The goal of our publication is to provide a forum for exceptional poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction in a dynamic, appealing and accessible environment.

The views expressed in The Oklahoma Review do not necessarily correspond to those of Cameron University, and the university's support of this magazine should not be seen as an endorsement of any philosophy other than faith in and support of free expression.
Those Things Remembered
By Paul Weidknecht

The beard was key. Of this, Ralph was certain. Anyone could put on the suit and cap, but the beard was the trademark, the thing that pulled the whole look together. A natural brilliant white, it had been that way before his retirement from the plant seven years ago, where even the guys on the job called him Santa. He was convinced this was the reason for that wonder in children’s eyes when they sat on Santa’s lap. Even shy kids who had to be coaxed up to the throne, who’d bury their chins in their chests as if they’d forgotten their lines for the school play, nearly always managed a sideways peek at the beard, amazed at its ethereal look. And the ones who didn’t need coaxing, the bold ones, they’d sometimes give it a tug for proof. Except for babies, every kid could discern a real one from a fake. This hair was also why the Fairbridge Mall had hired him for the last seven seasons to be their guy in red.

Black Friday, the day after Thanksgiving, and the indoor city of Fairbridge Mall bustled. Sounds of clicking shoes, rustling bags, and shouting children bounced off the hard floor, mixed and overlapped, filling the mall. This may have been noise to others, but Ralph never heard it that way; it was the sound of an orchestra warming
up before the curtain rises. As Ralph settled deeply into his leather chair at the
center of the atrium, watching the children and parents queue around the base of
his kingdom, he had to admit the mall really went all out this year. The set-up was
impressive. Frosted in plastic snow, the new castle stood over an expanse of white
felt speckled with glittering sequins. Nearby sat a full-sized antique sleigh piled high
with a mound of prop gifts, empty boxes wrapped in metallic red, green and silver
paper. The canted heads of robotic reindeer scanned dumbly back and forth as
mechanical elves waved, the entire scene illuminated with blue and pink lights for
that North Pole look. No red bow stapled to a plywood riser for Fairbridge.

Despite the fine work of the mall carpenters, Ralph was never fully persuaded
that the Christmas season started the day after Thanksgiving. With yesterday's
turkey still not fully digested, it seemed rushed to start in on another holiday. The
weather didn't seem right either; it needed to be colder. He recalled his youth in the
north woods of Maine, where it seemed everyone had half a backyard dedicated to
a winter's supply of firewood, where every single day in December saw the ground
covered in snow, and there was always a chance of snow falling on December 25th.
Here, snow didn't exist in November, was rare in December, and a Christmas Eve
snowfall was like hitting a meteorological lottery.

But he was an actor who disappeared into the role. People new to the
business always forgot things, and professionals always carried extras. White gloves:
Santa had to have them when holding the reins. Reading spectacles, the wire-
rimmed, rectangular ones: Santa had to read the list. Even breath mints. Kids had no
problem asking Santa for a radio-controlled car and telling him he had bad breath
in the same sitting.

But he wasn't sure why he'd been distracted by the thought of his beard,
or about Maine. It wasn't like him to have his mind filled up with other things while
working.

He had another problem. And it had absolutely nothing to do with the fact
he had not been relieved for his lunch break, or that he was burning up inside the
heavy suit because the mall had forgotten to provide a fan. Even the fact that his
left pant leg had been dampened by not one, but two children, in the past forty-five
minutes was nothing he couldn't handle.

The real problem concerned this last little girl, the one who'd just had the
accident. The accident was no big deal, a hazard of the job, but he had forgotten
her name. Forgotten it. That hadn't happened before. Ever. Parents, even mall
managers, were quick to detect an impersonal Santa Claus, and the ones who
couldn't connect with kids by remembering names and gift requests soon found
themselves not being Saint Nick anymore.
She had told him her name, and suddenly the name was gone, lost in a thousand other possibilities. Whenever a child would tell him a name, he would repeat it and imagine the first letter stamped onto the center of the kid’s forehead. What it lacked in warmth, it made up for in function, and until now, the trick had never failed him.

Time passed and Ralph got his lunch break, changing into a dry pair of pants between bites. Although the manager rolled his eyes at the request, eventually he ended up with a box fan someone found buried in a storeroom, making the last hour of the shift tolerable.

Rain slanted across Ralph’s headlights as he drove slowly past the rows of cars, picking his way through the mall lot. He tapped the brakes, allowing a pair of teenagers to sprint in front of him. Someone behind him blasted a horn, shouting something through a half-opened window as Ralph moved on toward the exit, to the boulevard and the interstate. Fifteen minutes later, suburban streets, already glittering with decorations, gave way to black rural roads, where lack of the same made it seem as if the season were still six months away. The dotted centerline reflected brilliant yellow against the night, as the car rushed through the closing fog, pushing it to both sides. Glancing up into the rearview mirror, Ralph saw a white glow hanging over the mall miles behind.

He wasn’t sick, but he didn’t feel like he normally would after work. This season seemed hurried, impersonal, not at all like the others. The manager was new, a young guy, not the person who had been there previous seasons. Whenever he and Ralph spoke, the man appeared distracted, his gaze constantly drifting behind Ralph, the kind of person who nods a lot and hears only half of anything that bores him. Ralph was suspicious of these young middle-management types. They were the kind who step into a situation, making changes for the sake of creating something new. To these folks, changes could only be improvements.

Taking this job had been a compromise between Eleanor and Ralph, a halfway point, with neither getting everything, but both getting something. Ralph wanted to stay on at the plant; Eleanor wouldn’t hear of it. To her thinking, Ralph had done his time and was deserving of his pension the very moment he qualified for it. Sixty-five was the end of the race, the finish line, not an opportunity to lose it all by running another stretch. She’d heard too many stories of men overstaying their welcome, union paychecks too fat to leave for the next person in line, dying at their machines, each becoming a cautionary tale for those who would consider suckling the company past their weaning.

Had Eleanor forgiven him? After these years he was still unsure. Their savings—the money that was supposed to buy Eleanor’s dream house in Florida—had
evaporated, slowly disappearing as he insisted on playing financial planner. When it was finally gone, with no chance of a market turn-around or recovery, he realized his stubbornness had also ensured him a lifetime of labor. Whether as a plant foreman or mall Santa, Ralph knew he would need to work until the dirt hit the casket. The pension and Social Security would pay the bills, keep the grandchildren in gifts, but the dream house in Florida would remain just that, a dream.

He looked to the side of the road: a speed limit sign whipped past. Something about it wasn’t right: the sign was too tilted, the numbers and letters not as black and sharp as they should’ve been, the white background too ashy. This road was suddenly unfamiliar to him, and it was only when held reached the ancient gas station at the crossroads eight miles later that he realized he’d taken a wrong turn, something he couldn’t ever remember doing in the last thirty-two years. He turned into the gas station, swung through the lot, and drove home.

Time had moved faster than Ralph had expected, and he found it hard to believe it was already December 17th. As he changed into his costume in the employee locker room, Ralph reached into his gym bag and grabbed a bottle of Vitamin C. He popped two tablets, then thought better and popped another two. If tonight was going to be like any other night, he’d be coughed at and sneezed on at least two dozen times before the shift ended. Just a shade over a week and that would be it for another year. Soon Eleanor would begin packing for their trip.

By now the trip was ritual. For the past seven years they had gone to Florida to visit Eleanor’s sister. They’d leave by noon on Christmas Day and arrive in south Florida three days later, staying for a month. Kaye and Tom would try to talk them into staying at their home, but they always declined, choosing instead a nearby rental. The two couples would spend the day together and go out for dinner in the evening. Afterwards, they’d part ways, two returning to a home with no mortgage, two withdrawing to something else. Ralph’s Santa money covered the rental, but whenever they’d wave goodbye until the next morning, he never forgot that a month in a Florida rental was not a home in Florida.

So many times during their drive back north, he would turn toward Eleanor and try to guess what she was thinking. Much of the time she stared dully out at the interstate, expressionless. Every so often a billboard advertising senior living would pass, showing happy, fit, silver-haired couples in pastel colors, with impossibly white dentures, their arms around each other, strolling contentedly, maybe with a golf course in the background. Golden years under golden sunshine. Ralph never had the heart to examine her face, to study it for a meaning. Was she tired? Was she sad that the vacation was ending? Or was she regretful of a life that hadn’t matched her
Ralph remembered his courting days, of standing in the foyer of Eleanor’s huge house under a chandelier that cost more than his father made in a year. While her mother went to find Eleanor, her father sat in the living room staring at him, saying nothing, rolling a cigar between his lips with his thumb and forefinger. Smoke curled above his head, and every so often he would exhale with his mouth wide, blowing out a cloud that obscured his entire face. The act was vulgar, and every time it happened, Ralph reasoned the old man did it to shield himself from the young man who was sure to drag his daughter into poverty with the ridiculous notion that love was more important than money.

It took several decades, but it seemed the old man had been right.

*

His Santa show started the moment he emerged from the employee area. He walked to the castle waving and laughing. A string of children who’d managed to twist free from their parent’s grips followed, some skipping, others pointing out their discovery to anyone willing to look. Within an hour he had forgotten three names. The fan had disappeared and he pulled a handkerchief from a side pocket to wipe his brow. An actor has to stay in character regardless of the variables, he thought. Always take a good picture. Smile.

Keep the twinkle in the eye. Try to remember the names. If not, then get the gift request right.

The manager showed up several hours later while Ralph took his second break. The kid handed Ralph his timecard and he suddenly remembered the morning, that he’d been late. He had accidentally entered Fairbridge through the far entrance. The mistake cost him a long walk and six extra minutes.

The kid stood before him in an inexpensive, white single-ply shirt and blue tie. Any business look he may have been trying to effect was lost by the fact he wasn’t wearing a T-shirt and that his chest and stomach were visible under the thin cloth.

“You’ve been with us for a while, Ralph, so—”

“I’ve been here for seven years. This is my eighth.”

The kid nodded slowly and frowned. “Right. Well, we’ve had some problems with lateness and I have to address it. Everyone, whether they’ve been here eight years or eight days needs to show up on time.” The kid produced a folder and opening it, withdrew a sheet of paper. “This is an oral warning.”

“It doesn’t look like an oral warning,” Ralph said. “It looks like a written warning.”

“No, it’s an oral warning. Oral warnings have to be documented. A written warning would come next.”
“Doesn’t oral imply something being done by verbal instruction, hence the name—oral?”

“Like I said, an oral warning has to be documented.”

“So a written warning should really be a written/written warning. Or maybe a double written warning. You know, they really should change the terminology on these things. It could get confusing for someone who’s not as informed as yourself,” Ralph said, smiling.

The kid swallowed and his eyes narrowed. “I hope you’re not confused anymore, Ralph.”

“I am, actually. I’m confused as to why an employee—a senior—doesn’t have the fan he requested. I’m confused as to why I don’t always get my break as required by law. OSHA doesn’t like people getting picked on, especially us old ones.”

The kid rolled his eyes. “Ralph, no one is picking on you. And regarding the warning, you have the choice of signing this or not. By signing it, you are not agreeing with it, only acknowledging that we have discussed it.”

“You can keep it. My gift,” Ralph said, grinning. “Merry Christmas.”

Driving to the mall, Ralph was grateful the 24th had arrived. The month had been long.
He parked and grabbed his gym bag from the seat beside him. As he approached the entrance, he could see garland, lights, shoppers. He stepped inside the door and stopped short.

Nothing was the same. Nothing. The castle was gone. No sparkling white felt. There were no robotic reindeer, no elves, no gifts in a sleigh. A skinny teenager wearing a fake beard, and a pillow under his coat, sat in a vinyl easy chair. Cottony stuffing sprouted from tears in both arms and the headrest. Twin infants sat teetering on each knee, crying as their mother tried to take a picture between sobs. Three mothers stood waiting in line with four kids.

Ralph turned to the left. No gourmet pretzel shop. And down from it, no record store. Instead he saw a sports shop and a clothing store for teen girls. He looked to the right. No puppies in shredded newspaper jumping from behind a glass partition, just a place selling fruit drinks, things he thought they called smoothies. Down from it was another girls’ clothing boutique, but no jewelry store. Everything was wrong.

He felt himself walk back to the car, each step wavering and uncertain. He was dizzy and could feel sweat warm on the back of his neck. His bag now felt heavy and he wanted to drop it in the middle of the parking lot and keep going, unburdened by anything extra.

Then he remembered, not what he wanted to remember, but something that had just worked itself to the surface. The memory was good, and he found comfort in its suddenness, that some part of his mind was functioning, and that it could call up something so vivid.

One particular Christmas Eve in Maine, as a boy, he’d walked out onto the back porch after dusk, the rush of air sudden and cold on his face and hands. With the snow past his knees, he punched step after step through the hard crust, trudging to the center of the yard and turning. Over the entrance to his father’s workshop, the silhouette of antlers from a moose taken years before rose dark and bony against the blue twilight, then the door creaked, the wind moving it in and out against latch and lock. He looked back at the house. The dining room light shone over the snow’s glazed surface, and occasionally he’d see his mother or father pass by the window making preparations for the evening. Inside, their tree stood trimmed and sparkling, all of it as inviting and warm and real as anything he had ever experienced in his short life. They would go to church later that night, come home to sleep, and wake to Christmas.

He recalled knowing he would remember this moment. He’d take a snapshot of it in his mind, more real than anything on film, remembering it as long as he lived. He couldn’t think of a better Christmas Eve.
And now he couldn't think of one worse. He was suddenly bitter, and he smiled at the irony: Santa Claus lost on Christmas Eve. What was more useless than a Santa Claus who couldn't remember kids' names or what they wanted? One who couldn't find the chimney.

As Eleanor lighted a scented candle in the front porch window, a police car pulled up out front. A moment passed before she realized it was a state trooper and not the local police. A jolt went through her stomach. Behind the driver's side window, the police officer's head tilted downward as if writing something on the steering wheel. He turned toward the house, looking at it from behind black oval sunglasses. Eleanor felt her legs go weak. She reached out and placed her palms on the table that held the candle.

The trooper stepped from the cruiser and opened the rear door. Ralph emerged from the back seat with his head down and offered his hand still looking at the ground. The officer shook it and handed him something. Ralph watched the car pull away, as he slowly made his way up the front walk carrying his gym bag.

Eleanor held the door open, but as he squeezed past her, he didn't look up. Relief and fear and questions swirled through her mind, but she couldn't seem to speak. His face showed things, said things, that went beyond words or comfort or simple explanations. She followed him into the dining room and they sat at the table. He handed her a business card.

"That's the trooper's card," he said, motioning toward it. "On the back. He wrote it all down."

She flipped the it over, shaking her head. "What's this?"

"That's where our car is now."

"Orchard Mills Mall, JC Penney, Lot B." Eleanor muttered the words. "I don't understand."

Ralph let out a breath, looking up at the ceiling, then closed his eyes. "I got lost on the way to the mall. I was going to work and got off at the wrong exit. Pretty soon, I was at Orchard Mills, lost. More than lost."

She wanted to ask him the obvious, why he hadn't just gotten back on the interstate, taken the correct exit, and gone to work; but she wasn't sure she wanted to hear the answer.

"Eleanor, I took the wrong exit thinking it was the right one. I pulled up to Orchard Mills thinking it was Fairbridge. I even walked inside. Got more confused than ever. I came back out to the car and sat for an hour not knowing what to do. The trooper drove by and I flagged him down. I'm just sorry."
“For what?”

“Sorry for all of it. The bad decisions. The things I wasn’t able to give you. The Florida house.”

She leaned forward, taking his hand. His face was flushed, red. He looked away. She let his hand go and pulled him into her with both arms around his shoulders.

“Oh, Ralph, it was never about things. You should know that. It was always about us. I don’t care about houses in Florida or anywhere else. I’m happy now, the ways things are. Do you think I’d ever want a place anywhere without you?”

“No,” he said with his head down.

“You’re the most important person in my life. It’s always been that way, and always will be. We’re in this together, no matter what happens,” she said.

“I have an idea,” Eleanor continued. “Let’s go to church tonight. Let’s spend Christmas Eve together like we used to.”

They hadn’t been to church on Christmas Eve for seven years, with Ralph hopelessly wrung-out, his energy always spent as the job came to an end for another year. The candlelight part of the service, when a single flame was taken from the altar and passed along to every person in the church, each holding a small white candle, was their favorite. The lights would dim, the sanctuary illuminated in amber, each person’s face aglow, everyone singing “Silent Night”. They’d file from the church, shake hands with the pastor, renewed and reminded that no matter what gifts were given the next morning or what wishes realized, their gift of Christ had already been given a long time ago.

“I’d like that,” he said.

The phone rang and neither of them moved. On the fifth ring the answering machine kicked on. It was the Fairbridge kid. His voice was measured and tense, his annoyance clear with each breath he drew through his nose. They listened as he instructed Ralph to see him in his office first thing tomorrow morning, then to his stammering as he remembered it would be Christmas morning, and rescheduling the meeting for the 26th.

Eleanor smiled and leaned into her husband, her forehead pressed to his.

“Ralph, I think you just got fired.”

“Isn’t that terrible,” Ralph said, smiling back.

An hour went by before Ralph walked into the bathroom and climbed out of his coat, letting it drop from his shoulders like a backpack shed by a trail-worn hiker. Lowering the lid onto the toilet seat, he sat down and pulled off his boots. He stayed there, slumped for a moment, his belly filling the space between his chest and thighs, then gave the boots a lazy kick to the side and looked out the window. Snow was beginning to fall in large goosedown flakes, and he could see them melt slowly on
the bird feeder’s tiny black roof. He stood up and stared into the medicine cabinet mirror.

He’d never given much credence to the idea of the mirror revealing something about him he didn’t already know. That sort of thing was for people with too little insight and too much imagination. But now he had to admit that he did look different, or maybe he just felt different.

Opening the medicine cabinet, he looked from shelf to shelf, and after scrounging around for a moment, getting what he wanted, he pushed the door closed. He threw the tiny lever under the sink faucet, closing the stopper. How much time do any of us have left, he thought. Ten years? A year? The next half-hour? Love over things. It seemed so obvious now. He remembered taking the job because of compromise, and now it seemed that leaving because of love was just a normal course of what was inevitable, maybe fateful. Because of this it didn’t feel sentimental or strange or frightening when the quiet snip came, followed by a tuft of white hair—not ethereal after all—falling silently into the sink before him.
It is a hot summer night. I am thirteen and too restless to sleep. When I’m bored, I use my mind to put on a show or to write a story. I imagine myself a rock star playing to a crowd full of adoring fans that swing their sweaty bodies at my feet, begging in desperation as if their lives depended on it for an encore, their voices piling into a crescendo. Or maybe I am the star who has just won an Oscar for a highly controversial role. As I walk down a red carpet, I pass by a group of people who stand behind the tightrope that bars the “little” people from the talent. Amongst the crowd of screaming heads, I see old friends of mine who used to like me before I started developing into a woman. In my story, they’re dying for me to look at them but I don’t. I just walk away with my Oscar in my hand and three great looking men at my heels. However, this night my storytelling fails me, so I decide to play a game that I love whenever I need excitement, which lately, seems to be quite often. It’s called dial random numbers and ask for Mike. My old friends and I made it up. I randomly dial a number and when someone answers, I ask for Mike. If it’s a woman, she’ll usually tell me that I have the wrong number; but if upon discovering that—voila!—there is a Mike at that number or if a boy answers and he sounds near my age, I start up a conversation with them. Well this night, I get lucky. I dial a number and get a whole group of boys, all hanging out late at their friend Mike’s house. I call them the “Johnsonville boys,” because they live in Johnsonville, the town right next door to mine. It ends up taking me a year, but the first “Johnsonville boy” I meet is Craig.

Before that day, the only thing I know about Craig is that he loves Jane Addiction and Porno for Pyros. I know from his description of himself that he has long hair and is twenty-two. I know he says the word dude a lot and that he has a gritty voice, like sharp rocks against bare feet, as if he is twenty-two going on eighty-two.

“When am I gonna meet you, girl?” He asks, his voice scratching away.

“I don’t know,” I say.

I am terrified.

The game has been fun until now; I didn’t expect anyone to want to meet me. What if he doesn’t like me? What if he thinks my nose is too big, my voice too loud, or my sense of humor strange? I have been called outspoken before—at least before I grew breasts—and my nose has always made me look a little more ugly, a little less pretty. My dad doesn’t like any of our noses—my sisters’, mom’s, or mine. Besides, I don’t know what 22 year old men want. I can barely figure out what guys my age are like.

In the Hands of Men
By Laura Lifshitz
"Well, I'm nervous," I admit.

"Girl, it's all good. Don't worry," Craig tells me.

Craig has short explanations for everything, which puzzles me because in my house—myself included—everyone says his or her piece in high-pitched, passionate fashion with the brutal honesty one equates with five-year-olds. After the tirades are through, you are exhausted from either trying to interrupt or from speaking yourself. Yet finally, after two months of coaxing with claims like, "Girl, it'll all be good," the month before I graduate eighth grade, I meet Craig.

Walking to meet Craig at a local Catholic church, I'm sweating from the heat. It is late June 1991. I pull out all the stops—I'm not going to meet Craig looking like a baby. I want to look the part—the tough, sexy, inaccessible woman I wish to be, not this unsure little girl with the woman's body. I wear a tight tube top and a Metallica tank top over that with a tight denim skirt and tall leather boots that just about hit my kneecaps. These boots are notorious on my block. The blonde boy down the street calls to me as he dashes to his basketball hoop, "You look like Julia Roberts in Pretty Woman with those boots on," his pine twig arms swooshing the ball into the net, and I wonder if I should be happy or angry. I haven't seen Pretty Woman although from the advertisements I know it's about a sexy prostitute who transforms into a beautiful lady under the care of Richard Gere. After watching my Dad worship long-legged models with Greek goddess-like faces, I know what sexy means. Sexy women have power over men, the upper hand over other women. I'll be Julia. I certainly don't want to be my mother, hiding purchases inside the trunk of her car so my father won't chastise her, handing over her paycheck so he can give her an allowance. Letting this man cheat on her while she emotionally raises four kids all by herself. Shutting her body down to him—each hug he gives her makes her body go into toy-solider form, arms stuck to sides, legs pinched together, face marked in defiance. But his kisses are the worst; mostly on the cheeks, they choke my mother; her face green and her mouth gasping for oxygen.

I cross over onto the grass of the church grounds, trying to avoid this statue of a saint that I have seen before. I swear it's alive, I think to myself, passing it by, seeing it hovering over me, pinning me into a little mental corner with its eyes, saying—"Oh it's you again—the town Jew." Feeling like the church is the last place I belong, I finally see Craig and I decide right away that my story was a better version than reality. He is a man. A real man, not like the boys in my neighborhood. A man with a potbelly like my Dad's only larger. He looks much older than twenty-two; he has a
receding hairline that leads to a mass of frizzy, long hair. Even his armpit hair is long and frizzy. I don't think I've ever seen armpit hair before on a man. Sweat gleams off the top of his hairline, trickling down the center of his nose. I see that he is wearing a Metallica tank top like I am, and I know I chose the right shirt, deciding that even if he's not Jim Morrison, my dream man, at least he is someone, someone different.

Men are finicky: I hope I am not as disappointing to him as he is to me. Whenever I disappoint someone, the feeling kills me. Each time I find myself thinking: How could it—how could I—have been perfect? My father is easy to disappoint; he is quick to figure out what is right, every time for everyone. He zeroes in on the right outfit for everyone in my family, even the right lipstick color. When he looks at a woman's lips, he sees the mauve plum with flecks of gold in a matte finish, not the pinkish-purple. I imagine that, like my body, he inspected my older sisters' bodies too: observing to see if we are well dressed, covered up, thin or fashionable enough. I remember the funny look my Dad gave me a few times. I wonder to myself if my growth spurt is weird for my dad, weird that his daughter's body is so ahead of the rest of its biological clock, or if he didn't really give me a funny look at all. That maybe, I just imagine eyes on me everywhere. Maybe no one has control over staring at my breasts, the host that has invaded my body.

I see Craig's eyes first as he walks towards me, dark glimmering slits that pass over me, section by section, as he says, "Hey duu-de. What's up?"

His hand is on his chin as if he is about to scratch it but he doesn't. As I walk up to him, he drinks me in, swallowing me whole as if he has been living on Melba toast and water for the last ten years.

"Nothing much, man. I try to sound cool, to keep in my disappointment that this phone friend of mine does not look like Jim Morrison who I love and have pictures of all over my notebooks and the walls of my room. Craig doesn't look a thing like my idol; he barely even looks as good as Meatloaf.

"Nice boots," he says, sliding his hand back to his chin.

"Thanks they're my favorites!"

I score a point: write it down in my mind. Maybe the boys in school just can't appreciate someone like me. What do they know? They probably had their wet dreams the other day. I just learned about wet dreams last year in seventh grade sex education class. I couldn't help myself—I laughed aloud in class and then went home deciding to get a rise out of my father. Using the proper word instead of 'wet dream', I asked him

if he ever had a nocturnal emission, knowing he'd be annoyed but any reaction is
better than silence. My mother laughed.

"Answer her Hal," she said, enjoying his discomfort.

My father sighed, and I write it down in my head—he responds! Hal! Despite the lack of taste the boys at my school have, here is a real man acknowledging me, even if he isn’t very attractive.

"So where do you live? Are we going there?"

"Well, it’s a bit of a walk. I can take you over to my house but my parents get home soon so we can’t stay there long."

"Let’s do it!"

The two of us walk back to my house, an odd pair. A six-foot tall man with his beer belly and hippie hair. Me with my small, awkward body with my oversized breasts and slutty boots. My eyes painted in black liner and my cherry red lips designed in Wet n’ Wild’s just-one-dollar lipstick. We walk down the main street of my neighborhood and I feel powerful. I may have lost my old friends but now I have Craig—an older man who likes spending time with me. Each step I take feels like I am floating inside a dramatic novel. I imagine that the author has picked the heat, the bright sunshine in order to capture a beautiful romance; that she—the author must be a she, I decide—she wants to see me, the newly-christened school loser win love. The author picks the older, less attractive man thinking that, “There’s no way the audience will believe this one!” But in the end, I tell myself, they will; the beauty in Craig will exist, developing from his hidden intellect or musical talent.

Finally, Craig and I reach my house and we walk inside. I offer this sweaty man a drink.

"Are you thirsty?"

"Yeah, girl, I could use a beer."

Beer?

"I don’t have beer. Will iced tea do?"

"Whatever."

I feel like an idiot. I don’t think we have beer; I look in the fridge and see no beer so I give him iced tea instead. Three of the six cats in my house surround him, but he doesn’t pet them, which surprises me. I suspect part of being human means loving animals. I cannot remember a day where I lived without one.
I hand him the glass and he goes to hug me. It feels awkward, but not as awkward as I feel talking to him. I never imagined it being so silent between us: our phone calls had always consisted of chasing one another’s banter. I will the silence to go away.

“Girl, you look good,” and his hands go down the front of me.

Wow, this is happening fast, I think. I imagined something romantic, like the scene where Molly Ringwald gets her first real kiss in Sixteen Candles, sitting on a table, she and a preppy hunk sharing a big birthday cake, except I was hoping for a hippie intellectual who could play the guitar or write. He puts me up against the kitchen sink and kisses me. I don’t like it. I just do it. I turn my mind off.

He puts his hands up my shirt, “Man you got some big tits,” and his mouth starts to suck on one of my nipples, as he uses his hands to pull away my bra, the under wire poking the side of my breast. It hurts, but I don’t say anything. I just watch him and feel nothing. He sure didn’t waste time. I look at the clock and start to panic.

“Uh, I don’t know when my parents are gonna come home.”

“I don’t know.”

“Let’s go to the woods dude, you got a lot of woods around this block.”

The woods and I were never friends before, and I know from listening to neighborhood gossip what sometimes happens to girls in the woods. Fairytales like Hansel and Gretel exist for a reason.

I was never a nature girl as a little kid, except for animals and flowers. When I spent my time playing outside, watching clouds form animal shapes in the sky, it was simply another setting for my imagination. I always wondered what the sky really held; if there was someone watching me from above—this God fellow I had heard about so often. Did God wonder if I was okay? Now at age fourteen, all I have seen are the woods: cutting through them to get to the stores where all the teenagers hang out or walking to the woods to try a cigarette, even trying my first sip of alcohol in the woods, tequila that burned my throat as if I had swallowed a curling iron. Branches scraping my legs, graffiti written on trees. Old beer cans, condoms and cigarette butts hanging out in little cliques.

So the two of us walk down the street to the end of my block where the street disappears and breaks out into woods. As we walk, I wonder what the neighbors
are thinking, if anyone notices us, if they make mental notes to tell my parents that I was hanging out with some thirty-something looking dirtbag. We take the trail where I can look through the woods and see a new neighborhood that popped up overnight a few years back. I loved that I could cut through the woods and end up somewhere completely different from where I started. I grab Craig's hand, which feels disproportionately large, and he starts to lead me. He tries not to walk too fast for me, making sure he's not pulling me like a rag doll behind him until we come up to a big pile of dirt and grass.

"This looks good," he says, "let's sit down."

I don't want to sit or even squat on that stuff. I hate getting dirty. When I was little, if I got a grass stain I would get very annoyed, and now we were going to fool around in a bunch of twigs, bugs and dirt. I look up at his face and see determination.

"Uh, okay," I resign myself to him. He's in charge now. Besides, Craig likes me. He took all the way here from another town and no one really does that for anyone.

We start kissing and my shirt is off in a ball behind us. I panic and look back to see if it is there or not, wondering how dirty it will get, if it will collect bugs, and

then once I put the shirt on, I'll find them crawling all over me. His mouth is greedily chomping on my breasts.

"God you're so sexy," and he goes to pull down my skirt.

"Be careful," I say to him, starting to be scared of what I think he wants. His weight shifts on top of me and I feel smothered.

"Ow! You're smushing me!" I say to him, but my words are muffled.

"Sorry girl," he says, shifting his body to the side. "Let me see these panties."

Mmm.

My skirt is off, thrown somewhere, somewhere with the bugs and dirt. Everything seems to close in on the two of us. I hear noises and they make me jerk. I can't relax on these twigs, but I just try to give into the situation. Every time a bird calls or a noise goes off in the distance, my head jerks.

"Whoa girl, it's just out on the street, chill."

His fingers enter me, his fat knuckles kneading me like dough, his middle finger stabbing me. He pulls down his pants and puts my hand on his dick. I thought it would be bigger, maybe because he is older. He smells a little funny, so I don't want it too close to me. I want to keep it at a distance, maybe over there by my neglected
shirt and skirt. At least it doesn’t look like it will hurt when it goes inside, which I know is what Craig wants. I remember the first time, the one and only time I have had sex before this. It hurt. I thought afterwards I would have a river of blood between my legs but I withstood it, a strong girl.

As his body looms over me, I imagine myself as the lead actress in a movie, but the scene just cannot spring to life like it usually does.

“Touch it, yeah baby,” he demands.

I slide my hand in an up and down motion not knowing if this is good or bad because I’ve never jerked off anyone.

“No, not like that, let Craig show you.”

He shows me while he thrusts his fingers inside me, jabbing me so hard I whimper. I remind myself to check for blood later.

“Ow!” I grab on to his back, digging my nails into his skin.

“Shit! Watch the nails dude!”

I try to keep my face away from his because I don’t want to kiss him. I encourage him to thrust fast, to get it all out of him.

“So good girl, so good.”

“Faster, my parents have gotta be home by now,” I tell him and he says he’s almost done. When he finishes, he stretches his arms over his head in satisfaction. I don’t feel satisfied, I feel dirty.

He grabs my hand and says, “Okay girl, we gotta find our way out.”
I make a note to myself that he grabbed my hand as lovers do, in the movies or in books. I don’t love Craig but I can pretend it’s something different now that it’s over. Pretend we are two young lovers on a stroll, he, the military man on his way to war, and I, the young maiden as we decide to make a pact to wait for one another until after his hopeful return from the war.

But the story shatters as we go to leave, and I finally take a good look at the two of us. We look like two dogs who have run away from home—unkempt me, a little stray mutt, with a crown of leaves and twigs, he, a beaten down hound dog with bloated belly, red-rimmed eyes and matted fur. How we will return to my house, I do not know. I start shaking the dirt and leaves off me, pulling my fingers through my hair. Frantically, like a schizophrenic convinced that someone in the television is plotting against them, I inspect my clothes over and over again for bugs, my eyes tracing the same spots, trying to convince myself that it is okay.

“Craig, I gotta get home now,” I whimper, not caring if I sound like a baby, wishing like little children do that my mother could come and make this go away—Craig, the woods, and me.

“Oh, oh, just chill girl, chill.” He is always chill, somehow. I find myself angered by this, angered that everything seems okay to him, when it is not okay at all. I swallow my anger, trying to figure out how to get out of the woods. Somehow, neither of us can remember the path we took to get here.

“Don’t worry, we’ll be out soon,” he tells me, so sure of everything, so sure of this world.

I stay quiet and simply point out if I see something familiar, other than that I hold his hand and try to stop thinking about peeing, which I really have to do because I hurt right now. I imagine that once I get home, my stream of urine will burn me. It did the last time, razors out of me into the toilet bowl for days, the sex not leaving me even after it was over.

When we finally see my street, purple dusk settling comfortably into its corner of the sky, my street looks the same as it did before the sex, just a bit darker. But even though I know that this is the same town, the same street, the same road I took to the woods, I feel like I have landed somewhere else. Or maybe it’s just me who is the stranger? Maybe inside the woods I escaped from my body? Whoever I am, the girl who entered the woods is different from the one who exits. The girl who dressed-up for chorus concerts as Pee-Wee Herman, the girl who wanted to be another Judy Garland, another Madonna, is not me anymore.

When we finally reach my house, I see my worst nightmare: my Dad’s car is in
the driveway. I reach out to touch his car, and it is still hot; he must have just gotten home. This can't be happening. It would have been better if it had been my mom, I think. Then again, maybe Claire would have killed Craig and me, a romance story turned into true crime.

"Shit, my dad's home," I start to freak.

Craig nods and says, "Just stay cool."

I wish that I were twenty-two and secure like that. We walk into the front door, and my Dad is standing in the kitchen, just home from work, taking a drink from the refrigerator.

"Hi Dad," I say. I try to say hello casually but there is fear in my voice. I hope he can't sense it. Craig is standing next to me, in the hallway between the kitchen and the living room.

My dad barely looks up at me, "Hi."

My dad barely looks up at me, "Hi!" I don't think he's looking at me, but I decide to introduce him to Craig, because I cannot pretend Craig is invisible.

"This is Craig, Dad-- he's just gonna use the bathroom."

"Uh, yeah. Hello. Okay."

Craig lifts his head up and then looks at us. He swigs from his glass of iced tea, puts it back down on the counter and then he walks up the stairs.

After using the bathroom, Craig leaves. My dad never says anything to me or to my mom, where he usually addresses his complaints. He is the same ghost dad he has always been. That's when I know I must have escaped from myself tonight.

Somewhere amongst the trees, I am now floating with freedom, while some dirty girl stands in my father's house.

It is now July. Craig invites me over to his friend Jeff's house, who he says is eighteen.

Craig entices me saying, "Jeff has a pool."

"Can we go swimming?" I always wanted a pool as a child, but we couldn't afford it.

"For sure, and we'll order pizza too."

I bike into Craig and Jeff's town, in the sweltering heat. I wear cut off shorts with my bikini bottoms underneath and a bikini top with a tank over it. I pedal uphill to the soundtrack of the Doors, wondering to myself now that high school is only two months away, what it will be like. I make a wish to myself, that I can again be the
popular, intelligent, funny girl I was before puberty. That I can talk to boys like I used to back when we were equals, and no one cared if you had breasts or not, if you were pretty or ugly, cute or fat. It was the boys and I in almost every academically gifted class straight from kindergarten. We were les amis, me—the girl—I supplied the jokes and they—the boys—supplied the spitballs.

It starts getting hot, so I take off my tank top and a group of men shouts from their car, “Nice rack!”

I scream back at them, my words running through the wind “Screw you assholes!”

I think to myself, I am woman hear me roar. No man will tell me what to do, what to think, what to wear. I won't be my mom.

Finally, after an hour bike ride, I pull up to the house. Craig is waiting outside.

“Hey girl, come on in,” he greets me with a bear hug.

I walk into the house and see two other men waiting for me. No pizza yet, and they are not wearing swim trunks. There weren't any cars in the driveway, (none of the guys have cars, which surprises me) so I'm assuming his parents aren’t home. In fact, all three men are so quiet, I wonder if they were all just meditating up until I came.

“Hey guys, this is Laura, Laura this is Jeff and Whitey, that’s his nickname, Whitey.” Craig introduces me to two guys sitting at Jeff’s kitchen table.

Jeff is the most attractive of the three, and the youngest, at almost eighteen. He has this head of curls that seem happy to be untamable, and small light blue eyes. I like his hair and his eyes, but I notice he has some acne wandering around on his chin. I wonder if it bothers him, having it there on his face. I hate getting a pimple, but he seems carefree, sipping a beer, sitting on the chair as if there was nothing better to do.

“No thanks, but I do want some pizza,” I smile and try to look sweet, although I'm secretly biting the inside of my lip. The pizza is supposed to be here; where is the damn pizza?

“Hey Laura, wanna beer?” Jeff's eyes peer out from underneath his hair. The hair is a smart idea; he never has to look at anyone if he doesn't want to. I envy the way he seems so neutral, so unaffected.

“No thanks, but I do want some pizza,” I smile and try to look sweet, although I'm secretly biting the inside of my lip. The pizza is supposed to be here; where is the damn pizza?

“You want pizza?” Jeff's eyes peer out from underneath his hair, and Craig is sizing my body up while pouring himself a drink, something with vodka.
"Yeah, Craig said there would be pizza," I say this feeling dumb, but hell I just rode a bike here, I'm hungry. Then Whitey speaks up. I've been trying to ignore Whitey because he scares me.

"No pizza here, eh Jeff?"

I decide they must have named him Whitey because his long hair is white tinged with a brassy yellow, and his mustache is too. He looks like a retired Dead Head.

"Feed the girl, make her happy. She came all the way here," Craig chimes in for me, licking some alcohol off the top of his lip. Jeff gets up slowly from his chair as if he is rising from the dead. His arms come up from his sides first, and his head seems to shoot straight up until I can see that he is tall. Very tall.

I could maybe like this one.

"Grab me a beer while you're at it Jeff. You don't want any?" Whitey says, looking at me.

"No, I don't. How old are you?" I look back at him reluctantly, because I just don't like the look of him. He has glasses with thick frames, his hair falls from underneath a dirty trucker hat, and his skin looks like a worn beige leather bag. He looks older than both my sister Dena who is twenty-four and her boyfriends.

"I'm thirty-four, thirty-four," he says, and after that doesn't say much at all. Looking at me from behind the freezer door, Jeff tells me he found some pizza.

"Great, can you make it for me?"

"Sure."

Jeff makes the pizza with such heavy movements that it looks like he's doing the hardest work he's ever done. With a flourish, he brings it over to me, pushing the plate in front of my face, smiling. Craig and Whitey are just drinking their beers, and I ingest the pizza in less time than it was made. I was hungry.

Hunger is all around me. I can feel it, heavy in the room, the lights dim, the air conditioner off, so the room feels like a womb.

Craig looks up from his beer and says aloud, as if the idea had just struck him, "Let's go downstairs to Jeff's room, and the guys just nod yes and we go downstairs, Craig turning his head to smile at me. Jeff's room is dark. Black light posters, black lights and no natural light coming inside the room-it's like a cave. Now, I get what all those men and the cave jokes are about. My mom and her friends weren't joking. A
smoky film hangs in the air, covering the room until it looks like a natural disaster is about to happen at any minute. This is when I notice the snake. In the corner, Jeff has a tank where a snake slithers around not caring for anything or anyone, just choosing his path through the rocks.

“You have a snake?” I’m fascinated, because my mom loves lizards. She had one as a child—an iguana, maybe?

“Really?” I had asked, not sure whether to believe my mother.

“Yeah, she killed it on purpose because she hated it: she thought it was ugly. She never wanted me to be too happy.” I asked her how she put up with it.

“Because, that’s how it was in those days: you respected your parents.”

I wish that she hadn’t been so respectful to her mother. She didn’t deserve it if you asked me, and I also wish she wouldn’t be so respectful to my dad! That she wouldn’t put up with everything. I wish I could tell her about this snake but I know I never can.

“Yup,” and Jeff turns on Black Sabbath.

“Yeah man, I like that snake, dude. Very cool. So Laura?” Craig stops and looks at me. I’m sitting on the edge of the bed, just seeing how the other gender lives.

“Laura, how about you have a little fun with Jeff and I, and Whitey too?”

All the men are now looking at me, waiting for a word to stumble out of my mouth. Craig smiles at me, looking at me as if he has just created me himself. I like that he smiles, telling everyone at least through his eyes, that I am one of his good creations.

“Laura: a cool chick: very cool guys, very cool”

I feel their eyes dragging down from my head to my toes, evaluating my worth. Whitey’s eyes are so subtle, it is more of a feeling I get from him that he is looking, than an actual look. Jeff views me head on, trying to will me to say yes, this pleasure inscribed on his face. I love how excited he is by me: maybe he thinks I am pretty. Craig doesn’t look at me head on: he slants his head towards his shoulder as if it might just roll right off of his neck. I like that he doesn’t look at me, head on. He gives my face and I some privacy to express what we want. I have always had a face that tells all, and I like that he doesn’t watch while my face tells my story.

Then I look back at the snake lying camouflaged in between some rocks; he probably thinks I cannot see him, but I can. His tongue lashes out towards the glass, and I lock eyes with him. No one can see the story on his face, he has all instinct and survival, hiding himself, coiled up in a ball. We all have survival skills, but the snake, I like his best. Maybe my mom liked lizards and snakes so much because of their ability
to camouflage themselves.

"Uh, I don't know..."

"Come on girl, you know I like you, and Jeff thinks you're sexy, don't you Jeff?"

"Yeah, hell yeah. You have great breasts. Right Whitey?"

"Yep, yep," Whitey just goes along with the ride; he knows he's not a selling point. Then Craig comes from behind me and starts to touch my neck and tries to kiss me.

"Come on baby, will be easy."

I know Craig likes my body, but I want Jeff to like me as in a girlfriend-boyfriend kind of way. I don't want Craig's body, or his sex.

Craig mouths, "Y'all like it," and so I do it, but I don't think I'll like it. In fact, whatever I do like, I push it out of my mind. This is about what the men will like and we all know it. Jeff's face sparks at the blank look on my face, taking it as a good sign, that I won't back down. And I don't. Instead, I imagine I am someone else, a powerful woman with a tribe of attentive men, a singer in a video, anyone but myself. If I am myself, I will know it's wrong and weird. If I am someone else, I can say it never happened to me. Besides, the real me is hovering around, a specter—a ghost in the woods by my house.

My clothes are off, and Whitey and Jeff watch as Craig's hand reaches for the back of my head, bringing it down to meet his penis. He peeks at them slightly out of his right eye, while watching my mouth's first motion.

"I taught this girl good, huh? Go on girl," he pats my head, looking proud, the darks of his eyes shining like he's about to cry while all the eyes in the room watch. Slow and seductive, then fast and deep, I calculate each movement, trying to be as precise as possible so it will end. Fast. His hand is on my head, and I feel his fingers, his dirty fingers in my hair. My neck wants to rebel from his tug, but I don't, hating this instantly--this feeling of forced submission. Time is going by so slowly I have to focus on keeping my eyes closed, just sticking with the motion, eliminating any thoughts. I tell myself I have to endure this and then things will get better.

Craig is enjoying himself, his eyelids velvet stage curtains folded over his eyes, his hands pushing my head down, gorilla grunts escaping from his mouth.

Opening one eye slightly, Craig calls out, "Isn't she doing a good job Jeff?"

"Yeah, impressive dude."

Craig opens both eyes on me, "Why don't you show Jeff some love, girl?"

I look at Jeff and he starts to unzip his pants, answering in the affirmative.
for me. I am aware that from this point on all questions are simply nicely phrased commands.

Jeff is to the right of Craig and I, on the bed, waiting. I feel like the air is suffocating me, and I try to breathe, try to gain my bearings. I change my posture to assume confidence; I smile to look sexy, assured.

Everything is okay! You're hot! You're wanted, the sexy girl tells me.

"Go down on me," Jeff says, with so much energy he tires me out.

I move over towards Jeff, and Craig stays in his corner watching. When I begin to go down on Jeff, I notice that he didn't use his hand to guide my head.

"Uhh!" Jeff's pleasure fills me up. The sexy woman can tell that he wants her, needs her. That she is the queen, la reine. As I struggle to go down on Jeff, my mouth, my body rebelling, Craig calls out to Whitney like a sports commentator, noting how the home team is playing.

"Is this a good girl or what? Hey don't forget me girl," and Craig moves towards Jeff and me. Craig puts his penis in front of my face, and he reaches for my head, pulling me towards his penis. My mouth and I hate this. My jaws want to shut, like a heavy lidded coffin, keeping my mouth closed for eternity. But like a mechanical mouth, I navigate their penises in structured rhythms, going from one to the next, tracking what mouth motions produces what type of noises. With each inch of moaning praise, my mouth accommodates in order to hear the words, 'Oh, you're so good,' or 'Oh damn- you're amazing!' I will achieve the end. I will come out glorious. I tell myself. I am amazing. I deserve attention.

Onto Jeff again, he starts to do the hand thing, grabbing my head to force me in to the rhythm he wants, "Yeah- fast like that, not like the other way," he says, and I try not to cry, the rawness of my throat killing me. I tell myself: I am the queen. La reine. The sexy woman. La belle femme puissante.

"Slower, more towards the top girl," their instructions are coming rapid fire, and tirelessly I follow. I am a big, blank canvas. If Jeff is happy, I am: if he isn't, I'm not. I use big, bold strokes and color myself in with their feelings. I don't have any of my own, except for pride and hope, when the feelings they paint me in with are feelings of adoration for what I do to them.

When the men get tired of my mouth, I have sex with them. Both. I produce these sounds of pleasure that come from nowhere, encouraging them so the men can feel good. I feel them inside of me, proud of how much I can take, even though I hate it. When the men are done, they both lie flat on the bed, as if they have just eaten
their Thanksgiving dinner.

Craig calls to Whitey, "Whitey man, she looks good doesn’t she? Man, that felt good, didn’t it Jeff?”

"Hell yeah, she was good," says Jeff. I sit Indian style, looking at nobody. I can only be blank. I look at Whitey. He forms a smile that seems to develop in time over his face—first a half-moon, then a smirk, and finally teeth. I realize that the show is not over. Craig leans over to me, speaking to me in a hushed tone, although I am sure everyone knows what we are saying.

"Hey Whitey a nice guy, can’t you give him a blow job, or sex, something? He’s lonely, dude," his finger tracing my thigh. I look down. I really don’t want to do this. Every time I look at Whitey, I imagine him as Old Father Time, the way they had him illustrated in children’s books when I was little.

"I don’t know," I whisper because I am ashamed that I do not want to do it. My "no" is like shooting Whitey in the face, after the show I just put on for everyone else. I want to ask just how he is lonely with the whole sha-bang going on in the room, but as an empty slate myself, painted with everyone else’s happiness, I should understand.

"Come on girl, you’re so good," Craig etches pride on his face. I am his sexual prodigy.

"Ok," I whisper. Saying it loudly would mean that I really want him, so I say it just so Craig and I can know the truth that I don’t want to go this far, but I guess I have to.

"Come on Whitey, Step right up!” Craig ushers him to the bed.

"Cool, thanks," and Whitey walks from his previously assigned corner, and sits on the bed. Craig and Jeff look on like proud parents. Whitey’s dirty Wrangler jeans—come off in celebration. Bleached out and yellow, they lie in a lazy lump at my feet.

I wish to be like those jeans, lying lazily in a ball, enjoying myself as much as the men are.

Craig and Jeff move towards the back of the room to give Whitey privacy. I go down on him, comparing the stark white of his penis to his dirty yellow jeans. I guess I thought the penis would be yellow too. I concentrate on the motion, the back and forth, the deep, and deeper. I hide myself somewhere in between exhaustion, and confusion. Two minutes go by, and Whitey finishes. The bitter shot of him comes into my mouth, sharp and punitive.

Later on, when I see Craig again, he will instruct me, “That’s it girl, swallow, please? That’s so good. No dude wants you to spit.” Then for the rest of the time I spend with him, Craig will only let me off the hook if he is taking too long, then hell
say, "You did good girl, you did good, it's okay this time." But I will hate the taste. hate
feeling a shot of venom into the space where my teeth and tongue live. My memories
will remind me until I am well into adulthood that nothing, no matter what men tell me,
not even soda can take away the taste. The texture, the coated layer in my mouth
will remind me who is on his or her knees, and it is I.

"Thanks, I appreciate it," Whitey's words so soft, I am taken aback by his
genuine feelings. I turn away from everyone and put my clothes back on, not knowing
what to feel.

"I taught you well, girl," Craig stretches out his belly, and takes us upstairs, his
belly leading the way.

In ten minutes, I will be gone on my bike, riding into the heat towards my
house. But I will be back the next time, and every time they call me, which they do
when they want something that they cannot give to themselves. I never say no. I don't
know the words.
An Afternoon, Say
By Jon Ballard

On the periphery of some vast imponderable.
Sitting there with you in an open-air cafe,
Sipping the crummy house brew. I comment
On our rube of a waiter—on the wait staff
In general, aproned harbingers of the apocalypse—
Until you marshal a defense: People do what they must.
Meanwhile, your name and accent have all
But escaped me, even as your beauty, I fear,
Cloaks a nihilist's bent (though nothing pleasantly
Surprises like being dead-on about a stranger).
Now a breeze topples a flower vase the next
Table over, water sopping the white linen
Like the spilled blood of a thousand cockroaches.
The stable of waiters passes a single cigarette,
Laughing in unison, pall on our afternoon.
Say my name, you whisper, accompanied by
A kiss, a surreptitious grope under the linen.
Whatever—your-name—is, listen: it's useless.

Previous Life
By Jon Ballard

Think of it now in terms your memory
Wont robotically abhor: moonlit walks, say,
But this time each of us strangers on opposite sides
Of the street. Your kisses like pawned jewels
Bought back in solvent times. Letters to me
Now all scribbled in Anon's feverish hand.
Your books with my dog-ears smoothed out,
Or failing that, lost in a grease fire or night theft
You failed to report. All of it is easy
To imagine. Erasure or revisionist history—
Call it what you want. Whatever empowers
You or makes you roar (however the women
Magazines codify it these days). Because now
That I'm gone I'm here to help. I want for you
Nothing but the best. Please pretend I mean it
When I say such things, the way you always did.
The Burlington, 1960
By Marie Buckley

I attempt to hook a tray onto a rolled down car window. Two bottles of grape pop tilt off, fall inside. The couple swears as purple liquid soaks their clothes and the car seat. I lose my first hour’s wage to pay for the order and retreat inside where it’s safer submerging fries in hot oil, watching Lola’s breasts pop out of her catsup-stained uniform when she leans out the window to take a root beer order: “Two large, three small ones!” I know she has that many at home, all with different fathers.

I learn to twirl cones under the soft-serve machine’s thick stream of ice cream, eat spoonfuls of every topping all alone: hot fudge, pineapple, strawberry, cherry and marshmallow coating my tongue, over and over.

“You’re eating more than 50 cents worth,” Irma tells me. “They’ll dock your pay.” Her flabby thighs thump against the sides of the stool she’s sitting on peeling potatoes, using her paring knife to scratch her head where her bun is anchored.

I study Carol strut her butt out to lean on Ron’s motorcycle. He’s been in the reformatory and keeps Camels rolled up in his shirt sleeve. He lights two, offers her one. She takes it, sucking the smoke in between her lips. He revs the cycle, roars away in a spray of gravel.

(continued)
Miladys' Gift
By Marie Buckley

My student Miladys knows Fidel. She marched for him in her school uniform, listened to him speak for hours in Havana. "Ever since, I can't sit anywhere for long," she tells me. "I am so sorry, but I must leave class and walk around."

"Did you know that I have a connection to Cuba?" I say.

My Aunt Dorothy sent our family a tiny crate of candied oranges all the way from Havana where she was honeymooning in 1954: postcards too—casinos, a cigar factory, their hotel, the sea wall.

Miladys' parents left her in Cuba with her grandmother. They came to the United States, worked in Florida, saved all their money to apply for a special Visa costing thousands of dollars to bring her to them. Fidel agreed. Miladys arrived in 1989. She met Marcos here.

Now Miladys is homesick: she wants to return to Havana. (continued)

Marcos is working, building a house that they and their boys can live in. Habitat for Humanity wants to write a story about Miladys' journey here. She says no. "Fidel does not like people speaking out or talking about themselves. He likes children who march and listen to him speak. I want to go back to see my country. I will bring you something."

I bring a faded postcard to show Miladys: Hotel Nacional de Cuba. "Americans will travel to Cuba again," I tell her. "What will you bring me?"

I imagine the seawater, taste candied oranges. "A cigar," she says.
Delusion of Grandeur
By Lewis Robert Colon Jr.

To Google Earth, 8/3/2007.

Flying above the topography,
look down and face facts.

Be a body looking down
on the temples of all other bodies.

This far up, we become meaningless
detail in an old atlas book
splayed before an etherized surgeon.
Only you, satellite,

have the clearest shot.
So snap it. This public

housing complex
poses. You are the last

(paparazzo
to rush over
for the razing.
Click here and zoom
in on the pixilated
bulldozer bossing around
the concrete and steel-
an awkward car grazing
a grey lunar field.
Harold Pinter
died today.
I saw it
on the news.

Also:
the markets plummeted
jobs were lost
there was a cholera outbreak
and tainted beef
product recalls.

Outside,
the rains came down heavy
and the car wouldn't start.

I went back inside
and made
some eggs.

---

Sunny Side Up
By Ryan Quinn Flanagan

---

An Or Ex I A
By Tracy Haught

Passing by and through and to,
She wills the disappearance of self through indeterminable equations,
And uncontrollable control factors-
This is what happens when too much is too little.
This is what happens when existence
Is all about not existing-
When you've torn out portions of the mind
Only to have the remnants left behind,
Like paper pieces hanging from a spiral notebook.
Reminders that cling.
Like when you believe in this.
Like that invisible ruler in your head,
Scolding you like an insistent father,
While blindly regarding your make-believe.
Watch the winding of the will around the suffering of skin.
Women's suffrage...
I thought it was something else.
A something for Her.
So tell her not to go out like that—
Fading surreptitiously into the folds of the ugly beautiful.
The be not of infinity—
The expensive toll booth to nowhere...
A Hole full of everything,
But you.

How to Take a Steak Knife from a One-and-a Half-Year-Old
By Brad Johnson

The approach must be slow.
She shouldn’t have been in that drawer
or in that room for that matter,
much less alone.
You should’ve been watching her
more closely.
If you freak out
shell freak out
like when you opened her diaper
full of Greek tragedy and horror movie
and you shrieked like eight-year-old
and flinched away which caused her to shriek
and jerk her feet right into the diaper.
You ran out of wipes cleaning her heels.
If you react outwardly now
shell jerk
(continued)
and the blade is pointed into her chest.
It shines like open wound.
Smile.
Get her to point the blade at you.
Hopefully, it will be the last time.

A Father’s Dilemma
By Brad Johnson

My four-day-old daughter’s developed diaper rash,
blister red on pinkish red.

My wife is maternally patient
but her hair’s frayed
and my daughter cries that baby cry
which is desperate and primal and squints
her eyes and arches
her neck and curdles
her throat and frays my hair, curling
it at the root, and frays the root
of my spinal cord.

I’ve been sent on a dire mission of utter importance
at 11 pm for Dyporex,
the miracle diaper rash ointment that will moisturize my daughter
immediately

(continued)
like her tiny bottom
was the Egyptian army after Moses and his people climbed
out of the Red Sea.
I've been sent through the suburban maze
of side streets and strip malls for the miracle cure of my only daughter's pain.

Dyporex: the Alpha and Omega of diaper rash cream.

There is no Dyporex in this county.
I've been up the baby aisles of three CVS stores and six Walgreens.
No Dyporex.
I'm tired.
The only thing keeping my exhaustion from swerving
my car into a roadside canal
is the mythical refrain galloping
like Roman steeds between my ears:


Gas prices taunt me at every stoplight.
The automatic doors slide open and disappoint.

Slide open and disappoint.
Slide open and disappoint.
The pharmacists and cashiers don't understand and don't care.
Other fathers search other aisles for other medical marvels.
Alas, there's no Dyporex in all of Palm Beach County.

I've always doubted existence of miracles.

But there, squatting
like a false messiah
on the baby aisle rack
of the seventh Walgreens
in a rectangular yellow box,
is (pediatrician recommended)
Boudreaux's Butt Paste.

Do I buy it?
For Jon, Once My Brother
By Sandra Kleven

This end stains a whole life
a poison tide set loose in the last hour
to seep through the sketched frames that hold days distinct
so that one hour of loops and crossed coils
can make of sixty years one screaming note
a toil of dread that ends the day - I'll say it - you choked yourself to death.

And kicked loose a spray of radium and bile
to backtrack through your life, recasting, reframing,
strangling fine days, our summers, our home, breaking hearts,
changing the story, ruining the plot, obliterating all, then
reaching the line that sums it up,
"He killed himself, you know?"

In Admiration of Margaret Atwood
By Meghan Tutolo

I want to watch her live,
my body close to her typewriter,
eating what she chooses not to say-
see what I'm doing wrong.

It's the silk of her words,
loosening me & the threads of my pajamas
when I try to sleep and
I want to know
if she is at her window turned up
to the carved light of a silver moon.

She couldn't have a cell phone.
I don't imagine much to say in the tight spaces
of breath between paragraphs, no room
for curtain-talk or a vacuum cleaner.
A rotary phone, if anything, collects dust

(continued)
on a desk in the hall, veiny plants die on sills.

Beached-shells under her bed never give up their promise, what is heard in the creamy pink inside of a conch, spines poke into burgundy carpet.

There are two white slippers by the night stand.

I imagine she eats soup. I’d like to see that, chicken noodle, because she cannot let go of tradition, yellow broth steams the glasses at the end of her nose.

Does she lift the bowl to her mouth when the noodles are gone—when the spoon can’t catch enough?

in a land of sons born motherless, wind just a bit too willful to remain long on your face, children refusing to turn around and face home, and the varied repetitions like memorized prayers chanted too often at syphilitic wooden saints. alone, the wind sweeps through the pews and empties it of voices.

in a landscape raw and empty as half-drunk eyes wild for the fight, the sober gnashing of naked branches and juniper, where perception is defined by absence the way words sit upon the brain like a feeble thrown, and on the page never clasp as thunderous as expected.

legs kicked up toward heaven, a half-slaughtered cow, soldier, poet. life writes itself a corrosive shadow

(continued)
that shifts with the sun’s gaze upon the mountains,
recognizes the rest is light, scant blue light
all around, deep pink flashes of lightning,
wild roses nearly the color of dust
but with such profound voices
even the artifacts buried centuries ago
can be heard repeating the sounds
of the roots tangled overhead.

I.

Within the electric buzz of power lines
running flat, forever like abandoned rail tracks.
Within the unseen cricket dance,
too constant to long retain mystery.
Within a quiet bombardment of nothing
I see hundreds of license plates
scattered like seed: my tracks
the only proof of movement.

Coughed up by the cruel sun,
jutting from fiery dead soil,
these slivers of tin speak their coded language
and I ask myself: what roads led them
this far beyond solitude
and what roads were they abandoned
too soon to experience

Badlands
By John Williams

(continued)
and where are the people once behind them,
where is written their story and when
did their lament touch upon a smile
and then laugh itself back to tears.

And since they could not have come to this country alone,
where and when will they reemerge,
introducing whose journey into tomorrow,
for even we who once knew motion and voice
cannot remain long half-buried like ghosts.

II.

In the chest of sudden night
I watch the hay bundles grow into a shadow
that eclipses the distant mountains and road
and runs up my legs, abdomen, chest, leaving my face
half-lit. Through this one eye
graced by violet moonlight, I can still capture
those long-dried pools of blood,
the discarded wagon wheels and feathers,
the desiccated, fly-swaddled hides,
the battles won without victory,
the regression vultures bemoan by night,
endlessly circling the lasting silhouettes once cattle.

And through the eye swallowed by the darkness,
I see flowering the rivers of blood
that seep from the arid wind and soil,
leading from both horizons to my feet,
the rusting cars and gray procession,
the blood that cannot dry,
and the vultures’ tender tears of renewed joy.

III.

And thus the moon dies
behind this vacant prison’s walls, exposed
to oxygen and somber tufts of gray grass
and freedom beyond my language.
The tears of lost and separated lovers
are naught but a stone here.
Beggarly, I finger its polished edges like a stranger
lost in a city of strangers, a field of stones.

"Pass on to the next," I repeat.
"What could be more natural?"

And so the seasons, and so friends,
and so harvests and seeds and time and color
as the light changes upon it.
With a pregnant heart and words like hollow wombs,
I pray for its inevitable metamorphosis,
its valor beneath daybreak's sword,
and extol its singular beauty
the moment before I realize
only some things must go
and others in their nature endure.

Marie Buckley is an adjunct reading and writing instructor at Portland Community College in Portland, Oregon, and a co-author of *Quartet: four poetic voices* (Media Weavers 2006). Her work has also been published in Thresholds, Writers’ Dojo Literary Journal online, and Verseweavers. She is a native of Nebraska and currently an Oregon State Poetry Association board member.

Lewis Robert Colon, Jr was born in Chicago and currently lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where he attends the University of Alabama’s MFA Program in Creative Writing. Recent poems have appeared in Columbia Poetry Review, and book reviews in Alabama Writers Forum and Black Warrior Review.

Ryan Quinn Flanagan has recently been published in *The New York Quarterly, The Oklahoma Review, Sacramento Free Press,* and *Valvum.* He also has pieces appearing in the anthology *Lake Effect* and has a full length poetry book in print entitled *Pigeon Theatre.*

Tracy Haught currently lives in Lawton, Oklahoma, with her (military) husband Deron, and their two (wonderful) children, Jackson and Emma. She is a senior at Cameron University majoring in English Literature, with a minor in creative writing. Tracy has written two novels, several short stories and poems, but has yet to have anything published.

Brad Johnson is an associate professor at Palm Beach Community College, FL, and has two chapbooks: *Void Where Prohibited* and *The Happiness Theory* available at puddinghouse.com.

Laura Lifshitz is a former MTV personality and stand-up comic, seen everywhere from the Rikki Lake show to Fox’s The Red Eye, VH1, and more. Traveling around the States while leading the up and down lifestyle of a performer for the majority of her twenties, she decided to make a career change and work on growing up, finally. She published an essay in the April 2006 *Lost* magazine and is currently at work on her full-length memoir. Laura will be a graduate of Columbia University this May with a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing.

Sandra Kleven’s work has been published in the June 2006 *Alaska Quarterly Review.* She is the recipient of a 2007 Celebration Foundation Award, writes a regular column for a weekly paper, and is the author of a children’s book, *The Right Touch.*

Meghan Tutolo attends Chatham University, where she is completing her thesis and hoping to start a career in teaching. She is writing a collection of poems that work to transcend the bounds of everyday life, no matter how mundane it may be.

Paul Weidknecht’s work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Oregon Literary Review, Boston Literary Magazine, Clapboard House, Snowy Egret,* and *Outdoor Life.*

He recently completed a feature-length screenplay, *A Storm In Season,* about a former slave who became the first African-American war hero, and is currently at work on a collection of short stories. Paul studied under Lee K. Abbott in his short story master class at the New York State Summer Writer’s Institute at Skidmore College, and has been accepted into the Sewanee Writer’s Conference for this summer.

John Williams presently calls both Boston and Vienna home, the latter for love and translation studies, and is compiling five poetry books composed from the last two years of traveling and living abroad. Some previous or upcoming publications include: *Flint Hills Review, Caridad Ciciantris, Joked, Phantasmagoria, The Alembic, Turtula Magazine, Black Rock and Sage, Language and Culture, Samizdata, Blue Fog Poetry Journal, Ampersand Poetry Journal, Hot Metal Press,* and *Red Hawk Review.*
Managing Editor
Dr. John Hodgson

Advisors
Dr. John Morris
Dr. Hardy Jones

Editorial Staff
Christina Billings
Bennett Dewan
Henry Evans
Kayla Leuch
Heather Rivera
John Robertson

Photography
Bennett Dewan