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# Not an Aspiring Gymnast Among Us

Katrina Marvin-Travis

As young girls we asked it and  
still they ask it  
so often  
on the playground or at parties  
upon meeting each other:  
*can you do the splits?* And always  
the ricochet response: *can you?*

Those who cannot, say no, calmly resigned  
to their inability. (Still  
they practice, when alone or with others who say no, stretching  
their tender ligaments.) Those who can  
must defend their credibility and demonstrate. And  
everyone knows the sideways splits are better than front  
to back.

Among each other,  
so young,  
we pay for our status  
by spreading our legs.



Lucien Kubo



## First Decade

Debra Spencer

Water is not always warm.  
If you lean too far out of the high chair, the floor will hit you in the head.  
The leaves of geraniums smell better than the flowers.  
The safest place to be is in my father's arms.  
Every word has its own color.  
Singing is like flying.

If you tell Candace Fields a secret, she keeps it.  
Sometimes there's nothing to eat but turkey soup.  
It takes a lot longer to fill a coffee can with shelled walnuts than it does to eat them.  
It's worth walking all the way around the block to avoid Timmy Weems.  
A baseball card over the hole in your shoe keeps your sock clean.  
Everybody else asks their mom first.

Not everybody wears the same kind of underwear.  
No matter how stuck the bread is, you can't stick your knife in the toaster.  
A baloney sandwich smells like lunch at breakfast and like garbage at lunch.  
If you're only as big as Taro Inoke, they can sew the finger back on.  
If you beg hard enough, you'll get the white Keds.  
Michael Gilroy's lips feel good against my cheek.

Even Taymor Johnson gets sunburned.  
If you're one of the Schmutzes, you have to spit out pomegranate seeds.  
Boys like Louis Trachtenberg make fun of you but give you their cupcake.  
I can think anything I like, and no one will ever know.  
I'm going to die.

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Lucien Kubo



## Yellow

Lan Tran

Before I was Yellow,  
I was green.

People didn't come in colors,  
crayons did.  
Yellow was for flowers:  
dandelions,  
daisies,  
the big smiling sun —  
(draw it round, like a rice ball,  
with yellow chopsticks  
sticking out).

Then I went to school  
on the yellow bus.  
— If you're yellow, you're a chicken  
Like a cute baby chick?  
— No! Like a scaredy cat, a fraidy cat  
Oh.

— If you're Chinese, you're yellow too.  
But I'm Vietnamese  
— Same thing, all Ornamentals are yellow.

I'm the fifth crayon from the left?

Talk about colored vision.  
Ever notice nice things  
aren't yellow?

You get in trouble for making yellow in your pants,

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Bees are yellow, they sting!  
Pink roses are better than yellow daisies,  
dandelions are a weed.  
Yellow bus kids aren't as good as  
kids whose parents pick them up.

Nobody gets picked up in a yellow car.

Mommy, why do we have to have round as the sun rice balls all the time with  
the yellow chopsticks?

– Don't be silly.

Me, silly?

Colors aren't just colors anymore,  
they're complicated.

– Why does your yellow sun look so sad, little girl?

– What did you wish for when you blew that dandelion, child?

Crayons,  
only crayons.



Noelle Correia

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## From the Balcony

Shannon Givan

He didn't call her by name. He did not even have a nickname for her, not princess or daddy's little girl, nothing like that. She went out to sit by him on the balcony. Her mother and sister were already asleep in the hotel room. There the girl and dad sat next to each other and it was silent for some time. The cheap hotels in Puerto Vallarta have mock balconies lined along the wall overlooking the street below. There was barely enough room for the two chairs pressed behind the curvy iron of the railing. He didn't call her by name. After a while the dad says to the girl, "Do you see the man below?" The old man on the sidewalk was hunched over with a cane and was wearing dark sunglasses. The girl watched the man greeting passersby, nodding his head, sometimes shaking their hands. Then the dad said, "Look how the people give him money." She had to look very hard from the balcony but then the girl noticed the green of the wrinkled paper passing through the hands, it looked delicate. "The old man is pretending to be blind so the people give him money."

"Shhh." There was a pause in the night, like there is when it is late and the streets are empty and the pavement is alive. The girl could not hear what the old man was saying but she watched him turn to the clerk in the convenience store. When the blind man spoke to the clerk, he did not hold his head stiff like he did when the white people carrying bags walked by. He even took off the glasses to make a kind of comma or exclamation point in conversation. More people came and the old man with the kind nod took his position again. Stiff and facing out into the night, like he was waiting for the return of an echo.

Something new appeared on the street. The dad said, "Look at the two men crossing, they work here at our hotel." Then the little girl recognized their white pressed shirts. They were the men that stood behind the buffet table when she was at dinner. They were carrying a white bed sheet wrapped and knotted like a duffle bag. "They are stealing away part of the buffet table in that sheet, I bet they even have a couple of lobsters in there." The dad spoke low and calm, he always spoke low and calm even when he was angry. "They are going to walk into that store and pass the sheet to the clerk and he will pay them for it." And the girl watched and the hotel men did what the dad said. It was like when they watched movies and the dad always knew the ending before it happened.

The night was continuing and the people were doing what they ordinarily did. The girl felt important with her new information and thought someone with this kind of information should be sitting up straight. And she could feel it coming again; the dad was going to say more. She folded her hands in her lap and waited. She was very still, and concentrated to look serious and capable.

"Do you remember the bus ride this morning? Do you remember the tour into the jungle, and the green all around? Did you notice Daddy didn't talk very much?" He said Daddy but the girl always called him Dad. "The green reminds Daddy of the war, in the war we used to walk through jungles like that. Sometimes Daddy thinks of the war and this makes him quiet." Then the

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girl understood it was not her or her sister or her mother that made her dad mad, but it was the green all around. She felt relieved and tried to place the words the right way in her head so that she could explain this to her sister and her mother later.

“Bad things happen in war. You see that woman over there?” And the girl noticed for the first time the woman standing on the balcony across the way. There were shadows but the girl could still see her face, it was round and brown and smooth. She was wearing a pink apron and holding her baby. She wasn’t going anywhere like the rest of the people in the night, she was just standing there. “In the war soldiers shoot people just like her.” The girl understood. She was crying, it wasn’t very loud except when she came up for breath. She felt lucky that the Dad let her cry and kept his eyes on the street.

The girl and the Dad went into the room later. The girl stepped over the piled clothes and suitcases to get to her bed. One of the suitcases had boxes of food that the mother had packed, because she was a good mother and knew that her children would not like to eat the food in Mexico. The girl looked at the box of Fruit Loops, the cartoon pictures of the toucan and his multicolored striped beak. She crawled into bed and tried not to wake her mother and her sister. She listened to their breathing and thought she should prepare her face for the next day. The moon or the street lamp was coming through the window. A hallow white light spread over the room. The girl rolled to the furthest corner of the bed and hung her head over the edge. There were little black ants crawling in a line across the floor.



Sara Friedlander

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# Deflected Miracle

Tom McKoy

El Santuario de Chimayo,  
a small wooden church  
in a canyon between  
Taos and Santa Fe  
is said to be  
a place of miracles.  
Behind the altar  
in a small dark room  
one looks down through  
a square hole  
onto a patch of dirt.  
The believer puts a hand  
into the dirt,  
says a prayer  
rubs the dirt  
into the skin,  
and is healed.

A long, low-ceilinged adjacent room,  
lit by a bank of candles,  
is lined with hundreds  
of cracked yellowing  
braces, crutches, and bandages.

I cannot put  
my unbeliever's palm  
into the soil.  
I look at the hole  
in the floor, then  
turn and walk out  
into the too bright sun  
feeling a faint sense  
of vertigo.

Kelly M. Woods



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# Stone

Rebecca Chourre

Woman is not made of stone.  
If you cover her from head to toe.  
Cover slender ankles, supple lips, shining hair,  
Is it easier to pretend she is stone?  
A carved marble statue draped in cloth?

Woman is not made of stone.  
Stone does not feel the blood of desire  
Well up within  
Like the sap of a tree  
Giving new life to barren branches,

Stone does not feel aching, longing

To touch, to caress, to smell, to taste.

Stone does not see a man and  
Hold the desire to enfold him in its arms  
And taste that desire like a pearl  
Held on the dark, moist tongue.

Woman is not made of stone.

And if you can pretend, by covering up:  
Covering the slender ankles, the supple lips, the shining hair,  
Denying her desire,  
Denying her flesh,  
Denying her lust,  
Denying her love,  
If you can pretend that woman is made of stone,  
How can stone kill stone?

Who will throw the first stone?

Once that first stone is thrown  
You will see her flesh.  
When the first bright seam of blood  
Opens on her forehead  
You will see her flesh.  
And how it must infuriate you!

This woman is flesh!

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Flesh of desire  
Of nurture  
Of love and pain and mother's milk and  
Soft open arms that smell faintly of smoke  
And blood,  
Rushing blood that has coursed faster through her veins  
With desire  
And with that first red seam,  
You will have to acknowledge  
That desire,  
That flesh,  
That lust,  
That love.

Is that when it takes hold of the crowd?  
Is that when you all scream silently in your minds,  
"She did it! She faced the possibility of death and embraced it  
To feel this man's body next to hers."

She succumbed to lust,  
Beautiful, sacred, sexual desire  
And I did not... so

THIS stone is for the man whose hand brushed mine so gently when I was  
buying oranges and  
THIS stone is for the doctor whose kind eyes comforted me when I was in  
pain and  
THIS stone is for my beautiful daughter who had to marry that old man with  
moles on his neck because it was "in her best interest" even though  
she cried for days and  
THIS stone is for the boy I loved when I was a girl who I never spoke to but  
who used to watch me each morning when I went to get water and  
THIS stone is for my wife who squeezes her eyes shut each time I make love  
to her until tears are forced out of the corners and  
THIS stone is for lust never realized and  
THIS stone is for love never fulfilled and  
THIS stone is for dreams never pursued and  
THIS stone is for a life I never lived.

And when you are finished,  
Spent,  
Panting,  
Sweating,  
Do you feel fulfilled?

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When you see Saba and Zaynab lying in a heap  
While their blood runs in streams  
To form a red pool in the center  
Of the stone-littered square,  
Do you feel whole again?

After expelling all your passion on violence  
Can you go home not missing the passion of love?

Woman is not made of stone.  
Saba and Zaynab are not made of stone,  
So do not repay their action with stone.  
Repay their action with flesh.  
With the acknowledgement that they felt the  
Heat of their own flesh so strongly that  
They put their own lives in danger to succumb to it.

Let them have their flesh.  
And you can have your stones.



Lucien Kubo

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## Dust Art

Patricia Zylius

Late afternoons in autumn,  
sunlight stripes the room  
illuminating countless floating particles  
that wander in an aimless mass  
like a crowd of dancers  
waiting for their choreographer.  
I wade through the drifting motes.  
They eddy into paisley swirls  
then settle back into simple chaotic milling.  
When I pick my socks up from the coated floor  
and pull them on, my feet awaken puffs  
that blow out like soft dry dirt  
erupting in a crown around a dropped rock.

Every surface holds a rich supply.  
I write a haiku on the tabletop,  
sketch a wandering of vines and blossoms  
on the windowsill.  
Picking up my book, my fingers graze the surface of the desk  
and trace four stubby lines  
that join the clear clean rectangle.

To rant against dust  
is to show a lack of gratitude  
for a palette that grows more abundant  
as it ages. I will not clean  
today, but take my book and plop down  
on the couch, launching yet another cloud  
into the air.

We rose from dust,  
it's said, and as I settle in  
I merge with the ancient source,  
soft particles slowly falling from the air to blanket me—  
material for the next performance.



Lucien Kubo

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## Talking Southern

Lisa Simon

We really mean it when we close in,  
unfurl you from within the dress rack  
like you're a teen in trouble hanging back,  
afraid of bad weather which there's no end to

in a southern mouth. We speak Flamenco without  
silences. We speak auctioneer, gold-plated-nail-spitting  
preacher, GX2 turbo engine, and windstorm  
of flattery that is meant only to sell you

on yourself and your particular shine  
that day. Heavy tremors in church, yes –  
speaking in tongues –  
we believe in that God of throat drops

who begat we breathy spellbound talkers  
to lean from pews, whisper loudly in choir,  
circle in on captive listeners,  
to burst with immaculate fire

their speech made dull by breeding.  
There's a spin like a carnival ride of cups  
when we speak, a flock let loose  
that's fast as Alice in Wonderland's pentameter

but not as close to death as tap dancing.  
There's a pinball gallery chorus when a pack of us  
dressed for a wedding  
make for the groom's family

like a round of blades on the knife thrower's lucky day  
– safe, but close enough for good fun –  
because we like their linen suits and the jokes  
they leave us holding like tails they shed to escape.



Maureen Quinn



## A Sign

Nathan Leslie

Everybody's selling something, cause everybody's got something to sell. Me? It's magazines. Used to be bricks, and before that hubcaps. Now's it's magazines. Out here on the sidewalk, everybody's hawking, and if they're not hawking they're rattling cans, or singing, or playing the harp or sketching folks, or something – working for their dime on the sidewalks.

Me, I've been out here twelve years believe it or not. Good clean number, twelve. This'll have to be my last, cause I'm getting too old to lay shit out. That's what we call it – laying it out. These days I'm using card tables and trash bags, but before that it was corrugated cardboard. But with that, problems come about when it rains. Everything turns soggy. Used to be I'd hide out in the Bat Cave all day when it rains. Now I'm free to lay shit out in a motherfucking thunderstorm if I want. Got me enough plastic to build me a house out of. Still figuring that part out though.

These days I'm known as "The Overseer" since I'm the veteran out here. The younger cats act as my protégés, if you want to call it that, but I ain't in the business of being nobody's daddy. See. Why you think I'm out here in the first

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place? It's freedom baby. I've never felt this free in my life. I ain't about to start taking up no obligations or nothing, taking cats on and mentoring and all that. Life's too short for chains you don't need.

It's around then when I hear Van calling me. "Hey Joe!" "Hey Joe!" From the sound of his voice this time I can't tell which Van I'm going to see. Am I going to see the drunk-or-high-off-his-ass Joe who's bumming five off me to score a vial, or am I going to see the ehi-pleasure-to-meet-you'-gracious-and-accommodating cat I sling magazines with? It's all up to him, which is the message I've been trying to engrain into his skull like motherfucking Leonardo Da Vinci. I told him I'll buy him a roast beef sandwich down at Arby's every day his life if he gets his ass together. He ain't but had a couple of them suckers, cause Joe's been messing around nine times out of ten.

It turns out I get the accommodating Van, thank the Lord, cause we got to get ourselves set up outside Blockbuster before we lose our spot to Slow Walt or one of them other heart-string-pulling gimps. It's already seven and the streets are starting to buzz.

"Hey Joe, you got any coffee with you?"

"No, man," I say. "You know the score." I'm off that shit for life. I'm off all outside chemicals that I don't breathe from this fucking barricade of smog they got going on.

"Yeah, yeah," he says, walking right passed me. "I'm down to Tariz for a cup. Be right back." I don't know how he can drink it hot in this shit. I'm already sweating and the sun's barely up. I'm just sitting there, watching shit take place, people walking to work, people laying their magazines and books out on the sidewalk like us, people walking their dogs with their little scoop in hand, people knee-deep in arguments with their husband or wife over some stupid shit that don't even matter. I see all that. Everybody's tied to some kind of duty. Can't avoid it. So the way I see it, if that's the way it is, I say might as well minimize the shit and keep on doing what I'm doing.

Take Mr. Pond — that's what they call him (he won't say why but everyone thinks it has to do with those fragile states he gets into) Mr. Pond lays everything out. As Van's down getting his cup of brew, I'm watching this cat put out tennis shoes, extension cords, leather gloves, light bulbs, candles, VCR tapes, hats, books, skull caps. Now who in their right mind is going to buy motherfucking leather gloves when it's one hundred degrees out? I mean, the customer has foresight, don't get me wrong. But any customer's got that kind of foresight must be fucking Rasputin come to reek damnation upon us, in which case I don't trust his ass as far as I can throw him (which given my bum leg, surely ain't far). Not that I'm against a well-placed prophecy. The way I see it, Mr. Pond's got too much going on, too much of everything. I try to tell him "You're not out here starting some sort of sidewalk K-mart," but he don't see it that way. He says, "You never know what somebody might want. You never know."

"Well, shit," I say, "why not bring out some half-eaten donuts and some apple cores up out of that trash heap then? You never know when somebody

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might need an apple core either?"

"There's a limit," he says. We cut up over that one. I shrug and leave it at that. Mr. Pond's got his own demons to chase down. To each his own, you know what I mean?

A lot of these guys out here got religion one way or another, including Mr. Pond who turned Mormon on all of us. They just about hold onto anything that holds back, and as everybody knows God holds back better than anybody. Not me. I ain't into that shit. But I can't help but be intrigued by it. Me and Van've had some deep-as-shit talks. He don't take up no religion either (which is one reason we partner up), but we both think that it's a chance if that's the way the wind blows us.

"I just need proof," he says. "I need a sign. Like in Bible-times."

"That's exactly what I need," I say.

"Cause it's not like I want to not believe. I don't think nobody does."

"That's right," I say.

"I want to be a decento"

"Man, who doesn't?"

Then you got Billy who prays everyday for Jesus to come. He don't have any delusions about it as far as I can see. Its just good old Bible thumping. But this guy is devoted. You go off to some nook of the city and there's Billy on his knees on the sidewalk, broken bottles and oily newspapers around him. You could say it was just about escape, but from what I hear, he's been like that always.

Van and me go to the storage unit down on Sixth. For fifty bucks a month they hold all our stash. Not bad considering if we kept it in the Bat Cave, it'd all be gone in about two hours. Van gets up on the ladder and does the combo, and we pull everything out into our milk crates. Then we're wheeling them down using Pond's hand truck, pushing it right through rush hour. Fine if they hit us: we get the license plate digits, we're rich. What do we care?

Believe it or not Van's in a good mood. He smells like the stale piss and shit of the Bat Cave, but I can tell something's changing in him. He's starting to feel his freedom, which is key. It makes my whole day that much better to see one of my boys in a lighter way. Today it's Billy I'm worried about. That kid's been off the sidewalk for two days. Close to his record. Hope I don't read about him in the paper this morning.

We get to our spot just in time. Just as we are laying shit out, Slow Walt is coming round the corner with his fake-assed crutches and his ratty KFC begging cup. He would have sat in that spot playing up the pity and then there would be no moving him (who's going to let you whup-ass on a cripple, even one that can walk better than me?). Then we'd have to go down the corner where nobody buys shit, cause nobody's selling over there. That's why I'm always telling Van seven o'clock, cause Slow Walt's an early rising somebody, but I ain't never seen his fake-ass before seven. Like I say, everybody's got their own sell. Everybody's hawking something.

I spread out the plastic bags. Then we start laying the magazines out on top



of the card tables. If a thunderstorm rolls up we can just throw the clear plastic overtop and everything stays clean. As far as sales, the important part is how you lay the magazines. You don't just throw them out random. Me, I like to do it in five rows based on type of magazines. Your sports row. Your women's interest. Your celebrity mags. Your catalogues and miscellaneous. Your European mags (porno comes out after dark with respect to the kiddies—my rule). Van's got his own way, what he calls the "sense method." He does it by how well they sell. Puts what he thinks might sell best up front, the others in back. I always give him shit about this though, cause to me, how you gonna know what's selling and what's not if you put the same shit up front? You'll be selling the same magazines you have up front, if somebody happens to like it.

I got other problems with it too. Don't get me wrong.

"What if a customer wants a certain magazine?" I ask him. "You know where it is in your layout?"

"Name a magazine? Any magazine."

I play it up. Pretend I'm a six-figure broker. Snapping. "Vanity Fair. I want it now."

Within second's he's got it at his fingertips. I try again, Better Homes and Garden? He finds it. Entertainment Weekly. Right there. He's got the hang of it. He's learning. It's just philosophical differences get to me. What's the use of

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being the mentor if you don't have no followers?

"But what if you're getting your coffee or something? What if you lay it out and then I got to work the table?"

"Well, that's your problem, man."

This is how it goes with us.

Today's another steaming one and both of us are sweating even just setting up. We ain't even sold nothing yet. Before it gets too busy, I go off to KFC and get two waters. As usual, the motherfucker's charge us a quarter each for the cups, so this has to last us all day.

In general, none of us talk about the old shit. It's like we just appeared right on this sidewalk, and nothing happened before. That's the way we like it: there's present and there's future, and sometimes not even a future beyond one day away. I mean, after a while everybody's story out here starts sounding the same. Either ex-Vet, drugs, or drinking. The mental is part of it too, but on this sidewalk it's the other shit that you see.

Me, after I got out of the service I ran into the law. Did time. The whole works. Too much of everything. Excess. It was unfortunate, but I'm alive, even if I couldn't get no job. But I'm not embarrassed. Life's too short for shame. Down in Atlanta I sold bricks from demolished buildings for ten cents apiece. Did that for years. Then came up here for no reason other than New York wasn't Atlanta. Too many ghosts down there. Plus I heard about this guy up here that was hiring. Fell through of course. Then stumbled onto the magazine thing.

Van's history is complicated and I don't know it all myself. I know he's got family, something I don't got. He was married at one point, even has a daughter. But all that was long back. I don't think he knows where they are now. He used to visit them around Christmas, that sort of thing. "That was in B.C. times," he says. Before crack.

Today's business is solid even if it's hot as shit on the street. School just let out so all kinds of punk kids are coming up to us asking about some teenybopper or other. We need to brush up on our Seventeen Magazine. That's about all we know: "Look in here," we say. I keep telling Van we're missing out on a market. He finally bursts out. "Hey, if Big and Nasty is tossing the shit, we'd be selling it. It ain't about choice bro." We both laugh at that one, cause there's no reason for him getting so worked up. It's that kind of day: the heat just sinks into everything you do.

Starting around eight thirty we move the shit at a fast rate. It's the kids, the professional women buying Vanity Fair and Cosmo, that boy who buys up the Absolut ads, the tourists snapping up the Euro mags. We even got a visit from one of our regulars, Claudia she buys all them L.L. Bean catalogues. She lives in Brooklyn where they don't deliver for some reason. Funny world. Van's in easy mode, joking with them, straightening the table constantly, not defensive or stiff at all. The afternoon's no good though. Too hot. The energy is sucked out of the day. Everybody just slogging through. We do just enough to make do.

Patience. This is all just how I told him. He's finally learned to not let them

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get over on him. Now he makes the barter's. "I'll give it to you for two," he whispers to a man with a Cindy Crawford Elle. "It's three, but I'll give it to you for two." The man takes it, and they both come away happy with the deal. It's all about respect. It's all about them treating us like humans. That's why we don't lay out porn during the day. Then we'd be disrespecting them. Then we'd be treating them like animals. You give and you get.

But the most important thing I taught these guys is even if you smell like shit, keep the magazines clean. They're not taking you home. As for the magazines, they don't care where they came from as long as it don't look like nobody wiped their ass with it. They're not stupid — most of them know we yanked em out of some dumpster. As long as they look and smell okay, why should they care?

We come away with one twenty for the day. Over par. We decide to celebrate with subs and potato chips from Tariz. Big thing of orange juice. Then we wheel all the shit back to the storage, pack it back in, and we divide up the rest of the dough. I want to go over to Big and Nasty's and restock, but Van wants more of the letting loose. He's off and running and I don't have to be Nostrodamus to figure out what lies in his future: trip down to the OTB, smoking, drinking, winding up in a crack binge with that whore, Lucy. If I ever see that bitch again, she's going to feel my wrath. Every effort I make with the guy she counters with a negative.

"Take it easy big guy," I say.

Van waves over his head and walks down an alley. This is why he lost his bi-weekly public, not to mention food stamps. At the moment I'm pissed. How can this be the same person as the guy who hawked mags with me all day? If Van wasn't five one I'd whup him a lesson.

So I go at it alone, humping six blocks to Big and Nasty's. But their Dumpster is nearly empty. Just a bunch of rags, what we call the coverless books. Most inventory comes on Mondays. That's the day you have to be there for their toss-aways. Oh well. I think about seeing a movie, but decide to do it tomorrow. I can felt it: Van's going to be missing from action for days. I hope shows up tomorrow. Shit, I'll need the flick to take my mind off these things.

I go back to the Bat Cave and find my usual corner. After a train lets off, I do my hard business on the tracks. When I sleep, I almost always piss my pants. Been doing it for years. Don't know why. At least it's not the other.

I wake up in sweat and piss. It's hot as shit already, probably not even seven. The days blend in like this. Day in day out. I pat my pocket, make sure my dough is still there. I'm good to go. Then I decide I'm taking the day off.

I pay a visit to Abdul's further down on Sixth. He's the book guy. Two dollars for anything on the table. He's another dude with some spiritual shit going on. Just something about him puts me at ease, and with Billy and Van both missing I need it. We talk about his trip to Mecca. That's what I ask him about every time, cause I never knew nobody that's gone up through Africa and the desert — shit like that. And every time I ask him he's got a new part of the trip to tell me about. It's never-ending.

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Then I need some peace and quiet. I dig into a copy of this thing called *Pensees* he gave me no charge. Don't know everything it's saying, but some of them sayings got depth. There's this whole thing about the wager. The gist of it is that even if you don't absolutely believe in God and feel faithful and all that shit, you should act faithful anyway because why not take advantage of the chance of heaven? This hits me like a ton of daggone gravel. Then I go back to Abdul and we get into it on this one. He thinks this Pascal dude's got something, cause for folks who ain't believing, they might as well put something on the line and act moral even if they have your doubts. This sends me through the roof.

"That's the most pussy God-theory I've ever heard. Why not put your money where your mouth is? If you don't believe, don't believe. Act on it. Live your life and roll your dice. I don't want to hear no shit about taking a bet just in case. That's weak, man."

"I see no wrong in living a moral life," he says. "That is what we should all be doing, right?"

"Yeah man. But you're missing the point. The whole idea is phony. It's dishonest as shit. I'd rather a dude be immoral as all get-out but stick to their guns about belief than deal with some phony-assed motherfucker who just does what he does out of some reward he may or may not get anyway."

"Is that why you spend so much time with Van and Billy then?"

Shit. He had me nailed there.

"Maybe, man. Maybe it is. So what?"

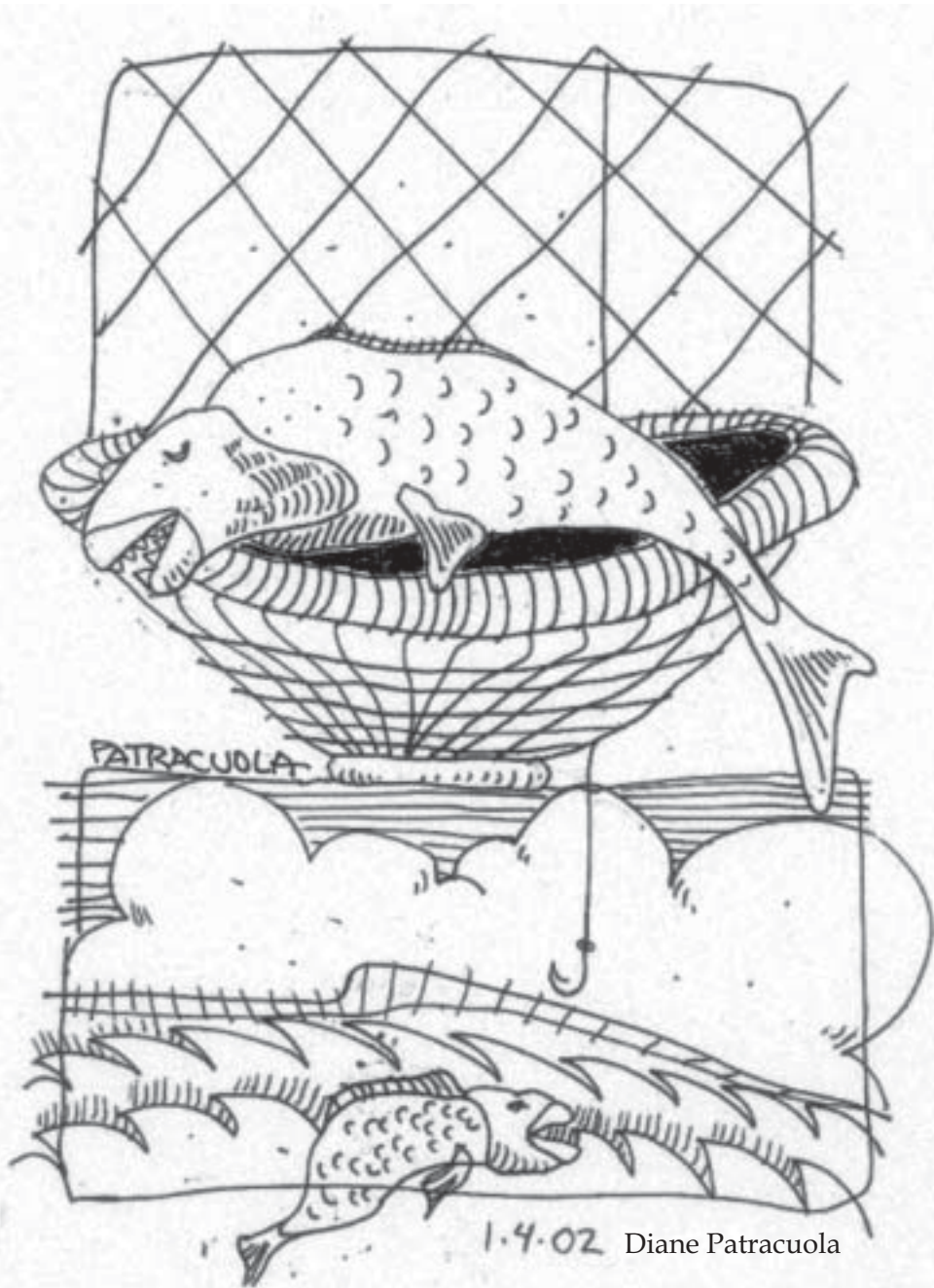
"Here," Abdul says, handing me another book. "This is for you."

I thank him and walk off towards Blockbuster to see who's out in the neighborhood. What I really want is a shower. I look at the title of the book: *Haruspicy for the Modern Day*. I'm scratching my head at this one. What the fuck?

Billy's walking across Sixth right to me. Dumb ass kid.

He's deaf so I can't even yell at him. I just shake my fist and pretend to slap him. I don't know no sign language, but he points way off in the direction of Queens and I know he was up with his sister. She's got some kind of disease and needs him to do groceries for her sometimes, that kind of thing. He makes motions that tell me he's going back there in a few days. I wonder if the motherfucker's leaving us, moving up in the world. Then again, his sister don't really like him. I'm happy for him though. He motions to me that he wants to work the table, but I cross my arms to show him we're closed for the day. He nods and goes to help Mr. Pond out. That's the way we are around here. Billy looks like he's been eating and sleeping. That's something. It's good to see him around.

Then I go see the dumbest fucking movie in the world. Sneak in when the doorman's not looking. It's all about this lady who saves the world by communicating with these aliens bent on wrath and destruction. I think Van and me could make better entertainment than that with a broom and a couple buckets. Unbelievable. When I get out I feel less relaxed than before. I decide I have to find out about Van. Call his cousin, Micky, who says he hasn't heard from him.



I invite Micky down to the table anyway. "Pay him a visit," I tell him. "Van needs all the help he can get." He says he can't though since he's leaving for St. Louis. I tell him to check back when he gets back, since Van and me will still be out there. "I'll do that," he says. I got to keep on top of these things.

I start reading about haruspicy. Turns out it's reading the guts of animals to tell your future. The book says all kinds of ancient priests and shit used to do it. That's how they could tell all them omens and make predictions. The book has

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all sorts of guidelines and tells you exactly what to do.

Fuck it. I go to the Dumpster down on Sixth and Fortieth and find a dead dog (which ain't ever hard to do). I cut him open and yank out all the nasty shit. I got my book right there to guide me. I want to find out about how Van's going to do. I look at the veins, which look pretty red, and then the stomach. Going by the book, the gall bladder is swollen looking, which is a good thing for Van's future. "Something promising lies on the horizon." I stir all the organs around on the concrete and just hope nobody comes around. It's late as shit anyway. Then I try Billy. Looks like "An increase in wealth is imminent." How about that? Maybe things will turn out all right for him. Then again, maybe you're not supposed to do the shit with guts from a Dumpster dog.

I get back to the subway before I'm too tired to lay shit out tomorrow.

Later Van comes to the bat cave. I'm amazed. He smells like VO5 shampoo and all that. Sober as shit.

"What happened, man?"

"So, yeah, I went out to the OTB, but man, it went bad. Lost everything.

Everything. Couldn't do nothing else with the night, so I went to my aunt's to see how she's doing. Not good man."

"So you mean those horses saved you for once," I say.

"That's one way to look at it."

"Jesus."

"Yeah, but my aunt, man. She's not going to make it much longer. She couldn't even remember me at first. Sad as shit. I had to show her old pictures to remind her of who I was. Finally she saw the light."

"Man."

"She wants me to come help her permanently. Nobody else has the time to visit her. I guess I did something right."

"That's great, man. This is great," I say.

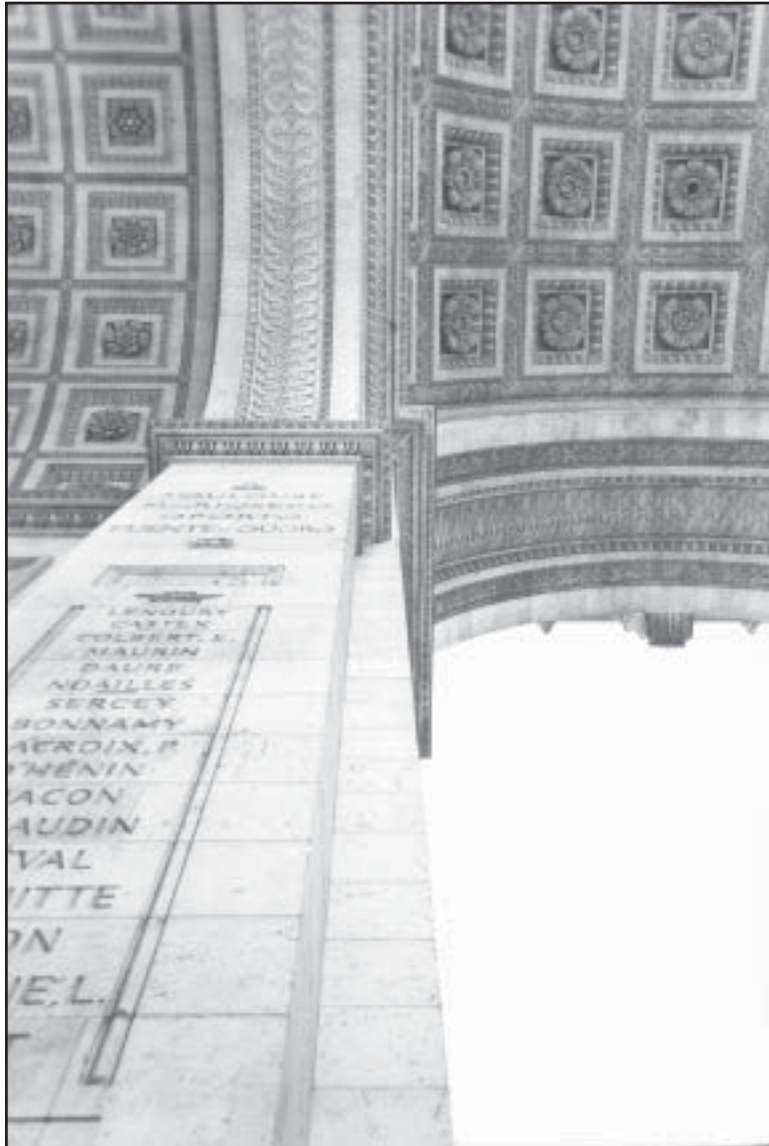
"Yeah. Let's get some sleep. This is my last night down here for a long while. I hope forever"

"Okay, yeah," I say. I'm smiling. I'm actually happy for the guy.

Even under that subway tunnel I can imagine the stars shining down. This is something, I say to myself. This surely is something.

The next day Van's heading back to his aunt's place. He helps me set up one last time, and says goodbye to all the cats. Says he's going to come by when he can. I'm happy as hell for him. And when I see him walking down into that subway tunnel actually with money in his pocket to get on that uptown train, it might be the best day of my life. I swear.

As for me, I let him lay out the magazines his way, just this one time. If feelings work this well, I decide, I don't see why it wouldn't work for magazines. The sun comes up hot and heavy as before. But the morning shade is nice and cool, and a calm breeze is in the air. It's another day on the sidewalk.



Adam Long

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## Hamster Babies

Molly B. Tierney

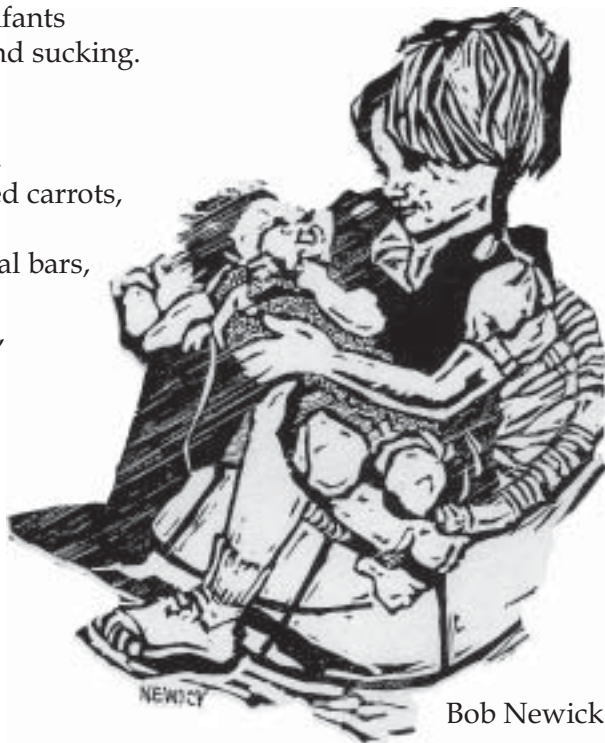
Why do I think she'll eat them,  
her pink translucent newborns? I've watched her  
voraciously lick and nuzzle a furless baby.  
Why not just as easily take a bite?

She gnaws on carrots that are bigger.  
As small as my thumbnail, one on its back  
kicks its skinny legs in the air, reminding me  
of my child reaching to be picked up.

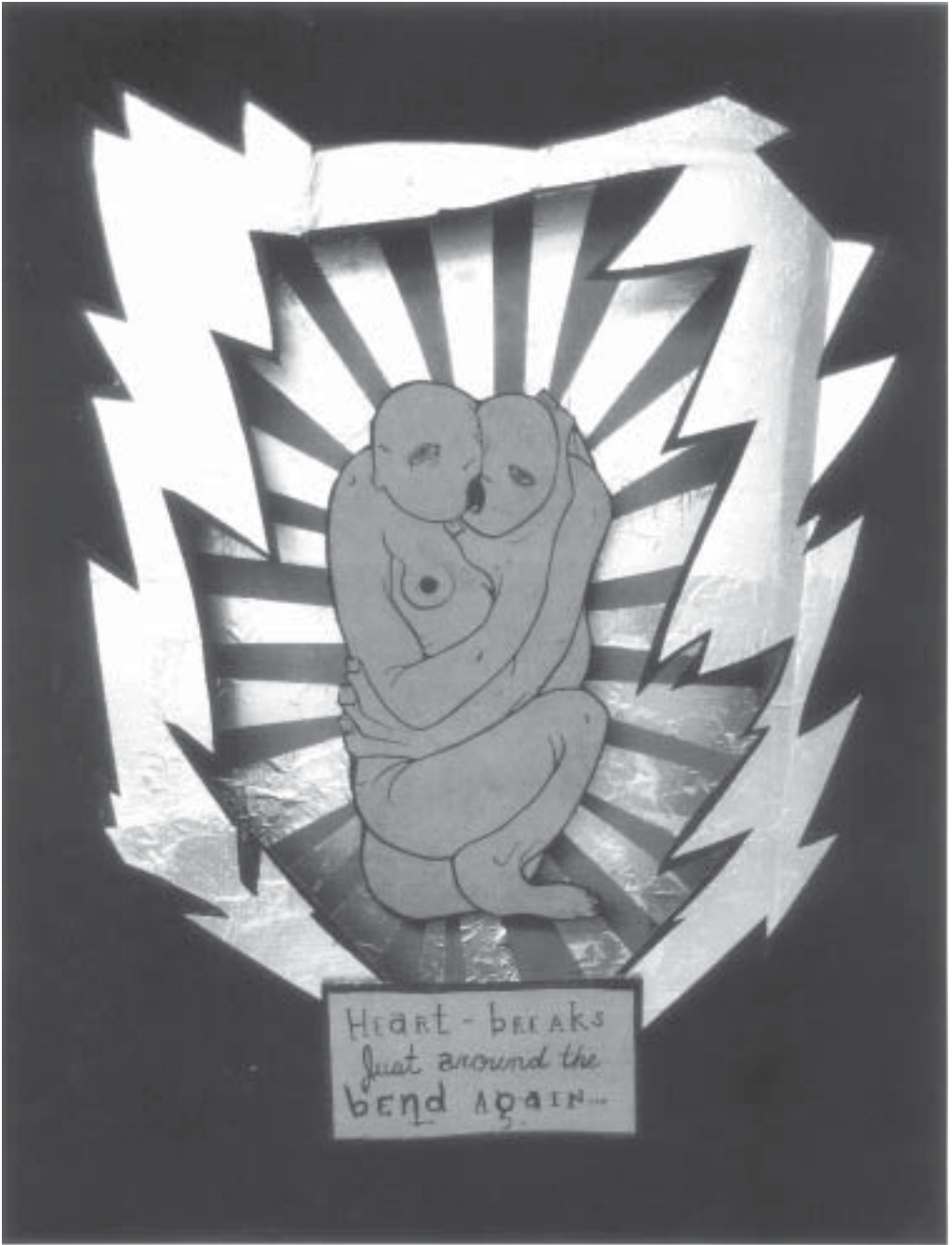
Another appears mysteriously away from the nest  
and the mother paws it back. But I'm afraid  
she'll leave it there, squeaking,  
the last drops of it's mothers milk  
visible through its skin.

In the night she hops on that exercise wheel and spins,  
climbs the wall of her cage,  
eats and eats. I imagine she is trying to get back  
to the life before squeaking infants  
clawing at her and sucking and sucking.

Maybe if she ate the babies  
the hard work would be over.  
so I bring fresh water, chopped carrots,  
bits of cheese, seeds,  
and whisper through the metal bars,  
Congratulations, Mama.  
But I leave the room thinking,  
Go ahead Do it.  
Then I won't have to worry  
about them either.



Bob Newick



KOAK

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# The Monkey Box

Debra Spencer

I was new at school and had red leather shoes. Sandy and Karen wore Oxfords, black on white, and Debbi wore navy blue Keds. The sidewalk was veined with tiny cracks stained by walnut hulls, crisscrossed by ants searching for water. It was September, the hottest month, and we kept to the shade, scuffling through leaves.

Our cotton dresses were limp from sweat and heat. I pushed up my bangs to let the hot air cool my forehead. Sandy and Karen had yellow hair, but Debbi and I had brown. Our knees were skinned from rollerskating, from when the wheels caught in the sidewalk cracks. Our fingers smelled of crayon. The edge of my left hand was smeared with pencil lead.

We scuffled along, and then the other three screamed and jumped onto the grass. I froze and looked down but saw only ants and veined concrete under my peculiar shoes.

*Monkey box*, Sandy said, keeping her feet off the sidewalk. *You're standing in it*, Karen said. *Get out*, said Debbi. *Quick*. They showed me the concrete imprint directly under my feet that said John H. Thompson, Canoga Park, 1956. Debbi said, *Now you're a monkey for a week*. My stomach sank. Everyone would know I was a monkey. They'd stick bananas in my face at lunch, make monkey noises, point at me, scratch themselves. They'd act like monkeys whenever they saw me, because I was one.

Debbi was already grinning and hooting, pretending to scratch under her arms. She stopped when Sandy defended me. *She didn't know*, Sandy said. Debbi said, *So what, she stepped right in it*. Sandy repeated, *She didn't know*, and Karen said, reluctantly, *You're right, it isn't fair*. Debbi sighed. She said, *Well, she can just jump it, then*. If you jumped the whole monkey box, you turned yourself back into a person. They showed me how far to back up, told me how fast to run, how to take off and land.

I backed up. I ran. I jumped. I landed.

Debbi said my heel touched the line. Karen said she wasn't sure. Sandy said I made it without touching, and besides, I hadn't known about it in the first place. A thing was fair, or it was not fair. A thing was wrong or it was right. Your foot was in or it was out. Or it was on the line. You could take it over sometimes, if the judges were merciful. Debbi relented, although I could tell she was disappointed.

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Three years later I jumped ahead of them into the class of Sandy and Karen's older sisters, skipping fourth grade. My fingers still smelled of crayon, my left hand was still smeared with pencil lead. Sandy and Karen forgot about me. Debbi forgot about me. But every time I step around a monkey box, I remember them. Everything straight-edged, the letters cut just so into the concrete.



"Her Story Yet to Tell," M.J.A. Chancy