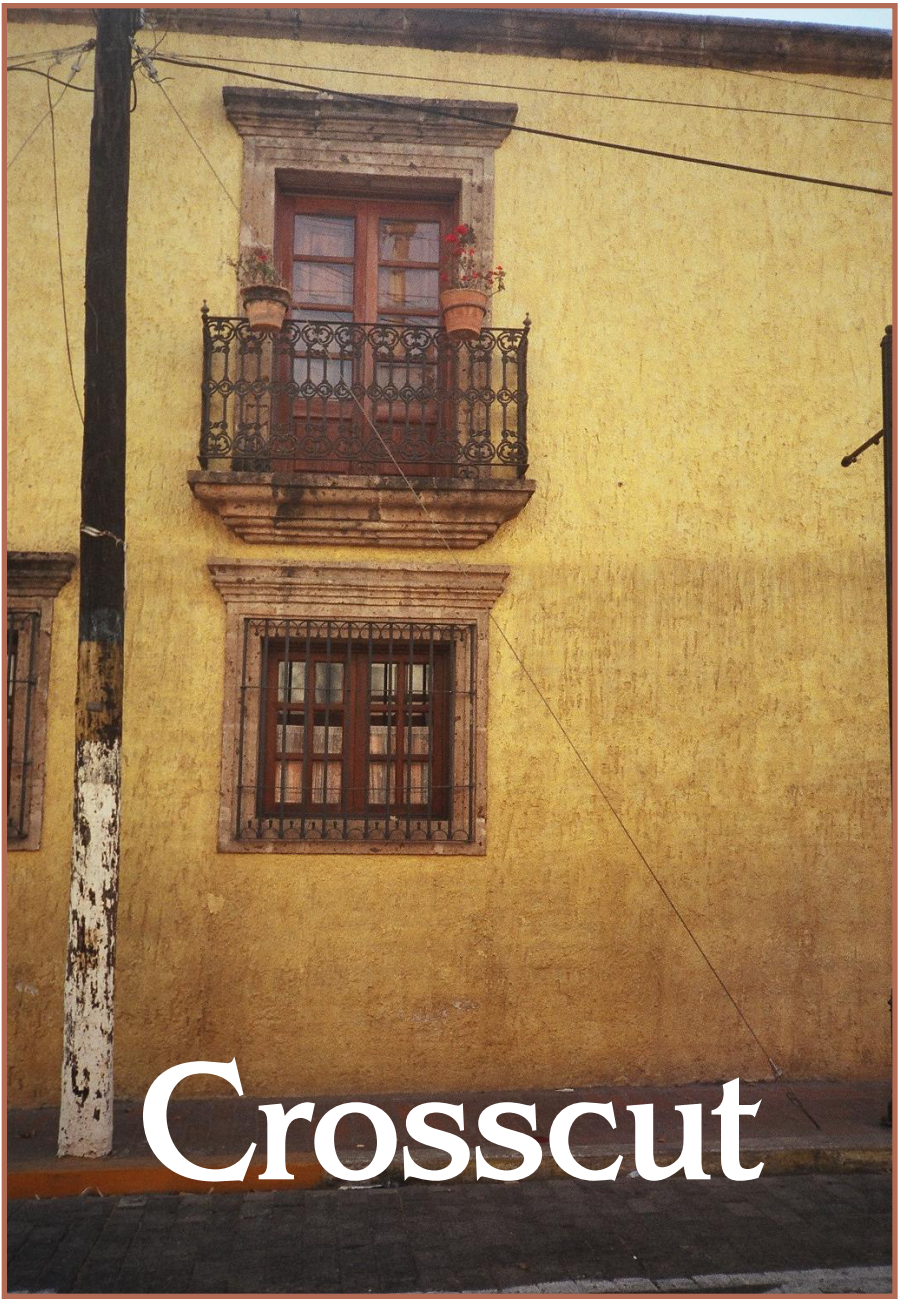

Crosscut

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literary magazine

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Crosscut

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Preface

As winter rages around the Husson campus here in February and the college is covered with several inches of alabaster snow, a reader can take refuge in this 15th edition of *Crosscut* magazine. It features student and staff submissions from some of Husson's most creative minds, as well as a variety of work (to include photos) from sources not only here in Maine, but all across the country from places like Montana, Washington, and New York.

As you explore the depth of the pages before you, be captivated by the obstacles that many of these writers faced and overcame. From Kristin Tobburen's battle with her weight in her short story "Me Massive" to Ray Harington's struggle with death and acceptance in his story "Sepia," the qualities of individual strength and perseverance are exemplified, forming the cornerstone of this year's edition.

A second theme linking these pieces is the way these selections illuminate the intrinsic beauty of imperfection. It may sound paradoxical, but flaws allow us as readers to empathize with characters and feel for them, in contrast to how we feel about some two-dimensional "perfect" characters whose issues are neatly and completely resolved at the end of the story.

While you sit by the fire watching the wind blow through the barren trees, grab a blanket, a cup of cocoa, and a copy of *Crosscut*, bundle up on the couch, and let yourself be warmed by the quality of the literature before you.

– Jason Falvey

Table of Contents

Susan Deer Cloud

Pemaquid

Your brother drove you and your sister
to Pemaquid Point. Not knowing
if you would ever return to Maine
you knelt on its great granite boulders
jutted up from Atlantic low tide,
fingers searching for
whatever sparkled like that day's waves –
mica, gneiss, feldspar, quartz –
slipping their glintings into bag
flowered open off sunlit shoulder.

Back in New York you wash sand from
stone, study such shinings inside hands'
fading sunburn. Like all your family
you revel in rocks, wild to collect them
despite recollections of bad jokes –
wives, husbands, friends teasing,
"You have rocks in your heads."
Why would anyone lug home
mere earth chunks, festoon rooms
with fossils, minerals, stone?

How sparkling you are, cradling each heft of Earth,
each layer, her stories that won't be trapped
in mere words. How *radiant* on the shores
lightnings of feldspar, black silvers of mica, stars
of quartz wash you to. That day at Pemaquid –
in its harbor of Indian ghosts, glaciers
long gone, earth scraped down to the bones

of centuries, you were just three “mixed blood”
Indian kids again, as if a half century
hadn’t come, then fled.

Yes, you always gathered stones that lack tongues
and can’t speak of love in the usual ways. ❧

Stephen MacKinnon

Acorns

Despite all of my mother's promises, we hadn't sold a single fruit basket all day, but like disciples driven by blind faith we trudged through the grimy dusk-darkened slush toward Chester Street. When we rounded the corner, it put us right back in the desolate warehouse district, and Jennifer O'Malley let loose with one of her unforgettable bone-rattling sobs. "I knew it! I knew it! We're not going to go to camp. We're not going to go a-a-a-an-an-y-y-where this summer." My mother gingerly handed off her fruit basket to one of the other kids and calmly dabbed Jennifer's red-blotched cheeks.

"Boys and girls, listen: I know you're all frustrated. You have every right to be, but – but this is just another one of God's tests. Remember what happened to Joseph and Mary on Christmas Eve? Did they give up? No." She turned her gaze toward a large, white, dilapidated Victorian, a dreary reminder of the prosperity our little town enjoyed during the heyday of the wool mills a hundred years before. "This – this looks like a buyer house. Everyone: behind me, please, just like when we sing Christmas carols." She pressed the door-bell, glancing at the name plate just as a heavy-set man in a white T-shirt opened the door.

"Mr. Hale, good evening, here's your wonderful, fresh fruit basket." As she stuck her foot inside the door, the stench of boiled cabbage stank up the February air. "I'll put it right inside on your coffee table. There you go. Quite elegant."

"Who's this from?"

"The Church of Our Savior Bible School."

"What?"

"These dear children. There you have it, fresh fruit; or, if you like, if you're expecting company, a lovely centerpiece. It's worth almost twenty dollars. What a bargain at ten."

"No, thank you."

"She's insane," Billy Swann whispered to Vin Sartori. Without turning around, I clipped his shin with my heel.

"I don't want it." Mr. Hale tried to hand the fruit basket back, but my mother stepped back onto the stoop and shoved her hands in her overcoat pockets.

"Cash or check will be fine."

"I only give to the Salvation Army."

"Jennifer – Jennifer O'Malley, step forward and please tell Mr. Hale what the Salvation Army does with donations. Why, they go for office supplies and to help Native American Indians and hurricane victims, all outside of Massachusetts. What are we, children?"

"Local!"

"There you have it. Ten dollars, and your contribution will help these nice deserving children attend Camp St. Paul, for a religious education of a lifetime, which you can't quantify in dollars. In fact, as your next-door neighbor said just a minute ago, 'Children are the future of this country.'"

At that point, he asked her to please step outside. He opened his wallet, and shoved a five, a couple crinkled ones, some quarters through the crack in the door and whispered. "Please leave and don't come back."

"See," she said turning to us. "Persistence pays off."

I was nine years old then, three years older than my brother Freddie. My mother, Virginia Lamb, had taken over the Sunday school just after my father left her for his secretary at American Reliable Casualty. My mother wasn't cut out for the job. There was something stiff and clumsy about the lessons she delivered from behind a beat-up Rotary Club lectern, but nobody else wanted it, and to her it was a sign from God that she had been hand-picked to shape and mold all fifteen of us into faithful followers. She handed out acorns

that she made us carry. “Faith,” she said at the end of each class, “is like the belief that an acorn will give us an oak tree, which will give us more acorns.” She had been telling us that there was such a thing as angels on earth – people that solved our dilemmas after we had endured enough of God’s testing.

Nobody, least of all me, believed that we would raise the money for summer camp. We needed nearly seven hundred dollars. Besides, this camp – it was a luxury reserved for the rich kids from the other side of the river, sons and daughters of insurance executives my father worked for who were driven to private schools, escorted by their nannies.

At the time, my brother and I had been told that my father was doing some secret insurance work with the government of Argentina. “Traveling” is what my mother told me and Freddie to tell neighbors, family, and friends. He had been “on the road” for seven months, something that might have been believable because of the picture my mother had shown of him getting on a small plane, and because his “civilian” clothes were still hanging neatly pressed in his closet, but the real story, which my mother had revealed late one evening to our caring but equally rudderless upstairs neighbor, Carolyn Hines, was that my father, a six-foot-tall insurance salesman with ice blue eyes, had simply lost interest in her.

Every day I came home there was a new bottle of wine on the counter, uncorked. My mother looked paler. Her teeth were always a stark red. I went along with her version of reality – what choice did I have? – but Freddie actually believed he was coming back sometime soon. A few nights earlier, at the dinner table, he had announced, “Dad’s coming home in a presidential limo.”

My mother turned with a startle. “Where did you hear that?”

I shot him a cold glare.

“I dreamed it.”

"You did not *dream* that, young man. You heard that from a grown-up." I'm sure by that point all the neighbors were having a good laugh at her cover story. Freddie, because of his age, picked up everything. "Frederick Burke, I asked you a question. Answer me."

"He's just making it up," I said.

"I thought I was quite clear. There's to be no discussion about your father's work outside this house. If I hear anything like that from either of you again, you won't go anywhere for two weeks. Do I make myself clear? Frederick?"

My mother's boss let us put the fruit baskets in the refrigerator at Lombardo's Diner while my mother worked the dinner shift. After Freddie and I were done with our hamburgers, I slid her purse out from underneath the counter and began counting our pitiful take.

As I stacked the coins on the counter, Jim, one of the regulars, leaned over. "Hit the lottery or something kid?" He wore his usual blue mechanic's clothes. His sleeves were rolled up neatly past his greasy elbows. His black hair was slicked back behind his ears.

"Not really." I told him about the fruit baskets, camp, the fact my mother had tried everything. "She's the waitress over there. My name's Leon. You want to buy a fruit basket?"

"Oh, Virginia. Jim Healey," he said extending his hand. I shook it. "I know your mother's been trying like hell. She's too nice to have such bad luck. What you kids should do is sell a car."

"We don't have one."

"I could help you get one. Fix it up, sell it."

Looking back, I certainly should have been more skeptical, but you can imagine the desperate relief on my mother's face when he told her what he had in mind after her shift.

She untied her apron, put it inside her purse, and refreshed Jim's coffee before pouring a cup for herself. He said he often bought cars at auction, often below book, and sometimes gave them as little as a paint job in his shop down the street. "No reason to keep beating yourself up with bake sales and fruit baskets, Virginia."

They continued talking while Freddie and I ate the ice cream sundaes Jim had bought us when all the customers had left. Jim helped my mother clear the tables and finish up her side work. Then he gave us a ride home in his shiny Buick. At first she tried to have him just drop us at the corner near our rather embarrassing third-floor walk-up, but it had begun to rain, and he insisted on bringing us up to the door.

"He's a nice man," I said when we got inside the apartment.

"He's nice enough," my mother said. She knew other men, but most nights she came home from work and fell asleep in front of the television, drunk on Pastene red wine. I had been imagining she'd go on the rest of her life this way and was worried because she was drinking more and going out less, which Carolyn Hines kept referring to as "giving up on the best part of a woman's life."

I kept thinking about camp, Lake Chickatawbut, canoes, and archery. I knew there was no way I could endure a summer in the apartment. I needed to be in the pine woods and so did Freddie.

Next Saturday morning, Jim Healey arrived early. His personal car was a sleek, shiny Buick LeSabre with a dashboard that looked like it belonged in the cockpit of a plane. He and my mother chatted about the weather. In the backseat I steadied the boxes of cleaning supplies – Turtle wax, white wall scrubber – on my knees, trying to keep ev-

erything from dropping on my little brother Freddie who was practicing archery with a little bow and arrow my mother had bought him because that's what excited him most about Camp St. Paul.

In the overheated church basement my mother called class to order. Stepping away from the Rotary Club lectern, she bowed her head solemnly, wringing the sheaf of green accounting paper in her bird-like hands. "Children, I'm sorry - eleven dollars and fifty three cents, that's not what we were expecting, not at all."

"I knew it," Bill Swann said.

"We're not going anywhere, are we?" Jennifer O'Malley wailed. "After all that work."

Just then a weak smile crossed my mother's lips. It was exactly the opening she had been waiting for. "Actually, not true. Children, it is with great pleasure that I report: God has answered our prayers. He has delivered an angel on earth. Class, I'd like you to meet Mr. Jim Healey. Jim, please come to the front." He stood next to her, his hands folded behind his back. "Jim has come up with a solution. We're going to sell a car."

"A *what?*" said Jennifer, pushing back her orange curls.

"We don't *have* a car, Mrs. Lamb," said Betty LeClaire. She crossed her patent leather shoes and scowled.

"Who's going to *buy* it?" Billy Swann said.

"Let me worry about the details," said Jim. When we arrived at his shop a block down the street, the car, a late model Buick, was parked inside the garage. "I'll do the mechanical things, and you guys just polish it up."

My friends were spraying Windex at each other, admiring their reflections in the chrome, but I tried hard to listen to the conversation between my mother and Jim Healey. He had popped the hood, removed the air cleaner, and set about giving the engine a complete tune-up. My mother, who had changed into jeans and a sweat shirt, was now busy handing

Jim wrenches and screw drivers as he took out old hoses and spark plugs, dropping in new, shiny parts. Every once in a while he put down his tools and took a cigarette from his shirt pocket. Smoke shot through his nose into the chilly air. For the first time, I studied his hands – thick, muscular, nicked, with black fingernails. My mother had once said she was done with smooth-handed men, and I wondered if she'd end up falling in love with Jim Healey. She'd already begun to take more notice of her appearance, borrowing burgundy lipstick that morning from Carolyn Hines, and accepting Jim's invitation to dinner.

Jim drove us to the Hilltop, a steak house on the outskirts of Auburndale. I remember the money – he always had plenty of money, wads of it, so much that my mother used to laugh that he didn't know how to spend it – and how my mother was hesitant at first to accept the charity that she so desperately wanted and needed.

He and my mother sat at a table shaped like Montana, and Freddie and I sat one booth over. Freddie wanted a lomster from the tank.

"Boys. Best manners, please. Ordering the most expensive thing on the menu is gauche."

"They can order whatever they want, Virginia."

He and my mother had porterhouse steaks with baked potatoes and Freddie and I had hamburgers in the shapes of steer heads. Freddie was eating around his steer's horns, grunting, making a mess of his plate. I was busy pretending not to listen to the adult conversation. Jim had just finished telling a story about a job he once had crabbing off the Alaskan coast. My mother, when she smiled, was a pretty woman. And Jim had the look of a man who had never been shy around women, had always been able to entertain them with his stories and jokes. But my mother's questions into his personal life seemed to make him uncomfortable.

"Where are you from?"

"Out West."

"Do you have family around here?"

"Nope, I just wanted to be in the city. Plenty of work. Everyone always needs their car fixed. It's a nice place."

"It can be nice in the fall," my mother said, "and in the summer, the beaches up north are beautiful."

While they were talking, I made up a whole life story for Jim Healey. He had been married to a woman who broke his heart by running off with another man, possibly his best friend, or at least somebody he knew, and like my mother, he'd given up on love. I imagined that he spent his Sundays tinkering with cars, hiking, fishing, thinking about what he was going to do with the rest of his life. That evening my mother was happy in a way I didn't remember seeing before. Her hands were folded in front of her, and Jim, finished with his meal, was leaning his chin on the upturned heal of his hand, hanging on her words.

"You know," she said, "I'm glad we did this, Jim. It was very nice of you to offer. Sometimes I think I've forgotten what it's like to relax and be happy."

"Been there," he said.

"And you know, occasionally I have to stop myself and issue a reminder that you get the life you think you deserve, don't you? That's what keeps me moving when other people might think I'm just an old fool."

On Sunday, after church, Jim took us fishing, to practice for camp. We drove to White's Pond with a picnic lunch my mother had packed. She sat in the car.

The poles were brand-new Ted Williams anglers that came with tackle boxes filled with fresh-water plugs and flies. Jim gave us a quick lesson in casting, but because of his shortness, Freddie kept getting his line stuck on the bush behind him, so Jim had to help him.

I put a plug on the end of my line and hurled it out far. I let it flow toward the culvert for a while and then pulled it in slowly.

"Warm me up, Leon," Jim said. "Get this derby moving.

"Yeh, get it moving, Leon," Freddie said.

"There's fish out here screaming to be caught."

Fifteen minutes went by. My hands were number from the cold, and my mother rolled down the window to tell us it was time for lunch, just as Freddie got a bite. "I got one! Jim, I got one. Get it. I don't want to lose it."

Jim tried to crank in the line but it was hung up on a floating log. He handed the pole back to Freddie, walked to the muddy edge, and stepped ten yards into the chilly water. Just as the fish surfaced and dove, Jim said, "I've got it. You two stay put. I'll bring it in. Don't worry." He looked desperate. What happened next – I don't know if he fell or swooned – but he disappeared for a second and came up with the fish, stuffing it under his shirt and dog paddling back to shore.

"My fish," Freddie said. It was a thirteen-inch pickerel.

———

All week I carried a little jack knife – a line cutter, I think he called it – Jim Healey had given me. Any time I questioned my trust of him – the car seemed, quite frankly, to be too good to be true – I opened up the knife and stared at the blade, thinking about the fact that the knife had been everywhere he had for the past five years. He had shown me how to put an edge on it with a little Norton stone, and said if I could shave the hair off the back off my hand the following Saturday, like a good crab fisherman, he'd give me a dollar.

He did. He also bought pizza and ice cream when we finished buff-waxing the car and turned it over to a man named Roy who, like Jim, carried a pocketful of cash, bills neatly wrapped in elastic bands.

"Virginia," Jim said, "why don't you do the honors?"

She accepted the money graciously, repeating her little speech about angels on earth, then stunning Roy with a request for pictures. A big deal was made over the pictures

she had already taken, but that was settled when Jim took the camera and offered to have the film developed.

Within a short amount of time, the class had begun focusing its attention on the second car, a Cadillac El Dorado, purchased with the profit from the first car. We polished the car in the parking lot because Jim's partner Harold was dissembling a similar car inside the garage, giving the pieces to people who pulled up and put them in their trunks.

The next evening Jim Healey called at five o'clock and asked if my mother would like to go out for some dinner. She borrowed a dress from Carolyn Hines that looked precariously elegant. The shoes she had on – half-heels – made her look taller and lighter on her feet. She walked with a steady grace, a sureness I hadn't seen since the day my father walked out on her. I had forgotten part of my mother had left with my father. I realized that when she told us he was traveling she could not bear to think about the fact he was never coming home.

I was watching Gunsmoke when the phone rang. We weren't supposed to answer it when my mother wasn't at home, but I imagined that she was having a good time and was calling to say good night. Besides, Carolyn Hines was there watching us.

It was Billy Swann.

"He's a criminal." A wave of panic, shame washed over my face.

"Who?"

"That Jim." The word stunned me. A wave of panic, perhaps shame, washed over my face.

"What for?"

"Guess."

"C'mon, Billy. Be serious. "

"Stealing. My father knows the details. Half the church

does, too."

"Stealing what?"

"Guess. And he just got out of prison."

"I don't care."

"Like hell, your mother's in love with the guy."

"Isn't."

"Is."

I hung up the phone and tried to call Betty LeClaire, a sometime ally, but the phone was busy. I assumed Billy Swann was talking to her, or worse, that Mr. Swann was talking to Mr. LeClaire.

But what if it was true? I thought about my mother all alone with this man. But what did Billy know? Nobody liked his father, who many thought lifted from the offering plate, but I thought back to Roy and all the money and began to wonder if there was some truth to Billy's story. But Jim just didn't look like somebody who had spent time in prison. Instead, he seemed rather shy and dignified. Carolyn Hines, having overheard the conversation – maybe she already knew the truth – bent my head into her waist. I didn't stop crying until long after she took my cheeks in her soap-scented hands and assured me that it was all just a rumor and that eventually Billy Swann would be sorry for the mean things that he had said.

"Unbelievable," is what my mother said when she got home, collapsing onto the couch. I heard bits and pieces of her conversation with Carolyn through the crack in my bedroom door. "Wonderful listener," she whispered. "Unfailingly courteous."

"A real keeper," Carolyn said.

On Saturday, half the kids – among them Billy Swann, Arnold Sperling – did not show up. I'm sure if Billy Swann had shown up, my mother's cross expression would have at that point turned into rage. I'm sure she would have grabbed him by the arm and said in a low, angry voice, "Get out of here. I can't stand to look at your face, mister."

He'd evidently only gotten so far with his rumors, because the conversation among my classmates revolved around the upcoming car auction.

My mother cleared her throat and said she had something to tell us. She said she knew it would come as a shock to some of us, and that it might change our opinion of Jim Healey, but she added that sometimes people make mistakes they were sorry for and that if God had forgiven Jim, so could we.

"Now, so everybody knows, Jim spent some time in the state minimum-security corrections facility. This was because Jim was in a car once that was reported stolen, and yes, he was the one who had taken it from its owner. He regrets that mistake."

"You mean prison?" someone said.

"That's an awful word. He went to the corrections facility. There he found God. I have spent a lot of time talking to him about this, and he realizes why he made the mistake and he is now a changed man. Does anyone disagree? Barbara Schofield?"

"No."

"Well, obviously *some* people feel quite a bit different. The reason I ask is, look at everything he has done for us. Did he have to? No. But he did. He did it because he wants each and every one of you to attend Camp St. Paul."

"Tomorrow, he will drive that Cadillac up the front lawn of this church and it will be auctioned, yielding the money you have all worked so hard for. Now, this conversation never occurred. Today when you see him, no questions. That's a part of his life he'd just as soon forget. Bringing it up will hurt him, and you'll – well, you know how I feel about tossing stones."

Just as she turned toward the sidewalk she pushed a tear out of the corner of her eye. Instead of continuing to feel stupid, I felt a surge of pride that everyone in the march had come over to my mother's side. That not only were we going

to camp, but in the coming weeks, when people realized how unfairly Mr. Swann had treated Jim Healey's reputation, they would come to our door with apologies and gratitude for my mother.

"Hey, Mom it's okay."

"No, it isn't," she snapped, cutting her eyes my way. "The pointless cruelty, the *viciousness*. That is not okay. Do these people take pleasure in other people's suffering? How can they call themselves Christians? Just when he finally gets purpose in life, just when he feels like he's contributing, people have to run over him, making me look silly."

"You don't look foolish."

"I didn't say foolish."

The uncomfortable silence we all worked in that afternoon actually came as a blessing. I didn't want to know anymore. I had bought the story of repentance, having imagined that Jim Healey had taken my mother out to eat to tell her his secret and to apologize for having kept it from her, and that she had told him he had nothing to be ashamed of. I wanted to believe the best about him because I expected him to replace my father and take care of my mother.

It was March, cool. The boys wore their communion suits; the girls wore corsages. Ross Gilbert, Robbie Gilbert's father, who ran the auction at the church fair, had taken my mother's side.

Fifteen minutes before noon, Mr. Gilbert finished auctioning off a chair, and reminded people through the loudspeaker that this was their last chance to get a seat for the car auction. My mother had been trying to reach Jim by phone all morning. "He's probably still waxing it," she said cheerfully, but I had a feeling that if anything, he was too embarrassed to appear in public. At twelve fifteen, she called again. People had begun to rise from their chairs and leave,

muttering disgust at the dollar admission charge. At twelve thirty, she asked me to walk down to the garage.

The garage was empty. I ran around back, dodging the puddles. No sign of him on the street, either. When I returned, she hardly acknowledged my presence. Parents had begun to crowd around her, demanding answers, and she said she needed a minute to think.

"You just missed him," I whispered. "He said to give you his love."

"Where's the car?" Betty LeClaire asked.

"Where *is* it?" Jane Cole said, but it was Martin Shoemaker, who hadn't done much of the work on the car, who finally said what everyone was really thinking. "Jim stole our car!"

"Where's the *car*?" Mr. Gilbert shouted from the flat-bed truck he was auctioning from.

My mother, sitting on a milk crate, said. "I don't know."

"Where's Jim?" Rosemary Chamberlain said.

"I-I don't know that either."

Martin Shoemaker's face went slack and pale. "So we've lost everything."

My mother cleared her throat, there was no point avoiding the truth anymore. "Look, we'll get it back. I just need a moment to think."

"He stole it!" Martin yelled. "He stole our car. I knew it."

"Didn't," I said.

"Did."

"Didn't."

I saw a flash of red and swung, but missed, then tasted iron just as his knuckles dug into my lip. I threw another punch, shattering his glasses. He twirled and fell, tearing his pant leg.

My mother jumped between us. "Boys! Boys! Please – stop it!"

"Criminal," Billy said. "Goddamn thief."

"Stop," I shouted, but *criminal, thief* dinned the air, splintering my mother's trance.

"What about our money?" somebody said.

"You're going to pay for this," said somebody behind me. Ed Cleaver, I thought.

"Children," my mother said, "I'll make it up. I'll – I'll take whatever measures necessary. We're still going to camp." I was stunned.

Mr. Gilbert said there was probably an explanation, but it was obvious that everything hopeful in our enchanted world had been lost for good. Parents, people who had believed in her, were starting to get into their cars and pull out of the parking lot.

"Can I ask you a question?" my mother asked. She spoke as if nothing bothered her. "Did you ever think I was in love with Jim Healey?"

"No," I said.

"Good. Because he was in love with me,"

"I understand."

"Good, Leon. I knew you would."

"Are we still going to camp?"

I waited for her response and hoped she'd say no.

"Yes," she said. "Most definitely." ❧

Nichole Harvey

Unconditional Love

My chestnut and my paint,
A mother and her son.
There is a bond that you can see,
Between the two of them and me.

Their hooves thunder through the field,
Hair blowing in the wind.
They are viewed as gorgeous,
Free spirit deep within.

They nicker when they see me,
And search for a treat.
They can tell how much I love them
Every time we meet.

When spending time with them,
I am not in any rush,
Because I can't ever get enough
Of that unconditional love.

C.L. Bledsoe

Relics

I have no memory of your voice. I can't rewind
and play it back like some tape recording in the
spinning cogs

of my thoughts. I have no records, no paint
splattered on the walls of the cave

hollowed between our lives that we two grew within.

That cry I uttered when I was pulled from you,
splayed before the world is also, I assume, forgotten.

So we are even.

The echoes have been long going,
but are now terminally forgotten, and I can mourn

the colors of all the days we missed by keeping eyes
solely on each other's throats, but they've passed.

Mother, outside, today, there was a purple fire
like Mars riding down to trample us all. The world burned,

and was renewed in light.
I just wanted to tell you.

CL Bledsoe

Me and Her at the Lab

Lost, we rode the elevator forcing chatter
until we found the directory for the genetics lab,

and beside it, a delivery man, a water cooler bottle
thrown on his shoulder.

His worrying eyes locked on the door
about to close between us.

"You go ahead," She said. "We're already late."
He nodded, brushed past to lodge

in the hesitant space between a baby stroller, wheelchairs,
smell of sickness. "There goes a man having a bad day," I
said,

my giggles banging nervously against the walls
until her silence chased them away.

In the next car, as we reached the floor, we heard a crash,
something dribbling into the shaft. The doors opened

to water, glass, the delivery man smiling
in an angry crowd and holding his hand

to stop the blood. She gathered glass, tried to help,

I checked in at the desk, glad to have something to watch
other than the cancer patients eyeing our youth.

The nurses came in a wave of white,
ushered us into seats and took the man

to stitch up his hand. Doctors streamed out
with vacuums, brooms, their white coats fluttering.

“I’ve never seen doctors work before,” I said.
“I didn’t even know they made those water cooler bottles

out of glass anymore,” she said. “And in a hospital.”
We settled into our seats to wait

while the doctors swarmed like clowns.
Soon, they’d be calling my name.

Annie Bauer

Playing With the Big Kids

I had on my best clothes, starting with my only pair of Normandy Rose jeans. They lifted my butt into a heart shape. Anybody looked nice wearing those pants. They cost my mother $30, practically my whole clothing budget for the start of the school year. It took some work to get her to give in and buy them. I had to point out everything she'd spent on my sister's clothes already, and how it looked to me like she loved her more than me. And now I looked great in those pants, topped off with the sweater my aunt sent from Washington. The sweater had dancing bears woven in angora around the top of my chest and the blue knit brought out my eyes. If I could have cut off and hidden my crooked pug nose I would have, but my eyes are my best feature. I put on perfume from a sample I lifted out of a magazine. Makeup took about ten minutes and hair another ten. I was so ready to go to my first house party.

Lena didn't share my sense of urgency. She'd been partying, a lot, for a couple of years now. It was nothing to her. Anymore, her mom just let her go, since she'd either run away from home or try to kill herself if stopped. Lena didn't like how her hair turned out, so she washed it and started over. I could have killed her, and would have, but without her, I couldn't get into the party. All the others kids were a lot older than I was, and I didn't know any of them. I didn't even know where the party was, exactly. I had no money in my pocket, in fact, I was borrowing cigarettes from Lena. I smoked OPs (Other People's) for a long time. So after a long hour we went downstairs and out the door. We passed Lena's mother reclined on their couch in front of the TV. She yelled something as we passed by but I tried not to catch

what it was. She reminded me of Lena's dog, the one who bit me. I let her lie.

Lena's boyfriend Steve and his friend waited outside in the friend's car, a Nova with something sticking out of it called an overhead cam. I know because the guy, Rick, told me. I rode in front with him. He was 17. He didn't impress me with his baseball cap and baggy pants, but he would work as Mr. Right Now.

We drove two blocks up the street for smokes. Nobody cool walked anywhere. I waited in the car while they went in. Everybody knew me and my family in this neighborhood, and the last thing I needed was for the store owner to see me with these guys and tell my mom and dad. I told them I was babysitting for the Meyers, overnight. That's the only way you could get out of my house at the age of 13, that, or spending the night at someone else's house. My parents accepted this. They never asked what I did with my babysitting money. I always spent it all anyway, so lack of it was nothing new, not a symptom of a lie.

It ended up the party was exactly a block away from where Lena and I lived two doors down from one another. I walked up behind everybody to the third floor apartment in an old boarding house painted barracks green, winded from the Winstons. Me, out of breath, even though I got a gold Presidential Patch in PE for running. I smoked those other girls around the track, the ones who didn't like to sweat and ran like, well, girls.

I never caught my breath because when I walked in, there he was – the one I'd been looking for. He was tall, blonde, and he had great teeth. Even, white teeth like in a commercial and eyes blue as the morning sky. He met all my requirements, but there was something else about him. He looked at me like he knew me, like he owned me, and he smiled because nobody knew it yet. He had the fingers of a musician and I wanted to twine them in mine.

He didn't talk to me first, and I couldn't be the one to

start talking to him, or he might think I was desperate. I edged closer to him, in the small crowd by the keg, where he talked seriously with other college men about union politics and the influence of Judaism in modern America. He wouldn't look at me again, either. Rick, meanwhile, started to irritate me. He stood so close behind me I could feel his breath on the top of my head. He got me into the party, he was someone to come with so I wouldn't look like a wart hanging on behind Steve and Lena. Now I wanted him to be gone. He kept saying stuff about his car while I hovered near the keg trying to listen for an opening in the conversation, the same way you watch the rhythm of the jump rope so you can hop in.

I got no opening, and not even a sideways look from my college man. So I led Rick to an armchair and snuggled up to him in it, our hip bones touching. I ended up kissing Rick there in that armchair, sitting in his lap, making sure that the other guy's eyes were on me. I sent him that message. *Hey, if you aren't going to be kissing me, someone else is. See me. Someone thinks I am beautiful. Are you jealous?*

It didn't seem to register on him. Rick wanted to stick his tongue down my throat and it was grossing me out. Rick was the kind of guy who had foot odor.

I got really drunk, feeling light and close and special. If Rick would go away then I could really have a good time. He was getting a little too personal, rubbing up against me, brushing the bears on my sweater. I couldn't think how to get rid of him except by going home and I didn't want to go home.

We went back to the place Steve was staying, just a few doors down from Hap's Bar. I swayed out of the car and into Steve's bathroom for a quick huddle with Lena, but she wasn't in any shape. Just turn your back to him, she said, and went on bitching about Steve. He'd been all over her and she wasn't in the mood and told him so. It wasn't that they hadn't done it lots of times; she even lived with

him for a couple of months in his Rambler when she'd run away from home. But she was going to start her period. And he wouldn't leave her alone. I didn't bother to fix my runny mascara that made me look like I had a black eye. I just peed and went back out to the living room.

When I got into the living room, Rick was the only one there. Steve and Lena were in the back bedroom. The lights were off. He was reclined on a twin bed made up with pillows to look like a daybed.

"I'm tired," I said. "I want to go to sleep."

"Okay, but…" he said, scooting over to the edge of the bed and patting the space next to him. "Do you mind if we sleep together? There isn't anywhere else."

"Okay," I said. He shoved the pillows on the floor. I took off my socks and shoes and crept into the space he made for me, between him and the wall. I held my arms together across my stomach and chest and turned to the wall. It smelled of gas heaters and mold.

"Don't I even get a little kiss?" he asked. "No," I thought to myself. I wanted to tell him no. I just couldn't say it, didn't know how. I was disgusted with myself, with him. I wanted to be alone.

"One," I said. "But I'm really tired." It escaped me, what to do. I couldn't think right. I was afraid of him being angry with me, afraid of what he might do if I tried to leave. I told myself to be nice and he wouldn't get mad and nothing bad was going to happen. I couldn't say, "I don't really like you that way." I'd been pretending to, to make my college man jealous. So I said I was tired, thinking, if he was decent he would get the hint. I was stupid like that.

I rolled over onto my back, arms still around myself, eyes open and straining in the dark, trying to pick something out of the darkness that would come to my rescue. He stuck me with his tongue again. I almost choked, but when I tried to roll over, he put one arm and one leg over me. He was on his belly with his left arm over mine and his left leg weighing

me down. I looked at him, scared, and tried to sit up, but I was pinned. He kissed me again, and while he did he shifted more onto me, pressing his penis against my stomach. It felt like a piece of hot pipe. I wanted it away. I tried again to turn over but his right forearm now lay over my chest. He stroked my throat, thumb tracing the notch, fingers curling around the back of my neck.

"Shhh," he said. "Nobody gonna get hurt here."

If he hadn't been pressing it down my heart would've jumped out my body. I wanted it to fly up out of me and then go catch it, soothe it, put it back in my body and go to bed in the soft, faded sheets in my bunk bed at home. I prayed. *Dear God help me. What do I do.*

"You son-of-a-bitch, trying to poke me when I'm sleeping!" Lena was screaming in the next room. I couldn't hear what Steve said back. He was keeping it low, trying to be calm. She persisted. He shouted, "Fuck you, then, leave." Then I heard a muted crack, the wet sound of a fist on a jaw, and a thud. Lena flew into the bathroom and barricaded the door shut. Crash. Glass. I didn't know if it was the mirror or the ashtray.

"Hey, asshole! I'm going to kill myself! You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

Rick got off me. Steve peeped in the keyhole, rubbing his jaw. I joined him in trying to talk to her. I had no idea what to say, but I felt like I was supposed to say something. Something that would make her not want to kill herself and calm down so the cops wouldn't come.

"Lena, let me in, and let's talk." I said.

"Fuck you, too!" she said. "You're not going to talk me out of this!"

"Bugga-boo, I'm sor—" Steve said.

"Don't use that name around me. I hate that name. I hate you. You want my blood? I'll give it to you. I'm cutting myself! I'm dripping the blood all over!"

"Come on," I said to Rick. "We've got to get help."

"Piss on that," he said. "I'm getting out of here. Somebody's going to call the cops with all that screaming and banging. Let's go."

Buzzed now only on adrenaline, I shook my head no and turned toward the door. "Wait," I said to him. "Give me a dime for the phone." Steve couldn't get a co-signer so the phone company wouldn't hook him up.

He gave it to me. I could hear Steve and Lena hollering away as I headed left and across the street to the phone. Rick headed right, got into his car, gunned the engine and drove off. While I was listened to the phone ring and ring at her mother's, the cops came.

I booked it back to the apartment as fast as I could. Lena was out of the bathroom squared off against the cop. He said Lena had to come with him. She was disturbing the peace. He reached for her but she ducked under his arm and took off down the street. He made to go after her but I pulled myself up to my full height of 4' 11", crossed my arms and stood in front of him. I had to save her. She would go back to the group home in Great Falls if she got busted gain.

"Move," he said.

"You can't intimidate me," I said. I figured he would never arrest someone as young as I who hadn't done anything wrong. He pulled out his handcuffs, sashayed me around and into the grille of a parked pickup, cuffed me and sat me in the back of his car.

My chest and wrists hurt from his lack of indecision. I couldn't be caught, couldn't come home to my parents after having been arrested. It was not possible to face my father in that condition. I started to plan. The cop didn't have my name. He'd left the window between the front and back seats open. My friend Pam lived near here. Maybe she had some wire cutters for these handcuffs, if I could get out of the car. I was half-way through that sliding window when Steve tapped on the passenger window and shook his head. I sat back down and cried. The door opened, the cop pulled me

out, made us both promise to keep it down, and left. Lena had come back. Steve had apologized. It was all over. I've never figured that out. Did he not want to do the paperwork? Was I just too little to put in jail?

I woke up the next morning smelling mold and stale beer in that twin bed, alone, and happy to be. I used Rick's dime to call my folks before they could call the Meyers. Mom yelled because I hadn't called sooner. I told her I was sorry and I'd be home soon. When Lena rolled out of bed, we caught up. She was pleased she'd saved me, but didn't know who the mystery man was. She'd ask Steve for me, later. About ten o'clock, a bum came to Steve's door, fresh off the rails. I gave him a bowl of the Campbell's chunky beef stew I'd heated for breakfast, the only real food I could find in the house. I knew I'd be going home soon, and there was plenty to eat there. ❧

Louisa Howerow

Before We Reached the Eternal City

In the late afternoon, we stopped to rest on the banks of the Niger. In an ordinary year, the river swells, floods the banks. But we had not come in an ordinary year. The water was low and the land was the color of faded ochre. So too were the shrubs.

You brought out a baguette, two tins of sardines and bottled water. The tin came with a little key to fit on a tab, but I broke the tab, before the lid was completely open, so that you had to pry the can open with your fingers.

I mumbled an apology, but you seemed not to hear, tore the baguette in two, offered me half — a cradle to hold the sardines, plump and glistening with olive oil.

If all went well, we would reach the Eternal city of Djenne by nightfall. I raised my sandwich in salute to us, our trip along the Niger. You pronounced Niger, the French way, with a long ee at the beginning, and the sound of air escaping at the end. Djenne, Segou, Mopti, Sendegue. The names seduced me.

You lifted up a finger, a signal not to move, called out softly.

I waited, stopped chewing.

A young boy, wearing a long sleeved shift, stepped out from the brush. His head was bare and so were his feet.

”He looks hungry.” I reached for the other can of sardines. “Do you think he’d eat this?”

You stayed my arm. “His diet lacks oils,” you said, and gave him the empty sardine can. “He can lick it out. We don’t want to spoil him, do we?”

The boy ran away. I wondered if he would return in anger, bring a band from the village. But no one came to stone us or curse us or set a spell upon the river. No crocodile slithered up the bank, jaws open to rip us apart. The river here was too shallow to hold a crocodile and the smaller water animals lay silent.

I bit into my sandwich. You offered me water, but I wanted the masticated bread and fish to stick in my throat, the yellow oil to coat my teeth and tongue, till all was rancid.

On the Ponte Garibaldi

A silver filament floats over the Tiber.

The man notices it first. A fishing line, he says. One end’s tangled in the bushes; the other end’s caught on the bridge.

The woman’s not convinced.

Above the dark green water, the filament rises, an arc
suspended, as if in pause. A shift. The arc
ripples, dips. An imperceptible change in the warm air
and the silver lifts, pushes out. A parabola
heads to shore.

They run their hands over the stone railing, search for the filament’s end. The man finds it attached to the baluster with a crisscross of yellow cautionary tape.

Audio-tape, says the woman. A depository of voices.

You can't know that, he says.

They stand on the bridge a long time, watching the silver tape arching, rippling, shifting. On the way back to the hotel, she makes up stories about the voices. He says nothing. They both wonder who attached the tape; they both think they know why. ❧

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Chelsea Goulart

Watermelon

A fragile skin stretches to protect the
Plump pink wound from the teeth of the blade
With jagged edges, dull and greedy
Mocking the once whole. Now, pieces. Memories

Of the past summer season flicker with
Each twist of the knife: the warmth of the June
Sun, the umbilical vine, bed of soil,
All disappeared with the force of one man.

I lay broken and exposed to the sun
That once offered comfort, my nectarous
Juices spill red rivers on the white sheet
Upon which my black diamonds have been

Removed. Deep bruises appear like islands
From the cruel hands of the man who chose me.

Chelsea Goulart

Thin

Born with thick thighs, strong and sturdy,
a plump underside to cushion against the cold,
wide hips, as Mother Nature understands the difficulty of birth,
she was different from the other girls—
whose knobby knees grinned beneath lean legs
exposed in short jean skirts and tight tummies bejeweled
with protrusions of pink diamonds, she could not have.
She stood vulnerable in front of the mirror,
Watching
Despising
the skin that is her own.
Names are thrown at her like wind that whips so hard it stings with needle pricks,
Eating stops.

Here she lies, after a slow hungry death—

Thin.

Kristin Toburen

Me, Massive

One day in April 2001, I decided to give away all my clothes. I'd lost fifty pounds, halfway to my one hundred pound goal, and the previous night at my Weight Watchers meeting, the leader had joked about how all of our closets would eventually resemble a sales rack for the range of sizes. I did not find it laughable, being able to reach in and decide that you wanted to be a size eighteen again. My road to thinness was too perilous to allow old clothes to remain.

My mom came into my room as I knelt on the purple carpet, stuffing garbage bags full of size eighteen and twenty jeans and shorts, double-XL T-shirts, sweaters, and sweatshirts. Some of the items I held up for one last glance – my favorite navy blue Land's End sweatshirt that was always comfortable, even as my body struggled to confine itself within the fabric. Mostly, I tossed items aside without a look back.

"What are you doing?" my mom asked, hand on hip.

Bulging Old Navy bags, swollen with size twelve clothes, stood by the wall, ready to assume their positions in the dresser and closet.

"I need room for my new things." I folded souvenir Disney T-shirts from two family trips to Florida, and Red Wings jerseys, items with sentimental value that would now serve as nightshirts. I stowed them in the empty bottom drawer.

"I have plenty of closet space," my mom said. "We can just put them—"

"No, I've got to get rid of them."

"Why?" she asked, looking longingly at a yellow dress that had become my staple Sunday Best for lack of anything else that fit.

"Because these clothes are not an option," I answered.

"I just hate to give them *away*," she said. Mom saw this cleansing ritual as wasteful, Mom whose family of nine children relied on hand-me-downs for their entire lives, Mom whose closet still held reminders of the polyester 1970's. "You can give them to Aunt Ann or Wilma if that makes you feel better." I tied up the bag, tossed it heavily into the hallway. "But they've gotta be out of this house."

I was getting rid of this girl, this size twenty girl – The Fat Girl. I was phasing her out. Some would keep these clothes as motivation to keep the low-cal diet going, a warning to the thinning girl. My Fat Girl would find a way to manipulate the emptiness, swell back into the excess fabric. If I got rid of all her safe havens, I thought she'd have no choice but to remain hidden, buried beneath thinner flesh.

*

I'd tried "dieting" off and on since I was twelve or thirteen. Usually when another favorite piece of clothing became too tight to wear easily in public, I'd spend three or four days eating naked and limp salads and drinking only water, with minimal (actually, no) success. I'd once lost an imperceptible six pounds after two months of *Sweatin' to the Oldies 2*.

But once I hit The Point – the point when I questioned every morning if the outfit I chose would still fit – once my equally heavy sister and I discovered Weight Watchers, once I acknowledged that I wanted a different life, or at least a different *image*, losing weight was easy. I dropped one hundred pounds in a year and have kept it off for four times as long. Just like that – or so it seems in retrospect – new person!

Living with the new difficulties that accompany her is the hard part.

To look at me now, you see a young woman in her mid-twenties whose brown eyes match her layered, shoulder-length brown hair, whose small waist looks even smaller in

tight black shirts, whose cats are like her children, whose Michigan accent sets her apart on the East Coast, who has an adored fiancé to call her *Cutie*. This girl looks not unlike many other twenty-something women. She might not stop you in a crowd, but in soft light, she may make you look twice to examine her defined jaw-line or long neck.

But if you saw her four years ago, you'd have seen a girl who'd never once had a boyfriend or even gone on a date. You'd have seen a girl terrified of walking into a packed gymnasium for a school assembly or basketball game because she feared everyone was thinking, *Look at that huge fatso.* You'd have seen a girl who always wore a smile, though not from ease or comfort, a girl who wanted to be asked to Homecoming and Snowball, but who didn't even attend school dances because she couldn't fit into the short, sleeveless dresses her friends wore. You saw a girl who drove herself, alone, to her senior prom

Inside the size six, I still feel like that girl, everyday.

*

Sixth grade. I'm sitting in Ms. Busch's class during our two-hour math and science block. Mark, a renowned class taunter, sits next to me, leaning back on two legs of his chair, swinging a string around in the air. Though he's hitting me in the back with it, I try to remain engaged in my work. "Giddee up, giddee up," he says, then neighing like a horse, oinking like a swine, mooing like a cow.

I don't react – we're supposed to ignore teasing at school, say parents, teachers, and administrators; they say bullies only want a reaction and if you deprive them of it, they'll leave you alone. This has never been my experience.

Mark turns to his friend Eric and says, "The cow is dead." But he continues to smack The Cow – namely, me – with the string and laugh. Eric is a nice kid, and my second cousin, from the "cool" side of the family. Though he doesn't

laugh, he doesn't defend me either. He sits there, a bemused half-smile on his mousy features, and says nothing. As if he knows that, by being fat, I am effectively indefensible.

I had always been intensely aware of my excess weight. I understood that I was *wrong*, in a very visible way. I understood in third grade when my teacher Mrs. Kominek stated, as we all sat around on a rug during a health lesson, that most third graders weighed about forty pounds. I weighed sixty.

I understood in fourth grade when the boys all snickered and pointed in swimming class as I approached the end of the diving board. After jumping in and surfacing, the water drained from my ears and I heard laughter echoing off the tiled walls, and saw them imitating the size of my splash by throwing their arms up and back over their shoulders and making bomb sounds.

I understood in all those gym classes when I was last picked because I couldn't run fast, throw hard, or climb the woven rope that hung from the rafters.

I didn't "fit" – a common claim made by many adolescents – but in my case, it was literally true. I didn't fit easily into the desks at school, my thighs squeezing tightly against metal; I didn't fit down the rows between the chairs, often knocking pencils off the other students' desks or bumping into notebooks while they wrote; I didn't fit into the marching band uniforms the school had in stock and had to have my jacket and pants special-ordered.

I sat there quietly in Ms. Busch's classroom and dreamed of the time when I could change my appearance and show Mark, show Eric, show them all. Shame made me vengeful; as I wrote out science definitions with Mark next to me, leaning back in his chair and brandishing his string, I wanted nothing more than to push him over backwards, make him bang his head into the cement block wall behind him, draw some blood.

*

My mother is slender and always has been. Her father died when she was ten, leaving my grandmother pregnant with their ninth child. Never enough food to go around, my mom's lunches as a child often consisted only of two skimpy slices of white bread smeared with a thin layer of ketchup and a small cup of milk. No money could be spared for her to buy a hot lunch at the small school in rural Dundee, Michigan, (population at the time less than two thousand), where everyone's family was somehow connected, yet oddly separate across class lines, and where Mom's skimpy lunches surely did not go unnoticed by those who thought their families better than hers.

Early in their marriage, Mom cooked dinner for my dad in their tiny new apartment. He came from a middle class family with two parents and three children, one with a college education, which was unheard of in my mother's family. She placed a bowl of strawberry shortcake in front of him, and sat down to eat her own juice-sopped biscuit. My dad stared at her for a moment, then asked, "Where's the dinner?"

Mom swallowed a strawberry. "This is dinner."

"No," Dad answered. "This is dessert."

Mom had a lot to learn. Never, she decided, would her children go hungry; never would her children believe a bowl of strawberry shortcake was a worthy feast. My sisters and I were never neglected when it came to food, and the fat girl was born and raised.

Eating was a sort of ritual in my family, and food the offering that strengthened the bond between us. Mom, despite her humble beginnings, became a phenomenal cook, and we all ate dinner together until my thirteenth year. We'd gather around the table to worship something hearty – roast beef with mashed potatoes and gravy, turkey and biscuits, big T-bone steaks and baked potatoes piled high with butter and sour cream. On Friday nights, Dad claimed the kitchen

and made homemade pizza topped with Spam, onions, and canned mushrooms, and we'd eat in the living room in front of the television as an extra bonus. Weekend mornings, while Mom dusted the living room or enlisted my reluctant help picking up dead branches while she raked leaves in the backyard, Dad cranked up some AC/DC or Van Halen and mixed up fluffy pancakes or cheesy egg sandwiches with bread soggy from butter. Every evening, we'd beg Dad to make his famous chocolate malts or spicy beef nachos, or we'd encircle a collective cup of cold milk and dunk Oreos, my dad, my sisters, and me finishing off a whole package. At holiday time, our kitchen was a mess of Christmas cookies. Our sugar cookies with buttercream frosting still earn acclaim at family holiday gatherings and church potlucks; Mom and Dad would frost the snowmen and Santa Clauses and wreaths and Christmas trees while my sisters and I sprinkled them with colored sugar. I remember watching Mom, Dad, and my sister Jennifer roll popcorn balls, the three of them standing around the metal roasting pot on the counter, scooping out gobs of hot, sticky popcorn, and placing the completed balls to cool on a sheet of wax paper. Eating was communal, collective. Food complemented every activity, from watching television to doing homework. It became my passion and my pastime.

*

Ironically, when I was fat, I was obsessed with my own image. While I shied away from mirrors, I posed for pictures at every given opportunity. My sister's scrapbook of our trip to Disney World in 1997 contains whole pages of me – me in front of the Cinderella castle, me with the Epcot globe, Spaceship Earth, in the background, me next to the fountain, me next to the flower pot, me with Winnie-the-Pooh, me, me, massive me. In every one, my face is thick, my eyes squinted behind round, red cheeks. The skin beneath my

chin is almost like a turkey's waddle. My stomach sticks out even further than my cumbersome DD-cup chest. Naked, I know my breasts are covered in purple stretch marks that lead out from the areola like sunrays. The folds that gravity pulls down from my thighs lord over my knees. But I'm always smiling, ready to pose and pose again. Perhaps, in pictures, I found a place where I could make myself the center of attention, even though in life I felt relegated to the margins by beautiful (that is, thin) people everywhere.

*

When a friend of my sister Jennifer's lost sixty pounds by joining Weight Watchers, emerging as a Lifetime Member to shimmer in little outfits, I longed for a different body. More importantly, seeing this success, I believed I could get one. Jennifer thought we should definitely join; we'd been unable to lose weight on our own, so it was time to seek other options.

I obsessed over Weight Watchers. Initially, I believed that joining Weight Watchers was admitting defeat – defeat as a functioning member of society, defeat as a human being without control over her own impulses, defeat as a Fat Girl who'd exhausted every other avenue and now had to run to a support group for help. I'd lived the first twenty years of my life thinking I ate no more than anyone else, lamenting my doom as an ostracized fat person. I blamed my thyroid, not my own lack of self control or will. To go to Weight Watchers was to accept blame, and it felt degrading.

I was a sophomore in college and accustomed now to finding my own food, not having to rely on a parent to provide for me. I took this new food freedom to the extreme – eating Wendy's and Taco Bell every other day simply because I *could*. My favorite staple made in my college apartment was Velveeta shells and cheese – I could eat an entire box on my own. I worried I wasn't ready to be told what to eat again,

this time by a food plan that didn't know the dependency I had upon chocolate and French fries. Although I longed for the romantic relationships my friends went through like I went through boxes of mac and cheese, I never considered dieting, seriously dieting – eating had become a habit, an act that brought me sensual pleasure, even if it was only transitory. Of course, my father's infidelity and my parents' subsequent divorce taught me at age fifteen that love too is transitory, the commitment of twenty-four years replaced with the first stray look, the first lie, the first kiss. Food disappeared from my plate as readily as I was learning love could disappear from my life, but I just ate more often; food never failed me.

Jennifer and I decided to give ourselves the holiday season. The month before we went to our first Weight Watchers meeting, I ate more cookies and fudge and pies than I'd ever done before. I ate like children think Santa Claus must eat, emptying millions of plates of goodies and downing mugs of milk. I went to bed each night full to my ears, nearly vomiting, and planning the next day's meals.

I realize now that I was mourning food. A lifelong relationship was ending. I loved food, loved the smell of a roasting turkey overtaking the house; I loved the careful arrangement of the plates holding brownies and pies and lemon squares on my sixteenth birthday; I loved the line of vendors selling corn dogs and Wisconsin fried cheese and elephant ears each August at the Monroe County Fair; I loved the first lick of a soft serve chocolate-vanilla twist ice cream cone at the King's Island amusement park. I eagerly anticipated each breakfast, lunch, and dinner as one would anticipate a first date. I loved the taste of food, every bit of it. In January, 2001, I made a conscious decision to leave a love-filled relationship because it ultimately made me miserable. I wanted to feel thrilled in ways food couldn't thrill me. I wanted to walk by a construction site and hear whistles, not laughter, real or imagined. Really. I went to Weight Watchers because

I wanted to be ogled by men.

*

At the first meeting – held in a strip-mall office sandwiched between a hair-and-nail salon and a Chinese restaurant, threatening aromas wafting through the door - Jennifer and I filled out registration forms and stood against the wall, waiting in line to step on one of the three electronic scales set before a long counter. I observed the other women standing around us and remember that some looked too skinny to need the program; others looked just like me, massive, with flabby skin sweaty with the exhaustion of hauling ourselves around.

I kept staring at the blank space that read "Starting Weight." I never let anyone know my weight, got embarrassed when even the nurse at my doctor's office read the scale, but I just closed my eyes, climbed on, and hoped that this was the last time I'd have to be ashamed. The woman filled in my box, and directed us to the meeting room. 238 lbs., the little box said, and my throat closed. *Oh God*, I thought. *Don't cry, don't cry, don't cry*. I knew the world thought I was fat; I knew my body was larger than other bodies. But seeing that number innocently staring up at me cemented it in my mind – I was fat, huge, massive. *I can't do this*, I thought, *this is too much. I'll never do it*. I knew this little voice would make me fail before I even began, so I pushed it down. I glanced at Jenn's paper and saw 220 lbs. in her little box, and shamefully showed her mine as I clenched my jaw to ward off the still-threatening tears. Neither of us could believe I weighed that much. I sighed to get control – I told myself then that I must have carried those 238 pounds exceptionally well.

Later that evening, I logged on to the Weight Watchers website and tried out all the tools talked about at the meeting. I checked the charts that told what a healthy weight

was for my height: at five-foot-six, I should weigh no less than 124 pounds and no more than 142 pounds – at least a hundred pounds had to come off. I took the "Are you Ready?" quiz that posed true or false statements like "I know that I need to make permanent lifestyle changes and not temporary modifications of my eating habits;" or "I think losing weight will solve all the problems in my life." I didn't need to take this quiz to know I was ready.I clicked the link to "Find out your BMI (Body Mass Index)." For a person who never ventured near a scale except under threat from medical personnel, this was a big step – I knew I needed to face the truth, just like I needed to face that Starting Weight box. I entered my height and current weight and waited for the computer to process. *Your BMI is 39.7*. The little explanatory paragraph said that a BMI of 20-25 is healthy and a BMI over 30 is considered "very overweight (obese)." I sat back in my chair. I was nearly ten points above "obese," which meant I was unbelievably obese, send-in-the-clowns obese, over-the-top obese, *morbidly* obese. I'd always hated that term, and never defined myself by it – who would want to call themselves *morbidly* anything? Morbid equals rotten, near death, overwhelmingly odorous, gruesome, or somehow psychologically depraved. *The woman thought the man morbid because he liked to pin live insects to pieces of cardboard and watch them writhe*. To be morbidly obese meant to be hopeless, completely disgusting, fit to be examined beneath glass, but never touched with bare hands.

*

I was more nervous that second meeting as I stepped up to the scale than I'd been the week before. I believed that this weigh-in would dictate the rest of my life. I'd worked hard all week, marking down each Point consumed in my daily food journal; if it didn't pay off, I was going to Wendy's and be damned.

I had lost six pounds.

"It's the water weight," the woman behind the counter said. "It's common your first week."

I didn't care. Six. Pounds. I got a gold star sticker, and I put it in the little booklet that recorded my progress. I was elated.

In the meeting, Jennifer and I took seats in the second row instead of near the back. The leader, Elaine, instructed us to take out a piece of paper and a pen. "I want you to write down a list of what you hope weight loss will bring you," she said. "I'm not interested in abstractions like *confidence*, although that is certainly valid, but concrete, tangible things. What do you want most?"

I'd been compiling this list all my life. I wrote down my desire for ogling and admiration by strangers. I wrote down that I wanted to look in the mirror without disappointment; I wanted to be able to wear strapless dresses; I wanted to approach a flight of stairs without worrying if I would make it up without stopping; I wanted to go into any store in the mall and be able to find something in my size; I wanted to be a runner; I wanted to get selective about men and clothes; I wanted to sit in a chair without my thighs hanging over the edges; I wanted to be able to cross my legs, for God's sake.

Next, Elaine asked how our week went, what we observed, yielding a variety of responses. One woman in particular voiced my experience exactly. "What I noticed most," she said, "was the emptiness in my stomach. I haven't been hungry in years."

*

And then, I was thin. In hindsight, the transformation feels instantaneous. In reality, it took about a year until I was at a weight where I was satisfied with my body. In hindsight, it seems effortless. The weight fell off me in little bunches and that was that – the Fat Girl was gone. At least

from the naked eye. Once, I ran into someone who hadn't seen me throughout my entire weight loss. He didn't even recognize me until I spoke. Totally new person to him. And yet, my grandmother once said, "You look so much better than you used to." Correction, totally revamped, reworked, repaired person. But they don't know what I know. The Fat Girl looms inside.

*

I am now obsessed with my reflection. I stare at myself at every possible opportunity: in shop windows, metal pillars, other people's sunglasses. I admire my legs, how slender and shapely they are now, I put my forefinger and thumb on either side of my waist. I tense my neck and touch the tendons there I'd never seen before. I scrunch up my shoulders and make the little pool between my collarbone and shoulder where water from showers and baths is now free to gather. I have been ogled – and even though he was a homeless man, I smiled broadly at him, wanting to thank him. I have had two boyfriends, the second of whom I love to distraction and hope to for the rest of my life, a hope I cling to in the face of my parents' reality of love.

I love my life, my body, now.

But I am terrified.

About halfway through my weight loss, I studied in Bath, England, and after my classes ended, my sisters came over to vacation for two weeks. We were heedless of what we ate – there were so many restaurants to try, and *we may never be back*, we said. Plus, there were some novel little treats I just had to sample at a tiny candy shop right down the road from the townhouse where my classes had been held. But I felt panicked as I ate fish and chips, shepherd's pie, hamburgers – when we discovered the most delectable Belgian chocolates in the food wonderland that is the first floor of Herrod's, my Fat Girl threw my thinning one out of

the way and dug in.

"Am I going to gain it all back, Jenn?" I'd ask as we walked from a restaurant to Big Ben, to the National Portrait Gallery, to the dock in Southampton where the *Titanic* began its journey. She'd roll her eyes and tell me no.

But I feel like I am one slip away from that size 20. I look at old pictures of me – me, massive, at high school graduation when my white gown looked like a sail; at countless Christmases when I wore dresses that fell down my figure like tapestries; on dozens of vacations where I stood in a bathing suit, thighs squeezing against each other – and I am filled with fear because I don't feel any different today than I did on the days those photos were snapped. In fact, if anything, I feel fatter now than I did then.

I never *owned* my fatness. I never celebrated it the way some people seem able to do. I never stood proudly nude in front of a mirror and said, "Yes, this is me. I am the bounteous rolls of flesh, I am the thickness of supple thighs, the curves of soft shoulders, the roundness of these hips, the woman of these DD-cup breasts." Instead, I didn't look at my body in the mirror except in shame, and told myself that I was just like all my thin friends on the inside, and if everyone could just see that, I'd be as popular and sexually alluring as anyone else. I was awkward, self-conscious in my fatness, because I didn't wield it like the weapon it can be in the hands of a girl who doesn't let the body she has stand in the way of the person she is. By getting thin, I felt I was excavating from the caverns of fat the girl I really was, letting emerge the sexually vibrant young woman who might turn heads on the sidewalk. With each pound gone, I felt I was getting closer to her, getting closer to me.

At size six, one could say, I have arrived. I feel comfortable now, because I am at ease in public. I can concentrate on the thoughts in my head, or the book in my hands, or the sidewalk beneath my feet because I don't worry if someone is thinking how *huge* that girl is and wondering why she

can't get control of herself. In many ways, I have become invisible, while at the same time, I feel myself sexually appreciable. When I want to be, I am seen, but not judged for my weight. But when I look down at my naked body, I don't see thinness, the lack of flesh first, I see the bumps and bulges, the wiggle of my inner thigh. Since I'm no longer one huge imperfection, all the little ones are more apparent. I am ironically more critical of my body now that it's thin. I'm always pushing for more, tighter, better.

*

The Fat Girl inside me is like a friend that has been with me all my life but really annoys me. She's like a destructive relationship because she pushes me to a place that I know can hurt the Thin Girl, but feels so good while we're there. She's my comfort because I don't know who I would be without her, but also my burden to haul around this food-crazed, thin-crazed nation. But the Fat Girl is also like a personal trainer, turned on its ear: she drives me toward the food, and so I have to push all the harder away from it, thereby maintaining my stamina and my size six.

For all my self-criticism, I know that in the mirror now is the Thin Girl, the heir to my body, the winner of the battle with the food. She took down the champion, the Fat Girl, and caged her somewhere inside me. The Fat Girl is there in the supermarket as I turn a blind eye to Velveeta shells and cheese and stroll down the aisles seeking out baked chips and diet soda, reduced fat cookies and I-Can't-Believe-It's-Not-Butter Spray; she's there at parties when I position myself nearer the foyer, the bathroom, the backyard, rather than letting her drift near the food to pick and graze like the cow Mark said we were; she's there as I walk down the street, past cafes with pastries in the windows, past Wendy's promising Frosty delights, past Starbucks where I allow myself only regular coffee instead of foamy mochas. Sometimes, she's

whispering in my inner ear, reminding me of all the tastes that used to satisfy our tongue – the saltiness of a Pringle, the smooth melt of a Hershey's miniature. She reminds me of the comfort of home when Dad made his malts and the living room was aromatic with food and love. Other times, she's screaming and rattling her chains as I refuse slices of pizza or Buffalo wings, wondering what is wrong with me and why I deprive her of all happiness.

Even when she exhausts herself, I can still hear her breathing. ❧

Narrows Bridge
– Barry Kitchen

Chipmunk Peeking
– Barry Kitchen

Ray Harrington

Sepia

My father was the biggest man I had ever known, but at my mother's funeral his shadow was no bigger than the stone they wrote her name on. Elle Fisk was my mother's name, but they had carved Eleanor into her headstone. It was the first time I had ever seen her full name. Never before had I heard her called Eleanor and I never would after that day. The way my father put it, that day was one to forget. But I couldn't stop thinking about that cool October morning. Not that school year, when kids would ask me where my mother was or after school when I would walk home with my little sister, Anna. She was only six and, being her older brother by five years, it was my responsibility to bring her home in one piece my Dad said. The funeral stayed in my mind when summer came and my older sister, Sam had to watch us when Dad was at work. That day was like a scar. I still felt it later when I grew up and started forgetting the little things in childhood. It was there, I just forgot to remember it all the time. But that summer, the scar wasn't a scar yet. It was still a cut, tight and dry. Cuts like that are never open for long, they start to heal even as you hiss the first breath of air between your teeth and wait for the blood. They start to dry out and, when all the tears are gone, you start to feel the burn of the new skin taking shape over the old. It may be healing, it may be almost invisible on top of your worn skin, but it never goes away. And maybe that's the way Dad saw things back then. His cuts hurt the way only something you can't fix can hurt.

Dad worked at the garage in town, fixing cars. He would come home covered in his day at the shop. Washing the day from his hands in the kitchen sink, the soap was black as

the grime under his nails. It was a kind of black that never faded, no matter how hard he scrubbed. The first day of summer vacation came and that night my Father came home from work smiling. Not the smile we used to see before Mom died. The smile he had now was still the same shape, it still made his eyebrows rise slightly from his eyes like he was just as surprised as you were to see it. But it was different in some way, we could all see it, maybe even Dad knew it was wrong now. It was too heavy for his face. The smile he had tonight was a little lighter than the one he gave us that morning as he dropped us off at school. I saw him at the sink, smiling like that and I felt myself smiling back at him. I sat at the kitchen table and watched my Dad's back as he talked about his day. First it was the Phinney's van with the broken tail-light, then it was the old truck that Mr. Kearson just wouldn't give up on. After all this, Dad turned his head over his shoulder, not quite looking at me but at the wall. "One day, I'm going to take you down to the garage and show you what I do, Tommy." He turned his head back to the sink and went on with his day, with Mr. Kearson's truck.

Steam rose from the water pouring over his hands, I thought of the tea that Sam sometimes made for him when he was sore. He said the tea relaxed him and helped with his back. Sometimes, Dad would sit in his chair in the living room and ask Sam to bring him another cup, then another and another until he fell asleep. His body finally free from the tension of being bent under a car's hood all day. A man like my father spent so much time hunched over working, it was hard for him to stand straight. Always slouched, as if in apology for a hard day's work. He slept there a lot, in his chair. He used to let me sit on his lap when I was little like Anna and he would read the newspaper comics to us. He still read to Anna, but I was too old to do that. Still, I would lie on the living room floor next to him, pretending to do my homework but listening to my Father make funny voices as he read Beetle Bailey. Anna would laugh and tell him to

read again. I would sigh loud enough for them to hear. Anna would whisper to be quiet so I could do my homework. The truth was I was waiting for the next comic strip for Dad to read. I did that a lot, I would pretend I didn't like something Dad or Mom did because I thought I was too old to like it. But every time I did, I felt like another part of me was going away somewhere. I was trying to act big, but still wanted to be small. I was shedding my skin so much I wasn't sure what I really felt.

"Tommy." In the kitchen, my father still at the sink, waved his soapy hand through my line of sight. I was always staring off into space, he said. Mom told me I just had a vivid imagination that I was busy in. She always asked me what I was thinking about. I would tell her stories from thin air and she would say I was a card. I asked her what kind of card and she would just laugh, letting her head fall back that way it did when she was really happy. I looked back at Dad, who was drying his hands on the kitchen towel we left just for him by the sink. It was as black as his nails at the end of the week. Those towels were always his and his alone. No one else would dare use them, not that anyone would want to, with all the grease. Mom would wash them at the end of the week and sigh that they'd never be clean. After Mom died, Sam started doing the washing and she never laughed at the dirty towels like Mom.

Dad threw the towel at me and laughed as it fell on the floor. I kicked the towel back at him and it slapped his leg. "What do you think about going to the garage this week?", He asked again. "Mom said I was too young to go to the garage yet." I said before I realized what I had been thinking. My father's smile faded from his face as he wiped the sink with the worn towel. I didn't mean to talk about Mom. We had an unspoken rule about it in our house. Sam, Anna and I never talked to Dad about her. It hadn't been intentional to stop, it just became easier than to see that look on my Father's face. Now, he just kept looking at the sink and wiping at

nothing, “Well, that was before…” He stopped there, his eyes locked on the towel. A second passed in the kitchen between his words and in that second I felt myself flutter. I felt my body lose the chair under me as I started to float. I felt the air around me stir as I flew out of the window by the sink. I flew right past my Dad, his shoulder brushing my leg as I flew over the house and through the field behind it. Flying faster, over the woods that surrounded us and scared me at night. Over the graveyard where mom sat at her headstone, waving at me as I climbed through the air.

Dad cleared his throat at the sink and I forgot how to fly. I fell like lightning back in through the window and into my chair. Dad folded the towel and hung it from the faucet. He turned to face me and I wanted to fly again. “You’re older now.” My throat started to ache and I wanted to take back what I had said, but he pushed on, “Maybe some other time, when you’re older then.” He said and walked passed me into the living room. He just sank into his chair and opened the newspaper. He didn’t read the comics that afternoon.

I never sat in his chair, that musty old leather monster. Sometimes, when he was at the garage and Sam was giving Anna her bath, I would stare at that chair from the couch. I would imagine him coming home to find me sitting in his chair and reading the newspaper myself. He would come in and ask me to read the comics to him and I would use the silliest voice I could manage while laughing along with him. Then Mom would come in and she would laugh along with us. She would scoop me up out of the chair and tell me to let my Father sit down. She would hold me like she did when I was little and tell me to read her another comic, letting her head fall back, the way she did and I would listen to her laughter like a song that never had to end.

I didn’t sit in the chair though. I never read the comics in a funny voice and she never came in to smile at me. Not even years later, when I had grown up and left that summer behind and even the image of my father standing before my

Mother's coffin had started to fade around the edges of my memory. Not when I took my Fathers things from the house and brought them to my home, the one I made for my wife and children. I never sat in that chair. I would just sit in my own chair across from Dad's, a chair I bought and made safe from the kids. I would sit and stare at that piece of my Father I had kept for so long. It would sit so out of place in the new house and always took too much space in any room we tried to hide it in. That chair was big, but never as big as my Father. ❧

Lana Hechtman Ayers

The Elusive Zen of Housework

I've been seeking it all morning,
scouring appliances, scrubbing walls, shining mirrors,
attempting to cleanse my thought, my untidy house.

I've tried to picture myself in a sunlit glade, aromatic
with wildflowers, hawks soaring overhead, blessing the
air.
But the detergent's lavender fresh scent is too artificial,

so instead, I envisage bald-headed, gold-earringed
Mr. Clean scowling, I over-hear the Tidy Bowl Man
swearing like a gondolier in traffic.

On my hands and knees, I'm drenched in sweat, wonder-
ing
how my mother did this so placidly for so many years,
when I remember one particular occasion.

Mother's eyes were red from Comet fumes,
a cigarette growing from the corner of her mouth,
Dad's armpit-stained tee-shirt wadded up

in a puddle on the floor by her bare feet.
The radio was on, Bing Crosby crooning about love,
and mother crouched down, sponging the fridge,

its former contents overflowing the trash can.
I asked her what she was doing,
"Taking advantage of the blackout," she said,

cigarette bobbing, ash dropping
to the yellow linoleum.
I noticed an ice cream carton

leaking a pool of mint chip and asked for it.
She nodded and I sat cross-legged,
scooping it up with my fingers,

licking my sticky hands,
licking the card board container.
We were quiet. Life felt good at that moment,

like anything could be turned around,
power outage into feast,
into an opportunity to make things shine again.

But I didn't ask my mother then
how she did it, what went on in her thoughts,
as perspiration poured off her brow,

her back bent into the rhythmic washing,
the radio singing on and on about sublime love,
and her not even humming along.

Cypress
– Robin Buehler

Liz Mandrell

Reaping the Whirlwind

"Get down here before your breakfast gets cold!" Mrs. Carmella yelled from the kitchen. In the front yard, the tulips fluttered, and the ivy quivered on the left side of the old Pennsylvania Dutch house.

The Carmella's and the tulips and the ivy had lived there in Holly Springs, the nicest neighborhood in Coburn, for fifteen years. When Mr. Carmella died last spring, Mona and her mother gave away the dog, the garden hose and the old Plymouth Fury station wagon. The tulips and ivy figured they were the next to go.

The shower door slid open, and Mona stepped onto the bathroom rug.

"I'll get some coffee at school!" she yelled loud enough for her mother to hear it downstairs. The sugar maple heard it too, and shook her shaggy head. Nothing had been pruned since last spring, and the back yard cartwheeled in swirling vines and trendils.

"You're not supposed to drink caffeine. It upsets your stomach. Didn't you say your stomach's been upset?" Mrs. Carmella stood at the bottom of the stairs, shaking her head. "Your eggs are getting cold!"

Mona stared into the bathroom mirror, the steam making a filmy frame around her face. She combed her wet hair straight down and secured it with a barrette. In the edge of the bathroom mirror, her mother had written a Bible passage on a Post-It note. "Stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain. I Corinthans 15:59."

When Mona's father died, Mrs. Carmella joined the Abundance of Rain Holiness, an evangelical holy roller

church, for guidance. Their neighbors, people they had once gone to the country club with, acted surprised and bewildered when Mrs. Carmella knocked on their door and asked them if they knew Jesus. At first Mona had refused to go with her, but her mother had a way of making her feel so miserable that it was easier to go with her than to have a long, drawn-out argument about it.

The first Sunday there, Mona met Mark. He drove a Taurus and played golf with old men on weekends, but he had a really good job in Lexington as a CPA. They soon started dating. They'd been dating a year now, and he wanted to marry her. He hadn't given her a ring or anything, but he made it clear that he wanted to buy a house in Coburn and wanted Mona as his bride. Mona didn't want to marry him, but she couldn't think of any good reasons not to.

Mona stared at the word "firm" on the mirror until it became bigger and bigger and threatened to take over the room. It blared in her head like a Sousa song. She slipped her long-sleeved cotton dress over her head and shuffled her bare feet into brown loafers.

In the kitchen, her mother hunched over the dishpan, scrubbing plates with a Brillo pad. The rich odor of coffee and bacon dizzied Mona for a moment, and she steadied herself in the doorway. Bile rose in her throat. She stood as still as possible, bracing herself in between the doorframe like she'd been taught to do in school in the event of an earthquake.

"Mark called. I told him you'd call him back before you left for school," her mother said.

"I don't want to talk to him." The nausea subsided, and her head steadied.

"You're going to mess around, and one day he'll just stop calling." Her mother attacked some baked-on cheese in a casserole dish. Her elbows moved up and down as she scrubbed.

"I'm just going to have some toast this morning," Mona

said.

"Why don't you dry your hair before you leave? I just called Time and Temp. It's 58 degrees out." Mrs. Carmella put bread in the toaster and took a stick of butter from the refrigerator. "You want a nice egg, don't you? You'll need something on your stomach so you can teach those children."

Mona reached for her tote bag and the brown bag lunch her mother had packed for her. Two stacks of graded papers, her neat handwriting crimped along the margins in red, sat beside her purse. Comments, smiley faces, question marks winked at her from the stack.

"I'm okay, Mom. Really."

"Do you want my sweater? It's hanging there on the hall tree."

"No. I have a sweater. I'm fine."

"Is there something wrong with my sweater?" Her mother put her hands on her hips. Mona sighed and pulled her purse over her shoulder, shoving the two stacks of papers in her briefcase. The nausea started marching up from her feet, a bilious attack with waving flags and tooting bugles. The toast popped up from the toaster and Mona snatched it, forcing it into her mouth to quell the roll of her stomach.

"You don't look so good." Mrs. Carmella pointed a knife at Mona. "Sit down here and let's read the Scriptures."

The wind blew suddenly against the house. An eerie whooo shifted between the cracks of their house. Mrs. Carmella looked up—eyebrows arched, eyes big—as if expecting the trumpet of the Lord. A few leaves whipped onto the windowpane and stuck wetly against the glass. Mona unshouldered her purse, sat down and munched on the dry toast. Mrs. Carmella pulled out her Bible from the sideboard crowded with church bulletins and catalogues. She let it fall open randomly and peered down on the onion skin pages.

"Ye are the light of the world. A city on a hill cannot be hidden. In the same way, let your light shine before men,

that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven." Mrs. Carmella's dry voice measured out the words, hesitating for emphasis. Then she sighed heavily and looked heavenward like a martyr ready to climb up on the cross.

Mona knew it was all for her benefit.

"You are the light on the hill. " Mrs. Carmella kissed Mona on the top of the head and rubbed her between her shoulder blades. "Your father would be so proud of you. Your first year of teaching and you're doing so well."

"I need to get going." Mona took out her keys and opened the front door.

"Don't forget to call Mark!" her mother yelled out after her. The tulips and ivy nodded in approval.

Every day Mona drove to school hoping that that day would be different than all the rest. But, unfortunately, every day was the same. She pulled into the parking lot and waved at Pinky, the 80-year-old security guard. She lugged her briefcase full of graded papers into school and walked to the lounge to copy some grammar teasers, but there was a line to use the copier: The Spanish teacher was complaining about the school board meeting the night before and the Special Ed teacher was applying eyeliner in heavy sweeping strokes around her eyes.

By the time she got to her room, homeroom had already started. Brandon sat on her desk.

"Get off my desk," she said, and dropped her briefcase and purse in the chair.

"Uh-oh! Miss Carmella's in a bad mood!" he said raising his eyebrows to the class.

Principal Darmond blared over the intercom with morning announcements—school pictures were next Tuesday, Color Guard practice had been canceled, the Key Club meeting was going to be held in Room 212 instead of Room 202.

"Would everyone please stand for the Pledge of Alle-

giance?" Principal Darmond said over the PA. When the students recited the Pledge, Mona stood also, hand over heart, feeling each pump of blood more futile than the next.

She had always wanted to be a teacher, but now that she was there behind a state-issue desk, she felt her labor was truly in vain. She never knew if she was getting through to her students, if they were learning anything. She felt buried under the paperwork. Her inbox was never empty. Her attendance records never matched the attendance office's records, and her grade book was a mess.

Every morning when she turned onto Pleasant Street, she wished that Dender County High School would be a smoldering heap of bricks, the gym a mangled wreck of cricket-legged beams bent to the sky, birds flitting in and out of the charred cafeteria. If this really happened, she planned to drive slowly by, taking in the view, maybe rolling down the window to breathe in the smoke. Then she would drive to the BP, get a big chocolate donut and keep on driving. When the car ran out of gas, she would stop, rent a house in whatever town in which she'd landed and live there for the rest of her life in peace.

Fourth period, she handed out spelling tests, and the students bent over them in studied concentration. Except Brandon who was humming and jiving and slipping his hands in the air like he was a dj popping records on a turntable.

"Brandon." Mona's voice was low and sharp in the spelling test quietness.

"Yes?" Brandon put his hand to his ear and cocked his head toward Mona. He was dressed in a baby blue silk sweat suit and construction worker boots, a white headband and a huge gold chain with the word "Brainy" dangling from it.

"Come here." Mona curled her finger at him. Brandon rose on his toes, sank an imaginary three-pointer and ambled up the aisle. He nodded at a kid across the room,

then winked at a girl who looked up at him.

"I need you to finish this test before lunch." Mona whispered as he leaned over her desk, his face inches from her own.

"Miss Carmella–you expect us to do something every day!"

"Do you want to go to Mrs. Darrin's office—" Mona lowered her voice even further. "—to finish your spelling test?"

A knock at the door, and a student office worker stepped into the room with a huge bouquet of red roses. The roses were arranged in a black vase with ferns and white baby's breath. The student worker carried them across the room like a three-tiered cake. The class looked up, following the vase across the room.

"Ah, Miss Carmella, you shouldn't have." Brandon moved in front of the student worker, his hands out ready to receive the flowers.

"They're not for you, numbnuts. They're for Miss Carmella. They're from her boyfriend," the student worker said in a sing-song voice.

"Wooooooooooooo!" The class took up a jeering blare.

"Read it, Miss Carmella. Read what the card says, " a girl in the front row said.

Mona smiled at her and took the flowers, plucking the card from the plastic holder.

No matter what happens, I love you, Mark. His handwriting made a wormy scrawl across the tiny card. The wind outside grew stronger and beat against the windows. Dark clouds moved rapidly across the sky from the west, and the room grew suddenly dark. Blowing down the hall from the courtyard, the wind slammed several doors shut.

The roses seemed to be glad to be inside. Mona sat them on the edge of her desk.

"You got my flowers, baby. You got my heart. You got the keys to the Lexus You got the part." Brandon snapped

his fingers, singing, moving his head from side to side. This time, the class laughed, and he slid across the room on his tip-toes to Mona's desk. "Yes or no? Will you marry me?"

The bell rang.

"Put your name on it or it doesn't get graded!" Mona said above the din of students clamoring to the door, slinging backpacks over their shoulder. They jostled and filed out of the room toward the cafeteria. She saw Brandon ready to slip out the door.

"Brandon, I want to see you!" she said, but he was already gone.

After the bell, the hall was quiet. Mona straightened her desk, shut off her computer, and collected the tests. She walked over to the window. The leaves on the pear trees turned backwards and trash from the cafeteria dumpster blew across the parking lot.

"You wanted to see me?" Brandon rolled back into the classroom. Mona turned around and stared at him. It took her eyes a minute to readjust to the classroom light. For a minute, Brandon looked like a pear tree, swaying a bit to a wind of his own absurdity. Mona picked up the unfinished test from the top of the stack and handed it to him.

"You can finish this in the principal's office. I'll walk you down there right now," she said.

They walked along the hall lined with orange lockers. He lagged behind her several paces, running his hand along the lockers, picking up combination locks and slamming them against the lockers. Mona turned around and looked at him.

"What?"

"Do you want a disciplinary referral as well?"

Brandon stuffed his hands in his pockets and huffed along the hall behind Mona.

"Why do you get to leave in the middle of the day? Teachers get to do anything they want to do."

Suddenly Mona felt a wave of nausea hit her body. It

rolled her momentarily and she turned to face the lockers, grabbing onto a handle. Her face was white and pinched.

"They get to eat in their rooms, leave in the middle of the day, smoke behind the stage during planning periods." Brandon walked on past her, down the hall in front of her toward the office, not looking back. Mona breathed slowly through her nose. The lockers boogie woogied alongside her flipping stomach.

"I'm fine," Mona said to no one, her stale breath bounced back from the lockers into her nose.

Mona sat in her car outside the clinic, checking over the spelling tests. Her appointment wasn't until 2:00, and she was early. The afternoon sweltered with humidity, and the low clouds made the air feel like a tropical rain forest. In the east there is a hazy green cloud tinged with yellow that seemed to be dancing just above the horizon. Sweat rolled down the inside of Mona's thighs. She concentrated on the tests. Copacetic. Cordial. Coquette.

Every day she taught five classes of Dender County freshman. This morning they read *Romeo and Juliet*. If she taught for 30 years, she would hear the Mercutio's Queen Mab speech one hundred and fifty times. She was an English teacher. This was her destiny. Every day she stood in front of the classroom and planted her two feet behind the elegant podium Mark had bought for her for Christmas. She was stuck, rooted, grounded, riveted, nailed, fixed, trapped, caught, entrenched, embedded, established, ingrained, spiked, tacked, pegged. Suddenly, the spelling words blurred together. She leaned her head against the window glass and tried to breathe.

Lying on the examination table, Mona looked up at the poster on the wall behind Dr. Sharkif's head—an illustrated print of a savannah, lions with daisy petals manes and monkeys with Model T headlight eyes peeked out of the green foliage.

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes. Thank you." She clenched her toes in the stirrups and held her breath.

"This is just a routine examination. You'll feel me touching you now. I'll try to make it quick."

Mona felt the speculum slip into her body. The instrument opened inside her like an alchemist's bellows. She imagined him mashing a hidden lever in the floor with his foot, a piano paddle or an air jack, that spread her open. She felt a muted tugging within her body and heard the clanging of one instrument into another.

She thought of Mark's fumbling when they had first made love last spring. It was just after her father had died. They'd been dating a few weeks.

"Guide me in down there," he said like he was docking a ship. He whispered some other things, but she couldn't remember what. The sex improved after that, but now she had stopped menstruating last month and was sick every morning. She didn't need a MD to tell her what her body was already shouting out.

"Okay, all done. You can get dressed now." Dr. Sharkif stripped off his gloves and threw them in the trashcan as he exited the room. "Here are some tissues to tidy up. I'll see you in my office for a few minutes when you're ready." He slipped out the door.

Mona remained motionless on the examining table. She closed her eyes. She wanted to sleep forever.

Dr. Sharkif smiled warmly as Mona walked into the dim office. The walls were lined with books, and the sonorous sounds of his fish tank enveloped the room. Several big Oscar fish swam around between fake seaweed. Dr. Sharkif motioned for her to sit down.

"We have your blood test back. You're definitely pregnant."

Mona could hear the buzz of the air vents, the scritch

of flies crawling across the ceiling.

"As I mentioned on the phone, I just wanted to check you out, see how far along you were. I'd say the fetus is twelve weeks old."

Mona stared at the brown carpet, watching the tiny swaying wheat fields of a poly-fiber blend. Dr. Sharkif came around from behind his desk.

"Are you okay? Is there someone you want to call? You can use my private line." He motioned to the phone sitting on the desk.

"No. I need to get back to school. I'm on my planning period."

Dr. Sharkif leaned on the desk, writing out something on a yellow legal pad he held on his knee.

"A noble profession. If this becomes a burden, seek counseling. There is no shame in this. This is not the end of your life. I am not a psychiatrist, but I know you will rise above this and go on. A lot of unmarried women are having babies and keeping their careers. Look at Madonna!"

"Yes. Madonna," Mona said. One of the Oscars burped a bloopy wet circle that broke the water and escaped into the air.

On the way back to the school, Mona pulled over and used the payphone at the BP. Mark's secretary patched her right through.

"I'm about twelve weeks," Mona said.

"That's terrific news, sweetheart," Mark said. It sounded like he was running some numbers through an adding machine. She pictured his desk. Tax forms neatly stacked on this bookshelf. Black framed diplomas and certificates on the walls. Bowls of paper clips on the desk. Venetian blinds leveled with the window sill.

Inbox empty, Outbox full.

"My life is over."

"Oh honey, your life is just starting."

Mona felt lightheaded as she parked her car in front of the school. She turned off the ignition and rested her forehead on the steering wheel. She heard the snare drum's *tick-tick-ticka-tick* down on the football field as the band practiced for Friday night's game.

She had tried to plan glorious lessons for her students, whether they appreciated it or not. She had written her lesson plans over the weekends, and graded their papers and returned them within 48 hours like they tell you to do in the College of Education. She had even designed and planned a new course in Creative Writing to be taught collaboratively with the art teacher next year. All this, and yet Mona could not imagine planning out the next eighteen years of an unborn life.

Mona stepped inside Mrs. Darmond's office. Brandon was doodling in the margin of the test. He looked up.

"Damn, Miss Carmella, you don't look so good."

"No cursing." Mona motioned for him to follow her. She felt hollow and parched. They walked side by side down the hall toward her room.

"Miss Carmella, you need me to get the nurse?" Brandon peered into Mona's face. Mona could feel her eyes expanding and contracting like whirlpools, swirling around and around. Pressure pounded in her chest. She felt lead stones in her stomach. Brandon's face moved in and out of focus.

"I'm a city set on a hill, Brandon, a light that cannot be hid." Mona inserted her key into the door of her classroom, and hung onto the knob.

Suddenly the long wail of the tornado-warning bell filled the air between them. Doors slammed open, and teachers and students filed out of their rooms.

"Leave the windows open, please. This is a tornado drill, not a fire drill," the Special Ed teacher said in a bored voice, standing in her doorway. The hall filled with bodies jostling against each other. Students joked and laughed, calling

out to each other, excited to get out of class. Over the P.A. system, Mrs. Daramond's voice came on calm and clear, yet with an edge of pinched urgency.

"The National Weather Service in Jackson, Kentucky, has issued a tornado warning for Dender, Estill and Powell Counties until 3:00. This is *not* a test! Faculty, please move to your designated areas. I repeat. . .This is *not* a test!"

In the hall, the students moved to the walls quickly, their chatter died as they listened to Principal Daramond. They moved into curled positions, their arms covering their heads. At the end of the hall, the double doors suddenly sucked open. The wind blew in a cloud of dirt and debris, making the hallway dark.

"Somebody shut that door!" a teacher yelled down the hall. Outside the sky pulsed and vibrated, and the air in the hall turned boiling hot.

"Get down! Hands behind your head, people!" One of the coaches who also taught Math barked out above the squirming lines of students, some of them now running along the wall trying to find a place to crouch. "Make room for each other!"

Mona stared down the long hall into the courtyard that connected the four buildings of Dender County High School. The wind whirled debris and dirt in a cloud. The pear trees bent to the ground, and splintering roof shingles sliced through the air like Frisbees.

"Miss Carmella! Get down! Get down here with us." Brandon crouched below her, his sweat suit bunched around his legs.

Mona needed a breath of fresh air.

She started walking toward the door, slowly, as if in a trance. Students, some whimpering and crying, squatted down along the walls, a double row of the prostrated prayerful. Mona was so hot. She needed to get a breath outside.

Outside the pink sky said *hello!* as Mona stood in the doorway, looking up, her dress billowing around her body,

her hair flying out behind her. It seemed almost peacefully still outside compared to the quaking panic in the hall. It was calm there in the courtyard. Even the birds were silent. In the face of the whirlwind, the grass shimmered an electric green, every blade in sharp outline. Mona wanted to lie down in its lushness and go to sleep.

"Miss Carmella!" Brandon ran up behind her, yelling into the wind, his hand gripping her arm. "Look!" He pointed to the football field below them. It was like something out of a movie. A slow writhing funnel cloud touched down on the corner and picked up the visitors' bleachers, languidly swirled it like spaghetti and dropped it lightly on the 50-yard line. The cloud sucked at the edge of Pinky's security guard shack, which exploded into a thousand toothpicks. The funnel roiled slowly toward the parking lot where it tipped cars over like tiny vaults.

Mona shook Brandon off, who stumbled backward and caught himself on the door edge. He lunged forward again and caught her around the waist as Mona raised her arms and leaned into the wind.

"Stand firm!" Mona screamed into the swirling cloud, black with dirt. Starting on the east end of the building, windows started exploding and the students screamed. The suck of some powerful vacuum from within bent the beams of the door that surrounded her. Brandon yanked her backwards, and they collapsed beneath the stairs.

There was a deafening, terrific noise, so loud it pounded the molecules around them—the roof lifting off above them, grinding and shredding metal, tumbling bricks, thick curtains of mortar ash.

Then, suddenly, it was quiet, a crushed hollow stillness. Mona looked up at a sapphire sky wiped clean. She could see eternity and the jasper city, foursquare gold and gleaming, and someone, maybe the Lord, standing on the other side. He was wearing a seersucker suit and walking a yo-yo. He might have been whistling. He might have been kissing her

right into heaven.

Then Mona felt wetness on her shoulder, a quiver flick of noise dropping on the pavement. Brandon cried next to her, his arms still around her waist, his wet face buried into her shoulder. Blood coursed down his face from a gash on his forehead.

"What the hell?" Brandon mumbled.

"No cursing." Mona shook her head and looked down at her shaking hands. In her right hand, she held Brandon's spelling test. On the top, he had printed his name "Brandon" in large, zig-zaggy capital letters, surrounded by a halo of sunrays and a gallery of firecracker stars. The picture took up half the page.

The rest of it was blank. ❧

Monica Jacobe

Woman with a Bottle and Flames

Lounging across a burgundy leather couch, I prop my head up with my left arm and rest my body's weight on the right knee stretched forward over my left leg and pressed into the cushion. Goosebumps stand up across parts of my bare legs; the leather is not yet warmed by my skin. With my hair shaking loose above bare shoulders and a tank top, I could be a centerfold. Instead, I am getting my third tattoo—a showgirl straddling a peacock with its tail feathers spread behind like a dancers costume.

"Are you sure you can stay like that?" Chase, my tattoo artist, laughs at me.

"Are you kidding? This is comfortable."

"For eight hours straight?"

"I can't do anything for eight hours straight. Can you work for eight hours?"

"If you can sit that long, I can tattoo you that long."

"We'll see."

He laughs the high-pitched, fake laugh that means he is still teasing me a little and checks the tiny tubs of ink on the table—green, yellow, red, purple, orange, white, and a lot of black.

"What about the blue?" The wispy backs of the feathers should be blue, and he doesn't have any blue out.

"Well, if you aren't sure you can sit for eight hours, I may not need it. I'll get it out later if you can take it all now. You said "we'll see"."

I nod; I did say that. I'm not sure how long any of it will take or where he's going to put all those colors. The huge purplish stencil filling up the side of my right thigh reminds me of elementary school—dittoes for language arts being run off the huge roller. But instead of the heavy rolling thump of

the mimeograph, I hear the plastic flap of Chase's peddle as he revs the tattoo machine to check the connections.

"You ready?" he asks.

"Yeah."

*****

My mother died at 34 with smooth, perfect skin.

The description the coroner gave of her–female, Caucasian, green eyes, brown hair, five-feet, three-inches tall–does not tell her story. On the metal table, bathed in bright, florescent light, her white-white skin keeps the marks of old wounds and childbirth. He may note that she is a mother and stop to think that someone, somewhere has lost something, but he cannot know what. As he stands over her body in the antiseptic, green tiled room, her flesh is silent. It does not tell him that she hated her given name and introduced herself as Sandy all the years she was married. Even the large, light brown mole on her back cannot tell him that it is the part of her I remember best.

That mole on my mother's back fascinated me. It was between her shoulder blades and a little to the left. A pale brown dot, a roll of flesh marking her like a bull's eye. She wore the same pale blue dress every time she and my dad went out to dinner, and the back of it dipped just low enough that I could stare at her mole while she stood in the bathroom mirror dusting her eyelids with shimmery blue. I do not know how many times I sat on her bedroom carpet, my head against the bed's boxspring, to watch her perform this same ritual. I saw her face in the mirror and the shadowy mark on her back. She would laugh at me with her eyes in the mirror, lashes pulled low and her lips, full like mine, pulled into a sweet smirk I didn't yet know how to make. I think she liked that I watched her. With the ritual over, she would pick me up, shake her short, Dorothy Hammill shag, and ask me if she was pretty. I always said yes.

I loved her mole partly because I never had a mole or even a freckle of my own. When she held me, I would reach as far around her back as I could to feel it underneath her shirt and feel secure. Sometimes, we would rock for hours in her rocking chair, me almost too old for her lap, and I would touch her mole as if it were all of her. It stood up from her skin, and I could roll it around under my fingers. It was larger than my fingertips in every memory I have. To me, that was huge.

*****

Instead of natural marks, I have always had scars. I have had a lumpy scar on my right knee for almost as long as I can remember. Not even old enough to go to school, I climbed around and through a folding chair and made it collapse, catching my left foot and sending me crashing onto my right knee and the concrete of the carport. Dad was grilling hamburgers there.

"Diane! Come quick!"

She didn't need him to yell—she was already in the door when he finished the last syllable. She picked me up by one arm, dangling me in the air to examine me. We were both staring at the bloody spot on the cement and the rivers of blood oozing down the lower half of my leg.

"John, do you have anything I can wipe this up with?"

My father brought her a paper towel not yet needed at the grill and stood silently to watch. My mother wiped roughly at my wound and the scraped skin around it.

"Hold that," she stuffing the crumpled paper towel into my hand and heading to the house. Moments later, she came running back with Bactine and a huge Band-Aid, the wide ones made for knee scraps. The Bactine stung as she sprayed it on my leg but the dark spots—actually dirt, not blood—came clean. I refused the Band-Aid when she tried to fit it to the side of my knee.

"It will just fall off," I said, "I don't need it."

She shrugged, still looking at the wound, then stood up and let me go. I started to run off into the yard and play, but she caught me by the same arm she had picked me up with.

"Now, you stay close to the house and let that heal! You don't need to be running out into the grass all bloody."

"So? It's just grass."

"And bugs," she said flatly. "The bugs will eat that open again."

After she had gone inside to slice tomatoes and onion for our burgers, I took off for the stunted apple tree in the middle of our long yard. The sharp blades of grass opened the wound again, and I just kept running, letting the warm, dark blood make its way to my feet.

A few years after my mother died, I was the one in the kitchen preparing all the sides and extras while Dad worked the smoking grill. At eleven, I was just tall enough to reach the counter top while standing and absolutely certain of my cooking skills. While cutting vegetables for pasta salad, I sliced across my left index finger instead of the carrot on the cutting board. Stunned at first and numb, I held my hand over the kitchen sink and watched the blood mix with the hot water from the tap. I held my hand there a long time as the feeling came back and the cut began to throb. No one screamed or came running; I just stood calmly at the sink until the water rinsed the blood away and I could see that the cut was deep. The ragged edges of cut pink flesh stood up around the slice, half the width of my finger and just below the first knuckle. The serrated teeth of the knife are still there on my hand. Maybe I should have gone to the hospital for stitches, maybe even a Band-Aid would have helped, but I just went on cutting vegetables with a new knife and made sure dinner was on time because no one else would.

****

Chase told me tattoos are really scars when we stopped for a break a little over two hours into the peacock tattoo.

"Can I go to the bathroom like this?" I ask him, indicating my still-bare right thigh and the small dots of blood just rising from my pores.

"Well, it is an open wound, so be careful. I can't bandage it yet, and it takes hours to scab up and heal, so you should be fine. Just like walking around with a gash on your leg—it'll scab and scar eventually."

"Pretty scar," I laugh as I limp toward the bathroom at the back of the shop, tile cold under my bare feet.

"And don't put any weight on it!" he calls. "You don't want more blood in that muscle than there has to be!"

I ignore him and close the bathroom door. Inside, I prop my leg on the sink's counter to stare at the work we have done. Chase would tell me I wasn't working, but I want to take ownership of this colored flesh even before it is finished. It is beautiful. He has traced every spine in the numberless feathers standing tall behind the curvy, naked woman. Her flesh is my flesh, peeking bare through the black outline of her body. I wonder if Chase will want to "color her in" and ask when I am adjusting myself again on the palate.

"Maybe just a little brown to give her some shape and a light source," he answers with his eyes on my thigh. He reaches for a bottle of ink I would have called sienna in a crayon box and a new cap to fill. "I kind of like how her skin really is skin."

When he changes his gloves to start again, I am already wriggling and trying to take some of the pressure off my left hip. I sat for three more hours that night. By the end, my fingers and toes were icy and I was getting dizzy turning my head when he asked me about details—did I want her to be blond like the original drawing, what color shoes should she be wearing. When we took our final break so he could get the blue ready, I asked him how much longer it would be.

"Well, there'll be blue and then I'll have to highlight with

some white—just a little bit, I think. Traditional tattoos like this don't need much highlight, and a lot of the color is layered anyway."

"So, how long?" I am hoping he will say a number I can handle. For the last ten minutes of work, I had been crying and didn't want to tell him.

"Maybe another hour or more, depending on how fast I can do the blue. A bigger needle would have been nice, but I didn't have time to make any this week. Too busy. Think you can keep going?"

I stare at the floor, not wanting to tell him that I am cold and clammy but wanting so much to be complete.

"Stand up and let me wash you off," he says.

I put my left foot on the floor and try to balance. He reaches up when he sees me wobble.

"Jesus, you're frozen," he pauses and rubs my fingers in one hand. "Let's stop now, okay? We can just do the rest later. It looks pretty good even without the blue. I'll just wash you off and then we can bandage."

He is still holding my fingers to help me stand. With the other hand, he soaks the torn paper towels on his counter with green liquid in a clear ketchup-type squirt bottle. He picks them up and touches them to my skin. My swollen thigh stops throbbing as he wipes the blood away. With a few tears standing in my eyes, I see all the vivid colors clearly for the first time on my wet and shiny skin.

When I have had my fill of staring, I ask, "When can we put the blue in?"

He is starting my bandage, concentrating on wrapping the tape at secure angles around the inside of my thigh. "In a few months after all this skin has healed and shrunk down to the size it's going to be. We do have to put it over all the outlines of those feather spines, and they need time to heal."

*****

I was not prepared for what it would feel like to finish the blue, placing it over the already black spines of peacock feathers. I didn't think of it as digging electric needles into scars.

I am on the same burgundy palate, and Chase is checking the needle he will use with a magnifying eyepiece.

"I think we can use a nine for this. All I have to do is color the blue over the lines, and it's supposed to look wispy. This will go faster."

By this time, I know enough to understand that "a nine" is a single needle with nine actual heads. Bigger needles cover more ground, and nines are the biggest Chase keeps around most of the time. Outlining is done with a three or five—tiny pin pricks or bold, heavy lines—and regular fill-in color is done with a five or a seven.

"Wish I had a fifteen, but I haven't made needles this week. I didn't think about using one that big for this. Probably could but less control."

I nod at his words and try to steel myself against the pain, the vibration, and the blood that I know are coming. He taps the peddle to check all the connections and pulls me around so my leg is in his lap. He touches the needle to my skin—not even a full second—and every nerve from my hips to my shoulders comes alive and floods with electricity. I jump. He stops.

"Hurt?" he asks.

I didn't have enough words to tell him that my fingers and toes and the space behind my eyes, all so distant from the spot where the needle was, seemed to catch fire at once.

"Yeah," was all I could manage with the half breath in my lungs.

He explained that the scar tissue in tattoos means they are no longer normal, untouched skin. He said this would feel different and promised he would hurry.

I had developed a system during my few tattoo experiences: breath slow–in through the nose and out through the mouth, close your eyes in pain and focus on the air moving in you, let the nerves jump when they jump. Let the electric buzz of the machine surround you. Get lost in the pain.

I forced myself not to hold my breath. I tried counting the knots and panels in the wooden booth wall. I tried staring in the mirror and watching him concentrate, pushing his lips gently out and pulling his eyes to an almost-squint. Nothing worked. I was trapped in the throbbing red behind my eyes, with pain shooting without focus all over my body from the top and sides of my right thigh. I couldn't lose myself in this pain, and forty-five minutes later when he stopped, I was shaking.

****

Were I to live the same 34 years as my mother, the eyes that looked down at my lifeless ones would probably catalog the colorful scars I have chosen. He would begin with the same physical details as were recorded for my mother—female, Caucasian, green eyes, brown hair, five-feet, three-inches tall. But I have mapped a different story on my skin with ink. He will list them by location: behind left ear, Japanese character; between shoulder blades, woman with bottle and flames; lower back, scrolled roses; outside right thigh, woman with peacock; top right shin, apple and horseshoe; inside right ankle, eagle and American flag; outside left thigh, woman in kimono; outside left ankle, rocket, stars.

The lack of details will be a necessity of his job, but he will take pictures to make the images clear, unique, and identifiable. They will show the negative space stars in the turquoise sky where a pink rocket climbs high, and they will show the vibrant red apple with its carefully placed light source making one side shine. They will even show the wispy medium blue of peacock feathers surrounding tri-colored

eyes in yellow, red, and purple opposite Monet's wife, in black and gray portrait work, swirling in a kimono so detailed the samurai is leaping out of it with his sword. He will dissect my painted body with his camera, fracturing the self I have built and still never knowing who I was. ❧

Scott Matteson

The Ride

She quickly jumps ahead and pulls me back,
A push, a right, a pull, a sharp swerve.
I'm at the mercy of her harsh attack;
I find much pleasure in her endless curves.

As we turn hard, she screams a painful squeal.
We lose some speed, slow down, become complete.
The heated slipping rubber starts to peel.
We speed back up; she is so light and sweet.

The rush flows throughout me, fulfilling thirst.
She comes from way out west; her name's Desalle.
A strive to be ahead, to place in first,
My freedom, my fast and fun playful gal.

If you explore her, this will be your hint—
Outside awaits her light blue purplish tint.

Liza Graham

My Love

My love you are so handsome you see.
Everything about you is now a part of me.
Your eyes that when I gaze, a sky so blue.
All my hopes and dreams turn to you.

Your lips are so sweet I long to kiss.
Oh God, please tell me can this be bliss?
And if this bliss so true it shall be.
Then do your best to keep these feelings with me.

The secrets we had which we now tell each other.
I could never imagine feeling this for another.
You truly have a tremendously large heart.
It's the kind in which many would love to be a part.

Those arms so big and strong hold me tight.
Every day I pray for the long silence of night.

M. Kelly Lombardi

San Gimignano

I wonder, sometimes, if
I'll ever go back there,
to the quiet halls,
the simple room,
the rosemary scented air,
the soft slippered sounds of steps,
the cadence of chants,
the red-tiled roofs
rising up from the mists
of the golden fields, or
if I will carry it
enclosed inside
my memory,
as a pristine crystal sphere
holding the most
precious of
healing spring
raindrops.

Adrian Potter

Protocol

When your lady comes home late from work,
when she returns broken down
and you are the repairman,
when she stumbles in with tip money in her pocket
and exhaustion in her eyes,
you have to pamper her soul.

You must have the bathwater drawn
and ready, waiting for her body like a baptismal pool
that will transform her into what she was before
nine hours of dirty dishes and crabby customers
soldered stress into her psyche.

You have to wash off all the restaurant grease
from dry skin, rub away the tangled tension
from shoulder and back, lather down the ache
from every joint, shampoo the stench of labor loose
from her hair, rub bliss and beauty
into what is callused and cracked,
tender and tired, furrowed and frustrated.

You have to embrace your lady's face
between both of your hands, take breast and belly
and heel and hip and rinse slow with healing water,
and when she opens her eyes, reborn,
you let her know, smooth and confident,
how a man mended her
back into woman again.

Contributors

Lana Hechtman Ayers grew up in Queens, New York and now divides her time between Washington and New Hampshire. She holds an MFA in Poetry from New England College. She is an accomplished poet; her work appears in many national publications, including Slant, *The Bitter Oleander*, and *Cider Press Review*.

When not writing or scratching out a living, **Anne Bauer** drives her poet husband, their two charming and talented children, and a spoiled dog around Montana in a mini-van. Her previous fiction has appeared in flashquake, *Pindeldyboz, Kaleidowhirl, Change of Seasons* anthology, *Staccato*, and others. She plans to receive her MFA in Creative Writing from Vermont College in July.

CL Bledsoe has work in over a hundred journals including *Nimrod, Clackamas, The Potomac Review, Margie* and *The Arkansas Review*. He was recently nominated for a Pushcart. His book ANTHEM is forthcoming from Cervena Barva Press in 2007.

Robin M Buehler is a journalist in southern NJ. Her work has appeared in print and online publications.

Susan Deer Cloud is a writer of Eastern Blackfoot/Seneca /Mohawk heritage whose poems have appeared in *Sister Nations, Prairie Schooner*, and *Shenandoah*, among other journals. She has received First Prize in the Allen Ginsberg Poetry Competition and was a recipient of a New York State Foundation of the Arts fellowship.

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 the fiction editor of *Folio: A Literary Journal at American University*. Her work has appeared multiple sources including *The Washington Post*, feminist news journal *Off Our Backs*, and the Entertainment Monthly *On Tap.*

Ray Harrington is a second year English Major at Husson College and a graduate of The New England School of Communications. He is also a Resident Assistant on campus and a proud Brother of Mu Sigma Chi Fraternity. His passion in life is writing, followed closely by playing the guitar. Ray also has a self-admitted problem with writing about himself in the third person. In addition, he is a member of the acoustic comedy duo, Travesty In Training.

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