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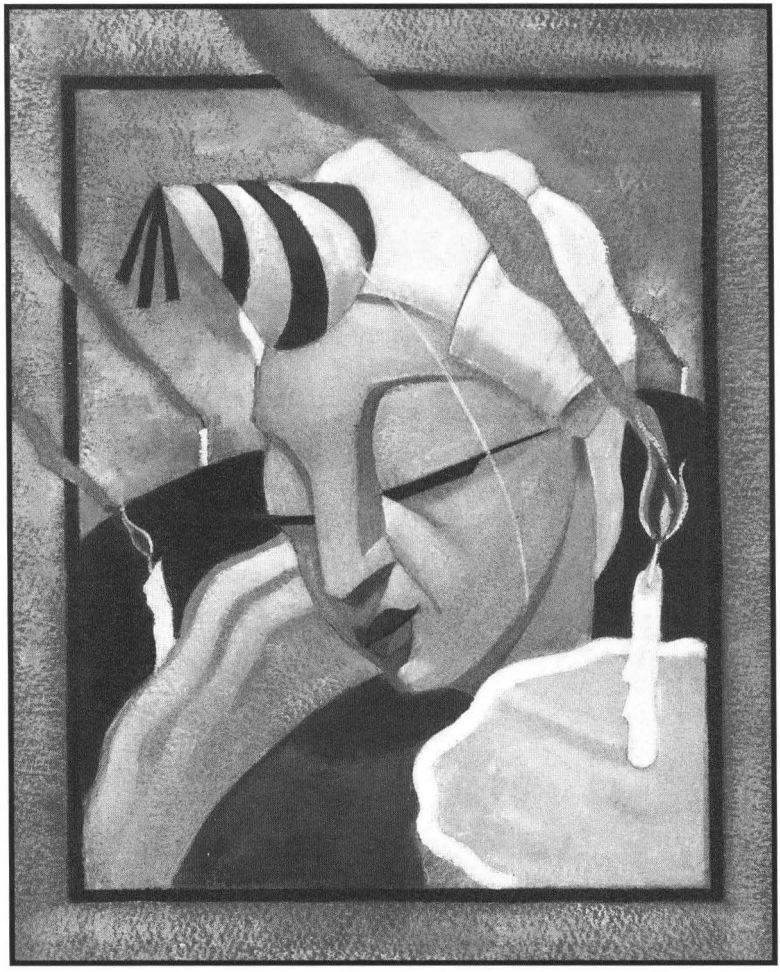


Brett Helquist

On Her Birthday

by Julie K. Curtis

Yesterday was my mother's birthday. I thought of it fleetingly all day long—in the quiet moments between worrying about my math assignment and the midterm paper in my modern lit class. I meant all along to get a card, write it, and send it. That's what I've done every year for six years, when I was last home for her birthday.

The truth of it is that usually I send the card late. I let a couple of days or a week pass of those in-between-the-moment reminders. Finally, I search for a card that's blank inside and elegant and unusual outside, and I spend another day contemplating what to write on it. Then I do write in the card and send it; a few days later I call on my dad's calling card to tell her that I love her, even though I forgot to send the card in time.

It isn't something my mother expects—the card, I mean. She doesn't even expect the phone call. For her, birthdays aren't such welcome time markers anymore. They aren't exact, or quite as valid, somehow. I remember someone asking her how old she was in the year she turned forty-nine. "Fifty," she answered. Later I asked her why she'd said that. "To get used to saying it next year," she told me.

I didn't fully understand her reasoning then, and I'm not sure I do now. But I do miss sharing birthdays with her. We were both born in September, and from the time I was old enough to realize that other people besides me have birthdays, I was privately quite proud of having my birthday in the same month as my mother.

Because there are five children in our family, I always made a great deal of anything that might distinguish me from my siblings, that might draw me especially close to our beloved mother. So we had this affinity for each other, I thought then.

Now our "affinity" is something I'm beginning to understand as a young woman—the affinity of womanhood, of nurturing, of the organic and spiritual growth process. It's wrapped up in these abstractions, but really it traces back to a stunning moment in my life, the moment I realized that my mother bore me. Out of her womb and blood she bore me. Out of her body and soul. In biology class I was watching that film, "The Miracle of Life," and I saw a woman giving birth. It was bloody. It was painful. Birth ripped her apart, but she bore it willingly. Then it was my mother, and I was the little wrinkled child emerging into life.

Not long ago I was visiting the city of my birth, up on a hill looking down upon it. That city always makes me brood at least a little bit—something of my organic beginnings there, I guess. From above I wondered which building was my birthplace. I couldn't pick it out, but somehow felt I should have been able to, even though I haven't lived in that city for twenty-one years. Once I asked someone to point the building out. At the time I thought I would always remember, but many things have come between me and that day.

There is a year when birthdays stop being so celebratory because other days become more significant markers of one's life. I think my mother's lying about her age has to do with this. I think I'm beginning to feel it too. My birthday is no longer the holiday second only to Christmas; it isn't so important as it was when I was small. But as I grow older, even Christmas isn't always one of my time-marking days. One begins to mark the years with other events: "the day I graduated," "the day I married him," "the day she died," "the day he was born." I mark not my own first beginning so much

as the second and third beginnings of my life and the anniversaries of the events of those I love. In fact, my own birthday consisted only of my brother stealing me off to dinner at an Italian restaurant, and my postponing my homework until the next day—not so momentous at all.

Each day brings its prospects of a new beginning, a new birthday. Each day has its turn of events, its new balance or imbalance. Each day can be a beginning or an ending. It's exhausting to think how much change and variation this implies for our lives. But it's beautiful, too.

The British poet Matthew Arnold wrote, "We live between two worlds, one dying, and the other powerless to be born." When I first heard this quotation, it stopped me dead, because I was experiencing just the sort of interworldly death and birth that Arnold describes. I had just returned from Hungary, where I spent eighteen months as a missionary. I was struggling to re-adapt myself to family life at my parents' home, then to social life and academics when I returned to college for my last year of undergraduate study. I was trying to find again a life I'd been absent from for a long time.

During that late summer and early autumn, I felt exquisitely the death and birth of those parts of myself, those worlds. I had lost the well-defined sense of purpose that missionary service brought me, and I searched in vain for the strong motivating purposes that had directed my life before my mission. Self-consciously, I reminisced about my missionary experiences, as I was painfully and guiltily aware that they were my only frame of reference, my only familiarity. I couldn't go back, and yet I didn't know how to move forward. At the time I thought I was supposed to rid myself of the old world and immerse myself in the new. But that wasn't working very well; I couldn't simply divorce myself from my other half. Arnold's words made me realize something I hadn't imagined before: you never quite leave, and yet you never really arrive. In limbo, that means, the times between.

But it isn't so nondirectional as all that. It isn't simply floating. Rather, it's the wayfaring, the journey that takes you through the worlds, but you're never allowed to simply stop and settle. Not quite.

Wayfarers have different birthdays, and many of them. Reincarnation is a fact of life, with each new phase and fancy. I felt like I was dying that day those years ago, leaving home openly with tears, knowing that my parents wouldn't live there when I returned. I died when I said good-byes to my most-beloveds and got on a plane to Hungary. Again, when I returned, I felt my funeral. My countenance wore black those first days, and I saw nothing. But each time I found a new birthday—January ninth, March fifteenth, September sixteenth, July eighth. You have to be born again, although that hurts too.

There is pain in birth. They say time heals. They say when the joy comes, you forget. My friend Krista told me, "But I didn't forget the pain. When they're sewing up three layers of me and the epidural didn't take, it hurts. When they put her into my arms, I didn't forget like they said I would. I loved her, yes, but I didn't forget."

I don't think you forget. The pain passes, though, and the triumph of birth comes when you know you'll live on. The pain passes the same way the pain of an ended love affair ends—when you realize that you will someday love another person just as much; when the uncertainty of "Shall I ever love again?" is answered in the heart. It's the wayfaring passage from world to world. It's the miracle of life all over again.

So as we are wayfaring between two worlds, the old world lingers and the new has yet to be explored. The dazzling beauty is in the array of choices they afford. Even the simplest things are full of rich meaning. Take me, as I stumble between languages and cultures. I read the word *hold*, and I can't for some moments decide whether to choose the English meaning, "keep," or the Hungarian

meaning, "moon." Each sends me into a sweet reverie. This is life between two worlds: one dying, yes, but it will never die completely, just as the other will never be completely born. I will never wholly belong to either, and so I will never wholly lose either. We need not refer to simply one death or one birth. We are wayfarers. We have many.

Until the end come our birthdays: birth-of-era-days, birth-of-love-days, birth-of-faith-days, birth-of-birth-days. But even beyond the end, we continue. My grandfather died some years ago, but my first Sunday in October is always his day, anniversary of the tearful morning when I knew he had passed, a birth-of-death-day. People have a way of living on.

For my birthday six years ago my mother sent a tape of children's songs by the Simon sisters, a tape I loved as a child. Now I'm thinking of the last verse of the last song:

> "I love you 'til Heaven rips the stars from his coat,
> And the moon rows away in a glass-bottomed boat . . .
> And I love you as long as the furrow of a plow,
> And so ever is ever, and ever is now."

It is a most fitting end to a declaration of love: the cosmic, organic, and spiritual dimensions of love—and not just of love, but of life.

That we love is why we are born, and why we live, and why some live on. Love has to be this sort of holistic conception, for it is the substance of life, just as the absence of love is life's emptiness. Love is the continuity that paves the wayfarer's road; one can't help following one's deepest heart.

As I wayfare along my chosen path, I carry threads and ribbons and banners declaring my travels. These mementos bind my wounded spirits and trace my wanton loves. They are my birthright, my continual inheritance. They are my reminder that births and deaths are temporal parts of a spiritual world.

My Aunt Tina, my mother's sister, wants to carry a sign that reads, "The world begins tomorrow," as opposed to its ending. "Every day we're beginning again," she says. "People ought to realize that." Someday I'll join her and we'll picket the sidewalks in the city of my birth. People really ought to know.

And, of course, happy birthday, Mother.

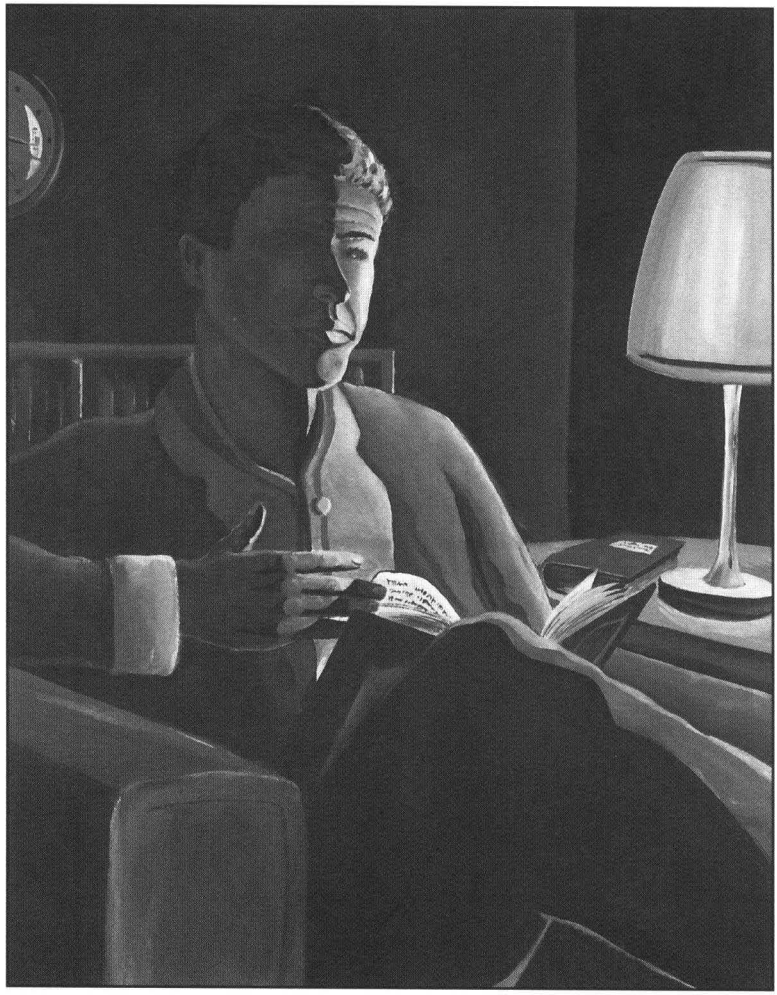
Two Holidays

For Brigham

by Mary Lynn Bahr

You spent an hour
thinning cotton through the branches
for Kleenex ghosts with blotted eyes
and the yarn and paper witches
who perch like blossoms
on the knuckles of your tree.
You filled the kitchen windows
with cardboard cats and pumpkins
and asked me
should you tape the extras
on the closet doors?

You sat on the linoleum
untangling strings of lights
to replace two dead bulbs.
You strung fat, blinking "V"s
between the porch rails,
wrapping cord to metal
with twist-ties. Tonight
as soon as it was dark
you asked me
should you turn them on?



Carson Davidson

Dad's Stride

by Sterling Augustine

Dad quietly turns the light in the living room on to its lowest setting. I'm sure he hopes that no one knows he's awake; he hates disturbing us. There's no big problem that keeps Dad up tonight; he just doesn't need the sleep. So he sits in his easy chair and reads.

Someone catching Dad awake at 3:00 a.m. would spoil his ritual, his trance-like engrossment in his latest book. He finds contentment in the solitude of his private insomnia, a mix of tranquillity and almost religious isolation—a solitude that presents itself at our home only in the middle of the night. I watch the living room light seep under my bedroom door.

Home between semesters, I have been awake with Dad for the past few nights. And even though I'm still recovering from finals' long nights, like Dad, I don't need the sleep. In fact, if he weren't already up, I would pad around the house, trying not to disturb anyone and enjoying the quiet. I too am a little embarrassed when someone finds me in the living room at 3 a.m. for no better reason than I couldn't sleep.

Our sleepless nights coincide often. More, I'm sure, than either of us knows. Through some undiscussed—even unconscious—unilateral agreement, I don't disturb him. And I imagine he knows not to bother me. He probably lies in his bed, sensing the light seeping under his door, wondering what keeps his son awake. In this way we share our sleepless nights.

Dad never taught me to enjoy those dark hours spent reading or thinking, but I do. I certainly couldn't have learned this habit by example, because with any interruption Dad's ritual ends, and he turns from savant pouring over some mystic tome into accommodating Father, concerned that he has disturbed someone's sleep. Yet I do know how he feels during these late hours because I know how *I* feel.

Although Dad would deny it, eight children strain the man reluctant to get married. He wasn't sure that he could live with another person. Mother persuaded him otherwise. He's glad she did, but the hermit in him misses the days he worked for the forest service, living alone in the woods for weeks at a time.

When he's in a sagacious mood, he tells stories of those summers in the woods, sounding like he was on Walden Pond. Sometimes he tells about the miles he walked checking his string of traps near Mansfield, Ohio, when he was fourteen. This story he told me by letter: "When I was about Sam's age, I used to go down to the stream behind our house (about four miles away) and look for different shaped stones or anything that was special and caught my eye. I would sometimes (more often than not) walk for miles (10-15 miles) just looking."

Even now, forty-five years later, Dad walks to think, looking for what Annie Dillard calls "pennies." There are lots of things to see, unwrapped gifts and free surprises. The world is fairly studded and strewn with pennies cast broadside from a generous hand. But—and this is the point—who gets excited by a mere penny? . . . But if you cultivate a healthy poverty and simplicity, so that finding a penny will literally make your day, then, since the world is in fact planted with pennies, you have with your poverty bought a lifetime of days. Dad finds these "unwrapped gifts and free surprises" wherever he goes.

When I was ten, my family took a trip to the Oregon coast. About five miles of sand-dunes separated our campground and the

beach. One morning as we played on the sand dunes, we kids decided to walk to the beach, following a path that Dad had walked earlier that day. We made it about halfway before turning back, bringing home the usual assortment of shells, driftwood, and children's treasures—pennies.

We didn't see Dad, even from the highest dunes, until he arrived at camp late that afternoon. Not only had he walked all the way to the beach, he had also walked along the beach several miles, where he found several teenagers driving dune buggies. He stopped and talked to them. Then my dad convinced a nineteen-year-old hippie into driving him home. I can only smile thinking of a dilapidated dune buggy catching air off some enormous sand dune and my college-professor dad grinning and holding onto his battered hat. A penny indeed.

I don't have my father's eye for pennies. I haven't cultivated a healthy poverty the way he has through his contemplative walks. And I can't remember ever taking one of those walks with him. He's never invited me—and I've never thought to ask. I'm not sure he knows when he's about to take one.

Neither do I. Like that day last summer when my philosophy class finished early. I got on my motorcycle to drive home and nearly reached the end of Hobble Creek Canyon before I realized that I was driving aimlessly, enjoying the solitude, engrossed in thought and gazing at the fire the sun splashed against the canyon walls. In that canyon I found a penny—another part of me so like my Father, my version of his long walks.

Tonight Dad looks for pennies in the small pool of light illuminating his book. He sits in the living room, the light warming the darkness. I wonder what he reads tonight. Perhaps a book my sister Kif gave him last week, Hermann Hesse's *Siddharthe.* His walks have given him a taste for deep thought found only in books about the human condition. Other topics don't have the depth of a long walk.

Dad reads five or six books at a time, either checking a book out from the library or choosing one from the shelf in his study: *The Way of the Sufi, The Man who Discovered the Secrets of the Universe, The Dancing Wu Li Masters,* and *The Collected Works of Leo Tolstoi.*

When I lived at home, Dad would read aloud from those books while sitting in his easy chair. I would lay luxuriously on the soft floor with the house entirely dark, except for the light from the same lamp he reads by tonight. I would fall half asleep soothed by Dad's resonant voice and Tolstoi's story of the Bishop and the three hermits. They saw the hermits coming along hand in hand, and the two outer ones beckoning the ship to stop. All three were gliding along upon the water without moving their feet.

He seemed to invent the text each time he read it—his voice owning the story completely, his words slowly overflowing from a deep well of eloquence that he rarely lets us see. His deliberate nature serves Russian diction well. Not even a pause on words like *desyatina* and *rozgovieni.* The cold steppes, the small huts, and the Russian peasants' austere lives materialize clearly in my mind as I remember him reading. If I were ever to direct a movie, I would take the script home, find Dad sitting in his chair one evening, stretch out on the floor, and have Dad read me that script by the light of that same lamp. I would then know exactly how to give the script life.

Reading out loud is troublesome for me. After about five minutes my head grows light, and I have to stop to breathe. But I do have a section of mystic books on my bookshelf. *Dubliners, The Prophet,* and *The Brothers Karamazov*—a book I read during my freshman year. While everyone else struggled through three-page paragraphs with names like Smerdyakov and Ilyusha, *The Brothers* kept me from feeling homesick. At the really hard parts, I would stretch out on the floor and listen for Dad's voice.

In all, Dad may have sent me five letters before I turned twenty-one, even though I moved out of the house when I was sixteen. In almost every letter he has ever written me, he has included a quote,

a poem, or some idea that he had stored away, waiting to share with someone when the time was right. He fills his letters to me with musings he almost never mentions in person: quotes in Latin, thoughts on *The Screwtape Letters*, explanations of Hesse's *Demaine*. He tells me of his love in passionate, almost painful terms by letter. Face to face, he limits them to the simple "I love you."

Like him, I enjoy giving away pennies. I always send my letters with a poem or at least a brief quote. Kipling's "L'Envoi"; Emerson saying "Rings and other jewels are not gifts but apologies for gifts"; or something from Steinbeck's *Travels with Charlie*. Like my father, I express my feelings much better in pen and ink than in conversation.

I have never tried to be just like my father, and Dad has never tried to mold me in his image. When I tell him I want to be a professor he warns me not to choose his career. But sometimes I stumble on another similarity and surprise myself. During the past few years I even outgrew modern music and now covet Dad's collection of original jazz piano recordings. And although we have many differences, they only thinly cover all the traits that father passes to son. Traits that he imparts more through proximity than through teaching. Traits acquired on the long walks looking for pennies that we both take alone. And while I may not be walking in his footsteps, it seems I have his stride.

Halloran Pass

by Joanna Brooks

Eight p.m. in a high desert diner,
smacked up waitresses triple jump
to the call of coffee cups.

Now, for the hunger that a couple
cups of mud couldn't cure. We eat.
You—grits and biscuits, redmeat.
Me—nothing, I'm fine ma'am,
Just watching this quiet, kind-eyed man.

Him? He's good to still my hands.
Thought he was it. Hundreds of miles
into the desert now. I shake
holding the hot white cup. Give up?
I can't go back. I must want

Nothing. Keep my mouth shut this time.
Though I'm a fine trader, not trinkets enough—
human hearts, roadside silver, myrrh from Muslim men,
oranges from children perched predatory
on speedbumps in a hundred small towns across the Yucatan.

What do I want? More cream and sugar, please.
Another cup; we leave into a night
as tense as turquoise.

Back at eighty miles an hour,
sky turns to ash at its edges,
smudges the lines of the road.
The radio scratches old words
into the sky with a jag of glass:
I want you to want me.

Engine's too hot—we stop near Apex Caliente;
the semi-precious sky settles such weight
on the small brown mountains. Your chest,
the sand move same to my indiscriminate tastes.
We stay the night, holding each other to pass time
in the Valley of Fire.

Please Repeat The Renaissance

by Saundra Cindrich

It seems
to me, Michelangelo,
that you could have waited
to paint your great Sistine Chapel
until now.

On good days naked I can see
myself touching God's finger
on a ceiling of dimpled thighs and ample bellies.

On good days naked I can hear
the murmur of plump defiance
as my delicate wings
propel me beyond gravity
into mounds of ice cream clouds.

On good days naked I can feel
the fall
of jealous eyes upon my body's inheritance—
generations of genes
deposited faithfully
in my round luxuriant self—
laid back and chosen
by you for the splendid ceiling
of your Sistine Chapel.

It seems
to me, Michelangelo,
that you should have waited
for me.
My sufflated body on your ceiling
would have been the envy
of even Raphael's
Graces.

Margaret Thompson

Raconteur

by Shauna Lee Eddy

Raconteur, he says.

Because I like words, he says *raconteur* expecting me to know. I don't, and this amuses him. He laughs as he eats the black beans and rice on his plate. Next to the salad, I like the beans and rice best. The Torch's Bar-B-Q chicken isn't all I expected.

Raconteur has become his game of withholding, and he laughs at his own game.

I automatically laugh with him because he has always been funny. But I stop laughing because now I understand. It is funny not because it is a joke; it is funny because it is a game. I wonder if everything I've laughed at before has also been a game. Only later do I learn *raconteur* means storyteller.

I am surprised that he and I have become friends. He brings the stories he writes to my house. I wonder why he tells me these stories. Rather than ask, I silence my curiosity; I enjoy the time and the stories.

His story intrigues and warms me. I ask questions and I listen to the many stories that constitute his story. These stories, they are Cardstonisms—he knows them all and tells me some. For some reason I laugh hardest at "Saaaaaahh." He and his friends say this when something is silly—too silly to be laughed at, really. I think it is funny. When he is with his friends and I am watching, they tell the same Cardston stories over and over. Laughing deep belly laughs every time.

I say, You should record these stories; you are a great storyteller. We are lounging in my bedroom when I tell him this. We are laying side by side on the bed. Not touching. He says, You know everything there is to know about me now; you record them.

He turns over on his stomach and continues to tell stories.

This time the stories are about Holland—about the old man he met there. And he tells me the story about his accident there. It was the only time he's every really been sick.

Another night it is elementary schools. He tells me how much the Black Foot Indian children from the reservation just outside Cardston touch him—how much their situation saddens him. He helps them and he reads to them. Because we saw *Dances with Wolves*, he tells me these stories as he drives his tan Jimmy 4X4 to my house.

While he tells me the Indian stories, I think I want to tell him my story as he tells me his—meshing and intertwining. I try. He listens and watches, inevitably writing bits and pieces. His voice feels familiar, natural. Does he understand his voice harmonizes with mine? Does he know he writes part of my story? I am nervous. I can't let him know; if he knows he may take his voice away.

I say to my far-off self, Of course you are nervous—there has never been reason to trust. This is different. I promise.

Why do I always tell myself it will be different? My friends say they do the same thing. I wonder why.

Sunday night in Denny's. ZZZZZZ: Vulcan mind meld, he says over hash browns and ice-cream. We are talking about Italian cinema. I laugh, taking hope and pleasure in our connection, in our melding. Part of me is *really* happy. I think it is enough of me.

Soon, I let the warmth of him envelop me.

Another night, I laugh my real laugh—my laugh-from-the-gut-laugh—with little hesitation. We are sitting on the couch in my living room watching TV—probably CNN Sports. We always watch that now.

He winks at me from under his red corduroy cap. A hockey cap. I don't know hockey. I have never even seen part of one game. But that's okay, he says. He smiles at me from under this same cap. I tell him I like his smile and he smiles more. We run about the living room taking and giving the basketball. In a tumble, I bruise my right knee. I don't care. He loves basketball.

It is his smile that makes me let go of fear a few weeks later. I think it is time to let go. I give fear to him to keep—to keep from me. I do not give it as I would give a gift. It is not a gift, in the usual gift sense. My trust is the gift, but fear is larger right now. Fear is trust's packaging. I think he hides fear from me. I hope he puts fear in a safe place I cannot ever find.

But he does not understand what I have done with fear. And I do not tell him. I want him to know. But he does not know how much fear I have entrusted to him. This leaves fear angry and alone. My fear fights back with more power than I knew it had.

Sometimes we drive around in the Jimmy 4x4. One Wednesday night he can tell I am nervous; he doesn't say anything—but he senses it. It makes him nervous, but out of deference to my feelings he is silent. Now we are both nervous: I am eternally the architect of walls. They are nice, elaborate; sometimes they have graffiti inscribed, sometimes porcelain; sometimes they inscribe me; but always they are thick and cold.

We are watching TV one Friday night in December after eating at Carousel. At first, it is normal. We are watching CNN Sports. Then he turns off the TV set to talk.

This he has never done.

Nothing, not even my own body, seems near me. Fragmentation. I can't touch, see, or hear anything clearly. Fuzz. That's what I sense. I see, hear, feel, and say fuzz. When I am like this, people think I am talking to them, touching them. But I can't hear or feel them or me. I am on automatic pilot; I am not really there or anywhere. I am far away.

He speaks of eroticism, of intimacy—its elusivity. He says, Intimacy never makes sense. You can't determine who you will be intimate with. It just happens or doesn't happen. I think he is explaining why, though we spend all our time together, we will never really spend all our time together. He thinks I expect something more than he expects. In a way, it is true. I don't expect more. But I want more.

He speaks of loneliness and pain. As if I don't understand. As if I don't know them more intimately than he does. As if I didn't hand them (I can do this because they are parts of me) to him for my safekeeping. Maybe they are new to him and he wants to tell me. But I already know. Maybe in the newness he dropped them and they came back to me for real safekeeping. Or maybe he already knows, too, and is giving them back to me because he already has too much. There are no more hiding places.

He speaks and his words float beyond me. I can't find them; I don't hear them. I just see him giving them to me. No. I see him launching them at me. Now he is distant enough to launch words in my direction.

I don't see some of them, and they sneak up at erratic intervals. I feel them and they hurt. I can't keep track of them. Too many come at me for me to watch all of them. I think I will cry, but they keep coming.

Crying isn't enough. Crying isn't what fear demands. Crying is too easy, says fear. My tears stop trying to come and the pain penetrates fully. Only then do the words stop coming. Because pain has penetrated, the words stop surprising me—they lose their significance.

As his words fade, everything (actually *THE* big thing that controls all else) comes back, more horrifying because I know I will tell him—because I trust him enough to tell him. I feel I must tell him if I trust him—if we are going to ever be "we."

I can see him talking to me, but I don't know what he is saying.

To console myself amidst his words, I tell myself that I won't *really* tell him. I will not tell him of the white-haired man in the dusty blue overalls who first had his way with me. I won't mention the weight, the smells. I won't tell him I was nine and that I have been alone ever since. I will not tell him that my nine-year-old self is still there. I will not tell him how blue overalls make her tremble, even though I know differently. Blue overalls can hurt her—they do hurt her. Every night. Nor will I tell him about the greasy black hair and the foreign sounds at sixteen. I won't tell him that in a Lisbon city park these things also had their way. I will not tell him I am still sixteen—the me who is sixteen is terrified of travel, of change, and of daylight and parks.

I think that telling him even one detail would be too much. I think telling him all would kill him. He is too sensitive for that horror. I will protect him from the harsh reality, but I will let him know reality. I am too sensitive, too. But I am no longer. Only fragments of me exist. Independently—apart from each other, only occasionally bumping into one another. And it is my parts that will protect him.

I will tell him. Not the details. But I will tell him.

Before I tell him, we are opposite each other. He has just turned off the TV.

Because he asks, I try to tell him about what I want to do and what I think I must do. I say, You see, I *have* to go out there and help them—those who are like me. But I am too afraid. This fear makes me a failure.

He doesn't respond. He is silent, which makes me more nervous. He is never silent like that. Finally he says, you have an irrational fear. I know you up to that fear, but beyond that I do not know you until you tell me about this fear.

I tell him.

And I think that in his sensitivity he understands. I think I have found someone who understands. I think, This me is no longer

alone. I think, I can come back. I think, I can end this schizophrenia, this fragmentation, of I and me and my many parts. Because of this, I relax. I break down—almost in a frenzy—the thick wall I have so carefully crafted. Frantically, I pull and tug at the bricks.

Perhaps in my frenzy I didn't really see.

You can make a difference here—for those really like you, he says.

Don't give up hope, he says.

I like hearing this from him. I think he understands me. (But now he looks at me oddly when the topic comes up—and he always brings it up. What can this mean?)

Don't give up hope, he says again.

But he takes my hope with him. We exchange hope and fear. Does he know this?

And he has lost *me*. He now talks to and relies on the me who is not me. Does he know *this*?

Enough, enough, enough. Now I will just listen.

Because telling him has made all the difference, I take refuge in listening, in an outward silence. I pull back from the language that is not me. Inside, I attach myself to music. Not to music generally. There is no swelling symphony of sound. Nothing that dramatic. It is a deceptively simple piece I hear in my gut.

Rachmaninoff wrote this piece that speaks to me as no other music speaks to me. He calls it *Vocalise*. Though *vocalise* is not even a word in English, it is powerful; maybe it is even more powerful than fear is. *Vocalise* in French means voice exercise; however, Rachmaninoff's *Vocalise* is a voice ascending and descending scales, but the scales are turned upside down, twisted, set aright, changed, undermined, and presented. And it is piano music, notes, intertwining with the voice and its scales.

The beauty of *Vocalise* begins to encompass me, making me part of its art. I think he is talking to me, but I cannot tell. Maybe I am even talking to him. But I only know *Vocalise* right now. *Vocalise*

captures my pain and the pain becomes *Vocalise*. But it does not become an exercise. It runs too deeply for mere exercise. *Vocalise* becomes notes without words—a voice no one can understand. It becomes notes that penetrate and hurt like his words. I both want to hear and don't want to hear it more. It is me. Its fragments are my fragments. It is the me that hurts and cries. It *is* me. I try to take pleasure in knowing me. I hear it again. Over and over. It is inevitable.

I am just listening now. No, I am doing more than just listening. We are braiding—this music and I.

The voice and the notes intertwine, mix, move in and out of each other—almost like a game, but too connected to really be a game. The intertwining, the mixing and moving is smooth. Right now it is languid. Because it has made me part of its art, because it has encompassed me, I complete the braid of voice, notes and me: *Vocalisesque*. We move in and out, up and down, penetrating and then leaving behind everything but ourselves.

I am sitting on the couch we used to share. He is sitting on the tan chair across from me. The TV is off. We talk. Actually, he talks.

He cries and I believe in his soul. Maybe I even believe his soul.

I try to listen, I try to pay attention, but *Vocalise* pounds louder in my mind, forcing everything into the background. The notes use their power and take over. I let them enter. They are familiar. We begin the braid within me now. The languid movement increases in tempo. My fragmented soul weaves its way in and out of the notes and the voice.

He is still talking about intimacy. I wish he were Sixo and would say, "It's good, you know, when you got a woman who is a friend of your mind." I wish he would believe that. Though it is true, it will disappear before it reaches his mind. I wish that he would believe these words so that he would say them.

But that is fiction. The world-as-it-should-but-never-will-be.

He says, Everyone needs intimacy, but intimacy isn't right

between everyone. He means, You are not attractive enough for me. Or maybe he even means, You are not attractive at all to me. I wonder if telling him what I have told him makes it this way. But it is definitely an issue of attraction.

I wonder how women might speak of being and failing to be sex objects. I wonder why we haven't really tried to honestly tell our stories of failure and success. The truth of our stories has never been told—the truth of our stories remains shrouded. We don't speak of it as women. Women, if they spoke of it as women, would not allow it, would become indignant. But we don't speak of it as women. We only feel it. I think if we spoke of it, if we told our stories, we would no longer fail. But we continue to fail—even in our success, we fail. But we fail more in our failures.

Sex objects. Pathetically, wrongly, but undeniably, my life is reduced to objectivity of the sexual sort. I fail, undeniably, inevitably, here. No success can compensate for failure of objectivity of the sexual sort. The mind merely accessorizes objectivity of the sexual sort. All minds are accessories. Well, all female minds are accessories. Male minds are the essence. Sometimes, the female mind is too loud and takes away from this brutal objectivity. Objectivity of the sexual sort, that is.

He is crying.

I don't want him to hurt, but mostly I don't want him to take any more of me with him. Ironically, I want fear back. He doesn't deserve it. He doesn't need to hurt. I can take his hurt and fit it to mine, add it to mine.

I tell myself, He hasn't hurt me; I have hurt me. I've decided I am the only one who can hurt me because I befriended fear. I have no option to believe otherwise. If other people can hurt me, they will. If it is fear, then I am part of it, and people have no control when I am paired with fear.

The weaving of my *Vocalisesque* braid enters the range between G below middle C and E above middle C. Minor sounds. The voice

opens, the notes plummet. My fragments race in and out, up and down.

I let go of imposed order, letting the invaders just speak, let them continue the braid: Who would you pick for me which one should I take out something must be wrong me I can tell she likes me he can tell I like him too I stayed awake all night thinking of sex it's an obsession my hand still smells like Susan I'm a physical person your hair—it's nice I like it I like it I like it it's beautiful you're cute with your hair like that sometimes you're really silly—can I say that? (you did) sure, I am silly sometimes can I come over tonight she's cute maybe my brain as accessory overstepped its bounds I can't find his words but I feel them they are more familiar than I am they become bitter-sweet

Talking like this—it helps, but it is not enough. It is musical, but it is not enough. Music can only approach—not reach—me now, unless it is *Vocalise*. It would seem that Rachmaninoff, a man, has taken over. He won't let anyone else near enough to help. He, too, laughs at his power. A musical game. Everything is a game to laugh at.

But Rachmaninoff doesn't control—he can't take over. I have heard *Vocalise* many times on many instruments. But it is not Rachmaninoff who controls: it is a woman's voice using his notes and intertwining with me that controls now. The braid equals power and control.

When I go home to Lakewood, the women at church say, I like your hair—it's cute. Now if you just lost weight, cleared up your face, hid your brain [maybe forever?], acted like a girl, dressed like a girl, and giggled like a girl, your life would be perfect; you would have a man.

Would that make my life perfect?

I am thinking about these women while he cries in his chair across from my couch. I am registering another failure in their goals for me.

I try to remember why he started crying.

The first thing I ever remember him saying to me is, I am deeply affected by your voice.

I am deeply affected that he heard my voice, because I did not think my voice would affect anyone. I think, he must hear the voice of my soul. This I like.

I remember the time he told me he liked my voice. I wanted to show some of my dinner guests my house, but he grabbed my arm and said, You have a nice voice. I didn't know what to say, so I said nothing. I responded with my eyes, but sometimes my eyes speak a different language and people don't understand.

I tried to say something, but I didn't say anything, just, Do you want to see my house? That isn't really anything. It is not something I would say if I were going to say something.

From his chair across from me, he says, I like you a lot.

He cries harder. I tremble more.

He says, I don't want to lose you. I rely on you for so much.

I want to rely on *him*. I have always thought friendship and reliance are mutual things. I think, since I want to rely on him, I have to rely on him.

And I try to rely on him.

I tell him.

I tell him about the men, I tell him about the pain. Still, I did not give him details. I try to hide that, even from myself.

It is after I tell him that he asks me, that he says, What do you think of me? I cannot answer first because I do not know how, and second because I cannot forget the dusty blue overalls and the greasy black hair.

He says, What are you thinking? What do you think of me?

I say, I think you are nice; I think you are wonderful . . .

No. That is not what I meant. That is not what I meant at all.

(It is, however, what he said. He said, What do you think of me?) I have to remind myself to keep myself.

I meant, What do you think of us?

He makes me make the first move. He forces it, though I don't think he meant it to be this way. How could he know? And I don't understand that I was forced until later. I can't answer because I am too afraid. No one has ever bothered to ask me before. I can't answer: I don't know how to talk—I forget all syllables, letters, and sounds. Something hidden deep answers. Something over which I have no control, but that takes over for me when I forget where I am. I am too busy trembling. I want to say, "Do you dare to eat a peach?" I am momentarily and slightly amused at my own allusion.

I begin the trembling, and this time I can't stop. I curl my legs up and try to wrap my arms around me. They don't go all the way around. In the stories he writes, he would probably explain my inability to hug myself with Physics. Physics is a subject very important to him, I think. Despite the laws of Physics, I *need* my arms to go all the way around. I hear *Vocalise* pounding stronger—penetrating deeper. The braiding stops, and I unite with the voice.

I need someone to hold me, even if it is me. I am the only one who will. Am I the only one who can? But I can't. I try as hard as I can, but I can't.

I suddenly feel more alone than I have ever felt outside of the night terrors—the night terrors of blue overalls and greasy hair. It is the same distance and muted sounds that surround, invade, and haunt, but this time they are stronger, distancing me even more. Fragmenting me even more. This loneliness lingers, echoing; it blends with the voice and notes of *Vocalise.* The more intricate braiding begins, accumulating more power in its intricacy.

I believe his tears. I really believe his tears.

But then he says, Thanks for an enlightening evening. What can he mean? Doesn't he know how I felt all along? What has been

revealed? What have *I* revealed? I cannot distinguish the revelations I have obviously made.

The me who is not me says, No, thank *you*.

For what? Why did I say that? Why did *I* thank *him*? Why did I say everything is okay when nothing is okay?

After the heart-to-heart in front of the silent TV, I tell my friends I still believe in him—I tell myself and I tell him. He cares. I know that he cares. But he cares his way. I do not know and I do not understand his way. I want to ask, but I am too afraid. He does not explain. Maybe he does not explain because he does not see the need to explain.

Because he tells me he doesn't want to hurt me, I tell him he can't hurt me because he doesn't want to. It is the last words we really say to each other. Everything else that comes later will be peripheral—a game we both engage in. I am good at this game. I know it well. All too well.

The next day, I think, Of course, I should be healed. I should encourage him in his womanizing fantasies; they are to be expected, they are normal and a friend would. I find this reasoning powerful.

Powerful enough that I try.

He drives my roommate to the airport. On the way, he tells her we are better friends after our heart-to-heart. Was his heart there? If I believe his tears, it was there. But then, if I believe his tears, my heart was there, too. My heart was there at first. But later, my heart was trembling, far from his.

Do I still believe his tears? Do his tears acknowledge my heart or his heart? I don't think it can be both. But I think I still believe his tears, though I don't know what they mean. I do not even know how or why I still believe. Do I believe because I think I am supposed to?

Two days later, he comes over to tell me about who he wants to seduce. I should be numb to his biting humor about sex, though he

knows I don't understand—though he now knows why I don't understand. He even knows why it not only confuses me, but also why it scares me and makes my nights worse. Though we continue our conversation, knowing silences him for a time. I have never seen him silent like that. I think it is because it hurts him that I am afraid. Is this why intimacy won't work?

Despite myself, despite my nights, I should play along. It is always expected by those who don't know. Sometimes it is expected more by those who do know. They think, Telling me should dismiss the pain, should dismiss fear; telling me, especially me, should be enough. Everything should be okay now. The fragments should be permanently in place now. They think, Even the cracks between the fragments should be healed—invisible.

Do they really believe this?

I should play along. I tell myself over and over: I should play along.

Raconteur.

The dreams, the night terrors, come back. They are more powerful. Because I told him? No. Inevitably it all becomes one again. I can never displace or decenter it because it *is* everything. I am alone, and I crouch.

Sometimes loneliness can't be explained. You can't say, I feel alone; I feel lonely. That is not what deep loneliness is. Deep loneliness comes when people are around you, even talking to you, but you can't be there—you are far away and can barely hear yourself. You definitely can't hear others. Just yourself. Barely.

The night terrors bring this loneliness: their loneliness that wanders around me, finding me at every turn. A loneliness that mutes the sounds I must hear to be with people, to be part of people, for people to be part of me. A loneliness that pushes everyone and everything away from me—so that they cannot hear this loneliness roaming and wandering inside of me.

My repetition of loneliness begins weaving through the *Vocalise* braid, making it even more intricate and powerful. I want someone

else to join this braid—to hear and feel its beauty—but they must know of the braid. And it is too hard for others to hear the footsteps I can barely hear.

At The Torch, we talk about loneliness. I think he understands, and this makes me sad.

Raconteur.

It is a deadly serious game we laugh at. It is a deadly serious game he has created. But I think it is only deadly for me. Despite the intricate braid I have weaved, it is deadly for me—maybe because he is part of the braid. For him, it is just a game to make you laugh—nothing more and nothing less.

Raconteur. Yes, he may be a *raconteur*, but he doesn't know this story, can't tell this story.

Raconteur.

He laughs.

To My Mother, Who Doesn't Like Feminists but Loves Me

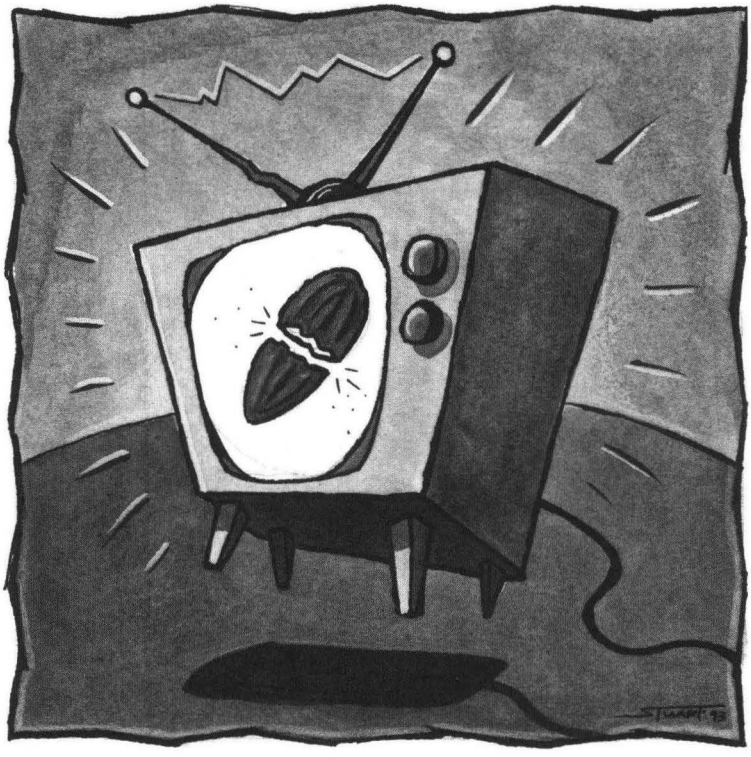
by Joanna Brooks

Mom, you should know
I'm now one of those,
a feminist.

Still recognizable,
though. I swear
I haven't butched
my hair, won't bring
some guitar-strumming
womyn home:
I still love men
too much, I know.

You told me those
feminists are hurt
along the way—
bruised bad fruit
left broke as is.

That's me, I find—
straight from your body
slightly out of my mind
like you.



Randy Stuart

Roasted Almonds

by William Powley

It was Dierdre's first day on her new job. It was Monday. She had spent the whole afternoon packing Florida oranges into cardboard boxes. She loved her job. She made seven dollars an hour. She was walking home to her husband, Ike, to tell him the good news. He would love her. She wanted that.

Dierdre walked near Miami Beach toward her apartment. Ike would be there waiting. She watched the jet surfers ride the waves. Girls popped off their bikinis as they lay chest down in the white sand.

She remembered her job. She could eat all the oranges she wanted during her breaks. She had eaten ten today.

"It's a nice day. It's a good day for a new job," she had said to her boss.

"It is the best day of a new career," he had replied.

Her job was not hard. But it was no easy task to organize oranges into a box.

"Thirty in each box," the boss had said.

Her responsibility was simple. She picked the firmest and ripest oranges from a large metal bin, attached a plastic sticker to the bright skin, and counted thirty, loading the oranges carefully. She sent the box down a black conveyer belt to where a lid would be stapled on.

Dierdre kept walking. Boys ran on the beach, played volleyball, drank Coors, and helped girls dry off with long white towels. She

was close to her apartment. She could see the large window which overlooked the bay.

Her husband, Ike, would be home from work. He had a steady job. He was construction worker. He built skyrise towers in Miami. He had spent his whole day walking the steel girders, a thousand feet above the ground.

"Man, it's hot," he would say to the foreman during lunch.

"Damn right," the foreman would answer.

Ike spent summers working as a lifeguard at the beach. He was careful to tan his body, oil, tan, and oil. He had helped save lives. He was in construction. He made money. He had met Dierdre on the beach patrol three years ago. They got married at the end of the summer.

In the shade of the orange trees Dierdre crossed the street where the apartment stood. She listened to the seagulls fly overhead. They were free. She was happy. Her new job will make her and Ike happy. She pushed the buzzer for the apartment. In a few seconds, it clicked open. Ike was home. She ran up the stairs.

The roasted almonds were in a round wooden bowl that was warm and smooth.

Ike liked to eat almonds when he watched Monday Night Football.

"How's the job?" Ike said, as Dierdre walked in.

"Good," she said. "Actually, great."

He savored the salt on his tongue and liked the edge it gave to the cold Coors. His fingers made damp, shining prints on the frosted glass as he put it down. The television glowed.

"Marino drops back to pass . . . it's complete at the thirty-two yard line. First down."

Ike tipped some more almonds into his cupped hand, glancing constantly from bowl to television screen.

Dierdre watched him. She could tell him later about her first day at work. She like to look at him even after three years of marriage. She enjoyed touching the contours of his face and watching the expressions change with every play on the television: his arms, his eyes, his mouth.

"The Dolphins are driving. They need a touchdown. It's crucial."

Ike's mouth was relaxed now, tiny particles of salt clinging to the hard edges of his upper lip. She experimented with her own sharp, pink tongue, running it across her lips, wondering how it would feel to lean over and lick his, then gently force it between his lips, to touch his teeth, his tongue. She looked quietly at his eyes, embarrassed, in case he was looking at her and could guess her thoughts. There was no need to worry. His forehead was creased with concentration as he watched every move on the flickering screen. He groped for his glass, transferring the nuts from his hand to his mouth.

"It's third down and twelve yards to go. The Bills will be in a nickel defense."

Dierdre giggled silently. She remembered the first time a boy had put his tongue in her mouth.

It was her first dance, her first kiss. She hadn't wanted to kiss him. She really didn't like him, but it seemed expected of her. Afterward she had gone to the restroom, feeling sick and violated, scrubbing her mouth with a paper towel, washing it with soap before she repaired the damage done to her lipstick.

Ike had laughed when she told him about it, after they were married, and she had been able to laugh too. Then he held her and kissed her and put his tongue in her mouth. They made love. She felt the weakness in her legs, the warming blood. She remembered it all. "I didn't know," she had wanted to tell him.

Ike's hands were slim and brown, curling gently around his supply of roasted almonds. She thought of taking his wrist,

uncurling his fingers over the bowl, emptying them, brushing them, placing them over her breast. He munched steadily. Watched. Exclaimed. Forgot her.

"Marino sets up behind center. He takes the snap. He drops back. The Bills come on a blitz . . ."

"I've changed a lot," she wanted to say, hating the upbringing that had made it so difficult for them to talk about sex, needs, or love. Maybe it was because she had been so shy and inexperienced that Ike didn't seem so keen anymore. "I'm sorry," she said silently, wanting to let him know she was ready to love him.

The magazines at her hairdresser's had shocked her at first. "How to love a man," she had read and didn't want to let anyone know what she was reading. But she kept turning the pages. The words excited her.

Dierdre looked at his lips again, at the sweet, deep corners, wanting them. He looked steadily at the mud-stained players in their helmets and shoulder gear.

" . . . over the middle . . . it's caught. Hill is at the fifteen, the ten, the five, and he's down at the three yard line. First and goal."

Automatically, she reached into the bowl, conscious of the fragmented smoothness, the clinging salt, took a handful, began to nibble, then suddenly became aware of Ike's eyes looking at her, cold with distaste.

"That's disgusting, you know."

"What is?"

"Putting your hand in the bowl."

"What do you mean?"

"You put the same hand up to your mouth, then dip it into the bowl again. A man doesn't feel like eating anymore. Couldn't you have tipped them into your hand like I do?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know."

She took a tissue. She wiped the salt from her hands and scrubbed the salt from her lips.

My Daughter's Sonogram

by Scott Calhoun

Your fingers, frail as drinking straws,
move toward the holes of your eyes:

already steady enough to grasp
your mouth, nose, and toes.

Although birdlike, your elbows
move like matchsticks in the womb.

The whiteness of your skull
floats across the screen—
a pale balloon.

And again, we see your fingers:
the narrow bones, white as moons.

And I think of the baby ring
my father purchased out of pawn for you,
its drop of turquoise, a bright pupil—
the band of silver, sliver of nail.

Bartered

by Nancy McBride

Soviet women wearing hats
lined with white rabbit fur that covers their ears
from the lies of poor media coverage
not broadcast by satellite or constellation,
sell the flannel sheets,
knotted, falling from Rapunzel's tower—
dripping like juice from rotted fruit.
Eclipsed knights nobly strive
to win the pillow joust
in cheap hotels with lots of vacancy
for dragons only.
Who was it
that exchanged his godly birthright
for a plastic bowl of beans?
Boston-baked or refried,
reused left-overs from bourgeoisie dinner parties—
diplomatic conversation for distinguished guests.

Welfare cheese goes great with crackers.
Gossips say the priests will flee
having pronounced death on newborn babes
aborted after the deadline.

Suzanne Gerhart

Another Spring

by Amy Harris

Something is wrong. It is blue—somewhere between navy and royal. A couple of teeth are missing, but it still works well. I have never paid so much attention to my comb before, but this morning it suddenly seems immensely important. Important because I can hear people in the kitchen talking, an alien sort of talking— hurried, hushed, and desperate. I have heard that talk somewhere before. I am only sixteen, but I have heard that kind of talking before.

Something is wrong. I leave the bathroom, taking the comb with me, and go into my parents' bedroom. Their room has a bigger mirror, and besides, it is farther away from the strange talking. I leave the bedroom and meet my sister in the hall. She says three words to me. Something is wrong.

A rock. There is a rock in my stomach, and it is growing, overtaking me, filling me with pain and anger. I can't stop it, and it finally comes out: I cry. Betsy hugs me and holds my hand. Funny, I don't remember hugging her for a long time, and I never remember her holding my hand. Why now? Something is wrong, something to do with those three words.

Somehow I have moved into the front room. Betsy is still in the bathroom. Dad and Mom and Alan and Susan are also in the front room. Where is Barbara? Strange, she should be here if Alan and Susan are. Then I remember, and the rock is back in my stomach. Barbara is the something that is wrong. Her name is one of those three words.

Tears, or their memories, hang in the air. Mom hugs me and holds my hand. But she can't make what's wrong go away. She knows that, so do I, but we keep hugging and holding hands. I am sitting, and she is standing over me. I can see her dress. It is black with some small white pattern. The pattern seems to be a cross between flowers and butterflies.

•••

The butterflies dance around the spring blossoms on the apricot tree. I love the smell of apricots in spring. I stare at the tree with its blizzard of flowers. I almost forget that I am playing "Hide and Seek." I remember to come back to the game. I know where my neighbor is hiding. I am just about to look behind the bush where she is hiding behind when I hear the honk. Our car comes speeding out the gravel driveway, Mom and Dad in the front with Barbara in the back. The car heads down the road and quickly moves out of sight. I move towards the bush again.

Someone is yelling my name. It is my sister, Deborah. She tells me to come inside for the night. She has been crying and she is upset. She's hardly ever upset.

The next day is tense at home. There are hushed conversations. Everybody is edgy, except for Barbara because she isn't home. I know why she isn't here: too many pills. Take too many pills, trying to end it all and going to the hospital. Mom and Dad tell me about Barbara's being in the hospital—too many pills. Only sixteen and too many pills.

•••

Sixteen. I'll be sixteen this fall. I was ten when I played "Hide and Seek." I am sixteen now, and I'm not playing anything. It's spring again, but there are no apricot blossoms. There's no apricot

tree anymore. We moved away from that tree and its flowers. I don't want apricot blossoms after those three words: "Barbara shot herself." Three words, six syllables. Six syllables that won't stop echoing: "Barbara shot herself . . . Barbara shot herself . . . Barbara shot herself." I can still hear those three words. They won't stop echoing.

•••

I hear the nurse's footfalls echoing off the walls of the intensive care unit. Her white shoes on the white floor under the white ceiling. Too much white. Not enough color. Not enough life. I'm in Barbara's room now. I am with Dad and Susan. Susan is crying. She talks to Barbara. Barbara can't hear. Maybe she won't hear. Susan still cries. She takes Barbara's hand and squeezes it. I look at Barbara's hand. She needs to clip her nails. She needs to wash her fingers. There is blood on the cuticles. Blood. I can't see the blood anymore for my tears. Dad is silent and controlled. He takes my hand, and we leave the room. We are walking down the hall. We've left the white behind. Now we are on light brown carpet. We go to the waiting room. He squeezes my hand and leaves. I can see the wallpaper. It has flowers on it. A few hours ago I liked flowers. Now there are too many of them, too many flowers, and it is too cold. The heater must be broken. It is so cold in here.

•••

It is still cold. I started feeling cold four days ago, and I am still cold. Dad is talking. It's cold, but the chill isn't coming from the room. I'm cold, but tears are hot on my cheeks. I can see Barbara's hand through them. She gestures towards the Kleenex box across the room. Dad keeps talking. I still have tears, but I can see the box. It is covered with flowers and butterflies. I don't want to think about

flowers and butterflies. I look at her hand again. I try to touch it; I just can't. I once wanted to be just like her, and now I can't even hold her hand.

•••

"I want to be just like her."

I'm looking up at Deborah and Susan. They are putting on makeup and brushing their hair. I can feel the cool white tile of the rim of the bathtub beneath my hands and the rich purple rug at my feet. We are getting ready for a birthday celebration. Barbara's birthday celebration. She is thirteen today. I tell Deborah and Susan that although Barbara is officially a year older, she does not look any different to me than when she was twelve.

"I want to be just like her when I grow up," I proudly tell them.

"Oh ya do, do ya?" Deborah smiles down at my five-year-old frame.

"Sure. Only I'll have long hair."

"Of course."

Growing up to be like Barbara is my greatest hope, but I don't think I could give up my long hair for it. I lean back against the rim of the tub again. I feel the refreshing cold of the white. Reveling in thoughts of growing up to be like Barbara, I contentedly put my hands on the cool tub, and dig my toes into the endless depths of purpleness.

•••

The deep purple of the petals shine in the sunlight. I put the flower on the mound. Barbara helps me stamp the dirt around better, and she says a few gentle words. She calms my seven-year-old fear of death. Boris had been a good puppy. She explains why all beings, including humans, must die. She helps me understand that

dying is not the end. That dying leads to something better. I don't completely understand, but I feel better. I look down at our dirty, summer-hardened feet. I feel the dirt pushing between our toes. The dirt that covers Boris. It feels warm and pleasant. It makes my feet look black.

•••

The night is black and cool. The crisp autumn air feels good on my face and the football feels slippery in my hands. I hold the ball tighter in the crook of my arm and run. I feel her hands grabbing me and pulling me down, but she is too late. I have already scored the touchdown.

Next we practice offensive patterns. We've been working on these for the past year, and at eight years old I feel experienced. She is great at offensive patterns, and she is teaching me everything she knows.

The cool grass tickles my feet and makes me run faster. The rays of our backyard floodlights cast a shadow as we throw the ball back and forth. Our shadows leap and tangle in the light. I can see our shadows together, then apart.

I run back for a pass. I know that I'm going too fast. I trip and fall. I ask Barbara to come help me because my ankle hurts. She jogs over. Before she reaches me, I look up. The floodlights are behind her—glowing. For a moment she pauses, and the lights cast her shadow across me and the lawn. Through the shadow, she puts out her hand and picks me up.

•••

But that was when I was eight; now I am sixteen. Why doesn't she keep picking me up?

•••

Why? I don't know. All I know is that there are no more dribbling practices, no more summer evenings playing games, no more watching the sunrise from Bear Canyon, no more lessons on right and left. No more of anything, except pain. Pain and fear. Fear and anger. Anger and guilt. Guilt because of anger. Just guilt remains.

Guilt and talking. Everybody seems so intent on talking. No one will just be quiet and let it disappear. They just keep on talking and asking questions. But I don't want the answers.

•••

Questions. So many questions. Why did she do it? Why did she let me down? How could she take my hero away? Doesn't she understand how bad it is? Doesn't she care about us? Does she hate us? I can't believe she would let me down. I can't forgive her. I can't love—

NO! That's bad. Of course I love her. How can I not? I do love her, but I hate her too. No, I can't hate her—she's my sister. No, I can't hate her. I hate what she did to me, to our parents, to our brothers and sisters. Why did she do it? Why? Why? Why? I don't want to answer that. I don't want to think about it or talk about it. Talking takes too much energy and hurts too much.

•••

I am downstairs. Barbara is with me. She is doing her laundry. I am watching television. Barbara asks me a question. I evade it and notice the yellowness of the light bulb. Why can't they make a pure, clean light bulb? Why yellow? Yellow is so hollow, so decayed. She asks me the question again.

"Mad. Why?" The question makes me cold.

Good, now I'm cold again. Cold is good. Oh no, I'm getting hot. It must be that light bulb and its yellow light. No, it isn't; it's tears. No, please not tears again. I hate tears. There have been too many of them over the last six months. I'm mad at the tears.

"Mad. Why?" The question makes me cold.

She has tears also. Hers are pain and love. Mine are anger. I look at the carpet. It is an awful combination of browns and oranges. It looks soiled and deteriorated.

"Mad, you. Why?"

Mad at tears because they are hot. Mad at light bulbs because they are yellow. Mad at you because—sorry. I'm so sorry, so sorry, so sorry. There are even more tears, but they have more pain and love than anger. I'm sorry, sorry, sorry, sor—please no more sorry. Please forgive. Forgive you. Forgive me, please. Please let me say it. "Forgive me, please."

"Forgive. . . . . Forgive?"

Through the tears I can see her hand. It's moving. She takes my hand. I can feel her skin. It's been so long since I touched her, but I remember the touch and feel of her fingers from so long ago. I remember feeling spring. I remember smelling apricot blossoms. I am smelling apricot blossoms now. She holds my hand. And I hold hers.

Praying Mantis

by Nancy McBride

I saw you in the door jamb,
an odd twig wedged in the wooden crevice.
When you moved, I jumped, horrified
by your foreign appearance:
the triangular head with its two
long hairs reaching out,
your slender body bulging
with autumn's eggs—poor mother,
too swollen to fly.
Your summer green hue has faded
to dry brown—wings tattered,
like old papyrus disintegrating.
Selfish, I put you in an empty mayonnaise jar,
catching moths in a kitchen strainer
to feed you and your burden.

Your reverent, folded arms
lash out as lightning
snaring your clumsy prey.
First, you tear away the tissue-paper wings
and they float to the ground like falling leaves.
Firm in your grip, you devour the body
quickly with your nimble mouth.
Then you hang upside down
and motionless, camouflaged once again.

Midnight Brownies

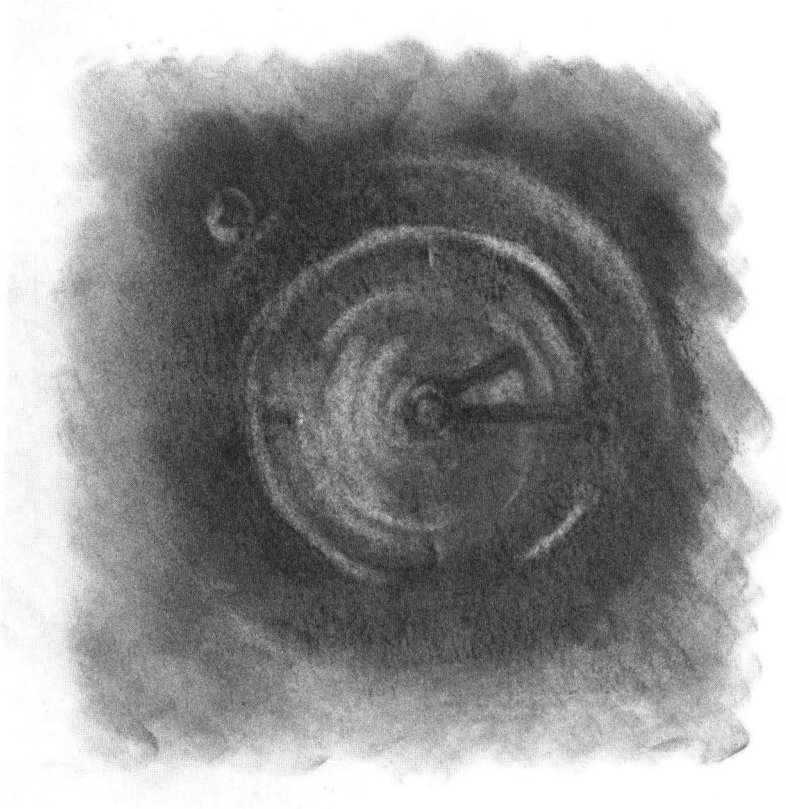
by Sean Ziebarth

We got home late
from work; I was tired
and hungry—
you craved brownies
and said,
"Will you make them?"
You said,
"it will only take a few minutes,"
but you are more experienced
than I am
in the kitchen.

I mixed the ingredients,
splitting the gold yolk
with a wooden spoon—
the kind I avoided
as a boy, hiding
under my bed.
I greased the pan with shortening,
and sifted in flour
like I used to sift through sand
at the beach in summer,
hoping for spilled coins.

They baked and we ate them
before they cooled.

Warm and moist,
we slept with chocolate on our tongues.



Jen Reinstadtler

The Matter of These Hours

by Paul Rawlins

Wus does it like this, first day back. First day. Two hundred kids bumping, squalling like sheep in a *kraal*. Prefects in their new coats the color of plums, with name badges, handshaking and pointing directions down the yellow halls. Wus does this.

He sniffs, sticks his nose up by them right there, and he says, "*Kak*."

They're looking at him, down, like it's the disgustingest thing, dirt on their sleeves. Wus drinks at the fountain, cold water, and he pokes the corners of his mouth with the cuff on his jacket.

"I'm gonna die," Wus says.

We're in school.

We have to go, Wus always says. This year and then one more. We have to go to get some jobs, some like we want on the railways. Or Wus says maybe keeping shop, somewhere in Hillbrow, in town, Johannesburg, not here. Anything but on the mines. But now Wus says he's not getting any of those jobs.

Wus has got sick, don't know how. I don't know how. He says he got it, AIDS.

We're backs up to the wall, and sharp, looking up and down the girls, short-skirted and no makeup with their uniforms, all their legs gone pale, the bone color of their tight-tucked blouses.

"Got it," Wus says, "makes the only difference. Got it, and I'm dying standing here talking to you."

And Wus wants a fight. Wus, they called Wus that when he's little, and he's still little, only now he's little and he's mean. He beats

up big guys. He beats them up in pieces, chops them like trees. He keeps that name they called him, Wus, keeps it for a dare: you believe it? right here, right now.

If he can wait, he'll beat up my landlord. He'll beat him up for what he does to my dad. My dad's the old man who's sick now and can't feed himself, and he goes naked outside sometimes. He says to me, "I don't know who you are," and he holds his own hands by the window.

Wus'll get my landlord for him, the one who's saying, always, "Tell your old man to get out of the window." Who says, "Get your old man off the steps, he's pissed himself again." The one who says now my dad's in hospital, "You're too young to hold a lease."

But Wus isn't going to wait. Tomorrow he can beat up my landlord, maybe tomorrow. He wants a fight now here in the commons, where there's the lunch crowd, and maybe he doesn't want to get away.

"Sit over there," he says. I don't fight with Wus. He doesn't need my help. "You get in the way," he says. He tells me to stand where I don't get hurt.

I sit over where he tells me. I nod at the girls over the back of the booth.

"Watch this," I say. "Watch over there." And they look at me like I'm a snake's head, and why do I talk to them.

"Watch," I say. I tell them, "Watch what he does."

Wus knows the guy; he knows him at the end of the table, with his hair oiled back and a grey school jersey, and he knows what he's said about Wus.

Wus says to him, "What are you saying about me?" And the guy looks at Wus and doesn't answer him, so he can smile at his class buddies and chew with his mouth open.

Wus asks him, "You say I'm a queer? Get up and ask me."

His buddies say, "Get up and pound the little suck." They say, "Beat his ass," and the jersey boy's smiling, standing up.

"Don't turn your back on him," his buddies say.

"What have you been telling people?" Wus says. And the guy who's smiling, he's always smiling, shrugs.

I tell the girls again, "Watch now. Watch it, what happens."

Wus hacks on him, a loud sound like a rock's cracked. He spits on his face, down his cheek.

"Now you're going to get it and die," Wus says. And then that boy, jersey boy, isn't smiling. He puts his fists up like he's on a chinning bar, but he only gets one punch, and Wus gets three. When Wus brushes jersey boy's punch away, that doesn't count. But Wus gets him a knee in the stones to fold him over. And the right hand's coming up backwards for knuckles in the breastbone, and the left, the fist, coming to the back of the head to knock him down, leave him grunting on the tiles like a hog.

The girls keep watching now. I hear a whistle blowing somewhere, and everybody leaving their food, standing up and saying, "Hey, hey!"

And there's two more jumping up from the table for Wus. It's two of them that can't hold him, and one gets busted in the eye, but the other digs a fork in Wus's back to where it's sticking out, hanging on Wus's shirt. He can't believe he's done it. He has to stop to look, so Wus can get away, me up and running with him into the toilet.

We're in the stall, me and Wus. The fork's still hanging on Wus, but he's pulling up his shirt and undershirt and all. There are little holes like snake bites and little lines of dark blood. The waistband on Wus's jockies is torn, so it clings above his trousers like a strap on something a girl wears.

"Get up on the loo," Wus is saying to me.

"What for?" I'm saying.

Wus is saying, "There's two of us in here, they'll think we're fagging."

I don't care.

"Get up," Wus is saying, and he's shoving me, shoving me like he'll pick me up off the ground.

Wus is screwing his head around. "I can't see it," he says. He puts his hand on the holes where the blood comes off on his fingers. I get toilet paper to clean it off. Wus is saying, "You can't get it on you."

I roll up lots of paper in a wad bigger than my hand. I touch Wus's back and the blood soaks up in patterns like flowers and kiss lips.

"What do I do with it?" I say.

"I don't know," Wus says. I've got it in my hand, all the paper with Wus's blood on it. Wus says, "Flush it."

"Where does it go?" I say.

Wus says, "The fountains. Let them all get it," but I'm only still waiting.

"I don't know," he says then.

I drop it in the bowl, and now I'm standing on the seat and holding balance, to stick paper on Wus's back like on shaving cuts.

When we're coming out of the stall, there's people coming in the door. Wus holds out the fork, and they can see the blood that's dried.

"Get out," he says. He jabs with the fork. When they go, he dumps the garbage can to stick the door closed. We hear them outside, asking who is it in there, sending for somebody to come here. We sit back in the stall.

"You better get a tetanus shot," I say to make Wus start to laugh.

"You're so damn dumb," Wus says.

We sit quiet, hearing the thump and rushing down the pipes. The windows are open, from people cutting in here to smoke. Wus leaves the fork on the floor between his feet. The tines are black, like the blood's bad, like it is.

Wus might cry. He might not, he might not want to.

He says, "They'll kick me out of school."

"Then we'll go in to the city," I say. I have to sit on my hands because the floor gets hard to me underneath.

"They kick me out, it doesn't matter," Wus says.

"Maybe you'll get better," I say. "Maybe there's going to be medicine for it."

"There's not," he says.

"Or maybe then you'll just get better."

"I'm going to be a worse mess than your dad," Wus is saying.

"You don't know," I say. And Wus not saying anything back to me, not, so he can laugh for himself to hear laughing. And me then yelling back at him again, "You don't know!"

He mashes my leg against the loo, and I know there'll be a bruise the size of a tennis ball on my knee.

The people outside now are probably police. They're pushing to get in, we can hear them.

"Get up," Wus says. He means get out the window, and we do, and we're outside.

We ditch at Uncle's.

He says, "Go to school."

"Been," Wus says. Uncle has customers, come to get their clean clothes. He calls the numbers to the boys working at the presses and the racks. Wus is bending a hanger to a boomerang while I'm tuning in the radio. "What's anything to me?" Wus is saying. I smell the distilled water and starch that makes me sneeze. We're getting in Uncle's way.

"Go bring me some fish and chips from the shop," he says. He forks over a purple five Rand note. "I get change coming from this."

I say, "We'll take the Honda," so we can get away on the motorbike while he can't stop us.

"See your father," Uncle yells to me.

Wus rides us toward Brackpan, toward where my father is in hospital. He's a week there now, and I've been Friday and Sunday seeing him. We don't stop because he hasn't known us last time, and to go inside there makes my stomach hard. We're only roaring around the parking out front and around the trees to maybe get the sisters mad. But nobody comes because the sound from the bike is too small.

We like a roadhouse in Brackpan, doublethicks from the Casbah. I get lime, and Wus has, always, chocolate. And we eat chips, me with only vinegar and salt, but Wus with pepper, too. We eat them hot at a table outside, blowing the steam out our mouths.

"Does it hurt?" I say to Wus. "They could have maybe put a plaster on at the hospital for it." Wus shakes his head no, his back doesn't hurt him. The sky is clouds, like always here. The black boys hang out lazy at the window, no cars to wait on. They're chatting up some cleaning girl, circling her like pack dogs.

Wus says, "We got to plan everything we're going to do, now."

"We got to spend all our money," I say, "go some places."

Wus says he thinks so.

"Do you want to get a girl?" he says.

I don't know.

Wus is riding us through the East Rand, past the trees and mine dumps, farther than we go mostly, which is only ever to the Casbah or out another way to Nigel. I hold my thumbs in the belt of his pants. We can't see any police.

Wus turns us to bounce off the road where there's a hole in the fence. He is yelling, "Hang on, hang on!" He is charging us straight ahead to a mine dump where the motorbike can only climb a little up the side, but already we feel us going straight up before the fifty heaves and conks out.

"Come on," Wus says. We climb up walking bent over, Wus first, up front, and sometimes our hands digging in the ground and

rock. The top is flat and big enough across for rugby or football, but all dead rock like the moon. There's wind up here, and the sun's where you can't see it.

"Look here at this," Wus says. And down the south side in white out of rocks and paint the dump tells the people on the road,

AWAKE!
JESUS
COMETH!

in letters all square.

We sit on the top to watch the cars on the road to Alberton and to throw down rocks, shoot for the middle of the "O."

"There's still gold in it," Wus says, he's talking about the rocks, "if we could get it out."

Back at Uncle's, Uncle says, "Somebody's been here from the school about you."

"Wus has got sick," I say. Uncle's got an ear on the phone to somebody who wants clothes brought by the house.

"You shouldn't have been out riding that thing," he says with his lips to us without saying it over the phone.

"It's not that kind of sick," Wus says. Wus and I haven't decided yet anything for tonight. Tomorrow's no more school if we don't want. "They'll kick me out, anyway," Wus says.

We're sharing Uncle's fish and chips, Wus's chips over to the side where he puts on the pepper. We lean elbows on the counter to eat off the newspaper Uncle spreads out for grease.

"Did you go see your father?" Uncle says. "How's he doing in there?" Uncle sees him every night. "You should come with me," he tells me. Uncle won't know about whether I say the truth now, but I tell him no.

"Tomorrow night, with me," Uncle says. I don't say to him yes or no.

"What's wrong with you," Uncle says to Wus, "except for what

you do with your food?" I don't think Wus is going to tell Uncle. I think he'll make a thing up, and he does, to tell.

He says, "I got a cancer."

Uncle can't eat now. He stubs out a chip like a cigarette. He bows his head to hear Wus say anything more, and I'm waiting, too, to hear it.

"It's only in my eye," Wus says. Then he says, "But you can't see it."

"The trials of this life," Uncle says, and he is sad. "What do they say about it at hospital?"

"Nothing, yet," Wus says. He's looking ahead, like when we get yelled at he does. "It's just small."

"I'm sorry, my boy," Uncle says. "And that truly." And he has Wus now, around the shoulders. Uncle could pick him up like a baby, but he doesn't. He only holds onto Wus, and Wus doesn't hold on back, but he can't be getting away.

"Have you turned to the Lord?" Uncle says. He's let go of Wus so he can see him again. "You've got to put your faith in him."

"I don't know anything about it," Wus says, and Uncle tells him about the tents and then the big Rema church in Randburg. He tells about the miracles. "They are the houses of salvation," he says. "They are the homes of peace."

When Uncle's gone back to the phone, I tell Wus, "We can go there. Do you want to see?"

I have money always I can get with a Help-U card. Wus has money in his pocket, and we take a train that goes to Randburg. Wus can't sit still, his back hurting him. He is sad now, not going to talk to me. I gave him a window to look out of, but there's only hills and dead grass and other tracks to see. I sit on the seat so I'm sideways to look up and down the aisle. I think about being little again, and if we had a ball with us, I could bounce it and catch it, like we did then all the time. I think that.

I think that because it's better than thinking Wus is going to die. And it's better than me thinking like I'm Wus and going to die, and I have to try all the time not to.

Wus says when was I ever at Rema.

"Uncle goes, and he took me to go with him," I say.

"Does he believe in God?" Wus says.

I tell Wus, "He believes in Jesus." I tell Wus wait till he sees the place, where it's built big enough for sport, and when we get there, he sees what I was saying. He sees it big, with chairs like you sit in at the flicks, and I tell him what Uncle said about the whole place is in a blue like sky because that blue is the best for being on TV.

It's middle week and seats are easier getting than on a Sunday. And maybe they're fuller when Ray, the weight lifter who got saved and whose place Rema is, is here himself, but he isn't tonight.

Wus asks, "Who gets healed?"

"The people who go up," I say. "You go up around the stage," and I tell Wus to watch for the front edge of the stage because it moves like a big tongue, out into the crowd and back on wheels underneath it.

"When do they do it?" Wus wants me to tell him.

"It's all at the end," I say. Wus nods.

"I'll tell you when it is," I say.

All the people start the meeting praising. They sing,

> He whose name is Exaltation,
> He whose wings supply salvation,
> Praise Him, children of His promise,
> Till we're caught up in the Rapture,

and some of them stand waving their arms, and some of them are standing up to speak.

"Listen," a fat foreign lady says, "listen to that manifestation. Listen to the tongues. Praise God."

It's a black man saying "Our Father" in some Bantu. He says it funny, but it means only, *The Father Who Is In Heaven, You, The*

Father Who Is In Heaven, Your Name Is A Great Name. It Is A Great Name Here On This Earth, And Where You Are In The Sky, It Is A Great Name There, Too. Give Us Bread Today. And Forget The Things We Owe, And We Will Forget Who Has Taken Things From Us And Never Returned Those Things Back. Keep Us Out From Trouble, And Keep Bad Things Away From Us. You Are Most Powerful, And Power Belongs To You. And You Are A King. And You Are Like The Sun. And You Are Forever.

And he says it over, like it's his passbook number he's giving the police.

But other people speak tongues. Wus wants to know is it a secret language they learn. "I don't know," I say. "It could be that." No one sitting around us speaks. In front of us, people clap to the music, and behind us is a couple with a little dog in a basket.

There's a singer special for tonight who's been on a ministry with a Mr. Vanderdos to Zimbabwe. The singer says, "I was a bad man. I was the biggest sinner before the face of the Lord." He was run away from home. And high all the time, too, shooting needles up in his arms like I have seen and never done. "I almost killed a man," he says. "I did it, almost killed him, for his money."

He starts out, and he's singing in English. He gets a mike check, and then he goes into tongues, and then the backup singers, some of them switch to tongues, too, and I think he's mad about that.

All the tongues say the same thing when the man at the microphone translates. They say praise the Lord, and they talk about the mountains and sun breaking out of the east, and they talk about glory waiting for all of them.

After tonight is sports night. Ray's sports friends who have gotten saved have come to testify.

"I loved my body," one man says. "I made it God." He is speaking to us, a big man, with arms that make a muscle when they bend. "I had my gym for a chapel."

And one a rugby flyhalf with his ear folded inside out. "Some people say you can't hit hard when you're a Christian," he says. "Some people think you can't win. But first you've got to be a champion for the Lord." Wus says the flyhalf played for Eastern Transvaal.

Then the man who's here instead of Ray tonight says come down and be saved.

Wus says, "Now?"

I tell him, "No. This isn't you."

We watch the people go down front and kneel on the blue floor. The choir's singing something about coming into the arms of Jesus. The man who isn't Ray is preaching to us to come get on the road to heaven, and all the church men and women come out from behind the curtain now, and some are gathering up the people praying from the floor to come with them backstage and finish, and some are handing out the yellow baskets for the crowd to fill with money.

Wus says does he have to pay?

"No," I say. "They won't know."

Then it's what we're waiting for, because the man who's here because Ray can't be tonight is saying brother DuPreez has got an anointing to heal, and I tell Wus to go now.

The crowd is singing again. Nobody going down the aisles to the stage looks too sick. Nobody in a cast, and they can walk. But they might all be like Wus is, who you can't see him being sick, but he's going to die.

There are about ten of them on the stage where Wus looks like a sloppy dwarf. His pants are too long and his shoes are thick on the bottoms and the sleeves on his jacket come down over his hands, only now he's taking that off because it must be warm up there on the stage where he has to wait.

Brother DuPreez has two assistants to catch the people. When he touches them on the forehead, they all fall, and I look to see him

pushing, but I don't. The second woman, she falls down forward, falling on her knees, but everybody else goes backward, like brother DuPreez is picking them up and giving them a toss.

"Look at it," the fat lady is saying. "Look at the miracle. Hallelujah. Hallelujah, Lord, amen."

Wus is at the end of the line, and I'm going down to have a look closer. I want to know what happens.

"You have to remember everything," I've said to Wus. "You have to say if you see anything." And now I'm down to where I'm in front, and it's going to be Wus they're coming for. The catchers line up back behind him, and see it now, Wus's shirt with a big spot of blood, big as a fist, and one of them says something. I see how his lips are moving when he says it, turning Wus to see his back, he must say, "You're hurt."

And Wus tells them he isn't here for that, that little spot is nothing to them. Then Brother DuPreez is over, and Wus telling him what he wants, like it's Santa for Christmas. And then the catcher letting go from Wus's shoulder like a hot thing and jumping back. And DuPreez standing with nothing he's got to say to Wus, with the other sick ones carried off the stage, and DuPreez now looking down like he's dropped a handful of water.

"You liar! You're liars!" Wus is yelling. He's got fists up to duke out DuPreez right there up front, but two of Ray's lifters are already on him, already with the rubber gloves. And they take an arm each of them to stretch Wus out so he can't move in on them, and everybody standing to watch.

I follow where they haul him out behind the stage, with Wus yelling, "Liars!" and trying to kick. Back here the halls are long and white like in hospital. "Watch it he doesn't bite," one of the lifters is saying. I follow till I see a fire handle to pull.

"Hey," I yell, "hey." And they're turning to look, while I tug the handle down to start the bells on. Wus is away between them, and we are too fast in this world ever for them to be catching us.

Outside of Randburg we can take a train now either way, back to Springs where home is and Wus not having to ride his bicycle anywhere because he can be staying at my house, or down into Johannesburg, and I say to Wus, the first thing, "Do you want to go to the city?" But he won't say. There's nothing here much. The railway platform and a shop. And then just weeds Wus kicks in and veld besides. The train's not coming till half an hour, and I'm hungry from it being so long since the Casbah and the fish and chips.

"You want to eat?" I say. Wus still won't say, but we walk to the cafe, and I buy two Cornish pasties and a Lunch Bar to divide up and pine-nut soda, and I know to buy two cans because Wus won't share.

"I hate it here," Wus says.

"Better than the East Rand," I say. Springs is ugly, and Brackpan and Boxburg. Here are no buildings, no mines.

The pie is mostly crust instead of meat, not how I like it. Wus has thrown his out in the weeds.

I haven't asked Wus to know how he got it. It's not his fault. Wus will die, and maybe my father first or after, but him too. I don't like things here either. It's dark and night now, and me shaking all over because it's cold. At the platform, Wus is buying tickets and then pushing the stick of hard blue cardboard in my hand.

Editors' Note: This story won first place in the Short Story contest held in conjunction with the Second International Conference on the Short Story and the Ann Doty Fiction Contest. It appeared originally in *Paris Transcontinental* and *Short Story*.

Fireflies

by William Powley

At dusk just off I-80
southwest of Des Moines
fireflies awake over
a cornfield. I climb
between the fence and the grass
into a soft breeze
watching how the bright
insects braid the air,
lighting above the tassels.

How they mix each other's blood!
Now all at once they
stop as if they had
heard my steps or thoughts,
each gliding on a line of breath.
At a twitch of my left hand
one flickers the air
full with a delicate light
from another world.

Early Pregnancy Test

for my daughter

by Scott Calhoun

We first saw jackrabbits
along the freeway
out the window of our Civic.
Another time, we drove
by the mall at night—
flashed our lights
in their eyes.
At first I mistook them for dogs,
a kind of terrier
on the freeway greens.
One night we saw ten
standing on hind legs
beneath a palo verde.
That night we bought a kit
to test for your life.
We mixed the liquids
in the test tubes
and poured the brew
on a dot of cotton.
It changed,
first to pink,
then, deeper—
the magenta glow
of rabbit's eye.

Sudden Husbandry

by William Powley

In her white apron, she calls:
"Come." Plates soak gray.

Her language this time
I cannot accept. She scrubs

dishes the way pebbles
shake in wood maracas,

asking me, "rinse
the knives, forks, and spoons.

Dry with a towel."
I dream to rattle castanets

over white paper, sounding out
a poem's rhyme and meter

while her fingernails chip away
the dried lasagna skins.

"It won't take long."
In my mind I play

yellow rubber mallets
on white lined timpani,

tap silver-chrome chimes,
or graze a gong with my elbow,

working through a stanza.
She calls me from words,

the new marimba music I write.
"Come to the kitchen."

My cheeks twitch. Dish hands
on a page quiver and fall.

Randy Stuart

Ciao

by Joanna Brooks

Morning and Torino.

Last night—Barcelona.

And before that, Valencia, where days began at midnight with music and *tapas* for our hot stomachs—*chiparones en su tinta*, octopus in its ink. Adolfo was a good host, yes, introducing us to friends who offered *horchata*, guiding us through the mobbed streets of his resort town, streets littered with thrown tables, a night distorted by blaring American pop and yellow light. A night so hot the ceiling tiles dripped.

That was nights ago, Valencia; now it is morning, Torino. All we have to show for time is a line on the timetable, an overnight train. My two sisters and I reclaim our passports, strap on our packs, and go stiff-legged down the train steps. New money, new language, new system. Short women with sharp voices quaff smallest cups of black espresso. We take large bottles of mineral water, miss our train, tie our backpacks together, put them in a phone booth, and sit in front of it.

A dark-haired man in a rumpled drab linen sports coat and tropical print tie passes. Slowly.

He's browsing postcards. He passes by again.

He's reading newspapers. Slowly. Finishes. Walks by.

We watch him. This is Italy. He is an Italian man.

He walks to the phone booth next to us. We are laughing. We are holding our heads in our sweatshirts. We are trying to hold our

water. He pretends to make a phone call. He puts his thumb against the token slot, fakes a 200 lira piece, glances at us, pretends to press numbers, glances at us, hangs up.

He crosses in front of us, walking heels first. His shoes are shined, his socks argyle. He is grinning, a flat skinny grin. His hands are in his pockets to his elbows.

This is a bad sign. People have warned us, warned our parents. How can you let two eighteen-year-olds and a twenty-year-old travel alone in Europe? In Italy?

The Italian man goes to the booth on the other side of us, fakes another 200 lira, thumbs wrong numbers, breathes into the receiver. He is watching us, smiling, talking to himself. In Italian. We are squatting on our packs, pulling our hats down over our eyes, dissolving onto the floor in laughter.

He makes five more phone calls over the next ten minutes, and we decide it is time for a location change. We remove to a far corner of the station, hide behind a pillar. MaryBeth reads an English-language magazine.

I get up to check the timetable. There he is again, crossing the platforms, smiling, hands in pockets.

This is a sign from God. We have heard bad things about Torino, great black industrial city. We've heard bad things about Italy, about Italian men, about Italian men in train stations. We've been here two hours, and already it's true.

Oh, Italy. Already surpassing our expectations.

I find my sisters. We pick up our packs, sight him, elude him, collapse laughing in a second-class compartment, and go on to Genova.

We meet Americans on the steps in front of Columbus's house and trade the obligatory travel talk over pizza margherita. Never take the night train into or out of Rome. Lash your backpacks to the luggage racks. We trade tips about how to escape the gypsies. Keep

your money in your shoes and watch out for the kids, the *zingarelli*. It is getting dusky in Genova. Buses come full from the docks and women take their groceries home.

Our friends teach us phrases in Italian—"Where is?," "What time?," and "How much?"

We also learn that *basta* means "enough," *socorro* means "help," and *va scfuzzi* means "go away scumbag."

Our friends are leaving Italy, going north.

We are going south.

"South," they say, laughing, shaking their heads.

"South," we say, eager, novice. We still have clean laundry. They look hard-traveled, seem old as they laugh, recalling Naples, the ports. Their shoes are broken; their backpacks locked.

"Keep that vocabulary list handy."

By week three, we have devised systems for deterring those legendary scissor-wielding pickpockets who cut travelers' clothes to get to their secret money neck pouches. We have figured out how to knot our packs. We have come safely from Genova to Milano and now we leave Milano for Venezia.

We shut the glass doors to our train compartment, put our feet up. Melissa passes out breakfast. Bananas. We are moving.

The door flies open.

"*Banana! Buon appetit!*"

He is tall, black curly hair, bad clothes. He is an Italian. He's coming towards me. My sisters grab their backpacks.

"*Italiana? No? Americana? Bella*—beautiful. I like it. Hold still."

He kisses my cheek.

"You like Italy? You want to stay here? We'll talk later. Okay."

The door slides back. The sun comes full strength now. He's gone.

I look at Melissa, who looks at MaryBeth; MaryBeth looks at me. We laugh. Then we check for our money. Nothing's gone.

Where did he come from?

Italy.

It's too early in the morning for this.

In Florence, we pass through narrow streets lined with leather sellers—dark-haired men, sunglasses, leather jackets. It's July. The salesmen touch MaryBeth's arm as she passes. They call *"Ciao! Bella! Ciao! Bella!"*—the Italian national anthem.

We pass up the leather, pass fruit markets, on to the Uffizi, the Duomo, the Gates of Paradise. It's a warm day, and we go without maps. We see Giotto frescoes, the finger of St. John the Baptist, the grave of Machiavelli.

At night, we sit on the steps of the great blue Duomo and eat lemon gelati. MaryBeth brings out cards for gin. Within three rounds, we have five Italian coaches, advising, accusing, colluding. Teams form. Ten rounds, and Melissa wins. They kiss her, offer her drinks, dinner. Maybe later, we say. That taverna by la Chiesa Santa Maria della Croce? Yes, maybe later. *Ciao! Bella!* They cross the cobbled piazza. We go to our room, to sleep.

Our first night in Rome we rely on old Florentine tricks, and MaryBeth deals gin on Bernini's marble at the Trevi Fountain. It is a warm night, a blue night. Trevi is flooded with lights, tourists, stray cats, Indian immigrants selling roses. Young Italian soldiers, stationed in Rome for their obligatory year of service, come to the fountain in busloads.

A group of five approaches. They are laughing, lighting Marlboros with fake Harley-Davidson lighters. Four talk to one, and that one steps forward. He's wearing Converse tennis shoes.

"Hello," he says.

We say hello back. This impresses them thoroughly. They consult, laugh, gesticulate.

"Want to walk?" he says, struggling.

"Walk?"

"Yes," he says, his friends nodding. "*Andare.*" He makes step motions with his hands.

"No," MaryBeth says, then deals me ten cards.

The speaker turns back to them, reaches at words. His t-shirt is printed in English. It says: "Young U.S.A. The Best for Fun and Winning." It makes, of course, no sense.

"Disco?"

"No, thanks," I say. This alarms the group greatly.

"Why?" the leader asks.

"We have a language barrier," MaryBeth says loudly, as though she were speaking to the hearing impaired.

"*Italiano*," I say, pointing to them. "*Americana*," I say, pointing to us. I am laughing. "No." I move my hands like puppets, talking, to indicate that verbal communication is virtually impossible between us.

The soldiers squint, prod at their friend, make motions.

"Disco?" he asks again. We laugh, wave them on.

Further conversations this night are similarly two-word affairs. Every Italian soldier, it seems, has learned how to say "walk" and "disco."

There are the more enterprising types who try to join our card game, buy us flowers, propose marriage.

Luigi is five foot five, missing teeth. He moves his hands like a gangster, a Gambino crew member planning a hit. Luigi is from Naples.

"Napoli," I say.

"Napoli," he says. He is immensely pleased—I know his hometown. He makes motions like an airplane. He will come see me in the U.S., he says. Next year. When he is released from the military. When do I leave Rome?

Two days, I tell him. He looks to heaven, clenches his fists. He wants to meet me, tomorrow, here. His friend in an orange shirt is

playing poker with my sisters. I tell Luigi that I'm engaged. I point to my ring finger, draw a heart on my chest, and put my hand flat on it.

He wants to meet anyway. I say no. He touches my hands, relents, it's late, their bus has arrived.

When the soldiers leave the fountain, we leave the fountain, buy more gelati, go to sleep.

In the morning, we ride the bus to church. We have 7,000 lira in cash—about seven dollars—to get three of us through the day. We buy one bus ticket, head up past Barberini, along the Via Settiembre XX. Again, soldiers, in uniform. They talk among themselves, look at us, move to the back of the bus. "*Ciao! Bella!*" one says to MaryBeth. He asks her where she is going. Church, she says, putting her hands together in prayer. He asks us if we are nuns.

A gray-haired woman watches and hurries ahead of us when we get off the bus at Station Termini.

"Pretty young Americans," she worries in perfect English. "Don't talk to them." She says she's from New Jersey, married an Italian. He promised to go back to the States, but never did. "Don't fall in love with an Italian," she says, hurries on, clutching her string sack of fruit.

They've cleared the gypsies out from the front of the train station. Now, Africans sit, sell postcards in their bright green and gold *daishikis*.

We leave Rome, unattached, the next day.

Further south, lemons grow as big as two fists, black dogs run uncollared in the streets, the locals laugh and sip *grappa*, and the Mafia is back, killing judges now. Jupiter smiles from souvenir store fronts, terra cotta with shame.

The trains grow crowded in Naples, and we sit in the aisles. People carry boxes of olive oil, bundles tied with twine. The conductor climbs through, checks passes. We pass churches, and

the women cross themselves. Graveyards. The women cross themselves. We meet, of course, more soldiers. They too are going to port, faster, through drier country, to the very boot heel of Italy, bound for Greece. MaryBeth speaks to them in Spanish, with an Italian accent. She speaks loudly, maximum inflection. Strangely, they understand. It is a trick she picked up in Rome.

Hours later, we arrive in Brindisi, register, pay port tax, and wait. Backpackers line the streets, fill the small piazza, drink wine, and throw trash. They are the rough kind who sleep in the plaza during Pamplona's San Fermin and stay among the bushes at Rome's Villa Borghese. They wear ten countries on their clothes, sit in circles, play guitars, knot each others' hair, pass more wine.

Our dinner is bread, cheese, juice. More soldiers—Sicilians—nudge each other. We talk. They have nice faces, short haircuts. We are leaving Italy, now. They know this. No marriage, no meet me here tomorrow.

We board the ferry for Greece, deck class. The captains are slick Southern Italians who say "*Bella*" under their breath.

My sisters lay out their straw mats, and I watch the Germans, the Danes, the Swedes. One curly-haired blonde man approaches me, wearing an American flag t-shirt. He wants to practice his English. He says he hates America. I am cordial. He offers wine.

We leave port, pass out of Italy. The night comes quickly. Everything is black, and the sides of the ship fall away black into the ocean. The moon is orange over us, all we can see.

It makes one crazy—this black and black, this empty full of all. It makes words seem tinier, more essential. Americans next to us are passing a flask of Johnny Walker's. We talk travel, God, nothing. Keep Johnny walking. It is too wet to sleep.

We make words across the Ionian sea. In Italy, words came in thrashing hands, loud from women in laundries, like water from Bernini fountains, red as tomatoes. We lay a thin stream of smoke across the ocean now.

I am always glad for things to end.

Rented Shoes

by Scott Calhoun

The boutonniere
proceeds me, a rose
tight as a baby's fist.

My date can see herself
in the reflection
of my rented shoes.

All night I don't know anything to say.
I pretend to enjoy lobster.

At the door I kiss her
for a long time
only our lips touching
as moths burn on the bug light.

I loosen the bow tie
while I drive home.
Football players at the Circle K
lick their dates'
bare shoulders, somehow
I know my life has just begun.

At home
by the pool
I float my plastic shoes
across the water
an invisible boy
dancing on glass
feet in two directions.

Sestina

by Steven Lange

A couple of months ago, I got married.
So now, I have a wife,
a bunch of blank thank-you notes,
various nice and not-so-nice gifts,
a dwindling amount of money,
and a pile of unfinished homework.

I really should get my homework
done, but I've been trying to make money
to live on. It's expensive to be married.
People tried to help us by giving gifts;
But now, I have all of these thank-you notes.
I should write them soon my wife

says. You get lots of advice when you get a wife.
They'd be done if it weren't for this homework.
The thing is, I don't even like most of the gifts.
I need food and books. They should have given us money.
You should give money to people who are getting married,
then you'll get better thank-you notes;

or at least they'll be sincere thank-you notes,
not, "Thank you so much for the gifts . . .
We are happy you came to see us get married . . .
We are busy with school and homework . . .
blah, blah, blah. Sincerely signed, me and my wife.
P.S. we would rather have had money."

Hopefully, the government will give us money
for tuition. They are good about that, if you're married,
and poor. But I love my wife,
We live on love and homework,
and worry about our thank-you notes,
because I am grateful for *some* of the gifts.

And as for the others, it's not the gifts,
it's the thought, right? My wife
was really good about the knit, green-owl. That thank-you note
was a bit ambiguous. So now, we do homework
and spend our free time earning money.
But that's the way it goes when you're married.

You kiss your wife, divvy-up the money,
sit down to your homework and blank thank-you notes,
thinking about the gifts you received the day you got married.

Suzanne Gerhart

Words for Kallie

by Mary Lynn Bahr

The triplets came when I was a senior in high school. Dad told us about the ultrasound, three little heartbeats with their heads together, planning the havoc they would wreak on the unprepared Bahr family. Mom was in bed for months. My sister Kathy and I went to the hospital the night the triplets were born; we snoozed in the waiting room until Dad came in and announced—three girls!

In a few minutes he was back. They are not identical, and the smallest baby . . . looks different. Don't tell Mom yet. Kallie has shorter fingers, a longer tongue, and slanted eyes. Dad wept on the way home from the hospital. I saw the chromosome charts three days later: Down's Syndrome.

She says her name is "Tallie"; at Mom's prompting, she renames herself correctly, with a hard, back-of-the-throat "K." I ask about school, the soccer game, the new Sunday shoes. Kiera answers. "No," I say, "let Kallie tell me." When my visitor ear can't untangle her consonants, Kiera plays interpreter.

A Down's Syndrome child in triplets is hardly everyday news. Special education researchers from Utah State University came to observe and test Kallie. Our family (the triplets made fourteen children) was written up in the local paper. My parents started reading about Down's Syndrome and attending conferences for Down's Syndrome parents. My mother decided that Kallie would

speak and run and dance and go to school and look as good and behave as well as any Down's Syndrome child ever did. By parental fiat Kallie became the cutest and brightest of Down's Syndrome babies. She did special exercises as an infant; she has had speech therapy since she was two; she takes dance lessons with her sisters; she is "mainstreamed" at our local elementary school. Her classroom has an extra teacher—a woman trained in special education who works with Kallie. We and the system are doing everything we know.

But she can't read yet. She cannot carry a tune. Her Christmas necklace was the first to break. She lost her ring first. She does not color inside the lines. The chromosomes will not change.

The triplets follow me downstairs to "exercise." They imitate my movements. We do jumping jacks. We twirl around. When I start jumping on one foot, Kallie sits down and announces—without emotion—"Can't."

"Yes, you can."

"Can't."

"Yes."

"No."

She really can't. I lift her by the arms and we jump on the minitramp.

Kallie knew she was different long before the day she came home from preschool and announced, "Me handicap." Mom told me about it with half a smile. How much will she finally understand about the difference between her and her sisters? I wanted to sue the teacher who had taught her the ugliest of labels. I wanted to punish the kids who one day tied her up as the captive for their cowboys and Indians game. They cast Kallie as the powerless one.

Sometimes I am afraid she believes them. Sometimes she sits down on the soccer field; she never kicks the ball. Sometimes when

you ask where she put her glasses, she shrugs silently. Sometimes she lets her sisters speak for her.

At dinner, Kallie starts to say something and ends up giggling wildly.

Klarissa announces, "Kallie says she's going to marry Jamison and kiss him!" She turns to me semi-accusatorily, "Kallie already knows who she's going to marry!"

"Well," I say, "you can't *really* know who you're going to marry until you're at least as old as I am." (My whole family holds their breath every time I bring someone home.)

I would sell my teeth to buy a husband for Kallie.

When Julie Clayton comes over to play Barbies and dress-ups, Kallie wanders upstairs alone. The girls don't usually exclude her deliberately; she just leaves. She watches whoever is cooking. She sits on my lap while I talk on the phone. She puts placemats on the table.

It's Mom's birthday and we are on our way home from her great-uncle's funeral. He was 103. Kallie has resisted several suggestions that she put on her seat belt. She hands a sheet of paper over the seat.

"Guess."

The page is half filled with bright markers—a blue square inside a red line inside some green lines. Mom guesses, "Trampoline."

"Nope."

"Swimming pool?"

That was the right answer. A few minutes later Kallie leans over the seat again. Her lower lip is stained with blue ink.

"Cake."

Mom doesn't get it. "Cake?"

"Buy cake."

"Buy a cake?"

"Birthday."

Klarissa fills in the blanks. "She wants you to buy a cake for your birthday."

We are headed for southern California. Dad has a week-long conference there, and plane fares are low enough that the family can come along. It will be the girls' first time in an airplane. We sit in the terminal. Dad talks to the clerk at the ticket counter. The boys are all wearing baseball hats; two of them hold their hands over their noses because a woman near us is smoking. Kiera hangs onto Mom. Klarissa dances around. Kallie fiddles with the bow in her hair and says, "I'm so embarrassed." She means, Mom tells me, that she is nervous.

Kiera holds the book and reads, "Goodnight moon," tracing the words with her finger. Then she turns to Kallie, "Now you read it," and traces the words again. Kallie mimics, "Goodnight moon." She got it right: she grins at me. She will read.

But she will never write an essay like this one. Letters and ligaments do not always obey her. Like Kiera and Klarissa, I am speaking for Kallie, telling her story in my voice. She may never hear this voice; she may never read at even a high school level. And yet I live by reading: I know the published voices of Donne, Eliot, Dickinson, Melville, Austen, Keats.

I hope I can hear Kallie.

Tomorrow Dad and the kids are going skiing. The little girls went once last year; this is their second time. The boys are getting the skis ready, seeing whose hand-me-downs fit who. Someone yells for Kiera to come downstairs and try on her boots. Mom reminds the triplets to find matching gloves.

Kallie says with emphasis, "I *don't know* how to ski."

I say, "You'll learn how to ski." I put more dishes in the dishwasher.

In a minute she says it again, with the same intonation, to no one in particular: "I *don't know* how to ski."

On February 12, the kitchen windows are full of lopsided paper hearts. The girls stand on chairs to break eggs into the bowl. Klarissa turns to me and says brightly, "Kallie says 'tookie.' "

"So?" I say, "I know what she means."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