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# SHORELINE

RHODE ISLAND COLLEGE MAGAZINE OF THE ARTS

Interview with *Thomas Lux*

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# SHORELINE

## Poetry & Prose



## Interview



## Artists

# The Present

THE PRESENT HAD BEEN WRAPPED carefully in a neat bundle of cardboard and flowered paper gently scented with lilac. Margaret carried the parcel tenderly in a pocket inside the lining of her coat as if she were a marsupial. Occasionally, she touched it through the dyed wool to reassure herself that it remained undisturbed, and to remind herself that the home she was taking it to would be a good home where it would be treasured and loved for life. "Don't worry, little one," she whispered, even though there was no one else in the car with her to listen. The Saab's windows were open, letting in October air, and the radio was tuned to 'GBH playing cool jazz. "David will know how to care for you."

Margaret turned off of I-119 onto Seven Mile Road and was surprised by the sight of houses along the road. There had been no houses along the highway when she had left for school so long ago. The closest house to the highway had been the Burrow's house two miles from the exit. Now there were small plots of raised land with the skeletons of houses pulling themselves up from the torn skin of the earth. A few had acquired hard shells of aluminum or wood and families that maintained the land for them. Margaret remembered the gray stone wall surrounding the farm on which she had been raised. It had been laid rock by rock by settlers in the late 18th century. While waiting for the school bus that would take her to Thornton School, she would place more stones on the wall at the entrance to the farm. She had been impressed by the age of the wall and its sense of permanence and by the fact that she had been able to add to it. But now, feeling these houses watch with shiny black eyes as she passed, she wondered if the stone wall still stood. She did not come back to Littleton to see her old house, though. Whatever drive she had had to go back to the old farm had been taken away by the sight of the oaks, reaching out to each other vainly separated by wide expanses of mown lawns. As Margaret turned onto Wright Street from Seven Mile Road, she was comforted to see a canopy of trees ahead, their intertwined branches sparking autumn leaves.

*It felt as if time had stood still. It hadn't, of course. Death had visited.*

David's house sat at the top of Wright Street. It was a dingy gray that should have been white, just as she remembered it. On the south side of the house sat a beat up yellow Volkswagen held together with duct tape. It appeared even rustier now, but the tires were still just as flat as the day she had left. Hardly anything had changed in four years. It felt as if time had stood still. It hadn't, of course.





Death had visited here. David's mother and father had both died of cancer within a week of each other more than two years ago.

A pair of crows which had been fighting over something in the middle of the yard flew cawing into a prematurely defoliated tree as Margaret pulled her Saab into the gravel driveway.

As she emerged from the car, Margaret noticed that the house seemed to lean. A malady of old age, she thought. Someday we all must lean. But the porch was crooked. The shutters bordering the dusty windows, even the stairs leading to the torn screen door, seemed somehow misaligned.

Margaret knocked on the worn, gray wood surrounding the screen much louder than she wanted to. The clack-clack-clack of her knuckles alarmed the squabbling crows from their perch in the tree.

"Who is it?" The voice erupted from inside the house as if it were startled from sleep. And there came a shadow from behind the screen, a silhouette of ghostly rhythm, looking, staring inquisitively, trying to make out Margaret's features through the dusty, torn fabric.

Margaret's heart rose and flew away with the crows. Suddenly, she wasn't sure she wanted to be here.

"Dave? It's me. Margaret."

"Margaret who?"

Margaret fought down an instinct to flee, to stop this pretentious charade. "That is exactly what this is," she thought. "A charade." She had been away too long, neglected her old relationships with the people who lived here. She had neither seen nor heard from Dave in the four years she had been at college. Some inner reflex had made her cut the ties with him all together. Suddenly, she had no idea why she had come here. What had she been thinking?

Somehow, David had changed. Through the screen door he seemed misshapen, only vaguely anthropoid. His voice sounded hollow. She wanted to leave, just to forget about ever having come back to this place, but her feet remained rooted to the spot. Some other instinct, perhaps the instinct that had made her cut her ties when she had left, wanted her to go through with this. And just what "this" was, she was no longer certain.

"Margaret? Is that you? My God, it is you!" David's face had moved into the light, and he was smiling. His blond hair had receded somewhat, but his face was smoothly shaved and still handsome. He was dressed in a plain t-shirt and jeans. "Well, come in, girl. How come you didn't call before you came over? This place is a mess."

David opened the screen door and Margaret entered the living room. As the door snapped shut behind her, she heard the rushing of wings; the crows had returned to whatever it was they were fighting over in the yard.

Inside, the house seemed smaller than she had remembered it, but it might have had something to do with how cluttered it now was. Newspapers, magazines, and books were littered everywhere as if a whirlwind had torn through the area. A television whispered the afternoon news from the kitchen. "I wanted to see you, David, before I head South. I'm in Providence for a few days with my parents. I thought it would be a good idea to see you before heading off again."

"Jesus, you look good. That coat must have cost a fortune."

"Actually, I bought it at a second

hand shop. But thank you."

"I don't actually get too many visitors through here these days. Everybody's moved off to the city. I think your parents were about the last to go. I'm the only one sticking it out. But you've probably noticed they started building houses up by 119, so I don't think it'll be too long before I get some neighbors up here, you know?" David moved a pile of magazines from a worn easy chair and motioned for Margaret to sit in it.

"God, I haven't heard from you in so long I thought you might have died up in Boston and nobody bothered to tell me."

Margaret sat in the chair and folded her hands in her lap. There was an odor of mildew that made her nose itch. She watched as David placed magazines on a lamp table only to have them slip one by one onto the floor. David laughed meekly. He seemed withdrawn and his elbows never left his ribs.

*It seemed as if everything she felt she could tell him would not be understood or appreciated.*

"So tell me what you've been doing with your life," David asked while wiping the dust from his hands onto his shirt. Margaret wondered if that was a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"I've graduated." Margaret found it difficult to think of anything to say. She licked her lips and remained silent for a moment. It seemed as if everything she felt she could tell him would not be understood or appreciated, that the total of her experiences which she had so much wanted to impart to him suddenly became classified information.

"I've been doing what I've been doing since I can remember," David said to fill the silence. "Land's all gone to hell, though. I read somewhere that this hole in the the ozone layer is going to change all the planet species native to the area, and the changes in species are going to drive all the species from here up north into Canada. The weather here is going to be like an African savanna."

"I wouldn't know."

"I'm thinking about moving to Canada."

"I hear the weather's nice up in Canada, depending on how far north you go." Margaret felt warm and realized she was still wearing her coat. She opened it up, reaching inside for the present, but Dave jumped out of his chair.

"Jesus, where are my manners? Let me take that for you. Can I get you something to drink? I've got some fresh lemonade, from real lemons, no less. Water?" David took the coat and the present into the bedroom. "How did you like Boston?" he called.

"It was alright, I guess. The air is really bad, though. It's annoying. I go out to run—everybody runs in Boston—and it smells bad. You can't wear white; it turns grey too fast. Other than that it's just too busy. I can't wait to move to a smaller town." David returned to the living room.

"I know what you mean. I go to Providence sometimes and all I want to do is come back here as soon as possible. This," he said, holding up the lilac-scented box, "fell out of your coat. I hope I didn't break it."

Margaret took the package gently from his hands. "I brought this for you. It is one of the first pieces I ever cast. Open it." David took the parcel from her hands, which were shaking slightly. She hoped he didn't notice how nervous she was watching his fingers set to unwrap the box. From





the paper and cardboard, David withdrew a bronze sculpture with ruby settings. He smiled.

"It's beautiful."

"It's a dragon," Margaret explained. "My professor gave me a C on it. He said dragons were too passé."

"I don't think so at all." David placed the sculpture on a bookcase. All the books were haphazardly arranged.

"Remember when we first started seeing each other...how we would stay up and talk until all hours of the morning? I remember we stayed up until four o'clock once talking about dragons and unicorns and how there weren't any, but should be. I told you about dinosaurs and you were totally dumbfounded. "How could there be any real dragons," you asked me. In any case, since the real dragons are a dime a dozen at the museum, I thought it would be fun to do a mythical one. It reminded me of you. I thought you might like it."

"Thank you," David said.

The dragon sat in the center of the bookcase, reflecting light from an open window with its scales and ruby eyes.

"I knew you were talented, but I had no idea this was the type of stuff you did. This is beautiful." Margaret stood and looked at the books in the bookcase.

"I don't remember there being so many books." There were books by famous philosophers and historians. Some she recognized from the footnotes of history books she read in class.

"My dad left them to me. He had picked most of them up at yard sales and he kept them in the basement. Mom didn't like him to read when he should be working. I don't think he read a single one all the way through, though I think he started all of them. I've tried reading some of them, but I don't particularly like them."

There was a long moment of silence as David stood and watched Margaret, who looked from her hands to the figure on the bookcase. It

*In fact, she felt ornamental.*

seemed so proud there, so bright in the midst of the dusty books. But she felt suddenly separated from her environment, somehow out of synch with her surroundings. In fact, she felt ornamental.

Margaret shook herself out of her daydream. She was nervous and restless, but she did not want to leave, not just yet. There was something she had to do. She wasn't sure what it was, though. She looked around the room.

"David? I don't want to sound pushy or rude, but this place is a mess. I can't believe you've let things go so much. Let's see what we can do." Margaret started by helping David do the laundry—seven baskets full. She showed David how to make a quick spaghetti sauce from a recipe she learned from a friend in Boston. She helped him clean and dust the living room.

"You don't have to do this, Maggie. You're my guest here. I should be the one doing all these things for you."

Margaret thought for a moment. This was probably embarrassing for David, though he didn't seem embarrassed. He seemed to enjoy theattention, the company and the conversation. "Don't be silly, David. I get pleasure from doing this. It's been so long since we've seen each other. Why not?"

"Can I ask you a question—a personal question?"

Margaret looked up from a pot of boiling spaghetti. She sensed what the question was going to be. She dreaded hearing it because she had never formulated an answer for it. The spaghetti boiled furiously, tangling itself into knots that continuously moved and flowed.

"Why did you come back? You left and never wrote while you were away. You didn't even come down for my parents' funerals. It broke my father's heart when you didn't even write." Margaret thought for a second and turned down the flame under the spaghetti. She suddenly felt angry. She wanted to throw something, anything. How dare he ask that question and bring up that his father's heart was broken. He could have just asked the question. It wasn't fair to bring emotions into this.

"Truthfully, I just got in my car and drove. I planned on leaving the present for you with a note and not even say a word to you. But I never wrote the note. I couldn't think of anything to say. I suppose I just wanted to say goodbye."

David digested her answer for a second. "But why didn't you call or write or come over before you left? My mother cried because you just up and left without..."

Margaret just looked into the pot of spaghetti. "Why do you keep talking about how your parents felt? They're dead now. I loved your parents, but...but I just had to leave here. I couldn't stay here any longer. It felt so stagnant here. I was beginning to spoil through lack of mobility. I'd have died with your parents if I'd stayed here."

Just like you're dying, she thought of saying. The image of the tree in the front yard came to her. The crows had flown into a dead and brittle thing. She tried to remember the tree as it was when she had lived in Littleton. She remembered David climbing the tree. It had been alive then, full of leaves.

"Do you have any bay leaves," she asked.

They ate dinner in silence. After dinner, while David washed the dishes, Margaret called her mother in Providence. Again, she didn't know why she was doing it. It just seemed like something that had to be done. When Margaret told her mother that she was staying the night with David in Littleton, there was silence on the other end of the line.

"When will we see you," her mother asked.

"Soon...soon."

"I love you, dear."

"I love you, too, Mom." Again, there was that feeling of finality, as if she were nailing a coffin lid shut. She hung up the phone and noticed David standing in the doorway, wiping his hands. His fingertips were wrinkled from washing dishes.

"Do you know what I miss the most," she asked, "the stars." She got up and walked to the door. It was already evening. She looked at David before opening the door and going outside. On warm nights when she was young, she often lay on a blanket in the front yard surrounded by swarming fireflies and the sounds of crickets and stare at the expanse of the Milky Way. As far back as she could remember, she knew that each tiny point of light was a blazing sun. Tonight, in the crisp, night air, the stars shown sharply and the Milky

*As far back as she could remember, she knew that each tiny point of light was a blazing sun.*





Way was a dusty ribbon crossing the night sky. Margaret wondered who had told her about stars, and thought it may have been her father doing that. She couldn't even picture his face.

The screen door closing behind her startled Margaret. The crickets momentarily became silent. David came up behind her and wrapped a tattered quilt around her shoulders. She remembered the pattern immediately. It was the quilt she and David had lain on the first time they made love. They had been swimming in Spectacle Lake on the last day of school. It was warm and they had gone down to the lake to sit near the edge and soak their feet. She didn't remember how the quilt had gotten there. Had it always been there? They had taken their clothes off and swam in the lake. Then as they lay on the quilt, feeling the water evaporate from their skin, they had made love for the first time. "I will always love you," David had said that day, not so much because it was the romantic thing to do, but because he had heard it a thousand times on television and read it in a dozen books. Margaret knew this, even then, but she gave her heart to him nonetheless.

Margaret responded to a pressure pulling at her shoulder. David pulled her close and kissed her. The quilt fell from her shoulders.

The next day, Margaret drew sketches for David in her sketch book, which David promptly affixed to the the refrigerator with magnets. Some of the sketches she kept. That evening, she helped him organize the house. They found a macramé pillow that David's mother had made as Margaret's going-away present. It showed a clean white farm house under a clear blue sky and yellow sun. Somehow she remembered the scene.

The pillow had been in a box on the top shelf of the closet. The box had other things in it: knick knacks from Disney World, an ashtray from New York, and a dozen or so postcards on which nothing had ever been written — frozen memories.

When the weekend was over, and there didn't seem to be much more to do, Margaret said her good-byes to David. The house was immaculate and everything seemed to be in order. As she left, she noticed the dragon on the bookshelf. Margaret clutched the macramé pillow tightly. A fine coat of dust had settled over its scales, and its ruby eyes only gleamed dully.

*Anthony Pierson*

## rotation

like a plowed-under field love runs its course,
first the age of sprouted golden loam, fresh;
uncharted exploration and surprise,
growing into each the other, brown and green,
enriching all around with leavings;
full color, full wonder, full life.

like two peas in the pod of life;
oh yes, me too, of course, of course.
aching at the door with leavings;
returning to love, once more, all fresh.
sowing together gardens green;
planting packets of surprise.

oh how she lives to see surprise
in his eyes, see his wonder at life.
oh how he loves to follow the green,
to be pulled, by his heart, to course
through tried things, now fresh;
through things made new, from leavings.

comes a time when she clings at the leavings.
comes a day when she fears surprise;
waits for him to, again, get fresh
in the furrows, under the sod — bring life,
sweet life, back on course,
never wanting to lose the green.

fear can turn leaves yellowed green,
sifting through comings and leavings
for the fine, and finding the coarse;
foraging, heartsick, for a surprise,
wondering if this is all, now, of life;
turning eyes, searching for the fresh.





love, no longer fresh.
where did it go, so green?
used to be full of life.
all that's left is leavings.
used to be, full of surprise.
now, locked together in a downhill course.

sad memories fresh, joy turned to leavings.
gone, pastures green; with them, surprise.
now garner gleanings for life, and till a new course.

*Phoebe Martone*

*"Parc Olympique"* Etching

Doug Forcier

## Chasing Light Beams
## (on how to relate)

From your bedroom
window, skip across
to the next roof-top
and say you've
kissed the sky;
reach into your pocket
and pull out no money;
donate; (eat something
that will make
you hallucinate);
read Kesey
to Kosinski;
procrastinate;
be aggressive
when making
left turns; speculate;
ask a question of your teacher;
gain weight; pierce a hole
through your belt strap;
copulate; believe in someone
who knows you well;
originate; call out
at that moment (or save it
for the next time you meet)
'how well do you know me?'
remember the answer
(when it is later tossed
back in your face); focus
on specifics; forget it; go,
climb a mountain; regenerate;

then, say something of great
social or political
import and blow your pot smoke
in the closet
so no one will know; in fact,
go in the closet
yourself and try again,
(you will spend time
thinking)
promise you'll contemplate,
at least once, the unresolvable
issues, but forget to,
hinting again that you feel
the relationship is failing
and altogether
the two of you
just aren't relating.

*Kristin Coia*





## Fishing

He was always standing around the Bait and Tackle shop.
Lingering smugly at the door frame, smoothing down his crewcut.
His eyes hit me while his tongue played at the corner
of his mouth, around the teeth. The stained enamel was tough,
peeking out of the pink. The black sheen of his hair stood
stiff against the shock of white skin on his face.
The way he looked at me, conjured up images
of slavemasters and sweet concubines and other evils
locked away in attic histories, school libraries of our heads.
I broke my gaze with his eyes (sure enough they were blue)
blue like the azure calm of the fishpond.

He once told me his dad owned the store,
but I did not care
about family businesses.
I just stood hovering there on the edge of puberty
not wanting to fall in. (girls fall so fast.)

Couldn't understand what he saw in me, all in my overalls,
baseball hat hiding my mass of messy hair. But he watched anyway.
Staring, nostrils flaring. I slid my hand into denim to pay for my lures.

I was sure the fishing would be good that day as I left the shop
and my face hit the sun. I continued down the street
away from that place to seek fishing with my dad
as a boy affected everything
by rubbing the back of his neck and breathing.

*Eileen James*

*Untitled*

black and white
photograph
double image

Debbie Garcia



*Untitled*

black and white
photograph
double image

Debbie Garcia

## FIVE YEARS

I was sitting in front
of a window
in a downtown printing place,
filling out
an application.

Contained therein
was
a series of
**PROBING**
questions.

"What do you look for in a working environment?"
"What do you expect from an employer?"
"From co-workers?"
"How do you expect to be treated?"
"What can you offer our company?"

As is so often the case,
it was as much a test of a
willingness to submit oneself to
a superfluous barrage,
as it was of
one's
specific responses.

I found that
essentially
the same answer to each question,
utilizing,
however, a different set
of superlatives
each time,
would adequately meet
the desired
standard of
banality.

"consistency, hard work and a professional attitude,"
I answered.

"In a year?"





"(er...) More of the same (I would imagine), and increased efficiency."

"In five years?"

I looked out the window.

People were walking by, going to
and from work,
running errands.

Five years of looking out at this.

A lady
with a fur collar came rushing by.
What would she offer
in five years?
She was gone.

I looked back at the application.

I did want the job,
at least I thought I did,
I mean, I needed a job.

But I also had other
plans,
or
wished I had,
or
hoped I did.

So of course I had to lie
but
what could I say to such a question
that
would have any
credibility?

Before college, I used to
lie much more readily
about matters of survival.
Could I have developed scruples in this area?

No, I decided.
I was just out of practice.
Work is work.
It's that or the streets.
You have to **LIE** and you have to **BELIEVE** the goddamned lie
**WHILE** you're **TELLING IT** and **YOU HAVE TO MAKE THEM EAT THAT GODDAMNED LIE OR YOU STARVE!**

And what about all the money I owed?
What about the landlords, collection agencies
and loan companies?
What would *they* have me answer?

These dark thoughts,
however,
were shrouded in
an
even
deeper
paradox.

Namely,
that the very **QUESTION**
made me feel **THREATENED** and
**TRAPPED**
in a job for which
I would probably
never even qualify
**FOR THAT VERY REASON**.

I mean this was a **BRILLIANT QUESTION!**
Whoever framed this question was an **ARTIST!**

I was frozen,
transfixed.





Ineedthejobbutlcouldonlypromisesomuch
andwhataboutgradschoolbutthentheywouldn'thireme
whywastetimewithafloatertheywantedalongtermcommittmentbut
thensodideveryplacesoyoualwayshavetoliebuthey'reneverthis
pointedanddirectaboutit…**SHIT!**

**BRILLIANT!**

I glanced over at the counter
the workers
the machines
the customers.

There were the
mandatory pretty girls,
two engaged,
one slutty.

Suddenly
I saw this
pale,
dangerously bland
looking guy
in dress shirt
and tie
standing near the Xerox.

Our eyes met
and I turned quickly back to the form.

*He was watching me.*

I thought to myself,
"Is *this* the question guy?
Is *he* the genius?"

I peeked over again.

He was making copies,
but he was also
overseeing
the other workers,
as if
helping out during the rush.

*And* watching *me*.

I looked back at the application.
It was clearly not standard.
It was in-house.
The choice of font,
layout, the very
sequence
of questions, some in boldface,
were all calculated to catch a printer's eye,
laying stress on certain specifics of
printing

BEHAVIOR.

But recognizing this did not help you
—that is help you lie—
when you came to **THAT**
**ONE QUESTION.**
It only emphasized the deliberateness
of the question.

I shuddered with admiration.

I looked out the window
at the lawyers and bankers.
They had it easy.

I looked back over the counter
quickly.
The eyes were still there,
along with
the barest trace of a smile,
as if he were thinking
"Aha. He's come to the question.
Let us observe the behavior."

**THIS MAN WAS DEATH HIMSELF!**







I turned vacantly back to the
window, tapping my pencil as if pondering
something.
A question, perhaps?

I looked up at the clock,
nonchalantly,
suppressing the urge to whistle,
then down at what I was wearing,
having forgotten by this time.
I didn't see any problem there.

I looked under the table.
Hm…very clean.

Five years.

I decided that I wasn't going to let them bully me.
I was going to go with my strength.
I was going to push on ahead into that
magical realm we all know and love so well.
I mulled over some possibilities
but, feeling PROVOKED,
I kept coming up with things like:

**"I HOPE TO OWN THE COMPANY IN FIVE YEARS!"**

**"I PROMISE TO SCREW ALL THE WOMEN WHO**
**WORK HERE WITHIN FIVE YEARS**
**AND OWN THEM TOO!"**

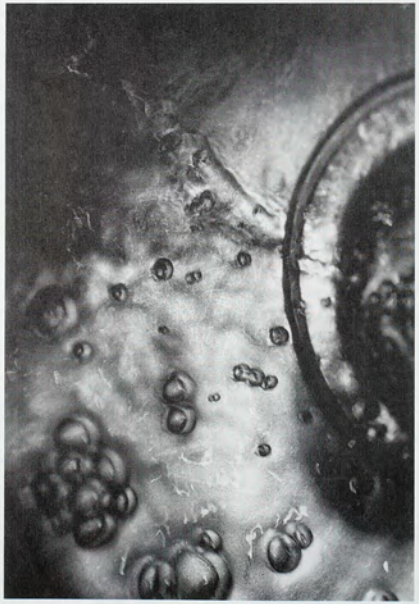
Maybe something more job-related
like:
**"I PROMISE TO ORGANIZE A STRIKE IN FIVE YEARS!"**

Instead I wrote:
"Uncertain."

The truth. Shit.
I felt old,
useless and emasculated.
I walked to the counter
and handed the form to one of the girls.

The pale guy was holding up a
sheet of paper,
studying it.
Or pretending he was.

*Untitled* black and white photograph



Shawn Cournoyer



*Untitled* black and white photograph

Shawn Cournoyer

The girl smiled
and said,
"OK...William? We haven't started interviewing yet
so if you could leave your number or check back with us...
etc."
As she talked she continued to smile and flirt.

"What's wrong with her," I thought,
"Doesn't she know about the grilling?
The question? The tormented drama
that just took place here?"
I said thank you and left.

I'd been blocked.
I didn't fit.

But as the glass door
sealed shut,
exhaling the street air
and me,

I experienced
something like
the rebirth
one feels,
having freshly quit
a job after
five...

days.

• • •

Well,
I followed up on the
application
(I'm in a big hole right now),
returning several times.

There were many applicants,
they told me,
and
eventually,
they hired someone
else.





But, they said,
they had my number,
and that I should
check back
now and then
because they weren't
really sure about
the person they
hired.

So I figured
fuck them,
they should have called
*me*.
I can run
*all* those machines.

So I didn't return for a while.

A month later,
alone and desperate,
the depleted job market
an unearthly shadow
over the land,
I stopped in

to see
how this story
turns
out.

Always
in my mind
was
the insufficient
response,
"uncertain,"
like
positive test results
stemming from a
bad
mistake.

As I walked in,
the mood in the room seemed lighter,
the death guy wasn't
around
and the girls were laughing
and
smoking cigarettes
(you're not supposed to
because of the fumes).

One of them ran over to the counter
just as I realized
that I had beer on my breath.

She hovered in front
of me
with a smile
like a
three year old.

"Hi. I applied here about a month ago
and you told me to check back because..."

Before I could finish
she said,

"If you applied here a month ago
we don't have your application anymore
because we had water damage and
all the applications were destroyed."

The girl behind her was laughing,
expelling much smoke,
saying,
"Yup. We had a flood. The water came down
from upstairs and rained all over us. It wasn't our fault
and that's our story."

She laughed some more.





I think the other girl noticed my
breath,
because she ran back and they
started whispering.

More laughter and
smoke.

The first girl came running over again.

"Do you have any experience?"

I told them about my years before
college, lying like a nightingale,
lying well,
like a real man,
with more detail
than truth has,
the father of truth,
the progenitor of all actuality.

She ran back
to her friend
and they did the whispering, laughing,
smokeblowing trick
again,
then they
both
came over to me
and said,

"You ran a Multi 1250
*and* an AB Dick?"

I nodded yes.

"Two color?"
I lied yes.

"*And* you stripped negatives
and did color separations?"
they asked
incredulous.

Yes,
I assured them.
It was 6/8's
the truth.

One of them stepped up very close to me,
like I was her pimp
and said,
"You operated a
*Misomex?*"
(an automated and computerized four color
plate maker capable of accurately
placing and registering hundreds of separate
images on a single plate,
used on larger presses for very long
and expensive runs.)

I nodded yes,
(the absolute truth,
though the machine was probably outdated by now,
and I left out the part about
the whole reason I got good at the job,
namely because they left me in a room
by *myself*,
and that I finally had to quit because I was
in love with a co-worker.)

"Shit,"
she said,
"If you can do all that stuff you could
run these machines in your sleep. The printing business has
*changed*. Computers have changed everything. And in places
like this, copiers can handle
most of it. You've been with the majors."

"Not since the eighties though,"
I said,
the retired gunfighter.

"And you said you went to college? What was your major?"





Well,
being a woman and all,
she had me talking,
so I told her
how I thought I was a writer.

"So that means you can proofread!"
she said, quickly turning around
to her friend who was nodding
behind the smoke
of acceptance.

"Yes. I mean
sorta..."
I was in trouble.
I felt trapped again.

"Listen," she said,
wise,
out of the side of her mouth,
"things have been really crazy around here,
what with the flood and all,
and the person we hired didn't work out,
so our boss left it up to us
to go ahead and hire whomever we want. Oh, by the way I'm
Cheryl and this is Jennifer.
We want you to come and work here
if you're still interested."

I felt myself fading,
receding from reality
once more
into the world
of printing.

I felt myself becoming pale.

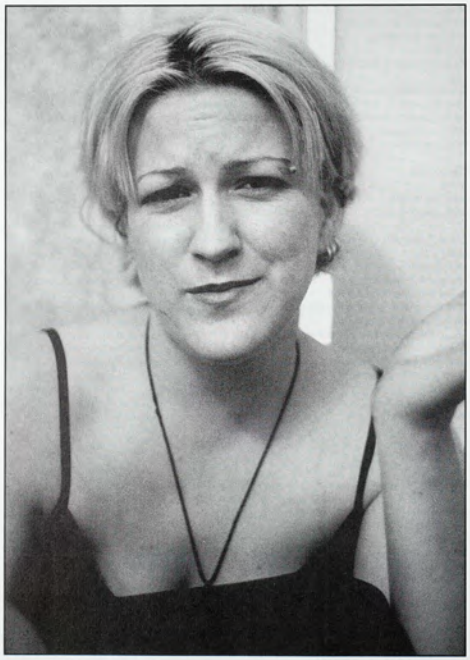
but I went
peacefully,
thinking,
who knows,

maybe there'll
be another flood,
destroying us all,
within

five years.

*Bill D'Arezzo*

model: *Barbara Quigley*



black and white photograph

Greg Comacho



model: *Barbara Quigley*

black and white photograph

Greg Comacho

# Interview with Thomas Lux

***Shoreline:*** *I read Split Horizons and I loved it. I haven't read anything like it. I thought it was unique and refreshing and most of my questions sort of stem out of that—things like your unusual choices in subject matter. So let's start there. "Endive," "Kasashnikov," and "Kleptoparasite." These titles are strange and wonderful and unique and I wondered where you came up with them.*

**Lux:** "Endive" is kind of a political poem. I'm sort of making fun of yuppies and republicans and stuff like that and it uses endive as a symbol, as an emblem of that kind of way of being. That poem started simply because I think endive looks like a pope's hat. There's an image at the end that calls it a "clerical little leaf." That's how it began and it evolved into a poem. I started thinking of the connotations of who eats endive and when and where and stuff like that and the poem makes fun of them. It's a satire of a certain kind of attitude.

Mikhail Kalashnikov, as it says in the poem—if you read lots of contemporary history which I do—invented a particular kind of weapon that shows up all the time. And it shows up with guerrillas and pirates and all sorts of thugs and terrorists and stuff like that. It's the world's most common rifle. That poem actually has literal research. In fact, I hired a research assistant, a graduate student. I knew it was named after some guy and I wanted to know who and know about him and know more about the weapon. Again, it's a kind of political poem. It's making a point about this kind of deadly weapon that's out there in the zillions. Not long ago, not after I wrote that poem but relatively recently, there was an article in The New York Times Magazine on Kalashnikov. He's a Russian guy, in his seventies now. He didn't make a lot of money from it. He made enough, but he didn't make a lot. It's a poem trying to use certain kinds of facts and historical realities and blend them with the poem. It is angry. It is anti-violence. It's an anti-war poem. It's an anti-killing poem. It has a kind of twist of sarcastic black humor.

"Kleptoparasite." I swore I came across that word in my reading because it was in my notebook. And I thought I even knew what book I got it from. But then I would try to find the word somewhere else and I never could. I couldn't find it in the book where I thought I read it and I couldn't find it in any dictionary. Maybe I dreamed it or made it up but it's two words put together—kleptomania and parasite—and the poem sort of works off the notion of the title. That poem is enigmatic even to me. I'm not sure what that poem's ulteriority is—what it's metaphorical readings might be exactly. I'm less sure than I usually am.





So, I come across a lot of the material or it begins from reading.

***Shoreline:*** *That's one thing I noticed about your work. Many poems were researched. I thought you must have been a history buff and that was one of my questions in fact. Tell us about other poems, like "Susanna Fontanarossa" for instance.*

**Lux:** I came across that name, Columbus' mother's name, in a history book about Columbus. I just thought it was a beautiful name. I started wondering if Columbus thought it was a beautiful name.

***Shoreline:*** *And the poem about Sarah Hale?*

**Lux:** That, I think, I came across in a biography of Poe. They really did meet. And the whole notion there again is one of opposites colliding and sparks flying off. There is Poe, for whom we have an image in America of the dark and all those horror tales and he was an alcoholic of course and all that. And then there is Hale. The one thing we really know of her, I mean the popular image of her, is she wrote "Mary Had A Little Lamb," which everybody knows. It's an American chestnut kind of thing. In fact, she was a shrewd and powerful literary editor of her time but we know her today for "Little Lamb." I imagined their meeting. The poem grew out of imagining these two opposite types of American literary figures meeting.

***Shoreline:*** *You seem to celebrate women.*

**Lux:** That's nice. There are, in the last two books anyway, five or six love poems I think and several, maybe three or four or five that have to do with my daughter. I don't know how to explain that anymore. That last poem in the new book, I actually stole the title from my daughter. I made only a slight variation of something she said about snow is the rain's mommy and I changed it to snow is the rain's father. I changed it on her. She said I could. I asked her for permission. She wanted credit for it of course.

***Shoreline:*** *And then you have some poems that seem to me more personal. You make a lot of references to women—your wife, your baby.*

**Lux:** Hmmm. Not a whole lot of directly autobiographical poems. But enough that it's there. I'm less...comfortable, I think, with that kind of poem. I could never write exclusively autobiographical. It feels selfish to me or self-centered or self-absorbed or something to write only autobiographically. But then sometimes, I have to.

***Shoreline:*** *I guess I didn't mean that they seem all that autobiographical to me but rather that those are the poems that really spoke to me. "Amiel's Leg" in particular.*

**Lux:** That is very simple. It's based on a literal experience. Something that struck me in an almost epiphanic way but it was just a simple act. She just came and sat on my lap and it touched me, it moved me. Sometime later I had my own daughter and I didn't write that poem until after I had her. Something in having her made me remember and think about that experience. I like to work in different realms and I like to think I work at some range. Different poems and funny poems and very dark poems and angry poems and celebratory poems. I want all of them to have some kind of heart and I hope they do.

***Shoreline:*** *"Amiel's Leg" is an example of one thing we are always trying to—I don't know if define is the right word—but find and write about. Universal truths. Something that will touch someone. What do you think about that?*

**Lux:** Well, I think that if you get too self-conscious about universal truth and start saying "I'm looking for universal truth," then you're in trouble. So, yes you do, but you can't be too conscious of that. You just have to work as hard as you can on making each individual poem as good as you possibly can and hope other people are touched by it in some way. And I guess if enough people are over enough years then that means that it has universal appeal but we're not going to be around long enough to judge that or get any feedback on that or any recognition for that anyway. That takes a long time so just try to write with your whole heart as hard and as carefully and with as much integrity as you can.

***Shoreline:*** *I think this book has incredible range. If you write a couple of say, political poems, in a row do you then try to get yourself out of that by intentionally writing another kind?*

**Lux:** Probably. Unconsciously, yes. I tend to work in groups of poems. I'll save up stuff until I have what seems to be the very beginnings of maybe six to ten to fifteen to twenty or more poems. Sometimes it might take me a year to get that much material and then I'll work on them all together for a period of weeks, months, years, whatever. And bring them all along. They develop individually.





Yes. I think I am looking to not only write one kind of poem. I need a balance. But I try again not to be too self-conscious. During the early stages of composition I don't want to be thinking consciously about what the poem means. I want to be paying attention to its writing and seeing where it's going to go.

***Shoreline:*** *Aside from having parallel ideas, "The Driver Ant" and "River Blindness" are just interesting. "The Driver Ant" is another poem where I thought some extensive research must have come into play.*

**Lux:** Yes, well. I read a lot about it somewhere. I was reading about ants, not in order to write the poem, I was just reading about ants because I was curious about ants. The possibility of a poem can always occur. In "River Blindness" it was something that came up from the reading. That's a political poem. As is the ants poem. Maybe political is not exactly the right word but they're social and they have political elements. "River Blindness" is a anti-imperialist poem in I hope a pretty subtle way. There are all sorts of horrible illnesses, starvation etc., and cruelties in the world. Trying to find ways of talking about them or make art, statements or expressions about them without being obvious or corny or strident or unimaginative is hard and in those poems I'm trying to find fresh ways to talk about that kind of injustice.

***Shoreline:*** *You wrote a poem about curiosity. As I said in the beginning, I wondered how you came up with your subjects. "Just Curious," seems to reflect your personality. Would you agree with that?*

**Lux:** I am curious about lots of things and I like knowing about weird things. I think whatever anyone is drawn to, someone else could make a psychological reading of why they are drawn to it. I'm not particularly interested in the pathology of it. I'm an expert, for example, on the Black Plague. If you have any questions about the Black Plague that you need answered, I'm the guy to talk to. Mostly the Black Plague during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. Also the defeat of the Spanish Armada. I read tremendous amounts of history. Reading is a primary activity for a writer and I read a great deal. And not only in poetry and history, but everything.

***Shoreline:*** *Do you write every day?*

**Lux:** No. I go for long periods without actually writing. I write mostly when I'm not teaching so I do most of my writing during the summer or over breaks. But I save up stuff. I'm always taking notes. I'm always thinking about it. I'm always planning. I write a journal everyday and read and teach practically every day but

sit down to do my own work? No. Wish I could sometimes...But I don't think I could sustain that. I don't think I have...no, I couldn't write like that. If I had six hours a day to write I couldn't write six hours a day. I'd read and whatever.

***Shoreline:*** *It's lonely too.*

**Lux:** It's lonely and it is hard, literally hard, physical labor. Because it takes such concentration. It is intense work when one is doing it.

***Shoreline:*** *Do you find your writing process has changed at all?*

**Lux:** No, not really, but it has developed. I've been working in groups of poems and working in off-teaching times for most of my writing life. And had never been terribly prolific but I've always been very steady. It takes me four years to write a book. Eight, ten, twelve poems a year that I keep. I'm pretty much the same every year. For well over twenty years. I'm steady. It's something in a quiet, undramatic way I'm driven to do. A quiet, workday, lunch pail kind of thing. And when I don't write for too long, I start getting kind of crazy. I need to. But I also hate the early stages because it's so hard and it's so bad. I'll do almost anything to avoid that. Then once it gets started, that's the best. In the middle of the poem or in the process where it's really going somewhere from draft to draft. That's my favorite time.

> *"Read till you bleed, and write till your eyebrows turn white."*

***Shoreline:*** *Do your poems always begin with an idea and then the poem comes out of that, or does it work backwards too—where you write and then the idea comes?*

**Lux:** It mostly works backwards. It mostly works from language—discovering an idea rather than having an idea then draping language on it. It mostly starts from a rhythm or a little spark. A title, image or a word like "kleptoparasite," and what its connotations are. My poems get written very slowly and painstakingly. I'll read a poem tonight called "An Horatian Notion" which is about my belief that poems are made things. That they get worked on. I've never written anything in less than twenty drafts and more often it's thirty or forty. It's very seldom that I have a fever or an idea or feeling and I put it down and that's the poem. You need something to make you need to write that poem. Some people call it inspiration—that's okay. But you also need the benefits of working on it, trying to discover it. If you know what you're going to do before you start writing the poem, then you can't make any discoveries.





***Shoreline:*** *That's refreshing to hear. Revision is such a big part of workshops. We spend almost all our time revising.*

**Lux:** It's a major part of writing. Writing is rewriting. That's what writing is. And that's been true historically of most good books and poems. Sometimes if somebody has been writing for forty years, maybe they can get lucky and write a poem pretty quickly. Frost wrote "Stopping By Woods on a Snowy Evening" in ten minutes, but he had been writing for forty years. He was ready to get a gift like that, to get a break like that.

***Shoreline:*** *When I read Split Horizons a second time I wondered about the sections. Why is section three subtitled? It's apparent almost immediately that the speaker is not you.*

**Lux:** I wanted to be sure about them. I'd never written a persona poem before and so it was new for me and I really wanted to be absolutely clear that the poems in that section were persona poems. The other sections are more or less intuitively put together. I couldn't explain any outwardly logical reasons why I put them together as I did. I was just an intuitive balance I was looking for.

***Shoreline:*** *Do you think poets, and writers in general, often struggle with something in their psyche? I haven't read your last book, The Drowned River, but in this book it seems the same images keep appearing, like boats...*

**Lux:** And rivers...my psychiatrist pointed that out too. [laughs] Yes, I have thought about that and I don't really know what it means except that I do love rivers, I love to look at rivers, I love to go over rivers on bridges, I like to walk by rivers, I like to drive by...I like rivers. Things do come up unconsciously, of course. There are recurring themes and images and things like that. You can see it when you can look back and try to view your work objectively you can notice what exactly it means.

***Shoreline:*** *I think I spent a whole semester writing about one thing. And then it carried over into the next semester.*

**Lux:** I think that happens a lot with a lot of us. You can't be too self-conscious about your subject and what you need to write about. Let yourself trust your instincts and write from your gut in your early drafts and then you can work consciously on them to develop them. But you have to write about what you have to write about. You can't be self-conscious about that, I can't be. I have to be able to let go at the beginning.

***Shoreline:*** *We talked about language and your natural curiosity about it. How does your writing and being a teacher interact? Do they play off one another?*

**Lux:** I don't know how they play off one another. I wanted to be a teacher before I knew I was a writer and I could be a writer. I wanted to be a high school teacher or some kind of youth worker. I always wanted to do that. I really like teaching. I love teaching. I'm sort of ground to that's how I earn my living. It's something I work very hard at and take very seriously. I like particularly where I teach most regularly, at Sarah Lawrence. Some writers complain if they have to teach. They do whatever they can to avoid teaching, but they still teach and that sort of angers me. I don't think a writer should be a teacher just because they are a writer although that seems to be the idea nowadays, that if you're a writer you're almost owed a job at a university because you're a writer. I think people who should teach should be teachers—good teachers. I get to talk about poetry and get paid for it...not only poems, I teach literature as well. That certainly helps me as a writer. I have to pay attention—to other people's work and the ways of paying attention carry over into paying attention to my own work. I have to practice what I preach. I'm forced to in my own class because if I say certain things in class and then don't show up in my own work then I'm a liar or something. I think it's the best of both worlds. I think it's almost a blessing. I earn my living doing something that I really love to do. I earn a decent living. I'm lucky. Not many people have a job that they go to and say, "I like being here." Teaching has never diminished my writing, taken time from me, made me resentful. The world doesn't owe anybody a living either just because they're poets or writers. Everybody has to earn a living. If you can make it as a writer, great. More power to you. But usually poets can't.

***Shoreline:*** *Let's talk about something you just said—that this is something you love to do, teach and write. One of the last things that came to me when finishing the book was that there were certain parts—and I had to go back and find them—that reflected your love for literature. For example: In "Mr. John Keats," the line, "what you read/teaches you what you love." In "Biographies," the lines, "then come books about people who wrote books/which you do not need to read/but you do,/loving them for having written books/you love." And my personal favorite, "An Horatian Notion," where you write "You make the thing because you love the thing/and you love the thing because someone else loved it/enough to make you love it."*

**Lux:** They are all ways of reading, of literature, of poetry and celebrating the art form. They're celebratory poems. "An Horatian Notion" is making an argument too. It's arguing against the chicken-shit aesthetic. It's an argument for the responsibility of the artist, the work, the responsibility, the craft, the attention,





the time that goes into making good art. It's an argument for that. And by making that argument and by saying some other smart-ass things, it criticizes a lazy kind of aesthetic. There's a poem in the book, "Gorgeous Surfaces," where there is more of a direct attack on that kind of superficial art or an art of outward glitter or flash but ultimately superficial. Obscure, oblique, elitist fake intellectual kinds of art. The kind of art, and the kinds of poetry particularly that is the reason poetry has a relatively small audience, because it makes people feel stupid, makes people feel excluded because they think the poet is so much smarter than them or something. Just because he or she doesn't make sense doesn't mean they're smarter. It just means they choose to write obscurely. There are so many different kinds of sense too. I don't just mean literal sense or something that can be easily paraphrased. I'm talking about a kind of surface razzle-dazzle which has no heart.

There's still a stereotype with a lot of people that poetry is an elitist, ivory tower, intellectual—"if I understand it, can't be good, because you're not supposed to understand poetry because some professor's supposed to explain it to you." That's a stereotype. It's been the dominate mode of poetry in our culture for only about forty of fifty years. Poetry has been a spoken medium, a popular art form as recently as early in this century in America. Even into the thirties or so, where poets where known for their public readings. But that all changed with modernism. When modernism became really crazy and became more of an academic exercise, the critic changed from a person whose job it was to separate the wheat from the chaff and say what we could and why and what was bad and supposedly good, to someone whose job it was to explain the poetry to the reader. If you have to have someone between you and the artist to explain the work to you, most people are going to say, "screw you." It makes people feel stupid. That's beginning to change. I think that's very healthy. There's room for that kind of academic, elitist poetry. But, it's not the only kind of poetry there is and it shouldn't make people feel that poetry is inaccessible, that it has nothing to do with regular people's lives.

***Shoreline:*** *Have any advice for beginning writers?*

**Lux:** Read till you bleed, and write till your eyebrows turn white. You have to read and you have to study the art form. You have to discipline yourself to do it and you have to get your main source of pleasure and satisfaction from doing it. Publication, or whatever it is you want, money or whatever. You have to love doing it. You have to keep doing it.

*Deb Delasanta*

*"The Door"*

Latex on paper

Daniel Venditelli Jr.



*"Dark Angel"*

Mixed media
on paper

Daniel Venditelli Jr.

## Girls Aren't Supposed To Like Trucks

I have a white station wagon now.
I got it the year I turned thirty.
All my friends said I was showing my age,
(on a subconscious level)
admitting that I was more mature,
more stable.
(more dull is what they meant to say)

Truth is, it's strictly utilitarian.
It serves a purpose, keeps things dry.
Truth is, I don't really own the wagon.
(I leased it)
Maybe that says I'm reluctant to
own a symbol.
(one that has no meaning for me)

Waiting for this damn lease to expire,
I contemplate my next vehicle.
Maybe an RV with four wheel drive,
(they're not trucks after all)
plenty of cargo space without
a tailgate.
(girls aren't supposed to like trucks)

*Robin Antoni*





## How to Be Manny

Baptize yourself in southern whiskey
intending to break down a plantation
and build a Boston.
Cut the Mason-Dixon with a razor blade
and sprinkle through history books/cobwebbed bibles.
Wear your pride like a highway billboard
or how a brown girl flaunts twisted braids.

Watch your mother lilt in her peach colored skin,
folding perfect laundry in a peacefulness you normally
don't feel around other white people.
Slide into your father's brown skin, try it on like a leotard.
can't get it off
Learn to fear police before you are eleven in your neighborhood.
See cops fear you before you are eleven in the neighborhood.
Enjoy your memories, like running over sidewalk concrete
pebbles and dust rising underfoot.

Love your brother: he wears the same brown suit that Daddy
shadowed over Mother's virtue.
Remember time with your brother:
the first high, the first revelation, best friend (No one knows what y'all
know from this scenery)
Love yourself. Believe you are God-like with all of your seventeen years.
(if you believed in God)

Dismantle world religions then pray to yourself
and the rainbow that folds laundry, clothes us,
and lives as blood-brothers without breaking the skin.

*Eileen James*

**Easter Sunday, nobody realizes it's Spring**

I accept the invitation and sit in the second seat away from the main course at the table's corner, where my father stands spooning lasagna slices to each of us individually, but not to my mother who drinks by the sink and says she won't eat, not feeling well, something going around the house and it got to her first. My oldest brother confirms this by saying he woke with a rash, my sister competes with complaints of a cough. I try to enter in on the conversation, but I feel fine and I turn to my father for lasagna, and see that he is growing older in the corner, his body curving over the table (his hands stretched out to support himself), aging as quickly as if waking from a sleep that would stretch his beard. His skin isn't the same, his voice already taken. I try to straighten his back to the paneling, but it won't; he's thin. If I grab his arm he will smash to pieces like the Mary I caught falling from my closet's shelf, soiling my hands with something gritty.

*Kristin Coia*

*Untitled*

black and white photograph

Jennifer Rocha

# Home

THREE O'CLOCK is the hardest hour to kill, especially when there aren't any customers pulling up to our pumps; but then, no matter how long this hour drags on, it's better than being at home.

"Damn Mobils and Shells, even those cheap-ass Cumberland Farms putting me out of business," Gary says with a sweeping gesture of his hand as though clearing the air of his own words. "Doesn't anyone want full serve any more?" He alternates between reading his newspaper and watching the road for a customer. "Should've moved to Route 1. You never see anyone here on 1A, not like it used to be."

Gary puts down the newspaper and moves past me to the doorway. Through the front window I watch the rain fall harder than it fell yesterday and expect someone who doesn't want to pump gas in the rain to pull in any second now. I hate pumping gas in the rain. It feels like being in the gas tank while it's being filled, but like Gary always reminds me, it's why I get the big bucks.

"So, Beth," he says pushing away what's left of his thinning hair, "how's your mom doing?"

She's dying, I think to myself, but I tell him, "She's hanging in there." I don't take my eyes off the rain that's making all the old oil spots new again.

"Good," he says still standing in the doorway. "Don't worry, your mother's too young to be buying herself a piece of heaven just yet."

I take a moment to look at him and hope that he's not expecting a response because I don't have one. She's still dying. We're all dying, and the only difference between her and the rest of us is that she knows it.

I see a white Cadillac pulling in before I hear the familiar mechanical bell. Gary moves aside in front of the window to let me through. I walk out into the rain and up to the Cadillac. As I'm coming around the front before the headlights, the woman behind the wheel rolls down her window and a strange mixture of leather upholstery and wet dog fills the air between us. Looking me up and down, she says, "Fill it up, premium," and rolls the window back up before the rain can get in.

"$18.50," I tell her after I'm done filling. She hands me a twenty and tells me to keep the change. I thank her and watch the car pull away from the pumps with her little Terrier sitting in the back window like a stuffed toy. There's no point in running back inside; I'm already soaked down to my bra.

Gary's moved to the back doorway just staring at the old Plymouth parked out behind the garage. He used to call it the final rest area because he parked it back there almost ten years ago, and it never started again. Shaking his head, he says he should've gotten rid of that piece of shit a long time ago. Then he mumbles something about some girl named Dolores and how that car never took him where he didn't want to go. He kicks a few stray rocks from the doorway. They hit bigger rocks and fly off to the left and to the right.

I look past his shoulder at the old Plymouth with the rust that eats away at its entire body. Even the roof has rust holes letting in tunnels of sunlight and rain everyday through the sagging cloth ceiling. Rain water always floods the backseat. Once I stapled a trash bag to the ceiling, but it was so heavy after the rain that the staples were pulled out and water dampened the backseat for weeks.

I GET OFF WORK at six o'clock and walk home to our house, the only hospital on the town line. Before my mother started dying, our house was just another raised ranch in our neighborhood. It still looks like a house from the outside, but inside it's a private hospital where my mother is the only patient. At home, every day my mother lies in bed with her short choppy hair listening to the weather on AM radio.

"Bring me my medicine, please," she says when I walk by. Her voice is barely audible in the hallway, even the weatherman coming through the static is easier to hear. In her bedroom all the shades are pulled, and the only light there is comes from the rectangular haloes around the shades. Her room like the rest of the house smells clean — no, sterile — like if white had a smell this would be it. There isn't enough light to read the bottles, so I grab all that I can carry in two hands and bring them to her. I put the medicine bottles by the half empty water glass and go back for the rest. In the mirror I see her lift her head, but she can't seem to sit up. I hear the caps coming off and the pills being shaken into her palm. Some of those pills must be pain killers because she never forgets to take them. She can't. From the mirror I can make out the outline of her short, choppy hair that frames her head, and I reach for it in the mirror. I think I can feel her hair between my fingers, fluid and full, before she was dying.

I remember the week before her first chemotherapy treatment when the doctor said she should have her hair cut so when it fell out, it wouldn't be so drastic. So she had my sister cut it. Fistfuls of hair fell in big and small clumps all around them. My sister's hands moved awkwardly around my mother's head picking up loose strands. The ends made a jagged line across the back of my mother's head that no one fixed. My sister's eyelashes were dark and matted together, almost glistening with tears.

"It's going to rain again tomorrow," she tells me when she's done taking her medicine. "Could you close the door on your way out?"

EVERY RAINY DAY is different from the one before and the one after. Today the puddles have become pools, but the rain drops seem smaller. The oil stains haven't had time to dry, and no one has pulled in yet, not even to ask for directions to the train station. Sometimes I can't understand why people stop in here only a mile away from the station to ask directions. They never seem to realize how close they are. Gary says I should just tell them to listen for the train horn, and then they'll know that they were almost there.

The last of the afternoon school buses pass, so the elementary school kids are almost home.

Eight days after my mother was diagnosed, the elementary school principal called and asked for Mrs. Morrell.

"This is," I lied and he asked how I was. "Fine," I said and asked who was calling.

"I'm sorry. This is Mr. Rice, the elementary school principal."

I paused, too long.

"Mrs. Morrell?"

"Yes, I'm sorry."

"It's about your daughter. Has she been ill?"

"No, why?"

"She hasn't been in school, Mrs. Morrell No one has seen her since last Friday. Even her friends don't seem to know where she is."

I didn't say anything for a moment, then I asked if he was sure.

He told me there was no mistake, so I told Gary that I'd be a couple hours late while I waited for my sister to come home. When she did , she walked past me with a familiar scent that I never noticed on her before. Some stale smell on her clothes and in her hair and maybe even on her skin. When she stood still, it settled on her, but when she moved, it moved too like her shadow. It was faint but definitely cigarettes and alcohol.

"Where were you today?" I asked her when she took off her coat.

"School."

"The principal called. He said you haven't been all week."

"Yes, I have."

"He said there was no mistake. You haven't been to school have you?"

"You can't make me!" she screamed at me, then ran out of the kitchen with that scent trailing.

GARY COMES IN at six o'clock to relieve me. There's less than three hundred dollars in the cash register. Not one of our better days.

I came to Gary over two months ago looking for a job. His last attendant and mechanic left four months before that. Gary never replaced the mechanic; he just locked the tools up in the garage and forgot to take down the sign for the E-Z oil change, $12.95. I don't think he wanted to hire a girl, but no one else had asked about the job.

Most days are pretty slow, so when Gary's not around I usually sit in the old Plymouth. It doesn't smell like a car anymore. It smells like rust under your nose, a little metallic and very dry. The seats are still deep and soft which is why I'd rather be sitting out there. The windows don't roll up and down and the radio's missing, so is the ashtray. Gary's right, it is a piece of shit, and it isn't going anywhere anymore.

WALKING TOWARDS my mother's room, I hear the weatherman say, "Sunny in the mid to upper sixties tomorrow." I want to put the shades up and let in some light. I want her to see the sun again even if it is from her bed.

The medicine bottles are where I left them, some with the caps off. Her water glass is empty so I go in to refill it.

"What are you doing?" she asks.

"I thought you were asleep." She blinks her eyes several times as





though I am out of focus. "Your water glass is empty. I was going to refill it."

"Sit down," she says. I put the glass back on the night stand, steady a few bottles before they can spill over and sit down on the edge of the bed. "How's work going?" she asks. "Is Gary treating you well?"

"Everything's OK," I say as I look at her skin. It looks so bleached that she almost seems an extension of her sheets.

"Is your sister home from school yet?"

"Yeah, I think so." But I haven't checked.

She swallows hard then asks if I've eaten yet.

"No, what about you? Has anyone brought you anything? Do you want something? Was the Hospice worker here today? I can make you something if you want." Her hair has grown so dull, why didn't I notice that before?

"That's alright," she says, "I'm not hungry right now." I look down on her and see that it's not just her hair that's grown dull. All of her has become so dull that light doesn't shine off of her any longer. There isn't even light around her. She's absorbed it all and can't give it back. Even her eyes don't shine; it's as though they were dry. I back out of her room and turn on all the lights outside of her bedroom.

I ask Gary for more hours at work.

"You willing to work weekends for me? I'd like a weekend to myself once in awhile."

"Any time you'll give me." He looks at me with something close to pity in his eyes.

"You can have Sunday's — all day from opening to closing and Saturday's you can open at 7:00 A.M. and stay 'til 2:00. Every other weekend," he adds.

I thank him quietly and wait for his look to change. But he looks at me just the same. "You sure you want to do this?"

"Yeah, of course." Then I turn my back so I don't have to look at him.

I want to quit going to community college and find a full time job. I want to stay away, maybe join the army, so I can come home at Christmas and find my mother decorating the tree. My sister will finish the sixth grade, go to junior high and high school. Then college. Maybe she'll become a doctor.

AT 11:45 P.M. my sister hasn't come home yet. My mother wants to get out of bed to find her. I promise to look for her because I don't want my mother to leave her bed and her medications. I drive through the town, nowhere in particular because I don't know where to look for a sister I don't recognize anymore. Circling the vacant mall parking lot, I flip on the high beams, but there's nothing there, so I check out McDonald's and Wendy's. They're closed, too. I even drive by her school, but who knows the last time she was there. There's no going home without her because I can't tell my mother she's gone. I drive back through our neighborhood.

Out of reach of the headlights is a tiny orange glow almost too small to be seen. I get closer, and the orange glow brightens, falls then goes out. I pull up to the sidewalk beside my sister. She gets in and smells stronger and fresher than usual, and I hope that my mother can't smell it, too.

The engine rattles a little as I let the car sit in park while we stare at each other. I go first. "Where have you been all night? You know Mom wanted to come out and find you herself?"

"That's not true," she says through her teeth, "or she wouldn't be leaving us."

"It's not her fault though," I try to tell her. "It's not her fault."

"Did you find her? I hear as I pass by my mother's room.

"Yeah, she was on her way home." I invite myself into her bedroom with slow, soft steps until I find her bed and lie down. I can't see her and don't want to. I feel her hand moving over mine, her weightless bones and her paper thin skin, and I'm afraid to touch her.

"Thank you," she says and reaches for my face to stroke my forehead. I think I can feel her bones even through her palm. I start to cry softly, and the tears are captured on the pillow. I wish she would never stop touching me.

Gary doesn't stop in on Saturday's since I have the keys to open up. I usually don't see too many customers in the first half hour even on the weekends. When it's nice, no one seems to mind pumping their own gas. I sit in the backseat of the old Plymouth with my knees pressed into my chest and my chin on my knees. I look through the crack in the front windshield to see where I've been. Gary's right again. This car's never taken me where I didn't want to go either. I've been further and faster than I could even dream. I can hear music through the windows and smell metal and oil but no rust. I close my eyes and I'm there. I'm there.

*Tara Hall*



*"crucifixion"* Woodcut

Doug Forcier

## strode rode

we'd go drunk
on our bikes
past the rich

and their burial grounds
and their Butler Hospital

each of us with a quart of beer
in one hand—

no pedaling
down that long
stretch
with Sonny Rollins
in our heads

a transistor radio
strapped
to the handlebars
with
d. j. Fred Grady
drawling lazily
and dryly
into the night mist
over
the
sound
of
one guitar string
playing "East of the Sun"

(although,
like the tree falling in
the woods,

we didn't know
what
it was called)

this
was before
things
had accumulated
like
names of songs
or
selves

black and white
tv
99 cent movies
at the palace theatre
the mouthpiece coffeehouse
and
records at the library

my best nights were when
I was
thrown out of the house
with the crickets
and traffic

not yet alcoholic
but there was always
some unique
and talented
princess
to be obsessed with

(which gave you something to do)

and soon
another one

like later
there would always
be another drink
(if asked which has
hurt me most
I'd have to say
it's
a toss-up)

couldn't hold a job
or even
*understand*
work





at
the top
of
my
eighty job
streak

so
there were
many
ceilings
voices
ashtrays
beercans
breakups
raw deals
free meals
reel-to-reels
dormers
sculpture
broken stereos and philosophy
etc.

then
it was

bossa nova

at
the risd
taproom

bari
tone
sax
sprinkled
thru
arched windows
into
a net
over benefit street
during
a
twilight
gothic revival
show

while
ears
and arms
stretched out
on primer
and
rust
on a
hood
over an
engine
under
a semi-loud
display

and
even if I vomited
on the Henry Moore thing

leaving a fairly even layer
of the evening's
melody
all over
it
there was a sense
of something
else
I had to do about
what felt good

and
a bad feeling
about the other

and
how much
there'd be of *it*—

then it happened that way

*Bill D'Arezzo*

*"Christina"* black and white photograph

Ken Fetta





## opening

listen my dears, listen
and i'll tell you how you came
into this world,
wished for and not.

someone lay back and opened
so wide to let you out,

and oh my creatures,
how can i tell
how i was strong so long
on a journey of one that many share,
but that moment i was the only one.

knowing you were beautiful
helped because
there was this moment,
blood of my blood,
when i didn't know
in which place i would join you.

what a will we have
that has nothing to do
with doctors in tinted garb,
glaring lights
or the midwife,
the covering of thatch,
under the elder,
sheltering cave
or the planting fields.

there is that moment,
sap of my sap,
when no one, no one is there
but whatever made the earth and me,
and you who want to be.

*Phoebe Martone*

## Eve and the Snake

The cat is bad luck and I know this, but still flinch at the sight of that feline darkie cutting my direction. Compare this to the snake that they left me alone in the room with. I told them about my phobia, but they said someone had to stay.
No one was worried about the singer for I had no instrument to tune up.
Nothing this free keg beer couldn't loosen, fix, straighten.

I found myself on the ledge of the radiator watching eight feet of python constricting skeletal muscles. Moving without legs (*it's just a pet, silly*). I felt the beer yeast foaming in my stomach. Rolling and turning like the scales that rippled the snake across the room.

"I don't want no apples"

I felt foolish as the snake slid into the darkness of a dirty laundry pile.
Snakes were evil. Deadly. With one bite. Or a squeeze.
And this snake could squeeze. I imagine it spiraling tight over my body.
It could keep me contained and safe. (*what a warm way to die*) Bones crunching inward, clenching. (*did you ever hug too hard?*) I could just lay calmly, snake easing me into sleep.(*what a gentle way to die.*)

Compare this to the young man I met earlier. Through his eyes, wet with bar cocktails and armed with no inhibitions, he related his fantasies and desires.
"I fantasize about being with a black girl." And I took this. As if when I was younger I envisioned (or desired) being the subject of these erotic dreams.
(I dreamed of hopscotch.) I stood in the schoolyard, fat yarn bows. Bright yellow and clean as sunshine cutting onyx kinky mane. I was clean and pure as sunshine then, but now have I become the Madonna of his palm and the whore of his dreams? Sometimes.

*Is it evil to get off on this?*

Digress back to the snake. Go back thousands of years to Eve's desires and Adam's weakness. (use a bible for reference) The snake tripped Mankind, fucked with the woman.
All without legs.
But this snake, I decided was more oppressed than I have ever complained to be: I've never been ensslaved.

(*It's just a pet, silly*)





A possession.
This snake will never glide over the greenest green, scratch over paper bag bark, scale trees.
Have a snake life.
*"Who is speaking for the snake?"*
Not me, woman and snake lead the fall of Mankind.
I could never befriend a snake, or a housecat, or a dog.

Look at the dogs. Running lame, hobbling and hungry. We created species like we were gods. Domesticate and civilize. The puppies belong in litters, in packs, like families. (*They are just animals, silly.*)

Let us forget the ssslave snakes, bastard cats, and inbred dogs, and instead watch the birds. They just fly away together. Manipulate the land like we should. Together. They are free to fly unless stolen away to be caged for show. Metal cages or tunnel-vision brains, or that young man I met earlier. He is at home now, hidden under bedsheets. Stealing my virtue with each stroke of his palm. Secret. Vivid. Real.
Sweat dancing on the nape of his neck.
Right where he wanted to kiss me.

I never hear the snake whine, though.

I've never heard of Eve complaining.

*Is it wrong to get off on all this?*

Nothing will ever change.

*Eileen James*

*"The Rape"*

computer generated image

Daniel Venditelli, Jr.



*"The Master"*

Computer generated image

Daniel Venditelli, Jr.

## Some Pleasant Victory

Somewhere along the west side
of Providence, we found a spot
on a sidewalk with trees
and drank iced coffee while watching a family of three
paddle by in a boat
made for four, whistling freely
to one another without the pressures of telling
a story (or the truth), names and dates included,
like the earful I was getting
about a boyhood revised
at twenty-five,
the letters from his lover made into balls and cramped into the ashtray
of his truck: I found them.
My friend James came out to me
yesterday, cocksure
about escaping that intense
isolation he felt through the Fall,
taking notice of Spring,
ready to fall in love for the first time
(in this new way),
listing so many things we never talked about before: that void,
not with the radiance and kindness
like something Buddhist,
but black and moody, like any other
undesirable paradox,
winter and summer,
a numb feeling.
How do you keep a good relationship going?
Four boys
across the street
were playing an unfamiliar game
through our vision
capped by a giant tree's drooping branches,
but one that ended
with all four boys
down on the ground,
flat with obedience, waiting
for the leader to stand and wake a second boy,





claiming this friend
as his victim,
shooting through him
with a full round,
announcing some pleasant victory
to himself, to the others;
but the dead boy got to his feet
and listlessly maneuvered
his body full of holes
across the street, dramatizing
his defeat (acting out his final good-byes)
swaying with the ease
of a dauntless villain,
remembering his mother,
and visualizing his passage to the skies,
faithfully falling
on someone's front lawn,
good and dead,
not moving again
until James fumbled into laughter, asking if we used to play that way,
the two of them laughing,
just lying there laughing — James and the dead boy — on opposite sides
of the street,
laughing.
Listen, the sunlight is coming
on strongly from behind you,
and the way you sit,
with your back relaxing
on the hill's slant upward,
I see something of a child inside of you; the light
resting above you with all its weight.

*Kristin Coia*

# The Lower Waters

My wife is a jew. She wakes up carefully, before dawn, not speaking until she has said her morning prayer down in the dining room, down kneeling under the good china, the expensive walnut table. She prays there because she does not want to wake me, but nothing is louder than the sound of her silent awe. She rises from the bed as if she were ascending to heaven. Life. Again. Today. The three cats, already hungry, circle her, paw her, too, as she gives herself to awe and love. I know because I have seen her there, kneeling on the deep pile rug, ignoring them.

She often dreams that she is on fire. I turn to her in darkness, in our dark house which is dark even by day, in the rich burgundy and gold of our bedroom. I turn to her as she is rolling over and over, and hold her still. I hold her in her old flannel nightgown and am never sure if I should. I am never sure late at night that the flames won't engulf her as I'm holding her gently. I am never sure, actually, that I will not catch fire, that we will not burn together in this bed, ablaze with glory or insolence.

"Last night," she will say, "I dreamed that I was on fire." I will feign surprise. "Again?" I will say. "Again?" I love my wife. I will pass her a plate of potatoes. She will talk about the baby that died. "He would have been a good boy," she will say, "he is with God now." Our child, never born. She will say that it was her fault, all her fault, and start to cry, spilling a glass of water. The water will spread slowly across the table in a big dark stain.

My wife was a rabbi's daughter, but now she is only my wife, the wife of a wealthy protestant. She was promised at twelve to a rabbi's son, she was groomed to be the wife of a holy man. She has lived her life in the presence of holy men, solemn men wearing beards. My wife has learned to read their guarded looks, has been captivated by their piety. I know nothing of such men. I do, however, know something of God.

For twenty years she has been my wife, and for twenty years she has been on fire. She comes home with the groceries, her face blazing. Fifteen years ago, she burst into flames in the brightness of a doctor's office as he told her she could never have children. The burning has hollowed her out and left her frightened, ablaze, awestruck.

"What is holy?" This is the question my wife asks, and laughs. She answers herself. "I am holy. I will not be filled." My wife wakes up to pray, rises, silent, puts on her robe, walks downstairs and kneels on the thick carpet, in a place worn down with her kneeling and rocking, and she prays this: that the earth and the waters come together again, that she may see God.

I write novels. Mostly pulp, under a female name. It is strange the things novelists need to know. I find myself walking into the hallway and asking odd questions. Do buses run at night between Boston and Portland, Maine? How could a Unitarian boy knock up a rabbi's daughter? Easy. She was beautiful. There is no *fault* as far as I can tell. It was, as my father said, "one of those things that happen," as he was writing me a check for the abortion. I was nineteen and did not yet know about things. She did not, as I found out, want an abortion. She wanted me to marry her. Needed me to marry her, actually, because her father had found out and had given her a week to leave. I hear the word "gentile" is archaic. My father wrote a bigger check.

I did not yet know about things. Yahweh is a God of tests, of trials. We decided: if the child was a boy, his name would be Isaac. Sarah wanted to give everything, she told me. "I do not understand what is happening," she said, "but I know that I have to stay out of it. I have been too selfish. I have been tying myself to the ground."

No messiah, she miscarried shortly after the wedding, and in a tumult of pain and wedding gifts, we sat in the thick silence of the house trying to love each other. "Sarah," I said quietly, standing over the bed, "can I get you anything?" She would not look at me for a week, would not look at anyone. Her family did not come to visit. One day she got out of bed, shut all the shades in the house and lit candles in every room, knelt in the dining room on the thick pile rug and prayed for five, six hours without stopping. Wailing. When she finally rose, shaken and weak, she stumbled to where I was, sitting on the couch in the next room, looked at me with her blazing eyes, and collapsed into my lap.

She has not seen her family in twenty years, although her sisters, since they moved away from home, made poor marriages themselves, have flocked to our house. I come home to the laughter of Jewish women in our kitchen. I come home and hear it and I walk to my study. I leave the door open.

This is what will happen if I become a widower: I will spend the rest of my life alone, feeling foolish, like a man laughing at a joke no one else understands. If my wife dies first, I will be free and empty, sitting in my car at a stoplight, laughing out loud, feeling foolish as hell. The people in surrounding cars will stare, then notice the empty space where my wife used to sit. I think this until I realize, oh yes, she is already gone.

We rarely fight. It never gets that far. What can anyone fight about? I often feel like a cat in a Buddhist temple, padding ignorantly around the relics, jumping on the statues, disturbing the worshippers. I feel as though when I touch her, I am really not touching her at all, that I would do better to put my hand on the lit burner of the gas stove, to walk away charred and hollering. That's how it is in this house. And I know that I am not the right man to say things. I am only fit to yell and she to laugh at my smoking fingers.

"It doesn't matter what I say," she said. "It doesn't matter what I tell you. I cannot tell you anything." Last tuesday, she suddenly burst out crying. She had the book of Psalms open on her lap. She got up and went into the kitchen.

We laugh together, my wife and I, sometimes. She came from the kitchen with a mug. She said, "It doesn't matter what I say. I can't. You can't. I'm going to bed."

"Stop," I said. The book was lying open on the couch. I heard her on the stairs, in the hall, shutting the bathroom door. These two lines, underlined in ink, lay on the page: *Pour out your heart like water/ in the presence of the Lord.*

I knocked on the bathroom door. "What is it?" she said.

"When God separated the upper and the lower waters, did He hear the lower waters cry out? My soul is there too. My soul is there."

"Yes," she said, "I have seen it."

*Kathryn Duhamel*



*Untitled* black and white photograph


Brett Roberts

## The Roses Between Us

I

"Everything rises and vanishes,"
she says. "Even the sorrow."
But,
I can't bake bread anymore.
Though sometimes
I roll out the dough
and pinch pieces to chew.
Sour gum. Dough bubbles. I eat
only white things: rice, yogurt,
angelfood cake. The dog gets fatter
from all the colors I throw him:
Bologna-red, pickle-green, cheesepuff-orange.
I want to eat
the sea shells she keeps
in a glass jar on her desk,
salty-white and crunchy.
I don't tell her any of this.
I sigh, and watch
the window of tangled branches instead.

We sit, every week, each on a blue couch.
There are always roses between us.
She lifts one, pink, out of the vase.
I want to drink the water dripping
from the green. Visuals. She's about
to make a point. She moves her fingers
like scissors. "See, you have to cut
the stem so the flower will get
the nourishment it needs. If you don't,
the good stuff can't get in."
"I'm not a flower," I tell her.
"If you don't let me in,
I can't help you get better."
50 minutes. We have to stop.
She picks out another, red.
"Take this with you. Think
about what I said."





At home, I find an old jelly jar
for a vase. I sleep, and dream
about fishing in a blue couch,
using pink and red petals for bait.
I sit on the arm rest, my feet dangle
down into the water
where the couch cushion should be.
The surface water is sky-blue
and sunny. But when I look deeper
I see it's
black like pupils
and bottomless.
"Watch your back,"
a passing Trout tells me.
"She wants to push you in."

II

Morning. A few red petals
lie on the kitchen table,
like the pieces of a popped balloon.
"Is it dying?" I ask my mother.
"No. Looks healthy."
"When will it open?"
"It won't," she says.
"It's not that kind."

I will do this instead of crueler things,
like my brothers plucking off insect wings.
I peel the layers of the rose,
like the leaves of an artichoke.
Except there is no goal,
no inside to get to, like that green
vegetable heart. This red hides nothing
but nothingness.

Each petal is different:
a bruised wing,
a baby's tongue, a fetus's.
Soft like the dog's ears,
curled that way too.
Eyelid of someone sleeping.

The red dress my mother wore
only once (She let me
smooth the hem and suck my thumb).

An empty stem.
A pile of petals.
There is no reason to keep them,
but I do. I find an empty sewing tin.

III

Next week, a new batch between us, yellow.
She tucks her feet beneath her,
tucks her hair behind her ear.
"So, how've you been?"
I can't get out of the shower.
I eat only green.
The dog won't come near me.
Moths make me sad.
"I picked your flower apart."
"It was your flower.
I gave it to you."
Silence. I watch the yellow,
and wait for her voice.
"You were 8 when your father left.
Tell me about that."
She leans back into the blue.
"Why?"
"We have to find your wounds
before we can heal them."

I don't remember the things
she wants me to. No incest.
No abuse. "Sometimes I feel
like hitting the dog."
"Who hit you?"
"No one."
She wants a crisis, a primal scene.
I have only some broken glass,
a father's bloody feet. She keeps
picking at me, searching.





IV

I can eat every color but red.
Eventually, the roses stop,
the once-a-weeks. One day,
cleaning, I find the tin.
I shake it and hear scuttling.
Open it, a smell of weak tea.
Pieces of something:
bruise-colored, papery.
I don't find
the rose petals.
I find

a pile of scabs,
interrupted healing,
dark clusters of hurt.
An 8-year-old's scabs,
picked from her knees, her falling places,
sometimes to watch herself bleed.
That summer, she couldn't stop
tripping and banging into things.
No major injuries,
just scrapes and cuts.
All those little cuts, she saved,
in a sealed place, until it was safe.
And now I can't stop remembering.

*Bethany Mott*

*Untitled*

black and white photograph

Jennifer McGirr

## Day Sleeper

The air itself is a heaviness.
pressing in.
sitting upon my chest.

Seeking sleep on a midsummer afternoon.
Lawnmowers droning
  Fan blades fighting
    to push dense air unwilling to stir.

Seeking respite from the heat and the noise,
quietly struggling
  not quite reaching
    the calm coolness within myself.





Perspiration clings to my lip,
moistens my brow,
gathers beneath my breast.

Seeking dreams on a midsummer afternoon.
slowly breathing
  silently slipping
    consciousness melts in the heat.

*Robin Antoni*

*Untitled*

black and white photograph

Jennifer McGirr

### Big Harvest

Those who don't like the over-generous
Might shrink at too much of a treat,
To have God in a carnival mood,
Frolicking with proportion.

In autumn, rising over the rim,
The too-close marshmallow moon pie
Is forced upon our sense of decorum,
When a simple vanilla snap was called for.

But those who celebrate the muchness —
The expansive jokes nature plays —
Will dance at such a variance,
Missed by nobody,
And mistaken for nothing else
But a smacks-when-you-whack-it
Piece of voluptuous ass.

*Phoebe Martone*





# Tourist Trees

the fighter

The first time he'd been punched in the nose he knew he should be a fiction writer. As best he can remember it was the nearest he came to dying. The sharp sting of having taken life for granted. There was ridiculously little pain, just some loss of balance until he steadied against the Miller Light mirror, quick water from the eyes, not much of a punch. But the suddenness, originality, tingling in your feet that you feel after being punched in the nose.

At Hess Publishing, where he made his money, no one bothered with his seize-the-day euphoria, no one had been punched in the nose. Quickly his copy deteriorated from an editorial standpoint, grammar and punctuation sacrificed for style and rhythm. Martin takes pride in having quit before being fired.

early to bed

Today he caught up in age with Eddie. Tomorrow he would be older. Twenty-seven and fifty-six days. What is it about people you meet in high school that makes them the closest friends you'll ever have? There are still orange minutes of August sunlight left, lifting from under thick, neglected hills. He shuffles through and files scenes in his memory and comes up knowing that he isn't much farther along than when he heard about the car wreck two years ago. On Alligator Alley, straight and flat, the glare like puddles of oil on the road.

Eddie said in Key Largo the fishing boats were hiring. The water is where life is left and starboard, gangway and galley. The drinks are cold, the beaches warm, and the bars filled with easy women and potential revolutions.

Back then he would think about going in a few years, packing up the Honda to fish and write in Florida. Then he had a job, apartment and steady girlfriend with a strawberry birthmark on her inner thigh to think about. Now he is just falling asleep too easily.

the playboy

He opens his eyes in blackness and sits up in his bed. He hadn't been dreaming and feels cheated from the five hours of sleep. He hasn't dreamed in weeks. Jennifer, Sue, Tina, he thinks. The girls he'd had. He holds out a finger for each name, and when he passes ten he starts again on the first hand. Sometimes he will write their names down on a scrap of paper, and some of the names he can't remember, so he will write, "with red Camaro" or "Spanish." He adds up thirteen and wonders if that is good or bad. Maybe it means nothing at all.

never far from home

Nothing is as embarrassing as your home town. People there never grow or think or live. Once in a while they die.

*"He traced the bridge of my nose with that beautiful finger, at once hard and soft, and stopped at my lips for me to let the salty extension of strength into my body. I still waited to break him, to punish him for whatever he would do to me later, but now he was feeling more like a timeless friend, worn-in slippers. I just hugged him as if we would die apart and we fell asleep on my couch with our pants and sneakers and watches on."*

He sits the open novel in his lap and sips from a glass. The writing is a little sloppy, sentimental, he thinks, but still there is something there in relationships, something childish that happens to people, something after words. He slides the vodka and tomato juice in the plastic Giants cup under the chair when the footsteps come, slow and unsteady, creaking the pine staircase. Everything he does lately must be covered up.

Her frame is like a snow-weighed branch in the hallway with the yellow fuzz of dawn. In the lapse of his leaving and returning, his mother had traded perfume for talc, a sweet musk that distances her from him.

The coffee maker grumbles in the kitchen. She sets a basket of clothes in front of the door to the washroom. Soon the whole house is filled with Downy steaming in hot water and a fabric sheet from the dryer, smells he had let go of. He goes into the bathroom to brush away the vodka.

job offer

You've got your appointment with Mr. Andersen today at ten, don't forget, she says. She sips black coffee from a tiny China cup and sets it in its matching saucer. He mops up egg yolk with a bagel.

I'm not sure that's really the thing for me right now, he answers as soon as his mouth is empty. Maybe I can postpone.

Mr. Andersen has gone out of his way to set up the interview. Brinklin Investments doesn't hire right off the street.

I appreciate his offer, really.

Give it more thought, Martin. Even if it's only for a little while. You know how the money can get tight.

Money, his face is opened, mouth hanging, eyes wide. Mom, if money is a problem, I wish you'd let me know. I will help, I'm not a lazy person, you know.

Money's not the issue, Martin. It's just not healthy for you to be idle.

Idle? He does not raise his voice.

Come on, Mom. Cars idle, people don't idle. I've been writing more than ever. Idle? Never heard the word.

She boots up the disappointment pout.

An idle mind is the devil's workshop, he sings, waving his bagel plate by his ear like a top hat. The dance and song works him over to the sink where he sets the dirty dishes, slippers tapping o the linoleum. He prances backward out of the room and leaves her with an easy smile on her face.

the angry young writer

*Black Strawberries*. He had written the piece in only four days. It was about a young man who picked up a girl in a bar by insulting her until she was crazy about him and then got punched in the nose by her boyfriend. He sent it to only one journal, The Indiana Review, and they accepted it. It would be in print in their Spring issue.

He has no doubt he will make it. Three stories are in the works on his lap-top. The years of special features, photo-wraps and fluff are just fuzz at the back of his head now. Life is a constant process of breaking away.





nightlife

Woodbury has three bars, The Newcastle Inn, Charlie's Pot-belly Pub and J.J.'s Cafe. Martin walks into J.J.'s because he will have the least chance of running into old school buddies. The moon blinks behind high fog and cedars and spruce stab up at the back like burned-out lamp posts. Pine cones collect on the front walk like garbage.

The inside of the bar looks like no one has thought about it in a while. The oak paneling is carved up with names, phone numbers for a good time. Half a wall is in the middle of the floor with ship-like oak dowels reaching to the ceiling behind which a small stage is set up for a band. Duct-taped drums, a small amp with three letters missing from Marshall. There won't be a band tonight, maybe on Friday.

He orders a beer from a bartender who is fiftyish with too much makeup, who he is happy not to recognize. He adds a shot of Jack Daniels to that and pays and drinks. The torn, unbalanced barstool becomes comfortable.

The bartender offers her name and slips Martin a smile as she trades three singles for quarters. The cigarette machine has a long mirror on the top. A little glassy in the eyes, but not bloodshot yet. His hair has been good lately, the clean well water doesn't leave residue like mustered New Haven city water. He pulls Marlboro. Behind him is a wide plate-glass window that looks like the gravel parking lot, and he catches a reflected glimpse of her. She tucks her hair behind her ear and disappears behind the etched brown door. It couldn't be her, not tonight, not on this quiet night.

connie

Constance. The name always bothered him. Like there was something formal about her that he needed to be aware of.

She stops in the doorway when she sees him, for a moment it's as if she might turn and walk again out of his life. Then a smile.

Her hair style has changed, long and un-permed, no more bangs. The face is older, a few lines, a little more makeup, still Kristie Alley in the eyes.

My God, Martin! She tries to pull his body into hers with a hug and brushes her lips near his nose. She still wears the same perfume. He remembers how well they fit around each other.

At the bar they sit and talk. She stops in every now and then for a quick vodka and tonic before going home to her daughter. Yes, one daughter, four years old. She still misses Eddie, can't believe he's gone.

The talk spins around and around. It wanders into their old college apartment with the heavy green curtains and prehistoric gas stove. Manny's at the bottom of the fire escape serving pizza with quarter-hamburger sized meatballs. She and Martin set up a volley ball net on the rooftop. When she left a year before graduating, Martin let her keep her key.

She pauses. She touches her face. She misses those times.

All he wants from this dingy night is to be with her again. A fire that he had let die out sparks up in him. He can do this, he can talk. Martin Hastings is a player.

bar talk

He picks up her hand and separates

her fingers, rubbing.

You're not married.

Was, she says, letting him brush the soft flesh between her fingers.

Lasted about a year and a half. The sad thing is when you realize that all your friends are really just his friends being polite.

She laughs a little as if she just realized that her whole marriage was absurd.

He squeezes slightly. She squeezes back.

It was just a mistake.

I would have guessed it, he says with warmth feeding into his face. I know you too well.

She has no reply.

He: Now let me guess. Around six-two, athletic, long hair, maybe a music man, with the lightest blue, no something unique, the darkest green eyes.

She: Five-seven, love handles, on his way to balding. I can't even remember the color of his eyes.

He: He smothered you with affection. You had no room to breathe. You saw yourself getting lost in him, a divorce was the only way for you to find yourself.

She: I came home early from work and found him stark naked, kneeling behind the sixteen-year-old baby-sitter. She was chewing a hole in the arm of my couch.

He: You see? I know you better than you know yourself.

He can still make her laugh. Laugh at herself. Laugh without control. Lately she hasn't laughed for days at a time. She will take him home. Martin Hastings is a player.

connie barefoot

He parks behind her in the narrow driveway.

Her apartment is the second floor of a green and yellow two-family. There are snowy outdoor pictures on the walls of the small living room. A glass-top coffee table with a crack down one edge holds a photo album that he will look through as soon as she is out of the room. The walls are pinkish or maybe some purple combination, and there are baskets and dried flowers. Martin decides that it must be post-divorce. He can't picture a man having lived here.

Her smell is everywhere.

Connie pays the baby-sitter. She is about sixteen. Martin wonders if she is the same one. She picks up a book-bag, tosses him a good night and leaves.

The daughter is sleeping in her room. Martin does not ask to see her.

Connie is in the bathroom, sink water running heavy. He sits by the coffee table and lights a cigarette. A shot of their daughter— a miniature replica of Connie, but with wavy blond hair74—at a birthday party in a children's restaurant, a large mouse passing out cake to the kids in the background. Halloween, The Little Mermaid, her eyes barely reaching the holes in the mask. One shot of mommy and daddy at an outdoor concert. Mesomorph with a Yankees cap, a good two inches shorter than Connie. His eyes are closed and his mouth opened, but she smiles hard to make up for it.

She comes in sweat pants and a T-shirt, and Martin can tell by the way her front jiggles that she is not wearing a bra. Without makeup her eyes lose a little of their sharpness, their strength, but that is all; she has very good skin. Her toenails are gloss red. She slides a movie into the VCR and turns the volume down. Something medieval with armor and Clydesdales.





Connie loves horses.

Martin swings her knees over his lap and massages her feet. They are rough on the heel and little toe but soft as tissue on top. She closes her eyes and leans back, a gurgling in her throat. He works off his own shoes and adjusts to lie across from her.

She is up and out of the room before Martin can ask why. she comes back with a fistful of money, Maybe from out of a flour jar in the cupboard.

I want you to have this.

Really?

It's about eleven hundred. I've just been saving for I-don't know-what. The ring cost more, I know. I would give it back, but I had to pawn it. I'm sorry, Martin.

He holds the money. It is wrapped in a rubber band, good and hard and heavy.

He hands it back to her.

I can't, Connie. Really. The ring was yours, a gift as much as anything else. Besides, I've got a job lined up with a friend of the family.

She hangs her head. The money falls to the coffee table.

I'll be rolling in it pretty soon honey, so's maybe I'll get ya's another one if'n ya's aint careful.

She kisses him harder than he has ever been kissed before, her cool, toothpasted tongue squirming under his teeth.

no memory

He kisses her smile by the blue flicker of the television. She throws a cushion off the couch and adjusts herself over him. The stretch marks under her navel are strange, like strips of bark under his fingers.

The tiny girl stands behind them. "Mommy, I can't find Oscar."

There are no blankets to cover with. Martin can't move.

He's on your toy box, sweetheart.

The tiny girl rolls her eye around the room. They stop on Martin, blinking, blinking, blinking. She turns and goes back to bed.

Don't worry. Connie tousles his hair. She won't remember any of this tomorrow.

A petal falls off a dried rose on the wall like a boulder to the floor. She buys herself flowers when no one else will.

A poem should always have flowers in it, he means to start intimate talk.

She squints and stares at her fingers. He realizes how much time has come between them.

a thief in the night

The daughter sleeps with a slice of moonlight on her cheek. Martin passes and follows Connie up the wooden ladder to the loft. The edges of the small waterbed are leather-padded. Slosh-slosh.

She is breathing sleep, full and heavy. His heart paces, rhythmed Like the tick of a bomb. It is raining behind him, in the past. He untangles himself from her quietly and dresses.

The money sits near the photo album. He lifts it, smells it, puts it in the jacket of his pocket. A snare trap, the metaphor slips into his mind. Leaving you dangling by a foot over a book of cheap pictures already curling and fading.

the load out

Gumbo Limbo trees I think is the real name.

Eddie sipped off a fresh Rolling Rock on the small wooden porch that overlooked the canal, a driveway of broken shells, flashes of tiny lizards.

The blonde stubble over his dark skin like cattails in the Glades.

We call them tourist trees because the bark turns red and peels when the sun hits them.

Martin slips into his car, rolls out of the driveway in neutral, and-starts the engine. He eases up the empty street mentally packing his suitcases. Springsteen pours slowly into the back through magnetic-based speakers.

*Runnin' into the darkness, some hurt bad*
*Some really dyin'*
*At night sometimes it seems you could hear*
*That whole damn city cryin'*

He wonders how entire islands can balance on fossils. the drive down is only twenty hours, eighteen if he hurries.

*Wayne Harrison*

*Untitled*

black and white photograph

Jin Kye



*Untitled*

black and white photograph

Jin Kye