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Strange Weather

Nick Vagnoni

Strange weather here: the occasional band of spitting rain, sunshine with 20 mile per hour winds, and giant palm fronds strewn across the highway like the bodies of dead horses after a flood.

Looking out a window, I know where it is coming from: a near miss, up through the Bahamas instead of across South Florida.

I have seen the satellite photography, the huge bloom bristling at the coastline.
I have heard the background hum of science, what conversations always devolve into, that which gives us confidence.

It is not the awesome power in quivering stop signs.
It is not the larger purpose in thousands of terracotta roofs scabbed with blue tarpaulin.
It is not just staring up at fast moving clouds, but recognizing that we are walking below something larger, organized.

Because we have read about it, seen the cone caterpillar slowly across maps, been told that it will arrive, and every time, unlike so many other omens, it does.

And this time, I know it is out there, know why this wind, and I wonder: is this what it is like to believe?

To know, positively, that something too massive for our sight is moving around us, breathing on our faces?
Ladies’ Night in South Beach

Sean L. Sullivan

When the needle hits the record, my eyes check the floor. A velvet-roped line feeds the club from the beach, while underage girls’ hands are stamped like produce. They float to the bar buying shots, two for one. The neon lights reflect evenly on this record, my house beat—my signature introduced to the electrified air. Stereo fresh, the ozone fills my lungs. My finger slowly taps the vinyl. My first lick in Miami—Ladies’ Night in South Beach, just one hook will make this club mine.

A nine-to-five crowd lost on mojitos stagger and let loose too early, while the club regulars stand back and watch. They wait for the connection to this beat, to this life, when out pops this chiquita in a little black dress—more skin than dress, her body now the center of the floor. Her stare is on me—purple light on her skin like sex, purple black like the record I spin. She has the connection to the beat I have laid down. My fingers touch the vinyl and I spin it back forth, back forth—I make her move. She smiles. I nod.

She lifts her head so slow, her eyes don’t move. She has the beat before my fingers can hold back that record. I hold on, while wannabe players work from the outside in. Like sharks, they circle the floor. My fingers now slight, I can still feel the grooves. My spinning like a line in the water—she has the hook.

I look away, the purple light now pink. A thump from the bass, a hum from the speaker, my fingers hot from that record—I stop. The crowd hollers out, waving their cell phones, lighting the air like flares at sea. She is by my feet, an ice cube in her mouth. She moves it back and to the side. Her tongue is pulsing.

I lift my finger up and mouth out, “Come here.” I crossfade, letting another record spin and wait, just waiting for the groove. She waits for the delay, relents for a second then she catches—my hand on her hip, so hot—before I let the other needle drop.
A Christmas Tattoo

Christine Hale

Mired to the hips in a too-soft couch, I shove the cell phone hard against my ear for closer contact with my daughter. J is sobbing, stranded by a blizzard at an airport a thousand miles away. Beside me—the side opposite the phone—my son slouches, a six-foot, skinny teenage mop-top. B’s posture is defensive, his expression stricken. The couch, in textured velour, muted greens and gold, clashes with the view through the storefront window behind it: the buckling asphalt parking lot of a seedy Tampa strip mall and the words PIERCINGS • TATTOOS, blazoned on the glass in biker orange and gun barrel-gray. We’re in line to get our Christmas present—a together-tattoo, a rite planned for weeks—with only two-thirds of our three-person family on hand.

Garbled airline announcements reverberate from the phone in my palm; I picture J huddled in the cavernous air terminal in Hartford amid hundreds of miserable holiday travelers. She flew north three days ago, her need non-negotiable, in a peak-traffic, weather-vulnerable season to spend time with her boyfriend. Her problem, she says, is her brother B.

“It’s more important to him to get his tattoo today than to wait for me to be there.”

He can’t hear her but he can read my face. He mumbles, “If we have to wait I will...” but we all three know perfectly well he will not. He and I are, after all, on this couch next in line for ink because he refused to wait. Tomorrow his winter holidays end and school swallows him and, anyway, today is the day he’s set to do this thing he will and must do.

She’s twenty. He is sixteen. I am fifty and have been between them, their single mom—one of me and two of them—for more than ten years. Flanked by their differences, their ineluctable connection, I am trying hard today to enjoy as much Christmas present as I think I’m going to get.

While they talk and I listen, my eyes track the tattooist, Lefty.
He is right-handed. He will reply to my eventual question about the provenance of his name with a laconic non-answer: his father’s name was Lefty and they are Puerto Rican. He is a painter; his canvases—pulsing-bright acrylics of skulls and swords, teardrops, gaping cuts, imploding crystals—tier the four white walls of his shop. Lefty concentrates with an artist’s intensity on the canvas before him, the shirtless back of a client belly-down on a fully reclined chair, that man’s attention, in turn, fastened on the portable DVD player he holds inches from his face. In Lefty’s right hand the tattoo gun buzzes like hedge shears. Car crashes, screams and explosions—a tide of electronic, facsimile violence—ebb and flow from the movie soundtrack. Nobody speaks except a twenty-something metal-head: thick ring in his septum, pointed stud like a displaced unicorn’s horn protruding from his lower lip, racks of barbells in his brows and ear cartilage. He lounges against the counter next to Lefty’s workstation and talks to no one in particular about money and the sure-fire ways to find it. I hear “eBay,” and “selling what’s in my pocket, man,” and “might as well, some guy’s put up a box aliens gave him, and he’s getting bids.”

“It’s me, isn’t it?” I say to J, because I have to say something because now she’s just crying. “You’re mad at me, aren’t you, because I didn’t make him wait…”

Before the words fully leave my mouth I recognize my default response to other people’s discomfort. No matter what’s wrong, it has to be my fault because there has to be something I can do about it because…otherwise what will I do? How can I stand it? I hate other people’s unhappiness.

She can’t stand me being once again the me she knows so well—concerned but eternally dense. She blows.

“This is my way of being with you! It’s the only way I’ve got.”

Too late, I do get it. J is being her passionate self, opened up and pouring out sharply everything that’s in her. Pain, temper, disappointment, and disempowerment—big crashing waves of it. She’s always done that, and I never see it coming until it hits. I glance at B, arms folded, face set. A peacemaker by nature, he’s as passionate as she is, but it comes out of him in stubborn attachments to his own will instead of emotional storms.

So. I apologize to J and sink deeper into the couch next to B, stuck with my useless warring impulses to walk out, to side with one
against the other, or to yell at them both to grow up and stop being... themselves. I have no idea how to handle this mess. I just know it’s familiar territory: I cannot quit trying. In every altercation among us, I try and try to distinguish who’s wrong and who’s right—when always there’s plenty of evidence of both, and not much practical distinction between the two.

“It’s always like this,” J says bitterly before she hangs up. “We never do anything together.”

But we do. For one thing, we fight. For another, we hang on, tenaciously, to each other and to our views of each other. When I shut the phone and it’s just B and me, he says, “She’s the one who left town.”

“Yeah,” I say, although I know better. “Kinda illustrates her priorities, doesn’t it?”

We scheduled our tattoo the way busy families do things these days—in multi-point cyber dialogue: she cell-calling me, he IM-ing her, me emailing them both, he texting her (along with a couple dozen of his high school friends) to confirm the satisfyingly edgy plan. I confess I found that edge pretty exciting myself. Different drummer has been my favorite beat since my own teen years, and what could be less compliant with holiday convention than eschewing the tree, the shopping, the wrapping, even the gifts, and opting for a together-tattoo? Besides, this particular Christmas was the last one we’d spend together in Tampa. J had already gone out-of-state to college. I’d leave Florida for a new job come spring, while B, having moved in with his dad at fifteen, would stay behind to finish high school.

By the time we calendared it, we all understood the Christmas Tattoo was intended to defy our spreading separation. But like most family dramas the real genesis proved hard to pin down. I wanted to believe J started it. The August she turned nineteen, in her last days home before heading back to college, she spent a big chunk of that summer’s wages (compiled at $6.15 an hour as a steakhouse hostess) in Lefty’s shop, acquiring a glossy midnight-black tribal tattoo that transformed her entire shapely back into a graphic statement of her individuality.

I watched it blossom over three evenings, as she arrived home wearing first the outline, and then two stages of inking in: a sleek
stylized caduceus-shaped scrollwork, its wings spanning her shoulders, its serpentine wand dropping nearly to her waist, and a smaller, flatter, fibula variant of it seated in the hollow of her low back just above the tailbone. The uncompromising contrast of all that black pigment embedded permanently in her milky, vulnerable skin enthralled me as artist and repelled me as mother. The simple intricacy, the restraint of the design—her own—pleased my eye and made me prideful; she is an artist, too, and she is mine. The audacity of her choices caused me sorrow—a little for her and a little for me. When she’d shown me the design on paper, life-size—not asking permission but definitely recruiting acquiescence—I’d told her my truth about it. Very beautiful. Very bold. Not likely to age well. She told me, as if her forthrightness undid my objection: “Mom, me and my friends never think about getting old.”

Right away—no surprise—her brother B initiated a tiresome nag. When could he get a tattoo? Sometimes I ignored him, sometimes I said “no,” and other times “when you’re eighteen, you may do as you like.” One Sunday afternoon the autumn before the Christmas in question, B and I strolled out of a movie house in Tampa’s sleazy-chic Ybor City, passing a tattoo parlor on our way to the car.

I said, joking, “Wanna go in?”

He said, planting his feet, “Mom, I want a tattoo like yours, exactly. Eye of Ra, blue, left shoulder.” This time, because I couldn’t speak, I didn’t say no. I had mostly forgotten, because after ten years, out of sight is out of mind, that I had that tattoo—the mark of my fortieth birthday and a savage divorce—a third eye that watched my back.

My boy had not forgotten.

“Does it wash off?” he asked back then, his innocent face perplexed, processing yet another event he hadn’t ever imagined could happen. When I came home wearing the tattoo, he’d been just six years old, in big trouble at school for the first time in his life—for punching other kids with the violence of his own pain—but familiar with tattoos only in their innocuous stick-on form.

“I want your mark,” he said, that afternoon he was newly sixteen. “Because you’re leaving.”

So. There stood my son, taller than I was, telling me I’d started it, the tattoo thing. My baby who’d clung to me in shrieking panic every time anyone else reached for him, allowing me to leave him now
simply because I said I needed to, but asking me to let him, please, be scarred like me. Marked with the mark that stood in my mind for a lifetime’s accumulation of mistakes made and lessons learned.

I looked him in the eye. I said, “You’ll have to get your father to agree.”

After that I heard nothing more about tattoos for a couple of months, but between B and J, the wee-hours IM-ing, and during-class texting, and talking-while-driving cell phone scheming must have been underway—in what would turn out to be a rare cooperative effort toward a shared goal of heretofore unattempted scale. J, I suspect, took the lead once he let her know I’d caved. He would have needed her to lead because she’s older, bolder, and, well, she’d not have followed. She thrives on connection and she likes to be the head of the pack; when those conditions mesh, she leads with grace, often to beneficent result. Whatever the mechanics of their collusion, it culminated one afternoon in November when she phoned me to announce the plan they’d devised, and not ten minutes later he called, acting casual, admitting no complicity but clearly salivating to hear me confirm what she’d—no doubt—dialed him in the interim to report.

We would, together, get three distinct and completely original tattoos, each incorporating a part of the other two—both of theirs including an eye of Ra, mine made entirely from parts of theirs. Each person’s marking would be witnessed by the other two. J and B would do the drawings, together, when she came home for winter break. Lefty, his skills a given, would do the ink. And I would pay.

Okay, Mom?

“Okay,” I said, first to my daughter and then to my son. Okay, my kids: tattoos, together, let’s do it. I didn’t want another tattoo nor did I like encouraging them toward tattoos, yet I knew myself honored. I felt myself affirmed. My children’s enthusiasm—and their initiative—proved, I thought, that we’d survived the divorce I’d had to initiate to survive. I hadn’t ruined their lives. We were a functioning family, still.

Yet, to each of my children I had to voice an important caution: “We can’t tell your dad we’re doing this together. We don’t want to hurt his feelings.”

Always the need for some kind of not-telling. Always the need to step over and around trip wires to landmines that might or might not blow. The following Sunday evening B stopped by to rehash the
plan, toast it with big bowls of ice cream at my kitchen table, and just incidentally to voice—as reason for his investment in the tattoos—a feeling darker than any he’d ever admitted in my hearing before.

“We’ve been through hell together,” he said, his stubbly face wry, his concision eloquent.

“Yes,” I replied, and nothing more, but to myself I had to admit we weren’t done surviving yet, and might never be.

When our tattooing actually begins—with B, by his choice, first up in Lefty’s chair—I have occasion to reflect on how fundamentally grotesque it is to choose self-mutilation as a gift, and to then have it inflicted by a stranger in a public setting while a family member watches. The atmosphere in a tattoo parlor is a cross between the chilly sterility of a dentist’s office—the antiseptic wipes, the latex gloves, the tipped-back, incapacitating chair—and a grunge hair salon in some trendy downtown location—the exposed ductwork, the uninhibited displays of narcissism. In either setting you pay for the privilege of undergoing a tedious, uncomfortable process in a venue where people unknown to you view your body and the procedures altering it dispassionately, and any emotions provoked in you by your vulnerability will humiliate you to the extent you let them show. B, at sixteen, very much concerned with Being A Man, is in this awkward position in front of his mother. How will I do this right?

He lies shirtless on his stomach in the flattened chair. Goose-fleshed. Gray-fleshed. Concentration gels his expression as Lefty gets started. Swabbing the skin clean, applying by transfer the drawing of the tattoo. Pulling on new gloves, loading the gun with fresh needles and ink. Then the buzzing commences. When he outlines, Lefty explains, he needles deep to make a dark, clean edge, the sensation, he warns, like a fingernail drawn firmly across a bad sunburn. After that, when he fills in, the strokes will be shallower, quicker, less stinging. I resolve to be cool. In that way I hope to offer B support but avoid embarrassing him. I try chitchat, sometimes with Lefty, sometimes with B, alternating a tone of nonchalance with one of calm concern I developed while jollying my pre-schoolers through immunizations and dental procedures. “Are you cold?” I ask B, who shakes his head tersely. “You want a soda?” Yeah, he does. I pop the tab and place the can in his hand.
B’s tattoo—two red arcs, upright and mirroring each other’s curve, strongly suggesting but not banally replicating a heart, nesting within an intricate bramble of jet-black tribal branches and points borrowed from barbwire, with an eye of Ra exactly replicating mine except in unblinking black tucked artfully, asymmetrically, within the whole—fits snugly between his shoulder blades. The design is less than six inches square, but with two colors and a complicated pattern of narrow lines, the work takes time. B says little. His eyes fix on the DVD player a foot from his face. A post-modern, noir-ish Christmas story flickers on the small screen; I think none of us is actually watching. “Give me a minute,” B says abruptly. “I gotta have something with more action.” Lefty sits up, the gun ceases its burr, B flips rapidly through the clear plastic sleeves of a zippered album, then we are watching but not watching bloodthirsty dinosaurs in collision with human stupidity. Plenty of action, lots of carnage. I notice—taking care not to let that notice show—that the white-knuckled force with which B grips the chair preceded the switch in movie subject matter.

He calls several more brief halts. Sips soda, shifts position. Standing on concrete, my feet and legs and my head ache; this is taking such a long time. I keep my eyes on B’s face—resolute—and hands—tendons sprung. I don’t like needles, and especially I don’t want to see or even admit I know about the constant dabbing—the gauze square in Lefty’s left hand lifting away blood beading in the needles’ wake.

Each time B takes a break, Lefty sits up, strips off the gloves, rotates his stool away from his work to sip from a soda of his own. Taciturn, maybe thirty, stout, darkly handsome, he wears a close-clipped, clean-edged beard. What I took at first to be a mustache turns out to be a thick tattoo on his upper lip. In his answers to my small-talk questions, he’s usually sardonic. In his actions and in the timing of his silences, he demonstrates exquisite tact about the emotional dynamic in front of him; his face and his body language remain blank as a curtain whenever B and I speak, and when we can’t. I imagine what Lefty must, in his work, witness. Bodies of all kinds, their most private as well as the public parts, in all their fat and bony, stretch-marked, spider-veined, hairy, odiferous imperfection. Ego and appetite, too: little human dramas of wastedness, grief, self-aggrandizement, wishful thinking.

He’s a tattoo artist, but he’s also, in this self-obsessed, spiritually denuded culture, some kind of priest. People walk into his shop
with feelings that can’t be fixed but need urgently to be addressed. Put a picture on me, they tell him, the exact, right one that magically, mystically, makes my hurting right.

When B’s ink is done, we send J—still stuck in Hartford—a picture, via his camera phone to hers, of him laid out in Lefty’s chair, the new tattoo glistening beneath its protective coating of A&D Ointment. We each speak to her, briefly, everyone’s tone cheerful, disappointments and differences masked. Then, abruptly, B has an attack of shivering. The shop is chilly. I am chilly and exhausted and hungry, and we have my ink yet to go.

Stepping outside, where daylight is fading, I pull from the trunk of my car the only thing I have to offer either one of us for extra warmth—this is Florida even though it’s also January, so neither B nor I thought to bring a jacket; we’d run the AC on the way to the shop. I take in my hands a scrap of the tough, brown, corded bedspread that covered the day bed in my first writing room twenty-five years before, five houses ago and a dozen states away, that has since addressed many away-from-home kid emergencies, from soccer-field blood-lettings to embarrassing motion sickness events.

The sky is the color of tired foil stripped from a tray of ballfield potluck. The darkening shapes of the last vehicles in the lot, the traffic rush along the four-lane behind me, the habit with which I suppress my wish to be somewhere else, writing or at the very least aware of myself being a writer, these sensations and that tension are the familiar, nearly comforting, discomforts of parenting. In this moment I cannot really believe how wholeheartedly I sometimes wish for the time, coming soon, when my children will not need nor allow me to feed, to shelter, to shepherd them, and I will be free to make all my choices—and all my art—alone.

Back inside Lefty’s shop, I drape the strip of bedspread around B’s naked shoulders. He welcomes the gesture, and me, with a big grin and wears the scrap like a shawl, or a royal’s robe, while he strides round the shop floor, loosening up. He is relieved. He rules. He’s done this thing he had to do.

When it’s my turn in the chair, I perch sidesaddle, my back to Lefty, my shirttail rolled up and my waistband rolled down. I will receive my tattoo in a spot, midway between coccyx and waist, that only weeks
later will B slip up and refer to as my “tramp stamp,” the idiom of his high school peers for what I will then discover—to the profound wounding of my cool—to be a ubiquitous peek-a-boo location for teen girl tattoos, exposed with every squat or bend that separates her too-short shirt from her low-riding jeans.

But my stamp will be the mark my children have made on me: the slenderest suggestion of wings, two inches in height, eight in width, hinged at a vertebra’s bump, and profoundly asymmetrical—the left arc B’s barbed wire branch and the right J’s cursive curl. Because this is my second tattoo, I think I know what the sensation will be, but because the old one sits in soft flesh beneath my shoulder, I learn something new when Lefty takes up his gun. Each time the needles work across the spine they set the nerves there to firing, the result not pain but strong neural static surging up the spinal cord to a brain that can’t make it mean something but won’t quit trying, an inescapable aggravation, a literal nerve-wracking.

B has found a stool and sits facing me, very near. He is solicitous, which surprises me. It taxes me a little, too; occupied with bearing the stinging and the zinging, trapped in that chair when I am so eager to finish, to go home, to get supper, I don’t want to make conversation. It dawns on me finally that he is uncomfortable watching me submit to something he finds painful—later he will say to J, his voice taut with anxiety, “Mom just sat there”—so I should do something, say something, to relieve him.

I cannot think what that would be. He offers me soda, asks if I’m cold, adjusts the position of his stool to look more directly into my eyes. The tedium of this process—time passing slowly, the necessity of being patient through one moment and the next and the next with a process that hurts but cannot be eluded—this makes me think about childbirth, the extreme by which I learned submission most powerfully. B’s was a homebirth, an un-medicated labor I found merciful and intimate compared to the over-engineered, frighteningly lonely hospital birth in which his sister was, literally, torn out of me. When B finally asks me straight out if I’m in pain, getting this tattoo, I quip, “It’s nothing like having babies.”

His face turns stricken for the second time that day, and a beat of silence ensues. The needles go on buzzing. Then he breathes out, “Thank you.”
His tone is passionate, humble. So tender, toward his mother. This great big child I have battled self and others to raise as best I can, often coming up short in his eyes and theirs, is grateful I put up with bringing him into the world.

I touch his cheek with my fingertips. Shaggy hair, pimples, bristles, all his teenage inelegance aside, the glance we exchange communicates such comfort and connection—acknowledgement and acceptance of necessary pain, exchange and release of that pain—we might as well be, for that single ephemeral moment, lovers.

B returns to the first day of a new term at his high school, juiced about the possibility his fresh tattoo will draw reprisals from the authorities when classmates gather round to gawk. J has gotten in from Hartford in the wee hours after spending twenty-four straight sitting up in the terminal, and has fallen right into bed. I leave the house at dawn to drive the sick cat (J and B’s outgrown pet) to a biopsy, fighting rush-hour traffic on a classic mom mission.

Squinting into the sunrise, hurtling bumper-to-bumper at seventy on Tampa’s overloaded freeways while attempting to tune out the cat’s yowling, I feel a leaden heaviness in the muscles and even the bones of my lower back signaling, I think, the presence of lactic acid, biochemical afterburn from the surges of adrenalin that clenched those muscles involuntarily tight during the waiting, the watching, the empathizing, the getting-mine-done.

My body had registered that form of physical aftershock before: the morning after the six hours I spent in the emergency room of a third world hospital trying to prevent, solely by my stubborn presence, my then-husband from dying from anaphylactic shock and a medical staff uninterested in the woes of one more ignorant, unlucky tourist. D had been struck by hundreds of Portuguese man-o’-war stingers and almost stopped breathing. I left J, then four years old, parked on the beach, uneasy in the company of my visiting childless childhood friend. I rode in the ambulance with D, our seven-month-old clamped on one hip because those were the days he wouldn’t let me leave him anywhere with anyone. So intent was I on keeping my husband alive that I never put our child down until the whole ordeal was over.

The next morning, when I rolled out of bed to answer B’s wake-up cry, still on my own inside a marriage that scripted me to be forever
strong, I fell to the floor, crippled with pain from locked muscles in my arm and hip. Only at that moment did I feel the whole truth of what transpired the day before. D had new scars, and so did I, but nothing had changed: we’d go on as if that near-disaster hadn’t happened. As if it were possible to leave its lesson behind.

Five years later I’d know in my body similar heaviness and toxic spasm—less acute but far less finite—lying flattened by divorce to a futon in front of a cheap television on the floor of an under-furnished and ratty rental house, one child curled wounded and fetal beneath each of my arms. My mind singed, my gut terror-blasted by my husband’s rage, I lay between my children, then nine and five, offering them only the animal comfort of my nearness, the sole form of care available from a mother so paralyzed by irreparable loss, so rigid with lonely determination to survive.

On the morning after the Christmas Tattoo—or the two-thirds of it then completed—I lack words for naming what it is my body wants to tell me I’ve lost or might be losing. Only months later, sitting down to write in the clarity of hindsight, will I wonder if that feeling was the beginning of losing the sense that all was lost.

When B and I return to Lefty’s shop a few days later, J’s already in the chair, sitting up, tipped back only slightly, with her legs extended—her portion of our three-part tattoo will reside on her lower leg, just above the bump of her ankle. Lefty’s already working, concentration keen, needles whirring. J watches us walk through the door; she does not look pleased to see us.

Today is the last possible date our schedules could be jiggered, inconveniently in each case, to allow all three of us to be in the shop at once: the day before she returns to college and the hour immediately post-school-day for B. I have arranged my day to pick him up so we can get there together, but we are late despite my best effort, held up first because B’s drama practice ran long, then further delayed by afternoon traffic. J’s chilly affect—just sitting there, expressionless, getting ink—tightens the tension I already feel; once again I’ve proven ineffective at getting B, and myself, to the right place at the right time.

“Does it hurt?”

The question is voiced by a young Latina, slight as a reed and visibly trembling, who’s entered the shop right behind me and B, sheltered beneath the arm of a beefy boyfriend. J’s fists and her jaw
clench the way they did when she was a toddler and yet another non-negotiable truth about the world had once again made her spitting mad. She answers, “It’s not bad.”

Weeks later, someone with personal experience will tell me that “ankles really hurt, much more than anything on the back.” For now, I watch J’s new tattoo take shape: a single cursive curl lifted from the twining wings of them on her back, reshaped at her ankle into a perfect circle opened in one quadrant by the eye of Ra. Brutal blue-black on that pale skin, yet barely three-inches in diameter. The work goes quickly, so fast B and I could have missed it entirely had we arrived only minutes later.

My eyes keep slipping off J’s immobile face, drawn by the beading blood, the dabbing of Lefty’s hand. B stands nearby, distracted, I know, by his cell phone vibrating vigorously, again and again, inside the latched pocket of his cargos, but doing the right thing by not pulling it out to look. I feel myself skidding emotionally. Nowhere to stand. Here at this culminating stage of our together-tattoo I find no togetherness, just a doing-it-cause-we-said-we-would rush.

Then it’s over. She’s called no breaks. I hand Lefty a folded stack of twenties, and the shaky girl and her guy step up to the chair while Lefty stretches his back, swigs soda, and begins again his expiatory presence to his clients’ needs. My tattooed kids and tattooed me, out we go, into a winter twilight purple, yellow-green, and gray, the color of a fading bruise.

I urge B and J—okay, I guilt them—into dining out with me afterwards, as we’d agreed to in the original plan. “Christmas dinner!” I chirp. At an Indian restaurant of my choice, seated two-facing-one in a particularly uncomfortable vinyl booth, the seat too hard and the back too straight, nobody eats but me. They piddle and stir in their entrees; they confess one after the other (in what seems to me callous disregard for my feelings) to having eaten (in what seemed to them famished necessity) immediately before the tattoo.

The minute I’ve paid the check, J heads straight back to Lefty’s to meet a friend who’s become a tattoo addict, she explains, after witnessing the inking of her back, his third tattoo scheduled this night. B is visibly impatient to get to the privacy of his room and answer all those missed calls and text messages, and maybe make a pass at his homework.
J was right, I tell myself, driving home alone after dropping B off at his dad’s. We never succeed in doing anything together. That dinner now boxed into three Styrofoam containers on the back seat replicates the disjunction of every eat-out meal we ever had as a live-together threesome—one or both of my children always preferring, and needing, something other than what I could give them.

Fifteen months later, we share a different couch in a different town, all three of us in the same place, this time.

I sit in the middle, of course. B to my left, J to my right, butt-sunk together in the soft cushions of a scuffed and scarred blonde leather sectional, hand-me-down from the affluent parents of J’s roommate. This couch is the centerpiece of a living room in a rundown apartment complex in Greensboro, N.C., makeshift home to college students and immigrant service workers, the worn beige carpeting in this unit obscured with heaps of books, binders and dried-out highlighters; a semester’s worth of discarded takeout containers; laptops, printers, and iPods in a tangle of cables and chargers; and three black cats, along with their toys and the kitty litter they’ve tracked from the box in the closet. Our three pairs of feet—B’s in long and narrow Chucks, mine in socks-and-Reeboks, J’s petite, callused and bare—line up on the smudged glass top of the coffee table. Each of my children holds a beer. My hands cradle a glass of white wine. We have full stomachs—they have just taken me out for Thai food for my birthday, and they have paid.

The large-screen TV we stare at plays a DVD made by a workers’ collective in Venezuela, celebrating Chavez and the socialist revolution there; J is just back from spring break in Caracas, clowning in hospitals and communing with Marxists beneath the wing of compassionate provocateur Patch Adams. It’s a weeknight late in March, and she has physics homework to get to. In only seven weeks she’ll graduate. B and I, on spring break ourselves, will hit the road in the morning for a victory lap visit to the nearby university he’ll attend in the fall.

J and I, living just two hours apart, have helped each other truck furniture up from Florida and shared confidences through a tough year of ups and downs with our respective long-distance guys, she ending up broken up and me not. Tonight, like one of her cats, she curls warm against my arm. B’s sinewy fist rests on the couch near my thigh. For the past nine months we’ve been separated by more than 700
miles, sharing just a weekly phone call while he grubbed the necessary grades and wore through his dad’s resistance to an out-of-state school, thereby orchestrating a three-in-N.C. togetherness that won’t happen now. J’s decided to return to familiar Tampa for a job since she’s solo, and I’ve just told them, this very evening, that with this man they’ve never met I’ve committed to making our three some kind of four, so I may need to move somewhere new.

I’ve hardly said it when I hear myself do the caution thing again: “Don’t tell your dad.” The reflex, hard-wired by old fear, shames me at the same time it clamps my muscles, and my heart, tight. So I apologize to my children for putting them in that position, again. B says immediately, with protective, manly prerogative: “It doesn’t concern him.” But I confess to my children, underneath the cover of the revolutionaries’ cheers and testimonials, how it troubles me, persistently, my flawedness, my transparency about that, my resulting atypical parent-ness. J’s response is acquiescence: “What matters is that you don’t have to lie to us.” B won’t let me be in the wrong. He begins his justification: “It’s more….” He pauses, searches, then finds, in relief, in concision, his answer. “It’s more real.”

We talk some, then, seated on that couch, about the Christmas tattoos. We lift shirts and J’s pants’ leg and refresh our memories of each other’s marks and share the satisfaction and the disbelief that we actually got them. I say, settling back into the cushions between them, “This is good.” J shifts fractionally closer. B gives an adamant, eloquent nod, then lets his head loll back in slightly tipsy relaxation. We are all a little bit buzzed, and drowsy. I know one of us, probably me, will toddle off to bed soon, and in the morning we’ll all be up earlier than we want to, rushing through the a.m. preparations, setting off on our different missions.

We could take hands, but we don’t. We could talk more about what’s next for each of us, but we don’t. We need the spaces that are always between us; we are, always have been, a complicated tripartite unbalancing act. Seated side by side, we take it in and we don’t: the television screen and the smiling workers there, and the drift by which we reached this couch.

My children and I, we are inked: pigment we took on together buried permanently, inside our separate skins.
Dennis Lehane grew up in the Dorchester section of Boston’s inner-city. Since his first novel, *A Drink Before the War*, won the Shamus Award, he’s published seven more novels with William Morrow & Co. that have become international bestsellers: *Darkness, Take My Hand; Sacred; Gone Baby Gone; Prayers for Rain; Mystic River; and Shutter Island.* He also published *Coronado*, a collection of five stories and a play. His last novel, *The Given Day*, was published in September 2008. His work has been translated into 28 languages. The film adaptations of *Mystic River* and *Gone Baby Gone* have garnered numerous awards. In February 2010, a major motion picture film adaptation of *Shutter Island*, was released. The film was directed by Martin Scorsese and stars Leonardo DiCaprio, Ben Kingsley, and Mark Ruffalo. Dennis earned his MFA from Florida International University and is the writer-in-residence at Eckerd College in St. Petersburg, Florida, where he runs the Eckerd College Writers’ Conference: *Writers in Paradise*. He divides his time between St. Petersburg and Boston.

**SA:** For you, does a story begin with an event or a reaction to that event?

**DL:** Every book’s different, but it usually begins with characters. They
walk around my head for a while and then I send them out to find me a story. Eventually, they come back with one, which I’ve always felt is mighty decent of them. *The Given Day* was the exception because all I knew at the start was that I wanted to write about the 1919 Boston Police Strike. All the characters came after, which was a weird way to write for me.

**SA:** What do you believe is more important, to tell a good story, or to address a deeper political, social, or spiritual concern?

**DL:** Well, I’m not sure the two are mutually exclusive. But, for the sake of argument, the first law of good storytelling is good storytelling. If you want to write a diatribe against the powers that be, go right ahead, but don’t expect me to read it unless it has full-blooded characters and an actual, you know, *story* at its center. I can read Fareed Zakaria for my politics, Jonathan Kozol for my social concerns, and half a dozen philosophers for my spiritual needs. I read fiction to embark on a journey of narrative, not of lecture.

**SA:** You have said that if you repress speech, you will repress thought. Is writing a way of thinking for you?

**DL:** Sure. Someone smarter than me once said, “How do I know what I think until I put it to the page?” I certainly don’t like to know what ax I’m grinding on, say, a sociological level when I start a book, because then I’ll write a polemic and bore the piss out of you. For me, writing fiction should be as much an act of discovery as reading it will be once it’s published.

**SA:** When do you first share a draft of a new work? For this early draft, do you seek the opinion of a professional writer, or do you rely on a regular reader who is more concerned with the practical points of the story as opposed to the craft?

**DL:** I usually show a third draft to my wife and my editor first, then my agent, then a select few friends—only one of whom is a writer. I get my literary game on with that one friend and my editor. From everyone else I want visceral gut reaction.

**SA:** You have never worked in law enforcement, and as far as we know you’ve never been involved in the criminal underworld, yet you often
write about these subjects. How do you conduct your research? Do you interview police officers and criminals, or do you rely on your imagination and what has been written on these topics?

**DL:** It’s mostly imagination. I knew a cop growing up who told me the thing writers always get wrong is the “this time it’s personal” aspect of his job. He assured me it was never personal; you just punch a clock. I never forgot that, and it helped me immeasurably when I created cops in my books. As for the criminals, no, I have no need to interview anyone. I grew up with such a heightened sense of class rage that I might not get why someone stalks and kills someone or why some moron kids lit another kid on fire the other day, but I totally get why someone would knock over a bank or drop off the grid and refuse to play ball with the system.

**SA:** For a historical novel like *The Given Day,* did you start by writing a draft based on your familiarity with the material, or did you first read up on WWI era Boston?

**DL:** I read for a solid year about the post-WWI world. Then I realized that while I’d become an expert on the time period, which would be helpful for five questions on Jeopardy, I wasn’t getting any writing done. So I put all the literature aside and went to work.

**SA:** When you write a historical novel, what responsibility do you have to stick to the facts?

**DL:** It’s a weird line. If, for example, I’m saying the Boston Police Strike was, in many ways, caused by the death of Commissioner Stephen O’Meara, then I think that should be true. (It is.) If, however, I need to speed up months of labor negotiations and, for dramatic purposes, make it appear most of them took place in the final days before the actual strike, that’s really just an issue of compression and the reader, whether she knows it or not, thanks me for not asking her to wade through a thousand pages of boardroom debates. I think we’re way too literal an age and expect way too many “facts” from our fiction, but at the same time, if I’m clearly stating to the reader that the facts are thus, then the facts should be thus.

**SA:** During the early years of your career, you carried around an index card that read, “nobody cares.” What was the point of this and how
did it help you? What issue for beginning writers does this piece of hardnosed optimism address?

**DL:** It relieved so much pressure. What it meant to me was that no one cared if I failed. It was cool; I could train to be a plumber in my late twenties if it didn’t work out. Nobody was keeping score. Similarly, *nobody cares* removed any sense of pretentious entitlement along the lines of, “The world *needs* my voice. I’m owed readership.” No, sorry, no one cares, kid, if you become a plumber or a writer. It’s all on you. As for beginning writers, I commend you wholeheartedly for daring to try and say something about the world or the universal condition or whatever gets you chugging out of the station. I’m your biggest cheerleader. But once the rah-rah is over, you do have to realize this is a job. It’s hard. And no one’s giving out medals just for showing up. The most unfortunate myth about writing is that because all it involves is a pen and a brain, anyone can do it. No. Anyone can’t. Anymore than anyone can become a baseball player or a mathematician. We all have different skill sets and some aren’t conducive to the creative arts.

**SA:** Considering that *Shutter Island* encourages rereading in order to understand the parallel levels the book works on, do you think writing can be alive in the same sense that a play can, changing with each recitation?

**DL:** I’d like to think so. Some books are more given to the varied interpretation than others but when I think of my favorite novels—*The Great Gatsby, Blood Meridian, The Last Good Kiss*, to name just three—they all reward rereading.

**SA:** When your first novel, *A Drink Before the War*, was shopped around to publishers, you refused to let it come out as a paperback original. What advice would you give first time authors for dealing with intimidating publishers?

**DL:** Everybody carves their own path, so I’m not going to sell the idea that there’s only one or two ways to build a career. In my case, I was going on instinct. It just felt right. Now if the book had gone through another year of rejections? Might have been a whole different story. The thing to remember about publishers—and agents—is that most of them are passionately in love with books. They are waiting on bended
knee for you to whisper in their ear and seduce them. That’s what good writing is—seduction. So don’t be intimidated, just be good. Bring your ‘A’ game. Oh, and never send something out before it’s ready.

SA: After the success of Mystic River, you reportedly felt a need to diverge from crime fiction with the thriller Shutter Island to avoid critical comparisons. You have since branched out into historical fiction with The Given Day, and you have produced a collection of short works in Coronado. Do you feel a need to take risk and explore new territory with your writing? How much of this genre divergence is an attempt to confound critics? What surprises should we expect next?

DL: Well, it won’t be a surprise if I tell you what to expect. For the record, I’m not actively trying to confound anyone. I’m just following this really cool path and I have no idea where it leads except that it doesn’t lead back to where I’ve already been. If I lose some readers over it, then I lose some readers. If I baffle some critics, well, they can take it. Bogart said, “All you owe the audience is a great performance.” I couldn’t put it any better.

SA: What do you think the main criticism of your work is, and is it justified?

DL: Oh, shit, I don’t know. Maybe that I veer toward melodrama too much, which is fair because I’m pursuing high drama—what Cormac McCarthy calls “fiction of mortal event”—and if you fall off the high drama tightrope you land in melodrama.

SA: A hundred years from now, how would you want to be described in an anthology of 20th and 21st century American literature?

DL: Cogently.

SA: In many ways, Boston is your literary home turf. Considering you split half your time between Boston and St. Petersburg, can we expect any future works to be set in Florida? Shutter Island, for example, took place on an island with a hurricane baring down, and the Cold War looming large. Some might suggest that this would be the perfect work to set on a Florida island, with the proximity to Cuba and the constant threat of hurricanes. In general, is Florida too sunny a place for your work, which tends to deal with darker themes?
DL: Sunny Florida’s far darker than most of the things I could dream up. You’ve got serial killers and assholes who throw babies from moving cars and kids who light other kids on fire and more sexual predators than you could swing a cat at. In Boston, crime is much more predictable, much more economy-based. In Florida, it’s all random, man. Crazy crime. That’s why the best Florida writers are so comic—you can’t write about what goes on down here with a straight face or else you’d go mad.

SA: Violence is a common thread in your novels. Why do you think that is?

DL: The short answer is I grew up in a violent place during a particularly violent epoch (busing) in the city’s history. And I was too young to understand it so I became fascinated by it—why are we violent? When does violence serve a purpose? Is it ever simple? Etc.

SA: Have you ever been in a bar brawl?

DL: Been in a couple, though I never threw a punch. I was once in one where every table but ours—every single one—was destroyed. Just matchsticks on the floor. It was Christmas night, 1987.

SA: On several occasions, you’ve confessed the regret of never becoming a bartender. What appeals to you about this profession and what is stopping you from living this dream? If you did work in a bar, which one would it be and what would be your specialty drink?

DL: I’d work in a nice pub with serious dart players and a good jukebox and no sports-bar vibe. As for my alleged love of bartending, it all started as a joke line and it just caught fire. Teaches me to make a joke in print, I swear.
Divorce

Denise Duhamel

When he’s not on the computer, he’s sitting in front of the TV watching *Nature*. Pygmies and polar bears, the arctic circle and Galapagos Islands. The weta, a newly discovered insect as big as a mouse and pink as a cartoon pig. It scurries around the equator, then half an hour later, the penguins in sync with tap dance music. His wife is yelling in the background. She wants him to get up and help with some chore or another, but he has adapted to his environment and learned to block her out. On the screen the hermaphroditic banana slugs glisten as they crawl toward each other ready to mate, to bite off one another’s penises afterwards, then slither away.
Madonna and Me

Denise Duhamel

Madonna and I went through
our divorces
around the same time
and I followed her and Guy Ritchie
on perezhilton.com
as a kind of therapy

I mean if Madonna was getting divorced
it couldn’t be so bad right
and she’d be OK and I’d be OK

Guy Ritchie was walking away
saying he didn’t want her money
because he was a macho British dude
unlike my husband
who was neither macho nor British
and wanted every cent he could get

I kept wanting my guy
to take a cue from Madonna’s Guy
I wanted the two to meet in a sweets shop
in London they could bitch
about how Madonna and I
were so manipulative and controlling

Guy complained Madonna wouldn’t allow
pastry in the house and I tried that rule too
since my husband had diabetes
Guy was underrated, as was my ex
who thought he was more talented
than I was as surely Guy thought
he was more talented than Madonna
or her Guy and my guy
could meet at a pub and pick up
younger women who would say
*I don’t know how you put up with that*
and the new women would puff up their egos
that had been flattened
by Madonna and me with our big voices
hogging the spotlight

the press turned on Madonna
and wrote that she slept in a plastic suit
her body lubed up with wrinkle cream
that she and Guy never had sex anymore
but I think that suit may have been a lie

I didn’t have such a suit
just old tee shirts and ratty shorts
I wore as pajamas
that my husband hated
because the shorts had paint stains
and the elastic waistband
was pretty shot and I’d dress up
for poetry readings but not for him
and what kind of wife did that

a wife tired of working two jobs
while her husband worked none
and maybe I was a workaholic
like Madonna who keeps touring
even though she’ll never be able
to spend all her money

I had to work to support myself
work just to survive
but the truth is
I was also happiest working
away from my husband
whose body left an imprint on the couch
like a chalk outline at a crime scene
and why didn’t I dial 911
when it got really bad
Madonna didn’t either all those years ago
when Sean tied her to a chair
though maybe that never happened
and it was just a Hollywood rumor

and even Madonna
who talked about everything
never talked about that
because that kind of stuff just doesn’t happen
to strong women like Madonna and me

or it happens but we write
"deal with the situation"
on the bottom of our to do list
and then throw the list away

it’s easier to just step on a stage
or have the students
pull their chairs into a circle
for the poetry workshop
in that small room
where they will love you
or at least need you
to speak about their poems
and they will say thank you for helping me

and you will feel that even though
you can’t help your husband anymore
you can help a few people
and they can help you
as you step into the applause
Food and Men

Denise Duhamel

I put in *Heartburn*, then start dipping breadsticks into a container of hummus, my dinner, as I watch Meryl Streep and Jack Nicholson their first night together, scoffing the pasta she’s made at 4 a.m. They’re in her bed, twirling their forks into the same big bowl just like the scene in *An Unmarried Woman* in which Jill Clayburgh and Alan Bates gobble her famous omelet with Tabasco sauce from the same skillet.
I have never eaten anything with anyone from the same pot or serving dish. Maybe I have missed out by not learning to cook something simple and sexy that I could offer in a post-coital moment. I have spent a good part of my life afraid of food and men, one of whom asked, *Why is there only diet coke and a head of cabbage in your fridge?* He’d spent the night and was looking for orange juice or a bagel, I guess. I told him I was headed to the market that very day, that I’d just been busy. We went to a diner where I explained the cabbage wasn’t even mine—it belonged to a roommate who was away for a week and that’s why it was turning brown. *She’s on some crazy diet,* I said. The truth is—I was too.
I can’t even remember which regimen it was—Low fat? Vegetarian? Sugar free?—but I went off it when I ordered pancakes. The man was older than I was with a woman to whom he was committed.

*Could I deal with that?* he wanted to know. I said that was weirder than having a lone cabbage in the fridge and I left in a huff, but not that much of a huff, since I was used to jerks. I wonder if he would have left her for me if I’d whipped up French toast and we wolfed it down together, standing over the stove, he in his boxers, I in my open robe. When I went back home, I decided to throw out the cabbage. It was heavy like a bowling ball without the holes. I awkwardly cradled it, slimy in the plastic it was wrapped in. The guy called back a few times, saying, *What about phone sex?* It would be another five years before I would marry someone else, someone appropriate or so I thought. The first time he spent the night at my apartment, he said, “Let’s order in!” even though I had stocked up on coffee and yogurt and fruit. The scrambled eggs came in Styrofoam containers, but he put the food on plates for good presentation. Soon after he said we should get married—so casual I couldn’t be sure it was a real proposal. For a while, he even cooked like Meryl Streep. But a few years into our marriage,
he started to sleep a lot and stare
into a computer screen instead of at me.
It ended badly, though not because
I was like Jack Nicholson. It’s true
that I’ve rented *Heartburn* on DVD,
but I still haven’t found the divorce
movie that truly captures
my situation. I am much happier
than when I was married,
but as Meryl Streep’s shrink
(Maureen Stapleton) tells her,
“Divorce is only a temporary solution.”
No one gets heartburn in *Heartburn*
which makes the title too much
of a pun, in my opinion. Still,
I can relate to the shouting matches
and the ransacking of pockets and drawers,
looking for clues. After my husband
left, I found dozens and dozens
of Alka-Seltzer packets he’d bought
for an art project. He’d written
words on the tablets with a Sharpie,
then dropped them into water,
filming them as they fizzled
and disappeared. I have to admit
he had some good ideas,
as I push the open button and slide out
the DVD. I make sure I’ve not left
any crumbs on the couch.
In the kitchen my ex was famous
for his spills and splatters, dirtying
as many plates and pans
as possible. I suppose I could say
that one of the reasons it ended badly
was because I was always responsible
for the clean up.
1) Why Florida?
We just kind of floated in with the economic tide. If you look around, there are really good writers at the universities in Florida these days, and that’s because the state only got around to hiring writers in the last decade or so. I came to Miami in 1993 because I liked the MFA program at FIU and they were willing to give me a job, and have never wanted to leave.

2) Your best-kept Florida secret?
The Springs. Not a secret to Floridiots, perhaps, but to most of the country. From tubing down the Ichetucknee to swimming with manatees in Silver Spring to swimming with alligators in Alexander Spring and even the Weeki-Wache mermaids, I love Florida’s natural springs.

3) Your strangest Florida?
To pick out any one detail misses the point, which is the dense and contradictory weave of Florida’s strangeness over all. Part of that strangeness is just diversity—what’s weird in Key West might not be in Pensacola, and vice versa. Miami has its own particular hyper-strangeness, for sure, but does any part of Florida really qualify as normal?

4) Your silence before the storm?
Well, I used to worry about storms, but with sea levels rising and the earth growing warmer, it’s pretty clear that Florida will be submerged beneath the Atlantic Ocean before it’s knocked over by a killer hurricane. That’s something we should all be very, very unquiet about, before we have to start treading water.

5) Your six-word Florida memoir?
I’m still working on it. (That’s six, kind of.) But in the meantime, if you read Florida Poems, you’ll get the idea.

This interview was conducted on 20 August 2009 via email.
On a morning walk, I stop in front of a yellow house. Inner lamplight leaks through a halfway open front door. On the porch, there’s an old wooden rocker, a large pine table with a mason jar of brushes, and a canvas lying flat: bold colors that resemble nothing or anything—could be sun-streaked river or wildflower field or portrait of the artist with a whiskey grin. An empty easel stands on the lawn. A man’s bicycle leans against an oak. Perhaps the artist is inside, sipping coffee, sketching flower petals or hands, the changing skin of peach or pear. Her lover is there. He has made the coffee. He stands behind her, rubs thick, callused fingers along her bare shoulders while she stares out the kitchen window. He names the color of the sky, calls it pearlgray and honeywhite. She doesn’t disagree. He mentions the music playing on her stereo, asks if it is Schubert. She says yes. He leads her to the bedroom, lamplight left on, front door ajar. Who has time to remember such things? I want to sneak up to the door, peer inside. But that would change everything.
Ricardo Pau-Llosa, Miami’s Poet—Whether He Likes it or Not

Armando F. Mastrapa

One of Miami’s premier intellectuals, the poet and art critic Ricardo Pau-Llosa was recently featured on PBS’s NewsHour with Jim Lehrer, the first Floridian to be included in its monthly Poetry Series. Pau-Llosa was born in Havana in 1954 and fled communist Cuba with his family in 1960. He has lived in South Florida since he was 14, after spending his childhood in Chicago and Tampa.

Miami emerges often in Pau-Llosa’s work, though not always flatteringly. In his fourth collection, Vereda Tropical, local nightclubs and bars provide the setting—in a consciously theatrical way—for “imaginative journeys,” as Pau-Llosa would describe them—into the spirit of the place. The vibrancy of Miami as a city and the lushness of its natural setting come through in the poems, yet Pau-Llosa refers to Miami as “Thing City,” an environment where crass materialism overwhelms subtlety and, more deplorably for the chronicler of Cuban cultural survival in exile, historical awareness.

In a provocative New Year’s op-ed piece published in The Miami News (“Artists Lead Dade to New Cultural Fusions,” Jan. 1, 1986), Pau-Llosa even then spoke about having a “promising love-hate relationship” with South Florida. That promise has turned into six volumes of poetry (the last four from Carnegie Mellon U Press, the latest title being Parable Hunter), a dozen monographs on artists, countless essays
in art magazines and exhibition catalogues, and a dozen short stories, some of which have made it into major anthologies (e.g., Norton’s *Sudden Fiction International: Continued*) even though he hasn’t published a book-length collection in this genre.


Pau-Llosa has played a major role in launching the careers of numerous visual artists—primarily Latin American, many based in South Florida—especially during the 80s and early 90s when he was a senior editor for Europe’s most prestigious art magazine, *Art International*. In 1989 the survey exhibition of Cuban exile art *Outside Cuba/Fuera de Cuba* which he co-curated at Rutgers University’s Zimmerli Museum and wrote the major catalogue essay for, came to the then Center for the Fine Arts (now Miami Art Museum) with much fanfare. He is also an avid collector—he describes it as an “addiction”—of modern and contemporary paintings and sculptures, folk carvings, Naïf paintings, and tribal art. Most importantly, however, is the fact that Pau-Llosa’s 34-year career in the visual arts has generated a unique critical approach to the art of Latin America, one that studies how tropes shaped patterns of visual representation and abstraction in the region’s art, setting it apart from European and American modernism. Even Pau-Llosa admits that, had he not lived in Miami, his explorations of Latin American art would not have been possible.

So why does this poet struggle with a place that is so central to his life? It is a question that sheds light on him and his work, but more importantly, it illuminates the Miami that provokes and sustains, or ignores and suppresses, the life of the creative mind. In the *NewsHour* piece on Pau-Llosa, Miami was showcased, beamingly, as part and parcel of his work and identity, and in it, he seems very much like Miami’s at times irascible ambassador to the world of ideas. Perhaps the poet doth protest the place too much, or his rejection of it—always tempered with tongue-in-cheek—is really a Frostian lover’s quarrel with his world.

**AM:** Why do you live in Miami?
**RPLl:** Where would you have me live?

**AM:** Wherever you like; as a writer and artist, you’ve established yourself nationally and internationally. Why here?

**RPLl:** It’s not that easy to pick where one lives if you make a living as a college professor. Poetry and art criticism aren’t exactly cash crops. But I did make a decision to stay here—that was in the late seventies. Then, I thought Miami had a destiny, which I, foolishly, fell in love with. Miami hasn’t lived up to it, however. I guess I wound up living that destiny in my mind. And rootless by nature, I seek a place where rootlessness seems natural, even mandatory. So a combination of factors keeps me here, though less happily than in the past.

**AM:** What was that destiny that Miami didn’t fulfill? Most folks think that Miami has come into its own over the last decade.

**RPLl:** I imagined, at one point, that Miami would be the first bihemispheric metropolis, a place where the high, middle, and low cultures of both North and Latin America could mingle irrespective of the assimilationist hierarchies associated with native vs. immigrant identities and agendas. That began to happen in the seventies, but it was derailed. The major institutions resisted that idea vehemently. The local museums, for example, pay only cursory attention to the Latin American and Caribbean legacies of Miami, and then only the work of artists who have found approval in New York or other metropolitan centers. They are afraid of affirming, in universally valid terms, the culture that is produced here and merits that affirmation. I have done precisely that in my work in the visual arts. Miami cannot shake the vocation to be obediently provincial, suffering the urban equivalent of arrested adolescence and only fooling itself into thinking it is a grown-up city because of its buildings, congestion, and the countless galleries that rehash what other places tell them is art.

**AM:** What was it exactly that made Miami unique?

**RPLl:** What made Miami unique was its geographic proximity to the Caribbean and Latin America and the resulting presence here of cross-sections of populations from Cuba, Haiti, Nicaragua, Colombia,
Venezuela, and many other countries of the region. There are excellent artists here who are native-born North Americans, whose work I admire—Barbara Neijna, Chris Mangiaracina, Bob Thiele, among others. However, for all their talent and discipline, the North American artists of Miami cannot be a part of Miami’s epic of terminal displacement, what I call the Minoan dimension of the self that is awakened by the destruction of one’s culture of birth. For the Caribbean and Latin American artists who moved to Miami, and especially for those who came as exiles and not as immigrants, Miami was something very different. Think of Humberto Castro, Ana Albertina Delgado, Heriberto Mora, among dozens of other Cuban exile artists. It was our Venice, the new cultural hub created by our flight from terror into freedom. And that positing of a new cosmopolis made this exilic art something very precious as an affirmation of the self. That’s the juncture that the local institutions refused to understand and turn to their advantage nationally and globally. That was the niche that institutions in real cities would have wanted Miami’s risible museums and universities and the non-existent cultural magazines and academic presses to fill, but the small-mindedness of the cultural and educational leadership and of the local media impelled them to reject this destiny, to everyone’s loss.

AM: Yet so many of your poems draw on Miami as a setting, and not just the bar and music-inspired poems in *Vereda Tropical*. “Terraces” from the early 80s captures the luxurious voyeurism of the then new high-rise condos on Brickell. You have many excellent poems set in the Florida Keys. Urban birds—gulls, ibises, herons —proliferate in your recent poems. Poems about Miami seen from airplanes. Beaches, foods...How can such a damned setting be so inspiring to you?

RPLI: I’ve lived in Florida since 1962 when my family moved to Tampa from Chicago; in Miami since 1968. We were in exile in 1960. I am not at odds with everything in Miami, but with the prevailing winds that have taken it away from a unique cultural destiny it can no longer recover, let alone fulfill. The fauna, flora, and architecture of any place where an artist lives are bound to manifest themselves in that artist’s work—it is the vocabulary life has assigned you to work with. What one does with that raw material is what determines the kind of artist the individual is. I can criticize the place vehemently while letting it play a role in my creative life. I see no conflict between these two attitudes. It is always
best to love critically.

**AM:** I’ve heard it said that poets, in their personal lives, are never as interesting as their work.

**RPLl:** I certainly hope this is true in my case. There is far too much interest in personal lives these days. The passions and eccentricities of life are best lived to their absolute fullest through the life of the imagination, in the work of art. This is because to live them absolutely—that is, without restraint—in one’s life can only court disillusionment or worse.

**AM:** But if one doesn’t live one’s passions to the fullest, doesn’t that lead to an inauthentic life?

**RPLl:** A central part of living authentically is grasping the dangers implicit in desire and acting accordingly. I’m all for discipline, accountability, restraint. For example, in the political sphere—and this is a vice of our time that is so rampant that few think it a problem—countless individuals are taken in by the slogans and superficial qualities of a political figure, and follow and support that figure on that basis alone. Their desire for a leader who has this or that surface quality—such as demeanor, ethnicity, charisma—or spouts this or that buzz word is enough to elicit their total support. Identity politics, which I deplore, rule the day. In politics, one should think coldly, analyze one’s own desires, and grasp that the attraction, whim, and yearning for this or that quality are not sound bases for a political decision, such as a vote. Politics is about having a just and critical sense of collective destiny and making that sense guide one’s decisions as a citizen.

**AM:** So, I take it you’re not in love with our current leadership.

**RPLl:** I deplore all charlatans, for they are all obviously false. But I deplore even more those who take charlatans as the real thing, for they know that what they love is false.

**AM:** Do you follow the usual advice about avoiding politics in art?

**RPLl:** Nope. Anything is a viable subject or idea for a work of art. It still has to be a work of art, however, and not a harangue or simply the
inane vomiting forth of a political position. I’ve written overtly political poems. The danger is that most readers, and certainly most critics, have political biases and are likely to let those guide their response to the work of art. So what? I write politically charged poems anyway, when I desire to.

**AM:** Common wisdom says one should avoid politics and religion in any civil conversation, so let’s talk about religion. Do you have any?

**RPLI:** I was brought up in a secular working-class family, but I attended Catholic schools, Jesuit especially. Graduated in 1971 from Belén Jesuit in Miami, where I received a great education, and I have always been interested in Christianity and other religions. I see religion as an enclave of poetry and theater in the world of ideas. I admire Mircea Eliade’s *History of Religious Ideas*, but I have always found it difficult to embrace one religious faith. The problem is *faith*, which all creeds require by definition, and poets and thinkers are addicted to other verbs, such as think, intuit, imagine. Believing is an eccentricity whose inherent limitations I, and most artists, see as inimical to creating.

**AM:** Is there nothing to admire in religion?

**RPLI:** I admire the religious impulse and am fascinated by what it discloses about the human desire to rebel against mortality, but I resist the self-mutilating and homogenizing impulse of belief. It leads to moral failure. Behold the Catholic Church’s utter disregard for the plight of Cuba under communism, a once Catholic country, and the “Protestant Pastors for Peace” types and their idolatry of Castro. For me, these are, to use Auden’s phrase, “important failures.” In many recent poems, though, I parody the purely secular man by juxtaposing a parable or a sacrament with a worldly counterpart. When Jesus admonishes his followers to follow him, he could have been commanding them to think poetically, to create parables of the infinite, and not just blindly believe this or that lesson or obey a commandment. Everything he ever spoke was a poem. How could such a maker of profound and spontaneous parables admonish us to abandon the liberating, theatrical multiplicity of art for the compulsive singularity of belief? If indeed, liberation from the ego is essential for salvation, the creative process—much maligned as inveterately narcissistic—is perhaps the best way to escape from the
personal and grasp something of the transcendent as immanent.

**AM:** Parables are indeed a major theme in your own work, but can the multiplicity of art ever become the firm basis for a belief system, hence a religion?

**RPL:** If we think God has one face, one manner of expression, one code that he expects all to believe and follow, if we think that this is God hence religion, then clearly no. If we accept our miniscule range and our total inability to grasp God, then we can embrace the variables of the creative act as the closest thing we can manage to prayer, meditation, communion, and awareness of the divine. I actually prefer to think of the divine, or divinity, as an expression of spiritual reality we can barely graze, rather than imagining God as an invisible but palpable, often oppressive and irascible, subjectivity who lords it over us. In fact, the cult of faith, which lies at the heart of all the great monotheistic religions, has led directly to the cult of the State and the dictatorship of ideology in our own time. The problem boils down to this: the origins of personality. Do we believe that our subjectivity is a reflection of the divine or vice versa—that divine personality is a projection of human subjectivity in an imagined timeless realm? Or do we do away with this either/or and explore through our creative faculties the coincidence of the human and the divine in subjectivity? This third path is more interesting.

**AM:** How does this appreciation of variability lead you to what you said previously about the need for “discipline and restraint”?

**RPL:** Very clearly, because an ethics is essential to civilization’s millennial advance toward freedom. I reject the incessant erosion of ethics in our social life, in all the arts and in our popular culture, perpetuated very maliciously in the name of personal freedom but leading exactly in the opposite direction. Pleasure abhors the slavery of addiction. Pleasure seeks no freedom from discipline. Identity borrows from groups a sense of tradition, and this loan is repaid by the creative transformation of that tradition into new, vital forms of living and creating. At present, the group is what defines identity, and the individual is trained to fit into this or that category. All categories have a political mission, so the individual is marshalled into an assigned militancy by virtue of his or her identity group. The thrust of modern “theory”—a word I dislike—is to deny creativity, originality, individu-
alism and exalt the social environment as deity. Unreflectively, the only avenue for rebellion, for most, becomes immediate gratification, which is the denial of all that makes pleasure revelatory and transformative. At all levels of our society, we are facing a well-planned debacle born of id-driven behavior. We need to orient ourselves toward higher, more complex forms of aesthetics and not revel in the vulgar and the strident in the name of populism—a change that, of course, will not happen. I also reject this widespread notion that art is separate from ethics—usually mislabeled “politics” in this usage. If the artist is the person most needful of liberty, then the artist should be most obligated to defend it. Yet our time is rife with intellectuals and artists whose embrace of communist tyranny is seen as essential to the artist’s identity, a key part of his assigned militancy. No one should get a free pass. We should treat communist sympathizers with the same scorn with which we rightfully treat those who collaborated with fascism, for there is no difference between these.

**AM:** In any dimension of your life, what have you sacrificed—in terms of emotions or material satisfactions—for the privilege of pursuing your art?

**RPLII:** I am reminded of Paul Tillich’s “ultimate concern”—the one thing, which is at the heart of each individual’s psyche, the one thing he will not negotiate. The oxygen, as it were, of his identity. The First Commandment is God’s insistence on being our ultimate concern. Writing, thinking, living the life of an artist are indeed my ultimate concern. Every other dimension or attraction or appetite or interest in my life, however personal, is completely at the service of this one ultimate concern. As a political heretic who condemns the leftist babble of academics and artists, I accept gladly my considerable isolation from the members of my guild. Their complacency is revolting to me.

**AM:** But your creative life is multi-dimensional. Poetry, art criticism, art collecting, fiction… And you have a lively political side, too. Is there one dimension that functions as the center or “ultimate concern”?

**RPLII:** All of these dimensions are equally important to me. What lies at the center of all these dimensions is the creative life. I said in another interview that an artist is a digestive system. Let me add that it is the digestive system of a predator of the imagination—for every artist wants to devour the world. In a good way.
AM: You paint yourself, don’t you?

RPLI: No, I do not.

AM: But I’ve seen drawing pads of yours lying around, and I have seen you take pads out in restaurants or wherever and draw and write profusely.

RPLI: I draw but for my own cultivation, not in any public or professional way. The drawings help me, in ways I haven’t reflected on too deeply, to reconfigure the compression of images—the way, say, a metaphor or a metonymy can fuse ideas, sensations, and settings into a new clarity. I am not interested in juxtaposition for its own sake or in the Surrealist sense to unsettle or create some transitory effect. I am interested in juxtaposition only to the extent that it clarifies into a new naturalness of setting so that an idea can come into being in the mind of a reader.

AM: So the drawings are a means of feeding your imagination and also a device that helps you find the solution to an aesthetic problem.

RPLI: That’s a good way of putting it.

AM: You live immersed in art in a way I’ve never seen another person live. Each time I visit your house, and I’m sure this happens to others, I see new paintings and sculptures that, you say, have been there all the time but I’ve missed. Don’t you find it unsettling to be so utterly immersed in art?

RPLI: Not at all. Why would I?

AM: In light of what you’ve said, the drive to live a life governed by the imagination might be short-circuited by the art of others all around you.

RPLI: That’s an insightful thing to have seized upon. Yes, the art of others can overwhelm one’s own drive to be governed by the imagination, as you put it. I don’t particularly feel threatened by the art I collect. Quite the contrary, the art feeds me. It doesn’t pull me in differ-
ent directions as I create and ponder, rather it enlightens the fact that multiple paths—stylistic, conceptual—are available simultaneously. Hence, perhaps, my interest in multiplicity and in the vividness of images, how these reverberate—to use [Gaston] Bachelard’s word—in the mind. Art has taught me to pursue vividness in language and to see the use of tropes as essential to clear thinking. It has also taught me to feel comfortable with a requisite simultaneity of thought, style, and idea.

**AM:** There is a tremendous mix of art here, though—tribal with contemporary, modernist fine art alongside Naif art, folk art next to kinetic sculpture. And you are an art critic and curator as well as a poet, so the art must live in your mind at different levels—historically, aesthetically, as well as a springboard for your own creative work as a poet. Don’t all these signals conflict in some way? How do you keep them straight?

**RPL:** I don’t know exactly. Perhaps I don’t manage to keep them straight, hence the poems based on art, and the philosophical approaches to interpreting art, and the historical joining with the aesthetic, and so forth. I may well be an undiagnosed mess when it comes to the catalysts that drive my work in all its forms. However, I find it a comfortable way to live, the only way I feel at ease. That may well be the result of having drifted into all the tumult of images and not a plan of some kind. If it all turns into clarity in poems and essays, then it was necessary. If it obfuscates the work, then it was a muddle I didn’t have the wits to escape. Readers decide.

*This interview was conducted over three sessions between May 25th and 30th, 2009 at the home of the poet in Schenley Park in Miami.*
Monsters

Ricardo Pau-Llosa

I confess
nothing drew me
to their comic kind
when my years made natural
their allure. The huge ape
circus-bound yet deeply
in impossible love, scaling,
then falling in a hail,
was neither troubling
nor braced with the lightning rod
destinies of desire.
Nor did the great lizard—
fire-eyed and crater-breath,
calmly venturing across
a livid metropolis
of guns and screams, bridges
failing like cardboard—
entice the scroll of fantasy.
Now, theory-armed
and like a miner
seeking to gem a culture’s lows
out from the vulgate dark,
I watch the stammering flicks
and glossy remakes,
roll the plastic toys
in the tide of my grown hands,
and understand America
as a ship run aground in allegory.
Its childhood Id was chained
and hauled across the sea,
and tossed among the granite monuments
clutching his blonde trinket.
Behold the towering reptile,
the adult Id finally breaking
the spell of regimen, not to glow
in the earned zenith, but to burn
in a rage of vices. I know why
their aberrants did not speak
to me, in flight from a breathing monster,
and why I refuse to forsake
the right to renaissance—privately,
if that is how it has to be.
The black-cloaked man in the Inness painting
pauses atop waves of land to ponder
the crater lake, the Salomé mist, two swans
rippling their flight, and makes us pause
as well. He stands for us, body-shadow-ink
presence, as mind that will have the world
stand still and be counted even as it melts
in ballet uncertainties, temple and castle
cropping from the creamy hills, a snake
of wall snowing off trees from grass
and saying, All is property, all is loss
by nature. Drunk with peace,
he cannot yet say: Dwell, sunken beams
of the emperor’s pleasure barge, in the Lake’s
belly. You will have your resurrection first,
then perish by flame. The pen-stroke man
does not know the Lake as well as it knows itself.
Parable of Marriage: Banyan Tree

Ricardo Pau-Llosa

Like hardened smoke, he said
of the trunkless giant, webbed
in sinews, myriad tethered
needlessly, for its isle
of canopy sought no wind
and brooked no tide. But she
had already sensed the trope
of flame in the language
of branches from which
a cataract of vines had wept
their graduals toward the hearth
of the good earth. And it is good,
you both thought, to think
the same about what cannot
sustain its sameness with its kind,
the trunked and swaying,
the axled thus proposition
of life first standing its ground,
the rise by which all trees are known
to bird and monkey, lizard and sloth,
and to us, too, who manage
like other beasts to tell the banyan
from its duties, the shape
from the freedoms it harbors
in its heart.

[for Brian & Kimberly Hooper]
Seat 19-F Window, Flight To San Juan

Ricardo Pau-Llosa

After the rattling climb, we soothe into Annapurnan peace—never lonelier. My usual view of bannered isles is trapped beneath the sprawl of wing. I am denied the tropic swirls of woven sea to which my hoisted eye’s accustomed. Shoed into my seat by weighty tourists en route to precious warmths that yawn my days. It is the world’s floor I miss, the gaudy traceries of nascent sand amid the inked stainwork of undertides, and the slow land gelling the way a petal dies away from hue, or how a perfume must be thoughtful pulled from forgotten garments. The secret of continents is that their edges might have wished to lurk in reef and wallow timeless in the shifts of water painted by simmering salt. Then these masses would always be unprepared and young, better apt for that strange gleaning in another’s eye than self-scrutiny. And so we’d join them in the shirk of this solid unnatural arc of cloud apexed by the wingtip, and the neat arrows that exit an emergency and which diligent foreboding has tattooed on the wing beneath my gaze.
“Portrait: Ricardo Pau-Llosa”
by Heriberto Mora
“Threshold”
by Heriberto Mora
“Uno”
by Ana Albertina Delgado
“The Hope”
by Humberto Castro
“Summer”
by Burt Barr
“Emerson Point Preserve” by Suzanne Williamson

“Emerson Point Preserve, Mound Path” by Suzanne Williamson
“Moon over Oranges”
by Laura Sobbott Ross
“Cedar Key, Florida” by Andrea Modica

“Cedar Key E, Florida” by Andrea Modica
“Parish, Florida” by Andrea Modica

“Yankeetown, Florida” by Andrea Modica
“Suwanee”
by John Moran
“Shore Liner”
by William Wegman
“Naiad 1”
by Janaina Tschäpe
A Brief History of Mermaid Sightings Both Contemporary and Antiquarian, Complete with Facts and Hearsay

Lu Vickers

Men have always been confused about mermaids. In 1493 Christopher Columbus saw three mermaids off the coast of Haiti on his way to the Rio del Oro, but he wasn’t impressed: “They were not as beautiful as painted,” he complained like an ordinary man in his ship’s log. Henry Hudson was making his way through ice floes near the coast of Nova Zembla in 1608 when he spotted one: From the navill upward her backe and breasts, were like a woman’s, he wrote. From the navel down she had a tail, like the tayle of a Porposse, and speckled like a Macrell. John Smith saw a mermaid too—in the Caribbean in 1614—and while he admired her green hair and for a brief moment thought he might fall in love with her, he decided her eyes were too big, her ears too long, and her nose too short. The real clincher he wrote, was that from below the waist the woman gave way to the fish.

These sightings didn’t just take place in the middle of seas. When Hernando de Soto’s men tromped ashore on the west coast of Florida and made their way through Hernando County before it was Hernando County, they mistook the West Indian manatees sculling alongside their boats in the Weeki Wachee River for mermaids. The soldiers climbed to the tops of the Cypress trees lining the banks of the Weeki Wachee River looking up and downriver for the lovely creatures. One by one, as they spotted shadows moving in the water, they got excited, lost their balance, and tumbled through the trees into the river. As they fell, pieces of their gray beards were snatched off in the branches. Those snatches of beard grew into Spanish moss. At least that’s what Otho Mickens told the tourists.
Otho wasn’t an explorer or a soldier, but he did pilot a boat. He was a native Floridian. He heard the story of Spanish moss a lot growing up in the woods around Elfers, a small town about twenty miles south of Weeki Wachee, the City of Mermaids. His Granddaddy had brought the family to Florida during the 20s land boom—he tried to make it in orange groves, but a cold snap got the best of him. He ended up turpentining for another man. By the time Otho came along, you didn’t have to farm—you could work at one of those tourist places that had sprung up all over: Sunken Gardens or Monkey Jungle; the place was crawling with alligator farms and shell factories. One guy brought in a bunch of parrots, taught them to play the piano and ride tiny bicycles. People fenced in alligators, ostriches, turtles, chimpanzees. Just about every gas station in Florida had a hand-lettered sign out front advertising a turtle or a monkey or the world’s largest gator. Perhaps inspired by the story of de Soto’s soldiers, Newt Perry brought in mermaids.

He hired Otho to be a tour boat captain at Weeki Wachee Springs when the boy was only sixteen. Cruising down the river on the Princess Wondrous back then, Otho felt like Errol Flynn; he constantly combed his fingers through his thick black hair to make sure he looked okay. For the first few years he liked shooting the breeze with the tourists; it was like acting, he told himself, and he tried to make himself sound like those black boatmen he’d seen up in North Florida once, the ones who worked at Wakulla Springs, the ones who sounded liked backwoods preachers, shouting out the names of birds with the rhythm and fervency of hallelujahs. He could do it. If he let himself feel possessed. He could shout the names of birds toward the heavens, but he felt more like a carnival hawker than a preacher when the words rolled from his mouth: *Anhingha, that’s a snake bird, that’s a ladies’ favorite, that’s a water turkey, lookit his neck gentlemen; lookit how he dries his wings...***

Twenty-three years went by. One Friday morning, Otho passed the stage where Duster the cockatoo used to ride his small scooter; he passed the cage that had held a small bear; he passed the Mermaid Theater and walked down the shady sidewalk to the dock to get ready for his first boat tour of the day. As soon as he stepped onto the boat
with his bucket of fish, a couple of pelicans glided over and landed on the orange canvas roof, their webbed feet visible as silhouettes above his head.

Ten years earlier, the spring manager had made him start hauling the fish along to attract herons and egrets. Otho balanced the bucket on the stool behind his seat. Once the tour started, he’d steer the boat with one hand and with the other toss the silver fish out to the birds who flocked to that part of the river when they heard the boat approaching. The birds had gotten used to the routine and some of them wouldn’t wait for him to toss the fish. Otho was afraid he was going to get speared in the back by an impatient flying heron. That or shit on. The pelicans and egrets had taken to perching on top of the boat for the whole ride, while Otho simply reached out under the awning and handed them fish Then they’d shit their thanks.

Otho checked the batteries on the boat while the pelicans padded around above him like small children. Tourists started arriving. He made himself look busy checking gauges while red-faced men and women gathered behind the rope. “Look! An otter,” squealed a little boy. The crowd turned their faces in unison toward the river like a herd of cows. The otter swam back and forth in the water next to the boat. The boy had stopped watching. Otho smiled at a little girl who swung on the rope even though the sign said “Keep Off.” He didn’t care anymore. It wasn’t worth it.

At exactly ten o’clock, Otho drew the rope back, and in a loud voice said, “Watch Your Step.” As the tourists lumbered to their seats, Otho realized he’d gotten lazy too. He wished he could just float down the river, right on out to the Gulf, not talking. He’d long quit thinking of himself as Errol Flynn. He was tired of hearing his own voice.

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Upriver, the Weeki Wachee mermaids stand in front of the mirrors in their lounge, still in their street clothes, watching themselves walk through the dance routines they’ll perform later, underwater. Then they walk upstairs into their locker room where they undress and put on their swimsuits. They lean into the mirrors and cake on their makeup. Then they carry their tails into the tube room where they sit on the edge of the portal and put the tails on for the first show of the day. This isn’t easy. The tails are tight and do not slide
easily over the special fins the mermaids wear. One mermaid twists onto her side while another mermaid zips her up. Once their tails are on, the mermaids are ready to drop down into the tube which runs under the auditorium and into the spring. The tube is 62 feet long and dark and scary. No one likes the tube. There are air hoses along the way, but they are hard to find.

The mermaids drop into the tube, one by one. Dressed in sequins and gold lamé tails, they burst into the blue light of the spring one at a time as if birthed, then float upward, unbound by weight.

In between shows, a smiling teenaged boy carries one of the mermaids-in-training outside for a photo shoot with tourists, mostly men and children. The mermaid-in-training is 16, self-conscious and bored. The boy lowers her onto a chunk of cream colored limestone in between two low benches and backs away. He and the mermaid-in-training smile at each other like they are sharing a private joke. Her hair looks blonder than it really is in the yellow sunlight. Her pink tail sparkles. Men in Bermuda shorts come forward slowly while their wives ready the cameras. The men are afraid to look at the mermaid too closely; they are afraid she can see what they are thinking: that her plump breasts are barely contained sequins the size and shape of fish scales. The children are frightened of her too—they’ve never seen a half-woman, half-fish—but they aren’t afraid to look her over, breasts and all, this strange creature; she might as well be under glass for the way they stare.

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Once they had cruised halfway down the river, a woman with long brown hair rose from her seat and asked Otho if she could take his picture. He smiled and said, “Yes.” She looked vaguely familiar. Otho gripped the steering wheel and saluted her, looking straight at the camera lens. When the flash went off, he remembered being a little boy living with his daddy in a rotting trailer next to a pigpen, the day a lady came and asked his daddy if she could take Otho’s picture for some government program. Leaning against the doorjamb, his daddy spit into the yard, said “yeah,” then shambled back into the dark kitchen where he sat under a yellow light piecing a jigsaw puzzle together. Otho had just taken a bath and his hair was wet. He slicked it back with his fingers, then stepped barefoot into the yard, and said, “Lemme show you my pig.” The lady took pictures of him standing in mud smiling, his arm cocked around the pig; she took pictures of him
squeezing his puppy up to his face, and as the puppy licked his cheek with a warm milky tongue, Otho thought that these pictures might end up somewhere. Someone would see him, and put him in a movie or something. Anything was possible.

Two weeks later, a stiff brown envelope filled with a handful of glossy black and white photographs arrived in Otho’s mailbox. He looked them over. Him holding his wet-nosed puppy up to his face, the pig lolling against the fence in the background. Otho hadn’t worn shoes and his toes had squished in the thick warm mud; his hair was still wet from a bath. He studied the photographs carefully. His hands. His hair. His muddy feet. He was embarrassed at how poor he looked. A crumpled tin soup can, an old newspaper, a rusted toy truck littered the ground behind him.

The woman with long brown hair lowered her camera and Otho heard her voice as if from a distance. “Excuse me,” he said. “I didn’t hear you.”

“You looked like you recognized me,” she said. “I used to be a mermaid. Twenty years ago. Can you believe it?” Before he could say anything, before he could reach out to touch her arm, she turned away and headed back to her seat.

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In their show, the mermaids perform balletic moves, the dolphin, the Ferris wheel, the adagio. They arc their bodies, point their arms out like movie stars, then drift upward through the blue water, still as statues. A quick suck of air from their hoses and they blow out streams of perfect silver bubbles. They lip synch to songs piped into the underwater theatre. Blue Heaven. Heartbreak Hotel. Even though they can’t see a thing beyond the blur of blue water, they mouth hellos at the audience, wave to children who press their faces against the glass. With white clouds of bread crumbs streaming from their fingertips, they feed the fish and turtles swimming around them. At the end of the show, the mermaids move close to the glass, blow kisses that turn into fine sprays of bubbles, their skin waxy-looking in the blue light of the spring, their hair waving upward in strands sleek as silk, their eyes wide open, unseeing, like women surprised at being drowned.

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As Otho watched the woman walk back to her seat, he decided his job hadn’t been so bad. At least he’d stayed. He’d done good work over the years. The ladies would smile at him while their husbands pressed a dime into his palm as he helped them off the boat. He was always careful to get his birds right—the wood storks, the herons, the ibis. A park ranger had lent him a copy of Audubon’s *Birds of America* and he’d sat in his trailer and read, *I have ascertained that feathers lose their brilliance almost as rapidly as flesh or skin itself, and am of an opinion that a bird alive is 75% more rich in colours than twenty-four hours after its death.* Otho hadn’t thought of birds as fading in death and he was amazed at how much shooting went in to painting a picture. Before he read the book, he hadn’t realized that Audubon killed the birds to paint them. He stopped feeling so bad about the birds he’d shot for target practice as a kid when he read how Audubon killed at least 25 pelicans to get one drawing. He stole some of Audubon’s stories to tell the tourists… told them he’d killed a Great Blue Heron once and found a whole perch in its stomach, how he’d built a fire right there on the bank of the river and fried that bugger up. Now he carried a bucket of fish behind him on the boat and Great Blue Herons would swoop right down and spear the fish, so close he could smell their feathers.

As he rounded the bend of the river, he spoke to the people on the boat. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, “if you look to your left, at the top of the tallest cypress tree, you’ll see a brown pelican.” Children gathered at the railing and looked up. Then Otho lied. Told them that the brown pelican was named Louie. That Louie always waited for the boat to come. The pelicans were always different and they were always Louie and nobody ever noticed the difference.

After he passed Louie the Pelican, Otho stared at the backs of the tourists’ heads, wondering what it was about himself that kept him from telling the truth to these people. That Hernando de Soto had never set foot on this river, never mistook a manatee for a mermaid, never climbed a cypress tree. That Spanish moss didn’t come from the beards of conquistadores, but was an epiphyte. They wouldn’t know the difference between an epiphyte or a parasite. Between the real and the fake. They wouldn’t even care. He decided the difference was in him. He didn’t want his life to be their entertainment. He kept the truth to himself.
Alligators and manatees are unmistakably different; gators have never been misidentified as mermaids, ugly or otherwise, not even when gliding underwater. Unlike manatees, who move slow as dirigibles, constantly feeding on river grasses, alligators move quickly through water. They are opportunistic; they will lounge motionless in the sun on the banks of rivers, then wait and wait and wait for some animal to make the wrong move. Sometimes they are so still they look dead. Do not be fooled. Despite such sluggish behavior, it has been said that an alligator can outrun a horse for a distance of 30 feet, that the only way to save yourself if an alligator is chasing you is to run zig zag. Neither of these facts is true.

When Otho was about 13, his daddy decided to take him on a gator hunt with Big Al Thornton, the alligator wrestler from Sarasota. Big Al wanted a new pair of alligator skin boots with a belt to match. Otho thought they’d go at night, but Big Al wanted to go in broad daylight as if they were going to Woolworth’s. They poled a jon-boat down the Weeki Wachee, until Big Al spotted a gator gliding underwater next to the boat. Big Al told Otho to lean over the edge of the boat to get a better look. He did. The gator was mossy green with bright silvery eyes.

All of a sudden Otho’s daddy pushed him overboard and he landed with a slap on his belly in the ice cold water, then sank, his eyes wide open. Even though it was blurry as hell, Otho saw the gator coming right at him, and even though it was only a matter of seconds, he still remembers the gator’s gunshot eyes. Then there was a huge splash. Still wearing his brogans, Big Al dove onto the gator’s horny back, clamping its mouth shut with both his hands. At the moment Big Al landed on the gator’s back, Otho felt himself being pulled from the river by the seat of his pants. He flopped into the boat and sat up quickly to see what had happened. His heart thumped hard as a fist against his chest.

Big Al and the gator thrashed around in the water, churning it into foam, then Big Al steadied the gator against his leg, grasped the jaw with one hand and wrapped a piece of rope around it with the other.
When the gator’s mouth was sealed shut, Otho’s daddy shouted, “C’mon boy,” and jerked his arm. Otho’s heart still hammered in his ears as he climbed back into the water with his daddy so they could help Big Al wrestle the monster onto the boat. The gator’s leathery body was a solid writhing muscle. It wouldn’t give up the fight. Otho was surprised at how rough the gator’s skin felt, not smooth like a shiny alligator belt at all. After they loaded the gator onto the boat and began wading back upriver, Otho found out that his daddy and Big Al had planned to dump him into the river all along to see if he could “walk on water.” Otho didn’t think it was funny, but his daddy and Big Al laughed the whole way back.

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When the mermaids’ show is over, they swim back into the tube, back through the darkness, back to the portal where they climb out, take off their tails, sling them across a rack to dry, then slosh across the wet tile floor to the showers where they stand beneath blasts of hot water to get warm. Their skin has started to turn blue from the cold, cold water. Their blue lips tremble. Their wet hair hangs limp as weeds against their cheeks. They dry off, get dressed in their jeans and t-shirts, and go home.

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Otho had a blinding headache. Fifth boat tour of the day. The Great Blue Heron standing in the water on the edge of the river looked like a skinny old man, Otho’s old man. His legs were thin as soda straws. Long grey feathers hung off his chest like a scraggly beard. Otho’s daddy used to wade through Cypress swamps sawing Cypress knees for an old man down in Palmdale. Some of the knees took on human shapes, legs, arms, faces. These the old man put in his museum. The others he sold to people who used them to make lamps, tables, chairs, clocks. Otho went Cypress knee hunting with his daddy a few times. Wading through the swamps, they never had much to say to each other. But once, on their way home from Fisheating Creek they passed a field full of sand-colored donkeys and they both said at the same time, “A field full of donkeys.”

Otho leaned against the steering wheel on the boat, staring hard at
the bird one more time, before he gave up trying to remember which heron it was. The blue, the grey, the green, the great white. He looked over the heads of the tourists and pointed. “Look at that big bird,” he said.

After work, Otho drove his Chevy over to the Hawg Pen for a cold beer. He wasn’t a biker but he tried to be a biker and that seemed to be enough to get him in the door. He’d bought a ‘68 Shovelhead and spent hours sweating in his yard, swatting gnats out of his face, slapping mosquitoes, taking the thing apart and putting it back together, sanding it, painting it, but hardly ever riding it. He liked the way the bike sounded when he fired it up, the deep farting sound of it, as he rode it slowly through the tall grass around his trailer. The truth was, he was afraid to take it on the road. But he could talk about it all day, about wrist bushings and camshafts and valve shims. Clutch hub studs.

He sat at the bar for a long time, staring at the wall, listening to Hank Williams Jr., waiting for his headache to go away. When it did, he walked outside and heard arguing and saw a biker he didn’t recognize pulling a woman across the gravel parking lot toward a van. He didn’t think anything of it; bikers were always barking at each other or somebody else. Better not to get involved. He opened the door of his Chevy, slid into the seat, and looked back over his shoulder through the rear window at the van. The woman was inside now, looking at him though the dusty windshield, her eyes wide open with fright.

He remembered where he’d seen her. She’d been on his boat that day. The ex-mermaid. She was one tough-looking gal. Jeans, cowboy boots. Long hair blown loose around her shoulders. He wouldn’t have ever guessed she was a mermaid, but he liked tough women—he couldn’t help himself, even though he’d been warned not to flirt with the tourists. When she’d gone to step off the boat that afternoon, he’d instinctively reached out for her arm, then caught himself.

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In the summertime, the sun didn’t go down until almost 8:30 at night, and even before the moon rose, there was still enough light to see by. But the moon had risen and the biker could see that her face was already turning purple where he’d hit her. He hadn’t wanted to hit her, but she wouldn’t cooperate. She hadn’t cooperated from the
beginning. She’d bitten his finger to the bone when he tried to shut her up. Even though he was furious, he still put her clothes back on. The bitch. Anybody else would’ve dumped her out on the road naked. He was so mad he couldn’t see straight, but he clenched his jaw and shoved her boots on.

He drove the van down to the Weeki Wachee river and dragged her through the saw grass, and scrub pine and palmettos, down to the edge of the river where the Cypress trees grew. She still fought, twisted like a gator roped and tied. The air was loud with the Screaking of insects and Frogs. When he crashed through the underbrush, they grew quiet for a minute, but by the time he waded into the cold water, holding her squirming against his body, they’d started up their racket again. Her skin was hot and sweaty. Mosquitoes whined in the air around his head, stinging his face and neck. He slapped at them uselessly. He was tired of her ass. Cold water rushed up against his arms as he pushed her down into the water like he was baptizing her, pushed her down and held her down. Sweat ran down the sides of his face, dripping into the river as he waited for her body to stop jerking.

She opened her eyes underwater, even though she knew it would be dark and blurry. Just one more look. Enough moonlight soaked through the water that she thought she saw the dark shape of a mullet swim past her in the cloud of sand kicked up by the man’s boots. She kept her eyes open, let herself feel the cold water swirling over her skin, felt herself falling away, then becoming light as air.

When her body went limp, he let her go, thinking the river would carry her down to the Gulf of Mexico. He watched her drift away from him. Maybe a gator would drag her under, drag her off to a hole someplace. He didn’t care anymore what happened. It was dark. The cypress knees at the edge of the water took on eerie shapes, bunches of fingers pointing upward, the heads of long-faced men, the arms and legs of deformed babies. A Great Blue Heron flapped the air above him. He waded out of the water.

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To be a Weeki Wachee mermaid, you must be able to hold your breath for at least two and a half minutes and be strong enough to fight the current that dumps 169,000 gallons of water per minute out into the river. One mermaid
could hold her breath for seven minutes, longer than porpoises or dolphins. You must be able to perform acrobatics while holding your breath. You must be able to free dive to a depth of 117 feet. You must be able to eat a banana and drink a soda underwater. You must be able to look like you are singing without letting bubbles escape your mouth. You must be a certified diver and you must know cardiopulmonary resuscitation. You must be able to keep your eyes open and smile, smile, smile.

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On his way home from the Hawg Pen, Otho followed a van down highway 27, his eyes fixed on the glowing red taillights in the distance beyond his dirty windshield. Suddenly the van jerked to one side, and inexplicably, a dog slid from under its back wheels across the asphalt in slow crazy circles toward the front of Otho’s Chevy before it spun to a stop in a white cloud of dirt at the edge of the road. Watching the dog, Otho felt everything slow down and become unreal, as if he were underwater. He hunched forward in his seat, leaned toward his dusty windshield to watch his yellow headlights crawl across the body of the dog as he drove past in slow motion. Up ahead he pulled over and made a U-turn to go back and see if the dog was still alive. He hoped not.

At daybreak the next morning, Otho went to work. He was motoring toward the Gulf beneath a lavender and orange sky when he found her floating face down in the coke bottle green water of the Weeki Wachee River, one of her feet hung up in the low slung branches of a willow tree. A wood stork perched on a limb above her, scanning the river for fish. Otho had been on his way to feed the goats on the cliff downstream before making his first official tour of the day and thought he was seeing things, thought she was a mermaid at first because of the way her long brown hair waved downstream in the water, catching light. It was only at second glance that he thought she might be an animal, an otter, maybe.

When he moved closer to look at the otter he saw she was the woman who’d taken his photograph the day before. She was a mermaid, after all. Her thin white arms floated just beneath the surface of the water, moving gracefully above her head with the current, as if she were dancing hula. He was afraid to touch her, he told his friends later, trying to explain why he didn’t pull her up onto the sand. He got as
close to her as he could, stared at her back to see if she was breathing, thought she was, but finally decided his eyes were deceived by the rocking of the boat—that and his pounding heart. Her pale white skin had begun to turn blue.

Later, when the sheriff and his men came and pulled her from the river, Otho stood in the shadows of the Cypress trees on the sandy bank and watched. As the men lifted her body from the water, her long dark hair hung down ropy and wet as seaweed. She wore faded jeans and scuffed up cowboy boots. The boots had been shoved onto the wrong feet and the whole left side of her face was a swollen purple bruise.

Sickened, Otho took the rest of the day off. The next morning, he read about the mermaid in the paper and for the next few days he couldn’t stop wishing he’d taken her arm the day before on the boat. He’d had a feeling about her. He’d had another chance that evening, at the bar, but he hadn’t taken it. He’d sat back and watched her being driven away by the man who murdered her, as if she were in a movie. He played the scene over and over and over in his head, his whole body engulfed in regret.

Years later when he thought of his life, he’d remember that night, the mermaid’s face behind the glass, wide-eyed and sad, the dog spinning toward him, its legs outstretched, its face contorted in pain, teeth bared. He convinced himself there was nothing he could have done in either situation.
econolockahatchee

Rajiv Mohabir

at 14 i learned the truth
whelps dog into rebel flags
hunt fags, tree coons.

i did not play inside
house but drank
from outside hose

jammed into steel lockers
southern baptist conviction
added another middle leaf
to bound pages of skin

brown fairy bitch go
back where you came from

followed me home that night
handheld bat hovered
too close to heads

the waters browned by falling
page tannin, i bathed
in this river, am a pot

from this clay filled
heavy with its tea

carried it north, i followed
the path upstream.
All Your Hard Work
Will Soon Be Paid Off

Donald Morrill

There it is, in your hands. Despite the energies of cosmic indifference, the limitations of your character, the imprudence of your purse—you have written a book, a small publisher has found it worthy (perhaps even bestowing an award on it), and you hold it, your accomplishment, for the first time.

A chance—a slim chance—remains to save you.

Feel the heft of the book, its thickness. Don’t hurry to open it and violate the spine or those pages not quite cut. Don’t hurry to dive into its now strangely foreign passages, wondering who wrote them, admiring that genius or pitying that underdeveloped aspirant. Notice instead how the oils from your fingertips already smear the dust jacket, stripping away the friction of freshness.

Treat it once more like the fetish it has often been, from the first intimations on paper or lighted screen.

Do it now, here, in your study, perhaps, standing alone over the just-opened carton of complimentary author copies. Do it now.

Savor then divest.

Live.

Or have you already made your way to a local mega-chain and found it there, shoulder to shoulder with today’s offerings? If so, consider your good luck. Your publisher is large enough, its Pow! ample enough, to make your book available, as many just-published books are not, among the throngs of units in the vast, well-lighted marketplace. Your book’s out. See? You can advise anyone who might ask that it’s ready for browsers, in this real place. Legit. Ta-da!

Put it back on the shelf now and walk into the evening behind a wise smile.

Because you have beaten the odds. Though ever-escalating numbers of titles spring daily from obscurity to oblivion without a pause for notice, you have still published a book, perhaps even a good
book, and this is an exceptional feat.

Because unless your publisher has paid a vast sum for your book, and thus has the need to flog it into profitability—a demand that includes the reasonable claim on you to work like the dickens to promote it—you’ve already done most of what can be done for your book. Anything more is a discretionary, spiritual exercise.

Or in the aptly-fractured words of the fortune curled amid my crumbled cookie after the dinner celebrating the acceptance of my first book: *All Your Hard Work Will Soon Be Paid Off.*

Save yourself, then. Take this fame and go. Kiss your significant-O. Consider what to do with that blighted birdhouse in the backyard. Catch up with a friend who repairs sailboats for a living.

But if you can’t spare yourself from pushing your book as far as possible on your own (and you even still secretly hope for a lightning strike of serious lucre, which can happen, even though you’re not one of the poster gods overlooking the check-out counter—those with the dates of their forthcoming volumes announced like feature films, who pay more taxes on their paragraphs than you’re likely to pay on your house): Get ready.

Tune up by thinking of Thoreau, say, dying with most of the self-printing of *Walden* in his closet . . . or maybe of the indefatigable, frustrated Whitman having to review his own great book and later revising it into a kind of Victorian coffee table edition, old Walt bellowing “Captain, My Captain” on stage at subscription performances, once for an audience including Andrew Carnegie himself.

Closer to home—and maybe to the point—think of your terribly skillful friend, whose Cold War thriller sold moderately well and should have been picked up by the movies—except that it came out just as the Cold War ended. Who could have guessed? None of his subsequent books “moved” off the shelves as well, and he’s been dropped by his New York publisher. Now he’s doing stand-up.

Think, too, if you must, of Gertrude Stein—who did have one best seller, finally—but who famously, and defensively, declared we write for ourselves and for strangers. (True enough, though I would add that we mostly sell to friends, family, acquaintances and colleagues.)

Once you step beyond the circle of those neighborhood book parties and reading groups, and the allied region of your local independent bookstore, (and maybe the one or two supportive appearances at a
conference or arts event, arranged, perhaps, by a friend), you will be encountering the you who browses how many books a year and sets them aside with a summary dismissal or a gentle pity, out of boredom or distracted agitation, out of distaste for the cover art or the opening sentence, or with amazement that the author could have believed the subject worthy, that the author could have hoped to be the exception.

I encourage you, then—if you choose to become the barnstorming, press-release-releasing, bulk-mailing, list-serving, platform-less author-flack—to prepare to hear, at the hour of your signing at a mega outlet in an out-of-the-way suburb, the purple jacket copy you yourself wrote delivered over the loudspeaker with a glass crusher’s affect, your name mispronounced.

Prepare to sit alone at a small table, then, beside a small stack of your books, surrounded by people at tables peering strenuously downward into others’ pages as though this were study hall. No one draws near. Do you dare take out that natty little placard your publisher sent to go with your readings? Here, like this? You resemble a bereft fortune teller.

Or maybe you have an audience, if the store has set up chairs. Three, five, perhaps a dozen. One will be an acquaintance—surprise!—who congratulates you . . . but confesses later, sheepishly, that she’s here only because she’d ditched a blind date at the grille next door.

Or there’s the person who sits through your reading, who seems interested—do you know him from somewhere?

“I saw you were going to give a talk,” he says, afterward, putting your book back on the table. “Very interesting.”

Did he receive one of your surgically-targeted announcement postcards? No.

He takes up a copy of the Hollywood Reporter from the shelf and explains he’s a professional extra come in, actually, to check the list of movies shooting in the area.

Or there’s the person who, as you read on, smiles every time you make eye contact because, well, you’re pinning her down with your hopefulness, aren’t you? . . . She runs off as soon as you finish . . .

Or she comes up and cuts off all escape for an hour, as only the loquacious and deeply crazed can—as she does here nightly, you begin to realize.

You shake her very small hand.
Because your volume—however truly worthy it is—will not be designated one of the *NY Times* Notable Books of the year, though it did get mentioned in an airline magazine.

Because the scheduler for the radio program three states away, whom you finally reached, is not really putting you on about putting you on but just won’t get back to you about it as promised and is already sighing, “I have another call on hold. Can we wrap this up?”

Because you will not be able to convince Amazon.com to remove that unsigned, serial killer-review published in *Kirkus* or *Library Journal* from the page featuring your title, even though it obviously will reduce what sales there will be.

Because the run date for the thirty column-inch feature on you in the good newspaper—with a flattering photo, no less—was pushed back, back until it came out a week after the last of all the appearances you alone managed to arrange in the area, and you’re beginning to realize what kind of minion-power it takes to keep Paris Hilton’s cell phone problems in the limelight.

Because you remember, now, yes, what it’s like to get that last book rejection letter on Christmas Eve. (More will come on Christmas Eve.)

Please, don’t mistake me, here, for merely a bitter author. (Nearly all authors I know are bitter about these numerous, nattering humiliations). What matters, in the end, is the degree to which you are other than bitter, and this depends on how you keep disillusionment in its rightful place.

Here, you might take sage counsel from that most metaphysical of texts: *The Poet’s Guide to Finance*.

To save your friendships, your love life, your day job, your sanity—and to protect your wherewithal to ever write again—give your book away.

Not to the small hands, of course, and not indiscriminately. But to those strangers you most want to know it exists. Make a list and send each a copy, with the least-foolish sounding note you can conjure, thanking them for accepting the gift of your work.

If you still crave the need to feel your book is out there, where the true readers roam, put together a list of good independent stores and send the buyer there a copy with some legitimate-looking, press-kit papers and a brief letter asking the buyer to read the first page of the
book and, if he/she likes it, to order a copy or two and let them live awhile on those halcyon shelves.

Then think no more about it. Certainly don’t imagine more. You’ve done all you can verify. The rest is silence, as it mostly is.

And you can rest on that, now, can’t you? After all, you’ve arrived.
Handbuilt, Thrown, Altered

Gianna Russo

the Hillsborough once poured
itself sluggishly past our door          orange blossoms persuaded
night air of what it couldn’t know      breaking into gardenias
and lavender      the backyard
curved through crescents of light in the crown
of the door      stairs convinced themselves
of our comings and goings      the desertion
of stenciled rooms and refinished hardware      the crib
rebuilt and emptied again of milky breath      the way you turned
your back on clay and glazes      your disregard
of ash      how you could sleep against my weeping
you could have lived there      how could you
wedged in the kiln of emptiness
Janet Burroway grew up in Arizona and was educated at the University of Arizona, Barnard College in New York, Cambridge University in England, and the Yale School of Drama in Connecticut. Burroway’s published works include short stories, poems, translations, plays, two children’s books, eight novels, including her most recent, Bridge of Sand (2009), and two textbooks about the craft of writing. Her novel The Buzzards was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1970, and her highly-acclaimed novel Raw Silk was runner up for a National Book Award in 1977. Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft (now in its 8th edition) is the most widely used book on creative writing in colleges and universities in the U.S. She divides her time now between Wisconsin and Florida, where she was recently honored as a Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor Emerita at Florida State University.

**RL:** If you could go back in time and tell yourself, as a young adult or upstart writer, one bit of wisdom mined from all that you’ve learned in the years since, what would it be and why?

**JB:** I always liked Grace Paley’s answer to this question: “Keep a
low overhead.” But really that is not my answer, which is: the most important thing you can do as a young writer, in a writing program or not, is to figure out how you can make writing a continuing part of your life. All the other problems may or may not be solved but only within a writing life. Publication is grand but mainly because it gives you the courage to continue. Ron Carlson puts it: “The writer is the one who stays in the room.” Staying in the room is always hard and does not get easier. You will have a job, a marriage, kids, both happy distraction and trouble. If writing can become a habitual refuge, rather than a chore subject to your will, then it will sustain you, and it will get better. It will get better. Only if you do it.

RL: Throughout the year, you divide your time between Florida, London, and Wisconsin. How do these very different locales affect your writing?

JB: Funny you should ask. We have just sold our flat in London, and are sort of consolidating in the States – partly because our granddaughters are now old enough to visit from London on their own, partly because I’ve become so involved in the theatre in Chicago that there isn’t time to split our year three ways. We are still basically Floridians and will be back down to Florida in January, but there will inevitably be more flying back and forth.

But your real question has to do with the effect on my writing, and I probably only partially know the answer to that. I’ve spent altogether something like a dozen years in England, and that has certainly affected my diction, the rhythm of my sentences and the nature of my humor. (I like it wry and dry). There’s a beach comber in me, and a woods walker, and a city girl, and it exhilarates me to be able to drop one and pick up the other, probably as much as I like to finish a novel and go on to a play or a memoir. I grew up in Arizona, then spent several years in the east and England, and what I missed most in thirty years in Florida was the turn of the seasons. We have that in the woods in Wisconsin, and I love to watch it. For me personally, what all this moving around means is probably that I’m still looking for home—that is certainly the evidence of my novels, where my heroines tend to be relentlessly engaged in that pursuit. But also it has made me richly aware of my surroundings, and that is reflected in the books. Where is always as much a question as who and why in my stories.
RL: How do you choose what genre or format you will write in next? What are you working on now?

JB: This is one of those parts of writing that I don’t choose: the genre chooses me. I mean that an impulse to write on some subject or other almost inevitably comes together with its genre—an image or a lyric line attaches itself automatically to a poem; an incident pulses with meaning and must be an essay—though there have been some exceptions: I thought *Cutting Stone* would be a screenplay, I suppose because it was a western.

At the moment I’m working on a musical—something I’ve wanted to do for most of my adulthood. And for this particular musical, an adaptation of Barry Unsworth’s *Morality Play*, I’ve been seeking the rights since I reviewed the novel for the *NY Times Book Review* in the late 90’s. I’ve prepared myself by taking an arduous workshop at Theatre Building Chicago, where I linked up with the very young and wonderful composer Matthew Kiedrowski. We’re about a third of the way into the book and have plotted all the songs. The real work is still ahead, but it’s a fascinating process, chock full of technical detail that must be right and emotional build that must occur in order to lead to song. Did you know that the American Musical has many rules? Neither did I. Here’s one: You can’t sing a lie.

RL: You have described *Bridge of Sand* as “a love song to the Gulf Coast.” Why set your novel here? What unique characteristics does Florida offer?

JB: Well, of course, I’ve spent thirty years driving back and forth to Alligator Point, St. Teresa, St. George Island, Cape San Blas and points between. For many, many years, a friend lent me a house at Alligator Point that was a sort of private Yaddo. I could only write for four days without speaking to another soul, but I did those four many times, and much of my fiction, many essays are for me redolent of salt and sand. The question was not really “why set a novel here?” but “what’s the right novel to set here?” This one seemed right to me because in the people of the Florida Gulf coast I found the character of my parents and my childhood. I am deeply drawn to the working class people I came from, and I have not got over railing at them about what I still perceive as their closed-mindedness. Dana in *Bridge of Sand* finds a
way, partial and imperfect it may be, to honor that life.

**RL:** You’ve been known to inscribe *Bridge of Sand* at book signings with the quote: “*The sky was almost white. A pair of flying bluefish broke from the waves…*” What is the significance of this quote?

**JB:** The significance is that there is only one book in the world inscribed with that line. Ken Kesey taught me, one AWP convention in Seattle, this way to sign a book: you write “For…” and the person’s name, open the book at random, stick your finger on a phrase at random, and write that phrase as an inscription. It’s a time-honored method of finding significance, old as St. Augustine. What it means at a signing is that all the inscriptions will be different, and it also operates rather as a horoscope. Kesey said, “You won’t know what it means, but the person will.” It’s amazing, and fun, how often the quotation seems somehow apt. I’m as grateful to Kesey for this trick as for all of *Cuckoo’s Nest.*

**RL:** In the years since you began as a college professor, creative writing programs have become common at many colleges and universities across the country. Have there been any negative aspects to having so many up-and-coming writers file through such programs? Do the benefits of such programs outweigh the drawbacks?

**JB:** Emphatic yes to both questions. Here are some of the perceived drawbacks: The stories will tend to be all alike, or, worse, all like the teacher’s. Talent will be quashed. Delicate sensibilities will be crushed. Contrarily, the programs will foster unrealistic ambition and expectation. The teacher him/herself will become a dull and confined writer with no experience from which to write. The students will not find jobs. There will be more writers than readers. We will all contemplate our navels. Students will stop trying to write well and begin to consider their “career arcs.”

I think these dangers all have to be faced and/or avoided, though the only one that really worries me is the last one.

Here’s why the benefits weigh more: We need all the writers we can get. The language is imperiled by schlock culture, visual excess, the sound bite, and public lies both commercial and political. Writers are the monks of this dark age, saving the fine distinctions and the grace of which language is capable. People who want to attempt to express
a truth have the right to that attempt. A workshop is a guaranteed audience with the gift of community and the gift of feedback. To write as a student is, in effect, to get paid for writing—in course credit. At the same time, it allows you to figure out how you will keep writing and so still have something joyous to do in retirement. As for the world, what it needs most is that we should be able to imagine each other. That is the only way to peace. And it is the particular task of imaginative writing to give us a way to imagine each other.

**RL:** How do you hope to be remembered in literary circles 50 or 100 years from now? How do you hope to be remembered by readers?

**JB:** It’s an indulgence and a confession, answering this question. I don’t generally think in these terms at all, still less admit to it. But, as thrilled as I am that *Writing Fiction* and *Imaginative Writing* have been valuable to other writers, it is disappointing to be known primarily for two textbooks while the novels are mostly out of print. I have a small, infrequent fantasy that some future student will happen upon a copy of the battered textbook and decide to check whether I could practice what I preached. And will say: Hey!

**RL:** You have included an excerpt from your upcoming novel, *Indian Dancer*, in this edition of *Saw Palm*. What is the novel about?

**JB:** *Indian Dancer* is the most elusive novel I’ve undertaken. I think it contains my best writing, and it flows away from me like drops of mercury. It’s had several shapes, several titles: *Time Lapse, Simone, Montage*, now *Indian Dancer*, which is the title of a Hannah Hoch montage made up of many elements, none of which bears any relation to an Indian dancer. The novel is about a woman born in Belgium in 1930, orphaned in 1942 as she is rescued to England, who spends her life avoiding that dark past. It began as a series of connected but contradictory stories; I reinvented it with a narrative arc, changed my mind about both what she is avoiding and how. I have now decided that the linked-stories shape was the right one, though at this juncture it means I must throw away half the novel. It’s despair, but rich despair. I’m frantic, but not bored, so I’ll keep at it ‘til Simone reveals herself.
Transit:  
Washington—Jefferson City  
1964  

Janet Burroway

They roll south and inland through the dark: Fredericksburg, Richmond, Charlottesville, Covington. The Greyhound stops every couple of hours so people can trickle dimes into the coke machines or sit at the counters to eat burgers or hot pot pies. Some disappear and others take their place, youths with duffles, women with whining children and their gear in shopping bags, businessmen in seersucker carrying scuffed brown satchels.

All summer she sat stunned in the Library of Congress waiting for her life to begin again, studying the way the light pooled on the base of the brass lamp, doing research on her cuticles. Now she has no more self than a fruit pit spat out over the Virginias. She is a traveling hodgepodge; she might as well have dressed out of Darla Moxham’s old dress-up chest: a mannish work shirt, her dirty hair concealed under a scarf knotted on her neck like a Slav peasant, school girl flats, and a school-teacherish skirt in “permanent” pleats that have splayed under her and balloon out over her bottom when she stands. The bus hurtles through acres of Appalachian hardwood—poplar, maple, hickory—the road a tunnel in blue trees. At dawn the haze swags like organdy among the branches. They descend toward Lewisburg past billboards touting Lost World Caverns. They stop for slabs of ham with eggs and grits. Half a dozen passengers scatter into the empty alleys behind the station, and as many materialize to fill their still-warm seats. It is nine years since the first Freedom ride, and federal law has ended segregation, but the Negroes sit mostly at the back.

An exception: At Charleston, a teenaged boy gets on in a letter sweater (he will not remove it even in the rising heat), his Afro cropped and tended, his neck thicker than his handsome head, strangling a disreputable radio by its handle. He swivels left and right with a
readiness for any challenge, then slings himself in the front seat across from the driver. To everything (turn, turn, turn), says the radio, there is a season (turn, turn, turn). In Huntington, he helps with her luggage a black girl in a yellow sundress like a bell, her long legs as clapper. By the time they hit Kentucky, the girl has moved across the aisle beside him. Her laughter rides above the radio and the hum of tires. *Blowin' in the wind.*

At Morehead, they change drivers, taking on a rotund gnome who beams *how-do* at them and mops his bald head with a paper towel. At Owingsville, three elder ladies in pillbox hats, carrying each a small hard-sided suitcase, settle themselves with decorous laughter. At Mount Sterling, a portly man boards who lifts the flap of his leather vest, removes a pistol from his belt and wraps it carefully in a shirt before stowing it on the shelf above.

Letter-sweater and the black belle are a couple now. They purr and murmur, the boy’s mowed head bent toward her. *A taste much sweeter than wine.* At Winchester, a lumbering white giant picks his way to the back, mumbling and twitching in his plaid flannel. “Simmadun,” he seems to murmur, “desiban at shee.” Simone tries to read, but lack of sleep has settled as a grainy film on her eyes. The muscles of her back are knotted.

Hills shallower, trees more sparse, the landscape spreads itself under a sun so fierce that the air conditioning concedes defeat, and damp is trapped under Simone’s shirt like a layer of long underwear. At Shelbyville, they pull into a truckstop behind half a dozen eighteen-wheelers and spill out into a little cumulus of diesel fuel and gnats.

The café is a long stucco rectangle with, inside, two separate soda fountains that Simone takes for a sign of recent desegregation. The place is already aclatter with lunch, the walls decked with paper hydrangeas and photographs of baseball teams. The smell of hot fat disinclines her, so she takes a table by the window and, nevertheless determined to go local, orders a coke and a moon pie. While she eats, she stares at the laminated map tacked to the window frame, which bears the logo *You Have Entered the Deep South.* Depth is represented as a cliff along the Mason-Dixon Line. She feels the drop-off in her stomach.

There’s a commotion beyond the counter at the far end of the café, a scraping of chairs and a thin yelp, and Simone looks up to see the white giant, his massive jaw squatting in his plaid shirt collar, fling a
chair at a plate glass window. It’s a plastic scoop-molded kind of chair that bounces and clatters across the linoleum. Nevertheless passengers back or sprint toward the door while the man roars something garbled, “stuck the nongs,” or “stuggernogs.” Even at this distance, Simone, half out of her chair too, can see his spit fly. It’s impossible to tell whether the rage is directed at anyone in particular. The cashier is shouting into the telephone.

The passengers fan out under the fuel-pump awning, embarrassed by their fear.

“Is he crazy?”
“What was he saying?”
“I don’t know. I think a coupla truckers got him down.”

The passengers find their bus, fueled and parked alongside the pumps, and climb aboard shaking their heads at each other, made a community by what they’ve seen. On the bus, they grin, sheepish. The paunchy man in the leather vest asks, “Was he on drugs, or what?” This is somehow the wrong question. The black boy turns up his radio. …such a lot of world to see.

“Was he one ’the truckers, or a local?”
“No, he was on the bus, before, there at the back!”
“Was he fightin with somebody?”
“They called the sheriff, though.”
“Plain crazy, is what I’d say.”
“Crazy, lord!”

At this angle they can’t see into the café, and gradually the talk subsides. They wait, as they have waited at every so-called rest stop for eighteen hours now. Simone bends to her book again.

Finally she feels the motor turn over, rev and rumble. It’s the intake of breath of a woman behind her that makes her look up just in time to see the door begin to close and to hear the gasp of the hydraulics. The huge man who had thrown the chair is in the driver’s seat. The lumberjack plaid of his shirt strains over his hunched shoulders. One hand is on the handle that operates the door, and he is trying to wrench it closed, cursing “Shittershee,” while the mechanism strains and wheezes. In the door is wedged the furious little gnome body of the driver. There is a stunned paralysis in the bus. Then the door flies open and the little driver lands like a pit bull. He grabs the huge man by his shirt and wheels him out of his chair. He slams him against the
windshield and flings him backward out the door. The man lands in the tarred parking lot, the driver straddling him, flailing at his hands. The passengers are half up, straining toward that side of the bus. The black boy is in the open door, and when the huge man makes a superhuman hump of himself to throw his attacker off, the boy grips the doorframe as if to brace for a leap. But falters. He looks wildly around. Does he dare make himself a hero by attacking a white man, however crazy? Leather-vest stands up in the aisle. He lifts his palm, a gesture of authority and warning. The boy, his upper body still pitched forward in the door, grips the frame and checks himself again.

By now a pair of truckers have come to the driver’s aid, and the plaid shirt is pinned to the asphalt like a struggling bug. The moment passes, as most such moments pass, and Simone knows she was not breathing because she breathes again. The black boy crumples dejected into his seat beside his radio. Leather-vest stands a moment more and then he too sits. A sheriff’s car squeals in from the highway; two cops get out. It takes four altogether to cuff the huge man and fold him, yelling his gibberish of twisted curses, down into the back seat. The car drives off, siren wailing. The heroes smooth their shirts.

This has taken three, four minutes. The bus passengers applaud. The driver checks his watch with a modest swagger. “I reckon we can make up the time between here and Louisville.” The youth slumps over his radio.

For the times they are a-changin.

As if to deny this, Leather-vest leans across to the hatted ladies. “You can take the boy out of niggertown…”

And the woman concedes, “People never change.”

Which must be so, Simone thinks; everybody says it. And yet surely people do nothing else but change. Children grow up into adulterers, scholars are corrupted by ambition, louts evolve into experts on Etruscan pottery. We are cobbled together like Polonius’ drama—historical-comical-tragical-pastoral. All that endures is peripheral detail—skin, height, a habit of gesture, a turn of phrase.

When dark falls they are slicing through the southern tip of Indiana, twenty-six hours toward her destination. The bus is mostly quiet now, but you can hear the petulant note of the girl in the yellow dress. The boy, placating at first but increasingly querulous, leaves her at Evansville and goes into the restaurant alone.

At St. Louis, the two of them separate. They hoist their suitcases
and stagger in opposite directions. The driver yawns and gathers his gear for another change of command. The fat man takes his gun down, returns it to the belt underneath his vest, and mildly disappears into the night.

She sleeps a little. When she wakes, they are crossing The Big Muddy from the edge of nowhere to the middle of nowhere. In the prairie flats, she thinks for a hallucinatory moment it is snowing until she realizes this is the warm ejaculation of the cottonwood trees. The suffocating night air rings with cricket sound. At dawn, they pass a wide porch in a clearing of oaks where men sit like postcard art, boots on the railing, spitting tobacco juice, a yellow dog asleep on the floorboards. She has come overland to limbo of her own free will.

At Jefferson City, Dean Sarah Magginis of Jepson State College for the Liberal Arts wraps her in a welcoming hug. She is here to drive Simone the remaining eighty miles.

“Welcome to Mis’ry,” Dean Magginis says.
The Initiation

Thérèse Halscheid

It was frightening
to grow calm lying down and yet not know
what sleep held

what the mind of wild trees
might do

black snakes, the alligator
I spotted earlier

in the swamp, anything was possible

already,
I witnessed areas
with no wind and flickering leaves

I had found shadows freeing themselves
enough to come alive

and when, by middle night, a presence
came through the screen, something that
took no form but moved
curiously forward

I, I

who had come this far
to be torn from the civilized world
knew only how to be good to it, was good to it in opening myself, my limbs as a woman might

and allowed its power to fall over me learning, as one’s eyes will do entering words on a page.

I was read that way

and then, in a manner which meant acceptance

felt gently closed like a book, as it left.
Last Panther

Christopher Tozier

You may one day come to regret
not collecting the light
in baby food jars maybe
painted over and sealed with thick silver mastic.
They could have lined your shelves
with candlelight, with fireflies,
with that morning in Campobello,
or that croquet game among the violets
at the foot of a startling Lake Superior lighthouse,
that unfurling of sails,
or that glow rising with mist through the Savannah moss.
Or maybe it would have to be boxes perfectly
constructed with bicycle reflectors faced inward.
Or some symmetrically generated magnetic field
and an endless supply of batteries.
Nevertheless, they would line your shelves
and on some lonely night, decades from now, tempt you,
but you will catch yourself and save them for when you grow old.
Maybe they would have to be put in a dark drawer
in case the house trembles from a jet or a wayward child
and the one labeled “Wisconsin – 1991 – prairie fire”
or “Ocala, Florida – 1968 – panther with fawn in mouth”
cracks and escapes into the photons of the room
and on the last day of your life, from your bed,
as you quietly twist open each cap under the blankets,
you will not remember how she stepped out of the thicket
with that bleating child, met your eyes, and in one smooth lunge
disappeared.
Maybe the drawer should be locked
for when the word gets out thieves will come, no doubt.
Maybe they should be saved
so your grandchildren, their grandchildren
can see, can see.
In the early days of spring, the park road held the heat of the sun into the night, and the gold-patterned diamondbacks sensed in the warmth a refuge. But come morning, tourists in cars heading for the beach drove over them and flattened them to skin and spine like scars across the pavement. The snakes hadn’t sought death but simple comfort on a chilled night. Her memory of him begins with snakes like scars.

She was a reporter then, on assignment, seeking to escape the per diem smell and sharp corners of a motel room. The sight of the snakes greeted her at the entrance road. A warning on colored paper pressed into her hand as she paid the fee advised against swimming alone or at night. And though the new season had arrived with conviction, few other campsites were taken. She set up the telescoping poles and unfurled her tent. She pulled a pair of shorts and a button-collared shirt, worn thin by her brother, over her swimsuit and took the path to the beach in the dying light. Cheap flip-flops slapped at her heels, innocent of surly editors. She knew she’d regret not pulling her hair back. At the boardwalk across the dunes, the canopy of salt-pruned trees and palmetto understory opened onto an expanse of black sky and dark Atlantic. With three stairs and a short leap over undercut sand, she arrived at the ocean boundary. The beach shone.

A figure lingered. A man? He reached down to pick up a bit of shell or other tidal debris. He dropped it, rose again and rocked from leg to leg, a compass circling on either axis. If a solitary person were walking along the water by day, she would head the other direction, but she wouldn’t give her back to anyone at night, especially not someone moving so crazy-like. She set her flip-flops side by side in the sand, buttoned two buttons, and sat on the bottom step. She could leave, wait, or walk out there. So many years since summer’s ocean. No good waiting.

After a few exchanged words they walked. He was taller, but
barely, and barely a man. The tide came in around her ankles and a floor of tiny shells clicked and blistered as the water ran back. Her legs felt long. Walking beside him seemed lonelier than walking alone—his stride, his shoulders, his hair greasy as if fallen wet across his forehead. He was skinny but in a way that could be strong. On Euclid Avenue where she lived, she was vigilant, not fearful but in-town wary. Nothing about him suggested sudden, yet everything did. She looked behind her at the steps receding into the distance, easy to miss in the grainy dark.

They turned back and only then did she see the swollen darkness to this other side of his face, the eye swollen nearly shut. She didn’t ask if it hurt and he didn’t say he was used to it. Wind and darkness, the waves breaking, and all this silence. The water cold and tingly. A couple of sand pipers skittered in a pool ahead. How long since she’d seen the night sky black?

“You can’t see the stars where I live.”
“Why’s that?” He sounded oddly small, himself a distant star.
“Too much light in the city.”
“Atlanta? I’d like to go there some day.” Even to her, his drawl was pronounced—a star with a tail. He kept with her on the hard-packed sand as she veered toward the stairs.
“What about you? Where’re you from?”
“Ty Ty, Georgia. Ever heard of it?”
“No.”
“Nobody has. It’s named after a plant.” She looked at him. “My grandfather used to run a filling station there. Little place with two white columns, two pumps out front. When I was a kid, I thought it was the damn Taj Ma-haul. Used to go there after school and just sit with him.”

She asked the boy his name.
“James Thibodeaux. What’s yours?”
“Libby.”

She parted the blowing hair from her face, twisted the hank of it behind her neck and let it go. The sea oats on the dunes blew landward.

“You know, once I grew up, I seen them columns weren’t nothing but painted cement. They weren’t even real. Whole place is a ruin now.”
As they came to the steps, she would’ve slid her toes into her flip-flops and said, Okay, I don’t want you to come with me—I don’t want you to follow me. But James asked, Will you sit here for awhile? And she did, though everything in her head told her not to. She sat cross-legged on the sand and he lowered himself beside her uneasily like a machine that’s been left to rust and seize.

Funny how that night didn’t persist in her memory. It wasn’t as if she ever forgot, but she never thought of him. Rarely, not often, she remembered the story of the nature preserve and how the rookery was bought by wealthy donors to protect it from north Florida development. She remembered the snowy egrets, the cattle egrets, and white ibis. Great blue herons, little blues, and Louisiana herons. The long legs and spread wings of birds coming in over the pond or taking off for the coast. The place had all the busy-ness of Hartsfield International Airport. The nests were heavy baskets of sticks holding mouth-open chicks in the trees. The trees were denuded like long branches stuck in the ground at the water’s edge.

The sky was bright, the rookery strangely colorless. Black shining water, gray trees splattered white from bird droppings, gray and white birds with black legs and long bills. The concentration of life and growth, fecundity, flutter and heat. The smell of rotten nutrient. The rookery would die someday, her guide told her, of nitrogen poisoning from the excrement of so many birds.

An unlikely guide, that man. Big, overweight, sunk into the seat of his Cadillac carapace. The road was little more than a track cleared through live oak, sweet bay, and the occasional loblolly pine. As he talked, the car moved slowly, the wheels soft in the sandy soil. Mr. Minton got out only to unlock the chain. He drove with the windows down and the air conditioner on. He was sweating and nearly breathless. Libby took notes while he spoke of the preserve and the pressing threats with a passion that seemed at odds with the elbow hanging heavy and sunburnt out the window. He remained in the car while Libby took pictures. The story ran as a weekend feature with a byline.

The assignment had been for a nature piece, not human interest, but what came back to her later, along with the birds and the alligators trolling for fallen chicks, was Minton’s story, the part she hadn’t written, the accident that mangled his body, the newly manufactured turbine
tumbling from a flatbed trailer onto the interstate in front of him.

“Lying in that hospital, I kept picturing this place, the way the trees open to the water like curtains on a stage. When I got out, I started coming every day. I swear…” The car idled. The AC blew and Mr. Minton sniffed the way men do to make a point. “I swear, this place, those birds looking out at you with yellow eyes, they’ve been my healing.”

Who would be Libby’s healing, now that she needed it? Jonathan, yes. But a two-year-old demands, consumes precious strength, even as he inspires. Lawrence is too kind. He carries his overcoat over his arm as he steps through the door and sets his briefcase down. He hires help. Jonathan’s eyes, looking up as she tried to screw the lid on the sippy cup. She dropped the cup on her blonde-haired boy, juice puddling on the floor. At least he wailed. Lawrence is too kind. I love you, dear. I love you. I love you, he said after she peed in the bed, Lawrence full and hard in her, the sweat slick between them in the dark. In the dark of his coming, she peed. Why did he hold her? Why couldn’t he hate her? Free himself and let her go.

Before Jonathan was born, before they moved into this house where everything’s on one floor, they lived in an old house that had to be rewired. The electrician showed her the wires, their cloth sheathing worn and the copper filaments exposed. That’s Libby’s nerves now, lesions along the pathways, and on the days she flares, she’s sure she’ll burn down. Her skin sizzles like the burnt socket by the sink in the old kitchen. She can hear it in her teeth. Lately, she’s been too tired to be alarmed. The burning is her vital sign.

Funny how that night at the beach didn’t persist in her memory. Perhaps she had no need of it. After years of adding stories to her clipping file, she met Lawrence at a Young Professionals Night at the museum. Among the formless sculptures, the current installations and the oils, the gulping young professionals swam with drinks in hand, male and female, glimmering. Libby had wished when she found the boy on the beach that he had been a man.

In the backyard of the new house, Lawrence built two long planters for her, stacking cinderblocks and smoothing the mortar with a trowel. He worked two weekends to finish them. How expertly he guided the dump truck that unloaded the topsoil and cow manure. How organic and reliable he looked with each articulated shovelful
he flung. The path is wide enough to roll a walker-seat along, and the planters are high enough for her to tend seated beside them in the style of an invalid. This year she would have tomatoes by June.

In the slanting rays of morning light, before the day grew hot, Jonathan followed her down the rows, opening his mouth wide, tilting his head back and closing his eyes for her to place bits of snap peas and asparagus spears through the portal of his lips with her green-gloved finger and thumb. This day he took a special interest in the tomatoes and the shape of their over-ripe syllables on his tongue. He marched up and down the stone pavers, calling, “Toe-toe! Toe-toe!”

With that, memory shifted a vowel and released the boy to her.

“Ty Ty. Ever heard of it?” Snakes like scars across the drive. Sitting beside James Thibodeaux, the wind at her neck, the sweet side of his face staring out to sea.

“My brother hit me with a two-by-four a couple a days before we left. Our mom died when I was born and he’s been mad at me ever since.”

A gibbous moon rose. The waves collapsed and exhaled. Libby reached across his back. She felt him flinch, but he leaned into her, his head heavy on her shoulder. The stars were dimmer with the moon risen. The ocean made its slow breaking, running out and chasing in. His face slipped to her chest. She wasn’t free to move the hair that tangled in her face. That afternoon at the preserve, she had been mildly startled when the first rill of sweat fell between her breasts. James’s tears, released as through a seep in the earth, followed the same course but were neither warm nor salty. Springwater ran beneath her shirt and was caught in the weave of her shorts.

At her campsite when she saw headlights, she crouched in the palmettos, their sword tips jabbing into her skin. She had made herself complicit with him. Her last sleep seemed days ago. She was cold. When the car passed, she sprang the tent poles. She wadded the tent with her sleeping bag and threw it into the back seat of her car. She switched the dome light off so it wouldn’t shine. The endlessness of the beach could mean freedom or something entirely different. “If my brother shows up,” James had said, “I want you to run and get away.”

She fled the unseen drunken brother, but also that sweet, stupid face of James, the way his bones cracked like grinding gears. The hurt
of him. Libby thought she cried because his face had pressed into the open V of her shirt, and her seldom-worn bikini felt like an invitation underneath. She thought she cried because his jeans were soaked to the knees with saltwater and rough with sand. Because he was without mother and she ached for a man. In all fairness, that was all she knew.

Now she wanted him back, sought to reconstruct their words. He said she was pretty. She pulled off her gloves and set them together on the planter’s edge. For days, when the thoughts receded, she willed them back. James remembered was new. She wanted to feel the weight of him on her, to be not thinking or afraid. If she and Lawrence were to bang in the bed all night, wake the baby with their humping—as if she were able—he still couldn’t reach her. Lawrence’s competence and compassion were a barrier to her now. It was the hurt of James she craved, as she couldn’t have then. How ironic, her former dread of disease.

But if that night on the beach Libby was limber and taut and not burning down, if she was unknowing of the wounds of battery or the betrayal of the body, and she loved James anyway, then didn’t she owe Lawrence some consideration? Didn’t she owe Lawrence the forgiveness of his not knowing? Lawrence, married to her diagnosis. She hadn’t really meant “in sickness or in health” because health was all she’d ever known, but Lawrence lives by choice with her M.S.

And James? Whatever strength he had to meet the glaring sun after the coolness of the night, she needed. She didn’t know if he was alive, living, or merely not dead and surviving. Even if he was dead, he was with her now, the tide to her moon. Her man and first son. And she was mother to Jonathan. “A boy can live without his father,” James had told her, “but he needs his mother.” The secret life of the rookery, where all is squawk and shit and glory. The snakes like scars.

At the library on Tuesday, Jonathan listened as Ms. Howe read Mike Mulligan and His Steam Shovel. He’s heard it a hundred times at home, but he sat rapt. Libby slipped away to the Reference shelves—that is, however much one can be said to slip when such effort is required to lift the right leg and swing it before the left with conspicuous steps. She scanned the spines row by row. The book she pulled, though not new, was fresh and unworn; the pages smelled of lignin. She turned to the entry she sought.

*Georgia has long used this word, perhaps even back into colonial times, as...*
a label for certain streams, swamps, thickets, galls, ponds, and lakes. The name is drawn from two members of the Cyrilla family: Cyrilla racemiflora, and Cliftonia monophylla. These plants, as shrubs or small trees, are found in the pineland regions of the coastal plains, growing as thickets in low, wet places, or along the boggy fringes of streams. … might be traceable to the Uchees or Yemasees… may be African … tighteye for a thick place that was difficult to see through. Ty Ty.

That night, Lawrence rough-and-tumbled with Jonathan on the floor of the den. Libby eased herself onto the carpet, joining them, and marveled at the trill of a laughing boy. Tomorrow she would ask Lawrence if they could take a trip to the beach, the three of them. Before it got too hot.

Summer in Florida
Laura Sobbott Ross

Let me tell you how hot it is—
if the window were left open,
the starfish on the bathroom sill
would soften as if in the sea
again and hungry for something
salty and hinged in a locket of shell.

The candle on the back porch
has separated, oil from wax,
lemongrass from ginger flower.
I don’t think those orange trees
got their thorns from a freeze.
They say it makes the pulp sweeter,

but the air in the parking lot
at Walmart is one hot, collective sigh
from those hoisting their heavy
bodies off electric shopping carts
and heaving them into the oven
of their cars. As we load our groceries,

baby ospreys, their bones too light
to boil with this humid dirge,
squawk from a nest atop a corner
pod of street lamps. Spanish moss,
a limp and windless brim
to their startled hunger.
On the way home, we see a baby goat has wandered into an adjacent pasture—a treeless place, too hot even for the cows. Tender creature, lying pale as a lamb, a post mortem fever lit beneath the vultures’ beaks.

They say a man’s body, if left to these summer elements would decompose in less than two weeks. Nothing but bone to spare until September.
Letters from Under the Banyan Tree

Carol Lynn Grellas

When you lie next to me in silence everything becomes Braille.

There is the bellwether for a place called hope where a stranger waits who might know me. I was on my way to ecstasy, but the tempest was approaching and reason ruled the outcome. Needless to say, I never left my home. Sometimes all you hold is the end of a tail, and still you follow thinking there’s a body, just ahead. A note in the bottle is always visible to creatures in the sea; letters from under the Banyan Tree.
When he looked at himself in the mirror his long, black, wiry hair was as it had been the night before, disheveled and with a sheen that could have been mistaken for Brylcreem. His eyesight had never been that good and when he found his glasses he noticed the white roots and made a mental note to pick up a box of hair color. His girlfriend was still in bed and if he could find a pharmacy that was open he’d have everything done before she got up, but he was tired and feeling stressed and went for a walk on the beach instead.

What he really needed was a vacation and not just a break from the city. Flying down to Miami and staying at the hotel where he and his mother had always stayed when she was alive helped, but it couldn’t make up for the lack of sleep nor the state of his career. Mentiroso was now a has-been in the world of avant-garde theater. He had come to a dead end, and for the past six months he’d been forced to pay his bills either in cash or with his girlfriend’s credit card. Times were bad but this lack of work was something that he had never experienced before. It was positively plebian, lower class and demeaning, and he wondered how much longer he would have to hand deliver the $2,000 of his monthly rent in crisp $100 dollar bills.

“Was any of this my fault?” he asked himself rhetorically as he stepped out of the elevator and walked towards the pool and the beach beyond it. Could he be blamed for stating the truth about that hotel in Rome? Should he have said nothing of the raw sewage smell from the toilet?

“Was that my fucking fault?!” he said out loud as he brushed past a Guatemalan maid and a Venezuelan pool cleaner. He hadn’t planned on broadcasting the filth of his lodgings to the rest of Italy but how was he supposed to know that one of the journalists that he’d spoken to would actually print what he had to say?

That was where he’d screwed himself. The paper published his “defamatory statements” and the next thing he knew the hotel was su-
ing him. “Mentirosos dice che la sua stanza fa schifo” (Mentirososo says that his room sucks) was the title that the newspaper ran and it was more than enough. He had a reputation for trash talk and over the years he’d made many enemies on both sides of the Atlantic, but in spite of everything his talent (which was real) had always protected him. He’d been sued before, but this time it was different. After the stock market crash, people weren’t as forgiving as they used to be. If in the past a judge might have seen him as a kind of clown and let him off with a slap on the wrist, tolerance was now a rare commodity and you had to be careful. For the hotel owners, he was an easy mark and the lawyer’s fees and the fine wiped out the million in stocks and gold that he’d saved.

When he opened the gate to the beach, he took his shoes off so that he could feel the sand on his feet. In New England, there was a foot of snow on the ground, but here it never got cold. His mother liked to compare it to the town in southern Italy where she’d been raised. “Feel how fine the sand is,” she would say, “and look at the clear blue of the water and you’ll know what it was like for me when I was your age.”

The water, of course, was still blue but it had never revealed much to him about his mother’s upbringing. She had serious issues with the truth and could invent the most outrageous stories. When he was a boy, she would often tell him that his father was a black American G.I. who she’d met after the war and that that was the reason for his kinky hair, or that the Mentirosos were Italian nobility but that they’d lost everything during the Fascist years. None of it was true, or perhaps all of it was, who could really say? When someone was lying to you twenty-four hours a day any ideas they might have about reality were sketchy at best. He understood that it was wrong but what could he do? She was his mother and while he tried to resist her, in the end he accepted her behavior as his own, even though officially he still dis-agreed with the lies.

When he was seventeen, he either left her or was kicked out of the house. There were two versions of this coming of age, but the one which most people recognize as true, and which was posted on his Wikipedia site, said that his mother had been living with two Mexican brothers near the border in Arizona and that her lovers had convinced her to give him the boot. Many saw this as the inspiration for one of his more scandalous and critically acclaimed pieces “Non scopare quei
uomini Mama! (Don’t fuck those men, Mother).” This seminal work finishes tragically for the protagonist, who is not only spurned by his mother, but also killed and barbecued by a group of famished Chicanos.

Moving to New York he financed his studies and living expenses selling LSD and pimping himself to wealthy lawyers and stockbrokers. It was a period that he looked back upon with a certain nostalgia and he could talk enthusiastically for hours about all the writers and musicians he knew or the time when he and a group of friends had hitchhiked up to Woodstock to see the concert.

He had lived through a lot and to be honest he thought that there wasn’t much that he hadn’t experienced that was worth knowing. He was a great artist and had been a part of the golden age in avant-garde theater of the 1980s and ‘90s. Of course, now that all of that had come to an inglorious end he realized that he needed to quickly write a book (and secure a movie deal) about his life. For this reason, he was in near constant contact with his agent.

With a book, but especially with a movie deal, he wouldn’t have to worry about the unpaid bills that had kept him awake at night or the consistently bad reviews that his latest works had garnered or even sticking with his girlfriend. Daniela was pretty, and gifted in a commercial/pop/soap-opera kind of way, but he absolutely needed to avoid becoming any more dependent upon her than he already was.

Just last night when they were eating at one of his favorite steak houses near the beach she’d asked him again if he really loved her and when he said that he did she upped the ante with “Well, don’t you think it’s time then that we got married?”

“What?!” he managed to blurt out as he almost choked on an exquisite piece of aged New York sirloin.

“Don’t you think it’s time?” she repeated with a knowing smile on her lips that he would have found attractive on any other woman but that on her filled him with a sense of panic and dread.

“I think there’s time for everything,” he told her after he’d swallowed his meat, “but we’ve only been together, for what? Three years? Why rush it? I love you and you love me and we’re fairly clear on that and there really isn’t any reason that I can see to overemphasize this issue.”

“Then you don’t love me?”
“Not at all,” he said (which was the truth).
“What?”
“I mean that we shouldn’t jump into this.”
“But I want to jump in, Gianni, and I want you to jump in with me.” And he knew that he was not going to get out of this one easily, and in fact just about everything he said to her that night as they ate was not what she wanted to hear. It was as if his genius for spin and molding the truth of anything to his needs had abandoned him and all he could do was state, in as many different ways, that fundamentally he wasn’t all that fond of Daniela. Of course, he didn’t say that, but he wasn’t telling her what she wanted to hear and this inability to lie troubled him. He wasn’t sure but he suspected that the combined stress of his financial and artistic situations was inhibiting his manipulative gifts and that if he didn’t find some kind of relief, there was no telling where it might lead.

Fortunately, not all was wrong with his world. America had a new president and everything about the man was inspirational and led him to believe that change was indeed possible. An Afro-American in the White House had altered the political and social landscape of his country and he felt a special kinship to this politician in part because of his mother’s tale of his black, G.I. dad and in part because of the baby boy he’d secretly fathered with a woman from Harlem. In many ways, he’d come full circle and had, before anyone else knew about Obama, created his own personalized version of the man; a “mini-me” who embodied the best of the U.S. (racially speaking) and who, like his father, would some day see the necessity of alien relocation and language integrity.

“And if he doesn’t want to throw the Spics into the sea then he’s no son of mine,” he reminded himself as he skipped a flat rock into the Gulf Stream.

The illegals were a pestilence on the land. This was obvious to him. They were a diseased and unsanitary army that needed a good kicking in the butt. Having sucked greedily and for years at the nation’s vital juices, they were sapping America of its strength and will to survive. Of course, as a patriot, and an artist, he knew what he had to do. He was way ahead of the curve and was just waiting for the movie deal to gel and take its final form.

“But shouldn’t he be calling me instead of me always having to
call him?” he wondered. The man had an apartment in Manhattan but
he was never there. In fact, Mentiroso couldn’t remember the last time
that the two of them were physically together. They kept in touch text
messaging and with quick conversations that the agent managed to
squeeze in on his way to see other clients in LA or London.

The phone rang and rang and Mentiroso grew impatient. He paced
back and forth with his Blackberry in the sand. The sun was coming
up over the horizon and the sky in the distance had shades of lavender
and light blue. There were three container ships steaming towards the
port and seagulls kept watch atop the concrete pilings of a pier.

“Where the fuck is he?” said Mentiroso. “Fifteen percent of every-
thing I make goes to this clown and so, goddamnit, when I call he’s
suppose to pick up the fracking phone.” But there was no answer. He
obviously wasn’t on the agent’s list of priority clients.

A few hours later when he was sitting by himself at the hotel bar,
his agent finally acknowledged his existence with a short text message
that read: “Gianni, no film deals with Warner/Universal. Try Disney??
Baci, Bernie.”

It certainly wasn’t what he wanted to hear but he had to admit
that there were reasons. Not only was his agent incompetent, the stu-
dios were even worse. He felt surrounded by a sea of philistines and
degenerates. No one could understand his art. It was beyond them.
They were like ants, tiny little insignificant specs of societal sewage,
and frankly, he had had enough of trying to educate them, of getting
them to the point where they could see what he had always known.

“To hell with them,” he said as he downed his fourth shot of Grap-
pa and ordered another. The bar had TVs set up in every corner and
on the one in front of him there was a pudgy, balding journalist who
in a deep, booming sort of voice was asking America again how much
longer it could afford to support the illegal aliens in its midst.

“Damn right!” said Mentiroso. There were a few other people in
the bar, but no one seemed to pay him any attention. The journalist
was commenting on the latest I.C.E raid in Ohio. Immigration officers
had surrounded a textile factory, shutting it down and arresting any-
one who couldn’t prove their US citizenship. The operation was mas-
sive and well planned, targeting the thriving Latino community that
for the most part worked in the factory.

As news of the raid spread throughout the community, panicky
parents rushed to pull their children out of the local school and hide them from the government agents. The journalist noted with a mix of solemnity and badly cloaked glee that over two-hundred illegal aliens had been apprehended and were at this very moment being processed for deportation.

“This,” he assured his audience, “is what I would call a good example of how our tax money should be spent and how it rarely ever is. A fresh start for America.”

“Indeed!” said Mentiroso as the bartender brought him his fifth round. He was pissed off at his agent and his mother, tired and somewhat disgusted with his girlfriend, but more than anything else he felt positively sick at the thought of what the illegals were doing to America. He wanted them out and was ready to take whatever action was needed. After five shots of Grappa, he was furious and had come to the conclusion that they were at the root of everything that was destroying his career. The journalist was right; better to deal with the problem before it got out of hand.

“Gimme a drink!” he said and the bartender handed him another shot. The pudgy-faced man was wrapping up his philippic and reminding Mentiroso that enforcing the law of the land was nothing to be ashamed of.

“I get plenty of emails accusing me of being anti-immigrant,” said the journalist, “but nothing could be further from the truth. All I want is for the laws of this great country of ours to be respected! And I ask you, is that too much to expect? Have we given up on the idea of America, on the idea of a land where Freedom, Justice and Liberty for all still mean something? I say not. The constitution still holds and anyone, and I mean women and children included, who enter this country illegally have to and will be forcefully removed, if necessary!”

“That’s the way you do it!” agreed Mentiroso. The sheer stress of having to deal with these illegals was killing America’s mojo. It prevented the country from spinning its image abroad. It had conquered a world with its vision of wealth and individualism. It was sexy and cinematographic and casting his gaze about the bar he wondered if anyone else was as enthusiastic as he was about the immigration raid. There was a businessman near the entrance who was talking to a client on his cell phone, a couple in the corner holding hands and a group of young Cubans who pretended not to see him when he looked their
way.

Not in a mood to be ignored he suddenly stood up and shouted in their direction “Tu puta madre (your mother’s a whore)!” He didn’t really speak Spanish but he knew enough to know that this was a bad insult.

“You talking to me, old man?” one of Cubans asked.

“Yeah, I’m talking to you!”

“Sit down, viejo, y cállate (shut up).”

“Stuff it, spics!” said Mentiroso and at that point even the businessman put down his phone. This was Miami after all and everyone in that room was Latino. The bartender came around to where Mentiroso was standing and calmly told him that it was time to take a deep breath and then leave. It was the sensible thing to do, and in retrospect, not only would it have saved him a lot of grief, but his two front teeth as well. Instead, taking aim for the first time in his life, he threw his shot glass at the Cuban, hitting him squarely in the face. The reaction of the victim was immediate and soon he and his friends were pummeling Mentiroso. They were enraged and Mentiroso didn’t do anything to lessen their anger, continuing to insult their mothers, their girlfriends and whoever else he could think of. The more they beat him, in fact, the more he spewed out his stream of venom and race-hatred. His face had turned puffy and blue under their blows, his glasses were shattered, but he didn’t care. He was finally fighting the good fight, sacrificing himself for his art and his country on the altar of his many lies.

The bartender tried to pull him out but the Cubans wouldn’t stop. They wanted him dead, but before he passed out he reminded his assailants of one last thing: “I’m in charge,” he said, “and that’s the truth.”
Notebook of a Return to Key West

Nick Vagnoni

After Aimé Césaire

Driving to Key West from Miami, I am thinking of you, Aimé Césaire, because we both realized what we had only when we left home—you, remembering Martinique from Paris, me only a few hundred miles gone.

I do not have the cane fields, but surely the poinciana blossoms, the tamarind. I too have seen the pearly upheaval of dolphins. I have seen the storm clouds drifting in over the gulf on their smoky skirts of rain. I have seen iguanas on the roads, busted open like watermelons.

But how can I take this land into my body as you have taken yours?

So many times, this drive. So many attempts to describe these bridges, these islands.

Each time, the sequence becomes clearer, the landmarks more familiar: the fish houses, the cheapest gas stations, the abandoned police car in Layton, the abandoned staircase in Ramrod.

I can speak the names of these places like charms: Mattecumbe, Saddlebunch, Little Knockemdown. Lignum Vitae, a wood so hard it was used for ball bearings. Fat Deer, Duck, Vaca, Conch, and Tarpon Belly. Cotton, Shell, and Plantation. Summerland and No Name. Big Pine and Big Torch. Sunset Key, nee Tank Island.
And all connected by bridges.

This sneeze of land, sprawled flat across the ocean. These bridges, braces on a crooked, drunken smile. These bridges, a curled spine garlanded with headlights and taillights. This highway, an artery terminating in some distant fingertip or extremity. And the old bridge beside it, like a ghost, a memory, a phantom limb, littered with splintered resin chairs, rusted barbecue grills, cardboard boxes of bait squid. Where do these islands reside? In my bloodstream? In my eyes? How are they me? How do I claim this place? How do I make it mine?

I leave it, and I return.
A Certain Etiquette, *of swamps*

Thérèse Halscheid

Do not doubt that something without eyes and ears
can know who you are—

I have lived long enough to learn of you,
your human ways

those who are humble as they enter me,
who bow under the low branch instead of breaking it

and those who have never thought
to walk lightly.

If your species can be of two powers
you must also believe I am the same:

- of cruelty
- of kindness, surely

the good have experienced it, walking along
they have fallen under a spell

blissful enough to unveil
the vibrancy of the ferns.

While others, who are not so good, feel captured
by an unnatural silence
or there can be vines creaking, trees forming
a grotesque series of shapes

the onslaught of insects
lifting from the tannic pools of low water.

I know how to excite fear
in the mind of the observer—

that urge in your legs to run or stand paralyzed
is my doing, it is me

wanting you right-sized,
until I am once more returned to peace.
Description of the Lue Gim Gong Orange by H. Harold Hume

Carrie Green

~a found poem—
from The Cultivation of Citrus Fruits, 1926

Form oblong, carrying the size well out to the rounded ends; size large, 3 by 3¼ inches;

color deep orange red; rind thin, smooth on current crop, becoming rougher on two-and three-year-old fruit;

sections 10-11, well defined; flesh deep orange; juice sacs large; juice abundant, even in old specimens;

flavor a rich blending of sweet and subacid; quality best; pith medium; seeds 4-8, large, flat, and wedge-shaped.

Season, June to September. A fine shipping fruit and a good keeper.
“Surprise! Here’s home!” Gesturing grandly, Daddy turned off First Street, toward 2438 Fogarty Avenue—an acid-blue square with rusted window frames and broken jalousie slats. The screen door, missing its lower hinge, leaned into the patched-screen porch, toward a noticeably warped, wooden front door, spotted with mildew.

There was no driveway, no curb, so Daddy edged the Chrysler onto the lawn: Bermuda grass tufting through the sand. Grinning, he jumped out, ran to open my mother’s door, and reached for her hand to help her from the car. The back of her sundress, which she made for this reunion with my father, was soaked and crinkled from sweat.

My mother leaned against the car, her spiked high heels sinking into the sand and sticky road tar, and said, “My God, Al Maynard, what were you thinking?” She then yanked her heels free, walked to the driver’s side, got in the car, and said flatly, “I’m going back to Mother and Daddy’s.” She didn’t shut the door or start the car, though. She just sat.

The heat forcing me from the back seat, I wandered to the short wall encircling the lot, a whitewashed cinderblock lattice.

“I wouldn’t get too close to the holes in the wall, Punkin,” Daddy said. “There are big scorpions in there.” The car door slammed.

My mother and sister and I had flown early that morning via a thrumming, bouncing propeller airplane from Baltimore’s Friendship Airport to Miami, leaving behind our life in Annapolis, Maryland: the little white house and flower garden, and the historic, picturesque Naval Academy, where Daddy, an ensign, had taught. Tucking us into bed the night before our trip, Mother seemed tense, but she told Debbie and me that our three years on Key West would be like an exotic vacation—we would live in a big house on an island of palm trees and white sand beaches.

During the entire flight to Miami, I vomited into Mother’s beige linen skirt, missing the wad of Kleenex she had pulled from her purse, while she and Debbie fretted over our puppy, Rebel, imprisoned in a
baggage compartment crate. When we landed, we carried our wrinkled, wilted selves into the lobby and waited for my father to arrive, while Rebel gagged thick threads of mucous on the concrete floor.

We were tired, but we would wait patiently, because Daddy was important. The Navy had ordered him months earlier to Key West, home of the Atlantic Fleet Submarine Sonar School, where he assumed command of the USS Threadfin, SS410, Submarine Squadron 4. He left Mother behind to sell the house, pack our belongings, schedule the moving van, say goodbye to family and friends.

But now, here he was, crossing the lobby floor, his smiling face tanned, his curly black hair even curlier from the island’s dampness. When he bent to hug me, I giggled shyly. I would eventually grow used to his many months of deployments and he would eventually become a stranger, but on this day, when he called me “Punkin,” I hugged him back tightly, inhaling the new smell that would become, like Lucky Strike smoke, part of his identity—diesel fuel, the heart’s blood of his submarines.

We drove south on US 1, the Overseas Highway of the Keys, our sweaty bare skin sticking to our new Chrysler’s red upholstery, holding our noses against the heavy smell of salt water and dead marine life, the bridge-highway so close to the water’s surface that Mother clutched the car door and I feared that the heaving, dark ocean would engulf us. Daddy told us that Key West had been established by the Spanish in the 1500s. “Cayo Hueso,” he said in a suddenly scary voice, “means island of the bones.”

“Mommy, let’s not go!” I shrieked, but Daddy just laughed.

The memory I carry of Key West is of an island of pastel, single-story stucco squares. A flat neighborhood baked by the sun, its sand-rooted grass sparse and spikey. Hibiscus and bougainvillea growing tightly against the houses’ meager shade. Sporadic groves of towering palm trees and squat banana plants, home to banana spiders that crawled through our kitchen window screens.

The memory includes Mother, eventually getting out of the Chrysler and bleaching mildew, painting walls, sopping ant and roach killer on baseboards, repairing the porch door, replacing the broken jalousies. Eventually, our furniture and boxes arrived, and Mother made 2438 our home.

Daddy was conspicuously absent. His deployments took him
away for months, but even when his submarine was docked at the submarine pen adjacent to the Navy Base’s Truman Annex, he seemed to live on it. When a hurricane threatened the island, he was ordered—or maybe he volunteered—to submerge with the vessel, and thus he and his crew waited out the storm on the tranquil ocean floor while my mother nailed boards to the windows, lashed the convertible to palm trees, bundled us and Rebel into a friend’s car for evacuation to the mainland. Someone at church told her that since the grotto to Our Lady of Lourdes was built, in 1922, Key West had been spared a hurricane’s direct hit. Mother, on her knees at night, prayed fervently and instructed Debbie and me to do the same.

Some nights Daddy was home, and Debbie and I peeked from our bedroom to watch the scene on the sofa: Mother kissing my father repeatedly until she led him to their bedroom and shut the door.

If Daddy’s absence was difficult for my mother, Key West itself was even harder. Trained as a nurse, Mother was obsessed with hygiene and abhorred that her daughters repeatedly contracted impetigo and ringworm. She waged daily wars against the spiders, scorpions, and cockroaches that crept into the house, the sand crabs that swarmed on our lawn, the frogs that swam through the pipes to the toilet bowl. She was frightened by Cuba’s proximity and weary of wives who couldn’t cope with the deployments. She held Rebel in her arms and cried as he died, infested by heart worms. She cried a lot on Key West.

There was little on the island that impressed Mother, but one Saturday, Daddy, evidently feeling that he had neglected his familial duties, insisted that we would visit the Turtle Kraals. Debbie and I imagined a zoo filled with cute baby turtles. Instead, Mother, Debbie, and I stood horrified on a wooden dock that smelled thickly of ocean as masses of sea turtles were shoveled off boats and down chutes to be bludgeoned and processed into the burgers that were all the rage in Key West. My father, oblivious to our horror, took home movies.

It’s a wonder she didn’t leave, but she was a good Navy wife, and good Navy wives weren’t deserters. Besides, she did love her handsome lieutenant and the dream of becoming an admiral’s wife. So, Mother re-created Key West. She bought a Waring Blender to make strawberry daiquiris, an electric skillet, a chafing dish, and a hi-fi. Her culinary masterpieces were the latest inventions featured in Better Homes and Gardens: lasagna, tomato aspic rings, and charcoal-broiled
steaks. She decorated the house with pink coral, polished conch shells, and purple- and yellow-dyed coral fans, served my father peanuts in an abalone shell, and perfected Key Lime pie. She styled her hair into a chignon and bought garish costume jewelry. She carefully chose her friends from the pool of officers’ wives who preferred afternoon cocktails and gossip to a game of bridge. She devoted herself to Daddy’s career. And—she started throwing parties. Parties that she believed would secure his promotions—to commander, captain, and finally, admiral.

** * * **

On the morning of the night that Betty Lauderdale made her début in our home, Mother, as usual, got up with Daddy. While he showered and shaved, she gathered the sheets to wash—he liked them fresh every night. She placed his starched and ironed uniform on the bed, smoothing out any wrinkles. Next to it went his socks, boxers, undershirt, and hankie. His spit-polished shoes were placed on the floor below his slacks. She then went to the kitchen to prepare his breakfast: three eggs sunny side up, freshly squeezed orange juice, all seeds removed, no water spots on the glass. She positioned the warmed plate at his place just as he entered the room, hovered as he sliced each egg into a grid of nine pieces, waited to refill his juice glass.

As he grabbed his briefcase, kissed her, and pushed open the screen door, Mother snapped her hand to her forehead. She had taken to saluting him, to calling the floors “decks,” the walls “bulkheads.” Alone, she fixed herself a cup of tea, poured cereal and juice for Debbie and me, sat to study her grocery list and begin the plans that would culminate in a party to be talked about on the island for weeks. A chameleon—they audaciously came and went—started its slow advance up the wall toward some prey. Mother saw it and shivered.

After breakfast, Mother donned her cleaning clothes: worn white shorts, faded cotton blouse. Even without makeup, she knew she looked like a movie star, so after covering her long brown hair with a scarf, she pulled out, on each side, thick tendrils of curls. She studied her face in the mirror, pinched her cheeks, smiled at the reflection of long eyelashes and tanned smooth skin, then clipped on her hoop earrings. She was ready. I asked from my perch on her bed if I could dust.

“No, I want it done right. Now, go play.”

“What if I rolled up the rugs?” I asked.
With an emphatic “No,” she exploded into action. I curled up on the sofa, glad to be home from the convent, where every Friday, we endured the metallic taste of turtle burgers. From here, able to see every room in our tiny house, I could at least watch the progress.

No one could match her tireless cleaning fury. She cleaned what the guests would see and would never see. She yanked mattresses off beds and dusted the frames. She dumped silverware out of drawers and wiped the insides with a soapy cloth. She filled the toilet bowl with Clorox, and while it sat, rolled her Westinghouse tank vacuum over the floors, muttering “goddamned machine” when its long metal runners snagged on a chair leg or rug. She raked away the small sand dunes encroaching on the sidewalk, poured Clorox into the low fence holes by the gate, hoping the straight solution would kill the nesting scorpions. I don’t think it did.

Her petite frame shaking to the rhythm of her task, she worked without a break until lunch time. Peeling back the top of the sardine can with the little key, she slapped headless fish and catsup between bread slices. Ignoring my gagging, she handed one plate to me, saying, “Don’t drop crumbs, young lady,” ate her own lunch standing up, then resumed her housework. I never heard her say she was tired. What would have been the point?

The house “spic and span,” Mother bathed and shampooed her hair. I wandered to my bedroom to play with my stuffed bunny, a gift from Tony, a handsome bachelor. He drove a red sports car and came often in the late afternoon to visit Mother. Following Navy protocol, she invited him in for one drink, then sent him on his way.

“Girls, it’s nearly time to go to the commissary,” Mother called. We slipped on our flip-flops, ran to her bedroom, and watched as she put her wet hair into curlers, securing each metal-meshed tube with a bobbie-pin she opened with her front teeth, her upper lip curling like a dog’s snarl. She tied a silky scarf over her bumpy head, put on red sunglasses, and we headed to the car.

Debbie and I climbed into the deep well of the Chrysler’s back seat. The interior was suffocatingly hot. Too short to see out or benefit from any breeze through the window, I whined, “I think I’m carsick.”

“No, you’re not. We don’t have time. Stand up on the seat.”

By late afternoon, the scent of simmering meaty sauces replaced the smell of Clorox. Now came the ritual of transforming daughters...
into party trinkets.

We were scrubbed raw, then dressed in ruffled pink pajamas and ballerina slippers with satin bows. Mother artfully sculpted Debbie’s hair into long ringlets tied with a ribbon. My short natural frizz was a challenge, but she wrenched it into coarse waves against my scalp. “Go sit in the sun to dry,” she snapped, “and don’t get dirty.”

In the early evening, Mother put on her favorite party outfit: black Calypso pants, with tiny slits at the cuffs, and a white boat neck with horizontal stripes of red, gold, and black. Her bra made her breasts pointy. Sitting at her vanity, she applied foundation, then flicked the point of a black pencil across her brows to make them dark and arched. She guided her blood-red lipstick just beyond the line of her lips, enhancing the two peaks, and kissed a Kleenex. As she studied her face in the mirror, a one-sided smile crept across it.

Suddenly anxious to see the full result, she yanked out the curlers and with frenzy, tore at and teased her hair with a brush, then sprayed the sculpture into place. Parted on the left, her hair waved seductively over her right eye and settled on her thin shoulders. She clipped on her gold hoop earrings. When I watched this ritual, she was, in my eyes, a movie queen. In hers, she was a prize—the wife of an officer.

Only minutes before the party was to begin, Daddy charged in to take his shower. He found his ironed slacks and shirt on the bed, his house ship-shape, his pre-party snack fixed, his bar set up. Casually dressed, his curls still damp, he had to do nothing but bellow to the first guests, “Hello, good to see you! Come in! What’ll it be?” At his bar, he upheld the rule of Navy entertaining: no guest without a drink, ever.

As they sipped their cocktails, the guests turned to my sister and me, posed on the sofa, and complimented my mother: “Audrey, your home is beautiful,” “Audrey, we’ve waited all week for your party,” and “Audrey, you look gorgeous tonight.” Our purpose served, we were shooed off to bed. We hid, though, in the hallway just beyond the living room. The conversation was already a din, with howls of laughter, shrieks at juicy gossip, exclamations at the abundant bar and delicious food. Soon, Mother put on the dance music, directed two male guests to roll up the living room rug, stepped rhythmically to the hard beat, nudged her guests into partners, and mock-pouted, “Let’s dance! What’s a party for?”
It was at that moment that the front door swung open. Betty Lauderdale entered, unescorted. No one seemed to know her, yet no one dared show surprise at her presence. Perhaps she was one of the small group of women who worked at the Base. Perhaps my father had met her at work. It would be years before I would understand her intermittent role in my parents’ lives; I would never know its provenance. She was tall, muscular, a contrast to my petite mother. A wide, red patent leather belt that matched her spiked high heels tightly cinched the waist of her black and white dress. Her dark eyes heavy with liner and mascara, her lips blood red, she sauntered into the room and placed her hands on her hips. It was a gesture that I knew my mother would call unladylike. I decided I did not like her height, her sharpness, her flamboyance. Yet I couldn’t take my eyes off her, nor could anyone else.

Daddy dashed to the bar to fix her a drink. Mother stayed across the room, her smile left over from teasing one of the officers into being her dance partner. Debbie and I inched forward. Betty Lauderdale didn’t wait for introductions. She pursed her lips into a kiss for the surprised guests. I hoped that she would kiss me.

When she came to where Debbie and I peeked, though, she did more than that. She knelt down in front of us. Her crinoline swooshed, and she smelled of thick perfume and cigarette smoke. I’d never met a woman who smoked. “You girls are utterly beautiful,” she whispered and took the ruffled hem of my robe in her long, graceful fingers. “I love the color. Pink,” she said, looking right in my eyes, “is beautiful on you with your dark skin. Are your curls natural?” She lightly touched some hair near my face.

No one had ever stroked my hair and said “curls.” “Yes, ma’am,” I whispered, wondering what natural was.

“Don’t ever let anyone do anything unnatural to them,” she said. “No, ma’am,” I said to her knees.

Mother slipped the Glenn Miller record out of its jacket, settled it on the turntable, and placed the needle on “Tuxedo Junction.” She swayed over to the Navy doctor, took both of his hands in hers, and started to dance. She knew he’d make her look good. But this jitterbug queen didn’t need help to look good.

Her steps were fluid and filled with snap and energy. The onlookers tapped their feet, swung their hips. Caught up in the excitement, I
slapped my bare legs on the linoleum floor.

Betty Lauderdale found a partner—Daddy. They began to dance, but her dancing was not like my mother’s. While Mother shot and twirled inside her circle of friends, Betty chose to dance outside the circle, in the dining room. Her movements were those of a stretching cat.

Debbie and I giggled. We knew that Daddy could never find the rhythm. His foot, tapping to a song, was like a mechanic’s air wrench loosening lug nuts. Whenever my mother cajoled him into dancing with her, she maneuvered him around, expertly adjusting his clutch as he bent his knees and bobbed to a beat that the music didn’t offer. But Betty didn’t seem bothered by my father’s piston-like plunges.

She placed both wrists on his shoulders and kicked off her red high heels. Her long red-nailed fingers busily tapped, stroked, and kneaded his shoulders. She must have exerted some calming pressure because his bobbing ceased. As tall as he, she looked directly at him, swayed like a piece of silk in a light island breeze, and soon, his officer-rigid body was moving with hers. She walked her long arms along his shoulders, pulled him closer. His hands encircled her waist. She pushed her fingers through his hair, and with that gesture, Daddy executed the one passionate move I would ever witness. He scooped the woman in his arms and swung her, her long legs shooting toward the low ceiling. In the soft, sparkly surface, her toes made a subtle dent that would stay there as long as we lived on Key West and would remain part of our lives.

Mother leveled her stare at my father. He glanced, but was drawn back into Betty’s eyes. With that, my mother swept proudly to the hi-fi, lifted the needle—“Too damned tame,” she announced—dropped it at “In the Mood,” and yanked a fresh partner toward her. She shot between his legs and pivoted. He deftly pulled her forward, grabbed her waist, and lifted her up and then down. Knowing the move, I held my breath as she and her partner linked arms at the elbows. He launched her up, onto and over his back. Her straight legs described a graceful fan.

As her feet touched the floor, the music stopped. Silence—except for her breath, hard and deliberate, continuing the song’s beat. She looked toward the kitchen, and I did, too. Betty and my father were gone. To us, she hissed, “Into bed. Now!”
Hours later, tangled under the covers of my bed with my stuffed toys, I was startled awake. Mother was hurling curses at my father: “You G D bastard! . . . You God-damn sailor! . . . Damn you to hell!” I couldn’t hear his voice at all. I slid off my bed and peered into the living room. Daddy sat on the sofa, his hands holding his head. My mother paced, then screamed, “I’m going back to Baltimore!” She rushed to the phone on a small metal wicker table. Daddy charged past her, grabbed the phone, yanked the cord from the wall, and threw the tangled mess across the room. Mother ran to it, picked it up, swung the phone toward my father, hitting him full in the face.

In a few weeks, my mother again cleaned the house, purchased groceries and liquor, and put on her party clothes and makeup. Only this time, she did it all just a bit more perfectly—calculating and executing exactly what was expected of a future admiral’s wife living on an island of palm trees and white sand beaches. My mother would not be undone by sand crabs or scorpions or Betty Lauderdale. She welcomed the chameleons; they ate cockroaches.
Contributors

Shawn Alff is the section editor of Creative Loafing’s Sex & Love website: cltampa.com/sexandlove. His work has appeared in Tampa’s weekly print edition of Creative Loafing and on various websites. Currently, he’s earning an MFA in Creative Nonfiction at the University of South Florida in Tampa, where he’s writing a memoir titled Haole, about being homeless in Hawaii.

Burt Barr is the recipient of numerous grants and awards, including six National Endowment for The Arts Grants, three New York State Council Grants, The American Film Institute, Arts America Grantee, the Andrea Frank Foundation, the John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation, the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Art, the Massachusetts Council on the Arts & Humanities, as well as production funding from private sponsors. He has worked with members of the art-world, many of them actors in various roles. Included in this group are Clarissa Dalrymple, Klaus Kertess, Dorothy Lichtenstein, Trisha Brown (his wife), and many others.

Janet Burroway grew up Arizona and was educated at the University of Arizona, Barnard College in New York, Cambridge University in England, and the Yale School of Drama in Connecticut. Burroway’s published works include short stories, poems, translations, plays, two children’s books, eight novels, including her most recent, Bridge of Sand (2009), and two textbooks about the craft of writing. Her novel The Buzzards was nominated for the Pulitzer Prize in 1970, and her highly-acclaimed novel Raw Silk was runner up for a National Book Award in 1977. Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft (now in its 8th edition) is the most widely used book on creative writing in colleges and universities in the U.S. She divides her time now between Wisconsin and Florida, where she was recently honored as a Robert O. Lawton Distinguished Professor Emerita at Florida State University.

Humberto Castro Humberto Castro was born in Havana, Cuba, on July 9, 1957. He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts San Alejandro and Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) in Havana, Cuba. He works in painting, drawing, printmaking, ceramics and installations. He is one of the most active members of the group widely recognized as the “Generation of the 80s” in Cuba, which generated changes in the aesthetic and conceptual art scene of the island. In 1983, he founded the team Hexagon in which, alongside other artists, he mounted installa-
tions aimed at provoking public participation in the work. Between 1980 and 1984, he produced an extensive body of graphics, particularly innovating in the intaglio technique. In 1989, he emigrated to Paris, France, where he lived for ten years and became active in the Parisian intellectual scene, holding exhibitions and giving conferences across Europe. In 1999, he moved to the United States, where he lives and works. Since the beginning of his career, he has received numerous international awards, and his work is present in notable museum and private collections. His work and artistic attitude have influenced subsequent generations of artists within Cuba. www.humbertocastro.com

Ana Albertina Delgado is a Cuban artist whose main disciplines are painting, installations and photography. She was born in Havana, Cuba in 1963 and obtained her U.S. citizenship in 1999. She began her studies of arts in 1979 at San Alejandro National School of Fine Arts in Havana, the oldest high school of fine arts in Cuba. In 1983, she graduated in Arts and entered the university-level Higher Institute of Arts. In 1985, she received a Mention in Photography and Drawing, Contest 13 de Marzo, Havana. In 1986, she won the award XVI Seminario Juvenil de Estudios Martianos, Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA), Havana, and in 1987, a Mention in Salón Playa’87, Galería Servando Cabrera Moreno, Havana, Cuba. By 1988, she obtained her Bachelor of Fine Arts with a major in Plastic Arts, graduating Summa Cum Laude. In 1991, she graduated in silkscreen techniques at Rene Portocarrero silkscreen workshop. Beginning in 1986, she founded the arts group known as Pure with four others artists. Pure made contributions to the Cuban esthetic and incorporated popular and social themes into the work of art. She also participated in several collective exhibitions of her generation, known in Cuba as the “Generation of the Eighties.” These took place in Cuba, Latin America, United States and Europe. During the eighties, she had the opportunity to have solo-shows in Cuba, Mexico and United States. Her works are located in Galería Nina Menocal, México, D.F., in the Ludwig Forum für Internationale Kunst, Aachen, Alemania, in the Art and Culture Cuban Museum, Miami, Florida, U.S.A., and in the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes de La Habana, Cuba, as well as, Public Collections: LOWE Art Museum, University of Miami, MOA, Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale. The FROST, Art Museum at F.I.U. MOCA, Museum of Contemporary Art, Museum of the Arts, University of Guadalajara, Mexico, National Museum of Fine Arts, Havana, Cuba.

Denise Duhamel was born in Woonsocket, Rhode Island, in 1961. She received a B.F.A. degree from Emerson College and a M.F.A. degree

**Pamela A. Galbreath** holds an MFA degree from the Creative Writing program at the University of Wyoming, where she teaches composition, technical writing, and creative writing courses. Her writing has won the 1996 Wyoming Writers Honorable Mention in Poetry and the 2007 New England Writers Frank Anthony Honorable Mention in Nonfiction. Her personal essays have been published in *The North American Review*, *The Vermont Literary Review*, *South Loop Review: Creative Nonfiction + Art*, and *trailBLAZER Magazine*. She lives in Laramie with her husband, John, and their two Labradors.

**Carrie Green** was born and raised in DeLand, Florida, and lives in Lexington, Kentucky. Her poems have appeared in *Gulf Stream*, and a poem is forthcoming in *ABZ*. She received a 2005-2006 Artist Fellowship from the Louisiana Division of the Arts and has received professional development funding through the Kentucky Arts Council.

**Carol Lynn Grellas** is a three-time Pushcart nominee and the author of two chapbooks: *Litany of Finger Prayers*, from Pudding House Press, and *Object of Desire*, newly released from Finishing Line Press. She is widely published in magazines and online journals including most recently, *The Centrifugal Eye*, *Oak Bend Review* and *deComp*, with work upcoming in *Breadcrumb Scabs, Past Simple* and *Best of Boston Literary Magazine*. She lives with her husband, five children and a little blind dog named Ginger.

**Christine Hale’s** debut novel, *Basil’s Dream*, was published by Livingston Press in 2009 (details at christinehalebooks.com). Her prose has appeared in many journals, including *Arts & Letters, North Dakota*
Quarterly, Apalachee Review, and The Sun. For fourteen years, she lived in Tampa, where she taught writing at the University of Tampa. Ms. Hale earned an MBA from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an MFA from Warren Wilson College. In the early 80s, she worked in investment banking in New York City; later, as the mother of small children, she lived in Bermuda. A fellow of MacDowell, Ucross, Hedgebrook, and the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts, Ms. Hale teaches in the Murray State University Low-Residency MFA Program in Kentucky as well as the Great Smokies Writing Program in Asheville, NC. Her work-in-progress includes a new novel and a spiritual memoir, both set in southern Appalachia, where she grew up.

Therése Halscheid is author of Powertalk, Without Home, Uncommon Geography, and a chapbook award, Greatest Hits. Uncommon Geography received a Finalist Award from the Paterson Poetry Book Prize. She was awarded a Fellowship from NJ State Council on the Arts and is a visiting poet in schools. Her poems have appeared in numerous magazines. For the past decade, the author has been house-sitting, while traveling widely to write. This mobility has helped her to sustain her writing life. Website: ThereseHalscheid.com

John Hemingway (born 1960, Miami) is an American author whose critically acclaimed memoir Strange Tribe examines the similarities and the complex relationship between his father Dr. Gregory Hemingway and his grandfather, the Nobel Laureate Ernest Hemingway; in particular it addresses the issue of his father’s cross-dressing and sex reassignment and its connection to Ernest Hemingway.

Hemingway moved to Milan, Italy in 1983, where he pursued a writing and translating career. His articles have appeared in several Italian newspapers such as l’Unità and Libero. He has also published several short stories in the USA, the most recent of which was “Uncle Gus” in the Saturday Evening Post.

As revealed in his memoir, Strange Tribe, Hemingway had a difficult childhood; his father suffered from bipolar disorder and his mother, Alice Thomas, is schizophrenic. Hemingway spent his early years being shuffled from one home to another and dealing with his dysfunctional family. He eventually went to study history and Italian at U.C.L.A. and after graduating moved to Italy as a way of distancing himself from his troubled family background. One of the unresolved questions for him was how his father, as a cross-dresser and transsexual, could fit with the image that the public has of his grandfather as an icon of male masculinity. What Hemingway discovered was that both men, besides being bipolar, were also fascinated by androgyny.
The macho myth surrounding his grandfather was in fact only half the story. After leaving Italy and spending a year in Spain, Hemingway now lives with his wife and two children in Montreal, Canada.

**Chavawn Kelley** of Laramie, Wyoming, has been published in *Creative Nonfiction*, *Quarterly West* and *Hayden’s Ferry Review*, among others, and in numerous anthologies. She has received fellowships from the Wyoming Arts Council, the Ucross Foundation, the Ludwig Vogelstein Foundation and Can Serrat International Arts Center (Spain). Her girlhood home was Atlantic Beach, Florida.

**Dennis Lehane**: Dennis Lehane was born and raised in Dorchester, Massachusetts. He has written seven novels, *A Drink Before the War*, *Darkness, Take My Hand*, *Sacred*, *Gone Baby Gone*, *Prayers for Rain*, *Mystic River* and *Shutter Island*. *Mystic River* was a finalist for the PEN/Winslow Award and won both the Anthony Award and the Barry Award for Best Novel as well as the Massachusetts Book Award in Fiction given by the Massachusetts Center for the Book. Before becoming a full-time writer, Mr. Lehane worked as a counselor with mentally handicapped and abused children, waited tables, parked cars, drove limos, worked in bookstores, and loaded tractor-trailers. His one regret is that no one ever gave him a chance to tend bar. He lives in the Boston area.

**Ryan Little** is a writer and filmmaker who has won awards from the Florida Film Festival for writing the film *Searching for Voice*, from Lionsgate’s Incubator film competition for writing *Fear Everything*, and has most recently been awarded the Ruth and Frank Coleman Award for Excellence in Short Fiction Writing for his story “A Fitting End.” Ryan currently teaches in the English Department at Full Sail University in Winter Park, Florida.

**Campbell McGrath**’s previous poetry collections are *Seven Notebooks*, *Capitalism*, *American Noise*, *Spring Comes to Chicago*, *Road Atlas*, *Florida Poems*, and *Pax Atomica*. His awards include the Kingsley Tufts Prize and fellowships from the Guggenheim and MacArthur Foundations. He teaches in the creative writing program at Florida International University in Miami.

**Armando F. Mastrapa** publishes *CUBAPOLIDATA*, a weblog focusing on Cuba’s politico-military affairs, and co-founded the online independent newspaper, *La Nueva Cuba*. 
Rajiv Mohabir is a second generation Indo-Guyanese-American, raised in Chuluota, Florida, who teaches English as a Second Language in Queens, New York. A child of four continents, he has a B.A. in Religious Studies from the University of Florida, MS Ed. in TESOL from Long Island University, and is currently pursuing an MFA in Creative Writing at Queens College. He is a VONA (Voices of Our Nations Arts Foundation) alumnus. Having studied Bhojpuri folk singing both in Varanasi, India and in his grandmother’s living room, he weaves aspects of folk singing into the fabric of his work. Having performed from Gainesville, Florida to New York City, Rajiv’s poems have appeared in the anthology, *The Yellow Brick Road: The Not-So-Confused Voices of Brown Souls* (forthcoming). His writing has also appeared in *Trikone*, *EOAGH*, *Ghoti*, and *Ganymede* (forthcoming) magazines.

Andrea Modica has received numerous grants including a 1994 Guggenheim Arts Fellowship and a 1990 Fulbright-Hays Research Grant, among many others. Her work has been published in numerous magazines including *Harper’s*, *Mother Jones* and *The New York Times Magazine*, as well as two monographs, *Treadwell* (Chronicle Books, 1995) and *Minor League* (The Smithsonian Institution, 1993). Her work is included in numerous collections, including the Museum of Modern Art and The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, George Eastman House in Rochester, The National Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C. and The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art. Andrea Modica’s folio of nine landscape photogravures, “Florida,” is an exquisite study in monotone of the “other” Florida that exists beyond the sun, surf and tourist attractions. As a newcomer, she travelled by car through the back roads in central western Florida, and captured with her 8x10” view camera the characteristic strong light and lush vegetation that overwhelms the land and swallows up the leavings of civilization.

John Moran is Florida’s unofficial Photographer Laureate. He was the state nature photographer in 2006, creating a calendar on state lands for the Florida DEP and Governor’s office. His bylines include *National Geographic*, *Life*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Smithsonian* and the cover of the *National Audubon Society Field Guide to Florida*. Moran seeks his photographic vision of natural Florida as it must have appeared to Ponce de Leon and other early strangers in paradise. His work highlights a 20-year odyssey to photograph the alligators, beaches, birds, rivers, trees, turtles and flowers that make Florida the amazing place we call home. Learn more at www.JohnMoranPhoto.com.
Heriberto Mora was born in Cuba in 1965. In 1987 he graduated from the “Fine Arts School of San Alejandro”, Havana, Cuba. In 1992, he went to Spain and after that, in 1993, he established in Florida. Since then, he has shown his work in art galleries in Florida, New York, North Carolina, Dominican Republic, and Puerto Rico. His paintings suggest, very often, a spiritual message. Mora has painted three works for a Hollywood film entitled Curdled, dated 2004.

One can find Mora’s work in the collections of Nassau County Museum of Art, New York, Lowe Art Museum and Frost Art Museum, both in Miami, and at the Fort Lauderdale Museum of Art. Some of his works belong to private collections in Madrid, Paris, New York, Bogota, Miami, Washington, Caracas, Buenos Aires, Mexico City and in San Juan. At present the artist works and lives in Miami.

Donald Morrill is the author of four books of nonfiction, Impetuous Sleeper, The Untouched Minutes (winner of the River Teeth Nonfiction Prize), Sounding for Cool, and A Stranger’s Neighborhood, as well as two volumes of poetry, At the Bottom of the Sky and With Your Back to Half the Day. He has taught at Jilin University, Peoples’ Republic of China, and has been a Fulbright Lecturer at the University of Lodz, Poland, as well as the Bedell Visiting Writer in the Nonfiction Writing Program at the University of Iowa. For many years, he directed the Writers at the University series at the University of Tampa and has been a poetry editor of Tampa Review and the University of Tampa Press Poetry Series. Currently, he is Associate Dean of Graduate and Continuing Studies at the University of Tampa.

Jeff Olson grew up in South Florida in the 1960s. Several years ago he began photographing the South Florida landscape through his lens. His images have been included in juried exhibitions at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, the Palm Beach Photographic Center and the Coral Springs Museum of Art. He currently lives with his wife in Coral Springs, Florida. More of his photographs can be seen at www.jeffolsonimages.com

Daniele Pantano is a Swiss poet, translator, critic, and editor born of Sicilian and German parentage in Langenthal (Canton of Berne). His individual poems, essays, and reviews, as well as his translations from the German by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, Georg Trakl, and Robert Walser, have appeared or are forthcoming in numerous magazines, journals, and anthologies, including Absinthe: New European Writing, ARCH, The Baltimore Review, The Cortland Review, Gradiva: International Journal of Italian Poetry, Italian Americana, Jacket, The Mailer Review, and 32 Poems.
Magazine. His next books, The Oldest Hands in the World (a collection of poems), The Possible Is Monstrous: Selected Poems by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, and The Collected Works of Georg Trakl, are forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press, New York. Pantano has taught at the University of South Florida and served as the Visiting Poet-in-Residence at Florida Southern College. He divides his time between Switzerland and England, where he’s Senior Lecturer and Director of Creative Writing at Edge Hill University. For more information, please visit www.danielepantano.ch.

Ricardo Pau-Llosa, also recently featured in The Writer’s Chronicle (AWP), is a keynote speaker at Wake Forest University’s April conference on Hispanic American Poetry, and will also be reading March 17 at Notre Dame. His website: www.pau-llosa.com.

Laura Sobbott Ross has been nominated twice for a Pushcart Prize. Her poetry appears or is forthcoming in The Florida Review, Calyx, Cold Mountain Review, Natural Bridge, Tar River Poetry, The Columbia Review, and The Caribbean Writer, among many others. She was named a finalist in the Creekwalker Poetry Prize.

Gianna Russo is a Pushcart Prize nominee and the founding editor of YellowJacket Press, the only Florida publisher of poetry chapbooks. Ms. Russo is a fellow of both the Surdna Foundation and the Hambidge Center for the Arts and Sciences. She is the recipient of an Arts Teacher Fellowship (which allowed her to attend the Spoleto, Italy Writers Workshop in 2006) and a Hillsborough County Artist Fellowship, Emerging Artist Grant. Her poems have appeared in Crab Orchard Review, Bloomsbury Review, The Sun, Poet Lore, The MacGuffin, Calyx, Apalachee Review, Florida Review and Tampa Review, among others. She is the author of the chapbook Blue Slumber.

Sean L. Sullivan lives in the Hudson Valley in NY with his wife Jennifer and their dog Nala. His fiction has appeared previously in BULL: Fiction for Thinking Men.

Christopher Tozier happily lives deep in the sand pine scrub between Paisley and Cassia, Florida. His poems have appeared in journals such as Tampa Review, Fifth Wednesday Journal, The Literary Review, Cream City Review, The Florida Review, Maryland Poetry Review, and The Wisconsin Review. He graduated from the University of Wisconsin-Madison Creative Writing and English program.
Janaina Tschäpe was born in Dachau, Germany, and raised in São Paulo, Brazil. She received her Bachelor of Fine Arts from the Hochschule fur Bilende Kuenste, Hamburg and her Master in Fine Arts from the School of Visual Arts, New York. Tschäpe’s work has been shown in numerous exhibitions throughout the world including Tokyo, São Paulo, London, and Berlin. Recent projects include The 59th Minute with Creative Time in Times Square, New York, the Centre de Art a Albi in Tolouse, the Fotomuseum in Winthethur, and the Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia in Madrid. Since 1997, Janaina Tschäpe has employed the female body as her muse, creating universes of polymorphous landscapes, embryonic forms and ambiguous characters. For her Graphicstudio print projects and her video installation Blood, Sea at the USFCAM, Tschäpe worked with the professional mermaids at the Florida attraction Weeki Wachee Springs. The mermaids performed while wearing underwater sculptural costumes designed by Tschäpe. At Graphicstudio, Janaina experimented with several printmaking techniques including lithography, photogravure, and direct gravure, to create six editions using images taken from her work at Weeki Wachee Springs.

Nick Vagnoni Born and raised in Key West, Nick Vagnoni currently teaches creative writing at Florida International University in Miami, where he recently received an MFA in poetry. He is a founding member of the Miami Poetry Collective, and his poems and reviews have appeared in publications such as Alimentum, McSweeney’s Internet Tendency, The Florida Book Review, and The Secret of Salt.

Lu Vickers has received three Individual Artists Grants for fiction from the Florida Division of Cultural Affairs. In 2007, she published the novel Breathing Underwater, and Weeki Wachee, City of Mermaids: A History of One of Florida’s Oldest Roadside Attractions. Cypress Gardens, America’s Tropical Wonderland, a history of Florida’s first theme park, is due out in the Fall of 2010.

William Wegman is world famous for the anthropomorphic photographs, videos and films of his Weimeraner dogs, Man Ray, Fay Ray, Battina, Crooky, Chundo, and Chip. Wegman began his career as a painter and conceptual artist; facets of his work that are often overwhelmed by the popularity of the canine portraiture. William Wegman was born in 1943 in Holyoke, Massachusetts. He received a B.F.A. in painting from the Massachusetts College of Art, Boston in 1965 and an M.F.A. in painting from the University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana in 1967. From 1968 to 1970, he taught at the University of Wisconsin.
By the early 70s, Wegman’s work was being exhibited in museums and galleries internationally. William Wegman lives in New York and Maine where he continues to make videos, to take photographs and to make drawings and paintings. www.wegmanworld.com

**Suzanne Williamson** grew up in the northeast and lives in New York City and Tampa, Florida. She has received several fellowships to the pre-eminent artist colonies, MacDowell and Yaddo, and served on the Board of The MacDowell Colony. Williamson received an award for her pictures of a Midwest drought, published in *Ohio Magazine*. Her photographs, made primarily in black & white, are in museum and private collections, including The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, The New York City Central Park Conservancy, and the Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris. As well, her photographs have been published in *American Archaeology, Harpers, Ohio Magazine,* and *Texas Monthly*. Currently Williamson is photographing remnants of early history in the Florida landscape for her series “Sacred Land and Shelter.”

The Photo Editor of *ARTnews* magazine until early 2008, Williamson also worked at *The New Yorker* and *Newsweek* magazines. Williamson has managed photography galleries and collections in New York City, and was part of a collective that launched a photographic exhibition of the events and our response to 9/11. The show entitled “Here is New York,” was installed in downtown SoHo, and traveled in the U.S. and overseas. Last spring Williamson directed an artist-led conference supporting arts entrepreneurship, the 2009 Self Employment in the Arts Conference, held at The University of Tampa. More of her work can be found at www.suzannewilliamsonphoto.com.

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City: ___________ State: _______ Zip Code: ___________

Telephone: (____) _____ - ___________

Number of Copies: _______

Please include this sheet with your check.
Make all checks payable to University of South Florida

<table>
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<th>Amount Enclosed</th>
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Please Remit Payment To: USF Cashier’s Office
4202 East Fowler Avenue, ADM 131
Tampa, FL 33620-5800

Please deposit amount enclosed to the following chartfield:

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<th>Op Unit</th>
<th>Fund</th>
<th>GL Acct</th>
<th>Dept ID</th>
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<td>122300</td>
<td>CAS028</td>
<td>0000000</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

USF Cashier’s Office:
Please forward invoice and a copy of the check to:
Department of English, Attn: Jerry Medlen – CPR 107
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