—Jamil Hellu
Introduction
The millennium edition of the Porter Gulch Review was produced by an English class at Cabrillo College, consisting of 25 dedicated students who have selected 54 pieces out of over 350 submissions of local poetry and prose. The annual project provides a venue for artists and writers of Santa Cruz County and seeks to respond to as broad a range of the community’s poets, writers and artists as possible within its means. All submissions are judged anonymously and democratically to allow new writers to compete fairly with those already established. Because of the large number of submissions, we would like to take the opportunity to thank all writers, artists and poets who submitted pieces to the Porter Gulch Review. All participants contribute to the learning experience and are much appreciated.

Submission Guidelines for Spring 2001 PGR
We invite submissions of short stories, poetry, excerpts from novels, short screenplays, ten-minute plays, photography and artwork for the 2001 issue by February 7th. All prose (two per writer, 5,000 word maximum), and poetry (four per writer), must be in triplicate, typed, single-spaced, in a 9x12 envelope with the title of the submissions, your name, address, email address and telephone number on a cover page only. Do not send originals, as we are unable to return submissions. All entries must include a computer disk which exactly duplicates the hard copies. Send all entries to: Porter Gulch Review, Cabrillo College, 6500 Soquel Drive, Aptos, CA 95003. In addition, you must email all submissions to pgr@cabrillo.cc.ca.us.

Staff Members for the 2000 Porter Gulch Review
Anna Bakalis, Rachel Bell, Sarah Belden, Daniel Bodeman, Lucas Brooks, Maura Callaghan, Ulrich Choitz, Abigayle Coddington, Shannon Dean, Alicia Flores, Falkwyn Goyenche, Adam Green, Brian Hamilton, Daniel Howell, Crystal Jones, Tyler Karaszewski, Katharina Klein, Kristel Lang, Angel Luna, Adam Nigh, Kirsten Oster, Michael Schultz, Marisa Sutro, Jennifer Taylor, Shannon Thomas, with independent study help from Michael Barnum and Cristel Williford. David Sullivan was the instructor.

Prose Award: “Salt Water Cure,” by Thomas Hickenbottom
Mary Lonnberg Smith Poetry Award: “Getting Over You” by Cathy Warner

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Ulrich Choitz

Photograph  
Jamil Hellu

Photograph  
Jenna Brager

Photograph  
Elizabeth Nissen

Photograph  
Elizabeth Nissen

Artwork  
M. Gould

Photograph  
Jamil Hellu

Photo (Lady in Waiting, Venice)  
Denise Fritsch

Photo (Max Greenberg)  
Antonina Hines

Photo (Stop Look Glisten)  
Antonina Hines

Photograph  
Denise Fritsch

Photo (Cascade Ranch)  
Antonina Hines

Photograph  
Marise Olivera

Photograph  
David Sullivan

Photo (Long May It Waver)  
Antonina Hines

Photograph  
David Sullivan

Photograph  
Jamil Hellu

Photograph  
Jamil Hellu

Photograph  
Jamil Hellu

The entire Porter Gulch Review, with articles by the staff about some of the submissions, is online at www.cabrillo.cc.ca.us/divisions/english/portergulch/pgrspr00
Getting Over You

I was a stringy-haired high school senior
new in town and desperate to belong
when I saw you with the tough crowd.
You stood out among their sunglasses and tight jeans.
You spelled my name with smoke signals
and I walked over. Your slim silhouette
punctuated your cool complexion
with a fiery glow that captured my breath.

Soon I couldn’t resist the feel of you in my hands
your taste on my lips, cologne that clung to me
long after you left.

Mother said, “You’re asking for trouble.”
“I absolutely forbid it,” coughed Father.
So I’d sneak out to meet you before school
and take you in hand the long way home after.
Nights, I’d hide you in my bedroom
breathe your heat and sit by the window
drinking night air.

When I got my first apartment
you moved in. Said it was permanent
but sometimes, you’d run out.
I’d find you at the all-night liquor store
behind the counter with your friends
or in a neighborhood bar
waiting by the door
for me to take you home.

I’d begin every morning with you
light in my hands
white in the curtained room
your presence surrounding me
so I could face the day.
I’d meet you on my coffee breaks
even in pouring rain
you’d show up in your boxy slicker.
I’d nearly unwrap you
just to brush you against my lips.
As the years went by I tried to leave you
figured you were part of my youth best left behind.
I was flighty, nervous without you.
A week would pass and I’d give in
caress you between my fingers
and inhale deeply. Intoxicating.
But I knew our relationship
was suffocating me.
I left abruptly. No gradual weaning.

I lay awake nights alone feeling
your pull on my body, fantasizing
that I’d picked you up at the liquor store or bar.
I’d see someone like you curled
between another woman’s fingers
and imagine stealing you away.
I ate quarts of brownie ice cream
while friends sympathized with my break-up weight.

It seemed the only way to exorcise you
was to write pages and pages in my journal
every temptation and craving x-rayed
in black and white. Gradually
your cologne disappeared from my closet.
Slowly I forgot your taste.
I closed my eyes
your image blurred indistinct.

Yesterday as I waited for the midtown bus
a woman pressed you to her lips
then threw you to the ground.
“Please let me,” I said
and ground you into the sidewalk with my heel
until all that remained was a brown stain.
Cigarettes. Nasty habit.

—Cathy Warner
Topography: The configuration of a surface including its relief and position of its natural and manmade features.

All those afternoons at the swim club when I was 10 tiptoeing from one dressing room stall to the next slipping bony little arms through bra straps heart-pounding shame What if someone comes in? while I’m trying vast expanses of cotton on my skeleton thinking Someday this all will be mine.

All those evenings the radio turned up in the kitchen to camouflage another crime I slid my mother’s underwear drawer open jumping at every squeak of wood on wood to feel the pearly tricot.

Same year the dusky aisle in the smoke shop thumbing through Esquire All those prayers begging for permission to ask for breasts.

Two years later the trip to Rose Brickman, Corsetier even though corsets were history— except maybe for plump Rose— a journey Mom made with a straight face that afternoon I left the store the proud owner of an AAA white cotton symbol of American beauty.
Closet-door mirror
truth-teller
not an ounce of encouragement
that sore knobs on my chest
would ever amount to anything
like what bounced under
other girls’ blouses.

Mother bestowed on me
her smallest falsies
with a smile of
one who knows the loneliness
of a chest flat as a brothers’.

I wept nightly
after Mrs. Hall read in Sunday School
that place in Song of Solomon
My sister has no breasts—
wept for my brothers
brave to show their faces
at school each day
the same school where everyone knew
their sister had no breasts.

If a girl can’t ignite whistles
If boys don’t bump into her on purpose
If Mom says the two-piece you wore
last summer fits just fine, Pussy
If Harriet’s father flirts with her
and mine says nothing
not even about me becoming a young lady
will I ever be an American beauty?

—Susan Drake
How Myra Feels

Rachel Lipton is awful. She is the first person I have ever really, truly hated. Mr. Siskin says she can have my role in the Purim Play because I’m leaving. Rachel’s about as far from the heroic Esther as anyone, laughing when Kevin Stern burps “You have attained the royal position,” her face made up like she’s a real actress. My mother would kill me if I wore lipstick to school. I want to kill Rachel.

My mother rolls her eyes whenever I talk about the play. She slices catfish into thin strips. Band-Aids twist around both index fingers since she’s learning to cook. Fat Lonnie from Aunt Chovy’s Pizzeria used to bring us fettuccine alfredo and calzone. Luckily he hasn’t shared my mother’s futon on my stage while I’m in a new city. My mother will be my only friend. She will rent the Stalin video series on weekend nights, though she knows I have no room in my life for politics. We’re moving to California.

We live on the bottom story of a brick house painted tan. Our back porch looks over the highway, leading to Amherst. I like to practice my monologues here. The inside of our house is bright and messy. Plants in macramé holders swing by the windows. My mother finds rejected furniture on our neighbors’ lawns. She slips clean patterned sheets over them and pretends they’re new. It’s her stress reliever, she says. Right now the living room floor is blanketed in cardboard boxes. Every day my mother takes more of her murder mysteries and embarrassing folk records off the shelves and shoves them into our tiny Dodge Colt. That’s how I discovered we were moving: last week when I was still Esther, I came home from play rehearsal and my mother was wiggling her behind to Joni Mitchell, packing. “I’m gonna see the folks I dig, I’ll even kiss a sunset pig — California, I’m coming home.” She’s so flighty when she listens to her records. Home? She was born in Des Moines.

My mother writes songs and plays the piano. Before I was born she studied the theories behind music. My father was offered a big professorship here in Massachusetts. So she left college and moved. Now she writes commercial jingles. You can hear her song in the cat food ad:

Let your loved one know how you feel
Warm its tummy with a Kitty Kat meal
She doesn’t play *Chopsticks* or that Fantasia song with me anymore. Instead she comes home, takes aspirin, and lays on her futon.

When Grandma calls she says that we should come to California where she just moved— that loneliness brews with the absence of family. She always talks like the wise old woman in nighttime dramas. She even wears pastel pantsuits and frosts her hair. Who says I’m lonely here? Worcester is where my life exists. It’s where I’m a part of anything. Moving near Grandma is more depressing than the fact that my breasts are growing at different rates. She lives in Leisure World. Anxious seventy-year-olds play checkers and pee in jars. They turn into children again. I hate it even when Grandma visits us from California. She leaves iridescent lipstick smears on my cheeks and brings me airbrushed posters of ballerinas. *And* she smells like cigarettes.

“Happiness comes with change,” Grandma told me yesterday on the phone. She calls every Sunday. Sometimes my mother pulls the phone cord out from the living room to the kitchen and talks to Grandma. She sits on the linoleum floor with her bowl of bell peppers and tofu. They eat dinner together. Grandma is our only family on my mother’s side.

I hate how my mother’s voice changes when she talks to Grandma. Delicate and wavery, like she’s capable of breaking. I used to have a little voice. Then I took acting lessons. I learned the importance of voice projection, of being noticed.

Rachel’s hair is always woven into a thick blond braid. I remember those old schoolhouse movies where the dunces dip little girls’ pigtails in ink. All I have is a Bic pen. I think about writing something evil on her neck, only I can’t decide what, when Mr. Siskin calls on me during the spelling lesson: *b-e-l-i-e-v-a-b-l-e*. And I won the spelling bee last month with ‘conceive.’ I’ve known the *I* before *E* rule since I was ten. Redness crosses the tip of my chin to my cheeks. Mr. Siskin slides his chalky fingers into his pockets and calls on someone else.

Most of my books are packed away. Only *Wuthering Heights* and two back issues of *Cosmopolitan* rest on my squat yellow bookshelf. My mother begins to read aloud, like she always does before I sleep. Lips moving with my mother’s, I recount dark Heathcliff’s absence, quivering inside. I love romance novels. In real life, I have never even been kissed. My mother pulls my flowered quilt back and slips in beside me, tucking her knees into her flat freckled stomach. It reminds me of the pictures of the fetal position I saw in Health Class.

Now that Fat Lonnie’s gone, I awake to my mother’s snores, her face burrowed into my cotton pillow. I remember the last night she
returned from a date with him. Mascara slid off her cheeks and onto my pillowcase. “Please, Myra.” Her voice was clogged and foggy. She folded her body in between my sheets. “Just let me lay with you.” Silk kissed the backs of my legs. She was still wearing her long blue dress. I feigned sleep. Her head curled beneath my arm. With my quilt mummying our bodies up to our necks, I felt taller.

She places the book down and touches my hair now. Hers is growing long again, loosening from a dark brown ponytail identical to mine. I like it this way. I remember sucking on the tip of her wavy hair when I was little. Her gray-green eyes are half-mast. She doesn’t look sleepy—more like she’s concentrating on something personal and immediate. My mother is stringing words together. She looked this way when she used to write songs that excited her. But she only murmurs something about California palm trees before drifting off. She has been trying to sell me California’s warmth since my first tearful performance about leaving.

I’ve only seen pictures of palm trees. Before they made me, my father took my mother to Israel. They picked peaches on a northern farm. “It should be Syria’s,” my mother says now when she watches the news. Whatever that means. In the photograph, bruised peaches fall out of my parents’ hands. My mother’s freckles blur her face. They traveled. My father rocked his body forward and back at the famous stone wall. My mother returned home and converted to Judaism.

Then she tried Buddhism with her old boyfriend Kenny and became a Quaker with Fat Lonnie. She purses her lips together every time I moan about the Purim Play, saying the only reason I attend Beth Hillel School is because the public school system in Worcester is “dangerous.” I imagine smokers in the bathroom; boys who kiss you in dark corners of school dances and then write exaggerations on the walls.

My father is a mathematician. When I was younger and more naive, I believed he left to invent equations that would uncover life’s secrets, and that he would come home to share his discoveries with us. Now I know that could take a lifetime. He’s already been gone eight years.

My mother keeps the Israel vacation album on the floor of the hall closet, underneath a pair of skis and the Game of Life.

I wish my mother would sleep in her bedroom. She’s shared my bed every night since Fat Lonnie left. I discovered a button inside of me. I draw hoops around it with wet fingertips. I don’t make beastly grunts like Fat Lonnie. His nauseating animal noises always swam into my bedroom. Instead I lay quietly like I imagine my mother does.

I pretend I am Esther, the most radiant girl from India to Nubia. I
have Rachel’s lipsticked mouth and B-size bra. Boys flock to me. “There’s nothing more flattering than a man who thinks you’re beautiful,” my mother said last Monday. She rolled pantyhose over her skinny calves. Her first Grandma-like quote. So far.

My mother’s old boyfriend Kenny is the only man who ever told me I was beautiful. And he’s a creep. He has a long kinky ponytail I fantasized slicing off. When my mother worked until dinnertime, he picked me up from swim practice. Twice he came into the changing room. My wet swimsuit dripped from my locker door. His eyes grazed my nakedness for a long time before he left and waited in the car.

I couldn’t tell my mother. Her face shimmered when he came over. They played the piano together. He hammered down the boards of the deck outside where I practice my monologues. He even brought me flowers to scatter across the deck when I pretended I was Ophelia. But I cringed when he slept over. In the morning he would hand me the school lunch he made. He wore only boxer shorts. I’m positive he waxed his chest. His big hands slithered across my back.

When he left, my mother placed a singles ad in the newspaper. She met Fat Lonnie.

At rehearsal, Mr. Siskin says Rachel should ‘become’ Esther for the next two weeks. Her white sheet gown is see-through. She’s wearing fuchsia underwear. Mr. Siskin sighs. “Myra, can you work with her on this?”

I speak slowly, telling her to think about how Esther would feel in every situation. How does she feel when Haman decides to kill all the Jews because her uncle refuses to bow to him? I clasp my hands. Does her stomach feel like a pot of anger, fear, determination? Is she afraid? I put my hands on my hips and stare at her challengingly.

“Yes,” she says. “Afraid.” She gives Kevin Stern a look of pure sex. He smiles at her, yanking off his long beard. Every particle of his wisdom is lost. I’ve seen them on the playground, behind the handball court. You’re not supposed to tongue your uncle. Rachel faces me now that Kevin has left the auditorium. “You have a big chance of becoming famous, Myra.” She leans toward me confidentially. Seventeen says that California is the hot spot for fame.”

I want her palette of earth tones to drip off her cheeks and stain her costume. No one’s going to be able to find me, let alone discover me. I’ll be lonely and anonymous while Rachel takes my big break. It’s pointless to imagine how Esther would feel in this situation, since my livelihood as a Jewish heroine is defunct. But I’ll tell you how Myra feels: pissed off. Besides, I’m moving near Leisure World, not to Hollywood.

I used to daydream about being discovered, but that was when I was younger and more idealistic. Ninth grade has hammered me into
reality. My mother would hear stories of my father’s adventures through old friends: that he skinned salmon on a boat in Alaska; that he was back in Iowa with his old college roommates; and two months ago she heard he’s as close as New York City, teaching at the city college. I imagined him discovering me. We’d leave for New York City, since that was my most romantic, exciting option. We’d move into a two-bedroom flat over a laundromat where a woman with a mohawk and a wooden leg sang into a paper cup outside. I’d wear platform shoes and black cherry lipstick. My father would ride the subway to the delicatessen after work, chatting with handsome, tired actor students in dark glasses and leather, while I worked my way to fame through bit parts in alley theaters.

But now I know how easily he can stay lost. He may not have the same bush dark hair that curled around his ears and out the neck of his shirt. Besides, I couldn’t leave my mother. We were easier to find. We’ve lived here on Lynwood Avenue my whole life.

The last place I’ll ever be found is in a condominium for ‘singles who enjoy a fun-filled lifestyle.’ I found our housing information in the mailbox today. I am abandoning my entire life to live at Santa Monica Singles Villa. My mother will wear a snakeskin bikini like the redheaded sexpot in the brochure. A tan shirtless man with back hair will coach her in tennis. Grandma is wrong. My mother isn’t trying to change anything. She’s going to recreate her loneliness with a new group of people who wear tackier clothes.

I stomp inside. Our disappointing front door closes quietly behind me. The television hums. It is always on when my mother is home alone. Bill Cosby wears a red jogging suit. He scrutinizes the full refrigerator and pulls out chicken and tomatoes for a sandwich. I want to fall into my New York fantasy again. I want Vanessa Huxtable to be my first Black friend. I want to obsess over a crush on Theo that will never happen because he is too wholesome to try and kiss me.

My mother lies on the kitchen floor. Her bare callused toes crawl up the wall. Gray dirt smudges the white paint. The phone cord coils her elbow. Her voice is feathery. I know she’s talking to Grandma. I’m invisible.

Our back porch is completely dark. Car lights flash speedily on the highway below me. I loved living over a highway. This was my stage. Now this will be my last performance before I’m trapped in Santa Monica Singles Villa.

I pull the red checkered tablecloth off our picnic table. It blankets my shoulders. My royal cape.

The moon sits quietly, a cleavage in the sky. It hangs over my
head like a spotlight. Tiptoes pointed down, I embrace the metal fence and cry out Esther’s most victorious speech. This is my moment. Blurry cars buzz by. I imagine a car accident, succeeded by a traffic jam. “The adversary is not worthy of the King’s trouble.” Drivers’ eyes roll upward, seeing me as Esther. I am eloquent in my moment of victory. I am extraordinary. “The adversary and enemy is this evil Haman.” People sit stunned in their vinyl seats, awestruck. The audience feels Haman’s entire body fold in terror.

I spin around, bowing to every side of me. Through the window, my mother sits on her bedroom carpet, pulling dead leaves off a plant. She doesn’t see me. She’s staring at her futon. Like Fat Lonnie will reappear if she stares long enough.

My mother will crawl under my quilt soon. I know I should go inside and slip in next to her so she doesn’t have to feel alone. But first I want to own this moment. I step onto the center of my stage. I want the moon to illuminate my hair into satin. For my royal cape to glow. I want to try to feel beautiful.

—Molly Johnson
Long Haul

We met him
in the middle of the night
on lonely stretches of road
where we brought him clean clothes
picked up his dirty ones
Sleepy-eyed children
in Disney pajamas
standing barefoot
on cold tar roads
waiting for a kiss
and squeeze from
the tall thin man that drove in
and out of our lives in metal
monsters that growled
and belched smoke smelling of
rotten eggs from two metal stacks
on the cab
Headlights glared down
long empty roads
as cattle stomped
and moaned in the trailer
We watched mom
until we got bored
curled into small balls
on the rear seat
of our old Buick
dreamed of fathers
who lived in houses
came home each night
smelling of after-shave
read bedtimes stories
after tucking you in
and said I love you
instead of
see you next week

—Charlene Villella
Breakdown

The van, our old VW, drones forward,  
pointed to home, we are making good time,  
then something snaps inside the motor  
a warning light comes on  
we pull off the empty highway,  
come to a stop.

The last humans  
are many kilometers past:  
an abuelita perched on handlebars  
of a grown son’s bike,  
plastic flowers in her lap,  
the son peddling hard,  
his tee shirt pulled up.  
I glimpse as we pass  
his broad, brown back  
a strip of Fruit of the Loom.

That was an hour ago and now,  
windless, dun-colored landscape  
in every direction  
sand and spiny sage, saguaro, rock,  
no people, no casas,  
no cars, nada.

Above, the sky all shadow-killing sun.  

*How much water do we have?* you ask.  

*Some, I say, warm.*

You climb inside the van  
toss aside shirts, move a box of camping gear,  
take out a spare fan belt.  
You can’t get the belt on alone,  
and I can’t with you.

We sip water,  
swirling with sun motes,  
it is while you check the map
that I see a small, bobbing movement on the horizon.

Coming closer it disappears into dips, reappears, wavering in the fluid bands of heat.

You return to the struggle. I watch him approach an old man pushing a scabbed, yellow wheelbarrow with a few sticks of firewood.

He sets the wheelbarrow down, smiles, wiping his face with a handkerchief, says: Ustedes tienen un problema?
The words, so much smiling ignite a cough, a lung-furnace cough, finally he catches his breath.

The bristle on his chin and cheeks is silver, he walks slowly, bent over, toward the opened engine and with minimum effort you and he slip on the belt.

Gracias! Gracias! We both say and I go inside the van for something to give him, jump out with an orange in each hand.

Para Usted, I say. Naranjas.

Si, si, he laughs, naranjas.

Son buenas... para su... infirmedad, I say, gesturing toward my own lungs.

He takes the oranges from me, arranges them with the firewood,
picks up the wheelbarrow,  
handles as splintered as the kindling.  
Gracias, he smiles,  
kicking huaraches against pavement  
to clear sand, dust.  
*But nothing, nothing,* he says,  
laughing softly, *will help me now.*

Standing together beside the van,  
*Gracias, adios,* we call out to his back,  
watching him go, looking beyond him  
for any kind of destination,  
a village, a house.

We see nothing. —Kim Scheiblauer

—not fear. much less precise:  
like ink diffusing in solvent,  
or unsurfaced bruise.  

*it travels by synapses, by blood,*  
until *I can’t feel for it is*  

—Elizabeth Nissen
Child Summer

Summers we swim in pools other people own
at homes empty of their winter tenants.
We scramble out of the back of my father’s pickup
and run shrieking across asphalt that burns
our feet to hurdle ourselves into the turquoise blue.

While he unloads metal pool brushes, chlorine
and dry acid, we splash high cellophane arcs
into the glittering air, take enormous breaths
and dive beneath the water to skim the flickering,
soundless length, break the dreaming surface
into a blaze of light and noise.

Afterwards we sit, dripping
on the hot cement, sun burning our plastered hair,
watching my father, his white straw hat tugged
down low against the sun, skim the long pole
back and forth across the water, pour in
chlorine, check the filters.

He signals and we skitter behind him
like puppies, climb back into the bed of the truck
and feel the hot air whip our faces, the engine
rumble beneath our legs, see the desert shimmer
from behind our wet, water logged lashes.
We’ll be good for three, maybe four more pools
before he decides to take a break, circle us back
to Mom and a late lunch.

We yell back and forth over the truck’s motor,
the rushing air, and there is nothing else
to our lives but that moment in a child summer,
the velvet weight of water,
the glaze of sun on our skin,
his white hat.

—Carol A. Housner
Making Fudge

I can’t help it, She says,
pouring sugar into the pooled amber
of melted butter, I love men.
The taste, the smell,
the texture of their bodies,
She continues, stirring the simmering
mixture with a flat, wooden spoon.
I love the smooth slide of skin,
the slope of muscle beneath, the
blade of bone beneath that, the salty
dark dream of blood surging energy
into the secret animal.

She stirs in vanilla, salt, a drizzle
of milk and begins to drop smooth chunks
of dark chocolate into the bubbling mass.
I love the sensitive ones, She murmurs,
almost under her breath, and the
beautiful ones, a bit dazzled with their
own sense of power, but so decorative...
She spreads butter slowly along the insides
of the yellow ceramic bowl, her fingers
slick and glistening, the puppydog boys,
catapulting helter skelter into the air,
the quiet ones stepping through their lives,
serious and slow...

She lifts the heavy pot from the stove
and pours the gleaming brown mixture
into the yellow dish and looks up,
her direct gaze, calm and earnest,
it’s like chocolate, the good kind
wrapped in heavy silver paper,
you know the kind I mean.
Of course we can live without it,
filling ourselves with potatoes and
pudding, but we love the taste,
the warm melt of it in our mouths.
And in the mundane rustle of days
it helps to remember the quick sweet
pinch from the stash on the shelf
above the sink, the bliss of brown
that keeps us going.

She scrapes the last of the thick
sweetness from the pot, covers the dish
with waxed paper and sets it to cool
on the counter below the open window.
The breeze billows the curtains a little
and She looks out and smiles.
I just love men, She sighs,
I can’t help it.

—Carol A. Housner
—Elizabeth Nissen
Hands

Your hands. Seeing them.
My skin peels like a serpent’s
from its sheath.
Your fingers: long, river polished roots
cooling my molten skin
before the flow of lavation
meets the kitchen floor.

Your hands promising
nighttime devotion and enshrouding.
Promising blood rhythms
and pounding algorithms
Promising
the consummation of my solitude
Promising to slip their way past
the dissention of my lips.

Your hands promising
an end to this starvation;
giving me something whole to swallow.
Your fingers lingering
like streaks of light against my body;
Each line vibrating with energy.

Your hands cupping, curling,
pocketing, softening, ascending, descending,
kneading, releasing, always moving,
promising more.

—Christi A. Crutchfield
Fuego
(For Jenn)

She’s a brightly burning fire
radiating a kind of heat and warmth
a contained purity
balance and passion
supremely alive
illuminating the dark places
with assuring orange light

A kindness and softness
above a full-blazing flame:
strong, complete, determined
but resoundingly life-giving
life-affirming

She’s in love, in life at once
and always
setting fire to the ground she touches
the earth beneath her beckons
for that spark (ignite the world...)
opening life up, purifying with a look & touch.
The scorched path is renewed
transformed, consummated with warmth
and liberated
from all limitation

A blaze, she is—fiery and true
solid, formless, changing shape
shifting and enlivening
all within her reach
and beyond.
She consumes life, and life inhales her
they feed each other in a dance:
a loving, breathing ever-embrace
joyful, grounded
and on fire...

—George Joyce
We park Les’s car down the street from the apartment, I ask, “Why are we parking so far from the house?” Les instructs me, “When buying drugs, never park right in front of the house; park down the street and walk a block to the front door. This way you don’t bring attention to the house or to you.” Typical Crank Paranoia is what I’m thinking, but I keep that to myself. I tell Les I want to wait in the car while he goes in, but he says, “No, this bitch always takes forever, so come in with me.” I go with him.

The apartments are brown with white trim around the doors and windows. In front of her door I notice an empty can of chili. Les sees it too and kicks the can to the side—it is in his way. Les is a definite druggie, but also a clean freak. He knocks, and while we are waiting we can hear a woman screaming and yelling from inside the house. This frightens me.

I move closer to Les’s back; I am so close that I’m practically leaning on him, touching him. I can smell the leather from his jacket, feel his long blond hair against my face. I like the fact that Les is over 6’3” and has tattoos covering his strong arms and back. He got those tattoos in San Quentin, but that only adds to his charisma. I know what you’re thinking: San Quentin and charisma don’t go hand in hand. But they do for me. I’ve never known anyone quite like him; he’s tough, funny and sexy. He introduced me to crank, not that he should get an award or anything, but I had never tried anything like it before. For me, the great sex, instant rush is worth putting up with the negative aspects of doing the drug; and being here at this apartment, listening to the yelling inside, is beyond doubt a negative.

Finally, a small blond boy around seven years old opens the door. Les looks past him toward the noise and asks if his mom is home. Not waiting for a reply, Les places his palm on the door, opens it further, and strolls past the kid. I follow, but give the boy an apologetic smile; he doesn’t see me since he is closing the door. I guess he has had people barge in before.

I follow Les through the door and glance into a small, dark kitchen. There is a large pile of paper bags with overflowing garbage in the corner; the smell of stale milk and rotten food hits me immediately. Without even thinking, I clasp my hand over my nose and mouth and
try to hold my breath. Normally, I would be too polite to walk into a stranger’s house covering my nose, but in this place simple courtesies seem foolish. I lower my hand anyway, and put both my hands in my pockets, trying to act as if everything is normal. There are a couple of doors on my right, but I keep looking ahead as I don’t want to see more than I have to.

The woman’s voice becomes louder and shriller as we enter the small living room. I finally see her directly in front of me. Short, skinny, with blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, she is standing on her tiptoes next to a large window yelling at something up in the corner. I can’t see what she is yelling at because the light is dim. All of a sudden a small yellow bird flies from the corner of the room toward us. Les ducks and I jump to the side. This scares the shit out of me; I hate birds, especially in confined places. She grabs a broom and runs toward the other side of the room.

“I’m going to kill the damn bird,” she yells. “Mom don’t kill it, just catch it!” shrills another voice from the corner of the room. This is her older son; he must be around nine. He is smiling and jumping too high on an overstuffed chair covered with dirty socks, pants, and a couple of soiled aluminum TV dinner trays. Then the younger boy joins in, jumping and clapping behind his mom. “Mommy, get the bird,” he yells. I start to feel sick to my stomach.

I want out. I glance at Les, but he just walks to the overstuffed chair and looks at the older boy. The kids jumps off the chair and Les, with one swoop of his arm, knocks the garbage from chair to floor. He sits down with his long legs stretched out before him and folds his right hand under his chin. He watches this pathetic scene with a bemused look on his face. This is pure entertainment for him and I’m amazed he can be so detached. He looks at me and winks. I like it when he winks at me. It makes me feel as if I’m *In on the Game* or something. I can’t help but give him a slight smile despite this awful situation. I know he has power over me and sometimes I welcome it. I want him to take me out of here but I wouldn’t think to ask. I walk over and sit next to him on the arm of the chair and whisper, “We should open the door or something so the poor bird can fly out.” Les ignores me and continues watching the woman.

The boys act as if this is an adventure, and the woman is just pissed off because the bird is getting the better of her. I feel sorry for the bird; I want to let it out of this place. It suddenly becomes very important for me to help this bird. I look at the large window behind us and notice there isn’t a screen. I gather all my courage and stand up to open the
window. Les, without looking at me, grabs my arm and says, “No, leave it.”

The commotion in the house is winding down. The mother finally sits down on the couch and says to Les, “I traded this stupid bird and its cage for some crank. I opened the door of the cage just to hold it and I’ve been trying to catch it for an hour. When I finally do... I’m gonna kill it. What the fuck was I thinking anyway?”

I finally see the mother up close. Minutes ago she looked like an average twenty-something woman, but now I see what crank has done to her: skin pale and pasty from lack of sun and pocked-marked from acne; blue eyes wide open but vacant. She has two bottom teeth missing. Missing teeth are common among long time crank users. I’ve never understood why they lose teeth, but I hope it’s due to poor hygiene and not due to the drug. Unthinking, I run my tongue over my teeth. Still there: all twenty-eight of them. I counted them once on a sleepless two-day crank binge during which I did nothing but clean my small apartment down to the smallest detail: using Pledge to polish the fake wood molding on the bottom of the walls.

The bird settles on top of a china cabinet. The cabinet looks new, only dusty and empty. The mother most likely traded that for some drugs too. Watching the bird hop and flap on top of the china cabinet, the older boy runs over and starts jumping up and down trying to swat the bird. “Get over here you stupid bird.” he keeps repeating. Seeing mother and son next to each other, I realize how similar they are: they sound alike and are both practically the same size; he just as blond and almost as pale and washed out as she is. The younger boy, now bored with the drama of his new pet, sits on the couch, and a pile of clothes, hitting some stuffed animal against his legs which are too short to touch the floor.

Les, still sitting on the chair, ignores her explanation and tells her he wants an eighth of crank. She shrugs and says she has it, but first she is gonna get this bird.

I wish we could get the stuff, leave and never think about this bird again, but that isn’t going to happen. Les realizes this too, so he slowly stands up. His legs are so long it seems to take him a long time just to stand all the way up. He walks over to the cabinet. I hear something over by the couch; the younger boy has just dropped the dirty stuffed animal onto the floor and is chewing his nails, eyes fixed on Les. The drama begins again.
The mother and older boy move off to the side. The bird seems to sense what is happening and takes off toward me. I scream and duck my head into my lap but it doesn’t come toward me, he flies to the window that I never opened. He hits it hard and I hear a smack! I jump up and stare at the poor bird lying motionless on its side. One of the boys runs over and pushes me out of the way. “Mom, I think it’s dead!” It’s the older boy, his face is flushed with excitement. The mother and younger son come over and peer at the dead bird. The younger boy wants to flush it down the toilet. The mother ignores him, bends down and grabs the bird as if it is a ball or a rock. She walks down the dark hall. I hear her open the door, then slam it. The boys race out the front door to investigate.

The mother then goes off to a bedroom and we hear a drawer close. Les is still leaning against the cabinet with his arms crossed. He looks at me and gives me a We’re Almost out of Here smile. I don’t smile back. He goes back into the bedroom and I hear muttering. My legs shake and my stomach hurts. I tell myself I wont be back no matter how much I want to do crank.

Suddenly, I feel a sharp pain in my left hand. I bring my arm out in front of me and look at my hand, clenching it into a fist, then flexing my fingers. My wrist still hurts from last week; it’s swollen and I have a large bruise where Les missed my vein and injected crank and my own blood under my skin instead. It burned like hell, and he quickly pulled the needle out, but not before it formed a golf ball size lump on top of my wrist. This entire week at work I had to wear a sweater with the arms stretched to the palm of my hand to cover my drug use. I suddenly realize I have more in common with this woman then I want to believe, and my throat tightens. I might have all my teeth and I sure don’t have any kids, but we have the same pain that comes with the desire to get a rush. Running my hand through my hair to get it out of my face, I notice my hands are shaking.

I want to leave, but instead I look at the window that stopped the yellow bird a few minutes ago. Even in the dim light, the smudges and dirt on the glass are noticeable. Can any sunlight get through the grime? I walk toward the window and then Les comes out and hits the side of the wall with his hand to get my attention. “Come on, I got it,” he tells me. I turn, walk down the hall and peer into the bedroom at the mother. She is sitting, crossed legged, on a bare mattress on the floor counting money.
Once outside, I follow Les towards the car but I’m slow because my legs seem to belong to someone else. Behind me, I hear the kids fighting over the dead bird. Les finally stops to wait for me. He smiles, but it seems out of place considering where we have just been, and his teeth look too big for his face. His skin looks yellow under the streetlights. I can see he’s in a hurry to do the crank, but I don’t care. I keep my pace slow because I’m afraid I’m going to fall.

—Liz Croom
Big Sur, Midnight

The silver cross slips from my ear as I sleep.  
Your pomegranate mouth fills my dream.

I awaken to owls calling, one to another,  
burn your letter in the woodstove.

The Milky Way is a curtain of lace,  
ripped down the middle to let darkness in.

Desire has no patience,  
consumes the cloistered heart.

At the baths I soak in the clawfoot tub,  
watch bodies move in & out of water.

Shadows merge in lantern-light, smell of sulphur rises.  
The devil’s fragrance surrounds me.

I would open my veins, let my blood run  
if that would bring you to my bed.

—Amber Coverdale Sumrall
To Open The Heart

Lose yourself inside the maze of a dream,
travel the night country of metaphor, world between worlds.
Translate the messages when you awaken, the visions,
search for clues, retrieve what has been lost.

Consider the many forms of silence, inner and outer,
grey silence before a storm, silent blue clearing afterward.
Watch how your words like stones ripple the pool of stillness,
choose carefully which ones to cast.

Gather sage, burn it for sweet, cleansing smoke,
observe how it clings to bare cliffs, thrives in the absence of soil.
Recall those you may have injured through fear and false pride,
breathe in fragrant, nourishing air, slowly let it go.

Walk the rim of a mountain scoured by rain, wind, fire,
ponder the myriad ways you attempt to fill your emptiness.
Allow what you are afraid of to permeate your being,
the way fog overtakes the forest, then dissolves in clear light.

Follow the singing, swollen river downstream,
remove your clothes, baptize yourself again in the water.
Forgive yourself for what you have not yet learned
then sleep unsheltered in a meadow of wild grasses.

Become a raven, a snake, a dolphin, a wolf,
greet each of your selves as sister, brother.
Learn to laugh in their language, speak with their tongue,
see how they dance circles around you.

Set fire to all you think you know,
create a new story for your life.
Let your body be a candle consumed by desire
as you change from one form into another.

Sit inside a redwood that has burned from the inside out,
call your sorrows up one by one, welcome them as friends.
Your tears are the body’s rain, without them nothing will grow.
Joy can be this simple, some long-locked door swinging open in the heart.

—Amber Coverdale Sumrall
Kingdom Come, 1951

When the Jehovah’s Witnesses rang the doorbell
and knocked in that urgent way, as if delivering a telegram
my mother was ready for them. Dressed as usual, in stockings with
seams,
black heels, a ruffled apron covering her cashmere skirt and sweater,
she opened the door, smiling in that abstract way reserved for flies
and hornets just before swatting them to Kingdom Come.

The woman, almost hidden inside a navy-blue bonnet,
asked if my mother had been saved, proffered a copy of *Watchtower*.
No thank you, my mother said, recoiling from the magazine
as if it were pornography, we’re not interested here.
Please don’t waste your time, and please don’t come back.
Smelling of hair tonic and stale sweat, the man leaned into the doorway
his face haggard as if he’d been fasting for days. The Second Coming is
at hand,
he warned. God will smite those who deny His words and pestilence
shall be visited upon those who turn their backs on Him.

My mother tossed her head, held it high as if dark floodwaters
were swirling around her. Now you listen to me, she hissed.
We’re Catholics and we’ve been saved since the day we were born.
Don’t you ever come to this house again, thumping on your so-called
Bibles.
She, who never stood up to anyone, even my father,
held her necklace with the silver cross to his face as if he were a vampire.
Paling, he fled, the woman retrieving his briefcase,
eyes lowered, mumbling, thank you for your time.
God bless you, my mother said sweetly, closing the door.

—Amber Coverdale Sumrall
Communion

Already landed on the shore of desire
she must put on the white dress, freshly starched and hemmed
not straight, but in a curve, because her mother is a realtor, not a
seamstress.
And her hands shake with excitement
for her youngest child
and from some small white pill to help her unwind
and a glass of pale wine or some combination.
So what it is Sunday morning?

She has never been to a wedding
but today she is to be a bride.
In catechism the priest said she will marry Jesus;
that without any physical evidence
she must believe
that he loves her uniquely and completely.

She expects he will treat her kindly—
better than her father treats her mother.
She is ready to be a devoted wife—
as long as he does not beat her or
shake her into submission.
And in a wilder moment—when she allows
herself more hope even—
she wonders where they will go
on their honeymoon vacation.

She has studied that He is a fisherman
and thinks a cruise would be fine.

She likes the idea of eating fresh fish from the ocean.
Maybe she could be in a miracle and walk on water also.
Over the heads of her classmates she would float upwards,
buoyant like a runaway balloon;
the way she leaves her bed when her father
joins her at night
kicking back the cool sheets
awakening her sister
rearranging the animals with one fell swoop
a giant bird he descends
while she pretends to ascend to the heavens
but only reaches as far as the bedroom ceiling--
hovering—a lost angel
where she watches his shenanigans
like television
but this is real
all quivering flesh and sex.

She wonders if Jesus will have three days worth of stubble
from not shaving after he has risen again.
And what it means to be dead,
the quiet of it like the darkness of sky at night
before the stars embrace light.
She wishes He will smell like pine forest
or cedar, her favorite tree.
Not the sweat of semen sticky on her lips (God’s secret)
or the alcohol on her father’s breath.

Maybe they can buy a house in the suburbs.
She knows Jesus is rich.
She has high hopes for her husband.
Even if she is only seven she can dream
she is at one with something.

—Mary Renga
pillows and oranges

We sit together sometimes, and sometimes you even smile,
Like two books on a bookshelf, touching but unable to open.

Benign, neutral, and nice, I want to tell you I love you,
But I am only a someone, more than a million miles away.

Like so many times before, safely, I’ll quietly wait,
As loves’ blazing inferno engulfs my impotent mind.

I love you, I love you, I love you, screaming inside my skull,
As the cruel hand of passion kneads my timid heart.

I want to touch your lips, I want to smell your pillow,
I want to fold your clothes, I want to peel you an orange.

I want you to call my name, I want you to brush my hair,
I want you to serve me coffee, I want you to squeeze my hand.

Pulsating desires every night, fondling and tormenting my emotions,
Morning passions unfulfilled, onto unruffled sheets extrude.

Everyday I want to, I want to tell you I love you,
Everyday I plan, but later cower and weaken.

Love is good and wonderful, I’ve been told off and on,
But here I sit muted, burning, emptied, and alone.

—Bobby McKee
Elemental

Before moonrise, black velvet
night is sprinkled with
a sequin band of stars
above the canyon, constellations
of late summer stitched
over the hazy strip of Milky Way.

Black air melts into black
river and dark outlines of rock–
shapes so familiar in the light.

The current’s gentle flow
is a caress I enter;
part of water, part of sky,
feel the silken stroking of
cool watery fingers on
my breasts and thighs.

I swim across, press close
against dark rock’s worn facets,
slide my hands exploring
over curved planes, into cracks,
within the smooth and slippery surface,

allow my toes and knees
to sink into the shallow
bottom sand, warm to my
receptive skin, now river cooled.

My eyes see only stars and shadows,
as my searching touch knows my own
softness, lightless liquid river,
firm textures of sand and rock.

I come into the river while
the river enters me,
marriage of rock and water,
air and stars, meeting me in
elemental union.

—Sylvia Bortin
St. Vitus’ Arm

Vivid recollections of you settle
onto each of the aging statues of saints
on the Charles Bridge in Prague
as if our years together could condense
into coal the people of Prague burn.
Out of the rising smoke of those fires
which tints the winter skies
of the city center what you and I shared
rains like a fine spray of black pollen
and in the warmest part of town, crossing
the river, I begin to notice.

Sometimes I rub the statues
to bring out the shine. It’s true
surfaces can’t hold what we want
to see in them. History has nothing
to do with the man who cast these figures,
it’s about how long his name gets left
on the plaque. I had already read it twice
before I knew you existed, and I’ve read it
twice since.

If you never write another poem
about me, I won’t be history.
Instead I will be what I told you
I could give you: I warmed your nights
and walked next to you. I tried to see
the changes as we ate. I slowed us down
to a limited space we could manage so
crossing the bridge past its twenty four
omniscient men didn’t ask for anymore
attention than we already gave. No,

I wanted history to be unimportant
Time to not accumulate and atomize,
like coal, into something else we should use
to go forward. I wanted to know
the black film would continue
to rain and cover the spot on St. Vitus’ arm
where we could be seen, seeing
each other in the reflection found there,
knowing his curves distort. The people on the bridge behind would stop in the same position, see themselves reflected in his antiquity and not realize they had witnessed us disappear.

—Farnaz Fatemi

—Jamil Hellu
The first thing Michael asked when I got to the hospice for my Monday morning visit was “Did you read the reviews? Have you seen ‘T-Rex’ yet?” I leaned against the door of his room and shook my head. “Jorge and Paul went on Saturday and stopped by afterwards,” he reported. “They loved it. So much gore and screaming. They said the dinosaurs were great.”

I balled a fist in my coat pocket and shrugged. “It’s not my kind of movie.”

It took effort not to sweep Michael’s body with what he called my “lighthouse look”—as if my eyes were a beam of light piercing night water, looking for changes, disasters from the weekend, new storms at sea. I lingered, instead, on the chaos of the place: the gurgling oxygen tank, the silent IV drip, the blood pressure monitor. The flowers I had brought on Friday were already drooping in the vase on his bedside table.

Michael gave an impatient sigh. “I’m not hallucinating again, am I? Aren’t you our resident expert, Miss I-know-everything-there-is-to-know-and-more-about-dinosaurs?”

I nodded as I yanked open the cheap orange curtains that cloaked the narrow windows. Sunlight splashed on the pale face of my dearest friend. “So tell me the truth, Dino lady. Why don’t you care about this film?”

I settled at the foot of his rumpled bed and leaned back into the arms of the side railing. “Oy, that Gorky,” I said, trying to speak past the sadness that thickened my throat. I looked away from the IV needle taped into Michael’s bruised arm. “He’s a director with a suburban imagination. To get six bucks out of me, he’d have to have more guts—the dinosaurs should be the heroes.”

Michael raised what was left of his right eyebrow. Then he waved his hand. “Don’t worry. You’ll sell your book someday. And the movie makers, I’m telling you, they’ll come running.”

I sat up to untangle the looping lines of the oxygen tube that had gotten caught in the sheets. “That’s the first thing I want you to demand from that god you are so determined to believe in. After you die, you talk to him, you make it happen.”

“He exists?” Michael sat up quickly, a smile widening his gaunt face. “Has the great atheist finally given in?”

“Not on your life, toots,” I began. Then I stopped. What had I just said?

Michael had the nerve to laugh. “You’re so stubborn. Even my dying isn’t going to budge you?” He settled himself back in against the
pillows and waited.

“I don’t know.” I spoke slowly, feeling each word echo against the drum skin of my chest. “You’re not dead yet.”

He grimaced, allowing the truth to rest like a knife between us for the first time that morning. “Well, maybe you don’t have so long to wait. It’s been hell, the last couple of days.”

Michael looked it: his face scraped into sharper angles than usual, the two lesions on his cheek blooming a deep purple against his white skin. Weariness had bleached the color from his eyes. “So,” I nodded, sorrow pricking at my ribs. “Are you saying that you’re finally ready?”

“I’m tired, Tess,” he confessed. Then my best friend since eighth grade, my grinning adversary, the star of the religious debate in Mrs. Neidleman’s history class at Le Conte Junior High School, frowned. “You’re crying?”

I swiped quickly at a few quiet tears. “You can’t do that,” Michael folded his knobby arms against his chest. “Outlawed,” he spat. “Breach of contract. Against the rules.” “Your rules suck,” I sniffed. In all the years I’d known him, he’d always been afraid of tears. “Mike, I’m not sure I can do this how you want.”

He shrugged. “You don’t have a choice.” His lips thinned and the shadows around his eyes deepened. “Listen, it’s the only pleasure I get from dying.” He tried to make it all a joke. “When else have I gotten to order you around?” Michael let his voice fall. “Enough. Read to me from that novel you’re writing.” He spoke in his marketing voice, the ad executive at work. “You know: ‘Brilliant! Provocative! The greatest fantasy since Watership Down.’”

I swallowed the ache in my throat as lines of pain mapped his forehead. Now that he had stopped talking, I could hear the gurgle in each uncertain breath. Slowly, his hand moved across the blanket to rest on my arm.

“Come on, Tess,” he whispered.

I gathered his bony fingers as if they were a newly hatched sparrow, surprised and blinking, in the palm of my hand. Softly, with a touch as light as feathers, I brushed them against my cheek. Michael opened his eyes and smiled. I nestled his fist in my lap and began to read.

_The trail wound up through red rock, scraping the edges of sharp cliffs. One by one, we followed the thin line, trying not to look over into the plain below, avoiding the suck and draw of the dizzying heights. Each view revealed the panting length of our journey. With every aching step I wondered how we_
could possibly go on.

“Great Mother, Creator of the World,” I breathed, “please, let us find you.” I looked up, as if my thought would bring her closer, but I wasn’t watching the trail and so my claw slipped. I skittered, yelping, down a flank of rock, skidding two full body lengths toward the bottom. T-Rex bellowed, stopping Triceratops from the ascent. Thescelosaurus turned back, ready to make his way down to me.

I shook my head and slowly stretched a bleeding leg upward. Claw-hold by claw-hold, I dragged myself, bruised and gasping, back up to the trail. Triceratops nudged me a tired welcome with her horns, blunted now from our travels. Thescelosaurus hissed, his scarred snout wrinkled with concern. Even T-Rex linked her stubby tail with mine for a moment as I stumbled past her into the lead. The weariest must walk first. I took another wheezing breath and began.

Up, into the Great Mother’s country. Up, step by step, twisting our way toward the mystery of her home. When the trail flattened to circle a hulking boulder, I thought we had finally reached it. Trumpeting to the others, I raced around the big stone. And there, straight ahead, shimmered a wall of flames.

“So many obstacles,” Michael objected.

I placed a hand on his leg, muscles eaten by the virus. “What, you want I should make it easy?” I could feel my fingers shake a little as they rested on his knee. Of all people, he should understand. “Tell me the last time it was a picnic for you to get to the core of something.”

He shifted his hips back against a pile of pillows. “Stories,” he shook his head, “we’re not talking real life here.”

“I am.” I looked around at the burnt orange walls of his room, the yellow linoleum that threatened to flame our feet. “Every word of it.” And I felt the fire in me begin to blaze.

Michael peered up into my face for a moment. “You’re angry?”

“Yeah.” Flames climbed the bones of my cheeks.

“You know I don’t want to hear about it.” Michael brushed a strand of hair from his face. “Anger’s a waste.” He slapped a hand weakly against the sheets. “Honey, it just doesn’t do any good.”

“Good for what?” I almost asked. “Good for who?” But the trembling in his jaw stopped me. Michael’s anger and grief hadn’t kept his lover Peter from dying or five of his closest friends; it hadn’t made him immune to the disease. So now we sat in this hospice room, thick with the silence of his rules: no tears, no fighting. Still, I leaned toward him, wanting to make him see. “Mike, I’m telling the truth in this story and you’re not going to stop me.”

“All right.” He shrugged away from me. “What do I care? You’re the writer. So tell.”
We climbed, heads bent against the lick of the flames. We trudged, we stomped, we burrowed. The trail wandered, twisting upward, always upward, like a song. Once, when it straightened for a time, I was sure that we had reached the Great Mother’s cave and I thought I smelled water. I stood still and sniffed. A wash of mist drifted through the air and then it was gone.

I took that coolness into my lungs and hooted. As if my blood had fevered, I bolted, I galloped, I shot toward the wet scent that pooled in the middle of the burning. I arrived at a lake and splashed joyously into the murky water. But when I bent eagerly to drink, I choked. The stuff was salty, a wetness I had made myself, nothing more than a gathering of my tears.

“Great Spirit,” I sobbed, “where is the cave, the shelter you promised your children?” At my words, the air darkened, as if the world had turned to smoke. I could barely make out the rest of the group as they thumped toward me, chased by claws of fire. Triceratops’ horns had burned. “We beg your help,” I cried from my heart. “Please! We have come all this way to speak to you.”

A huge creature, feathered and boned, scaled and glistening, lumbered toward us out of the dark. She had two legs; she had six; she was pawed and snouted, finned and gilled. And her eyes, a pond of oil, a loch of ooze, had eaten the bones of the world. They knew everything.

“Great Mother?” I gasped.

The creature laughed.

“No!” Michael tried to sit up and spilled his pillows. As I bent to gather them, he swore. “Jesus shit, she’s horrible. You can’t make God like that.”

“God?” I shoved three small lumps behind his back and fluffed the largest in my hasty hands. “I’m not talking about any god here.”

“Of course you are,” Michael glared at me, irritation giving his cheeks a flush. “Who the hell else could the Great Spirit be?”

I took a breath, for patience. I rolled my eyes, for calm. And then I gently placed the pillow behind his head. “She’s the mother of the world. If you want,” I shrugged, “the goddess of evolution.”

“Oh come on.” Michael laughed, but the sound had eighth grade ridicule in it. The sneer on his face looked as if he had a video camera set up in heaven. Right there, in the VCR, was the tape he was planning to show Mrs. Neidleman’s class to prove that I was wrong.

“Let’s not be too sure now,” I cautioned. “You sound an awful lot like the mother of someone I love who refuses to visit her son when he’s dying. She prays but keeps the whole damn family away because her god says any queer, even her baby boy, is a sinner and headed straight to hell.”

Michael’s eyes darkened. “Low blow, Tess.” He turned on his
side, his bony back hunched away from me.

Kathy, his favorite nurse, interrupted us to check the monitors.
“You’re arguing?” she chortled. “Go at it. It’s good for the saint in him.”

I pushed past her to rub Michael’s sore shoulders. “I’m sorry,” I whispered. After a time, I felt the strain in his muscles ease. I said, “Okay, so this isn’t about you and your mom. You want it to be just a story, remember?”

He sighed and I traced the vertebrae, knobby as redwood bark, down to the small flaccid pool above his hips. “These guys are dinosaurs, Mike.” I leaned over to gently finger a lesion at the tip of his shoulder. “The mother of their species isn’t going to look like Sunday school, some guy with a bald head and white beard dressed in a toga.”

Michael turned back over and gripped my hand. “Why are you doing this?”

I took a step into the blue pool of his eyes. Because you don’t want me to cry, I thought. The water lapped at my feet. Because you don’t want to hear why I’m angry. I sank in the wetness to my knees. Michael, I can’t bear the thought of losing you and it’s coming so close. Please, I cried, listen.

“I’m writing to say something,” I answered.

For the first time in years, Michael’s eyes shone for a moment. I thought I saw a gleam of tears.

Like the sea or a swamp, an unexpected pond offering up water. Like a dream, ferned and moist, we followed the laughing Great Mother up a final slope to her home. The dark mouth of her cave gleamed like a sunset lake in the middle of the burning. As we crossed the threshold of black rock, mud rushed to cool the blisters around our claws.

Triceratops whimpered as she sank to her knees in the ooze. T-Rex lumbered to a quiet pool to drink.

“Is this what you have been longing for, my children?” growled the large creature who stood, a glittering of orange and green scales, in the midst of our pleasure. I blinked. Had she changed shape? Perhaps it was the steam, rising off the lakes, or a bit of smoke that curled in through the cave opening. I tried to count Mother’s paws: now six, now five, now seven. When I looked up again, she had grown three eyes.

She laughed at my fear, a sound that filled the dome of her dwelling. It echoed off the slick walls like a shower of stars in an autumn night. “Why have you come?” she snorted, and this time the cave shimmered with bolts of lightening.

“What is it?” she thundered, “that you have traveled all this way to ask of me?”

“Mother of the World...” T-Rex began. The Great Spirit threw up her long neck and brayed, drowning T-Rex’s howl.

“Please,” Thescelosaurus bleated. “We have been sent...”
Mother stomped, splashing great plumes of water from the pools at her feet.

“Oh honored Mother,” Triceratops screeched. She lifted her horns into the fury of the Great Spirit’s silence.

I shook my head. Our words were too grand, too far off the path of our deep longing. All the hopes and dreams of our species rose like a tide to flood my throat. Tears splashed across my snout as I grunted, “We are so heavy. Please, allow us to fly.”

“Fly?” Michael rasped on Tuesday morning. His voice echoed the pinched look of his face, bones scraped clean by a scalpel. Pointed and sharp as a mugger’s blade, he pricked at the ball of fear blocking my throat.

I blinked, willing myself to see how the disease held him captive this morning. In twenty-four hours, except for his face, Michael’s body had gone slack. Sometime during the night, his muscles had weakened. Even the simple act of sitting up was too difficult for him today. I reached to lift a shock of his dark hair, collapsed behind an ear, but Michael shifted quietly away from me. A spasm jumped across one of his stubbled cheeks.

“What are you doing?” he asked, the words avalanching from his mouth like a spray of boulders. “The story stinks! You’re twisting it, giving them all that niceness.” Michael licked a trail of spittle from his lips. “Pools and water, for Christ’s sake.”

“Mike...” I placed the papers carefully in my lap, leaning forward into his snarl. My chest began to hum: a steady beat that was joyful and sad, furious and filled with longing. “Hey,” I said, “the story’s good.”

He stretched a contemptuous arm over his head to grip the corner of his pillow. The bathrobe that I had given him for Christmas was already frayed at the cuffs. “And that goddess of yours, the Ugly Mother, she listens to them?” He narrowed his eyes and worried a flap of dried skin on his chin. “Flying—it’s not that easy. You don’t just get to waltz in and pop off with your wishes. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Why not?” I got down off my blue plastic chair and crouched on the linoleum so I could face him. He grimaced, then tried to twist away. Sitting back on my heels, I tugged at Michael’s bathrobe belt. “What do you want? They went through hell just to get there to ask the damn question. Why does it have to be so hard at the end?”

“It just is,” he panted. “Take a fucking look.”

I stared at the canyon of his face, the deep shadows and crevices. His eyelids were crusted with the sands of his hard night. Michael shook his head, “Cut the dinosaur crap, Tess.” He raised one thin eyebrow.
“This whole business—we’re talking about you and me.”

We had been pretending differently for so long that my lie was automatic. “Getting weaker hasn’t ruined your ego, mister. You think I spent the whole last year at my computer just for you?”

“No shit.” Michael reached for my hand and gripped the palm fiercely. “And it was worth every minute, wasn’t it darling?” A fleeting smile, lean as a hungry wolf, loped across his worn face.

Then he sighed. “But the ending’s wrong. You want something easier for me than I’m getting.” Avoiding my eye, he whispered, “You want a pretty story, something healing. Honey,” he shook his head, “it’s not like that.”

“How do you know?” I asked, tears welling. “You’re not there yet. You’re still following the trail through the fire.”

Michael flushed; he pulled at my hand, drawing me down on the bed beside him. We slid into quiet, our breath punctuated by the noises of hospital machines. The gurgle of the oxygen tank, the click of the blood pressure monitor.

“So what do you really want?” I asked, gently rubbing my nose along Michael’s cheek. “Just in case there’s a Great Mother. Will you tell me? What’s your deepest wish?”

We stared, face to face on the scratchy pillow. His eyes, the leached blue of high summer, merged into one big sky.

“I want to get the hell out of this stupid body,” he gasped. “I want to live for a thousand years.” Then he rolled his face into my shoulder and began to weep.

I shook the tears from my eyes and raised my head to look at the Great Spirit. Wind rustled the ferns in the cave. She bent her long neck and I stepped closer. Then, with one claw lifted, I fell off a precipice into her gaze.

Her eyes: green and cool, molten and raging. Her eyes: the sandy nest of the world.

From the air, spinning away from a sandstone cliff, I gathered my courage to look down at the plain that stretched below me. I saw species after species, plant and animal, as they hatched and sang and died. A millennium passed as I fell, like a thrown stone arcing across a wide prairie. Rivers shifted. Mountains rose up and wore down and still I tumbled, end over end, toward the ground. Just before I hit, I heard feathers, a flurry of plumage ruffling an air current. I cried out as I lifted up off the earth. Lifted up! “Oh, Mother,” I sang, the tears beginning again. There, in place of my upper legs, flapped the gift of wings.

“It is one of the theories,” I said, holding Michael’s skepticism away with my eyes. “Dinosaurs evolved into birds. You remember that PBS special on TV, Bakker, the long-haired guy from Colorado?
Hummingbirds are a direct line from a cousin of T-Rex.”

Michael shook his bleary head. He rolled back on the pillow, too weak to speak.

“Think about it,” I pleaded. “Someone at the heart of things has a sense of humor. She took the heaviest creatures on the planet and put air in their bones.”

A deep shudder lifted Michael’s ribs and the breath wheezed from him. His left shoulder tensed for a moment, then let go. Lightning pulsed a vein on his forehead like the jagged line of the heart monitor. The last few days had stripped him, pared away at his body so that I could actually see the electrical force that was keeping him alive.

“Listen,” I said, “for twenty-five years you’ve been yelling at me for not believing in God. Isn’t it time, already, for a little faith?”

“I don’t have it any more,” he panted.

I kissed the fingers and then the palm of his left hand. “I do,” I said.

Faith, like a red-tail hawk salvaging a dive, winging up from the earth at the last minute. Faith, like the knotted branches of a great sequoia, sprouting leaves around the scar of a lightning strike. So all right, yes, I’m writing you this pretty little dino-story. So what, Michael? Now that you’re gone, you know better than I do if it’s true.

What I know is that on the last day, you had traveled so close to the cave that you had become a slab of stone lying still under a baby blue blanket. Your hand had metamorphosed into a claw, clutching the edge of the bleached sheet. The room was filled with friends and nurses, the tangled yarn of your heavy breathing. I sat cross-legged on the end of the bed, my chest aching, and watched.

Watched your face: the line on the right side of your mouth deepening into a cavern. The skin, stretched like a drum across your cheekbone, blushing a mottled pink and then settling into pale. At one point, the tips of your eyelashes caught the afternoon sun and lightened. They fluttered, a nest of blonde moths, beneath the fluorescent lights.

You never opened your eyes; you never responded to our endearments. The only movement you made was the rise and fall of your chest as you struggled to find breath. The bars of your ribs would lift as if your heart had grown too wide to be caged there. You’d wheeze and groan and then your lungs would collapse.

And then your breath changed, getting faster as you evolved into a creature too large to be held by your frail body. You panted, you lifted up and out and in your final moments, Mike, something washed the room. I could touch it, as if you and I were in New Orleans again, walking beside the Mississippi in July, dripping with the humidity. Or
back at the Taos Pueblo, watching feast-day races, sure that we could see each molecule of color in the sky.

What I mean is that in the midst of my grief, I felt a rush of wind sweep the tired hospice linoleum. I squeezed your hand in a burst of joy. “Great Mother, take him.” I kissed you. “Mike, do it. Let go.”

Your spirit snaked up through the top of your head and flung itself in a dazzle of stars outside of your body. For an instant, I saw bark and branches, the weathered trunk of a tree. I looked down and your face was feathered with the needles of a giant sequoia. Then, a gargle, a sigh, and the last of your breaths was done.

“Thank you, Mother,” I breathed. Then I leaned forward to press the shell of your cooling cheek. “She did it, Mike.” I was crying. “Such a good tree, you’ll make. May you live a thousand years.”

—Marcy Alancraig

—Denise Fritsch
Good Girl

I’m tired
tired of being
a good girl
a should girl
an  I don’t think she would girl.
Everyone knows
it’s fear
fear that makes me be
a good girl
a should girl
a  tell me what to do girl:
the don’t do this-es
I wouldn’t if I were yous
the be carefuls
call me when you get theres.
I’m tired
tired of being
your girl
not my self
following your words
not my voice
living your life
not mine;
wanting  wanting
you to love me
more
so much more
than I’ve loved myself.
But now
I’m tired
tired of being
a good girl
a should girl
a  do this or else girl.
I can’t
I don’t want to.
I won’t
be that woman
again.

—Susan Allison
Tryst

A double ringed moon

shines through fog

onto lovers

pressed

against

a sprawling oak.

Bodies stir slowly

on cool bark

sap

flowing.

—Susan Allison
Dinner Roles

God
Keep us
from becoming
the couple at the next table
sitting years apart
politely cutting and re-cutting
their pasta
into dime-size pieces.

She dabs her mouth
with white linen
flashing a carat diamond
on rolls of finger
her smile twisted
through an upturned
wine glass.

He nods
from the creased collar
of his oxford shirt
adjusts his glasses
and faces his penne
tomatoes and basil
no longer in love
with the woman
across the table;
instead
enraptured
by the fork
entering
his small mouth.

—Susan Allison
A Ten Minute Drive To The Mall

Sarah gets a phone call. When she hears her cousin Michelle’s voice, her heart stops. They rarely talk. Long distance means bad news.

Michelle gets right to the point. “You have to deal with Aunt Iris. She is losing her mind, driving my father nuts. She forgets, she yells at my father. You have to stop her.”

No “How are you, Sarah,” no, “Sorry to be the one to bring bad news.” Michelle was always cold. Sarah can picture Michelle in her 4-bedroom condo, this phone call a burden between her social events. “I’m telling you, my dad says she is impossible.”

“So what else is new,” thinks Sarah. Uncle Cal and Aunt Iris were born fourteen months apart, and according to him, Aunt Iris never forgave him for being born. No one ever rushed to spend time with Aunt Iris. Except for Sarah. Aunt Iris never had kids and spoiled Sarah with trips to the beach, new clothes, and lots of affection.

But the rest of the family said that only a saint could put up with Aunt Iris for more than a few minutes. Sarah’s mother used to turn off her hearing aid when Aunt Iris got to be too much. Sarah smiles at the memory, but not for long.

“Well, what are you going to do?” Michelle demands. Sarah’s heart and stomach close up. Just hearing Michelle’s voice makes her feel inadequate. Ten years old. She is standing naked, the black sheep, 1000 miles away.

Sarah takes a deep breath, rises to Aunt Iris’s defense. “What do you mean she that she forgets? You know Aunt Iris. She never forgets an insult. She’s told me everything you and your dad have done wrong for the last 50 years. You know her name for it— ‘The List.’” That’s it, Sarah thinks. Don’t listen and attack back.

A snide tone creeps into Sarah’s voice; “She’s fine. I talk to her every Sunday. Nothing seems wrong.”

Still, Sarah was happy when Uncle Cal took Aunt Iris’s car away. Eighty-five was too old to be driving. That is usually what they talk about on Sundays. It has been two years and Aunt Iris can’t handle it that Uncle Cal “sold her car right out from under her.” Sarah suspected that Aunt
Iris had stopped driving anyhow, but to hear her tell it, and tell it and tell it, you would think she was out cruising day in and day out.

“Look,” Michelle’s voice was rising. “Just get on a plane and figure it out. I don’t want my father bothered with her. What’s the matter with you anyhow, don’t you care? Anything could happen to her.”

The thought of Michelle caring about Aunt Iris is a laugh. Aunt Iris was at war with Michelle. Ten years ago, at her son’s bar mitzvah, Michelle seated Aunt Iris at the same table as Ethel. Ethel had had an affair with Aunt Iris’s husband 25 years ago. The passage of time didn’t stop Aunt Iris from spitting into Ethel’s chicken soup. She left the party without a glance backward and Michelle had made it onto “The List.” No one ever got off “The List.”

Two weeks later, Sarah is standing in Aunt Iris’ doorway hugging her. Aunt Iris starts to cry, “I thought your plane crashed. I saw one on the news. You said you would be here this morning!”

“I told you afternoon, Aunt Iris.” Sarah looks down on the top of Aunt Iris’ gray poodle curls. She still keeps it in style. Sarah gives Aunt Iris a kiss on the top of her head and looks around the apartment. Everything looks in order, the bed is made and there aren’t any dishes laying around. Still as neat as ever. This is normal.

“Oh Sarah, your hair is too long. Get it out of your face.” Her gnarly hand reaches up for Sarah’s hair and Sarah pulls back. “Goddamn it, leave my hair alone.” She can’t believe how pissed off she feels. They sit down to talk. Sarah notices it smells in here. Sarah turns on the TV. Jenny Jones is smirking at her latest trailer trash guest.

“Do you want something to eat?” Aunt Iris asks. Sarah looks in the refrigerator. The milk is outdated; there is a brown apple on the shelf. Some diced onions are on a Styrofoam plate. Sarah looks around. There are Styrofoam containers everywhere. Junk mail too. They are stacked neatly, though. Normal. Sarah declines the food offer. “I ate on the plane.”

“Plane?” Aunt Iris looks vacant for a minute. “Oh yeah. Do you want something to eat? What day is today anyhow? Tuesday? Thursday?”

“It’s Friday, Aunt Iris.” They are watching the trailer trash guest leap out of her chair and walk off stage.
“Do you want something to eat?”

Sarah cranks up the sound. Jenny Jones is sounding pretty good all of a sudden. They watch for a while, ’til a furniture store commercial comes on.

“Hey,” Sarah says. “Let’s go to the mall.” Aunt Iris always liked to shop.

Aunt Iris agrees. She goes into the bathroom and is in there forever. Sarah paces. Aunt Iris comes out with her makeup on. Normal.

“Do you want something to eat?”

They go outside to Sarah’s rental car. It’s about a 10-minute drive to the mall. Sarah helps Aunt Iris into the car. Sarah says, “Which way do I turn?” even though she had been to this mall a thousand times in her past life. Aunt Iris gives the right answer. “And then where?” Aunt Iris is right again. “How much farther?”

“You know, Sarah, right after the light, across from the Kroger store.” She looks over and up at Sarah. “What is this, a test?”

Sarah says nothing, breathes a sigh. Normal.

They prowl the mall, wander through the Womens’ clothes. Sarah sees a blouse she likes. She takes it off the rack. Aunt Iris stands there. She farts. She is barely as tall as the racks. Sarah can picture her ducking under, getting lost, gone. That’s what Sarah used to do when Aunt Iris was bigger. Aunt Iris could drive then. Not too many women could drive, but Sarah’s aunt could. A stick shift too. One time they drove all the way out to the lake without the men. Sarah’s mom was terrified of getting lost, but Aunt Iris got them there and back. Sarah couldn’t wait to tell her friends.

Sarah puts the blouse back, no longer interested. They go to the food court. Sarah goes to the Mediterranean booth and buys some babba ganoush, dolmas and a 7UP. Aunt Iris always liked exotic food.

Sarah looks around. The rows of wrought iron tables are almost deserted. Four tables down, a couple of older women are sharing some French fries. A group of teenagers are at the sweet roll place, trying to get a date with the sweet, young clerk. The tile floor shines like the place just
opened.

“Try some of this.” Aunt Iris takes the dolma, eyes it suspiciously. She tastes it, makes a face, then eats some more. She licks each of her fingers, slowly, one after the other. Sarah looks away.

“Sarah, where do you live?” Sarah is silent. The whole place seems to stand still. Sarah takes a deep breath.

Cautiously. “You know...California.” They talk about California every Sunday, about Sarah’s husband and son. About how long it has been since Sarah lived in the Midwest. About how much Aunt Iris misses her.

“When did you move there? Are you married? What day is today? Tuesday? Is it Thursday?”

Tears spring into Sarah’s eyes. The skylight sends rays of light onto the table. Sarah looks up, hoping her tears will roll back in her brain. She swallows. Wipes her eyes with the back of her hand. Traces a crack on the table with her thumbnail. Reaches across the table and takes Aunt Iris’ hand.

“Hey, Aunt Iris. Guess who I talked to? Michelle. She was worried about you.”

Aunt Iris comes to life. “Worried? I should live so long. She’s on “The List” you know. Right near the top, as a matter of fact. Right after Cal. You know, he took my car away from me. Sold it right out from under me. I’m lost without my car, the son-of-a-bitch.”

“Let’s go, Aunt Iris.” Sarah rises and brushes her hair back with her hand. Aunt Iris gets up, too.

“Where are we going, Sarah?” Aunt Iris sounds lost.

Sarah doesn’t answer. She will have to talk with Uncle Cal about that. It is much farther than a 10-minute drive from the mall.

—Sharlene Cece
Growing Old at the St. George Hotel
—for Gray Chang

In skin loose and heavy as silk I lie
(love long dead, this window my eye)
along the sill a story above the street.
A player carries his keyboard under one arm
in search of a band. The bubble man
sets up tub, readies sticks with their loop of string.
A siren calls like a long-dead friend, a thief
sips his sweet take from a fragrant cup.
A magician brings a dead dove back to life,
the harper tuning beneath a hummed surprise.
A unicyclist sings the newest song, lamps come on,
lovers stroll whispering skin against skin
through the spangled night. Bubbles rise
and glow like paned spheres against the light.
The magician strokes the feathers of the dove,
love flies arrow-straight from the harper’s strings.
My skin whispers into dust above.

—Debra Spencer
Replica
—from an etching by Escher

Draw up the net now, heavy with scales
as mutable as smoke or sand,

a dripping burden, efficiently
hoisted above a silver pool.

Gild the shadows to switch the catch—
greenling for starling, mullet for gull,
tail fin sketched to a fanning crest,
pectoral fins finessed to wings
beating like stars in the feathered air,
a burden converted into birds.

—Debra Spencer
The Discovery of Sex

We try to be discreet standing in the dark hallway by the front door, he gets his hands up inside the front of my shirt and I put mine down inside the back of his jeans, we are crazy for skin, each other’s skin, warm silky skin. Our tongues are inside each other’s mouths, where they belong, home at last. At first we hope my mother won’t see us, but later we don’t care, we forget her. When she does see us she makes a noise like a game show alarm and says Hey! Stop that! and we put our hands out where she can see them. Our tongues stay where they are, though, and when she isn’t looking anymore our hands go back inside each other’s clothes. We could go where no one can see us, but we are good kids, from good families, trying to have as much discreet sex as possible with my mother and father five yards away watching strangers kiss on TV, my mother and father who once did as we are doing, something we can’t imagine because we know that before we put our tongues in each other’s mouths, before the back seat of his parents’ car where our skins finally become one—before us, these things were unknown! Our parents look on in disbelief as we pioneer delights they thought only they knew of before those delights gave them us.

Years later, still we try to be discreet, standing in the kitchen now where we think she can’t see us, I slip my hands down inside the back of his jeans and he gets his up under the front of my shirt. We open our mouths to kiss and suddenly Hey! Hey! says our daughter glaring from the kitchen doorway. Get a room, she says, as we put our hands out where she can see them.

—Debra Spencer
Resistance Gravity Chaos Waves

The toaster buzzes when I press down the lever.
It’s the resistance that makes the heat, he says.
Same with the iron and the coffee maker.
    Same with us, I think.

He’s singing Fly Me to the Moon
but suppose I did.
What would keep us there
together?

Notice how the milk when first poured
sinks into the coffee
then rises in little billows and ribbons.
Once stirred, it is forever lost to itself.

A quiet pool—surprised
by a single pebble:
ripples lap
and lap at my heart.

—Winifred Baer
trivial memories

the starlight wraps around your image
twisted, deceitful
playing games with the pictures
in my head
reminding me gently
with absence of tact
that it is not you who sits beside me
under a moon-less sky
listening to the lullaby of waves
and winter winds
that memory’s reflection glistens
on a form
which sits where you once sat
and traces out the old familiar
indentation
left in the sand when you walked away
the world is empty and lonely
and there’s no one there
only shadows, cast without a moon
and there are only memories
to taunt me
I look into the eyes of a stranger
who shines out of darkness
and I see you looking back at me
I smile at the stranger
confused, flattered
he believes I see him
where he is standing
but I see only what once was
I see only you
as I turn and walk alone
down empty crowded streets
without a hand to hold
I watch the girl go by
arms entangled in his arms
and all wrapped up in his jacket
and I lose myself
thinking I watched myself walk by
I stop to cry
because that was me
and I walked right by myself
without knowing who I was
and thought how lonely I must be
and felt sorry for the girl who was myself
but no one is here to see my tears
or share my sorrow or sympathize
because there is no one on the street
and no one passed me by
even though you’re driving the car
which isn’t in the right hand lane
on its way to my house
where I’m sitting up late
waiting for your telephone call
so there’s no way
that you could have walked by
holding me, protecting me
promising me
that you would never leave me
where I am now
staring at you in the shadows
cast on my window sill
by curtains and starlight
and memories and dreams
and my inability to let go
to forget that you’re not here
no matter how close I hug you
and that you don’t whisper in my ear
in my sleep
sweet nothings that echo in my mind
and leave me waking
ever so sure
that you came to invade my dreams
because you found me in yours
and you whispered to me
in a voice I still listen for
took me to the beach
and sat with me at dawn
in the still warmth of summer mornings
gazing at the colors of the sunrise
and singing to me
in the lull of the sea’s voice
but I know you weren’t here
because your jacket doesn’t smell like
you anymore
it hasn’t in an eternity
and even though I wear it still
I’m cold
with my head on a lap of hard sand
instead of your warm body
and you swimming out past the breakers
to float into the rays of the sun
and melt away
so that I won’t remember
and I never will
because if I don’t forget
then I’ll cry again
and again
and I will never stop
the way the rains never stop coming this
late in spring
and I know you wouldn’t want me to cry
even though you don’t care
it’s easier for me to tell myself you do
and that you will kiss away my tears
and tell me not to be sad
and that whatever I want to believe
is okay, and perfect
and that no one will ever tell me
differently
not so long as you’re around to say so
which is why I don’t care what they
think
what any of them say
because I know that you understand
and that you’ll never laugh
even when you find me talking to you
in the place we always went
and shake your head
and leave me there alone
with the tree we used to swing from
when all the leaves fell orange
to the ground
without my ever having noticed that
you came
and went
so entrapped was I
in the conversation I was having
with you

—Shanti
—Antonina Hines
Ghost Talk
(A poem to be read horizontally or vertically.)

I continue	Watching for you
I walk a blind path	I know no bounds
I am reckless	I break speed limits
I rush through wind.	I am hollow
I am	Walking through your house
Unseen	I am at your table
I am the reason	You stroke your daughter’s hair
I am the moon’s night	I rush through trees
When it is cold	I am with the stars
I am in the back of closets	In attic boxes
I am waiting for you	I will wait seventy years

—Carolyn Flynn
daddy

steps creak
stop—
i freeze:
force thawing
barely breathing
in-out unnoticeably
cold

my slim fingers pull
chaste lips
stretching
until i can crawl out
sinuously naked and damp
peeling off dry skin
i leave him nothing
to pierce
but a hollow shell

i traverse

snow-cloaked mountains
dampen muffled sounds
blanket of flakes settling cry
beneath the burden
of stoic examination

i observe:
1. ethanol remains fluid on mars
2. ice crystals possess sharp edges
3. saprophytic snowplant consumes seedling

collapsing
he dislodges
his angular mass
abruptly
he retreats
reminding me:

daddy loves you
no one trusts a liar

—Elizabeth Nissen
Kathy’s Memory

Her parents drank. Even at five years old she knew it was damn lucky one of them woke up the night her father let his hand rest because he was too drunk to waste on sleep and a cigarette keeps it going and the mattress made a cradle for his dazed arm. What she always remembers is the shrieking and the choking and then standing outside looking back at her house alight in the black smoke and the night crazy with sirens and that everything was lost.

—Susanne Holland

—Denise Fritsch
Letter to a Rapist

It is morning—
Those dark hours
Before the sun comes up.

I am lying
On my back
In the bed of your pickup truck.

I cannot
Let go
Of not having said no.

But I am thirteen,
I am unclean,
I am the smell of fear and Everclear.

I am tears.
I’m useless motion
Without words or sense or wit.

You are
Drakkar Noir,
You are chords of flesh, and sweat, and spit.

My blood is
Frozen cold
But it’s also piping hot.

You said you’d
Take me home
But you seem to have forgot.

I forget
To breathe,
I don’t know how to leave

And now
I want to know:
Did nothing seem amiss?
What kind of Trophy is this?

You said you were taking me home.

—Ann Laura Wetherington

—Antonina Hines
Deconstruction

No one comes to witness love’s demolition.
Each week, unchallenged, I kick another brick loose,
strip away one more floorboard.

As the wrecking ball descends,
you watch t.v. and drink beer,
sleep through every eviction notification.

I relocated aeons ago, far beyond
the spreading circle of disenchantment,
dust from ground zero fallout.

Only a polite ghost still shrieks in courteous alarm,
fluttering through ruins where a patient wolf waits
to blow the last flimsy wall down.

—Jennifer Lagier
Three Refugees  
—Year of the flood, 1982

I left my marriage at home last night  
I have a room at the World Famous Brookdale Lodge  
they are taking flood victims and displaced persons  
we are displaced  
I packed clothes, brushes, paper, a typewriter  
and two children

I have taken the clown picture off the wall  
and put it in the closet  
We pushed the two beds together  
so the children would not fight over who will sleep  
with me  
We have a hot plate and a cooler  
a TV, Nintendo  
On the dial of the thermostat are the tiny words  
“comfort zone”  
There is a bar downstairs, but  
I am keeping to myself

The San Francisco of our Love  
“The Zone called Paradise”  
is one thousand light years away  
We three are settled like refugees  
into the Comfort Zone

to him I type:  
*it is better to be here, longing*  
to be with you  
*than to be there, longing*  
to be away from you  
*with no place to go*

I had a marriage once

—Laurie Corn
Potrero Hill

—1969

You lived on Portrero Hill
near Army Street
in a dark basement pad
with cement pillars
a low ceiling
green and red square melmac dishes piled high
in the kitchen sink

I would come to visit every night and sit shyly
on the edge of the bed
until you said “Take off your coat”
You had to tell me every time
It was always a first date

And then
in that bed
between the Bozak Concert Grand’s
speakers as large as refrigerators
such passion raged, such woman-screaming
passion

I lived for it
I nearly died each time

—Laurie Corn
I was a good student in high school. With the convenience of a near-photographic memory I could ace any test by memorizing everything the night before. After the test the material would be quickly forgotten to make room for the next installment. Except for French. It is forty-two years ago, and I can still recite whole passages of “Cyrano de Bergerac.”

The sounds of French resonated in me from nursery school when we would sit in a circle on the floor and Mrs. Courtney would teach us poems and songs of France. I loved the taste of French inside my mouth and pretended I was a French girl. That little girl was back again; she embraced me, kissed me on either cheek and I was called home to la belle France.

The first day I walked into Room 204 and sat in the semicircle of chairs facing Pierre Pasquier, my world expanded like a warm sunrise and I knew once more that I was French deep, deep in my soul. There was a river of attraction between us. Pierre was speaking only to me. Time had stopped. He sat, hands folded on the desk or with his chair rocked back, playing with his ear as he talked, and in a voice deep and soft and rich and full of all the colors and glory of France, he taught us the elements of grammar.

Pierre was a man of immense charisma and charm—all of it French. He was sixty years old, bald, with a large, round face, high, soft cheekbones, a nose “aquiline” and pale blue eyes. He spoke softly and deliberately and had a slow warm laugh that rose up from some bottomless place. He was heavy and walked with a slow swaying limp for which he was famous. It was common knowledge that he had lost part of his leg in World War I fighting for France, and through his twenty-five year high school career he became known as “Peg Leg Pierre.” It was said that if you stuck out French for three years, in your third year he would lift up his pant leg and show the class his wooden leg.

I was captivated. I had never felt a man-woman attraction before, not like this. There was no eighth grade going-steady love leading up to it. No high school romance to balance it. I knew this man with a knowing that I could not explain. As day followed day my newly expanded world began to contract. I was in love, and as for the rest of life, I just went through the motions. Pierre and I and la belle France—that was my world.
I loved his walk. I loved his laugh. I loved the way he stood in the hallway outside the door watching the students scurrying to their next class between the bells. He would always be standing there when I arrived and he would nod and bow slightly and, so I imagined, follow me into the classroom where I would sit in the front row of the double semicircle of chairs.

Mostly, Pierre lectured us about life. His real passion was for sociology and philosophy, art and literature, and he wanted above all to impart a respect for France and for humanity. If we learned some French in the process, all the better.

Every word he spoke was truth. He said that babies should be breast fed. I knew that I would someday. He told us it was the capitalists who made us think we needed toothpaste. A toothbrush and a bar of soap would do. I gagged on Ivory soap. He expounded Socialist philosophies. I struggled over Karl Marx’s “Das Capital,” joined the Socialist Labor Party, and “The Weekly People” in a brown wrapper arrived at our suburban home every week.

I spent most of my time after school in my room, reading my assignments over and over out loud, perfecting my accent. I ate up my French, savored the taste of it, loved the nasal, juicy, spitting, face-twisting, exuberance of it. I hated that English was my native tongue. I was French body and soul.

When I read out loud in class Monsieur always beamed and complemented me on my accent. We would memorize poems and prose. When it was my turn to recite, with my photographic memory and my true accent I would turn on a switch, staring straight ahead, and the lines would reel out as if I were reading them off the blackboard. Everyone was quiet when this happened, especially Pierre.

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By third year, I was declared a French scholar. Pierre confided in me that I was the best French student he had ever had. I was entered in the state-wide scholarship test in Bowling Green, Ohio, and placed fifth in the state. I did this for Pierre. It was all to please him. I only wished I had been number one.

In third year we read Alphonse Daudet’s “Le Petit Chose,” the touching tale of Daudet’s childhood. The small blue book still sits on my shelf and once in a while I pick it up and read my favorite parts out loud. We also read “Cyrano de Bergerac.” I memorized practically the whole play. I never felt that I was showing off or being a brown-nose. There was an understanding among all of us—the other students, Pierre and myself—that I was a French scholar, that there was no competition intended. I was simply doing what I did best.
That was the year he spoke to us of W.W.I, of how as a young man he returned home from battle with half his leg shot off, of how his grandfather ushered him in to sit in his easy chair and that he put his leg up and he was glad to be alive. He didn’t lift up his pant leg to show us. I was secretly glad.

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The worst part of this was having to keep my love a secret. Of course my friends figured it out and teased me. They had no choice. It was normal to have a crush on your teacher if he was one of the cute, buff football coaches, but to be in love with a balding, limping French man from World War I...I had to deny it. There was no choice.

I believe that Pierre knew that I loved him, that I adored him. How could he not know. The air between us was thick with the knowing. And he was respectful of my love. He did not draw it out or cheapen it. A light brush on the shoulder once or twice, a special twinkle in his eye, an encouraging compliment on my papers—that was all.

In the summer after my third year I was desperate. There was no fourth year French in DeVilbiss High. I sat in my room, my year book in front of me on the bed, and cut the black hair from the head of a student, carefully pasting it onto the bald head of Pierre whose picture was in the teacher’s section of the book. I studied the picture and tried to imagine him a young man in France going off to war.

I made a brave decision. I would go to his home on the excuse of borrowing French books to read. I had passed by his house many times in the night. It was a small bungalow on a tree-arched cul de sac near the University. He lived there with his wife, Ethyl, a quiet woman who taught math at DeVilbiss. After several terrifying attempts I called him and he invited me to come.

All morning I kept changing my clothes and finally settled on the black pedal pushers with yellow cuffs and matching sleeveless blouse. I rode my bike. I circled around the block five times until I finally landed in front of the little house. I parked my bike and knocked quietly on the door. Pierre was standing in the doorway, ushering me in. I was sitting in his living room. There were bookshelves lined with French classics. I told him I was going on vacation with my family, that I wanted to keep up my French. He handed me a Zola, a Flaubert and a Lamartine book of poetry and said I was welcome to them and to return them in the fall.

Ethyl, his wife, walked in and out of the room quietly, wondering about this tall, awkward young girl who had to have French books on summer vacation. Ethyl didn’t matter. Nothing mattered except seeing Pierre once more.

As I left, he laughed his deep, soft laugh and bowed slightly, and
I walked back to my bike clutching those precious books that might have come all the way from France, those books that I would be reading alone in my knotty-pine room, a dictionary at hand, books empty of pleasure because I would never again sit in that semicircle of chairs discussing them or reciting passages.

In the fall I returned the books to Pierre who was still standing in the hallway watching the skirts hurrying by, waiting for his next collection of Freshmen French students to find room 204 and take their places in the semicircle of chairs. I thanked him for the books, and he gave me a soft kiss on the cheek and said that I was a very deep young woman.

Except for brief glances in the hallway of DeVilbiss and encounters once in a while at a grocery store or in the audience at the Greek peristyle where Toledo Orchestra played, I never saw Pierre again.

Fifteen years later I heard that he had died alone in a nursing home in Toledo. And I never went back to visit, to tell him I had always loved him, to talk to him of l’amour and of life. I never went back.

—Laurie Corn

———Marise Olivera———
Tohachi, New Mexico

She stands at her door, gazes into the desert. Her classroom of raven-haired children has no trees to shade it. When she first arrived, heat came to meet her before anything else.

Virgin Mary pray for us she whispers as she picks up the chalk, corrects the tests, endures the rough ones who refuse the bus, who walk the long miles into blue air.

Each day there is more space, the progress she makes is that of an ant navigating a pebble on the moon. In bleached light she walks a dry landscape of uncertainty, but she knows, by the unlocking of her own thirsty bones, that the land has welcomed her. She has stumbled into the heart of a wild blessing.

—Maralyn Robertson
Baroque Benediction

I ironed to Mozart this morning,
As steam poured into my beige linen pants,
Music penetrated my skin and hair,
Its vapors relaxing my muscles,
Expanding my heart.
While the iron’s heat smoothed
The creases in my cotton jumper,
The warmth of the music
Banished the wrinkles in my soul.

—Hermie Medley
Salt Water Cure

December 31, 1995, the last day of the year from hell. The swell leaped from six to ten feet overnight, lining up from Middle Peak into Cowells. If you had a long enough board, and knew how to maneuver it through all the reef sections, you could even make it into the cove.

As he walked along the bike path with the ten foot Yater under arm, the old feelings and images began to inch their way back into his consciousness. The tide was sucking out fast and the Cowells sand bar gleamed in the warm afternoon sun. He remembered how it was back in the late fifties when he and Eddie and the Lindsays would mat surf and skim board on the low tide sandbars and soon afterwards borrow boards from the older surfers like Don Snyder, Danny Reed, Bill Laudner, Howie Spruitt and Al Fox. Finally, in nineteen fifty-nine, he’d saved enough money from the paper route he shared with Tommy Estrada, to buy his first board, an eight foot, eight inch Yater, with a 3/4” redwood stringer and foam fin for eighty-five bucks brand new. That was back in the days when balsa boards were just giving way to the new “foamies.” Of course, in those days, there were no boulders along the cliff line, no new stairways, no Dream Inn, no yuppies, no wanna-bes, few wetsuits, no cords and no crowds.

And “surfers” were still a counter-culture, bohemian group unexploited by commercialism and the media. Beach fires at Cowells Cove were the only way to warm up and it was hard as hell to even think about going back into the freezing water after you stood next to the blaze for very long. Your feet would turn purple and numb out until you couldn’t even feel the board under you. You’d eventually stumble off, swim after your board and paddle hard for the fire as your teeth chattered and your nuts sucked up and sought refuge in the warmer areas of your crotch. But of course those days were long past. “Santa Cruz” died somewhere around nineteen sixty eight, he thought. What had spawned in its place was a kind of Santa Berkeleywood de Jose York.

It had been a hard year, too damn hard, devastating would be a more accurate description. His wife’s cancer took him to edge, then the Vietnam flashbacks pushed him over...falling, falling, spinning, spinning, into a strange, dark, swirling abyss. He’d take his wife into the clinic month after month, watch them hook up all the plastic tubes, pump miracle chemicals into her, watch her hair fall out, and witness the slow, gut-wrenching transformation into something nearly non-human. A stunning example of modern medical practices and beliefs, a product of better living through chemistry. Then he’d take her into the hospital
every month for five or six day stays as the miracle drugs took their heinous hold of her body, nearly killing her. They’d hook her up to more plastic tubes with drugs to get her stabilized again, only to discharge her and begin the whole vicious cycle again. He began to wonder if the cure was truly worse than the disease. It was surely a toss up. He’d take care of his one year old and six year old sons while mom was in the hospital, go work his ass off during the day, come home and do it again. Day after day, month after month, world without end, amen.

Then the flashbacks. They began slowly at first, creeping into his unconscious mind while he slept, emanating as bad dreams, then nightmares. During his waking hours, he’d feel light-headed to the point of not quite being fully in touch with his physical world. Every time he’d take his wife back into the hospital, he’d get real queasy, spaced-out and nauseous, not knowing why. He suddenly began to realize it was the same way he felt years before in the war zone when his mission was to tend after the wounded. The mortally wounded. The role of the nineteen year old healer. The wild surfer boy from the West Coast turned trauma specialist in a few short months. He began to hear the screams again, then the rancid smells of death and sounds of the incoming choppers loaded with more casualties. Before long, he was living in some kind of disjointed, twisted reality, lost some where between truth and illusion. At times he wasn’t even sure if he was sitting in the hospital in Santa Cruz or inside some damp bunker waiting for the next batch to come in on a chopper.

Then he got help. Eight months of psychotherapy on a weekly basis began to unravel it all for him. He began to realize he was just a victim, a helpless victim in a world not of his choosing. The astrologer told him years ago that his was going to be a road full of bumps, but that bumps in the road were what created a person with strong character. His character was getting stronger every week. Around christmas, his wife finally finished nine months of chemotherapy, radiation therapy and surgery. Her hair was growing back, her spirits were high and she seemed well on the road to full recovery. A fact that only nature knows for sure. But the damage was still lingering in the air. Things were just not quite right. He knew he was a changed man, changed in ways he couldn’t ever comprehend, or even wanted to comprehend. But change is the only permanent thing in life; he knew that and read about it years before in the Tao Te Ching. He was now living proof, at one with the natural flow of the universe, and his ultimate destiny.

So it felt good to be walking along the cliff with his longboard under arm in the winter sun. The rays soaked into his face and warmed his graying beard. He was greeted by some old friends along the way, people who hadn’t seen him in quite a while. He could see the
compassion and uncertainty in their eyes as he strolled along. After all, who could possibly understand what he’d gone through unless they walked the same path, and he hoped that they would never have to walk such a path. The path of extreme terror and isolation. But he was coming back now, finally making it back from the shadows into the light, a wounded but healing man, turning to the ocean for the ultimate answers. Seeking answers that can only be found through close involvement with the natural world.

He descended the new stairs by the surf statue, set the ten footer on the sand, and stretched his muscles. A big set rolled through from the Lane. He watched the spray wisp off the tops of the swells as they turned past the point at Cowells and faced the off shore winds. The sun crackled on the mottled surface of the long green lines as they sped shoreward along the reef. He paddled out during a lull, pulling through the cool water towards Indicators. His muscles started to awaken from months of non use. He began to feel the tug against his spine and neck, familiar feelings lost for awhile during his time away from the sea. His mind started to clear more as he pumped over a six foot set, as he continued to stroke against the rip towards Inside Curl. He saw Eddie take off by the Blow Hole, drop down the face, do a casual backside turn off the bottom, turn off the top, set his rail and speed along towards the cypress point at Cowells. He smiled a deep smile and nearly cried as he watched his old friend glide past in that classic stance honed out through decades of unswerving union with the waves. A true pioneer, he thought to himself, a humble man in total sync with the natural rhythms of the sea. A surge of electric energy shot through him as he tried to catch a couple of waves. His paddling strength wasn’t quite there yet, but the kinetic memories deep in his muscles began to re-awaken. Another set swung in from Middle Peak as he continued to battle the rip. He went over the first two waves and let the crowd scatter after them inside. The third wave was the biggest by far. A shortboarder ate it on take off by the Blow Hole, free falling down the face. The wave hollowed out more and peeled quickly along the sandbar. He swung the ten foot Yater around and pulled with all his might down the face of the reeling tube. His muscles tightened and fully awakened as adrenaline surged through them. He took a deep breath, stood up and drove the longboard down the face, into the pit, setting tail and rail on edge. The board swung back up into the heart of the wave as he took a few steps toward the nose and squatted. The wave hollowed out more as it felt the sandy reef and offshore at the point of Cowells, turned and pushed faster towards the cove. He inched closer to the nose as the spray from the lip blew into his eyes. For a second or two he was completely blinded by the spray, speeding through the tube on instinct only. He regained his sight as the
wave backed off slightly. He back-pedaled to the tail, dropped his knee, arched with arms over head, cutting the Yater back towards the Cove where he set the rail up for the inside section. He bent down slightly as the wave regained it’s speed into the Cove, and took a few steps toward the nose again. He began to laugh and cry at the same time as he ran up, squatted and stretch-fived into the shorebreak half way to the pier. He streaked along in the tube, then dove off the tip as the six foot wave closed out on the beach. His cord broke as he surfaced. Taking a quick breath, he dove under another pounding six footer. He sobbed aloud, tears of joy, as he crawled onto the wet sand next to his board. He laid atop the Yater and took some deep breaths. He felt some of the anguish and pain release from his mind and body. A young boy with a boogie board came over to him. “Are you okay, mister,” the boy asked cautiously.

“... yeah...I’m okay...I’m okay, kid” he stuttered. The kid looked at him with a strange glance and ran off into the shorebreak. He stood up, nestled the ten footer under arm and began the stroll towards the cement steps at Cowells. He wiped the salt water tears from his cheeks, “damn right, man, I’m okay,” he mumbled to himself. As he neared the steps, he stopped a moment and watched Eddie make another smooth turn off the top of the outside section and streak towards the long, inside bowl.

He lifted the Yater atop his head, turned and began to climb the stairs. A seal barked under the wharf and gulls squawked overhead as he walked along West Cliff toward his house. The sun gleamed bright in his reddened eyes.

—Thomas Hickenbottom
The Cement Ship

*The Palo Alto, 1919*

I visit you once a day
cross-weathered boards to
your stone solidity.
They built you for battle then
when the war was over
hauled you to this bay,
dressed up as a party ship.
Your only adornment now is
a scattering of starfish
but if I close my eyes and
listen hard to the ocean
I imagine I hear the tinkle of a piano
the shuffle of dancing feet
on your deck.

I never know how I’ll find you
calm on a shimmering mirror of sea or
captured in a maelstrom
waves slapping your sides
water whooshing and whistling through
the gaping hole in your middle.
I watch the sun set behind you
blaze of fire or muted pastel wash
sometimes a simple fade-to-black
the slow shuttering of an eyelid.

Some look at you and see an obsolete wreck
storm-beaten
entrails of rusted cables splayed
across your middle.
They miss the purpose in your new stage
refuge for quarreling pelicans and hungry gulls
for gray-speckled harbor seals
lying fat and lazy in a row
for cormorants, graceful on your ironwork
and for me
selling my life in eight-hour increments.
I come to savor your retirement and
dream of my own
moored in secure harbor
answerable to nothing but time and
the changing rhythms of nature.

—Barbara Leon

—David Sullivan
Upside-down Trees

Our front yard is dominated by a large pine that chokes my wife’s struggling flowers, shitting brown needles upon them. Its lower branches droop in a disorderly pattern between our living room and the street, a natural curtain, which I appreciate, but which the neighbors would like to chainsaw into a trimmed military appearance, since the twigs are meshing with their telephone wires. It’s a big tree, though, and it vaults right through the wires, and up to another level, where it sways to other breezes, arms reaching to Allah in prayer. Somewhere up there I once noticed the remnants of a kite. Nice tree, common tree, public tree: a mandala, a folk-dance, an ultimate gesture of Being branching into Nothingness, a pesky obstacle to gardening; when the wind blows it talks, no doubt, with the other trees, the other public, verifiable trees standing in the light and air shared by all of us.

Naturally it also has roots. In fact, the same neighbors told us that one root had cost them a great deal of money, some years ago, by cracking the concrete of their foundation. I felt a brief unspeakable glee, then, as if a bad guy had escaped from the local pen: a feeling I could not acknowledge. But who does not thrill for a moment when the baby vomits on uncle’s lap, when the sandbagged river breaks through, the avalanche closes the highway, or the rebels bomb the police station? Our tree has a secret life, then. And when I’ve dug holes for my wife’s flower patches, I’ve often bent the shovel on some rugged wooden muscle and had to start over elsewhere. Purple thighs peered at me out of the grime, iron-veined and unyielding, and I realized: there’s a tree down there. An upside-down tree.

I knew all this, of course. But the other evening I started trying to visualize that tree, to make it real to myself. Root systems have various shapes, I remembered; there are taproots that go straight down, and shallow horizontal mats, and everything in between. But whatever the shape of my shadow tree, my earth tree, it surely lived in conditions quite different from those enjoyed by its partner above the ground. It would never see light. It would never play in air. Decades ago, pliable young tentacles had probed and groped; but now huge underground branches bulged, as patient as glaciers, wedging boulders apart. In their cold dirt tomb I could imagine no sound but possibly a tenacious grinding. Their groans would take weeks to groan and would be too low for a human ear to hear, their sucking too subtle, as the root hairs offer their chronically desperate membranes to the rainwater or the dishwater or the sewage, dog urine, motor oil: all the effluvia that percolate from the fabled spaces above, whose very existence is in dispute down here, but which have become much busier in recent centuries.
I became rather concerned when I realized that ALL the trees in the neighborhood had mirror images, or shadow selves, in the earth. Besides the public trees, that gossiped like villagers about the news brought by birds and breezes, besides those accessible trees below which we parked our metal vehicles, the suburb was underlurked by a stifled, ghostly population that strove not towards the light, but toward the “water table”; huge living beings that had buried themselves in dense material darkness to meditate in grim isolation from one another and from the sun. Shocking to think of the severe privacy of all these brooding characters, each one held incommunicado, monomaniac and solipsistic, holding brute earth between knobby knees in a permanent, until-death-do-us-part grip. The thought of such an underclass spooked me. A revolt of these submerged Ents could well occur, particularly in dream, where they could wreak revenge for pent frustration, breaking earth-chains of centuries, and stalking, slow and dismal, in dark subterranean riot through our complacent streets.

The climax came when I realized that all life is trees: vein trees, capillary trees, lung trees, nerve trees, kelp and fern, broccoli and cauliflower, the spiral tree of DNA, and the black branches the galaxies hang from. The greatest tree of all holds the night sky above a chilling mind at a dying campfire. And that mind itself is but the public expression of a brain locked in its skullbox, a nerve-pudding forever cut off from light and air, solipsistic in its darkness, its happy or nasty chemical soliloquies. What could be fomented there? What could break loose, if the thirst became intolerable?

Send my roots rain!

—Vito Victor
I Am A White Man

“What’s going on in your country...The only stories and poems we read that tell us anything about everyday life in the United States come from the blacks, the Latinos, the Asian Americans...Others, the whites, the majority...their writing often seems so disconnected from the country’s problems...Why are American writers so coded...so private?”


I am not a black man.
But I know there are things wrong with this country.
I am not a Chinese American woman.
But there is a voice in me that knows the truth.
I am not a Latino, or mestizo peasant.
But I am wondering about my place in this land they once owned.

The new century circles around our lives like an eagle or a vulture,
and I cannot tell which,
yet

there is a rainbow shining after the storm
and I am one of its colors.

I am a white man—

whose heart is hidden
by this mask of privilege,
by an indecipherable code lifting me alone above a ceiling of glass.

Stones are thrown,
the glass covering us all.

I break open this heart,
bleeding your same blood
red as rain from a common vein.

The rainbow is a bridge from one place to another.

I am a white man
with an open hand
extended
moving towards you

with a heart
that once beat innocent as every
child in every womb in every mother
of every color.

I am a white man—

who falls across the sky
as a blaze of color
after rain

even this reign of white.

—Dane Cervine
Susanville, CA

magpies dip and rise
dip and rise
flight encumbered
by tail feathers
longer than their bodies

in winter
wind blows cold
off 8000 foot peaks
through High Desert State Prison
situated upon the valley floor
on wizened land
where snowmelts
evolve into dust clouds

birds fly in
over razor wire
fly out
past guard towers

even magpies
magnificent tails
streaming behind

inmates test the wind
spit dust
measure time
in harsh seasons

—Judy Luiz
Emmy and Danny raced each other on their bikes to the beach. They careened down neighborhood streets, flying over the carpets of blue jacaranda blossoms.

The water was about a mile away. Soon the paved road gave way to a sandy lane, and they could hear the ocean and smell its perfume. The girls, both eleven years old and best friends, leaned their bicycles against a tree and kicked off their flip-flops onto the sand. They ran towards the water with their snorkels.

They splashed into the water ankle-deep, then up to their thighs. Emmy’s bathing suit was a deeper blue even than the water. Her skin was paler than her friend’s, but she tanned readily. Danny’s yellow bathing suit was covered up by her father’s large, white tee shirt, and when she got wet her arms and legs looked like shiny dark mahogany. The ocean was as warm as air, and so clear they could see the squiggly lines of their toes. They cleaned their face masks with spit and salt water, then anchored the straps to the backs of their heads and pulled the masks over their faces. They gripped the snorkels between their teeth and were soon floating on the water, breathing contentedly through their mouths. The warm salt water was buoyant as a mattress.

“First fish!” yelled Danny through her snorkel. Her voice was muffled and strange. The first school of fish were little and silvery and no bigger than the girls’ thumbs. A school of them swished by all guided by some unknown auto-pilot, all turning exactly the same way at the same time. Sun flashed off their glittery sides.

Emmy held a thumb pointed up in front of Danny’s mask. Both girls stood up. The water came up to their waists.

“Hey,” said Emmy. “What happens when we get our periods? Do you think piranhas will come? Because there’ll be blood?”

Danny thought about this for a moment. “I don’t think so,” she said. “Our mothers swim sometimes—”

“Yours does,” Emmy said, looking down and swishing the water with her hand.

“—and nothing’s gotten them.”

“Yet. Yeah, I guess so. I don’t have any intention of being eaten by a bunch of piranhas just because I have some stupid period.”

“Maybe we’ll just sit out those days.”

“Sit out! Are you kidding? I’m never going to just sit out. What would we do? Count sand?”

Satisfied it was all a problem for another day, the two girls floated again on the water. Even so, Emmy was glad no piranhas lived on the
island that she had ever heard of.

They drifted over a few neon blue and yellow fish which pecked at the sandy bottom, looking for lunch. Little puffs of sand rose behind them. The white sand floor was ridged like the roof of a mouth. Delicate sea grasses swayed and jerked this way and that with the water's motion. It was a silent world, one which Emmy loved. The only sound was the girls' own breathing and the beating of their hearts.

They swam in lazy breast strokes, parallel to the beach. Emmy felt like she was an angel or a bird hovering over another world. The problems from the past week faded behind her. The light underwater was more beautiful than the most lovely stained glass she had ever seen. The cornflower-blue and turquoises underwater darkened to royal blue then black into the distance. The sun passed behind a cloud for a moment, and the water became darker, suddenly more mysterious.

They had drifted over the coral, which was sharp and painful to step on. The girls knew coral was a living thing, although it looked merely like a long underwater hedge of bubbly rock. Snorkeling over coral was like flying too low over knives: the points of the coral would be only inches from their bellies. But there was all sorts of life hiding in the coral, so the girls floated over it for a while before swimming back over the sand. The sun came out and by now was very hot on their backs. They always wore tee shirts to prevent becoming too burned.

The girls pretended they were astronauts when they were underwater and would talk to each other and mission control, even if they couldn't make out each other's exact words. Besides, they knew that on the water no one else could hear them, that this was their own private conversation, so it didn't matter what they said or how odd they sounded. Sometimes the girls brought bread to feed the fish, who would crowd around them.

Emmy had brought her air mattress with her in her bicycle basket, so she ran back up to the beach to inflate it. While she was sitting on the sand, frowning and blowing deep breaths into the long, skinny plastic mattress, Danny came out of the water and flopped down on the sand beside her.

"This is the life," she said.

"Hhm hmm," said Emmy, whose cheeks were full of air.

"I heard the upper forms are having a spring dance," Danny said, looking up at the clouds. "I wonder when we get to have one."

"Hopefully never." Emmy gave her lungs a break.

"What do you mean, never? Don't you want to dance with Keith Martin?"

Danny poked her friend's leg with a sandy finger.
“Keith Martin? P.U.! I don’t want to dance with Keith Martin. I bet he doesn’t even know how to dance.”

“Yeah, well, neither do we so it doesn’t matter.”

“I bet you want to dance with Mr. Porter.”

“Yeah, well I bet you want to marry him.”

By now the air mattress was more or less inflated, so the girls ran back to the water. They each draped themselves over the mattress, with their masks in the water. They paddled contentedly along for a while, following nothing in particular, first one fish then another.

After awhile, Emmy, whose ears were underwater, was surprised when she thought she heard muffled staccato barking-like sounds. She listened again. It had stopped. Maybe it was something she had just imagined. Then it started up again, louder this time, insistent. Like someone’s voice.

Emmy lifted her head up out of the water, and sure enough, walking back and forth on the beach was her mother, calling her name. Her arms were waving about her as if they had minds of their own, and she was having a hard time controlling them.

“Time to get out!” her mother called, pacing closer to the water. Her mother hated to get wet. “Let’s go, Emmy. We’re going to look at a house.” She held a small Jamaican flag in her hand.

By this time Danny had raised her head, too, at the commotion. At the word “house,” the two girls looked at each other in dismay. ‘Not another house,’ their eyes said to each other. They reluctantly paddled back to shore, staying afloat even when the water was only a foot deep. In the clearest, shallowest water they put their arms down and crawled along slowly on their hands, legs drifting out behind them. They were so close in to the beach that Emmy’s mother waded in gingerly, trying to snatch at the back of Emmy’s tee shirt. She couldn’t grab hold, and her long fingers just pinched the air like crabs’ claws.

“Come along, now, missy,” she said with clenched teeth. Emmy was close enough to grab her mother’s ankles who, even though she could see it was only her daughter and not some ferocious sea-creature, still bolted for the dunes at the first touch of something on her skin. From higher up on the sand Mrs. Humphries began waving her arms again, this time walking towards the road, where she had left her Morris Mini Minor parked with its engine running. Now, a Morris Minor is a small car, and the Mini Minor is basically sort of a toaster with a carburetor. Nevertheless, Mrs. Humphries seemed unfazed at the idea of tying down the girls’ two bikes on top of her car.

“We’ll stick your bikes on the roof,” she said, tossing them a length of rope from under the back seat. Emmy and Danny had reluctantly followed Mrs. Humphries to the car. They lifted their face masks against
their foreheads, like the skin divers they’d seen on television. They dragged their feet as they walked away from the playful waves.

Mrs. Humphries tossed the girls their towels from their bicycle baskets. Then she energetically hoisted the bikes onto the roof of the car. “There,” she said, satisfied. “You girls just towel off and hop in.”

The girls looked at each other for a moment, then just shrugged. They wrapped their towels around themselves and climbed in. Mrs. Humphries was wearing her lime green cotton dress. Large, bangly green earrings hung against her neck. Her sandals matched her dress. Her eyes were glassy with exuberance. Her dark hair was tucked behind her ears, and she wore a trace of light pink lipstick.

Before Emmy had even closed her door, Mrs. Humphries jammed the car into gear and off they bounded, tires fishtailing on the sand. Emmy was afraid to ask where they were going. She had learned not to ask her mother where they were going during one of these house-hunting escapades, because she was usually just lost in her own little world. Emmy slouched down in her seat and propped her feet up on the dashboard. Usually her mother would ask her to remove her feet, but on house-hunting days Emmy could throw live crabs on up there, and her mother wouldn’t notice. Emmy squished her salty feet against the windscreen, pretending she was walking on air.

Now, what Mrs. Humphries called house-hunting adventures were actually anything but. What she really loved to do was to look at the outsides of elegant houses—mansions, really—but she didn’t have any intention of buying any of them. Not that she could come close to affording any of them. She was merely looking for her perfect house, or at least the perfect house where she would be living if life were fair, she felt.

The Mini Minor turned off the beach road and onto the neighborhood streets, then left on Liguanea Road and straight up into the hills. Uh-oh, thought Emmy. We’re out of our league now. The minutes and miles whipped past as the ground rose and the houses became larger. Mrs. Humphries’ foot pressed harder on the accelerator the farther they went. They speeded up even more at yellow lights, and they zoomed along in the left lane, passing other cars. Soon most of the houses they were passing were hidden behind hedges and gates.

They passed by an especially lovely home. “That’s where Keith Martin lives,” whispered Danny to her friend in the front seat. “I think I saw him looking at you.”

“He does not! I know for a fact he lives close to the school.”

“How do you know where Keith Martin lives?” Danny asked with great interest. Then she saw Emmy’s cheeks were flushed. “You’re blushing!” she cried, pinching her friend’s ears.
“Shut up!” Emmy hissed with crunched up lips. Her eyes motioned towards her mother.

But Mrs. Humphries was completely oblivious to the girls’ conversation.

Suddenly their car skidded to a stop. All three of them leaned forward and back like rag dolls. “Well, what do you think?” Emmy’s mother said, hanging onto the steering wheel. She was looking to her right, out her daughter’s window. Her eyes were huge.

The first thing Emmy saw was the hedge. It was so green it was almost black. It was the tallest hedge she had ever seen, much taller than she was. It looked like a wall surrounding a fortress. Even if I stood on Danny’s shoulders, Emmy thought, I bet I couldn’t see over the top. Buried deep in the middle of the forest of hedge was a brass plate with the number “1745” engraved on it. The only other thing they could see was a metal gate. It was narrow and looked locked. Since they couldn’t see any of the house from the car, Mrs. Humphries jumped out as soon as she yanked on the brake. She ran towards the gate with her arms outstretched, and to Emmy’s horror, grabbed the metal gate bars and gave them a little shake. They rattled deeply, not with the clangy, tinny sound most gates gave off. These gates seemed to Emmy to be very heavy and very old. Next Mrs. Humphries tried the latch, and finding that it was indeed locked, muttered a little curse under her breath. She stepped back, planning her next move.

Emmy and Danny were watching all of this from the car with a mixture of horror and fascination.

“Here we go again,” said Emmy. This was not the first time Mrs. Humphries had taken the girls on one of her adventures. Emmy wasn’t sure if she was glad that her friend Danny had come along today. These excursions always left her feeling a little embarrassed and a little lonely.

“Rock, paper, scissors,” cried out Danny suddenly. Each girl made a fist, which they moved up and down as they said the words together.

Danny held her hand out flat.

Emmy held out her hand like scissors. “Hah! Scissors cuts paper. Goodbye, paper,” she said, pretending to cut her friend’s hand.

“Okay, again,” said Danny.

“Rock, paper, scissors,” they said together.

Both girls kept their hands as fists. Two rocks.

“Rock, paper, scissors.”

This time Emmy held out her two fingers for scissors. Danny was still a rock. “Hah!” she called out. “I win again! I’m a genius.”

Emmy’s mother, meanwhile, was pacing along the brass number plate with great interest, apparently searching for something in the
leaves. “What’s she doing?” Emmy said. She didn’t have long to wait for an answer, though, because in a moment her mother’s hands dove into the hedge and wrestled with something within. She stepped back and peered through the metal gates with an expectant look. Emmy wished she were far away, back in the water, anywhere.

“Mother,” she whispered sharply, leaning her head out of the car window, “what are you doing?”

“Sssh,” he mother snapped, whirling around. “I’ve just rung the bell.”

Emmy’s eyes widened with horror and she looked at Danny as if she were going to be ill at any moment. Most of the time on these expeditions her mother didn’t ring the bell. She was usually content to just look from the outside. Today was to be different, however; today, if anyone answered the bell, Emmy saw that they was to be plunged into a whole new level of mortification.

Fortunately for Emmy, there was no response, so Mrs. Humphries walked backwards to the car slowly, keeping her eyes glued to the house just in case someone appeared.

“What’s it look like?” Emmy asked from the window.

“Don’t ask me, go see for yourself,” she said happily.

Emmy looked at her friend for help, but Danny was no use, for she was clambering out of the car, interested in seeing it for herself. She found Mrs. Humphries pretty entertaining most of the time, even if she did have some pretty wild ideas. Emmy was annoyed to see her friend caught up in the excitement. Danny ran to the gate and grasped the bars in both hands.

“Wow,” was all she said.

That was enough for Emmy, who darted out of the car and followed her friend. Curving away from them was a graceful oval driveway edged with blue and white agapanthas. In the middle of the oval rose four stately palms. Green lawns fell away to the left and right, and beyond the oval driveway rose an enormous house shaded with giant monkey-pod trees. Emmy thought it was one of the most beautiful houses she had ever seen. She could almost understand why her mother had dragged them all this way. The steps flowed down to a walkway lined with huge flower beds. A porch surrounded the graceful house, and on it were swings and red geraniums hanging in pots. A stone chimney rose on one side of the house and the gardens continued around the back farther than the eye could see. The windows upstairs and down reflected the sun and the endless blue sky.

“Wow,” Danny said again.

Emmy said nothing, but she could sense her mother rooting around in the hedges again.
“Don’t,” she said to her mother. “No one’s home. Can we go now, please?” She turned to walk back to the car.

“Not so fast, young lady,” her mother said, holding her arm. “We have just found what I’ve been looking for. This is the real Gardenia Bay,” she announced.

Emmy rolled her eyes and shook her arm free from her mother’s hold. She dove into the back seat of the car, and tried to crunch up into a the smallest ball she could.

“Hand me the camera,” she asked her daughter.


Her mother ignored the comment. “Just hand me the camera, will you?” she said, not taking her eyes off the house, as if it might disappear if she looked away. “It’s in the glove box.”

“Fine,” Emmy said glumly. She leaned over the front seat and dug around in the maps and chewing gum wrappers. She found a small, beat-up old camera.

Mrs. Humphries took several pictures through the gate, holding the camera this way and then that. She worked fast and furtively, like a spy. She seemed to relish the whole adventure.

“There,” Mrs. Humphries said contentedly, walking back to the car. “We’re going to have the best pictures yet for Christmas cards of our home, Gardenia Bay,” she tossed her head back and laughed. “Maybe I’ll get the card engraved: ‘Greetings from Gardenia Bay.’ We can get someone to take our picture in front of the house. Don’t you think that’s a great idea?”

“Could we go?”

Just then Emmy looked up and saw someone running down the sidewalk; a man was rocketing straight towards them. His shoes slapped the pavement loudly, and his hands waved in the air, as if he were trying to get their attention. He was shouting her name.

—Jean Walton Wolff
Curtains of Time

Corridor of Marble, tall windows each side
Billowing sheers ebb like the tide.
They swoon with the wind, dancing ghosts of white,
Inhaled exhaled by a starlit night.

I am carried away by these Galleon sails
Enraptured, they call me to veer off the trail.
Tugged like a puppet upon a cool marble sea
Passing portals of chance, veils beckoning me.

Reflections, my projections, they get in the way.
Whispering mirrors, confusion, etched shards of gray.
Window after window like snapshots of time,
Grasping, clasping what is not mine.

Years of tears, great windfalls of joy,
Beauty–pain–passion, am I crone or young boy?
I keep walking thru time, many lives I glance,
To see what might have been, what if, perchance.
I keep walking and walking, I won’t skip a beat.
Ignoring the curtains that pull at my feet.

Look up! There’s an opening, a rooftop view.
A Panorama of Self, I find what is true—
No beginning no ending
No above no below
No within no without,
Not ONE thing to Know.

Corridor of Marble, hallway of time,
Fades to reveal what has always been mine.
Shattered are the walls that kept me apart,
That segmented views, that fragmented heart.
Now I breathe like the curtains, sitting still just to be.
Ocean of wisdom, timelessness, all beyond ME,
Is here, Is now, Is forgiven, Is free...

—Antara Davis
Backdoor Karaoke

At the Backdoor Karaoke a man
I would not recognize again sang
*I Love You (For Sentimental Reasons)* to his fiancée.
Clean shaven, a little overweight—not the kind
of guy who bends over, showing his crack,
but one who could be handy with the remote—
he looked down at the monitor and gave it his best.
And as I twirled the ice in my second
Johnnie Walker Black—I was working up to my own
*Embraceable You*—I thought again how
astonishing that we pick someone out of the
countless people who stream by like schools
of silver anchovies, glinting sun. We pair up
to practice loving, the way we once
practiced kissing on the cold glassy
surface of the mirror or the mute
backs of our hands. We try to be kind.
We get used to their little quirks,
grinding teeth in sleep, farting in the morning.
We find what to treasure—the way she reads aloud,
hers cry at the crest of sex, his hand
dry and quiet as cloth at the funeral of a child.
And we give what we can—willingness
to get out of bed and look for the cat,
forgiveness for an old affair, a real attempt
not to always be right. We act as though
it’s natural as geese mating for life,
but I cannot get over my wonder
that you come home day after day and offer
yourself, casually as the evening paper.

—Ellen Bass
Footprints

This morning my son left two wet footprints
on the bathmat, dark and flat
in the green fluff, one with a scrap
of brown bag pressed into it
like a bit of petal.

And I thought how, if anything
happened to him, that imprint
would remain, briefly,
shimmering in that shock
that aims a spotlight on the details of our world.

Folding laundry after your accident,
I sat on the floor by the basket of tousled clothes—
they had been washed and dried
while you were still unbroken—
and smoothed your empty shirts against my chest.

—Ellen Bass
Don’t they have Elvis in London?

A brown porcelain cow with wooden spoons sticking out it’s head, a water glass on the windowsill sprouting an avocado pit, the tiny towels that hang on the stove; everything in the kitchen has a sharp focus, like exotic specimens behind the glass that she’s seeing for the first time. Shannon realizes she’s been holding the rice cooker for half an hour, staring around her mother’s kitchen like it was a museum. The rice cooker. It comes down to things like the rice cooker balanced on her hip. The plug dangles against her leg like a freshly clipped umbilical cord. Since when did she carry things on her hip anyway?

“If I go back to London I’m bringing you with me, you know.”

The house is quiet at eleven a.m. It’ll be seven p.m. over there. He’s probably just walking back from the station. There are always two times, two people, two worlds in her mind now. It’ll be cold in London but he never wears a scarf. Does he stop at the pub or go home and call her?

The third stair creaks, just like it did when she was five. And there’s that spot on the floor just in front of her sister’s room. Everything is like in a movie, panning slowly: shelves, books, desk, pictures; only she can’t hear the music. You always know what’s going to happen by the music.

He’ll be at the pub now.

She can smell the flat ale on the bar rags, and the cigarettes in his hair, Oasis on the stereo, the pub full of young bankers in Marks and Spencer’s suits. She knows all the regulars now, after six months.

“Six months,” she sighs, flopping on her bed. That’s all they give you. I mean who at what agency decided a work visa would only be valid for six months? Can’t you see I’m falling in love here? Who can figure out their life in six measly months?

It’s sunny in Santa Cruz; yellow petals falling across her bed, a million miles from Elephant and Castle. A million miles from the tube stop at Clapham. What she wouldn’t give to be stuck on the Northern Line again. Is a place really your home just because you lived there your whole life?

They sat together on this bed. He looked at all her photos and laughed at how American she was. Just a visit.

But visitors don’t whisper, “Marry me” in your parent’s living room late at night.

Marry me.

“It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just a piece of paper, Shannon.”

Then she can live in London, they can be together, she can get a real job, and go to the pub after work, like everyone else. But marriage?
Marriage is father giving you away, white dresses, and relatives. Marriage is saying goodbye to your little sister, having couples over for dinner, flannel pajamas. Marriage is pets...bills...houseplants...

“Ok, don’t think of marriage—just a wedding.”

“It’s not about whether it’s a wedding or a marriage, Mark. But while we’re on the subject; do you think this will lead to something, us? I mean is this just so I can work and continue to be your girlfriend, or does it mean you love me and want me to be your wife? Wife, Mark. Think.”

“Well, I think I’d like to,” he held her hand with both of his, “This last year has been great. Of course I desperately want you to stay. I don’t know if I’m ready for all this other stuff, but if that’s the only way we can be together I’m willing to try. Then at least you could work, so it makes sense to do it now, but I’m still in school... can’t we get engaged or something?”

An engagement wedding?

It had all started with a joke. Dominic and Ewen, Marks’ mates, were reading the guidebook. “Look, it says you can get married in Las Vegas by an Elvis impersonator! Shannon, Mark, you hear that? Sorted!” Dominic had shouted up from the couch.

“We’re going to Vegas anyway,” Ewen added helpfully. Las Vegas. Mandatory stop on the ‘lads’ tour of the States.

“It’ll be a laugh. We’ll get you one of those shockingly huge green plastic rings, and we’ll all wear velvet tuxedos. Look, it only takes twenty minutes.”

White knuckled miles past Barstow into the night, the ‘lads’ asleep in the back. Marry him? Not marry him?

Signs crawl out of the night, flashing their simple suggestions, like dreams.

No U-turn. Exit Only. One Way.

If the next one is a Gas Food Lodging, I’ll do it. Denny’s. Left lane.

...mortgages...diapers...dentists...

If they had gotten married she’d be in London right now. But who wants a wedding drenched in sleaze and neon, even if it is Elvis? Don’t they have Elvis in London? A British Elvis seems more civilized. The rice cooker sits next to her on the bed, like a cat. Must be almost last call now. Today he was to arrange the fiancée visa.

The whole house seems to be floating now. A slow rolling wave passes through the room, a big swell, lifting everything up and setting it down again silently in the same place. She is left with a queasy feeling, and the unsettling image of all her pictures and clocks floating above.
their shelves. Waiting.

When the phone rings, she is holding her rice cooker.

—Andy Mannle

—David Sullivan
I think flowers of you
bloodredhotsweetsoftslow
Drinking the fast feet of rain
Brilliant colors in fresh moods and all about
the green rolling grass of lush memories
I feel your warmth about my ears
Soft lips in my hollows
reaching staying holding
kisses eons long
where Galaxies grow like flowers
A voice that wraps me in downy feathered phrases
And eyes a black night of warm summer
A tiny light shines from my Map
Where you live
Floating up as wind we dance
above the blue bubble
and we are everywhere my darling

We are Hippos in the Nile
   Great Redwoods in the high first snows
   Giant Pandas dappled in bamboo shoots
We are comets, great Mountains and
   Twin Lover Volcanoes

On tatami mats we lie
Listening
Do we hear all that
is to (has become) be?
we hear only soft kisses
and summer rain

—Andy Mannle
Horny is like an old sock.

It’s stretched out
And faded but
it’s still comfortable.

Horny is like an old sock.

It’s crusty and dirty
but you never throw
it away.

Horny is like an old sock.

It feels good but
you can’t wear it
out in public.

Horny is like an old sock.

It’s always on top of the pile
when you’re looking for
somebody else.

Horny is like an old sock.

It’s not your best emotion
But it’s good enough to
keep in the closet.

—Andy Mannle
So Used

I wake up in the darkness. The light has just run away. I reach down to check if my penis is still intact. I get out of bed and feel the warm floor. It feels like sand, not the good soft sand, but the broken glass sort of sand. I move my way to my closet with my hands. I reach for a nice summer dress. Its wool fibers are so soft. Yellow and gray weave in and out in no particular order. It just covers me. High heels and a garter belt go on afterwards. I check my make-up to make sure I look smutty for my date. She’s taking me out to dinner. I hope we go to a nice place, perhaps Arby’s. She has always taken care of me. I hear her 1989 Mustang 5.0 screech around the corner. She always drives crazy; she drives me crazy. I love dangerous women. She has a pierced eyebrow and a tattoo. I know my parents hate that. They always say I should find a nice girl who has a career in mind and an education, like mom. I just want to have some fun. I made sure to pack the diaphragms just in case she forgot. I don’t know if I’m ready, but I want to be prepared. My mom said if she starts to get fresh with me to hit her in her breasts and cry for help. I don’t think I’ll need the advice. She’s here. “Just a minute,” I say as I check myself in the mirror one last time. I head out the door. She smells as if she’s been working on her car or running a marathon. I like it. After we get in the car she kisses me a hard kiss, mmmh tar. “Where do you want to go…baby?” she says with such angst. “Arby’s” I retort trying not to sound too eager. “Nothing is too good for my sweet buns,” she whispers. After the best roast beef sandwich I’ve had in a long time, we go back to her place for some “alone time.” She wastes no time making her move. On the couch, she starts with the patented tar-tongue. Tar is such an aphrodisiac, but I don’t know if I’m ready. I can feel my nipples getting hard and my ears getting wet. “I don’t know if I’m ready,” I tell her. She just takes off her shirt. I see “die” written in blue pen written above her tit. She must be on a diet. She loves to play with words. She reaches into my pocket and grabs my hard cover dictionary. She opens it and looks up a word. “How can you be so lascivious…baby?” she sneers. She hands me the dictionary with the definition. I can’t hear anything. I am stunned by her tattoo below her navel. “Enter Here” it reads. Below a yellow colored sign reads “Slippery When Whet.” I say no, but what can I do, I’m trapped. “All your friends are doing it,” she argues. “No, no, no,” but I really mean yes. If it weren’t for Arby’s, I wouldn’t be doing this, I remind myself. With diaphragm in place we begin. “Ooh, it hurts,” I laugh. She tells me it will get better “…moo…cluck, cluck, cluck…talk clean to me…you’re so nice…chicken soup.” I’m surprised she can last for so long. I have already had multiples. I can see her eyes roll back in her head as she begins to come.
She offers me an after-sex pez. I ask her for Tweety. She takes Superman. I want to cuddle, but she says she needs some sleep and rolls over. “Shut the door on your way out,” she whines. I feel so used.

—Daniel Bloom

—Jamil Hellu
Beauty Risk

Beauty!
Damn you.
You’re a colossal crashing wave,
    And I can’t swim.

Oh, you’re fine in retrospect.
But until then, I risk
    Death by drowning.

—Susanne Altermann

—Jamil Hellu
This Body

This body of mine
has danced till dawn,
hiked to the mountain top
and to river’s edge.

It has rolled down sand dunes,
swam in many oceans,
skipped through spring meadows,
basked in the sun.

It was a mermaid one Halloween
Vampira another.

This body of mine has laughed so hard
it almost cracked at the seams!

It rode a bicycle across the USA,
and has carried backpacks to magical hidden places.
It has strolled down ancient cobblestone streets,
and fished for its dinner off a tropical island.

This body of mine loves to touch and be touched,
kiss and be kissed,
hold and be held.
Sometimes it purrs like a cat in ecstasy.

So, if you think my stomach is flabby,
my hips too wide,
or my butt too big,
You’ll just have to go play
with somebody else.

—Marcea Marcus
Primitive Divinity

Between the purple storms of philosophers cracking the sky open white with their lightening philosophies, at the outskirts of the campfires of technology unleashed into bonfires, beneath the crown and bars, freedom and borders, shackles and flags and wars and wars of all political systems great and small, within the hum of science packaging up the shriek of the wild, silently in the bark of thought and the quiet whisper of economics soft as wind or the lightest rainfall, covering everything continually in its toothless yellow acidity, at the center of the mandala of all religion nestled where east and west, axis and horizon, matter and spirit intersect and hang on the cross, there, that same directionless woman squats on haunches supporting torso’s curved arch, delicate light-reflecting crescent, part beast, part goddess scoops out from her blouse one aching breast mute as a planet the pink flesh of nipple descends fills the black hole of wailing lips suckles it.

—Joanna Martin
Pressure of the Dead

His smell like hay curing in the sun
or walnuts bursting within the thickness of shell
hanging heavy in the leafless trees
about to fall, or horses, standing
in the same spot for hours
lipping the grass between their teeth
looking up, their hooves holding fast to the hillside
the sun slanting chestnut against their flanks
painting them opalescent.
Is it the weight of evening
that causes the walnuts to fall
or their own specific gravity ticking like an internal clock?
In the lengthening light rays of sunset
the blackened shells crack open to center,
the horses become silhouetted,
the hillside infuses incandescent
as the world vibrates,
raises up that thick layer of lushness like steam
or dust, expands itself briefly
before shedding itself like skin, briefly allows
the dead back in. —Joanna Martin
Getting Over Big Tobacco, My Sweetheart
Lucas Brooks

There are roughly one thousand chemicals added to cigarettes that enhance their potency and addictiveness. Likewise there are around one thousand small elements that make you love someone. It is widely known that cigarettes are deadly, yet millions upon millions of people smoke. Similarly, there are a large number of people who are involved in unhealthy relationships. There is a cement that keeps them attached to the aggressor, the epoxy of addiction. Cathy Warner’s “Getting Over You” explores these two types of addiction by using a human relationship as a metaphor for smoking. It is evident that they share certain behavioral trends that are typical to cycles of addiction. Although they are inherently similar, it is important to note the points where they diverge in order to better understand the nature of addiction, in particular cigarette smoking.

The narrator is introduced to smoking when she begins to run with a “tough crowd”. The people that one is surrounded by have a deep impact upon one’s style of life. The narrator was “desperate to belong” to the said crowd, and smoking cigarettes apparently was a matter of course. If we approach the initiation of the relationship from the human perspective we see a young girl who is not yet confident in herself and needs somebody to complete her and flesh out her identity. Cigarettes also help to bolster her identity, she is a smoker now, not just another young girl, and is connected to the “tough crowd”. Through either method the narrator’s self image and confidence is strengthened; she now belongs to something, be it cigarettes or a man.

At this point the narrator is committed to her significant others, “Soon I couldn’t resist the feel of you in my hands / your taste on my lips, cologne that clung to me / long after you left.” She sneaks cigarettes at night in her bedroom window, and meets up with her lover before school. Her parents disapprove of her new lover, “I absolutely forbid it,’ coughed Father.” How convincing of an argument can a smoker give against smoking? Rather than heed her parents’ advice she is compelled to conceal her vice. By denying her the habit that she has grown accustomed to her parents serve to reinforce the rebellious quality of her new partner, which makes it all the more alluring.

As the narrator matures she begins to grow out of her rebellious stage, and she leaves her bad boy lover, “You were part of my youth best left behind.” Her boyfriend was part of a phase in her life she passed out of. In contrast, cigarettes grow with you, they alter your brain chemistry, and the monkey’s claws become firmly embedded in your shoulders. It could be argued that cigarettes are harder to give up than a youthful
flame. This can be attributed to the physiological effects of withdrawal, which wreaks havoc upon emotion, concentration, and general well being. At this point the two forms of addiction diverge, leaving her boyfriend may be heart breaking, but leaving cigarettes is a drastic change in brain chemistry, and everyday occurrences have the potential to become heartbreaking. There is also the dilemma of how to react when you see someone else smoking. The narrator may catch a glimpse of her ex with another woman, but cigarettes are everywhere you may look, inescapable.

In order to overcome her addiction the narrator turns to writing, “It seemed the only way to exorcise you / was to write pages and pages in my journal / every temptation and craving x-rayed / in black and white.” This is a valuable method to cope with addiction, in whatever form it may come. Although writing will not compensate for the blaring lack of nicotine in her brain, it does keep her mind off smoking. How many pages of journals have been filled with break-up inspired prose? If it was known environmentalists would surely be up in arms. Does it work? Certainly, to overcome addiction it is crucial to tune into the self and learn why one is addicted. It is surely impossible to overcome addiction without knowing oneself, separate from significant others, separate from the crutch of vice.

Although free of the sticky cement of love, cigarette smoking adheres itself to the addict through other means, by altering brain chemistry, by its availability “at the liquor store or bar,” and by sitting perched “between another woman’s fingers.” “Getting Over You” can be thought of as a primer for overcoming addiction, with the basic premise that one must write to exorcise one’s demons. The last line, “Cigarettes. Nasty habit” may have been better left out, so that it does not limit the poem specifically to cigarettes; it could hold it’s own as an examination of love as well as vice, rendering it relevant to both smokers and non-smokers alike. In a time when addiction is treated by acupuncture, hypnosis, drugs and counseling it is evident that the addict is a targeted market, and that recovery is a commodity. But Warner offers us the most effective and economic alternative to expensive, capitalistic therapy: a five-dollar journal and a good pen.
A Poem for All of Us Who Were Ever Imperfect
Adam Nigh

The human body and depression are two subjects that poetry has dealt with quite extensively. “Junior High Topography” by Susan Samuels Drake is a poem that deals with the depression someone goes through when they feel their physical appearance is less than perfect. More specifically, it portrays the sorrow a young girl goes through when she has a flat chest. There is obviously also a message that the way people look in our society is given too much importance. Now, this is not a new idea and most people agree with it to the point that it almost does not need to be said. But this poem points out that the message is not sinking in. It also makes us relate to it and brings out our own feelings of ugliness.

Rather than directly discuss the major social issues that contribute to peoples’ depression over their bodies, Drake takes it on first person. She shows us what people go through in a very personal way. Instead of exclusively discussing her feelings about her body, she paints very sad pictures of life events that most, if not all people should be able to relate to.

While not all of us can recall specific moments in our lives when we found ourselves “slipping bony little arms / through bra straps” and wondering “What if someone comes in?”, especially those of us who are male, we can all think of similar events that correspond to our own physical imperfections. For me it was being a chubby kid. For others it might be lack of a tan or an embarrassing facial complexion. Whatever the failing might be, we cannot help but find ourselves relating to and feeling sorry for this girl. When she describes sliding her “mother’s underwear drawer open / jumping at every squeak of wood on wood / to feel the pearly tricot,” it is very hard to not feel her pain. We all know the feeling of being paranoid that someone will catch us in the act of something that would reveal our imperfections. She doesn’t need to tell us how she feels. It is obvious.

Another aspect that many of us can relate to about this poem is the shame of our siblings for our shortcomings. The speaker tells us that she “wept for my brothers / brave to show their faces / at school each day / the same school where everyone knew / their sister had no breasts.” This portion of the poem is especially painful for me to read, having been an overweight kid from a rather slender family. Seeing embarrassment in a sibling’s eyes for your own imperfections can be a very hurtful thing.

The language of this poem is rather simple, but still very descriptive. Consider the following line: “while I’m trying vast expanses
of cotton / on my skeleton.” One cannot create a visual image out of these lines without coming close to tears for this girl. The following stanza is equally saddening.

Closet-door mirror
truth-teller
not an ounce of encouragement
that sore knobs on my chest would ever amount to anything
like what bounced under
other girls’ blouses.

Nothing rivals the hopelessness of something you do not like about your own body that cannot be changed without ridiculously expensive surgery. Especially when you feel that you are the only one in your social circle that has your particular problem.

The full force of the statement this poem is making is felt in its final stanza.

If a girl can’t ignite whistles
If boys don’t bump into her on purpose
If Mom says The two-piece you wore
last summer fits just fine, Pussy
If Harriet’s father flirts with hers
and mine says nothing
not even about me becoming a young lady
will I ever be and American beauty?

Let us examine this segment closely. The first two lines speak of a girl’s body drawing attention to it. Most would agree that these forms of attention are not politically correct and that they are actually somewhat offensive, in that they make a girl’s body merely a sexual object. It is obvious, however, that this girl desires such objectification. This is a sad statement about our culture that young girls would yearn to have their identities exchanged for a curved body.

The next two lines describe what was evidently an event in this girl’s life. Her mother in essence declared to her that she had made no progress toward womanhood in the past year because the bathing suit she wore last year still fits her. We could assume that her mother did not intend this meaning in her comment, just like the girl’s body does not mean to tell her that she is a worthless person by not growing breasts. However, this is the message that she is receiving. We could look for an answer for who is telling her that her bra size is equal to her personal worth, but we should not have to look for very long. If anyone has so much as looked at a magazine, television advertisement, movie, or billboard once in the last twenty-five years, they would know exactly who is sending her this message.

She then goes on to speak of a girl’s father noticing her breasts
and even flirting with her because of them. It is not even worth discussing how revolting such an act would be, let alone the fact that a girl would actually long for such perverted compliment. It is astonishing how depraved a society would have to be in order to put such sexual pressure on their young girls that they would find such degradation appealing.

She ends the poem with a depressing question. She does not ask whether she will ever be beautiful. Such a question would be a little vague. Beauty is a broad term with much room for interpretation. Instead, she asks if she will ever be an “American beauty”. This places the American interpretation on the word beauty. We have seen through our magazines and billboards that America sees feminine beauty as large breasts and small minds. It is not so much depressing that she will never reach this goal. It is extraordinarily depressing that she would have such a goal in mind.

We must then ask ourselves why a young girl would feel this way. While our society is full of slogans like “beauty is in the heart” and “looks aren’t everything”, are we backing these statements up? Are we really letting people know that we really see them as beautiful and valuable no matter what they look like? Or are we letting our billboards and magazine advertisements speak for us?

This poem may not win any major awards, but it does make a disturbing comment about what the standards of beauty are in our culture. Any of us who fail to meet those standards should be able to relate to and sympathize with this poem. Those that do find themselves seen as beautiful in our society should feel both lucky and unlucky. They should be grateful that they have met such difficult and arbitrary standards, and yet grieve that they live in such a time and place that would make such demands of people. Either way, we should all be able to see the beauty in this poem, no matter what its shape is.
Superficial or Supersize?
Kirsten Oster

In a somewhat humorous yet sad manner, on a subject many females can identify with, Susan Samuels Drake explains the tortures of growing up small-breasted in a society where a great emphasis is placed on the size of a woman’s chest. Her feelings of inferiority and self-doubt are made inherently clear as she elucidates the inadequacy she was made to feel by our fickle society, all because of her washboard-flat chest. This poem is a dramatically written lesson that many can relate to. It deals with a vital issue of womanhood that is dominant in our society: breasts are beautiful and the objects of admiration and desire. But on the flip side, physical attraction is a powerful force for us all, and the size of a woman’s chest is a big attribute contributing to that attraction. So throughout this poem, there is an intertwined message. On the one hand, Drake critiques our society and the pressures it places upon women to reach unrealistic standards. On the other hand, she also recognizes that such thinking is part of being feminine, and that overdoing such thinking can be destructive. But, to pretend that women will stop thinking about this altogether is foolish. Completely entertaining, and told in a way in which many can relate to, “Junior High Topography” takes us through the experience of a teen afflicted with the flat-chest-syndrome. We suffer her feelings of inadequacy and shame brought on by the top-heavy, silicone-injected society in which she lives.

From birth, we strive to be accepted, loved and admired by those around us, but with perpetual rejection, many are left with low self-esteem and feelings of worthlessness. And for teens who are growing into womanhood and trying to be noticed and accepted, achieving the stereotypes for beauty becomes a necessary factor towards attaining that goal. And as stated by the sex-driven messages our society has created, ample breasts are a necessary part of being beautiful. Many argue that to force such unrealistic standards upon the growing teens of America is wrong, including me. But the fact is that society has already created these standards, and they cannot just be erased. To try to teach these girls that “real beauty is on the inside” and that big breasts don’t matter is an unrealistic goal, because this society has already brainwashed these girls. So Susan Samuels Drake is telling a story of the consciousness girls have on the emphasis placed upon the size of women’s busts in this nation, and of the feelings of inferiority from a lack-of-chest many are left to suffer from. As little girls grow up with the aspiring dream of becoming an American beauty, the simple misfortune of a flat chest can dash the chances of them ever achieving this goal thus leaving them with massive insecurities. Drake is telling the painfully sad story of these
Playing dress up, smearing mom’s makeup across your face, and tripping across the floor as you attempt to walk in high heels five sizes too big, are all a part of growing up. A child is completely impressionable, eating up every word and swallowing down every bit of information they glean from the adults around them. Turning on the TV and watching Pamela Anderson Lee and Carmen Electra can give the false impression that big boobs are something every desirable female possesses. The television seems to have forgotten to add the disclaimer at the bottom of the screen “breasts not real, only with cosmetic surgery can you achieve this look.” And for girls aspiring to be grown-up, they see the attention these big-boobed women command and set out to create that look for themselves. As early as age ten, “tiptoeing from one dressing room stall / to the next / slipping bony little arms / through bra straps” begins. And as the longing for adulthood and beauty comes ever closer in that moment in which “I’m trying vast expanses of cotton / on my skeleton / thinking that someday this will all be mine,” the illusion that growing up is synonymous with growing breasts is created.

To be a beauty in the eyes of American culture is what most girls strive for, and the longing and praying to develop the objects of men’s desire is a common occurrence. It is our popular culture, filled with the surgically-enhanced images of women that make these goals of beauty that much more unrealistic. At the same time, girls are forced to try and reach an even more unattainable look. Boys watch the television and get the same impractical standards forced into their minds. They, too, think that they will find a girl with the same proportions as the women they lust over on the television screen. And this is where the myth begins. Boys find big-busted girls attractive and sexy, and for girls who are minimally proportioned, the desire to achieve that look is activated. Society makes these girls think that a big chest is necessary to become an American beauty, and for those built differently, the loneliness and longing begins. And as Drake tells her story, the desire of young females “to feel the pearly tricot” is strengthened by the hope that “prayers begging for permission / to ask / for breasts” would some day soon be realized. And when she “left the store / the proud owner / of a AAA white cotton symbol / of American beauty,” her pledge to become part of that clique became partially realized. But with the “closet-door mirror / truth teller” that gave her “not an ounce of encouragement,” her hopes of being accepted were dashed. Once again, with that dream of achievement and self-worth gone, she was left with nothing more than “sore knobs on my chest,” and feelings of inadequacy.

Feelings of inferiority and ugliness drape around many afflicted with the flat-chest syndrome. The “heart-pounding shame” of a chest
that is as “flat as a brother’s” makes acceptance and admiration seem impossible. In the third stanza, second line from the bottom, Susan writes, “one who knows the loneliness,” and I believe we all do. It’s a loneliness that stems from rejection. Susan describes it in the form of beauty, and how painful it is not to be beautiful. She speaks of the shame that riddled her brothers because of her “lack of a rack,” and of the sympathy her “mother bestowed on me / with a smile of / one who knows the loneliness / of a chest as flat as a brother’s” By attempting to reach standards set forth by well-endowed or silicone-injected women, today’s teens grapple with one more inadequacy they feel at not reaching idealistic standards. And, that inadequacy is what plagues them. “If a girl can’t ignite whistles / will I ever become an American beauty?”

With unrealistic and cosmetically enhanced features, the awkward stage of adolescence is made even tougher by the warped standards adolescence have been led to believe they can achieve. And upon failure, they are left with that feeling of rejection and a dashed hope of ever being accepted, of ever becoming an American beauty.
An Ode to Junior High
K. Lang

When I came to the poem "Junior High Topography" written by Susan Samuels Drake, the title immediately brought me memories of the M.C. Hammer pants, the wild Pucci-esqe 80’s prints, the Milli-Vanilli scandal, Madonna belting out tunes of being "touched for the very first time"—Madonna, the woman who spoke to us girls about sexuality when no one else would, teaching us that wearing lace shorts and garter belts was appropriate. Quickly coming back to my senses I continued on with the rest of the poem. Delightfully, I discovered that this poem was an accurate and endearing description of that awkward, yet memorable, phase pre-teen girls experienced in Junior High. It was those painstaking years, when the eagerness to grow into a desired woman was all we really sought after, but the shame and ridicule we experienced before being "socially" defined as desirable, breasts and all, was the burden weighing our self-esteem down.

This poem exposes the ideals that society had impressed on a young girl, as she idolized the women with developed breasts, the kind that men "bump into on purpose", and yearned for those of her own, assuming that breasts were the only link to womanhood rich in desire and attractiveness.

When I finished reading this poem (and imagining the raging feminists using it as proof that BAYWATCH mentally ruins the esteeems of junior high girls), it made me realize, however, how much we complain and blame society for ruining our youth, for subjecting them to these unhealthy habits, but we as adult women still go out and buy padded push-up bras! We are hypocrites, admit it.

We assume that junior high girls are too young to understand the difference between real and ideal women, and somewhere in the back our minds we also know that they look up to us, women somewhere in the middle of extreme and nanny-ish, for guidance. Despite this fact, we don’t distinguish, separate, or stand up to society’s ideals by wearing a Wonderbra. And with this say-no-but-do-so solution to solving a societal problem that is impressed on these girls, nothing will change. These girls look up to us, the goddesses of adult women we are, and we stick our feet in our mouths when we tell girls that "it only matters to be acknowledged for inner beauty"; but then we spend two hours getting ready to go out in public, or pay $3.25 for a magazine that tells us what to wear to be chic! Women pride themselves about being strong and not caring if they are desirable, well then why on earth would they stay up late at night and do boob exercises, like they teased in the musical Grease? What is so bad about wanting that kind of attention? What is so
bad about being desired?

The young girl in the poem is responding to the atmosphere around her. She believes that breasts are the symbol of desire, an accurate assumption for adolescents, when they see that the actresses on TV, and the women that girls fathers gawk at, all have similar traits. They absorb this pick of 36-24-36 "American Beauties" and return it to the expectation of themselves, junior high girls. "If a girl canít ignite whistles/ If boys donít bump into her on purpose" shows that junior high girls want to be desired just as bad as any forty year old going through mid-life crisis. The acceptance, the glamorous thought of being compared to a sex symbol such a Marilyn Monroe or Jennifer Love Hewwit is appealing as soon as women become interested in sex, and lasts only because it is constantly being fueled by the same women.

When the girl in the poem compares her body to a womanís while she was "trying on vast expanses of cotton/ on my skeleton/ thinking someday this will all be mine", she knows of the attention she will attract when the cups are full. She has obviously seen it happen to other developed women. She has seen how society hates, but also at the same time admires the women who can marry the rich men on appearance alone. Itís the easy way out that makes this sort of lifestyle so forbidden, its why when purchasing that Wonderbra, you look over your shoulders in fear of being caught.

I still can so clearly remember the day my mother brought me thought the doors of the "mothership of femininity": Victoriaís Secret. My eyes opened with awe when the voluptuous associates, prepared with measuring tape around their necks, guided me into a fitting room and flooded me with these symbols of womanhood, that would hang loosely around my ribs.

Eight years later, despite every lecture I have heard in a womanís magazine about inner beauty, I am the same girl who shops frivolously at lingerie shops, recently trying out the new "Water Bra" (a bra with its cups literally filled with water to simulate the "natural" consistency of silicone). At a bar with my girlfriends, I am suprisingly sulky, not at all celebrating the attention to my instant "liquid" cleavage. Instead, I feel ashamed of my culture and how much pain we cause people who are less than our concept of ideal. I am thinking of ways I can make the flat-chested audience feel more powerful; what I can do to deliver the message about maintaining positive self-esteem; yet I am still using all of my will power not to smile when the guys across the room are gawking at the contents that are filling the low plunging neckline of my dress.

Women need to be desired. I know for a fact that not one woman can say she isnít flattered when she is whistled and ogled at. She might be slightly disgusted of the manners of some men; but knowing that the
eyes were acknowledging her, and whatever features she enticed them with, that feeling is pure giddy. Until our culture decides that big feet are what make a woman desirable, women of all ages are secretly persuaded to pad, push up, tape, and inject, in order to achieve the ample goal of flesh society likes, between their armpits. And like always, after we fall into this booby-trap (no pun intended), our fear of being labeled shallow and materialistic will inevitably cause us to blame and gripe about our society; how disgusting it is that they can force these junior high girls to have a negative self-esteem until the skin on their chests swell into firm mounds of American beauty: American Beauty that the American society creates.
When I first read the poem “Long Haul,” by Charlene Villella, I was instantly envisioning a childhood much like my own—even down to the pajamas the young kids are wearing. I, too, spent much of my life wishing for a father who would come home every night, tuck me into bed, and tell me to have sweet dreams; the family in “Long Haul” yearns for those same qualities. Though my father may not have been a truck driver, I would often pretend that he was just away on a trip, rather than sit with the reality of his alcoholism. This poem allows the reader to journey down the dark lonesome highway with a trucker’s wife, into the arms of a dirty father, and into the souls of the little children. It allows you to see into the lives of a family, through a child’s perspective, broken apart by a man’s career. A family broken apart because of a father’s lack of commitment to his family, his wife, his relationship.

Growing up I quickly and painfully learned what it was like to have a father that likes to drink a lot and it was easier to detach myself from him than it was to watch him drowned himself; however, I lost a father to gain some sanity. I remember those long drives to his house on “visit” days, wanting so badly to see him, yet knowing that he would soon be gone again, those visits became further and further apart. I still wonder if that was good or bad, I always wanted to see him but at the same time, never really wanted to. “Sleepy-eyed children in Disney pajamas,” I had Disney pajamas, my dad got them for me for Christmas one year before the “Divorce.” I wore them until they fell apart; it was like they were a piece of what my father used to be.

“...and belched smoke smelling of / rotten eggs from two metal stacks / on the cab...” if there was one thing I could ever distinguish my dad by it was his breath: Marlboro Reds and Mount Gay Rum; it is sad but sometimes that smell was almost soothing because it meant that he was home, he was safe, he was there. He smelled like that morning, noon, and night, it was stained into his clothes, and his skin emitted the scent as his body odor.

“We watched mom/hold him and kiss him / until we got bored / curled up into small balls / on the rear seat / of our old Buick”. My sisters and I would watch from the backseat of our dad’s old Buick Skylark, but it was never mom that he was hugging and kissing, it was usually just “some girl” that we never really would meet, or even yet, ever see again. Sometimes we would see those girls as they were sneaking out of our apartment the morning after; usually dad would stay at their houses. Those nights were followed by mornings of getting ready for school all by ourselves and calling mom to come pick us up and take
us to school. Once mom got involved, those mornings never seemed to happen anymore, we also didn’t stay at dad’s house too often either. It was always obvious when dad had a new “friend”, he would wear his “good shirt” which meant that it wasn’t a free gift when he bought a pack of smokes, or that his local hangout/bar didn’t get it with a shipment of booze. His wardrobe consisted mostly of shirts that read things like, “Lick it, Drink it, Suck it” or “If you can read this shirt, you haven’t had enough (some brand of alcohol) yet”. He had maybe one or two shirts that were saved for special occasions that were somewhat nice.

I don’t mean to come across as a father basher, he did have a good side to him too. He taught me about the stars and why they do what they do, he taught me little magic tricks that he would pick up at toy stores along his way. He would stay up with me on nights that I would wake up in a sweat from nightmares. But those times are hard to remember, they became more and more sparse as time went on and as his drinking became more than just an “occasional thing.” I miss those times, just like the kids in “Long Haul” miss their dad. I spend a lot of time trying to remember just the good things about my father; I haven’t spoken a single word to him in over two and a half years so it is hard not to think he is bad. He doesn’t even know that I am in college now, the only one of his children to go further than high school and he is too drunk to even appreciate it. I don’t want him to have the gratification of even knowing, that’s why I don’t talk to him, I don’t want him to be a part of my life unless he can really be a part of it, not just come and go at his leisure.

I feel as though reading poems such as “Long Haul” have helped me get through many of my hardships with my father; they help show me that I am not alone. I am not the only girl in the world that grew up without a father, especially when all of my friend’s parents were still happily married at the time. I was very touched by the story that took place in the poem; it was as if one of the stories I would make up about my dad was put down on paper and told to everybody. It inspired me to write this essay--which was hard considering it will be online--but it gave me the courage to tell about my similar upbringing; I greatly thank the author of “Long Haul”, Charlene Villella, for that.
Hot Steamy Metaphors
Cristel Williford

While “Making Fudge” does not compare to “The Wasteland” by T. S. Elliot, and is far from a masterpiece, it is accessible, common, and best of all, sweet and simple. It omits the pretensions of the aforementioned masterpiece. Just as an artist uses a brush, and a potter uses clay, poetry is an art form used to see the world in a different perspective with different eyes, by using words as its vehicle. Being the type of person who says the wrong thing at the wrong time, I feel that this is the right time to say that, after reading all of the submissions (over 300), it is necessary to remind the community what poetry is. Whether it is used as therapy or a hobby, basic qualities such as vivid description, meter, rhyme and uniqueness are still necessary, and make it even more enjoyable. (We do appreciate the risk all writers take with submitting their work, and truly do appreciate all submissions.) I find this poem made a great attempt to this meet this criteria, and was a pleasant diversion from the rest.

“Making Fudge” is about sex, a well-used topic. What is most intriguing is the fact that “Making Fudge” is not about making fudge at all. With its soft porn undertone, you get the feeling someone just had one hot lunch hour visiting their new lover. It erotically correlates sex and food and emphasizes the conjugal/conceptive quality of making fudge.

In every hot love scene in a movie there are four main parts. First, the couple starts kissing and holding each other; then the clothes come off; third, the intercourse begins; and then, when it is all over, they lie spooning, catching their breath with a little smile. This poem creates the image of a very explicit love scene where you see the male’s throbbing member, hear the moans and the sweet nothings. And like a porno, whether soft or hard (no pun intended), you see the actual intercourse and bodily fluids. Looking closer at this poem all of these characteristics materialize.

The first stanza starts with the woman describing her weakness for men. She pours sugar into the melted butter, then she starts to stir the mixture with a flat, wooden spoon. This spoon signifies the penis, or the “secret animal” as put in the poem. This is the kissing and holding part. She is drawing us in with her words while he is stroking her with his flat spoon! To look at the second and third stanza we feel the passion of foreplay and intercourse. “She stirs in vanilla, salt, a drizzle / of milk and begins to drop smooth chunks / of dark chocolate into the bubbling mass / . . . She spreads butter slowly along the insides / of the yellow ceramic bowl, her fingers / slick and glistening...” There is no avoiding
the fact that this writer is writing about explicit sex. 

“She lifts the heavy pot from the stove / and pours the gleaming brown mixture / into the yellow dish and looks up, / her direct gaze, calm and earnest.” The “drizzle of milk”, “bubbling mass,” spreading “butter slowly along the insides of a ceramic bowl,” “fingers slick and glistening,” “gleaming mixture” and “direct gaze” are all very sexy images. One can certainly go into details of what these all mean in terms of sexual metaphor, but perhaps we should wait until the lights are low and everyone else is sleeping. 

As the poem is transitioning into the fourth stanza, we see the “clean up” of the love scene via the straightening up kitchen. In other words, the lovers are satisfied. Their hunger has subsided. It is as if he is lying in the bed gazing up at her as she straightens the sheets. Maybe she puts her sundress back on and, as she does this, the wind catches her skirt and it billows slightly like the kitchen curtains. She kisses him good bye. The “thick sweetness” is scraped from the pot, the dish is covered with waxed paper and set to cool under the window. The curtain billows from the breeze and she smiles. I think I would be smiling too.
Almost everyone has used drugs like alcohol, tobacco or marijuana, but crank is a whole different world. Crank is a highly addictive drug; it gives you a high higher than cocaine, followed by a lower low. Heart rate and breathing increases under the influence of this drug, creating experiences and feelings of excitement. I met with a former crank addict and she explained to me the effects a user has. She described the high as an increase in self-confidence and a built up of higher alertness. She always felt incredibly good and didn't care about anything else. These are the feelings that are highly addictive and all you care about is getting back to these feelings, to forget the pain you have without the drug. How far someone would really go to get this high is unimaginable for a lot of people, but the short story "The Small Yellow Bird," by Liz Croom, gives the readers a taste of this experience. This story reminds the readers who have never lived with an addiction just how different our experiences in everyday life are. It points out how dangerous and chaotic your life can become when you are addicted to crank.

The story depicts a scenario in the life of a young woman. Real life doesn’t always have a happy ending. We will see throughout the story that this woman's fate is up to her, but her addiction remains a powerful influence. Sometimes it takes a certain incident in our lives for us to realize that we need to change something—in this story it took a small yellow bird. For this woman this experience opened her eyes to a change. The story not only opens the reader’s eyes to how terrible an addiction can be, but also, how important it is to make the right decisions to change your life. It also deals with the intersection between decisions and the recognition of our reality. It shows how we all, as a society, can become infatuated by simple, black and white answers, to the point where we lose sight of our struggle for humanity.

Throughout the first paragraph the reader is repeatedly reminded that this story deals with the problems of a crank addict. A young woman like me falls in love with a "clean freak." I personally relate to the unusual, but strong character, played by the woman’s boyfriend. There is something about freaks; maybe it is just the fact that they are different from anyone else that makes women fall in love with the wrong guys. Les, the main character’s boyfriend, surely is the wrong guy. He pretends to be a "I'm in control, really-I-am" crank addict, but as much as he tries, he will never be in control. The main character at this point though is not aware of his characteristic, and still admires him regardless. People are blind when they are in love, and they do a lot of
foolish things--such as crank. A drug like this makes you feel incredibly
good and takes you into a different world. This experience can be
reinforced when you share it with your partner. Everything from then on
seems different and better for lovers: you might talk for hours to share
this new experiences with each other, have the feeling you understand
each other better than before, and "the great sex, instant rush is worth
putting up with the negative aspects of doing the drug." An addict like
her hasn’t only lost touch with reality; she is in her own reality.

Throughout the piece the author creates a setting that is
uninviting in every respect as she describes vividly the experience of
getting drugs. The main character and her boyfriend can hear "the
women screaming and yelling from the inside" and "the smell of stale
milk and rotten food" hits her immediately when she enters the house.
The drug-dealer is a short and skinny mother of two boys, age seven and
nine. The house they live in is unorganized; chairs are "covered with
dirty socks, pants, and a couple of soiled aluminum TV dinner trays" and
there is a large "pile of clothes" on the couch. This scenery shows the
readers not only the life of addicts, but also how it affects the family
environment. The dirty and unorganized house and the fact that this
woman is selling drugs undoubtedly has a significant influence on her
children. When Les places his palm on the door to open it further, the
child who opens it is not even paying attention; this has happened
before. People walk in and out of this house without even thinking what
type of effect their business has on the children. The younger child is
sitting in a pile of clothes, while the older one is begging for attention,
shrieking at the bird. "'Get over here stupid bird.' He keeps repeating."
The young woman, looking straight into the drug dealerís face, realizes
that "Minutes ago [the dealer] looked like an average twenty-something
woman, but now [she sees] what crank has done to her: skin pale and
pasty from lack of sun and pocked-marked from acne; blue eyes wide
open but vacant. She has two bottom teeth missing. Missing teeth are
common among long time crank users." All these factors--the failed
education of the children, the disgusting house and the damage crank
does to someone--play an important role in the changes the main
character goes through.

The most significant metaphor in this story is a small yellow bird
that the main character relates herself to. This small yellow bird was
traded for crank and escaped from its cage. The mother and her nine-
year-old are now desperately trying to catch it while the main character
and her boyfriend are waiting for the drugs. The bird--trapped inside the
house and trying to escape--is like the main character. She is the one that
is trapped inside an addiction, trying to get out, but everyone around her
is unwilling to help her. When she realizes that, she tries to change the
situation, "I feel sorry for the bird; I want to let it out of this place. It suddenly becomes very important for me to help this bird. I look at the large window behind us and notice there is a screen. I gather all my courage and stand up to open the window. Les, without looking at me, grabs my arm and says, 'No, leave it.'" The situation is not only frustrating, but it also reflects her own life. The experience makes her more aware that she is trapped too, but in an addiction. She might be willing to stop crank soon, but the present situation may hinder that process. Her boyfriend may even inhibit her from the attempt to help herself, just as he stopped her from helping the bird. Les is as influential as the drug itself. He tries to control her as much as possible, afraid of loosing the only thing that he still can influence. Why would he want to stop her if he knows he will be left alone?

When the bird finally flies into the window and dies, she realizes that she could have made a difference. The bird flying into the window signifies reality. If she would have had enough courage to tell Les that he is wrong, and that she needs to open the window the bird could have survived. Now she understands that it is solely up to her to make a difference in her own life. "My legs hurt and my stomach hurts. I tell myself I wont be back no matter how much I want to do crank." These are strong feelings and the reader can see the changes the main character went through within the last scene.

The conclusion is left open; the reader can only imagine what becomes of her. They both leave the house together. Les is in a hurry to do the crank, while she slows down. "I can see heís in a hurry to do the crank, but I donít care. I keep my pace slow because Iím afraid Iím going to fall." Is she really afraid of literally falling down, or is she afraid of falling back into old habits? What will happen now is open to the readerís imagination, but I donít think that this is a happy end. The power of addiction is so strong; it is not as easy to get out of an addiction as someone might think. Addicts are: "habitual drug users who continue to use the drug despite the adverse effects of the drug on their health and life and despite their repeated efforts to stop using it" (Biopsychology 4th Edition, John Pinel).

Not only the main character, but everyone in our society does the wrong thing sometimes--yet it is important for us to remember that this is our life, and that the decisions we make are very important. The realization that the main character endures difficulties when trying to make the right decisions, and faces the problems of withdrawal, opens the reader's eyes to our own reality. We have to keep an eye open for significant moments in our lives. They present themselves for a reason; a chance to change our lives for the better. A lot of people in our society are trapped in a false dichotomy--either/or thinking in which they view the
world in terms of black and white--but there are always shades of gray and chances to change our lives. It might not be as easy as we think to escape old habits--as we see in the desperate attempt of the main character to go through her change--but this story makes us realize the importance of seeing our reality and making conscious decisions to see it anew.
Awakened Spirit
Abigayle Coddington

In order to create a vision of a freer self in today’s society, it is important to have the technique to free ourselves from the daily routines and burdens that weigh us down. A passionately felt poem composed by Amber Coverdale Sumrall guides us on a spiritual journey, introducing ways in which to explore our inner thoughts and feelings. With her use of lively, deep-rooted emotion she reveals to us the power of nature.

Sumrall also inspires her audience to precisely examine the soul, self and being. Taking time to evaluate and explore our inner being will allow us to strengthen who we are and who we become. In the poem, “To Open The Heart,” feelings come to life as truth, hope and courage ignite a burning desire to stimulate and rekindle our passion for life, which sometimes becomes buried inside us. Amber Sumrall’s poem inspires, directs, and moves her readers like a well-orchestrated symphony.

Her inspried-self reminds and instructs us to return to the essence of our being. She gracefully introduces imagery, words and phrases entwining them with her visions. She feels it is valuable, “To lose yourself inside the maze of a dream,” where the soul and heart, “travel the night country of metaphor, world between worlds.” She uses the power of nature to connect and show the correlation between emotion, the world and us. Sumrall’s poetry takes us on a spiritual quest connecting us with nature and examining all forces that affect us in our lives. The uses of the elements of nature ensures us that Mother Earth will direct us back to the core of our being just as she does with all her creatures. Sumrall allows her audience to blossom encouraging them to, “Walk the rim of a mountain scorned by rain, wind, fire, / ponder the myriad ways [we] attempt to fill [our] emptiness.” We can free ourselves using the Earth as our instructor. By allowing ourselves to feel her pleasures and pains, we connect ourselves to her like a mother with a newborn child; she will nourish us.

Sumrall has the courage and strength to guide her audience. She fiercely commits to exploring the issues that effect our inner self and our surroundings. When we surrender our minds and allow our thoughts and imagination to awaken, we free ourselves, leaving us carefree from many of the burdens that confine and restrict us. In this fast-paced society, where ideas and people run rapidly it becomes difficult to examine our issues and thoughts without receiving scrambled information. We find ourselves consumed by so much that we become buried under society’s pressures and we lose the ability to stay open and connected to the core of our being. In my life I become so overwhelmed...
with school and work that I forget to check-in with how things affect my inner self. Instead of concentrating on our troubles and worries, Sumrall communicates the idea of self-purification; by cleansing our body, mind, and soul we will soon begin to explore our true beings.

Sumrall encourages us to, “search for clues, retrieve what has been lost.” She invites us to examine our ideas and opinions, so we can have the knowledge and strength to truly know and believe in who we are. Sumrall’s words are calling for a spiritual awakening, an unmasking of our true self. When we examine beauty and truth in ourselves and evaluate the sacred thoughts that encompass our being, beauty and truth will ignite within us and come to life. Spirituality in our lives will enable us to see and feel a power that is greater than us. This power can grant us freedom, comfort and security. In my life, I look for this sense of freedom, a higher power greater than myself to guide me. The imagery of Sumrall’s words are as alive and fresh as a spring day. The images of change force upon us a fresh beginning. These images will bring a rebirth and a new beginning to our lives.

Sumrall reveals and directs her passion to a more divine self. On her spiritual journey word between words, thought between thoughts, we begin to, “watch how [our] words like stones ripple the pool of stillness” but she warns us to, “choose carefully which ones to cast.” It is important to articulate thoughts and words before allowing them to slip away from their context and our meaning of them. It is important to communicate true meaning of what we are saying so we can better understand one another. Sumrall uses her self-healing prescription to unveil the truth and serenity that lies in each of us. As thoughts cluster and fill our minds we become overwhelmed, disillusioned and distracted but we should not, “Allow what [we are] afraid of to permeate [our] being, / the way fog overtakes the forest, then dissolves in clear light.” She encourages us to explore, “Become a raven, a snake, a dolphin, a wolf,” become all, feel all, and experience what we can to enhance our being.

Examination of the self will help you grow along with inspiring others around you to do the same. Sumrall moves us by appealing to our senses and imagination. Skillfully, she conveys her visions, allowing our minds to travel to spaces not yet explored. She breathes life into abstract ideas making them concrete. She encourages change, “Set fire to all you think you know, / create a new story for your life.” The author promotes new creations through her words. She finds that it is crucial for people to know and feel their present state of being. The people who do will learn from change and grow from experience. Guidance can be found within us and our author illustrates that.

Throughout her poem, Sumrall exemplifies the beauty that we
all hold inside. She whole-heartily encourages and inspires through her written words. Her passion I feel, her voice I hear, her spirit I see, as I, “Sit inside a redwood that has burned from the inside out,” Sumrall’s words are like the spirit of that tree encircling me, I “Call my sorrows up one by one, welcome them as friends.” I awaken with visions to adhere to our author’s words and I listen to Mother Earth has she speaks to us in her many forms. She shows us how important it is to think about the spiritual path our lives follow. Amber Coverdale Sumrall inspires her readers to retreat to the core of their soul, self, and being--and there she asserts we will find something truly valuable: “Joy can be this simple, some long-locked door swinging open in the heart.”
Christ versus the Anti-Christ
Rachel Bell

“Communion,” by Mary Renga, offers the reader a poignant glimpse of a young girl’s struggle with incest, juxtaposed with her belief that she will be saved upon entering into a union with Jesus. The two antagonists’ in this piece, Christ and—as represented by her father—the Anti-Christ, delineate the polarity of good and evil. For this young girl, her first communion is a step toward salvation from the evils of her reality. She must contend with the forces of evil in the home; her father defiling her innocent body. Receiving her communion is then born of her need to ascend and transcend the impossible situation of sexual abuse. For a seven-year-old caught in the detriments of abuse, love from Jesus without any physical evidence will suffice as her perception of love is tainted with the “sweat of sticky semen on her lips” from her father; unwanted physical evidence of dysfunctional and misguided philoprogenitiveness. A child cannot fully comprehend the ramifications of abuse. In this poem, however, Renga illustrates how an opportunity to foster hope for salvation for her desecrated and molested soul by receiving communion becomes a pivotal event for this child in distinguishing good from bad; real from the ideal.

She is, in essence, entering into an arranged marriage; communion being her wedding day. Dressed virginal in a “white dress, freshly starched and hemmed/ not straight because her mother is Realtor not a seamstress,” while her mother is popping pills, downing them with wine, taking her own communion. “So what is Sunday morning?” she ponders—her irreverent family filing into Church every Sunday without ever internalizing the creed. Committing Sin. The paradox of emotions she must feel as her family of sacrilege looks on while she is poised to marry a sanctified being, Jesus. She has high hopes for her husband-to-be. “She expects he will treat her kindly—/ better than her father treats her mother.” Sadly, she is privy to such marital and familial failure but she is determined to escape the cycle. “She is ready to be a devoted wife—/ as long as he does not beat her or/ shake her into submission.” The young girl is being discerning—making choices. She will be devoted to Jesus if he treats her right, emancipating her from the vulgarity of her family. Just as her father smothers her, she will not be subdued by her new husband.

The works and life of Jesus are reduced and simplified to reflect a child’s perception of Him: “She has studied that He is a fisherman/ and thinks a cruise would be fine./ She likes the idea of eating fresh fish from the ocean./ Maybe she could be in a miracle and walk on water also.” For the confused, young child, Jesus is a literal figure, swooping
down from heaven to protect her innocence. She toys with the notion of joining Jesus in his miraculous endeavors, unlike those her father undertakes. For her, Jesus embodies noble qualities, devoid of any deviant tendencies—which is all she knows. She imagines Jesus being her knight in shining armor; in one fell swoop He will whisk her away. Just as her father, when he carelessly joins her night, “[rearranges her stuffed] animals with one fell swoop.”

“A giant bird [her father] descends / while she pretends to ascend to the heavens” where Jesus resides. “She wonders if Jesus will have three days worth of stubble / from not shaving after he has risen again / And what it means to be dead.” She believes Jesus is coming for her; rising from the dead to save her from the atrocities committed by her father which she no longer wants to endure. She prepares herself to be His bride; wondering what He will look like, what He will be like. She has questions for him, but mostly high hopes.

In moments of abandon, the young girl allows herself the freedom to dream. She fantasizes about going on her honeymoon with Jesus. She revels in the wild bliss of running away with Jesus, leaving her father and his shenanigans behind her. “Over the heads of her classmates she would float upwards, / buoyant like a runaway balloon; / the way she leaves her bed when her father / joins her at night.” She disassociates from the salacious encounters, “hovering—a lost angel.” She believes with her whole being that Jesus will find her. The sins of her father, ‘all quivering flesh and sex” will be exposed for what it is, evil. Jesus will redeem her.

Jesus will be subtle: “She wishes He will smell like pine forest / or cedar, her favorite tree;” not the smell of crude sex, “or the alcohol on her father’s breath.” Jesus will be everything her father is not. He will be kind, “maybe they can buy a house in the suburbs. / She knows Jesus is rich.” While her father incessantly consummates his sick love for her, she dreams of Jesus—“she is at one with something.” In order to survive the abuse, she must ardently maintain “that He loves her uniquely and completely,” that Jesus will not judge her or reject her due to her father’s sins against her.

But will she be saved? Will Christ bestow justice in time to save her from her father, the Anti-Christ? As much as I hope Jesus showed up to the wedding, I imagine she found herself disappointed returning home from the ceremony in the family car, fearing bedtime. Perhaps shrouding herself in faith makes the Sin bearable until she can rise out of the home and ultimately, reunite with her husband in the skies. Is faith enough? This young child, stripped of her dignity and virginity, needs a miracle. Will Jesus deliver in time? I imagine her small hands clasping together in the dark, keeping her faith alive, while the sound of her father’s footsteps inch closer to her room.
Perfect Husband
Alicia Flores

“Communion,” by Mary Renga, is a troubling poem that takes the tragic encounters of an innocent little girl only seven years old, and compares them to a special event about to take place in this little girl’s life. She is getting ready to make her first communion, a religious event in which she will spiritually marry Jesus, the son of God according to Catholicism. Due to the abuse and incest that this child has had the misfortune of experiencing, she has become confused and taken the words of the priest literally, using these religious ideas to get through the shattering of her faith by parental love.

In catechism [Sunday school] the priest said she will marry Jesus;

that without any physical evidence
she must believe
that he loves her uniquely and completely.

Considering these words and the experiences of this little girl it is easy to understand how a child can take the meaning of this ceremonial event and compare it to her own life. This child who has already become witness to her father’s cruelty towards her mother and herself, has become a confused and scared little girl. What most of us never encounter or even imagine, she has already experienced first-hand. Therefore, when she hears the words “marry Jesus” come out of the priest’s mouth, she really believes that she is to become the wife of Jesus. A belief that for a while—or for the rest of her life--will help her overcome the mental and physical abuse through imagination. She has no idea of what the priest truly means, she only knows that to marry someone is to become their wife—to love and honor in the good times and in bad.

Like other children who interpret what they hear, see and know, this little girl takes what she knows about Jesus and what she has witnessed in her home and then imagines the perfect marriage and the perfect husband.

As she lays in her bed listening to her mother’s cries for help down below she closes her eyes and “pretends to ascend to the heavens” like “a lost angel” mentally running away, leaving behind the helpless cries of her mother and her father’s sexual encounters. As her eyes remain closed her father enters the room and descends like “a giant bird”--ready to feast on its prey. Trying to escape the situation she thinks about her future husband and remembers that soon she shall become the bride of Jesus.

Having watched her mother get beaten and shaken like ice cream in a blender she hopes that Jesus “will treat her kindly—/ better
than her father treats her mother.” She knows that he will love her because Jesus loves all of his children, she just hopes that he will without the slap across the face or the shove against the wall. Like her battered and abused mother who believes that it is her fault and up to her to make the relationship work, this child has also made herself believe that “she is ready to be a devoted wife—” perfect in every way and ready to make the marriage work.

As her father continues hovering like a crazed animal she remembers that Jesus “is a fisherman / and thinks a cruise would be fine.” The perfect place to go on their honeymoon—an idea she probably got from catechism while learning about the miracles of Jesus in which he took “five loaves and two fishes (Matthew14:13-21)” and fed about five thousand men “not counting the women and children (Matthew 14:13-21).” As she continues to “float upwards, / like a runaway balloon”; she can feel her father’s rough, prickly face as he hovers above her and “she wonders if Jesus will have three days worth of stubble / from not shaving after he has risen”—once again referring to the Bible when Jesus was crucified on the cross and rose again on the third day.

As she continues to lay in her tainted bed she wishes that her future husband—

will smell like pine forest
or cedar, her favorite tree.
Not the sweat of semen sticky on lips (God’s secret)
or the alcohol on her father’s breath.

Trying not to think of the awful smell of semen she doesn’t realize that her father has left the room. When she finally opens her eyes and realizes that her father has left tears roll down her face both from fear of knowing that her father will come back tomorrow and happiness that she is to become the wife of Jesus, a man who “loves her uniquely and completely...without any physical evidence.”

As this child takes what she knows about Jesus and compares it to her troubling situation taking place in her living- and bedroom, she is comforted by the idea of becoming a wife and marring Jesus come Sunday morning. Even though she has no idea that it will be a spiritual connection, “she has high hopes for her husband” because “even if she is only seven she can dream” of the perfect marriage and perfect husband. She can make believe that “she is at one with something.”
Faith and Hope are what we all Need
Crystal Jones

A disturbing view of oppression and abuse inflicted on a family is revealed in the poem “Communion,” by Mary Renga. The use of religion to justify the actions of the oppressor and abuser—in this case her father—is nothing new to the history of womanhood. The history of western society has revealed a legacy of Man’s dominion over Woman. Many people would place religion at fault for the oppression of anybody. For instance, the Bible states,

Wives, submit yourselves to your own husband, as it is fit in the Lord. Husbands, love your wives, and be not bitter against them. Children, obey your parents in all things: for this is well pleasing unto the Lord. Fathers, provoke not your children to anger, lest they be discouraged.

Colossians II 3: 18-21

These social principles have been true throughout history, on almost every continent of the world. An important tool in enforcing these ideas has been religion, which has been misused when it is used to ignore, discriminate, beat or molest any person of any age. To the seven year old girl telling the story, the religious lessons of her youth offer a sense of hope and freedom. “Communion” sheds a different light on the use of Biblical lessons. The lessons and spiritual ideas taught to her offer her a fantasy world when the reality of her world is too much for her to take.

Communion is a Christian ritual practiced weekly by Catholics, and less frequently by most other denominations of the Christian faith. Communion was started by Jesus on the Jewish holiday called Passover. This particular meal is known as The Last Supper because it was the last meal Jesus ate with his disciples. At the end of the meal

Jesus took bread, and blessed it, and brake it, and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And He took the cup, and gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink ye all of it; For this is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for the many remission of sins.’

Matthew 26: 26-28

The ritual of communion is carried out the same way in remembrance of Jesus, and the idea that he died for our sins. The pastor will offer the bread saying, “This is Christ’s body broken for you.” The idea is that you are washed clean of your sins. Oftentimes communion is accompanied with confession in the Catholic church. This can be intimidating for a young child, however a child’s First Communion in the Catholic church is a time that calls for great celebration.

She has “Already landed on the shore of desire” because
excitement and anticipation weigh on the girl’s family while they prepare for her first communion. Though she is only seven, she is now seen as a girl old enough to understand parts of the Bible, and to differentiate the difference between wrong and right. First Communion is seen as a stepping stone in the growth of a child. Months of studying and memorization are required of such young children, before they can take their First Communion. The girl has studied faithfully, and she is quite aware of her surroundings, and she shows an active imagination and curiosity.

She has never been to a wedding
but today she is to be a bride
In catechism the priest said she will marry Jesus;
that without any physical evidence
she must believe
that he loves her uniquely and completely.

There is excitement in the air, and it is clear that she has listened to what the priest has said. The “he” in the last line caught my eye, because an upper case letter is always used in reference to Jesus, the Holy Spirit, or the Judea-Christian God. It could be an error of ignorance. However, the first stanza talks about her mother’s hands shaking “from some small white pill to help her unwind/ and a glass of pale wine or some combination.” Though, nothing concrete has been given, it is obvious that her mother has some sort of addiction problem. When one person suffers from an addiction, then the whole family suffers too. The addiction could easily stem from mistreatment from the father. The way the lines are broken up, gives insight into what the girl is thinking. The use of the phrase “physical evidence” as opposed to “tangible evidence” could easily be a reference to bruises or scars. “She must believe” is almost a command to herself. “She must believe that he loves her” “he,” referring to her father. If she doesn’t believe that her father loves her, then at seven years old, her world could crumble right before her eyes.

The girl has hopes for a new future, one that is better than her present life. She is sincere in her faith saying, “she is ready to be a devoted wife.” She also expects to be treated kindly, “better than her father treats her mother.” She doesn’t want to be beaten or shaken into submission. Throughout the third stanza, she states these expectations and rules using “he” instead of “He.” She makes these statements as if she was speaking of her husband, but she writes with the hope that her father fulfilling these expectations. She does not want her father to beat her. She wants him to love her “without any physical evidence.” She has hope that her life will improve, and her hopes are expressed through lessons and stories of the Bible.
“She has studied that He is a fisherman/ and thinks a cruise would be fine.” These two lines show a slight misunderstanding of a concept a lot of adults don’t understand. The idea that “she will marry Jesus” is a little strange, and she has been taught that she will marry him. However, she doesn’t seem to understand what this means. She accepts her new husband, and she has hopes of being in a miracle, and enjoying fresh fish. In truth, Jesus called himself and his disciples “Fishers of Men.” He went out to teach his faith to other men. However, this fantasy is her way of staying sane.

Over the heads of her classmates she would float upwards, buoyant like a runaway balloon; the way she leaves her bed when her father joins her at night kicking back the cool sheets

Child molestation is a harsh reality to face for anybody. It is harshest to the child who is being molested, or to the child watching a sibling being molested. How do you deal with such a situation? She deals with her life by fantasizing about a different life without her father. She dreams of being Jesus’ wife, who is said to love every person unconditionally. He is forgiving and nonjudgmental. Every human being on earth seeks a friend like that.

The young girl’s thoughts become darker when she wonders “what it means to be dead,/ the quiet of it like the darkness of sky at night/ before the stars embrace light.” She still wonders what Jesus is like, if he will have stubble, and what he will smell like. These thoughts show an acute awareness of physical attributes of the male body. This awareness is reinforced by the lines, “Not the sweat of semen sticky on her lips [God’s secret]/ or the alcohol on her father’s breath.” Despite her desperation, illustrated through her thoughts of death, she looks to a brighter future. She maintains a sense of a better life, and a better relationship with a person of the opposite sex.

The poem ends as follows:
Maybe they can buy a house in the suburbs.
She knows Jesus is rich.
She has high hopes for her husband.
Even if she is only seven she can dream she is at one with something.

She can and will dream. The numbers seven and one are used quite often in the Bible to represent a small period of time, or a significant character. She dreams of being at one with something through communion. She will, as a Catholic girl, take communion every seven days. Every seven days she will eat of the “body of Christ, and drink of his blood.” She will, for a few fleeting moments, feel at one with her dream of a better life.
There is much controversy on the subject of religion. In today’s society, so many people jump back and hiss when they hear of Christianity, Islam, or any other faith they believe to be oppressive. Religion can be a persuasive tool to manipulate people by. Pastors and other religious speakers have a grave responsibility in society. When speaking of the family, often the roles of the wife and children are emphasized. It would seem that the man is left to do as he pleases. Unfortunately, some people take advantage of their power and ignore their responsibilities. People will twist and pervert the meanings of powerful messages to maintain their control over the people they are oppressing and hurting. The church is not often a great source of support to abused wives and children. I have personally met pastors who have instructed women to have their abusive husbands arrested and put through therapy, but these women were instructed not to divorce their husbands. Children are kept at home so they won’t be separated from their parents. The family is held higher then the women and children who support and create the family. The church has the power to intercede and help the family out. When the church holds back or turns its back, then it is ignoring its responsibilities. However, the catholic church, and other dogmas, are not responsible for the abuse that goes on at home.

Communion is taken once a week by people of the Catholic denomination, with the idea that their sins are forgiven and they can start fresh. All Christians partake of this ritual at least once in their life. Part of the Christian dogma is that when you’re forgiven of your sins then you are set free from your past and you’re a new person. The girl writing the poem hopes to start a new life, separate and different form her past. Catholicism is not at fault here. It is not the enemy, nor is it the problem. The lessons of religion can easily be used to oppress people, but in this case they may eventually set her free from an unhealthy environment.
Imaginary Endings
Tyler Karaszewski

Marcy Alancraig’s story of a woman comforting her dying friend by writing a story about their relationship illustrates how people can invent situations in order to help them cope with what's going on in their lives. The “Dino Story” she is writing is an attempt to validate Michael’s death by creating an after life scenario in which he evolves to a higher state of being, like the dinosaur in the story that becomes a bird. This is the speaker’s attempt to come to terms with the impending death of her friend. She is unable to cope with the facts of the situation, so she invents an imaginary situation in which she views his death as a new life, and this interpretation, through her story, helps her to live with his death. However, she is unable to see the rebirth that Michael anticipates through his belief in God. She wants his belief to be true, but she personally can’t believe that there is a God, or a heaven, so she invents this story to keep this idea of an after-life intact, despite the fact that she doesn’t share Michael’s faith. In stressful, emotional situations, like the death of a loved one, people will often relate the unfamiliar situation to something with which they are more familiar in an attempt to comfort themselves. Tess tries to hide from the situation behind her story, in which the end is a beautiful journey and evolution to a higher being, rather than a slow and painful death. While all the while Michael just wants his friend to comes to terms with the truth: which ultimately means his death.

Tess relates Michael to the main character in her story, a dinosaur. Tess was an expert on dinosaurs, Michael even called her “Miss-I-know-everything- there-is-to-know-about-dinosaurs-and-more”. It’s fitting then, that she would use a dinosaur as the object to which she could relate her current situation in life. She takes all the key elements in her relationship with Michael, and makes parallels to them in her story. Michael himself becomes the dinosaur, his God becomes the Great Mother, his disease is the journey, his death is the fall from the cliff at the end, and the sprouting of wings is his rebirth as a higher being. Tess, being a scientific person rather than a religious one, can’t relate life after death to a religious background, so she uses a scientific one instead. Since she doesn’t believe in Michael’s religion, she relates the theory about dinosaurs evolving into birds as an explanation for how Michael being after he passes away.

Tess tries to hide the fact that her story is an attempt to help her live through Michael’s disease. This is an attempt to show that she is strong, that she can deal with the situation. Perhaps she believes that this will help Michael, that if she really showed her despair, it could put him
in an even worse position, emotionally and physically, or she could be trying to keep herself together because of the nature of their relationship, which seems to be one based more on humor than sharing emotions. She denies that the Great Mother in her story is God, even though it’s obvious to Michael what she really represents. Tess tries to hide the true meaning of her story from Michael, because the story was really meant to comfort her, not him.

Michael, on the other hand, has no need to try and relate his sickness to something in his life. It is his life. He criticizes Tess’s candy-coated vision of the end of Michael’s life: “‘Why does it have to be so hard at the end?’ ‘It just is’ he panted. ‘Take a fucking look.’” He resents the way Tess has written the story with a happy ending, because he knows the real story, the story of his life, won’t end that way. He wants Tess to be able to accept his life the way it is rather than hiding from the truth by inventing dinosaur fantasies about how she would like things to be. He tells her “The story stinks!” not because he doesn’t want the ending to be that way, but because he wishes Tess could come to grips with the reality of the situation.

The idea that people will translate something they don’t understand into terms of something that they are more familiar with is not only applied to Michael’s death, but also to his Christianity. Tess, being a very scientifically minded person is unable to believe in a religion in the same way that Michael does, she relies on physical evidence to found her beliefs. In Tess’s story she uses evolution, as the Great Mother, in place of the God that Michael believes in. The Great Mother is God-like in her ability to give wings to the dinosaurs, but the process takes thousands of years, “A millennium passed as I fell . . . Rivers shifted. Mountains rose up and wore down and still I tumbled.” This is much more consistent with Tess’s belief in evolution than with Michael’s belief in God. Michael interprets this part of the story differently than Tess, he equates the Great Mother with his own God, even when Tess tries to deny it.

This story within a story illustrates well one of the more peculiar aspects of the human mind, and how the human imagination can be applied in stressful or poorly understood situations. It shows the effects that the death, or the impending death, of a loved one can have on the mind. It also shows one of the common, yet peculiar methods that people will employ in an effort to help themselves understand the meaning behind situations like these, and to help them cope with them.
The Good Girl’s Cage
Sarah Belden

“I’m tired,” says Susan Allison, author of the poem “Good Girl.” I know what she means. It’s tiring living in a space set up by those around you. One way or the other you’re always fighting. Sometimes you fight against the image, and sometimes you fight to fit the image. Either way, tooth and nail, it’s emotionally exhausting. And all you really want is acceptance; acceptance for the person you are, regardless of who everyone else thinks you should be. It’s hard to love yourself when no one else seems to care who you are inside. “living your life / not mine; / wanting wanting / you to love me / more / so much more / than I’ve loved myself.”

This poem is great in its simple rhymes and patterns. The repetition of phrases and rhythms alliteratively shows how it feels to live the life that Allison is describing. “a good girl / a should girl / a I don’t think she would girl[.]” and “a good girl / a should girl / a tell me what to do girl[.]” and “a good girl / a should girl / a do this or else girl[.]” flow through the poem, continually reminding the reader of what the ‘good girl’ was experiencing throughout her life. Allison’s use of italics emphasizes the voice that is not her own. She goes so far as to physically separate this voice with extra space between the italicized disapprovals and her own voice. This space also shows the lack of communication and understanding between the accused and the accuser. No one bothered to find out what she expected of herself before making presumptions about the ‘good girl’s’ future actions. Because of these presumptions, a good girl would attempt to live up to others’ views of her without having the time to decide what her view of herself is.

It took me three years, two high schools, a new set of friends, and my parent’s divorce to escape the confines of my ‘good girl’ image. When I was young, everyone had the highest expectations of me. I always did well in school. In the sixth grade, I was in the advanced math class, doing seventh grade work. I tattled on everybody, especially the girls who wore makeup to school (it was, after all, against the rules). I was always the teacher’s pet. In the fourth grade, my teacher knew that I had started writing poetry, and she asked me to compose the rhyme that would go inside every classmate’s Valentine card to their parents. But as I grew up, the good girl image surrounding me began to limit the person I was becoming. Teenage years are supposed to be times of experimentation, be it sex, drugs, music, hair color, clothing style, or activities. It seemed, however, that no matter where I went or what I was doing, someone who knew my parents (or the kid of someone who knew my parents) was always around; I was still trying to bust out of my mold
quietly enough that my parents wouldn’t hear horror stories. I would be risking punishment if my parents knew I did things that didn’t go along with my good girl image. “Everyone knows / it’s fear / fear that makes me be / a good girl.” That was when I started learning to temper some of those good girl things so that most everything I did was beneficial to myself.

Being a good girl gets you certain things, like trusting parents. That in itself gives you room to do things your parents would never suspect from you, should you be willing to attempt them and risk the guilt you would later be stuck with. But being a good girl can also mean that you don’t make as many friends. Good girls aren’t popular girls, unless the goodness is a well-kept front. Popular girls wear makeup to school, have boyfriends, pass notes in class instead of taking notes, and aren’t usually A students. When you’re a good girl, your parents think you want to hang out with them (which unfortunately is sometimes true, driving home the good girl name), and think it’s okay to drive on all the class field trips. After a while, once some independence is finally established, being asked to check in every time you get to a new location—the “call me when you get there’s,”—leaving phone numbers with parents or boyfriends or husbands—a “do this or else girl,”—and always having expectations to live up to—a “I don’t think she would girl,”—becomes a strain that’s no longer worthwhile.

By the time I reached the tenth grade, I was still in school with kids I had been in kindergarten with; even though I knew myself a lot better by that age, no one else took the effort to see the different person I might have become. My good girl reputation stuck to me, and even though there were people in my high school that hadn’t been at my elementary school, most of them quickly learned who I was by what other people thought of me, and I was again branded the ‘good girl’.

The first time I smoked pot was in high school. Even today, with this being read by a general public, someone reading this probably knows me and is shocked that I ever smoked pot. The first time (yes, I did it more than once), I was with my close friends. Many of them didn’t think twice about it, but even within that circle of friends, I was still heckled to no end. “Sarah Belden’s smoking pot??!!?” And it was always my full name. As if it carried angelic connotations. Sarah Belden.

It wasn’t just my friends. I started thinking that it would have been easier to start out as a rebellious child so that my parents wouldn’t expect so much of me. But no, I had to start out as a straight-A student who wore dresses and didn’t scrape my knees. So when I got to high school and had harder classes or just didn’t want to try as hard, I got a lot of flack from my mom and dad. Because getting a B would have to mean that I wasn’t putting out enough effort; obviously if I had, I would
have gotten an A.

The first time I got grounded, it was because my glasses got bent on the playground one day. For some reason I lied to both of my parents about how they got bent, but didn’t tell the same lie. Even worse, I told the second lie in front of both parents, thus getting caught. (Okay, so you figured out that I wasn’t anything but a good girl at that point.) My grounding only lasted one day, so it meant that I couldn’t leave the house once I got home from school, which didn’t usually happen anyway since we lived on top of a mountain. But I was so ashamed, I didn’t want to get out of the car when we got home, and I couldn’t look my parents in the eye. What I did figure out was that I should have told the truth, or maybe that I should have been consistent in my lie. I was still so young that I didn’t see any other way to be. When I got older, I started realizing that just because my parents wanted to prevent me from doing something I wanted to do didn’t necessarily make it a bad thing to do. That’s when I started getting better at the little white lies, and definitely better at not telling the whole truth.

By the time I changed schools before my junior year, I had learned a lot about who I wanted to be. The good girl image could definitely get me places; I kept that façade in my pocket, to retrieve at opportune times, like when I wanted adults to do something for me. I have always been good at winning adults over, and usually it really was worth their effort. But when I was around my new friends (new as opposed to people from my old high school who I used to drool with when we were in diapers), I was myself; sometimes that meant being ‘good’ and sometimes it meant being ‘bad’. Nothing shocked my new friends, because they knew the current me.

Childhood is a difficult time; teenhood is worse. Surviving it with enough strength to know yourself well is an amazing feat. Maybe being a ‘good girl’ showed me who I was until I was clear enough and confident enough to share myself with others. Maybe it was a balancing act; being a good girl when I was young allowed my path through childhood to be comparatively smooth, setting me up for any future I choose. Now that I’ve grown up a bit, and escaped my perceived cage, I can make any choice I want to make. While these are all things left unsaid in Allison’s poem, she shows the resolve in the narrator’s voice going from a weak protest, to a plea, to a strong, flat statement. “…I won’t / be that woman / again.”
Four-Part Harmony in Resistance Gravity Chaos Waves
Dan Bodeman

This poem is a medley of four separate poems; Winifred Baer organized each verse with its appropriate section of the title to be a poem onto itself. However, it is combined into a four-part harmony to create a symphony of a poem which can be seen from many angles. There is not one weak link to be found. This particular symphony enacts the truth that relationships are built on tension.

The poem takes things that might seem trivial, but turns them into something extraordinary.

Resistance:
The toaster buzzes when I press down the lever.
It’s the resistance that makes the heat, he says.
Same with the iron and the coffee maker.
Same with us, I think.

The first verse is a harmony between a relationship and some inanimate objects. These at first might seem like a discord, but at a closer inspection they make beautiful music. The man in the relationship tells the woman “It’s the resistance that makes the heat.” He is talking about the toaster, the iron, and the coffee maker. She then says: “Same with us, I think.” The heat is a simple, but lovely, metaphor for their love, heat, and passion. The heat is what keeps a relationship interesting. I haven’t ever heard someone say they want to be in cold relationship. The everyday difficulties make a couple grow stronger. This poem begins by taking the trivial, and turning it into something extraordinary.

Gravity:
He’s singing Fly Me to the Moon
But suppose I did.
What would keep us there together?

This verse brings in a joke from the title to describe their relationship. He is singing to her a song that sounds like it is trying to make everything all right, but she is having trouble letting the problem go. She doesn’t know what good going to the moon would do. Even if they made it to the moon, it would take more than gravity to keep these two together. There is a slight sound of sarcasm when she answers the question, gravity? This sarcasm is used to great effect because it is unexpected. The gravity brings in a concept from physics. Einstein,
physics incarnate, once said, “Falling in love is not at all the most stupid thing that people do—but gravitation cannot be held responsible for it.” The tendency of one person to fall for another does not include the equation for gravity. She needs more than gravity or a song verse to stay with this man.

Chaos:

Notice how the milk when first poured
sinks into the coffee,
then rises in little billows and ribbons.
Once stirred, it is forever lost to itself.

Here is the mixing of black and white, coffee and milk, Yin and Yang. I don’t think it is a literal black and white, but it is two opposites in their own melting pot. The coffee is hot from the resistance we saw in verse one, but the milk comes to cool and soothe it. It is amazing to see two things so different come together to become one. If you imagine a Yin and Yang symbol we can see that the two fit well into each other, but this poem goes further. The Yin and Yang are still two separate entities, but the milk and coffee can never be separated. Try to stir your cream out of your coffee; it cannot be done. This is not only a beautiful example of two people becoming one, but also the complex chaos theory. The milk when first poured into the coffee creates different billows and ribbons every time; nothing in a relationship can ever happen again. Once one partner says something it is forever lost to time, never to return to itself. This difficulty of time creates a chaos that helps facilitate a successful relationship.

One thing about chaos is it always leads to order. How does the universe keep from colliding into itself? It doesn’t make sense, asteroids, orbits, planets, all revolving and expanding, but never colliding. Nature is chaos in its purest form. Every year the seasons change, the snow falls, but no two snowflakes are the same. The leaves change in the fall, and no two are alike. Chaos creates the best symphony of all, nature. Winifred Baer took this concept and harmonized it with human relationships.

Two people becoming one is what marriage was thought to be at one time. The man and women became one in marriage. It seems to be the case with married couples. When they first are married there is much chaos and many problems, but as they grow older, they start to act and look like their counterpart. This is the marriage of milk and coffee. The milk when first poured causes chaos, but once stirred, it forms a beautiful union between these two opposites.

Waves:
A quiet pool-surprised
by a single pebble:
ripples lap
and lap at my heart.

Isn’t this always the case? We are going along in our day, just “A quiet pool,” then when we don’t expect it we are “surprised” by something, someone. Falling is love is not something most people choose to do. Someone drops into our quiet pool of a life and creates a little chaos, a few waves. At first we are upset that someone broke our surface tension, but the waves they create make it to our heart. This is where their energy is transferred. The waves go away, but they have created a lasting impression on our heart.

I have been recently experiencing the symphony that the poem creates. I am interested in a girl, but there was a strange resistance to talk to her. “She’s too hot for me to talk to,” is what my brain was saying. It must be from all the resistance. I suppose I could try to impress her with flowery words and songs, but what would keep us together. I don’t feel a tension that is so necessary to a successful relationship. We get along almost too well. Nothing exciting happens to facilitate chaos. I need to find a boulder to catapult into her pool. Chaos and excitement need to pound at our hearts like a hurricane, but I think I’ll just sit in my room and enjoy this poem from a safe distance.

Most musical masterpieces have four movements; this poem has four movements. The theme is uniform, but each verse sheds new light on a tired subject. If we were to look at the third verse out of context it wouldn’t make a lot of sense, but in the harmony shown by Winifred Baer, it adds more depth, height, and length. I think that this is the most important verse to show how mingled these two people have become. Each verse has a little tension, and a little chaos, but this verse shows that it just takes time to become one. She and he are forever lost to each other, and to time. There is no longer a he and she, but a beautiful harmony of man and woman.
Resistance to Love on Potrero Hill
Fawkyn Goyenche

The poems “Potrero Hill” and “Resistance Gravity Chaos Waves” are both about sexual relationships; they are about opposite effects that love can have on people. The poem “Resistance Gravity Chaos Waves” is about someone who is devastated by a relationship whereas in the poem, “Potrero Hill,” the speaker lives for the sexual relationship and they love it so much that they, “nearly died every time.” People become involved in relationships because they are attracted to one another and because in today’s society a healthy thing to do is to stay with the partner that you are attracted to. However it is difficult to maintain such a bond with one person, and these two poems prove the awkwardness of trying to make and keep such a bond. In fact, both of the show the effects of sexual relationships and make us question the idea of monogamy.

The poem “Resistance Gravity Chaos Waves” is obviously about a relationship. Two of the lines in the first stanza read, “It’s the resistance that makes the heat, he says. / Same with us, I think.” The word, “us” shows this. This stanza leads the reader to think that the relationship is awkward and that monogamy is not a good thing. Two metaphors for the relationship are being used here, the “resistance,” or awkwardness of this relationship and the, “heat” which represents the anger or frustration that the people suffer from their involvement in the relationship.

Just before the climatic part of the relationship there is the line, “He’s singing Fly Me to the Moon.” This line indicates that the man singing desires sex or a climax in the relationship because the moon is a destination that is dreamt about. To “Fly” there means going beyond the earth’s atmosphere, or away from reality which indicates great ecstasy. In the next line the speaker doesn’t want to have sex with this man, for fear of him breaking her heart. Instead she puts up her defenses. It reads, “but suppose I did. / What would keep us there / together?” The speaker is hesitant about taking this ungainly step in their relationship.

The third stanza, which is the action stanza of this poem, uses the metaphor, “milk when first poured / sinks into the coffee.” This action is “Chaos” as the milk, “rises in little billows and ribbons,” making the virgin coffee impure. The speaker did actually have sex with this man because the pure coffee became, “forever lost to itself.” The coffee turned into something polluted. After the sex, with no more desire to be together, the people in this relationship are once again stuck in the awkwardness of a monogamist relationship.
The line “a quiet pool—surprised, / by a single pebble:” shows that the relationship is spoiled by a single action which implies sex, or perhaps the loss of one’s innocence. Then there is the aftermath of the relationship where the speaker feels devastated because of what they did. The single penetration of the, “pebble” into the, “quiet pool” caused the speaker to be heartbroken. The speaker is then lonely. The last line of this poem reads, “ripples lap and lap at my heart,” showing how devastating the relationship was and how it is being affected with each recurring wave initially sent out by the heavy penetration of water.

“Potrero Hill” is similar to “Resistance Gravity Chaos Waves,” because they are both poems about relationships and the difficulties of sex. However, the poem “Potrero Hill” shows the speakers love of the experience and not finding it to be so emotionally devastating but more of a great physically moving experience. The speaker here is not emotionally committed to this relationship, so the speaker has no regrets about it. By praising the nature of this “casual sex,” “Potrero Hill” is telling the reader that monogamy is not as enjoyable as a relationship that involves no attachments.

The beginning of “Potrero Hill” describes the surroundings of the speaker very well. From this information one can conclude that the speakers focus is on what’s going on around them and not inside of them like in “Resistance Gravity Chaos Waves.” There is an obvious physical awkwardness present in this poem too, “It was always a first date” is a line that points this out. Also there is a straightforward line that reads, “I would come to visit every night and sit shyly / on the edge of the bed.” Here the speaker is avoiding a commitment or relationship.

Then, suddenly, the action of this poem is presented to us with the line, “And then, in that bed.” The climax of this encounter is revealed with the line, “such passion raged, such womanscreaming.” Both of these lines are definite attention grabbers; there should be no doubt about what is going on here in the reader’s mind. The way that the words, “woman” and, “screaming” are combined to create the neologism, “womanscreaming,” was done deliberately and is the most ingenious part of this poem that one word form indicates that the sex was one powerful action. Then after all, the speaker is happy about the experience when they are remembering it. The last lines of the poem are, “I lived for it / I nearly died each time.” This great outcry of pleasure was repetitive since the speaker mentions visiting each night and the result is the speaker feeling as if these orgasmic encounters were nothing more than a pleasurable, physical experience.

By leading the reader to think about the woes of a monogamist relationship, “Resistance Gravity Chaos Waves” directly tells the reader that because of the pain and the gracelessness involved, a relationship
that is monogamist is unhealthy. “Potrero Hill” praises not being committed to a relationship at all, which tells the reader that instead of becoming involved in a painful relationship, one can just have great sex. Though unrealistic and immature, currently in our society, it is widely accepted attitude. Monogamy is a concept that is being accepted less and less, and both of these poems are examples of people portraying that idea.
Love, or Infatuation?
Michael Barnum

When I was in High School, I remember that some of my teachers were especially helpful in fueling my passion for new ideas. Mr. Hilbert, my English teacher, introduced me to the implicit world that lies under the surface of literary masterpieces such as Lord of the Flies. He showed me the road ahead of High School, and gave me a strong push in that direction by showing me a new way to look at life--that life contains more than I could perceive without an education. Laurie Corn, the author of Pierre had the same experience, but she associated her newly found passion for French with a passion for her French teacher, Pierre.

Laurie’s story helps show that the line between ideas and physical passion is not as clearly drawn as we may think. I don’t think Laurie’s passion for her teacher is unusual, because it started with the normal student-teacher relationship, where Laurie’s passion for French was drawn to Pierre’s knowledge of French. When Laurie realized that Pierre was a well-rounded man, she began to direct her passion toward Pierre, because human passion encompasses all other passions. In other words, Laurie wanted to know how to become more human from Pierre after she realized all the traits he had in addition to French. Laurie was like a just-forming star, and to her, Pierre was a sun that was radiating energy. To Laurie, Pierre was not a crusted old man as other people saw him and in intellectual terms, Pierre was shining very bright--bright enough for Laurie to be attracted to his core.

Pierre embodied all of Laurie’s aspirations--all that she wanted to be in terms of a French scholar, and everything she wanted to be intellectually. In Pierre, she saw herself: “I knew this man with a knowing that I could not explain,” and she found that she had much in common with him, plus what she found everything she wanted to be. She noticed only the parts of Pierre that embodied her aspirations, and she found them beautiful,” he talked, and in a voice deep and soft and rich and full of all the colors and glory of France. He spoke softly and deliberately and had a slow warm laugh that rose up from some bottomless place.” She did notice Pierre’s unattractiveness, but she was not repulsed by him; in fact, she thought that “Pierre was a man of immense charisma and charm—all of it French.” She goes on to describe his features, but not in a repulsed way: “He was sixty years old, bald with a large, round face, high, soft cheekbones, a nose aquiline and pale blue eyes.”

Laurie’s story is wonderful, because it is a display of pure human passion without physical or social conditions. However, her experience isn’t something that I would go around promoting, because I
cannot tell people that a relationship between a teenage girl and a sixty-year-old man is okay. Since definite, and right or wrong answers dominate today’s light-speed society; today, we cannot socially accept a relationship that is built solely on passions, because our material culture has so ingrained the idea that the physical body is the source of attraction in a person. I know that it is not true, and we all know that it’s not true, but I continually find myself gravitating towards girls that are physically attractive because of what has been taught to me. Laurie was vehemently chasing her passions, but her mind wasn’t ready for the place where her passions took her, she went through a very complex and inexplicable human experience, one that few go through, and one that is impossible to accept in our material society.

When Laurie was in Pierre’s class, she didn’t fully know what she felt, or why she was attracted to Pierre. Only through the act of writing was Laurie able to articulate what she felt was in fact a very deep-rooted love. What she felt defies reason, and conventional logic cannot explain what she felt, so Laurie described her experience in hopes that the reader would understand fully the kind of experience she had. In order to maintain an objective description of Laurie’s experience, the Porter Gulch Review cut the end of Pierre because we thought that the story said enough, without trying to articulate complicated emotions into words. The three paragraphs that we cut raise the question: What if there really is one true soul mate in your lifetime and he [Pierre] was it? And because I was fifteen and he was sixty we could never go any further. Would this not forever explain why I have felt since I was five that I would be ultimately alone, without a life companion, and why I was destined to go from one relationship to another and for it never to quite ring true?

This is a very important question, but it relies on logical reasoning, and so she would get a conventional answer, like, “you’ll find the right person someday, you just have to keep looking,” or “you just have to get Pierre out of your head, what you had was just a silly infatuation.” We don’t fully understand how much more complex passion is than just a physical urge--and given the restraints that our society has put on passion--it has been made it into a single-use tool to help us make money, and start a family for comfort in the meantime.

In the process of learning from Pierre, Laurie began to replace her passion for French with passion for Pierre, which is normal in an intellectual attraction. French is stagnant, and is unchanging, and France is thousands of miles away, but Pierre was a man with a brain that was always showing her new ideas:

Mostly, Pierre lectured us about life. His real passion was for sociology and philosophy, art and literature, and he wanted above all to impart a
respect for France and for humanity . . . He told us it was the capitalists who made us think we needed toothpaste. A toothbrush and a bar of soap would do. I gagged on Ivory soap. He expounded Socialist philosophies. I struggled over Karl Marx’s “Das Capital,” joined the Socialist Labor Party, and “The Weekly People” in a brown wrapper arrived at our suburban home every week.

She was in love with the living, breathing personification of French, and also Pierre’s myriad of other ideas that had come to her from the intellectual, experienced adult world. So she began to automatically follow his ideas, because she found them valuable, coming from this man who shared her passions, who she trusted and admired as a man, “I loved his walk. I loved his laugh,” and who had much more experience than she did. I mean no offense to the author, but when she was of early High School age, she hadn’t formed any opinions about intellectual ideas of the world, so she received Pierre’s ideas like they were all words of undisputed wisdom.

Laurie’s fascination with Pierre’s intellect brought her to believe that her ever-growing passion fit in with his. Laurie could have become Pierre’s tutor after she graduated from his course, but her passion for his intellect would only allow her to associate with Pierre in a classroom setting where she could learn the most from him. Her passion would not compromise, and she wouldn’t be happy unless she was pleasing him by her performance, and unless she was constantly learning from him. This explains why she was so scared to make a friendly visit to his house, and why she wouldn’t want to be just friends with him, because the conditions were so intense, and she had no idea how to reach those conditions.

Laurie was petrified when she went to borrow some French books Pierre during the summer after she graduated from his course: “I circled around the block five times until I finally landed in front of the [Pierre’s] little house.” Since Laurie could no longer take French in Pierre’s class, her passion for French diminished; she tried to keep up French outside of class, but it wasn’t the same without Pierre to guide her through. “Those [French] books that I would be reading alone in my knotty-pine room, a dictionary at hand, books empty of pleasure because I would never again sit in that semi-circle of chairs discussing them or reciting passages [in Pierre’s class].” In the classroom, she got a wonderful feeling from being complimented for her skill in French. “There was an understanding among all of us—the other students, Pierre and myself—that I was a French scholar, that there was no competition intended, I was simply doing what I did best.” I can relate to this—without immediate satisfaction it is hard to persevere in our aspirations, especially if our aspirations budded in a classroom setting and we were encouraged for everything we did.
Pierre did noticed Laurie’s passion for him, and realized what was going on inside her. Without being able to explain it though, he “gave [Laurie] a soft kiss on the cheek and said that [she] was a very deep woman.” There was nothing more Pierre could do. He could not explain what she felt to her, because there was no way of explaining it, and he could not make any advancement, because since she was young. There was not much more in Laurie for him to be attracted to, other than the passion she had. And evidently, he was attracted to her passion: “When I read out loud in class Monsieur always beamed and complimented me on my accent . . . Everyone was quiet when this happened [when it was Laurie’s turn to recite poetry], especially Pierre.” I have been in Pierre’s position, and have been attracted to girls because of the fresh passion they possees. That person is especially attractive if they share your passion. I don’t think that any of the ideas that are addressed are particularly foreign, and I don’t think that anyone was shocked while reading this story. I think that the ideas are actually very familiar to all of us, because we question a person’s passions, experience in life, and simple demeanor whenever we meet someone new who we are attracted to.

Genuine passion runs through seemingly endless unfruitful times, but that passion also takes time to develop. Since Laurie’s passion came to depend on Pierre’s inspiration, her passion for French dwindled as soon as she left Pierre’s class. However, her passion for Pierre is the passion that strengthened in the three years the narrator spent in Pierre’s class, and that passion survived years and years: “Fifteen years later I heard that he had died alone in a nursing home in Toledo. And I never went back to visit, to tell him I had always loved him.” This was a genuine passion that had stood the test of time. Laurie’s passion for Pierre was smothered by society’s rules of what kinds of relationships are acceptable--she never went back to Pierre’s house to tell him she loved him because she was scared that her advances would be looked down upon. However, her love for Pierre persisted probably through numerous relationships because she felt a connection to him, and I feel that is a strong passion right there.

Passions take us into some amazing places but our passions oftentimes take us past our physical and mental restraints, because they are always taking us into the unknown. So when Laurie’s passion took her into a fascination with a sixty-year-old invalid, she was frightened. What would her friends and family say? What would Pierre think? This anxiety filled her at the time and for long after, so that it was not until years later after Laurie had gained life experience that she realized that Pierre might have been her soul mate. The question is would have it been better for Laurie to have found her soul mate and lost him, or to
have been left alone in life, without having too be tortured by having lost of her soul mate? I think that we should allow our passions to take us to new places, even If we’re not prepared to live up to those passions, because we will eventually find our place in life, even if it seems like a myriad of opportunities have passed us by.
Life's Pressure
Michael Schultz

It was 1998, two years ago; I shared an apartment with my brother and a couple of friends on West Cliff across from the Dream Inn. Laying around the apartment one day, half drunk, Gayle, Rocket and I decided to change into our board shorts, grab a couple of long boards that had accumulated on our patio and paddle around Cowells. That year (because of the El Nio storms) the sand bars where the best I've ever seen. Cowells is known as a popular beginner spot. Not really somewhere you have to fight against a lot of attitude to get some waves. This was perfect for us that day due to our inebriated state. We had a nice casual surf for about an hour. I had just pulled off a wave, started to paddle back out to the peak, when I heard an angry voice behind me. I thought to myself that was odd to hear at Cowells. I turned around and to my surprise I saw Rocket paddling towards me shaking his head on the verge of laughter. An older gentleman made some remark at him built up from frustration that we were hogging all the waves. This remark eventually led into back and forth insults that I found myself right in the middle of. I normally try and ignore ignorant people out in the water that need to prove themselves with their mouths rather than their surfing ability. In this case although, I couldn't help but speak up.

"Why don't you paddle up to the Lane (a close by advanced surfing spot) if you feel the need to act tough", I said.

I probably stayed out in the water an extra half-hour just to increase the redness of his face.

Although this gentleman was out of line, I never stopped to realize that he had probably grew up surfing here way before I was ever born. I should have given him some kind of respect. It never occurred to me that he might have problems going on besides us "hot dog" kids. Everybody runs into problems in his or her lives. Some might be not a big deal at all, but some might change your life forever. After reading the story Salt Water Cure, I was reminded of this incident. Salt Water Cure is a good example of how to take these problems and deal with them in a positive manner.

The main character in the story Salt Water Cure experienced a lot of trouble in his life. "It had been a hard year, too damn hard, devastating would be a more accurate description. His wifeís cancer took him to the edge, then the Vietnam flashbacks pushed him over." It's not uncommon to hear stories about Vietnam vets who have returned with so many visions of horror that they turned to drugs or alcohol as a temporary cure. Thomas (the author) described a man that had been pushed over the edge: "A wild surfer boy from the West Coast turned trauma
specialist in a few short months." There was no doubt that this boy came back a man with too many nauseating images to count. It wouldn’t have been unlikely for him to end up on the streets--like so many others do--because "before long, he was living in some kind of disjointed, twisted reality, lost some where between truth and illusion." The fact that he found a better way to deal with his problems by rediscovering himself though surfing is what brings power to this story.

In order to lead a successful and happy life, one of the most important things is to have a way to counter-act all the problems. A good way to do this is to have a therapeutic activity or hobby that allows you to get so involved that you be able to clear your mind and free some of the pressure. The man in *Salt Water Cure* took eight months in psychotherapy "to realize he was just a helpless victim in a world not of his choosing." This was his first step back to recovery. Once he realized this all it took was one wave to "make the anguish and pain release from his body and mind."

When I first read this story I was so caught up in the surfing images that I didn’t pay much attention to its meaning. Now that I’ve looked deeper into it I can relate to the surfing as an excellent therapeutic activity. More importantly though, I realize how significant it is to have a way release the pressures that life can bring. Everyone in our society runs into problems throughout their lives, but not everyone finds a way of dealing with them. The story made me realize how easy it is to get compressed by your depression if you don’t have a way of releasing your pressure.
Looking Forward to Growing Old
Brian Hamilton

As humans, we are constantly reminded of our own mortality; we drive by the old folkís retirement home and see the elderly slowly spend their few remaining years playing chess and watching Matlock reruns. We hear our parents and grandparents complain about back pain and muscle aches, and how they used to work fourteen hours a day when they had their youth. We listen to their wise advice and laugh at their daily routines and complaints, but we "youngsters" need to keep one thing in mind, and that is the fact that we will grow old in time--just like our elders. But the way we look at growing old need not be negative according to Barbara Leonís poem "The Cement Ship." Instead, the poem suggests that growing old and retiring is a period of relief, relaxation and reflection. This poem is a positive reminder of the aging process, and it brings hope and peace of mind to those who are looking forward to retiring.

As Americans, we are a society of people who statistically neglect caring for our elders. This sad fact was reaffirmed for me recently when I interviewed an elderly man named "Fred", at the Sunshine Villa retirement home in downtown Santa Cruz. Fred is a typical elderly male in his late sixties. He has a mild case of arthritis and tires easily. He is by no means grouchy and seems to get along fine with all the staff and co-inhabitants. In my opinion, if anyone doesnít belong in a retirement home, it is Fred. The reason for his tenancy at the "Villa" is abandonment. After spending a couple hours playing Uno with him, Fred opened up and explained to me how his wife had passed away five years ago, and about his inability to work anymore due to his arthritis. He told me how he had no retirement with the exception of social security and small savings, and how he was forced to ask his only daughter to move in with her. Not willing to accept the burden of her father, Fredís daughter said no, and instead, offered to pay for his residence at Sunshine Villa. Left with no other choice, Fred accepted and has been living there ever since. Despite holiday visits, Fred doesnít see much of his familyóas his daughter is his only family, and mostly keeps to himself in his small apartment at the Villa.

This poem has a special message for us; it tells us that retiring is a time for peace and reflection, not a time to worry about money or being passed on to the retirement home, as Fred experienced. The author of the poem looks at the Cement ship, and sees a symbol of integrity and peace in growing old. She states "I come to savor your retirement and / dream of my own / moored in secure harbor / answerable to nothing but time and / the changing rhythms of nature." This is telling us that to a retiree,
peace and reflection take precedent over petty annoyances, such as money or politics. Nature is much more important.

I wonder if the youthful achieved this state of mind and slowed down a little, that the result would be a better understanding of our elders. But many younger people look at an elderly person and automatically think of the typical stereotypes; old people ramble about the way things used to be, they complain about everything, they can't hear well and need help with everything. However, in the opening lines of the poem, the author tries to tell us that appearance isn't everything when it comes to getting old. "I visit you once a day / cross weathered boards to / your stone solidity." The "weathered boards" she speaks of is a metaphor for the often frail, withered appearance of the human body after about the age of sixty. The "stone solidity" she is referring to is not only the appearance of the ship, but it is also a metaphor for the strength in mind that you posses when you are older, not typically seen by the average person. The author is telling us that if you look past the physical appearance of an elderly person, and get to know them personally, you will discover a strong personality and even wiser mind. The author further solidifies this idea in the final stanza. "Some look at you and see an obsolete wreck / storm-beaten / entrails of rusted cables splayed / across your middle. / They miss the purpose in your new stage / refuge for quarreling pelicans and hungry gulls / for gray-speckled harbor seals / lying fat and lazy in a row / for cormorants, graceful on your ironwork." Here the author is also telling us that growing old is a time to become more in tune with nature and the biological habitat around you. It is a time to focus on nature and enjoy the simple things in everyday life that you may have taken for granted when you were younger.

For the author, the cement ship and its peaceful solitude is a symbol of what is to come. The author seems to look forward to getting old and is envious of the ship and its quiet simplicity. More than anything, I think the author is looking forward to retiring, as it is a perk that comes with getting old—for most people. She seems to be fed up with working a typical job, not having enough time to slow down and reflect on her life. "and for me / selling my life in eight-hour increments. / I come to savor your retirement and / dream of my own." I believe many people who work most of their lives and don't have time to relax and reflect, share this sentiment.

As much as I wanted to, I did not show this poem to my new friend Fred. I felt that if he had read it, it would have brought tears to his eyes. I thought it would have made him think of a time in his life when he and his wife looked forward to growing old together; a time when he still had hope for the future. Now all Fred has to look forward to is the occasional visit from his "busy" daughter, and tapioca pudding for desert.
on Thursdays (his favorite). "The Cement Ship" is written for a target audience: anyone who is still working and young enough to dream of the "ideal" retirement; one filled with leisure, vacations and spending time with the grandkids. This would be an ideal retirement for anyone, but I think us youngsters should simply hope that our children and grandchildren take better care of us than we do our parents and grandparents these days.
Upside-Down Insight
Daniel James Howell

This contemplative essay explores the social life of ordinary, domestic trees and the dark underside of their roots daily activities. The author uses the duality of a tree and its isolated root system as a metaphor for people and the isolation of the human mind. He finds a reflection of himself in the twisted existence of the “Upside-Down Trees,” and he shows how we all possess such a shadow-self.

The introduction presents to us the face of a tree: “A large pine which chokes my wife’s struggling flowers...its lower branches droop in a disorderly pattern between our living room and the street, a natural curtain.” As the narrator continues his analysis of the tree, he begins to personify the tree affectionately: “Nice tree, common tree, public tree: a mandala, a folk-dance, an ultimate gesture of Being branching into Nothingness.” Already the author has begun to associate the tree to things specifically human, such as a mandala, or a folk dance; and identifies it as a universal symbol of consciousness. Furthering the tree/human parallel, the author is convinced: “When the wind blows it talks, no doubt, with the other trees, the other public, verifiable trees standing in the light and air shared by us all.” Now the tree doesn’t just stand as a symbol for a person, but symbolizes the human condition, the trials and celebrations common to all people.

“Naturally it also has roots,” brings the author to another conclusion: “Our tree has a secret life then.” He realizes the intricacy of the underground part of the tree and the comparatively strange life its root system must lead: “It would never see light, it would never play in air.” The author experiences the microcosm of life as a root through vivid metaphoric language:

Huge underground branches bulged, as patient as glaciers, Wedging boulders apart...in their cold dirt tomb...their groans would take weeks to groan and would be too low for a human ear to hear, their suckings too subtle as the root hairs offer their chronically desperate membranes to...all the effluvia that percolate from the fabled spaces above.

The “secret life” of the roots turns out to be just as active as the “folk-dance” of the upper tree, whose obvious branches reach out in conversation to the social suburbs.

As the narrator continues to describe the details of the “underground trees,” the parallel between the trees’ situation and the circumstances of the human condition become stronger through the reflexive nature of his statements:

Huge living beings that had buried themselves in dense
material darkness to meditate in grim isolation...shocking to think of the severe privacy of all these brooding characters...monomaniac and solipsistic, holding brute earth between knobby knees in a permanent, until-death-do-us-part grip.

This draws the metaphor of the isolated root system as the “island universe” of the human mind that Aldous Huxley wrote about in *The Doors of Perception*: “The mind is its own place...there is an inside experience as well as an outside [experience]” (13-14). What Huxley and the narrator are saying is that although we communicate like the public faces of the trees, we are also doomed to the eternal solitude of our own individually isolated “roots” or minds.

The author’s visualization of the tree’s structure, and his inferences about the relations of its two halves, public and private, lead him to direct introspective speculation. He identifies with the duality of the tree, and in realizing the hidden nature of the “upside-down trees,” he re-evaluates his own persona in relation to its inner reflection: “And that mind is but the public expression of a brain locked in a skullbox...forever cut off from light and air...What could be fermented there?...What could break loose if the thirst became intolerable?” As the author realizes the significance of this “upside-down insight,” he comes to terms with that insatiable thirst that drives all conscious beings to continue in the search of all forms of sustenance.
I Am a White Man

Marisa Sutro

We are divided by color. The Poem, “I Am a White Man” by Dane Cervine, is an attempt to demystify the white experience. I am white. It’s not going away with African beads or a deep tan. I am white, it is my flag to the world. We are defined by our color, the shape of our noses and eyes. Black once a slave. White once a slave owner. We are bound by our separation. “I Am a White Man” brings thoughts about sorrow and race to mind, but it fails to bring them to completion.

The opening lines of this poem show who the writer is. Not a Chinese or black, he is a white man unsure of his place in America. Many white people in America have the feelings of guilt over their unearned privilege and what their race has done to others. The next stanza talks about the future, an eagle heralding pride in our nation or a vulture, a parasite feeding off the dead. This stanza ends hanging-- “I cannot tell which yet”--which leaves the reader able to interpret for him-or herself what our future will be.

The next verse, “Whose heart is hidden behind a mask of privilege by an indecipherable code lifting me alone above a ceiling of glass.” To me, these lines are themselves a very decipherable code. They say: Here, look at my vague white man’s guilt; I have nothing to contribute. And yet I am given privileges. I alone am raised above where “Stones are thrown. Glass covering us all.” The author’s only contribution is to observe the glass shards on those below. One wonders if any pierced his hidden heart because of his undeserved position. “I break, open this heart / bleeding your same blood / red as rain from a common vein” I am a white man with an open hand extended moving towards you” His heart is open, he is ready to be forgiven, but forgiven for what? For his superficial glance at his position in America? or his allowing this system to continue?

This poem addresses race and racial positions and the future of our nation. From the many submissions that we received at the Porter Gulch Review, this was the only one I read that dealt with race. I applaud the author for putting pen to paper and writing “I am a white man,” but I think he fell short of writing a truly moving poem. What is it about our society that shrinks away from looking at our own part in racism? We know that in Santa Cruz Latinos are discriminated against, that they work in unsafe conditions, and that they receive unfair pay. We know that black high schoolers in Aptos receive threats and swastikas on their lockers from young KKK members. We can feel the hot rage of the oppressed on our necks, yet a white man sits alone above the glass ceiling, writing poetry about “Bleeding your same blood”. I was looking
for a poem to hold me down and scream in my face but it failed to do that. I would rather hear verses like Quincy Troupes’ *Boomerang (A blatantly political poem)*, where he writes that he “use to rite about stabbing white folks in their air-conditioned eyeballs with ice picks “

“I am a White Man” is an easy read for those who feel a white man’s guilt but don’t want to come down from the glass ceiling.
Two Girls Living with Cobwebs and Sunshine  
Anna Bakalis

In *Gardenia Bay* by Jean Walton Wolff, an excerpt from her novel in progress of the same name, the 12-year-old heroine knows her mothers shortcomings. Emmy has the maturity of insight, a rare quality in such a young girl, to see that her mother is an alcoholic, has strange habits and a flighty personality. Her mother's addiction is addressed in the introduction of the novel: "But her (Emmy’s) biggest problem, the thing that she could not control no matter how hard she tried, was her mother’s drinking."

I envy Emmy for her strength of character at such a young age. She is one very together preteen. Though she has a mother that has a drinking problem, the 13-year old doesn't let it get to her; She is able to detach herself from her mom’s issues and go about her business of being a young girl in a beautiful land.

Mrs. Humphries and her daughter Emmy moved to Jamaica from the US when Emmy was five. The story takes place in the spring of 1962, just a few months before Jamaica’s liberation. Emmy is surrounded by a lush mix of trees, beaches, freedom and light. This particular chapter, “Snorkeling Interrupted” focuses on Emmy’s afternoon at the beach with a friend, before the day gets interrupted by her mothers insistence on indulging in a strange habit called "house hunting." Wolff’s description of the underwater world when the girls are snorkeling is nostalgic and languid:

> The light underwater was more beautiful than the most lovely stained glass she had ever seen. The cornflower-blue and turquoises underwater darkened to royal blue then black into the distance.

Like Emmy, one of the most defining moments in my life happened when I was 13. Although it's not what you think....no, I didn’t become a woman. No, my parents didn’t divorce. Heck, I thought Ren & Stimpy were the metaphors for the human condition. What gave me an unhealthy dose of reality involved the events leading up to an A+ on an English paper.

My father, clich or no, is the most important guy in my life. He always has been. One Saturday afternoon in 1990, I was working on the infamous John Milton paper. I was using my father’s old Smith-Corona typewriter, the machine I could never understand, being my life's love and adversary. Me, a daughter of an intense poet. Me, an aspiring journalist. My fathers stupid typewriter.

While Emmy had her beautiful beach and sun, I had a stack of books to read and a trusty blue and white '60's style typewriter that for me, at the tender age of 13, was the great catalyst for great writing.

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Wolff’s beautiful description of the vibrant paradise, Jamaica’s liberation from England paralleled to the coming of age dynamic and knowledge of the main character's personality suggests she was Emmy. Remember having a great sense of purpose in tiny things, like going to the beach to find sea glass because I thought it was a foreign currency known to the underwater world only. I would take snapshots of my TV surrounded by barbie dolls and trolls, thinking that photo said more about contemporary life in America than newspapers or that dumb 60 minutes show.

Like most kids that age, I felt more in tune with the world because I had the imagination to make my personal reality an external reality. Sure I felt misjudged and misunderstood, but who didn’t? My father, instead of reading Dr. Suess, read me Shakespeare and Blake. He wanted me to be all grown up by the age of 13, to be a sort of literary equal. If that isn’t traumatizing to a girl who just wanted to read Judy Bloom, I don’t know what is. Even though Emmy is carefree when playing, she also is a pensive girl, she likes her privacy: "Emmy liked people to knock before they came into her bedroom, and she hated having to do homework, especially on sunny days."

So there’s me in his office, surrounded by thick spiral notebooks containing months/years of indecipherable notes, stacks of old books that reached the cob webbed ceiling, typewriter brushes, manuscripts, an ancient playboy magazine, and a picture of me in central park eating a pretzel.

Among this homage to the writing life, I sit. Knowing and fearful what I write on good ol’ Smity would never be as good as a paragraph of my fathers journal from 1975. I struggled, but 4 hours later, emerged from the room feeling fairly confident of my work. A few spelling errors, but hey, Smity didn’t have spell check.

My father, who LOVES Milton, who graduated with honors and a thesis on the poet of Paradise Lost, read it, crunched his jaw, retreated back to his office and shut the door. All I heard was that incessant tap-tap-tap of Smity. My stepmother belts out "you’re not going to let him write your paper, are you?" I wasn't about to question with my father, and if she thought it was so wrong, why didn’t she stop him?

He emerges an hour later with a 6 page golden boy, a balance of perfect proportions; style, wit, knowledge and a smattering of amazing quotes from some dead biographer. All with no spelling errors.

My fathers reasoning for writing my paper: "We’re family...what this is here (hands me the paper), you'll think of in a few years, I just thought of it sooner." Right. His eloquent explanation carried me to turn in his essay instead of my own. An A+ is great, but it isn't more important than losing respect for a parent. My dad’s A+ was the worst
grade I ever got.

What I failed to realize when I was young was that my dad made mistakes, some big ones. I thought of him as superhuman, an unquestionable figure that couldn’t be reckoned with, when in fact he was the one at fault for trying to make me more mature than I could have possibly been. I turned in the paper with a bowed head, but now I realize it was my father I was ashamed of, not myself.

But Emmy, a mature and strong girl, has the disposition to be forthright rather than passive towards her mom. She is a happy young girl for the most part. Emmy and Danny swim in the warm water and snorkel around tropical fish. They wonder about their faraway, seemingly absurd adulthood:

"'Hey," said Emmy, "What happens when we get our periods? Do you think piranhas will come because there’ll be blood?’

Danny tilted her head to the side for a moment. 'I don’t think so,’ she said thoughtfully.

'Our mothers swim sometimes -’

'Yours does,’ said Emmy making a face.”

Emmy says that her mom doesn’t like to go swimming even though Danny’s mom does. Emmy makes a face as if to say, "well I wish she did, but she’s not the type of mom who swims." Her mom is not as fun as Danny’s, her mom is just different. Her mom would rather sit by the beach and drink a bloody mary or an ocean breeze than go snorkeling. At the beginning of chapter one, after a colorful description of her backyard, Emmy finds her mother in the mud, getting soaked by the pelting rain: Her lawn chair was overturned beside her. Emmy ran across the yard, almost slipping as she went...her (mom’s) dark hair was glued to her face like paint and her eyes were closed.

But earlier that same day, Mrs. Humphries, Emmy and her math teacher had a conference where their home life was brought into question, upon which Mrs. Humphries snaps back a "Everything’s-just-fine-thank-you." Perhaps the birthday party evening was a momentary wake up call for mom, only to be different the next day. Just like my father would call me his greatest achievement, then the next day criticize my choice of verbs for describing a movie.

On this particular sunny day at the beach, in the midst of her snorkeling adventure, Emmy’s mother pulls up in her Morris Mini Motor and Emmy sees her arms waving "as if they had minds of their own, and she was having a hard time controlling them," probably because she was sauced. "Her eyes were glassy from exuberance."

Another habit that Mrs. Humphries indulges in involves dragging Emmy and her friend along on "house hunting adventures.” This is seen as a killjoy to Emmy, being that a grand day in the ocean
water ends quickly when her mom’s absurd hobby. They tour upper class homes as if they were prospective buyers. But being as poor as they were, Emmy saw this as ridiculous. They get into the cramped car, "the mini motor is basically sort of a toaster with a carburetor." They speed up into the elevations of the town. The idea being that Mrs. Humphries looks at houses with a longing, but without the intent to buy. Emmy’s mom takes photos of stately homes behind dark hedges and welded gates. "Well, what do you think?" Emmy’s mother said, hanging onto the steering wheel. She was looking to her right, out her daughters window. Her eyes were huge."

Of course this is a mortifying situation to be in if your overly dressed parent with a cheap camera is taking photos of an estate that she could never afford, gawking and snapping. As Emmy’s mom is about to leave the estate, her "real Gardenia Bay," a man runs out of the front door to the mansion and rockets down the sidewalk, shouting her name. "These excursions always left her (Emmy) feeling a little embarrassed and a little lonely."

My father was a recluse, and consequently I saw that all dad’s were daunting figures. My close friends’ dads’ weren’t really talkative, I saw that they tended to keep to themselves as well, like my dad. Emmy knows her mom has a problem socializing as well, but is able to see the difference between her mom and her friend Danny’s mom, who is very outgoing and happy. Emmy is embarrassed by her mom because she never knows when she has been drinking. On her birthday, however, her mother surprised Emmy by preparing a lovely meal and not drinking: "Just as good was the fact that nothing had gone wrong during dinner. Her mother was drinking nothing more than a grapette soda. Life was good tonight."

The relationship between Emmy and her mom is a common one among parent and child. The parent is rather oblivious to their harm or embarrassment on the child. But depending on the constitution, the response is different from one kid to another. While one daughter would shun her controlling father, another might submit. In the case of Emmy, she did not let her mom’s addiction affect her own behavior. Aside from a little embarrassment, she continued her life as a happy young girl coming of age in idyllic Jamaica.

Eventually my father realized that I needed to be my own person, that I was never going to be a literary critic or a poet, or even LOVE John Milton, but at least I learned to be an honest writer.

After reading Gardenia Bay, I felt inspired by Emmy’s insight into her mom’s character and took stock of my own adolescent years, and the story helped me come to grips with that year in my life. I was 13 and thought my father was the sunshine of my life even though he
wasn't perfect. Older and wiser, at least now I know there is sun shining everywhere, especially in Emmy’s Jamaica.
Dwell in the Details
Maura O’Callaghan

Have you ever lost someone? Or thought you did? Or had a loved one or animal die? I have. I’ve had many and each one taught me something different and I grew stronger from each experience. I learned that it is hard and something I don’t like to experience, but it’s unavoidable. That is why I enjoy spending time with my parents, brothers and best friends. That is why I will sit and listen to all of my grandma’s stories, even if I have heard them before. That is why I will sacrifice a weekend with the girls to go to my cousin’s first birthday. It is because I know that the people I love won’t always be around. The poem “Footprints,” by Ellen Bass, is an excellent reminder of that exact truth. “This morning my son left two wet footprints / on the bath mat.” The first time I read it I thought the son had an unexpected accident and died. The second time I realized that it may be that the poem is suggesting a mother’s fear of what might happen to her son. “Footprints” shows a mother imagining what it would be like to experience the shock of an accident and how to relate to it.

“In the green fluff, one with a scrap of brown bag pressed into it.” How often do we all take small things for granted? Everyday of our lives we assume certain things will always be there; we never consider cherishing the gum wrapper our loved one left on the counter or the piece of brown bag molded in to the shower rug. In the next stanza, the author writes “I thought of how, if anything happened to him, that imprint would remain, briefly.” The wet prints may remain briefly, but they will eventually start to fade just like the memories of her son. We all consider what might happen in the future, but we never really think that it will. Somehow, things always happen to others and never to ourselves. In a sense we are naive and in denial because anything can happen at any time to any of us.

The author uses great sensory images; when things do actually happen to us, they’re blown up and enhanced. “that aims a spotlight on the details of our world.” This is my favorite line of the poem. Since we don’t have time to consider trivial things, including brown bags and what might happen, we only see them and concentrate on them when they are brought to us in the context of something important. The spotlight is on us and how we feel is what matters. The small things in life are what really count, but there is no time for them because we’re concentrating on how much money we earn or successful we become. The wet footprints of your son are what matter most. Small things suddenly become so important: habits, smiles, the sounds we make in our sleep; Bass does an excellent job of focusing in on them.
“Folding laundry after your accident.” She imagines that the son did have an accident, and realizes she wouldn’t know how to react. The author took an ordinary day with ordinary chores and shows how life would change after the accident. So she continues doing laundry. “They had been washed and dried / while you were still unbroken.” The suddenness of the accident is unbelievable. Just a short while ago the son had taken a normal daily shower and the laundry had been dried just like every other normal day. Now, it wasn’t a normal day anymore. Everything had changed yet everything was still the same; the laundry was still going, the bath mat was still wet. The only thing different was that the footprints now represent a memory.

The shirts and material possessions had not changed; they were still there. Only now they would be empty and the arms of the son will never fill out the sleeves, the socks will never mold over his feet again. The poem walks you through a typical day and shows you how, in a split second, everything stable around you can fall to pieces. Who would have known this could be the last time to do the son’s laundry or see the wet outlines of his feet? “and smooth your empty shirts against my chest.” She smooths the empty shirts on her chest embracing the fact that he is okay and that what she just imagined didn’t happen. In is in this last line where the author makes the strongest point; what could have happened didn’t, and that is what counts.

I recently lost someone who was very close to me and who had always been there. I knew someday my grandma would pass on, but I was in denial; I never thought it would happen when it did. I procrastinated thinking about her death and thought it would always come tomorrow, not today. Just as the the footprints were cherished, I noticed the small things. The scent of her skin and how it lingered throughout her closet even after she had died. Just like the laundry, I stood in my grandma’s house and everything was still the same, with the exception that she wasn’t there. Her favorite books and magazines were scattered on the coffee table and her toothbrush sat on her bathroom counter.

I asked my mom to read “Footprints” and to tell me what she thought of it. Her first reaction was that it was depressing; it was a truthful and scary poem. She could relate to the author and admitted having the same thoughts of what might happen to her children. She said that every time I leave the house to go to school or work or anywhere, in the back of her mind is always the thought of what may happen to me. I never fully understood why my parents were so strict with me. They wanted to know where I was going, with who, when to expect me home, and who was driving. Now I understand that by them knowing it numbs the fear and narrows the possibilities of what could
happen. I asked her if she thought it was healthy to consider the future possibilities or if it was a waste of energy and emotion. Her response was that it was healthy to consider but not to obsess over things out of your control. There is no way of knowing so it is a waste of time to dwell on your own fears and insecurities.

This poem is about a mother who stares at the wet footprints of her son and starts to day dream about him. As she does laundry, she continues to daydream about what might happen to him and how she would react and feel and be affected. But you can’t have these daydreams and dwell on such negative thoughts because you’ll drive yourself crazy and become paranoid. Instead, you prevent insanity by having faith--faith that the people are lost for a reason. You must have faith and realize there is nothing you can do; it’s in God’s hands.
Is Feeling Horny Good For America?
Adam Green

“Horny is like an Old Sock” by Andy Mannle brought out many issues: lusting for unimportant things, love, and the idea that being horny is good for society. It hit on a variety of issues without being too direct. He talked about being horny and said that it was “good enough to keep in the closet.” The poem brought out an important question: is being horny a thing that one should hold onto? Through examining the words of lust, love, and horny, I will show that being horny is an emotion we all feel, but one which we should try to keep under control.

The poem, “Horny is like an old sock,” feeds off an emotion felt by people. The feeling of being horny towards someone--or even having emotions of lust for sex, money, or drugs--can consume people. Does being horny help one out in a career or give people the opportunity to succeed in life?--I don’t think so. Being horny is a feeling individuals should try to express less, otherwise it may corrupt one’s mind, and take one’s focus off of more important things, such as a career, true love, or God.

I don’t think this poem dealt with love, it dealt more with the feeling of being horny. What is love? “Strong or passionate affection for a person of the opposite sex” (World Book 1237). The definition of love reinforces that love was not mentioned in the poem. Love could also be a romantic encounter that lasts forever, but, the poem does not show this either. True love belongs only in a true relationship, whether it be marriage or dating. I think that lust and horniness can conflict with love.

Why is lust confused for love? Lust is defined as, “strong desire: lust for power, lust for gold--desire for indulgence of sex, especially excessive sexual desire” (World Book 1245). So when one is lusting after something it may consume one’s self. Many couples base their relationships on lust rather than for love and this may be why married couples today have a divorce rate of fifty- percent (Dr. Dobson). The confusion of lust for love is revealed by the line, “It’s stretched out / and faded but / it’s still comfortable.” The fulfillment of lust feels good. It is also a comfortable feeling. Why has this lusting feeling for some become so comfortable to live with? These lines make me realize that lusting after something is not good. So can someone lust after something and still feel pure inside? I think so, as long as a married man or women keep their focus on the marriage.

Each stanza breaks with “Horny is like an old Sock.” These lines emphasize the feeling that horniness is daily. The definition of horny is, “Of or made of horn: hard, callous: compact and homogeneous with a dull luster: desiring sexual gratification-excited sexually “ (World Book 547).
Stanza by stanza these lines could give you a reason to falter. The lines “It’s crusty and dirty / but you never throw / it away,” demonstrates that horniness is a feeling we do not want to throw away. Why has a world so enriched with life, whether it be trees, plants, or animals, become so fixated on just one aspect of life. Feeling horny towards others may be a good feeling, but a feeling we need to question. We need to ask if it is horniness or love that builds a relationship. It seems as though being horny is something, which one wants to hold onto according to the lines in the poem.

A fling or a short stint with someone may make you feel good at first, merely because their being horny connected with someone else also being horny invoked one night of passion. Soon after a heated exchange of passion with someone you have just met there is often heartache among the individuals who participated. The lines “It feels good but / you can’t wear it / out in public,” seems to recognize the feeling of being horny, but counters with wanting to hide from others. Now when a man tells his friends that he slept with a lady he is considered a stud, but when a woman sleeps with a man she is considered a slut. I think others should not judge a man and woman who engage in a sexual act. When a man and a woman make love within a marriage, it is easily accepted by society. People who commit acts of lust with others seem to be treated with less respect than those who engage in love with their partner. When true love is felt, “sex” turns into “love.”

Have you ever felt like you have seen deja vu? Or maybe felt the same feelings over and over again. Or it could be that one piece of clothing you have had since you were five: stains, rips, and dirt, cover the article of clothing but even still you still keep it. This love for something you know is dirty is how horny to me is revealed. “It’s always on top of the pile / when you’re looking for / somebody else.” Why are marriages ending so quick in today’s society, compared to the early nineteen hundreds, when marriages seemed to last for a lifetime? Is it merely the fact that one is tired of the other?—it could be. Or is it a bad physical relationship?—it could be. Or is something else driving the couple apart, maybe lusting after material things, or being horny for a new person in their life? Sometimes people want a new person because they may stimulate them in a different way. So is there a way to get rid of that dirty laundry on top of the pile?—in a sense, yes! But, the feelings of horniness will be there no matter what the circumstances.

The last line is the line in which I wanted to fight the most. In the last stanza it issues somewhat of a decree, maybe something someone would agree with. I would like to change peoples’ opinions on the last line. The stanza reads “It’s not your best emotions / But it’s good enough to / keep in the closet.” I feel being horny is an emotion,
which is not good enough to keep in the closet. If it was possible to get rid of being horny I think we should. Although this can never happen so we should do our best to get impure thoughts out of our head. Being horny is an emotion in which should be keep in the dump yard, because for the most part it consumes humans.

The way I think it is supposed to be is have a best friend who is either a guy or girl and then from there you fall in love. I feel that if love happens this way then the chance of a successful relationship is a lot higher. When people fall in love for who each other are, then that is what love is all about. When people are lusting after one another then the chances of a successful relationship seems a lot less. Being horny and lustful is not bad as long as it does not deter your mind. But the best emotion is that of “true love” which more Americans need to feel. This poem goes through emotions not only felt before marriage, but through one’s whole life. It made me realize that we should try to exclude horniness unless it is directed at our partner.
American Beauty: Reclaiming Our Worth
Shannon Rose Thomas

A hard belly-laugh came out from deep within my body as I finished reading “This Body” by Marcea Marcus. She wrote this poem specifically for me. Not for herself or any other woman who is tired of being judged by our current pop cultural standards of what makes a body beautiful. She must have overheard my recent secret thoughts regarding my own body and the gravitational pull that seems to be overwhelming it—as I plunge into thirty-hood in less than 30 days. I needed to be reminded of the journey this body has taken me on, and how beautiful it really is—with all its varied shapes and textures. Ms. Marcus’ poem shows the reader that our bodies carry us through amazing paths in life and we must not give away our self esteem or confidence simply because someone “think(s) my stomach is flabby / my hips too wide / or my butt too big.” It’s time we try to stop listening to the lies of our culture and start re-establishing women’s sense of their self worth and positive body image. How exactly are we going to do this though?

I know first hand the tremendous struggle it takes to change one’s perspective of one’s own body image. Less than five years ago, I weighed over 255 lbs. and was a size 22 (I have since lost almost 100 lbs. and dropped to a size 10). I know the difference in how I was treated in society when I was obese—as compared to how I am received now. The weight and size a woman is, dramatically changes how she will be welcomed in American society. It is very sad to me that this is true—but it is. I believe we must try to break through the stereotypes of being overweight. However, I can see now that a part of how I was received in society, was based on how I represented myself to the world. I would allow myself to be the butt of fat jokes by insensitive family members, co-workers and even friends sometimes. I allowed myself to be put into the category of “updateable”. I put up with mistreatment by lovers because I internalized the message that told me that I should feel grateful anyone wanted to date a “fat chick.” I did not see my self-worth. When walking into a room, I would not stroll in with my head held high (as I do now), but rather I would creep into a room and direct my eyes to the ground in front of me. It was whispered to me in many ways by society that I was undesirable and I propagated that lie by my own actions. I believe the treatment of overweight women will only change when we, as all women, find our strength and dignity in other achievements beyond body image. We need to change the thinking that says we belong to a lower or higher class based on our weight or size. Ultimately, we must learn that our honor, dignity and worthiness come only from
seeing ourselves as wonderfully made by God. “For You created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother’s womb. I praise You because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; Your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from You when I was made in the secret place...” (Psalm 139:13-15). We are greatly loved and when we really embrace the truth in that, our self-esteem will no longer be based on ever changing factors--such as weight, body size or age.

For women in America, their worth diminishes as the clock ticks on, but as men grow older, their age lines give them “character” and they look “distinguished”. A forty-something woman standing naked in front of a full length mirror will point out all the cellulite, age spots, wrinkles and other normal signs of aging on her body. Her self-esteem is tied into how her body is perceived by others and typically, she will not be pleased with the reflection in the mirror. On the other hand, a forty-something man can stand in front of the same mirror, grab his beer gut with both hands and proclaim with pride, “yeah, I still got it!” Our culture does not judge his body with the degree that is strapped onto aging women and therefore he does not see his aging body with the contempt women see their own. If a women’s breasts sag a bit or her thighs are not as tight as they were some years ago, then she is considered over the hill and not worthy of competing among the cult of womanhood--vying for the all important admiration of the All-American Male. I personally don’t want to play the games anymore and I am going to head straight into thirty-hood with an appreciation of my years and the benefits that come with age. I agree with Ms. Marcus in saying, “you’ll just have to go play/with someone else” if you don’t appreciate me. I am going to value my body beyond “your” reaction or judgment of it.

An important question is who is this allusive “you” anyway? Whose invisible hoop are we, as women, trying to jump through in regards to our beauty? Is it the old boyfriend who left for us someone younger and better looking? Or maybe an older sister who out did us in everything--including body development? Or even maybe the “you” is actually you and me. Perhaps some of the struggle is within us to accept and love our bodies. Perhaps we don’t value ourselves beyond the external indicators of beauty and maybe we are not requiring others do the same. We need to set a new standard and it must start with us. Whether it is the media and/or society that set the standards for body image, we need to re-establish how we measure our self-worth.

When I find myself lapsing into self doubt and comparing my body and attractiveness with other women, I know I have let my eyes wander off how God sees me and onto the false gods of pride, ego and
vanity that prevail in our culture today. The Lord has a plan to heal and restore each and every woman from self-hatred and torment over her body image. He created all of us to be His pride and joy. To be His dearly loved daughters (His Princess’) and to walk with our heads held high—not in self promotion, but in dignity; knowing that we are personally chosen by the Kind of kings and Lord of lords. He says that we are worthy and beautiful, so what should it matter what mere men think? There is a wonderful world out there that we need our bodies to carry us through, so let’s not be so preoccupied with how we look, that we miss the boat for our adventure.

The Author states that “this body of mine has danced till dawn hiked to a mountain top / and to a river’s edge.” Who can not imagine a wild bunch of pals dancing on tables and letting out shouts of joy as the sun rises over a night of celebration? Her body also took her from the mountain top to the river’s edge. That is the full spectrum of geographic differences and her strong body carried her through these two extremes. “It has rolled down sand dunes / swam in many oceans / skipped through spring meadows / basked in the sun.” I love the imagery of a wonderful body swimming in the oceans of the world. Taking in all the sights, sounds and smells that accompany the water. It does not matter what body shape one is when there is so much beauty to be appreciated in the natural world. As she skipped through spring meadows, picking daffodils and laughing, do you think for a moment she was consumed with self hate regarding her body? I don’t think so. She was enjoying it as a tool to live her life in fullness.

This is evident in the poem when she writes: “This body of mine has laughed so hard / it almost cracked at the seams!” The author wants us to remember there is more to life than fitting into a particular standard of beauty. She shares with her reader “this body of mine loves to touch and be touched / kiss and be kissed / hold and be held / Sometimes it purrs like a cat in ecstasy.” The art of love and sensuality does not come merely from the outer body structure, but rather, deep within the heart and soul of the person. Bodies of all shapes long to embrace another with passionate love. Regardless of the size you wear in jeans or what the scale reads when you climb up on it, it is a basic human need to be loved and connected with another person. People of all different sizes and shapes are capable of touching, kissing and holding the one who has captured their heart. It’s a universal truth.

In the last stanza, the author slaps her reader in the face with the reality of our perverse culture. She has just recounted all the fabulous experiences her body has allowed her to enjoy and then she hits us with the fact that the very same body that did all those great things will be judged, mocked and shamed because it does not fit the youthful mold.
However, the author takes a stand and says that she will no longer be judged by the standards of today and tells critics to go find someone else to play with. The author is proud of all her body has accomplished throughout her life so far, and is not going to allow anyone to be unappreciative of it. We all can take a lesson from the truth that is shared in this poem. I hope everyone who reads it comes away a little more enlightened to the beauty of the women in their lives and their own bodies and will stop feeding into the lies that are spreading like a plague throughout our country. There is a lot more to being a women than being eye candy for the rest of society. The Lord has hope and a great future planned for all who call on Him (Jeremiah 29:11)—without regard to our outward appearances.

FOOTNOTE: (Book Recommendation) *The Princess Within--Restoring the Soul of a Woman* by Serita Ann Jakes. I highly recommend this book if you want to learn more about womens’ value and worth.
Death Does Not Separate Us
Ulrich Choitz

Have you ever taken hallucinogenic words? "The Pressure of the Dead," a poem by Joanna Martin, uses charged, evocative words and phrases that magnify our senses. This poem is about the struggle to believe in something to make sense of difficult times. Change implies loss and the loss of loved ones can be terrible. When pain grows unbearable, we must look closely at inner experiences we may have previously ignored, and search for paths leading to a new system of belief. Such a transformation involves an inner sense of changelessness and belonging, of being part of creation and simultaneously, blissfully, being the whole of creation.

The title, "The Pressure of the Dead" at once repelled and intrigued me because of its ambiguity. Is this going to be a dour and depressing litany of death and decay?

But instead of macabre images, I experience moments of building intensity: "like hay curing in the sun," "walnuts bursting within the thickness of shell," "leafless trees," "weight of the evening," "lengthening light rays," "the hillside infuses incandescent," "the world vibrates," "that thick layer of lushness...expands itself briefly," and "shedding itself like a skin." These are all rich transitional moments, snapshots in time that tell me changes are occurring. Changes are punctuated by death, the cessation of what had been. Dying is the human condition, and reflection concerning death exists practically among all people. From the beginnings of recorded history, realizations of finitude have been both a powerful personal concern and shaping force of societies. Many feel that one of humanity’s most distinguishing characteristics, in contrast to other species, is its capacity to grasp the concept of a future--and inevitable--death. We also realize that nothing ever remains the same. The poem is telling us that change and flux are our world. Death and life are interwoven, and therefore we should accept change and find meaning through the inner path of spiritual striving and understanding.

Since everything changes "out there," power, wealth, health, knowledge, emotions, relationships, people art, literature, science, and religions, we cannot cling to any of these changing phenomena to give meaning to our lives, for then we are entertaining false hopes of salvation and meaning.

After a death we struggle to reattach to life. A death can have such serious consequences that faith can be shattered and the question becomes whether one can reaffirm and reconnect their relationship with God. In this case I feel that the author has indeed connected with God because her poem is filled with images of fullness.
The author conveys a sense of ripeness and expectation through the use of phrases like: “walnuts bursting within the thickness of shell,” “hanging heavy,” “shells crack open,” “weight of the evening,” “lengthening light rays,” “hay curing in the sun,” and “that thick layer of lushness.”

This is optimism. I feel that this sense of optimism, after having gone through a loss of a loved one and bereavement indicates that that their relationship was one of mutual love, trust, and support. The poem goes on to celebrate the miracle of life.

The line, “looking up, their hooves holding fast to the hillside,” telescopes our attention to the horses’ hooves. They are still, of course, an integral part of the horse, but through the use of language they become heroic in their interaction with the earth, hillside, and gravity. The special way that language is used here has sensitized me and altered my senses; it has magnified my perceptions and removed my commonplace way of perceiving.

In the lines: “is it the weight of the evening / that causes the walnuts to fall / or their own specific gravity ticking like an internal clock.” The author’s use of the term “specific gravity” suggests that she has had scientific training. Specific gravity is a chemistry term used to visualize on a molecular or atomic level. At this level matter is differentiated only by tiny electrons, where atoms wink in and out of the matrix of being continuously. This way of seeing is reinforced by the line, “as the world vibrates.”

Sunset and evening are mentioned, which brings to mind the fictional writing of Carlos Castaneda, in which the Yaqui Indians regarded Dawn and Dusk with great respect. They believe them to be a, “crack between the worlds,” when the spirits of the dead could enter the realm of the living. Dawn and dusk are times that naturally induce reflection in most cultures; they are times of introspection about emotional events.

The night is also a time for sleep, sometimes called “the little death,” after which we are refreshed and strengthened. This poem portrays death as a component of life. A snake’s shed skin seems inert but is still a part of the living snake. An altered, rejuvenated snake emerges from its mantle, which returns to the soil, grist for the mill, to ultimately be transmutated into new life.