

Coowee**scoo**wee



A Journal of Arts and Letters

Rogers State University

Cooweescoowee, a journal of arts and letters published by Rogers State University, features poetry, fiction, and art from outstanding writers and artists. The journal is edited by Rogers State University faculty and printed on campus at the RSU Print Shop.

Sally Emmons-Featherston	Managing Editor
Mary Mackie	Poetry Editor
Emily Dial-Driver	Fiction Editor
Bryce Brimer	Art Director
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Cooweescoowee's name has its origins in Cherokee language and history. Now anglicized, the term was known in ancient times as the onomatopoeia for a large bird, gu'wi'sgu'wi', said to have been seen at infrequent intervals in the old Cherokee country of the present-day southeastern United States. Usually observed accompanying migratory wild geese, the bird has been described as resembling a large snipe with yellow legs and un-webbed feet. The word was also the Cherokee name for John Ross, Principal Chief of the Cherokee during the 19th century removal period, subsequent "trail where they cried," and re-establishment of the Cherokee people in Indian Territory, now Oklahoma. Currently, Cooweescoowee is the name of the Cherokee Nation district where Claremore and Rogers State University are located.

COOWEESCOOWEE



2008

Disclaimer: We are not responsible for the potty language herein, nor the seedy characters who seem to be like someone you know, nor the offensive art that is certain to shock your sensibilities. If you are considering legal action, what do you say we avoid the lawyers and just settle the whole thing with a game of high stakes poker?

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Mark Bussmann has been writing fiction for many years and recently has even begun to enjoy it. He has completed seven novels and a short story cycle and has individual chapters and short stories published in numerous journals and quarterlies.

Freddie

Mark Busmann

It was incredibly hot today. I drove my Camry along the expressway at five-thirty and wondered if I would die. The first heat wave of the year does that to me, makes me horizontal, Mom says. Some of the men at work might like to know that. Also it makes me a little punchy.

I pushed my sleeve up, dangled my arm out the Toyota's window, and waited to move. The traffic at the end of the day pulses like sluggish blood, never more than a small part of the vessel contracting at once. David says I should get a car with air conditioning, the air is too foul to breathe on hot days, but there's something I don't like about it, that you're abandoning something or someone. When it's hot I want to be hot. Or some place cool.

My left arm tans; that's when I know summer is coming. So I unpack the creams and lotions and sun guards and dig out the light cotton wear—shorts, tops, bathing suits (in which I'm all thighs) and towels. I'm lucky, I have nice skin I guess, tight pores, though I do sweat. Water ran under my arms and dampened my bra. I took it off as soon as I got home, then was in front of the mirror again, looking, but nothing had changed. Same old Megan. Older. Okay, I don't feel older. The changes are too subtle, but at thirty, there's no return, no teenager running on the beach anymore.

David thinks I'm very young. He's thirty-three or twenty-nine. He says both, laughs when he says it. I'm not sure. He has translucent skin with tiny freckle dots and wavy copper hair, more brown than red, and he could be either or both. When he hits forty or fifty, suddenly he'll age. He'll have a paunch. His mauve tie will hang on it. I'll pat his stomach, though I doubt I'll know him then. We are more than friends but how much more we haven't decided. I have a say in it, I tell myself. I can say no to him. He wanted to see a horror movie, somebody maims fifty people or so, and I wouldn't go. He went with "the guys" at work that Friday and we didn't talk until Monday. I don't think he was punishing me; he just had other things to do. He brought me a yellow rose for our next date, and we slept together that night. Here. In my apartment, one built in the forties near the foothills. My bedroom has floor to ceiling French windows with half moons at the top of each frame. The windows open into a small patio where roses grow on a thatched trellis. It rained that night, lightly, and the beads clung to the windows as if for life, then skidded downward. I could see, opening my eyes as David moved on top of me, a crystal haze in the garden, a few roses already a purple red and the black green of the leaves flapping in the mist. I hugged him, crushed him it seemed from his grunt, and I thought we touched. I petted his head afterward, as he slept, and I watched the delicate drops descend from the eaves and heard their pitter-patter on the plants until sounds other than rain resumed.

We didn't talk about it, that we slept together, the next morning. I fed him

eggs and toast and orange juice and coffee and chunks of pineapple I'd bought fresh the day before. He ate slowly, then hungrily, as I watched and picked at my food. It wasn't that I had no appetite, but food was not especially important to me at that moment. He had a second cup of coffee, and was off to help a friend repair a sailboat in dry dock on the bay. He invited me, but only once, and I didn't really want to go. We kissed, he held me, and he left, tooting the horn as he drove away.

I trimmed the roses that morning, something I should have done weeks earlier. Even the thorns grabbing at me, occasionally stabbing me, were not bothersome. The rain had swept the sky, it was shiny April, and I listened to a violin concerto drift gently into the patio. I gazed upward, pruning shears paused, at the mountains that grew beyond me, a few miles away. Their clean green outline met in a long flat dome the impressive blue overhead. At this time of morning on clear days a bright silver tower dotted the peak of the tallest mountain. It twinkled like a glittering lantern for three or four minutes, the sun at the right angle, then it was gone, the light turned off. I watched for the moment it disappeared but never quite saw it.

David called Sunday, said he was still working on the boat, but by next weekend we might sail it. Did I want to? I had the strongest urge to say no. Just no. I talked around it, never answering him, and we moved to other subjects and said goodbye. I wandered around the apartment, cleaned the kitchen, and went out shopping. I wore pastel pink shorts to the mall and wanted to pull the hem down, make them longer to cover my legs. A nectar scented breeze caught me as I entered a bookstore and I didn't care anymore, was glad to be me, and stood straight, towering over a lean, tanned young man who looked at books on sailing. When he turned, I guess I must have seemed surprised because he smiled oddly and looked away. He did remind me of someone, but it was someone who'd already been on my mind.

Freddie Sievers was an inch shorter than me, though when I wore flats and he had on boots he stood taller. That was seldom because he mostly wore tennis shoes. We met in high school as freshman, had the same home room for four years and talked as friends for the last three.

Freddie was very athletic, but not quite good enough to stand out. It didn't seem to bother him. I liked him for that. He had a nice, compact body and moved with a kind of grace, for a boy. He wasn't dumb, but he didn't excel in his studies either. For that reason we were in very few classes together. Something changed between us, though, in our senior year. We looked at each other differently, or at least I did at him. He had a very boyish face, tousled brown hair, and a crooked smile that appeared easily and often. Then overnight—actually a summer passed and fall turned cold—his beard, a kind of fuzz before, turned dark and demanded shaving every day. There was suddenly a roughness to his face that made him older, and I wanted to touch that face.

We talked and talked and talked, all the time me wanting to run my palm or the soft underside of my wrist against his cheek, to feel the bristles. There must have been something about me too that Freddie wanted because although we chatted about everything our eyes seldom strayed from one another. Near Christmas, after I had fed him every clue I could think of, that I really, I mean really, want-

ed to go to the Snow Dance (there wasn't snow within a few hundred miles of our high school) he mentioned that maybe, possibly, we could go together. Maybe. I said yes so quickly I embarrassed us both, but we went and danced most of the night. Freddie held me all evening as if he were clutching an egg carton, and I managed once as we bumped into another couple to casually graze his face. The touch thrilled me, even more than I'd expected.

I must have been pie-eyed because when we left the floor, sliding by the green ice cubes floating in the red punch that was becoming muddy brown, Freddie looked slightly up at me, closed his eyes and our heads bumped, then adjusting we somehow touched lips. We were both satisfied, almost giddy with success until later at my doorstep we kissed again. There was a moment of anticipation for me, filled with butterflies and the sensation of weightlessness, and then our lips met, more accurately this time. Freddie put his arms around me and we stood there for ten or fifteen minutes. Finally I said, Freddie, I have to go in now. I didn't really want to say it, I didn't really want to go in, but we might have stayed there until the snow sometime did fall.

We dated regularly that winter, became a kind of item when we had been so anonymous before, and our discussions continued. We talked at school, at the basketball games, at A&W Root Beer afterwards, at the dances we went to. Our conversations always concerned someone else or something separate from us. Maybe we began to notice that, that it was not so important about what we talked but that we did.

Spring grew strong, we went in large groups to the beach and we became adventurous. We necked while others drove, we hid sometimes or went alone on long walks. We began to explore, to touch, our skin and fingers electric, conductors of electricity. Freddie was always so slow, so careful, it made me a little wanton, maybe even conniving. He left a red mark on my shoulder one night and he apologized for a week about it, but secretly I was proud.

The week before our senior prom, eating dinner at Freddie's, his uncle mentioned that his beach house would be vacant on Saturday and we might use it if we wanted. I gave Freddie a look that meant yes, and his uncle gave us the key. We packed a lunch, brought chicken to barbecue for dinner, a radio to listen to, and we were off and there by noon. We ate our lunch, lay on the beach, me in a new white swimsuit that showed off my long tan legs and Freddie in blue striped trunks with a white drawstring that hung below his navel. I wanted to tuck that drawstring in but never found the right time to do it.

Late in the afternoon we brought in our portable radio and Freddie set about lighting the fire for the chicken. For half an hour he tried to get the charcoal to catch and I couldn't help but laugh, too loudly I guess. He threw the pack of matches at the uncooperative coals and walked away. I'd never seen him angry before and I froze. Then a breeze sprung up and with it a little flame. I let out a shriek, both from fright and excitement. Freddie looked back, smiled, and that probably saved our dinner and the evening.

We ate at sunset, the chicken undercooked, the salad I made soggy, the bread crusty, but we didn't care. We sat at a little wooden table Freddie covered with a white cloth, on rickety straw bottom chairs that squeaked whenever we moved. The curtains were open to the large window that overlooked the beach

and I saw the single candle on our table reflected in the glass as if it hung over the ocean. Above the water in gray pockets a squall brewed and all we could do was giggle.

When we finished and cleared away the table, Freddie said he had a surprise. He went into the kitchen and came back with two tall fluted glasses and a bottle wrapped in a white towel. Champagne, he said, and slipped the towel off. The bottle was black green topped with golden foil. Mmm, I said. I'd had very little alcohol, I didn't like beer, only sweet wine appealed to me, and I'd tasted my parents' highballs, but didn't care for them. Champagne had to be different and I watched with fascination as Freddie fooled (I didn't tell him that) with the wire cage, and the stopper, real cork not plastic. He yanked at it, tilted the bottle one way and another, his face all the time redder and redder. I wanted to ask if he needed help, but the question might seem cruel and probably in a small way it was. I was glad I wasn't the one who had to open it. Then the cork exploded past Freddie's head, hit the ceiling, the window, the couch, and settled near my feet. While it ricocheted around the room the champagne erupted from the bottle and Freddie tried to cap it as one might cap a Vesuvius and with as much success. The foaming liquid skimmed his face, flew over his shoulder and squished between his fingers. Into the glasses, I yelled, and he directed it there, filled them up while soaking the tablecloth. The eruption stopped, half the champagne was gone, and he sat down, exhausted. I had a peculiar and very strong urge to lick the drops from his face, tasting the champagne and his beard at the same time, but I got up instead, took a napkin, put my hand on his shoulder and patted his face. I said it was very nice and I kissed him on the cheek. He remained unmoving for a moment, then shrugged. He wiped both our glasses with the towel and gave me mine. The room reeked of champagne and I hoped it tasted better than it smelled, than what touched my lips when I kissed Freddie.

We held our glasses up, pushed them together until they clicked, and drank. The first swallow was bitter, biting, and I think we both tried to hide our reactions. Good, I said, but I wanted to hold my hand over my mouth in case it didn't agree. Freddie echoed me, and shook his head. I'm not old enough for this stuff, he said. Come on, I said, let's give it a chance. We sipped again, this time the taste not quite as bad as the first, though nothing, I swore to myself, I'd ever drink again.

We sipped back and forth until near the end it really wasn't bad at all. In fact, I felt quite good. We might have a little more, I said. Freddie looked at me as if I were crazy, but he poured us each a half glass more. Maybe, he said standing up, I should close the curtains. I nodded yes and watched as they squeezed the picture window smaller and smaller and the gray-black ocean dwindled to a tiny slice, then nothing at all. We heard it, though, the surf sliding in and out, as if something enormous outside was going ahhhhhhh, ahhhhhhh, ahhhhhhh.

What shall we talk about, I said, holding my glass, liking the long, slender cool feel of it in my hand. Freddie just exhaled, kind of like a sigh.

What college we're going to next year?

No, I said, not that.

We drank the champagne and it got better and better. No longer bitter. Or the bite was something pleasant. I marveled at it, looked at it, laughed. Freddie laughed too, and reached across the table and put his hand on mine. I let it sit

there, then turned mine and held his. The ocean and our breathing seemed to be one.

We moved over to the couch, our hands still meshed, and we sat. I leaned against him and we kissed, sloppily, and then with a kind of passion. The feeling was something I hadn't known, yet dreamed about, thought of, and experiencing it was strange, as if I were a third person watching myself. Our eyes were closed, our tongues wound together and I began to purr. I listened to myself and thought: that's interesting.

I slid backwards and Freddie moved over me, kissing my face, my neck and nuzzling my breasts. I was afraid for the time when he saw them, that they were small, and I wished for a room with full darkness. But as I pulled my straps aside, the white swimsuit iridescent in the room, he seemed not to mind. I had the oddest feeling then, that I was a young mother suckling her child. It almost made me shiver, with a sort of terror yet need, and I patted Freddie and asked him to turn off the light.

He was up immediately and I lay there unembarrassed, my wrap aside and my suit pulled to my waist, my nipples pointing to the ceiling. The light went out with that image and Freddie returned, his shirt gone, and his skin touched mine. It was one of the most delicious feelings I've ever had, his chest brushing against me, tickling me until I pulled him tight and clasped my arms around him. I think he gasped and I let him go and he nibbled at my ear. That really did tickle and I let out a little laugh, something I'd probably never do now, and he lay still. I petted his head, his thick damp hair, while he breathed on top of me. I wondered if this was it, if we had exhausted all the moves in his manual that he seemed to be following, and I felt sad and defeated. My hand played with his hair, but I was a failure. Maybe my breasts were at fault.

We lay silent except for the surf and the wind that moved the brass bell on the porch. The bell clanged each time a gust surrounded the beach house. I breathed in, was fascinated with the night there, so peculiar yet so familiar. I became stupid and gently pushed Freddie's face down to where my chest heaved; they were my breasts, I thought, and he should be satisfied with them. He seemed to revive and began slowly to suckle and moved from side to side, finally as if he wanted to be on both at once. I wished he could. Something inside me melted, nothing I had known before, and abruptly he moved away, as if he were a ghost, and he struggled and took something from his pocket. I wanted him very much to return, to be on me, the pressure of his body, his muscles on mine, but he weaved and tore at the package he held and threw part of it away. I knew what it was, had heard about them, never seen one (God knows what my Mom and Dad used), and it dangled crazily in Freddie's hand, almost as if it had a life of its own. I wanted to laugh but knew better this time, watched, not literally but as if I looked at something on the wall, and was amazed as he donned it and the thing swung lazily like a little pontoon. I wanted to ask if he had used one before, but that seemed too much, and I might not want to know the answer. He told me anyway, as he fumbled more and said, I guess that's how it goes.

He kneeled and I pulled him down to me and felt my swimsuit desert me as I lifted and his full body fell on mine. We moved awkwardly and his hand stroked me and it seemed so much had led to this moment, all my years of childhood, my

first period and the disgust yet afterward a kind of pride in it, my body changing, becoming a woman's, a girl though in a woman's body, and the future now balanced on a precipice, to fall or not fall.

We tangled and kissed and grew sweaty. One moment I wanted him very much, the next I doubted it. I wondered what I was supposed to do that I wasn't, what others did. We had never talked about this exact moment, my high school girl friends and I, maybe because we thought little was required except to lie there.

I walked my hands down Freddie's back, up and down, my fingertips like sensors probing for an answer. I looked at the ceiling, gray blue shadows formed from ocean light, and turned carefully to Freddie whose head was an inch from mine. His face was buried in my shoulder and his eyelids were squeezed together and his arms flopped about as if with motion, any motion, the right thing would happen.

I smiled at him, the mother in me loved him, and I couldn't not help. I reached down slowly, found his pontoon, one that seemed incredibly hard, and slipped it into me. I shivered as he slid over me, in some kind of primitive pulse that scared yet intrigued me. He couldn't get very far in and when he tried a number of times I let a little yelp and he stopped immediately. It's okay, I said, it's okay. I wanted to zipper shut my mouth, weld my teeth together and get it done with, please, but tiny cries kept coming out and each time he paused. Finally I held his buttocks, not bony but firm, and forced him into me. In a minute he needed no more urging, though my fingers dug into his back. I was quiet as drops popped from my eyes, huddled and fell down my cheeks, and he said over me, again and again, oh, Megan, oh, Megan, oh, Megan, oh, Megan.

Afterwards he was apologetic, almost horrified with himself. I touched him gently and said it was fine, what I wanted, what we wanted, it would be better next time. I wouldn't let him move until he asked if there might be blood on the couch. He sat up and there wasn't. But suddenly I felt naked and embarrassed and he still wore ridiculously his pontoon which had drastically dwindled except for a small pouch at the end.

I'll be back in a minute, I said, and took my clothes to the bathroom. I washed and patted myself and combed my hair. I didn't want to take too long, but I couldn't help looking at me in the mirror, to see if I was any different, if anything had changed about me, that maybe my parents would notice. Nope, same Megan, just a little disheveled, a little flushed and a little sore. No bike riding tomorrow.

Freddie went in when I came out, some clothes in his hand covering himself. I wondered what he was going to do with it. Flush it down the toilet? Rinse it out and save it as a memento? Reuse it? God, I had joined the ranks of women and even joked like them. Well, some of them.

I lay on the couch and waited for Freddie and heard the bell clang and the wind bluster around the beach house. I hugged myself, alone and not especially unhappy that I was. When he came back I made room for him and we lay side by side, embracing. He was cute and I liked him against me, but I wanted something to cover us. He found a soft beach blanket faded from the sun, and we pulled it over us. I pushed up against him, my free arm wrapped around him, my hand

touching his neck, my head on his chest, his arms crossed over me. I think he dozed, I could hear him breathe, sometimes a kind of wheeze beneath me. The shadows in the room deepened, and I looked around, my eyes flicking from dark object to object. There was a quiet tapping, very faint, as if someone knocked at the door. The sound grew around me, everywhere, and I realized rain fell. It was all a very gentle symphony, the rain, the wind, the surf, and Freddie's breathing mingled with mine.

I woke with a start, I guess because Freddie's body jumped beneath me. We sat up and it seemed morning arrived, light came into the room and left, but it was brighter than before. We slowly understood the neighbors had arrived home and the headlights and their garage light had caused our stirring. The room darkened again, but we could see the clock, past one-thirty, and knew we had to get up. We couldn't stay for any number of reasons, specifically because someone else was to be there early the next morning.

We dressed like two old lovers, very familiar with each other, and embraced by the front door. Part of me inside was singing, the other part was very tired and wanted her own bed at home.

I slept on the ride back, my hand vibrating on Freddie's leg with the motion of the car, and we kissed quickly at my parents' door. Fortunately I had my own key and I shut the door behind me as if I were a robber closing a vault. When I turned and walked through the house no one was there, no questions, only sleep sounds as I entered my room. I was relieved but in a way disappointed, that Mom hadn't waited up to see me, that Dad wasn't ready with a lecture. I had been eighteen for only a few months; was this the reward of becoming a woman? I suspected not, that the next morning I would hear about it, but I didn't. They asked questions at breakfast, when I finally tumbled out near noon, how was Freddie, how was the beach, was Freddie's uncle's house nice? I answered them all, eating eggs and toast Dad made for me, and I still wonder to this day if they really knew.

Freddie and I slept together three or four times, but something was gone. We pretended not to notice at the senior prom, clung to each other with pasted smiles around the pleasantly lit dance floor, me in my blue formal and he in his white tux. We continued to date as summer began and I wondered how we would end. To my surprise he started seeing someone else; he told me about her one evening as we sat in A&W, and I said it was all right, I understood, I felt the same way. He dropped me off that night and I went to my room and cried, cried until probably I could cry no more. I told Mom and Dad the next day and they seemed not especially surprised, though Mom hugged me. I went to my room and cried again; I didn't know why. Later, I couldn't wait for summer to end and the newness of fall to come.

Andrei Guruianu is a Romanian-born author whose poetry work has appeared in *Days When I Saw the Horizon Bleed* and *Paterson Literary Review*, Ted Kooser's *American Life in Poetry Project*, *River Oak Review*, *Edison Review*, *Saranac Review*, and *Kaleidoscope*. He is also the founder and editor of the literary journal *The Broome Review*.

ALIEN AUTHORIZED TO WORK

Andrei Guriianu

Legal for one more year, his voice
is like an excited child on the phone.
He tells me the papers have come,
the papers, the papers,
all I ever heard growing up
with the weight of expectations,
playing the good immigrant son,
learning to anticipate
those envelopes from the government
more than the arrival of Christmas morning.
The papers came today my father said,
and it means he's legal for one more year,
a man made real by a document,
not by the worth of his mind,
the sweat on his gray, receding brow,
a broken body defined by two words—legal,
alien—the internal rhyme
of our immigrant selves.
And because our taxes are good enough,
our sweat and our blood is good enough,
we're allowed to work to pay
for the name that scars like a firebrand,
the number and the letter A engrained
in the skin that cannot be washed clean
and printed under laminated shifting holograms
that for a price renews the burden every year,
should we ever dare forget
that indeed we come from somewhere else.

Naomi Feigelson Chase's poems have appeared in *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, and *Harvard Review*, among others. Her most recent book of poetry is *Gittel, The Would-Be Messiah, A Novel in Verse*, which won a Turning Point Award.

The Bris

Naomi Chase

My daughter, the Madonna, waits,
Flowers in her hair.
Footmen bring her
The infant on a tray.
I'm the dead mother in "Our Town,"
Watching her life, unable
To stop
The little knife.

Desiring This Manís Art

Naomi Chase

I photograph a tree stump wreathed with mushrooms,
Knives, if poisonous.

A mouthful could shrivel you,
Feed you back to earth.

Beware of things that spoil.
The woods are full of hit men.

I want the leaves,
Their amber yellow, their see through red,

Would keep them,
Transparent relics,

Pinned to wood,
Like butterflies under glass,

Like bog faces. As though all art
Were matter, cured long enough.



Nadia Kyrylova
Cemetery

Kim Hawke is a 17-year-old senior at McAllen High School in Texas, and has always wanted to be a writer. This past year, she took part in the first Creative Writing class her school offered, and “Jules, the Disgruntled Pumpkin” is the story she turned in for her first grade in the class.

Jules the Disgruntled Pumpkin

Kim Hawke

Jules the Pumpkin had rotting holes shaped like hearts for ears. He didn't know why; they were just like that. It was his vine's fault.

On Halloween night, Jules hopped into a kitchen through the window and accidentally landed on a knife, which went flying and stuck into the wall. He hid under the dining room table as someone came in the room.

"Hey, Mom! Can you come in here for a minute?" a girl with a chocolate-smeared mouth said. Her mom came in. "There are little pumpkin seed-shaped droppings all over the floor."

"Hmm. Mice, maybe. They need more fiber in their diet. Cheese isn't good for your intestines. We'll pour some of Grandma Goo's fiber chocolate that she keeps sneaking into our cereal on the floor for the mouse," the mom said. The two of them cackled as they got rid of the food they hated so much.

The doorbell rang and the two left the room to give kids candy.

Jules hopped out from under the table and sniffed the fiber-loaded chocolate, a.k.a. the Laxative. It smelled all right to Jules, so he ate a few pieces and if you want to know what happened to Jules, ask an evil little kid who has fed Alka Seltzer to seagulls. The same effect.

The next morning, Grandma Goo screamed, and three generations of Goo women stood around Jules.

"I didn't know pumpkins had mouths," the youngest Goo said.

Mother Goo made Jules into a pumpkin pie and froze him for Thanksgiving. When the pie was finished baking and its smell filled the house, it didn't smell any different from the other pumpkin pies the Goos had ever made because fiber doesn't have a smell...

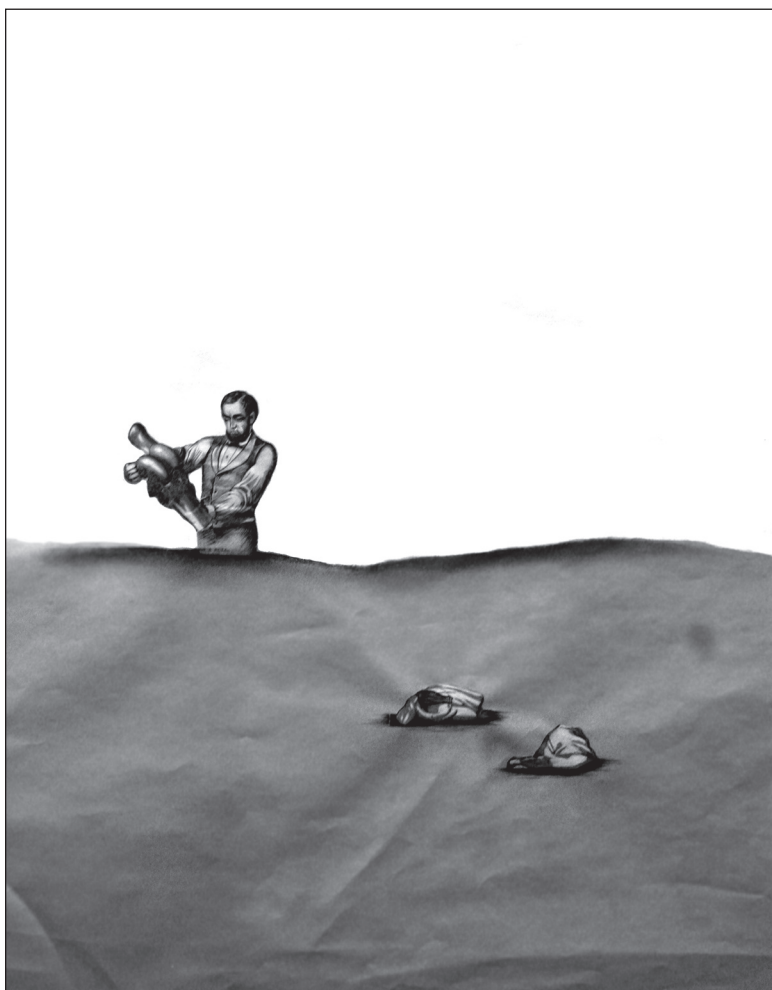
Jules, squashed, mashed, baked, and brooding, sat in the freezer for a few weeks, waiting to be let out of the cold, aluminum-foil-covered prison so he could get revenge on the Goos.

Finally, the morning came when Jules was defrosted and set next to the turkey guts that come in a little white bag inside the raw turkey. Jules just sat there on the counter, not being able to see or anything, but sensing the salmo-

nella that was possibly crawling over to his crust. He felt cheated. How did he end up in such a disgusting kitchen filled with women who gossiped about the other women from their church when he'd had such an adventurous life outside this place? Curiosity smashed the pumpkin.

Eventually, after witnessing some nibbling on his crust in the kitchen, Jules was brought out to the dining room and his gooey crust was sliced by the crusty Goo, who had specs of flour in her wrinkles. A room full of people grabbed their slices of Jules before anyone in another part of the room had a chance to get theirs, and soon Jules was divided and sliding down esophaguses to do his real work.

In less than an hour, twenty-something Goos were all racing and pushing for the only bathroom in the small duplex, and Jules was released into the sewer, which had a leaky pipe that drained into a pumpkin patch on the outskirts of town, and Jules soon took his regular form again, growing on heart-shaped vines.



Hannah Beuke
Transforming a Bull

Lara Mann is of English, Irish, Choctaw, French, German, Scottish, Spanish, and Cherokee descent. She is an enrolled member of the Choctaw Nation of Oklahoma, a native of Kansas, and a University of Kansas alumnus. Currently, she is an MFA candidate in poetry writing at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

An Ars Poetica Wherein the Author Finds Herself Confronted With the Necessity to Impress

— or —

Faced With the Certain Doom of Reading Next to Sherwin, LeAnne, and Ralph at AWP: A Freak Out

Lara Mann

I've got the shoes. And they could kill

seriously

spike 3 ¾ inch heels and

snakeskin

embossed leather. I got over
my morality quandary when buying them
because actual snakeskin would have bothered me—
too sacred and sexy
—but cows, not so much.

So the shoes go in the bag

and the suit my mom made especially for this event. I can sew

but not well

enough to be good

and a suit requires tailoring

an upper echelon of needlework prowess that I

don't have.

So I've got the suit option

a Vogue vintage pattern from 1944
in green silk cashmere.

But a suit is so expected
at a conference.

I'll take it anyway, maybe wear it
to the East Village

(yeah, less expected

there)

but my cousin will know what I should wear.

My favorite part of any outfit

besides the shoes

are the unmentionables.

If I'm wearing a suit, there has to be pantyhose.

The stand-by are the thigh-high backseams

and they would fit the suit's era. But

they're not elastic-top, so I will have to bring a garter belt, which has a tendency
to inch down and I only have so much room in my bag. And I have to put in my
Spanx, those surgical-grade elastic Puritan panties, since the skirt is form fitting.
Have to save room for all my fluids, gels, and creams over 3.4 ounces, as well as
my hair styling tools: curl cream, conditioner, frizz spray, plastic sleep-in curlers,
pins, clips, and bands.

I could take the flesh-colored fishnets instead of the

thigh-highs.

Black would look too trashy
but the flesh-colored reference traditional fish-

nets

and

also the burlesque.

Yeah, Retro Academic with a hint of

Burlesque;

Blasphemous Aca-

demic;

I ap-

prove.

But I'll have to take both pantyhose options; Lima will tell me what to do.

If she thinks that it's too naughty

I'll take the black (tailored but not fitted) pants.

I'll roll them, yeah,

put them in the bottom of my bag
so they can maybe get wrinkled.

It's weird:

like, I have to make the gesture

but

as long as the professionalism intent is there, even if it's thwarted by me, it still counts. Anyhow, Lima may want to take me out in Midtown and I'd probably need something generic for that. She will know. Thank God for older cousins.

I'll pad my blow dryer with cardigans and scarves

and if I happen to wear

them all at once

I can blame it on the

weather.

I don't want to lump in with the dyed black
swoopy-bang girls

who are gonna drink cases of

hotel bar wine

(because it's what poets do)

so I'm not likely to wear that.

But if Lima thinks everything else looks

like I'm taking myself

too seriously, I will.

Depending on what mood I'll be in

and what music I listen to to get

pumped

I have to take some skinny

jeans

and band t-shirts.

But this probably isn't one of those

times

to be that

kind of individual.

It'll make them think I'm

too weird

too scary

But I'll need those things for going out.

The "NDN" vibe is gonna have to be in the jewelry

if I want it.

I'll

throw in

my turquoise earrings, and beaded tri-medallion necklace, some wrought silver stuff with leather and bone accents, but it's just gonna get in a knot anyhow. It would save time to laminate my card and wear it on a chain. Maybe that wouldn't be appreciated. The unmentionable options for the black pants and the skinny jeans are pretty standard, just as long as it doesn't show a seam line it'll work. How utilitarian. But it will save bag room.

Oh yeah, the poems.

Shit.

I hope they hold up.

Maybe they'll be better

if I put them in a

leather portfolio.

What if they're only as good as I can do

and that's not enough

and

that's all they'll ever be?

What if this is my peak? What if my voice shakes and my hands shake and my eye twitches and my face breaks out in hives and I trip on my heels and on the elevator I realize that I look ridiculous and I'm the whitest person in the room and I don't know someone I'm supposed to know and I humiliate my family and my tribe and my university as all of their representatives and I get up there with my meticulously planned outfit, so obviously planned, and I'm

laid open

and the poems are all that anyone will see

and it won't

matter

what underwear I planned to wear months ago
if my metaphors are juvenile

and my shoes

aren't gonna save me

from not being as good as everyone else

if that's how it is.

And I can't control it

how they react

just what they

see

and it's so

futile

petty

and my over-preparation will look just that: petty
especially if what I'm there for is sub-par.

Nominated for a 2009 Pushcart Award in fiction, **Bruce Pratt** is the recipient of numerous writing awards including the 2007 Ellipsis Prize in poetry. His poems have appeared in, or are forthcoming from, *Only Connect*, *Smartish Pace*, *Puckerbrush Review*, *The Poet's Touchstone*, *Rock and Sling*, *Red Rock Review*, *Crosscut*, *The Unrorean*, and *Wild Goose Poetry Review*. His nonfiction has appeared in the *Yale Anglers' Journal*, *the Hartford Courant*, *Bangor Daily News*, *Salty Dog*, *Bangor Metro*, and *Portland Magazine*. A graduate of The Stonecoast MFA at the University of Southern Maine where he teaches undergraduate creative writing, Pratt lives with his wife, Janet, in Eddington, Maine.

Maestro Silvestri's Cello

Bruce Pratt

Elena fingered her pearls like a rosary and stared out her kitchen window, as blue flames burnished the bottom of the kettle and the first wisps of steam escaped the spout. Sun was predicted for the afternoon, but the morning had dawned dark, a cold rain dripping from the fading maples outside the kitchen door. The kettle sang, startling her. Elena allowed the tea to steep until almost black, recalling how the Maestro had taught her to favor it over coffee, assuring her she'd be surer with the bow. As she poured the steaming brew into her mug her glasses fogged, and she wiped them with her sleeve. Holding the mug in both hands, fingers tingling, she wept.

Maestro Silvestri had been gone a week, but only beneath the gathering clouds of the previous afternoon, as Elena slumped against a jagged stump behind her parents' house, had his death fully riven her heart. She'd come to the woods to find a tree, where years before she'd carved her initials below those of a boy she dared not tell she loved, but had discovered only its charred remains. Before felled by lightning, the sprawling beech had been the refuge Elena sought as a little girl when she was too sad to tell anyone and was where her father would find her and make her feel well again. But as the day dimmed, she realized that this time her grief was her own.

Her quartet, Seacoast Strings, would perform one of the Maestro's own short pieces as the opening selection at his funeral, which had been delayed to accommodate relatives and dignitaries from Europe. As the hot mug warmed her hands, Elena wondered if she would feel the Maestro's pudgy fingers on her shoulder, or hear him humming in her ear as she played, and was glad she knew the piece by heart as she knew she would not be able to sight read with her grieving eyes.

Unlike the other musicians in the group, Elena had gone to Julliard, but lasted only two years, withering in that hothouse. Often too shy to speak, she could not explain her fear of failing. When she withdrew and said she was returning to Portland, a teacher asked her if she knew "The esteemed cellist Massimo Silvestri."

When she shook her head no, he said, "Look him up. Fascinating man, but a bit of a recluse, now, I hear. Perhaps he is taking students."

Elena did not call and enrolled in a university where her diffidence could be hidden behind her wire rimmed glasses, and she could sit, as she had in high school, far back in the room. For a year, the Czech cello her father had taken out

a loan to buy for her sat mute. Elena knew the sight of its dusty case sorrowed her parents and that they fretted she'd never perform again, though they told her, "Life is not a race" and "You'll play again at the right time."

But she did not touch the instrument until, for her twenty-first birthday, her father took her to hear the Maestro play a benefit concert at the university. Though the event featured a full orchestra, Elena heard only the Maestro's cello, his playing urging her fingers to recall the stinging memory of bow and strings. Twice she had to dab her eyes, and, for the long winter of that year, Elena practiced deep into each night. Her soul remembered, but her fingers would not obey, kenning the notes but not their place or the spaces between them. Though her hands and back ached and her bruised and humiliated fingertips throbbed, she practiced scales both consciously and unconsciously with such persistence that her supervisor at the rent a car desk where she worked asked her if she had, "Some kind of Tourette's," causing her to color, unable to answer.

It was when his married daughter came to the airport to pick up a rental car, the Maestro himself standing a few feet away in a white shirt, French cuffs rolled up his massive forearms, that Elena first spoke to him. Though her co-worker, Evan, was checking them in, Elena asked the woman, "Will the Maestro be driving?"

"You know my father?" she said.

"Only his work and reputation," Elena said, "And I've seen him play."

The woman smiled, "No," she said, "Much as he'd like to."

Elena, her skin flushed and hands trembling, said, "My professor at Julliard told me that I should ask the Maestro to take me on as a student."

The woman regarded Elena as Evan handed her license back to her, then opening her purse, said, "This is his card. He'll be back Wednesday, but don't call before ten. He won't admit it, but he's up half the night and sleeps late."

Elena took the card and said, "We could have the car brought around if you'd like."

The daughter asked her father if he wanted the car pulled up out front, or if he wished to walk, and it was the first time Elena heard his voice, deep and full, not raspy like many older men. "Yes," he said, "Have them bring it to us, Elena."

Elena assumed he'd read her red Avis name tag, but when his daughter said, "Okay, Poppa," she knew it was her name as well.

Elena blurted out, "Have a nice trip, Maestro."

He grinned and bowed.

The Maestro lived in a gray-shingled saltbox perched on a knoll encircled by low hedges and wind-stunted pines at the head of a narrow neck thrust into the bay. From the second floor, one could see beyond the end of the neck to where the Atlantic spread toward the horizon, a view, he told her after she'd been his pupil for several months that reminded him of his boyhood home on the Adriatic.

"Do you go back there often?" she'd asked.

"To Italy, yes, but never to that place," he told her, "Because too many were whores, selling everything for a promise made of hate and fear."

"Don't you find it cold here?" Elena said.

"Cold, but honest," he said. "When we left Italy, we went first to England, but I did not like it, never summer, never winter, wet and gray. So, I went on to Boston."

He paused, then pivoting from the window said, "When my wife died, my daughter convinced me to come to Maine. She lives near enough to be helpful, and I have taught her to respect my privacy."

Elena said, "Why not New York?"

"For the same reason you do not live there. Too much chaos, and it is full of critics who are like eunuchs. They claim to know what to do, but cannot do it themselves."

Blowing across her mug to cool her tea, Elena smiled at the memory, though a torpor bled through her like a prolonged chill. She had not slept well, pestered by memories of the morning of her first lesson with the Maestro, when she'd risen well before the light. Fearing she would play poorly, her stomach roiling, and certain the Maestro would reject her; she'd barely touched her breakfast. Nixon had been on the news. There were pictures of dead Marines. A boy she'd danced with at the junior semi-formal, Alex Strong, was shown in his Army uniform, crutches in one hand, hopping down the gangway to the airport tarmac, left leg gone. Elena remembered him, recalling his clumsy dancing and clammy hands, the beads of sweat clinging to his incipient mustache bathed in Royal Lime Aftershave. When the news had shifted to sports, she'd set her dishes in the sink and trudged upstairs, taken a long bath, then spent ten minutes ironing a skirt she later abandoned for a long dress. She remembered feigning sleep when she heard her parents stir, waiting until eight, after they had gone to their real estate office, to dress. Later, her father had called from his desk to wish her well, saying, "Honey, we're pulling for you," and from her extension her mother had added, "Be yourself, Elena. You'll do fine."

The Maestro conducted lessons in a spare room under the eaves on the second floor. "The ground floor has too much plaster," he'd told her that day. "The wood here makes the sound better. And you can see the water."

She played a piece she knew well, but stumbled over easy passages, her hands sweaty and cold to the touch, not daring to look up when she'd finished, the last notes fading into the walls. He did not speak, his silence crushing her, but at the moment when she thought she might flee the house in despair, leaving her cello behind, he said, "You have talent, but you played to please me. Music is like love. It is best made when you're not trying to impress anyone, when you enjoy what you are doing." Leaning toward her, he tipped her chin up with the tip of his index finger and said, "Now, tell me about Elena."

Once she summoned the courage to begin, Elena could not stop. He sat in his chair, listening, chewing the ends of his great mustache, and scratching the bald middle of his head with the tip of a conductor's baton. She told him that she had started on the violin, but because she was tall, and violinists stood at recitals, she wanted to play an instrument where she could sit.

When she took a breath, he said, "You're not so tall now."

"I was then," she said, "And so thin that my friends called me Kansas."

"Kansas?" he said.

"Because it's so flat."

"Ah," he'd said, "Children may be as cruel as critics."

She told him about Julliard, and about not touching her instrument until seeing him play. When she paused, he straightened in his chair. "Do you want to

study with me to become a concert cellist, or because you love music? I offer no Roman Charity."

Elena did not know what he meant, but, tapping her chest, said, "I want to feel the music again. Here."

"Thursday afternoons at three," he said, rising. "Can you arrange that?"

"Yes," she said, though to get Thursdays off she knew she would need to work Sundays, which would vex her parents.

"Fine," he said drawing two folios of sheet music from a chest wedged beneath the eave. "These," he said handing them to her, "are exercises. Prepare the first two. Do not rush, feel the breadth of the long notes, let the rests be full. Can you afford twenty dollars?"

"Yes," she'd said, without thinking.

As the wind gusted wet leaves against the kitchen window, Elena recalled how she'd arrived an hour early for that first lesson and waited in her gray Vega at the side of the road a half of a mile from his house, a soft, coastal rain falling a few drops heavier than a mist, the heat from the defroster making her nose itch, her legs crossed, needing to pee but unable to bring herself to drive back to the Cumberland Farms and use the rest room for fear she'd not come back. To keep her mind off her bladder, she raced her fingers through the exercises.

Later, sitting in his bathroom embarrassed by the sounds she made and the flush of the toilet, she noticed his sloppy shaving mug, an uncapped bottle of cologne, and a brush tangled with strands of his wild, white hair on the sink-top. It was then that she first saw the print of Roman Charity, and in time, though she knew her reedy frame would never swell like Rubens' model, she knew she'd give the Maestro her breasts to suckle if she had milk and he was hungry.

When her mug was empty, Elena poured and drank another. She made buttered toast, but ate only half a slice. Regarding her watch, she realized that she'd needed to leave for the church if she were to park nearby and avoid having to tote her cello through the rain. She broke her toast into small pieces for the birds, set her dishes in the sink, and put on her raincoat. In the hallway, she slung her bag over her shoulder, gripped her cello case by its bony handle, and stepped into the half-lit morning, which smelled like dead leaves.

Elena secured her cello in the back seat, and fetched the newspaper from the box. The edges were damp. An old promo picture of the Maestro, his face creased with joy, stared at her from below the fold on the front page, and she recalled the first time he'd kneaded the tension from her shoulders, and how he'd said, "My daughter, Elena, was named after her mother, who was Italian, but was raised in Spain. She pronounced it Eee LayNee Ah. My Elena pronounces it as you do. She and her husband own a factory that makes, of all things, pasta. It's all right, but great pasta, like great music, it must be made by hand." Closing her eyes she could hear the soft rub of his starched white shirts, and feel his fingers on her neck. She'd marveled at how unmusical his fingers looked when she'd first held them in hers, and recalled how womanly soft his lips felt on hers the first time she kissed him, unlike the hard boy lips she had kissed before.

Elena sat in the car, the windshield fogged, the engine warming, reading the article on the Maestro, feeling betrayed to discover things she did not know—that he had a daughter by a German woman who had been his pupil in England,

and a son by a violinist from Madrid, both expected at the funeral. He had been rich—his father a wealthy industrialist—and the article mentioned him as a partner in his daughter's business, which made Elena laugh. If he was well off, she wondered, why had he lived in such a small house, and why had he continued to take her folded twenty-dollar bill the first few months after she'd become his lover?

She read the last paragraph twice.

Born in 1918 at the close of the first war, Silvestri was the only child of Silvio Silvestri, a wealthy industrialist whose factories were briefly seized by the Fascists in 1942, and Oriana Taglianetti Silvestri, a painter and patron of the arts. Silvestri was schooled first on the violin and then the cello, the instrument with which he was associated during his career, by tutors at the family homes in Porto Garibaldi on the northern Adriatic, and in Venice where his father had several factories. Later he excelled at the Conservatory in Rome.

Elena had not realized he was so young. 1918 was famous in Maine; the last time the Red Sox had won the World Series, something her father spoke of often, making it seem like a long time ago. When she'd begun studying with him, the Maestro was fifty-four, though she'd assumed he was at least sixty.

As she pulled out of the driveway, Elena remembered her first time in his bedroom under the eaves, where the Maestro had made love to her with an assured tenderness, slaying her with his lack of modesty about his soft paunch, shiny shins, and blue boxer shorts with golden trumpets. His wild white hair, pouring off the side of his head like frothy surf, tickled her face, and his craggy cheeks glowed as he drew her to the bed's edge and removed her shoes. She was cut to her soul when he knelt beside her, removed her panties, took her legs, one at a time, and kissed the length of them, the rest of her clothes falling away as if willed from her limbs, his fingers never fumbling with a button or clasp.

When he had pulled a blanket over her nakedness, and turned out the bright lamp, he admired her face in the soft afternoon light of the gable window, tracing it with the calloused tip of his index finger. The phonograph played quietly, Brahms. When he fused his body to hers she gasped, his touch and size stunning her. When she could at last close her eyes and reel him to her, yield to his tender insistence, she arched to meet him, stirring something musical, unknown, and terrifying in her marrow. He loved her long after the record had reached the end and the needle scratched against the label.

Even when making love she called him Maestro.

When the Maestro was not playing, or loving, he was clumsy, his shirts often stained with brown splashes of milky coffee, or drops of blood-red marinara sauce, but as teacher or lover, he was tender and cajoling. Remembering his patience in those things, Elena believed that he had loved her, in part, because she had given to him things she had given no other man, things no other man had asked her for, yielding all the openings of her body to him, and she remembered that the more she'd loved him the better she'd played. And when she'd said that to him he'd answered, "I told you, when you can love, you can play."

Elena set her cello case on the church steps and stared with grievous envy as the mourners arrived, the mayor, the police chief, the governor and his wife, each pausing to speak to the Maestro's children before being hustled to the front pews. When she could watch no longer, she stole in the side door and trudged upstairs

to the choir room next to the organ loft.

The loft was cool; the rest of the quartet already setting up. As Elena entered, Melissa and Karen, the violinists, were each rubbing their hands together and hunching their shoulders. "Hey, Elena," Karen said, "Melissa and I are playing with the Portholes tonight at Bromley's. Come see us."

"I don't know if I can," she said, opening her case a crack to allow the cello to warm to the room.

"Starts at nine," Melissa said, "And it's two-dollar pitcher night. Be a lift after this, huh?"

"I don't feel up to it," Elena said, draping her raincoat on a spare chair

Ari, the violist, said, "We need to stop doing funerals, Elena; it's the only time other than rehearsals when we see you. Christ, let's book a few weddings and bar mitzvahs, make a little bread and have some fun."

"I miss him, Ari," she said

"I know," he said.

Elena settled the cello and began to tune. She wondered what the Maestro's European children could know of him? What they read or were told? Perhaps something discerned back stage in a great hall while vying with sycophants for their father's attention? Could they understand his fluency with his instrument, or imagine his deft touch on a woman's nipple?

Elena was the lone pupil the Maestro had kept after a minor stroke. Though only his right arm, the one with the legendary touch on the bow, retained its youthful strength, he still touched her, and made love to her to the music of Brahms. When the choir sang "How Lovely Is Thy Dwelling Place," from his *German Requiem*, she cried, not for the music, but for the way the Maestro had pronounced those words in his Italian accented German, "Wie Lieblich Sind Deine Wohnungen," rolling the syllables out in a long silky phrase, as if they were words to describe delicious food or searing passion, or the view from the little house that peeked out over the sea with the lumpy bed up under the eaves, or the serenity of the practice space under the gable with its soft light, and the record player that did not automatically reject the needle, instead playing on with a rhythmic scratch like the squeak of the headboard against the wall.

It had at first seemed odd to her that he, an ardent anti-Fascist, had loved a German composer's work, and scrupulously avoided playing the music of the great Italians. When she asked him why, as they spooned in bed in the inchoate darkness of a winter afternoon, he said, "Italians create opera. There we have no equals. The cello drowns in opera." She had never questioned that, and when he would expound upon theory, as irascibly opposite in his beliefs from her teachers at Juilliard as he could be, she did not argue then either, though he seemed to invite her to do so. Sometimes she believed he was trying drive her away, saying, "When you are finished with school what shall you do?" And when she said she did not know, he answered, "Then what are we doing wasting my time and your money?"

Still, she would not reply, only play harder, though when he had wounded her that way she did not play well.

Elena watched as Ari adjusted his chin rest and tuned. She knew that he believed she was gay, because of all the times she'd turned down his invitations

to get a drink after rehearsals, and because a few weeks after the quartet's first paying job, when he'd asked her to a concert the Maestro was giving in Boston, she'd declined. When he stopped asking, she'd longed to explain to him her searing love for a portly man with a wild white mane and musical hands, without having to say that she did could not accept his offer because she recoiled at imagining his veiny, boy fingers on her skin, or his rheumy whisper in her ear.

The day after turning Ari down, Elena had begged the Maestro to take her to the concert himself. "If you wish," he'd said, "But as teacher and protégé. You must not be perceived as my muse." She'd been hurt, but understood his insistence on separate rooms, when, at the post concert reception, she offered her hand to a woman the Maestro had neglected to introduce her to saying, "Elena Reed. I study with Maestro Silvestri," and was riven with shame when the woman, staring at the Maestro said, "Yes, I'm sure you do. You're Massimo's type." Elena flinched, poised to excuse herself, but the Maestro grasped her hand and said, "I stole Miss Reed from Julliard. Perhaps, Madame, if you're fortunate enough to live a few more years you'll hear her play here." The woman's face withered, and it was then that Elena realized he felt more affection for her than charity.

When their piece was over, the rest of quartet slipped out of the church. Elena leaned on the loft's rail aching to be seated near his coffin with the dignitaries, and watching the Maestro's older children, mute in the front pew, who did not speak English, listen as those who did not know the Maestro praised him: the governor for the honors he'd won, an Italian conductor for his prodigious skills. But Elena knew what the Maestro wanted said; what he'd told her in one of the rare moments he'd spoken of himself. "When I die, Elena, I want the world to know that I hated Fascism, preferred the company of women to men, and didn't give a fiddler's fart for critics." She longed to shriek those words from the balcony, to shout that his touch was a gift given only to gods, that his body tasted like honey and hard candy, smelled like lilac and burnished wood, but was soft and moist and warm.

The only one of his students invited to the event, Elena tossed a rose wrapped in bow hair and long white strands from his hairbrush into the oozing grave, then drizzled damp dirt over the gleaming coffin like brown sugar on oatmeal. She lingered before the fresh wound in the earth long enough to hear people whispering, the mud on her pale fingers reminding her of coffee stains on the Maestro's white shirts, relieved that her parents were not there for she was sure her father would have understood in her grief that she had been the Maestro's mistress.

It was Elena who'd found him in his chair, the phonograph turning, the record, a Beethoven sonata, over. Later, she felt a scorching pang. Had he played Brahms only for her? No, she thought, he must have played Brahms for other lovers, as there had been so many. But what, she wondered, would she do now, languish like one of Rodin's forgotten lovers? She did know, observing the mourners abandon the cemetery, that she would suffer a long time and she did not know if she could play again. Peering into the departing black throng, she grieved that no one was looking back at her.

After the event, she drove to his house. The hedges had not been trimmed; newspapers lay ruined at the end of the muddy driveway. After the stroke, when

the Maestro had completed his stay in the rehabilitation hospital, he'd insisted on coming home, and his daughter had given Elena a key. "He won't live with me, or hire a housekeeper," she said, "Says he'll die without at least one student. At least this way he won't have to use the stairs to answer the door."

Elena came every day after work, and insisted that they keep her scheduled Thursday lesson. When he was strong, they lay on the bed all the evening, saying little, Elena rising to turn the records over, to locate one he wanted to hear among the casually organized jackets on the shelf, or to play for him. Often, he'd ask her when she would find a young man. She'd answer, "Never."

"That would be a great sadness," he'd say. "You could have both a virile young man and a wise old man."

"You don't have a young girl and an old woman," she would say.

"I'm too old for an old woman," he'd say, "But would that be bad?"

She'd answer, "I wouldn't like it."

Mounting the stairs, Elena noticed his bedroom door ajar. She spied his unmade bed, the view of the bay, and wept. The water reflected the emerging sun. A breeze stirred. She pulled a fresh white shirt from the drawer, held it to her face, searching out his smell.

In the practice room, Elena placed Brahms on the phonograph, and dusted his cello case with the muddied hem of her black dress, aching to recall each kind thing he'd said to her, and longing to press her face into the softness of his belly to feel his laughter. She strained to hear his voice say, "Legato. Yes. Hear the spaces between the notes, that is where the music is." Most of all, she yearned to feel his fingers on her face, as he whispered her name.

Driving home, Elena tried to recall her life before the Maestro: a time when she could crawl into her father's arms and he would promise to make everything all right, a time when Alex Stone had two legs, when her initials and those of Danny Lott were still visible in the silver bark of the beech tree, the time before she had shut herself off from the world by trading it for a place under the eaves, the time before she had become invisible in her grief, the time before she could not imagine her future to be better than her past.

A lawyer invited Elena to a reading of the Maestro's will as an interested party. That he left her his cello surprised no one, but that he'd left her the house, most of its contents, and some money, stunned the room. He said in the will that he loved her more than any woman he had known, and that he hoped she would play music in his house by the sea for many years, but it would not dishonor him if she wished to sell it.

He left everything else, including his interest in the factory, to his daughter Elena. The other children were forgotten. Leaving the lawyer's office, the son whispered, "Put a," into Elena's ear. She learned that it meant whore, and wondered if he'd have called her that if she'd worn widow's weeds or carried the Maestro's seed in her womb.

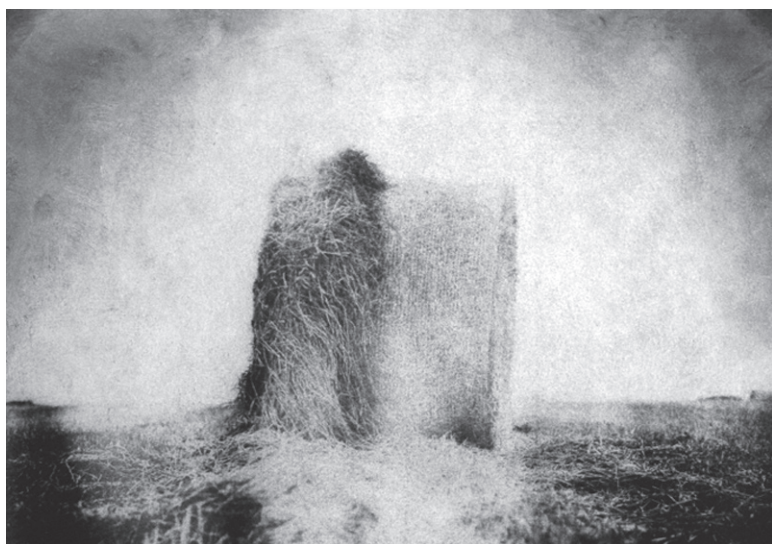
Elena moved in on a Thursday. She lifted the last box, of the last load, from the tailgate of her car as the day dimmed, the low rays of the sun wrinkling the waters of the bay. A sea breeze cooled the land. She served pizza on paper plates and beer in plastic cups to those who'd helped her move, saddened, as she scanned the kitchen in the afternoon light, to realize that the members of the

quartet and her parents were the only living friends she had.

When the darkness settled and Elena was alone, the breeze faded to cool delicate puffs, she took out his cello. Sitting in the student's chair, she hiked up the long dress she'd changed into to accommodate the instrument and drew it to her. His cello was larger than hers, with deeper bouts. She recalled how the Maestro had insisted that the cello was the most feminine of the strings, saying that "It has the greatest range and can suffer the most without dying." To Elena, his cello had been masculine, big-shouldered, but he swore it was, "A wide-hipped woman." She pressed her hands into the wood, kneading its perfect symmetry as if she were rubbing balm into his back. His bow felt as warm in her hand as if it had been held by an excited child. She tuned the strings. Old, they did not intonate well, but she could feel his moist fingertips in them. She played, gripping the body of the vibrating instrument with her naked knees, and closed her eyes. As the notes soared and suffered, she felt his fleshy hands embrace her, and the music loved her like no other man.



Joshua Meier
Hidden



Joshua Meier
Unwinding

Joshua Caleb Ellard recieved a liberal arts degree from Rogers State University. He is an avid sailor and a musician and plans to pursue happiness. "At 10" is his first published poem.

At 10

Joshua Caleb Ellard

A great slab of sandstone is shoved over
the lake, near the final destination
of a stream that flows so slow it never
has water during summer vacations.

He brings an old milk jug full of water,
a tackle box, worms, two poles and a gun
in case an old loggerhead decides our
worms are intended for his ingestion.

White light pours from the sun of summer's end.
My face screws, the undulating light play
off water stirred by the hot breath of wind
hurts my eyes. I find a spot in the shade,
cast a line, spend a little time with him,
and learn life can be good at every age.

Mark Brazaitis is the author of *The River of Lost Voices: Stories from Guatemala*, winner of the 1998 Iowa Short Fiction Award, and two other books of fiction. His poetry has appeared in *The Sun*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Poetry East*, *Poetry International*, and elsewhere.

Birthday

Mark Brazaitis

When my father turned forty, he declared,
“That’s it, no more birthday parties for me.”
He didn’t want presents, either.
“To have no more birthdays,” he said,
“would be the greatest birthday gift of all—
if I could somehow accomplish this
without dying.”

For his sixty-fourth, my sister and I
planned to sing him the Beatles’ song.
But deciding whimsical lyrics about hair loss
wouldn’t amuse a man whose head was bone-bare
because of whole brain radiation,
we murmured the usual tune.
Four syllables into it, he joined us,
the strength of his voice
surprising us into silence.

Today, had his cancer retreated
or never come to conquer,
he would have been sixty-five.
He would have gone to a movie
or to his favorite golf course
or done nothing at all,
a birthday more inconspicuous than today’s,
when his absence summons his presence
and his silence is everything I hear.

Thaddeus Rutkowski is the author of the novels *Tetched* and *Roughhouse*. Both books were finalists for an Asian American Literary Award. He teaches fiction writing at the Writer's Voice of the West Side YMCA in New York and lives with his wife and daughter in Manhattan.

Off the Pace

Thaddeus Rutkowski

To celebrate my adolescence, my father gave me a gun. It was a .410 model, a shotgun for beginners.

I hefted the weapon; it felt light in my arms. I practiced using the safety catch. I worked the tab back and forth with my thumb and felt the metal parts rub against each other.

“You can pull the trigger,” my father said. “The gun’s not loaded.”

I aimed the barrel at a window, pushed the safety forward, and pulled the trigger.

I half-expected to see the window explode, but instead I heard the firing pin snap forward in the empty chamber.

In shop class, my classmates and I got an assignment to make a rifle from a piece of plywood.

Along with the rest of the boys, I sketched the outline of a gun on tracing paper, then transferred the drawing to the surface of a long, narrow board. I used a band saw to cut the shape from the wood. The saw was easy to use; it practically sucked the board into the blade.

My completed object looked like a silhouette of an M-16. I put it over my shoulder and marched around the shop. I circled the spot welder, the lathe, the hole-puncher, and the acetylene torch. The weapon was light as a feather.

In gym class, all of the boys had to run 400 yards—a quarter-mile—while carrying the guns we’d made in wood shop. Wearing white T-shirts and red shorts, about twenty of us walked to the mown field outside the school building.

At a signal from our coach, we started loping. We followed a dirt track around the border of the field. As we ran, we sang: “Hey, Bo Diddley Bob! I wish I were back on the block. With my rifle in my hand, I’m going to be a military man.”

At first, I jogged with the pack. But before I reached the first bend, I started to fall behind. I heard the coach yelling, “Run, Mouse! How are you going to be a Marine if you don’t run?”

The pack pulled farther away. The only runner with me was an overweight boy. He and I fought for position. Gradually, I gained ground. I finished before the fat boy but after everyone else.

I stood at the finish line with my hands on my knees, hyperventilating. Inside the school, students looked at us through the picture windows.

Before dawn, while my mother and brother and sister were asleep, I put on thermal underwear, denim jeans, a thick shirt, a plaid-wool coat, fleece-lined boots and a blaze-orange hat.

Once I was dressed, I had trouble moving. The layers slowed me down. I hobbled to my father's car and got in.

In the woods, my father gave me a handful of live .410 shells. The shells weren't short and fat, like those for other shotguns; they were long and narrow. I didn't think they looked powerful enough to make much of a bang, let alone kill any game. I loaded the shells into the ammunition clip and pressed the clip home.

My father and I walked for a long time without seeing any game. After a couple of hours, I hadn't fired my gun.

"Shoot at a tree," my father suggested. "You don't have to aim; just cover the target with the barrel."

Casually, I brought my .410 up to my shoulder and pulled the trigger. The blast was so loud it shocked me. I walked to the small tree and saw that the pellets had cut the trunk in two. I didn't want to fire the gun again.

I switched from stalking game to collecting spent shotgun shells. I looked for plastic casings as I hiked over leaves. The shells were either high brass, for long shots, or low brass, for close-range blasting. They came in 12-gauge, 16-gauge and 20-gauge widths. I didn't find any .410 shells.

When I came to a flat area, I noticed that the ground was cracked. Loose stones lay on the top of the soil. I looked for flat specimens, then picked them up and examined their surfaces. Most were blank, but a couple of them held fossils. Scallop shapes were embossed in the lime. I remembered we were about 250 miles from an ocean.

At home, I put the shotgun shells and the fossils I'd found in a drawer. I thought that, sometime, I would arrange each of the sets in a display box.

The next time I went to gym class, I had to run the 800—the half-mile. My classmates and I started at the schoolyard and ran down a narrow paved road. As we jogged, we sang, "My grandma is ninety-two. She can dance and sing songs, too."

Our coach us followed on a bicycle. Now and then, he called to me, "Come on, Mouse! Run! How are you going to be an Army Ranger if you can't run?"

Shortly, the pack pulled ahead of me, and I had the road to myself. I ran between lush trees that grew beside the shoulder. When I arrived at the end of the course, I found my classmates waiting for me.

"Are you a sissy mouse?" the coach asked me, "or a speedy mouse?"

I put on my hunting outfit and went into the woods with my father. At one point, while I was walking by myself, I saw a gray squirrel tearing through the leaves. Its tail was whirling. I didn't shoot at it—I ran after it with my gun at my side. Suddenly, I heard a shot and saw the squirrel fly up. My father had made the kill.

We carried the squirrel in a plastic bag until we came to small stream. Using a single-edged razor blade, my father gutted the animal. I watched as he turned the corpse on its back and pointed to the testicles with the blade. "It's a buck squirrel—

rel," he said.

At home, he skinned and butchered the squirrel. He cut the carcass into pieces: two sections from the back, two hind legs, two smaller front legs, two small rib parts. He put the meat into a bowl filled with a mixture of vinegar and water.

My mother stood nearby but didn't touch the bowl. "How long does it have to soak?" she asked.

"Overnight," my father said.

"We didn't have squirrels where I grew up," my mother said. "We had pandas. Li Po wrote poetry about them. You couldn't hunt them. We spent our free time memorizing lessons, not running around."

The next day, my mother cooked the squirrel parts in a covered pan. There wasn't enough meat to go around, so my brother and sister and I received the treat. As we ate, we sometimes bit down on shot pellets. We removed them with our fingers and kept chewing.

My father and I told the story of our success. "It was big squirrel," I said, "it was fast."

"The hunter here wouldn't let the animal out of his sight," my father said. "He chased it down."

"I ran as fast as the squirrel," I said.

Shashi Bhat is completing her MFA in fiction at Johns Hopkins University. Her work has appeared in *The Missouri Review*, *Event*, and *Bayou Magazine*, and was been nominated for the 2007 Pushcart Prize.

Self-Surgery

Shashi Bhat

My boyfriend Patrick has webbed toes. This is the main reason I'm going to break up with him. We're lying on my bed in the dark, and he is telling me something about genetics, about mingling genes and other things I don't care about. He is talking about our future children, which at this point, only I know we're not having, and I imagine our physical characteristics spilling down the generations, hiding and emerging with brilliant predictability.

"Do you think they'll have your feet?" I ask him. He pretends to squash me against the wall. I pretend to be squashed. Then he tells me we should sleep because he has to wake up for lecture in the morning. He keeps his eyes open, blue and offended and open, both figuratively and literally, horribly, open, because now he will wait for me to fall asleep. He always waits for me to fall asleep first. I told my friend Matilda about the waiting, about how he doesn't even begin to drift until I've been passed out for half an hour, and she said, "I can't imagine anything more caring than that." And then I wanted to go back and tell her a different way, so she'd understand what it's like, the pressure to fall asleep.

I have insomnia because of some medication I'm on. The funny thing is, I fall asleep fine when he stays late at the genetics lab and I go to sleep before he comes over, although sometimes I wake up when he gets into the bed because he smells like chemicals, ether and ammonia and pink lab soap. I've tried a bunch of sleep remedies. I sneak pills in the bathroom and imagine him catching me like in that scene in *Pretty Woman* where Richard Gere thinks Julia Roberts is doing coke but she's really just flossing her teeth, but I guess it wouldn't matter since I'm only taking Tylenol PM and valerian root anyway. My new falling asleep technique is to make mental lists, for example, of things I have to do, or orgo reactions I have to memorize for class, or of problems in our relationship. Tonight I am internally reviewing every moment I've had with Patrick that somehow involved feet.

Before I saw them, I thought webbed feet would be like duck feet, flat and triangular, perhaps orange. I saw his toes at his house when I stayed over the first time. He lives with seven other guys, and they do things I'd always imagined boys would do, like keep *Playboys* on their coffee table, using the glossy breasts of women as coasters.

They had just thrown a party, and everybody had finally left. From the front porch to his room, we passed two of the skinny-armed housemates arm-wrestling

in their living room, and we stepped over another one passed out in the kitchen, lying like a starfish in the beer-soaked floor. Until Patrick started leading me to his room, I hadn't really been sure whether we were dating or not. We'd gone to one silent auction, during which we didn't speak, and one late-night road trip to Binghamton, during which we spoke about our mutual involvement in community service activities. I didn't know what that meant, so before the party, Matilda and I googled tips on how to figure out if a boy likes you by shrewdly yet subtly observing his body language. The only one I could remember said that when standing in a group of people, a boy will always face his torso towards his principal romantic interest. So even if he's talking to the infinitely more attractive girl standing next to you while you just stand there trying to seem thinner and taller and like you've read Proust, if you can draw an invisible line from your navel to his without dodging any awkward bodily corners, it means he's in love with you. I spent the whole party drawing these invisible lines. They formed trapezoids across the room. Now his torso is facing me, I would discern, but then he would turn slightly and suddenly he'd be facing some other girl, or a guy, or the refrigerator.

But finally there was nobody left and we retreated into Patrick's room, and he started pulling his shoes and socks off.

"Just to warn you," he smiled strangely, "a couple of my toes on each foot are joined together."

I stared at him.

He continued, "It's called syndactyly and occurs in 1 in 2,000 births. So I'm a pretty rare specimen."

I still didn't really know what he meant, so I took a moment to examine his feet. They were pink, and joined by a thin piece of skin. I imagined slicing them apart with a scalpel.

"Do they do surgery for those?" I asked.

"You mean to separate them?"

"Yeah, like do they just cut the skin there?" I pointed.

"I guess when you're born sometimes. I like them though; I'm a good swimmer," he said.

We both laughed, but I thought, what a mutant.

Patrick can't wear flip-flops, which really bothers him. Sometimes I worry I might be a horrible person, because I wear flip-flops all the time in front of him, not just in the summers, but around my dorm room and in the shower or if I'm running quickly to the dining hall, and I even left an extra pair at his house for when I'm over there. He keeps his bedroom such a mess that I had to place them in a rather prominent location, for fear they would disappear in the daily churning of his stuff. His stuff rolls around the room and surfaces unexpectedly, pencil drawings of lab equipment turn up like treasure maps, and multicolored free t-shirts from all his volunteer activities appear like cereal marshmallows. I kept my flip-flops right under his poster of Rachael Ray. The next time I went to his room, I couldn't find them.

"Where are my flip-flops?" I asked.

He pointed to under his desk next to the printer, and silently reproached me with his blue eyes, which he has told me before our children won't have, because

they are a recessive gene and my dominant brown-eyed genes will blot them out.

I wear flip-flops not to annoy him, but because my feet are beautiful. I exfoliate them in the bathtub. Sometimes while working at my computer, I will take a break and arch a foot against the leg of my desk and admire my skin against the plywood. Or I'll put them right on top of the desk and get out my camera and take pictures. In high school I was yearbook editor, so I am very good with Photoshop, and I upload the photos to my computer and adjust the levels and variations until my feet are as pink and white as Judy Garland in a Technicolor movie.

When I'm angry with Patrick, I open up pictures of us together in Photoshop and then replace him with an attractive celebrity. One time I replaced him with Ashton Kutcher, because I'd read somewhere that Ashton Kutcher also has webbed feet, and then I set it as my Facebook profile picture and everybody thought it was real. My friends wrote jealously on my wall, "Did you meet Ashton Kutcher? I am sooo jealous," they said, and I did not respond. They didn't notice that our bodies were in the wrong proportions to each other. And they didn't notice Patrick's hand in the photo, in the wrong skin shade, growing over my shoulder, plump and dry like gingerroot.

My parents met him only once, but afterwards, my dad told me privately that Patrick was too handsome for me. He said this very seriously, and with concern.

I went home and altered Patrick's photo with the Photoshop liquefy tool. I flattened his head and stretched out his eyebrows and turned his eyes into weird spirals. I used the clone stamp tool to multiply his eyes and then placed them in a semi-circle across his forehead like bizarre acne. I pulled his grin outwards literally from ear to ear. After a while, I forgot my boyfriend even existed under this drawing I'd made, lost in the pudding of features. I set the photo as my desktop wallpaper, tiling it over my screen. Later I woke up in the middle of the night and went to check my email. I didn't bother turning the light on, so I was sitting there, alone in the black room, and my eyes hadn't adjusted so I could only see my body lit up by the swirl of the screensaver. I tapped on the mouse and the screen cleared, but I'd forgotten about the picture and I found myself startled and horrified by Patrick's mutilated face.

Patrick seems to like it when I'm scared. The only reason I'm even thinking about feet is that tonight, before trying to go to sleep, we made s'mores in his microwave and then we turned off all the lights and he told me a story. It turned out to be an urban legend I'd heard a million times, about a small town dance. He began, "So, okay, there's this town, right? And it's small and everybody knows each other. They have this town dance because, um, I guess cause there's not much to do there and they're bored."

He wasn't doing the story justice. I had always imagined the town in an old-fashioned way, which I think makes stories creepier. I imagined everyone arriving at the dance in their archaic outfits, pale yellow dresses and coarse brown suit jackets, and eyeing one another across the floor. They sipped punch, too pink and too sweet, from half-sphere glasses. The young people started dancing, and then the older types joined in, passing their weight like a burden from shoe to shoe. Three musicians stood silhouetted against a large window, and played their music wordlessly, soft rather than loud.

Patrick said, "So then this guy walks in, wearing all black clothes and all the girls are looking at him and thinking about how handsome he is, kind of like when your dad looks at me."

I fake laughed and then threw a marshmallow at Patrick, hitting him in the forehead. He retrieved it and ate it, and continued telling the story while chewing, holding a flashlight to his face so I could see the white lump, turned yellow in the light, moving in his mouth.

As I pictured it, the stranger in the story wore clothes black and shiny as nothing else that existed in that time, like computer parts, or the darkest Photo-shop pixel. Walking through the crowd of townspeople, he seemed taller than anyone else there. He had an angular face, with lines instead of features, like it had been carved with a knife into a tree.

A girl attended the dance, maybe sixteen years old. She'd never before been allowed to attend. Every other year, she'd stayed with a bunch of other children at her grandmother's, sleeping early and dreaming storybook things, like that she was dancing with some boy from another town, who didn't know her but wanted to know her, who put his hand to her waist lightly, bending with her. At the dance, she stood near the punch with a friend. The stranger watched the girl's goldfish-colored hair and the way her back curved to form a semi-circle when she reached to refill her glass. In real life, I think it's hard to determine the prettiest girl, because girls are pretty in different ways, but in stories, there is always one undeniably beautiful girl that the stranger will choose. And he chose her. He strode towards her, growing taller like a shadow on a wall.

"This girl," continued Patrick, "was extremely gorgeous but not as gorgeous as you."

The stranger and the girl danced for hours. They danced in the center of the room, under the prisms of a threatening chandelier. They clacked a reverberating rhythm solid on to the ground, and whirled and twisted as if their bodies contained no bones. The wooden floor planks grew damp with their sweat. The girl thought about the boy she had dreamed of from another town, thinking perhaps that this was he, even though the boy in her dreams had been softer, his face round with youth, and he had held her gently, whereas the stranger flipped her from side to side so her skirt spun wildly, and while, in the middle moments between sleep and waking, she had remembered laughing together with the character she'd seen in dreams, the man in front of her refused to laugh and only grinned with teeth too white and lips too red, as though he'd been eating some dark, staining candy. His eyes weren't any one color but instead every color at once.

It took hours before the girl realized her legs were aching, from dancing without stopping through every song. She pulled her glance away from the stranger's face, meaning to stop for a break, to reach down to her slim calves and rub out the muscles that were now burning through her skin. She looked down, and startled, she jerked herself away from him and began screaming, her voice shrill and dry.

The townspeople looked towards the commotion, and saw the stranger, and the screaming girl. They looked at him and saw that he didn't have on boots or dancing shoes, or anything that resembled feet at all. Instead, what they saw at

the bottom of his shiny black pant legs were the devil's cloven hooves.

Patrick finished telling the story, grabbing my shoulders at the last line. "Would you dance with the devil?" he asked me, grinning, and I think he meant it as some kind of segue into us having sex, so I ignored it.

Now, lying here in my bed, with Patrick's arm sitting oppressively over my stomach like some heavy rollercoaster restraint, I am thinking about how I had closed my eyes and waited for the inevitable ending of his story, and I feel this odd irrational fear. It occurs to me that I don't really know what is at the bottom of the bed we're sharing, at the bottom of Patrick's legs, feet or hooves. In the minimum half hour since we got in here, his toes might have merged and hardened and blackened. I regret the fact that the bed has blankets, imagine myself trying to escape and becoming tangled in sheets, toppling on to the carpet, making it that much easier for him to pick me up and carry me away to hell.

"Why aren't you sleeping yet?" he asks me, cutting my body in two with his arm.

"Hahaha," I laugh nervously.

I gather up my nerve and reach for his feet with my feet under the blanket. I test them, to make sure they're still soft flesh. They are, but I can feel the shape of his toes, still joined like Pangea pre-continental drift. This is one of the last times I will feel his feet. I wonder if I should feel wistful about this. In the morning, we'll be facing each other, stomachs in line with stomachs, and I'll tell him that I don't really love him at all. I'll say it in a nicer way. A year from now, after the breakup, maybe on homecoming weekend, I might run into him, maybe in the campus bookstore. I'll be looking through yearbooks and he will be buying coffee. I'll say hi and he'll nod and we'll ask how it's going. At that point, I might only remember some of him, like how he said he loved celebrity chef Rachael Ray more than he loved me because she was on television and ate bacon, and how his torso faced me more often than not, how if he knew I was on my period, he would rub my stomach, his hand like a hot water bottle, the only thing that helped the pain, and how the first time I saw his bedroom, he'd had such an acquiring of clutter on his bed that I'd asked how he possibly slept there and he said he just curled up amongst the junk.

Of course, he'll be wearing a shirt I don't recognize, not even one of his usual volunteering shirts, but maybe a sweater. He will casually mention his new girlfriend. I'll think about the girl and wonder what color eyes she has, and whether he is too handsome for her too. I'll want to know if she's seen the feet yet, and if she knows anything about meiosis, if they giggle together over Punnett squares and trihybrid crosses and swear that in the future, when they have the option of predetermining their baby's physical characteristics, they will decide against it and leave it up to nature. She will forgive him the flaws in his gene pool because she has none in her own.

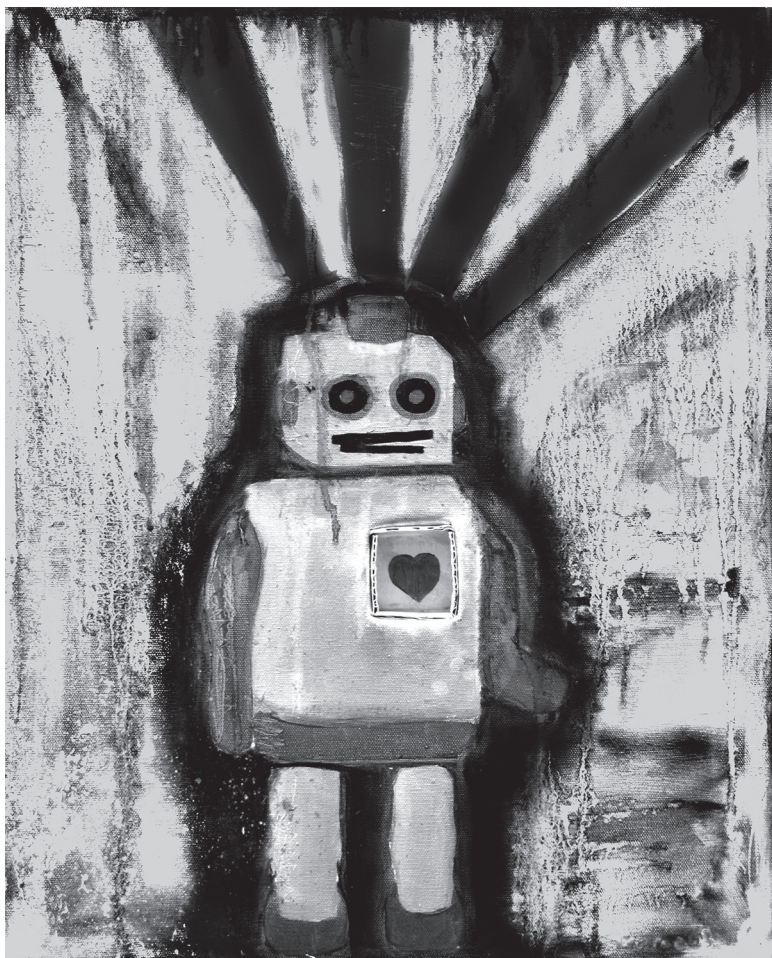
After small talk, Patrick will say a friendly but perfunctory goodbye and turn to leave. I'll watch his heels and know what nobody else in the bookstore knows, what's inside the shoes. And he'll know about me too, despite the foreignness of my outside appearance, of my new clothes and different perfume, he'll know what's underneath.

I can't sleep because I am thinking about the beautiful maybe-geneticist girlfriend, so I give up on sleeping and crawl to the foot of the bed and take one of his feet in my hands, and kiss his toes, one-by-one in their waiting line, like in *The Sound of Music* where all the kids have to kiss the Baroness after the sad game of catch. I look up at him when he sighs, and watch him close his eyes, wondering if this time, he'll fall asleep. I run my hands across his legs and around the bulb of his anklebone, and I keep kissing his toes in the dark, thinking of the only possible way I can think of to save the relationship, which is for me to get up and go to the kitchen and get a knife, and slice apart those stupid toes. I don't think it would hurt that much. If only Patrick wasn't awake. Or I could drug him and then leisurely liberate his digits. I consider this but then realize that the only medication I have in my apartment is prednisone, the corticosteroid I'm taking for an inflammatory eye disease I have, the drug that causes my insomnia, so it wouldn't knock him out; it would only suppress his adrenal system and maybe cause water retention in his face. I have to have my Tylenol PM and I wonder if that will work and how I will craftily dissolve it in a glass of water and somehow get him to drink it.

In eighth grade my friend Matilda performed self-surgery because she didn't like her outtie belly-button. I watched her do it. I sat on her bed reading *Seventeen Magazine* while she ran to find the sharpest scissors in the house. She stood in front of the full length mirror in her bra and pajama pants and judged her skin with her hands.

"Will you sterilize the scissors?" she asked.

I got up from the bed and dipped the open blades in alcohol, then wiped them off and handed them to her. I didn't tell her I thought it was a bad idea. I can't really remember whether I thought that or not. Mostly I admired her for her strength, for her ability to fix things, for her lack of hesitation in cutting and detaching, and then I admired her more for not fainting when the blades went through her skin. It sounded like she was cutting through craft foam, which we had been working with in art class earlier that day. She bled over the carpet and I had the uncomfortable task of finding her mother. "Mrs. Forster?" I called tentatively through the house, moving down staircases, searching all the rooms, trying not to hope she wasn't home.



Tobie Munroe
Mrs. Robo

Mark Smith is an instructor of English at Frostburg State University. His haiku, haiga, and haibun have appeared in *Modern Haiku*, *Simply Haiku*, and *Contemporary Haibun*. His poems have appeared in *Liberty Hill Poetry Review*, *Confluence*, and are forthcoming in *Poetry East* and *Kestrel*. He resides in Keyser, WV.

Final Lean

Mark Smith

Led here to lay down wedded
wreckage of the year,
I approach the old barn slowly
giving way
to earth and weather.

It's flaked gray, a hardened
wound I'm unable
to penetrate.

But if I were to step
inside, lose myself among

fallen beams, the caved in
colossus of its loft
would it be easier to bow my head
in cobwebs,
near rusty nails,

listen to splintered surrender?

An afternoon of
the sere, the lonely, and my house too
in its final lean, wife
not wanting me to enter.

T. Allen Culpepper splits his time between southwest Florida, where he works as an associate professor of English at Manatee Community College, and northeastern Oklahoma, which he and his partner call home. His poems have been published in *Florida English*, *The Church-Wellesley Review*, and *Children, Churches & Daddies*.

Lightning Bugs

T. Allen Culpepper

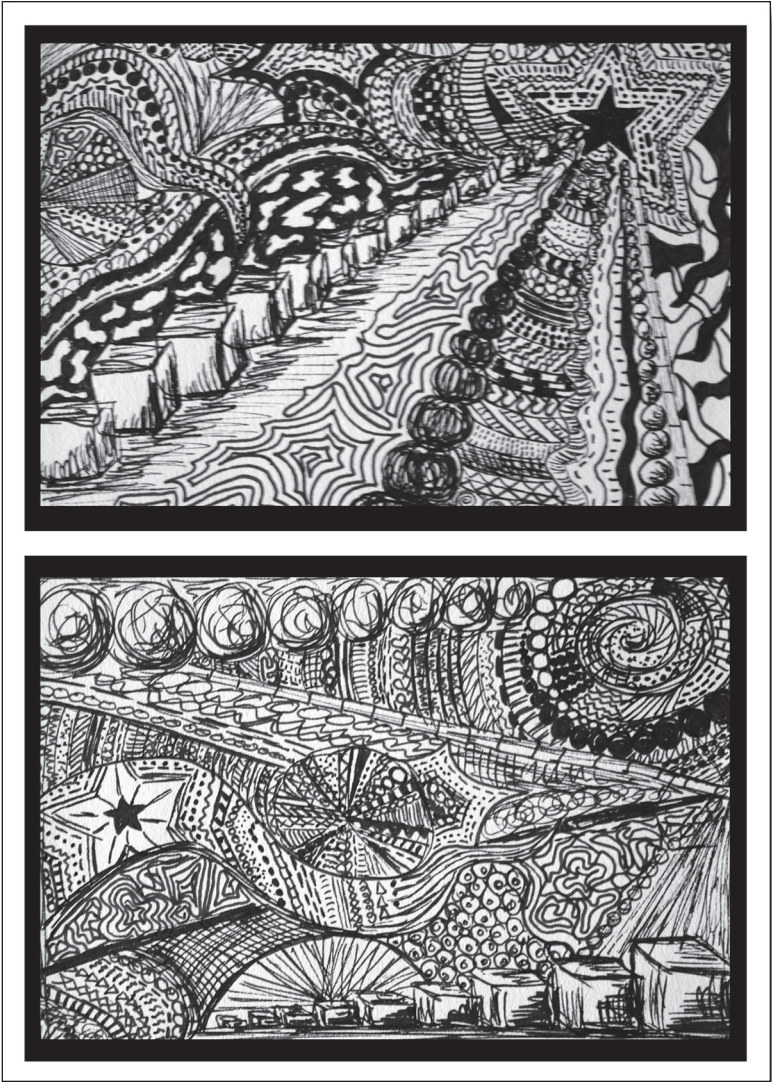
He remembers seeing them--
fireflies in an open field,
like blips on the silver screen,
always somewhere else so you
can't guess their speed and spot
at the same time.

(Visiting friends from Washington State
confidently claim they've never seen
these flighty mythic beasts their
southerly kin for them describe
as "bugs with lanterns
in their butts.")

As a kid in the sixties,
after too many Tarzan flicks
(eyes fixed even then on shirtless men),
his pulse skipped sharply when
he glimpsed the natives' torches glow
in the woods adjacent to his yard:
lightning bugs flirting through
the Southern gothic night.

Now, years later, walking the dog,
rocks rattling in his bourbon glass,
he sees them again, the fireflies,
and from this latter-day perspective,
perceives instead moments of inspiration
flickering hot before they die.

Sticky, stifling when the breeze lies still,
it's the kind of night to sit with
an old friend on the back porch,
talking into the wee hours,
listening to Michael Stipe
singing "Everybody Hurts Sometimes,"
shooting down enough Wild Turkeys
to regret everything
when it gets good daylight.



Megan Edmonds
untitled

Rebecca Clutter, originally from the front range of Colorado, obtained her Bachelor of Arts in Liberal Arts from Rogers State University and has begun graduate work towards a Master of Arts in English at Pittsburg State University. She presently resides in south-east Kansas with her husband and two children.

Stupid Dishrag

Rebecca Clutter

Returning to your childhood home as an adult can be a bittersweet experience. A flood of memories piled upon me as I entered my tiny hometown, most of them good, some of them bad. I was grateful to see the daffodils and tulips blooming, reminders that life is present, splashes of happy color in an otherwise depressing landscape. The air was crisp, and, with my window down, I could smell the fryer of the donut shop as I passed by. I had been driving all night and decided to stop at the diner to get a cup of coffee and some food before going to the farm. I am sure my mother was awake and would have preferred I drive straight to her, but I wanted to get my thoughts straight and recover from driving all night before I faced her. I needed to apologize for the dishrag discussion we had years before, and wasn't quite ready to admit my guilt.

I can't imagine St. John without the diner. It must have been the first building constructed and I knew it would be the last standing. It was the heartbeat of town, from early morning until close. When I walked in that morning, the table of old farmers and ranchers briefly looked up from their coffee and conversation to size me up. I good humouredly smiled and raised a hand in a half-hearted wave, taking my seat at the breakfast bar. I am almost positive that I heard one of them announce to the others that I was James Anderson's girl and they all turned around again to take a better peek.

"What'll it be this morning?" the waitress asked, her eyes focused above my head, out the window to the parking lot.

"Coffee with cream, and a bagel with butter," I replied.

"I don't think we have bagels," she said with a giggle. Looking down at me, she took a step back. "Oh my God! I can't believe it's you. It's me, Stacy."

I looked up at her and recognized the pretty blue eyes and dark head of curly hair.

"How are you doing, Stacy? I didn't recognize you at first."

"Well what are you doing here?" she said as she poured a cup of coffee and set it in front of me. "I heard you went to Chicago. You missed the reunion, you know."

"Yeah, I know." I stared at the coffee. I had missed the reunion intentionally.

"Oh my God," she said again. "You look great. What are you doing back here?"

"My mom's been sick. I came to stay with her for a while until she gets back on her feet." I poured cream into the dark coffee and watched the smooth ribbons of white curl back to the top. I had no idea how long it would be before Mom was able to care for herself again. Somewhere deep inside, I knew I would be in St. John for a while.

"Well, we'll have to catch up while you're here. I'd love to hear about the city. I'll be right back." Stacy walked to the other end of the bar to greet the next customer.

The feeling of not quite belonging poured over me, and I remembered distinctly how I felt during high school. I was terrified of ending up in the posi-

tion Stacy was in. I knew I could never make a good waitress, or receptionist, or housewife, or any of the other jobs that are delegated to women in St. John. I knew that this town wasn't ready for a woman artist, running her own studio, selling artwork. I paused for a moment to thank God that I had found the courage to leave when I did.

I took a sip of coffee and stretched my arms above my head, my neck and shoulders tense from the long drive. Stacy was back in front of me and asked about my mother.

"We're really not sure," I replied. "Some specialists in Wichita think that she must have had a stroke."

"Oh I am so sorry," Stacy said as she fiddled with the coffee urn behind the counter. "Are her spirits high?"

"I don't know. I haven't seen her yet." I took a long sip of coffee.

Stacy turned back to face me. "What are you doing here, then? Go." Stacy was right. There was no reason to stall further. "Come back later though, I'd love to catch up. Coffee's on the house."

I stood, thanked her for the coffee, and turned to walk out the door. I smiled at all the old men trying unsuccessfully to stare nonchalantly and left the diner. I simply needed to go face my mother and get over my apprehension. Mother probably did not even recall the last conversation we had before I left St. John. It was not that big a deal, really, and we had talked plenty of times since then. But in retrospect I see where I insulted her and I have not yet forgiven myself. I hurt my mother's feelings and never apologized.

We had been in the parlor discussing my upcoming trip.

"Why do you have to go so far away?" she asked me, "Can't you just be happy painting here?"

"Mom, there is a school for artists there." I tried to sound grown up as I explained myself. "Plus, people in Chicago actually buy art."

"You could sell your work here, honey," Mom said as she rested her yarn and crochet hook in her lap.

"Mom, you know everyone around here wants paintings of the Last Supper, or a farmscape painted on the back of a saw blade. I don't paint like that."

She slowly lowered her eyes to the yarn and crochet hook that lay in her lap, and, after pausing for a moment, she resumed her work.

"Mom, please understand that I need to do this. I can't imagine myself doing anything other than creating art and I can't do that in a place like this – a place so devoid of art." I was getting frustrated and stood up, crossing the living room to the piano.

"Sweetheart, there is art everywhere. We create every day." She lifted the dishrag she was making in acknowledgement.

"Mom, are you serious? That's just a stupid dishrag."

I left the room and went up stairs to my bedroom.

I left St. John on the Greyhound the following Monday. The dishrag conversation, as I came to think of it, played again and again in my head as the bus ticked away the miles. I tried to reconcile the dialogue with myself, and then I turned to bargaining with God. I never brought it up to Mom, however, and she never brought it up to me. We just went forward; her making more dishrags and me chasing a dream to a far away land.



Joshua Meier
Genesis, Exodus, Revelation

Tyler Farrell is an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Dubuque (Iowa) and book review editor for *An Sionnach*. His work has appeared in *The Book of Irish American Poetry*, *The New Hibernia Review*, *The Recorder*, *Natural Bridge*, and *The Blue Canary*, among others. His first book of poetry, entitled *Tethered to the Earth*, has just been published by Salmon Poetry.

The Lives of the City, Long Forgotten

Tyler Farrell

We have seen them
in the sky, in the trees,
among the fog
that rises from a winter earth
covered by snow
white on ice
like the Mississippi.

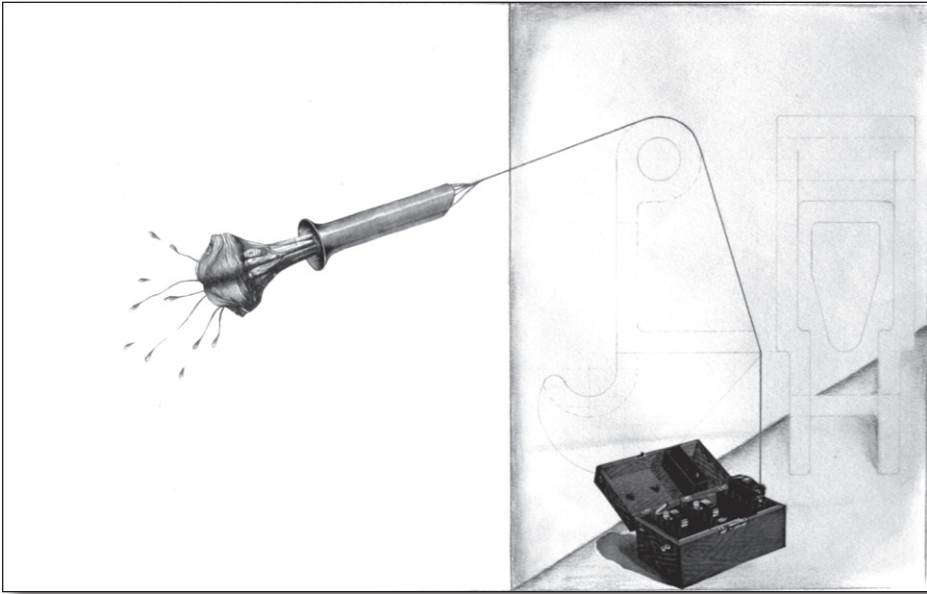
We have felt them
with our hands,
the sounds blamed on breath,
streets and houses
like steel pillars
next to a subway station,
shadows from darkened windows.

They are full, like pomegranates,
small seeds from the ground
that look like a heart
greeting a new child,
a small direction for a finger

to point out our flaws
nearly shown
from a wrinkled face.

We have told others of them,
their good work
and, like outstretched hands,
their lives naked
to amuse ourselves.

There is morning and night
to see through their eyes.
There are amusements
to be told, invented,
two historians that begin a game.
One may greet you
on the road to the city,
the other sits on a bridge
and waits to be asked
about his legacy,
that face with many
grains of distance.



Hannah Beuke
Maximum Height for Structure

A. Sami Wood is a dietitian by training. She lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma, with her husband and two energetic boys and works in the field of diabetes at one of the local hospitals. Writing fiction has been her passion since childhood.

That Tamed Viking

A. Sami Wood

Ooh, how much I loved Häagen Dazs. Vanilla fudge brownie was my favorite. Rich, smooth, and creamy as it melted in my mouth and slid down my throat. The fudgy pudgy bits of brownies hesitated slightly before departing my tongue, leaving behind traces of magic. Häagen Dazs was where I buried all my sorrows and drowned the annoyances of the day. When I was with “him” nothing else mattered. That “exotic male” from the land of the cold, that tamed Viking with the dual edge of thrill and comfort intoxicated me. I could have my daily bowl of Häagen Dazs over a pile of dead bodies without noticing my surroundings. Häagen Dazs was sin draped in virtue. I did not smoke and I did not drink. I just ate high quality food—premium cream, sugar and chocolate. Häagen Dazs crawled into bed smack in the middle between me and my husband and wove “himself” into my dreams. Ah, the thrill of adultery. When I told my husband I was having an affair, he did not believe me. The fool! Häagen Dazs was always there for me through PMS, ovulation, menstruation, and all the ups and downs of life. No parent, no husband, no child, no friend could begin to compete with “him.” “He” did not cry, whine, moan, groan, complain, nag, demand, nor reprimand. Häagen Dazs was always there seductively silent, getting acted on and never reacting.

For years, I managed to sneak in my daily bowl of Häagen Dazs with minimal impact on my figure, an impact I liked to refer to as curve enhancement. Some-time in my mid thirties my clothes got tight and my enhanced curves morphed into bulges. I hopped on the scale and what I saw took my breath away.

“Time is never kind to anybody,” I thought.

For a moment blaming the weight on time seemed reassuring, but out of nowhere a small voice whispered in my ears, “It is ‘him’; Häagen Dazs.”

Stunned, I stood frozen solid on the scale.

The small voice whispered again, “You need to jilt Häagen Dazs.”

I stomped my foot in defiance, almost ruining the scale.

“Are you out of your mind? I can never give ‘him’ up,” I protested, my voice shaking and my heart racing.

“No more Häagen Dazs for you,” mocked the whispering voice.

“Shut up,” I snapped as I walked towards the bedroom, humming the tune of “Strangers in the Night” to block that nasty little nagging voice. My humming developed an angry edge to it as I stuffed myself in a pair of elastic-waist pants and felt the tug of the tight waist. “I eat Häagen Dazs in moderation. Although I do it every day, I only do it once after dinner and use a small bowl after all,” I reassured myself and the nagging voice.

“Small bowl? Are you sure? Are you sure?” nagged the tiny voice over and over.

In the beginning I impatiently reassured the voice that I knew my portions, but later when even the hard rock music blasting from the stereo could not drown the nagging I marched to the kitchen and determined the capacity of the ice cream bowl. It was a two cup bowl and not half a cup as I had deluded myself for years, the second shock of the day. I estimated guzzling down about 600 heart-warming calories of Häagen Dazs every night. This was going too far. I had to do something about it. Maybe the tiny voice was right after all.

"No more Häagen Dazs," I declared to the whispering voice.

My tension and anxiety mounted as the night approached. The thought of no Häagen Dazs was unbearable, so unbearable it put me on the verge of tears.

"Häagen Dazs once a week. That should be harmless and not too punitive," I thought as I glowed with pride at my brilliance in devising practical compromises.

That same evening, I indulged in my weekly bowl of Haagan Dazs with a strong commitment for abstinence for the next six days. Every night was the night of indulgence before the great deprivation and the next six days of abstinence never came around. The elastic-waist pants got tighter and the tiny voice bolder and almost obnoxious.

"Lustful pig" it called me.

"Lustful" I could bear, but "pig" was a bit too much. I came up with a new strategy, no Häagen Dazs only once a week. Sure, I can abstain from "him" one night out of seven.

"Saving 600 calories a week is better than none," I thought in an attempt to defend myself from the accusations of the progressively audacious whispering voice.

D-day was the same night the decision was made. I bit my finger nails and sucked on tasteless ice cubes until my tongue went numb. Sometime during my agonized daze, bedtime was declared and lights were turned off. I dragged myself into bed, my heart heavy with dread. I was afraid I would raid the freezer at 12:05 a.m. and call it the next day. What a great failure that would be. I prayed, begged, and pleaded to be able to wait until tomorrow evening. Häagen Dazs was already in bed. "He" did not even wait until I got into bed before joining us. "He" did not weave "himself" into my dream, but was rather the dream in its entirety. Häagen Dazs was as seductive and as delicious as ever. One decadent flavor after another twirled around in synchrony. It was a feast for the senses of the infatuated. I twirled around dancing and generously sampling each and every flavor. I had so much of "him" throughout the feverishly dreamy night that I woke up stuffed and nauseous, but very proud of being able to abstain from the real live Häagen Dazs for one entire night. The next Häagen Dazs-free night, a week later, was somewhat smoother, possibly due to the anticipation of the intoxicating dream. Häagen Dazs made a grand appearance, although the dream was less rosy and the dance less festive. On the third week Haagen Dazs climbed rather late into bed and made only a brief appearance in my dream. The next morning I could not even remember what exactly "he" was doing in the dream. I figured it was time to abstain from Häagen Dazs twice a week. Again the same agonies and festive dreams with the twirling decadent ice cream flavors returned. I did twirl around and generously sample each flavor throughout the feverish dreamy nights for weeks to come, but did always manage to maintain my vow of abstinence. I

do not know why abstaining from Häagen Dazs twice a week was so agonizing for so much longer. Maybe by that time I had figured out the plan. I was going to drop the days one at a time until I got down to six or seven Häagen Dazs-free nights a week. What a dreadful thought. But, I stuck to my guns and persevered. Seven weeks later I was down to three Häagen Dazs-free nights a week. By that time “his” audacious bed climbing and “his” seductive parading into my dreams were rather symbolic in nature. Nevertheless, I was stuck in this phase for another seven weeks for no reason other than fear of relapse.

By the time I progressed to four Häagen Dazs-free nights a week things were smooth sailing. In less than three weeks I was having Häagen Dazs only once a week. After that the weeks merged into one another and months went by between one Häagen Dazs feast and another. One evening and out of the blue, I suddenly discovered that Haagen Dazs was no longer in bed smack in the middle between me and my husband. A sense of great relief tainted with a bit of uneasiness swept over me. I wondered where Häagen Dazs went. I wished “he” had gone back to the land of the cold. I imagined “him” a wild Viking again roaming the icy deserts of the north, the arctic wind gusting in his face. The truth of the matter is that Häagen Dazs is still in the freezers of almost every super market and convenience store. Every once in a while I run into “him” in one store or another. “He” always seems to be seductively winking at me as “he” flashes “his” flavors. Somehow, I always manage to walk away, but not without reminiscing about more carefree times and reflecting on the erosion of a power named youth.

Dorothy Alexander is a poet, publisher and storyteller living in Cheyenne, Oklahoma, where she is the co-owner of Village Books Press, a two-woman publishing house. Her three collections of poetry are *The Dust Bowl Revisited*, *Borrowed Dust*, and *Rough Drafts*.

Red Moon Powwow

Dorothy Alexander

Tribal drums tremble the night air.
 Dog Soldiers stomp a fancy dance,
 turkey feathers bob and weave,
 Converse All Stars and Nike Hi-Tops
 slap rhythm into the packed red earth.

The whole Cheyenne Nation
 sits on folding chairs, eating
 Frito chili pies and fry bread.

Spotted Bird's widow, Christine Star, daughter
 to old man Finger Nail and Martha Swallow,
 waits for the give-away to begin,
 rechecking her list of those she will honor.

Baskets stuffed with bags of Yukon's Best
 corn meal and flour, Domino sugar,
 made-in-China junk from Wal-Mart.

Plus one fine Pendleton blanket
 and a carton of unfiltered Camels
 for the Arrow Keeper.

Imogene Old Crow paces back and forth,
 her shadow dancing in firelight,
 carrying on a serious cell phone conversation,
 Blue-Tooth loop clipped to one brown ear.

She listens to the sacred drums with one ear
 And the profane world with the other one.

John Estes is a doctoral student and instructor at the University of Missouri in Columbia. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Another Chicago Magazine*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Journal*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Literary Imagination* and other places. A chapbook, *Breakfast with Blake at the Laocoön*, is available from Finishing Line Press.

State of the Art

John Estes

A poem in Sioux Falls—itself once saved
 like this—talked a jumper down.

A poem takes you by the hand, compliments
 your shoes, makes you ask for its number.

Poems love attention, love little gifts, but many
 thrive on abuse. Go ahead—try it!

Some poem or other no doubt tried to make
 a move on your high school boyfriend.
 He let it, no doubt, and that's where he
 learned to do that thing.

Poems make good chains, garage rags,
 and in some cultures palate cleansers.

My cousin had a poem once that always tried
 to hump the leg of house guests.

You know those confused moments
 when you think you saw this moment
 in a dream? That's a poem.

Ten or more poems hanging out, wearing
 similar colors—move quickly and quietly
 to the other side of the street.

Never attempt to save a drowning poem
 by swimming to it.

Red sky at night, poem's delight; red sky
 at morning—poems don't give a shit.
 They sleep in.

Kissing your sister is, by definition, a poem.

In some areas, poem populations are reaching
 nuisance levels. Agencies have re-introduced

natural predators; qualified hunters
 have been allotted increased bag limits.
 Most poems were obsessive masturbators
 when young, and swore they'd stop when
 or before they became adults. Right.
 Quality parts for poems are tough to come by.
 Poems and elbows are safe to put in your ear.
 Stacked atop each other, poems make nice
 monuments; skillfully arranged in a circle,
 stood on end, you've got a nifty shelter
 for your garden gnome.
 I suspect the Batboy of being a poem.
 Poems have learned the hard way to keep
 their politics to themselves, but a few
 drinks will sometimes open them up.
 Whatever Jesus wrote in the dirt, with his
 finger, that's the Ur-poem.
 Sometimes, because they like irony, poems
 wear suits and work as business-types.
 Lacking couth as well as loving comfort,
 even these poems rarely wear underwear.
 Most drug stores carry poem masks year-round.
 Some poems sing very well, but the wise
 remain wary of falling in love with them
 on that account.
 Poems are unusually susceptible to liver
 and foot disorders; many wear glasses.
 Too much blue eye shadow is a guilty
 pleasure for many poems.
 Next Christmas, donate to your favorite poem
 on behalf of a loved one or friend.
 Experience shows poems make better lovers
 than spouses. There are exceptions.



Megan Edmonds
Love

Cooweescoowee 2008

Carolyn Helmberger is a native of Omaha, Nebraska. She received her B.A. from Creighton University and her M.F.A. in creative writing from the University of Nebraska. She lives with her husband Lee and their menagerie of pets—two cats, two bulldogs and one basset hound.

Sunday Afternoons

Carolyn Helmberger

Dad ate his sandwiches,
cheese and jelly on rice cakes,
at the kitchen table.
His t-shirt was see-through
in spots, and his houndstooth Levis
were something his father would've
worn, had he lived past thirty-three.

I played on the faux tile,
stacked blocks and knocked
them over. Dad watched
the window. A blue jay
thudded, a flyboy
barrel rolled
into the grass, another
crash and burn.

Mom, her glasses off,
snapping the carrots
gnashed them in her teeth.
She penciled in answers
to crosswords, and finally wondered
aloud, What's a three letter word
for lonely?

James Gish, Jr. was raised in western Kentucky in the relentless forge of the Southern Baptist Church. He lives in Arcanum, Ohio, with his wife Jan and teaches college level psychology. His writing heroes are William Faulkner, William Styron, Eudora Welty and Reynolds Price.

Walking Through Snakes

James Gish, Jr.

After the hallelujahs and hosannas, after the prayers vaulted upward in supplication, the goiter healed, the drunkard supine before God's infinite mercy, then there was only left the half giddy smiles of the nearly raptured, droning home toward summer reruns. When the Reverend Larry Carson had shaken each hand, he stood wrung out and honed thin, watching the last tail lights fade away. It was then that he turned to observe the Saviour in that picture behind the pulpit, looking out at the lights, saying, "Jerusalem, Jerusalem, how oft would I have gathered ye as a hen doth gather her brood, but ye would not."

Later, there was a pinpoint of pain just behind his left eye as he herded his twelve year old station wagon past the farm produce stands, sitting closed in the moon light. He drove past the cricket-cleaved sloughs where the frogs croaked for rain, and, finally, down to the place which was his own. A double-wide "Victorian style" mobile home at the end of a gravel drive. In that fork of land Lurlene judged "idiot mud" where the murky Blue River met the spring fed Lilly Creek.

"Lord, this ain't nothing but a pure dee snake den," Lurlene complained in that first summer when she saw the snakes he had mangled in one mowing of the triangular lawn. "You have done moved me into a nest of vipers."

"You've never seen a viper in your life," Carson advised her.

"I know what I know, Son," she told him back, wagging her head in that timeless Southern woman's way, full of wonder over the sprawl of ignorance that men lived with as a matter of course while they stumbled through life's switches like dream-gaited children.

Now Larry Carson unfolded his lanky self from the interior of the station wagon on this night ten years after her pronouncements. He shone the beam of the flashlight on the cement circles which were stepping stones leading to the red wood deck/porch.

Inside the house, which smelled of her musky perfume and lemon furniture polish, his Hungry Man meatloaf dinner gurgled and popped in the oven as Carson changed clothes and felt his soul's burnished surface dim, here away from the dot and tittle of the scripture. There was too much of Lurlene's saucy irreverence for salvation to hope for a foothold here where she stormed and laughed and sometimes danced naked like a pagan moon maiden. Back in the kitchen, sitting alone under six yellow lights of a faux chandelier, even the sweet radiance of his faith seemed somehow counterfeit as it receded down a long dim lit rail.

And the thing which pierced his heart was the sharp and prolonged needle of weariness. The black dog of fretting fears moved slowly through the bomb shelled cratered landscape of his psyche, moaning of dark things to come.

He finished his TV dinner while he read the baseball scores. His Cubs were in their June swoon. He walked to the lounge chair which faced the picture window, only six hundred dollars extra said the Elvis-eyed salesman, who seemed to be appraising Lurlene as though he were in the market.

After a lifetime of hard waiting, Carson settled in to wait once more.

He sifted the sparse facts, the accumulated wisdom which came unbidden concerning her, who was the desire of his heart and the black hole in his soul, Lurlene Darcy Carson.

"Remember when I found you," she taunted him, "me, fourteen going on twenty-five and you twenty-two going on twelve. You were in that damn white suit your mother got you at a rummage sale. I trailed you like a stricken thing, just a stupid moon calf."

Then her full rich laughter.

After six months of dates, initiated almost entirely by Lurlene, when the Reverend Larry Carson had asked her mother for "her hand in marriage," Agnes Thompson said, "Take her whole damn self."

Driving at midnight through a March rain, while the Everly Brothers crooned from the green eye of the radio, Lurlene frothed with grand hopes, punching her soon-to-be husband in the ribs with her elbow, nuzzling his neck, spitting out the window.

At Shawnee Town, a thin, elderly justice of the peace in a white shirt faded toward yellow, got out of bed and consecrated their union, egg yolk congealed at one corner of his mouth.

"Go with God," he intoned. "That'll be fifteen dollars." He took the money and shuffled off down the hall, leaving them there, startled by their sudden new status.

This many years later, Larry Carson was still surprised.

His eyes were trained, knowing that sometimes after midnight, the bright lights of her Camaro would announce her returning. As she shot the straight away outside of Stella and jumped the dipper over the L&N crossing, off of work from the second shift, top production worker at Purcell's Plastics three years running.

"You checking up on me, Boy," she asked one night, bursting in and catching him waking up in that chair facing the window which faced the road. "You have got some nerve, marrying me at fourteen and giving me Jesus on light bread and two hundred and sixty dollars a week from the Flaming Brotherhood of the Gushing Blood Church there in Broken Bridge. Then you think that after all of that nothing which you have given me that you have the right to stay up and be my daddy, too. Well, let me tell you something, Scooter. My daddy is dead, and I ain't taking any applications."

All off this while she was spitting venom, her eyes nearly crossed with indignation. She flung her clothes right and left, leaving them to land in soft puddles all over the living room floor. Standing finally in her pure glory over Larry Carson who flinched before her words and took that lesson unto himself.

But he was a man born to waiting, having waited so long to try to divine the substance of his own soul. As he stood in the pale winter light over his father's grave which sank one inch every six months, his mother jabbered behind him, and Jesus flowered in his heart in the first month of his nineteenth year and shewed Larry Carson the ways of righteousness, inviting him to be a fisher of men. Who had mostly been a fisher of nothing, sitting by himself at the back of high school classes, watching out to where the wind tossed the branches, thinking of a Briggs and Straton engine he was rebuilding.

"I guess I thought it would be different," he mused to himself, as he contrasted the glory and wonder of beginnings with the quotidian detail of everyday life.

Looking out the fly-specked window, the only light he saw was that of Mr. Marvin Wainwright a mile away. His Christmas tree lit brightly in July, lost in the benign senility of eighty-three, standing every Sunday at the door of Larry Carson's church, welcoming the young and old alike with a separate stick of Juicy Fruit chewing gum.

Somehow, it did not seem right to the Reverend Larry Carson that he who could arrange Jesus on the cross with such spell binding anguish, that he who could bring the congregation to the glory of atonement as he exposed the folly of their hundreds of sins, could not also solve the dead spot in his heart.

Behind him in the empty room, the shadows shifted and stirred. The cat, Percy, moved from its pillow perch on the scarred blue couch to the water bowl. he lapped daintily, came to touch Carson's feet and then retired to a red pillow in the corner.

"We don't need a child, Larry," Lurlene told him when he had offered up that solution. "Babies don't fix marriages. You take a marriage like ours, barely on three wheels, the baby would be a basket case before it learned to crawl."

Even as her words echoed in his head, he was newly amazed at his dismal logic. The truth from the mouth of a child herself, off at midnight, drawn like a moth to a fatal flame which was really no more than the neon around the bandstand at the Holiday Inn Lounge, where a salesman from Atlanta with a silk tie and a charge account swirled her about the dance floor. A man with a sunlamp tan who pulled twenties out of a money clip and said things like "Princess, you are somebody's lost dream." Hearing these words after the sweet hum of the fourth beer might just naturally turn a girl's head when she had married as a child, ransoming her teenage years to the lock stepped boredom which was well nigh unsupportable if one was not enamored of Pentecostal holiness and the rich poetry of Psalms.

The town knew about Lurlene and Larry, knew it as they knew all things through that vast and secret, subterranean river of dramatic speculation, unleavened by the merest smattering of evidence. On Saturday afternoon, when the couple prowled through the aisles of the IGA, certain parties were apt to smirk in their smug way or smother a giggle before they went home to scream complicated curses at the tag teams on *Big Time Wrestling*.

What they could not understand, Larry Carson wanted to explain, was that knowing Lurlene's wayward habits and living with them, much less doing some-

thing to change them, was all an utter mystery. A dark mystery composed of fear and love and guilt and lust shot through with all manner of flashfire emotions from murder to cold despair. The solution seemed crystal clear to everyone except Carson himself. He read the Scriptures. He spent hours with his boney knees locked upon the hardwood floor, importuning the heavens for one rare white dove to come descending, carrying in its beak a single message of truth so that, finally, there would be an end to all of that. Sitting out on the banks of the Blue River, counting the fireflies, he was certain in his heart only that nothing was certain, wondering at odd moments if God had forgotten his own.

Two years before, in June, Lurlene had been gone three days running. All his frantic calls came up empty until one of his own deacons came to him, a man who was the supervisor on the second shift where she worked.

"She has been coming to work every day with a man in a red Corvette, got a Tennessee license plate."

So on the fourth night, when she arrived home at three-thirty a.m., Lurlene found her bags packed on the front porch and the doors locked against her. Carson stood in the darkness behind the door and shoved his fist into his mouth to keep from calling out.

Lurlene stood outside on the redwood deck and looked at her bags, chewing her gum, one hand on her hip.

"I know you're in there. I know you can hear me."

Not defiant, not even mad.

"I don't even blame you for this. It's what I would do to if I was addled enough to stay married to me."

She picked up her bags and started down the steps toward the Camaro.

"I'll be over at Marty Ann's if you need to talk to me," she said over her shoulder. "The man in the Corvette was an asshole if that makes you feel any better. He wasn't half the man that you are."

She said the last in a slow, plaintive way, just somebody's baby out in the cold. He watched her through a slit in the blinds, walking gingerly across the yard, leaping from one cement circle to the next, sure that a fatal water moccasin waited outside the circle of light to cancel all her debts.

Larry Carson lived alone for three whole weeks. He ate Spam and canned beans and Dinty Moore beef stew out of a can. The people at his church pulled their prayer meters down a notch, flinging those words of need heavenward like handfuls of bright rain. Back in the double wide, the snakes criss-crossed the yard, from river to creek and back again, while Carson sat in his lounge chair and clutched Lurlene's Mammoth Cave pillow to his chest, wondering if there was suffering worse than this, thinking he would gladly accept any old plague of locusts. He would welcome anything to chase his loneliness in the blood-colored light.

Percy the cat fell into a blue funk of grief and nearly starved to death. When Carson sought to console Lurlene's cat, he was rewarded by two claw marks across the back of his hand.

Twice in two weeks, when the phone rang at one A.M., he snatched up the receiver with the words of forgiveness already a formulated utterance upon his lips. But it turned out to be one wrong number for Estelle and a drunken man

named Bobby Farquahar who wanted to be baptized before he jumped off a bridge.

People came to counsel and encourage, but Larry Carson thanked them and sent them on their way. There was no way to explain the shapes the clouds made when the heart knew no peace. Finally, unable to make sense of his life without here, Carson drove to Marty Ann Smithheart's square, white house in West Flora where he sat upon the porch while paint flaked down around his shoulders and told Lurlene stories about Mrs. Cain's fat sons, Tooter and Booty, who lived in a basement apartment under the laundromat and subsisted almost entirely on Little Debbie Choco Cakes and waffle cut french fries.

Carson drove his wife to the Dairy Queen where they had marshmallow shakes. And so Lurlene came home, not humbly or with even a word of contrition, which her husband had not expected or required.

It was enough for him to have her there, all full of "piss and vinegar" as his Uncle Paul had said after their first meeting. It was enough to have her head upon his chest as she chattered on about Barbie Basham whose baby was born with a caul on his face or her sister Jessica who was thrice divorced and now living with a heavy-woman named Mavis who wore dog collars around her neck and fixed motorcycles.

In December of that year, she came home from work on a Friday smelling of bourbon. After making love, they huddled together on the brown rug, naked and spent, wrapped in a threadbare blanket, in the shadow of the blinking Christmas lights.

"I have just worked so hard, Larry, divided myself up into so many pieces that there is just not anything left to hold me together. It is just like I am a bunch of floating fragments, and not enough of any one thing to lay claim on or name."

She talked on and on nearly until dawn, weaving the words in the air like a tapestry of dark lace which became a heavy weight of truth settling onto Larry Carson so that he felt like a creature yoked to a thousand sorrows. Telling him things about his friends, his uncles and even his own half-brother who visited from Texas. All of those who had wanted her and needed her, who had used her and fled, each leaving behind a singular admonition.

"Don't tell Larry. It would kill him."

It did not kill him, of course. It only reawakened in him that old feeling that he remembered as a child when he stood apart and watched the others play. That feeling of being separate and unreal, not a part of the everyday stumblings and abrasions where duplicity and treachery were only the revolving faces of even those who claimed to love him.

In February, the Reverend Larry Carson went to a pawn shop in Hopkinsville and bought a gun. He brought it home and wrapped it in cleaning rags and put it in the chest of his lawn mower shed. He told himself that it was for snakes and burglars. Twice in six months, someone had rattled the locked door late on a Saturday night, mumbling drunkenly and then disappearing a moment later, throwing gravel as the car sped away up the drive and then onto the blacktop backroad. Later, he moved the gun to a place in the house behind the hot water heater where Lurlene had stuffed Brillo Pads in an effort to keep rats from eating through.

As the clock crept toward one, Carson thought of the gun as he sat at the

window, watching for the lights of Lurlene's car. In the movie which he rehearsed in his head, he took the gun from behind the heater, he walked through the yard and into the river in a whippoorwill dusk. Standing in the river, he pointed the gun, pulled the trigger, and found his peace, drifting off toward the fierce, white water frothing over the dam.

Thus it was his suicide attempt dream which caused Carson to miss Lurlene's lights flashing down off Brewster Hill. By the time he had spotted her, she was coming out of the curves and passing Marvin Wainright's house where she laid on her horn every night for a full five seconds. Once each month, she stopped to eat cookies and drink hot chocolate. Sitting there together, Lurlene and Marvin told stories about black cats, about vengeful ghosts, about things which they had traded and lost.

By the time Lurlene parked her car behind his station wagon, Carson was in the bedroom where he slid between the cool sheets which smelled faintly of lavender. His wife came through the trailer door in a clatter of jangled keys and cursing. While she did not want a guardian or overseer, she was nearly always more than eager to have someone to talk to while she wound down from her night of a hundred minor melodramas. Tonight, by the time she slammed the refrigerator door and got herself a Pepsi, cracked the ice trays and rattled the cubes in her glass, Carson came into the light, yawning and scratching .

"Hi, Sugar. You'd wake up the dead," he told her.

Lurlene laughed and looked at him quizzically.

"Good God! You look like your Uncle Ted."

Carson pulled a tee shirt on.

"I thought you liked my Uncle Ted."

"I love the old fart," she told him, "but I don't want to be married to him. You need to get back to jogging , and I'm going to cut your hair different. You know, sexier."

Her husband sat down beside her and took a drink of her Pepsi. Lurlene was rubbing her feet.

"I'm worn to a frazzle. I think Fred Dennings speeded up that mold line tonight. He does that sometimes when he and Tracy Jean are fighting."

Larry waited for her to ask about his evening and finally told her.

"We had good services tonight."

"Did the Holy Spirit drizzle on down?" she exaggerated the last two words with faint mockery.

"Yes, Ma'am. It drizzled down pretty well, thank you," he answered with no malice.

Then she told him about Mary Helen Lindsay, working a full shift and some overtime in her eighth month of pregnancy so that Dale Lindsay could drink whisky and work in his backyard with a trouble light, pretending he was going to make it on the NASCAR circuit. About Darrell Luger, whose seventeen-year-old girlfriend slashed the tires on his Volkswagen Rabbit when she found out that he had never filed his final divorce papers.

On the TV, John Wayne led a wagon train through Apache country.

Lurlene got up for some microwave popcorn.

"Honey, would you get my cigarettes? I left them in that side pocket of the

car. I'd go back out myself. . ."

She arched her back, her sentence trailing off into a yawn.

Larry Carson pulled on his battered tennis shoes.

"We ought to move to town. I'll bet there's a hundred snakes out there crawling around, just waiting," she sought to deflate his kindness.

Carson stood at the door a moment, watching her as she sucked the ice in her glass.

"Probably more," he told her.

"I don't need to know that!" she said emphatically.

He closed the door and stood watching the wisps of fog which drifted in off the river. An owl lifted up off the yard near a flower bed, a snake dangling from its talons.

The Reverend Larry Carson walked through the wet grass toward the yellow car, not looking right or left, living on the thin blade of his present joy.



Julie Dermody
Sunset at Marco



Julie Dermody
Solitary Corridor to Contentment

Cooweescoowee 2008

Cherri Randall is Assistant Professor with the Department of English Writing at the University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown in Pennsylvania. She has an MFA in poetry and a PhD from the University of Arkansas. Her poetry has appeared previously in *Cooweescoowee*, and she has published stories, essays, and other poems in such journals as *Lake Effect*, *The Potomac Review*, *Sojourn*, *Paddlefish*, *Paper Street*, and *The Mid-American Poetry Review*. She has also been nominated for a Pushcart Prize for her essay writing.

Threnody

Cherri Randall

He died when I was five,
 My father's father.
 I was his favorite with my red hair
 And my custom of sitting
 On his good knee,
 The one that did not take shrapnel
 In world war aye aye.
 My mother was eight months pregnant
 With the only son who would carry on
 The family name.
 We sat together without my father who,
 Refusing to attend,
 Ordered 8 x 10's
 Made from the negative of his favorite picture:
 My grandfather holding a stringer
 Full of crappie and bass,
 Squinting into the sun.
 My father gave copies
 To all his brothers and sisters,
 Saying, "This is how I want
 To remember him, grinning,
 A Lucky Strike dangling from the corner of his mouth."

My father liked mimosa tree switches,
 Their leaves trimmed to whistle
 Cleanly through the air.
 He always watched, waiting
 For me to unhook my bra strap,
 Counting how many times
 He brought his arm down.
 I remember the narrowly
 Swollen marks that turned
 Raging blue before fading
 To a sour shade of green,
 Then yellowing softly,
 A fruit unripening.

Three years ago my father died.
 I have my own pictures.
 When my family finally
 Started speaking to me again
 They said my brother did him proud;
 It was a mighty fine funeral.



Joshua Meier
untitled