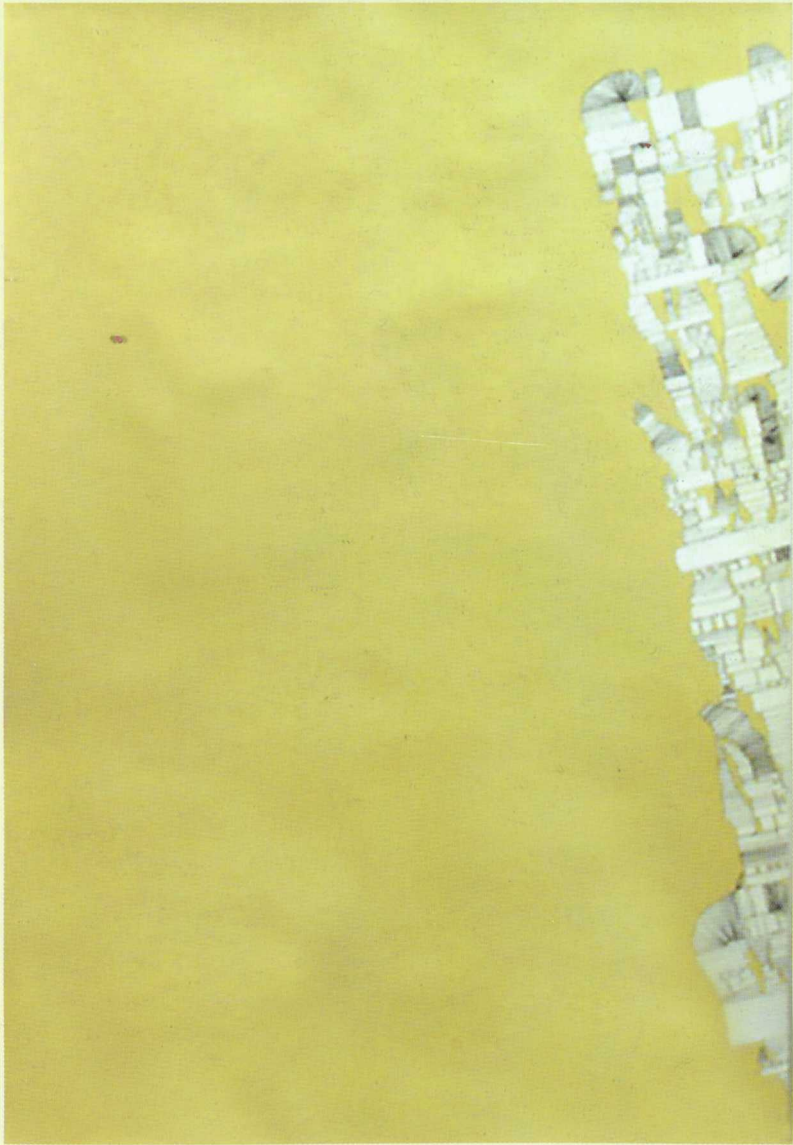


Towers

2004, Number 84



Towers

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Towers Award in Fiction

Emily Celaric
Towers Award in Poetry

Adam C. Kotlarczyk
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Number 84

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BRENT MURRAY

Autumn blink Spring

Intermittent yellow paint equates pasts and futures,
a cycle that leaves me
leading me up these corn-rowed roads.
This afternoon: crisp leaves leave winter waiting trees
harvesting kernels stream a yellow blur.

Peripheral vision laid down by a lawnmower
to see what summer sun shaded—
veins and arteries of comings and goings;
many minds on one mission, molding into one.

Single cells drown in a tributary.

Across the felled field—see the river flow.
Blinded to the single, only mass moving.
The road rises to bridge the flow,
and as our paths cross, my eyes grab the individual.

Confusion bubbles from the moment of separate solitude:
the connection made, severed, lost in passive immediacy.
A brief blink of comprehension and realization,
Then red lights fade away, form—
reform into a seventy-mile-an-hour waterway
that washes me further down the stream.

MARGARET M. COOK

Nice

Tears well up from the remembered pain of fourth grade, sliding down my lover's cheeks onto the pillow. Her voice breaks with shame as she softly tells me the names other kids used to call her.

"Fatso," they sneered as she looked for a seat on the school bus. "Tub-o-Lard," they hissed from across the classroom. "Fat Sweat!" they shouted during gym class.

Her face contorts. "I don't know what it was about me that made them so mean."

I bear witness to her pain, sharing this moment when the smoldering heartache of the 10-year-old girl erupts through the composed surface of the 36-year-old woman. I try to ease her anguish. "I'm sorry they were so mean to you. They were wrong. They are the ones who should feel ashamed."

She says, "If we had known each other then, we would have been friends."

Even in the sixth grade, the swings are the most popular spot on the playground. I stand at the swingset next to Lori, waiting for a turn, as we watch Linda Addison climb into the swing in front of us and futilely swing her legs back and forth, trying to get started. She cannot get the swing going beyond a gentle sway. Sitting stiffly upright in the rubber strap, hands gripping the metal chains, she swings her legs to no avail. She does not have enough strength in her arms to lean back and stretch her legs out to get her momentum going.

"Can I have a push?" Linda asks.

Her innocent request lands in the space between Lori and me like a baited hook, an invitation that is hard to handle without getting stuck. Lori and I freeze for a split second, trying to figure out what to do. We look at each other, saying nothing, and behind our clear eyes our minds are racing, calculating the danger we face from Linda's loaded question.

Linda Addison is untouchable. No one talks to her, unless to say something mean. Linda had been tagged as an outcast within days of arriving in Mrs. Farrell's homeroom class that year. She didn't have much going for her from the outset. Her stringy brown hair was greasy and often full of dandruff. She wore her hair shoulder length, parted on the left side, with barrettes pinning it to the sides of her moon face. She was overweight, and her pudgy mid-section, weak limbs, and awkward gait gave

her the appearance of waddling when she walked. She spoke so quietly we could barely hear her in our classroom. Her appearance and her timidity combined were a magnet for scorn. Sensing the menacing glances in her direction early on, she tried to defuse the gathering storm by taking the first available opportunity to explain that she had been born with a heart defect and had open-heart surgery that left her with a weak heart. Neither her explanation nor the long scar on her chest, visible when we changed clothes for gym class, was enough to save her from the cruelty of sixth grade. She was quickly pegged with the unforgiving nickname "Penguin." Classmates found excuses to spit the insult at her on a daily basis, verbal slaps meant to remind her where she stands in the courtroom of adolescent judgment.

The Penguin is asking for a push on the swings, and Lori and I know that even such a simple gesture brings the risk of having that withering communal hatred directed at us, especially if someone like Sheila or Sandy sees us and our accidental proximity to the Penguin is misconstrued as intentional. Yet, to ignore Penguin's question would require that we be openly rude, and would put us in the same class as Sheila and Sandy, people who go out of their way to be mean. Although we are caught in this double-bind together, Lori and I do not know each other well. We feel discomfort in part because neither of us is certain we can trust the other.

Lori is standing directly behind Linda's swing, putting her in the more awkward position. She glances at me, knowing that I am watching. As she moves forward to give Linda a push, Lori leans toward me and whispers, "Well, I don't want to be mean," nervously lifting her hands to her mouth, as if trying to smother the words. She hopes this will be an acceptable excuse for why she is about to do something friendly for the most friendless person in our entire sixth grade class.

Lori gives Linda a half-hearted push. She tries to make her gesture of kindness seem casual, a simple matter of politeness rather than a daring balancing act on the social dividing line. Even as she steps forward and raises her hands to the chains at Linda's sides—careful not to touch Linda's body—she defends herself against the accusations she fears will come, either from me or from our classmates if I tell anyone else.

But I will not tell. I live too close to the edge of sixth-grade acceptability myself. I do not want to be seen as complicit in this act of kindness. I end Lori's anxiety, and my own. "I figure you don't have to like her, as long as you're nice to her," I say.

I too am one of the new kids in sixth grade, having arrived at junior high from a nearby country school I had attended for only nine weeks the year before. I sit in the

front of Mrs. Farrell's class, near two girls both named Debbie, kitty-corner from where Linda sits in the back. In those first days, I cautiously gaze around the classroom to see if anyone looks friendly and wonder if anyone will talk to me. Debbie W., her preppy name-brand clothes perfectly coordinated and her hand in the air to answer Mrs. Farrell's every question, is the center of attention at the pinnacle of sixth-grade social life. Debbie V. is trying hard to be seen as her best friend, her large blue eyes shifting to watch Debbie W.'s every move as she gauges how to react by watching what the other Debbie does first. It's amazing how quickly leaders and followers reveal themselves.

The Debbies ask me questions about myself, sizing me up: "Where do you live? Are you going to the football game? Don't you wear makeup?"

A few conversations is all it takes to give me that feeling that I am not measuring up to their standards: I'm a farm girl, I'm not pretty, I don't wear makeup, I don't really care about clothes, and I prefer playing sports myself to watching boys play them. The Debbies exchange glances as I answer their questions, their looks communicating that I am losing ground. I begin to feel nervous. I have a budding case of acne and crooked teeth from a childhood accident. My hand-me-down clothes, long hair parted on the side, and bangs suddenly seem to look very different from everyone else in class.

I feel self-conscious and uncertain until we receive our first math test back from the teacher.

"What'd you get?" Debbie V. asks me.

"Ninety-eight."

Her eyes widen slightly in surprise as she pulls back almost imperceptibly. She immediately turns around to tell Debbie W.

"You got a 98?" Debbie W. asks, not quite able to believe what Debbie V. has said.

I feel the social ground shift as they take into account this new piece of information. I begin to understand that being smart is the thing that will save me in the social jungle of the sixth grade.

Having seen just how quickly the ground can shift, I enter seventh grade having settled warily into the large, nebulous middle of the hierarchy that rules most of our lives in junior high. Even with a new haircut that helps boost my confidence, I am self-conscious about my increasingly severe acne and the weight I have gained over the summer as I hit full-fledged puberty. I manage to avoid the fate of the outcast by being smart and nice. I am not popular by any means, but I earn some respect through

academic success. I am not mean to anyone, so I get along with everyone for the most part.

But the drumbeat of insecurity is the unconscious rhythm that governs my life.

We are nearing the end of seventh grade, and our P.E. teachers have almost run out of ideas for things to do with us. The end of school is too near to start a new unit, so we head out to the track where Mr. Mitchell divides our class in half.

"Everyone in 7A homeroom on one team and everyone in 7D homeroom on the other," he explains. "We'll race two people at a time around the track. Each person does one lap, then the next person goes, until we reach the last person. Everybody got it?"

We've got it, all right. This is head-to-head competition. One team wins the right to feel superior and one team has to defend themselves against the inevitable put-downs. One team of winners, one team of losers. So much more than a race is at stake.

Linda, of course, is the last person to run for her team. Before she even starts out the fuse of animosity is lit, the trail of venom is snaking toward her.

"You better not lose this for us, Penguin."

"Yeah, Penguin! You stupid jerk."

"God, we're gonna lose; Penguin's gonna blow it."

"You better run like hell if you don't want to get the shit kicked out of you!"

Linda plods around the long track, her soles slapping the grass flat-footed as she tries desperately to keep up. Step by step, she falls behind. As she finishes the last half of her lap, her face is red with effort and tears; her sobs are making it harder for her to breathe, slowing her down even further.

The gathering storm breaks. I watch as her teammates drench her with a furious downpour of insults, accusations, and threats.

"Penguin, you stupid idiot."

"Don't you know how to run?"

"We lost because of you!"

"We coulda won if we didn't have you on our team."

"I'm gonna kick your ass, you cow!"

Even students who are on the winning team join in. Linda cries harder as we move en-masse back to the locker rooms. Her tears are like fuel, feeding the fury. I look on, my discomfort rising in tandem with the shrillness of my classmates' taunts. The bullying continues as we shower, change, and head down the hall to our next class.

Linda sits crying in her seat in Mrs. Edmond's English class. The rage of her classmates dies down, becoming a whispered river of anger. When Mrs. Edmond asks her what has happened, Linda, who has said nothing throughout the entire drama, can barely speak through her sobs. In a voice shimmering with humiliation and pain, she cries, "They keep saying it's my fault that we lost the race in gym class."

Unlike my classmates' utterly predictable storm of hostility directed at Linda, the next explosion of emotion erupts without warning: "How dare you!" Mrs. Edmond yells at us. She is standing at the head of the class, face red and voice cold. Her fury blasts through the room, shocking us into silence. "How dare you!" she yells again, slamming down the papers in her hand. "Who do you think you are? What right do you have to blame her?"

I do not hear anything else she says. She has caught us. Linda's tears have washed away the thin cover of silence, exposing the never-acknowledged code of cruelty. I feel every thud of my heart. My stomach churns with guilt, fear, and the shock of my teacher's rage. The room is uncomfortably quiet. People shift in their seats. They scrutinize their hands on their desks. I want to protest, to say, "I didn't do it."

I had done nothing. Why do I feel so ashamed?

Face to face with my lover's hurt, I cannot bear to tell her what I know to be true. I want to believe that if only I could transport myself back through time, a ten-year-old version of who I am now could have offered her refuge. This would be an easy lie to tell, to soothe her sadness by offering her this fairy tale rescue from childhood pain. She does not need to know the shadow of shame in my heart. But the rock hard truth is that I would not have been her friend. I was not so nice as that.

MEGAN LOBSINGER

Impala

"It's going to be OK," he says.

But it's been a blue Chevy
with a bad engine
from day one.

The car for drinking
a six pack of High Life
while driving down curved roads
that will never end
under an upside down bowl of stars
that will never end
on a Friday
in a summer
that cools at dusk
but never ends.

And a possum lumbers
onto the road, eyes filled
with all the light in the world
and the brakes are slow.
Empty bottles clink,
swerve; the animal watches,
frozen in the street,
as you right the wheel.

Someone turns off the radio.
The ribbon of road
returns to pavement.
And you drive nervous after that.

AARONSITZE

Dishroom

The conveyor belt rolled into the kitchen from the cafeteria through a small metal box in the wall. To the people in the cafeteria, it was a grateful mouth for their plates and food and saucers. It lapped the dishes right up, and people were happy to be rid of their trash. They looked into the mouth and saw human hands—without faces—at work, ridding them of their trash. We were the hands. To us, the box was utterly and hopelessly nauseous, vomiting at a constant rate without end. Even when nothing came out, the gray tongue rolled and rolled. We stood on each side of it with a giant sink next to us. The sink was very deep and very chrome. Everything about it was giant and chrome. The handles and spout of the faucet were overly long to the point of being fashionably upscale. From the wall came two giant chrome hoses with levels and gages. They hung over the sinks and bobbed on springs a little if you tapped them. They sprayed water like crazy. Spraying dishes with them felt like shooting a water gun with a recoil, the fifth grade fantasy water gun.

At the bottom of the giant chrome sink was a giant garbage disposal. It could fit grapefruits easily. Bunches of bananas were easy too, or a small whole chicken. It could eat anything, and it ran the whole time the belt was on. If there were no dishes coming in, it ate water until food came along. It chewed the water with its teeth. The dishwashers stood across the belt from each other. You could see their hands from the cafeteria, darting in and out of view, grappling with the trash as it disappeared into god knows where. The people in the cafeteria didn't know where their trash really went, they just put it on the belt and walked away. It went into the garbage disposal, or into the giant garbage cans beside the belt. The people in the dishroom knew that, but they didn't know where it went after that. The bags of trash were put into the metal dumpsters outside. The janitors knew that, but they didn't know where it went after that. Only the garbage man knew. He came on Tuesday, and kept his terrible knowledge to himself.

The garbage man traveled the area fulfilling the law of conservation of energy, taking people's trash out of sight. From the cafeteria, it seemed like the trash disappeared through a hole in the wall. But trash is matter, and matter cannot disappear. It cannot be created or destroyed, just moved from one place to another, or

from one form to another. If it was burned, for instance, it would exist all the same in the atmosphere. If it was buried, it would exist all the same underground somewhere. In fact, all the garbage that has accumulated over time, the millions and millions of pounds of garbage from each home each year, still exists somewhere in some form or another. It's a law of the universe and can't be helped.

Some of it was probably burned, and it spread evenly into the air, drifting with currents over land and sea, mixing with other molecules and moving around like it's supposed to, and people breathed it into their lungs, like they're supposed to, and no one ever suspected that they were breathing cheese wrappers in a different form. Some of it was buried underground, and mixed in with the dirt there, and was carried around by worms, and mixed in even more, until a tree root stuck down and grabbed it and sucked up its nutrients. If it was an apple tree, the nutrients ended up in the firm, fleshy fruit part of the tree, and mixed with the chemicals used to keep the bugs off. In the stores, everyone would appreciate the roundness and perfection of the apple, free of blemishes and coated with a smooth shimmer that they would attribute to the fine, fine nutrients of The Apple State. No one would taste the trash. Or the wax. The container that held the apple wax would be taken away by a garbage man, obeying the law of conservation of energy, and eventually it would be turned into something else, or it would stay in its original form forever, and take up space. There are mountains made out of garbage. People put soil and grass over them, and when it snows everyone sleds like crazy down them. That's good thinking. I always thought they should build wildlife preserves out of trash, trees and animals entirely out of trash. They just need to figure out how to turn trash into living things, using mathematical equations. It's that simple.

No one really knew where the garbage disposal in the cafeteria led to. Some people said that it emptied outside in the shrubs as fertilizer, others said that the garbage disposal pipe went up in the ceiling with all the other pipes and got mixed back in with the food. Maybe the garbage disposal pipe went underground, where a thousand different scientists in laboratory coats worked around the clock to turn the sludge into living animals and trees for my wildlife preserve. One day there would be a breakthrough, and I would hear the cheers in the pipes above.

I stood on the right side of the belt because it was the side I had been on the day before and it seemed to suit me well. There was no need to change. The hose sprayed good and strong and the sink was giant and chrome. I had seen the other dishwasher before, and I remembered that I named him Andrew Jackson, but not because of his hair, or face, and not because of any connection with politics. I saw him carrying a

huge chrome pot to a cook in the back room, and thought: There goes Andrew Jackson, President of the United States, circa 1830.

He was my age and it would be twenty more years before he would be elected president. When he was elected, it would not be because of his voting record, or his grand speeches for the forward progress of the nation. He would be elected because he was Andrew Jackson, President of the United States. It's simply common sense to elect a president President. We had worked together before, and had talked a little. His hair was growing longer, and he looked like a mad scientist. I wanted to run some things by him, some equations about trash and its possibilities, and about our chances of tracking the smells with mathematics, but we had only just met. Mostly he washed dishes and kept to himself, and mostly I washed dishes and kept to myself. When there were no dishes we sprayed the sinks with jets and shot the glasses that came by. Sometimes I waited for him to announce his upcoming candidacy. We put the plates and glasses in trays and stacked the trays on moveable carts, and someone would whisk by and take them.

The job of moving carts around was an entirely different world, all speedy and smug and clean. The cart movers were very clean-cut people, because they were seen by people in the cafeteria. They were hired to be expressions of an efficient, handsomely groomed kitchen staff. They showed interest and concern very well. They were the makeup for the human blemishes of the dishroom, with its wild hair and eyes, hands working quickly with trash and water. The dishwashers got the dirtiest and the wettest uniforms of all the kitchen workers. The cooks got apron suits that buttoned up to their necks, and boxes of plastic gloves. The dishwashers got maid-looking aprons that didn't work to repel food or water. I wore them anyway. The water in the spray ran hot, and it slightly scalded the thumbs and forefingers that held the plate by its side and back.

There was a lull. We cleaned the sinks off.

"When did you start?" Andrew Jackson said across the belt.

"A week ago," I said. "How about you?"

"Three months ago," he said. "I was on dishes, then they moved me to salads. Then they moved me back to dishes."

"Is salads any good?" I asked. It sounded like an all right job, cool and lettucey away from the gray tongue.

He shook his head. "You have to stand there and serve it up like a waiter. I didn't last."

"Did you get to eat any?"

"It's bag salad," he said. "Terrible. Too dry. Anyway, it's all iceberg lettuce. There's not even any romaine in there."

"What's wrong with iceberg lettuce?" Iceberg lettuce, that cold crispy taste, like chewing on an iceberg out of the ground.

"No vitamins. None of that E that romaine's got."

"Iceberg is crispy, though," I said. "It's got some kind of good crunch to it."

"Not bagged iceberg," he said. "It flops around like pickle slices."

"It still tastes like lettuce," I said.

He shook his head. "Lettuce isn't dry," he said, "real lettuce isn't dry at all. Bag lettuce is dry lettuce. It still tastes like lettuce all right. But there's something wrong about it." He paused and thought it over. "It's untrustworthy."

"Working dishes is better?" I said.

"Working dishes is better," he said, "because of this giant hose and this amazing garbage disposal. When you work salads you get those wooden fork-spoons, and clear plastic bowls, and that's it. And you have to stand there, serving it up."

"Why'd they put you back in here?"

"They said I wasn't cut out for lettuce," he said. "I think they wanted me to wear cologne and smile, but they never said anything, they just moved me back here."

"You think I'm cut out for salads?"

He skimmed over me. "No," he said, "you're stuck in the dishroom with me."

Some dishes came through and we cleaned them, stacking the plates and glasses on trays and placing the trays on carts. The movers came through and took them, stacking the plates in a giant carwash dishwasher. More movers, waiting at the end, came through and took them, stacking the plates in front of people and placing the food in front of people. Their plates would come through and we would clean them, again and again. A tray came down the line with a whole sandwich mashed in potatoes, and the sink ate and ate.

"This garbage disposal is pretty good," I said.

"It's fantastic," he said. "Watch this." He picked a small plate and dropped it in the garbage disposal. There was a sound like teeth grinding pieces of teeth. It was miraculously sharp and blasting. Little bits of plate shot up like a little fountain and the plate was gone.

"Fantastic," he said, looking into the sink and then looking at me. "Try it."

I looked around. The buxom kitchen workers were lounging near us, wiping their knives. I looked at him and nodded back at them.

"It's fine," he said. "No one cares." I took a plate and dropped it in the sink. It stuck in the garbage disposal for a moment, blocking the sink and filling it up, hanging on as long as it could before the weight of the water pushed it down. There was a sound like metal nerves and porcelain. Bits of plate emerged and were submerged. There were two plates less to clean.

"This is an excellent sink," I said. Andrew Jackson nodded and took another plate. He held it with his fingers and dropped it into the sink. There were three plates less to clean. The noise was beautiful and fragmented, like a car crash in slow motion. I dropped a glass into the sink. It made a sound like crumpling frozen tinfoil. It was a softer sound than the plate, and I told Andrew Jackson so.

"What's it sound like?" he asked.

"It makes a nice crunch," I said, "not as harsh as the plate." Squishy Can was my boss, the short man who had hired me. He had told me his real name, but that was before I had promised to remember it. He hustled towards us, his short steps looking professional and short. There was a plate in my sink, and I nudged and corralled it into the garbage disposal with powerful jets of water. There was a sound like a boss near an employee doing something wrong. Andrew Jackson fixed his eyes on the belt and washed dishes and I did the same.

"Anything wrong, Sam?" he asked Andrew Jackson.

"Nope," he said, we watched the belt and the dishes. Peas and rolls, butter packets.

"I thought I heard a plate getting ground up," he said. "I told you plates are three dollars each out of your paycheck."

"There was a rush," Sam said, catching my eyes.

"I got real backed up," I said, trying to look like I had been through hell and back, nodding gravely at Squishy Can. A tray came down the line looking like it had been through hell and back and I gave it a nice warm shower.

"They're three dollars each," he said to us before he left, "out of your paycheck, so be careful."

"How much are glasses," I asked Sam after he'd gone.

"Guess."

"Two dollars," I said.

"They're fifty cents," he said.

"Glasses are the way to go," I said.

We had been working long enough to have paid for the dishes we had broken, and I wondered if spending a few hours of my life in work was worth the glorious sounds

of dishes breaking in the sink. I mentioned this to Sam.

“Definitely,” he said. “I think I’d spend eight hours here without pay, just to ground up this whole stack at once.”

“I think I would too,” I said.

“Well,” he said.

He put the stack of plates in the sink and they fed themselves into the garbage disposal one by one. There was a symphony of plate bits in the air, accompanied by the sound of industry versus industry versus insanity. Before it was over I put my stack of plates in the sink and we stood and basked in it. It sounded like eight hours of my life being ground into ten seconds. A tray came down the line with a plate and a glass. The plate had some leftover Jell-o on it, and someone had mutilated it with a fork. I dropped the whole plate into the sink and listened for the sound of Jell-o in the mix of angry teeth and plate.

Sam picked up the glass and dropped it into the crunch. He looked at me and at my tray of glasses. Squishy Can was on his way. As he turned the corner, he was yelling last minute directions to the cooks with his back to us. I snuck a glass into the sink, and it made a sound like a royal whisper echo. I sprayed water down the drain after it to bury the sound waves. Squishy Can’s shoes squeaked on the floor and his mustache led him quickly towards us, like Lassie. I watched the belt for dishes.

Sam took a glass in each hand, and with his fingers took two more. He fed them one at a time into the sink, leaving pauses like a musician. His eyes were closed. He was listening and conducting, and I began to hear the beginning of a strange melody at work. The last glass dropped and his brows knotted for a moment, and then released as the sound rose around us. I was silent, my hands at my sides. I was waiting for the applause. Squishy Can was behind him.

“There goes an hour of work for you,” he said to Sam, angry, “and I saw those plates, too.” He didn’t look at me when he said it, and I didn’t know if he saw me or not.

Sam nodded at him and looked at my tray of glasses. He looked at me. There was a feeling like something was expected of me. It was all around me. It was in my ears. I looked at the boss and tried to figure out if I was caught or not. A tray came down the line with a glass on it. Alone, empty, rolling. Squishy Can looked at me and I took the glass in my hand. He turned back to Sam. I took the glass in my hand.

“A whole day of work for nothing,” he said, shaking his head at Sam. Sam nodded at him and looked at the belt, watching the food and the dishes as he washed

them. Squishy Can muttered and left, glancing back a few times before disappearing into his office.

“Looks like you’ve still got your whole paycheck,” Sam said, envious and disappointed.

“Looks like I’ll be buying the drinks tonight,” I said, washing dishes.

JOSHUA SERRANO

Juan's Rising Sun

Some unimportant people called astronauts
died in a skyward rocket, engorged
in a tangle of flames and towers of flailing smoke—
the most expensive death in the history of the world,
mourned across the nation.

I remember when I last mourned,
afraid to look on Juan's cold dead remains, slouched
uncomfortably in the pew, listening
to "Wind Beneath My Wings."
Juan would have asked for "The House of the Rising Sun,"
but nobody can recall that.

Crazy Juan Contreras—that's how he'll be remembered—rolling
to his death out of a door-less jeep, flying
down a deserted highway in some generic Mid-West town.

He'll be remembered for quitting school,
knocking off a gas station for less than a hundred dollars,
landing on his face after a drunken fall from a cliff,
and starting a monolithic brawl at a skin-head party.

Now, they roll his body to an empty pit in the earth.
Tears march down puffy cheeks, roll down
trembling lips, down quivering chins, dropping
down, down to ground,
as the mariachi band wails "Amor Eterno"
and strums furiously at beat-up instruments.

The mourners lower their heads and wipe away
tears of pity, not of love, as they listen

to the Mexican elegy—so foreign to their ears—and
imagine Juan's drunken swan dive onto Highway 29.

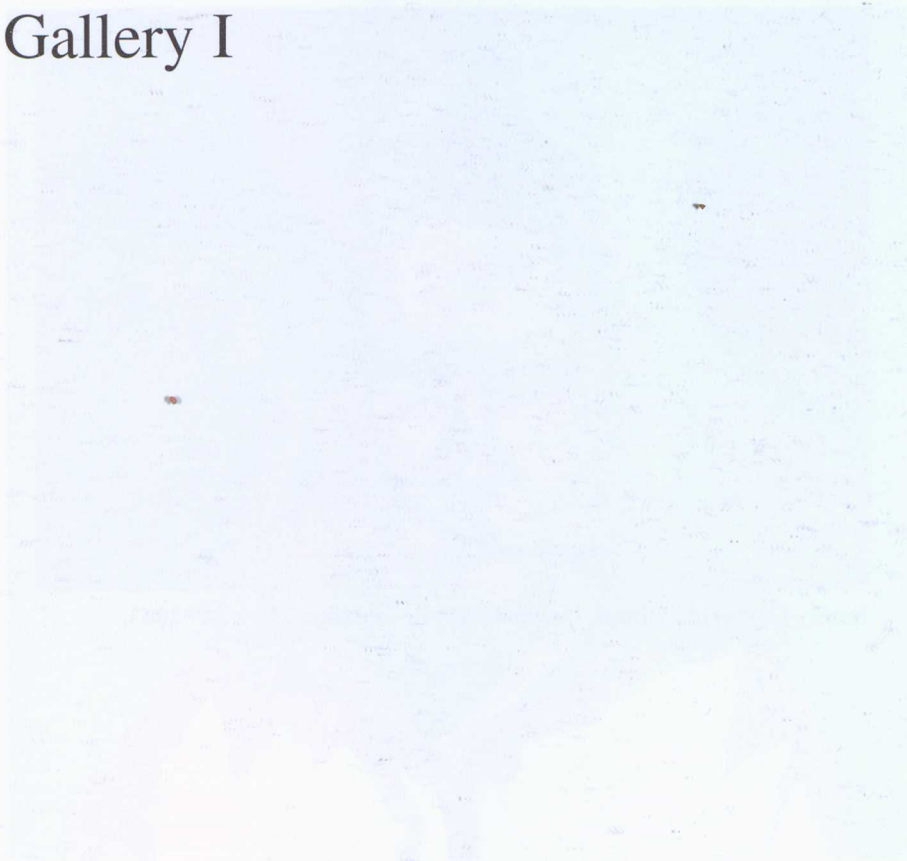
Tomorrow, his tragedy will fade, fade away,
like a tiny ripple at the bottom of a well,
until his memory is as dead as his body.

And yet the astronauts have become gods of the sky—
their glory rising where their shuttle failed,
blazing through the news
like a forest fire raping the countryside.
Oh I've got rape in mind—I'll sing of rape.

Cuz' I'm gonna buy me a car
a big fancy one
A custom made, six-billion-
dollar rocket
And I'm gonna name it
"Juan's Rising Sun"
Then launch into hyper-speed
and collide with Mt. Rushmore
And sever the heads
of my favorite presidents.

(For my cousin, Juan Contreras)

Gallery I



Faint, illegible text, possibly a caption or description of the artwork shown in the gallery.



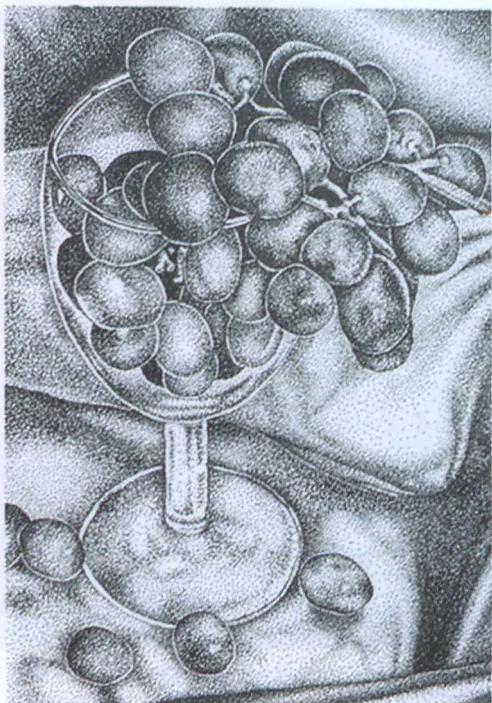
Sandy Catherine Olund, *Untitled*, acrylic and oils, 23" x 24" 2003.



Jessica Rosenbaum, *Melissa's fake ID says her eyes are blue but they are really green*, oil on canvas, 3' x 3' 2003.



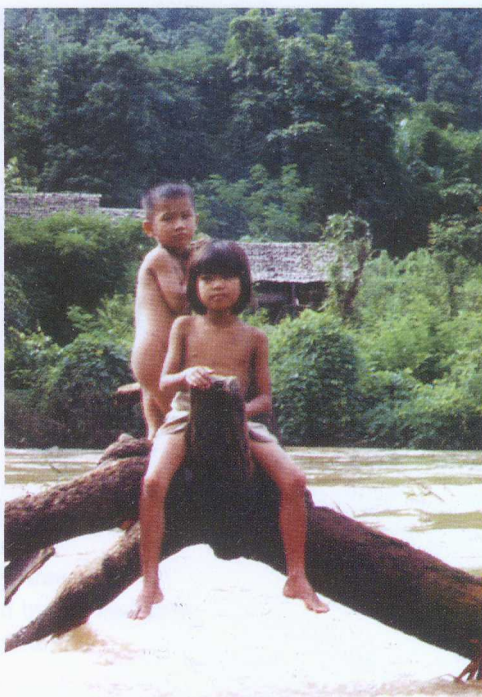
Heather Keister, *Dragon's Spear*, watercolor, 21" x 28" 2002.



Nicole Poindexter, *Grapes*, pen and ink, 4" x 6" 2003.



Chris Rogers, *School of Fish*, mixed media, 20" x 30" 2003.



Hamilton Waters, *Emptiness*, Shoklo Refugee Camp,
Thailand, photograph, 5 3/4" x 4" 2003.



Jessica Rose Witte, *Please with sugar on top*, installation with rice and sugar sprinkles, 6' x 11' 2003.

DREW POLAKOFF

Common Misunderstanding

Fortunately,
No such real thing
Is a *brokenheart*,
Only in metaphor.
When *broken*,
It is reported *to be ripped*
Apart, though working
Perfectly, not truly
sore.
But certain news
Can incite rapid mammoth
Flow. And the mind,
It cannot comply, thus
Drowns, usurped by the undertow,
And of a brokenbrain,
People do die.

ADAMC.KOTLARCZYK

Lines to the Girl I Haven't Yet Met

Day One

My friends call this my Big Two-Hearted River trip, but I don't know. I landed in Washington early this morning. Hot. Haze rising heavy over the wide gray Potomac. Air heavy in my lungs.

The trip is to visit my two remaining grandparents. Not long, just three days, a long weekend. Grandpa is recovering from a stroke. I haven't seen him in ten years and, honestly, he looks different. I remembered a barrel-chested, smiling man, robust. But he is smaller now, shrunken somehow, concave shoulders. His eyes are still lively, his brain still quick, but there's no denying it. He is old.

I remember all the memorials from the trips I used to make out here as a kid with my parents. The charm of those monuments wears off pretty quick. Tired marble, vainglorious carvings, people yapping on cell phones, blindly taking home movies, yelling at bored kids. Jefferson, Washington, Lincoln... they were just men. They all had good traits and bad. Jefferson with his slaves, you know. Now we lionize them.

Worse are the war memorials. Vietnam, that black wall rising all around me like mute death, the bizarre silence as I descend and the wall rises around me. The Korean memorial... that is new to me... a bunch of statues of soldiers carrying weapons. They look confused, scared. The memorials list the casualties... over 100,000 killed, combined. For what? To stop communism. Communism that crumbled on its own. For what?

Back at their house, he still calls Grandma "Mother," and she calls him "Daddy." He's seven years older, and, back when they met, he was too shy to even ask her out. His mom called her, told her there was someone standing there who wanted to talk to

her. He was 26. I went to their 50th wedding anniversary about ten years ago. It's so fucking beautiful. Maybe that really does happen.

I could spend hours at the Vietnam memorial. A trio of black men stands at one end, thumbing through the catalogs, looking up lost friends. "He died in November, when I had a month left, when I was real short." They know people on that wall. My throat tightens. I want to say, "Excuse me, but you were over there?" and shake their hands and say thank you. What did they do for me? Protect my freedom? Bullshit. I wasn't even born. But they did do something. They taught me. They taught me that you need to do your job, and sometimes to fight against injustice, against a government that pursues unjust wars, that frivolously throws away the lives of its men and women. They taught me never to accept injustice, not at any level. You need to resist it—maybe that is the most important thing—even if the only way you know how to do it is to write stupid stories.

All the roads in Virginia and Washington curve around; there are no straight lines. In traffic, it's practically impossible to keep from getting lost. I read that some French guy—*L'Enfant* or something—designed the place. I hope they hanged him and quartered him in a traffic circle. It takes two hours to get back to my grandparents.

I jog at dusk, after dinner, although it is still hot. Along a little trickling creek on a nature path that no one seems to know about, my shoes crunching and seizing the gravel path. It is practically deserted, and the day's heat and humidity still hang thick and heavy in pockets in the undergrowth. I am coated with sweat that won't dry, one mile, two miles. My shirt drips. Up a hill, the loose gravel costing me footing, the burning in my quads, three miles, my calves tight as knots. I run to remember you, and to forget. I run so that the ache in my legs and the burning in my lungs overpowers me, makes me forget about all the lesser internal pains you've caused me. I keep running, up the hills, alone on the trail. Back down, past a lone man walking his dog, out of the woods, into the neighborhood again, into civilization... four miles.

I wonder if you got my letter today. I checked, but no emails, no messages. Did you not respond because you didn't think I'd be checking? Did you not read it? Do you just not care? How did we get here from there, from where we were, from love? How does that change to apathy?

I know you had a wedding to go to. I remember you telling me you had RSVP'd and I was stuck going with you, back to your podunk hometown (that you always hated more than I). I wonder if that was this weekend. I wonder if you've already found someone else to go with. I wonder if you did the right thing and went alone, or took an old friend. You would be the first.

I watched preseason football with my grandfather tonight. He was laying in bed, still suspended, the fan on. It's hot, but he's anemic, wrapped in blankets. He'd alternate between watching the game and leaning back and staring straight up at the ceiling fan. It was like something out of a Faulkner novel, me in the Old South, and him... moths kept bumping against the windowpane.

I lie in bed tonight and listen to the sounds and it reminds me of when we used to go camping. I hear the crickets, the chorus of nighttime insects, a distant bullfrog. I half expect to hear the smoky, popping wood of our fire, to see your face smiling warmly at me from a lawn chair—you, drunk already on half a bottle of *Boone's Farm*, winking sexual innuendos even as I can see in your eyes that unforgettable look of being lost when you look at me. How does that go away? How does it go from that to the cold, clipped phone conversations? These thoughts drift into my dreams, and, as I sleep, I smell campfires, and fresh earth, and old forests.

Day Two

My friends call this my Big Two-Hearted River trip, but I know better. Don't I? This isn't literature; it's some embarrassingly autobiographical self-discovery, straight out of a first-year college creative writing course. After all this, it's just another fucking love story. Maybe they all are.

Today: Arlington Cemetery. It's immense, all those acres on top of bones, rolling green hills of bones and symmetrical gleaming white bone headstones, rounded tops like old, dull teeth protruding from grassy gums. A country of old bleached bones: generals, colonists, slaves, Indians... bones on top of bones and more bones, and we're only a few hundred years old. Think of the *Old World*, of France and Italy and England. Generations of forgotten bones.

Joyce, I think (from the little of him that actually makes sense to me), was right about the dead. So was Charles Wright. They are everywhere, control everything...

but are unknowable. Whispered suggestions. They haunt us with an intangible, invisible, echoing presence, remind us vaguely with a scent or image or sometimes touch of things we've forgotten or are forgetting. Wet paper blown smooth against a fence. Sometimes the dead aren't even dead when they remind us.

I went to Kennedy's grave, saw the everlasting flame burning there, where he is buried with his wife and two infant sons... and a few paces away, his brother. Etched in stone are parts of his more famous speeches. "Ask not what your country can do for you" and all that. I didn't expect it to move me, so I was surprised when it did. I thought of the news clip of McCarthy's political HQ getting the news of Bobby's death, a shocked silence, hopeless crying.

Arlington Cemetery was originally the home of Confederate General Robert E. Lee. You can still go to his plantation house; it rests atop a high hill overlooking the entire cemetery, looking out across the Potomac into the District. From his front porch you can see the Capitol dome, the monuments: Washington, Lincoln, Jefferson. I spent some time there this afternoon.

In 1861, Lee was a decorated and respected colonel in the United States Army, having served his country well in Mexico and even as commander of the force that captured militant abolitionist John Brown at Harper's Ferry. Lee loved his country; he married a descendant of George Washington. But his state seceded from the Union. The United States sent him a letter, asking him to command all its military forces in the upcoming endeavor. From the second-story bedroom that I stood in today, Lee wrote a letter. He declined that command, choosing instead to fight bravely for his home state and with his people in a cause that he must have known, even at the beginning, had almost no hope.

On the battlefield, he was a genius—worshipped by his men (they'd take off their hats when he passed), cunning and aggressive. Without him the war might well have ended in '62 or '63. But his aggressiveness was his ultimate undoing, shattering his invincible army over three days on impossible ground and on the blue rocks in the hills of a small town in Pennsylvania. They never recovered. He was a pious man, chivalrous and gentlemanly. A family man. But so sad. You can see it in his pictures, in his eyes.

I wonder if he stood on that front porch after writing his letter, after betraying his country—after making his choice—the way I did today, leaning against one of those giant pillars, looking across the Potomac at the buildings and the country that he had spent a lifetime creating and defending... realizing they were now his enemy. I wonder about the look on his face. No photograph could have captured it. I wonder if that is how you looked after me when I walked away, back to my car, after you said goodbye.

During the war, the federal government seized his land. They started to bury the dead soldiers there, close enough to see from the house's windows. If he'd gone back to Arlington, he would have had to look out at the consequences everyday.

Most people just stop by the big-name graves, pass by thousands of other headstones without a glance. Looking for celebrities, the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, John Kennedy, Taft. Their cameras click, camcorders roll, cell phones ring. But beneath every marker lies a man, and I nearly get lost from the tour group while reading them. I must be gone for an hour in the fevered heat and dripping damp of Virginia August. Dead from Vietnam, Korea, WWII, the Great War. Thousands and thousands, almost a million. And, of course, the Civil War. Two-thousand-one hundred of them in one grave. Then individually. Enos Williams, Company F of the 52nd Kentucky Artillery. What was your voice?

I ran again today. Earlier in the day. It was still hot though it had just rained... ghostly fingers of steam tickled up off the black hot asphalt. A little farther today. I needed the burn a little more. The purge of sweat.

When I got back, I found an old volume of Frost on my grandparents' shelves. Most people think of him as the warm, patriotic New England farmer. But they should read "Acquainted with the Night." Or, like me, they should live it. I was watching football again with my grandfather in his white tee shirt and suspenders; Michael Vick broke his leg, snapped it. Awful.

I thought about you again, in spite of myself. I wondered what you were doing, and who you were with, even though I guess I probably know. Was that wedding this weekend? Are you dancing with him? I wanted to talk with you. I thought I should tell you about the first girl who broke my heart, almost fifteen years ago, thought that

might make a difference. But with all the others since, it isn't important; it isn't unusual. The important girl will be the first one who doesn't. I'd thought it would be you.

Here it is storming: thunder and lightning higher than the giant oaks. It is midnight and here it is storming.

Day Three

My friends call this my Big Two-Hearted River trip, and they might be right. Nick finally came to a moment when "he felt he had left everything behind, the need for thinking, the need to write, other needs. It was all back of him." Is it all back of me?

I saw the FDR memorial today for the first time... a brown, botanic plaza of statues and walls etched with quotations and carved by waterfalls. It was cooler today and less damp after the night's rain; in the shade, it was cool and puddled and fresh. Again, a passionate leader, eloquent.

I walked from the FDR all the way around the Tidal Lagoon, watched young couples in paddleboats happily plodding through the coppery reflection of the Jefferson Memorial in still waters. Over a bridge and to the Washington Monument, where I could look toward the Reflecting Pool and the Lincoln Memorial and see the construction of a new monument under way—I think it was the WWII Memorial. They always find more things to memorialize, more statues to build, more dead to remember.

I walked then to the National Gallery. Renoir, Van Gogh, Monet, Cezzane... portraits of fathers, gardeners, artists; landscapes, cathedrals, the sea. I let them talk to me for the afternoon, whispers and dances in rotting barns and shipwrecks and empty bridges; I looked through their eyes at their worlds. I must have seen the entire gallery. It was getting dark when I caught the Metro green line at the Archives-Navy Memorial station.

I come home tomorrow. Tomorrow it will be one year ago that we met.

Part of me still wants to believe in happy endings. To think that while I've been pounding and sweating out everything on the winding, wood-canopied trails that you

found your own version of that solitary peace. That you realized the mistake you were making. But I know that realization won't come for a year at least, if it comes at all. I know it because it has happened to me before.

My grandfather may not have much time. His mind is still sharp, but his body is slowly giving out on him. Tomorrow before taking the Metro to the airport I will say goodbye to him and he will hold my handshake a little longer and we will both silently wonder if it will be the last time. He still calls Grandma "My bride" or "Mother" or sometimes "Momma." She calls him her "English Patient" and takes perfect care of him. Those two... I will never have that.

I will have the galleries, the memorials, the black wall of names.

You will be a wing in my locked gallery of disappointments, and I will return now and then—not always willingly—to see our history on the walls. The crisp-lined sunrise newness of our early neo-classicism; the soft-smiling, violet Christmas blurs of our warm impressionism; but also the pale, midnight-diner emptiness of our colorless modernism, the confused and angry strokes of our lost contemporary period.

I will bury you. Build you your own tooth-white headstone beneath my kitchen window, build another monument of mind on my littered green quadrangle, a smiling statue to visit from time to time and pleasantly remember. Etched with some of your sayings that I enjoy remembering, on whose marble letters I will smooth my calloused fingers. And like I do at Lincoln, or FDR, or Kennedy, I will mourn when I visit, and try in vain to feel the presence of your ghost. As I do at those monuments, I will pause a moment and silently wonder how—with a little more luck, a little more cooperation from Fate, a little more time—my life... both our lives... might have somehow been different.

Tomorrow I come home.

ROBERTWODZINSKI

Saturday.

A subtle rupture,
god vapor cleft into powdery
aerial cleavage scenes
above two sport teams,
hanging as awkward bulbs
now apart, the sun highlighting
facial hair inconsistencies, and
then suddenly "ocean is a godhead word"
lingers, with a hand now on top of mine,
the playing field seemingly scripted
to a negative rapture.

A rapture so voluminous that
one player's insult re-seals the clouds
with an audible churn,
a heavenly indigestion,
a "fuck you" and a swung arm
to persuade teeth to leave their homes
in fabulous red swells.

The mouths of lookers form big O's.

Their necks crane back
as water begins to fall from above
and into their eyes.

NATHANDETTMAN

Like Butter

Alan: Hello. What are we looking at here? It appears that you are looking at a small man who is really not doing well. I'm pretty sure I'm on the verge of death. About twenty minutes ago, I was stabbed in the asshole by a large Dominican man in an alley by the bridge. I don't mean fucked in the ass, never by a Dominican. I was stabbed with a knife in the ass. Let me tell you, I'm lucky to be standing here on this spot, which I am standing on. I bled, gushing for the first ten minutes straight out of my asshole. It stopped. The blood stopped gushing out. I began walking. I'm almost positive I began walking. Wait, am I walking now? *(Yelling)* Please, tell me if I'm walking. I can't tell that I'm not walking, but I can tell by the way you are all looking at me that I look as if I've never walked, as if you are certain I will never take another step. Half of you are going to start as soon as I say the word which I am going to say, as soon as I stop annoying you will start giving to me and really just say the word that you don't know but I do which is, betting. I said it. It's been thrown out there. The idea to bet on—how much longer I have to live. I'm about to breathe my last breath and I will fall to my knees then fully flat to the floor and die here in front of you. I can tell some of you will be glad to see me die of an ass wound. I'd be glad to see any one of you dying from a stab wound in the ass. It would actually be hysterical. I would probably laugh so hard I would piss my pants, burp, fart, hiccup, pop my ears, shit my pants, cough, and sneeze all at the same time and die of a heart attack covered in piss and shit and make whichever of you got stabbed in the asshole look honorable. As if they had died for their country from a stab to the asshole. *(Pause)* I really don't want to die here. A room full of strangers and I'm dying from an ass stab. I'm dying and you all probably think I'm racist because I blamed my ass stab on a Dominican. I only blamed a Dominican because my friend told me—oh, all right, I'm a flippin' huge racist. I figure if I weren't the one stabbing my asshole it would be a Dominican. It wasn't a Dominican. There was a Dominican a long time ago. He broke my heart. I'm not really a racist. *(Pause)* I was masturbating, sitting on the kitchen counter. I wanted to be fucked so fucking hard I wouldn't be able to survive. I wanted to know I could still feel. It went in like butter. I got scared; I was shaking, but then felt nothing. *(Pause)* Yes, my constant rubbing of the genitals. This definitely is not for

shock value. I'm not trying to sicken you, or arouse you, or question your morals. I've known I was going to die for going on twenty-five minutes now. I figured out after five minutes of dying that nothing matters, for me. Of course, for those of you not moments from death everything matters. I'm a dying man. No one can deny a man slipping toward death the chance to grope his cock in an attempt to feel something, anything. At this point I can't feel much else. I hit myself thirty-one times in the leg before I would believe that my legs were already gone. Shame on any of you who think this is inappropriate or crass. This is a dying man's last wish. This is a man who wanted to just feel something as he is dying. Not go out in numbness. Dying before death. Letting my mind go with my body. Wasting the last moment of life. Shouldn't a man feel death? How could masturbation lead to a knife in the ass?

Pain can please
those in need
so try and seize
the chance to tease
and always feed
the feeling you freed.

JOSHUA SERRANO

Taco's Trophies

I looked across the train tracks at the tangle of sharp, naked tree limbs in front of the moon. Paul took a seat next to me on the long, ripped-out car seat, which leaned up against the red-brick building of the run-down Chillicothe Locker Plant. A train sounded in the distance, approaching from across the Illinois River.

Paul lit a cigarette and considered my advice as he thumbed his red goatee. Finally, he said, "I know you've thought about it before, but it's different with me. They're not just—just thoughts anymore. I came here last night by myself and sat on those fucking steps, and I said to myself, 'I'm gonna do it. I'm gonna fucking do it.' I had no fear." The trains whistled again, and soon the ground began to tremble as the train drew nearer.

"You didn't do it because you really don't want to. You just like to think you do."

"No man, I'm fucking telling you, that train started coming, and I hopped onto the tracks and just waited. I felt all-powerful. I was going to end it. I'm telling you, in that moment that I watched the train, I was all-powerful. You know? Fuck this world." Paul's talks of suicide had become more frequent lately, but I had no intention of calling the suicide hotline. Maybe it's because I didn't care or maybe because I knew he wouldn't kill himself. Paul often went through cycles of rage and depression. I once sympathized with his disordered life, but we had grown apart from each other over the last year, and I could no longer stomach his melodrama.

He had been this way since I met him in junior high. At the time, we were both metalheads, we both had been in a few fistfights, and both of us felt like outcasts. We bonded instantly, and, within a few months, we thought of each other as brothers. Both of us saw life as a slow, tragic, meaningless journey, but Paul claimed to detect something more. "Life is full of hate," he advised me, "and you have to hate back to survive."

Paul was a proud racist, and even though he knew I was half Mexican, he accepted me as a brother because he believed my lack of Mexican culture negated my father's "spic genes." He even bought me a Confederate bandana, so we could wear the same colors. I remember proudly wearing the bandana home one day. Outraged, my father ripped it off my head and told me, "Never come in my house wearing that

trash." I couldn't understand why my dad was angry; I thought he was trying to prevent me from having friends. I was confused.

Later that year, Paul showed me a map of Los Angeles. On top of the city he had drawn four rings, all different in color. "See this?" he asked and pointed to the center. "This is where I drop the bomb." He was referring to the homemade A-bomb that he had been researching. "The blast goes as far as this blue ring, and the rest are different degrees of lethal radiation." He smiled. "This would take out about a million niggers."

Of course, Paul never built the A-bomb or destroyed the city of Los Angeles; but as I looked on the map, unwilling to acknowledge the sickness I had just witnessed, I felt like a part of me was destroyed instead. I felt myself drifting toward something dark and hateful, but I was powerless to change it. Paul's friendship was so important to me then that I ignored all of my thoughts that told me Paul was crazy. But that only lasted for so long. Soon, Paul's beliefs rubbed off on me. By freshman year of high school, Paul had formed a group of angry teenagers like him. They felt awkward including a half-breed like me in their group so they joked that I was "the only *cool* greasy Mexican" to trivialize their discomfort. Soon, "Greasy Mexican" became my nickname. The group spent its time away from school complaining about life. In school, Paul and the gang bullied classmates. Kevin Quan, the only Chinese kid in our small school, was Paul's favorite kid to bully; and I always stood at the back of the group and watched Paul torment Kevin, wondering if I really hated Kevin like everyone else.

On a December afternoon during my sophomore year, I flipped through my father's 1973 yearbook and came across a black and white photograph of the high school trophy case where a classmate had written in blue ink, "Taco's Trophies." Laughing, I showed my father the photograph. "They used to call you Taco too?" I asked.

Angrily, he slapped the book out of my hands. "You let your friends call you that?" he growled. Surprised at the outrage, I took a step back and explained that my friends were only joking. "Those aren't jokes," he told me. "They're racist assholes. If you bring them around here, I'll knock them over the head. See if they think that's funny."

Later, I snuck into his room and found the yearbook and read the nicknames his friends had written: *Burrito*, *Taco Vender*, *Nacho*, *Border Jumper*. Curiously, I flipped to his photograph and saw a dark Mexican youth with a head of thick curly hair and a somber frown. I wondered if my own face looked as despondent as his. Later that week, I saw Kevin Quan's face sink into that same painful frown. I

remember Paul asked Kevin if his parent's restaurant was hiring, and Kevin said no. Paul then used his fingers to make his eyes slant and said, "You—white bastard—no work at my store. Only for Chinese—white bastard." As usual, we all erupted in laughter. Kevin looked at the ground dejectedly. His lower lip trembled before he tucked it in his mouth and looked up at me with accusative eyes. I stopped laughing and watched him slowly turn away.

At lunch, I told Paul, "Look, I don't want you to do that in front of me anymore, okay? It's not funny. Well, it's funny, but—you know—it's not right. I won't be a part of it no more."

"He's a fucking gook, Serrano. Christ, what's up your ass?" Paul asked, shaking his head. An ugly argument ensued. "You're just sticking up for him because you're a fucking beaner," he shouted at me. I ended the argument by grabbing my tray and moving to a table by myself. Over Christmas break, Paul and I didn't speak. One night, he drank a bottle of Jack Daniels and fought his dad and two cops. He was put into a rehabilitation clinic for a month. I only wrote to him once. He never returned my letter. When he got home, he replaced the Confederate flags in his room with American flags, vowing to me that he was a changed man. Two months later, he finished his outpatient program and put his Confederate flags back up.

He became an alcoholic and soon dropped out of high school. We spoke from time to time on the phone and shared an occasional beer, but the friendship we once maintained was never restored. He began talking of suicide off-and-on, looking for me to sympathize with him, but I didn't. And as I watched the train fly down the tracks, pushing dead leaves up into the air, I knew this night was no different; I no longer had sympathy to give. "Yeah the world sucks all right," I told him, just as the train passed, "so why don't you just kill yourself, huh? Fuck the world, right?" He said nothing. "You always say you're going to do things, but you never do." I waited for a response. None came. "And you won't because you're just full of shit. Just like every other time you bother me with this nonsense." He flicked his cigarette out onto the road, nodded his head, and agreed.

Later that night, Paul swallowed a half bottle of pills. He finished his suicide note just as he passed out and went into a deep sleep. He awoke sixteen hours later, surprised to still be alive. He showed me the suicide note later that day, and I was not surprised by its contents. He made no apologies to anyone; it was mostly self-centered babble about how unfair life has been to him. Wordlessly, I gave it back to him. "What do you think?" he asked.

“You’re right, life isn’t fair,” I told him coldly. I began walking toward the door. He blocked my way and asked me where I was going. “To hang out with Kevin Quan,” I answered. Surprise showed on his face as I pushed past him and walked out of his house into the chill autumn air, feeling my face slip into its first satisfied smile in years.

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Gallery II





Jessica Rosenbaum, *Untitled*, oil on canvas, 4' x 4' 2003.



Nicole Poindexter, *Invisible Man*, graphite, 9" x 11" 2003.



Sandy Catherine Olund, *Untitled 2*, acrylic, oils, and mixed media, 30" x 30"
2003.

MEAL



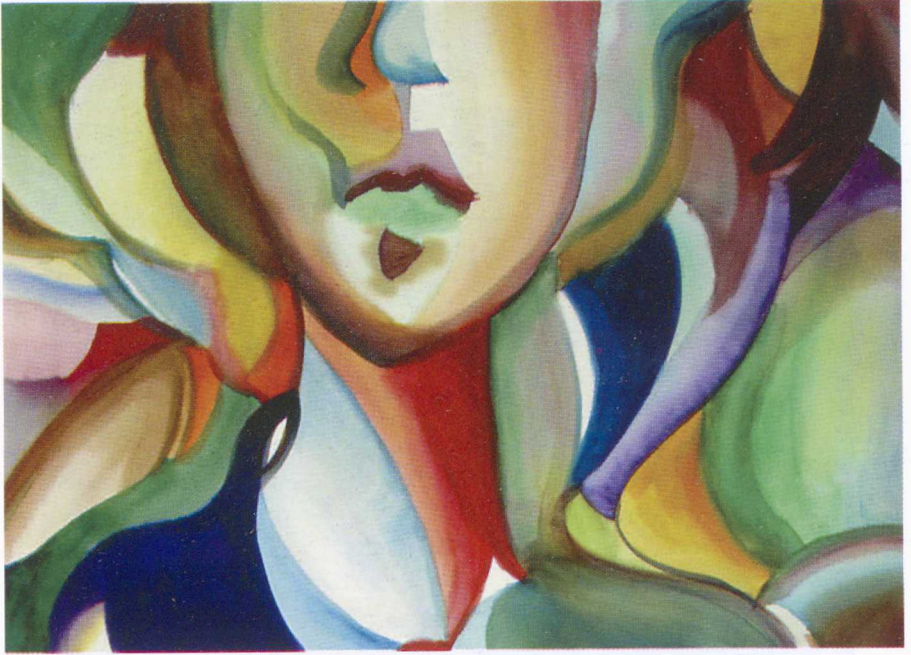
Andy Tafelski, *Meal*, digital art, 9 1/2" x 3 1/2" 2004.



Hamilton Walters, *Rainy Season*, photograph, 4" x 5" 2003.



Chris Rogers, *Flat Eric at a Rave*, mixed media, 20" x 30" 2003.



Heather Keister, *Memory of a Schoolgirl's Kiss*, watercolor, 21" x 28" 2002.

LISE MAE SCHLOSSER

Her Stride

Yes!
She would buy the flowers
Herself.

A day like this deserves flowers;
a day that blooms
round and jagged,
blossoms
piquant and sweet.

Why pine away for someone to present them?
A tired token of obligated emotions
gratitude, regret, love, apology.

What a lark!
What a plunge!

The words of some novel
echo in the beat of
her stride.

Why should she wait
for an occasion
where someone else
chooses each sprig
assigns each placement?
Unnatural design.

No time to wait.
For on such a day,
a day with silken petal air,
life itself
is the party.

LISE MAE SCHLOSSER

Yes

She twizzled the word in her mouth
letting it roll along her tongue
savoring it like a piece of candy
tapping it tentatively against her teeth
and letting it puff out her cheeks.
She let its juices slide into the spaces
at the back of her throat.
She sucked on its flavor
until it was almost gone
and she could finally answer
yes.

EREK ARMENTROUT

Meiyo

Yowai

The room is very quiet. At least to me it is. I am not really paying attention to anything around me, except for Yuuki, my former friend. I do not want to miss what is going to happen to him. Not any of it. I think drums are playing. They are standard for this type of ritual. Yuuki is dressed in his ceremonial kimono. My rage and my tear-filled eyes are focused on him. I am sure everyone can hear me crying. I am certain it is quite loud, but I do not care. My wife is dead after all.

I loved my wife, Baishunfu, and these tears I now cry are solely for her. Not for Yuuki. He may have been my friend and companion once, but no more. My wife loved me and I loved her with all my heart. From the moment we met she always made me feel complete when she was near. When I held her, the world went away and all troubles, all fears, disappeared. I am broken now. A part of me is gone, lost forever, and nothing will ever fill that void again. Even more so, I have been dishonored. I will do anything to gain my honor back, but Shihaiasha will not let me. He will not let me be the *kaishakunin*, the second man, who assists in the ritual. Shihaiasha said my rage and need for revenge are too strong to act fairly. He is probably right, and I must do what he says regardless. He is my *daimyo*, my lord, and I am his retainer.

Shihaiasha has never experienced this type of dishonor before. The death of a wife is a sorrow unknown to my *daimyo*. Since that day, I feel as if I have been falling eternally into darkness with nothing to grasp to end my descent. Only Yuuki's death can bring me to light. I could blame Shihaiasha for what happened. He was the one who accepted Yuuki into his house. Such a dishonest and dishonorable man should be a *rurounin*, a wanderer, forever. I do not regret what my *daimyo* did, though. I made the mistake of letting Yuuki near my wife.

The tears well up inside me and I am unable to withhold them. They roll on, never ending, like a waterfall. Yuuki sits before me, lacking empathy. There is no emotion on his face whatsoever. No pain, sadness, regret, sympathy, or fear. He looks like a stone statue. The room is still, much like Yuuki. My sobs rack my body as I hold focus on him and only him. I wish Baishunfu were alive to witness this.

Yuuki is looking at me but his eyes are unfocused. He is most likely imagining where he is going, or remembering where he has been. In the past he was a great man.

He was never married because he was so dedicated to our *daimyo* and to the sword. He fought with great passion in battle. When we fought one of our rival houses, Yuuki gave us strength. His cry could be heard across the valley and when I looked ahead I saw him pressing on, leading others with his courage. We lost the battle that day, yet he still pressed on. Ten men had to withhold him and bring him back to the castle. It is amazing he has lived this long.

Everyone is watching me now. Even Yuuki focuses his gaze on me. My *daimyo* is coming to me. The ritual is ready to begin. Shihaiha looks at me and nods. I return a nod to him to show I am ready. It is all my body can do in its quivering state. He looks around the room and addresses Yuuki. Shihaiha speaks in a loud, clear, and powerful voice, "You have dishonored yourself, your comrade, and your *daimyo*. There is only one way you can redeem yourself and that is *seppuku*. Are you ready?"

Yuuki nods in response. How I hate him. My gums bleed from clenching my teeth so hard in anger. After he is gone I can be at peace, and hopefully Baishunfu can be as well. My honor will finally be restored.

Shihaiha returns to me and takes his place by my side. Apart from me, he has the best view for the ritual. I can no longer wait. The anticipation makes the crying unstoppable. My hands bleed from the pressure of my nails digging into my flesh. I want to scream at Yuuki. I hope his face burns with pain and fear when he begins to cut himself. I hope he is reborn as a fly. If anything he will be reborn as a scorpion. Then, much like the fable of the fox, everyone will know his true nature. His nature of betrayal and pain. I wish the worst upon him.

Yuuki begins by lifting the *kozuka*, the ceremonial knife. He looks to my lord for approval, as if he needs it, but receives none. Then he cuts open his stomach.

There is not much blood initially, not until he pulls out his intestines. Then it really starts to flow. It seeps across the *tutami* mat. Yuuki bows his head, knowing it is time. The *kaishakunin* raises his katana and with one clean stroke cuts through Yuuki's neck.

It is over and I am still unsatisfied. Yuuki's head hangs on by a thin strip of flesh. It looks like he is bowing. He looks so honorable. There was no fear or pain on his face. His eyes had a horrible, blank expression that will haunt me forever. It is too much for me. I scream in anguish. I still feel dishonored. I still feel the loss of Baishunfu. Questions plague me that I want answered immediately, but I can no longer hold together. My honor has not been restored. I collapse, continuing my fall into darkness with no hope of ever stopping, and the world goes black around me.

Baishunfu

In this room I silently watch. No one can see me. I am only a spirit waiting for the outcome of the events that will unfold. I wait and watch Yowai and Yuuki. I linger here for Yuuki, who will come join me in death, but I am also here for Yowai. I wish to see his suffering end and his honor restored.

I loved my husband and I am sorry for what I did. I met Yowai five years before Yuuki came to Shihaiasha's house and instantly knew he was the man I was going to marry. He had gentle eyes and was the most honorable retainer in the castle. I was just a lowly servant girl, the daughter of one of the lesser samurai. I admired my father, but I idolized Yowai. He and my father had fought many battles together and formed a great bond. I wanted a bond like that with Yowai, so I sought his favor and gained it. I sent him one of my most beautiful fans and he presented me with one of his own. After a month of courting we were married.

Shihaiasha approved of our marriage immediately, as did the rest of the house. I was the most desired girl in the castle and Yowai was the most admired retainer. We were an ideal match. When we were together Yowai would gently caress my body, giving me pleasure no man could ever know. He would hold me for hours after we made love and stroke my hair. I was euphoric. We were inseparable.

Those days were the best of my life, but it could not—it did not—last. Yowai became distant to me. After five years of marriage I still had not borne him a child. He was upset by this, as any man would be. Yowai stopped giving me attention. Every now and then I would all but force myself on him. He would oblige me, of course, but the gentleness was gone. The pleasure was gone. I assumed he was having an affair. What else could explain his lack of interest in me?

I began following him; however, he showed no signs of adultery. I asked other members of the house if Yowai had been unfaithful. They all said the same thing: *No*. I confronted Yowai with my accusation finally. He said, "You have yet to bear me an heir after all these years. I have given up hope that I will ever have a child. That is why I no longer touch you as I once did. This does not mean I no longer love you. I still do, with all my heart." He held me as I wept, and when I finished we made love for the final time.

Soon after, Yuuki came to join our house. Shihaiasha discovered him in the local village. He was a *ruroujin* with fire in his eyes. Our *daimyo* was as instantly intrigued by this young man as I. Yuuki had the same gentleness to his eyes that Yowai once did. There was something more though: Yuuki had passion. My husband rarely showed any of the devotion and zest that was inside of Yuuki. He was everything Yowai was

and more. If only Yuuki had come to our house earlier, I would have married him instead. If only.

Yuuki was a more honorable man than my husband ever was. He was stern yet compassionate, strong yet soft, handsome yet humble. Yuuki was the ideal samurai who followed the *bushido* strictly. Nothing else mattered to this man except upholding ideals. I doubted a man like that could ever love a woman. It was not in his nature because it would distract him from his duty. I was wrong about Yuuki, just as I was wrong about my marriage to Yowai.

It all began when Shihaiasha sent my husband to escort his daughter to one of the neighboring houses. Yowai was still the *daimyo*'s favorite at the time, so Yuuki was left behind. Regardless, he was slowly gaining Shihaiasha's favor. Yuuki came to me to guard his friend's wife. Yowai and Yuuki's bond was strong because they were the two most honorable retainers in the house. Yuuki looked as he always had—dedicated, but there was something else in his eyes that day. Hidden behind his emotionless gaze was an unmoving feeling. Desire.

I do not know why I did what I did. Maybe it was because I longed for the touch of a man or because Yuuki reminded me of the husband I once knew. Anyway, I set upon myself to tempt and seduce Yuuki. I still had not lost my beauty or charm and it was a simple task, especially since Yuuki's infatuation for me was already in place. I teased and tempted him until he could no longer fight his yearning. He embraced me and I welcomed him. Yuuki was tender with me as Yowai had once been, but there was a fever in his touch. It was more than just love—it was lust. I had never felt such rapture before in my life.

Our affair went on for months. When Yuuki gained more favor with Shihaiasha, he was sent on every mission our lord assigned, so it was difficult for us to meet. My husband was always around the castle, but somehow we kept our arrangement secret. It is odd that I was the one who started an affair when I was so worried before about my husband betraying me. Yet here I was, betraying Yowai's trust so easily and contented. Fate is ironic in that way I suppose. Even more so, fate is cruel. Cruel enough to turn friends into enemies and tear those we love away from us in a heartbeat.

One day Yowai caught us in the midst of our passion. I knew it was only a matter of time, but I did not expect it to end like it did. Yowai was not horrified as I expected he would be. He was enraged instead. The betrayal—being dishonored—had driven him to the brink of insanity. I doubt he ever recovered. I will never know though. My story ended at that moment. Yowai screamed. There was a fire in his eyes hotter than

the sun. I cannot remember if I said anything. Yuuki had no emotion on his face. Not even a hint of sorrow for what he had done.

Yowai drew his *katana* quickly. I could see the flash of bright steel as he unsheathed it. It blinded me for a moment, and it must have done the same to Yuuki because he did not notice Yowai charging at him, the *katana* lunging forward. When I regained my sight, everything froze. People believe that time stops right before someone dies and they are right. Yuuki was not reacting at all. He looked ready to die, but I could not let him. I raced in front of Yowai's path. The *katana* easily pierced through my flesh and I felt blood rise in my throat. I vomited all over Yowai's face.

Yowai let go of the *katana* and fell back with horror. His face trembled with alarm. I looked down at him with such sorrow. My heart felt empty. It could have been because it was gone, shattered by Yowai's blade. I spat up more blood and took hold of the sword protruding from my chest. I labored as I said, "Yowai, I am sorry to betray you. I love Yuuki, but I love you as well. We both have dishonored you. I do this to restore your honor as well as mine. Let Yuuki find a way to do the same." With that I gripped the blade more fiercely and my hands bled. Then with my last breath I pushed it in deeper. I fell to the floor at Yowai's feet, and I slowly sank into the never-ending night around me.

Yuuki

I am a man with very few desires in life. In the beginning, all I wanted was to find a house and *daimyo* to serve to my fullest. It was never my intention to deceive the trust of those around me. Yet I did it regardless and have dishonored many people, particularly myself. That is why I am here today, ready to die. I have been waiting patiently for over an hour in this room, sitting in front of the man who I have dishonored most. I do not know if I loved his wife, but I do know that he did. The fault does not lie with him, but with me and his wife for what occurred. We both committed a terrible act. She has already paid with her life, and I shall in turn.

Yowai was once a great man, and now before me he is reduced to an infant. His crying is unbearable to my ears, yet I remain still. I must, lest my honor be more damaged. I will restore his honor with my life, but that is the least of my concerns. I am more concerned with my honor, and my *daimyo*'s honor. I am a retainer. It is my duty to be obedient, loyal, and strict. I bound my life to the way of the *bushido*. Honor is all I have. I should not have had such a desire for Baishunfu, but what is done cannot ever be amended completely. I can only replace a small part of the devastation I caused.

Baishunfu was a beautiful woman. In all my years of traveling I never once saw such a star as bright as her. Her soul was liquid fire that coursed over my being. She was the idyllic companion for any samurai. Unfortunately, fate is harsh. Baishunfu was already betrothed to another. Yowai was a man held in high regard, until I came. I easily took all he had. I stole his position in the house, I stole his wife; I stole his honor. I never intended it to end like this, but it is done now.

Yowai's crying shakes my nerves. It is clear how I seized his honor. He does not follow the *bushido* as a true samurai should. He is easily swayed by emotions and earthly possessions. He does not accept death as simply as other warriors do. It is in the samurai's nature to die. I should die in battle, fighting for my daimyo, but I no longer get to fulfill my destiny. I have strayed from the path, but I can still leave this world in an honorable fashion. Thankfully, I take solace in this fact.

The sound of drums moves my spirit. I am ready to end my life, but my *daimyo* is not here yet. Yowai still sobs before me, but I do not wish to look at him. He is too disgraceful of a sight, yet my eyes will not turn. I can sense the oblivion before me. It is as dark as a starless night, yet there is one star shining there. It calls out for me. It must be Baishunfu. She awaits me in the next world once I have restored my honor. If she is there, I can be at peace when I transcend. With her by my side, no obstacle can withhold us. Death is never the end for a samurai.

How I wish I had died in battle! The blood of enemies would be all around me, engulfing my senses as I fight until my last breath when I fall, facing the enemy. It would have been such a glorious end, the most honorable end. My *daimyo* would have known that I had great strength in life and a willingness to serve him to the last. He would even hold a ceremony to honor all those who had fallen in battle and make sure they were never forgotten. I am sure Yowai would survive the battle. He would have fled like the coward he is. I will not let him have his honor back. He will attain no relief from his suffering. If I perform *seppuku* perfectly, if I restore my honor, he will never rest again.

My *daimyo* finally arrives. He goes to Yowai first to make sure he is ready. Then he turns to me and says, "You have dishonored yourself, your comrade, and your lord. There is only one way you can redeem yourself and that is *seppuku*. Are you ready?"

I nod in response and my *daimyo* takes his seat next to Yowai. Yowai's bawling grows worse, but I do not let his tears distract me. I have to perform this flawlessly. I lift the *kozuka* before me. The steel shines brilliantly and the blade is light in my hand. I look to my lord. I do this to show my approval of what I am about to do, to show him that I will restore both his and my own honor. I slice open my stomach. It is

excruciatingly painful, but I hold my emotionless expression. Then I open the wound and let my intestines spill out. The pain is excruciating. All I can do to withstand it is remind myself that this will be over quickly.

I bow my head, awaiting the *kaishakunin* to execute the final stroke. I can hear the *katana* unsheathe and sense it slowly rise above my head. I do not tremble. I do not cry out. I do not fear. I hear the air break as he swings down. I feel no pain. The stroke was quick and clean. My head droops and my body goes numb. My consciousness and my life slowly leave my body as I hear the drums come to a climax and stop. Someone lets out a horrendous scream. I can only assume it is Yowai. His painful scream gives my soul a feeling of delight as it withdraws from my body. My honor is restored. The deep ocean of nothingness surrounds me. I cannot help wondering what awaits me.

EMILY CELARIC

*... It is because
Language first rises from the speechless world
That the painterly intelligence
Can say correctly that he makes his world,
Not imitates the one before his eyes.*

—Howard Nemerov, "The Painter Dreaming in the Scholar's House"

Greyless

A fan in her hand, the woman in white
walks in a world of philosophers and alchemists
floating over oceans of sunlight and shadow.
She passes the one in black, solitary—not glaring.

She does not see the poppies straining to break the terracotta.
She likes what the poppies make her see—
the opiate absinthe, and the laudanum nectar.

The poppies struggle—o poor poppies! They want her
to see, and yet they can make her see
only a bent vignette of children's laughter.

She wants man in black to tear away his outer world.
She wants him to sing white when all speaks black around him—
to taste infant joy and explore Xanadu

and the glass vial in her fingers as she tips it lightly
into his goblet of wine.
The man in black frowns, then smiles, then frowns again

then he smiles,
and the poppies weep with time.
They resent giving the woman their joy-milk,
and their roots scratch at the walls of their clay pots.

ADAMC.KOTLARCZYK

Between Worlds

For Sergeant Jo, who has earned it.

First time I ever saw an elephant it had a thick cargo net over its back—a whole column of them like that—carrying mortars, machine guns, and RPGs through the jungle, and we called in artillery and it slaughtered them, muscle and grist and bone everywhere, like a butcher shop afterward. In the debriefing we told our CO that we'd spotted and destroyed 18 elephants.

"No," he corrected, "You spotted and destroyed 18 enemy vehicles."

"No sir," we said, "They were elephants."

"No one is leaving this room until you confirm that you destroyed 18 enemy vehicles," he said.

Many years later, by accident, I learned that those elephants had recently (in the last 30 years) gone on the endangered species list. That's the kind of war it was.

The first dead body I saw, an old, black-pajama-clad man slumped against a thatch hooch, I thought I saw his soul escaping. I'd heard that you could see it, at that exact moment right after he died, ascending heavenward. The old man's soul was gray, reluctantly climbing from his forehead and squeezing out, up to heaven. I just stood there and watched for a minute. Sergeant Kav kicked my backside.

"Get moving, Everton," he growled, "he ain't going to shoot you."

When we got closer, I realized it wasn't his soul. It was part of his brain. That's the kind of war it was.

You'd learn things quick. We all carried mosquito repellent—you had to, the way they'd come at you. That's one thing all the movies have got right. Dusty, this white guy from Arkansas, left his repellent in his front pants pocket during a long patrol. The cap came off and it leaked—real slow, so he didn't notice. The oily repellent softened his skin there, his thigh and balls. By the time he realized what happened, the skin was all but worn off, like wet tissue. He could barely walk.

"This never happened before," was all he could say when he saw the blood. When it got bad, we had to med-vac him. He never finished the patrol; I didn't see him again.

Sergeant Kay was the first face we saw in our unit. He was a rough Catholic Irishman, fair-skinned, clean shaven, definitely had the Stare. He was a hard ass; told us how to take care of our feet, told us to write home for bug spray because we wouldn't get any from the quartermaster, showed us how to burn off a leech, told us how to beg, borrow or steal the supplies we needed from a nearby Green Beret camp. Told us the boot sizes we could and couldn't expect (they had already issued a lot of the smaller sizes to the South Vietnamese). Checked our jungle hats, face paint, rifles; checked everything.

"Everton, you want to get yourself *killed*?" he barked one day, "Clean that fucking rifle."

"Everton, you look like a goddamn clown with that face paint. Fix it."

"Everton, if I hear one more thing on you jingle, I'm going to shoot you myself and save the VC the trouble."

It was like Basic all over again. He was in charge. I thought he had a problem with my color. I hated him. That kind of war.

In my neighborhood we all went. I learned afterward that wasn't the case in the richer neighborhoods. All the guys I used to play stickball and basketball with—Petey Walker, 'Little' Mac, Willie Jackson. A lot of us just didn't know what else to do. High school was ending. Most of us weren't good at school, anyway—few could get into a college, even if we'd wanted to go. We all had two strikes against us—we were black, and we were poor.

But we all had bills to pay, mouths to feed. My momma worked two jobs, on her feet all day at the restaurant and at night cleaning a movie theater. Had to take the bus to both. She usually left the apartment before six and got home after eleven. For years I never thought about it; now I wonder how she did it. She left Darrel, my older brother, in charge of us most of the time. Sleepy-eyed, quiet Darrel. Watching over me and our sisters, and himself. He did a good job, what he could, even though I think it made both of them old before their time.

There weren't a lot of jobs then. Darrell worked in a grocery store, a stock boy, during the days. Brought his money home for Momma and the family, but it wasn't ever enough, not even when we all added together. It was his idea, enlisting. When he brought it up, I never saw momma get so mad, not even when we talked about dad.

"One boy making just a little still better than a dead boy who don't make nothing," she said one morning as she hurried out the door, and that was the end of it. Darrell would stay here and work and watch over our sisters.

We trained with M-14s, old rifles but reliable straight-shooters. We used them in Basic, in AIT, our first month or so in-country. Then I guess someone in the government signed a contract for M-16s. One day a deuce-and-a-half showed up at our base, filled with crates of rifles. They collected our M-14s and issued us M-16s. But they didn't give us the cleaning oil for the M-16s, not for another three months. You never knew, when you pulled the trigger, if the weapon was going to fire or jam. That's the kind of war it was.

I met my best good friend Joey Peterson at AIT in the Philippines, right before we deployed. AIT was where you learned the small squad tactics that we used over there in recon—observation, rubber raft deployment, stealth, guerilla fighting...that sort of thing. Joey and me were pals, drinking buddies...used to mix it up with guys from the 82nd Airborne who trained there, too.

Joey had this bad habit whenever we did rubber raft training. There's a bunch of you crammed onto this tiny raft, balancing it with your weight, and stealth is key, so no one can move much. And Joey had this terrible habit of breaking wind on the rafts. I don't know what Joey ate, but it was unholy when his body was done with it. You would think that with all the open air in a little rubber raft on the ocean that it would dissipate quickly. But you'd be wrong. He always shrugged and gave his crooked-toothed smile and said the motion of the raft must have worked his system funny.

When I was seventeen, I wanted to be my brother Darrell when I grew up. Only way I knew how to do it was mechanicing. Spin a wrench down at the garage on 53rd and Stevens. It was my goal. That was the only way I could be as responsible, as important, as valuable to the family as Darrell. That's what I thought. Until the marines came to my high school.

Those crisp blue uniforms, sabers, white gloves. And the men that wore them were like Greek gods, only black—square-jawed and clean shaven, big-chested and thick-shouldered. Sharp eyes. They put their hands behind their backs when they talked to us in the gymnasium. For us, it was the way kids look at Michael Jordan today.

So on my 18th birthday, I knew that was the way to make Momma and Darrell and even my father, wherever he was, proud. I enlisted. I didn't want to tell her until I had my blue uniform to show her, but I couldn't hold it in; I was so excited. She got

mad and hit me and then I showed her the papers, already signed, and she locked herself in her room. I heard her crying.

Darrell got his draft notice the next week. That's the kind of war it was.

I smoked my first joint in Vietnam with my best good friend Joey Peterson, Arnie Williams and a guy everyone just called Lewis. Arnie was tall, lanky, a basketball player from Harlem; Lewis was a white guy from the South—not too bright, but nice enough. Lewis was stockier, angrier, but *really* short, I mean, a real two-digit midget. We'd smoke up and complain about Sergeant Kav busting our balls. We'd ask Lewis about how he got through hell, and what he was going to do back in the World.

"There is a secret you need to figure out to get through this," he said. "Here it is: You ain't in hell, boys. No. You dead. You already dead. All of us is. Once you got that," he said, passing the joint to me, "then you got everything. The rest is gravy."

It didn't set in right away, not for a couple of patrols, a couple of dead friends. It got him through the war and me, too. It gets you through; you keep your life. But you give up something, too.

My first firefight was over before I knew what happened. It was our third patrol. I heard the crack of the rifles, hesitated, then fell flat on my belly. I looked all around. Men next to me were firing; they seemed to know. But I had no idea. They could have been anywhere; all I saw was grass and trees and bush. A grenade exploded. I saw another man in my platoon, saw which direction he was firing. I fired that way too. Then all the firing stopped. We checked the brush where we thought they'd been. There was blood, deep crimson on the crushed green ferns and grass, but no bodies.

"Everton, keep your head down and your ass moving between these two groves of trees," says Sergeant Kav, pointing to a clearing. "I don't like the ground here." Nobody is sure about the new lieutenant, but Sergeant Kav doesn't like him right off the bat, and doesn't like the path he's picked today.

"Right," I say but I only half-listen. It's so hot, so wet; the air makes everything heavy. Why move quick? We're five clicks from any enemy activity. Sergeant Kav always has a stick up his ass about things, always picks on us. He's probably just trying to make lieutenant. Probably figures me and Arnie are just a couple of dumb blacks, another couple of niggers.

I've been silent about this war for so long; I've had to be. Astigmatism, a cancerous quiet, too embarrassing to look at or mention. We lost. *We* didn't; *they* did—the generals, the politicians. Who understands the difference? Fighting for the freedom, the democracy of a people who didn't give a shit, who hated us, resented us as they did the French and before that the Chinese. The centuries of despise in their eyes, walking through a village.

While applying for teaching jobs, I left it off my vita for fifteen years. That kind of war.

Momma never said so in her letters, but I knew the money helped. Not having to feed and clothe me and Darrell helped, too. Her joints started to hurt funny; she had to quit the movie theater, but it was okay. She didn't need the money any more.

I debated it, whether or not I should tell her about my re-upping. I told myself that it was for her, for the money, to make life better for her. But I thought of my brothers in the jungle with me, sleeping in a circle at night with our feet together. Nothing breaks the circle. Laughing at camp with Arnie, with my buddy Joey Peterson. I couldn't leave them here. Leave them for what? A grocery store? A movie theater? A garage?

And the scariest part—at least afterward—was when I realized that yes, it had something to do with all those things. But also, I started to notice that whenever I was under fire, whenever I thought of a firefight, my stomach kicked over and the adrenaline shot through me and I tried not to smile. I was 19. But give me a radio and a grid and I could make fire rain from the sky. Part of me loved it.

There were horrible things there, and magnificent. Happiness without hope.

She must have got my telegram that I'd be away for another six months about three weeks before she heard about Darrell's wound. That's the kind of war it was.

Now, people—friends, my students, family—ask me what kind of war it was, what was it like? I want to write it down for them, to show them a thousand images that exist only in my mind, to make them understand.

I don't know how to explain it.

The ones who really want to understand, and don't just ask because it's polite or conversational or trendy, some of them learn and really do understand, at least the most important things.

It's impossible, of course—words, paintings, photographs—they don't show you all the souls escaping, all the ghosts. They can't. The ghosts around all of us,

walking in our dreams, mumbling to us during moments of solitude, reminding us every day. Ghosts offering us oddly familiar scents or sounds, silage and burning wood, the thumping rotors of a distant helicopter.

Still, you must try; you must learn—they make you. That's the kind of war.

Sergeant Kav isn't the reason I went to college, or the reason I went to graduate school, or why I became a teacher. Sergeant Kav saved me, but this is not his story. This is my story. This is my life. What I have done to earn that second chance.

We all owe our lives to others. It made me think, made me realize that I have this thing, something to teach, a voice. Sergeant Kav isn't the reason I teach now. I am the reason.

My good friend Joey Peterson got killed near Laos. That's when I started to get the Stare, or at least when I noticed. That's when I stopped talking to FNGs. His parents got told he died under enemy fire, but what happened was another recon unit called in an airstrike wrong, gave the wrong coordinates. Called it in on top of us. The reports all said it was an enemy mortar. His mom died years later still thinking that. No one wanted an investigation. That's the kind of war it was.

The other teachers sometimes make fun of how I talk, although the students like it. Part of me still talks like I'm in the old neighborhood, and part of me like a professor. I never notice it; I doubt I'd care if I did. Part of me *is* still in that ghetto, the one bedroom apartment. Part is still walking around the University after the war, watching the oblivious students and elm-shaded autumn quad and wondering if it's real. Part of me is still wide-eyed in that high school gymnasium; part still humping the bush. Spread out over countries and seas; across time, between worlds.

I grew up thinking my dad must be a black John Wayne. I never met the man, neither of them. He couldn't have been all bad, in order for my momma to have been with him and all. I figured he must be brave like John Wayne, a soldier. The type that would die charging up Mt. Suribachi, or be in the Flying Tigers.

It wasn't for years that I figured out that if he was brave, he wouldn't have left us. And if he was *really* brave, he wouldn't have let me go to Vietnam. He would have been there and stopped me. I stopped wondering about him while I was over there, and started hating him when I got back.

A machine gun opens up. It's shocking, unexpected, but the reaction is conditioned, reflex. Me and Arnie hit the dirt right away, fumble with our rifles. We contort our bodies to take advantage of the slightest hint of cover, but it's no good—we're between the two groves of palm trees. No cover; only grass. Just like he said. It is stupid, so stupid. Why are they shooting at us? Still in the open, totally exposed, the bullets tearing up red dirt around us; training closer every burst, no idea where they are coming from. Exposed like this, it's only a matter of time, part of me realizes. We're going to die.

One morning after I got back, I sat down to eat with my family. Breakfast—eggs and bacon, hash browns, hotcakes. I looked at them and it didn't make sense.

"Aw, fuck this," I said, packed a ruck, and left. I bought a motorcycle and rode for a long time.

We'd humped a lot of jungle where they'd sprayed Agent Orange, mostly in Laos. You'd see how it killed everything, took the vibrant greens and turned them dull gray and brown, killed the grass, the leaves. A spook went out with us once—probably CIA, but no way to be sure. We would ask him, Is this safe? It kills everything; are you sure we should walk through this?

He laughed.

"Men," he said, "You could fill your canteen with Agent Orange and it wouldn't hurt you to drink it. Might even be better than some of the water here."

I've often thought about that. When Arnie Williams puked black blood in the hospital seven years later. When Lewis itched so bad all over his body for years, years, that he killed himself in his garage in Georgia with his hunting shotgun. When I got diagnosed with diabetes. I've often wished we had a canteen of it then, wished we'd made him drink it. That's the kind of war.

Some things you won't forget, even if you can never talk about them. Like the sounds of those elephants, their screams. The jungle rot in your armpits, between your toes, in your crotch. The stench of burning human flesh, driving by a bad car wreck decades after. Some things you can never forget, even if you won't ever talk about them.

Many years later, Veterans Affairs called me and asked me to come in to be checked for exposure to Agent Orange. I came in at the appointed time, told the clerk

my unit and when I'd been in Agent Orange areas.

"But that's in Laos," he said.

"That's where we were running ops," I explained.

"You were in I Corps. The United States was never in Laos."

I should have killed him. I owed it to my dead friends in Laos, and to Arnie and Lewis and Joey and Darrell. But I just walked away. That's the kind of war.

I had nightmares. They can take you out of Vietnam, but they can't take Vietnam out of you. After the war, the nights were the worst part. I couldn't ever really sleep, so I'd be in a daze. My girlfriend after the war told me I used to call out radio commands, call signs, artillery coordinates, airstrikes. I used to call for a medic.

We kept a broomstick beside the bed. For those rare occasions when I did sleep. When she needed to wake me, she'd nudge me with it. Most times I'd grab the stick hard, but she knew to let go. That's what you learn, the training, the experience. We went through a lot of broomsticks.

When I was humping its mountains and spilling blood in its jungles, I didn't know shit about Vietnam. When I got my orders to go over there, I thought it was an island in the Pacific, like Iwo Jima or Guadalcanal; something out of *Victory at Sea*. But when you'd go by the old French plantations, vandalized by the Vietnamese, you'd see the ancient stone Buddhas, the venerable villages. It was an old land. I started to wonder about it. I started to learn.

Suddenly I feel his grip on the back of my collar. The strength is inhuman, tears me off the ground, uproots me. Bullets shred the earth all around us, a ricochet whines by my cheek; I feel its heat. I am flung stumbling into the next grove of trees, into cover. I'm in cover. I'm safe; I'm saved. I should be dead. Others in the platoon return fire now, suppressing.

When I made it back to the World, we landed in San Francisco. There were people outside the chain link fence at the airport; you could see them through the grimy windows of the plane. It didn't look quite like a parade, but I didn't know then why they were there. When we got out of the plane, they were yelling, swearing. They called us baby killers. The man next to me, a sergeant from Oklahoma City, got hit with something. He looked at his uniform.

"Shit," he said.

They were throwing human shit at us.

In my neighborhood, Petey Walker, our best stickball player, took a slight flesh wound in the arm, but lived. 'Little' Mac, our catcher, is still MIA, somewhere in II Corps. Willie Jackson stepped on a mine and somehow lived, but the shrapnel tore up his legs pretty bad, and he walked with crutches or canes. Boy was twenty years old, and walking with canes for the rest of his life. And my brother Darrell, sleepy-eyed Darrell who used to watch us while Momma was at work, got paralyzed from the chest down from a sniper. In a wheelchair—can't walk or make babies.

I lived; never wounded, not physically. I don't understand it. *Why did he do it?*

Arnie falls next to me, his eyes huge and white, terrified. I realize what has happened and look back. Sergeant Kav is lying in the clearing just in front of our cover, not ten feet away. Close enough to touch, almost.

Cup your right hand over your eye.

That's how much of his face is gone. That's the kind of man he was, the kind of war it was, the kind of boy I was. *Why didn't I listen?*

Curiosity, that's all. I'd heard about it, but never gone. Ever since they'd dedicated it, I'd suppressed the pull I felt, the gravitation toward it. Just a shiny black rock. But sometimes on TV I could feel it sucking me out of my chair.

Life is good now, or as good as it gets. Summer vacation. But I leave the kids with my wife and mother and Uncle Darrell for the weekend, make the trip alone. The mall in Washington is crowded and busy on the sunny July day, families hopping around, buying ice cream and hot dogs from parasoled carts. Then I walk the slow decline and the black wall rises around me like inevitability itself, and everything is silent.

I didn't know I could cry like that. Just open up and cry, out of control, unable to stop or even breathe sometimes. My fingers raw from tracing the names, pressing so hard, I want the flesh to tear, to bleed again with my lost friends. My reflection is in the wall, the young me and the middle-aged man; it envelops the names, I envelop them; they are inside of me.

A white man, gray-bearded, my age, wearing a fatigue jacket, puts his hand on my shoulder. I don't know him, his name. He hugs me and I hold him; his grip is the only thing keeping me from being sucked into that wall with all the others. We cry together; I don't know how long. Years.

I've tried so hard every day to deserve this.

That's the kind of war it is.

CHRISTINA GILLERAN

Tracing home

Breaking ground, stubborn and true
shedding their winter crust
yearning, reaching, twining they crawl

old yellow rose wild and careless,
violets, turning faces to follow the sun,
peonies, fat, pink floozies drooping with satisfaction

intoxicated wasps gather, tempted by the headiness
of soft ripe apples, plopping to the ground,
mellowing, softening, wrinkling in the sun

Tender fingers do not pluck gold from thorn
no tiny vase awaits purple buds
freckled noses do not press against soft pink petals

head cocked, glassy, eye fixed upon the earth
oily rainbow black grackle hops across the lawn
twitching mouse whiskers periscope from a rusty coffee can.

bent spoon, broken stone, cracked mason jar
slinking weeds steadily gain ground
vines and tendrils climbing fallen timbers.

Black dirt scar drawn heavy as a grave
somber, flat silhouette alone.
sooty stain of home.

Lacing the edges, faithful, her garden
ghost flowers bloom. Brilliant and pure
defiantly, tracing home.

MARK CHRISLER

The Vinegar Tasters

They didn't know how to, they never had done it. Fine points of socialization children are assumed to learn while pretending to learn state capitals had escaped them. How were three so common, three so different; so perpendicular in manner?

Intellect, pondering, intense dialogue; these things were drowning them as they sat with a bottle of cheap red wine. The wine was old, not good old, not aged, just old and cheap and red.

The world had been subdivided: People with all thought, no action. People with all action, no thought. Philosophical separatists. The three seemed an exception, at least to a point, and points are all philosophy can muster. They attempted a union between movement and motion, together working towards a grand ultimate.

It should be noted (as not to romanticize the commonplace) that above all this was a meeting of coincidence. A triumverate of abjects thrown to the wilderness, as far as wilderness goes in this land—which is not far. Secluded, the three were attempting to create a nuclear age of sorts, splitting the atom of ideology and art. Of course, with that kind of creation there involves a large expenditure of energy, an explosion, an inherent instability. What had seemed so common for them quickly, much too quickly, became otherwise.

Conner had always seemed the frontman in most things. Fierce for victory and fierce in defeat, few fights that Conner could recall ended in failure. Sid was quite the opposite, so much so that the two reacted as inverse polar charges, drawing together tighter than onlookers could be comfortable with. Sid had always been afraid, always subservient, always too easily trusting of ideas not his own. How strange it is that his sour taste should have come after he left Govinda. And Lenny, the crazy, the worthless. Neither Conner nor Sid could recall Lenny ever doing anything. Only a couple of thoughts here or there; idiotic in principle, silly in action.

Conner and Sid had had something in their eyes that Lenny did not have. Maybe hope, maybe regret; it was hard to know for sure. To hypothesize Conner was angry, maybe angry? But for what? He had an air of opposition, but against what he couldn't be sure. This idea had to be frustrating, surely it was frustrating, but just as surely there was something else involved with this flame, this plume of rage.

"It's gone sour," said Conner, taking a swig from the bottle of Gallo. The porch was dimly lit, hiding the blue and gray blotches on the three faces. Things had gone on here. Maybe Conner wondered how things had gotten this way, and seeing how they had gotten from there to here, what point C would be on this trip, and could it possibly be good? Two lawn chairs and an old coffee table sat the boys, creating a broken circle facing the water. Conner had always worried for Sid, but there was no worry left in him tonight, only perhaps a strange feeling of allegiance that never had been so carelessly displayed before. Neither of the two displayed things carelessly.

Poor Sid, how had the world broken him so early? Conner often asked himself this question with an affectionate concern. Sid never asked why he had been broken; perhaps Sid wasn't broken, maybe his will just looked different than most people's did, maybe his will was simply more abstract than the classical Greek marble statue. Even still, poor Sid. It was hard to know him, even to those who knew him well: little could be known that was not observed. It is safe to say that his subservience had probably been conditioned by his family, his parents. That is, unless it came from his friends, possibly youth experience, rough schools (he had moved around a bit), maybe it came from Lenny. Maybe it came from Conner. Dreadful thought that one: Probably just genetics.

Sid was ready to join the future. Above all things he wanted the future. Had his past been so horrible as to warrant such alienation and contempt? The question was moot, for whatever the answer, any passing ship in the night that might lead to El Dorado, as any carnival barker on his way to a supposed Canaan would capture Sid's heart. Being with Conner and Lenny was rough on Sid; he didn't know which post to mark, which path to travel, when the two diverged.

And the choice was always there to be made. They slept together, ate together, worked together, sported together. The time that Lenny and Conner spent together hurt Sid the most.

"It's turned," Sid said, having taken a chance on the once denounced bottle. Poor Sid, he never had a thing to worry about, and he didn't know what it was he imagined he did have to worry about. Lenny was uncommon enough to Connor and Sid not to change the dynamic that they shared. But still. And still, the pressures were building, though the why and how seemed incorporeal. Even still again, the world is full of conflicts with intangible rationales.

What had been the moment again? Like the figures in a cartoon cloud the past was obscured to them, even in the present, when it was the present that is. But while causation fails, sequence remains, at least in a bullet-point. Safe to say this: at first things had been a war of words. A wicked war of words where Conner was not involved.

Sid had never been a speaker; Lenny had the uselessness of sophistry. But despite Sid's tendency to shy away from verbal conflict, he could still throw a punch. This is important to note, not for the sake of giving the fight a preconceived outcome, but to eliminate a diplomatic motivation for the actions of Conner, who joined the fray in an attempt to aid Sid. Only Sid.

Were these the battle lines? Was this the side of the argument most righteous? No. As the bottle now sat, everyone was sure a balance had been toppled. "Give it here," said Lenny.

"No use, it's vinegar now." Replied Conner.

"Vinegar will still get you drunk."

"I'm not sure if that's the case."

"Just give it already."

So he did. And I myself am not sure if vinegar can or can not get one drunk. I do know that it is certainly a nasty thing to drink, and it can get you sick, and drunk is an easily recallable state, so who knows what these days.

And Lenny, the non-doer, drank it down fast and hard. Upon completion he got up, walked toward the water's edge and vomited a wicked vomit. As he composed himself he began to walk away, towards a road that led to some town, who knows where.

“What are you doing?” Asked Sid.

“You two are for yourselves now.” Lenny told them as he walked, perhaps intoxicated, perhaps not, maybe just sick, maybe in fine health.

When he was out of sight, Conner spoke up.

“Is he coming back?”

“I don’t know... no?”

“He’s wrong though, you know that?”

“The vinegar?”

“No, the last thing.”

“Which part?”

Because the present is where the past and future meet, and when Conner and Sid sat in the corners their glance met in the middle, and Lenny was by no means supposed to be standing there. Not for Conner. Not for Sid. Not for Lenny. He was not the man in the middle; he only obstructed the view of them for them. Both of them. Only them.

“Which part?”

“We don’t know how to, we never have done it.”

