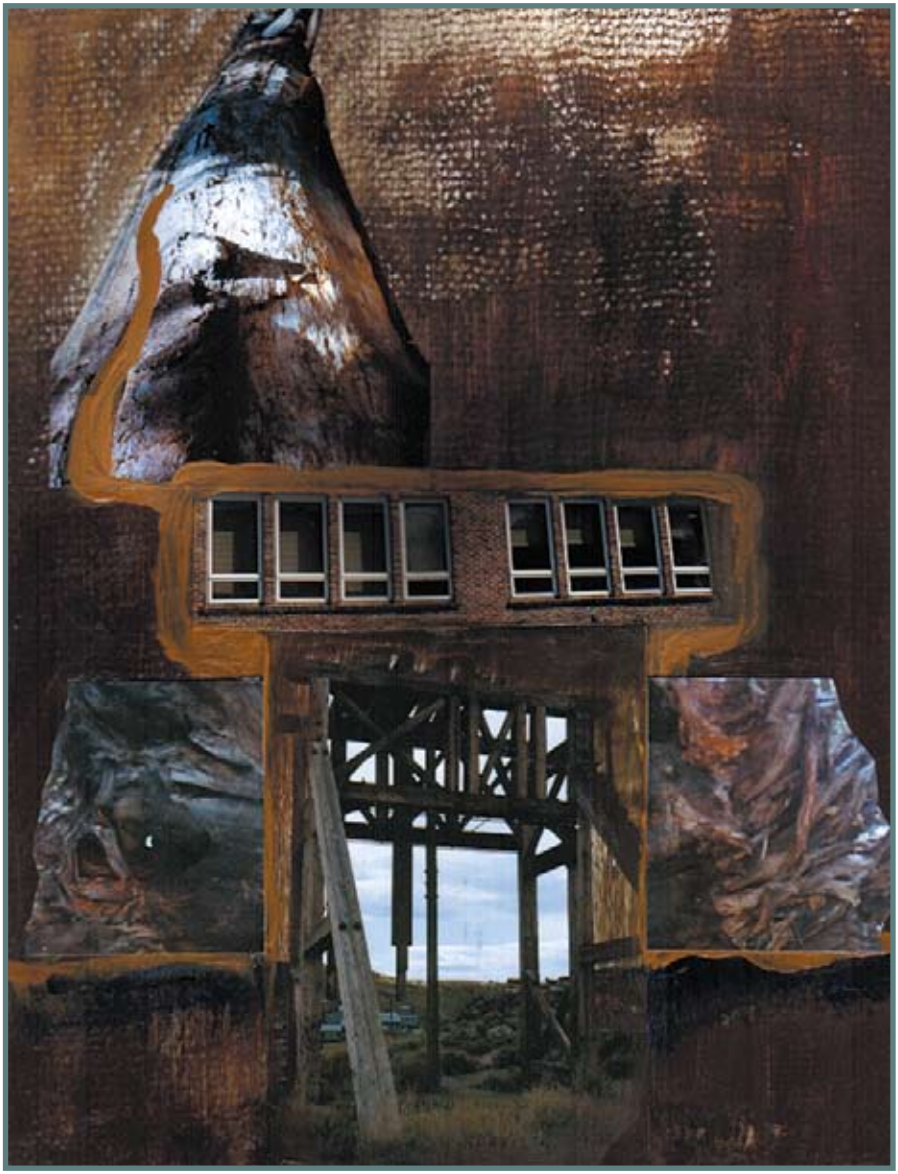
# Crosscut



With an introduction by George Drew

# Crosscut

literary magazine

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# Crosscut

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# *Preface*

This fourteenth volume marks a new phase for *Crosscut*, as it features writers from beyond the Husson campus, beyond the state of Maine, and even beyond the North American continent. For the first time, the journal cast editorial nets far and wide, taking in a haul that was rich, diverse, and surprising.

Flash fiction from South Africa, flash photography from Washington, DC, fresh verse from Maine's western mountains, prose reflections on Cambodia by way of Mississippi, and a novel excerpt relating life in a nineteenth-century Pennsylvania logging camp: these are representative of the geographic and artistic range to be experienced in this issue. Consider this the positive side of globalization, its cultural benefits rather than social costs. No tariffs, no IMF, no deficits, no impediments to immigration—just a fair trade in poetry, fiction, and visual arts.

Even as it ventures beyond its home ground, Crosscut continues its tradition of support for up-and-coming writers alongside established voices. The reader will find a balance of each in the pages ahead.

*– Greg Winston*

# *Introduction*

*George Drew*

## LET THE MIRACLES MATTER

"For poetry makes nothing happen," W.H. Auden famously said in his famous "In memory of W.B. Yeats." No matter. As he also said, it "survives in the valley of its making."

Precisely. It survives, and so does the poet—as the poems and the poets, the short stories and the writers in Crosscut amply and ably attest. Take, for example, Bruce Pratt's "The Trout of Thorballylee," a poem in which, symbolically, not only the trout survive, but freedom itself—codified in Irish myth. And in M. Kelly Lombardi's "A Necklace of Pearls," a concentrated lyric, what survives, really, is the metaphor-making imagination. Moreover, in Hillary Barngrove McQuilkin's suspenseful short story "The Road Ends Here," the oldest impulse in the human world thrives, that of story-telling—narration. What survives, ironically given the title, is the road that is, the necessary journey we all must make, from darkness into light, the darkness here being the main character's willful transgression, his near adultery, and the light being his full awareness of what he is doing spurred by a violent loss. He destroys his dog, and in doing so, again ironically, just might have saved his marriage, and more important, himself.

So *something happens.* Poetry might not make it happen, but it happens—much as the poem often is something the poet doesn't make happen. It just does.

Consider the following little poem. It is titled "The Teacher," but could just as well be titled "The Poet":

> Never mind the teacher's table
> round has turned square as hell.
> October, and the soccer field's
> green as Ireland as she kneels
> in the cross-country trail
> that circles the campus like
> a chastity belt and plucks
> the most miraculous maple leaf
> from sunset stacks of the fallen.

In this poem clearly something is happening, both in the world of the poem and in the real world outside it. What happened in the real world was that the teacher for whom I wrote the poem won the New York State Chancellor's Award for Excellence in Teaching, the highest honor accorded a teacher in that state. It was right that she won, and the poem, implicitly at least, shows us why: even in a time when the teacher's "table/ round has turned square as hell," this teacher sees and appreciates the beauty of the "miraculous maple leaf." That is, she has not turned off, not aesthetically nor, one assumes, educationally—in the classroom.

Who wouldn't want a teacher like that? And who wouldn't want such a poem? Look at the world it presents. This poem, too, makes nothing happen, and yet, curiously, something has—two things really, two miracles: that which occurs in the poem, the teacher's simple apprehension of beauty, and that which is the poem itself, the miracle that is any poem.

Actually, there are several small miracles that, collectively, comprise the larger miracle that is the poem. There is metaphor, or rather two metaphors twined into

one, that of classic Christian myth and medieval Arthurian/Chivalric myth; there is a detailed, specific sense of place—a cross-country trail on a campus in the fall; there is a tactile snapshot of time and space inhabited for a cosmic moment by the teacher; there is the wind of music—rhythm, an unforced undercurrent of meter, internal rhymes (vowel sounds, consonant)—; there is the sound of sense and the sense of sound in our ears, throats, lungs, hearts, and guts.

Miracle is not a word everyone is comfortable with, which might be one of the ironies of our time, given our obsession with the self. But it is a handy word when the empirical is not enough. Empirically, then, the maple leaf doesn't qualify: it can be explained by science, its perceived beauty the effect of light refraction, and of course a loss of chlorophyll. The real miracle here is the teacher's *apprehension* of its beauty—of the physical fact of the leaf and the emotional charge it gives her. Strictly speaking, what is "miraculous" is the nexus of human perception and the physical object being perceived. That, and the beauty of the poem that enshrines that one intimate moment on a cross-country trail on an anonymous campus. That the teacher, too, is anonymous doesn't matter. The human point is made, and taken.

Make no mistake, then: poetry, and all good writing, *does* make something happen, in the poem and in the poet. At its best, this is the miracle; at its best, this the transformation. The hard truth, however, is, sometimes the miracle takes a long time to make its way into the world. I can attest to that, and so, I suspect, can all of you, whether you are a young, neophyte writer or already advanced, even professionally established.

I wrote my first poem in November, 1963. I had just turned twenty when President Kennedy was killed, and I knew nothing of poetry. I knew the poetry lodged in me, but I had not an inkling of the poems it would become.

I suffered the same grief and "dissociation of sensibility" that mostly everybody did, thrashing about for a way to relieve such complicated and searing emotions. I suppose I can say I was hurt into poetry. The poem I wrote at the time, a lyric "elegy," was, as you would expect, not very good—it was, after all, my first. Now look at the following stanza:

> Now that bodies are piling up again
> and Taps being played from one end
> of the Republic to the other and mothers
> carrying home ashes and folded flags,
> I find myself thinking a lot about Lincoln....

This is the opening to one of my first poems of this new year, forty-three years later. Now I have this poem, which I have come to see is about Lincoln and for Kennedy. Really, it's the poem I didn't have the necessary art and craft to write in 1963. This makes it twice a miracle, one that was well worth waiting for.

What has happened along the way, and I can state this categorically, is that poetry has transformed me and my life. That is the power, the beauty, the miracle of poetry—and of all forms of literature. Clearly, it is on view for all to see in this issue of *Crosscut*.

I salute you writers and poets, and I salute Greg Winston for shepherding this compendium of "miraculous" leaves—these inspired pages so radiant with the color and light that is our language and our literature.

Let the miracles matter. Let them continue to multiply. ❧

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*Hillary Barngrove McQuilkin*

# The Road Ends Here

The rifle still clutched in Charlie's hand dangled from his limp arm. He had one shot remaining, but as far as he could tell, the dog was already dead. Blood trickled down Bailey's snout, puddling like tar on the dirt driveway.

Charlie stood, slump-shouldered, in front of the large white house where he and his wife, Julia, had lived for twenty years. It was the last house on a nameless dead-end dirt road that twisted for miles through the Vermont countryside. Beside the front door two pumpkins glistened in the late afternoon light. A scarecrow wearing Charlie's old tattered clothing hung from a pole in the yard, keeping guard over Julia's dying summer garden.

A breeze pushed dry leaves against Charlie's ankles. He looked down. Bailey was sprawled awkwardly, his back legs were tucked under his belly, his front legs were askew and to Charlie they resembled the crooked sticks the dog loved to chase in the hayfield across the road.

Charlie knelt and placed the palm of his trembling hand on the still warm dog. With a forceful nudge he heaved the glassy-eyed Bailey onto his side. A puff of air escaped from the dog's mouth.

It wasn't supposed to end like this, Charlie thought.

*****

That morning, Charlie awoke before dawn. He slung the strap of an old army issue backpack over his shoulder and stood beside the bed in silence, watching his wife sleep. From outside, a gray glow flooded through the open window and across the bed. Thin wisps of Julia's blonde hair moved gently in the murky light.

Julia shifted beneath the sheets. "Bye," her voice was muffled. She pulled herself up from the pillow. "Don't shoot

yourself," she said, letting her head drop back as if to emphasize the point. Charlie knew she didn't approve of his annual hunting trip.

He stood a minute longer, seeing the muscles in her jaw go slack as she fell back to sleep. The quilt, a wedding gift nearly 25 years ago, was snug against her neck. He tiptoed across the room and fumbled for the door.

At the top of the staircase, Charlie hesitated. It wasn't exactly a lie, he thought. He was going hunting with the guys. What Julia didn't know was that this year they had decided to go for only a few days, not a week like usual. He inhaled deeply, a dull ache thrumming in the back of his head. On the hallway table a clock ticked, a noise he was so accustomed to hearing he only noticed it when he stopped to try.

Every Friday for the last five years he and Julia would order out for pizza and watch a rental movie together. The night he met Sonia it was his turn to pick up dinner. He pushed open the glass door at the Pizza Pick-up-and-Go. Chimes jingled on the hinge above his head. Something turned over in his stomach when he first saw her standing behind the counter. She was tall and her hair was dyed black, the color of a raven.

She pushed a pizza box across the counter. "You're Charlie?" she said.

He nodded.

She pointed to the side room where the owner sat in the dark, talking on the phone. "Lenny said you order every Friday," she said. "Large, extra cheese and mushrooms." She tugged at her hair, twining it like rope around a finger. "Do you ever get onions or something different?"

Downstairs in the kitchen Charlie could still hear the clock ticking. He didn't bother to turn on the lights. He made coffee, and although he had no appetite, Charlie forced himself to eat a piece of toast.

Bailey, his 9-year old mutt, lay on the floor near the front door. Bailey had been a gift from his daughter. He remem-

bered that night, how Vera's warm hands wrapped around his head, covering his eyes from behind. It was Christmas and the house smelled like Julia's gingerbread. Vera, practically as tall as her father, directed him towards the back porch in a calm voice. "Turn left," she told him. "Stop," she cautioned as he stepped too close to the twinkling tree.

Outside it was cold and if he opened his eyes he knew he would see their exhaled breath in the winter air. Vera yelled "Merry Christmas" and flung her arms away from his face. Sleeping on an old towel and nestled in the corner of a cardboard box was a small rust-colored dog. Around his neck was a yellow bow, cinched securely like a necktie.

"He'll be your new best friend." Vera knelt down and stuck her arms into the box. She tapped the puppy on the head and his eyes flew open.

Bailey was old now, so when Charlie called out his name from across the kitchen, the dog only wagged his tail, a *thump thump* on the linoleum. Gathering his pack, Charlie went to Bailey. He reached out to stroke the dog behind his ears. "Take care of Julia," he whispered as he stepped out onto the porch.

For the first few days of what should have been his weeklong hunting trip, Sonia and Charlie planned to stay in a cabin they rented an hour away at Arrowhead Lake. It had been Charlie's idea to use false names and when he told Sonia that she was now Mrs. Bailey, she squealed and threw her arms around his neck. They were standing in the parking lot of the Pizza Pick-up-and-Go and afraid someone might see, Charlie stepped back. Her mouth went crooked when she smiled. "Come on," she said. "No one will see. No one cares."

Charlie straightened. "I care," he said.

Sonia pushed her chest out and elongated her neck, mimicking his stance. "I care," she said in a voice meant to sound stern. She reached out and touched Charlie on the shoulder when he finally smiled.

Charlie told her the plan. Sonia would meet him in the early morning in the grocery store parking lot. They would leave her car there and they would drive his truck to the lake.

The morning chill was beginning to lift outside his house. The air smelled damp and Charlie guessed it would rain that afternoon. Driveway dirt crunched beneath his boots. He heaved his pack into the bed of the truck, the metal fastenings on the bag clanging against his rifle case. Bailey sounded a lone bark from behind the front door.

Charlie pulled himself into the cab and paused before starting the truck. He looked up at the bedroom window. His wife would sleep for another hour before rising to get ready for her job at the bank. He cranked the engine and backed out, careful, always, of the blind curve directly before the driveway.

He saw Sonia before she saw him. She was sitting in her car outside the grocery store. A stray shopping cart wobbled on a slant and began rolling slowly towards an abandoned corner of the parking lot. Her dark hair wafted in a stream of air shooting from the vent. Sonia picked at her nails, something he had seen his wife chastise their daughter for doing.

The parking lot was empty. He stepped out of his truck, but when he got a few feet from Sonia's car he stopped. He looked back at his truck, still running. He could just go home. Tell Julia the trip had been shortened. Surprise her with a few days at Arrowhead Lake. But then Sonia looked up. A smile cleaved her face and for a fleeting instant, Charlie forgot about his wife. He reached for the handle and opened her door.

"I thought you might not show," she said, stepping out of the car. Her ruffled green skirt caught in the wind, whipping around flat against her thin frame.

His tongue felt thick and dry. "Nope."

The summer had been rainy and the last mile of road

up to the rented cabin was full of potholes and washouts. Charlie drove the truck cautiously, using his whole upper body to turn the wheel. Sonia laughed and slid around exaggeratingly on the bench seat beside him. At a gargantuan rut, Charlie reflexively stepped on the gas and slammed the wheel to the right. Sonia flew into his lap, giggling and groping for his leg. It was then when he realized his mistake; he had left the key to the cabin along with a foldout glossy brochure on the narrow table by the front door where Bailey had been sleeping.

The road flattened and abruptly stopped at a small parking space. A manicured walkway meandered down to the cabin, the shingles on the roof the only part Charlie could see. Beyond, he could see the blue of the lake.

"Looks like the road ends here," Sonia said. She threw open the door and started to run down the pathway. Charlie smelled wood smoke. She came back from around a bend, holding her hair back with one hand and beckoning for Charlie with the other.

The lakeside cabin was everything the realtor's pamphlet had said it would be: cedar siding, glass doors, a porch with a view. Fall leaves, swirled by the wind, were heaped in corners beneath the cabin. Around front, Sonia made herself comfortable, lying stomach down on the sun-warmed deck. She hiked her skirt up to the top of her thighs and Charlie took notice of how tan her legs were.

"I love it," Sonia said, looking up at Charlie. She dropped her head, face down, into her arms. She mumbled something and then lifted up her head and, grinning, said, "So?"

"What?" he said.

"I said, want to go naked swimming?" A crooked smile pulled at the edge of her lips and Charlie saw the glint of a metallic cavity filling.

"I have to go back," he said. "I forgot the key." He looked out to the far side of the lake. Spindly leafless trees exposed another cabin.

"You forgot the key?"

"I left it on the table." Charlie looked down at her.

Sonia sighed. "I'll just stay here, take a nap or something." She put her head back down and wedged it into the crook of her elbow.

This time, driving the rutted road, Charlie swerved with the deftness of someone who had driven that stretch every day for years. Without Sonia in the car he went faster. Violently, the truck dipped into a hole and stopped. Charlie bounced on the bench seat and his head slammed into the ceiling. He punched his fist into the dashboard. How could he have forgotten the key? Dropping his head onto the steering wheel, he thought about Julia. She was at work, probably talking with a customer. He could see her gently tucking hair behind an ear. He could smell her perfume.

Charlie rolled down the window. Fresh air filtered into the cab. Along the side of the road, brown ferns bowed towards the ground. An old stonewall angled off into the woods, the rocks in various forms of disarray. A tear escaped and dripped onto his leg. He watched the pinprick of wet darken his pants. The truck engine hummed. He swiped at his eyes and then pushed the gearshift into first. Charlie swung the Chevy onto Route 28 and headed home.

Sunlight flooded through the windshield when Charlie turned off the highway and onto the winding dirt road. Gravel rumbled under the tires and small rocks kicked up, pinging off the sides of the truck. Charlie drove fast. The road was familiar and he remembered teaching Vera to drive, her small body wedged between the wheel and his lap. He worked the pedals and she turned the wheel. His wife sat on the passenger's side, her hands gripping the door handle.

"Take it slow," Julia commanded as they neared the blind curve. And then changing her tone, she said, "Vera, stay on the outside here. You can't see around the bend." Vera swung the wheel, pulling the truck along the outermost edge of the road. "Good girl," Julia said.

Charlie was close to home now. His head pounded and he was thirsty. With a sick rush of adrenaline, Charlie stepped down on the gas. The truck flew across the gravel and hurtled around the corner.

Even before Charlie saw the dog sprawled in the middle of the road like a lizard on a rock, Bailey had probably heard him coming. The truck, a familiar sound. It was too late, however, by the time Charlie saw the dog. In a desperate attempt to stop what was inevitable, Charlie slung his foot off the gas and onto the brake.

His shoulders buckled when the truck shuddered over Bailey.

Blood leached from a wound on Bailey's underside and his breathing was jumpy. The dog did not respond. He did not wag his tail and he did not whine excitedly like he usually did every time Charlie came home. It took all Charlie's strength to gather the dog into his arms and carry him out of the road and up the driveway. Pebbles dug into his palms and he could smell blood, the stench of iron.

Bailey whimpered and then snarled as Charlie set him down. He ran back into the road and tossing the army pack aside, grabbed the rifle from the bed of his truck.

"I'm sorry, buddy." Charlie whispered in the dog's upturned ear.

He aimed the rifle, and fired. "I'm sorry," he said again.

*****

It wasn't supposed to end like this, Charlie thought again.

He lifted the rifle and hurled it into the yard. It knocked against the scarecrow. The straw body wavered and then sloughed off the pole, landing in a heap on dead zucchini leaves. Lowering himself to the ground, Charlie arranged himself along Bailey's spine. Somewhere in the distance he heard a tractor start and soon he smelled cut hay. The sun sank behind a cloud and the shadow of the house elongated

and cast the driveway in shade. He thought of Sonia, lying there on the deck, alone, waiting for him to return.

Charlie drifted sleepily. When he took notice again, it was twilight. The dog was cold. He sat up, knelt, then pulled himself up and stood. The rain will begin soon, he thought as he looked up. He listened as a faint far off noise grew louder as it moved closer. Charlie looked to the road. He knew it was her car approaching, practically crawling around the curve. Julia turned into the driveway, her headlights arcing like a beacon. ❧

*Bruce Pratt*

## The Trout of Thorballylee

In the Fergus at Kilnaboy,
Above the weed-praying rapids,
Tea-stained, slack-water bends.
In the narrows beneath the bridge,
Fierce browns rose.
Hooked but never landed.

In the dark mill pond
At Thorballylee,
The trout remembered
A whispering from Yeats,
About Cu Chulain.
And did not take the fly.

Folded into his oilskin,
A man with fisted briar vowed,
"This stream rises in a bog.
You would know by the color,
And drinking it you would know
Again by the taste of it."

At the splash of hackle and wing,
The Galway browns whisper, Saor,
*Uisce Fe Talamh,*
Huddle to nose the current,
Then rise and arc skyward
To spit the offending hook.

*Saor*=free or freedom
*Uisce Fe Talamh*=water beneath the ground, a code phrase used in the early twentieth century by Irish Republicans.

*Bruce Pratt*

## Little Michael's Bar

Seventy-one Main Street had been the Portside Pub as long as anyone could remember, and the town of Little Michael's Bar had been known by that name for longer than that, though the natural phenomenon that the Yankee residents believed had given the town its name, a narrow, crescent-shaped sand bar had vanished in the storm surge during the hurricane of '38, and was now visible only in a sepia-tinged photographs hanging in the Town Clerk's Office.

Another theory for the origin of the town's name maintained it to be a corruption of the French, *La moule avec le petit barbe,* correctly translated, "the mussel with the small beard," a reference, some insisted, to the bay's once plentiful shellfish. As most of the town was Republican, the sand bar origin was the most accepted, though who Little Michael was no one could say.

When Caleb and Annie Saunders decided to retire and sell the Portside, which they had owned for twenty-seven years, and buy a motor home for a cross-country visit to their far-flung children, folks assumed that Roland Pelletier would be the next owner. Thirty, Roland had lived all of his life in Little Michael's Bar, first on the bluff above the bay in the family home, and then in his own modest house on Cutter's Cove Road on the way out to the island. He'd had his eye on the Portside for several years, stopping in most weekday afternoons after his shift at the mill for a beer or two before going home to his wife Danielle and their two small girls.

On a sparkling Saturday in June, a tangy, northwesterly blow piling up white caps against the incoming tide, the Saunders sailed down Main Street in their new thirty-four

foot rig to the closing, traffic fetching up behind them.

Annie leaned forward in the mate's seat as Caleb circled the six blocks of Little Michael's Bar's commercial district searching for a place to dock, smitten with the view from the cab. When she suggested parking in the town lot behind the Coastal Trust Bank, Caleb complained that that was where the people from away parked and that he didn't want to get a dent in the new rig on the first day.

Roland, his lawyer Mary Davis, and Hal Kimmerly, representing Caleb and Annie, noticed the rig making passes in front of the law office..

"What's your client doing?" Mary asked," We're on for quarter to eleven."

"Probably too cheap to pay to park, but he'll be waiting for Labor Day for a big enough spot to open up on the street," Hal said.

"Hell, he's about to get two-hundred and sixty grand from me, you'd think he could spare a couple of quarters for a meter." Roland said.

"I've got a speech to give to the Chamber picnic at noon," Mary said, "He'd best pull over soon."

"Mike Phillips is coming to put the new sign on the bar at noon, too, so he better get here pronto," Roland said.

Hal eyed Mary and said, "What new sign, Roland?"

"Ultrasound says Danielle's having a boy. We're naming him Michael, after her father, and we're gonna rename The Portside, Little Michael's Bar."

"Sure you want to do that?" Hal said. "It's always been the Portside. It's a known landmark."

"Town doesn't support the place like it used to, Hal," Roland said. "I need the tourists, they're the only ones with any money. And with school starting before Labor Day these days, the season is shrinking. Gotta sail with the tide. Besides, Portside Pub sounds too conservative."

"That may be," Hal said, "but this is a conservative community."

"That's why I'm banking on the flatlanders," Roland said. "You Yankees have fishhooks in you wallets."

"I'd think this over," Hal said, "Don't rush into anything."

Mary tilted her head at Roland, held up a finger, and raised her brows. Regarding her watch she said, "Caleb doesn't dock that landship soon, this whole discussion will be moot for today."

"I'll flag him down," Hal said.

Stepping out onto the sidewalk, Hal hailed Caleb, who lowered Annie's window and said, "Mornin,' Hal. Can't find an open mooring."

"Put it in the town lot." Hal said, "You're late as it is. Mary has another appointment, Roland is champing at the bit to get going, and I'd like to get out to the island to visit my mother."

"Geez, Hal, I don't want to get her stove in by some fool from Massachusetts…"

"Caleb, park it in the lot so we can get this done. We're running out of time."

"Can I leave Annie out here to guard the rig?"

"No, Annie needs to come too. We'll be done in half an hour tops."

"Hell of a town where a taxpayer can't find a safe place to park," Caleb said, raising the window. Making a wide swing Caleb eased the rig up the alley between White's Pharmacy and English's Shoe Store and parked at the back of the lot in the shade of two maples. "She's out of the wind a bit," he said turning off the ignition, "Less sand blowin' 'round to scratch her up."

When Caleb and Annie entered the conference room, Roland and the two attorneys were seated at the conference table. Pointing to seats on either side of him, Hal said, "Most closings are happy times for both the seller and the purchaser, as it is today, and generally pretty straight forward. Caleb, do you have the tax check?"

"Yep, " he said, settling into the seat on Hal's right, "It's in Annie's purse."

"Then we can proceed?" Hal said, smiling at Mary and Roland, who were staring out the window toward the Portside.

"He's early," Roland said, raising up in his chair.

"Who's early?" Caleb asked.

"Mike Phillips. He's supposed to put up the new sign at noon and it's just eleven."

"What new sign?" Caleb asked.

"I'm changing the name of The Portside, to Little Michael's Bar," Roland said, "Better for business."

Caleb gulped a startled breath. "You can't change the name of my place."

"Once you're paid, Caleb, I'll name it anything I want to," Roland said.

Caleb placed his palms flat on the table and leaned forward. "I'm not gonna allow you to change the name that has been on that building since before either of us were born, which in my case is sixty-two years," he said. "You're buying more than a building Roland—hell, you're buying history."

"I'm buying number seventy-one Main Street, Little Michael's Bar, Maine," Roland said. "I have my checks and the tide's running, so let's haul the damn anchor."

Caleb turned to Hal, "Can he do this?"

"I think he should keep the name, but we have an agreement and he can call the Portside whatever he wants to call it." Hal said.

"You mean a man has no right to insist that the name of the business he built up can't be changed?"

Hal shook his head.

"Then I ain't selling," Caleb said.

Roland pounded the table. "Boat's left the harbor, Caleb, let's not be chasing it in the dinghy. You sign or I'll sue you, and get the Portside free.

"The hell you will, you damn French…"

"Calm down," Hal thundered, rising up to his full six foot three height. "Caleb," he said, "We're here to close a sale, not debate naming a bar."

"It's a pub, not a bar," Caleb said, as he slumped back into his chair, his gaze riveted on Roland. Squinting his eyes and enunciating each word he added, "Unless there's a clause, or codicil, or whatever legal mumbo-jumbo is required, that prevents the new owner from changing the name of The Portside, there'll be no sale."

"But honey," Annie said, "What about the motor home?"

"We'll take it back," Caleb said.

"We paid cash," she said. "We'll take a beating on it. And what about our trip to see the grandkids? Let Roland do what he wants. It's his place now."

"Not yet it ain't. No clause, no sale," Caleb said.

Hal stood next to Caleb's chair, the documents awaiting his signature shaking in his fist. "Be reasonable," he said, "And thank God a local boy bought the place instead of some Philadelphia divorcee planning to open a vegetarian restaurant. As your lawyer, I am directing you to sign these papers. Let Roland get to his new business, let attorney Davis get to the Chamber picnic, and damn it, Caleb, let me get out the island to see my poor mother."

"Roland, you want the Portside," Caleb said, leaning forward on his elbow and wagging a finger, "you agree, in writing, all legal, to keep the name."

"Caleb, dear, please," Annie said.

"Sorry, Annie, Can't live with myself if I don't stand up for principle. What'll it be, Roland?"

"You can't do this," Roland said.

"Watch me," Caleb said, as he started out the door, Hal in pursuit, Annie a few steps behind. Mary restrained Roland in the doorway, who threatened to sue, shoot, and dismember Caleb in one outburst.

Caleb strode along the sidewalk with Hal at his shoul-

der.

"Don't be a god-damned fool," Hal said to him.

"No damn Frog pup is gonna ruin the Portside," Caleb said, panting, and turning into the parking lot, head down.

A hard, salt-tinged gust stirred the dry sand, and the air was rent by a sharp crack that halted all three in their tracks. They looked up in time to witness a gnarled, newly-leafed branch from one of the maples crash onto the roof of the new rig. Annie shrieked.

Caleb froze, rooted to the asphalt. Without turning he said to Hal, "Hope the town's insurance covers this," he said.

"It's up to your vehicle insurance, Caleb. And only if you have an Act of God clause," Hal said, hiding his mouth with his hand.

"Act of the damn devil's more like it," Caleb said.

"Insurance might cover some of this, but the deductible…well that's up to you," Hal said, his smile breaking over his face.

"I'll sue the town," Caleb said.

"As your lawyer, and the town's attorney, I must advise you that your chances of prevailing aren't good," Hal said. "You'd need to get Mary to represent you because of the conflict of interest, and she'll be a bit chafed if we don't settle this today or if she misses the Chamber picnic."

"You're saying that so I'll give into that damn Frenchman."

"No," Hal said, "But you should. He's a good kid—busted his tail at the mill and worked weekends at the boatyard for his father so he could buy the place. Wants to name it after his son, which is his right."

"But what about respect for the past?" Caleb said.

Hal did not answer. He peeked at Annie who was staring at the motor home and fidgeting with the clasp on her purse. The wind rose and the twisted limb slid off the roof

of the rig and splintered on the asphalt.

"Ought to be illegal," Caleb said, quieter, "But I suppose I can let it go. Won't go back inside though, you bring out to Annie and me whatever we have to sign. We'll be in the rig. I suspect it'll still drive, and I've got to get back to Daley's before they close up. Little Michael's Bar—hell that's the name of the town not the pub."

"That's fine," Hal said," I'll be right back."

Annie linked arms with her husband. A crowd, mostly tourists, had assembled to gawk at the wreckage. She leaned into Caleb, head against his chest.

"Don't fret, Annie," Caleb said. "We've weathered worse than this. But there ought to be a law against people owning pubs if they don't have enough sense to keep a good name. Act of God, my ass. " ❧

***Connected Place 3***
*– Mary Lee*

***Connected Place 12***
*– Mary Lee*

*P.J. Piccirillo*

## *Excerpt from Chapter 10 of* ***Heartwood***

When Geet turned up his lamp flame and roused the crew on Tobias's first day of work in the woods, the windows above the sleeping quarter's desk were as black as when Geet had called for lights out and traps shut.

Tobias took his place in a line for the basin where the men doused their faces with wash water they ladled from a barrel. In the dining hall he tried to match them in devouring bacon, eggs and prunes, which he heard a hick call sow bosom, cackle berries and belly birds. These men — most skinny as pole timber — ate like bears. Tobias gauged by their appetites the strain of the work ahead, but he felt ready as ever.

"Cooled down overnight, Dutch," a hick said as Tobias followed the gummy plod of the loggers' corks across the planks of hemlock between the camp and the tracks. The men didn't seem so eager to get to the woods as they had for their meals. Tobias had expected chatter and urgency. But the faces he could make out looked glum, business-like, and the hicks walked with the sarcastic, defeated mood their snickers cast over the dining hall last night with talk of the operation closing. Up ahead, Tobias could see the lamps of the engineer and fireman hovering and jabbing like burning moths about the gears and sprockets of the mini engine. Old Crawdaddy, they called the dinky.

Tobias's orders had been brief, handed down from Austin Fritz through Old Snyder at breakfast: obtain a two-bit axe from the Smitty after breakfast. Go with the camp crew to the cutting. Swamp for Cowboy and his sawing partner, Billy Gaines — a thirty-year-old gone-gray short man with jutting, sturdy haunches and shoulders. Tobias squeezed in close

to them when he picked a place to sit on their log car.

The little locomotive lurched into pulling them up Teaberry Hollow, its lantern beaming sharp in the mist-less dawn. Cold now, the woods had withdrawn their sodden springtime scent.

"Worked much with an axe?" Billy Gaines asked Tobias. His voice had the oh-golly local dialect that Tobias had learned to single out in this mixed pot of immigrants, transients and natives — a sound that pleased his ear.

"No, but I've swung a sledge to split a good many cords," Tobias said.

"An axe ain't a sledge," Cowboy said. "You're comparing the sickle to the scissors. One's for the rough work, one's for the delicate stuff." His words dawdled out of his mouth in drawls, each as long as his face, Tobias thought. "But there is something common between them," Cowboy said. "You let either one do the work. You don't fight the tool, you guide it. It's the way of its stroke that makes for a good bite of the axe, not the force behind it."

Billy Gaines cut in: "And you tuck that advice into your back pocket for when you know women."

At a place where the tracks arced up the ridge to sidestep a narrowing in the hollow, the train stopped and pairs of sawyers grouped themselves with their swampers, spudders and buckers. Then they scattered up and down the hillside. Tobias followed Cowboy and Billy Gaines, ladder-stepping up the slope while the two fairly bound, focused and drawn as if pulled by a puppet string. In the faint light and against the grade, all there was for Tobias to follow between his own huffing breaths was the flim-flam of the flopping, sow-bellied crosscut Cowboy shouldered. Tobias compared this peculiar hick to his saw: long and skinny with a mournful twang in his way of talking.

Their climb stopped at a narrow shelf cut into the steep of the hollow. Woodsmen called them benches, ancient shifted strips of valley wall at the lips of the ridges, high

above the waters that invisibly carved deeper and deeper. Upon the bench and above, great piles of hemlock boughs dimmed the milky light of dawn that spilled down the ridge. The masses of soft-needled branches had been pushed into piles twice the height of Cowboy. Scattered between the heaps, their trunks lay in various states, the freshest fallen of them still bearing limbs. But most were bare, bucked into saw logs, denuded of their bark, which lay in heaps about them. The putrid tang of their tannin lingered, even in the cold. Tobias could not believe that only a small crew had done all this.

Cowboy walked to the broad trunk of a standing hemlock. Engulfed in the dark furrowed background, he no longer looked so tall, but all the more lanky.

"We work down from here," he said, looking at Tobias while other men from their crew broke away in several directions. "You work from behind us, always behind us. We fell thatta way." He pointed downhill. "So now you've been warned of which way the trees come down." Then Cowboy looked across the bench and nodded at a felled and fully branched tree. "You chop limbs and bump any knots off the boles behind us. Chop them tight and get 'em in the round as close as you can. The peelers come along behind you and they want them round as a hoe handle. And snub the ends off the logs so they'll skid easy."

Tobias nodded and pulled the big brim of his hat over his forehead, on the ready.

"Then you swamp. Swampin's to move the branches and brush to make way for the spudders and buckers, and to open skid trails for the teamsters. The spudders peel, the buckers saw the boles to length, and the teamsters and their hosses move the logs. Walk yonder later —" he pointed to the edge of the bench, "and take note of how Hudson cleared skid trails. Keep them straight and pointing at the slide." He threw a thumb over his shoulder, indicating that the log slide lay out the ridge.

Tobias shook his head to show he understood, though he was lost, swimming in the compliment of being entrusted with so much. His mind was sorting out where the particulars of his job fit the scheme of the operation. And the teams, just how did they get teams up here?

Then thoughts of his predecessor took hold and he told himself not to let Hudson's fate — whatever it may have been — take this moment. And he tried, too, to keep that promise he'd made long before not to give up his instincts.

In a way that was not polite or impolite, but matter-of-fact, Cowboy concluded his instructions. "And mind your axe, Tobias Meier. The smitty don't stand for a lost axe. And the company don't stand for a dull one. It's your job to keep it sharp — I'd say sharp enough to shave your whiskers, if you had any. Whet it with your soapstone regular. And put it on the grindstone when you get back at night. To Ryder Lumber, a dull axe is slow work. Ryder don't like slow work, and mind you that the team of hosses goes slow when just one leg's lame."

Tobias couldn't keep Cowboy's warning from calling up the broad-caped silhouette of a man aiming a gun, and the morning chill broke through the charge of his uphill hike. But it was important that figure not be what drove him to do good work today. So he concentrated on J. Hadley Erhart taking time to talk to a boy as he would a man. And there was something else he'd try to mind, something that began trickling to him the moment he'd hopped off the rail car and breathed the peaty smell of wrought earth drifting down from this high ridge where men and horses had scoured the ground moving trees. Something about being at work in the woods that was the same as stalking through laurels for a bear; it honed him again to a cycle. He was aware of a higher work standard, a code other than Ryder Lumber's, which he had to match before he could weigh into the pulse he felt charging this land, the cycle that gave it order. It tied right in with what Cowboy said about a team eight legs-strong

but weak as its lamest.

Cowboy and Billy Gaines turned toward the big hemlock. They took up their axes and started their notch, Cowboy swinging lefty, Gaines working right-handed, woodchips the size of buckwheat cakes firing away. Tobias walked past them, toward farther heaps of fallen trees that still bore limbs. The thump of the axes gave to the singsong of a saw, and Tobias figured the perfect rhythm of their sawing a sign of decent men, a good sort for crosscutting; he'd heard at the Whitehouse that skilled sawyers only pulled their turns, never pushed.

It was full light now, but moving among the great wilting boughs of felled trees was like stepping into a boxcar — dark and engulfing. Here, the mint of hemlock needles held back the dank tang of fresh-cut wood. Tobias looked up and saw the emerald bud tips catching the morning light like so many lamp mantles. He made his way in, along one of the tree's arms, his steps mute on the undersides of the boughs that had crashed beneath it. The bottoms of the needles were pale, catching the whitening sky; Tobias supposed he could be stepping on clouds.

At the bole of the fallen hemlock he sized up a standing branch, a tree itself. His four-pound axe stroked awkward with the first swing, biting shallow and sidelong into the branch, and inches away from where it knuckled into the tree. He tried again and missed by more. He looked up the length of the trunk. How would he get every branch off this one tree in the span of a summer, much less all the others he was supposed to de-limb just today? He doubted the strength in his back to pull that axe until lunchtime, much less all day, all week. He lifted it and started swinging, mostly to quell his panic. His swings sloppy, Tobias concentrated on where the axe should fall. And it fell there, sometimes. Yet it was falling square, and he knew that wouldn't notch out chunks. He concentrated on also turning the axe head, looking for that rhythm he'd so long imagined he'd have in

his swing. But two things to think about made his strokes wobble in the air and tucking his elbows to strike closer, he missed the limb altogether. The tip was at an angle, so when it struck his shin it glanced off. But he might as well have severed his leg for the pain that shot clear to his crotch and watered his eyes. He knew he'd bruise to a mound there, and stiffen with a limp by dinnertime. He crouched and squirmed until the ice started melting out of it.

Tobias leaned the axe handle against his waist as the piercing settled into an ache,. He looked at the tree limb. "How am I going to swing this axe and think about it at the same time?" Cowboy had told him to let the axe do the work. He took it up, swung, concentrating throughout the sweep on how the head should fall, but not acting on it. The axe flew smoother, but off the mark. Next time he thought of nothing, but pictured the wedge he wanted to slice out of the crotch of that branch. And the axe swung twice at opposite angles without his willing it and the wedge of bark and flesh popped out as he jerked the axe head sideways when he pulled away his second stroke. He felt no more effort in the two than he had in his first swing.

Now he was watching the bit of the axe sink into the tree, not thinking about the motion but what it was accomplishing. There came a rhythm, but it was staccato, seemed to be broken as quick as it started; he wasn't working full on Cowboy's advice yet. So he let the revolutions be of a piece. And the axe began calling out its own arc, was tilting its bit this way then that to dig out wedges of wood. But he felt himself driving its head at the end of each swing, and that, strangely, seemed to stop it short of how far it wanted to bite. And so he let the axe dispatch its speed, nearly letting go as it arced downward, and he saw it dig deeper when it met flesh. He felt his strength slide through the handle and pour like hot oil out the bit and into the hemlock bole, spitting water, cracking like a bullet ricocheting off slate. It was free of Tobias, just a midwife for where he pointed his

will. Then he was not an axeman but a knot bumper, a tree limber, moving up the trunk, limb to limb, knot to knot. He was a hand now in the operation's progress.

By the time Tobias finished chopping clean his first hemlock, he'd cloyed of the smell of fresh evergreen sap and settled into the chamber-hold of the fallen timbers that surrounded him. In the silence of stopping to stretch the muscles around his swollen shin or to move to another limb or knot, he keened to the raspy pant and swish of saws bantering ridge-to-ridge across Teaberry hollow, sounding as determined in their purpose as gathering wolves. He caught the dings of hicks sledging grab hooks into timbers farther up the hollow. Here and there chains rattled, then mane bells tinkled and jingled with the thumps of logs that horses bumped along the slides. And sometimes, in soft rumbles like distant thunder, and other times seeming near as a lucky miss, the felling of hemlocks came upon yells of "timber!" and the crackle of limbs as the trees roared heavy against the earth. Then he'd pick up his axe and go back to work, feeling himself move to the concert of the crew, the thump and rip of his axe adding his own beat to the sculpting of Teaberry Hollow, the wail of the woods.

As the urgency of spring wilted with the last blossoms of valley-bottom crabapple, weariness left Tobias's back. Swinging an axe every moment of daylight, both sides of the noon hour, his body and mind were becoming a more efficient team adapted to the moods of the forest. It showed in his person, his limbs sinewy. And his early concerns about malicious hicks faded from his imagination — most of those he got to know lived up to his boyhood awe.

And through what was happening to the land, Tobias saw that getting used to seeing something makes it smaller, less formidable. Back when he first worked his way to the edge of a ridge, the sad outlook across the desolation that had been his woods jolted him somewhat. But accustomed

to the work, the shock was not what it would have been a year ago.

Beneath that, though, was still a root awe for the contender the land would always be. He knew the vantage of those beaten ridges lay under their blanket of new bracken, that tremor of life that rooted there. But seeing the boldness of a lumbering operation made him wonder if the plateau deserved a little more edge. Just like Pops said about hunting, it's in keeping with the way of the land for the score to be always in favor of the birds.

Tobias never stared long over the feats of the crews. He was a hick now, and the kind cursed with loving the woods, the might and heavy presence of the shrouding hemlocks, but woods work too. Such hicks always looked beyond the wake of the saw and strained for some remaining tree line.

As spring progressed, so did Tobias's responsibilities. He had held his own with the other knot bumpers and swampers, kept up with the fellers and before the peelers. They'd cleared to the slides where the cycle of the crew's tract was nearly complete. The trees felled and de-barked, Tobias no longer worked as an isolated cog, rather a pivotman at the head of one of the slides where time to himself, which he'd come to like, came less often.

"Git, git," snapped a teamster, urging his horses to lurch into position the logs they'd just skidded to Tobias. The pair made one step and at the teamster's "oh," awaited another request.

"All yours," he said, glancing back at the two end-to-end logs he'd skidded. Sharp-pointed, j-shaped grabs were driven into the facing ends of the logs and coupled by chains. Tobias pried them out of the bare, yellow logs with his crook-ended grab skipper, then leaned it against a stump with his other tools, picked up his cant hook, and began working the rear log toward the slide with upward thrusts of his body.

"Bout, bout," the teamster said. And his horses swept around, readily as they'd turn for a rattlesnake. The chesty

tan Percherons were adorned with ivory rings about their bridles and their harness fittings — hundreds of them. Tobias liked this show of pride by men who shared their better wages lavishing spoils on the partners that gave them their trade, who spent their evenings in the barn bleaching the tarnish of sweat off those trappings, who groomed coats, salved sores, undressed riggings in the months horses scratched fly bites against the walls of their stalls.

Tobias had learned the language of each team that came to his slide. There were "hees" and "hoes" or "yips" and "yaws" for left and right; "ohs" or "whoans" for stop; even commands to put them in reverse. And by gruffness or sweetness, the teamster could tell his horses how much to brace up for a particular pull, or to slow down on a descent.

"We nearly cleaned the top off," the teamster said, hooking the log grabs to his horses' chains. He was a Scotsman with long, uneven tendrils of whiskers bunched like corn tassels, and like most teamsters, as quiet tempered as his Percherons. Tobias liked these men and he guessed they sensed it through their teams, since teamsters cared only to understand horses, not men. He was that rare hick who regarded the teamsters beyond their privilege of easy walking behind horses. Skill earned their extra dollar a day. And Tobias counted it for a man, not against him, that he smelled like his passion.

Tobias rested a hip against the sixteen-footer. "What do we do when the top's done?"

The teamster nodded toward the bottom of the hollow. "We skid all the logs to the slide from here to the landing. You'll work downward with us." He pointed along the winding chute of the slide, a snaking trail of side-by-side logs, hewn and leaned into a v-shape. It followed a short and steep side-hollow to the landing of logs jumbled at the head of the rails, the cables of a Barnhart log loader plucking them to a train. After Tobias made up a string of five logs,

horses dedicated to working the slide pulled the rear timber, pushing the others ahead. Bump, bump, bump, like the hull of a moored rowboat against its dock.

"Seems the trains keep bullying their ways farther up these hollows," the teamster said. "Times past, we'd have to skid and slide quite a piece to get logs out."

"Ever work the rafts?"

"I never did work a floating operation — log drives or rafts. Wasn't much rafting in these parts, and they don't drive logs from up this far anymore.

"Do you think Geet worked the rafts?"

"Don't know, but I'd guess he did." The teamster said it in the Scottish way of lilting a statement as a question. "He's old as Adam, you know."

Igidius Rakestraw crowded Tobias's thoughts lately, for he wanted to learn the legacy of this logging business. If he linked it all together, he thought he'd find something larger in it than moving trees.

The Scotsman led his team away, following the furrow his logs had plowed into the earth along a tram road that threaded through the brush and deadfalls. The morning sunlight still wedged aslant enough to reach in and tinge the inners of the ground-brush, alighting every labyrinth layer. So in the distance, instead of stepping out of sight, the team submersed slowly into illuminated briars, diluting by steps from the heart of a lumbering venture into the recovering ridge.

The last of the team to sink into the thicket were the light sand-scapes of their hams, scalloped and manila-colored like hemp rope, every muscle distinguishable and pulsating with its purpose. Until he'd hear the approaching jingle of another team's mane bells, he could break away. So Tobias walked to the base of a spreading, gnarled white oak on a slight rise that marked the height of the ridge. Any life bold enough to take root on that crest fronted the prevailing westerly elements that whisked on fair days and battered on

unsettled ones. In the scars of that chafed piece of ridge, weather was seeable.

High atop the plateau, the soil on Allegheny fronts was leached and sour to plants that took to the valleys. Tobias had come to notice the likings of kinds of trees and considered the handsome straight ones protected from wind and ice down in the bottoms to be un-hardy, like fair-weather, snow-escaping birds, like people who complained about chill rooms and windy days, whose moods soured at a falling snowflake -- the kind who desired a spayed world but wouldn't be happy anywhere.

Lots of majestic tulip-poplar and sycamore grew down in the valleys, already green with their big showy leaves. But not on the windy ridges where spring reached last. This ground was sandy and strewn with shards of gray gritty stone, a long-ago broken crust that he'd read had come of ocean sediment. Moss-splotched pieces of it wedged upward against the roots and trunk of the white oak and the few dwarfed and misshapen trees that somehow found footing between the stones. Among these, wiry snags of laurel with sparse leaves twisted out of the ground like Medusa's hair.

Though the oak Tobias leaned against was a giant, it had been spared from the saw by its ugliness. It resembled in form the scrubby sassafras, pitch pine and bear oak that writhed around it on the knoll, "waste wood" the lumbermen called such trees. They all showed in their distorted figures the struggle of their sentence to a stark ridge line. Or maybe, Tobias thought, somehow they sought out that place, maybe their figures were their nature: built to cope.

That energy he'd felt swelling out of the ground the day of the bear hunt was so ripe here the knoll sizzled, like a snake on the ready. Celts, Tobias once read in a farmer's Almanac, called certain parts "thin places" where through the earth, they could connect to a greater being. He'd eyed up those twisted and knotty trees every day when he had break time, and it occurred to him they were fuller of life than towering

valley sycamores that rooted into rich loam because of their weak nature. The trees up here were a paradox that put him in mind of times like chasing the bear, when his sense of life heightened while he was most vulnerable, far from safety. He decided these were handsome trees, unadorned, un-bastardized beauty that sprouted closest to what feeds all life, gaining that comeliness not by the depth they rooted to, rather from what they reached for, and how there was less to distance them from it in thin places. Some things thrived, he saw, not because of the rain, but the cloud, not because of the sunshine, but the sun.

Hicks had a way of honoring how relic trees stood against time and elements: they named them. They called the oak Old Fatbottom. For certain she was hundreds of years old, and her bottom bustled the way marbles fill a sack. Five loggers could put their toes to the base of Old Fatbottom and barely reach their neighbors' hands.

She looked as though with scorn she had hunched down to take the west wind's best blows. From her haunches up, Old Fatbottom was simply confused on which way to grow — up, out, over, twist this way, send a branch that way. The shrewder hicks saw in the outward-stretching arms a clue that Old Fatbottom had always held to the knoll alone, with no other tall trees to compete with.

In a hospitable way, Old Fatbottom's buttress swelled seat-like, and there sat Tobias. He looked up at the digits of the scrub oaks, kinked and knotted, rheumatoid, then down at the stunted, writhing laurels. All around, the woods had been worked bare, right down to the bark off the stumps that pimpled that rolling nakedness. All but this swath of saddleback. Now what's so barren? he thought.

The old-survivor oak on its knoll put Tobias in mind of Igidius Rakestraw. Each eluded his axe — never thought for much of a function.

Tobias looked out where once stood tall and straight hemlocks and hardwoods, look-alike timbers that didn't

seem so handsome as Old Fatbottom. Here she remained to stand over what they'd held. He leaned his back against her trunk and believed Old Fatbottom sensed him there, and that this timeworn knoll would remain an unchanged place he could return to, a kind of reference point, indifferent to what lumbermen, any men, needed. ❧

*Jeffrey Thomson*

## The Songs Orpheus Sings

The songs Orpheus sings concern the frayed
ends of love, a knot unraveling and letting go
with the *gawk* of an untuned guitar string.
Hyacinthus, beloved of Apollo, ratcheted
with a discus' rebound, turns to a flower
scribed with loss. Myrrha desired
her father with the whole wet throb
of her groin and gives birth to her brother
whose name means *beauty half-saved from hell.*
Only Pygmalion, whose statue (stained
with his nightly thrusts) never lived to die,
was pure enough to escape such closure.
Can there be a message in this catalogue,
a meaning behind the loss of boys beloved
and girls turned to common whores?
We might read it as modern way of fighting—
telling tales to turn us against his twice-lost wife,
as if she were to blame for the turn upon
the threshold, his eyes quick as insects,
and Orpheus pure. Orpheus turns away,
that's his gesture. No matter who tells you
otherwise, he turns away. He retreats to fields
of swollen oak, cloaked in loss. His meaning
is found in the glance, sparrows oaring down eros
from a sky scaled with clouds. His model the cypress
which stands always beside the mourning crowd.

## First Days in Maine

The woods are lovely, dark and empty
and I am miles out and miles in
to a run that started at a new house
old as the horse-hair plaster
I tore down all morning, black mat
locked inside white dust. Down
to the lathe, the knob and tube wiring.
Here's where a door was once, and here
a window walled in with timbers
of limbed pine trunk, the bark still on.
Here a maze of odd-angled studs
that held with Yankee desperation
the sagging adventure of the plaster.

My feet kick up the smell of pine duff,
sand and granite beneath the sun,
the clover mill and river flat
and flashing in late summer,
and beyond, the hemlock dark, where
the only light ladders down
in skinny stems that tumble down
to the bronze floor. Yet another
landscape to learn, wide meadows
blooming with the flowers of mistake,
the trees receding in a swale of failure
and all the small grasses of omission.

The dog kicks forward as if toward
early winter when a week's cold rain
will dismantle summer's architecture
in an effervescence of birch leaves
and two roads diverge in a wood
that has long ago lost its yellow.

*M. Kelly Lombardi*

## A Necklace of Pearls

How many mornings
have I stood
here at the glass door
on the second-floor landing
looking out at the
necklaces of pearls
which rests on the
necks of the Tuscany hills…

I stand here until the sun
starts to lift them off
and red-tiled roofs and
neat rows of fields
invite the eye
with their
green and yellow light.

## Harlequin Doves

Today, lunching with a friend,
in a sidewalk café, the pigeons
were begging from us, and
I remembered
the ruins of the oratorio in Ostia Antica,
where the ancient Gods and new Gods
walked on the old Roman Road.
On the left was the remains of a pool
with Neptune and his trident in it;
Across the way was a small hermit's hut
where a religious once prayed.

The oratorio steps were solid, but chipped,
the sun bright and forgiving, and
ghosts were all around me;
I tried to imagine
the pagan gods and the christian gods
in their lifetime.

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There was sadness and joy and a
sense of fitness, somehow as I
sat there on the oratorio steps
watching a pair of harlequin doves
dancing, doing their
stylized mating ritual,
unfurling their wings,
arching their heads to rub each other's neck
chortling, cooing, coupling
oblivious to the past.

***Fruit***
*– Amina Hafiz*

*Morgan Callan Rogers*

## The Ironing Board Incident

Chapter from *Route 100*, a Novel-in-Progress

*Route 100, takes place in a trailer along the route. Florine, the narrator, lives there with her husband, Bud, and her two kids, Arlie, four, and Travis, two. In this scene, a childhood friend travels up from the 'Burg, where Florine and Bud were brought up. His visit triggers a number of external and internal events.*

Our old friend Glen Clemmons surprised us by driving the three-hours from the 'Burg yesterday to bring us lobsters fresh caught from the harbor. He got to the trailer about three-thirty in the afternoon, and he and Bud sat out in the back yard drinking beers and swapping stories while I steamed lobsters ad melted butter. After supper, they downed more beers and swapped more stories while I sopped up lobster juice and cleaned up the kitchen.

At one point, Bud said to Glen, "Remember pretending we were karate kids? Remember that time we chopped Ma's cutting boards in half and she had a shit fit?"

Glen, misty-eyed with memories, said, "Jesus, we should do it now."

"Leave my boards alone and get some from the shed," I told them, and put the kids to bed. Arlie went right down, but I had to convince Travis that the balled-up black sock in the corner of his room was not a spider, had never been a spider, and wasn't likely to be a spider. Once I'd killed the sock and stuffed it into the hamper, I went to see what the big boys were up to. The cutting boards were in their place, but I saw that they had taken my wooden ironing board out of the closet, set it up on the lawn. They were using

the surface to whack boards. They shrieked and chopped, laughing like maniacs and looking like assholes.

I figured it would only be a matter of time before one of those damn fools hurt themselves and, sure enough, Bud took aim at a board and smacked it with the edge of his hand. The board spun up to smack him on the forehead. "FUCK!" he yelled, but he was more pissed than hurt. Glen was splitting a gut over it, which made Bud madder, so he busted the board over his knee. Glen kept laughing, so Bud picked up my ironing board and heaved it across the lawn.

That ironing board was special to me. I had gotten it at a yard sale one day. I remembered it clear, because it was a June day when everything smelled sweet and new, and I had strolled around a stranger's sunny yard with a secret named Travis in my belly and a smile on my face.

"Bud," I shouted. "Stop it."

"Bud, stop it," he copied me in a twelve-year old voice. He picked the board up again and hurled it toward the trailer.

"Whoa," Glen said. "Whoa, Bud."

I started for the ironing board.

"I'll get it, for chrissake," Bud muttered. "Just go inside. Jesus, relax."

"I'll get it," I said, mad now.

He shrugged. "Suit yourself," he said in a tone that made me want to squeeze the pus out of him. I picked up the board and lugged it past them. I took it into the trailer and put it back in the closet. "It's okay," I said, patting its grainy surface. "You're back with the broom and mop. It's alright."

I looked out the window and looked at Bud and Glen as they sat at the picnic table and killed two more beers. I wondered what had come over Bud. Normally, he wasn't an ironing board tossing kind of man, but he'd been a little edgy lately, and he didn't want to talk about it.

I figured there wasn't much I could do right then, so I

went off to bed. I was just drifting off when I heard Glen's truck, a big, black stallion of a thing, rev to life like it was pawing the ground. I heard the front door slam, then slam again, and I jumped up and went into the living room. I looked out the picture window in time to see Bud set the ironing board partway up in the middle of the driveway. Glen backed up the truck.

Before I could get out there to yell, "What are you losers doing?" Glen gave the truck its head. It shot down the driveway, crushing the ironing board with a sickening splinter underneath its behemoth tires. Bud laughed so hard he couldn't straighten up.

"What the hell did you do that for?" I asked him.

"For chrissake, Florine," he said. "It was a joke. Something to do. Jesus, honey, don't make a thing out of it. It was an ironing board."

I looked at the board, looked at Bud, then at Glen, who was standing by his truck door, waiting for some kind of ending.

I gave it to him. I stormed back to our bedroom, got into bed, and huddled under the comforter, angry and shivering. To calm down, I kept saying to myself, he's drunk and I'm tired until I fell asleep.

When I woke up in the morning Bud was stretched beside me, wearing only his boxers. I moved his hand from my hip and got up. The television was going in the living room, cartoons by the sound of it, which meant the kids were up. I found Arlie and Travis giggling, but not at the cartoons. They were laughing because Glen was lying back-to on the couch, and his jeans had slid down to expose a fair to middling part of his butt crack.

Arlie had drawn a flower for each cheek with a magic marker. She gave me a look like she was afraid I was going to yell at her, but I walked over to the pencil mug on the kitchen counter by the phone, grabbed a black, indelible

Sharpie and wrote, "Glen, honey. Call me." I added a heart and a fake phone number that Evie, Glen's wife, would be on to like a fly to fresh cow flaps.

Glen groaned and rolled over to face the ceiling. He flung his arm above his head, opened his eyes, gave us all a bleary smile, and shut his eyes again.

I looked out in the driveway. There was no sign of the dead ironing board, which I was glad about, because I didn't want the kids to see it. I got them breakfast and got us all dressed. Glen finally rolled off the couch and I made him a pot of coffee and handed him a mug.

"We were assholes last night," he said. He seemed shame-faced and sorry.

"It's all right. I'll get another ironing board," I said.

He took a sip of coffee. "Don't be mad at Bud. I was just as much to blame."

"Oh," I said. "I don't get mad. I get even."

Glen laughed. "That'a girl," he said.

"I got English muffins if you want one. I'm taking the kids and going to Home Wonderland," I said.

Glen sipped loud, dragging the curl of steam on his coffee toward his mouth. "Okay," he said. "Thanks. Nice seeing you, Florine. Miss you down to home."

"Thanks for the lobsters," I said. "Take care."

I packed the kids in Bud's truck and backed it out, swerving around Glen's truck. His front tire on the driver's side, I noticed, was a bit soft, and I smiled. I was also smiling because I'd taken Bud's spending money from the back pocket of his jeans. Hell, I thought, maybe I'll go whole hog. Maybe I'll get a new iron along with the board.

I drove to Home Wonderland, parked the truck, unloaded the kids, and grabbed a shopping cart. Arlie claimed the basket, leaving Travis to sit in the bottom. He looked through the squares in the cart and snarled like a lion.

I started in the general direction of where I thought the

ironing board aisle might be, but I ended up taking a short-cut through the home and garden section. I needed a whiff of spring, after smelling and raking dying leaves all fall. I sucked in the smells of dirt and plants and thought about what I would add to the trailer garden next spring. Then Arlie spied a set of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs lawn ornaments beneath a shelf of misted ferns. "Doc! Happy! Grumpy!" she yelled, like they were long-lost pals.

"Sleezy!" Travis added, in his own mix of Sneezy and Sleepy. They clapped their hands and Travis jumped up and down. I made him sit back down, and I tried to walk on.

"I want them," Arlie said.

"Not today," I said.

"Hi ho, Hi ho, it's off to work we go," Travis sang.

I wondered how far I could get before Arlie blew. It turned out to be one aisle length. She muckled onto my jacket and yelled, "Snow White, I want Snow White."

I considered stuffing her into one of the steel trashcans we were passing, but there were too many witnesses rolling by, probably thinking, "My child would never behave like that." Then one of the wheels on my shopping cart went wonky and I had to keep tacking to the left. But we forged on.

When a blond woman shopper decked out in catalog clothes started to pass us in the opposite direction, Arlie held out her arms. "Take me," she cried, big tears curling down her face like shiny ribbons.

"Ignore her," I said. "The devil shit on a rock and the sun hatched her. Believe me, you don't want to mess," and we wobbled on past her.

Arlie was fussing so bad I debated whether I should take her and Travis out of the store, but I decided to ride it out. I was here, I needed the board, and I had Bud's six-pack money. The time was now. A bored-looking kid with a Wonderland Associate label tried to slip past me, but I

nabbed him.

"Excuse me," I shouted over Arlie.

"Huh?" he asked. He gave Arlie a "Kill me if I ever have kids" look.

"Ironing boards?"

"Aisle 12."

"Snow White," Travis whimpered sadly.

I crab-walked the crippled cart toward Aisle 12. I got mad at Bud again, thinking how, if he hadn't been so stupid, I wouldn't be here, and Arlie wouldn't be having a hissy fit, and people wouldn't be staring at me. Then I thought what the hell? If I had enough left over from the ironing board, why couldn't I get the ornaments? That'd shut Arlie up, and piss off Bud. I deserved a treat, after the senseless murder of my poor ironing board.

Aisle 12 finally hove into view. We found the boards about halfway down. I took Travis from the cart. "Don't move," I told him, and I hefted a long box across the cart, pushing it toward the basket where Arlie wriggled and whined.

I put Travis back into the front of the cart and he held onto the edge of it as if it were the prow of a ship. I threw the first ironing board cover I saw into the cart behind him, a really loud thing with big red, yellow, and orange flowers on a bright green background. "This'll spruce things up," I told Travis.

Arlie hiccuped and sniffled. I looked into her red eyes and took a tissue to her snotty nose and I said, "Okay. We are going back to look at the statues. I may not have enough money to get them. If I don't, we'll have to leave without them. And I want you to stop this foolish crying. Travis isn't crying."

"I don't care," Arlie said, with a sniff.

"You should," I said. "He's the baby, but you're acting like one." I wiped her face and kissed her nose.

All the way back across the vastness that was Home Wonderland, Travis went, "Toot, Toot," as he pulled on the cord of an invisible whistle, and passersby smiled at him. I felt better now, with my two beautiful babies and my ironing board slung over my cart like fresh kill.

We reached the home and garden section and I maneuvered the maverick cart toward the ornaments. But another woman, the one Arlie had begged to take her, was lifting the Snow White and Seven Dwarfs lawn ornaments into her cart.

"Excuse me," I said. "Are there more of those down there?"

She smiled at me and shook her head. "No," she said. "Guess not."

"Well," I said to Arlie, "I guess we can get them another time."

Arlie let out a banshee wail and pointed at the woman's cart. "MINE!" she yelled. "MINE!"

"Goodness," the woman said. "She's a hot ticket."

"You got kids?" I asked.

"I do. But I never take them shopping. I'm always afraid they'll act up."

"Well," I said, "I never have to worry about that. As you can see, mine behave beautifully."

While she was pondering that remark, Travis made a silent statement of his own. Without a word, he monkeyed himself over from our cart and into hers and wrapped his arms around Sneezy.

"Sleezy mine," he said, with a big, loopy smile.

"No, honey, I'm afraid not," the woman said.

"Travis let go," I said. I tried to unhook him, but he scrunched down in the cart and held onto the dwarf like he was crushing a winning touchdown catch to his heart.

So I picked him up, Sneezy and all, and put him down on the floor. "Give her the Dwarf," I said, stern as I could.

"No," he said.

I knelt to his eye level. "This belongs to the lady, honey. She got here first."

"No."

"Look," the woman said to me. "I'm getting these for my daughter for her birthday. Snow White is her favorite Disney character."

"Does she know you're getting them?"

"No, but she'll love them."

"Isn't there other Snow White stuff?"

"Yes, there is probably more 'stuff'. But I want this 'stuff'."

"Look," I said. "Your daughter will be none the worse not knowing what she's missing. My kids are going to be broken-hearted and hell to live with, to boot. Now, I know you had them first, but can't you just rethink this?"

"Hi ho," Travis sang to Sneezy. "Mine," he crooned.

Bud was chopping wood in the back yard when I got home. I put the kids down to nap and went out and sat on top of the picnic table. I watched him for a minute. "You look like hell froze over and then thawed out," I said.

"Nice."

"Got a new ironing board."

"I would've done that." He stopped chopping and looked at me.

"Why'd you wreck it?"

He shrugged. "I don't know," he said. "I just felt like being an asshole. Don't you ever feel like that?"

"Yeah, but if you asked me to, I'd stop."

"Well, we're different." He picked up the ax and swung it, perfect aim, down the middle of a birch log. It split like soft butter.

"Next time you play jujitsu, you might want to use the ax," I said. I jumped off the picnic table. "And you need to

unload the truck," I said. "I got some lawn ornaments."

"What for?"

"Kids wanted them."

"Christ."

The thwack of the ax grew louder the further away I walked. ❧

*Liesl Jobson*

## ...At the Bottom of Hunchback's Pond

Inside the house the phone rang. The bouncing smack smack smack of the new basketball on the driveway drowned it out. Robin had turned off his cellphone. His ipod lay on the towel on the grass. Power surged through him with each bounce and catch. He hoped Sarah would be at the match that night. Now he needed to focus. For half an hour. Absolutely. She was unpredictable.

Inside the house the phone rang. A bus roaring past in the street drowned it out. Robin was the only white boy on the Wits Rebels squad. It was sometimes lonely on the court — especially after his spectacular fumble last week that had cost them the match against the Soweto Peppers. Tonight he must show his true colours. Sarah had been acting strange lately.

Inside the house the phone rang. The thud of his sneakers and his ragged breath drowned it out. Maybe Sarah had PMT. Focus. He could never remember her cycle. Keep focused. It changed all the time anyway.

Inside the house the phone rang. His pounding heart drowned it out. By his watch he'd been going for 29 minutes straight, without a break. Sometimes she didn't bleed for months. Ten more dunks. Nine, eight, seven. She's been looking pale recently. Maybe he could encourage her to go jogging with him.

Inside the house the phone rang. Six, five, four. Maybe Sarah was doing drugs again. Keep your eye on the ball. Three, two. And there were all those weird poems about drowning. One! Shit, drowning. He hoped she wasn't drugging again. Robin flopped onto the grass on his back. He didn't understand poetry. The clouds above were shaped like breasts.

Inside the house the phone rang. Ten rings. It was

bound to be her. Sarah could wait a moment, till he caught his breath. The phone stopped. Maybe she'd stopped sulking. That would be nice. She'd been moody all week because he refused to go to the Van Reenen's party with her. The guys always got vrot there. Somebody got a finger broken at the last party. A smashed jaw at the previous one.

Robin had quit drinking when he got selected to the squad. It improved his performance. In bed too. Sarah said his sperm tasted really good. Very sweet. Her mother liked it that her daughter had a sports nut boyfriend. How's my favourite health freak, she'd ask, making him a yoghurt smoothie. Some sacrifices were worth it. Robin's groin throbbed pleasantly. He rolled over on the grass, heaved himself up, looped the ipod through his little finger. Dry flakes from last week's mowing stuck to his sweaty legs. He flicked them with his towel. A cool shower. He'd jerk off under the water, then call her back. He wanted to placate Sarah, suggest a movie after the game. Or dinner. Robin opened the front door. The phone rang. He lifted the receiver.

"Hey Sarah-sugar…"

"Where the fuck you been?" It was his sister.

"Jeez, just shooting hoops."

"I been trying to get hold of you for hours." Her voice rasped.

"What's up?"

"Sarah. They found her at the bottom of…"

*Liesl Jobson*

## Treasure Upon Earth

"It's number five, yes, we're staying alive."

Your first lucky number tumbles down the Perspex chute on the small screen, but you're not sure. Is the man in the tuxedo winking at you? Or is it an angel talking, one with teeth glinting gold? Did he breathe on that jumbling tumbling box to help your little yellow ball with the number five jump down the chute, just to give you a thrill, to play with you, trick you, give you a foretaste of things to come. They say that in the last days you'll dement with this illness. You'll see things, hear voices, bat away phantoms.

The man said five. You chose that number for the children, birthed, unready, unwilling. But where are they now? Somebody said they weren't well.

You can't see so too well either anymore. Your sight is going, there's no money for spectacles. There isn't even money for your TV license. The TV you bought was repossessed, but when the sheriff came to fetch it, he didn't stop the license, so you still get renewal notices, and warnings, with interest.

"Next we have a nine; you're in your prime."

This TV set came from Sipho after the sheriff took the last one. Sipho, your first-born, whose name meant 'gift', who brought the curse home too, not yet 30, unmarried, still a boy. He was a rogue when he was young, and well. You never knew where he was or what he was up to. This TV he brought, before he got so thin and died, is stolen property, but what is a sick woman supposed to do? You can't even get to the bathroom by yourself any more.

You chose nine for the abortions you performed for young girls. The blood on your hands can't be washed away. Maybe it's not real, this bouncing of rainbow-

coloured balls on the TV screen. Nine times you gave them herbs, you pummelled their tight little bellies, bulging slightly. Now nine demons dance on your bed, mocking your lesions, delivering maggots in your last day's wounds.

"And it's 49; so you're doing just fine!"

You're not 49 anymore, but you don't know how old you are either. You look ancient in the sliver of mirror you keep by your mattress, a skeleton worrying about an unpaid TV license, so when the nice man with the honest face says onscreen, "Pay your TV license, it's the right thing to do," you wince, wishing you could. If he'd come over to your humble home, come over in his smart blue shirt, you'd show him where the weather comes in through the rain-rusted roof, dripping into the empty breadbin, you'd explain that you'd pay if you could, and he in his cool blue shirt would hold your hot hand, pat it and say, "Don't worry, Gogo, don't worry about a thing." You'd tell him that thugs stole your pension again and your legs don't work any more, and he'd pat your arm and say, "Hawu! Gogo, you suffer too much." He says 49, you think, but the numbers churn and boil and you can't hear so very well.

"Lucky seven, God's in His heaven," and you know you're going there soon, to glory land, leaving your house with the peeling seven. Sipho painted the number on the wall, painted flowers and leaves curling around it, so you'd remember him. The social worker told you to go to Hospice with her, but you're not sick. You're waiting for the seven seals to burst open from below the ground of this tiny hut. The seven angels that will bear you to find again your five babies, the nine infants, your children who walked this road before you, this unstoppable road to the grave.

"And last but not least on the Lotto Feast, it's the special… one! Are you having fun?"

You chose this one for you, left behind, alone now. The children gone to the place beyond, where neither moth nor mammon doth corrupt. They soldier on in the godless hereafter, where disease and landmines, policemen with hard hats and famine collected the ancestors. You would have visited their graves if your withered limbs could have taken you there.

The last number – it's also yours, you're a winner, but too late. Your number is up and now you're slipping down the chute too.

*Liesl Jobson*

## Steinway Summer

A piano grew in my grandfather's garden last summer. Daisies sprouted through the keys, pansies at the pedals, around the seat, snapdragons. Beside it an archway entwined with crotchets that blossomed in shades of Chopin, quavers of Schubert, semis of Schumann.

Grandfather put compost on his pupils, weeded their scales, plucked syncopated snails out of arpeggios, deadheaded dropped wrists, and raked wrong notes into tidy piles. He lured the Czerny bumblebee to pollinate the prelude. Sonatas bloomed beside mazurkas in bud.

Mozart nodded in the sun. Bach unfurled tender leaves. Grandfather sprayed soapy water to keep the aphids away.

This winter he woke up in a quiet flat with a tiny balcony, big enough for a potted Clavinova that sprouts only headphones. ❧

*John Rauschenberg*

## Late Winter Restrictions

I've spent this evening walking the slim streets
of the Slope, wishing something faintly angelic—
the round good moon, the moon-white threads
    that cross
the worn parts of some jeans—would show itself;
a tree could bow and make some winsome gesture,
tuck a leaf
into my hair
or dust my arm with fuzz.

But there are only strands from willows, cold
and rigid, tan rocks, gulls on the few floats
of lake-ice left. They angle their wet heads,
like bartenders who flirt, reflexively,
with customers. Instinct governs. And I—
I've decided
it would be best
if I see other things.

I hear doors settle closed on other tracks.
I miss the west. I shouldn't be here now.
Two pairs of Converses are gossiping—
their ice-stiff bangs turn toward some girl, and back.
I hear the little mocking sounds they make.
The girl just looks
at her hand-stamp,
its light, retreating ink.

## The Curveball Pitcher

Haven't you heard, dude? My famous left arm
gets raved about in summer radios,
while weekend TVs, bleached in sun, display
the orbits of my pitch—it flirts, then falls.
And even if you live a life avoiding
hitting against me, you'll be installed,
after, in a perfect, spacey field
where the air is helium, and your bat is lead.
There with a blank stare I'll test you.

My grand role, to hear daughters chant my name
while jealous boyfriends cough uncomfortably,
caught in the shabby plasters of their homes.
I put my body through a flawless yoga—
I hardly throw it, bro, I just release—
I yield the ball, and something makes it leap
above this penitentiary of fact.
It's an instrument of utter virtue,
a joy more major than your life's small thrills.

You've seen it punctuate your afternoons,
piercing the blues of your thin hot skies
like a high comma, fresh as citrus,
to make you lose all loyalty to Earth,
the skin of those you've loved, the furtive smells
of June evenings, sprinklers, the too-ripe fruits,
and watch instead the curve's divine sickness,
afflicted brief by Him and hanging—fair—
until it snaps you back to human troubles.

*Louis E. Bourgeois*

## The Khmer Rouge

Slow movements of a day, and I'm ten years old and walking home from school skipping along the cobblestone sidewalk, deeply entrenched in nothing in particular. I'm walking to meet my mother at the State Health Office where she works as a urine tester to find out who's pregnant and who's not.

And I'm very happy to be alive on this day for no other reason than school is out for the weekend and Tina Brown, the little fourth grader I've had eyes for all year, just gave me a kiss quickly and sharply as I was leaving the classroom.

I skip along and sing pop songs to myself and along the front of Dunaway's Grocery, I take notice of the same half dozen or so newspaper boxes and see that the boxes are filled with bones, that is, on the front pages of all the newspapers is the same image—piles of skulls stacked neatly in little piles inside of what looks like chicken coops, and I remember the word *Cambodia* and was instantly thrilled and slightly frightened by the word itself, but I wasn't attracted to the skulls, because at that age I was beginning to become fully aware of that other word too frequently used, *Death*, so I didn't look at the pictures for very long but skimmed the headline articles through the plastic glass of the newspaper boxes until I came across the words *Khmer Rouge*, which nearly made me pass out in front of the store, I nearly overdosed on poetic euphoria.

The rest of my walk to the Family Planning Center to meet my mother was disrupted in slow increments as I fumbled on the words *Cambodia* and *Khmer Rouge* in my mind and I would from time to time look up and take notice of the pigeons that burst up before me as I walked and how late it was becoming as everything around me began to die more and more in this terrific little world that I never wanted to leave. ❧

*1979*

*Duncan Whitmire*

## The Commedia

Tuesday nights the young man attends a graduate-level course in Italian poetry. Last week, during the break halfway into the lecture, the girl sitting next to him asked to look at his notes. The two made small talk until they were interrupted by the professor, so they resumed speaking when class let out.

The girl said she liked to go to Smitty's Lounge on the other side of campus and asked if he knew of it. When he said he did, she asked if he wanted to get a drink and continue their discussion of Paolo and Francesca.

"I'm kind of seeing somebody," he told her.

The girl laughed, and he was embarrassed by his assumption so that when she renewed her offer he agreed to one beer.

The place was dim, lit by a candle placed on each table. A six-piece band jived in the corner. Conversation between the pair was possible only by leaning their heads towards one another. Her eyes did not leave him, even when the waiter took their order. He was more comfortable gazing into the space between them.

Over the third round she asked if his girlfriend had ever read the *Commedia*.

"She reads," he mumbled. He was downing light beers, half a pint with each pull, while the girl, at equal speed but more moderate pace, sipped rum and Cokes. Her right hand held the base of her glass, and the slender fingers of her left hand tapped against her straw like a smooth saxophonist. The glass never left the table so when she went to drink she looked up at him with eyes that reflected the candle's flame.

Pushing her empty glass to the center of the table she told him her apartment was around the corner. The young man stared at his feet as he shuffled behind her to the door and out into the narrow spotlight of the street lamp in front of the bar.

The girl reached for his hand to guide him up the sidewalk.

"Goodnight," he said. "I'll see you next week." ❧

*Cedric Tillman*

## Branding

The plates of my daddy's chest
come together at a raised area,
an old place
that looks like a tectonic result.
The scar runs down,
brown, unevenly corrugated
ranging near the bowl of his stomach.
I think it helps him remember.

When I'm home
I spy on him from my bedroom window
like old times,
watching him mow the yard
I avoided.
Just now he pauses
to wipe his brow in the heat,
casually looking around
as if he heard something interesting,
and rubs his chest,
tracing himself
with this straight edge,
searching like somewhere
there is a switch that will
open it all up again.

When he comes in,
I ask if it still hurts.
He says
he hasn't felt that pain in years.
I quickly circle him on my tiptoes,
removing random shards of grass
from his fro.
He pours a glass of his favorite
Tropical Punch Kool-Aid I made
and complains it's not sweet enough.
He makes an uncouth noise
to indicate that he's drained the glass.
Then he laughs, ruffles my naps
like I'm much younger
and says
*stay out them blinds boy,*
*ya mama gone kill ya.*

*Richard Downing*

## Exotic Plants

The blooms were somewhere between
orange and red,
outlined
in yellow.

You said you thought
they were ginger.

…Ginger. Like Ginger
from *Gilligan's Island.*

Beautiful. Marooned on an island
with just a cast of characters,
some cosmetics,
teased
hair,
a few cameramen,
some lights,
and a weekly script –

unobtainable for the unrehearsed rest of us
who could only watch and wish

from mainland sofas.

## Reflexology

I am lying

on my stomach, head to the side, eyes closed while
Elisenda rubs my feet. She knows just where and how
to touch. She smiles

at my English words and pretends to know
what I'm saying. All this for a few American dollars.

Outside the spa, beyond my view of the lush green
foliage and the yellow-beaked toucans that soar
into and over the tropical leaves

are the *obreros* who are laying pavers one by one on the road
that will take tourists to their hotel rooms-with-a-view
of Volcano Arenal.

Earlier I was sweating from walking as I passed the workers
on my way to the spa, voucher in hand, wallet in zippered pocket.
Inside the spa waited Elisenda. She would be dressed in white.

I wondered if she wondered what my feet would be like,
smooth and pale
or cracked and calloused like the feet of the men

I passed, each of whom would lay hundreds of pavers that hot day,
no, thousands,
no,
a number as infinite as the moments
of their collected lives.

*Margo Solod*

## Halo

*for Gus*

Here is a halo the living made, snow angel perfect
on a bank, boy size nine. He struts

below, admiring his handiwork. Yesterday he
was taunted for his spelling, last night a party

invitation did not come. Prone to fits
of rage, too much to bear; this final disappointment,

he dropped down, kicking, sobbing, sure no matter what
we say (what do we know) that life cannot

be borne. That was last night. Now the snow has
fallen, a brief blizzard, seven glorious inches

puts the world on pause, now he's here beside the house
and he's made something wondrous –

something we are all called out to see,
and for this brief moment he

knows what we always knew
this size nine boy is holy too.

## Reality Sleeps

A dream should be real enough
so  that later at the grocery store
you pass by the avocados because
you know you made guacamole
for 200 last night. And it was good,
though it could have used a touch more garlic.
A real dream takes you out of the Motel 6
and around the same block five times
in search of a cup of coffee, and when
you finally find one there is of course
a river between the coffee shop
and the car. Real dreams leave you
with your hand just inching up her
plaid schoolgirl skirt, rescue you or
drop you just as the worst or best thing
that's ever going to happen almost does.
Sometimes a dream lets you lean in
five or six times until you finally
get that kiss right, but if it's
that time of the month
you may actually have to punch
your mother in the face
before you get to wake up.

# Contributors

**Louis E. Bourgeois** was born in New Orleans in 1970 and earned his B.A. at Louisiana State University and his MFA at The University of Mississippi. A four-time nominee for the Pushcart Prize, he has published hundreds of poems and stories worldwide. His most recent collection of poems, *OLGA*, was published in 2005. Currently, he is an instructor of literature and writing at Rust College in Holly Springs, Mississippi.

**Richard Downing** has published poems in many journals, most recently *New Delta Review* (winner of the Matt Clark Prize), *Prose Ax* (second place, *Tacenda* (featured poet), and *Potomac Review*. He is a political/environmental activist who believes poetry may not save the world but it might. His poems published here were written in Costa Rica, a country that understands on many levels the importance of the natural world.

**George Drew** was born in Mississippi and raised there and in New York State, where he currently resides. He has published in journals around the country, and his first collection, *Toads in a Poisoned Tank*, was published in 1986, and his second, *The Horse's Name Was Physics*, was released in March, 2006 by Turning Point. He also has a chapbook, *So Many Bones (Poems of Russia)*, published by a Russian press in a bilingual edition.

**Chelsea Goulart** is in her third year at the University of Maine at Farmington's Bachelor of Fine Arts program.

**Amina Hafiz** is currently a graduate student in the Creative Writing MFA program at American University, where she is fiction editor of *Folio: A Literary Journal at American University.* Her work has appeared in *The Washington Post*, feminist newsjournal *off our backs*, *Long Story Short, r-kv-r-y, The University of Maine Binnacle*, American University newspaper *The Eagle*, and entertainment monthly *On Tap.*

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**Mary Lee** is a Massachusetts-based artist who works with connected themes such as sense of place, fleeting memories from road trips, and merging memories of her childhood home with the New England landscape. Her series of mixed media collages connects her childhood home with her current location by merging images of California and New England.

**M. Kelly Lombardi** is a practicing and teaching poet who lives in coastal Washington County. Her credits include *Wolf Moon Journal, MVNO, Better Homes and Gardens, Aroostook Review, Coastal Courier, Narramissic Journal, Stanza and Christian Science Monitor*. She teaches poetry in the Sunrise Seniors College at the University of Maine at Machias, specializing in contemporary Irish poets, international poets and how-to-write-poetry.

**Hillary Barngrove McQuilkin** graduated from Bowdoin College with a degree in English and Environmental Studies. She studied documentary at the Salt Institute in Portland, Maine, and worked as a freelance reporter at the Maine Public Broadcasting Network. She has spent two summers at the Stonecoast Writers' Conference.

**Bruce Pratt** was a finalist for the 2005 Rick DeMarinis Short Story Award from, *Cutthroat, A Journal of the Arts*, the 2003 Andre Dubus Award from *Words and Images*, and the 2003 Fiction Award from *Dogwood, A Journal of Poetry and Prose*. His story, "The Trash Detail," first published in *The Greensboro Review*, will appear in the 2006 *Boston Fiction Annual Review*, an anthology. Pratt's work has also appeared in, *WordSmitten Quarterly Journal, Briar Cliff Review, Portland Magazine, Watchword, The Staccato Literary Magazine, The Gihon River Review, Puckerbrush Review, The Blue Earth Review, Crosscut*, and *Stolen Island Review*. He has work forthcoming in *The Wild Goose Poetry Review*. A graduate of The Stonecoast MFA at The University of Southern Maine, Pratt lives with his wife, Janet, in Eddington, Maine.

**PJ Piccirillo**'s stories have won several literary prizes, most recently the 2005 Appalachian Writers Association Award for Short Fiction. He is a resident writer for the state of Pennsylvania and leads book discussions for the Pennsylvania Humanities Council. PJ holds an MFA from the University of Southern Maine and is currently marketing *Heartwood*, a novel set in the timberlands and red-brick industrial burgs of northern Pennsylvania at the turn of the last century.

**John Rauschenburg** is an editor of academic books at Oxford UniversityPress and an MFA student at New York University. He has published poetry in various small literary magazines, and reviews and articles in several outlets, including *Chelsea, Kitchen Sink*, and the *Boston Review*.

**Morgan Callan Rogers** is a writer who lives in Portland, Maine. She received an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Southern Maine's Stonecoast program in 2004. *The Ironing Board Incident* is excerpted from her novel-in-progress, Route 100.

**Margo Solod** has published poetry in over 80 magazines and 6 anthologies. She has two dogs, a life partner and a cabin in the middle of 62 acres in the Shenendoah valley of Virginia.

**Jeffrey Thomson**'s second book, *The Country of Lost Sons*, inaugurated a new poetry series from Parlor Press at Purdue University in 2004. His third is *Renovation*, from Carnegie Mellon University Press in 2005. He was recently awarded Fellowship from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts. He teaches at the University of Maine at Farmington.

**Cedric Tillman** was born in Rockingham, NC and graduated from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte, receiving a B.A. in English and minoring in Philosophy. In December 2004, he graduated from American University's MFA program in Creative Writing; in March 2005, he was named a semifinalist in the "Discovery" contest for unpublished poets, sponsored by *The Nation* magazine. Currently, Cedric lives in Charlotte with his wife and daughter.

**Duncan Whitmire** is a senior majoring in political science at the University of Southern Maine. He also works full time providing residential assistance to persons with developmental disabilities. ❧

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