Saw palm florida literature and art





Winter 2007 Volume 1

Dedicated to Michael Kuperman (1971-2006)



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Editor's Note

When the first issue of Saw Palm: florida literature and art was published in 2007, it appeared entirely online, at a now-forgotten web address hosted by the University of South Florida. In the seven years since its inception, the journal has grown considerably. No longer does the faculty have to pound the pavement, beg, and call in favors for submissions. Today there are enough submissions coming from all over the state, country, and the world to keep our graduate student editors busy all semester. The journal is also no longer exclusively online—every spring a handsome full-color print edition is released—and the website has moved from the old address to sawpalm.org. During this period of growth and transition, it seems volumes one and two were forgotten, left to idle somewhere on a USF server, and they never made the move to the new website. It took a few years, but these inaugural editions have finally been updated and re-released in the format of the current print editions. We hope you enjoy this early volume of Saw Palm, which laid the foundation for today's thriving journal.

> Mike Rusó Managing Editor May 2013

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A Comprehensive Map of Paradise

Tia Ballantine

An alabaster angel with one hand flat against its cheek sits near a 19th century black carved coconut, balanced

on a woven basket from Vietnam. Rain comes through the window and beads on the angel's head. Across

the room, a woman carved of ebony carries one hip forward and an empty water jar on her head. Her breasts

are rubbed from black to tan, her back bared to four wingspread birds on a gold stained lacquer screen. One

a swallow, another a mocking bird, and two wet with silence. Like fingers, the fringe of the Mexican

shawl drawn tight across the piano bench blows out on wind. Someone digs a hole beneath

the banyan tree with a shovel that sounds like teeth.

To An Englishman, Lost in Florida

Erin Belieu

Your grief is an old jazzman sitting with his legs crossed on a straight-backed chair and the rain fingering your rented window is his guitar. He surrounds your room

with the blurred chords of a hurricane refusing to come. There's nothing to say since the night you found a giant at your dinner table, foreign locks on your children's home. Now your accent

begs an explanation and local girls in the pool hall guess wrongly from whence you came: Australia? Savannah? Best not to speak when you touch them.

You'll abide, knowing the brightest tongues are made of water, though your boat sits on blocks in your new roommates' driveway. The bow won't stop filling with green needles the storm tears loose.

I can't carry the tune soft enough to comfort you, though I've been to your country, can picture your boyhood, that postcard of ruins made comfy for the tourists. They spread their picnics on a pyre, where Queen Boadicea lit every Roman soul at the wick of her righteous sorrow. Strangers came to take her

daughters, too. Legend says, plant your shovel in the earth of Colchester and to this day you'll turn over a mouth of ash. So the history of rage shakes its long tail with an embered rattle on the end.

I wish you another music.

Last Trip to the Island

Erin Belieu

You're mad that I can't love the ocean,

but I've come to the world land-locked and some bodies feel permanently strange. Like any foreign language, study it too late and it never sticks. Anyway,

we're still here aren't we? trudging up the sand, the water churning its constant horny noise, an open-mouthed heavy

breathing made more unnerving by the presence of all these families, the toddlers

with their chapped bottoms, the fathers in gigantic trunks spreading out their dopey circus-colored gear.

How can anyone relax near something so worked up all the time?

I know the ocean is glamorous, but the hypnosis, the dilated pull of it, feels

impossible to resist. And what better reason to resist? I'm most comfortable in

a field, a yellow-eared patch of cereal, whose quiet rustling argues for the underrated valor of discretion. And above this, I admire a certain quality of sky, like an older woman who wears her jewels with an air of distance, that is lightly, with the right attitude. Unlike your ocean,

there's nothing sneaky about a field. I like their ugly-girl frankness. I like that, sitting in the dirt,

I can hear what's coming between the stalks.

In the Red Dress I Wear to Your Funeral

Erin Belieu

1.

I root through your remains, looking for the black box. Nothing left but glossy chunks, a pimp's platinum tooth clanking inside the urn. I play you

over and over, my beloved conspiracy, my personal Zapruder film--look,

here's us rounding the corner, here's me waving at the crowd. God, you were lovely in your seersucker suit. And weren't we happy then, before the cross-fire triangulation? Answer me, dead man.

Wait. Here comes the best part, where my head snaps back and you crawl blood-addled and ferocious from the moving vehicle....

I am undead and sulfurous. I stink like a tornado. I lift my scarlet tail above your grave and let the idiot villagers take me in torchlight one by one by one by one....
Your widowed Messalina, my soprano cracks the glasses on the buffet at the after party. I know you can hear me.
Is my hair not coiffed like the monster's bride, lightning bolts screeching at my temples?
What electrified me but your good doctor's hand alone?

3.

I'm a borscht-belt comedienne working the audience from behind your headstone.
I shimmy onstage between Pam And Her Magic Organ and the gigantic poodle act.
Your coffin is a tough room.

Mourners talk through my set, down schmutz-colored highballs, wait for the fan dancer to pluck her scuzzy feathers. But you always loved the livestock, didn't you? I say how many of you folks are in from Jersey?

The microphone sweats like your cock did in my hands.

I help the Jews drape the mirrors. I peel the foil from the Protestant's bleak casseroles. The Catholics and Agnostics

huddle in the parking lot, smoking a memorial bowl. My dear, even the worst despot in his leopard skin fez

will tell you: the truth doesn't win, but it makes an appearance, though it's a foreign cavalry famous for bad timing and

half-assed horsemanship. History will barely remember that you were yellow and a cheat, a pixilated bi-valve who consumed

as randomly as the thunderheads pass, and yet, how strange, how many of us loved you well. So tenderly, I'll return

what you gave me--a bleached handkerchief, a Swiss army knife bristling with pointless blades. Tenderly, I return everything,

leaving my best evidence in your bloodless lap

5.

I go to our Chinese take away, where the placemats say I'm a snake and you were my favorite pig, though astrologically you were a wasting disease and I'm the scales of justice. Coincidence?
Get down on your knees and cross yourself all you want: all systems are closed systems, dead man.
I keep my saltshaker holstered in my garter belt, ready to spill.

I recite the fairy tale in which only I can save you: it's our story,

so there's a swamp instead of a forest, and no trail but a river agog with water moccasins winding through the cypress knees.

Your faithful Gerta, true sister in my red pinafore, I've tracked you doggedly for miles, appearing at the critical moment, when you take the Turkish Delight into your mouth. I've arrived just in time!

It's impossible to miss me, eager as a stain behind the Swamp Queen's white shoulder, your tattered avenger, your loyal roach, who's wanted only you in every suppurating hut, who's belly-crawled through the shit-filled bogs to find you,

to whom you gave your vow, my will undone, family asunder, my home disappeared by the charm of your girlish tears... and that's it. Nothing comes next.

That's the moment you decide, dead man. You look into my face and gulp her candy down. You shoot it like a bad oyster.

No matter how I tell it, this world ends when you swallow.

I was never your Intended, never meant to be the official widow like that plain, chinless girl I refused to recognize or comprehend.

But the plain ones are patient, aren't they?

I'll admit, she's earned her orchestra seats at this burial the old-fashioned way.

She's up front, next to your mama, that Chanel commando baked medium-well in her spray-on tan. A rare example of a real Southern lady, how many nights did it cost her, patrolling the family compound for Jezebels like me?

Your women, dead man. From here they look like two snap peas squatting in the same pod.
And they did their job, didn't they?
They made it easy for you?

But later, once the ladies go, I'll climb down to you again. I'll come to you in that dirty box where we've already slept for years, keeping our silent house under their avalanche of flowers. EYE AM THE PROMISED VISITATION
PRIESTESS OF BLACK POPLARS
MY TREES R HUNG W/ BRAZEN BELLS

EYE HAVE AUGURED THE PREGNANT SOW'S INTESTINES RORSCHACHED THE PICKLED WORM GLUED TO THE BOTTOM OF YR SHOT GLASS

EYE BRING U NEWS OF THE UNIVERSE AND THE NEWS AINT GOOD DEAD MAN

B-HOLD!

THE ZOMBIE COCKTAIL HOUR OF THE YEARS TO CUM
A PURGATORY UNBENDING AS
A BADLANDS
HI-WAY

IN THE T-LEAVES EYE SPY YR OUTLINE
YR CORPSE SNORING IN A VINESTRANGLED HOUSE

REBEL DRAG MOUNTS THE WALLS

LIKE A CONFEDERATE

HARD ROCK CAFÉ O! THE BLURRED DAYZ
COLLAPSING INTO DINNERS WHILE THE MAID BURNS

THE FAMILY BISCUITS & YR WOMAN BEATS

THE GRAVY STIFF U ARE LOST

GANYMEDE GONE THAT

BOY

WHO POURED HIMSELF WHOLE INTO THE SIBYL'S

LOVING CUP NOW EYE CUM

TO BURY U 4 EYE AM

THE GHOST OF X-MAS PAST AND YR FU-

TURE

BEGINS NOW DEAD MAN

I do not desist in my delusion do not permit the victor's history will not admit your fake religion what jams your fingers in the dry vagina of tin idylls will not will not go quietly your evil goody who cries me in the marketplace who knocks my ear to the pillory with false instruments my crimes never crimes for firstly I be the pretty pony of all plague slant-gashed a coil beneath my scum of loveliness No! I was I always am

your yellow roses in a beer bottle your weakness and reward one organ conjoined in the blue tipi of floating whistles doubled thunder coming in my wicked mouth to eat you and your grandma too Name her! Name her who bites you harder little girl! Will not say for seconds I am filth dirty as the damaged apple I bore not yours never yours that unspeakable sunshine Turn your head!

Turn your head and I'll kindly cut it off Yes Yes the best reason I am left only the mother of a great sun you would go blind and blinder to look upon its number and for finally I am not of your being being Queen of the flat kingdoms what crop your emptiness I do not admit these nor I lied nor I betrayed nor I am starving for you nor can you make me never Will I disappear

I peel myself and wherever these rubied feathers drop, a poppy unfurls in the graveyard, each head plush as a stitched lip. You're right, it gets me high, how thin I am, my love, the substance uncontrolled. But this molting becomes me,

your naturally-occurring razor, your baby I.V. Now I am fashioned the gun so truly fired I blast like a magic cap through my own skin. So go on,

throw the bones to your hairy pack and let them gnaw. I'm done with the meat. Soon, I'll be demolished. I'll step away free.

The Night of the Pivot

Andrew Epstein

Midway through the campus interview's rolling progress we leave the new gallery's opening soirée

where the mustachioed self-proclaimed redneck wove his crass crazy stories—naked communal showers, Quaaludes, the whole nine yarns—

to squeeze back into the poets' beat-up blue car parked down the asphalt off the busy ugly route, billboarded, stripmalled, half dead,

we greet balmy February air, cold home quick-vanishing, my teeming city ten states away,

sweet southern night murmuring somewhere inside, dredged up literary echoes bubbling, barely submerged, as I listen to the funny chitchat of my guides,

both poets, husband and wife team (though no shades of Ted & Sylvia here): "Sam is a dirty man" she says of Mr. Southern Moustache

who hails from Cairo (that's "Kay-row") at the nether edge of Georgia, "he tells the dirtiest stories and I'm telling you: they are one dirty dirty couple" as we cram

in the two-door car doors he says he loves Sam's stories and how they fill his own poems like air a tire, me on my best and brightest behavior, the job, whole futures, swinging madly in the balance, months of striving compressed

to the head of a skin-piercing pin, the possibility of actually living in this place gathers like a thick late-day storm or laugh,

this place where poems seem to float aloft, story for helium, as I look up towards noisy Monroe Street replete with American junk

to spot a flash tableau: acetylene blowtorch glare backlights a dwarf and two other bodies hunched against the unwinding historic night

fixing a giant neon sign for mufflers

Yawning Gulf

Andrew Epstein

An instant Hopper: the fierce morning sun illumines the deck posts so they're white-pink matchsticks glued to a kid's art project, the butterscotch yellow of the house siding ignited, the dark rocking chairs still beyond the posts, now gently moving in the wind unlike a Hopper, it changes, the light leaves and the rockers rock and palm tips flip and jiggle, and the balcony posts go dull a flat matte white. the yellow loses its yell as the wind keeps charging, embodying the sound of the waves working and working but now it's back, the sun, and with it the slant-light beach painting: empty porch, dawn, just a hint of human pain, human story.

Heading South (March 2001)

Andrew Epstein

We spin through Panacea, pee at The Oaks, where gator tail's a special at \$8.95 and soon we're suspended over Ochlockonee Bay a gasp of open space, high blue umbrella of a sky, lost in a thicket of new delicious names, Sopchoppy on the way to Apalachicola, on a thread of bridge above the shimmering field of wet not sure, but feeling as if we haven't even seen the best yet.

On Entering the August Grades

Debora Greger

From my high office, I look down. Have I cast a sudden dark shadow? Like minnows, my students swim off,

green thoughts down the green streets of Florida. O December! Papers lie on my desk, patches of old snow refusing to let go.

To the children of the subtropics, I have failed to convey the lessons of the cold: north of a morning like this,

you would wake to a world gone blank. Only the junco would have been out, leaving cuneate tracks in the snow.

O blade of moon rising, worn thin with use! Cut me a sliver of Arctic air from on high. Cut me, snowy paper. Draw my cold blood.

He Who Is Especially Fond of Birds

Nicholas Samaras

Look at the still air, its bluest trembling. This is distance and what distance may embrace.

In a place of solitude, an observant man can hear a busy silence.

His Arcadian hands lift open the window onto a flannel sky, an edging of shaggy pines

whose green wavering suggests silver. He looks below the comb of the trees

and smiles at the tiny ibis--scorchingly white-that moves forward so slowly, there is no sound.

Above in waning light, black-tipped terns smudge the sky. A high kestrel eddies on the wind

and, like this, the last hours go. By the window, he listens for the unseen aviaries

that continue to warble and skirl through the dusk. What else is needed?

He silently chants along: sand crane, kingfisher, heron. Even their given names improve the world.

For now, he loves to view the muscular clouds at midnight, their swift and pale blueness.

His house luffs into a stirring wind that dresses the hill of snowbells and the color of that waving.

High above a thresh of foxtail grass, the newest moon is a rind of platinum light. What is distance, then,

but solitude shared and the touch of hope? The valley recedes to dark velvet, blunt breathing, a knap of stars.

A Lodge In a Garden of Cucumbers

Kimberly Johnson

Isaiah 1.8

1.

What spectacular mulch we hauled!
Under the gloaming the opaline midden sheened the pales. Blame the climate's heavy exhalations for sultry grass, beetles sultry in their mucous, weeds of exotic variety, and at the end of all our labors an engorgement of cucumbers. They swell at dawn, slick in cucumiform splendor, plump bunches stretch long into furrows, oodles in wanton vines-brave greens, bold greens, cocksure blossoms. Hours we doubled over rows, weeks coddling seedlings for this bonanza.

2.

But what rude hands will pluck, what barbarous chops devour these our first, our only fruits now you have deserted?
Already shutters hang skewampous.
The roof won't hold the rain. Windows faced with plywood, door nailed shut, everything nailed shut, and chickenwire can't keep out the vines, vines that tendril through each crack. Can I behold my drear retreat, my sweet regret? My Love, when you sup with your coterie gloze not of garden: say it the big con.
Nor reminisce your lodge: rather, call me chump.

Opening the Word

Kimberly Johnson

Our text today is the heliotrope swiveling its holy troupe, a charming fence

above umbrage tangled where leaves intergrown are intercoursing in fat succulence and each bunch threads down an orgy of roots,

blind mazes to imbosk the sense. Let us lean not to our own blear understanding standing under such lovely thrall, but squeeze shut

the hoodwinking eye. The world's plain voice scrapes and grumbles its burden, stripped as early spring, sure as the hoar lying

over the violet bed, and so forthright we take it for honesty. O brothels and cisterns, my tongue is a fovent choir,

a cloven fire. Listen if your ears be true.

147 Wildwood Lane SE

Peter Meinke

Old houses are best they have secrets shadows trembling everywhere

in closet and corner their weaknesses secret cracks in the blocks corroded pipes the termites' patient gnawing Their strengths are secret too: the handcarved the portrait paneled over a feeling they've Every board in the house has been earned their way pressed by finger and foot forehead and knee tears on old tiles have told their stories the stories spread through the rooms like the scent of gardenias we breathe stories here we inhale old passions exhale the dead resolutions In the closet there is . . . something that are still living Sun slants through casement windows around slender candles shattering on the wicker where we sit with the shadows old houses are best old oaks bend over them whispering it's all right it's all right all those kids had fun and remember that young couple who had such love for each other it overflowed and did the azaleas sing while birds blazed like roses and even the garage which long ago burned down was an object of affection

Neighbors

Peter Meinke

I'm suing my neighbor for 10 g's His views pollute the air he has bad breath: I'd like to see him swinging in the breeze

I'm serious about this: I'm no tease He should be locked up and starved to death I'm suing that bastard for a cool 10 g's

He put in a driveway that ruined my lemon trees They curled up and shriveled from his car's bad breath: I want to see him swinging in the breeze

He's some sort of pinko he loves the Vietnamese and was happy when they beat us half to death I'm suing that maniac for 10 big g's

His children yip like demented Pekinese their teeth are pointy they all have doggy breath: I'd like to see them swinging in the breeze

His wife's so fat she's never seen her knees and if she did they'd make her puke to death I'm suing my sick neighbor for 10 fat g's: How I'd love to see him swinging in the breeze!

An Ode to Mirror Lake, St. Petersburg, Florida

Peter Meinke

Help me William this lake depresses an opaque cataract that burbles not but stares at me and the old folks huddled on our chairs

Unblinking Cyclops My cigarette arcs toward itself and spits in your eye to no effect minor mote in a major reflection of our cave-like isolation

Perhaps though you're not Cyclops but one of the unblinking eyes of Argus Panoptes watching us trapped like Ios by your brackish gaze . . .

Too much mythology too many books Numbed by your beercans candywrappers condoms pigeonfeathers I see you more than watch us: you are us Your lids are lashed by fists of palms

and turtles on your planes stick up like thumbs

Talisman

Michael Kuperman

Succumb to the paucity of symbols: feel the heft of an ancient coin, consider its contemporaries' vagaries. Look for signs but don't fabricate from nothing: the candle drowning in its own wax is not a vain attempt to escape mundane prophecies. Behind closed eyes, the world's heavy-handed narrative stutters, contemplates; chest cavities fill with the weight of all that beautiful guilt.

Blood Orange Moon

Michael Kuperman

The recently emerged full moon looks so much like an orange that to rely upon the default metaphor seems unseemingly facile.

Alternatively, to shun the obvious, to pander to a conjectured cliché council is affected and tedious.

At any rate, the moon most definitely resembles an orange. Twilight or atmospheric interference causes the shadow play which boasts pockmarked profiles.

A pocket of shadow darkens, a sweeping blemish on this heavenly citrus.

The incredible happens.

The orange moon slowly turns a shade of delicate red as the nightfall brings down vestiges of daylight's trumped boundaries.

How can the orange moon (those words again?) turn a shade of delicate red?

This is not an encyclopedia entry.

Let us suppose the orange was a blood orange, so-called because of its telltale hint of delicate red and the mystery is purged.

The blood orange moon sails past the window of visibility, its symbolism bled out of existence by its lack of creative ingenuity, its fatalistic resignation.

The Doldrums

Michael Kuperman

An island of nothing much, of waves barely breaking on an unenthused shore. A shipwrecked sailor, exhausted from the long swim and the hours of negotiation with his neglected maker, fashions a makeshift dwelling, starts a fire. But soon his interest in the redundant cycles of body and planet wanes. Monotony spreads, elongates, stretches its jaws to swallow tedium and apathy, slowly, slowly. He no longer languishes for rescue, or fondly recollects events that may or may not have transpired before the malaise of this forsaken place. It is too late for salvation: boredom is omnipotent.

In Terminus Res

Michael Kuperman

The park bench, wet with green paint, barely holds the suggestion of exploratory touches, smudges.

A naked couple sleeps twisted in sweat-soaked sheets as the dusty ceiling fan slows but does not stop, scraping on every revolution.

A young girl stands over freshly dug earth. A bare stick with a tattered yellow ribbon marks the passing of an animal and feather-pillow beliefs.

The air is stale but life lingers in the aftertaste of a dog's panting breathe.

Night sleeps on morning's shoulder.

An oval tear drop falls.

A Beautiful Woman Passes By

Michael Kuperman

She is my belladonna lily.

I dream of her red and white flowers as reality slowly slips away and my senses are assuringly dulled.

Drugged, I sacrifice reason and wish the spread of her deadly nightshade complete.

My search is over and life complete. In my construct there are no wishes no real risk of growing mutually dull no chance the weather will whisk her away. If she were in a field of flowers I would know her face, my fatal lily.

American Dream: Version 2.0

Michael Kuperman

It is half past the middle of night. The lusty superstructures of steel built upon girders of green money and infinite stores of greed and power go slowly dark before a restless sleep that will outlast the century.

In the hush of the last century electricity was not yet a contender to night in its long supremacy over sleep. Only the eccentric would steal time to waste on the ethics of power and the nasty viccitudes of money

forced to spawn with other money until a surplus shipment, a century's worth of compressed power, is squeezed into a single night. The glorious machines, magnates of steel which know no fear, need no sleep.

A nuclear, suburban family sleeps in a manicured life of money. Daddy works at the office of steel and glass, while Mommy's century prepares to say a drawn-out goodnight to eternal questions of love and power. Son's baseball swing lacks power. Daughter might very well be sleeping (meaning fucking) every night. If only perversion and money excite a dwindling, bankrupt century, then the tainted melting pot must steal

itself to being melted into steel containers, humming with latent power. In the drowsy morning of a new century a man snores in a hangover sleep having spent all his factory money in the harmless rages of a decent night

out on the money-power corrupted streets of Hometown USA. The century sleeps and conjures fake knights of flesh and steel.

Germ Theory of Infectious Diseases

Michael Kuperman

I know it sounds crazy, but microscopic organisms are the secret rulers of the planet.

If cells outside the body (too small to see: evolution's first interloper) can bring its collapse and demise, then surely the body must protect itself.

The next morning, when five of the mice were still alive, an age-old battle began to turn in our favor.

Miracles (not unlike paradises) are good while they last. As antibiotics proliferated the bacteria held council: even now, they are busy revamping.

Invention

Michael Kuperman

Timeless necessity is a mother who abandons her children in the rain, without an umbrella or a cover, until the eldest sibling, once again, takes hold of little hands and navigates.

Alchemy turns bread to penicillin. Carbon paper casting in duplicate. The thin mustache of an old film villain. Computer dinosaurs devour a meal.

Cars inch alongside highway closure cones on the shoulders of the cave person wheel clumsily coaxed from pre-historic stone. Innocence is how animals must think. Language has forever broken that link.

King Shit and the Golden Boys

Michael Kuperman

From a porcelain throne in a one bath apartment in Mobile, he reigns over all he surveys

and has only to pull the lever to make his enemies disappear. His loyal warriors,

the golden boys, clean up any messes, but spill more disease in the process

until plague is the rule of the land and the peasants have begun to revolt.

Soon they will elect a new leader, begin to build a fresh dynasty, and pray

for the birth of a Midas.

Rhetorical Sensibility

Michael Kuperman

This poem is all the poems you have ever read divided by all the poems

you will never read.

A deliberate line
break, frantic attention

seeker, flailing swimmer. Forgive the meta-discourse, the awkward intrusion.

The blatant attempt to curry the favor of a faceless audience,

to plum the depths of a bottomless reader. To risk drowning.

Words and Distance: In Memory of Michael Kuperman

John A. Nieves

with contributions by Andrew Asberry, Zach Childers and Ashley Felton

The sun had just called it quits as the lights came up in a seedy used bookstore in downtown Tampa. I stepped up to the microphone and cued the squeal of feedback. "Words and distance," I said. I was introducing the night's featured poet: Michael Kuperman. He had asked me to do the honors—to find a few words to characterize his work. I took him literally. From across the room he gave me a long, pleased smile. This summer, Michael died unexpectedly. Leaving only "words and distance," taking with him the excitement in his voice, his fervor for poetry and the smile with which he coated the walls of every room he entered.

Words

Kuperman's aesthetic began with word choice. In many conversations, he would start, "John, I can't find the word I want. The flavor is just a little off." The beauty and bounty of language itself fueled his creative fire. In a workshop at the Florida Suncoast Writers Conference, someone in the room said the word "paucity." Kuperman immediately grabbed his pen and scribbled this note onto my napkin, "There's a poem in that word. I will write it tonight."

And he did.

This love for language made Michael a voracious reader. He often called me or sent me e-mails asking if I had read the new issue of Poetry or Paris Review. This made Michael one of the foremost (if unheralded) experts on Contemporary American Poetry. He would mutter little asides like, "What is Olds

doing? That doppelganger that replaced her in the mid-eighties is not nearly as crafty as it thinks," and, "Komunyakaa is on fire! I swear the man's genius grows with every book." He created a running critical dialogue of contemporary literature in almost every conversation I had with him.

This obsession with language also made Michael an incredible teacher. His students often praised him. I once spent two hours on the phone with him as he ran ideas past me for "livening up his class" and "helping students feel like scholars." This is a point where our ideologies closely met. So as a tribute to Michael, I have included brief commentaries on his work from three upcoming literary scholars, and students of mine from the University of Missouri-Columbia, at the end of this piece. I'm sure this would have brought that long, pleased smile back to Michael's face.

Distance

Kuperman's poetic also centered around distance-distance traveled, distance between people, distance between ideas and the things they represent. In this distance, Michael found poems. He would look at the distance between himself and his memories to come up with "place poems" that had shocking vivacity. He captured longing (the distance between someone and something they desire), irony (the distance between two conflicting truths) and wonder (the distance between the known and the unknown) in much of his work. He braved this distance, though at times it was difficult, for one specific reason: to connect with his readers. He saw each poem, each publication, as dialogue between himself and (in his own words), "faceless strangers hungry for feelings that are not their own." He counted himself as one of these strangers when he read the works of others. These lines from his poem, "Rhetorical Sensitivity," deftly express his conviction for this dialogue, regardless of cost:

The blatant attempt to curry the favor of a faceless audience,

to plum the depths of a bottomless reader. To risk drowning.

Now, the distance between Michael and those who knew him must serve to inspire more dialogue. This would have been Michael's wish. Please read the poems in this issue, access the feelings that he so carefully laid out on the page, and connect with those feelings. Revel in the facelessness of "words and distance." If you have the capacity to share his work, please do. Ask a friend to read. If you have the means, teach it. It would be a tragedy for Michael Kuperman's brisk and original voice to go down forgotten.

A Personal Note

Michael Kuperman was my colleague and my friend. His slick sense of humor and patented brand of linguistic slapstick will always stay with me. While I could give a glowing ode to Michael Kuperman, the human being, I think he would prefer to be remembered as Michael Kuperman, the poet. So as a tribute to a dear friend, that is how I have painted him here. His poetry has inspired many people. Below are excerpts from the reactions to his work I mentioned above-each a testament to his accomplishments:

In its entirety, I felt that the poem "Invention" showed progress in ways that are not normally thought about . . . which showed how the language of humans, or their evolution into "complex animals," furthers the gap between development and underdevelopment; progress, and stagnation.

—Ashley Felton

If art is at its heart an expression, then poetry is expression with intent to arouse—to arouse emotion and thinking. Kuperman's works are very much a means of inflicting a rich vision upon the psyche of the one who reads it. His words have described the moon by frowning upon cliché, and his diction and pacing made readers taken in the boredom of "Doldrums" without growing weary themselves.

Titles of an often gratuitous and, well, simply shocking nature are a unique means of gripping the attention of a potential audience. Kuperman does not miss a beat here as titles such as, "King Shit and The Golden Boys" and "Germ Theory of Infectious Disease," have raised many eyebrows since their conception in this world that still thinks "roses are red, violets are blue" when it comes to poetry. Kuperman is obviously well aware of this observation as he writes a poem about the very ideas behind a poem's creation and needs from the perspective of the poem itself. It is through Kuperman's poems and the creations of other artists that the unspoken rules of expression are bent and ultimately broken and art changes.

—Andrew Asberry

Anti-technological themes in Michael Kuperman's poems often equate "progress" with human corruption. This tendency is evidenced in his "American Dream," in which electricity is described as a "contender to night," resulting in the baser motivations of greed and power being exercised where formally night held "supremacy over sleep." In "Invention," it is sug-

gested that language itself is complicit in the decay brought on by technology: "Innocence is how animals must think./Language has forever broken that link." Perhaps the metaphorical power of words, misused, has blanched the "thing itself" and allowed for a control over the natural with, occasionally, lessthan-ideal results.

Many of Kuperman's poems, in fact, hinge on the power of language to transform. In "Blood Orange Moon," the facile metaphor of the moon as an orange exerts a transformational power over the moon itself; the vehicle replaces the tenor in the mind of the speaker and, when the moon changes color and strains the relationship, the vehicle is stretched instead of replaced. The metaphor has usurped the object as the dominant image. Likewise, in "A Beautiful Woman Passes By," the subject, a "bella donna," is yoked to the poisonous flower whose name describes her. The opiate power of the woman's beauty is, therefore, equated with the fatal nature of the flower. As is commanded in "Talisman," the speaker is forced to "Succumb/ to the paucity/of symbols."

But the transformational power of language can be generative as well as restrictive. The modification of the phrase in medias res offers pathos in reminding the reader that all things must end. At the end of things, a park bench offers subtle evidence of exploration, two lovers sleep off the event of the evening, a pet is mourned or a dog catches his breath. Every morning has night sleeping on its shoulder and every person, at his end, is remembered and celebrated with "An oval tear drop." And finally, after life, "in terminus res," the person is himself transformed by, and into, language.

—Zach Childers

First Love

Maggie Jones

Lily sits tall, cross-legged, in front of the full length mirror, wearing her black and red lace La Perla thong. An open bag of chips sits in a triangle of space in her lap. Crunch. She selects one chip after another, placing them on her outstretched tongue, then pulling her tongue in and chewing methodically, evenly, with her mouth closed. Her lips, plump and washed in a cherry tint, never make contact with the glistening chips. She feels the crunch, crunch, crunch in her temples. After each chip she wipes her pointer-finger and thumb on the pale pink towel wadded up beside her. Wipe, then back in for another chip. Crunch. She stares so hard at the face in front of her she does not see it. She sees only cheeks, round and peachy like a child's, eyes smudged in black, and lips and nose. She is not here, she is not anywhere, and she floats with a sudden gift of lightness.

Lillian! Her mothers voice vibrates through the intercom mounted on the wall next to Lily's bed. She cannot hear her mother, at least not with her ears. The vibrations run down her arms and across the bony backs of her hands. She selects another chip. Crunch. Lily, the voice now low and solid, I need your help, the "p" popping into Lily's ears. She feels the chenille rug underneath her and runs her fingertips down her matte smooth cheek. In what seems to be one fluid movement, she slips into a hand-painted robe, grabs her dry-cleaning draped dress, and drops the chips into a deep drawer in her vanity.

Lily pads down the Spanish-tiled corridor, passing her brother Jacob and father drinking beers out of bottles in the olive-green study. They do not notice her walk by, and she tells herself she doesn't care. She can't help but feel glowing, thin silk over her breasts, pre-party bustling through the house and outside. Cream linen is draped over all of the chairs on the lawn, sparkling Waterford punch bowls and champagne flutes lined

up in endless rows, and red-bud roses tightly bunched in rich spheres, dotting the tables. Perfect, she thinks, striding even taller along the sunlit hall. The patio and lawn look silent, sacred even, with the twelve Guatemalans moving things carefully into place, miniaturized by the transplanted royal palms twisted with lights. Lily feels something bubble up; love, she thinks. She loosens the tie of her robe and lets it fly behind her in a green, shiny wave, feeling a warm spot of sun hit her left breast, noticing out of the corner of her eye a small brown man with black chin-length hair as smooth as sea glass, staring at her through the freshly washed panes of the French doors. She does not worry about her father or Jacob, they never leave the study during the preparations for a party. Although she is only nineteen she imagines she is older, much older, while this man's eves are on her. The bubbling love feeling is gone, replaced, smothered by a fierce veil, a heat that is addictive.

Nearing her mother's room, Lily's mind begins to churn. Did her mother remember to return the strappy, silver Celine's and get the half size bigger? Lily glances down at her bare feet and glossless toes. How could she forget? How? She stops with her arms crossed over her, concerned all at once for the grass and the flowers and the crystal and how it could never stay fresh and under this sun. Will the satin, closed-toed shoes work?

"Are you wearing the satin Ralph Lauren's?" Lily stops surprised to be surprised by her mother's bare breasts. Huge, round, hard. After all, Lily was the one to change the gauze after surgery, holding the skin down around the nipples while lifting off the bandages, hoping, praying that the skin didn't stick. She remembers her mother's tired whine and how it always turned into laughter—how they both laughed, her mother holding her breasts in agony. They ate ice cream and watched TV in bed for days. Jacob would bring them take-out french fries and plantain soup from Havana Vieja, serving them in bed then closing the door behind him. Lily secretly waited for her mother's next trip to be freshened up.

"Why can't you wear the Celine's?" Her mother is fiercely plucking the hairs around her nipple in the mirror. She drops the tweezers on the marble counter-top and turns to Lily as if it was her fault. "What shoes are you going to wear? You probably should've thought of this." Her mother has lipstick on her teeth, looking Lily up and down. Once she is done she will look completely different. Her pre-cancerous blotchy skin will be even. Her makeup will look heavy to some, but Lily knows it is necessary. The transformation is vital, but the steps feel too ugly and brightly lit.

"You don't have to get all pissed off." Lily turns her eyes away from her mother's face, burning under the bare bulbs lining the top of the mirror. "I didn't have time to get my toes done."

Her mother shakes her head. "I made you an appointment with Helene." She pauses searching her eyebrows and begins plucking this new area. "If you think living on your own is easier," she laughs smartly, "you can't even keep an appointment."

Lily stands, her mind searching the closet for a pair of shoes. The message is too familiar. Her mom has been piling up stuff for the new apartment for months; silk duvet, embroidered pillows, wrought iron breakfast table, shower caddy, garment boxes, towels, linens, hand woven jute rug, china, wine glasses, and with each purchase, each time she sets something down in the corner of Lily's room, it's with a sigh and a disappointed look that says, without me you won't survive. And Lily half believes her.

"Just wear the Ralph's I'll find something else."

Lily knows this would be her response. She could never let her daughter go out there feeling unpolished, clumsy. Suddenly Dean Martin blasts, "Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow," through the intercom system. Lily rushes out, turning down the music, stopping to gulp from her mother's chardonnay on the way back.

"I told your father to keep it off."

"They could at least hit the switch so it doesn't play in the back of the house. They're just in there, you know, drinking beers." Lily sighs, shoes dangling from her hand. Any chance she can get to tarnish Jacob's sturdy, caring image. Everything about him seems so easy to Lily. My mother's blonde boy, she thinks. Lily swallows her jealousy whole.

"Assholes," her mother growls into the mirror. Lily smiles, slipping into her shoes. "Any stray hairs left?" She shoves her face up to Lily's. Her mother's face is too raw from the microdermabrasion she had that morning. She tries to concentrate in her search but cannot ignore her mother's bare breast touching her upper arm, and the sour wine breath. Nauseous, she turns away feeling her pointy hip bone brush against her mother's soft stomach.

"They're fine," Lily makes out. She slinks off from view, dropping her robe in the carpeted closet, and moves into the bedroom to get dressed.

"Lillian," her mother calls out in a strange softness, "you look good, healthy." The books Lily reads about eating disorders warn the parents to never comment on their child's weight, even in a positive way. But her mother would never consult a book or a professional in dealing with her family's health, especially her own daughter. Lily lets her knowledge, and her mother's groping attempt take over. Redness rushes through her body. Still she needs help zipping up her black silk file dress. Lily comes to the doorway of the bathroom, back to her mother.

"I know what that means mother." She manages to say this while her mother yanks up the last few inches of dress. She feels her stomach breathing in and out against the dress. It is welling up. Hot tears start to come.

"Don't," her mother says right into her neck. Her hands fall from her daughter's shoulders and she turns to get dressed. Lily waits on the bed. They take the long hallway together, clap, clap, clapping toward the foyer where they will welcome the guests. Lily hears the shower start up in Jacob's room. He will join the party later, rested and happy.

The small brown man is in the foyer, his hair now back in a neat ponytail, smoothing down the rich velvet swags covering the table in the entrance. Lily notices him but not as the same person, he is too close and her shoe is not fitting properly. She bends down to try and tighten the strap. They're just too big. She is working at the strap when her mother yanks her up by the thick sash around Lily's waist. The guests are here and Lily follows her mother, smiling, while thinking, what are their names, their names, their names?

She doesn't need to know. Just smile, kiss twice, twirl, stay light. Lily remembers she knows this dance well. The room is full, white perfume and mulled wine so thick it seems to drown out the jazzy Christmas soundtrack. The laughing is closed mouth, floor length gowns sway, and wine glasses are held by the crystal stem. Lily mingles, her mother occasionally nodding her off toward a different set of people. She takes the direction, joining circles, sipping champagne, aware of the sticky gloss smudge along the lip of her glass. She gawks at the woman with the orange tan practically matching the orange hue of her Oscar de la Renta ball gown skirt. Probably over a thousand, she notes. She prefers something simple like this navy silk column with the small keyhole detail in the front. Ralph Lauren, she guesses, it looks like Ralph Lauren. Lily has learned that this is what people are drawn to, simple, elegant, and with a hint of sex appeal. She finds her brother, hands in his pockets, and joins him. Now all she must do is follow him from circle to circle, rest on his conversation, his friendly, easy way, pose next to him so the whole party can see.

Lily watches her mother walk quickly across the living room, her long strand of pink pearls bouncing of her chest. One hand is clutching her left shoulder while the other hand waves

at guests. She is singing out greetings as she weaves through the satin and velvet and wool gabardine and Lily's chest constricts. Her shrill laugh is directed toward no one and nothing. She follows her, lifting a glass of champagne on the way. She finds her in the bathroom off of the dining room, red-nosed, with both of her palms on the gold-leaf counter top, staring at her face in the mirror. And now her chest relaxes, seeing the intense glaze of her mother's eyes, knowing that they will not return to the party. For Easter last year they had thirty five people over for dinner and her mother had finished an expensive bottle of champagne while cooking, the same bottle her father had planned on giving to his business partner as an engagement present. After their fight in the pantry, everything else was ruined for her, the practical solution of just getting another bottle was simply not an option. Lily found her mother in the bedroom, eyes wide and staring at the TV in the dark. She joined her hoping to engage those eyes.

"Mom?"

She jumps, straightening up, relaxing her eyes. Lily closes the bathroom door. She can feel the reflection of the polished fixtures, golden faucet and knobs, deep antique golden sink, beaming in her face. She blinks knowing that this light will never change.

"My strap broke," her mother says. "I was standing there talking, I don't even remember to who, and it just broke." She tries to reach the thin black strap dangling down her back, huffing in an effort to find it.

"How did it break?" Lily asks, bringing her voice as far into reality as she can. Her mother is grunting, reaching behind her, and Lily is momentarily mesmerized by her jiggling tricep, until her mother falls back against the door and crumples down to the floor, her dress high around her thighs.

"Damn it, damn it! Three thousand fucking dollars and this is what I get." Her mother's voice is muffled, coming through her hands, covering her face. Lily lowers herself to the ground, and she wraps her arms around her knees relaxing into the soft smell of Clorox and gardenia potpourri. "I don't know, I don't know how it broke," she begins smaller, pulling her skin back, back toward her hairline. Lily places the champagne flute in her vision. She takes it, the clink from her oversized cocktail ring echoing purely, and gulps it.

Lily is leaving the Christmas lights, the tight smiles, the satin shoes clicking around to group after group—you look fabulous, oh look at you—Lily spinning around in skinny little circles. She leaves the instant glow, endless pairs of eyes watching her, convincing her of her beauty. It is harder to leave Jacob though--watching him, standing next to him. So easy, she thinks, smiling, knowing this is her, here with her mother, alone on the bathroom floor, and Jacob is the party, the real laughter and lights and beauty.

Lily puts her hand on her mother's knee.

"It'd be nice," her mother says looking up at Lily, "if we could get a bottle of the good stuff in here."

Closed

Andrew Cochran

Don called me yesterday while I was stuck in rush-hour traffic on I-275 in Tampa. He calls me every time something happens in De Pere, the small Wisconsin town where we grew up playing tackle football in snow and fishing walleyes out of the Fox River on sticky summer nights. Don's news this time: Matt Garrits had been killed in Iraq.

"I didn't even know he was over there," I said. I took my hand off the wheel and rubbed my brow. Sun hammered off the car ahead of me. "What happened?"

"He was on patrol in Baghdad," Don said. "Middle of the day. A roadside bomb went off and Matt caught some shrapnel in the stomach. He bled to death."

"Unbelievable." The car ahead of me rolled two feet forward. I let mine inch up. Ahead, the sky stretched to a sunny haze, but in the rearview mirror, high clouds were coming in like crumbling white fortresses.

"Yeah, middle of the day," Don said. "He's the first of our high school class to die."

I shook my head. I started to say something about how sad it was, but I couldn't find the words and fell silent.

I remembered when we were ten, and after school all the boys in our class played football in the field at Legion Park, near the grove of oaks that were tinged cinnamon in the autumn air; and I remembered how Matt ran the fastest and hit the hardest. And when he had the ball he couldn't be tackled-three of us would hang on him at once, straining to pull him down, but he kept his balance and pumped his legs until he broke free and raced away downfield.

Now he was the first of us to die.

He'd been the first to do everything. First to smoke a cigarette and first to get drunk. First to shoot a deer, an eight-

pointer, and the first of us to play varsity football under the lights. From the stands we watched him run through warm-ups with the bigger upperclassmen, his white uniform gleaming in the chilled black night.

And Matt was the first of us to have sex. Our freshman year of high school he slept with Maggie Borman, crowned May Queen the previous spring, Maggie we all loved during junior high in that secret, boyish way. She'd gone on to the Catholic high school while the rest of us went to the public one, but Matt dated her into our freshman year. One night, after a party, he brought her back to his dad's place behind Art and Erma's Tavern. His dad was hunting elk in Colorado, and Matt did what we all prayed we'd get to do every time our parents left for a few days. He went all the way with Maggie right on the drab olive couch where the next afternoon Don and I sat as Matt told us his tale. We leaned forward and listened to him as though he were an explorer just returned from some place of fable. I wanted my eyes to shine like his, with that excitement, and I wanted his smile, which charmed teachers even as they scolded him, the smile that was certainly what Maggie saw as she heard herself say, Yes.

"His dad is having him buried here," Don said. "The body should be back early next week. The funeral's the following Saturday."

The car ahead rolled forward and stopped. Its bumper flashed in the sun. I pushed the brake a little harder.

"I'll be there," I said. "Let's go together."

"Certainly," Don said, and from a small break in his voice I knew that we would stand at the gravesite, quiet, our silence a third presence there with us.

We exchanged good-byes, and I tossed my phone onto the passenger seat. I recalled Matt's face when he told us about making love to Maggie—his cheeks flushed like he'd just come in from a blizzard, his blue eyes smoky and bright—and I hoped his casket would be closed.

Bleach

Ryan Meany

Bill Connelly is the guy who wrestled the bull shark to shore while it attacked his nephew. Bill thought Dalton had been struck down by a wave. His cries were more like the whimpers of a child being sniffed by a big dog. He and Bill were the only ones in the ocean. The loud cries were not Dalton's. They came from the hard shore, a wave of people stopping at the ocean, screaming and yelling and pointing. Someone held a woman from running into the water. The big black dog sniffing Dalton was a black-gray shark with Dalton's leg in its mouth, spilling him into the ocean. The red cloud looked like the fake cloud of blood in movies. The ocean came to Bill's waist. He doesn't know how. He saw the fish was just a little longer than him. The tail was sandpaper skin, flimsy as a vinyl record, and gas powered. It pulled Bill down and he found the bottom with his feet, the tail cutting his fingers, whipping his arms left and right. He hadn't wrestled guys this fast before. He still doesn't know how he knew that a shark would drown if you pulled it backward, but he pulled him toward shore. Dalton's leg was coming off. Bill thought to yank Dalton from the shark's mouth. You punch a man in the nose to end the fight quickly. Bill punched the soft nose twice or four times hard in the shallow splashing water. He couldn't believe how soft the nose was. He heard cheering far off. Dalton was limply white after the shark let go and took Bill's knee faster than the most frightened man could move. All three of them would die together in the shallow water. Bill dug under the shark's left eye with his thumb. They were red-washed onto the hard shore. He punched the very soft nose with one fist and punched the softer gills with the other. They were both winning until the shark let go of Bill's knee. He thought he'd been shot after he heard a shot, but the shark stopped moving. The crowd was big around him. He

couldn't see Dalton. Lotion, sweat. Everyone seemed to know one another. Bill lay in soft dry sand. No reporter would bother to mention he fell there after swinging at some tourist who was filming. Bill couldn't see the shark. The people had closed in on it. Everyone was concerned. He didn't know them. They said he blacked out.

Bill's high school football team, the Rangers, had been getting their asses beat. He wasn't playing because he'd broken his ankle the last time they'd been getting their asses beat. He yelled every time the Rangers' defense, his defense, allowed another six points. While the crowd moaned and cursed, Hannah, years before she was Dalton's mother, looked at Bill as if he were the only person in the stands, shook her head as if she wanted to ask him something she knew he couldn't answer, then she kissed him. Bill remembers that well, his ankle aching in September, the smell of warm hotdogs blowing through the bleachers.

His coach hadn't liked the idea of his sitting in the stands with his girlfriend instead of on the sidelines with his team. Bill introduced him to Hannah after the pep-rally. "I wouldn't be doing the team any good if I let this pretty young lady watch the game with someone else." He looked at Bill: "Better keep her, though."

He might have kept her longer than a month if not for a half bottle of Jack Daniels and a topless Heidi Garcia. Bill was a punk then. He was still throwing bags of shit at kids' cars with his teammates. Now he owns a successful sports bar. Thirty-five hanging televisions, four big screens. People eating, drinking and seducing under a constellation of football, baseball, motorcycle racing, golf, tennis, basketball. Bill walks through the aisles shaking hands. He sits in the control room adjusting sound, starting hockey games, stopping boxing matches. He tries to pick out the patrons who know whether they're watching something live or taped. His employees call

him Mr. Connelly, even though he tells them all he's Bill. Their need for him is clear. He'll return to them tomorrow.

Riding through the beach town Hannah shushed Donnie after he cursed the zigzagging lines of cars, the poor city planning, the old farts from Indiana in front of them, their left turn-signal pulsing falsely. Dalton had awakened and was now bobbing and asking questions about waves and the skateboarders on the sidewalk. Bill decided he would put Dalton on his shoulders after they got out of the car.

Hannah put Bill off in high school because of the change in her eyes, the growing attentiveness. When she called him he could tell she had been trying not to call. She pushed down an excitement in her voice. He wanted to think he was worthy of her care because he knew she was a better person, more lively and capable, happier. After she found out about Heidi Garcia she cried in her parents' bathroom. Bill was thankful they were out of town. They were nice people and they liked him. He put his foot in the doorway and pushed himself in. She missed him with a bar of soap. She screamed, "Don't touch me!" and threatened to call the cops if he didn't leave.

At their ten-year reunion Bill introduced Hannah to Donnie, who was two years younger and in high school had not hung out with Bill's friends. "You were such an asshole," Hannah said punching Bill in the arm. Blue and silver balloons lay lethargically on the convention-hall tables. He'd switched his and his brother's name tags. Hannah hadn't been fooled.

After Donnie started laughing Hannah laughed louder. Bill said, "You should have dated Donnie," he said. "He's uglier, but he's the one with all the money. Don't blame me."

Hannah pushed back her bangs and smiled, a little uncomfortable and, Bill saw, a little pleased. Something was already happening, and Bill was glad. He was proud to be happy for his brother where an old girlfriend was involved. Donnie's face reddened. He smiled and looked down, swirling his drink. Donnie's relationships had always been screwed from the begin-

ning because he left himself open, begging for love's salvation, arms flailing like a castaway. Eventually Hannah embraced him. They married a year after the reunion.

Across the scorching parking lot Dalton sat on Bill's shoulders, his hands on his uncle's forehead. Hannah and Donnie were walking to the drugstore to buy film. They'd brought a camera and a video camera, which Bill thought was stupid. But he'll be the first to watch the tape when enough time has passed, searching for nonexistent clues, secrets, miscues. He'll watch Hannah putting sunscreen on Dalton's face. He'll hear himself ask Dalton to go in the water with him. He'll watch Hannah wave to the camera, one hand still on Dalton's shoulder. After years have passed and Bill has watched the video several times, the strangers gradually become the foreground. A couple walks by Dalton so closely they could have touched him. Did they ever realize he was the boy attacked by the shark? Did they ever have kids? That biker guy, cigarette hanging out of his mouth, about to throw the Frisbee: would he embrace his girlfriend so she couldn't see the shark tearing Dalton apart? And those old folks there under the large white umbrella. They are probably dead by now. These are their ghosts, and like ghosts they were only a few yards away from Bill and he never sees them. Surely their children would be thankful to have a copy of this unknown moment in their parents' lives, a trivial moment then, the old woman reading, the old man tinkering with something too small to be a radio, a moment with no significance until a lot had been forgotten and too much time has passed. In the final shot Bill is walking to the water. Dalton is running.

Bill's hands were wrapped all the way around Dalton's soft lean legs, his red and white shoes the size of a dinner rolls. Bill took them off and put them in his pockets. He hadn't often been left alone with Dalton, who was easy to love. He planned. He would carry him to the beach first, then come back to the car for the cooler and towels. He would pick a spot for Dalton near a family to deter any perverts.

"I'm not a monkey," Dalton said as Bill carried him.

"Yes you are."

"No I'm not." He tried hard to pull Bill's head back.

Bill went wobbly. "Uh-oh. Shouldn't have had all those beers."

"Stop!"

"Uh-oh. Better hold me up."

"I can't! Stop!"

Bill laughed.

"That's not very funny, Uncle Bill."

Bill laughed and tickled Dalton's thighs.

They passed a middle-aged couple. The woman wore a long T-shirt over her bathing suit. Her husband seemed to be wishing for his coffee and tie. Bill wondered whether the man had asked his wife to wear the shirt, or she had made the decision herself. She waved to Dalton, a four-fingered, hand-puppet wave. Dalton held Bill's forehead firmly.

"Let me put you down for a second."

"Why?"

"Just a second. I want to take off my shirt."

Bill's bigger than he was when he played football. He used to work out because he played football. He now works out because he doesn't play football. Dalton had always been impressed by Bill's size, which meant a lot to Bill. After he took off his shirt Dalton said, "Hot hot," marching in place. "The sidewalk's hot!"

"Sorry. I'm sorry. Here." Bill handed him his shirt and put him back on his shoulders.

"Ouch."

"You'll make it, monkey."

He pulled Bill's hair. "Stop calling me that."

"Okay. I'm a monkey."

"Where's Mom?"

"She's coming. They went to get film."

Bill tried to make eye contact with a couple of teenage

boys whose shorts were barely held on by belts. One wore a gold watch. They talked and gestured as if in a rap video. Bill wanted them to see Dalton on his shoulders.

In college Bill broke the same ankle doing the same thing for the last time. A bone is never right after it breaks. His college coach had already warned him about his playing style. "You abandon your body ever time you tackle. Line your man up. If his head's forward of his legs, go for the legs. He's got to take most of the hit. Not you. Learn it."

Bill thought his high-school coach should have been a military commander, until he got to college. His college coach thought and saw beyond strategy. He knew how players were going to perform before the game started. Sometimes for no obvious reason he would leave starters on the bench.

"You're not here today," he'd tell them.

"But coach—"

He iced over, the father you don't question, that paralyzing look. The starter would take off his helmet and sit. Sometimes he'd spit or jolt out a damn under his breath, but the conversation was over. He was mostly angry at himself for whatever thing Coach had sniffed out.

Coach was part Napoleon, part witch.

Bill never sat during a game. He probably should have. He never did "learn it," either. Maybe because he got up after every play, Coach gave up scolding him for abandoning his body. It took Bill years to understand what that meant. He tackled the way he'd been taught by his high-school coach, who said that when you lined up the guy running with the ball you had to imagine four guys running directly behind him and you had to hit the first guy hard enough to make all five fall. Bill understood that. He would find out late in the game, late in the week, late in the season that he'd given this receiver a concussion or had made that running back cough blood. The team and fans had all sorts of nicknames for him. Bill loved playing. He

respected his position. To fill it fully he could not just be himself. He was number forty-seven, the last line of defense on the defense. Every touchdown scored during the game would be his fault, as he viewed it, but he would have no time to worry about what mistakes he might have made during the game. He was a projectile with a pulse. Thought was simple and directed, no ruminating; time mattered too much. If someone came within his range his job was to hit them so hard they wouldn't want to be hit by him again. The recipient of the ideal hit hoped the next play called for someone else to run with the ball. Bill stalked the backfield. He focused on the ball. He concentrated on the ball carrier and attacked him with the worst intentions. The harder he hit the louder the fans cheered.

Usually the talkers on the other teams were the running backs. They would be so pumped up when they came onto the field that they'd convinced themselves they were forty pounds heavier.

"You gonna hit me tonight, Connelly?" they'd say. "Heard you can hit. I wish you'd hit me. Man I wish you would."

Bill hit them hard whether they wished or not. There was no such thing as hitting too hard. Not hitting hard enough lost games. Some good running backs would still talk and wish after Bill hit them, but the one who eventually went on to do well in the pros never said anything. Bill doesn't remember even a direct look from him while they were on the field together. Bill admired him. He didn't care about Bill's reputation, the hits, the hurt, the aching all through next week. His eyes were on the end zone behind Bill.

During Bill's last game he ran a cut to line up a receiver whose uniform was orange and white, candy colored. Had Bill not been playing he would have thought the cut impossible to make. He blindsided the receiver. The guy lost the ball. Bill's team recovered it. The play ended. The receiver was on the ground searching for his breath. Receivers usually take hits better than that. He had bet his ass and his career on the improb-

ability of the cut Bill would have to make to hit him. Bill was on the ground, too. His sock was bloody. His ankle had broken through the skin. As the trainers helped him to the sidelines coach patted him on the head. They never spoke again.

Dalton was up to his neck in sand when Hannah and Donnie came with the film. Bill watched women walk up and down the beach. Most of the good-looking ones contradicted, or at least attempted to hide, one of their intentions, which was to gauge their public value in bras and underwear. Their indifferent, if not snobby, attitude silenced and at the same time implied questions: "Could you start loving me as I am here, now?" Yes, Bill thought.

"Hold on a second, honey," Hannah said. "I want to take a picture."

"I'm sick of this now, Mommy."

Bill hated that Dalton said Mommy instead of Mom.

"I know, honey. Let Mommy load the film."

Her calling herself Mommy was a good example of why he and she would have never worked out.

"Uncle Bill almost made us fall."

Bill chuckled.

"How'd he do that, Dalt?" Hannah asked.

"We almost fell on the parking lot."

Donnie wasn't playing with the video camera yet. He was spreading beach towels. Embroidered on them were large cartoonish lug-wrenches and sockets. Bill also owns a couple of the towels. Donnie's company sells tools and merchandise that advertises the tools.

"Bill," Hannah whined playfully. "Why did my Dalt almost fall in the parking lot?" She concentrated on loading the camera.

"Like I told Dalton. Too many beers."

She looked at Bill. He thought she would drop the camera. "What?" he asked.

"Hurry, Mommy. The sun's hurting my face."

She asked Donnie if he put sunscreen on Dalton. He was adjusting the cooler so its base would fit flat and stable in the sand. "When would I have done that?"

"Okay, baby," Hannah said. "Come here." She held out her arms for Dalton and asked Donnie where he put the lotion.

"In the bag."

"Which bag?"

"The one with \dots The clear plastic one." Donnie fumbled around in the bag. "Here."

"What about the picture, Mommy? I'm getting up now."

"It's okay. Forget the picture. You need sunscreen."

Dalton rose from the sand like a monster slowed by its size, his fingers curled claws.

"I'm coming to get you, Mommy." He growled. "The sand makes me invisible."

Hannah turned her head left, right. "Where's Dalton?" She held up her arms inquisitively.

Trying not to giggle Dalton walked like Frankenstein toward Hannah.

Bill wanted to tell Hannah he couldn't turn her little boy into a drunk just by saying beer. He thought she sheltered him.

Bill was a little miserable. The beach had brought it out of him: the cheerful crowd among the sweet coconut lotion, the radios, the glib disc jockeys, the giggles and splashing. Water, sand, sun, the factional togetherness, all of it seemed an okay reason for so many people to be so chipper at the same time. He decided to join them so he wouldn't waste his day, and who knows what else. He made himself feel better by studying the kinds of people he can't stand. The guy in bikini briefs. The woman subjecting everyone to her pale lumpy legs, shouting commands at her swarming kids. "The fat ones always make the most noise," Bill said.

"What?" Donnie asked, messing with the video camera. Yes, Bill was already feeling better. "Dalton, hey, when your Mom's done stinking up your face, let's go find us some women."

Hannah had Dalton by the chin as she rubbed the lotion on his forehead, nose, cheeks. He tried to look at Bill but couldn't turn his head. "No," he said.

"Why not?"

He looked at Hannah.

"Then come swimming with me."

"Okay," he said through pinched cheeks.

"Yeah?"

Hannah kissed him. Bill is certain.

"Just don't dunk me."

"I wouldn't dunk you."

"Say hi to the camera," Donnie said.

The day Hannah returned from the hospital after having Dalton, Bill saw that her and his brother's relationship had been solidified unshakably. He felt like an architect might the first time he stands back and looks up at the completed skyscraper. Hannah's hair was matted and burning gold as she held baby Dalton all bundled up in thick soft love. Her eyes smoldered with sleeplessness. Her beauty had been enhanced, or completed, and she stood high above her awareness of it. She was unreachable. In the kitchen Donnie shuffled for something that was important to his new view of the world. Now if Hannah just pointed he would jump. Bill was proud of him. Hannah handed Dalton to Bill with a delicacy that did not surprise him. He'd like to say Dalton was the most precious little baby ever, but he doesn't remember exactly what Dalton looked like as a newborn. He remembers the slight weight in his arms and wanting to return it to Hannah. He was anxious for some reason. "So can Daddy go play golf now or what?" he asked.

Dalton and Bill went into the ocean because they were at the beach. When the temperature of the water is right certain kinds of fish feed closer to shore and bull sharks feed on those fish. Bull sharks aren't made to find food way out in the deep ocean. Bill might be morbid, but he would like to know how much time passed between the moment the shark first lined up Dalton and the instant it bit. On television he's seen Great Whites attack sea lions swimming on the surface. They circle under the prey for a while before they find the correct angle. The shark launches after the sea lion with such force that it actually ends up out of the water, a fish ton with the small added weight of the sea lion and whatever great many pounds of force are crushing the sea lion, all hanging above the ocean for a second. No stadium, no fans.

The crowd on the shore was screaming.

The sports and eating continue. Tomorrow on crutches Bill will go back to his business. The questions his staff will most want to ask, he predicts, will be those they wouldn't dare to. Instead they'll say the things they think they're expected to and he'll only expect them to if they don't. He's convinced that the best thing he can do for his brother and Hannah is leave them alone to decide whether to collapse. He won't go to the hospital where the doctors are probing, trying to save Dalton. They're hunting for something else. Dalton wasn't the reason those doctors went to medical school. Real doctors always say they can't take their work home with them, they can't let one dead patient ruin their lives. Dalton's doctors would prefer he live, Bill knows. He's sure saving lives is the fun part of their job, but he also knows they wouldn't put up with those hours and all that blood for minimum wage. They want to move on. They want a vacation in Spain. They want a husband who matters. They're a little better than the bull shark that gave them something to do, and Bill is the last person to judge them. He was the first shark who tried to save Dalton, instantly hungry for his life. His focus was inhuman. Dalton could have been a seal floating above him on the waves. His concentration was ferocious. More notably, his ferocity was familiar. He might have been waiting for such a chance to prove his love for Dalton, not to himself or Dalton but to Hannah and his brother. He might have been circling below the waves praying for a disturbance on the surface. He imagines that the Great White absolutely forgets himself by aiming at those objects that sustain him. He misses his prey, he moves on. His loss is a killer's. He'll feed elsewhere.

Slipping Through the Light Blue Water

Andrew Plattner

At sunrise, George, Gwen and their mother were on the road, pushing ahead with only gas and bathroom stops and it seemed as if they were going to make Tampa by nightfall. This was until their mother nodded in the direction of an approaching Holiday Inn billboard and said, "Let's call it a day already." She had been quiet since a Burger Chef lunch, but George wondered if a hangover was the culprit there. She had been drinking last night, listening to the radio, singing along with one song, "I Don't Want to Know," by Fleetwood Mac. The sun was still floating well over the horizon when they checked into the Holiday Inn of Citra and right after they dropped off their bags in their rooms, their mother wanted George and Gwen to join her out by the pool. None of them had brought along any swim wear, not that any was needed back in Birmingham. The city had a public pool, but from what Gwen and George heard it was more toilet than anything, that before going into the water you pretty much needed to dress like an astronaut.

Their mother chose a chaise lounge, kept her children in lounges on either side of her and on two separate occasions, she did rise, tell them to stay put and then she walked for the lobby in the main building. There was a bar in there somewhere; each time, she returned carrying a clear plastic cup with a strong smelling drink. "The Baltimore Orioles once stayed here for an entire winter," their mother said lying still, breaking a silence that had gradually enveloped them. Drink #2 rested on her stomach, the melting ice of it. She was squinting when she turned to see George. "There's a team picture over the beer taps." She snapped her fingers lightly in the air. "Wouldn't that be something, playing baseball and living in hotels all the time?"

George's lounge felt soft, it felt as if there were nothing to him now other than what he was thinking. "I would like to live in hotels forever," he said.

"Your dad says that," his mother said. "It makes him feel as if nothing has been decided, specifically, I mean. Christ, I can just imagine how he's living down there." She frowned, considered George for a moment. "I'm not trying to run him down," she said, in a quiet way. "I mean, I like hotels, too." His mother waited for George to agree, which he did, with a nod. "What are you doing over there?" she said turning her face towards the sky.

"Oh, this and that," Gwen said. What she was doing was looking out at the swimming pool, watching something about it.

"Are you happy right now?" their mother said.

"Of course," Gwen said.

His mother made a face at George, and then rolled over in Gwen's direction. Gwen did not react as her mother reached over and brushed at her forearm. "My angel," her mother said, softly. Gwen turned slightly, gave her mother a look as if their roles were reversed. "I know, Gwen," her mother said. George wasn't sure what was happening, but he supposed the unspoken subject was school. He was afraid of that, the world that they'd been living in before his mother cashed in this bet George's father had called and encouraged her to make a couple of days earlier. That world probably had not gone anywhere.

"I'd like to live just like this," he said aloud and both his mother and sister turned to look in his direction. George shrugged, then looked out to the pool and tried not to feel defensive.

"We look like a bunch of rubes sitting out here," he heard his sister say.

Then, George simply closed his eyes again.

"Hey," his sister was saying, some time later. She was up from her lounge now, leaning over him, jabbing his arm. "Let's go watch TV in the room." Instinctively, George turned to view his mother. She was sleeping, or seemed to be, her face bathed in sunlight, her thick blond hair tussled. "Maybe they'll have something different on here," Gwen said.

"Right," George said.

"Let her sleep," Gwen said in a whisper, when George turned again. "We're safe here, George, we're okay."

The children took the room Gwen and their mother was sharing. Gwen turned on the TV, kept tapping the remote, changing channels. They hadn't had a remote on the set they'd left behind in Birmingham, so that was part of it. She went around the dial twice, and then settled on a movie with Peter Fonda driving a Trans Am, Karen Black riding in the front seat with him. There were two beds in the room, George and Gwen each sat on the edge of one, still as stones. Whenever there was a commercial break, it went to a live studio shot of two grinning men, discussing aluminum siding.

George said, "I wish you'd cool it on the school talk, you freakin' goof. Kids everywhere would kill to be us right now."

"I bet the schools are better. Maybe there won't be any Jim Bobs down here." She put her upper teeth over her lower lip. "Jim Bob do good. Jim Bob made doody." George was just shaking his head. "I want to go to a school where I have to wear a uniform," she said. "I want to fit in for a while. Maybe for forever."

"You're crazy," George said, a moment later.

"You don't want that. I mean, you have been around that long, right George? You have been paying attention to at least that much?"

"I don't want to be like them," he said, his eyes on the set. "I never said that I did \dots I'm not good at school, man," he said. "I can't concentrate."

"You don't try," she said. "You're like all the boys I know. Scared."

"I'm not scared," he said.

"Okay," she said.

"I'm not," he said.

"You think we're going to get a satellite dish or something?" Gwen said.

"Yeah," he said, quietly. "Sure." Gwen was a good sister, he liked her. George wished he had a little brother, maybe a year or two younger than Gwen, that he could boss around on a regular basis. You couldn't boss a sister around. A sister could be pretty nice to you, but you could never tell her what to do. George allowed his eyes to focus on the TV, but he was thinking about school, that here he was a sophomore and he was going to be a new kid, right along with Gwen. George suddenly felt nervous and gloomy and somewhere way inside him he understood none of this was going to work out very well. Not any of it. Not even the stuff about Jesus.

He and Gwen watched the movie for a while and outside the drawn curtains, George could tell the sky was darkening. He didn't care much about the movie, that Peter Fonda and Karen Black were having a good time pulling off various capers, but then the car they were driving got plowed over by a train. The credits were rolling.

"I knew that was going to happen," he said.

"Bull crap, George."

"Something like it, I mean," he said.

"Whatever," she said, in an annoyed way. He turned to look her way, see exactly what the problem was and before he could really tell anything, he heard his mother's voice outside the door, shouting at someone, swearing at them. "Fuck you, go fuck yourself!" The knob twisted, but the door was locked. George scrambled in that direction, pulled it open and in swept his mother, nude, her shoulders pale. She pulled her clothes to her chest, though George could see the nest of hair between her legs. A man wearing eyeglasses and a green vest stood by the pool's edge. "We're getting out of here right now!" his mother

said. "George, get over to your room and get packed!"

"I never unpacked, Mom," he said.

"Then, get your stuff and get out to the car," she said, more calmly. George didn't look back, had taken his room key from his pocket. In his own room, he grabbed his gym bag, opened the door, moved in the direction of the swimming pool. The man in the vest was still there.

"We swim with our clothes on around here!" the man said as George strode past him. George walked through the lobby, slapped his key on the front desk and kept going. Once he was out at their Oldsmobile, he set his gym bag on the hood and started pacing around. He wondered if there would be more trouble, why the man in the vest was still standing out where he was. George was separated from the pool area by a hurricane fence, though it was only up to his shoulders. George could clear that fence easily if there was trouble and for some reason he believed there would be. He understood the man was standing out there because he wanted to see George's mother again. George decided this man was the one who'd caught her swimming in the nude and that the man for some reason, wanted to see her with her clothes on. George felt disgusted by him, but he didn't know what to do about it.

George and the man waited. Five minutes. Ten minutes, longer. George kept staring at the man in the green vest for a good deal of this time and he tried to decide what the man was thinking, that if he had demanded the Linzer family leave the hotel immediately why the man was not over there pounding on the door to the room that held George's mother. Any woman who would swim nude in the Holiday Inn might be capable of anything. George could not help but imagine his mother swimming in the pool. The sunset was bringing a peach-purple light to the sky and the man in the vest was getting darker. He imagined that their mother was telling Gwen about it, what she had done and how nice it would for them both because Gwen took pleasure in disapproving in some of their mother's personal de-

cisions. As the man in the vest continued to stand out there by the pool, his hands in his pockets, George thought of his father and what would be waiting for them all down in Tampa. George suddenly found it impossible to believe that his father would not try to win his mother back. George wondered if this was the point of that they were doing now. That she wanted to give him the chance.

Were they about to go back in time? That seemed a possibility, at least in the sense that there would be familiar things waiting for them all. His father, a racetrack. But something would need to be different, too. Somebody just needed to figure out what that should be . . .

When his mother and Gwen finally emerged from their room, the man out there was nothing more than a silhouette. His mother and his sister walked in a steady, purposeful way and one of them said something to him as they passed and George thought he heard a faint plop, something light hitting the water. Gwen would tell him later: The room key.

The Linzers wound up that night at the Mona Lisa Motel a mile down the highway from the Holiday Inn. George had his own room, and his mother and his sister, seeing his quiet behavior, decided to sit up and watch TV with him for an hour before they adjourned to the room they were sharing. Everyone was careful not to talk about what had gotten them kicked out of the Holiday Inn. George was unhappy, though he could not say why exactly. They would see his father tomorrow, he was sure of that. His mother did some chattering about the show they all were watching together--a repeat episode of Hill Street Blues--and Gwen would either agree or disagree and it made him wonder if overall things were going to work out a lot better for the women in his family. "You okay?" his mother said, towards the end of the episode.

"Yes, Mom," he said.

This motel was an incredibly cheap one. George's room, he thought, smelled like a city bus, and literally there was a

hole in the wall, a small one, next to the mirror in his bathroom. The hole was New Jersey shaped and beyond it was darkness. George slid his hand through and was halfway up to his forearm when he finally touched the drywall of the next room. He lay in bed that night and, from beyond the wall at the headboard of his bed, heard the murmuring of his mother and sister. He thought of going over there, just sitting in and talking about whatever it was that they were talking about. He thought of his mother slipping through the light blue water of the Holiday Inn swimming pool. He thought of that as he heard her humming lightly after Gwen had apparently gone to sleep.

In the morning, the three of them had breakfast at a Denny's restaurant near the entrance ramp to I-75 and while sitting across from his mother and his sister, George found himself in a much better mood. He ate all he food on his plate and accepted Gwen's plate when she held it over to him. There was a strip of bacon, hash browns, a slice of toast. Their mother hardly touched the small bowl of grits she'd ordered. Part of it was the dream he'd had last night where the thirtyish, strawberry-haired librarian back in Birmingham, Miss Janet, was filing books while wearing a red bikini. She wore her eyeglasses and had to stand on her tiptoes to file some books. She waved to George every time as she pushed by the portable book cart. Her assistants were also in bikinis. When George had awakened that morning he'd felt so happy he run to the bathroom mirror to see if anything about him was different.

"You guys gonna miss me?" his mother said, after George had finished the leftovers. He and his sister both looked at their mother in the same way, alarmed. Their mother seemed to snap out of something, the cloudy mood she'd been in. "I'm gonna leave you with your dad for a day kids, you know that," she said. "Get things organized."

"Stay with us tonight," Gwen said. Out of nowhere, she was smiling brightly, as if nothing could ever be set in stone. Their mother patted Gwen's arm and Gwen's expression lost

some energy. "Please," Gwen said.

"I made a plan, in my mind," their mother said. "He can be here for me, for us. But we are not as his disposal. We will remain independent." She checked the expressions of both her children. "I'll find an apartment in the city and you both will live with me. You'll have your own rooms. We'll be together. And your dad, he'll have to keep up." Her voice grew less sure of things.

"Dad will forget that we are alive," Gwen said. "Or, as soon as you leave, he'll get all clumsy."

"Maybe he'll take you to the races," their mother said.

"Hoo-ray," Gwen said.

By noon, the three of them were just outside the city limits of Tampa and then George was reading the instructions his mother had written down about how to get to the A-Day Motel. George was trying to watch for the right exit signs while Gwen sat in the backseat with her arms crossed, watching everything in front of them. She was inconsolable and George and their mother had stopped trying to get her to speak. Then, before any of them knew it, the Oldsmobile was pulling onto an asphalt lot, easing their way towards a small building with a wooden sign perched atop the roof like a weather vane. The sign said 'A-Day.' George's mother eased the car to a stop, looked to her left and right, and while trying to decide which direction to turn, she spotted George's father standing outside, just in front of an opened room door. George saw his mother swallow and it surprised him. His father seemed huge out there, standing with his hands in his pockets, waiting. His father wore a royal blue shirt with a collar and khaki pants. His mother slowly turned the steering wheel and eased the car in that direction. She stopped the car a few feet from where he stood and then no one seemed to know what to do next. George's mother lowered her window. And waited. His father walked over to her side, and in a move that George instantly admired, casually crossed his arms on the window sill.

"Hi there, family," his father said.

"Hey, Dad," George said, after his mother had just nodded her reply. His father's hair was brushed back and he was cleanly shaved. George was trying to nod and smile, show his father it was all okay, but all he could think was, He'll never let go. George had never felt as positive of anything in his entire life. His father looked older, more worn that George remembered, even if they had just been away from one another for a month. Strands of light hair at his father's temples shone in the sunlight.

"How's my girl?" his father said, looking back to Gwen. She, too, seemed taken aback. He reached his hand past their mother's shoulder and Gwen reached up and their hands met in a clumsy way. He nodded, looked back to their mother. "You gonna come in for a minute, anyway?" he said.

"Yeah, okay, sure," their mother said.

He stepped back from the car. When George got out, he and his father were looking at one another from across the car roof. "You guys bring anything with you?" his father said.

"In the trunk, Dad," George said. His father's expression was as if he were trying to put something together, perhaps what his family had been up to for the past couple of days. George's mother was holding out the car keys. George met his father at the trunk and after he'd opened the trunk, his father said, "This is it?"

"We packed quick," George said, trying not to sound as if there were doubts inside him. His father was plucking gym bags and plastic grocery sacks from the trunk, trying to hold too much, George thought. And, he didn't know whose was whose. George's mother arrived then, wedged herself between them and flattened her hands on certain items.

"Just leave that, Lyle," she said. "Mmm-hmm, that too. Let George do it, let him get what he needs." It sounded as if she was about to sprint for the driver's seat and just take off.

"Okay," he said, quietly like she'd really made her point.

Then, the three of them were standing back from the trunk. George's parents both had free hands, but she closed it. "It's room seven there," his father said, after they began walking.

His mother tapped on a closed window. "Come on, Gwen," she said. "Let's go." George kept moving as he heard a car door open and close. Then, there was simply the sound of footsteps, the four of them walking for the room with the opened door. Gwen was the last to arrive inside their father's motel room, and when she reached to close the door, her mother said, "Just leave it partway, honey." Gwen crossed her arms and stayed close to the doorway, right by the air conditioning unit in the window. The room smelled like a pine air freshener, but the thin brown carpeting had specks, cigarette burns and a shiny gray stain at the foot of the bed, like somebody had dripped candle wax. His father sat on the bed and his mother took a chair positioned by a small table near where Gwen stood. George wound up between a pine bureau and a chrome clothes rack. The father had his windbreaker hanging there, along with a few shirts. His boots and sneakers were lined up at the foot of the rack and George considered this, imagined his father leaning over this very spot earlier in the day, lining these shoes up a certain way. George understood one thing at least and it was that his father wanted this room to look as if things were going all right.

"That was a good horse you picked out, Daddy," Gwen said and George's head turned sharply at this because it was like he and his sister were thinking approximately the same thing.

The horse he'd picked out, this was the reason they were here now. Their father had called two days ago, had this sure thing for their mother to bet. He had left Birmingham after one of their knock-down drag-out hollerfests and a few days later, of course, he'd begun calling the house again. Trying to sound like it was all going according to plan, as usual. He had gotten another job as a groom, which is what he had been in Birmingham, too. Last year, he had taken out his trainer's license, tried

to make a go out it running a stable himself. But that had been a disaster. In six months time, the family was broke, owed the world and a few people on the planet over. His father resorted to fixing a race, or at least attempting to. One of the jocks going in on it sang for stewards before the thing even happened, though. George's father was a nobody, easy to be an example of, and he was given a five-year suspension from training horses. Even George understood that this was probably not the worst thing that could happen, that to everyone but his mother, his father would be better off if he was simply a groom. His father enjoyed the racetrack life, that was the point. Away from it, he'd be worse, and a lot worse off.

And George's father did have a good eye for horseflesh. When his father had called from Tampa about this one particular horse, his mother did not seem quite as angry about how things were turning out. When it was time for the horse to run, she drove across town, to the dog track, which also offered simulcast betting on horse racing from all across the country. She returned beaming, dazed, even let the kids hold the thick stack of money she'd won. Sometime after this, too soon perhaps, his mother decided the family could be together again, at least approximately so.

"Well, good, yeah," their father was saying now. He sat there, nodding, watching their mother for a second. "That was exciting. I mean, it brought all of you here to me." George supposed it was a pretty thing to say, but it was very much unlike his father to speak this way. He's been alone down here, George thought. George supposed he understood something else now, that if the horse had lost his father would have taken the first bus heading north again. That scene back home certainly would have been a lot worse than this one. There were a million race horses out there-this time he had found the right one.

"What have you done about rooms for the kids, Lyle?" George's mother said, in a guarded way.

"Either side is occupied," he said, pointing an index fin-

ger in the air and moving his hand like a windshield wiper. "So, I got her twelve, around the corner there. I'm gonna get a cot from the front desk guy. George can just stay here with me."

His mother said, "Around the corner?" She was shaking her head and looked as if they had been talking to one another for a lot longer. "This is a young girl here."

"It's just . . ." he said, pointing. "A few yards away." She was still shaking her head. "Listen, you're the one who wants them to stay here."

"I want them to stay with you," she said.

"In one room?"

George's mother offered a quick, irritated smile. She looked over to Gwen, whose expression, George thought, was difficult to read. "Gwen can just come with me," their mother said. "Girls night out." Their mother did not sound playful. "That okay with you, George?"

He snores. George wanted to say that, but he held back. "Sure, Mom," he said. His father turned a bit, gave George a nod.

"Okay," his mother said, quietly. She glanced at Gwen, who had just swallowed. "Settled," his mother said.

"I have missed you all, a lot," his father said. "You know that right?"

"Yes, Daddy," Gwen said.

"Of course," George said, from behind him.

"I've got big plans," their father said. He waited and after a second George wanted to speak because he knew that someone should. His father was a horse groom and this was a bleak motel room. "You're so beautiful," his father said to his mother.

"Lyle," she said, quietly.

"Shoot me," he said, as quietly.

"Look," she said, slapping her hands lightly on her thighs. "I gotta take a walk, okay?" She was shaking her head, looking to her children for support. "I just want to want to walk around for a minute outside . . . stay here," she said, touch-

ing Gwen's shoulder on the way out. She disappeared into the doorway of bright sunlight while the rest of them remained still. The children's father was smiling in a wry way, had leaned forward, let his arms hang loosely on the knees. George had an odd thought then and it was that if his father had to part for good with either his children or his wife, he would pick his wife. George's mother would choose her children. George wondered if it at some point it all might actually come down to this. Then he wondered if each one of them would simply be better off by themselves.

"... Mom just drove to Birmingham OTB parlor by herself," Gwen was saying. "We waited at home."

"Didn't know what to think, right?," he said. "I'm sorry kids. One day, maybe, you'll be a part of all this. Maybe you can get closer next race... sometimes I see kids standing on the hoods of their daddy's cars in the parking lot." George did look Gwen's way at this point, the both of their expressions like, Yeah, that sounds like a blast. Their father noticed the quiet, looked at her, then him. "I've got a horse," he said. "I mean that I have a new plan you're really going to like."

George's mother suddenly appeared. "I'm going to take Gwen now, Lyle," she said. "I need some rest."

"Just take the room down there," he said. "I already paid for it." $\!\!\!$

"No," George's mother said, her expression injured. She noticed George sitting where he was. "I'll pick you up for breakfast in the morning, my baby," she said. "Around eight. You okay?" her voice softened at that.

"Yeah, Mom," he said. "We're fine." He surprised himself with that 'we' part, but he guessed his father appreciated it. And, a moment later, his mother and his sister had vanished through the sunlight.

In another moment, George's father said quietly, "She thought it would be easy, I guess." He turned and regarded his son in an even manner. George wanted to snap at him, he could not stand the idea of anyone criticizing his mother. Or perhaps it was simply that he didn't want his father doing it. "She did great, Dad," he said, trying to pick his words. "You would have been proud of her."

His father stood in a measured way; walked to the open door and pushed it shut, eliminating the blast of light in the room. While George's eyes were adjusting, he heard his father's voice say, "You don't know as yet what I have planned." George dropped his head and suddenly felt exhausted. A second later, he felt a hand on his shoulder, his father jiggling him. "Lay down if you want, George," he said. "Go ahead."

George was glad for the chance to close his eyes. He did not want to burst out crying in front of his father, but part of him felt like doing that, just breaking down and confessing to something. The only reason he didn't was that he simply wasn't sure what he needed to confess to. He was learning a lot about jacking off, but he never wanted to talk about that. He had a picture from a magazine, a cigarette ad where a brown-haired woman in a white blouse was leaning forward to avoid getting splashed while standing in the middle of a shallow creek. George dreaded the prospect of talking about sex with his father because he imagined that his father would try to use as few words as possible and this, potentially, would leave George even more baffled by it.

So, George lay on the one bed in his father's room, while his father returned to sitting on the edge of it, facing that blank TV screen. On the night table by the bed was his father's little boombox with a small stack of the typical cassettes-Jackson Browne, Ian Hunter, Graham Parker. George closed his eyes and after a minute, he felt his father's hands on his sneakers, the laces being undone, then one foot being lifted slightly as one shoe was taken off, then the other. When George opened his eyes, he discovered his father's shoulders were turned in his direction.

"You wanna know what I'm thinking about?" his father said.

"Of course," George said.

His father considered George a moment longer, then turned back to the set. George closed his eyes. "That horse we bet on, his name is Bowl Game," his father said. "I'm going to buy him, train him myself . . . How much did you all make from that bet, son?" His tone was empty, not really curious.

"A lot, Dad," he said and his eyes opened again. He could see the stretched shape of his father in the screen. George thought of the money his mother had won again, that what it really meant was that they were all getting another chance. At what, though, he could not be sure.

"I made about ten thousand dollars for myself . . . for us," his father said. "I can buy Bowl Game, but the people who want him want twice as much. I'm gonna talk to your mom, see. We can pool our resources and buy him. I don't know if she'll go for that, but she might. I know winning that bet was exciting for her. I could hear it in her voice. See, these boys who own the horse, they are gamblers. That's all they care about. They won't be able to get odds on this horse again, not unless he runs in the Kentucky Derby or Arc de Triomphe." Day treeomf, his father pronounced it. This sounded right to George. It was big race in Paris every year, he knew enough racing to know that. "For us," his father said. "The horse will be something else. I'd train it. I'd get my chance. Those horses I had last year, they just didn't have any run in them at all. I never really had a chance to show what I could do. I can train, I know I can."

"What about your license, Dad?" George said. They were both watching one another again.

"I got that figured out," his father said. "The guy I work for, we'd run the horse in his name. I'll give him a little cut. A gravy deal."

"Really?" George said.

"I gotta get the horse first, George," his father said. A

second later, he said, "Close your eyes, son, get some sleep." George did this. A minute passed. "What do you think?" his father said. "Think she'll go for it?"

George did not answer. He didn't want to appear disloyal to either of his parents; if he answered he thought he might be taking sides. George preferred his mother, he would have married her if that at all had been possible. But his father, he thought, really had nobody. Who looks after Dad? George thought. His father was on his feet now, hands tucked halfway into his pockets, standing a few steps from the bed, looking in George's direction, and it seemed like George really possessed the answers in the room.

"What?" his father said.

"Dad, Gwen wants to go to a prep school. She's already got Mom talked into that. I mean, that's expensive." His father did not respond. "Mom's getting an apartment, too," George said. He held off mentioning that she did not plan to get a job, not unless it was something she really liked. His father could make an issue out of that.

"You're saying I'm cooked, right?" his father said. "Don't count on it. I have a Plan B, you know."

"Right," George said.

His father was ready to be angry with him, George sensed that. George wondered if he'd already said too much. "I'm gonna go to Miami then," his father said. "See, I do know something, George. I know how this horse game works. You just have to get on the right side of it, the top side. Play smart, play like you are already ahead Your mother doesn't want to help me, that's fine. I can do this on my own. I just need another horse to bet on, see. Just get the closest thing to a sure thing I can find. Now that I've got money, that won't be as hard." His father kept talking and George found himself looking to the drawn blinds over the window, wondering if what he was feeling now was claustrophobia. His father was talking about betting pools and money and that down at Hialeah in Miami

the betting pools were a lot larger and a big bet like the one he was thinking about making wouldn't change the odds much. He would not have to take a terrible risk to double his money, just a sensible one, that was the point. His father said that he had been looking over the races down there for a few days now, reading the Racing Form, with this very idea in mind. "What do you think, Georgie?" his father said. "Think you might want to ride down there with me?"

George had not been aware that this was the direction his father had been heading. George and Gwen watched Miami Vice on Friday nights and he instantly liked the idea. They even showed horses breaking from the starting gate at some track down there during the opening credits. What he really liked most was Gina, the raven-haired policewoman who rode around with Trudy, the hot black lady cop. George felt happy, but panicked, too, like everything would always come down to this, the woman who might fall for him. "Dad," he said, suddenly feeling exasperated. "Think they'll let me in down at Hialeah?"

"No," his father said. "They won't. But you can sit out in the car and listen to the loudspeaker and I can tell you about it afterward."

"Yeah," George said.

"But it'd be you and me see," his father said.

"I get it," George said, feeling a bit defeated and worse, unable to hide it.

"But I'm going to talk to your mother first," his father said, as if this was what George was worried about. "She might want to go in on the horse, son," he said. "She might love the idea," he said, his voice trailing off. "I gotta back to the way I used to be. When I really wanted things."

"Gwen," George said.

"Yeah, I know," his father said. "Look, I want you kids to have everything, have it all. That's what I'm talking about here."

"I know, Dad," George said. The room grew quiet again

and George knew very well that because his father's equation would involve a sacrifice on Gwen's behalf there was absolutely no way his mother would go for it. His father got that, too. Gwen was sacred in the family, somehow she had a chance to be different and all of them knew it. No one said this in front of George, because everyone wanted him to feel as if he was sacred, too. But he wasn't. He did not feel that way at all. In one way, he supposed that he just wanted to be his father.

"Miami," his father said. "Think about it, okay?"

"I am," George said, though it felt as if he already knew something about it. Miami was a city with palm trees. He imagined that he had already been there. In another life, not terribly unlike this one. The palms had waved to him, all day long.

Me and Three Come of Age

Karen Wiegman

Old Three and I were hanging out by the ice-cream shop in the dark that night, done working but still thinking and meanwhile watching how the beams of car headlights rolled a path along the chubby, silver-bodied ice-cream machines inside. We liked to leave the shop's electric sign running while we sat around after closing--a neon hula girl holding a cone and yanking her hips from side to side over the melting words "Tastee Freeze."

Being with Three was always like being with myself and my opposite, like looking both close and far into a mirror and not really being sure which side I was on. I was a girl and he was a boy, but I never counted it up enough to make a difference, even though Three was always trying to find his way through me, saying that if he didn't want to pull himself to Trisha's body the way he did that perhaps he'd like us to go night-flying over the Everglades. He'd speak it with a sort of force that would stir me, yet I always told him my true thoughts. Three, I'd say, those teeth in your mouth grow all over each other like daisies and tell me plainly you're a storyteller. I think he liked it when I framed his teeth, even if it cut at him a bit, because I still believe that sometimes he didn't mind the sear that comes with having me so close.

I guess it was Three's idea, but maybe it was mine, to recline in lawn chairs outside the shop on Friday nights and listen to the Gulf's water sing up to us from the key. We could feel the mosquitos creep in and out again real quick, never sticking to us long enough to find out our bloody, human ways. On most Fridays, the white glow of the high school football field lights hummed up to the sky, and the tropical air hauled the bleats of the air horns and the hecklings of the announcer and the crowd's hip-hoorahs through a mile of its own thickness to

where we sat. Mick, my beau, my paramour, my heart's frightening pulse, was out there on that field playing quarterback with an ability too terrifying for me to witness; and so every Friday during gametime I found myself always wanting to be just where I was, at a distance, at the shop, not caught but not free, right in that spot there in our chairs, every Friday night right there with Three.

There was nothing special about that night—Three and I had our usual stomach-deep laughs and leisurely snaps at each other. Maybe there was a tiny odor of lonesomeness, too, as if Florida's fall had certainly arrived but was hanging back in the corners of doors and catching our warm and sleepy words in its nets. I recall Three was talking about the military, telling me some silly, backwards story about the armed forces, and the football game was still rumbling along when a hulking old pick-up swaggered its red and ruined body into the parking lot and came to a stop, engine whistling and shimmying and lights shining straight at us so that we couldn't discern whether the truck had pilot or passenger.

Three asked me if I supposed it was Rodney, that Rodney's pop had an old-timer running down almost just like that, and I said I hoped not. I wasn't often in the mood for Rodney to be around because he wore me out with his bullish ways. Once he had tried a whole long night to get Three's Trish into the swimming pool at a party, but of course Trish wouldn't even dip in her toe. Trish was a good girl, and she wouldn't have reason to let Rodney coax her into anything. She worked hard at her studies, and she was always saying how she and Three were star-crossed, as if she'd waited hard for Three all her young life.

Trish was Three's devotee, that's for sure. Her mother had even staged for Trish and Three to have a kind of ceremonial deflowering one night. When Three told me about it, about Trish's mom going so far as to provide candles and seafood and supermarket champagne, and then going to the movies with some of her nurse friends and leaving Trish and Three to make

their magic, I was sort of sickened by her mom's desire. And I'd also seen her, cakey-faced and divorced, giving Three some vast looks across the counter at the shop. What Three thought about her, though, I couldn't say, and he hopefully would never tell me. He had some inlets like that, which I respected even if I did want to plunge into them and splash around some. I was always one to be hard on the universe. But Three had taught me how tremendous reverence could be.

The pick-up ceased its whirring then, and one door and next the other poked open and let go of two shadows that became Rodney and what looked to be his date, a painted and pinched-faced younger gal whom I'd once spied hissing over a table to a friend in the library. Her eyes slatted in a sharp, meanish way, and, tonight, they were a sunken, gleaming violet. I prophesied that she and Rodney would soon be giving each other some rapid pecks of brutality.

Rodney came up saying his howdy, meanwhile patting all his pockets for his smokes. Finding them finally in the breast pocket of his flannel shirt, he left the pack there but excavated a long and slightly bent cigarette that seemed surely to be a slim and twisted piece of bone. He asked Three for a light, and Three had matches from his second job bussing tables out at the oyster bar, which he fished out of his jeans pocket and tossed, rattling in their box, over to Rodney.

"They're wooden," Rodney said. He struck one against the circular, concrete party table, and the flame flared and condensed without altering in essence. He brought the match to meet his cigarette, and the amber hue and his swift suck of breath momentarily beatified him. I sneered quietly into the dark, and then I felt sad.

Rodney looked clearly at me. "Mick's not doing his usual stuff, Rachel," he said. "The game's a wreck. But who cares? I was tired of it and told Mary here she should come blow up a building with me."

Mary gave a sharp, shrill, wild laugh. "Yeah, Rodney.

Let's blow up a fucking ice-cream shop."

"Hey, steady," Three said. "This shop is the town's heart. You know, the stop after all day at the beach."

"Sometimes it's an intermission," I volunteered.

"Yeah," Three agreed. "People go out there, come back in for a cone, then take to the sand and sea again. It's gorgeous, those people coming up all sticky and sprinkled with shells."

I doubt that I will ever not love Three. Mary shafted her head Three's way but I couldn't tell what kind of treasure she thought he was.

"All right," she said. "But how about that one in the shape of an ice-cream cone? That ugly plastic piece of shit? I hate it, and I hate the soft, crappy ice-cream they serve there."

"And there's always the new Dairy Queen over on Palmetto Road," Rodney said vaguely, and then he muttered: "Nah, this place is sweet."

I felt Three's face open toward me, but I fastened my gaze to the hula girl's hips, unwilling to give Rodney anything at all. Sometimes I'm jealous about the way Three sees people. He loves his way into them, and I love to disassemble them.

"So, anyway, what's the story tonight?" Rodney asked. "Three, where's the lovely Trish?"

Trish is cheerleading at the football game. She's a cheerleader and a volleyball player and a cross-country runner, all in just the fall season. I find her to be an odd combination, but that's probably what Three likes about her, her action and her seriousness, her honey and her seawater. After tonight's game, Mick will drive her over here like he does after every home game. She and Three will curl together on the step and kissthey're very tender-and then they'll walk, hands wrapped, the five streets over to her house where they'll twirl some more in front of the television screen and in the air conditioning.

I don't worry about Mick and Trish being in a car together because I don't worry about them being attracted to each other. Trish doesn't have a skeptic's eye, and Mick has a dark-

ness about him, a something of spoil that he craves. An instinct for ferociousness brought him and me together, I believe. And while Three and Trish whirl through their kind of paradise, Mick and I'll head out to some cruddy, empty backstreet where we'll grope at each other and do some heavy breathing. I love Mick, I do, because his eyes are like tough blue gems, and he has the leanest body, plain tendon and bone with flesh not yet decaying, still freshly killed. Next to him I feel rapacious. Near Three, I feel different, transparent and weightless, and though I have an urge to move toward him, my inclination's of a different nature. I want to swing my flame into his and be bound up in his golden skin.

It's likely a dangerous thing to say, but Three's a warm and good one. I've often asked myself straight why I don't want to be with Three physically, in the flesh. But if I even try to imagine us entangling, I feel myself sort of curve and coil up, fearing to do him more harm than good. Sometimes I wish I could unhook myself and have him nicely, but I know that in reality I'd choke the moment.

Anyway, thoughts like these are always chipping away in my mind. I used to try to measure them out, and I wondered if I should say something to Three about it all, but finally I realized that he already knows what I know, that nothing needs to be spelled out. Making words would only take me farther away from what moves in and between us like water licking a dock or waves falling to the shore, and I doubt I could live without the sensation of eternal movement that he conjures in me.

"So," Rodney said, punching at the pavement with a grossly white tennis shoe, "Mary and I are going to get it on. Tonight."

Three and I—I felt us—looked together toward them and their dirty union, foretold before its time, in a wonder, awe, and disgust that I touched and that Three probably considered and discarded. Taking in Rodney, and taking in his date with a cruel eye, I felt my badness unfurl and stretch.

"Rachel," Three warned, but I already felt sunk.

"Hell, yeah," Rodney said with vigor. "That's it. That's just the thing I'm needing."

Mary giggled, maybe a little nervously, and asked how exactly I thought they could be comfortable in there.

"No problem," I said. "You can use the American flag. It's gigantic, and no one remembered to fly it today, so it's probably a little restless."

Three moaned and covered his face with his hands for a long second. But I couldn't figure my way out of it, and so, jangling my keys, I got up to let Rodney and the slut into the shop.

"Hey," Mary whined, "listen. The game's over, you can tell. Everything's quiet. People are going to be getting here any minute."

And she was right. This little town is isolated and predictable. On weekend nights kids gather in the parking lot between here and the Chinese food restaurant next door to decide on the night's destination. Usually they linger for about an hour, pawing at the ground, flirting and yelling and exchanging their raunchy comments before they vanish off into the woods, where someone will build them a bonfire if they're lucky.

"Whatever, Mary," Rodney said. "It's not as if anyone's going to know we're in there. You're just going to have to keep your moaning down. Hey, hey, hey, what do you say?"

Mary still wanted to hedge, I could see, and yet the novel thrill was creeping into her. She looked glitteringly at nothing for a space, then faced Rodney directly.

"Okay. Okay," she agreed, with a curled lip.

Three, meanwhile, hadn't been looking at anything in particular, and I knew for certain that he was avoiding the vision of me. He was blameless in this, and, anyway, I wouldn't have wanted to see myself reflected in his eyes. And yet sometimes I wonder, had Three looked at me in that awful moment,

whether then the night would have come tearing out of the woods and onto a brightly lit highway. But when I think that way, I'm just thinking cheaply.

"Follow me, folks," I said to Rodney and Mary. I was anxious to get rid of them so I could start working toward some kind of redemption with Three. I rose, and they came along toward the shop door, them not even touching each other in prelude. I let them into the darkness, showed them where the flag lay folded on the wire cupboard rack, and beat it on out of there. I didn't want to catch even the littlest shine of what was going to happen next.

"What are you doing, Rachel?" Three asked when I got back to our lawn chairs. "I can't believe this. I can't."

Three's disappointment was heavy on me.

"I'm sorry, Three," I whimpered. "Fact and fiction just got all tangled up. I'm sorry."

He shook his head and gazed up at me with his ancient, jungle-green eyes.

"I'm sorry, Three," I whimpered again, praying he wouldn't think I sounded petulant or false. I was losing my grace by the gallon. "Three? Please, please, please, please, please?" Three bowed down just far enough for the shadows to hide his expression. Then he raised his head again and looked at me with a consolation I didn't deserve.

"Rachel," he sighed, and I knew that, here, on our own holy ground, I'd betrayed him.

Naturally, my body reacted. My throat cramped, my head flooded, and I heard the wail that never did surface because, right then, like both a gift and a punishment, the game crowd began to pour into the parking lot.

First, of course, came Freddy in his shambling brown van that had deer antlers roped to its grill, and him honking his horn and sticking out his head and waving his skinny, white arm so far and so wildly out the window it was always a marvel he could drive. Then followed what seemed the rest of the high school, cars and pick-up trucks turning rhythmically right into the parking lot and pulling up next to each other in a parallel politeness. Their windshields reflected the single towering parking-lot light with a dumb, accidental allegiance.

Stereos more costly than the cars that bore them twanged out country tunes, which clashed with the deep thud of rap that set doors and windows to rattling. People got out of their vehicles, girls screaming each others' names and hugging as if they'd crossed a desert before finding each other again, and guys slapping hands and spitting at the ground. Two of the burlier football players let down a monstrous blue cooler from a truck bed, and the team's best kicker punted it open. Its mouth gaped wide, stuffed with sparkling silver beer cans.

Three and I watched the dull and familiar scene in a dense silence, waving hello to the people circling by and feigning ignorance of the defilement underway behind us in the shop. Soon enough, or maybe too soon, there was Mick coming toward me, his eyes looking at me but not seeing me, his mind still caught in the game as he reviewed his every motion, measuring and remeasuring the distance between him and his teammates. I remembered how, in his first year's season, he had walked toward me from the locker room, calm and crooked, his collarbone broken from a new play he'd tried in the middle of the second quarter.

Trish, a few paces ahead of Mick, glided toward Three, beaming.

"Three, oh, Three, oh, Three," she sang and laughed. "I have missed thee." Three stood as Trish climbed up the white steps to him, and they clasped hands, hugged, kissed, and Trish giggled into his chest. "We lost tonight, Three."

"Yeah, I figured," Three said.

"But it was a good game," Trish declared. "A very good game. I was wishing I could watch more of it instead of having to look at the crowd and guess what was going on."

And that's the way it is with Trish and Three. The world shimmers for them, pretty and safe.

Mick came up and handcuffed my neck for a second, then took his hand away. "You okay?" I asked.

"Damn," Mick answered, and he grimaced.

"I know," I said honestly.

Mick paced away to the dark edge of the concrete patio and stood staring, jaw clenched, into the gloom. Someone in the crowd ripped open a bag of balloons and flung the contents colorfully into the air. Guys scrambled about, plucking up the balloons and filling them at the water spigot at the side of the shop. Lumbering brutishly back toward the throng, they hurled their rainbow grenades, which exploded with colossal splashes amidst shrieks and guffaws. Word was rising that everyone was heading out to Hourglass Lake to party, but no one seemed too concerned about cutting down the ruckus to get there.

Trish and Three were cooching and cooing on the steps, and Mick was still a ways off, deep in pitiless scrutiny, when a long, yellow, unfamiliar Buick with a black vinyl top pulled in and cruised through the parking lot. Most everyone looked at it, shrugged, and pretended not to care that they couldn't identify it. Yet they didn't have anything else to ponder, so they dropped their games and watched it close in on them and come to an abrupt stop, lurching back and forth on its wheels for a second. The driver's door opened, and a stranger stepped out onto the pavement.

He wasn't tall, but he was big, except big in a concentrated way, as if he was infatuated with dumbbells and comforted himself with steroids. His shoulders were wide and ridiculous in relationship to his squat legs, and he wore a shirt with bright red and blue horizontal stripes that emphasized his brawn and caused his face to melt in a shiny, brown, unremarkable blob.

"Hey," he said. "Hey, I'm looking for a dude named Rodney. Rodney Hayes. Any of you know him?"

People looked his way, unsmiling. Some shook their heads. Others nodded. Three and I looked straight and deep and knowledgeably at each other.

"What is it?" Trish asked of us, her face tick-tocking

from Three's to mine and back again.

"Nothing," Three said, and he shook his head. "It's nothing."

The stranger's presence was agitating Ed Snyder's testosterone, which was not unusual, and Ed's stupid face was crossed with pointless fury. "Who are you, and what the hell do you want with Rodney?" he demanded.

"It doesn't matter who I am," said the stranger. "I'm here on some personal business."

The conflict was going to be waged in clichés, which was no surprise owing to the cast involved, me included.

"If you've got business with Rodney, you've got business with us, too," answered Ed. "You've come to the wrong town. We don't like outsiders."

"You all are shit—stupid," said the stranger. "Rodney's messing around with my girl."

"Who's your girl?" some girl piped up.

"Mary. Mary Moore," said the stranger.

"Ew, she's a slut!" said another girl.

"You're a little bitch," said the stranger in the girl's general direction.

With a roar, Ed went lunging at the stranger like a bull. His head smacked into the stranger's belly and, wrapping his arms around the stranger's legs, he took him down. The stranger grabbed Ed's neck and strangled him, both of them grunting and slobbering all the while.

"Isn't that Rodney's truck?" Mick had walked up and was leaning toward me, pointing at the old red pick-up standing separate from the rest of the vehicles.

I nodded and, without looking back at Mick, said bluntly, "Rodney's in the shop having sex."

Mick stretched a stare my way, but I couldn't turn meet his eyes. I never doubted his intelligence, but his keenness is of a different, more immediate sort than mine. Instinct and achievement fill his moment, while I squander my seconds away with nostalgia and regret.

The stranger was squeezing all the air out of Ed, and Ed was losing power, so Ed's back-up boys went and ripped the two apart, shoving the stranger backwards. The stranger staggered to lean against his yellow car.

"You fuckers," he said, and spat.

"You'd best get out of here," warned Bill Spellman. The other guys echoed him in various form, and in a hodgepodge they started advancing toward the stranger.

"You all are a bunch of assholes," the stranger asserted again, but he was getting into his car.

The pack came yet closer, and some girls were shrieking names and cursing at him, but their high voices got lost under the pounding that someone started up on the Buick. Yowling, most everyone joined in, beating the hood and roof and back of the car with the palms of their hands. Their faces were contorted, bulging and swollen, and shadows dug into them with an ugly menace. A filmy blackness seemed to rise continually off their bodies, puffing into the air and pooling around their feet that were grinding in the balloon desecration on the ground. They piled and pushed over each other to take swings at the car, their eyes rolling darkly in their sockets. "Lurid" was a word I had come across in writing, but I'd never had occasion to apply it to real life until this leering grizzliness boiled up before me.

"I'm getting Rodney, that idiot," Mick said, and he moved toward the shop's door. I grabbed at his arm, but he shook me off. At the same time, pulled by some unknown force, Trish went down the steps and crept slowly toward the mob. Three started to follow her, stopped, then started again. I trailed him by three steps, out of loneliness.

"Trish!" Three shouted. He was a few yards behind her. She didn't acknowledge his call and kept moving, according to what cause there's no knowing, because right then the stranger rolled down his window and waved a pistol in the air.

"He's got a gun!" someone yelled, and then everyone was screaming and running, and there was no collective anymore. Somebody, probably some stupid girl, sprayed pepper spray, and those near her started choking, their hands gnawing at their eyes, and some people fell down. The pepper hooked onto the breeze and stung my eyes too, and I spun back toward the shop. I couldn't see much, but the quiet right close to me told me nobody was near. Three and Trish had disappeared in the commotion, and Mick had yet to return with any evidence of my trespass.

The stranger's car took off with a mad screech, but hit something big and soft that slapped onto the ground and went thunk-thunk with the wheels until they finally hubbed over it. There was a pause, a kind of horrible silence, and then the car squealed away again.

I turned around and, through my tears and the sting, I saw the back-end of the Buick, its squinting red taillights. The car reached the edge of the parking lot and slowed. The right turn signal flicked a ludicrous three times, and the car jerked onto the empty road and disappeared.

All familiar sounds were magnified and extraordinary: frogs chorused from the drainage ditches, a bobwhite whistled once, and canned laugher from a distant television unsettled the air. I could hear the hula girl's hips hissing and jerking on the sign. Adding to this, Three began to bay a deep and endless "No!" that still to this day goes shuddering through my hollows.

With unearthly gasping yelps, Three went wildly crabwise on all fours to Trish and crumpled over her. He grabbed her hand and laid down his head, first on her chest, then near her cheek. Her skin was quickly purpling, bruised, and her bronze hair fanned out, darkening with blood. Then Three rose to his knees with her blood on his face, in his hair, all over his white T-shirt. He lifted her into his arms and cradled her, weeping into her neck. Her arms hung slackly down behind her, her hands curling monkeyishly on the concrete.

"Don't do that, man, you could crush her insides," someone timidly advised.

But Three knew Trish was gone, plain gone. We all did, with a shared, stricken awareness.

Freddy, always first, always sadly goofy, took off in a duck-footed run toward the telephone booth radiating absurdly in the farthest, darkest corner of the parking lot. I turned back toward the shop and saw Mick stopped, astonished, on the steps. He was alone, but Rodney's and Mary's dusky faces peered out of the shop's sliding service window, shadowy and loathsome. The lawn chairs in which Three and I had been sitting less than an hour ago looked awkward and frail, like sad little waterbirds.

"Did anyone get his plate number?" Bill Spellman demanded.

"It doesn't matter, Mary knows who he is," answered the girl whom the stranger had called a bitch, putting a sass into her voice when she said Mary's name.

"That bastard is going to fry," said Ed.

The crowd began to shift and move a bit, and I trembled with the secret, traitorous guilt sneaking through me. My sticky handprints were all over this mess, and already I was questioning whether I was ever going to be able to balance my soul. The so-called witnesses talked in hushed voices, and Three kept holding Trish through all of it. We could hear sirens screaming like a catfight as they made their way toward us down long, dark River Road.

Somehow Trish's mom got to the scene at the same time as the ambulance. A "mama's instinct" brought her there

she later said, and she stood, slack-jawed and teary, gripping Three's hand with both of her own as the EMTs covered Trish's body and strapped it to the stretcher. Three watched the whole thing vacantly, not looking right nor left, nor up nor down, nor anywhere but at the form of Trish. When they rolled her up into the ambulance, Trish's mom wailed and turned into Three, who remained motionless. I guess it's not for me to know, but I believe his spirit had left him, chasing after Trish.

I'm not sure what anybody did after that. I heard most people went on out to the woods, but that it was a somber crowd. Me, I felt myself darkening, but Mick shoved me into his Mustang and strapped the seat belt over me. He didn't speak to me all the way home, and for the first time I wasn't sure what kind of monster he was autopsying. At my house, he didn't try to stop me as I got out of his car. He said he'd see me tomorrow, which I knew was true, and then he cursed me with some advice, saying I should quit worrying about whether I was good or bad and instead spend some time figuring out who I am. I stood nauseated on the driveway for a spell after he drove off, and then I let myself into the dark house, my parents having already retired to their bedroom. Their television was on, and I went, unobserved, to bed for the night.

This is just a story, but it's a real one, and I've tried to tell it nearly a hundred times. I'm sure I'm always choosing the wrong time or the wrong place, and, honestly, I probably haven't reckoned the right structure that will get it out of me. True, I don't know where to begin, and people are always wanting to know how it ends, and I'm not sure what to say to that. One thing I'll mention is that Trish's mom never filed suit against the stranger, who remains a stranger even today. She said there's too much pain and turmoil in this world to go around punishing people. She said there's a design and a plan to everything, whether we believe it or not. She said these things, and more, too, but I've never exactly felt myself pardoned.

Mostly, I avoid thinking about how it felt to be near Three.

After Trish died, we both immediately quit the ice-cream shop, and we stayed away from each other until we graduated, never even making eye contact. Then Three moved off to live with his older brother in some northwestern, snowy place, and I never heard another thing about him. I picture him bringing in wood from a woodpile or warming his socks by a fireside, and my imaginings cause me to ache. Mick went to play football for a small college in Georgia, where he found himself a new girl-friend and even sent me a few pictures of them wearing matching gold and scarlet football jerseys together. That sight was okay with me, as I had almost expected it. Later, I moved two towns up the coast, waited on some tables and considered dancing on others, but never could, my body being what it was.

Years have passed since that night. It seems my memories stick mainly to the moment when the stranger is being swarmed, and he rolls down his window to brandish his gun. He holds it up fiercely, and there's just nothing anybody can do about it. Maybe that's not a fair point to keep spinning around, but I spin around it anyway because, if I didn't, I'd have to face the angry wish I have to prove that there's a pure love holding up this world we're in.

Still, I look straight into people's eyes these days, hoping to find Three there in pair, and by the night's side I fly, calling out his name—"Three!"—a scream, a howl, and sometimes a terrible whimper. There's always an echo that comes haunting around, and I hear only that—I hear only my own voice, and a corresponding silence.

Visual Diaries

Rebecca Sexton Larson

The "Visual Diary Series" is an on-going body of work I've continued to explore since 2001. The series focuses on my attraction and investigation into personal journaling and storytelling. The work derives from old family photographs, letters and journals (mine or otherwise) that I have collected throughout the years. My aim is to examine and question family structures and relationships . . . possibly to have a better or clearer understanding of my own past experiences. Obviously, there a difference in how I viewed various events as a child to how I would perceive the same event now as an adult. I can sense this when I look at personal family photographs today—I see and sense things in the photos that I didn't notice before. As a result, my work challenges the viewer to contemplate what might be the unseen or unspoken characteristics of the image. For instance, what is going on behind the scenes of the "traditional family dinner" photograph?

As the digital revolution makes capturing family memories more accessible to everyone through the use of camera phones, palm pilots and a vast array of inexpensive point and shoots: I choose to embrace a 19th century technique of image making. The "Visual Diary Series" utilizes large black and white silver prints produced from pinhole cameras. Making im-

ages using a traditional camera frustrates me; I tend to focus more on the mechanics of making the photo than the message of the final image. I began making my own pinhole cameras fifteen years ago when it was too costly for me to purchase a large format camera. Quickly, I became enamored with the results I obtained with the use of pinhole photography, for example, the spontaneity and unexpectedness of the process. The elements that makeup my final pieces are photo-based and captured on film by using either a 4x5 Leonardo pinhole camera or a pinhole camera made from a Tide detergent box.

After the silver print is made, I build upon each print by using various art mediums such as painting, drawing, and image transfers. Often, multiple photographs are juxtaposed together to evoke narratives connecting one image to another, not unlike chapters in a book. Frequently, I incorporate hand or machinesewn verses or writing into select areas of the print to act as dialog. The writings, both from personal journals and verses from popular 20th century poets, push the narrative capabilities of the image. All of my finished pieces are distinctive works on paper that move beyond the boundaries of a traditional photograph and challenge the viewer to discover the story being told.



Bestow



Under Dusky Wing



Mournful Wing



Defining Silence

Toward an Urban Pastoral

Reginald Shepherd

In his Life of Johnson, James Boswell famously quotes Samuel Johnson as telling him, "Why, Sir, you find no man, at all intellectual, who is willing to leave London. No, Sir, when a man is tired of London, he is tired of life; for there is in London all that life can afford." As early as the eighteenth century, Johnson couldn't imagine life outside the metropolis. Yet his poem "London" is "in Imitation of the Third Satire of Juvenal," railing against the decadence and misery of the capital city (Rome for Juvenal, London for Johnson): "Here malice, rapine, accident, conspire,/And now a rabble rages, now a fire." To be fair, the poem is not just about London, but about the sorry state of Great Britain as a whole. Still, it is London which it calls "the needy villain's general home."

The vast majority of the US population, some seventy-five percent, lives in what are statistically defined as urban areas; as Boswell writes of London, the city is "the great scene of ambition, instruction, and amusement." With the seemingly inexorable expansion of suburbia and exurbia, and the saturation of the country by communications media new and old, truly rural life is almost extinct. Yet as urban historian Eric H. Monkkonen notes, "The United States has become one of the world's most urban nations, but . . . it has a rural sense of its own history . . . it continues to conceal its urbanness from itself."

Much of our poetry participates in that concealment, ignoring our contemporary urban reality, and much of what does engage the urban (or the suburban) does so in a sadly prosaic and mundane manner, untouched by what Hart Crane called the silken skilled transmemberment of song. (As Monkkonen

notes, "the United States is urban but not urbane.") Even to-day, one can read book after book of contemporary American poetry and get no clue that cities even exist, let alone that most people live in one, that the poet him- or herself might well do so. Once when I assigned Elizabeth Macklin's A Woman Kneeling in the Big City, a book in which lyric and urban life confront and speak to one another and are both transformed, to my poetry writing class, a student expressed his relief that we were finally reading a book about the city, instead of more poems about flowers and fields, which were as alien to him as nymphs and satyrs.

I think that often we write about nature because there is a readily available, thoroughly worked-out language with which to do so, because that language provides the assurance that one will indeed come up with a recognizable poem. Of course, often what the language of nature produces is a simulacrum of nature, a reiteration of the vocabulary of nature that refers not to nature but to nature poetry. That readily available language is much more problematic precisely in and due to its ready availability than most who avail themselves of it are willing to recognize or acknowledge.

Charles Baudelaire, the father of the modern, is the inventor of the city in modern poetry, above all in the prose poems of Paris Spleen. As Eliot (with his assumption that the life of the metropolis is by definition sordid) writes, "It is not merely in his use of imagery of . . . the sordid life of a great metropolis, but in the elevation of such imagery to first intensity-presenting it as it is, and yet making it represent something beyond itself-that Baudelaire has created a mode of release and expression for other men."

Baudelaire invents the figure of the flâneur, the archetypal solitary observer wandering the city in search of new sensations, abandoning himself to the crowd from whom he still

maintains his psychic distance. As Baudelaire writes, "It is not given to everyone to bathe in the multitude: to enjoy the crowd is an art The lone and pensive pedestrian derives a singular thrill from this universal communion" with the strangers he passes in the street.

In Walter Benjamin's words, "The crowd was the veil from behind which the familiar city as phantasmagoria beckoned to the flâneur. In it, the city was now landscape, now a room." The flâneur makes a home of the streets, which are no one's home: "The street becomes a dwelling for the flâneur; he is as much at home among the facades of houses as a citizen is in his four walls."

The flâneur is in many ways the quintessential figure of the modern poet, the speaker of poems by Eliot, Pound, Williams, and even Frost. The modern poet is the person (usually a man) alone in the urban crowd.

Eliot is the great English-language poet of the city. Prufrock invites us to wander through certain half-deserted streets threatening both in their seediness and in their insidious intent to lead one to precisely the overwhelming question one has attempted to avoid by loitering amid these one-night cheap hotels, streets that also promise a brute vitality and sexual energy that the enervated existence of the upper-middle class, measuring out their lives in coffee spoons, cannot even imagine: "That is not what I meant at all." Such vitality and such sexual energy is also a threat, enticing yet frightening.

In "Preludes," Eliot tries to imagine the lives of the working-class occupants of those sawdust-trampled streets littered with withered leaves and newspaper scraps, to inhabit the conscience of a blackened street lined by a thousand furnished rooms, only to withdraw into a distanced vision of revolving worlds, the cosmic circle come around again and again.

"Rhapsody on a Windy Night" shows us what Prufrock

might have seen during his wanderings, or perhaps what he feared seeing as the streetlamps beat out the times of night (much too late to be about): a woman in a stained and torn dress who may be a beggar or a prostitute or both, a feral cat licking a pat of rancid butter, a child with blank eyes pocketing a wharf rat as a toy, and finally the return to a room that is as much a prison as anything he has seen on the wrong side of town.

The Waste Land is all about the city, though not about American cities (Eliot was not necessarily the great American poet of the city), and in it the city is a desert of lost souls wandering in circles, not realizing that they're dead: "I had not thought death had undone so many." The city is, mostly, London, where rats drag along the banks of the Thames and women are seduced in rowboats and rooming houses and nothing connects with nothing. Sordid by definition, full of foreigners and homosexuals, full of sex in general, the city is rootless, cosmopolitan, depthless, substanceless: the antithesis of true culture and settled values:

Jerusalem Athens Alexandria Vienna London Unreal.

In capitalist modernity, as Marx wrote, "All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions [exactly those relations to which Eliot aspired, though such an aspiration arose from their unattainability], are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and men at last are forced to face... the real conditions of their lives and their relations with their fellow men."

Modernity is ancient history by now, modernism only slightly less agèd, yet we have come up with nothing to replace

or succeed either one, just variants of the "post." We are still struggling toward a poetic language of the city as neither exotic wonderland nor demonic nightmare, a language that embraces those real conditions and relations, those profane cityscapes stripped of what Benjamin calls aura. The challenge is to find a vocabulary and a syntax for the city that isn't simply a reiteration or ventriloquization of the language of prose, but a specifically poetic language that can encompass, embody, and enact the chiming and clashing textures of the city. The city's resistance to our reified, ossified poetic dialects provides some resistance to the rhetorical "cheating" that often goes on when people write about "nature." As Baudelaire wrote almost a hundred and fifty years ago, modern life demands a new language.

In one of his most famous essays, Benjamin wrote that some of Baudelaire's motifs render the possibility of lyric poetry questionable. It is our duty as poets to respond to that question without presuming to answer it.

I don't mean to imply that there is no American poetry of the city or that American poets have not addressed the American city in their work. Carl Sandburg celebrated Chicago, "Hog Butcher to the World, Tool Maker, Stacker of Wheat, Player with Railroads and Freight Handler to the Nation." In his lyrical epic The Bridge, Hart Crane attempted to incorporate Brooklyn Bridge and the New York subway into his myth of America and into the vatic, visionary Romantic mode he had half-inherited and half-invented. William Carlos Williams's American epic Paterson, his riposte to The Waste Land, uses modernist techniques of quotation, collage, and radical juxtaposition to produce a portrait of the past and present of a typical American city-not a cultural capital like Paris or London, but an ordinary place in New Jersey. Williams said that Paterson's overall theme was "the resemblance between the mind of modern man and the city." The "I do this, I do that" poems of

Frank O'Hara (the quintessential "city poet," to cite the title of Brad Gooch's biography) are saturated with the textures of New York City: the city moves through them, on foot, by taxi, by bus or by train. Echoing Samuel Johnson, though somewhat off-key, O'Hara wrote that "One need never leave the confines of New York to get all the greenery one wishes-I can't even enjoy a blade of grass unless I know there's a subway handy, or record store or some other sign that people do not totally regret life."

Most relevantly to my own project of poetically limning the Chicago cityscape, though her Chicago was very much not mine, Gwendolyn Brooks, in such works as A Street in Bronzeville (laconically and often ironically chronicling the everyday lives of the residents of Chicago's Bronzeville black ghetto), and In the Mecca (set in a tenement that was once an elegant apartment complex), portrayed life on Chicago's black South Side with a broad range of diction and formal techniques, and a rich musicality drawing on both the poetic canon and the rhythms of jazz, blues, and working-class black urban speech. As distinct from Baudelaire and Eliot's alienated flâneur, Brooks writes from within the community she describes, as both (sometimes distanced) member and (personally invested) observer.

Also relevant to my desire to construct a linguistic analogue to the built environment of the city, George Oppen's Of Being Numerous examines the city as humanity's greatest accomplishment and expression, but also reveals the alienation and oppression which distort that accomplishment. The book's title poem, originally called "Another Language of New York," kaleidoscopically explores both the city as physical structure and the structures of class oppression of which the city is built as much as it is built of bricks and glass and girders. To misquote Lacan, the city is structured like a language of social relations, and the poem is a city of words. For Adrienne Rich, the city is both opportunity and threat to a woman, a lesbian, a writer, who wants to find a new way to live and a new lan-

guage with which to speak. The city, New York in particular ("this island of Manhattan [is] island enough for me"), is both the physical manifestation of the history of exploitation and an arena of new and unpredicted possibilities, the embodiment of tradition and the enactment of the shattering of traditions: "We want to live like.../sycamores blazing through the sulfuric air, dappled with scars, still exuberantly budding,/our animal passion rooted in the city" ("Twenty-One Love Poems").

As this brief list indicates, these have been highly individual, even idiosyncratic projects. There is still no commonly available, shared poetic language by which and within which to address and account for the city in all its multiplicity, as there has been for so long for the natural world.

Much of my own work has been engaged in trying to develop such a language in and for my own poems. For all the long, miserable years that I have spent in small towns, cities are in my blood: I grew up in New York City until I was almost fifteen, lived in Boston for four years, and spent six years in Chicago, the longest I'd lived in any one place since I was a child. (There have also been stops in such lower-tier cities as Buffalo and Milwaukee.) The urban textures of Chicago are a dominant presence in much of my work, particularly in that of my second, third, and fourth books, all of which were written in Chicago and under the influence of Chicago. The stuff of Chicago pervades those books. It's only recently that I've realized the extent to which I'm a landscape poet, and the cityscape of Chicago was fertile imaginative terrain.

Despite its ongoing efforts to remake itself as a postmodern information hub, Chicago is still an industrial city in a way that New York, the American city its physical presence most closely resembles, has not been for a long time. Chicago is a city with an exposed exoskeleton: its workings are visible on the surface, the gears and pistons apparent to the naked eye. Even

downtown in the Loop, the aging 'L' (whose circuit defines the downtown rectangle within which nest so many corporate skyscrapers, its tracks and platforms hastily thrown up out of surprisingly durable sheet metal and wood) reminds one of the rusting mechanics underlying all the virtual numbers traded on the various exchanges, of what Nelson Algren called the city's "rusty iron heart." It seems appropriate that Chicago has retained its elevated trains while New York and Boston have torn theirs down: the machinery is all out in the open.

Walking along Fullerton Avenue (one of the North Side's major east-west thoroughfares) from the yuppie neighborhood of Lincoln Park to the once-depressed and now gentrifying neighborhood of Bucktown, one passes condos and factories directly abutting one another. Some of the condos used to be factories and some of the factories will be condos soon, but the sense of the material underpinning of the city, of the physical embodiment of social relations (and even of means of production), is palpable. You can even smell it.

As photographer David Plowden writes in his book *Industrial Landscape*, Chicago "is built on an absolutely level plain, which spreads away from the lake surely to the edge of the western horizon. Because of its flatness everything that Chicago has built stands in bold relief against the sky....Everything is laid bare. The relationship of man and mechanization is dramatically played out. No other city that I know of reveals the industrial world on such a stage."

Chicago presents a topographical paradox, a city of towering landmarks built on a featureless and seemingly endless plain, yet it is uniquely defined by the massive presence of Lake Michigan, an utterly other kind of plain, a shimmer of fresh water stretching far past the limits of sight. Chicago presents a social paradox as well: forgetful to the point of amnesia of social history (indeed, such social history feels as if it's been repressed, as is the ever-present but almost never-mentioned social, economic, and racial tension), it is replete with physi-

cal memory, despite the myriad of notable buildings that have been carelessly demolished over the years.

In its radical juxtapositions and abrupt transitions, its densities and overdeterminations, Chicago is structured like a modernist poem; in its physical embodiment of social relations, Chicago is an objective correlative of modern capitalism. To use the semiotician Charles Peirce's typology of the sign, Chicago is at once the symbol, the icon, and the index of modernity.

The poems of my Chicago period work toward a mode I call urban pastoral, an exploration of the splendor and misery of cities in which the cityscape is an active character, a presence that conditions and shapes the poems as much as it is appropriated and shaped by them.

Historically, pastoral has been a literary genre or mode celebrating the idealized innocent pleasures and joys of country life, with all traces of what Marx called the idiocy of rural life effaced, the squalor and brute labor erased. As such, it is always an implicit critique of the corruptions and sorrows of city life. (As John Kinsella notes, "The pastoral isn't really about nature, except insofar as it's about landscape, the mediation of nature through human interference and control.") The pastoral is by definition the product of city-dwellers, looking back with a wistful nostalgia at a life they have never led, a world they have never inhabited. It is a mode of alienation and exile.

In this light, *The Waste Land* may be seen as a dystopian counter-pastoral, in which moments of pastoral innocence (the hyacinth girl passage, for example) are highlighted both in their beauty and in their unattainability by being juxtaposed to the overall portrait of an urbanity which has condemned itself to a kind of living death.

Conversely, Susan Stewart has noted pastoral's link with a democratizing speech that extends from Wordsworth through Whitman to William Carlos Williams, as well as the attempts of pastoral since the eighteenth century to heal over the split between the agricultural and the industrial worlds by means of song. Stewart makes clear that there is in pastoral both an ethos of conservation and an ethos of innovation: as the dual sense of the word "original" reminds us, these two are not always separate.

I have attempted to develop a mode of pastoral that takes the city as it is, in all its glory and horror: a mode in which, as Adorno puts it, everything is both itself and wholly other, in which the textures of the cityscape and the textures of the poem's mental landscape echo and mirror one another.

My fourth book, Otherhood, brings together the materials of language and the materials of the urban environment which together constitute the poem. It plays with the two senses of the word "material"-subject matter and building matter, the stuff of which the physical world is built and the stuff of which the poem is built. The words and lines correspond to the bricks and walls of buildings; the poems are constructions like the Monadnock Building or the Sears Tower. Rather than recounting "experience," Otherhood explores the structures-historical, architectural, botanical, mythological, meteorological, and topographical-that condition and implicate such experience, to produce what the Situationists would have called a psychogeography of Chicago.

Benjamin wrote of shock as the mode of modern experience, a mode of distraction and inattention in response to the sensory overload of the modern (which is by definition the urban, as perhaps the postmodern is the suburban, turning its face away from that from which it derives its identity). William Carlos Williams practiced poetry as a mode of attention, and it is significant that two of his poems limning the contours of urban space are titled "Pastoral." In its attention to and homology with the textures of urban life, to and with the feel of the city, the (potential) poetry of urban pastoral can restore the experience of the city to us, as if for the first time.

Interview with Erin Belieu

David Moody

This phone interview was conducted on Saturday, October 28, 2006, while Erin Belieu, who recently released her newest collection of poetry, Black Box, was attempting to create a Halloween costume for her five-year-old son, Jude.

David Moody: Do you consider yourself to be a connoisseur of words?

Erin Belieu: I'm never at a loss for words. I'm often in that conversation where, in a workshop, there is the discussion of the difference between prose and poetry (and there is no clear delineation) but I constantly support the primacy of the poetic line and the force of every single word.

DM: How does that affect your wordplay when writing poetry?

EB: To me, writing poems feels like being a diamond cutter or fine watchmaker—detailed, exquisite work that requires great powers of concentration. I know some fiction writers that have that same attitude. I'm primarily conscious of craft and language when I'm actually in the moment of writing a poem. I don't usually have a clear subject I'm writing toward—I just let the language reveal the what and who of it as I go along

DM: Do you ever have problems conveying that idea of precision and concision to students or others?

EB: Well, I think that some people know it intrinsically and some people want it to be easier than that. There is a level of attention one has to pay in regard to details, and many people just are not willing to. Which is fine. But if you find yourself sitting in front of a computer screen or paper putting in a com-

ma and taking it out, putting in a comma and taking it out for about 40 minutes and you can be oddly entertained by it, or not even entertained but obsessed, then it might be a terrible time to learn that you, too, are a poet.

DM: What are the roots of your interest in poetry? Was there much of it in your home life when growing up?

EB: There were many books of all kinds in my house growing up. I always loved to read and was allowed to have pretty much any book I wanted from an early age. I do the same thing with my son Jude now-I never say no when he wants a new book. My father has vaguely artistic notions, so I guess he figured I'd be the child he offered to the Art Gods. And given that I was a very spotty student academically, I guess he figured we'd better cast around until we found something for me. So I had a lot of lessons in pretty much everything one can do as a kid. It turns out I don't act, draw, play an instrument or dance particularly well. That's how I became defined as a writer and I wore that persona all the way through high school—though when I look back at the stuff I was writing then, it doesn't seem at all promising to me. In fact, it's stone cold revolting. I think enthusiasm was probably my only obvious gift. Then again, there are worse traits for a beginning writer to have.

It wasn't until my undergraduate experience at the UNO [University of Nebraska at Omaha] Writers Workshop that I had any clue as to what a poem was or how I might begin to write one. I had great teachers there and met a lot of visiting writers who took a very kind interest in me. I remember working closely with Stephen Dunn and David Bottoms when they came to visit. They were particularly generous. That's when I realized that I really did want to write, for my own reasons.

DM: So would it be safe to say that you evenly divide your time between reading and writing?

EB: I wish I were more prolific. I'm not like my friend, Carl Phillips. He's always writing twice as much as I am. Of course, it helps that he's absolutely brilliant. But I sweat way too much over every single word. It's sometimes counter-productive and squashes all the light and heat out of my writing if I'm not careful. I think I'm actually a better reader than I am a writer. I read everything and anything very quickly. I've tried to slow myself down since reading so quickly messes with my retention. I have Vicky Stone to blame for my voracious habits.

Vicky Stone was her arch-nemesis in grade school. They would try to out-read each other in an unspoken, intense competition to be the first one done reading and look up at the teacher. She is still not entirely over the competition and describes Stone as having a "Cheshire smile."

EB: If I hadn't run into Vicky, I don't know that I would read as I do. As I said, I sometimes worry about retention, but I'm the kind of person that finishes a book and then immediately turns back to page one. I just keep reading the same book over and over. Right now I'm reading Philip Pullman's His Dark Materials trilogy for the third time in a row. When I mention my favorites like Middlemarch or Anna Karenina some people ask "Why do you like such enormous books?" but it's like the longer the book the better. If it's a great book, I don't want it to end. I want it to last longer. So there's a paradox: I'm a stone passer in my work, but I read ridiculously fast. Just one of my many, mostly useless talents!

DM: I'm sure Vicky's just a search-engine-click away. I'm curious: do you ever type your name into Google and see what pops up?

EB: I limit my self-googling to only once in a while to see if anything alarming is about. Probably best to know if there are any naked infrared pictures or other random atrocities floating around! It's a little disconcerting to find people blogging about one's self. In some ways it's nice to know when people like a poem or some such. But the audience has been turned loose with a bullet. There's little context for a lot of the commentary. There's little ability to say "Actually, this is what I meant." I semi-disapprove of blogs in a kind of ignorant way, but I'll admit, I'll do it for money. I was blogging for a while and there were people commenting on my blog. It was unnerving. I couldn't take how self conscious it made me feel so I stopped.

DM: Some writers have taken to pseudonyms and such when writing in the public domain. Do you adopt a persona of sorts when blogging?

EB: I am what I am and I don't try to hide that, though I'm afraid I come off as kind of chatty and domestic in a way. I'd like to be more mysterious or elegant.

DM: Do you think that particular domesticity comes through in *Black Box* at all?

EB: I think so. The first part is spent watching that whole tradition of domesticity coming apart at the seams. Then it launches into an emotional heart of darkness that chases its own tail absolutely to the bottom of the rat hole. I think there is a level of domesticity in the work, but I'm not sure if other people would see that. If going from my previous books to Black Box, I think there's a thread of ironic domesticity that's being dealt with along with the issues of monogamy and fidelity that run throughout. With this book I think I've become more identified as a poet that works within the feminist tradition. I've always thought of my works as feminist in a real politic way. But I

don't think it's been until this last book that people have started identifying me with it directly. In *Black Box* I gave up trying to be a good girl. I think I've outed myself.

DM: Has your educational background played a part in this at all?

EB: My background in my PhD program was in psychoanalytic theory and I think that really forms the way I view writing.

DM: Do the female critics and reviews pick up on your themes?

EB: Rarely do I have female critics. I think there's been only a small handful in twelve years. It's something that I discuss with my students often. If women want to change literary culture, they need to do reviews and become the editors of more magazines. With my first book, the critical attention came strongly from men. When I first was recognized I didn't realize how powerful and potentially dicey it was for a young woman to be writing erotic poetry. I still have a lot of ambivalent feelings about this. But then again, I'm thrilled to be read and reviewed at all.

DM: When you read I can assume there to be both men and women present. Has *Black Box* been well received by both?

EB: I've given a lot of readings of *Black Box* since I was on the Wave Poetry Bus Tour for a couple weeks this fall. It's interesting in that it's not a feel-good crowd-pleasing group of poems. With this book, it doesn't give me a lot of opportunity to get out of that heart of darkness that is *Black Box*'s landscape. The audience reactions are strong, and I've seen a few men who are afraid to approach me after a reading. I think in some ways they're intimidated by the idea of a very female anger and quality of grief. I had one guy say that I was trying to do "the Plath thing." I'm not completely sure what that means. And

anyway, I think the book has a lot more to do with Tsveteyava as a poetic model than Plath. Then again, I've had a number of poets I respect who happen to be men tell me this is by far the best work I've ever done. They seem to really dig it. I suppose one can't and shouldn't generalize about audience.

DM: Did you get a chance to read the entire "Red Dress" series?

EB: Omaha was the only place where I read the entire series. A very strong reaction. And honestly, it's not much fun to read. I generally get nervous when I read and go into comic mode. There's no way to do that with this book. When I read the third section, some people positively jumped ship. Some people are so turned on by it and some people are disgusted or maybe even embarrassed by it. I could see the reactions looking out at the audience. I've seen it often enough, depending on the crowd and location in the country. But a strong reaction of any kind is certainly better than a polite one any day.

DM: What about the poem to your son? "The Birthmark?"

EB: Many people have come up to express their interest in that poem. There's something to the notion that parenthood is often not written about. There's obviously love, but an infinitely complicated love, as if an alien has arrived on your doorstep and you have to learn each other's ways under a certain amount of duress. It's rarely the immediate bonding and bliss that culture tries to sell to women. How could it be? I did have one reviewer refer to that poem as "coarse" and that mystified me. I can only assume this reviewer has never had a child.

She says this as her son twirls in front of her wearing only rain boots and a bandana.

EB: He's the most inexhaustible being in the world. I think the poem is simply realistic, getting away from that ideal perfection of mother/child relationships. He's always coming over to the computer and shutting the monitor off saying "Okay, we're done writing now." He understands that Mommy needs to do this because it's how she can afford all the things he likes, but we have to negotiate. Jude's a joy and a challenge and I can't imagine my life without him. He makes me laugh every day. And spiritually speaking, I think every parent gets the child they need in their lives.

DM: Have you noticed how single motherhood has affected your writing or timing?

EB: My best writing time is when I take Jude to school in my pajamas, all before having coffee. Then I come home, make coffee and write before picking him up again a few hours later. And Jude is lucky to have a wonderful dad who is as much a part of his life as I am. This makes my life infinitely easier, having a co-parent who is totally on board and thoughtful about giving me time to work. We have a nice family, even though it's not a traditional one. But traditional families don't seem that great to me over all. I think a lot of people are trying to discover new ways of being a family. We're doing that and it's working pretty well, I'd say.

DM: Does your audience ever write back? Do you have a particular audience envisioned when writing?

EB: I get feedback from readers occasionally—the Internet has increased this phenomenon quite a bit for all writers I'd guess. Usually it's just some nice person paying my books a compliment. Every once in awhile I get "interesting" mail from prisoners (I know a lot of other woman writers get this, too). Then there are those people wholly unknown to me who send their

entire manuscript by attachment and ask me to read and comment on it.

I don't have a general audience in mind when writing. Usually I have some other writer I'm addressing. My recent book, Black Box, is addressed mostly to the poet Marina Tsvetaeva. As I was working I kept wondering what she'd make of the poems-if they might somehow be worthy of her attention.

DM: Have you ever considered yourself highly successful or unsuccessful at conveying a particular message?

EB: It's hard to know the impression others have of my poems-but the feedback I get makes me think people expect some combination of humor, anger and sexuality as a "message" within my work. And that sounds about right. With Black Box, I feel like I've run the risk of alienating some readers. Writing this book, I was interested in grief and anger as a purifying force and shaping that force through poems that would be extremely disciplined. But that kind of confrontational energy can put many readers off. I've always loved artists like Kathy Acker and Diamanda Galas and I would hope that people might see Black Box as the same kind of artistic/political feminist expression.

DM: How did you select the title from all the words in your new book?

EB: I struggled with the title of the recent book for a little while. But once I'd finished the "Red Dress' poems, I realized Black Box was kind of perfect-at the most literal and metaphoric levels. It's the surviving record of a disaster, it's a metaphor for a coffin and it has those vulgar/erotic overtones that I thought worked with some of the poems performative and hyperbolic qualities.

DM: About your readers: do they often come to you for advice?

EB: I have people who occasionally want my advice-usually young women who, after readings, want to talk about love and relationships and what it's like for a woman artist to have a husband and child and a career at the same time. I'm amazed that after reading my work they'd have any notion that I was wise about the ways of the heart! Maybe they're looking for advice from the incorrigibly reckless. Yes, I'm good at giving reckless, passionate advice. Not quite as bad as the ill considered, I suppose. That's some virtue, though a small one.

DM: Before I forget, a friend of mine is a fan of your writing. She says that Sharon Olds and you are her personal favorites.

EB: What a nice compliment. Sharon Olds is one of my favorites, too. She's a damned good poet. She was very graceful under pressure when she went through some critical nastiness in the early 90s. There was some weird, poetry establishment backlash against her work. Just plain jealousy I suspect, that she should have such a large audience. Because of her poems' subjects, she was a bit of a target for some loud, misogynistic types at one point.

DM: How has Florida State University been treating you?

EB: FSU has a great writing program and it's well organized. I can't think of any places I'd recommend over it.

DM: Don't they offer a certificate in publishing and editing?

EB: They do. It's a good thing to do—getting a background in publications. It's good to fall back on. Anything to keep you around literature but help pay the bills can be good.

DM: Are you aware of the University of Florida's movements to eliminate the arts from their course offerings, keeping composition only because of its "applicable" qualities, but eliminating creative writing and literature courses?

EB: The UF administration and the state legislature should be collectively ashamed of themselves. Deeply ashamed. When a university gives up on the ideals of art and culture they might as well shut their doors. These kinds of cynical choices are killing our country. How much fatter and more disenfranchised do Americans need to become before our government and educational institutions recognize just how much they've abdicated their ethical responsibilities? I know governments generally like to have an ignorant and anaesthetized public to manipulate, but history shows how quickly ignorance grows into viciousness. As America's social fabric continues to unravel, we're all going to pay dearly for their total lack of integrity.

DM: Do you find that Florida is a pro-poetry state?

EB: Is Florida a pro-poetry state? Is any state a pro-poetry state? I will say Florida is lucky to have a number of very fine poets living and working here. I haven't lived in Florida very long so I look forward to meeting more of the writers in our area.

Book Review: Erin Belieu's Black Box

David Moody

Black Box by Erin Belieu Copper Canyon Press, 2006, 80 pages, ISBN: 1556592515

Black Box, Erin Belieu's newest poetry collection from Copper Canyon Press, carves for her a smooth groove into the foundation of feminist tradition. Her blunt phrases and prosy expressions assert her grounding with the calm solidarity of an aged cocktail waitress. However, "aged" does not describe the bonds of struggling affection that presently wax and wane throughout the book's four sections. The youth of the moment is as pervasive as ever.

The feelings are fresh with paper cut acuity, yet dressed with patience. Whereas Belieu lit the kindling beneath the groundwork of ideal domesticity in her previous works, the first selections of *Black Box* live with the idle aggression of a flame watcher. Issues addressed in "Against Writing About Children," from One Above and One Below, are revisited on a more personal level with "The Birthmark." The idea of a child as "a problematic ocean, a mirrored/body growing denser and more/difficult to navigate" is juxtaposed with the view of parenthood as a harrowed relationship with offspring that can coo and disturb all in the same bite.

Belieu challenges writers and readers alike to make choices, actively prodding them out of their poetry-induced lull. In "Last Trip to the Island," she defines "a field, a yellow-eared patch/ of cereal, whose quiet rustling argues for the underrated valor of discretion" as her ideal ocean. "How can anyone relax/near something so worked up all the time?" Whether she is or is not, Belieu transfers a feeling of confidence that implies a relaxed familiarity in any setting or subject.

In "Shooting Range," Belieu proposes to an unnamed: "Aren't you just like the Daddy every girl dreams of, with your handgun cocked and your pants pockets full of dirty peppermints?" Though there is often a direct referral to "you" throughout *Black Box*, only the guilty reader feels accused, and only the mistaken reader can soundly claim to grasp to whom is being written.

Belieu edges along an all-purpose dialect that any reader can understand but that few can speak. This is exemplified through the "In The Red Dress I Wear To Your Funeral" sequence, the third section in her collection, in which she speaks for those tongueless readers, representing issues that undermine the everyday concept of what it means to be a woman, a mother, a lover, a watcher, and a someone wanting to be watched. Readers of Belieu will not be left doubting her sincerity, but may be left wondering why their own sincerity seems suddenly lacking, "dirty as the damaged apple."

Style is her craft with wit that can be abrasive, a thorough and sometimes painful scrub that grinds with dirt and grit to leave readers tender yet cleansed. Eroticism is a concrete. Eros is not the God of Love; the lover's zeal is gone, replaced by a fractal account of how it was ("The microphone sweats/ like your cock did in my hands.") and what it is ("Your coffin is a tough room./ Mourners talk...but you always loved the livestock) without directly consenting what could be. Her structures, an ever-shifting variable, slips unnoticed to let the meaning rather than the form compel the reader to continue, though once attended, it is clear that the formats are crafted with precision-the stage that goes unnoticed under the actress's feet.

Black Box is Belieu's inception of a constant call in effort to "remind you/ that even the millionth tragedy/ went uncelebrated the day/the world was born." In that she succeeds for both the reader and herself.

Book Review: Robert Olen Butler's Severance

Josef Benson

Severance by Bobert Olen Butler Chronicle Books, 2006 264 pages, ISBN: 0811856143

The first thing the reader must do when examining Robert Olen Butler's new book *Severance* is decide what exactly the book is. Is it, as the writer claims, a book of stories? Or is it poetry? Or is it a book of prose poems? The fact that Butler made the point to call his work stories perhaps is a hint as to what the author is up to.

We are given the background for the book right away in the two quotations which appear just after the dedication. The first quotation by Dr. Dassy D' Estaing, 1883, states, "After careful study and due deliberation it is my opinion the head remains conscious for one minute and a half after decapitation." The next quotation, by Dr. Emily Reasoner states, "In a heightened state of emotion, we speak at the rate of 160 words per minute. —A Sourcebook of Speech, 1975." Butler seems to have taken these two bits of scientific opinion and created a work where each character is given a monologue of thought and dialogue 160 words long, the very 160 words he or she, or it, may have said when their head was cut off.

The 160-word stories are each introduced by two black title pages citing the character's name and the manner and year in which they were killed. Then, on two white pages, the story is told in lowercase with no punctuation, save a few spare commas. After the first line the rest of the text is indented giving the effect of an eruption of communication resembling poetry much more than fiction. Perhaps the best quality of the book is its poetry. The 160 word tumults are full of gorgeous language

and employ such poetic devices as assonance and repetition. Butler writes of "Mud," a "man beheaded by a saber toothed tiger, circa 40,000B.C." (11):

but we all feel the time coming like many suns past, before suckle woman is old, and there were other old and the cold came quick and we all were drawn tight on our bones and the biting was fierce in our centers and we all were going slow and it was time to eat, to eat the old, and now the cold is upon us and now the time is again and we alone fall back to hold the suckle woman (13).

Again, it is the pure poetry of these lines that make the book a stunning read. The repetition and assonance of the o sound adds chillingly to the overall tone of the language and is something Butler employs throughout the book.

The book extends continents and is told in chronological order from 40,000 BC to 2008 when Butler himself becomes a character in his own book, reminiscent of the works of Kurt Vonnegut. Even the Author himself is not spared the common demise of all the characters in his book. One could even suggest certain links to absurdist techniques found in the works of Samuel Beckett.

Butler's research must have involved finding those who have been beheaded or decapitated, conducting background research on the circumstances leading up to the death-moment and then ruminating on what this person or animal may have been thinking as his or her head tumbled to the ground. Not all the beheadings were executions; some were accidents involving a subway or some piece of heavy machinery. Butler does not discriminate when depicting those who have met this similar end. He writes from the point of view of men and women of all nationalities and even from the point of view of a chicken, and further, he foretells of his own decapitation. Perhaps one of

the more notable stories is of Ta Chin, a Chinese wife beheaded by her husband. Anyone familiar with the Chinese tradition of foot binding knows that a woman's feet were often brutally bent back and inserted in special shoes so there feet would not grow. Essentially, their feet were broken and retarded so that they would remain small, and in the eyes of a man, beautiful. Butler writes, "I see Buddha in heaven sitting on his lotus but it is my naked foot the golden lotus he sits upon and hands push me down my neck made bare and I cry please, before my head cut off my feet" (129). Once again, as in his Pulitzer Prize winning book of short stories, A Good Scent from a Strange Mountain, Butler's most powerful lines are from the perspective of an Asian woman.

Butler tackles themes such as God, sex, and the idea that all living things are bound by death and violence. Also, Butler does not limit himself to the real world. He freely draws from realms of myth such as his telling of what Medusa might have thought or said as she was beheaded by Perseus. Butler, though, seems to always have a trick up his sleeve for the reader. For instance, who ever thought that man, when he looked at the beautiful Medusa, actually turned to stone from a sexual hardening? Another example of sex in death is Valeria Messalina, wife of Emporer Claudius I of Rome beheaded by order of her husband. In her story she has just had sex with her husband. Butler writes, "I take it between my teeth tugging gently and he moans and I bite hard now his skin yielding his blood" (29). Perhaps Claudius was not into biting.

Another recurring idea is that those being killed seems to take in the world around them and then take in what has killed them and only then can they look to God for answers. Consider the apostle Matthew and his words after he is beheaded by King Hirtacus. Butler writes, "the Sea of Galilee is bright from the sun but it is more than that, the tips of the upchurning waves are flames rising and I begin to tremble and now a day of clouds and a fine misty rain and he says follow me" (41). It is as though

Butler feels that once a living thing is beheaded, even a human, it takes time for one's consciousness to realize its position. The mind can only cling to the life that it knows. Valentine, a Roman priest and saint, beheaded by Emperor Claudius II says, "she has abandoned them to give me her tit and the cave is my jail cell and I wake ready to die for my lord" (45). For Butler, no doubt, there is a link between sex, death, and God.

Perhaps Butler's greatest achievement in Severance is illustrating the point that all living things die and that we are all bound by this. We can find a certain unity in our fates. We all cling to life no matter what. It is our instinct. In the end it is all that we know. It does not matter if one is a Man or a Woman or an Easterner or a Westerner or even a Chicken. We have all been given the gift of life and in these prose pieces Butler shows just how precious this gift is. Perhaps no other writer before has ever attempted to get at the heart of our intense desire to live, for even as our heads are gone from our bodies, we still cling to that life, those sensations that connect us all. For Butler, there is no light at the end of the tunnel; there are only words and thoughts that link us with the world and our mutilated bodies.

In the interest of not spoiling everything, I have intentionally withheld the notable last words of Maria Antoinette, a Dragon, John the Baptist, and Jacob, an American slave beheaded by his owner, among many others. In the end this reader found that trying to figure out what the book is, is pointless. Whatever the hell it is, it is a great read.

Book Review: Harry Crews' An American Family: The Baby With The Curious Markings

Philip Booth

An American Family: The Baby with the Curious Markings by Harry Crews Graham Press, 2006 103 pages, ISBN: 0940941015

Harry Crews' An American Family: The Baby With the Curious Markings, a slim book and the self-described Southern "grit" writer's first novel since 1998's twisted trailer-park drama Celebration, arrived three decades after A Feast of Snakes, arguably the most accomplished work by the Georgia native, a longtime resident of Gainesville, Fla. What hath Crews wrought? By conventional standards of literary craftsmanship, and in comparison with the other novels by the retired University of Florida creative writing teacher, An American Family is a decidedly inferior work of fiction. The characters are largely underdeveloped, and the author's narrative is decidedly uncontrolled. The bloodletting in An American Family, unlike that in Crews' other work, is mostly disconnected from anything resembling dramatic tension.

The storyline, set somewhere in the Fort Lauderdale area, might be described as pure revenge fantasy. Major Melton, a junior college teacher and former Marine married to Nicky, a beautiful, wealthy, considerably younger woman, is attacked by a motley gang of his own family and would-be friends. Because of one or more instances of physical abuse that Major directed at Nicky, and due to other unnamed offenses committed by Major, she enlists her lover Pete Zack, her dentist parents, Pete's father and a hired-hand Japanese man with the unlikely name of Bac Bong Suc, to torture her husband.

As in many of Crews' novels, particularly 1992's Scar Lover, several characters are blemished or given deformities, beginning with the infant boy of the subtitle: An unusual birthmark, a bright purple figure shaped like a camel, mars the child's penis. An adult male sexual organ, belonging to the corpse of Pete's suicidal, seven-foot-tall father, Mr. Zack, is subject to the same fate visited on the sheriff's deputy in A Feast of Snakes—it's lopped off with a sharp blade. Major and Nicky live in a development called Crippled Horse Acres. (Those looking for autobiographical references might find some in the description of Mr. Zack: He's a novelist whose "Southern Gothic" work was well-reviewed "but didn't sell for spit" [80]).

An American Family offers other parallels with A Feast of Snakes (and autobiographical references). Like the latter novel's Duffy Deeter, a Gainesville lawyer visiting the Rattlesnake Roundup in Mystic, Ga., Major is a wiry, hard-bodied professional accompanied by a younger woman. Both plots, too, feature an abundance of vicious pit bulls. Mr. Zack, like Big Joe in A Feast of Snakes, is a breeder of the animals, described as "devil dogs" (40) by one ill-fated young woman. Hundreds of the dogs, gathered together at The Pit Stop, Mr. Zack's pet store, figure into a mob scene that's nearly as hellish as the one described in A Feast of Snakes. The aforementioned girl, one of the survivors of the melee, suffers a fate possibly worse than that experienced by those who were killed by the rampaging dogs: "The girl had no face, only a reddish paste of blood and dirt from the hairline to chin" (47).

An American Family offers a redneck symphony of violent incidents, and practically nonstop bloodletting, including images of a salad fork driven through a hand, a successful suicide by hanging, pit bulls ripping into human flesh and crippled animals being fed, alive, into a meat grinder. The word "blood" appears on 11 of the book's 103 pages, by one count. Images of knives and blades proliferate: The child is to be named Mack, as in the Bobby Darin hit song "Mack the Knife." Major ex-

plains, "I want to raise him to be razor sharp and always ready to cut through the bullshit of this world" (102). Nicky's smile is described as "thin as the cut of a knife" (22) and the Japanese man's hands are "knife-thin" (70).

It would be practically impossible to construe An American Family as containing any calls to a moral or spiritual reaction to the bloodletting, or, really, any types of humanizing messages; those looking for redemption will be sorely disappointed. Booklist critic Brendan Driscoll, in one of the few widely distributed reviews of the novel, called it a "testosterone-fueled trance of cryptic meaning and freakish violence." A Publishers Weekly reviewer wrote that the novella is a "twisted tale of violence and passion."

What accounts for all the violence? One explanation might be a general psychosis, a break from reality, experienced by man and beast alike in the book. Major's pet bulldog is "berserk" (1) and "shithouse crazy" (11). His friends are "going quietly mad" (1) and "the world has gone crazy" (34). A cabbie drives "like a madman" (25), and Mr. Zack is "a very famous crazy person" (36). Emasculation is suggested as a reason for the madness—Major's problems result from being "tied on a leash that was too short" (1)—and then is practically dropped as a theme, although late in the novella Pete makes mention of "the rehabilitated savage" (93).

An American Family concludes with an entirely improbable reunion between the battered Major and Nicky, who has overseen her husband's torture. The story's resolution appears to be little more than a quick, frivolous exit from the bloody goings-on, rather than a meaningful response to all that's preceded it; the violence has little apparent meaning. Nicky's nonsensical summing-up of all that she's seen, including a view through a picture window of her son resting peacefully on the stomach of Mac, the dog, essentially recycles words uttered 61 pages earlier by Mr. Zack: "What a beautiful, terrible world,"

she says. For fans of a major, underappreciated Southern stylist, once gifted with absolute control over his craft, that's the unkindest and most painful cut of all.

Film Review: John Sayles' Sunshine State Philip Booth

Sunshine State directed by John Sayles Sony Pictures, 2002, 141 minutes.

John Sayles—an author when he's not working his day job churning out a movie every other year or so—favors a filmmaking style that's downright novelistic. In 2002's Sunshine State, as in Lone Star, City of Hope, Limbo and other feature films in a much-admired career dating back more than twenty-five years, he assembles an eclectic mix of characters, each equipped with a specific point of view related to the movie's central theme(s), and he gradually sets his figures in action. Does their movement result in narrative friction? Sometimes.

Sayles' films are pleasantly unhurried, workmanlike and with no frills except for the dialogue: They are often weighted with transparent sermonizing, long speeches meant to illuminate a particular political stance or a bit of social history. That indulgence aside, the veteran independent filmmaker always gets the job done on time and under budget. Still, one could argue that there's little in the way of movie-movie gracefulness about his work. His transitions aren't exactly seamless. After all these years, his interweaving of sundry characters and subplots isn't nearly as smartly or effectively executed as that of, say, a master like Robert Altman (Nashville) or even the Altman-influenced Paul Thomas Anderson (Magnolia).

On the other hand, Sayles' movies are nearly always marked by engaging, sympathetic characters and appealingly rough edges. They're never shrill, and they are consistently "about something," as he has said. Sunshine State, his 13th film, shot on a budget of \$6 million and featuring a cast loaded with more high-profile actors than usual, is no exception. It pos-

its Florida as a poisoned paradise, a place where unrestrained corporate greed has resulted in the continuing desecration of a state once characterized by its natural beauty. The swamp land—home to alligators and other primordial creatures—is rapidly disappearing and the spectacular Gulf of Mexico and Atlantic Ocean vistas are quickly being co-opted by the wealthy. Vanishing, too, is the distinctive nature of the state's small communities, regularly being subsumed by the larger urban areas and attendant mall culture.

The land developers, of necessity, are the chief villains in this scenario, and none are as callous—or, playing the devil's advocate, as pragmatic—as Murray Silver (Alan King), the New York-accented carpetbagger whose pronouncements spike the movie like interjections from Mount Olympus. "Dreams are what you sell, a concept," Silver opines, while golfing in a foursome with likeminded pals on a course in an exclusive gated community. What's he offering to investors and future homeowners? "Nature on a leash." Development, Murray explains, has been a godsend for the Sunshine State: "Remember, this was the end of the earth, this was a land populated by white people who ate catfish, and almost overnight, out of the muck and the mangroves we created . . . this!"

Sayles' story, set on the fictitious Plantation Island in Delrona Beach and adjacent African-American area Lincoln Beach, was mostly shot on Amelia Island, near Jacksonville on Florida's east coast. It's centered on two female characters, each plagued by old, troubling issues and facing crucial decisions regarding their respective futures.

Marly (Edie Falco of *The Sopranos*), a sixth-generation native of Delrona Beach and a former Weeki Wachee watershow mermaid, is the manager of her family's business, the once popular, now downmarket Sea-Vue Motel, located on a piece of beach property highly desired by out-of-town land speculators. She's in the process of dumping her younger golf-pro lover Scotty (Marc Blucas), a non-descript fellow about to split town in

pursuit of a career as a golf pro. Marly also spends time fending off dopey financial schemes pushed by her ex-husband, Steve (Richard Edson), ex-leader of Skeeter Meter, a Southern rock band described as a cross between Lynyrd Skynyrd and the Allman Brothers. The latter character, now making a living playing a Union soldier at a historical fort, gets one of the best, most ironic lines: "You can't live in the past." Marly is growing hopeful about her budding romance with a visiting landscape architect (Tim Hutton), a laidback guy whose dreams of creating aesthetically pleasing public spaces have been replaced with the more mundane work of converting swampy land into upscale planned communities. But Marly doesn't just have boyfriend issues. She's also not so sure she wants to continue running the motel, and she worries about disappointing her retired, nearly blind father (Ralph Waite, aka dad Walton) and her mother, Delia (Jane Alexander), a director of community theater.

Desiree (St. Petersburg native Angela Bassett), from Lincoln Beach, a failed movie actress now starring in infomercials, is at the center of the film's other dominant story. Back in town for the first time since she was sent away pregnant more than twenty years earlier, she's dredging up old family conflicts with her mother, Eunice (Mary Alice). Desiree's husband Reggie (James McDaniels), an anesthesiologist, provides a sympathetic ear and pitches in to help out with distant relative Terrell (Alex Lewis), a troubled teenage delinquent now under the guardianship of Eunice.

Lincoln Beach, based on real-life historically black American Beach, founded in the early 1930s by insurance entrepreneur Abraham Lincoln Lewis, also is home to Flash Phillips (Tom Wright), a former FSU football star (Tom Wright) now using his old-school fame to sell cars. Phillips, Desiree's old flame, is feeling somewhat guilty over his role as a colluder with out-of-town developers. In opposition to Phillips is Dr Lloyd (Bill Cobbs), an old timer and veteran of Civil Rights struggles. He's buoyed by pleasant memories of Lincoln Beach's heyday

as a center for blacks—the community, ironically, lost its cachet and financial footing when segregation ended. Phillips initially seems to be the only person of real integrity: He's willing to lead the fight against the determined developers by attempting to rally residents against an impending buyout.

Also woven into the film's multicultural, multi-generational tapestry is Francine (Mary Steenburgen) a chipper Chamber of Commerce type in charge of the community's bogus Buccaneer Days festivities, a euphemistic, Disneyfied celebration not dissimilar from the pirate-themed tourist events that take place in Tampa and other Florida communities. She complains how difficult it is to "invent a tradition." Francine's financially struggling banker husband Earl (Gordon Clapp), a County Commissioner and compulsive gambler embroiled in financial corruption, stays busy with bungled suicide attempts, played for comic value.

Like the movie's other central character—Florida—Marly and Desiree are unable to construct a present that isn't uniquely colored and maybe even thwarted by the past. That's of a piece with a theme that flavors all of Sayles films, in particular his debut feature, 1980's The Return of the Secaucus Seven (essentially reborn three years later as Lawrence Kasdan's The Big Chill): Life, real life, has a way of taking unexpected directions, of following its own course, of leading one down paths that couldn't possibly have been predicted. Dreams are easily and randomly smashed, and, in the best circumstances, may be rebuilt into a far more satisfying vision for the future, or, as a consolation prize, a hope based on practicalities, built on basic human needs and desires.

"That's the struggle with life, for most people—things not living up to their expectations or their promise, or if they do, figuring out how they get to stay there," as Sayles told me during an interview conducted shortly before Sunshine State opened in Florida. "That struggle is something that most people deal with. At that point, does that make them bitter or do

they give up? I wanted to have a character who keeps losing and losing and losing (but doesn't quit), like Edie's. The characters all had this kind of inner strength. America is a country that is so based on winners. Right now on television there's all these kind of survivor shows—who's gonna' be the winner and who are gonna' be the losers? Most people don't make the major leagues or the pros. They get more realistic. They find something else to do. They make do with what they've got."

There are minor skirmishes, but no real showdowns between the conflicting parties in *Sunshine State*. A small eleventh-hour victory for the anti-development forces comes when a portion of the area is set aside because of its value to archaeologists. But Sayles is more interested in dropping in slices of life, making two or three points in support of his message, and exiting the story without any real sense of resolution. By those measures, he's entirely successful: *Sunshine State* is pleasant if less than particularly compelling; there's very little dramatic tension afoot, and that's not necessarily a fatal flaw.

Sayles began to formulate ideas for Sunshine State after taking a road trip across Florida, a place whose sun-scorched people and places have been affectionately satirized in recent years by Carl Hiaasen, Dave Barry and Tim Dorsey, among other authors. The filmmaker, whose 1991 novel, Los Gusanos, is set in Miami, had been influenced by the likes of John D. MacDonald and Marjorie Kinnan Rawlings, and Peter Matthiessen's writing on the Everglades. Sayles' short story, "Treasure," served as his initial inspiration for a Florida movie.

"I was thinking about telling a different story, on the west coast, about treasure hunters," he said. "I traveled from Everglades City to Pensacola and I couldn't find the west coast that I remembered. It had been developed way beyond my recognition."

Florida, as his trip affirmed, isn't entirely overrun by the greedy contractors, coke-addicted lap dancers, wayward senior citizens, hit men with encyclopedic knowledge of regional his-

tory and man-eating alligators of recent Sunshine State fiction. Then again, the state's future—thanks to the population explosion, crisis in affordable housing, traffic insanity and hurricane worries - isn't exactly as bright as its nickname suggests.

And as the movie suggests, big-business interests all too often seem to trump the concerns of the little guy. "There's usually a feeling that there probably are four guys on a golf course deciding your future," Sayles said. "But now there's this sense that (as recently as the early '90s) there were no environmental laws, so at least now the brakes have been applied."

If the 141-minute Sunshine State has a failing, it may be because of its earnestness, a sober-minded seriousness of purpose that sometimes descends into didacticism. That's a criticism that was lobbed by critics around the country at the time of the film's release: "John Sayles is less a filmmaker than an earnest student run amok with a highlighter," wrote Salon critic Stephanie Zacharek. Is Sayles' film simply a message movie, a political tract disguised as an art-house movie? He has protested that characterization.

"I think (it's a message movie) only in contrast, because most movies aren't about shit," he said. "You can think about this (film) for more than five minutes. The characters are adults. So, for instance, it's unusual for a film to actually go to a county commission meeting, but human beings do that. I think that, generally, Hollywood movies are a little afraid of the characters being conscious. They always seem like they don't know what's going on in their own world."

So appreciate Sunshine State as a thematically rich, intermittingly entertaining, surprisingly poignant comic drama that highlights Florida's pressing issues more effectively than any movie before or since, including this year's eco-conscious Hoot, based on the children's book of the same name by Hiaasen. It's a cinematic think piece that ought to be required viewing for any politician daring to construct a vision for the future of the South's trickiest state.

"I think the unique thing about Florida is that it's a state that has always been connected with the very idea of leisure in the United States," Sayles said. "Florida was populated partly because of advertising. It was a very big state without many people in it until developers started coming down. They created this iconic idea of the sunshine state and the vacation paradise and all that. A lot of the state industry is based on tourism.

"I've been coming down here since I was four or five years old. I saw the Miami here before and after the Cuban revolution. You see a change so quickly that you realize that some of that was planned and understood, but a lot of it is just people shaking their heads and seeing what happened. It finally all came together in this story."

Contributors

Tia Ballantine is a poet and a painter who lives between islands. Currently, she is a Visiting Assistant Professor of English at the University of Tampa.

Erin Belieu is the author of two previous poetry collections from Cooper Canyon Press: Infanta, which was chosen for the National Poetry Series in 1995, and One Above & One Below, which won the Midland Authors and Ohioana prizes in 2001. Belieu is also the co-editor (with Susan Aizenberg) of the anthology The Extraordinary Tide: New Poetry by American Women (Columbia University Press, 2001). Her poems have appeared in places such as The Atlantic Monthly, The Best American Poetry, The New York Times, Ploughshares, Slate, Tin House, TriQuarterly, and The Virginia Quarterly Review. Born and raised in the great state of Nebraska, Belieu studied poetry at The Ohio State University and Boston University. She now lives in Tallahassee, Florida, and teaches in the Creative Writing Program at Florida State University.

Philip Booth is a longtime arts/entertainment journalist and musician whose byline has appeared in Rolling Stone, Spin, Variety, The Boston Globe, The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, The Journal of Popular Culture, The Tampa Tribune, Detroit Metro Times, Philadelphia City Paper, the Journal of American Culture, The Journal of Popular Culture, Literature Film Quarterly, Banyan and many other publications. He regularly writes about music and film for the St. Petersburg Times, Billboard, Down Beat, Jazziz, Las Vegas City Life, and Miami New Times. A Florida native, he and his wife, Callie, live in Tampa with two small children who require regular feeding and watering.

Andrew Cochran, the fiction editor of *Muse Apprentice Guild*, grew up in De Pere, Wisconsin. He and his fiancé, Daisy, reside in South-central Florida with their menagerie of pets, which includes a cat named Sweetness and a soft-shelled turtle named Pinocchio.

Andrew Epstein is the author of a critical study, Beautiful Enemies: Friendship and Postwar American Poetry, which has just appeared from Oxford University Press. His poems have appeared in various journals, including Mississippi Review, Gulf Coast, Western Humanities Review, Conduit, Notre Dame Review, and Verse. He moved to Tallahassee from New York in 2001 to become an assistant professor at Florida State University.

Debora Greger's most recent book of poems was *Western Art*, published by Penguin in 2004.

Kimberly Johnson's first book of poetry was Leviathan with a Hook, and her new book, A Metaphorical God, was completed with support of a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship. Dr. Johnson holds degrees from the University of Utah and the University of California, Berkeley.

Maggie Jones was raised in Miami, FL, with generations of native Miamians behind her. She received her B.A. from the University of Vermont and her MFA from the University of Miami, where she was a Bennett Fellowship recipient. She is currently teaching Language Arts at an all-girls Catholic school and working on her first novel.

Ryan Meany's work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and The Best New American Voices and has appeared in *Crazyhorse* and *River City*. He teaches at the University of Tampa.

Peter Meinke has published 14 books of poems, 7 in the prestigious Pitt Poetry Series, the most recent being The Contracted World (2006), Zinc Fingers (2001), Scars (1996), and Liquid Paper (1996). His poetry has received many awards, including 2 NEA Fellowships and 3 prizes from the Poetry Society of America. His book of short stories, The Piano Tuner, won the 1986 Flannery O'Connor Award. Another collection, Unheard Music, will be published in 2007, along with his book on reading and writing poems, The Shape of Poetry. He directed the Writing Workshop at Eckerd College for many years, and has

often been writer-in-residence at other colleges and universities; from 2003 through 2005 he held the Darden Chair in Creative Writing at Old Dominion University. His work has appeared in *The Atlantic, The New Yorker, The New Republic*, and dozens of other magazines; he and his wife, the artist Jeanne Clark, have lived in St. Petersburg since 1966.

Andrew Plattner lives in Atlanta with his wife Diana and commutes weekly to teach Creative Writing at the University of Southern Mississippi. He has won the Flannery O'Connor award, a Henfield Prize and a gold medal from the Association of American Horse Publishers. He has published stories in the Paris Review, Epoch, Sewanee Review, and Mississippi Review.

Nicholas Samaras won The Yale Series of Younger Poets Award for his first book, *Hands of the Saddlemaker*. He has just completed a new manuscript of poetry, *SIMKO* (based on the life of the Slovakian poet and translator of German Poetry, Svetozar Daniel Simko), and a memoir, *The Lost City of Pekin*. Samaras currently lives in West Nyack, New York.

Reginald Shepherd is the editor of *The Iowa Anthology of New American Poetries* (University of Iowa Press, 2004). His four volumes of poetry, all published by the University of Pittsburgh Press, are: *Otherhood* (2003), a finalist for the 2004 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, *Wrong* (1999), *Angel, Interrupted* (1996), and *Some Are Drowning* (1994), winner of the 1993 AWP Award in Poetry. Pittsburgh will publish his fifth collection, *Fata Morgana*, in spring 2007. He lives, writes, and dodges hurricanes in Pensacola, Florida.

Karen Wiegman was born and raised in a small town on the gulf coast of Florida. Though she currently lives in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, she is still plagued with dreams of Ponce de Leon searching for the fountain of youth.

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