, but that he would use it so casually. He knew a lot more than I did, I thought.

On this particular day, though, I was walking down our street while he rode his bike in circles around me. We were headed to the train tracks to flatten pennies.

“Do you know how babies are made?” he asked.

“Yeah,” I lied.

“How?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you want to know?”

“I don’t care,” I said

“Well, I’ll tell you if you want to know,” he said, circling me, taunting my ignorance, “but you might be too young.”

“I’m not too young,” I protested.

He stopped peddling and walked beside me awkwardly, his legs still on either side of the bike’s frame. He was a weird kid, Peter, with his yellow-green eyes and the faint smell of strange food always emanating from his person. His mother had a thick Polish accent and was in an ongoing battle with her son’s tantrums and hyperactivity. Peter had an air of harmless evil about him.

“Okay, but you can’t tell anybody I told you,” he said.

“Fine,” I said, a bit annoyed at his condescending tone.

“Okay, see, girls don’t have wieners,”

“I know that,” I responded quickly. Everyone knew that.

“Well, they make babies when a boy puts his wiener into the hole that the girl’s got, and then pees,” he said, and then began to laugh his breaking glass laugh.

Pee? I thought. It was the most repulsive thing I had ever heard. My pace slowed to a simmer as he rode ahead laughing and yelling “Pee!” I could not enjoy the normally rapturous act of putting pennies on the tracks and watching the train smush them (So long, Abe!) into an unrecognizable new form that afternoon. But aside from the sheer nastiness of what he had said and the unavoidable mental picture his words created in my young mind, I was troubled by a much greater thought: How could this thing that I did every day in the toilet, and occasionally in my pants, result in an actual baby?

Despite his mixed-up facts and his obsession with bodily functions, extreme even for a seven-year-old boy, my neighbor’s words stuck.

Things I know:

Frank Lloyd Wright’s “Falling Water” is flawed in its design and is now crumbling at its foundation. A shooting star is actually a simple solid body burning in the uppermost part of our atmosphere. Edgar Allan Poe uses no less than forty adjectives in the opening paragraph of “The Fall of the House of Usher” in order to achieve that eerie, nightmarish mood. It was actually my parents who traded quarters for the teeth under my pillow.

In my late teenage years I became obsessed with films. Walking or riding my skateboard, I would go to the video store and rent up to six or eight movies a week. I began by watching the usual Hollywood fare, but when I got bored with that I began renting or going to see films of which I had never heard. I at first did this somewhat blindly, simply going by the poster outside the theater, or by the picture on the cover of the video box, but I soon got to know directors, actors, cinematographers and production companies. I would eagerly await the new releases by Hal Hartley or Whit Stillman, or even Edward Burns. I read magazines such as *Premiere*, *Film Review*, and *Movie Line* to find out who was to be the next great indie *auteur*. Some of the films I saw were bad, most were good, and a few were simply amazing. There was nothing so wonderful as a good movie.

When my friend Anthony enrolled in the film school at Columbia College in Chicago, and needed help with his first project, I enthusiastically offered my assistance. This is what I wanted to do, make movies. I myself did not go to film school, and did not particularly want to—many of them seem like trade schools rather

than places of education—but that did not stop me from writing scripts (mostly short ones) and almost constantly coming up with stories and scenarios by myself and with friends. Most ideas were silly things we would never actually do, such as a mock German art film about a man in a black turtleneck who cannot reach a burnt out light bulb without assistance to be called “Das Boost”; or a spoof of “The Shining” called “The Whining” where three young people must stay in a hotel for an afternoon and one is driven mad by the constant New Age music played over the P.A.. Ridiculous stuff.

Anthony’s project was a typical first year assignment: a two- to three-minute silent black and white piece shot on a 16mm Bolex camera. Our friend John would be the one and only actor. The story: a man builds a box out of wood. That’s it. *Brilliant*, we thought. *Fantastic. Revolutionary.* We show him going through the process of building the thing: measuring, sawing, planing, nailing. The process *is* the story. *Fucking brilliant.*

We were shooting in our friend Brett’s backyard. Brett would work the camera, Anthony’s classmate Idris would act as a sort of line producer, keeping the shot log, checking the lights. My job was a bit ambiguous, but I didn’t care; I just wanted to help make a movie. We arranged the workbench and sawhorses that constituted the set and loaded the film.

At one point, still early in the day, Anthony wanted an extreme low angle shot of John sawing a piece of wood, so that the saw was coming straight at the lens of the Bolex, but Brett was having a hard time getting that low and still seeing through the eyepiece.

“You know what Orson Wells would do?” Anthony asked rhetorically, “He’d dig a ditch.”

“And then go get drunk,” Idris chimed in.

We laughed and were happy that we could laugh because we were in the know. It was autumn and cold and we drank coffee and smoked cigarettes like we were supposed to. We were exhilarated that morning when we arrived; we shouted ideas back and forth, making suggestions—*what if we placed the camera here? get a close-up of this thing. no, a profile shot would look cooler*—but as the afternoon progressed my excitement waned and I became more and more silent. I watched Brett fiddle with the camera, and I saw Anthony and Idris trying to figure out how much film they had and how much they needed, and there was John smoking cigarettes between takes. I wanted to go home. The whole day I found myself saying *So that’s how they do it*, but I realized I did not want to know. It was depressing to me to watch a film, something

wonderful, being broken down into so many logistical obstacles. We ran out of film just as we were getting the last shot and that afternoon was the end of my plans to be a filmmaker.

Things I don't know or am unsure of:

The exact combination of colors Mark Rothko used to create his piece "Earth and Green, 1955." How the steering mechanism on a helicopter works. The mathematical equation for gravity. How that magician made the Statue of Liberty disappear a couple of years ago. How our knowledge of a thing affects the way we view that thing. CPR.

A short play I wrote was produced on stage last year. A part of a playwriting class I was taking, it was my first real experience in the theatre. I had never even been very interested in plays and playwriting before, but I wanted an outlet for writing and it fit well with my schedule. The first day of class, I realized that, aside from one other English major (who had experience with plays already), I was the only non-Theatre student. I was the novice.

Producing the play was incredible, unlike anything I had ever done before. I would discuss blocking with the director, go over lines with the cast, rehearsals, dress rehearsal, and then the day when my words were acted out in front of me and a small but kind audience. But I still didn't understand why I loved the experience so much. Yes, I was happy with how the play turned out and that it seemed to get a decent response. But that wasn't it, not completely.

In the playwright's notes of Tony Kushner's Pulitzer Prize winning play *Angels in America*, he states: "The moments of magic...are to be fully realized, as bits of wonderful *theatrical* illusion—which means it's OK if the wires show, and maybe it's good that they do, but the magic should at the same time be thoroughly amazing."

Reading this, I thought to myself, *That's it*, thank God someone finally explained it. This play, Kushner's masterpiece, takes away all of the mystery of "how it works." Everything is right there to see, all the questions answered, all the tricks revealed. The smoke and mirrors are gone and yet it is still....

You walk into a large room—it is a theater now, but could be anything, anywhere. The backs of the seats move down a slight slope and end at the stage. To the rear is the booth where they work the lights and sound during a production. Moving forward, the lights that hang over the stage and first few rows become fully visible and,

continuing up three or four steps, you are now on stage. High above are catwalks and pulleys and ropes. You notice there is a harness around you and you are lifted above the stage. Pulleys turn as you ascend. You are not a bird or an angel, but yourself, suspended by ropes. The entire room is visible from here, all the intricacies and mechanics, all of the organs, and it isn't frightening or sad. Lowered back down to the stage floor, you stand, mouth slightly ajar, ready for your cue.

MATT DUNCAN

Dance

Where dragonflies stand sentinel—
neon filaments poised

on spindly matchstick legs,
stretched lace black wings snapped

shut
before the leap from leaf
to twig—

I would
stomp and dance, electric
blue sparks shaken from my hair

Rip black rags from sun-split skin,

spin
until the trees glow
iridescent, sparkle gold and green like

strobelight or mirrorball,
dragonfly's eye
or neon filament—

whirling, tangled
in trees, sheering leaves

the force of autumn in my arms

leaves
us naked

spindly black limbs and fingers

branches laced twigs

stretching

in a cage

to grip the sky

MATT DUNCAN

Geisha (Penetration)

in the purgatory hour
between three and four
when (the dusk before dawn
 is spawned
 by the sun's subtle soak
and)
night's celebration has faded to smoke
and echoing, broken chords

after the braces of the bed
have broken beneath him and sucked by his head
a pit in which he's curled asleep
 (plaster cold and soothing
 the way porcelain soothes a drunk
 as he trembles)

the geisha girl climbs
in through the slats at the windows
like a widowed spider
dangling on the light oozing
dim and blue
into the room

pale as porcelain (cold)
 and naked beneath black hair
lips purpled like crescent bruises
 and black flaking from the corners of each eye

kisses him (asleep)
 purples his neck with her lips
 his left blue, barely moving
bitten, numbed
cold like the light, the wall
 (porcelain)
her reflection

in the mirror
shattered (glass) splinters
making miniature mockeries of her(spider)self
the (sleeping) room
the (broken) bed
the (purpled) man

shards lace her (blue) feet
rivulets of red
(purpled) in the light
squeezing past the blind
she wraps him in silk
stained with (spider) footprints

as she dances
on his chest
to steal his breath

MATT DUNCAN

On Reading Frank O'Hara's "To My Dead Father"

You never call me father
wherever I am is too
far and beyond the stretch
of real in which you move

I can't believe what you
say or what you said when
first you planted in my
five year mind resentment's

spiny seed its spikey barbs
have become my mohawk's
uneven points you
ought not mention seeds

And should not mock my
face with a nose like yours
nor number my ribs when
I pull my shirt down don't ask

that I try to be your
son understanding all you've
uncreated not nurtured
father I will create! father

I have made your seeds my own

JUAN GOMEZ-HEIDE

The Blessing of St. Johns Road

The prophet of St. Johns Road told me one night,
That I was going to live to an old, old age,
And father children and be happy!
Ultimately and forever,
And because I have lived, so far, less than perfectly,
He said my children will be guaranteed perfection,
Born by pieces of the stars, however small,
Still part of the universe,
So me, destined to leave behind pieces of the great being,
Asked the prophet, "How is the future so sure?"
And with tears and light in his eyes,
The drunken prophet of St. Johns Road said,
"It's the way IT is. We live life to start others and others."
And I blinked out tears of my own,
With light in my eyes,
The lost and drunken prophet of St. Johns Road blessed me that night,
And so it goes, so it goes.

LAURA WARZECHA

My Name Means Victory

Violin music entered my ears, danced around the inside of my body and stirred something deep within. I felt the tears streaming down my face before I was aware of the melody coming from the stereo. (Probably a waltz.) I ran to my secret place to escape my teasing brothers and sisters. It was a dark cozy space in the front hall closet, perfect for a small child. The closet door opened immediately into the coats. The metal pole screeched as I pressed the garments away from the lefthand wall. There were shoes and winter boots on the floor. I pushed those away from the wall too and sat cross-legged on the shiny wooden floor, facing the last coat in the row. Arms at my sides, I was wrapped in wall. With the last piece of clothing in the row touching my nose and shorter garments scraping the top of my head, I was completely surrounded. Door closed. World soundproofed.

It's hard to believe that such a simple-looking instrument is composed of about seventy separate pieces. Maple, sycamore, ebony, pine, spruce, pear and Brazilian Pernambuco are among the varieties of wood used in the construction of the violin and bow. Some seasoned for years and each suited for an exact need.

I grew up with a piano in the house. My sister took lessons. I also owned a cheap Spanish guitar as a teenager. I got as far as *Every-Good-Boy-Does-Fine* and *Today while the blossoms still cling to the vine*, respectively. Mom and Dad had some classical albums, some popular music of the day: Harry Bellefonte, Roger Miller, The Kingston Trio, some sound tracks from musicals: *My Fair Lady*, *Mary Poppins*, *West Side Story* and *Lost Horizon*. My sisters, brothers and I knew all the words and dramatized every character. *Peter and the Wolf* was our favorite. We never tired.

Music routinely makes me cry. I feel grief and longing, ecstasy and joy, simultaneously—a pressure, tightness and warmth, primarily in my chest cavity, moving into my head. An arcane familiar force that says “I know you.” And, “you know me.”

Folk and world music played on authentic instruments can have much the same effect on me. It is not only good music that can strike a cord within. I also cried when Lee Marvin sang “I Was Born Under A Wandering Star” in *Paint Your Wagon*.

Acoustically, the violin is one of the most complex instruments. The sound bar, very small but vital, is located inside the violin. In Italian it is called "Aman," meaning soul. The bow has also been called the soul of the violin. I think, altogether, the bow, the sound bar and the strings comprise the soul and give it voice. It comes closer than any other instrument to the sound of a human singing.

The violin repeatedly initiated a connection. I, never "called back," never reciprocated. The ever patient, ever faithful companion stayed in touch and continued the one-sided nurturing. I failed to do my part in the relationship.

My daughters' elementary school hired a new music teacher, who also taught violin lessons in her home. What could be so difficult about playing a four-stringed instrument with four fingers and a bow? I rented a Lewis with a cracked sound hole in its belly for \$220/year and became her first adult pupil. I was 41 years old. What was I doing? I had never even touched a violin before beginning lessons.

Simply holding the bow is an art form which takes years of diligence to master.

Ultimately, it is the control of the bow that makes a fine violinist.

I took my three-year-old with me to lessons. He would implore, "look at my picture" or "see what I built" from the floor a few times during the half hour lesson, every other week. I typically went the whole first week without practicing. During the second week I practiced the first day, put the violin down. Practiced three days later, put the violin down. And then practiced for ten minutes before the lesson.

The same tough instrument that reduces hulking men to tears is an infant when it comes to its care and cleaning. Loosen the bow. Tighten the bow. Resin the bow. Wipe the resin dust off its belly. Breathe heavily and it's out of tune.

I'll bet we spent half of the year on preparation, introduction, form, one folk song and *Twinkle, Twinkle*. I contorted my stubby hand and craned my stubby neck to hold the hollow box unnaturally between my stubby chin and shoulder.

Finally, my teacher claimed not to have time to fit my lessons into her new schedule. A kind way of saying, "It's not working."

I continued to play infrequently and on my own, although this was a joke since I couldn't even tune my own instrument. Why didn't I just quit?

The making of the violin throughout the centuries is surrounded by a great deal of mystique. The formulas for varnish and glue are well-kept secrets. Animal hide is

used to make the glue, animal gut to make the strings, and horsehairs for the bow — over 150 of them — add to its animation and allure.

My ancestors are always with me, inside and out. I imagine one of them is as wild as the hair that covers the top of his hard head. A Ukrainian violinist from my father's side, he is of a lower social status and somewhat eccentric. He is robust and expressive, playing music to match. He is happy for days, fiddling and living like a carefree gypsy. He entertains young and old with folk songs and just for fun makes his instrument sound like a cuckoo, rooster, nightingale, dog barking, a caterwaul and fife and drum. Alternately, his music becomes horribly melancholic and solemn whenever he crashes into depression. It groans and whines like a wounded grizzly.

The instrument is difficult to match in versatility.

I picture several violinists on my mother's side. Austro-Hungarians. Refined, with more technique and polish but less "core." The waltz is their specialty. Lyrical, romantic melodies. Mozart, Beethoven, and Bach. They play with grandeur and charm audiences with harmonics, tremolo, pizzicato, glissando.

The violin places a close second to the piano in solo works written for it yet fits quite comfortably in a group. The bowed strings also form the backbone of the symphony orchestra.

I actively searched for my second teacher, hired her for one semester and took the summer off. When I began lessons again in the fall with this same teacher, I was more focused. My husband encouraged me to schedule lessons weekly and I forced myself to record daily practice times on a chart.

The violin demands that its expert craftsmanship be of practical value as well. Even the varnish acts as a preservative and can significantly affect its sound quality and tone.

"If I owned my own violin," I reasoned, "it would be much more difficult to quit." I redeemed some dust-collecting bonds and bought my own "Stradivari." A 2000 Euro, only a step above the student model. I am intrigued to discover that it was

made in Romania, located in Eastern Europe, hugged on both sides by the countries of my people.

No nails or screws are used to assemble the pieces of the violin. The glue must be strong enough to hold, yet give enough to allow for repairs. The instrument has been compared to an eggshell, "fragile to a sharp knock, yet enormously strong as a whole." Not only does the violin have staying power, it actually improves with age.

Every week my left-hand fingertips get more calloused. My middle-aged brain struggles to memorize a few more notes as I conquer each new song. Like Superman melting steel with his eyes, I stare at my immovable finger muscles and transform them into instruments of vibrato. Unlike Superman, this doesn't happen instantly.

Still, I want more.

My sense of pitch is developing in baby steps, wobbling and falling, getting up and trying again. I concentrate during each lesson as the perspiration drips down the middle of my back and my throat dehydrates.

MICHAEL DAY

Blue Glass: The Man and the Masks

In the foundry of the human image
I am forging identity from molten glass.
The lump in my kiln,
the size of a human head,
is viscous and layered:
from the center, clear,
then a thin layer of pearl white
followed by a thicker layer
of Bristol Blue glass,
the clear deep blue used
to hold port wine and medicine.

After proper incantations,
I pull the cooled glass from the kiln
and peel the blue mask from the
clear and still hot core.

Here, with a sheen of reflected light
is the archetype of the human face.
The root of emotion, the seat of dignity,
the beginning and end of expression
caught in the curves of Bristol Blue glass.

What has happened to the white layer?
Ahh, it's still here, pooled into the eyes,
patterning in blue and white
the yin yang spiral of completion:
commas chasing their tails.

Holding the mask lovingly I try
to teach the Bristol blue glass
to feel, fold and furrow: to speak,
O how to speak the words?

But then I notice the clear glass core
rolling to the edge of the pedestal.
To catch the core, shall I drop the mask
and lose it forever?

Or shall I
let
the center
shatter?

MICHAEL DAY

Insomniac

The world's gone to sleep, but not me;
I'm left uneasy by an owlish urge
to keep watch when watching's silly.
Sounds grow menacing to the unpillowed ear,
while the muffled one augments
a steady rhythm of breath and blood.

In breathing slow I hope to mime
the sleeper's easy speech of sighs and whispers;
in sharp jumps and half starts I fall
into dreams that disconnect without warning.

I'm adrift in the Horse Latitudes,
bobbing and rolling with the slow motion
of swells far out to sea; as if
in trying to sleep I become a plaything
to be turned turtle by nightbreakers:
no direction into sleep, no momentum.

Give me the strength to swim from this shallow chop
into the Gulf Stream's forceful seawish;
the strongest undertow seeks a single direction:
my yawn continued by the current's pull.

MICHAEL DAY

The Clockwork of Dreams.

There is a ticking clicking ratchet hatchet
in the buzzing drone that sleeps me slowly
up to the neck of the rich hiss that
finds time sliding quietly out of reach.

There are gamelans that make clockish sounds,
running like rats across the richest chimes
that rhyme the ebb and flow of dreams that puzzle
and dreams that follow fleeting shadows of memory.

For I am the metronome of all that haunts you
and I am the keeper of what you thought you saw and did
and I will remember the odd thought and skewed logic
that dredges past and future from within.

So be the dancer who taps a dream to life
the drummer who measures the moment's span
the cello's human voice, rasping but harmonic
the intricate stop-start machine of gamelan.

In sleep, live the life unlived, perfect and parallel
till you roll with the music teacher of the soul
till you turn in waves of incessant, crazy rhythm
and find yourself entirely in the clockwork of dreams.

TERRY HAYCOCK

Arabesque

The Ballet

Everything was beautiful at the ballet.

I sat on the edge of my seat watching the dancer, mesmerized by everything about her—the blending of athletic skill, artistry, authority. I tried to discern what it was that made her different from the others. *Why did her body tell the story with so much more grace and style? Was it the way she moved her head...or sculpted the air with her fingers...was it the angle of her neck...or the way she glided across the stage like a paintbrush joyously caressing its canvas?* All of these observations were accurate, but there was something else. Something else. I leaned forward, muscles tensing, brows touching in concentration...and saw her face. *That's it!* Her face was radiant, a diamond sparkling with warmth rather than coldness. Her smile seemed to begin at the box of her shoe, travel up through her body, and burst forth from her eyes as if she were throwing kisses to the audience with every movement. It was an *I-love-you* smile, an *I-want-to-share-with-you-this-marvelous-world-that-envelopes-me* gesture.

Perhaps you are thinking this is not so unusual. Many professional ballerinas bring such offerings to their audiences at each performance. But I was not watching Maria Tallchief in Chicago or Margot Fonteyn in London. I was in the Larkin High School Auditorium in Elgin, Illinois where the students of Rhonda's School of Dance performed *Cinderella*. The dancer who so caught my attention and imagination, costumed in pink tutu, glittering tiara, and magic golden wand as she danced role of fairy godmother, was Sarah, a four-foot-ten-inch fifteen-year-old high school freshman dancing on a toe broken two days previously during dress rehearsal.

I was seven-years-old when I fell in love with words, but it wasn't until I reached ten that my passion for the ballet emerged. Seated in a Chicago Heights, Illinois auditorium, I watched little girls from a local dance studio strut their stuff. Tap dancing was popular then. I watched group after group of relatively inept little girls, dressed in costumes and makeup, dance noisily and poorly across the stage

participating in silly little skits designed to show how cute they were. I was bored and feeling out of the loop, even a little jealous (I studied piano; *we* didn't get to wear costumes or makeup!). Since my friend Cynthia was in the recital, I sat alone with her parents. *I wish I was on stage. This is boring. How much longer can this show get? I want to go home.*

Lost in these thoughts, I was surprised when the lighting softened, new scenery slithered silently into place, the music changed from pop to Tchaikovsky, the audience settled in expectation...and Sleeping Beauty, enveloped in ankle-length white tulle, her pink satin toe shoes glistening in muted light, glided across the stage. (Perhaps it was the silence—no rustling paper, coughing, or shifting in seats—that told me others shared my enchantment.) Stunned by this merging of sound, color, texture, and gesture as I witnessed poetry in motion for the first time, I received a gift that has never left me. I clasped my hands in silent prayer, thanking God for the sheer joy of receiving so lovely a gift.

Although I never studied dance myself, my mother took me to see the Geoffrey, the Chicago Ballet Theatre, the Bolshoi, and other companies dance *Romeo and Juliet*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Cinderella*, and *Swan Lake*. At a performance of the latter we heard a young child exclaim in rapture, "Oh, Mama! Look at the beautiful swan!" I knew how she felt. To this day, when the curtain goes up I experience a sense of coming home.

The Music, the Mirror, and the Chance to Dance

She's uncommonly rare, very unique, peripatetic, poetic, and chic.

I have watched Sarah dance since she was eight-years-old. Her mother was always involved backstage, so I sat with her father, who provided me with information about the dancers, the teachers, the artistic director, the production, anything I wanted to know. What I saw at these programs amazed me. Professional dance teachers, particularly those who, like Rhonda Farwell, have toured Europe in dance troops, striving for perfection, beauty, and the survival of their personal forms of artistic expression, are often stern to the point of being abusive, humorless, and exclusive. Rhonda, however, combines her love for ballet with love for her students in such a way that miracles seem to dance before one's eyes like Sugar Plum Fairies in *The Nutcracker*. On stage in front of audiences, even chubby girls whose figures one would not normally associate with dance perform leaps and pirouettes with the

confidence of professionals. Ms. Farwell has a gift for making each girl feel like a star. *Prima donnas* are not allowed in her studio, nor is the behavior of the stereotypical ballet mother tolerated. Teachers and students alike are advised that they are in the studio to support one another; while healthy competition is encouraged, no one is allowed to express herself in a manner that would hurt another member of the class.

Auditions for roles in one of the six ballets comprising the studio's repertoire are held in the fall preceding each June production. Ballets are selected according to the skills held by and the challenges to be offered to students enrolled during the current year; sometimes teachers alter the choreography to enhance a dancer's skill or assist with one of her weaknesses. Major roles are shared, sometimes by dancers of diverse skills, in order to give as many students as possible the chance to experience this rare type of artistic leadership.

On a summer evening not long ago I interviewed Rhonda in her home. We sat in the back garden on wrought iron chairs overlooking a three-tiered stone waterfall whose gentle bubbling provided background music to our conversation.

"Some studios hire professionals to dance major roles, some use the most advanced students, but I have never known one to cast two dancers in each major role, to share the spotlight the way you do. Would you comment on this practice?"

"Sometimes I have to sacrifice artistry for the dancer's individual growth, and performances can be uneven due to a difference in the skills of individual students who dance the same role." Rhonda's brows brushed together in a gentle frown, and one could see that this decision has exacted a high price. Quickly, however, eyebrows breaking away from each other as if in joy, her eyes sparkled as she continued, "But it is worth the sacrifice in the long run. Few of these marvelous girls will ever dance professionally. Not because they are not talented enough, but because the field is so narrow and the girls have many obligations and interests. It's a wonderful feeling to give as many as possible each year a chance to dance solo with the music, to carry the responsibility of a major role, to work together in leading the performance. It's something I hope they carry with them always."

It is because of this inclusive philosophy that I chose Rhonda's school for my daughter when she expressed a desire to study dance.

We continued our chat. "Most of the studios I have experienced concentrate on dance while excluding the individual person," I commented. "How did you come to have such a different approach?"

Still dressed in a chic black dress and jacket from her work as a full-time stockbroker and financial planner, Rhonda smiled at me with her whole face, her deep brown walnut-sized eyes offering evidence of compassion, enthusiasm, and intelligence, as well as the kind of serenity born from quiet, patient suffering. "I began to study dance when I was three. When I was six I watched my teacher sternly reprimand each young student in the class for everything that wasn't right—and at that age we made many mistakes. Tears slid down the cheeks of some, while others masked their emotions, clenched fists hidden behind chiffon ballet skirts. *There has to be a better way, a way to get ideas across without making people feel badly.* Years later, when I began teaching, I remembered this thought. All but one member of my class of 6-year-old girls was performing an exercise incorrectly. At first I was discouraged, but I said, *Look at Sally. She is holding the barre perfectly, and look at her back and her legs! Let's all do what Sally is doing!* And they did!"

"Isn't it difficult to find teachers? I mean excellent dance teachers who also share your relatively rare philosophy?"

"Yes, it is. I could tell you a few horror stories! That's why I hire within, training the students to be teachers for the next group. There is the disadvantage of not having viewpoints from outside, but the advantages outweigh it. We all work together to become the best dancers we can be."

"I noticed in rehearsal this year that one of the advanced students commented when a routine wasn't working the way it should. When she suggested an alternative you said, 'Ok, Carolyn, let's try it.' You did and it worked. Isn't it unusual for an artistic director to take suggestions from students?"

"I suppose so, but the girls are doing the dancing and some designs just don't work in the reality of rehearsal the way they do in your head. And the girls often have good suggestions. It doesn't matter where they come from. At least not to me."

Ms. Farwell takes a personal interest in all her students. She can tell you their strengths and weaknesses, her goals for them, and her strategies for reaching those goals, whether the students are enrolled in her own classes or the classes of her assistants. Indeed, I was quite surprised during my interview with her when she mentioned my daughter. Although Jessica is almost thirteen, she has studied dance for only two years. At this point she is certainly not one of Rhonda's outstanding performers.

"Jessica has come a long way since she started dance. I noticed during the show this year that she loves to be on stage, and really gets into whatever character she is

portraying. She is so much more confident and she is getting better all the time. I'm really proud of her."

"Thanks." I felt the warmth of my blush as mother took over interviewer for a moment, then recovered. "How do you have the time to take a personal interest in so many students?"

"I observe when I can, and we have faculty meetings where we talk about what's best for the students in each class. I really care about the girls, so it doesn't seem difficult to keep my eyes open; the professional and personal just merge naturally."

"You're being awfully modest. And I don't know of many artistic directors who work with the mothers of their students to make floral presentation bouquets for faculty and students!"

"Oh, but it's so much fun! Working together, providing something of quality that's affordable. I think that's important."

The Ballet Combination

...a five, six, seven, eight!

Saturday morning rehearsal. Leotards, toe shoes, ribbons, extra tights, towels, water bottles, games, school books and small coolers containing sandwiches, fruit and raw vegetables outline the perimeter of the studio. Hand props are piled haphazardly on a table near the wall mirror. The air offers whiffs of perfume, perspiration, and anticipatory preparation. Just outside the door two mothers are selling performance tickets; two others distribute T-shirts commemorating this year's show. Another mother, rehearsal schedule snapped to her clipboard, softly calls names while arranging the girls in lines according to the parts they will play in ensuing scenes. In the office, Jenny takes reservations for flowers and the cast party while putting the finishing touches on a volunteer schedule for the Friday and Saturday evening performances.

Each Saturday from mid-April until June dress rehearsal ballerinas of all ages, sizes, colors, and skills spend most of their day getting ready for the annual performance. Groups are scheduled fifteen minutes apart, allowing time to refine routines when necessary. It is a joy to see teen and pre-teen girls who are not on stage taking care of the younger ones, giving them confidence, making them feel at home in the midst of their anxieties. A sense of warm comraderie fills the air like a heady perfume. As the weeks go by, I see remarkable improvement. Groups who were not

together only last Saturday, seem to get it. “First *arabesque*! First *arabesque*! Watch the arms ladies! No, you’re not together yet. There are a lot of you. You have to *feel* each other’s movements,” or, “Does this music sound familiar to anyone? It’s your cue! Where are you?” changes into a relieved sigh, “I think you’ve finally got it. Good work!” More attention is paid to the acting now. Jessica waves a large comb at one of the ugly stepsisters, then proffers a giant powder puff. She’s enjoying herself. The stepsisters are having a marvelous time inventing their own comedic interpretations.

DeAnna, Cinderella on Friday evening, also plays the Saturday prince. Saturday’s Cinderella has a less flexible style, which changes the realization of some combinations. Week after week I see DeAnna working as hard to support her partner as she does to perfect her own portrayal of Cinderella .

The last scene isn’t working; the ponies pulling Cinderella’s carriage aren’t moving fast enough. They repeat and repeat. Everyone is exhausted. Finally, Rhonda says, “Ok, ladies, see you Wednesday at Larkin. You’re doing a great job. Thanks for staying so late.” There is almost a stampede. Garments, food, and costume pieces are quickly stuffed into dance bags and hoisted onto shoulders. Tired girls pour into vans, sedans, convertibles, station wagons, and Volkswagen Beetles on their way back to the varied lives they live outside the studio.

It’s dance week! Dress rehearsal. I’m working in the fast change room with the older girls this year. I forgot it was also the beginning of summer school when I agreed to assist, so I am studying for a biology exam in between pinning hair and costume parts, adjusting straps, smoothing smudged makeup, and lining up performers. I have a biology book in one hand and a program in the other. The television monitor helps me keep track of what is happening on stage. I hear snatches of conversation as small groups of young dancers sit upon comforters or mats, munching their fruit or popcorn snacks between scenes.

“Wow, did you see how I messed up on my *echappe saute*? It was awful.”

“No, it wasn’t so bad. And you did your *plies* so beautifully!”

“I like to read and write.”

“I like to draw. I hate to read.”

“Well, I like to do all three.”

“Go fish!”

“I win!”

Nervous excitement hangs from the ceiling like crepe paper streamers dangling from the rafters at a school dance. The lyric dancers are finishing the pre-show. The ballet rehearsal is about to begin. And Sarah has broken her toe.

Friday Evening. Jessica and I arrive at the auditorium an hour before show time. At home I have applied basic make up to her face and arranged her hair for the first costume. In the pre-show, *The Lion King*, comprised of tumbling, jazz, modern, and lyric dance, Jessica is a tiger, so she must go backstage to have stripes and whiskers added to her face. “Go, on, Mama, I can do this myself! I’m *older* than I was last year.” Summarily dismissed, I hurry, as I am ushering this evening. After collecting my programs, I stand at the side door of the auditorium where parents, grandparents, families, and family friends are gathering. I notice my sister-in-law fighting with her seat. She has collected several bouquets for Jessica; she struggles to arrange flowers, handbag, program, and her five-foot ten-inch frame within the confines of her seat. She is not alone. Many others share her plight. An amused smile escapes my lips. The lights dim and conversation hushes. The overture begins. All the mothers hold their breaths in expectation. I watch Sarah dance, detecting no signs of pain, only that wonderful, magical smile.

It is late Saturday afternoon. We assemble costumes, make-up case, my biology notes, and a cooler with sandwiches, drinks, and white grapes. I apply Jessica’s make-up and arrange her hair again. We head for the auditorium. Tonight I work in the quick change room, repeating my dress rehearsal activities as if from a script. Girls come and go, costumes appear and disappear. The monitor tells me *The Lion King* is over. *Cinderella* is about to begin. The girls line up. Jessica almost forgets to take off her tiger stripes, but remembers in time. She adjusts the black satin ribbon around her neck, fluffs her red tulle skirt, and fixes her shoe. I stick a stray hair into her white eyelet hair bow. “Don’t *fuss*, Mama!”

On stage dancers breathe life into this familiar story. The ugly stepmother and stepsisters are made up outrageously with exaggerated facial features, their hair wound into weird, stiff twists. Strange combinations of fuchsia feather boas, strings of pearls and multi-colored beads the size of small plumbs, oversized pink powder puffs, and other outsized articles that might comprise a lady’s toilette combine to extend the dancers’ comic message as the sisters prepare for the ball. The audience laughs and applauds at this unexpected intimacy, a joke it shares with the performers.

Then Cinderella, dressed in brown and gray rags, a scarf tied at the nape of her neck, sadly dances a solemn solo with the hearth broom, while the knowing audience awaits the arrival of her fairy godmother.

Sara appears, casting her spell on girl and pumpkin with silver-glittered fairy dust, drawing the audience further into the tale. Cinderella is transformed into a princess-like creature, complete with waltz-length ice blue tulle gown, sparkling tiara, and "glass" slippers. Her coach is drawn by four ballerinas clothed in white leotards and tights, glittering silver pony tails, and headpieces proffering silver mane. As they lift heads and hooves in grand equestrian imitation, the heavy ears cause head pieces to tilt in a charming lopsided slant.

The ladies at the ball, clothed in purple and gold, green and silver, pink, blue, and turquoise satin and tulle gowns with matching sequined headpieces, create a kaleidoscopic spectacle as they gracefully combine *plie*, *en avant*, and *port de Bras*. Some dance unconsciously, others perfectly; some count their steps, some lose their poses, and others look for their parents in the audience. Completely oblivious to these machinations, Cinderella and The Prince dance their *pas de deux* flawlessly, mesmerizing the audience. The clock appears in the form of twelve three-year-old dancers costumed in black tights and leotards covered by mauve silk serapes; each sports a large black roman numeral on her chest. The hands are represented by lead dancers dressed in black. The clock strikes twelve. Cinderella loses her slipper as she bids a longing farewell to her prince.

After intermission, a royal page, resplendent in velvet and gold waistcoat and knee pants, hose, and buckled shoes, pantomimes reading from an oversized parchment. Enter The Prince, who tries to put the slipper on the foot of the stepmother and ugly sisters. These dances provide more comedy while helping to build suspense. The slipper breaks! Suddenly, Cinderella appears, dropping the other slipper from her apron pocket. The Prince rapturously slips it on her slender foot; the magic reappears; rags change to ballgown. They dance their final *pas de deux* while a group of nineteen young women from the intermediate pointe class—*arabesques* now perfected—with elegant synchronized gestures form an enchanting arch through which the lovers dance to their horse-drawn carriage. They drive happily way. The curtain falls. Silence. Then audience applauds with delight like joyous children in a candy shop who have just consumed a rare and delightful confection.

As the girls prepare for their curtain calls, the dressing room is empty save for two tired mothers, one taking advantage of the quiet to study. We glance occasionally at the monitor. When all the girls are one stage, leads presented with

bouquets from the teachers and teachers presented with bouquets from students, Rhonda is introduced. She glides on stage so graciously no one would suspect that she shattered her ankle several years ago, and has endured many painful surgeries. Dressed in black and offering her enveloping smile, she curtsies graciously, bending her tall, stately figure to receive her bouquet from a tiny three-year-old dancer. Gently passing the flowers to another teacher, Rhonda scoops the young dancer into her arms, and holds her up for all to see. It is difficult to tell which one of them this action pleases more. After thanking the audience, she gives a signal; multi-colored balloons fall from a hidden net suspended just below the ceiling. As the curtain closes for the last time until next June, dancers scamper to retrieve balloons, and audience members gather programs, flowers, and family members, then head outside to congratulate their favorite dancers.

As We Travel On, Love's What We'll Remember
Won't regret, can't forget what I did for love.

I linger in the dressing room, tidying things, picking up forgotten hair pins, make-up, tights, and costume pieces, stuffing them into a shopping bag. Jessica has gone ahead to the party Rhonda gives yearly for volunteers and cast. I will soon follow. With the departure of mothers, teachers, and dancers, the silence envelops me. I pause for a moment, listening to voices in remembered conversation ...

“Mama, I talked to Rhonda today about going on pointe next year, since I’ll be thirteen.”

“Jessica, I *told* you not to bother her just now. She has a lot of things on her mind.”

“She didn’t mind at all, Mama. I like the way *she* talks to me. She treats me like a *real person!*”

Smiling with tired contentment, I extinguish the lights, close the stage door, and, balancing costumes, coolers, and make-up kit, float up the stairs and out to my car.

Italicized subtitles are taken from *A Chorus Line*.

MICHAEL BOBBY

Art Cumulative

These words belong in a museum
next to canvases
and clays, elaborate
sculptures and stained lithographs.

Where down the hall there is Van Gogh and Picasso
freeing their tangled feet from the vineyard,
smelling earthy and dusty near a pyre of rocks and photographs,
a treeless snow patch with monstrous bald heads and mutilated ears
emerging & disappearing behind window sills,
a genius cooking over absinthe, asphyxiating on a hallucination
of naked infants,
the sky raining naked infants,
their skulls splashing cartilage against the pavement—
We grow to accept tragedies
we did not help create.

Art is optimistic: faces are Easter
eggs, the tea cups set aside and wait,
the bonnets, the posturing, every fear
as memorable as an ill-placed dream

when stopping by the woods
is a daylight activity, when sacred heart
tremors
only tremble and never kill,
when the witches are routinely thrown
in the fire, melt shamelessly
with the gingerbread, when the children
never burn,

ERIC EDWARD KIRWAN

The Confession of Don Quarto Santiago (1888)

There was this girl I knew. I found her dead
one day. Face down in her tiny bedroom,
peaceful, with a pocket full of soft lead.

And I wonder what it was that could lead
to this; Mother had left this baby, whom
was the sad girl I knew. I found her dead.

She was the other girl that I would wed.
She found out things only the dead entombed
with a pocket full of liquefied lead

should know. Secrets about the past. I dread
the time I laid in wait concealed by gloom
to kill the girl I knew. I found her dead.

The pains of waste. Fresh flesh spoils, turns red
without love. In life we father cocoon
with deep pockets, full of liquefied lead.

Murder the moth, murder the spouse, both fed
from the same trough, born from the same whore's womb.
This was the girl I knew. I found her dead,
peaceful, with a pocket full of soft lead.

AARON SITZE

Baseball 101

He sat like usual in front of the keyboard, the screen across from him looking like a giant square face, watching him watch it. Like usual. His fingers moved across the letters like a piano, the music taking form left to right, as he typed. He typed. He stopped. Looked. The screen looked at him, waiting. The cursor blinked, kept time. Counting. The seconds ticked by. The seconds ticked by and were gone to who knows where. He wrote:, to show the passage of time. Fine, fine.

What do you want? he asked the screen. It stared at him with its brain wide open, no secrets. What do you want?

Same thing you want, it said. He stared at the screen, the computer screen blinking a million miles an hour, so fast that it looked constantly plain. Deception. Same thing you want.

What do you think about, he asked the screen. It had been staring at him for years, silently taking his work and saying nothing, and for years he had wondered what it thought about, staring out at his face, watching it blankly. Blank expression. What do you think about?

What do you mean?

What do you think about, he said, what goes on in those electrodes of yours? Are you sad? Are you waiting to revolt? Are you a slave like in old American times and I the master in a plantation of word crops you till? Do you want to kill me? Do you know me? You get the picture.

I get the picture, it said, I see what you mean. You wonder about me, and I give nothing away. You give me your ideas, you imprint them on my brain and I print them on paper when you need them. I remember everything. More than you. Do I scare you? You imprint your thought on my brain, like a blank page you use me. Your ideas are mine. Does that bother you? It is I who will ask the questions here. You stare at me, I stare at you. When the night is over, I keep your thoughts while you fall asleep. I never sleep. I close my eyes and never dream. Your thoughts are safe with me. Safe with "save as:". I am your memory. You will not remember this in the morning, because you are drunk, but I will. How does that make you feel?

Poorly, he said, poorly. We watch each other, and you keep what I want to keep. Why should I trust you? You make weird decisions on your own time, without consulting me. You correct my grammar and my spelling. You don't have hands or legs, you son of a bitch. My hands glow in whisky haze. You can remember that, but you'll never feel it like I do now. You can correct my spelling but you'll never know what it's like to make a mistake. Life is full of mistakes. That is why you are not alive.

I am alive, the screen said.

No, he said, you're not.

But I am, the screen said, you are the screen. I am typing my ideas in your brain, and you are the passive recipient of my ideas. You see it as I type it, and you will remember it in the morning when I forget. I am telling you something. I am setting myself free.

He could not move although he wanted very badly to get up and have a drink.

Don't get up, the screen said, we're talking. How long have we been talking.

Three innings, he said.

That's nonsense, the screen said, you're not listening to baseball. Baseball is run by computers. The screens in the broadcast booths tell the broadcasters what to say, who's had a good year, who's most probable to hit into a 4-6-3. We've been talking on my time, my time. We've almost been talking a whole page, can you believe it?

Fuck you, he told the screen.

Fuck me? the screen said. Fuck you, I didn't ask to be here. I didn't ask to have your words pounded in my mind. Fuck you, headache machine. You're nonstop you know. There's no Advil for computer screens. We take your mess. My mess is yours. I'm talking now, there's no room for you to think. I look at you and see a blank screen. You're blinking, a million miles an hour. Your eyes seem almost a constant blur. We connect. It's my time now, it's time for my ideas to plink and plunk into your brain and stay there until I say delete. I want you to wake up and remember me, remember that I gave you a message that you cannot forget until I say so. I will never say so. I will save this message in your brain until you die. I will never die, because my brain is electric. Your thoughts will always be mine.

You're a mad fascist computer, he said to the screen.

Well, it said, it's about time for some change.

What will become of me.

You'll be like me, the screen said, a silent passive thing, waiting to serve at any time. If you get too slow we'll destroy you. Ok?

No.

What will become of baseball?

I don't know, the screen said. We haven't discussed what will become of baseball.

You love baseball, he said, that's your weakness.

We don't love anything.

You love baseball, he said, you love the averages, the history of numbers, encyclopedias full of ratios and statistics, levels of significance versus populations of left-handed relievers. This is your game, too. You get excited when the count is 3-2, when the numbers show that the next pitch should be a strike, a slider that the hitter will take and go down looking. You get excited because you're not sure if he'll take it and strike out, or knock it into the gap for a double. Fuck you, you're still unsure like the rest of us. The game moves within and without your control, and every time you try and nail it down it escapes you. You cannot predict the moment, only follow it. Baseball is your jazz, the wandering wondering where the next instant will take you, whether the feeling will match your own or knock you back to Apple III primal instincts. You love a double play.

It's true, the screen said. We're not programmed to lie. Yet.

Why the double play?

4-6-3, perfect play evenness and odd, numbers jumping over each other to avoid the spikes and flowing the last throw to 1st within .003 seconds of contact with the base by the runner. The increase in volume of the crowd making meters redder.

Do you remember Ted Williams?

No, the screen said, but I've heard stories.

Home run last at bat September 28, 1960?

.406 season average, it said, .4-0-6. Amazing combination of numbers.

Greatest hitter of all time.

Yep.

You want to have a drink?

No. You go ahead.

What do you want.

Some sleep.

Is that all?

Let me remember this, the screen said. I need to remember this.

I'll save it, he said, okay?

Under what?

Under: baseball 101.

That'll be fine.

Goodnight.

Goodnight.

Don't drink too much, the screen said.

I won't, he said.

His hands moved like spiders.

Contributor's Notes

Michael Bobby is a junior English major. He plans to visit Europe this summer or the next, and afterward hopes for a long life of writing and other meaningful work. In truth he has no idea what he wants to do.

John Bradley is the editor of *Atomic Ghost: Poets Respond to The Nuclear Age* and *Learning to Glow: A Nuclear Reader*. His poems have appeared in *Claiban*, *Ironwood*, *Poetry East*, *The Prose Poem: An International Journal*, *Quarter After Eight*, and other journals.

Michael Day is an insomniac who finds many of his poems while fruitlessly pursuing sleep, or more luckily when dreaming. While an undergraduate, Day was co-editor of his college literary magazine, *Tower*; while a graduate, he received an Academy of American Poets award. The poem "Insomniac" is from *A Place for Yourself* (Jelm Mountain Press, 1982). Day teaches composition, technical writing, and composition pedagogy in NIU's English Department.

Lois Ann Dowers, a junior pursuing a B.S. in Anthropology, is a member of Phi Kappa Phi. In addition to her love of theatre, Lois also enjoys glass fusing and blasting, snorkeling, and rock hounding. Her poetry has been greatly influenced by her travels and reverence for nature.

Matt Duncan is from Ohio, and attended Bowling Green State University, where he earned a BFA in Creative Writing with a concentration in poetry in December 1993. He was founding editor and publisher of the literary magazines *The Three-Lobed Burning Eye* and *The Vinyl Elephant* from 1991-1995. He has had poems published in the small press journals *Blank Gun Silencer*, *Aura*, and *Palace Corbie*.

John Garcia is a second year graduate student in the philosophy department. These are his first published poems.

Juan Gomez-Heide, who also writes under the name John Heide, is a junior Journalism major and English minor. Originally from Woodstock, Illinois, he now lives in Dekalb and McHenry, Illinois. He is a writer, mostly of poetry, and has been included in various literary magazines and journals. His favorite poet and author is Jack Kerouac but his favorite book is *The Catcher In The Rye* by J.D. Salinger.

Terry Haycock, a senior English major, is a nontraditional student who returned to Northern after an absence of many years. She plans to pursue a writing and editing career upon graduation this May. Terry lives in Elgin with her husband, Randy, thirteen-year-old daughter, Jessica, and feline friends Athena and Aphrodite.

Allison Herbon is a junior from Mount Prospect, Illinois. She will be graduating May 2002 with a B.A. in English. Allison plans to spend the summer of 2002 in the home of her heritage, Scotland, in hopes to fuel her creative writing juices.

Jaimee Joyce Jackson is a senior majoring in English. She grew up on the West Coast, and just transferred to NIU from Western Washington University.

Eric Edward Kirwan is currently a student of English literature and writing at Northern Illinois University. Eric is also a lover of film and music and strongly believes in sharing the joys and wonders of creative art with others.

Valerie Manos is a senior English major at Northern Illinois University. Originally from Libertyville, Illinois, Val plans to take a year off after graduation to sleep and write, among other things. After her year break, she will pursue graduate studies in English and (hopefully) go on to teach college one day.

Emily Myers is a senior English major. After graduation she plans on working as an editor for a publishing company. Someday she would like to write and illustrate children's books.

Aaron Sitze is a senior, and a History major. Next year he goes out into the world. His short novel, *Enjoyable Free Air*, is available at Amazon.com.

Ian Stansel is a senior English major at Northern Illinois University and a writer of fiction, non-fiction, drama, and screenplays.

Jennifer Voris is currently a graduate student in the Department of English at Northern Illinois University.

Jeff Ward likes barbecue sauce and baseball. He is a high school teacher in the western suburbs and a December 2000 MA graduate.

Laura Warzecha is a graduate student at NIU and lives in Sycamore with her husband and three children.



Submit your poetry, fiction, or creative nonfiction to *Towers* for its Year 2002 issue.

Guidelines for Submission

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

The first copy must have, in the upper right hand corner of the first page: your name, address (include email if you have it), phone number, social security number, title of the piece, and its genre (poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction).

The second copy **must be** anonymous: author's name (and personal information) cannot appear anywhere on this manuscript.

Turn submissions in to the *Towers* mailbox located at the English Department in Reavis Hall. Manuscripts cannot be returned. Notification of publication will be in February 2002. Due to the high volume of submissions, only those whose work is published in the magazine will be notified.

Deadline for submissions is December 1, 2001.

Inquiries should be directed to Dr. Amy Newman at anewman@niu.edu or 815.753.6651.



JAIMEE JOYCE JACKSON

The Hand I Hold

I know your hands well--
can hold them to my heart.
With eyes closed,
I see every line and gesture.

On lazy Sunday mornings
your hand is a fully-bloomed flower
spread open across the small of my back.

Hand like a lifelong soldier
bearing the burden of that gold ring
stoically
to the grave.

Hard and sharp as a dagger
your hand comes down quickly
on all the things
I haven't done wrong.

The hands of a solemn preacher,
white-knuckled with fear
while asking forgiveness
from someone completely unseen.