

An abstract painting with a textured surface. The background is a mix of light blue, white, and pale orange. A prominent vertical red stripe runs down the right side. In the lower center, there is a large, textured block of orange and yellow paint. A horizontal red line crosses the middle of the composition. The overall style is expressive and modern.

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The logo for Chantwood Magazine is enclosed in a double-line black rectangular border. The word "Chantwood" is written in a large, elegant, black cursive script. Below it, the word "Magazine" is written in a smaller, black, sans-serif font.

Chantwood
Magazine

September 2018 • Issue 16

Edited By:

Kristi Rathbun-Nimmo • David Jensen • Betty Darnall
Jackie Havens • Amanda O'Dell

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“There was a song and story: an aged Scylding, widely learned, told of the old days; at times the fighter struck the harp to joy, sung against chant-wood, or made a lay both true and sorrowful; the great-hearted king fittingly told a marvelous tale...”

Unknown, *Beowulf*

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro

The Argument

I feel it nesting in the hollow of my throat,
in the roof of my mouth, what I've held in
since you, the boss of forty, retired
and were left with only me to direct.

*He's depressed, I tell myself. Help him
through this, but one day
that sparrow tumbles out,
falls toward the unmown grass and lands
halfway between our bare feet.
I stare down at it, its feathers slimed
with my spit as if birthed
from the broken shell of me.
It lies on its back, feet up,
like a cartoon of bird death.*

I see the droop of my husband's bony shoulders,
the tremble of his aging hands, the lines the years
have carved into his cheeks.

"So sorry," I whisper to him
and to the sparrow, its face markings
like a black sleep mask.

Its beady eyes begin to open.
With its eyes to each side,
it's unable to see both of us
at the same time, I think.
Its beak parts—*cheep, cheep, cheep*.
My husband is heavy-lidded, silent.
My throat is scratched.
I kneel, scoop the sparrow
into my cupped palms,
and wait for it to fly off.

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro

I See Her

In early mornings if you turned the cut glass knob
and walked into my mother's bedroom,
you would see her sitting at her vanity table
in her white nylon slip, dabbing on powder
specially blended at a Helena Rubinstein counter,
rouging her cheeks, coating her lashes
with mascara, and penciling a beauty
spot on her right cheek.

In a voice thrummed with longing,
you'd hear her say—

“When I first came to New York City,
I was so gorgeous that men would follow me,
press their calling cards into my hand.
'Call me,' they'd plead.”

You'd see me, her third daughter, behind her,
my reflection small in her round mirror
circled with lit bulbs, my face pinched
with each dawning that she wished
to be back at a time before I was born.

On my 70th birthday as I sit at my mirror
my daughter, a mother of three,
comes up behind me, bends
to clasp around my neck
the silver chain of the gift
she bought me shining like a moon.

Like a clockface without hours
this charm brings back the “oh”
of wonder that rose
when I, sweaty and heaving,
saw my daughter’s head
crowning
in the mirror
at the foot of the birthing table.

I am young again.

A Single Pearl

Dawn Lo

Singapore, Today

Katherine Goh tumbled violently out of a dream she was sorry to wake from. Around her, the room clung to darkness, but the glare outlining the heavy drapes hinted at midday. Her eyes adjusted to the familiar sight of her four-poster bed of Himalayan teak, stark against the chalky white plaster of the ceiling, the white shutter cabinets that lined a wall. The AC unit gleamed white too. It hummed out a chill that belied none of the humid, jungle air of Singapore just outside black-trimmed French doors. Tucked away in her lavish vault, Katherine laid in interrupted rest.

Also familiar was the way she had fallen asleep: in bed sideways, shivering in a velvet robe, stained wine glass on the bedside table, her duvet still tucked into the mattress. She reached for the Vicodin in the table drawer, and popped a pill into her mouth. It knocked about the walls of her throat before she rolled her neck back and swallowed. Then, lying back down, she closed her eyes and chased the garbled traces of her dream. Blurry-edge visions surfaced and expanded into a vastness of somewhere glowing, mollifying, foreign yet familiar, like some stashed-away impression from her forty-one-year existence. The dream's siren call told her to recollect this warm place in her memory. She had just about eased back into sleep when another thought, the one that had woken her in the first place, invaded her mind: her husband Wolf would be coming home that night after four months away for work.

This thought put her on high alert, though, later, Katherine could have easily blamed her nerves on her dog. The Pomeranian

had been sniffing about the adjoining walk-in closet with its clothes and accessories strewn about, like an isolated monsoon had blundered through the night before. It stopped at a scattered cobblestone path of jewelry, where it began to root around the baubles looking for something to eat. And it found something: a pearl, the smallest jewel in the cluster, with a necklace hoop but no chain, looking lacklustre in the dull light. Katherine had just slid fleshy legs out of bed when the guttural choke came.

Two hours later, Dr. Sam Svensson examined the ailing Pomeranian atop the hardwood dining table of Katherine's modern bungalow. In the middle of his noontime appointment with a struggling feline, his receptionist had swept into the examination room and announced that a Bentley was here to take him to Mrs. Goh's. *Right now?* he had inquired, his gloved fingers still probing the kitten's open mouth, but the receptionist's alarmed expression and the burly driver peering over her head informed him that, indeed, right now, was the answer. Mrs. Goh, wife of Wolf Goh who founded the gastropub chain *Wolf's Impressions*, paid a handsome retainer for the sole purpose of summoning him at any time of day. This was how he found his schedule hijacked by a middle-aged *tai tai* and a Pomeranian with an upset stomach.

Katherine flitted around Dr. Svensson, all fretful hands that jangled their bracelets about. A master at playing the charming hostess, no one would be able to tell that she drank herself to sleep most nights. On any other perfunctory visit, she would have led the young doctor into the garden to offer refreshments. She liked talking to him, liked forming his full name with her mouth, *Doctor Sam Svensson*: the alliteration, the sifting of the common with the strange felt voluptuous to say. She often wondered if she would find him attractive seeing his medium build and thin shoulders on the street but, under the fragrant frangipanis, she soaked in his serious eyes. She smiled, and hoped that he saw her as worldly, sophisticated and, well, older, but a *real woman*. Despite the opportunities, he never once looked at her or said anything inappropriate, and this worried her.

Today, she had no time for fantasies.

“Sam, please, how is my Valdi?” she asked.

“Just a second—” Dr. Svensson tapped the little dog’s spine.

“What has happened to him?”

“Mrs. Goh, just give me a minute to perform some tests.”

The vet resented the barrage of questions, especially without the convenience of his regular office and tools. He pressed gently into the dog’s fur and when his hands reached the stomach it gave a whimper.

“From what I can tell, he has swallowed a foreign object. I don’t think it’s very big, maybe the size of a hazelnut. Not to worry, he will pass it in a day or two.” And, as he removed his latex gloves, he asked in passing, “Any idea what it could be?”

Katherine’s mind whirled, working backwards. Dr. Svensson had to be summoned because Valdi, usually so sweet and docile, had raced through the bedrooms and bathrooms, through the outstretched arms of Katherine, the maid, the gardener, and the driver like a modern-day nursery rhyme. It even bit the maid, which has never happened before. But Katherine remembered, before chasing the orange cloud around the house, finding Valdi panic-stricken among scattered jewels with its mouth open, head jerking forward. *The jewelry!*

“I have no idea,” Katherine replied in such a stilted way, Dr. Svensson frowned at her. She did not see this, with her head down in her hands. His eyes caught her wedding ring, large and cut like a weapon, snarling the light. Without warning, she left the room. He heard her footsteps retreat up the stairs.

After administering a mild dosage of painkillers, Dr. Svensson left Valdi to rest on the leather sofa in the living room. He was escorted unceremoniously by the driver to an awaiting car, a taxi. The mistress of the house did not come down to bid him goodbye.

In her ransacked closet, Katherine picked a careful path to an overturned jewelry box covered in tiny pleated shells, a cheap knickknack a girl might pick up from a bazaar. She had vague flashes of fumbling for something the night before. The strewn contents were of much greater value: necklaces, bracelets, gem

encrusted jewels in every metallic sheen. Wolf had given her the Cartier bangle when he took off to Ibiza for a week following his restaurant opening in London; the Van Cleef parrot brooch when he worked through her birthday; the Art Deco sapphire ring, a priceless antique, after the restaurateur convention in Miami. Later, she had found photos of him in an online article covering the event. He was leaning into an intimate laugh with a woman she recognised as an investor in his restaurants.

Whatever Valdi swallowed must have been part of this collection, and she feared it was the smallest jewel she owned. She sorted through each piece, contorted her creaking body best she could to look in corners, behind cabinets, under the velvet divan. But her pearl pendant was gone.

Phuket and Singapore, Before

“We could build it right here by the ocean,” a young Wolf says to a young Katherine. They are on the beach in Phuket, are lean and languid as you can only be in your early twenties. It is July and a rare day off work for them in the few months they have been here, him shucking oysters at a seafood restaurant and her as a waitress in a café.

“No one builds a bakery on a beach,” she murmurs.

“Why not? With ovens in the back...”

The sun has warmed the sand for the better part of a day. Katherine had paid for their one-way tickets from Singapore on a rebellious whim because Wolf had never been and wanted to live here. They were relying on themselves now and living in ‘thrilling squalor’: a studio apartment with a mattress on the floor and little else. She didn’t mind because she had a plan. She would save up and open her own bakery for the two of them, a simple, self-sustaining space where others can come and go but they will stay together, steadfast and undaunted. She is convinced she doesn’t need more than this dream with Wolf and beautiful weather.

And the weather today is, indeed, beautiful, balmy with just

the right amount of breeze. Katherine and Wolf watch a couple their grandparents' age wade into the sea. The man is coaxing the woman deeper in. So warm, devoted and welcoming is his encouragement that when the tail of a rogue wave sprays suddenly into her face, she giggles in his arms like a young girl.

Katherine curls her long legs up into her chest. She closes her eyes. The afternoon glow turns the inside of her eyelids amber, surrounding her with the couple's laughter, with the trill of mynah birds, and she thinks, this must be what bliss feels like.

"...and you can serve your cakes, whatever. I'll grill fish right on the beach. Then, at night, we can have bonfire parties. All the cooks, the tourists, locals, random people passing by. Everyone on the sand, enjoying each other... Katie, you still listening?"

And though she is, she can't bring herself to move or say anything. It would shatter the moment she so desperately wants to hold onto forever: sea-scented days with sand in their hair, Wolf talking about their bakery. He wraps her up in his arms, grazes her shoulder with his lips.

"I want to salt every dish with you."

Making sure her eyes are still shut, he lays her palm flat on his leg. He rummages for a while before a small, rounded thing falls into her hand. A single pearl, gleaming cream and sherbet in the sun. The thinnest of golden chains drapes from the pearl.

"It was in an oyster I shucked, can you believe it? I've only just saved up the money for the chain." He beams at her. "My lucky pearl."

"Can we afford this?"

"We'll make it work."

She runs a finger over the pearl, as if to memorise the smooth uneven dips of the first jewel he has ever given her. "What are you waiting for? Put it on me," she says.

His fingers graze her neck as he fastens the necklace. The chain is short and the pendant rests at the base of her throat, but it is all he can afford. Without saying so, they both know that this necklace is as good as an engagement ring.

"You've never managed to keep a secret from me for that long."

“Three months. It wasn’t easy.” He gives a hollow chuckle. “It took three whole months to pay for this.”

Some months after the engagement, Wolf decides abruptly that they should leave their Phuket haven, return to Singapore and marry. Almost immediately, it seems to Katherine, Wolf finds work as the host of a new competitive cooking TV show, an instant hit. People would stop them on the streets to tell him how much they enjoyed his show. His sudden fame bewilders her, but had always been a natural performer. And Wolf is reborn. For the first time, his hard work results in appreciation, praise and money. He covers all their expenses, including the rent for a chic newly-renovated walk-up. When the real estate agent congratulates Katherine on ‘having such a famous hubby,’ her first reaction is one of pride, followed quickly by an unsettling feeling, like she’s the one in competition.

A year later, at a party hosted by the network president after a successful first season, Katherine finally meets some of Wolf’s co-workers. While Wolf mingles with the other guests, important execs from the network. Katherine spends most of the night on her own in the corner of the living room, feeling childishly pink in her flaring floral dress, ignored by the older crowd of people who all knew each other.

Thankfully, a tall woman approaches her near the end of the night. Slim arms, ankles and face make her look slimmer than she actually is. She is a woman who wears her weight well, and her understated crepe jumpsuit fills to perfection. Her name is Anabel. And she has heard so much about Katherine, but Katherine had no idea who she was.

“Wolf speaks so highly of you,” Anabel calls huskily over the music, scratchy saxophone wails that make it hard to have a conversation without yelling. Katherine finds it a peculiar way of describing how a husband talks about his wife. She hugs Katherine, which feels strange to her too. “You’re so skinny. I can see your bones! How can a celebrity foodie have an emaciated girlfriend?”

“Wife,” Katherine corrects. Smiling.

“Yes! Yes, of course. We’re working him too hard, he has no time to feed you, isn’t it?” Because Anabel doesn’t seem to need encouragement to keep talking, Katherine merely smiles. “You know, I owe Wolf my career. If he hadn’t insisted that I become a producer, I’d still be out there trying to scout the next hot thing. Mind you, he missed all his cues when we first started filming but I could see that he’s got this spark, even back in Thailand.”

“You knew him in Thailand?” The warm champagne, or maybe the noise, was finally getting to Katherine’s head.

“Oh, but you must know about all this.”

“Yes. Slipped my mind. I’m not a big drinker.”

Anabel grins a little. “You are looking a little flushed. Let’s get you a cold one.”

Anabel takes Katherine’s hand and they thread through pockets of glossy people, balancing glasses in soft hands. Conversations fizz above the music, on the canapés, on the versatile mouthfeel of the wine, on jazz’s superiority over all genres of music, even over, yes, classical. The two women wander into the kitchen, where Wolf is refilling his plate. He looks surprised to see them together, and reaches out for Katherine’s waist.

“Here – let’s fatten you up – you need this salmon-mousse cucumber.” Anabel tries to feed Katherine a cucumber cup. “Wolf *loves* them. We get them catered to the studio because of him. I know what you’re thinking. Why would a cooking competition need catering? And do you know what the bosses say? ‘Anything to keep our poster boy happy.’” She pauses and squints her eyes at Katherine. “Oh, but... you like pastries, right? It’s bakeries, isn’t it?”

“We eat everything,” Wolf replies vaguely.

“Don’t we now?” Anabel says, crunching into the green.

On their way home, Katherine and Wolf loll their heads together in the backseat of the taxi, and Wolf sighs. “I hate talking to rich people sometimes.”

“Are they snobs? Are we just not fancy enough?”

“Hey, I’m fancy! I say something is ‘damn shiok,’ and people think I must be right because I have a show.”

“You sound so cliché.”

“Anabel thinks I sound cute.”

Katherine steels herself, wondering what territory she’s getting herself into, whether she should soldier on. Another time she might have stopped herself. But a wife should never feel uncomfortable in asking, and so she did: “How come you never said anything about knowing her in Thailand?”

“Didn’t I?” he said with an exaggerated furl of the eyebrows.

“And you told her about our bakery.”

“I must have mentioned it in passing one day. She gives good business advice.”

“I don’t know anymore...” Katherine let her voice trail off.

“Listen, I never want to talk boring work details with you, Darling Kate,” he whispers into her hair. “The little time we have together I want to make about us. You know I’m only in it to make enough, and then, we get out and we get you that bakery.”

Singapore, Today

In her walk-in closet, Katherine sat heavily on the floor twirling her wedding ring around her finger. It had spun smoothly when she was twenty-five but suctioned now onto the extra padding she had acquired through the years. She had asked for the ring for their third anniversary, after the TV show propelled Wolf into the limelight and he parlayed his celebrity into the first *Wolf’s Impressions* restaurant. Anabel became his personal manager. Katherine insisted on a ring that made a stunning, but elegant, impression. She had received an emerald cut diamond, imposing and definite. But, accenting this monolith were delicate little pearls, tiny seeds in different off-white hues. Katherine had loved the ring from the first moment of receiving it, loved that he had remembered, that he had spared a rare thought for her.

In her other hand, her phone screen showed Wolf’s number. She hesitated because she hadn’t called him for years now, had left communication to the odd text when he traveled. She was out

of practice; yet, why would it be strange to call her husband before he boarded a flight home, especially if poor Valdi was ill?

Wolf did not pick up by the second ring so Katherine hung up, quickly, mid-peal. Her pulse quickened. When he called her back a couple minutes later, she made sure to sound composed and distant.

“Hello?” she answered.

She heard the jingle of an airport announcement muffled then snapped back into clarity, like he was whispering to someone next to him.

“Hi.” She sat waiting as though he had been the one to call out of the blue.

Finally, he asked, “Everything alright?”

“Yes. Well, no. Valdi has a stomach issue so I brought in Dr. Svensson.”

“Did you give him strawberries again?”

“No. He swallowed...something.”

“I see.” This was not the response she was looking for. Go on, then, she willed, ask what. “Valdi’s gone through worse. I’m sure he’ll be fine.”

After a pause, she blurted, “Aren’t you going to ask what he swallowed?”

“What?”

“Some jewelry.”

“Poor thing.”

“You’re not going to ask what?”

“What? Hopefully I can get you a new one—”

“Valdi swallowed the pearl pendant.”

There was silence on the line. She could only hear the background noise of an airport full of people going somewhere. She waited for him to say something but he didn’t.

“It’s not important if you don’t think it’s important,” she continued. “How was the trip? Is Shanghai really so wonderful?” Even though Wolf had restaurants worldwide, opening one in China, everybody said, was a glorious feat: this new world of opportunity, of beautiful people with youthful energy willing to splash money onto the latest, hottest trend. The crown jewel, she

snorted to herself.

“Everything is going well.”

“Four months there and that’s all you have to say?”

“Do you want a blow-by-blow account right now? We got the restaurant up and running.”

The word “we” pierced her to the gut. “Oh, I see. And how is the team?”

As if on cue, a woman’s husky voice breathed through his mouthpiece. “Wolf, we’re boarding now. Stop holding us up.”

“Saved by the *bell*, I see.” She laughed a little foolishly at her pun, hoping he would too.

He didn’t. He only said, “I’ll see you very soon.”

“Well, I’m not going anywhere.” *Am I?* She hung up in the middle of his goodbye, afraid the bilious, bubbling pit of her stomach would surge out hot anger that he would interpret as him having an effect on her. He did not need to know she had buried her face into the sheepskin rug, mascara-steep tears bleeding charcoal into the white. Shutting her eyes, she let the inward scream pulsating through her body surge through her mouth. Snot, saliva, and tears collected into a chaotic pool. But she’d be okay by the time Wolf came back, she thought. After this catharsis, and newly emboldened, she’d be ready. *What if I left you today?*

Phuket, Before

Shucking oysters at Trove Oyster Bar in Phuket is Wolf’s first real job. The restaurant, which holds itself in higher regard than the nearby stalls displaying skewers of fish balls, dangling octopuses, and vats of sopping curry, wanted an energetic young man to shuck oysters at an ice bed out front. The owner hired Wolf on the spot, never mind that he had never worked in a kitchen before. With friendly quips slipping off his tongue and playing on his dimpled, boyish smile, Wolf fit the bill. He had realised, from an young age, how capable he was of hiding the anxieties that

plague him.

Wolf learned quickly and soon he shucked with ease while shouting greetings to passers-by. Locals and the tourists alike found him intriguing: a boy-man who looks like a native, with sun-soaked skin, dark hair, and the comfortable manner of someone at home, yet speaks English with the command of a foreigner. *Trove* became a sensation, with lines trickling down the street every night, and, ten months after he started working there, a young woman walks up to him with a camera pointed at his face. He smiles and is about to say hello –

“Don’t talk,” she says. “You’ll ruin the shot.” It startles him to hear a low, rasping voice coming from a shapely being dressed head-to-toe in black. His face must have betrayed his confusion because she asks, “Why aren’t you smiling? You’re so adorable when you smile.”

So, he starts shucking faster, popping the top shell of an oyster into the air and smirking into the lens. A small crowd forms around them, congesting the already narrow street. After a few minutes of shooting, she lowers her camera.

“I can make you famous,” she says.

“Looks like I already am.” He gestures to the crowd, which erupts into cheers at the wave of his hand.

She steps back and looks at him with her head cocked. He has the oddest sensation of being appraised. “You love the attention. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“It’s part of the job,” he says but he is curious, a little uncomfortable, and asks lightly, “Why do you say that?”

“Well look at you, showing off. Doing it all without taking your eyes off me.”

“Maybe I like looking at you. Or, maybe, I’m just good at... shucking.” The joke, meant to disarm and help him regain control of the situation, has no effect. Her smile is patronising but polite as she hands him her business card.

“Imagine a studio, primetime TV. Girls screaming themselves silly. Not to mention, more money in a day than you’ll see here in a month. Now, how does that sound?” She pauses to let the effect soak in. “So, why don’t you give me a call when you can be

serious.”

He doesn't know what to say as he takes the card. Printed on it are these fateful words: *Anabel Ong-Wiley. Talent Acquisition Specialist*. His wet fingers make bubbling imprints over her contact details. When he returns to his apartment in the early hours of the next morning, he sits naked on the tattered sofa studying it.

He always makes a point to strip naked as soon as he walks in to not bring the filth of his work life into his home. When he creeps into the bathroom to scrub his hands clean of their salty, pungent smell, he is appalled by his face: bloodshot eyes and ashen cheeks. A ghoulish mouth drooping from the antics of another night out with the rest of the town's cooks, night pirates who needed to mutiny after the order of a kitchen. Months of this has taken a toll on him. It makes him disdainful of the having to work with his hands. And, still, he made no real money.

Here by himself in the twilight, he loosens his anxieties, allows them to roam free and swarm him.

He stares at the business card. Then, at Katherine, sleeping noiselessly, the spare morning light washing her violet and cold. He wants to go to her but something stops him. How can he allow himself to be the reason she sleeps on a mattress on the floor surrounded by old furniture and stained walls?

He decides then and there to call Anabel Ong-Wiley in the morning.

Singapore, Today

Katherine woke up in her walk-in closet in the dark. Where is Mira, she thought, riding out the dull ache of her joints, picking her way over jeweled landmines, before she remembered her maid's bloody hand from the afternoon, and instructing her driver to take the scared young woman first to the hospital and then home to Malaysia for an impromptu leave. And where was Valdi, who should have been watched to make sure he didn't

swallow any more jewelry. But the poor dog was not likely to have any appetite until it passed the irritant lump. Katherine, on the other hand, was ravenous.

The clock on the refrigerator shone a green 20:37. Wolf should be home in a matter of hours, but she was determined not to wait for him like for some venerated guest-of-honour. She pulled open the stainless-steel doors and took out all the leftovers she could find: a tub of Greek yogurt, a container of biryani, kale salad with pumpkin and goji berries. Her fork dipped into the vessels in rotation so that yogurt dripped from each tine and the colours and flavours blended together. She ate restlessly, without tasting anything.

Perhaps some company would do the trick, she thought, retrieving Valdi from the living room and placing him on a chair in front of her. Her fingers grazed the dog's head and ears, tickling down till she reached its tummy and it shrank away with a low growl. She made a face as if to say, *Is it hurty? Do you need to number two?* With the other hand, she jabbed bits of cold chicken into her mouth, irritated still that the ambiance and the meal could not satiate her boredom. It was no use.

Whatever food was left Katherine swept back into the refrigerator, and, before she quite knew what she was doing, she had loaded the counter top with raw ingredients: all-purpose flour, brown sugar, coconut cream, salt, eggs, oil, then Milo powder and rose syrup. Her body operated a step ahead of her mind but she soon understood what she was doing: She would bake again. She would make muffins for her husband's return.

Katherine had not baked in years. Her memorised movements reawakened haltingly like an aging dancer's, and after the initial awkward readjustments for the right amount of flour, she disregarded measurements and threw in choreographed handfuls of powder. The tin of Milo clacked on its way back down onto the counter. Valdi curled up at into a tighter ball. She rubbed globs of coconut cream, eggs and oil into the dry ingredients with her bare hands until the grit and goop blended into soft batter. She drizzled in rose syrup, hoping to mould pretty pink spirals, but nothing appeared in the overpowering brown of the Milo. Still,

she was not discouraged; the sifting, folding, the methodical mixing had lulled Katherine into a familiar trance.

With the muffin tins in the oven, Katherine slowly awoke to the mess she had made. Flour dusted and settled on usually spotless floor and handles. The bag of sugar tipped out a golden sand dune. Spilled cream and rose syrup formed jubilant puddles on the counter. The sight surprised her so much she sank to the floor, mitts still on, doubled over by the laughter frothing out of her mouth. The kitchen presented – had she meant to all along? – a scene curated to perfection of a domestic goddess gone to spoil.

What a moment for Wolf to return.

“Hello, hello! Welcome home,” she gasped to him as he leaned, trim and meticulous, against the kitchen door. Valdi looked up in greeting but sank down pathetically again.

“Hey, Darling Kate.”

“I didn’t think you would be back so soon.”

“We landed early.”

“Oh, did we? I am so glad we did.” She waved him in, an egg in her clumsy mitted hand. “What, are you just going to stand there?”

“Where do you want me?”

“Come, come in. Step into your pristine, welcoming, comfortable home, just the way you like it.” She tossed the egg onto the floor near his socked feet, but he didn’t move. The yolk ran over the square tile lines of white marble.

“It smells wonderful,” he said.

“I’m baking muffins.”

“My favourite.”

“Are they? I thought it was burgers you liked. Or is it money.”

“Katie, not now.” He took a step away from her.

“Careful, dear, you’re walking on eggshells!” And Katherine fell into another manic fit of laughter. “That was funny! Why aren’t you laughing? Wasn’t that funny and amusing?”

He didn’t respond.

“Am I not everything you ever hoped for?”

“Sure, Katie. You’re excitement personified.”

“Ha!” She was yelling now. “Is that why I’m baking in this

castle of a kitchen?” She snatched the tray of half-baked muffins out of the oven and flung it onto the floor between them. Steaming batter splattered and oozed muddily.

Wolf stared gravely at the mess in the kitchen. He looked everywhere but at the lined face of his wife. He opened his mouth and tried to speak. Katherine watched him lift his eyes to her. Their sorrowful expression reminded her of how he had looked sometimes in their early days in Thailand, working hard to make ends meet. When she had asked what was wrong, he would shrug and say that work was tiring. No words, no explanations were given then, and now.

He finally shook his head and said, “I’m not doing this with you, Katie.”

“How did ‘we’ become ‘you and them’ and not ‘you and me?’” She asked this quietly because she was culpable too, that she had plunged herself into her role of trophy wife: collecting her own trophies, living lavishly, pricking at him to make him feel something for her. She squirrelled away resentment for the winter when all she wanted now was to return to warm, sandy days with him.

A sudden yelp came from the Valdi. Katherine and Wolf turned to see the dog squatting back on its hind legs. The commotion must have awakened a rumbling in its bowels, and it issued out a steaming swirl of brown. Then, shaking but relieved, Valdi gave a happy bark and bounded away.

Katherine leaned over the chair to look at Valdi’s shit. Inside, gleaming still, was the pearl. In a breathless but resolute voice, she asked, “Would you choose me still?”

“What?”

“Pick it up.”

“Pick what – the pearl? You want me to pick up the pearl?” He stared, dumbfounded.

“Yes, the pearl.” She pointed to it. “If, after all these years, you’d still choose me, pick the pearl out of the shit.”

Wolf walked up to her and the chair. He looked down at the moist, earthy lumps.

The two turned to each other and stared.

Phuket, Before

The wooden crate of oysters for Wolf to shuck sits next to a booth of sweating ice. He pours the cragged shells onto the chips. One of them doesn't look like quite right, green-brown and rougher than the rest, but what does he know in his first week of work. He picks that one up, fumbles his knife into the shell's crevice and twists for the pop. He sees a tiny orb pressing against a side of the fleshy mollusk; a slit from the blade reveals the pearl inside.

The world is your oyster. The joke rolls into his head. He imagines Katherine's face contorting into amused derision at something so prosaic but the tightening in his ribcage, his breath caught fluttering inside like a feverish bird is anything but commonplace. He draws the natural pearl out with his finger. More oval than round, it juts out a curved lump here and there. Wild as the untamed wind, like my Katie, he thinks. He slips the hard gem into his pocket.

In a few hours, the dinner rush would be over. His first days holding down a job would be over and, with any luck, would lead to the bakery Katherine wants so much. There is still so much road to go before they can achieve such a thing but the thought buoys him up. And, yet, he wonders if she can be satisfied with their little dream. Can he? Can anything stay this simple forever?

He will likely have to go out with the rest of the kitchen crew tonight. There is a bar, they told him, where all the cooks go after the common people have gotten into their comfortable beds. Right now, Katherine is probably leaving the café for home. He maps her route inside his head, sees her stopping by the convenience store under their building to pick up a loaf of bread and tomatoes. Maybe a carton of milk for the cats that yowl by their window in the morning. She would spend the evening alone, reading, falling asleep to the radio playing in a stranger's language. There is nothing he wants more in that moment than to curl himself

around her and whisper, *darling, darling, we are going to make it, we are this close, just days and fingertips away. We are going to make it together.*

Wolf's hand unclenches from around the pearl and he takes up his knife because, inside, a call comes for another plate of oysters.

Robert Beveridge

The King of Pentacles

The seventh star fell, and the seas
tasted of wormwood. The old died,
and the younger, and the younger,
until only the youngest remained.
Bloated, sore, naught but jimsonweed
and calla bulbs for sustenance.
Scurvy has set in, its darker cousin
rickets just over the horizon. What
we see we cannot feel; what we feel
we cannot taste.

Into this wasteland
comes a teenage stranger with gifts of orange
juice, calcium supplements, jazzercise
programs on betamax. The survivors
crawl from their pits, drink, eat, begin
to jerk uncontrollably to the sounds
of hoofbeats in the distance, ever closer.

Mama Bama

Randall Van Nostrand

A gray squirrel chittered at the round, pale-haired woman pulling a rusted, red Radio Flyer along Plum street. Mama Bama's wagon made an awful racket. So far the day's pickings were slim, a single Mason jar found by the Farrow family's front gate. She'd dumped its sour contents in the street- suspecting Ricky, the Farrow's teenage son, of using it as a beer mug- and put it in the wagon where it bounced and banged. A Mason jar wasn't a bad find. Handy for holding small, transient things like nails and paper clips and bobby pins- Mama Bama had a lot of bobby pins. Really, there was no end to what you could store in a Mason jar.

The squirrel continued chittering. Mama Bama looked up shading her eyes until she found him perched on a heavy branch in the pine tree, "Whatsa matter with you? What's all the fuss?" The squirrel unwilling to answer, flipped his tail and ran up the trunk to chitter opinions from loftier heights.

Mama Bama continued her noisy round, peeking into the Jones's trash can and then over to the new couple's who'd moved into the house next door. She didn't think the couple was married. The woman- her name was Deedee- carried a look of shame. What kind of man wouldn't marry a girl with a name that sounded like singing? Not a gentleman, that's for sure. She knew by the way Deedee combed her hair, all of it over to one side of her face, that she wanted to be married. Mama Bama carefully replaced the top of the new couple's trashcan making sure it was on good and tight.

At the Rosario's house, Mama Bama walked slowly. Her eyes checked the ground under the hedges separating their yard from the sidewalk. She picked up a small red barrette half buried in the dirt. It probably belonged to the littlest Rosario, a sweet child named Alice. "Al-iss, Din-Ner" Mama Rosario would call from the

doorstep, and Alice would run across the yard on short, fat legs. The thought of the child warmed Mama Bama's heart. She slipped the barrette into her pocket and lingered, straining to hear the child's voice. All was quiet, the house locked up tight against the cool, autumn morning.

Mama Bama worked her way home. The morning's expedition turned up little more: a man's brown penny loafer without the penny, half a packet of red striped straws, an old phone book. In her tidy kitchen, she washed the Mason jar in the sink turning it upside down on a dish towel to dry, put the loafer in a bag for Goodwill and the straws in the cupboard.

Her morning chores done, Mama Bama sat at the round kitchen table. It was a table made for family and loud conversation. A democratic table without corners. As she sat, cold black loneliness gaped. She gripped the red barrette in her hand picturing little Alice, knowing it wouldn't be enough. She got out Celandine's baby blanket with the scalloped edges and tucked it tight around her thighs as the empty place inside her yawned vast and dark. She gripped the red barrette harder pushing the plastic into the soft flesh of her palm, pushing the cold black hole away. She teetered on the edge, the awful edge, the edge that left her weak and weeping. Spying the newly found phone book she brought it closer and began reading names out loud;

John Cuthbert

K L Cuthbert

Mary Cuthbert

Michael Cuthbert

N Cuthbert

Susan Cuthbert

A L Cuttaway

It was soothing hearing the names of so many people. On and on she read until the hole was just a keyhole of small gray space where her family should have been. The family she should have had: Betty and Bobby, Benjamin and the eldest, Celandine. Mama Bama was a woman born to have babies. A woman born to change diapers and play patty cake and teach children their manners. A woman born for bending down to listen closely, for combing

tangled ponytails, for cooking pots of soup. A woman born to raise a big, noisy brood.

The clock above the stove ticked in the quiet of the small house. Such a silent house with only the ticking of the kitchen clock and the rasping of her breath. In the heavy silence, the hole inside Mama Bama roared awake, stretching wide. She bent over the phone book and continued reading: A. Franklin, A & B Franklin, Charles Franklin, D. Franklin. She read the names until she was hoarse and calm.

Mama Bama fixed a snack. A large cup of hot chocolate with marshmallows- little Betty loved hot chocolate - a roast beef sandwich with mayonnaise and horseradish and finally, two pieces of strawberry cheesecake. She kept eating until the hollow place inside her eased and she could once again picture Celandine. Three days from now it would be the child's 7th birthday, November 5th. She closed her eyes seeing Celandine's snub nose, blue eyes, and fine blond hair. Celandine who chewed the knuckle of her index finger. Celandine who liked waving her arms to music on the radio. Celandine who would have loved marshmallows and probably complained about her baby sister and brothers: Betty the baby, and Bobby the oldest boy, and Benjamin the middle child. Good children, though not too good, not goody two-shoes good. Good because they loved their mama and each other and tried hard to do the right thing when they weren't getting into mischief. Bobby would be 5, Benjamin 4, and Betty 2. She could almost hear their voices.

Mama Bama put on her heavy brown sweater, wrapped a woolen scarf around her neck and added a small black hat. She pulled the clackity red wagon down the street towards the elementary school. She hurried, wanting to catch the bell, that magical moment when the doors flew open and the children ran out of the building. She loved how they ran shouting and screaming. It was like opening a bottle of shook-up soda, those children bursting out of the tall brick building like they'd been fizzing up the classrooms.

With time to spare, she got to her spot on the bench by the library across the street from the school. Looking around, she

saw a pair of small woolen gloves tied together with a long piece of yarn. How was a child supposed to play with his hands tied? No wonder they got left. She slipped them into her pocket letting her hand curl, imagining small answering fingers.

She could have had a big messy family if Big John hadn't run off. He was a good, deep loving man. Their loss, their unimaginable loss had done them in. The stillness, the quiet, Celandine... The door to the elementary school banged open, exploding children. Mama Bama sat with her hands folded in her lap and ankles crossed; her face, all turned up attention. She smiled as a tiny girl in a red coat with a hood, held onto the stair railing taking the steps one at a time. Her Betty would be careful like that. She watched mothers and grannies and nannies swarm, giving hugs, patting backs, pulling on hats. She watched small faces turn bright with questions, and hands stretch out with papers and crayon drawings. Mama Bama itched for a crayon drawing. Maybe one of a house and a sun, or one of a lion. A drawing she could tape to her refrigerator and see it every time she opened the refrigerator door.

A woman with a baby in a stroller and two children in tow passed in front of her. Mama Bama glanced shyly at the children and smiled. The little boy, all floppy dark hair and glasses gave a grin that spread syrupy warmth across her shoulders.

If Big John had stayed they could have made more babies. But when the whooping cough took their little girl, well, it nearly killed him. He took to going out late, not coming home. She took to bed, not getting up. He turned to drink, she turned to food. He couldn't talk, she couldn't either. The scientific name of the disease was Pertussis. It sounded like a bump on the head.

The doctor they took Celandine to, he told them, well it didn't matter now what he said, he'd been wrong to send them home with baby aspirin. By the time they got her to the hospital, wasn't much anyone could do for her.

After a month in their quiet house, Big John left for good. Ran away fast to become somebody else. He left her with the empty crib, and the tiny shoes, and the scalloped edged baby blanket. Left her with swollen breasts. Left her with the deep dark

hole.

She dreamed about Celandine. Later she dreamed the others: Bobby and Benjamin and little Betty. Without a husband, she dreamed her children to life, dreamed the sweetness of their smiles and the smart things they said.

The school was quiet. A few teachers left together. She admired their nice clothes, the confident way they walked, purses over arms, arms full of homework.

Mama Bama crossed the street, the wagon noisy in the after-school quiet. She studied her way down the block, looking for... looking for what? She stopped, confused. What was she looking for? A feeling of no purpose came over her like a hood blocking out the light. She held still, waiting for the darkness to pass. Her left hand rested on the woolen gloves in her pocket. They had belonged to a child with a whole life waiting. Mama Bama squeezed the gloves tight. Perhaps she'd see a little boy or girl whose hands were cold. She imagined the child's face looking up into hers. She imagined helping him get the woolen gloves on. She imagined him happy.

Feeling better, she pulled the clackity red wagon towards home.

Phil Huffy

An Uncertain Light

Is it dawn
or just before dawn?

Which is the better name
when it is no longer night,
yet colors are unannounced

and monochrome is the medium
wherein the mystery shapes of darkness
will begin their transformation?

When scenes no camera can equate
or eye verily accomplish play out in quiet,
and only dark forest things find their way,

isn't there a particular name for this
murky magic curtain in its brief encounter
so to claim pedigree and assure remembrance?

Melinda Giordano

It Knows Not What It Does

Naughty!

Savage miscreant:

Your blood urges you on

With an undefined threat

Although the bell hangs like a dainty insult

From your throat

And you wear a collar bearing a name

That you did not want.

Your hereditary muscles – a wild gift

Now hidden beneath grooming appointments

And bowls of salmon broth

Move in a half-forgotten locomotion

A velvet trust from your ancestors

That launched you into the air

With the silent, mindless intent

Of a sociopath.

And I saw the arch of your torso

Your extended hopeful limbs

And the gleam of your claws

That singed the feathers of the dove,

Escaping the cat

That knows not what it does

Jodi Adamson

The Art of Tea, Textiles, and Other Commodities

Ladies of this New World colony,
Leave the gentlemen to stuffy committees.
We all agree that Mother England has built a wall.
The fairer sex will brew Liberty tea and have a homespun ball.

To the back of the wardrobe, push your satins and silks.
Yarn, wool, flax, and hemp will be more of our ilk.
Set the spinning wheel a'humming and clicking of the loom.
Better to be a blooming wild Apothecary Rose than hard, hollow
gems scattered about
 the drawing room.

Instead of a formal, staid minuet, strike up a lively reel.
With each independent movement, we will reinforce how we feel.
Maybe Colonel Washington will be available for a dance or two.
We can converse with Martha about the next anti-British riot and
other boycotting news.

Ladies of this New World colony,
Leave the gentlemen to stuffy committees..
We all agree that Mother England has built a wall.
The fairer sex will brew Liberty tea and have a homespun ball!

The Greeter

Kathy Mirkin

When Ruby Gold heard a motorcycle zoom up the driveway, she peeked through the front window's lace curtains. On her stoop, knocking on her door, stood a man in a black leather vest and combat boots, with a black bandanna wrapped around his head, and beyond him, parked on her driveway, a red motorcycle. She yanked the drapes closed. Was he a Hell's Angel? What the heck could he want?

The doorbell rang. She parted the curtains again to take a better look. The man had a shaggy beard and appeared as if he were in his late sixties, like her, and his oversized biceps popped out of a white muscle T-shirt. A hooligan? Rabbi Susie had jerked her out of sleep around six this morning with a call to warn her that some hooligans may have been at the Jewish cemetery last night and messed with her family's graves. Who were the scumbags out there who would do a thing like that? She imagined men in leather jackets, knee-high black boots, with nails or spikes on their heels, swastika and skull tattoos on their arms. Ruby had told the rabbi that she wanted to jump out of bed and drive to the cemetery right away. Wait until we hear from the police, said the rabbi. Ruby twisted the phone cord round and round. But my heart's thumping out of my chest, she said. Wait, said the rabbi.

The doorbell rang again. Well, risks were for the living, and she wasn't dead—even if it did feel like living each day was killing her. A deep fury burned in her; if he were one of those beasts who bashed graves, she'd give him a piece of her mind. She opened the door a crack to see what he wanted.

"Captain Buck at your service. Ready to go welcome home our troops?"

"*You're* Captain Buck?" she said. The man's eyes were cobalt blue, like her boy's eyes.

He nodded and extended his hand, but she didn't shake it. She opened the door, looking him up and down. How could he be the fellow she'd spoken to on Thursday? She'd fought off tears when she'd read a newspaper story about soldiers coming home from overseas. Near the end of the article, it mentioned the group that welcomed home the troops. A photo showed flag-waving, smiling people. It didn't say much about them, but it gave a phone number. Sorry to bug you, she said when she called, but could someone drive her from LaGrange to the Reserve Center in South Bend? She wanted to help greet soldiers on Saturday when they were supposed to be coming back from Iraq and Afghanistan. A man told her that they didn't have a group scheduled for the South Bend Reserve. They'd be in Indy that day. But we're happy to send Captain Buck at 1:00 pm to escort you personally, he said. He chortled and added, "That's me. Good old Captain Buck." He hadn't said anything about a Harley.

Ruby pointed at the cycle. "No way we're going on that dang thing. It's February."

"We sure can't giddy up there on a horse and buggy. You're in luck. It's almost fifty degrees today."

"For heaven's sake, I could fall off and crack my head open."

"Naw. I'll give you a helmet. Now you coming or not?" His eyes were clear and friendly-looking. He tilted his head, waiting for her response.

She hesitated. Maybe it was kooky to go with him, but it sure beat staying home and driving herself crazy worrying about bashed up graves. She nodded, then grabbed her rain coat and scarf. She stepped out, locked the door, and followed Buck towards the cycle. If only she'd found out more in advance about who these greeters are. You bet the guy had broken beer bottles and subscriptions to *Hustler* stashed in his trailer home. He could be anybody; he could work at the zoo with the apes, he could be related to Charles Manson! But his eyes looked gentle. She stumbled on the cracked bottom step where a chunk of concrete had fallen off, catching herself, fuming that she hadn't fixed it, or any of the other broken things around the stone home where she lived alone. At least the gabled roof didn't seem as if it were likely to cave in, well, not any time too soon.

Buck pointed at her rusty basketball stand, with its ragged net, toward the end of her driveway. Jeepers—would you take a look at those fire-breathing dragon tattoos on his biceps! “You’re going to need a new net for your son,” he said.

“Who said I have a son? Mind your own beeswax.”

“Don’t get all huffy,” he said, shrugging. “Most of the ladies I escort have boys off in the military. But maybe you shoot,” he said, grinning. “You’re sure tall enough. What are you, six feet or so?”

“I’m in no mood for small talk.”

Buck pretended to dribble a basketball. “Me and my brother Stevie used to shoot baskets together when we were growing up. I wish we still could. Like we did until Vietnam.”

“You must have served—”

“Nope. Not me. Stevie.”

When they got to his motorcycle, he rubbed the Harley’s back seat and said, “Meet Buck’s Wild Bull. Ready to get aboard?” Ruby frowned, took a step back, examining the cycle; those seats looked wide and comfortable. Buck pulled a rag out of a pack attached to the cycle and wiped down the gleaming machine. An American flag was posted by the rear seat and a teddy bear, wearing fatigues and a cap with the name “Steve” imprinted on it, poked out of the pack. Buck handed her a helmet, but he didn’t put one on. “All right, hop on up,” he said, offering his hand. She grabbed it, stepped up, and squished her wide rump onto the seat. “Where in Hades is the safety belt?” she said.

“Naw. The Bull’s got none. Now you ready for a ride?” He didn’t wait for an answer before starting the motor, and revving the engine, but then, stopping it cold, he turned to look at her. “Steve got blown up into nothing. Nada. Zilch.”

Before she could say anything, he jerked around, started the motor again, and yelled something over its roar that Ruby couldn’t hear. What a horrible thing to tell her and then to take off without another word. Maybe he thought he was Evel Knievel and would try a crazy stunt. Maybe he might drive his cycle across a cemetery, breaking things up until it was nothing, nada, zilch. They took off down the driveway. She wrapped her arms around him and sniffed in a whiff of gasoline and manure from the

pastures as they swerved onto the county road. Sunshine splashed out from the rain clouds and spun the cut-down corn fields into gold. The wind rip-roared against her as they passed the Amish on bicycles and in horse-pulled buggies, the RV factories near Shipshewana where their men often worked, past handwritten “Jesus Saves” roadside signs, and on through Elkhart with its mansions facing the St. Joseph river, then down another county line road.

As they headed through Mishawaka, the breeze felt warmer. Her ear drums pulsed from the Harley’s clatter. They passed a military plant—four, one-story brick buildings protected by two layers of chain link fences topped with barbed wire. Humvees in straight rows lined the side of a building, the steely vehicles saluting a darkening sky. It hurt to think of young people getting in those things and driving around somewhere dusty and horrible and far away.

South Bend was next to Mishawaka, almost indistinguishable. As they zoomed through it, along the roadside by a cemetery, in the shadow of oak trees, Ruby saw men dressed much like Buck, holding large American flags, their motorcycles parked behind them. Buck slowed down, honked, and waved. They didn’t wave back. They were as stiff as the tall flag poles they held. A hawk circled high above them. Grayish clouds punctured the horizon as the sun slipped away. A thunderstorm? A few raindrops slicked her arms. Would the men stand there if the storm came closer? What were they waiting for?

Neal used to stand like that sometimes on the Fourth of July, her little sentinel, ramrod straight watching the parade marching down Main Street. She tried to imagine the expression on his face if she could tell him that she was zipping around with this scruffy guy, but lately, especially when she longed to see her boy, it was getting difficult to picture him without her favorite photograph that she’d lost last week: Neal dressed in his soldier outfit. She’d looked again for it this morning in photo books, in drawers and cupboards, in every crevice and corner of her messy house, but it was gone then and it was gone now. If only she could see it, hold it, see him again—her little tin soldier—if only he were coming home. Ever since she’d glanced at the newspaper’s photo of

homecoming soldiers, she'd been driving herself berserk trying to imagine how her boy might look if he were coming home now in military fatigues. Her little tin soldier, he'd been gone too long.

They followed a line of honking cars, vans, and a bus into the army reserve's parking lot and parked near the western edge. After she got off of the Harley, she rubbed her lower back and stretched. "That contraption sure got my old blood going," she said.

"You look flushed," he said, smiling. "The Bull's as deluxe as they come. Real cushy." He patted the front cycle seat, then asked if she was ready to go join the greeters. She nodded. They headed toward the crowd in front of the Reserve. A light rain sprinkled more than a hundred people, mostly families, gathered before the two-story, red brick compound. People took Welcome Home and We Support Our Troops signs and American flags from their trunks. Girls in fancy dresses with bows pranced around. A group of pregnant women huddled together—don't think about the hours those ladies spent alone, apart from their loved ones. No. Look at the greeters dressed in red, white and blue clothes like they're ready to celebrate the Fourth of July; and the strange scarecrow dignity of an old WWII veteran who stood posted in his threadbare uniform.

Some South Bend firefighters unfurled a massive American flag and hung it above the reserve's gate. Soldiers arrived in buses and a few Humvees, raindrops drizzling down the front windshields, police cars with blaring sirens trailing behind. People cheered and waved signs. Buck hollered, God bless America! Ruby wanted to yell but her voice felt tight and locked. Young women and men in camouflage fatigues and combat boots leaped out of the vehicles, and strode through the lot. Cameras flashed. Everywhere, people cheering, sobbing, hugs and kisses and cries of joy.

"Get a load of that fellow with his little boys," said Buck, motioning at a soldier who picked up twin boys, lifting them into the air to kiss them.

"Lucky him to have two boys," said Ruby. When Buck moved in front of her and blocked her view, she lifted onto her toes, straining to see each passing soldier. She tapped Buck's shoulder.

“Could you move out of the way? I’m hoping to see my bo—,” she said, stopping cold, regretting saying anything about her son.

“So your son is coming home today. You want to wave my flag? You two probably been Skyping to stay in touch.”

“Stop talking about my son.”

Buck scratched his head. “Why—”

“Just get out of my view.” She wanted no questions asked about Neal, no comments made, then she wouldn’t have to tell his story or give explanations. Buck moved, then they both lined up with about twenty people to shake hands with soldiers hurrying by, who were quickly losing any military order, duffel bags slung over their shoulders. What a stampede home, those young-faced soldiers, beautiful buffaloes, set wild and free at last!

Ruby searched their faces. She tapped a passing soldier, his sleeve rough to the fingertips, and he tipped his hat and smiled. She closed her eyes, hummed Humvee, Humvee, and imagined Neal driving through the gate. Wouldn’t he love to steer a Humvee? When Neal was six, Hal, her ex, bought him a camouflage outfit. She tried to remember Neal’s image in the lost photo; wearing his fatigues, standing in the backyard by his favorite plant, the cascading spirea with its small white blooms, a red scarf wrapped around his neck, a toy bayonet rifle in one hand. She couldn’t see his face, but his words came to her: “Mommy, will you play war with me?” She must have pretended to be dead, dropping onto the grass when he bayoneted her, then jumped up and told him she was the ghost of mommy past and never, ever, do that again. She tickled him; they laughed and rolled on the grass while cicadas clattered. Neal would bring her their green-winged bodies, asking why they’d died. They are dead and gone, there’s nothing to be done, she’d told him; their wings will crumble to dust in your hands.

The rain kept drizzling. Ruby looked up, hoping to spot some blue sky, but she saw only gray clouds. Although it was a light rain and her raincoat and scarf protected her, she felt a chill and she rocked from side to side to keep warm like some nearby men in leather jackets were doing. They looked like the fellows who had been standing outside the cemetery. Glancing toward them, Ruby

asked, "Are those guys over there the motorcycle men we passed on the way here?"

"Nope. The guys we passed are the Patriot Brigade, not greeters. They stay at the cemetery. They wait till the hearse comes by, then they'll follow behind," he said. "To the funeral."

"How terrible."

"Excuse me?" he said, his face reddening. "You think it's terrible to show some respect for soldiers who give their lives? A soldier's family asked them to come."

"Calm down. I meant how terrible for the soldier's poor mother and father. How many funerals do those guys go to?"

"Whatever family needs and wants them. Funerals, memorials." Buck kicked some gravel. "It never stops." He took out a hanky and blew his nose. They both grew quiet, shuffling in the dirt for a few moments. Ruby's feet felt wet in her canvas shoes, and heavy, as if they were weighted. She shivered and said, "When's it ever going to stop? Boys getting beaten up. Boys going off to wars. Cemeteries bashed up."

"Now hold on," said Buck, stamping his feet. "Those brigade guys go along to make sure nothing and nobody starts trouble at the cemetery. The soldiers can rest in peace."

"Are you so sure?" she said, wringing her hands.

He wrinkled his brow and looked bewildered, and when the crowd began to cheer, he turned away, and joined in. She didn't cheer. She looked at her cell phone. No messages. If only the rabbi would call. She imagined her family's graves in ruins, muddy, wrecked. For a fleeting moment, her son's image came to her, his face pale, his arms reaching, pleading for her help. She felt desperate to take him in her arms. A bolt of panic shot through her. She searched the crowd until a red-haired soldier passing by caught her eye. She had to stop herself from calling out. He looked so serious, like Neal. She grabbed his arm. He stopped and offered his damp hand. She held it longer than he must have expected, and he said, "Something wrong, ma'am?" His expression was blank and innocent, as if war had barely touched him.

"Sorry. You remind me of someone." Ruby let go of his hand. He moved on. She had so much to say to him, beyond thanking him for risking his life. Had he been scared? Did he feel that he'd

protected anyone? She tried to remember her son more clearly, but her memories were watery, cracking ice; then she noticed Buck next to her, watching. He patted his heart. “Don’t you worry. I’m sure your son will be along soon.”

“Stop saying that! Go buzz off with your Hell’s Angel buddies,” she said, pointing at the leather-clad men.

Buck looked struck. “Whoa, now. Hold your horses.” He raised one hairy eyebrow. “Hell’s Angels? Are you pulling my leg?” He shook his head. “Now look here, I’m Buck Cedarbaum. I’m a podiatrist. It’s about time we made proper introductions.”

“*You’re* a podiatrist?” She wiped the raindrops from her eyes and studied him: his long beard dripping, his wet leather vest and muscle T-shirt. “Cedarbaum?” she said. “*You’re* Jewish?”

“Yup,” he said. “I thought you might be, but I wasn’t sure. It’s pretty strange for a Jew to be living way out in LaGrange.” He stood closer to her, their shoulders almost touching. Her eyes met his; she held the gaze for a long moment, then said, “Well, it’s not like I live in Timbuktu. And I’d wager it’s pretty strange for a Jew to be dressed up like it’s Halloween, riding around on a Harley.”

He laughed. “I’m a mensch on a motorcycle. Now aren’t you going to introduce yourself properly?” He extended his hand.

She shook his hand. “I’m Ruby Gold. A secretary at the LaGrange Courthouse.”

She was going to ask him whether he knew what had happened at the Jewish cemetery, but then the crowd whooped, whistled, and waved their signs, their voices booming like bombs, or was that sound coming from behind her? Ruby turned to see a few protesters beating drums and waving banners with red-lettered slogans: “We Need Jobs and Healthcare, Not War.” They looked young and earnest, their fresh faces shining with raindrops. Thinking she spotted a familiar face, she rushed toward them, with Buck trailing after her, but when she came closer, she recognized nobody, until a boy who looked like the red-haired soldier she’d greeted earlier— but dressed now in jeans and a rain breaker—suddenly stood before her. “What were you doing over there?” he said, pointing at the flag-waving crowd, his hair flopping over his brow. “Cheering for war?”

“Now, wait a minute,” she said. “I’m here to greet—”

“Yeah, right,” he interrupted. “You probably say you support the warriors, but not the .war. Like my mom and the creeps she works with at the plant pumping out Humvees.”

His angry face stunned like a punch. Surprised that he wasn't the boy she'd talked to earlier, Ruby squinted, examining him. “So young people going off to fight is your mother's fault?”

“You've got to face it sooner or later, lady,” he said, shaking his finger at Ruby.

“Face what?” Ruby said, grabbing his sleeve. “Sonny, you don't have a clue what I've got to face.” The young man grimaced and yanked his arm free. He pushed his wet hair off of his forehead and turned to walk away, but Buck waved his flag in the boy's face, saying, “You leave this lady alone.” The boy whipped out his cell phone, clicked at Ruby, and marched off. Ruby groaned, picturing her image on Facebook and Twitter, her mouth hanging open, her face livid.

What had made that boy so furious? His mother? Maybe he'd once been a soldier. What terrible battles did he endure? She'd never wanted Neal to be in any fight, but she remembered when she sat him down on his bed and told him to stand up to bullies and protect the helpless after he told her that his friend Billy was getting beaten up. Kids could be cruel; she didn't want him to stand by. Neal had listened, quiet and solemn. Hal blamed her when Neal fought those damn Weaver boys, who were roughing up Billy one winter day on the icy pond behind their house. The boys thought it funny to taunt Billy when he slipped on the ice. When Neal rushed to protect his friend, they smacked her boy up until he plummeted down, his head banging against the ice. The police called it an accident; the Weavers got off Scot-free; and Neal, he was hurried to the hospital in an ambulance, and never left. If only someone had tried, convicted, and locked her away for the crime of telling her boy to defend the vulnerable. Well, hadn't Hal punished her? When she couldn't stop talking about what happened to Neal, when she talked at the A&P, talked at the dry cleaners, talked in the morning as Hal drank his coffee, and talked at night when they lay in bed, then a few months later, Hal moved out, saying she would drive him out of his mind with her talk.

So she stopped talking about her boy.

Maybe she still heard Hal's voice blaming her; but no, it was Buck saying, "Hey, don't let that kid get to you." He tried to speak to her, but she couldn't say much. She longed for her son, and whispered to herself, It's not right.

"What's not right?" asked Buck.

"What?" she mumbled. Composing herself, she said, "It's not right that my son can't be here."

"But he's on his way."

"Where? Where is he on his way?"

Buck scrutinized her, raising his brow in alarm. She was going to tell him the truth about her son, but he looked away at a new car crowded with soldiers coming through the gate, and then he joined in with the cheering greeters. When it got quieter, he turned and asked Ruby why she wasn't cheering.

"He's not coming."

"But he's—"

Ruby shook her head.

"Tell me what's wrong. What is it?" His temple veins swelled.

Ruby shrugged. Her voice felt gagged.

"I'm hurting, too," he said. "I swear I still see Steve in my dreams like he's here right now. He knew I was a jerk. When he got drafted and I didn't, I laughed. Jesus! I laughed." His face seemed to cave in on itself. He touched her lightly on her forearm, hesitating before taking her hand. She wanted to tell him he had no right, but his gentleness surprised her. When she didn't pull away, he lowered his head and rested it against her shoulder. Then he wept, muffled, choking sounds.

She cleared her throat. "There's nothing you could have done." Lifting his head, he stroked his beard, then took a deep breath. "Jesus, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to lose it. You're a knock-out strong lady."

"Baloney," she said, wiping her eyes.

"Oh, don't cry."

"I'm not. Just some sprinkles in my eyes."

She scanned the parking lot. The greeters, the cheerers, the protesters were getting into their cars. The massive flag sagged from the gate. She longed to see more boys, but no more came.

"Where's your son, Ruby?"

“He’s never coming.”

He opened his arms as if he wanted to hold her, but Ruby turned and walked away. A gust of wind knocked against them as they headed towards the motorcycle. Ruby’s ankle twisted and she fell forward, her body halfway down when Buck caught her. You’re shivering, he said, we should get some coffee and dry off. She told him she was fine, but would he please drive her to the Jewish cemetery in Mishawaka? No, she wouldn’t explain, would he please drive her, it’s only minutes away, please, right this second, let’s go, and if he wouldn’t, she’d take a cab.

“We’re sopped. Can’t it wait?”

“Don’t you know,” she said, “the cemetery’s been banged up.”

“What?” His eyes widened and he raised his eyebrows.

“I’ll explain later. Are you taking me or not?” she said, motioning toward the cycle.

Nodding, he wiped down the cycle seats. Puddles pooled around the cycle. The water splashed over them as they sped off through South Bend.

They parked next to a chain link fence outside of the cemetery, then walked through the gate toward a brick prayer house shaped like a Star of David. Buck pulled the wooden door to see if they could go inside and dry themselves, but it was locked. How could they just walk into the cemetery? Where were the police? Seeing no officers present, Ruby doubted that the rabbi had called them. The small cemetery, next to a railroad track, was quiet, as it usually was except for the rare times when a cargo train chugged by. The rain had ended and patches of pale gray sky opened up between clouds. They approached the lawn where the graves were, and stopped. Ruby gasped. She clenched her hands against her chest. About a dozen headstones near the railroad track were overturned. Some were cracked or broken into pieces and strewn across withered grass covered with twigs and scattered brown leaves. She turned to face Buck. “Your son’s buried here?” he said, softly.

“That’s the rotten truth.”

“Oh, God, Ruby.” He glanced at the graves. “You knew about this?”

She nodded.

“It makes me sick to my stomach. We should call the cops.”

“For crying out loud, why bother! They’ll just say it was an accident. The rabbi supposedly called them. Maybe they just haven’t showed up yet.”

“I’d say it’s a hate crime, for sure. Crazy nutcases. We need to clear out of here.”

Ruby shook her head, and strode off, bending over now and then to look around for pebbles to leave on graves. “Stop!” called Buck, but she kept going, roaming among the overturned headstones. Two of them were shattered, indecipherable. Trickles of water flowed through the grooves in the dirt where the stones had stood. Squirrels scampered nearby. A brown headstone with the name “Julia Wiseberg” was cracked and chipped at the sides. Morris Blattstein—a survivor who’d smoked Cuban cigars—his stone with its Star of David, was knocked down. She stifled a cry. Oh God, her old friend Molly Roth’s stone was split in two, a long crack between “beloved mother” and “wife.”

She approached the edge of the cemetery, near the railroad tracks, and then she glanced back to see Buck hurrying toward her, his eyes wide with concern. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go back.” She waved him away. Damp air rushed into her lungs when she hovered over her parents’ overturned stones. Her heart pounded and she began to cry. She crept towards the edge of Neal’s grave, the last one before the railroad tracks. “Your boy’s?” said Buck, opening his tattooed arms, and she turned and collapsed in his embrace. His face was warm, blotchy, freckled, his soft beard brushing against her cheek, his palm against the back of her head, warm. She shut her eyes and tried to muster up Neal’s face: happy, drenched, freckled— how could she have forgotten his freckles?

She let go of Buck, opened her eyes, and stared at the mangled clumps of brown grass, the headstone toppled over and crushed into large pieces. Neal’s Hebrew name, Gabriel, the letters shattered as if a sledge hammer had struck them. She dropped down on her knees, struggling to put the letters together,

and Buck tried to help, but it was no use. She lowered her forehead against the ground and, sobbing, sank onto the muddy grave, laying there for a long time. She longed to hear Neal's voice, begged God to send her a sign that he was safe from harm, and prayed that he knew nothing of this cold stone shambles.

If he could see her now, he would put his arms around her, bring her a tissue, and tell her to go home. Exhaling deeply, she tried to wipe her eyes with dirty hands. As she raised her head and upper body, Buck's hands, the fingers surprisingly long and delicate, lifted her up. He gave her a tissue and said, "Let's take you home." When she stepped away from the grave, her knees cracked and her legs felt wobbly. She took his arm and asked him to escort her to the motorcycle. She paused by several spirea bushes planted against the cemetery fence and touched their mucky branches. "I bet the roads home will be slick and dark," she said.

"Naw. It'll be okay. Now let's get the mud off your coat before we take off."

She let him brush her coat off as she gazed at the dried up spirea, her arms dangling by her sides, as if she were helpless as a small child who believes those bushes will be ghostlings when they bloom, white on black branches, in the coming spring.

Jane McGuffin

Valley Forge National Park

We've had cups of tea in strange places,
so why not Valley Forge?
We shuffle through the fields alone,
foggy perfume of lovely long-stemmed dandelions,
buttercups and pretty things with names unknown
along this path.

We are twelve again
trudging through hay in my great aunt's meadows
looking for the cold spring
my mother found when *she* was twelve, and paid visit to
our matriarch with the crests of seven family forefathers
hanging in the hall in New England,
all veterans of '76.

My mother now, in her brick colonial serves tea
in Dresden cups to seven other Daughters
of the American Revolution.

They say those men were hungry
here, that winter in Valley Forge.

No matter:
What's past is prologue!

Today we carry tea in styrofoam.
A thousand purple clovers set us free.

Jane McGuffin

Kites

There was a woman made kites
of all her loves;
they were orange and red and green,
and little baby kites for all her
children, all
dancing in the sky,
over the sand and the rolling waves.

My kite flew
out over the dunes
swishing its long tail in the wind,
flashing its colors,
vermilion and green and
aquamarine, a long paper snake,
eyes looking out
at us, and the neighbors
on rows of porches
all smiling
at the ladder
from earth to air.

The string breaks.
Like driving through the night
on an unfamiliar road
with a cup of coffee
and a good radio
it can be done.
Without the string,
the kite can still fly.

The Night Bus

Simon Broder

I always judge by how they hold their coffees. Crewcut at the counter takes the cup firm, three gnarled black hairs curled over a pasty knuckle—shades of a life spent with a turkey on Christmas Eve and a wifey on her knees. He walks over to the door and leans against the frame obtrusively. *Damn right I'm waiting—you got a problem with it?*

Now if this were some suburban Starbucks or bohemian hub on Haight, you'd expect to find a clump of nauseating humanity—all telegraphing their life stories—following him to the counter. There'd be the insomniac ADD-fiend dropping his cup in his spastic rush, the jaded loner holding it close like a woman, the femmish daddy who uses the *wrist*. Thing is, though, this isn't one of these awful coffee joints. It's the Greyhound terminal in Albany, New York, it's 3:30 in the morning, and the guy behind the counter is some 50-year-old brother who falls asleep between the orders instead of a jaded revolutionary. I'm sitting in the corner booth talking to a hooker named Isabelle about the meaning of life. Isabelle and I were the only two people awake on the bus down—I don't like her much, but truth is in the middle of the night in an American shithole there isn't much to do but talk, and the Chicago bus isn't due for another ninety minutes.

There's one more coffee hound lurking. He's young with a face full of grungy beard, which tells me that either the dude's a straight-up crackhead who got his fare paid by the popo after one too many loitering tickets or he's just another college fuck. I watch as he saunters to the counter and pays in change. He snatches the Styrofoam off the counter with quick flamboyant fingers like a juggler or a pickpocket. I can picture him running into some anonymous bitch he fucked last weekend and throwing

his arms wide with a fifty-cent smile, sending whipped cream slopping all over my shoe.

“Oh man,” Isabelle says, returning me to the topic at hand. “I just remembered I had this same conversation last week. We decided,” she crinkles her nose. “We decided that as long as you’re searching for it, you know, it just doesn’t matter.”

Hipster-junkie sits down at the booth across from us and tosses Isabelle a leer which rattles me. The girl’s told me enough about the street life that I’m pretty sure she’s full of it—seems to me when someone feels the need to assert something like that it’s because it’s not entirely factual. She’s big-bodied, too. Not pudgy, exactly, just—*loose*. Like there’s baby fat hiding out somewhere.

“Do you want to take a walk with me?” I ask her. “Just a walk.”

“You didn’t get it, did you?” she says. “You have to *think* about it.”

“Yeah, well,” I say. “You know Albany at all?”

“Sure.”

“Sure, or sure? I don’t trust this place.”

“*Yeah*. I’ve been before.”

I elbow past the asshole sipping his coffee and out into a terminal with white industrial paneling that simultaneously manages to convey sterility and filth. Outside the foyer we pass by an old man curled up in a pink ski jacket. I can tell he’s old because the light from the Greyhound sign illuminates his cheek wrinkles. I’m worried that his head will roll off the concrete step onto the sidewalk. I crush up the coffee cup and lob it towards a trash can, but it rattles off the rim and rolls up against his comforter. Isabelle giggles a little too loudly and the man grunts and rolls over.

“I’m cold,” Isabelle says.

“So where are you from originally then?”

She grabs my arm. “Did you hear that?”

“What?”

“Nothing.”

I didn’t hear anything. At the end of the sidewalk, a gate jogs off into a city park, the walkway lined with maple and oak

branches. She pulls me down onto a bench.

“Give me country, at least,” I say.

Before I got on, the bus came from Toronto via Windsor. I wonder if our peachy rebel has what it takes to cut it in the harsh liberated world of the U.S. of A. Isabelle’s right index finger traces a figure eight on the knee of her jeans, which are torn and patched badly. For the first time I notice the scrapes on her legs where the skin shows. Her fingers are positively klepto, moving up onto the button of my jeans.

“Stop it,” I say.

“Sorry.” She laughs childishly again, and this time it grates. I imagine listening to that laugh in a reclining chair as my lungs fill with blood. There’s been a rock in my shoe for the last fifteen minutes and I twist my foot against the ground now to try and get it to move over.

“So,” I say. “You got on in Toronto?”

“I guess.”

“Never been a fan.”

“No?”

“Too cold. Not like this.” I’m shivering. “Just—alien.”

“Alien. Yeah. Yeah, maybe I know what you mean.”

“Maybe. Let’s move,” I say.

We come out onto another street. A city bus—number 17—stops and lets out three drunk college kids and an old man in a black toque. The two boys start beating on each other and the girl yells at them to pipe down, do they know what time it is? One of the guys picks up a rock and whips it at his friend, but it misses and skids up to the curb about two feet in front of me. The old man disappears around a far corner.

“What the hell, Mark!” the girl shouts. She smiles across at me in patronizing sympathy, then they hurry past. Isabelle and I stop at the bus shelter.

“So many buses,” I say, and she laughs. “I wonder where this one goes.”

“I don’t know.”

“No schedule. Want to wait for the next one?”

I pull off the sneaker and reach inside to feel for the pebble,

but there's nothing there. I feel around the bottom of my sock, then I pull the sock off and turn it inside out. The concrete is cold against my bare foot.

"Well if not where you started," I say. "How bout we work backwards?"

There's nothing in the sock, so I put it back on and then I reach my hand back into the Nike and tear out a gum-shaped polyurethane nub. Flicking it against the wall of the shelter, I notice a pack of Natural American Spirit propped in the corner. It's not flattened or tossed aside, but standing upright. I pick it up. No cigarettes. But there's definitely something inside.

"Check it out," I say.

"I don't really want to wait anymore," Isabelle says.

I pull out the baggie. It looks like shrooms, maybe a quarter ounce—mostly stems. I shake them into my hand. Isabelle takes the empty package and turns it over. She points a stubby finger at a name scribbled in permanent marker on the bottom of the pack. It looks like "Lucy."

"Let's put it back," she says.

"Should we dose?" I ask her. I don't want to, though. I'm already lost.

"Put it back," she says again, and hands me the cardboard. I grab her hand.

"Tell me something."

"What?"

"What are you doing here?"

"I *told* you," she says. "I got someone to see."

"Come on, now."

"I'm going back to the terminal," she says.

I watch her ass in those torn-up denims as she waddles up the street. I should follow her – she's the one who's supposed to know this town—but I don't. I wait for a while in the bus shelter, but there's no sign of a bus. I have no idea what time it is and the damn box in giving me a raunchy tobacco fiending. Before I can decide to hunt down a convenience store, I hear a bang like fireworks and then a red Jaguar hurtles into a median ten feet in front of me.

There's a cardboard coffee cup in the holder when I go over to inspect the damage. Spiked, no doubt.

"You okay, buddy?"

"Holy fuck," the driver says. "Holy fuck."

"Hurt yourself?"

I came out of the shelter fully expecting to be confronted by a first-rate douchebag, some asshole full of rage. But this kid doesn't project much aside from fear. There's a wet sheen to his face and hair, like he's squeezed out a whole tube of Brylcreem and I think he must be Filipino. He gets out of the car and walks around to inspect the damage. The front right headlight is smashed and the tire's leaking air in strangled gasps. The guy pops his shoulder a couple of times but it's hard to tell if he's trying to relieve some overextended muscles or it's just a nervous tic.

"I'm fucked," he says. "No insurance. Fuck."

"Hey, you're alive, right?"

"Fuck me."

"Hey," I say. "You got a smoke or anything?"

"Something wrong with this damn city!"

He kneads his shoulder blade. He's not so much talking to me as verbalising his agitation. I've got at least six inches on him and I can't help but think how ridiculous he looks pacing the open concrete like a hysterical Chihuahua.

"You're sober, right?" he asks me suddenly.

"Me? Sure."

"What you say we put you behind the wheel?"

"Me?"

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Never mind," he says. "It's a terrible idea."

"For me it is."

"You know," he says. "I could just leave it here. Report it stolen."

I hear sirens, but they could be anywhere, going anyplace. They grow faint, and I become aware that the streetlamp in front

of the ruined sign is buzzing. At first I think it's just a result of the accident, some object still careening from the impact, but when I move closer and put my ear right up to the steel, I realize that the pole itself is possessed of some lifeblood, a constant internal vibration seeming to come right out of the earth. I lay a finger against it. The pulsating metal sends a tiny electric shockwave through my fingertip. "That's a better idea," I say. "Are you hearing this?"

"What?" he says.

"You know any gas stations round here?" The sirens peal again, closer, and without warning the Filipino guy breaks into a run.

I start running, too, but in a different direction.

I couldn't tell you why I do it. I just *do*, and once I've started it's hard—maybe impossible—to stop. I feel the rush come on, my brain boiling in an adrenaline frenzy. I feel dispossessed. Tires screech somewhere and I speed up. I haven't run since gym class in senior year and haven't run *like this* ever, I don't think. I've never been an athlete but now I'm hopping gates, climbing fences, just doing anything and everything within my power to keep the adrenaline wave from reaching its breaking point. I don't know where I'm going—hell, I don't even know where I started—but I don't stop until I come up against a ten-foot sheer stretch of wood panelling that slides viciously under my palms when I try to scale it.

I fall against it. My body is wasted and my neck is throbbing violently. Somewhere in my mind an authoritative male voice from the past admonishes me not to hyperventilate. I'm too tired and exhilarated to care. As the pounding in my ears subsides, I realize the fence behind me is vibrating, too.

I test for a handhold again, but one of my hands is bleeding and I'm drained. Around me are skeletal hallmarks of innocence: a giant mud-caked seahorse and deflated purple wading pool. It's a good thing there are no dogs. I hate dogs. I work my way along the fence, listening all the way to make sure the beat's still there and not just a figment of my paranoia. Eventually the wood panelling ends, but a latched chain-link gate still guards me from the street.

When I vault over it I catch a shoelace and my scraped hand hits the grass hard. It pisses me off. The beat is louder out in the open. In the driveway two houses up I finally identify the source of the music. A tubby white guy decked out in camo seems to be guarding the door.

“What’s goin’ on?” I ask him.

“You know Cameron?”

“Yeah. Sure,” I say. “Who doesn’t?”

This is the kind of guy who would crush a Styrofoamy in his hands in front of all of his buddies just to show he could. He levels a glare at me and I slump away. At the corner I find a cab with its light turned out. I knock on the back window. Nothing happens. I knock again and the window rolls down.

“What do you want?”

“Are you open?”

“Can’t you see the sign’s off?”

“I need a ride.”

The cabbie’s a youngish white guy. The card on the backseat identifies him as Brandon Leighton. He looks like kind of half-assed dude who winds up cabbing because he can’t think of anything better to do with himself. He’s nice enough, though, and once I get him talking he pretty much won’t stop.

“This chick, man, she’s so hammered she can’t even *see*. And she was *fine*, too. Some girls, you know...even with her head hanging halfway out the window, you can just tell. I know a lotta guys don’t like freckles, but on this girl there was just something so fucking *dainty*, even when she’s pumping her stomach right out onto the sidewalk...”

I like this guy. He doesn’t give a fuck. The clock on the dashboard reads 10:34 PM but it’s flashing and obviously wrong. By the time we pull into the parking lot of the depot the sun’s already thinking of coming out and I’ve clearly missed my bus. The hobo is still in his cubbyhole. He’s sitting up now, clutching a crinkled cup forlornly as he waits for the morning commuters. I turn to Brandon and ask if he wants a coffee. He shrugs and says sure.

The brother’s asleep again when I get to the coffee lounge. I

gently tap him on the shoulder and order a couple of cups, black. He grumbles under his breath but pours some thin opaque liquid into two foamies. The terminal's completely deserted now except for a teenage black girl tossing and turning on her suitcase as she tries to avoid pinning her spine against the industrial chairs. I chuckle to myself and think about Isabelle. Poor Isabelle.

Brandon's nowhere to be found when I get outside. You really can't trust anyone, I guess. I hand the second steaming cup to the old homeless dude, who hoards the warmth greedily with both hands. Then I go back inside to wait for the morning bus.

Judith Cody

The Clock Watching Expert

The existence of time is heavy
for a thing so fast to spin
a minute for us
and go like a dust devil
goes
somewhere
where it will soon disintegrate
into dead order
grey dust.

It presses too awfully against
skulls to never speak of
of time
of eternity

one I will know
closely within
my flesh like a
lover
who plans to
abandon

the other
is always
alien.

A poetry teacher once admonished a young poet
“never write about TIME or ETERNITY.” Too arty
too poetical in the ancient sense.

But time is there
both innermost
and outermost
at once
in the human
scheme of things
draining like
pus or sand
depending
on momentary
pain level
measured like
the boredom of surf
slipping, slipping
always slightly
sliding
away the land
surf of cells
the same.

Time for “CNN” time for “NewsCenter 4” time for someone
somewhere to gurgle to death time to dig a hole for corpse
for cabbage seed for a new swim pool for cat shit for hiding
in—

a drawer of broken
watches stare out
at the drawer opener.

What’s to be done?

There is no time
left to fix them all
all is sieved through
the glass
the sun whizzed by
so often already
too fast too many
to count anymore
gave up trying.

Time to cook a ten thousandth supper for some man's
"What's to eat?"

What's to cook?

It all ends up in the same hole all
those gourmet extravaganzas
or curds or whey.

About the Authors

Rochelle Jewel Shapiro is the author of *Miriam the Medium* (Simon & Schuster, 2004) and the Indie finalist, *Kaylee's Ghost*, 2012. Her essays have appeared in the NYT (Lives), Newsweek, and more. Her poetry, stories, and essays have been in *Moment*, *The Iowa Review*, *Permafrost*, and more. She is the recipient of the Brandon Memorial Award from *Negative Capability* and was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She teaches writing at UCLA Extension. <https://rochellejshapiro.com>

Dawn Lo works as a teacher and writer. She received an MA in Creative Writing from Lasalle College of the Arts. She has lived in Beijing, Hong Kong, Montreal, and Toronto, and is currently in Singapore with her crooked-mouthed cat. Her work has appeared in *Flash Fiction Magazine Online*.

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *Savant-Garde*, *Other People's Flowers*, and *The Indiana Horror Review*, among others.

Randall Van Nostrand started writing at the age of seven when her teacher, Mrs. McLean, told the second-graders they had to use both sides of the paper in their notebooks. This posed a problem. Randall liked seeing her schoolwork on the clean right-side pages. Her solution? Fill the left-side pages with her own poems and stories. While those early works are long gone, her love of writing survived. Randall is now an emerging author with a novel in the works. She hopes you enjoy reading her story as much as she enjoyed writing it.

Phil Huffy writes all manner of short poetry, often at his kitchen table. He tends to speak about things he has seen or thinks he has seen. Recent placements include *Orchards Poetry*, *The Lyric*, *Better Than Starbucks*, *Anapest* and several haiku journals.

Melinda Giordano is a native of Los Angeles, California. Her written pieces have appeared in the *Lake Effect Magazine*, *Scheherazade's Bequest*, *Whisperings*, *Circa Magazine* and *Vine Leaves Literary Journal* among others. She was also a regular poetry contributor to CalamitiesPress.com with her own column, 'I Wandered and Listened' and was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize. She writes about the possibility of remarkable things: the secret lives of the natural world.

Jodi Adamson, retail pharmacist by day, finds time to write, read, design and sew costumes, collect assorted tv and movie memorabilia, and take care of two cats and a yorkiepoo. Her writing can be found in written and electronic literary journals, anthologies, and also the self published *The Ten Commandments for Pharmacists*, illustrated by Stacey Hopson. Her costumes have won several state and national awards. She is a proud member of the Atagi Chapter of the Daughter's of the American Revolution which inspired the poem seen here.

Kathy Mirkin writes fiction and poetry for adults and children. Her writing awards include: a Highlights Foundation Writers' Workshop scholarship and the SCBWI-Illinois Words in the Words scholarship. She is working on a novel featuring Ruby Gold and short stories, poetry, and picture books. For more information, visit her at www.kathymirkin.com and follow her on Twitter@kathymirkin.

Jane McGuffin is a poet/songwriter/psychologist who lives in Philadelphia Pennsylvania. She likes to say her poems are as varied as her songs - rock, pop, country, indie, contemporary, traditional. She likes to say this happened because she attended too many different colleges over the course of her education, beginning with Agnes Scott College (2 years), the University of Florida, Gainesville (B.A. and M.A. in English Literature), and culminating with the University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia (Ph.D. Professional Psychology).

Simon Broder is a freelance writer based in Toronto who spends far too much of his time tweeting about sports @dougiejays. When he's not talking sports he can be found knee-deep in a manuscript about the modelling industry. Credits include *Blank Spaces* literary journal, *Disarm Magazine* and *Raptors HQ*.

Judith Cody's poetry is published in over 135 journals, won national awards, is in the Smithsonian's permanent collection. Her poem won second place in the national Soul-Making Keats Literary Competition. Poems were quarter-finalists for the Pablo Neruda Prize. Books: "Vivian Fine: A Bio-Bibliography," "Eight Frames Eight" and "Woman Magic." Cody was editor-in-chief of the first "Resource Guide on Women in Music," she edited a PEN Oakland anthology. Cody loves organic gardening with her husband, Dave, and long walks. www.judithcody.com

