



QUIRK

# QUIRK 2000

“PREPARE A FACE TO MEET  
THE FACES THAT YOU MEET”

--T. S. ELIOT

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# QUIRK



## Editors' Note

Nobody is one-dimensional. We all have an assortment of masks crafted for various situations. These personas allow us to manipulate others' perception of ourselves. In T.S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," the speaker recognizes the inescapable need to "prepare a face to meet the faces that you meet." We, the *Quirk* staff, also acknowledge the multi-faceted nature of an individual's personality. We all prepare, unwittingly or not, our faces, our projected images, for all the other projected images we meet, which are prepared, unwittingly or not. Appearance and reality, of course, do not always have to be at odds with each other. Sometimes, the appearance is the reality, but oftentimes, the ways things are aren't really what they seem. Consequently, we decided our theme this year should address this marvel of human nature. The diverse works featured in this year's edition of *Quirk* constitute a collage of façades.

We are extremely proud of *Quirk* 2000. It took the efforts of many individuals to get this journal off the drawing board. We would like to thank those who made this edition of *Quirk* possible. First and foremost, we are indebted to Dr. Moumin Quazi for giving freely of his own time, energy, and guidance. He patiently showed us the tools and language of the editor, so that we now know not only what we like or dislike in a poem or short story, but also how to voice our editorial opinion professionally.

Additionally, we are grateful to UIW's English Department and Student Government Association for their financial contributions. And, of course, we would like to thank the contributors for providing us with the raw materials needed to piece a journal together in the first place. We are especially grateful to Laura Tohe who was recently named Writer of the Year by the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. We are honored that she generously sent us one of her works in progress. Finally, we are grateful to you, the reader, for your interest in student-produced literary publications. Thank you for buying this journal, for reading it, and for sharing your support with us. We believe that you will be pleased, and perhaps even a bit surprised, with this year's selections.

Without further hesitation, we enthusiastically present to you the latest installment in our series of journals: *Quirk* 2000. Enjoy!

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## Third Degree

Bob Fink

It's not his lopped off left hand,  
the stump healed over with extra skin—  
folded ends of waxed, bread wrappers  
a 1950s mom smoothed and creased  
to seal in freshness, paste-white slices  
she was told would build her child's  
body twelve strong ways.

Nor is it the river and tributary scarifications  
branching up each forearm, a family tree  
of waters trickling out into the smooth plain  
of the bicep—that field just beyond the fire  
break, preserved as a reminder, a contrast  
to the charred trunks, the burned-toast limbs  
of pine and sweet gum trees fronting the field—  
ghosts who surprise us rising at midnight  
for a glass of water.

He knows we can't help but stare askance,  
waiting in the checkout line with our one-night  
action videos, our smooth jazz compact disks  
sealed in cellophane. Because he knows,  
because he wants to help, he offers what  
he has practiced as a grin and says, "I know.  
It's a leisure suit. I can't help it.  
I'm a sucker for polyester." Because  
he has no lips, we don't know to laugh,  
and we're too ashamed for him to engage  
in conversation as if we haven't made it  
to the nose, the eye, the transplanted



sod of scalp—its sewn-on tufts of hair  
removed from hidden locations on his body.  
We might contain ourselves until he pays  
and escapes were it not for his lifting high  
the Bob Seger C.D. with thumb and two fingers  
for all of us to admire. He says he can't  
believe his luck, being so hard to find,  
and here it is for us to witness his purchase:  
*The Fire Inside*, and this time, for sure, he smiles.

## God's Will

Bob Fink

She must have heard it first as she hugged the baby to her breast swollen to a size she'd dreamed of since sixteen when she would have agreed to almost anything for a blouse, a sweater not from the petite juniors sales rack in McWorter's Five And Dime.

How could she have known the weekend choir director preferred tiny girls and drove up from the seminary not because he needed his share of the offering plate to purchase nice things for his wife and daughter, not because he lacked experience?

Now, of course, she understands that when leaning across the passenger's seat to lock her door, he touched her there on purpose. Now he knows her daddy's farm was out of the way that Saturday after choir practice. Now she knows why she accepted his offer.

Her mother and the nurse at the home for unwed mothers must have said it was God's will even before she'd broken the rules and named her son and for the first time in seventeen years felt unashamed of her body. Even the attending physician may have said it, prompted by the girl's mother. It was the forties. Unmarried young women did not raise babies on their own in North East Texas farming communities. It was God's will.

He could forgive her being innocent and pliable but not embarrassing her family, her church.

It took all of them to get her on the bus, one seat behind her mother, who wept and read her New Testament the 243 miles back from their stay at the Oklahoma Sanitarium

For Female Problems. Her mother couldn't get out of her mind  
how she had dressed as if for Sunday worship  
and stood before the high school principal to say  
she was taking her youngest daughter out of school  
but, God willing, she'd return as good as new.

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## **when god was a cowgirl**

Shannon Schreiber

when god was a cowgirl  
we walked  
without the masks  
that we have fastened  
on our selves

when god was a snakegirl  
we danced  
without the bonds  
of ridged motion

when god was a catgirl  
we loved  
without slavery

when god was a wolfgirl  
we howled

when god was a girl



## **Face in the Mail**

Linda Arredondo



## Sister Friends, Voodoo Mamas

Janie Jarrett

I'm a social worker for the state. But it's not my fault. My husband Steve says I was born with this big tattoo on my forehead, written in invisible ink only needy people can see. It shouts, "Yes, ask me. I can help!" Sort of like a dog whistle.

At first you cry a lot. In social work, I mean. I did. Every time you hear somebody's story you think it's got to be as bad as it gets. But it isn't. That first year, I was ready to build an ark and march them into it, two by two.

Then you get tired, run out of room, I suppose, so you laugh at the sickest things. When you find out one of the kids on your caseload was caught in the janitor's closet at the Junior High in mid-stroke, fucking the forty-year-old P.E. teacher, you look at the worker at the next desk and say, "What the hell, he's younger than her old man." And then you both laugh so hard you can hardly talk, and you nickname the girl, "The Fuck Monster."

You catch yourself at parties telling some really sick joke, or blurting out a disgusting remark. For a minute you've forgotten you're among normal people, but as soon as you've said it, the room gets quiet and everyone's eyes say, "They pay you to help people?"

\* \* \* \* \*

My friend Teri came in to work with this article she found in a women's magazine, a scientific study that linked helping professionals with cancer in women.

"We have a higher rate of cancer?" I asked.

Teri held the magazine in front of her face. "Yeah, and listen," she said.



“‘Tentative data suggests those in the helping profession, particularly women—therapists, social workers, cops— have a higher rate of cancer than any other group.’ They speculate that it’s because we ‘are more likely to feel responsible for client’s problems.’”

I hadn’t said anything at work about the lump, so Teri had no idea she was striking a nerve. I acted normal. “So?” I said.

“So, look,” she shoved the article under my nose. “They think it’s the stress associated with co-dependency. We take on so much of our clients’ garbage that eventually it becomes part of us, a physical result, our cells start to divide and reproduce radically—and voile, cancer!”

Teri was always bringing in some controversial thing we could debate. We both thought it was probably bull shit. Most of that stuff is. But it got me moving to schedule my physical. What I’d believed was a tiny kernel in there, suddenly felt like a bowling ball inside my size B boob.

\* \* \* \* \*

The two day wait on the mammogram results seemed like forever. Usually you get this quaint little form letter in the mail that says, you’re fine or you’ll live until next year, or something like that. But this time, Dr. Greely called me, personally, at work.

His words lingered heavily in the air around me—Surgery, dysplasia, could be a malignancy—until I suddenly felt like I needed a bath. But he told me to hang on while he gave the phone to Cleo, the receptionist. Cleo is one of those people who bubble over with do-gooder Karma, flinging it out at everyone, until patients want to slap her silly. But not this time.

Matter-of-factly she said Steve and I had to swing by the office Monday morning and sign the consent form.

“My husband has to sign?”

“The surgeon says it’s just standard procedure, in case—”  
Cleo cleared an imaginary blockage from her throat, “In case a

mastectomy is advised when they get in there.”

“And they need my husband’s signature for that?”

“What?” Cleo asked.

“Nothing,” I said. I resented the implication that a man owns his wife’s breasts, that she needs his permission to lose them, but I didn’t say this to Cleo. I just wanted a bath. So I blew her off, opened my desk drawer and took out my purse then lied to Joyce, my supervisor, the first serious lie between us in all our years together. I didn’t need her getting all drippy on me at that point.

I’ve never had a flair for self-pity. I managed to get out of the office and half-way to the car before I began to bawl, the deep heaving sobs of a child. I couldn’t stop myself.

At home I realized it wasn’t that I needed a bath so much as I just wanted to look at it, privately. To take off my clothes and stand before the mirror, trace the curve of the right one first, as a sample, then turn to get the profile of the other side. I couldn’t see anything. The nipple didn’t point in any strange direction, and with the naked eye I couldn’t detect any difference in size.

\* \* \* \* \*

Teri convinced me to start a journal, only instead of writing down the day’s events, I’m supposed to free myself of my most memorable clients.

“Think of it as treatment,” she said. “A few minutes of writing a day. Might work like an apple.”

“A few minutes? Ha. I could probably write a book, ‘How to Screw Up Your Kids in Ten Easy Steps.’”

Teri said, “Get serious.”

I was serious. I could write a book, but I don’t think I can identify just ten steps. Ten specific cases maybe.

Like Diane, this crazy mom who thought I was brainwashing the whole family, her chapter would cover at least five good ways to make sure your kids turn out to be serial killers or



lunatics. Diane was diagnosed schizophrenic and wouldn't take her meds. She always wore some sort of head garb over her tight curls, and sometimes she glued a rhinestone to her forehead. I once asked if she was Muslim or Hindu.

She said, "No. Full-blood Cherokee."

She told me she could speak authentic "Indian." The spirit gods taught her the language in dreams. Her records listed race as white.

She was sitting in my office, shortly after we got custody of her girls, going over the ways she could maintain contact with them. I'd placed April in a local group home and Tammy was in a foster home twenty miles south of town.

"I got to keep in touch. April's gonna forget the language if nobody speaks it to her." She claimed she'd taught April "Indian" so they could communicate no matter who was around and never worry about somebody eavesdropping.

"Well, you can write all the letters you like," I said, printing each of the girl's addresses on a note pad.

"Can't write letters," she said, wide-eyed with earnest.

"Why's that?"

"Shock treatments fried those wires. Can't remember nothing before 1975. Not a drop of anything from school. I just can write my own name."

I had forgotten this was one of her phobias: Never put anything in writing.

"I see. Well, you could call—from a pay phone or something. Or you could come up here and call once a week—save your change."

"Can't do that either. Can't hear nothing over the phone."

"You have a hearing loss?" I asked. This was a new one.

"Yep. Not just a loss, deaf as a sweet tater."

I subdued the urge to laugh out loud. "Diane, can you hear me now?"

“You’re a smart ass, aren’t ya?” she laughed. “It only happens over phone wires. The ultra-violent rays traveling over fiber opticals don’t register on my ear drum. Doctors can’t explain it. But it must be that, cause I never had no trouble before they come out with the fiber opticals.”

Then she claimed she was blind for a while. She had a service worker pick her up and lead her into my office for a staffing. The worker rolled her eyes at me from over Diane’s shoulder, then left us there alone. Diane waved her head around like Stevie Wonder reaching aimlessly for walls, until I took her hand and steered her over to the chair. I’d planted my purse in her path on the floor beside the desk, just to see, and she stepped over it without a skip. She was pathetic in ways, but smart enough to get what she wanted from the office. I had to be careful that she didn’t charm me into believing she was harmless.

We got her girls after a protective service call. Diane was soliciting truckers on the CB. The officers said they’d heard of her before. Her handle was “Sunshine,” but she only worked at night, usually meeting trucks at the four-way stop north of town and supplementing the welfare checks with twenty-minute visits to the semi’s sleeper. Diane’s sixty-year-old “husband,” a disgusting, deep wrinkled man who reeked of something like strong red onions, apparently didn’t care what she did, he had other interests too. Raymond, was his name. He worked evenings as a janitor at the chemical plant. A neighbor realized the girls were left alone at night too much and called it in.

Raymond left bruises on Tammy that were present when we picked the kids up. On that case he admitted he hit Tammy, but only once, when she set fire to the bedroom curtains, so the judge gave him diversion. Several months later, April, the older girl, broke down in a group therapy session. She said Ray would come into her room after work. He’d hide in her closet, wearing a mask that looked like Rudolph, the reindeer, and make



noises until he woke her up. He'd jump out of the closet, into the dark room, and scare the bejesus out of her before he pulled off her panties. She couldn't remember anything after that, except that he once gutted their pregnant peek-a-poo and showed her the canine fetuses. "This is what I'll do to you and your mother if you ever tell a soul."

We never got a conviction. April couldn't remember enough specific details. Raymond supposedly moved out two weeks before April's review hearing, so the judge sent her home. Diane and Ray abandoned Tammy in foster care, and took April with them to Texas. She was fifteen.

April called the office about a year later, but I was in a meeting and she wouldn't leave a number.

"I'll call back later," was all she said.

We heard through the system grapevine that she hung herself.

She once drew me a picture of the group home's cat. It was taped to the front of my desk for a long time, but I can't find it anywhere.

\* \* \* \* \*

The evening nurse came in for my vitals. Her name tag said Kathy Song.

"Great name," I said. "Kathy Song even sounds like an angel of mercy."

She smiled and asked, "Do you work? Outside the house, I mean?"

I confessed, "I'm a social worker for the state. Lucky me, I work the adolescent cases."

"Fascinating," she says. "It must take a special person to do that job."

I tell her Steve's theory about the tattoo. She dies laughing, so I go with it.

"Steve says the message changes according to the current

situation. In the grocery store last summer, when I saw the old woman there in front of the canned tomatoes, gray-eyed and confused, my forehead must have said to her, yes I will drop everything and help you search for the Aunt Rosita's chili seasoning. Apparently the old man, her husband, had wanted chili for lunch fourteen years and five months ago, but she was mad at him that day, so she heated a frozen casserole instead—"

Kathy Song, R.N. looks at her watch a couple of times. I am keeping her too long, saying too much, so I decide not to tell her how the old man died right after lunch. A heart attack, and his last meal was a crusty reheated casserole. The gray eyed woman found something that morning, a pair of his gloves I believe, that triggered a fit of guilt and grief. We finally got the manager who told her they stopped making Aunt Rosita's several years ago. Before it was over, I was thirty minutes late getting back from my lunch break. I don't tell Kathy this. I yawn and act sleepy.

"But some other time," I say. "I need to rest."

It is dark outside. Kathy Song shuts my curtains while she smiles and asks, "Do you need more ice chips?"

\* \* \* \* \*

The next night I begin to appreciate the IV morphine. I remember getting all tingly, floaty, and thinking, They do have some good drugs in this place. I closed my eyes and it felt like I was eight years old again, asleep in the back seat of my parents' car, Daddy's big Chrysler, driving home from somewhere late at night. My eyelids are heavy, but I force them open enough to see the green glow of the dash lights. I listen to the murmur of my parents' voices, but can't make out the words. I am safe.

\* \* \* \* \*

It would take a lot of drugs to make you forget something like this. I kept dreaming about it, or maybe I was awake, a drug-induced psychosis. The cancer had become a parasite. I could actually feel it growing inside my chest, and it throbbed a steady



beat that said malignant, ma-lig-nant, mal-ig. . . , over and over.

Then I could see inside it and I knew for certain I have a curse. But it's not a tattoo like Steve thinks. It's some sort of radioactive transmitter in your chest that sends out subliminal beams of light. I think I read something about that in a magazine too. Somebody did a study. Certain people have this aura you can actually see if you know what you're looking for, like the tattoo in a way, only it's an aura generated from the heart that attracts people. In the muddy clarity of morphine, I think that it goes both ways. The aura is both a transmitter and receiver. Once they get the message, the needy come swooping down on you and unload all that is wrong in their lives. You have no control over how much comes in, so it grows and grows.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carol was one of the snottiest little shits I've ever worked with—we call her type the hip-slick-and-cool kids. That was Carol. But you could see beneath the flippant charm that she was scared. And smart. The smart ones get me every time.

I saw her in Wal-Mart two weeks and four days before she disappeared. She'd taken a stripper's job at Valley of the Dolls, a nasty little dive east of Galena. My friend Teri always said, "If they were going to give Kansas an enema, they'd stick the syringe in Galena." That's the sort of town it is. The Valley of the Dolls was painted a bright orchid latex with white letters, Girls, Girls Girls, in spray-can-graffiti cursive, to call customers in from the highway.

"I make three hundred a night for a few hours work," Carol explained, reading my mind, then she looked down at her pale legs and bare feet. She was visibly dirty, more than one day's missed bath.

"What about school?" I asked. She'd told me once she planned to be a psychologist.

"I'm still gonna do that," she said. "When I get some money saved."

I tried to smile as I said, "Well, you always were a good dancer." But I saw my own disappointment reflected in her eyes. It was an awkward moment before we said goodbye.

The local television stations had her picture on the screen every night at first, then it was only when they had a new lead or when her mother called them to ask for more coverage. For several weeks I'd be somewhere and a young blonde would strike a familiar pose, or flip her hair just right and my blood would rush to my head. Sometimes they hardly resembled Carol at all, really. Each time I had a thousand things I thought I would say to her, but when I had time to think, to sift through it all, the only thing that seemed right was, I'm sorry.

\* \* \* \* \*

Last night, aided again by the magic drugs, I imagined the aura was Carol—only I was there with her. It's the first time I've gone out of body. Carol and I were both inside my chest, rolling around with dozens of women I couldn't make out, though I thought one of them might be April, and another was my friend Teri, from work. We were like a ball of snakes so entwined I couldn't tell which body belonged to which head. It was stifling. Then, suddenly, the mass burst apart and they slithered away, leaving me there alone.

I look around and realize I'm standing on stage in a hospital gown. They're playing this sleazy strip-tease record, on scratched vinyl that crackles in the background, and the crowd chants, dance, Dance, DANCE. And the really bizarre thing is I don't tell them to get fucked or anything. I do it. My hips start to sway and I glide into this seductive, dance-strut, thing from side to side. Then they say "take it off" and I begin to untie the gown before I realize. My cheeks and eyes burn. I can't show them what they want. Then Carol comes out on stage and she dances over beside me.

"It's okay," she says.

I say, "No, you don't understand—I can't—" and I touch



the place where my breast used to be. But Carol seems to know already. She helps me take the gown off. The crowd doesn't seem to notice the scar. I am relieved by their obscene gestures, that they still want me.

When the music stops, Carol and I both run off stage and I say, "Your mother has been worried sick."

She smiles this eerie smile, "I know. Tell her it doesn't hurt."

And then it stopped. Or Kathy Song, R.N. woke me up, checking vitals. Thank God she doesn't expect me to talk—it's the middle of the night—I just lay there and wait for her to do the job and get out. The room is dark again so I close my eyes and try to see Carol, as she was that day in Wal-Mart, but I can't. Did she sniff and touch her nose too much? I think she did, but I can't be sure. By this time, I've forgotten her face.

\* \* \* \* \*

My hair is growing back curly and a light shade of chestnut brown. It's ironic, all the money I've spent over the years for perms and die jobs to get it just this color. Maybe there is a God and He hasn't forsaken me.

\* \* \* \* \*

People screw up their faces with concern, ask about my reaction to the chemo. I think I neglected to knock on wood when I'd say, "Yeah, well, the porcelain bus drives were worth it—I'm cancer free."

The next time I come out of anesthetic, both my breasts are gone. They say that when I'm stronger, they can build me two brand new ones from the roll of flab around my stomach, a tummy tuck and boob job in one. Everyone says they feel good about it.

\* \* \* \* \*

I went back to work half-days, but I'm not taking new

cases. I don't want to hear any more stories. Besides, I think the "I can help transmitter" must be out of order. I shopped for groceries and not one old lady I saw asked for anything. I think it's the short haircut. They think I'm a lesbian.

Steve says I should quit work and concentrate on my health. He's trying hard not to be protective, but it's killing him.

\* \* \* \* \*

It's growing again—this time from under the arm, "into the chest cavity," Dr. Greely said. I suspect that's a kinder version of, "It's reaching out for your heart. I keep thinking about the "aura" thing and that stupid article from Teri. I can't help wondering if I could dump this shit out, all these years of crap, that the cancer would stop growing. Of course I can't say something that silly out loud—Diane and I would have to share a room in the funny farm.

\* \* \* \* \*

If one more person asks, "Have they ruled out surgery?" I'll slap the shit out of them, I swear. Would anyone in their right mind leave an operable tumor in their body? Try two rounds of chemo first?

The daydreams from the hospital are coming back again, only now it's without the aid of morphine. It's like my eyes roll back into my head and they stare into the cancer involuntarily. I see it throbbing almost every time I close my eyes now—that snake-like ball that is me and some of the kids. This time it was Krissie, the one who'd never used silverware and got herself thrown out of two group homes before we figured out why she was starting food fights.

The night before Krissie, it was Candy. I could see her sitting at the big table with her attorney. She walked to the witness stand with this false smile and never stopped smiling. Not even when she told them everything, including the part about the adoptive parents' German shepherd and the clothespins clipped



onto her flat-chested nipples.

\* \* \* \* \*

Today at work it came again. This time I'd only leaned back in my chair and closed my eyes for a second, when I remembered Tina. Her retarded mother was standing beside her at the corner of Seventh and Broadway, holding a sign that said, "Girl for Hire." The same woman who pimped her out for twenty bucks a trick and told her never to take the pill because it wasn't 100% effective, that she'd probably get cancer if she took it.

Sitting in my office, the old lady told her daughter, "Don't you let them try to give you no birth control. They'll cut your tits off, and you'll still end up pregnant."

As soon as I got a break from phone calls, I went down to Income Maintenance and pulled Tina's file. She has four kids of her own already, still lives with her mother and doesn't list a father on any of the kids' birth certificates. I think she's twenty now. Twenty or twenty-one.

\* \* \* \* \*

I've been complaining to Teri that Dr. Greely never prescribed any pot for me to smoke. I asked once, but I think he thought I was kidding. He grinned and said, "Sorry. You'll have to make your own connection."

Teri rolled on that one. "If he only knew how easy that would be," she said. "Just call one of our clients and you'd be token within the hour."

\* \* \* \* \*

Maybe it's too much time spent with Teri, all the talk about the aura, but I swear every time I meet with a client or go to a staffing, I imagine that I can feel the new tumor growing. We've decided to start having dump sessions. I'm not one to discount

anything at this point. We told Steve it's my night with my "Sister Friends." He doesn't know it's just Teri and me, that we secretly call ourselves the "Voodoo Mamas."

We're supposed to keep a pad and pencil with us and every time we think of a kid, past or present, we write it down. Then Teri comes over on Steve's poker night and we drink White Zinfandel and dump, a resurrection and cremation of the worst cases.

We read the notes, talk about them, then set fire to them, the smoke billowing up from our back deck, a sacrifice to the gods.

This week I started with Jana. When Jana was five, her mother died of, guess what? Cancer. Ten years later, we get her on a runaway petition. Her dad has been in a coma at St. John's for six months. Dad and a younger sister were coming home from a picnic when he turned in front of a semi on the bypass at Centennial. They had a fight before he left because he wanted Jana to go along. Jana was fifteen, in all the self-centered glory of the age. She played sick, so she could stay home and make out with her boyfriend, some thug dad didn't approve of. Her little sister was killed. There are no living relatives.

I also remembered the little girl with braids so orange they resembled carrots. Neither Teri nor I could recall her name. Her grandma lived on Oak street. 1425 Oak. Her natural father put Drano in her bottle when she was 16 months old. He got out of prison last year. I wonder if he's tried to see her.

\* \* \* \* \*

Dr. Greely suggested I get "my affairs in order."

As if it had no significance at all, I looked at him, serious as hell, and said, "I've never had an affair—Steve would kill me. But, if you insist—"

Greely writes something in my chart. Probably one of two things: sense of humor is still a plus, or pt. is in denial.

I wanted to write Steve a letter. All this writing and not one word to him doesn't seem right, but I couldn't think of a single



thing to say that didn't sound melodramatic. I guess I could say, Dear Steve, Thanks for wiping the puke from my chin and checking to see if I'm breathing when I lay wide awake there beside you and can't let you know I know. The 'sign on my head' that you've always hated has caused this thing in me. I'm trying to dump it all out again, but it just keeps coming, and coming until I can't make out the details any more and I close my eyes and the tumor throbs with their stories. I want to tell him the only thing I really regret is not having children with him. I can't say any of this.

\* \* \* \* \*

These are some whose names and stories I remember but I wouldn't recognize them on the street. I see them on the page. Their psych evaluations, family histories, presenting problems. They are stories without a shape. Lives in uniform black letters on flat white paper.

Jackson, Kendra

Rogers, Jackie

Keeling, Mary

Potter, Mary

Winters, Mary

Sullivan, Mary

If Steve and I had a daughter, I'd call her Carley, or

Hannah, maybe.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yesterday, I sent Steve a card, mailed from our house to our house. I bought it for him last year when he was gone to a week-long conference. Put it away in a drawer and forgot it. There is a bear on front, sitting on a fallen tree, looking up at a slivered moon and the stars that are tiny yellow dots except for one which has transparent glitter over it, making it stand out. The inside message

says, miss you. I almost wrote, I will, above it, but my hand wouldn't let me.

Today, the mailman brought the card back. I took it out of the mailbox and put it on the counter with the bills. Steve came in from work, grabbed a chilled stalk of celery from the vegetable bin, and I handed him the pile.

"Bill, bill, junk," he sorted through, chomping on the crisp green stalk. My card was on bottom.

I slipped into the living room and waited. Several minutes passed before he walked up behind me.

"You miss me?" he said, nipping my ear with his teeth as he put his hands on my waist and turned me around. "But, I'm right here," he said, the crisp bitter-cool scent of celery brushed against my face.

I smiled, but I couldn't maintain eye contact. I let my chin fall.

"You do," he said. "Want me to take some time off work?"

All I can think to say is, "No." He draws me closer to him. I am reminded again that they never built my new breasts.

I say, "If I die, tell them to put me in a Wonder Bra, size 36 D, stuffed full."

"You're not going to die," he says.



## Adam

Christina Houle

Oh tree,  
I'd be a fool to attempt  
Your fragile dew.  
Waste not silken honey  
And blushing fruit  
On my fickle tongue.  
I won't disturb your slumber,  
Nor distract you from your sun.

Only let me root  
In your neighboring earth.  
Morning will turn our leaves  
Toward polar stars,  
And the lone mark of my presence  
Will lie beneath carpeted grass  
And accordion worms.

Through vacuum night  
You'll hear me sigh,  
Exhaling fears and failures  
To rediscover youth's potential.

And with ear to breast,  
I'll find slumber  
In your chambered lullaby,  
Feeling muscle echo  
Through cavernous chest.

For though I wished your indifference upon myself,  
I'm now a fool to pretend I don't dream it undone.

## Washed-up

S. Campos

Backstage, only feet away  
from a thousand cigarette butts and ashes  
randomly arranged like a fortune's knucklebones,  
she eyes a slippery bar of soap  
like trappers' bait.

She takes it; stylus finger dragging  
in the dermal grooves, whipping up  
thick lather and a hope that each rotation  
turns the years back one by one.

The mask which mediates  
between the well-worn leather  
and 1981 dissolves,  
concealed by the foamy blinder.

And as she dreams in iridescent schemes  
she hopes that twenty years compressed  
into a ten-track greatest hits CD  
will be the knock on Lazurus' tomb  
and not the epitaph.

But when the bubbles burst  
and wash away, she glares,  
wide-eyed, hands ripping at the tinted hair:  
"If only mirrors worked like photographs,"  
and the shadow is pulled in the swirling of the drain.

## Come to Me

S. Campos

Come to me—sit here on the sand  
and trace my lines. A pictograph  
the black sea taught me—  
words that tiptoe to the lips,  
peek, and then retreat—  
how I choke on the unspeakable.

“What does all this mean?”

I cannot say; the hungry waves  
are licking at the text,  
and now I'm suddenly relieved.

I picture the insatiable Charybdis,  
a mile wide esophageal twist,  
a churned soup of ships  
and sailors' bones rest  
tranquil on the floor.

And soon this hieroglyph, soon  
the very core of this emotion  
will return to its tangled source—  
a bedmate for Leviathan  
and a thousand other fantasies.



## **Motion**

Phoenix



## Smoke *(The Senora and the Student)*

Chris Al-Aswad

### I.

The American student emerged from his bedroom at nine o'clock at night. He moved slowly down the short hallway toward the well-lighted kitchen. He always greeted the Senora, and sometimes he blinked from the light. An unlit cigarette usually drooped down over his dry bottom lip. The cigarette might have been born there. But the Senora never noticed the cigarette. She just dragged a dust mop along the kitchen tiles.

The student was accustomed to taking the small chair that leaned against the pantry to a central location beside the stove. He would then sit down and light up the cigarette. The Senora would reach for her own pack on the counter-top. She always knew exactly where it was without the slightest movement of her eyes. She had good eyes for her old age. She began cooking dinner at nine-fifteen.

"I haven't seen you since lunch."

"Not sleeping. Reading. And I wrote letters."

"When you sleep in the afternoon, you have difficulty sleeping at night."

"You have reason. But this afternoon I did not take a siesta. I read a book. And I wrote a letter to my mother, and one to my father."

"Bueno. Pues, nada. I will make us rice soup and a tortilla de patatas for dinner. A tortilla appetizes me tonight."

So the Senora cooked a pot of rice soup, and she fried a tortilla de patatas in a pan. The chorizo hung from a string on the wall above the stove. The Senora took this fat-blotted red sausage to the cutting board. She chopped it up into the pot of rice soup. She hung the chorizo back on the wall. At dinner time it smelled like the greasy chorizo. At breakfast time it smelled like apricot marmalade.



The student always had himself planted in the small kitchen chair. He loved to watch the Senora cook dinner.

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The Senora sliced five whole raw potatoes into a pan for the tortilla. Nimble as ever, the sharp blade bounced off her thumb. The move from whole to sliced—into the bowl—he couldn't catch it. There should have been two forms of the potato, one easily distinguishable from the other. But to the student, there was just one blurred image: potatoes flashing back and forth.

He always opened his dog-eyes wide before the Senora. It was easy for the student to make dog-eyes dumb. He didn't really speak much. He usually jawed a try in Spanish and then muffled his mouth with another cigarette. It was easy to smoke cigarettes. The shutter of his mouth smoked cigarettes like it talked simple talk. His mouth had smoked many cigarettes for one his age.

The Senora cooked with a good deal of life for her age. She flared through the small, well-lighted kitchen. There was always a cigarette in her mouth and the flame never traveled too far from the Senora. It went with the Senora from here to there in a half-second. Like that. She flung the spot of light along with her. And then she would modestly flick the cigarette twice into the garbage bin. This was the closest the Senora ever came to the student in the well-lighted kitchen.

As she made the dinner, the Senora moved faster than the little light she was carrying. She was quick at cooking. Although the kitchen was very small, his eyes could not keep up with her after long. His eyes would give up. It was enough. His eyes would pant. Enough. At times what he saw was not even smoke.

There was, for example, an unhappy cloud full of worldly dreams. The Senora had disappeared, the cloud might loom toward the student. It did as it pleased, sitting on top of his head, or forcing him out of the room. The student grew afraid of the thing because, though he didn't know *exactly* what it was, he knew what he had made it in his mind. What was worse than . . .

He imagined that there might not really be any worldly dreams inside the cloud. He imagined there might not be any hope or wisdom left inside it.

The Senora made the potatoes do a miserable disappearing



act. For suddenly the Senora slipped away from the picture, leaving her hands flashing. Was she going to gather the eucalyptus from the other room? Was she going to Portugal again? In the student's vision, the Senora's hands whispered something about the end of his days in Spain. The hands quickened as if to tell him to get ready, the last days were approaching. And he thought:

What will become of me at home?

He could hear his father's voice:

What a crime it is to smoke . . .

The Senora sensed that the student's dog-eyes shielded something deeper, perhaps some secret boyish shame that threatened to undo him in Spain, but she could also see a lightness behind and beyond the frail shield. She could see that lightness living and singing in the student as if he were her fostered child.

She knew about his case of nerves. She told him one night that she understood the situation as if it were her own. She had her own case of nerves. It was that spark of life that desired to flicker uneasily. Now she was stronger and wiser. Now she managed herself better. She told him:

When I was your age, I could not attend school either.

She even told him:

My mother had a private tutor come to the house because of my nerves.

He kissed her on the cheek.

## II.

The Senora prepared the lunch as Darl washed his hair in the shower with strawberry shampoo. The shower room was through the kitchen. Darl would arrive from classes at five minutes to two o'clock, and he would slip into the shower. He did not have time to shower before class. So he took his shower quickly before lunch, then a very short siesta before he went off to class again. Darl studied such a great deal that by dinner time he was usually sleeping on his books.

These days the student was leaving his bedroom less and less. Dinner was the only meal he ate, when he spent time with the Senora alone. He started off sleeping through the apricot marmalade in the morning. Then he stopped joining the table at

lunch. Each day, when he decided to skip lunch, he would feel worse and worse about it. He always told himself that he was doing it for this moment only. He always told himself that he would do it never again.

Maria Angeles and her sister, Juanita, were sitting down for lunch. Juanita lived on the third floor of the same apartment. She came for lunch every day at exactly two o'clock. The sisters praised Darl for sitting down on time. Darl smiled and kissed each of them on the cheek. He pulled in his chair, placed his napkin on his lap, poured a glass of wine. The late dictator's picture was on the bottle of wine. The sisters often told Darl that he was a lovely American student, a model of sorts. It was true that Darl conjugated his verbs fluently in the pluperfect tense. The Senora served him three scoopings of creamed broccoli. Juanita broke off a piece of fresh bread for Darl. Juanita monitored the bread basket with her trusty right eye. Juanita was much older than her sister. She still believed the general Francisco Franco rode on a white horse. Her left eye was permanently sealed shut. When she asked Darl how his day went, Darl tried his best not to look into her defected eye. Darl was so self-conscious about looking into Juanita's poor left eye. He wanted nothing more than to be a polite American student.

The student was not eating lunch today, and in his absence, Darl told the Senora that the student might be forced to leave her apartment. He said it was against the rules. And it was true what he said. The Institute called the Senora later that day. The student had to find another place to live, or go home. But the Senora disagreed with the Institute. The student's case was like that of having a broken leg and not being able to attend classes, she said.

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Upstairs, in the apartment directly above, a mother hollered at her children. Every night at dinner time, the wooden floors shook. The mother, like a titan, stomped in fury. The kids scurried in all directions. You could hear them resonating from the heavy foot steps. The angry mother drowned out their little voices; she kept at a higher pitch the next minute. In the end, the entire production could ruin a nice meal.

The student scooted the small kitchen chair away.



The Senora finished slicing the patatas with a modest 'ya esta' and added, "The weather today was precious."

"Yes," he said. "There was wind, or no?"

"Eh?"

"Wind? A little cool?"

"Why not leave the room one day? Go to the park, a short walk down our street. The fresh air is good."

He thought:

Yes, the people outside might be unfamiliar. But fresh air is good.

But no, no:

The air is not that fresh.

He used to walk to school every day. It used to take thirty minutes. The skimpy sidewalks always under construction produced a slow-footed current of Spaniards two and three deep. The monotonous fall of feet made way through the city.

As it began, he felt largely suspended from the Spaniards. For this made the stream, and the smoky cigarette trails it left behind, measure life at one moment solid. When the student approached the Spaniards they were whole. The cigarettes pumped a slow energy into the Spaniards. Their smoke thickened as if blood flowed through the veins in the atmosphere.

These words arose in him:

Que Vida! Que Vida!

He lusted for that blood in the atmosphere, he desired that clot of life. And so, one afternoon, he marched out of the American Institute. He ran home to the Senora; he was very nervous. His vision shifted everything around him. He brushed past the Spaniards, one after the other. They divided over and over again into slices. Was the *whole* stream a mere illusion? Some people tossed him forward, some people pushed him back. He remained aloof, running with a cigarette in his mouth. It bounced up and down, touched his nose to his chin. The smoke went up into his eyes. His dog-eyes watered. He ran on and on, until, finally, the cigarette dropped from his mouth.

He stopped running. He turned around in the middle of pedestrian traffic. He looked back at the fallen butt. A gorge of people swept through him. Buckets of unfamiliar faces came at him, going on and on, as though he were still running, he could not



escape the pull of it. Of himself. The wreckage of the fallen butt drifted in particles behind him. The butt soon became part of the stream itself, repeating over and over again, with the smoke rising.

The smoke would thin out of the student's memory . . . dissolution. Even the dry Spanish wind that came in a whiff every now and again erased the remorseless city. It picked up the leftover smoke and cigarette trails, and scattered real people into thin air. Whole, slice; cigarette, smoke; forgetting, forgotten.

So he stayed indoors, withdrawn from strangers, nestled in the apartment of Maria Angeles.

"I prefer to be here with you." He said.

"Hijo. It's not good for your health."

\*\*\*\*\*

As Darl, Juanita, and Maria Angeles were eating lunch that afternoon, the student had locked himself inside his room. He would not hear them call to him.

The student went out onto the balcony. Nothing bothered the student from the balcony. He could admire the day in peace from there on that ledge. A four-story apartment building sat under his room's view. A young woman caught his eye. Her head was chopped off. She wore a white uniform and she was ironing in front of one of the fourth-floor windows. He opened the balcony doors wide. He stepped backwards from the balcony, moving deeper into the room. He tilted his head toward the floor. He stood there for a good ten minutes trying to find her head. She had nice breasts he focused on instead.

He stripped down to his boxer shorts in front of her. She couldn't see him. He watched her breasts ironing for one more minute, then he closed the balcony doors. He drew the curtains. He yanked the cord hard, the lever wasn't working properly. Upstairs, in the apartment directly above, a piano bellowed, then softened. The student stood there with his boxers down to his ankles in the dead center of the room. He stared helplessly at the

poster the Senora had put on his wall. It had a clown on it with a blue and yellow striped shirt, blue pants, and clumsy-looking tan shoes. The clown wore a round black hat that sort of floated above his head, rather than fitted onto it. The clown bent over at the waist, pronouncing the recti of his clown-thighs. The clown was about to pick a flower. Above the floating hat in cursive Spanish it said:

*To wait for too big of a happiness makes it a difficulty for the same happiness.*

The student placed his head on top of his baby-sized pillow. He tucked his feet under the two tattered blankets. He didn't know why he felt better suffocating under a tent of sheets, he just did. He got to enjoy soaking in sweat just like people feel good and clean dancing in pouring rain. When he was under the tent sweating he was reminded of when he was little and took showers with his parents. He used to get out of the shower and kneel down as though he were praying intensely on the fluffy-soft mat. His tiny hands fit over his knee caps. His body bent into a ball. The big towel caped over his spine. He disappeared the same old way in the sweat and the steam. He remembered it all perfectly!

But he couldn't breath very, until, well, was, passed . . .

He pulled the sheet off.. He stood up on his feet, tingling. He opened the balcony doors, swallowed the cool air. It swished against his pores, a drop of sweat evaporated. She was whole at last.

A child was practicing piano upstairs. The notes sang to the student at noon, when the child was home for lunch, when the student locked himself in his room. The recital repeated daily. The pianist continually lifted the expectation of the your ears. After a while, you might not even distinguish between the piano and the player. After a longer while, it didn't even matter if the player existed. In the end, when you really got down to hearing it, the piano played itself. It refined the player out of existence. With life



itself going on.

### III.

"I'm not ready to go outside. Not yet. I need some more time."

"Your time is almost over here in Spain."

"I want to stay here. I want to live with you."

"Bueno. Pues, nada. The dinner is ready."

The Senora began scrubbing the dishes in the sink. The student peeled off the transparent plastic table cover that stuck to the varnish of the wood. He went out to the balcony to shake off the crumbs. He folded it and placed it neatly in a drawer. He stepped into the kitchen and grabbed the small kitchen chair, once again moving it out of its place. He shadowed the Senora for a short period of silence and running water. His observation of her was both a preservation and a penetration of her enigma. The harmless enigma he could not master—

He had been chain-smoking for weeks and had adapted unconsciously to a young but giant cough. The small kitchen chair rattled on its unsteady legs. There was no riddle to that cough.

The cough originated deep inside the student's throat. It lodged there like a scale-model boat of phlegm. At times it slipped down and swam in his belly. But it always climbed back up his throat to bother him. When it really bothered him he sort of puked it out. He liked to look at the slimy thing; he was proud of its size and shimmer. He watched it glisten off the inside of the sink. Sometimes it looked like a boat, sometimes like a tiny golden treasure chest washed ashore to the outer world.

He once fingered the tiny treasure chest. He fiddled with it in his palm. What he found inside the treasure chest were hundreds of carefully cultivated daydreams sticking to each other in one slimy mass. Living on top of one another in the tiny chest, they had all begun to look alike. He had kept them inside for too long. He thought that from then on, as soon as they came up together in the back of his throat, he had better puke them out.



"My cough . . . my cough." He said gasping.

"You're going to cough yourself to pieces."

"I know. Is it bad?"

Her husband died of lung cancer. She had described the gentle old man as a champion of cigarette smokers, absorbed by the fateful hobby of rolling mountains of cigarettes daily, entranced by the smoke itself and his ability to produce it. The doctor had told her, most likely cigarette-in-mouth, that smoking had not been the cause of her husband's death.

She herself had begun smoking at the late age of forty, when she used to work all day in a cubicle of a government building. She had blown smoke out of sheer boredom. Now, twenty years later, her husband was buried deep in the ground. The student watched over her as she clung to the ends of her cigarettes. The student thought that their smoking had never been more comforting nor more thick with her late husband's presence.

"You will take the eucalyptus tonight." She said.

"Yes, I want the eucalyptus. My cough is bad." He said.

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All of her nine children were heavy smokers, nervous types without plans of ever quitting. The daughter nicknamed Pichu lived in Portugal. Pichu had been rushed to the hospital due to a mid-life siege. This was just two weeks ago. The Senora never specified what it was, she mentioned a series of tests that needed to be taken, then she flew off to Portugal. She had just disappeared with her tobacco. The student had wandered around aimlessly through the unlit apartment. It was as if he were tracing the figure of her general outline in the blank page of darkness, searching for a ghost she may have left behind to take care of him. He contemplated:

What am I looking for?

For three sleepy days he awaited her knock on the door.

The Senora returned with the good news that Pichu was fine. The tests suggested there had been a false alarm. For some reason, this made the student feel better about his own private lungs. The Senora said she had a surprise for him in the plastic bag. While in Portugal she plucked several branches off a eucalyptus tree. She said the trees were everywhere, almost like they were following her around. He loved such a strange gift from the Senora.

“Joder!” He stepped back from the pot of boiling eucalyptus.

“Claro!” She said. “Your bowels are clogged.”

“What can I do?”

“Suffer, Hijo.”

The student moved down the short unlighted hallway with a saucer in two hands. Right before he slipped into his bedroom, he turned around to say goodnight. The Senora was dragging the dust mop along the wooden beams of the hallway, silently.

“Buenas noches, Madre.”

“Que descansas, Hijo.”

In bed he drank the leche con miel, under the covers as she told him to do. She made it for him. She probably wanted him to fall asleep. Supposedly the concoction would put him fast asleep. But how could he possibly fall asleep?

He leaned his back against the wall. He brooded there over himself. The bedroom had a stale stink. His dog-eyes hung on the light fixture above his head. He took one last smoke.

## Mountain Flower

Rachel Jennings

A mountain  
is neither one side  
nor another  
but a fateful collision,  
a coming together.

With or without  
a lowland admirer,  
a mountain flower  
peaks  
with a most wondrous

blossom.



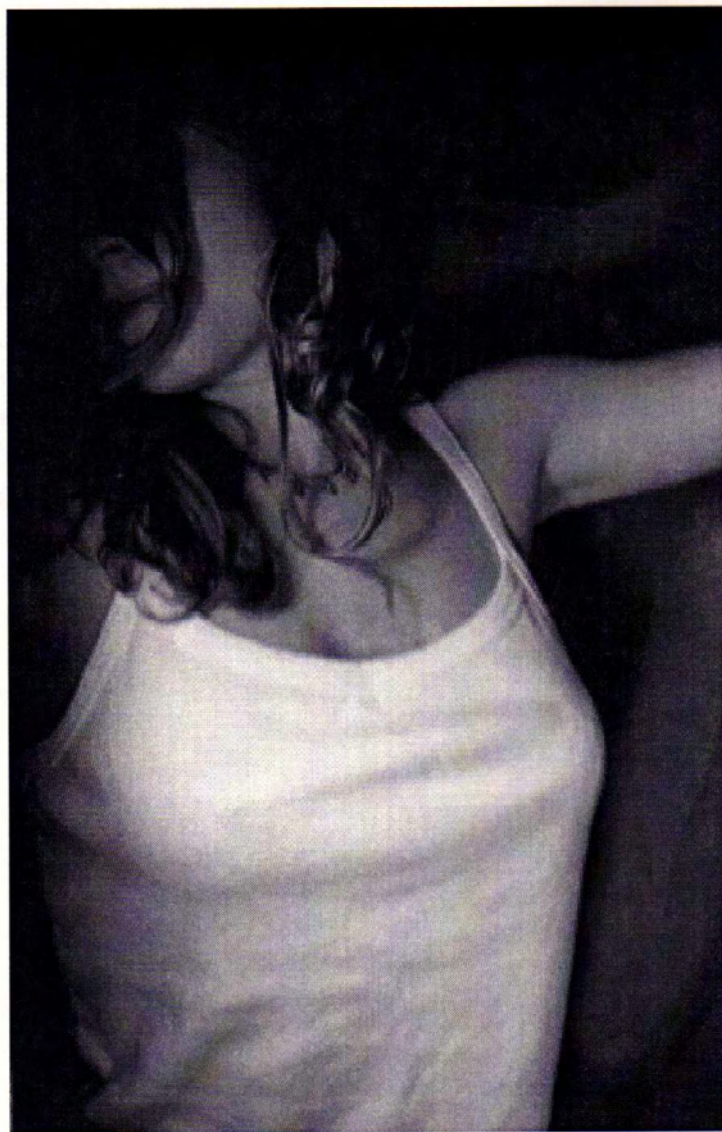
## **As a Sunrise**

Michael Veliz

The cans  
which once held  
such rancid food  
are empty now  
scuttling across  
the orange dirt  
from silver notes  
in rhapsodies  
of galloping  
wind.  
Oh what music they make!  
Leading me to another plane!  
Skip-skip-skiping  
Across the way  
children  
in fields  
splash and plod  
in mirrored puddles  
the rain has left  
laughing freely all the way  
as lavender hues  
from the rising sun  
paint pictures  
over rows  
of sleepy earth.  
Blink-blink-blinking  
Awake.

## **Kristine**

Stephanie Baize



## *Soup, Fish, Rice, Lilacs*

Michelle Lisi

We took turns like that, stirring the soup. My spoon did circles in the peppered broth. John took the cracked wooden spoon from me and broke all the oil up again. It's too greasy, he said. I thought maybe I'd add some rice. But John said no, no. We have enough, he said. I made some rice on the side.

I left the fish sitting on the cutting board while the soup and the rice were cooking. John took down the blue and the gray ceramic set his sister Jean brought us last summer from Sante Fe. The bowls and dishes match and there are cups too but we never use them. I keep them over the sink next to the picture of us on the cruise three years ago. We are smiling in it but our eyes look red. Jean's kids saw it when they stopped by last summer. One of them halted as he ran through the kitchen, grabbed his brother and stared at it.

Weird, one of them said. You look weird in that picture. Aunt Nic? You look weird. I heard Jean tell them to hush.

Weird how? I asked, but he saw his mother watching him and ran away.

Later, Jean thought I couldn't hear her when she stood in the backyard under the kitchen window and talked to him. You don't have to call her Aunt Nic, she said. She's not your aunt. Sally is your aunt. But Sally's gone, he protested, and I heard her tell him to hush again. She walked in looking for the fruit salad after that. We'll use the bowls, she said. Alright with you if we do that? She gathered them. Looking out the kitchen window later, I saw John flipping burgers. One of the kids zoomed by with a bowl on his head. I hoped he would break it.

It was quiet now. John sat at the kitchen table, reading the paper. The kitchen fan barely made any sound and the kid voices in the neighboring yards had all gone home for barbecue. Then the phone rang. I knew the woman's voice when I answered it. It was the third time she'd called. She said, Hi Nicole, is John there? She



sounded young. This is, um, Jean, she said. I handed him the phone. It's for you, I said. He took it in the other room.

I went back to our fish while he talked to her. The tips of my fingers stung but when I looked at them, there was nothing there and I knew I hadn't used a knife yet. I thought, I have to chop the head off, I can't eat this fish with the head still on it. John knew I wanted a wooden block and a butcher's cleaver when I moved in here. He got me a plastic cutting board and a dull set of steak knives instead. I had to saw through the layers of the fish until only a small piece of flesh remained and then I heard John laugh in the other room. I heard him say You too, sugar, see you later. I grabbed the head by the face and tore it off. Then I gutted the thing, pulled the mess apart with my fingers, stuffed the innards with the head into the trash.

The oven door was stuck and I put my shoulder to it, leaned my weight into the door. I thought about pressing my face against it, about burning the skin off of my face and leaving an imprint of my expression behind for someone else to see. I wondered what it would look like and if I'd be in mid-scream. He came back into the room as I slammed it closed. Hi, he said, but I was too busy to notice. He pushed the juice out of the way, flattened the paper with the slab of his hand and leaned over it. I felt another prick, this time in my arm. John stretched. His old tee-shirt was wet under the arms. I went and put the blue bowl in front of him, right on top of the article he was reading. Jesus Nicole, he said.

John pushed the bowl off the paper and kept reading his article. We were quiet then a while. I looked out the window over the sink but the cups were in my way. When I moved here, I found Sally's recipes in a brown box on that shelf. They were index cards, nothing but fish. I never ate so much of the stuff before moving here with John. I never knew what it was like to see the eyes of an animal avoid you. Sally's recipes taught me to cut the head off, make it easy. Sometimes, I stare over the sink into the yard and I

know that she stood here and I wonder if she ever answered the phone, and which voices she recognized at the other end, asking for John. I pretend that I remember once when I was one of them.

The lilacs in Joe and Maryann's yard were starting to bloom. They looked good. Every year we plant but our yard never looks so good as Joe and Maryann's. She feeds them special vitamins, I think. Everything I plant just dies so I stick to cactus and let John tend to the weeds when he gets to them. Even our trees are dying. John pushed his chair out suddenly. The legs groaned across the linoleum and left marks there. Almost ready? he said. Yeah, I said. Just wait, almost done. I put on the padded mitt my brother got us in Florida. It was bright colors, red and green and yellow, with Florida embroidered at the top. John thought it was ugly so I never bothered to wash it. The steam fogged my glasses for a minute when I lifted the foil, and I waited for them to clear before I moved again. I said, John, can I have the plates please?

He said he thought he'd left them there by the stove but I said no, they were on the table under the paper. He looked and said he didn't see them. Maybe they're in the dishwasher, he suggested. They weren't. John said maybe I left them at work in that case but I said that was ridiculous, he'd just had them. Well, he said, I guess I don't have them now, Nicole. Just use something else. I didn't know what else to use. I felt as if, if two dishes had gone missing so suddenly, then who knows but maybe the whole lot of them were gone. I thought about opening the cabinet and finding no dishes at all, just fish heads and a lot of pepper. Finally, I reached under the sink and found some white paper plates toward the back. They were old but the ones in the middle of the pile weren't so dirty. I had to tear the plastic down around them so they could be unstacked. We'll just use these, I said, and put the fish on the plates. The pepper swirled as I ladled it into the bowls. The rice was soggy but he didn't want any anyway.



I turned off the stove and the burners and covered the fish and the soup. John didn't say anything, just kept reading his article. I thought it must be a long article for him to be focused on it so long. I thought about tripping as I walked towards him, tripping and dumping all of this hot food in his lap. I wondered what he would do, jump up and yell or sit quietly and sigh, Jesus, Nicole. He was still at it with that article. He picked it up, turned the page, bent at the folds and smoothed. Why don't you just hold it up between us? I said, but he didn't answer. What's it say anyway, something interesting in there? John heaved a thick, slow sigh. What, Nicole? he said. I said, Nothing, John, not a thing.

Neither of us started eating after that. I looked across the table at John. I saw the arches of his hairline and the sharp of his nose, like an eagle, reading. I wondered if we ever went camping again if I'd come across an eagle on some high rock somewhere and if he'd be reading the paper instead of talking to me. I wasn't so hungry anymore. My stomach ached like I was hungry but when I thought about putting food in my mouth I just felt sick. Not hungry? I asked him. He looked up and said Oh yeah, I guess I am actually. I held my arms flat against the table and listened to him slurp and chew. Finally, John pushed the soup bowl back and crumpled his plate into it. This is a good idea, Nic, he said, grinning across at me. You won't have to waste time washing dishes tonight. Yeah, I agreed. We can do something. He stood up. Think I'm going out actually, Nic. Yeah, I said. I kinda figured. Bowling, he said. I said, Sure.

He even put his shirt on before he left. It's got his name embroidered in cursive on the right side. I used to sleep in it when he started playing again. All those guys he used to bowl with, they'd come over after the game, watch TV and drink beer. I'd walk in, asking if anybody wanted something. Sometimes he'd grab me down onto his lap after I said that. Just you, baby, he'd say and I'd smell drunk and bowling alley on his moustache. Sometimes

it'd get so late, they'd all pass out and we'd go upstairs. Let's try again, Nic, he'd say then. Let's make one this time. And I'd just hold still, hoping that this time, maybe this time we'd do it.

When I think of that phase of our life the part that stands out the most to me is our bathroom garbage pail and how we'd fill it with those plastic tests he'd bring home every time I was late a couple of days. Try it now, he'd say, and I'd disappear behind the door for a while. I never wanted to come out when I was done. I never knew how to make my face look. John would try to read me from across the room. No? he'd say. It's okay, don't get disappointed. There's another one in there anyway. He'd always be holding the unfolded instructions like origami come undone. Always reading and rereading them as if the rules might change. As if I hadn't just been sitting on the toilet reading the back of the box again with pictures for instructions so I could get the job done the right way. It says to use the morning stream, Nic, he'd say. He'd always laugh at that.

I didn't have to waste time washing dishes after he went out. I just rinsed a few bowls and folded up the paper. I turned the off the kitchen lights and headed up to bed. John had left the TV on. The walls flickered purple then white. I got under the sheets. A long time later, it felt like, I woke up alone. I could see headlight shadows on the ceiling so I just lay there, watching cars go past. My stomach felt curled up around something hard and small. I thought maybe I'd just eat a little something, pulled a shirt on and went down. Nothing in the kitchen had shifted. I knew that something, something tiny, must've changed down there while I was away upstairs but I couldn't perceive what. The pots hadn't moved, the fish head was still in the garbage. I got a little bowl out from the cupboard and poured myself some soup from the pot still sitting on the stove.

The moon had risen and the floor was blue with it. I looked out onto our yard, looked over to Joe and Maryann's. Nothing



moved. I thought maybe I'd sneak out, then, snip a few blossoms that were dangling on our side. Just wait a bit longer and then go out, quietly. I'd put them in one of the jelly jars Maryann gives us for Christmas every year that I clean and keep in a cabinet over the window. She makes them with ribbons and checkered cloth. We have four of them now. Four years and four empty jelly jars waiting for something new. I don't know how to jar jelly. I thought about the lilacs again, waiting out there. I'd keep them in the bathroom, I thought. Just a blossom or two, out of the window so no one could see that I had taken them and what I was keeping them in. I could make a simple arrangement, I thought, with petals, wet plastic tests, and fish scales. I could take Sally's old recipes, write *Lilac Blooms* on a card, stick it in front of the jar. I thought about that, then. Lilacs dying mixed up with all that other stuff in our bathroom in a jar. It seemed right to me.

I wondered if Sally had any recipes that didn't use fish. John had put the box back on the shelf above the sink, in the same place it had been when I first moved here. I took it down and started rifling through the cards. First I reread the instructions for each recipe carefully, then I started skimming, looking for directions I might have missed. I read faster, scanning for any indications of why she'd cooked for him, anything that said what to do when you wanted to stop cooking fish for John. So many of them. Nothing. I checked the back for further suggestions. Blank. Then I heard his car wheels in the driveway. I started tearing them then until the floor became a mess of scattered pieces. I knocked the cups off the shelf, looking for any cards I'd missed. The picture frame shattered as I moved it out of the way, to the floor. I heard John's footsteps coming up the walk.

I reached into the cabinet, found one of Maryann's jars towards the back, strained to pull it towards me. The lid was on tight. When he walked in, I was crouched on the kitchen floor, moonlit, cleaning the mess I'd made all into the jelly jar. Nic? he

said. He stumbled a little, looking for the switch. Nic, is that you? Where are you? he said. What are you doing? Where's the light? I stood up, sober, with most of the mess clean. My fingers were bleeding from the bits of glass I'd scraped up. There, it's done, I said, and handed it to him. Just wait, I told him and walked past. The front door was open. I could see into the yard, could see John's pick-up angled over the driveway, onto the grass. I could see past it, too, could hear night sounds, smell lilacs, fresh. Nic? he called. The kitchen light was on. Nic, what're you doing? John was standing in the middle of the kitchen, some pieces I'd missed on the floor by his feet. He held his head like it hurt him, stared at the empty, toppled recipe box and at the floor, confused.

You're standing on us, I said and pointed at his foot, over the picture of our faces on the floor. Oh, sorry, he said, and moved off. Nic, what happened? he asked. You're bleeding, you know that? C'mere, he said. Lemme see.

I stood still. Where'd you go tonight? I said.

He looked at me. Where'd I go? he answered. What do you mean where'd I go? He got louder. Where do I always go? he demanded.

I don't know, I said, my fingers getting numb. Where do you always go?

John took a step towards me. Baby, you're bleeding, he said. He reached for me. Don't touch me, I said and stepped out of his way. He reached past me, into the space where I'd been standing. He took another step and faltered. He swayed a little and grabbed the counter for support. I put my fingers in my mouth and sucked on them.

I don't need this John, I said. You took me here four years ago for what? To have a baby? There is no fucking baby, I told him. No baby and no reason to expect one.

You never talk like that Nic, he said softly. You never curse at me.



Well, I'm cursing at you now, I said.

John stumbled over to the table. He tried to grab me as he passed by, tried to pull me down onto his lap. I wouldn't budge. I pushed him off me. He lost his balance then and went flying towards the table. Lookout! I shouted, but he'd already smashed into it. There was a terrific noise as he and the table toppled to the floor. Goddammit! he shouted. I wanted to cover my ears but I was afraid the blood would get on them.

John?

He sat there on the floor, not looking at me. His elbow was cut. After a while he said, What is this, Nicole? What's going on? I felt bad, then. He just looked so sad, sitting there on the floor. Get up, John, I said. I went to help him but he wouldn't let me. You're leaving, right? he said. That's what this is? John, I said, but he interrupted.

I'm sorry I can't give you one, he said. Is that what it is? Because I can't? You think maybe it's me?

I don't know, John, I said.

He was still sitting on the floor. He looked at his elbow. He shrugged. I've tried, he said. God knows, I've tried to before.

I know you have, John, I said. We've both tried. If you want the truth, I don't want one, really, I told him. I never did.

Well I did, he said, and I'm sorry. He stood up then and righted the table. You look thin, Nic, he told me. You want something? He moved towards the stove. Watchout, I said, the glass. John turned the soup on, brought the wooden spoon over from the sink. The grease had congealed on top. He spooned some into the sink.

Sit down, he said, but I didn't want to. I picked the chairs up and swept up the rest of the mess. So, you're leaving, right? he said, stirring. Is that what this is? He didn't turn around. I emptied the dustpan into the garbage. I don't know, I said. We'll see. I started washing my hands at the sink. If I stay, I said, I don't

want any more Jeans calling here. He chuckled. It's not funny, I said. Fine, I told him, and went to walk away. No, Nic, he said. Baby, please. He looked at me. Please what? I asked him. You want this ring back or what because I'll give it to you.

No, he said. Come here, he said. Please, he said again. Baby, he called me.

I walked closer to the soup. It's almost ready, he said, stirring. See? Almost done. The soup was starting to simmer. John put an arm around me. You stir, he said. He handed me the spoon. I didn't want to. I don't want my ring back, he told me. He put his other arm around me. I want you to wear the ring. Okay? Nic? I put the spoon in the broth. I started to stir. I don't know, I said. I just don't know. John put his head down on my neck, rested it there. Nic? he said. We could try again, Nic. You know what the doctor said last year, and he squeezed me. Yeah, I said. I know, timing. Yeah, he said, and squeezed harder. He was kissing my neck now. It's almost done, I told him. You want some? Not really, he said. I put a spoonful in my mouth and tasted the pepper. It's good, I said. Sure it's good, he told me. You made it. We made it, I answered. Yeah, he agreed. We did.

We stood there like that a while, me stirring, him holding me. It got quiet, no cars driving past, just crickets, soft. John turned me around to him and I put my head into his chest. No more phonecalls, he promised. I didn't look up, just moved in a little closer. We didn't move. I could feel his weight on me, crushing me a little. John? I said but he didn't answer. John, you're dozing, I said. You're hurting me. He said, Huh? and then he opened his eyes half-way. Sorry, Sal, he said, let's go up. And he walked ahead of me up the stairs.



## Frog Verse

Vanessa Huff

We see a frog  
with blemished  
skin  
of gray and black fabric  
her outfit  
has been arranged;  
and her suction hands  
and her suction feet  
are moist transparency.  
Her underbelly, stroked  
in color of flesh  
reveals  
the insecurity of her balloon  
eyes,  
bumpy on top  
naked petals  
plated on bottom  
pulse stretching  
to confirm  
floury ribs  
of insects.

This  
dedication  
parallel fear  
(of the child's  
insurgent finger)  
to stillness  
such

as if  
posing  
for the sculptor's  
final chisels  
to the frog statue.  
Two glassy  
reflections  
of onyx  
were  
the exposers  
of breath.

Pushing contact  
of flesh  
does not  
un-nail her  
position  
here amidst  
concealing blades  
as a warrior  
who knows when  
to attempt  
escape  
for solid eyes  
waiting  
wrapped in curiosity.  
I have  
never observed  
a teacher  
counting silence  
as action  
absence of guttural  
pedantic



to educate  
by  
parceling out  
stillness,  
observance.

Hurdling across  
rocks  
departing  
without being  
noticed  
to keep where she  
emerged  
from inquiry  
the under side  
of the soil  
must heap  
moisture  
to support the  
unmoving dance  
she does.

Nourishment  
to inspire  
this uncontrolled  
amusement  
of the frog in being.

## **A Yellow Woman Story**

Laura Tohe

He stayed in her mind all across the snowy mass of clouds. That time she crossed three time zones at night into the western horizon across Canada into Alaska. She remembered seeing the glow of the western sunset just before it closed upon itself. That time she had thought the sun was coming up but realized her mistake. She looked at him to show him, but his eyes were closed too.

It had been five hours since leaving the Minneapolis airport where she first saw him in the crowd of travelers. She had fallen asleep on the black vinyl chair across from a little girl who was rubbing a ring that hung around her neck as if it were a magic ring ready to grant her a wish. Without realizing it, she had fallen asleep and later awoke to find that all the travelers had left including the little girl with the ring. Feeling a little better from the cold she had caught the day before, she sat up and made sure her purse and bag were still beside her.

She thought of going into the lounge and ordering a Bloody Mary but decided against it. Already she regretted wearing those shoes that were beginning to squeeze her feet.

She checked her departure time again to make sure she hadn't missed her flight. She was safe, so she watched people as they moved into the waiting area: men in suits, wives and children waiting for their men and fathers, young men in the military, a light-haired man who was pointing toward the check-in counter.

She thought of her children at home with her mother. No need to worry about them. The tension of the day was beginning to wear off, and she was beginning to like being alone, to be leaving for a few days. She liked the idea of traveling alone, on her way to a land thousands of miles away where no one knew her. She



crossed her legs and let her shoe dangle.

The 757 shook as it picked up speed and the vibrations spread from her toes to the top of her head. Her whole body shook and stirred to life. Never before had she felt these sensations from being in a plane. She thought of the other who was waiting for her at the other end. Suddenly the vibrations stopped, and they were airborne into the darkness.

She sat next to the window. While watching the luggage being loaded, she became aware of him taking his seat next to the aisle. Those first moments were always uncomfortable, because she felt like she should say hello and get it over with so later they might exchange polite conversation. Might as well make the perfunctory hello's since it was going to be a long flight. She turned toward him as he was buckling in. It was the light-colored man.

She hardly noticed the time. They leaned across the empty seat toward each other. She was telling him things about herself the way someone who is alone talks too much. Thirty thousand feet below, people watched TV, washed their dinner dishes, or slept in their warm beds. Once she caught herself and wondered if it was the Bloody Mary she had drank that was making her feel increasingly more talkative. When he leaned across the empty seat, she wanted to touch his face. He was so close she noticed the diagonal indentation that ran from the corner of his eye toward his cheek.

Then he was telling her he noticed hands and shoes. He said her hands were beautiful and strong. His hands were clearly those of an artist, slender fingers formed like wings. He told her his name, which she promptly forgot. Maybe because this had happened to her before, and even then she couldn't help herself. She had run away with the other one weekend, and her life had never been the same. And here it was happening again. The stranger was writing in her journal, talking about the throw of the dice deciding everything. The movie was over. The lights were

turned down low in the cabin. People settled into their seats for the rest of the flight.

The stranger was beckoning her, and she was trying to think of what to do. This kind of thing didn't happen to her everyday, so she held back, and when she didn't, well, you never knew.

How easy was it to become Yellow Woman in the 21<sup>st</sup> century anyway? To run away with a stranger? To leave it all behind, kids and husband? To say you were kidnapped? What with metal detectors, cellular phones, and fax machines. They were always calling her up in the middle of grading papers or vacuuming and asking for her by name, pitching carpet cleaning service, or Olin Mills photography, or some other service she didn't need. She could just imagine herself in some motel room and suddenly the phone would ring. They would ask for her, and then the jig would be up.

He beckoned to her again, and she gave another vague answer to stall. To run away with this man even for a few days. To drive away into the Chugach mountains of her northern relatives, where they must have crossed in the lonely cold of the north looking for warmer places.

The scenario was unfolding in her mind. The other would be waiting for her at the arrival gate, searching for her among the passengers, asking at the ticket counter, and questioning the flight attendants. "Have you seen this woman?" He'd check the passenger list to see if her name was there. How easy was it to become Yellow Woman? He'd call home and wake her parents in the middle of their dreams. "No, she hasn't called. We took her to the airport. Maybe she missed her plane. Maybe she got lost, you know how big those airports are. Have you called the police?" He didn't believe for a minute she could get lost, not her, not this woman who traveled all over Europe one summer without knowing one single foreign language.

And there she'd be, a fugitive from the other who would be

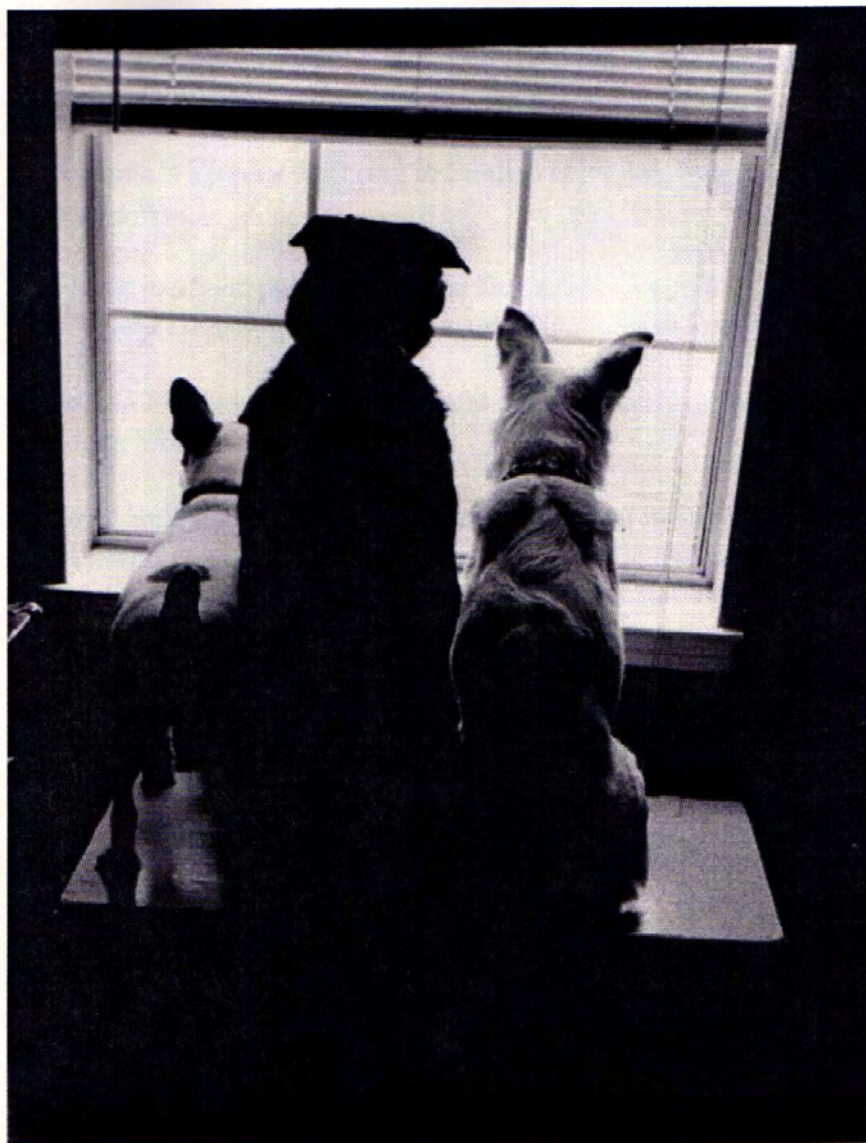


searching for her. By that time she could be driving away with him into the Chugach to watch the aspens surrendering to the coming winter. She would tell him her name was Vida Yellowhair and they were destined to meet. She would tell him the story of Yellow Woman kidnapped by a k'atsina. They would find each other. Then she would tell him these things happened, even now in the world of jet planes, e-mail, and MTV.

And in the morning, on her way back to the other, she would have to think of a damn good story.

## **Wilson, Maverick, Vespa**

Stephanie Baize





## ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Linda Arredondo** resides in San Antonio, Texas.

**Stephanie Baize** is an art major, psychology minor at the University of the Incarnate Word. She was born in Manhattan, Kansas, and has been a photographer for seven years.

**S. Campos** is a junior majoring in English at the University of the Incarnate Word.

**Bob Fink** has been published in *The Texas Observer*, *The Texas Review*, and *Descant*, and has a poem forthcoming in *Poetry*.

**Christina Houle** is transfer student at the University of the Incarnate Word.

**Vanessa Huff** is a mother of two, currently living in Las Vegas with her husband. She recently studied in Torino, Italy, and has an "absolute passion for the written word, because it has always been there when others were not."

**Janie Jarrett** is a non-resident doctoral student in fiction at the University of Missouri—Columbia and teaches English composition part-time at Missouri Southern State College, Joplin, Missouri. Her poems and stories have appeared in *The Lyric*, *Artisan*, *Midlands*, *Highbeams*, *Cow Creek Review*, and *World Wide Writer*.

**Rachel Jennings** teaches English at Stephen F. Austin State University in Nacodoches, Texas. She has previously published her poetry in the *Appalachian Journal*, *Concho River Review*, *Austin Chronicle*, *La Voz de Esperanza*, *Struggle*, and other publications.

**Michelle Lisi** earned her bachelor of arts in communication and literature at the University of Delaware in 1997. Since then, Michelle claims she's gone deeply into debt traveling in Europe and taking classes at New York State University. Currently, she is working on a master of fine arts in fiction at Columbia University. She also teaches creative writing at Bank Street College.

**Pheonix** resides in San Antonio, Texas.

**Shannon Schrieber** is a senior English major at the University of the Incarnate Word.

**Laura Tohe** is a Diné (Navaho) writer whose latest work, *No Parole Today* (1999), garnered a Writer of the Year award from the Wordcraft Circle of Native Writers and Storytellers. Her work has been published in numerous journals, such as *Calyx*, and her works have been heavily anthologized in Native American collections. She is presently an Associate Professor of English at Arizona State University.

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