



Jaimie S. Uymatsu

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## The Poetics of Unworthiness

Wilma Marcus Chandler

The first televised sex-change operation  
will be on tonight, and later,  
a show about the blind mother  
who let the pop-star adopt  
her two illegitimate babies  
and then he took them to Africa  
for a Special on Famine,  
but she never signed the papers and now she wants them back.

There are things I never dreamed I needed to witness  
but here on this summer night  
they unroll before me as I lie  
on my couch, remote control at the ready,  
raised in a toast to sloth.

Outside, my car is parked in a tow-away zone  
but it was hot when I drove home  
and "The Many Ways To Prepare Fresh Trout"  
was about to start.

Now, as evening falls  
and the tow truck winds along the street  
toward our expensive, future rendezvous at the impound lot,  
I am watching China  
where I am told  
a lunar eclipse will occur  
each time the Giant Dog of Heaven  
tries to take a bite of the moon.  
Only when the people of the village rise up, rush to the temple,  
beat the great bronze gongs with all their might  
to frighten him away  
can he be stopped  
from swallowing it all.

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## Grateful Deadheads Talk Trash At The Café

Dane Cervine

They remind me of any group of corner tavern drinkers, brash & inflated, opinions falling from tongues like foam-headed cappuccino or lager, syllables spread round the room like so much smoke, crudely erudite & gruff all at the same time, how we love to hear ourselves talk, making the world by saying so, no matter the clique, the zealotry, it's all in the speaking, like now,

young hippie wanna-be's posing as Tibetan-bag toting, tie-dye orange-purple shirted caterers of swank wine auctions, holding temp jobs as undercover security dressed like *the normals*, keeping an eye on the light-fingered, slipping thousand dollar bottles of cabernet under coat and making for the door. Now, the morning after, it's all about the misshapen bodies of the rich, their plump children, bellies and thighs lumbering dangerously in stretch nylon or baggy cotton, it's all a plot, they are the ones, the cause of the world's undeniably predicated end, doesn't matter

where you go, southern Baptist land or northwest cultured cool, sweet LA oxygen bar or corner barber stool, it's always the same, always *them*, spoken with curl of lip, almost a spit, doesn't matter who they are, as long as it's clear it's not *us*—the rich fucks who rule the world, the righteous billion to whom it's owed, the pentagon patsies, grateful dead head lackeys, republican racketeers with their oil & steers, democratic dopes, loggers on the ropes, protestor pinheads afraid to pull the trigger, patriotic mass-murderers with the itchy nuclear fingers— it's always them, the reason for the madness, 'cuz if everyone was just like me, shit, things would be a whole lot better.



"Explosive Gnome"  
Sara Twitty

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## Sueño de niñez

Elaine G. Schwartz

Las maestras con las trenzas dulces  
vuelan por las calles  
cantando sin palabras  
canciones de cintas perdidas

Sus alumnos las siguen  
dando vueltas uno tras uno  
cantando sin palabras  
canciones disparatadas

Juntos empiezan a bailar  
a la música silenciosa de las calles  
dando un paseo con el viento  
les comió una polverada

En la oscuridad del mediodía  
sus sombras se diviertan  
con los ecos de las canciones  
sin palabras

## Childhood Dream

The teachers with sweet braids  
fly through the streets  
singing without words  
songs of lost ribbons

Their students follow them  
turning about one by one  
singing without words  
nonsense songs

Together they begin to dance  
to the silent music of the streets  
taking a stroll with the wind  
a dust storm devours them

In the darkness of midday  
their shadows amuse themselves  
with the echoes  
of songs without words



Alissa Goldring



## The Brand

Ann Keniston

A fly trapped in the overheated phone booth  
buzzed circles around me. Miles of wire twisted  
between us past underground rocks,  
under lakes, through dirt soft  
with the recent rains – and our voices  
were dancing, then tangled up inside.  
My wish was the usual one: to unmake  
distance, I didn't care how, even through cruelty.  
So we started up the old sequence: a soliloquy,  
then an answering complaint. It wasn't till we'd drifted  
so far out we couldn't remember any way back  
that we realized love had hoisted its makeshift sail.  
The argument was love's, and the fly.  
And the two of us wearing our identical rings,  
and underneath, concealed by them, the same mark  
on our fingers – a ring's width of paler skin, like a brand.

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# Untitled

Jessica Rumwell

I asked Hillary what to do  
and we prayed for you.  
She helped me to know that  
loving someone means letting them  
wander through the doors they choose,  
not jamming those doors on them  
and I left the conversation with hope.

But my insecure nature soon choked  
my hope and I began to worry.  
I saw you drunk, scaling rooftops  
ripping off your clothes, passionate, possessed  
as if you lived for this, not me.

Recovering from exceedingly long hangovers  
Recovering from the battle wounds only  
to prepare for the next war.  
I saw your face an early convalescence green,  
bed-ridden dead before death  
or out with a bloody burst of glory,  
a blaze of lights as literally  
you are driven to your death.

Your flesh and mind, beautiful life too malleable  
exploded into the invisible air of this moonless night.  
If closing this door means that I can not love you,  
then I cannot.



Jaimie S. Uyematsu



“I Want to be Like You”  
Daniella Irish

## Beanpole

Mark J. Bradlyn

### CHARACTERS

BOY - A young teenager.

FATHER - A man in his forties. His name is Milton.

MOTHER - A woman in her forties. Her name is Helen.

GRANDMA - Mother's mother. A woman in her sixties.

KAREN - A teenage girl.

### SETTING

The action takes place in BOY's bedroom in a suburban tract home anytime between 1960 to the present.

At center stage is a single bed. BOY is lying on the bed facing the audience, slightly propped up on pillows so the audience can see his face. He stares straight ahead into the distance. He is stiff and his face is expressionless. On one side of the bed stands MOTHER, on the other side GRANDMA sits in a chair. FATHER paces in the hall outside the bedroom. We can see FATHER pass the open door to the hall as he paces.

GRANDMA: Honey... honey... Just say something. Look at me, honey. Look

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at me.

FATHER: *(Stops in doorway.)* He won't look. *(Paces away.)*

GRANDMA: Say something to GRANDMA. Anything.

FATHER: *(Stops in doorway.)* You're wasting your breath. *(Paces away.)*

MOTHER: *(To FATHER)* You be quiet. Let her talk to him.

FATHER: *(Stops in doorway.)* Why? What can she do?

MOTHER: This is all your fault. You could have let him just tell the story.

FATHER: What? About that girl who killed herself? Is that decent dinner conversation?

GRANDMA: Who was the girl? Someone he knew?

MOTHER: Betty Anne May. Eleanor and Winston's girl. She was... trouble.

FATHER: I don't want to hear about this. Not from him or from you.

MOTHER: I'll say what I want. Besides, it's not dinner anymore. You ruined dinner. Bring me a piece of pie.

FATHER: Pie? You want pie?

MOTHER: Not for me. For him. Maybe he'll want to eat it.

FATHER: He's hungry, let him get his own pie.

GRANDMA: I'll get him the pie. Honey, would you like me to get you some pie? It's blackberry, the kind you like. Would you like it ala mode? I could put some vanilla ice cream on it?

FATHER: Get it through your heads. He's not talking. He's not going to talk to you or to me or to anybody. He needs a psychiatrist, that's what he needs.

MOTHER: Get him the pie, mom.

GRANDMA: And the ice cream?

MOTHER: Yeah, get the ice cream too. He won't eat it, I will.

FATHER: You're both nuts. You know that.  
*(GRANDMA leaves the bedroom. FATHER steps inside and stands near MOTHER.)*

FATHER: We'll have to send him to a psychiatrist, that's all.

MOTHER: Will you stop saying that. Do you think he can't hear you?

FATHER: Maybe it's what he wants. Hey, BOY, you won't talk to us, you want to talk to a psychiatrist? Is that what you want?

MOTHER: Some father you are. Listen to you.

FATHER: I'm as good a father to him as my father was to me. Better

MOTHER: That wouldn't take much.

FATHER: I am. Have I ever hit him?

MOTHER: That one time.

FATHER: What time?

MOTHER: That time he was up on the Fredrick's roof and the Fredrick kid fell off and broke his arm. You hit him. With your belt.

FATHER: He learned the lesson, though, didn't he? Never got up on any roofs again, did he?  
*(GRANDMA returns with the pie and ice cream on a large plate. She sits back down in the chair beside the bed. She cuts a forkful of*

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*the pie and holds it out to the BOY.)*

GRANDMA: Here. I brought your dessert. Fresh blackberries. Your favorite.  
*(The BOY doesn't respond. He continues to stare into the distance. GRANDMA puts the fork down on the plate and sets the plate on the edge of the bed.)*

FATHER: See, he doesn't care. He's not even here. He doesn't even know you're speaking to him. I'm going to call the hospital.

MOTHER: The hospital? What hospital?

FATHER: Zion. See if Dr. Tobisch is there.

MOTHER: Dr. Tobisch isn't a psychiatrist.

FATHER: He'll know one to recommend. *(To BOY)* Do you hear me? I'm calling Dr. Tobisch.

MOTHER: He heard you.

FATHER: How do you know?

MOTHER: The whole neighborhood can hear you.

GRANDMA: Come on, honey. Please. Just a word. Just say that you heard your father. Say, 'Yes'. That's all. Just the word 'Yes'.  
*(Everyone waits a beat.)*

FATHER: See! He's stubborn. Stubborn as a mule. I'm making that call.  
*(FATHER leaves room.)*

GRANDMA: Please, honey. Please. Say something. You're making us worry.  
*(To MOTHER)* Come here. Sit on the bed. Talk to him.  
*(MOTHER sits on the side of the bed nearest her, opposite GRANDMA. GRANDMA hands the plate to her, over the BOY. MOTHER offers BOY a forkful of pie.)*

MOTHER: Come on now. I know you like GRANDMA's pie. Come on. Have a little.  
*(The BOY does not acknowledge the pie. He continues to stare. MOTHER hands the pie back to GRANDMA.)*

MOTHER: Here. You keep trying. I'm going to see what Milton's up to.  
*(She leaves.)*

GRANDMA: *(Holding the pie, she extends the fork to the BOY.)* Here. Taste it. Just a taste.

BOY: I don't want any.

GRANDMA: Ah! Ah! Oh, honey! You're talking! You were making us all crazy. Why didn't you talk?

BOY: Why should I?

GRANDMA: Why should you? What kind of question is that? You should speak because that's what people do. They talk to each other.

BOY: No one in this house talks to each other. They talk, but they don't talk to each other.

GRANDMA: I don't understand you.  
*(FATHER and MOTHER return.)*

FATHER: Tobisch wasn't there. I have to call back.

GRANDMA: He talked! *(To BOY)* Tell them what you just told me.

MOTHER: He spoke? While we were out of the room?

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FATHER: He talked? To you? What did he say?  
GRANDMA: Honey... tell them what you just said to me.  
*(The BOY stares and says nothing.)*  
FATHER: Ach! You tell us.  
GRANDMA: Well, I don't know if I can get it all straight. He... it was so strange.  
MOTHER: Just tell us. What did he say?  
GRANDMA: He said we don't talk to each other.  
FATHER: Of course we talk to each other. What are we doing right now but talking to each other? *(To BOY)* What do you mean we don't talk to each other?  
*(BOY doesn't reply.)*  
MOTHER: And what did YOU say?  
GRANDMA: I told him, of course we talk to each other.  
FATHER: And that's it? We don't talk to each other? That's all he had to say? Okay. I'm calling Tobisch back right now. I won't hang up until I get him on the line. This is driving me crazy. *(Turns to BOY.)* I'm calling Dr. Tobisch, and tomorrow you're going to a child psychiatrist, somebody who will know what to do with you.  
*(The BOY says nothing. FATHER throws up his hands and leaves.)*  
MOTHER: Give me the pie before it spills on the bed.  
*(GRANDMA hands her the plate.)*  
MOTHER: I'll take go put this in the refrigerator before the ice cream melts completely. *(MOTHER leaves the room.)*  
GRANDMA: Your FATHER is calling Dr. Tobisch again. He's going to take you to a psychiatrist. Crazy people go to psychiatrists. Do you want to be crazy? Is that what you want?  
BOY: No. All I want is a girl like Betty Anne May to come in the door and sit down on the bed and start talking to me.  
GRANDMA: *(Shouts)* He's talking again! He's talking! *(To BOY)* What about me? I'm here. I'm talking to you.  
BOY: Then tell me something. Say something to me.  
GRANDMA: Stop talking like this. You're scaring me.  
*(MOTHER returns to the room, FATHER follows a few steps behind her.)*  
MOTHER: He talked?  
FATHER: What is this? He talks to you? Since when does he talk to you? When has he ever spoken more than a word to you? What did he say?  
GRANDMA: He said he wanted a girl to talk to.  
FATHER: He wants a girl to talk to? What does that mean? Maybe I'd like a girl to talk to. *(To MOTHER.)* Can I have a girl to talk to?  
MOTHER: *(Ignores him.)* He wants a girl? *(Thinks)* I could call KAREN Kaplinksy from down the block. *(To BOY)* Should I call KAREN? Would you like me to do that?

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(*BOY does not respond.*)

MOTHER: Okay. I'm calling KAREN Kaplinsky. (*Leaves the room.*)

FATHER: Do I know KAREN Kaplinsky?

GRANDMA: You know her. From down the block.

FATHER: The tall skinny one? Girl Scout cookies? What can she do?  
Ach! I've had it. (*To BOY*) Tomorrow right after school you have an appointment with Dr. Glasser. Tobisch says he's the best. Maybe he can straighten you out.  
(*BOY does not respond.*)

FATHER: All right. I've had it. I'm fixing myself a drink. (*To BOY*) See what you're doing to me?

GRANDMA: (*To FATHER's back as he leaves the room.*) Karen's a nice girl.  
Quiet.  
(*MOTHER returns.*)

MOTHER: She's coming right over. KAREN's coming. (*Doorbell rings.*)  
She's here.  
(*MOTHER leaves the room to answer the door.*)

GRANDMA: Honey... KAREN's here.

BOY: So what? I don't want to talk to KAREN. I can't stand her.  
She's nothing. She's a blank.

GRANDMA: What do you mean she's a blank? What are you talking about?  
Why do you talk like this? Can't you talk like normal people.  
(*MOTHER enters with KAREN Kaplinsky. She's a blank. Literally. She wears a plain white featureless mask.*)

MOTHER: (*To Karen*) Here he is.  
(*Grandma gets up from her chair. Offers it to KAREN.*)

GRANDMA: Here KAREN. Sit here.  
(*KAREN takes her seat.*)

MOTHER: Come along, Mom. We should leave them alone for a while.  
KAREN, just call us if you need anything. We'll be right out in the family room.  
(*MOTHER and GRANDMA leave.*)

BOY: So, KAREN, tell me something.

KAREN: (*Says nothing.*)

BOY: Is that so? Well, I think our brains are too big for our skulls.  
That's the problem with people. Too much pressure inside.

KAREN: (*Says nothing.*)

BOY: Well, I've decided that in a few thousand years our heads will finally grow to make room for our brains, and our bodies will shrink away to little vestigial nubs. Our babies will have to be born in bottles by artificial insemination. Would you have a baby that way?

KAREN: (*Says nothing.*)

BOY: Well then, what if you were the last girl on earth after a nuclear holocaust, would you have sex with some man you didn't even know just to have babies and start the human

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species going again?  
KAREN: *(Says nothing.)*  
BOY: What if the man was me? Would you then?  
*(KAREN rushes out of the room. We hear the front door slam. FATHER and MOTHER and GRANDMA storm into the room. GRANDMA sits down in the chair by the bed. FATHER and MOTHER shout at the BOY, their lines overlapping.)*  
MOTHER: What did you do to her? She ran right out of the house? Did you say something to her? What did you say?  
FATHER: What the hell did you do? What did you do? Probably tried to talk about the May girl killing herself. That's a pleasant topic of conversation. What an idiot. He's got no sense.  
GRANDMA: Honey, she's such a nice quiet girl. She only came here to help you. Why did she run away? What did you say to her?  
*(BOY stares ahead. Says nothing.)*  
FATHER: I've had enough of this. Turn off the light and leave him alone. Let him stew. I'm fixing myself another drink. It's almost time for "60 Minutes".  
*(Telephone rings.)*  
MOTHER: Oh my God. It's probably her mother calling. What will I tell her? What should I say?  
*(Telephone continues to ring.)*  
FATHER: Are you going to answer it?  
MOTHER: *(To BOY)* What did you do to her? Tell me! I need to know.  
FATHER: Well, if you won't answer it, I will.  
*(FATHER leaves the room and picks up phone in the hall. He stands in doorway speaking into the telephone.)*  
FATHER: Yes, we saw her leave... No. She looked fine. She was running, but she didn't look... I don't think... Absolutely not... She was only in his room for... No, don't do that... Here, let me give you his MOTHER... Helen! Come talk to her. She's hysterical. I can't get... Hello? Hello? Dammit, she hung up. *(Slams phone into cradle. Comes into room.)*  
MOTHER: Well? What did she say?  
FATHER: She said he tried to... he tried to...  
MOTHER: What?!  
FATHER: He tried to... talk to her about... I don't know what. She couldn't tell me. She was too upset. Maybe something about... artificial insemination. Then he apparently... I don't know. The point is, her mother's calling the police. They'll be here any minute now.  
GRANDMA: *(Wringing her hands.)* Oh, honey!  
MOTHER: The police? Oh my God! The police!  
*(Siren approaches outside.)*  
FATHER: They're here.  
*(Siren passes.)*

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MOTHER: Thank God.  
FATHER: Call her back, will you? Try to talk some sense to her? I mean, look at this room. Look at the bed. Look at HIM, for God's sake. Nothing happened. There's no need for the police.  
MOTHER: All right. I'll call her. Maybe she's calmed down a little.  
FATHER: I'm getting that drink. I've had it.  
*(FATHER and MOTHER leave the room.)*  
GRANDMA: Why didn't you just talk to her? That's what you said you wanted to do.  
BOY: I did, GRANDMA. As much as you CAN talk to a blank like that, anyway.  
GRANDMA: You're talking crazy again, honey.  
BOY: I can hardly wait to go to college.  
GRANDMA: What?  
BOY: In college people talk. They stay up all night and talk.  
GRANDMA: When they should be in bed asleep. How can they get straight A's by staying up and talking all night? When you go to college, you'll go to sleep early and get straight A's. I know you will.  
*(FATHER and MOTHER return. FATHER carries a drink.)*  
GRANDMA: He talked again.  
FATHER: I don't believe you. You're just saying he talked because you're on his side. You're always on his side. Both of you are. My opinion means nothing in this house. It never has.  
MOTHER: Oh, finish your drink. What did he say this time?  
GRANDMA: He was talking about going to college and staying up all night. I told him he should sleep at night if he wants to get good grades.  
FATHER: He'll never get into college if he doesn't snap out of this.  
GRANDMA: Did you speak with the girl's mother again?  
MOTHER: I did.  
GRANDMA: Are the police coming?  
MOTHER: No, the police aren't coming. But KAREN is not allowed to see him anymore.  
FATHER: No loss there.  
MOTHER: To him or to her?  
FATHER: To either of them. They're not a match. I never liked her anyway. She's too skinny. Beanpole. That's what she is. Beanpole.  
BOY: *(Laughs hysterically.)* Ha ha ha ha ha ha. Beanpole. Ha ha ha.  
FATHER: What did you say?  
BOY: *(Laughs so hard he almost chokes.)* Beanpole.  
MOTHER: See, he can speak. We just need to give him time when he gets like this.  
GRANDMA: Oh, honey! Do you want a glass of water?  
BOY: *(Laughing and choking even louder.)* Beanpole!

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GRANDMA: I'll get you some water. (*GRANDMA leaves the room. MOTHER takes her place in the chair.*)

BOY: (*Chanting*) Beanpole beanpole beanpole beanpole beanpole  
beanpole beanpole

FATHER: Hey! That's my BOY. I'm going to call and cancel that appointment. Hear me? I'm calling and canceling the appointment with Dr. Glasser. Psychiatrists are too expensive anyway. I'll put that money toward your college education instead. Have you decided where you want to go to college?

BOY: Beanpole!

FATHER: Then it's all set.

MOTHER: (*Leans over and kisses boy on his forehead.*) Oh, honey! See. That's all you need to do! Just talk a little. We're so proud of you. You've made us all so happy!  
(*BOY stares into space. BLACKOUT*)

"I Want to be Like You"  
Daniella Irish



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## Ponte De Barca, Portugal, 2000

Carol See-Wood

What is it like  
to live in a village  
where the widows  
wear black the rest of their lives?  
To wear stout black shoes  
black woolen stockings  
pulled up to reddened knees  
carry heavy trays of silver herring and cod  
dried and flattened like sheets of cardboard.

In autumn to hear trucks rumble  
down the hills from the vineyards  
loaded with freshly picked grapes.  
To drink your own white wine  
pour it pale and sparkling  
from a chipped white enamel jug  
wine so young and fresh it snaps in the throat.  
Spread goat cheese on freshly baked bread  
take bites between spoonfuls of bean soup.

To live in a place where men walk  
through the streets at night singing  
drunken songs in beautiful baritones.  
To hear children shouting and running in the dark  
the lovely ring of tin cans  
skittering across cobblestones.

To sleep every night  
with church bells  
tolling in your dreams.  
To die in the same village  
where you were born.



Alissa Goldring

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# The Importance of Hunger

Susan Allison

We stand, ravenous  
in line at the deli, breathing  
the baking bread, steamy air  
pungent with peppers and pickles.  
I lean my cheek against his chest  
as he whispers, *I need some skin.*

He slips a hand under my shirt, traces  
spirals on my back, teasing  
the curve of my breast  
with his thumb. Bending  
to kiss my neck, he finds  
my mouth waiting.

Eyes closed  
my mind lifts on updrafts, swirls  
over oceans, through tubes  
of lava, slips under ferns  
and over plummeting falls  
to a coarse sand beach, white and shell-strewn.

We lie at high tides edge  
lips parted and wet, bubbles of warm foam  
popping on our skin.

*Six inch tuna on wheat, with everything.*

We untangle, straighten  
shirt and skirt  
and turn to the counter for our sandwich.  
As we weave to the door, I realize

there's no need for a weekend marriage encounter  
or a cruise to the islands, only  
a long line at a deli  
and a shared hunger.



AP HALLOWEEN

PAUL MORRIS 2003

Paul Morris

## Between Lake and Pasture

Travis Upright

Turkeys mingle with pumpkins  
outside my sister's first-grade class.  
She points to a purple turkey on the wall,  
"That one's mine." Her black velvet shoes step on  
fallen leaves, "It's my hand print."

The chill of late autumn reminds me  
of the lovers and the others that I knew.  
Stirring our bodies and our minds long  
into the warm nights of smoke and laughter.

Up ahead is the winter where I turn thirty,  
my youth ripens and sets itself for harvest.  
My sweet sister is young enough to be my daughter  
and old enough to see the cold wind burns my eyes.

We walk through the leaves, edging rows  
of reaped corn. This battlefield of yellowed  
broken stalks and weathered husks.  
Here, in the muddy furrows, seasons are victorious.

She holds my chapped hand tight, giving the air a kick.  
November breaks my heart, more than any other month.  
"Say good bye to the leaves", she tells me "say goodbye."

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# Safe

Julia Alter

Castle and marrow, stingray and milkweed.  
I'm only in love with words: rust and  
pampas grass, lovesong and terminate.

I love injury and junebug, exalt and indigo.  
I love bedroom and bebop and meteor.  
Orion and hammerhead. Sicilian and bliss.

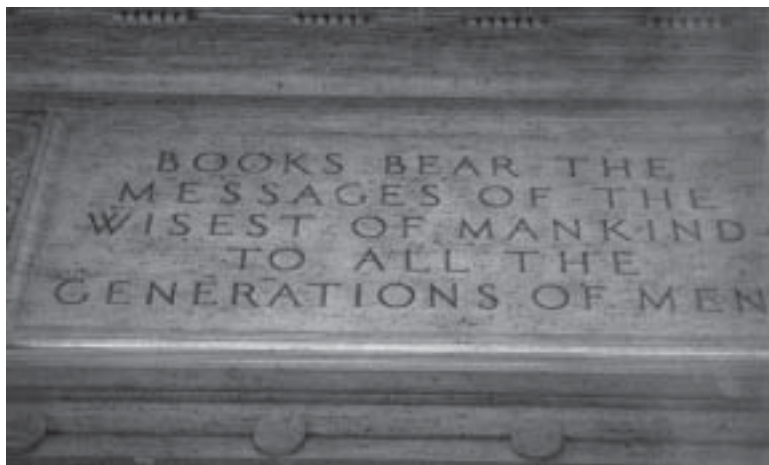
This, my curse. I love the music of words.  
Blasphemy and cantankerous. Belief and cantaloupe.  
Pterodactyl. Heartbreak. Dandelion.

Give me vertigo, chartreuse and rhubarb.  
I can only love the words: dictator, shindig, elbow.  
Fever. Slap. Trickle. Bamboo, distrust and philanthropy.

Whisper these to me in the night:  
undulation, trapezoid, thunderhead.  
Custard, isosceles, revenge.

These are safe to love: razor, winter, insanity.  
Indulgent, engulf, and sleaze. I can love these.  
Ravine, delinquent and piano.

Sometimes I love words more  
than I love you. How they stay.  
Become mine.



Janet Thelen

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## A Love Dog Afternoon

Sara Friedlander

My cousin Judy and her daughter Claire are visiting from Europe. On this calm and unusually fog free Santa Cruz morning, Judy and I are sipping tea when our two fourteen-year-old daughters approach, stirring up some weather of their own.

"Mum, Sara," Claire begins, "you see, Sasha and I have a proposal for you. But before you say anything, please let us finish our presentation. We believe we can address all your concerns."

They want to have their bellybuttons pierced. They have researched it, are prepared to finance it themselves, endure the pain, avoid infection, and be very discreet about exposing their pierced bellybuttons to the world. However, doing it as a "bonding experience", means it must happen tomorrow, since Claire is leaving the following day.

Suddenly everything is getting foggy. I'm wondering is this a rite of passage? Is piercing a form of bodily adornment or self-mutilation? I'm thinking infection, rubbing alcohol, and Neosporin when I remember that Judy and I have brought our daughters up to believe that *they* are in charge of their bodies?

My husband questions if Judy and I have lost our marbles. But the girls are ecstatic when we give them a thumbs-up before heading to bed.

Waking them in the morning, Sasha reports "Oh yeah Mom, Scott said he gets in at noon and we can show up any time after that."

"Who's Scott?"

"Scott Friendly, the guy at Love Dog's, the guy we talked to yesterday about piercing our bellybuttons."

"Oh, Scott Friendly at Love Dog's." *Maybe we have lost our marbles.*

As we enter the building, painted bright blue with paisley trim, a queasy feeling floods over me. A young man in his late 20's approaches us. I hear him say, "Hey, I'm Albert, bet you're looking for Scott, he'll be back around one o'clock." I can barely make out his words, for I am transfixed instead on his four eyebrow rings, six lip rings, three nose rings, eight earrings and two ear-plugs. I wonder how he functions with this inventory attached to his head. How can he sleep? Blow his nose? Images of him flossing or kissing have me tangled in knots. Still I startle myself with the thought that there is actually something pleasing about the way the lip rings are so evenly spaced, and wrap snugly around his lower lip. Sasha asks, "So should we just come back in an hour?" The silence which follows indicates that she is speaking to me and that I'd better stop staring at Albert or else she'll die of embarrassment or kill me.

"Fine" I reply, as we exit.

"Shhh, don't say a word," Sasha warns.

I unlock the car and we jump in. Doors slammed, we sit stunned until Judy blurts the first, "Oh my God." Three more follow, then a lot of "Phew's", and, on cue, Sasha insists, "I still want my bellybutton pierced, don't you Claire?"

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“Of course.”

A few errands under our belt, the hour's up, and we're back in the car en route to Love Dog's, take two. As I make a left turn into the parking lot, we notice a man, tattooed from head to toe, walking towards the store. We all gasp at once. Suddenly, he turns around and approaches the car as I slow down to enter the lot.

He is wearing a simple black sleeveless tank top and a pair of cache shorts, yet he appears fully clothed. Long sleeves are solidly tattooed on his arms as are knee socks clinging to his calves. His head is shaven and his ear lobes are two loops hanging three inches below his jaw. Two black rubber plugs pierce his upper ears and by the time I've registered all this I realize we're stopped and he is motioning for us to lower the window. Judy does, and he says, “Oh, Albert said you'd be back. I'll meet you inside.” We park and like zombies follow Scott into the studio.

Once we're inside he immediately addresses the girls; “I talked to you yesterday didn't I?” They nod. “Well, did you bring the consent forms and birth certificates?” They shrug their shoulders hopelessly. He asks Judy and I for some form of identification proving that we're their parents or legal guardians.

Losing perspective, and insisting that he acknowledge their physical resemblance, Judy's maternal pride has her working hard to convince him that she is indeed Claire's mother. Scott, intent on keeping matters professional, explains, “First let me communicate my part of the deal here, which I take very seriously. Mind you there's a fine, to the tune of two hundred and fifty dollars, if things aren't done to the letter of the law. I also want to talk about what the girls are getting themselves into. And if, after that, you're still interested, we'll discuss the paperwork.”

He continues, “In exchange for fees, I'll do the piercing, supply the ring or stud, and provide six months of checkups, maintenance, and consultations.”

Judy interrupts, “Six months? We're leaving the country tomorrow.”

I'm equally surprised. “Isn't six months a long time for one bellybutton to heal?”

“No, actually the bellybutton is the hardest to heal and needs a whole lot of attention: bathing in saline solution for 30 minutes twice a day, and avoiding the ocean for six months to a year.” Our jaws drop. Citing the levels of e.coli in the water, he then, bans swimming in streams or swimming pools for the same period, just for good measure.

“Are you two prepared to carry out this regimen?”

While they nod, Judy blurts, “This is ridiculous, Claire, we're on our way to the coast of Spain.” And I interrupt, “Sasha, what about your high school swim class? And once school starts how will you have time to soak your bellybutton for 30 minutes, twice a day?”

Sasha insists that she can and glaring at me mouths, “You're so annoying.”

Turning to Scott I ask, “Actually, if we go ahead with this, what do you think about her playing soccer this afternoon?”

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“Ugly. Just imagine you’re fouled and you go sliding along the ground on your stomach, the stud in your bellybutton ripping at your flesh. You don’t want to know what I’ve seen and you probably won’t want to do what you’ll have to do to tend to this properly. It’s a big commitment.”

I’m thinking: *Couldn’t he have just as easily punctured them, collected his eighty bucks, and been done with it?*

Sasha, heading for the door whispers in my ear, “I hate you! I knew this would happen. You’re so mean.”

Judy and I turn to Scott simultaneously. “Thank you *so* much.” As we step out to the sidewalk, Judy asks me, “Did you orchestrate this? Should we go back in there and pay him?”

Piling into the car, disappointment grips the rear seat, “You’re happy aren’t you? You always get your way. I’ll bet you actually like Scott, don’t you?”, while relief oozes from the front in a stream of “Oh my God!”; “What were we thinking?”; and finally, “Thank you, Scott.”

Six months have passed. Yesterday I overheard Sasha telling a friend how glad she was that she hadn’t gone through with the bellybutton piercing, because “everyone’s had theirs done already.” She caught my smile and continued, “but I’m just dying to get my tongue pierced.”



“Natural Bridges” Michael Allison



Angela Gibson