

# EL PORTAL

**75th Anniversary Edition**





# EL PORTAL

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## 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Issue

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**Eastern New Mexico University's  
Literature & Arts Journal**

## About El Portal

El Portal is Eastern New Mexico University's Literature and Arts Journal. It is published biannually.

El Portal and El Portal awards are funded by a grant from the Jack Williamson Trust. The late Dr. Williamson was a science fiction master, author, ENMU professor emeritus of English, and friend to writers and readers everywhere. He served as the faculty sponsor of El Portal while he taught at ENMU.

## Special Thanks

We would like to take this opportunity to thank ENMU Duplicating Services for all of their invaluable help printing *El Portal*. Their patience and hard work have elevated the quality and appearance of the journal a thousand-fold.

Our gratitude to Betty Williamson, the niece of the late Jack Williamson, for facilitating the reproduction of the short story "The Metal Man." Her help and encouragement regarding *El Portal* remains greatly appreciated. We are proud to display Jack Williamson's work, especially in the 75<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the journal.



# Submissions

El Portal is open to submissions from all artists and writers; submissions are published on the basis of talent, content, and editorial needs.

El Portal serves as the creative forum for the students, faculty, and staff of the university as well as artists, writers and photographers worldwide; consequently, the views expressed in El Portal do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints and opinions of ENMU as a whole.

## Guidelines

- Flash Fiction (500-1500 words)
  - Short Stories (up to 4000 words)
  - Creative Nonfiction (up to 4000 words)
  - Poetry (3-5 poems) • Art & Photography (300 dpi JPEG)
- Please submit all written work in .doc, .docx, or .rtf formats. With the exception of poetry and art/photography, please limit entries to one story or essay.
- Prizes will be awarded to ENMU students only. Prizes awarded only in Short Story, Poetry, and Art/Photography categories.
- When entering a submission, please include a 20-50 word biography to be printed alongside your piece in the event that it is accepted for publication.

<b>Deadlines</b>	Fall: October 1st, 2014 Spring: March 1st, 2015
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*Dear Reader,*

75 YEARS ARE A LONG LIFE FOR ANYONE. They are an eternity for a literary magazine. Editors leave, students graduate, and often the money runs out. *El Portal* was founded in 1939, the year WWII began, and although it lived under a different name for several years, it has survived.

It's an anniversary that calls for a celebration. When we launch this new issue, I hope that many will come to hear the contributors read from their work, and to congratulate the winners of our fiction, poetry, and essay competitions.

The magazine is now accepting submissions from writers in English from around the world, and this new issue reflects the diversity of voices and styles of contemporary literature. Our students now publish their stories and poems alongside writers from Florida, Hawaii and Russia.

It's time to say thank you to the man, who ensured that *El Portal* continues to thrive. The first story of this anniversary issue is his. And it's the first story he ever published, "The Metal Man." He was a master of science fiction, and he has kept creative writing at ENMU alive. Thank you, Jack Williamson!

Stefan Kiesbye

Advisor, *El Portal*

Assistant Professor of English, ENMU

## The Metal Man *Jack Williamson*

THE METAL MAN STANDS IN A DARK, dusty corner of the Tyburn College Museum. Just who is responsible for the figure being moved there, or why it was done, I do not know. To the casual eye it looks to be merely an ordinary life-size statue. The visitor who gives it a closer view marvels at the minute perfection of the detail of hair and skin; at the silent tragedy in the set, determined expression and poise; and at the remarkable greenish cast of the metal of which it is composed, but, most of all, at the peculiar mark upon the chest. It is a six-sided blot, of a deep crimson hue, with the surface oddly granular and strange wavering lines radiating from it—lines of a lighter shade of red.

Of course it is generally known that the Metal Man was once Professor Thomas Kelvin of the Geology Department. There are current many garbled and inaccurate accounts of the weird disaster that befell him. I believe I am the only one to whom he entrusted his story. It is to put these fantastic tales at rest that I have decided to publish the narrative that Kelvin sent me.

For some years he had been spending his summer vacations along the Pacific coast of Mexico, prospecting for radium. It was three months since he had returned from his last expedition. Evidently he had been successful beyond his wildest dreams. He did not come to Tyburn, but we heard stories of his selling millions of dollars worth of salts of radium, and giving as much more to institutions employing radium treatment. And it was said that he was sick of a strange disorder that defied the world's best specialists, and that he was pouring out his millions in the establishment of scholarships and endowments as if he expected to die soon.

One cold, stormy day, when the sea was running high on the unprotected coast which the cottage overlooks, I saw a sail out to the north. It rapidly drew nearer until I could tell that it was a small sailing schooner with auxiliary power. She was running with the wind, but a half mile offshore she came up into it and the sails were lowered. Soon a boat had put off in the direction of the shore. The sea was not so rough as to make the landing hazardous, but the proceeding was rather unusual, and, as I had nothing better to do, I went out in the yard before my modest house, which stands perhaps two hundred yards above the beach, in order to have a better view.

When the boat touched, four men sprang out and rushed it up higher on the sand. As a fifth tall man arose in the stern, the four picked up a great chest and started up in my direction. The fifth person followed leisurely. Silently, and without invitation, the men brought the chest up the beach, and into my yard, and set it down in front of the door.

The fifth man, whom I now knew to be a hard-faced Yankee skipper, walked up to me and said gruffly,

“I am Captain McAndrews.”

“I’m glad to meet you, Captain,” I said, wondering. “There must be some mistake. I was not expecting—”

“Not at all,” he said abruptly. “The man in that chest was transferred to my ship from the liner *Plutonia* three days ago. He had paid me for my services, and I believe his instructions have been carried out. Good day, sir.”

He turned on his heel and started away.

“A man in the chest!” I exclaimed.

He walked on unheeding, and the seamen followed. I stood and watched them as they walked down to the boat, and rowed back to the schooner. I gazed at its sails until they

were lost against the dull blue of the clouds. Frankly, I feared to open the chest.

At last I nerved myself to do it. It was unlocked. I threw back the lid. With a shock of uncontrollable horror that left me half sick for hours, I saw in it, stark naked, with the strange crimson mark standing vividly out from the pale green of the breast, the Metal Man, just as you may see him in the Museum.

Of course, I knew at once that it was Kelvin. For a long time I bent, trembling and staring at him. Then I saw an old canteen, purple-stained, lying by the head of the figure, and under it, a sheaf of manuscript. I got the latter out, walked with shaken steps to the easy chair in the house, and read the story that follows:

“DEAR RUSSELL,

“You are my best—my only—intimate friend. I have arranged to have my body and this story brought to you. I just drank the last of the wonderful purple liquid that has kept me alive since I came back, and I have scant time to finish this necessarily brief account of my adventure. But my affairs are in order and I die in peace. I had myself transferred to the schooner to-day, in order to reach you as soon as could be and to avoid possible complications. I trust Captain McAndrews. When I left France, I hoped to see you before the end. But Fate ruled otherwise.

“You know that the goal of my expedition was the headwaters of El Rio de la Sangre, ‘The River of Blood.’ It is a small stream whose strangely red waters flow into the Pacific. On my trip last year I had discovered that its waters were powerfully radioactive. Water has the power of absorbing radium emanations and emitting them in turn, and I hoped to find radium-bearing minerals in the bed of the

upper river. Twenty-five miles above the mouth the river emerges from the Cordilleras. There are a few miles of rapids and back of them the river plunges down a magnificent waterfall. No exploring party had ever been back of the falls. I had hired an Indian guide and made a muleback journey to their foot. At once I saw the futility of attempting to climb the precipitous escarpment. But the water there was even more powerfully radioactive than at the mouth. There was nothing to do but return.

“This summer I bought a small monoplane. Though it was comparatively slow in speed and able to spend only six hours aloft, its light weight and the small area needed for landing, made it the only machine suitable for use in so rough a country. The steamer left me again on the dock at the little town of Vaca Morena, with my stack of crates and gasoline tins. After a visit to the Alcalde I secured the use of an abandoned shed for a hangar. I set about assembling the plane and in a fortnight I had completed the task. It was a beautiful little machine, with a wing spread of only twenty-five feet.

“Then, one morning, I started the engine and made a trial flight. It flew smoothly and in the afternoon I refilled the tanks and set off for the Rio de la Sangre. The stream looked like a red snake crawling out to the sea—there was something serpentine in its aspect. Flying high, I followed it, above the falls and into a region of towering mountain peaks. The river disappeared beneath a mountain. For a moment I thought of landing, and then it occurred to me that it flowed subterraneously for only a few miles, and would reappear farther inland.

“I soared over the cliffs and came over the crater.

“A great pool of green fire it was, fully ten miles across to the black ramparts at the farther side. The surface



of the green was so smooth that at first I thought it was a lake, and then I knew that it must be a pool of heavy gas. In the glory of the evening sun the snow-capped summits about were brilliant argent crowns, dyed with crimson, tinged with purple and gold, tinted with strange and incredibly beautiful hues. Amid this wild scenery, nature had placed her greatest treasure. I knew that in the crater I would find the radium I sought.

“I CIRCLED ABOUT THE PLACE, rapt in wonder. As the sun sank lower, a light silver mist gathered on the peaks, half veiling their wonders, and flowed toward the crater. It seemed drawn with a strange attraction. And then the center of the green lake rose up in a shining peak. It flowed up into a great hill of emerald fire. Something was rising in the green—carrying it up! Then the vapor flowed back, revealing a strange object, still veiled faintly by the green and silver clouds. It was a gigantic sphere of deep red, marked with four huge oval spots of dull black. Its surface was smooth, metallic, and thickly studded with great spikes that seemed of yellow fire. It was a machine, inconceivably great in size. It spun slowly as it rose, on a vertical axis, moving with a deliberate, purposeful motion.

“It came to my own level, paused and seemed to spin faster. And the silver mist was drawn to the yellow points, condensing, curdling, until the whole globe was a ball of lambent argent. For a moment it hung, unbelievably glorious in the light of the setting sun, and then it sank—ever faster—until it dropped like a plummet into the sea of green.

“And with its fall a sinister darkness descended upon the desolate wilderness of the peaks, and I was seized by a fear that had been deadened by amazement, and realized that I had scant time to reach Vaca Morena before complete

darkness fell. Immediately I put the plane about in the direction of the town. According to my recollections, I had, at the time, no very definite idea of what it was I had seen, or whether the weird exhibition had been caused by human or natural agencies. I remember thinking that in such enormous quantities as undoubtedly the crater contained it, radium might possess qualities unnoticed in small amounts, or, again, that there might be present radioactive minerals at present unknown. It occurred to me also that perhaps some other scientists had already discovered the deposits and that what I had witnessed had been the trial of an airship in which radium was utilized as a propellant. I was considerably shaken, but not much alarmed. What happened later would have seemed incredible to me then.

“And then I noticed that a pale bluish luminosity was gathering about the cowl of the cockpit, and in a moment I saw that the whole machine, and even my own person, was covered with it. It was somewhat like St. Elmo’s Fire, except that it covered all surfaces indiscriminately, instead of being restricted to sharp points. All at once I connected the phenomenon with the thing I had seen. I felt no physical discomfort, and the motor continued to run, but as the blue radiance continued to increase, I observed that my body felt heavier, and that the machine was being drawn downward! My mind was flooded with wonder and terror. I fought to retain sufficient self-possession to fly the ship. My arms were soon so heavy that I could hold them upon the controls only with difficulty, and I felt a slight dizziness, due, no doubt, to the blood’s being drawn from my head. When I recovered, I was already almost upon the green. Somehow, my gravitation had been increased and I was being drawn into the pit! It was possible to keep the plane under control only by diving and keeping at a high speed.

“I plunged into the green pool. The gas was not suffocating, as I had anticipated. In fact, I noticed no change in the atmosphere, save that my vision was limited to a few yards around. The wings of the plane were still distinctly discernible. Suddenly a smooth, sandy plain was murkily revealed below, and I was able to level the ship off enough for a safe landing. As I came to a stop I saw that the sand was slightly luminous, as the green mist seemed to be, and red. For a time I was confined to the ship by my own weight, but I noticed that the blue was slowly dissipating, and with it, its effect.

“As soon as I was able, I clambered over the side of the cockpit, carrying my canteen and automatic, which were themselves immensely heavy. I was unable to stand erect, but I crawled off over the coarse, shining, red sand, stopping at frequent intervals to lie flat and rest. I was in deathly fear of the force that had brought me down. I was sure it had been directed by intelligence. The floor was so smooth and level that I supposed it to be the bottom of an ancient lake.

“Sometimes I looked fearfully back, and when I was a hundred yards away I saw a score of lights floating through the green toward the airplane. In the luminous murk each bright point was surrounded by a disc of paler blue. I made no movement, but lay and watched them. They floated to the plane and wheeled about it with a slow, heavy motion. Closer and lower they came until they reached the ground about it. The mist was so thick as to obscure the details of the scene.

“When I went to resume my flight, I found my excess of gravity almost entirely gone, though I went on hands and knees for another hundred yards to escape possible observation. When I got to my feet, the plane was lost to view. I walked on for perhaps a quarter of a mile and suddenly realized that my sense of direction was altogether

gone. I was completely lost in a strange world, inhabited by beings whose nature and disposition I could not even guess! And then I realized that it was a height of folly to walk about when any step might precipitate me into a danger of which I could know nothing. I had a peculiarly unpleasant feeling of helpless fear.

“The luminous red sand and the shining green of the air lay about in all directions, unbroken by a single solid object. There was no life, no sound, no motion. The air hung heavy and stagnant. The flat sand was like the surface of a dead and desolate sea. The mist seemed to come closer; the strange evil in it seemed to grow more alert.

“SUDDENLY A DARTING LIGHT passed meteor-like through the green above and in my alarm I ran a few blundering steps. My foot struck a light object that rang like metal. The sharpness of the concussion filled me with fear, but in an instant the light was gone. I bent down to see what I had kicked.

“It was a metal bird—an eagle formed of metal—with the wings outspread, the talons gripping, the fierce beak set open. The color was white, tinged with green. It weighed no more than the living bird. At first I thought it was a cast model, and then I saw that each feather was complete and flexible. Somehow, a real eagle had been turned to metal! It seemed incredible, yet here was the concrete proof. I wondered if the radium deposits, which I had already used to explain so much, might account for this too. I knew that science held transmutation of elements to be possible—had even accomplished it in a limited way, and that radium itself was the product of the disintegration of ionium; and ionium that of uranium.

“I was struck with fright for my own safety. Might I be changed to metal? I looked to see if there were other metal things about. And I found them in abundance. Half-buried in the glowing sands were metal birds of every kind—birds that had flown over the surrounding cliffs. And, at the climax of my search, I found a pterosaur—a flying reptile that had invaded the pit in ages past—changed to ageless metal. Its wingspread was fully fifteen feet—it would be a treasure in any museum.

“I made a fearful examination of myself, and to my unutterable horror, I perceived that the tips of my finger nails, and the fine hairs upon my hands, *were already changed to light green metal!* The shock unnerved me completely. You cannot conceive my horror. I screamed aloud in agony of soul, careless of the terrible foes that the sound might attract. I ran off wildly. I was blind, unreasoning. I felt no fatigue as I ran, only stark terror.

“Bright, swift-moving lights passed above in the green, but I heeded them not. Suddenly I came upon the great sphere that I had seen above. It rested motionless in a cradle of black metal. The yellow fire was gone from the spikes, but the red surface shone with a metallic luster. Lights floated about it. They made little bright spots in the green, like lanterns swinging in a fog. I turned and ran again, desperately. I took no note of direction, nor of the passage of time.

“Then I came upon a bank of violet vegetation. Waist-deep it was, grass-like, with thick narrow leaves, dotted with clusters of small pink blooms, and little purple berries. And a score of yards beyond I saw a sluggish red stream—El Rio de la Sangre. Here was cover at last. I threw myself down in the violet growth and lay sobbing with fatigue and terror. For a long time I was unable to stir or think. When I

looked again at my finger nails, the tips of metal had doubled in width.

“I tried to control my agitation, and to think. Possibly the lights, whatever they were, would sleep by day. If I could find the plane, or scale the walls, I might escape the fearful action of the radioactive minerals before it was too late. I realized that I was hungry. I plucked off a few of the purple berries and tasted them. They had a salty, metallic taste, and I thought they would be valueless for food. But in pulling them I had inadvertently squeezed the juice from one upon my fingers, and when I wiped it off I saw, to my amazement and my inexpressible joy, that the rim of metal was gone from the finger nails it had touched. I had discovered a means of safety! I suppose that the plants were able to exist there only because they had been so developed that they produced compounds counteracting the metal-forming emanations. Probably their evolution began when the action was far weaker than now, and only those able to withstand the more intense radiations had survived. I lost no time in eating a cluster of the berries, and then I poured the water from my canteen and filled it with their juice. I have analyzed the fluid and it corresponds in some ways with the standard formulas for the neutralization of radium burns and doubtless it saved me from the terrible burns caused by the action of ordinary radium.

“I LAY THERE UNTIL DAWN, dozing a little at times, only to start into wakefulness without cause. It seemed that some daylight filtered through the green, for at dawn it grew paler, and even the red sand appeared less luminous. After eating a few more of the berries, I ascertained the direction in which the stagnant red water was moving, and set off downstream, toward the west. In order to get an idea of where I

was going, I counted my paces. I had walked about two and a half miles, along by the violet plants, when I came to an abrupt cliff. It towered up until it was lost in the green gloom. It seemed to be mostly of black pitchblende. The barrier seemed absolutely unscalable. The red river plunged out of sight by the cliff in a racing whirlpool.

“I walked off north around the rim. I had no very definite plan, except to try to find a way out over the cliffs. If I failed in that, it would be time to hunt the plane. I had a mortal fear of going near it, or of encountering the strange lights I had seen floating about it. As I went I saw none of them. I suppose they slept when it was day.

“I went on until it must have been noon, though my watch had stopped. Occasionally I passed metal trees that had fallen from above, and once, the metallic body of a bear that had slipped off a path above, some time in past ages. And there were metal birds without number. They must have been accumulating through geological ages. All along up to this, the cliff had risen perpendicularly to the limit of my vision, but now I saw a wide ledge, with a sloping wall beyond it, dimly visible above. But the sheer wall rose a full hundred feet to the shelf, and I cursed at my inability to surmount it. For a time I stood there, devising impractical means for climbing it, driven almost to tears by my impotence. I was ravenously hungry, and thirsty as well.

“At last I went on.

“In an hour I came upon it. A slender cylinder of black metal, that towered a hundred feet into the greenish mist, and carried at the top, a great mushroom-shaped orange flame. It was a strange thing. The fire was as big as a balloon, bright and steady. It looked much like a great jet of combustible gas, burning as it streamed from the cylinder. I

stood petrified in amazement, wondering vaguely at the what and why of the thing.

“And then I saw more of them back of it, dimly—scores of them—a whole forest of flames.

“I crouched back against the cliff, while I considered. Here I supposed, was the city of the lights. They were sleeping now, but still I had not the courage to enter. According to my calculations I had gone about fifteen miles. Then I must be, I thought, almost diametrically opposite the place where the crimson river flowed under the wall, with half of the rim unexplored. If I wished to continue my journey, I must go around the city, if I may call it that.

“So I left the wall. Soon it was lost to view. I tried to keep in view of the orange flames, but abruptly they were gone in the mist. I walked more to the left, but I came upon nothing but the wastes of red sand, with the green murk above. On and on I wandered. Then the sand and the air grew slowly brighter and I knew that night had fallen. The lights were soon passing to and fro. I had seen lights the night before, but they traveled high and fast. These, on the other hand, sailed low, and I felt that they were searching.

“I knew that they were hunting for me. I lay down in a little hollow in the sand. Vague, mist-veiled points of light came near and passed. And then one stopped directly overhead. It descended and the circle of radiance grew about it. I knew that it was useless to run, and I could not have done so, for my terror. Down and down it came.

“AND THEN I SAW ITS FORM. The thing was of a glittering, blazing crystal. A great-six-sided, upright prism of red, a dozen feet in length, it was, with a six-pointed structure like a snowflake about the center, deep blue, with pointed blue flanges running from the points of the star to angles of the prism! Soft scarlet fire flowed from the points. And on



each face of the prism, above and below the star, was a purple cone that must have been an eye. Strange pulsating lights flickered in the crystal. It was alive with light.

“It fell straight toward me!

“It was a terribly, utterly alien form of life. It was not human, not animal—not even life as we know it at all. And yet it had intelligence. But it was strange and foreign and devoid of feeling. It is curious to say that even then, as I lay beneath it, the thought came to me, that the thing and its fellows must have crystallized when the waters of the ancient sea dried out of the crater. Crystallizing salts take intricate forms.

“I drew my automatic and fired three times, but the bullets ricocheted harmlessly off the polished facets.

“It dropped until the gleaming lower point of the prism was not a yard above me. Then the scarlet fire reached out caressingly—flowed over my body. My weight grew less. I was lifted, held against the point. You may see its mark upon my chest. The thing floated into the air, carrying me. Soon others were drifting about. I was overcome with nausea. The scene grew black and I knew no more.

“I awoke floating free in a brilliant orange light. I touched no solid object. I writhed, kicked about—at nothingness. I could not move or turn over, because I could get a hold on nothing. My memory of the last two days seemed a nightmare. My clothing was still upon me. My canteen still hung, or rather floated, by my shoulder. And my automatic was in my pocket. I had the sensation that a great space of time had passed. There was a curious stiffness in my side. I examined it and found a red scar. I believe those crystal things had cut into me. And I found, with a horror you cannot understand, the mark upon my chest. Presently it dawned upon me that I was floating, devoid of gravity and

free as an object in space, in the orange flame at the top of one of the black cylinders. The crystals knew the secret of gravity. It was vital to them. And peering about, I discerned, with infinite repulsion, a great flashing body, a few yards away. But its inner lights were dead, so I knew that it was day, and that the strange beings were sleeping.

“IF I WAS EVER TO ESCAPE, this was the opportunity. I kicked, clawed desperately at the air, all in vain. I did not move an inch. If they had chained me, I could not have been more secure. I drew my automatic, resolved on a desperate measure. They would not find me again, alive. And as I had it in my hand, an idea came into my mind. I pointed the gun to the side, and fired six rapid shots. And the recoil of each explosion sent me drifting faster, rocket-wise, toward the edge.

“I shot out into the green. Had my gravity been suddenly restored, I might have been killed by the fall, but I descended slowly, and felt a curious lightness for several minutes. And to my surprise, when I struck the ground, the airplane was right before me! They had drawn it up by the base of the tower. It seemed to be intact. I started the engine with nervous haste, and sprang into the cockpit. As I started, another black tower loomed up abruptly before me, but I veered around it, and took off in safety.

“In a few moments I was above the green. I half expected the gravitational wave to be turned on me again, but higher and higher I rose unhindered until the accursed black walls were about me no longer. The sun blazed high in the heavens. Soon I had landed again at Vaca Morena.

“I had had enough of radium hunting. On the beach, where I landed, I sold the plane to a rancher at his own price, and told him to reserve a place for me on the next steamer,

which was due in three days. Then I went to the town's single inn, ate, and went to bed. At noon the next day, when I got up, I found that my shoes and the pockets of my clothes contained a good bit of the red sand from the crater that had been collected as I crawled about in flight from the crystal lights. I saved some of it for curiosity alone, but when I analyzed it I found it a radium compound so rich that the little handful was worth millions of dollars.

“But the fortune was of little value, for, despite frequent doses of the fluid from my canteen, and the best medical aid, I have suffered continually, and now that my canteen is empty, I am doomed.

Your friend, 'Thomas Kelvin”

THUS THE MANUSCRIPT ENDS. If the reader doubts the truth of the letter, he may see the Metal Man in the Tyburn Museum.

The End

## Uncomfortable Truths *Kayleen Burdine*

THEY LEFT IN THE MORNING, before the stars had even begun to disappear. The sky that had been purple-blue-black when they first pulled away from the flickering streetlamp just outside Claire's family's apartment was now vibrant and alive with the fiery oranges and yellows of sunrise, its reflection settled smack-dab in the center of the rearview mirror like a miniature masterpiece. They had three hours behind them and no particular destination in mind, their duffle bags slung carelessly into the bed of Ethan's run-down '82 Ford pickup. The cab was chilly with the last dregs of winter and Claire shivered a little. The heater was busted.

"Alright, screw it," she announced, propping her feet up on the dash and tossing her book down onto the weathered seat between them. "Uncomfortable truths. Go."

Ethan turned his eyes from the road for a second, confusion apparent. "What?"

"Uncomfortable truths," she reiterated, this time more slowly. "Tell me something unsettling about yourself that I don't already know."

"Like what?" he asked, still not seeming to understand. Claire sighed.

"Fine. I'll start," she fiddled with the radio's volume until Led Zeppelin faded out to a low hum. "You know those novelty jelly beans people buy as gag-gifts? The really gross ones that taste like mud, earwax, vomit...?"

"Yeah?"

"I like the soap-flavored ones."

"What?" Ethan's nose crinkled in disgust. "Seriously?"

"Yup," she replied proudly. "Your turn."

They drove nearly four miles in silence before Ethan finally spoke up, his face reddening a little as he admitted, “My first crush ever was on Roger Moore.”

Claire’s expression lit up, disbelieving. “Maverick or Bond?”

“Bond, obviously,” Ethan scoffed.

Claire seemed to consider this for a moment. “So the reason that big poster of him is hanging directly over your bed—”

“Stop,” he interjected. “I know what you’re thinking and you need to stop.”

She laughed as her feet slid off the dash, but she made no further comment.

Up ahead, the road forked in three directions. In the past, the two of them had taken a right to get to Albuquerque and her own family often kept driving straight to visit relatives. Ethan took a left. Claire had no idea where the road led, but it didn’t really matter. That wasn’t the point. They were driving for the sake of driving, claiming a day for themselves before the winds of change swept in. She pressed her temple against the cool glass of the passenger’s side window and closed her eyes, soaking in the mid-March morning. His hand found hers and their fingers threaded loosely together.

Eventually she softly murmured an admission. “My parents don’t know I’m here with you.”

“Mine don’t either.”

The notion unsettled her. One lie was dangerous, but two were deadly. Though her parents liked Ethan well enough and a day with him was no source of worry, spending a night with him was out of the question. She’d told them instead that her friend Raeanne had invited her to go with her family to Lubbock for the weekend. Not a total lie. Raeanne’s

family *would* be gone for the night and, like Ethan and herself, they'd left early. A decent enough cover, to say the least. Claire wondered faintly what Ethan told his own parents, but in the long run it didn't really matter. If they were going to get caught, then they'd get caught. End of story.

She pulled away from the window and narrowed her eyes at him. "Truths we share don't count."

"Then I guess it's still your turn."

They played for another fifteen minutes or so, divulging tidbits of information unexpected and often bewildering before the novelty wore off and the two of them went silent again. Ethan released her hand and turned the radio back up a few notches, drumming his fingers against the steering wheel in time with the beat. Claire smiled. Their masterpiece had disappeared, leaving in its wake a stretch of pale blue sky underscored by mesquite and cacti. For land she'd never seen before it remained familiar in the way only the New Mexican desert could. Beautiful in its own right, but a little greenery wouldn't kill.

They hit the next town nearly an hour later, a hole in the road about fifty miles from any actual form of civilization. A half dozen abandoned homes lined the single road that ran through it, but by the looks of it an ancient gas station at the end of the road was still in commission. Near its front door an old man sat smoking a cigarette in overalls and a weathered baseball cap with a frumpy gray dog at his feet. The whole scene was just shady enough that Claire asked Ethan to stop.

"Piss break?" he guessed.

She nodded and he rolled his eyes, but pulled over, killed the engine, and followed her inside anyways. After stamping out his cigarette with a heavy sigh, the old man was right at their heels. She was relieved to find that the store's

interior wasn't half as dilapidated as its exterior and by the time she emerged from a restroom that was at the very least the illusion of clean, Ethan had pulled the truck around to one of the pumps and was filling up. His light brown hair was a little wind-ruffled, one bit sticking up at an odd angle atop his head. Claire grinned and decided not to mention it.

"Took you long enough," he joked when he saw her coming.

"Just be glad you didn't take me four months from now," she shot back. "More pee breaks than there are Podunk gas stations, I guarantee you." Ethan just shook his head and grinned, watching the digital numbers climb upward. Claire threw a glance over her shoulder. The old guy was still inside. "Did Reverend Kane threaten you with my life or did we just need to fill up?"

"Just needed to fill up, unfortunately. I'd be six miles down the road otherwise," Ethan tried to pull in a deep breath, but a laugh bubbled out when she glared at him and came around to his side of the truck. He reached into his jacket and pulled something out before tossing it to her. "Catch."

She only nearly did, then laughed when she realized what it was. A bag of jelly beans.

"No soap-flavored ones," he said with a false pout. "Sorry."

She punched him in the shoulder and felt satisfied when he winced. "Jerk."

"So abusive!" he shouted. The old man's dog let out a half-hearted bark, but didn't rise from where it was slumped against the concrete.

The pump clicked off at eighteen dollars and fifty-three cents and Claire climbed back inside the truck while she waited for Ethan to pay. She stole a glance at her own

reflection and felt a little anxious. After having spent all morning avoiding the subject, she hadn't meant to bring it up. Especially not the way she did. It was too late now, though. Within a few moments Ethan returned and they were on the road again before she realized it, the highway winding out into oblivion. The silence in the truck went from comfortable to tense in an instant.

"So," Ethan began lamely, failing to gracefully edge around the subject. "Does she know yet? Your mom?"

Claire shifted uncomfortably. "If you think I'm *that* brave, you're wrong."

Ethan turned from the road and stared at her for a moment, his eyes betraying him. He was worried. So was she, but it hardly mattered.

"I'll do it, okay?" she folded her arms across her chest.

"Okay," Ethan nodded. When the silence stretched on uninterrupted, he added, "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I planned on telling her after we got back, I just—" Claire paused. "Let's just enjoy ourselves *now*, okay?"

"We can do that," he agreed, then reached out and placed a reassuring hand on her knee. She looked up and met his gaze, slowly taking his hand in her own and giving it a gentle squeeze. "It's gonna be alright."

"Yeah," she nodded and pulled in a deep breath. "I think it will be."

The tiny town behind them sank into the horizon, forgotten entirely. Claire settled a bit, stroking her thumb across the back of Ethan's hand while she closed her eyes and drank in the sort of peace she hadn't experienced in weeks.

"I'm pretty sure I killed my first pet."

Eyes snapping open, she squinted at Ethan in confusion. He squinted right back, mockingly, and the instant



their eyes met she understood and burst out laughing. In two days' time, things would undoubtedly change. But for now at least, she hoped they could stay exactly the way they'd always been.

## Consuming the Girl *Beth Thomas*

*IT IS ONLY SOIL, SAND AND CLAY, ROCK.*

She is the one everyone in town is talking about. The young Flores girl who got pregnant by the cross-eyed Mexican boy from Española.

*Palpitations of hunger, a taste for earth, for ground. It is the language of geography, of tangible paths and gardens.*

Tonight she kneels between rows of green chile in the small garden out behind her Abuelita's. Her fragile hands are buried up to the wrists.

*Only to touch, to feel, to taste. Oh, tasting is good, but consuming is so much deeper. Still aching for the earth, the soil, its minerals and knowledge.*

The moon casts light on leaf tops, on bodies of chiles curled like fat green snakes among the stalks. Thunderheads approach from the west. The whole landscape is enveloped by their distended purple underbellies: a patchwork of wheat fields, peanut farms, blooming cotton, and there, her. She turns her round face upward to watch the storm gather.

*Damp soil feels like kisses across closed eyelids, down cheeks and throat to the tops of swollen breasts.*

A sound from inside, a wooden chair on Saltillo tile. A square of yellow light thrown across the yard breaks the spell. She stands and smoothes her nightgown, smudging it with dirt and leaves.

*Move on to the pathways lost in deep, long grass, to the gardens no one is tending.*

The baby flutters in her belly like a hive of bees, lost without their queen.

## Drifting *Beth Thomas*

WE WALKED TO THE FENCE and saw the birds there, pecking into the gourds that grew wild in that otherwise barren land of rock and shale and dusty bones. An arrowhead plucked up and held, a souvenir, a ghost. We did not stop to check it for blood. We did not speak, only walked, gathering memories, folding them and tucking them safe into back pockets.

And then we walked to the rotting stable where the pair of pale horses pawed at the ground and snorted and shivered in the dying light, as though ready to charge into the coming night with us atop them near naked and wild in the wind, clutching fistfuls of mane in our bony hands like we did when we were young, whooping and digging our heels into the hollows of their ribbed sides, calling and calling and calling. We ran our hands over their forelocks and rubbed behind their ears, saying their names.

And then we walked to the gutted county road where the 18-wheelers made their way during the days, kicking up clouds of pale dirt that then hung in the air, cumulus. And then we walked into town, past the Food Mart and the shuttered movie theater, past the post office, town hall, the bar. And then we walked to the bus station, to the ticket counter, to the waiting area. One bag, one book, one bottle of water to start a new life in a new place.

And then I walked and you rode and I walked and I saw again the beauty in the empty night sky, in the moths at the streetlights, in the wild gourds, in the low round belly of the cow. And I wondered if you were seeing them, and from what speed you were seeing them, and from what angle you were seeing them. And I wonder still if you think of me when you see the clear sky or the black bird or the blousing cow or

the wild horse, and I wonder if you will come home someday  
and we will mount the ponies and ride them until our backs  
ache with the clear and purposeful ache of the young.

## Hoodwink *Holly Bayly*

A spoon softly taps against china  
soothing and smooth  
like ocean wind  
endless space between the strike of a second  
where dust levitates on sunlight  
surrendered to thoughts  
free  
doves of peace stream  
over st. peter's square  
upturned faces hope  
across deserts  
fly  
between moments where  
silence sinks  
softly suspended  
straining seams  
resisting realities  
outside  
the black  
sack  
suffocating  
Standing  
on stains where  
all that's left are  
Nightmares  
in a paper bag  
Unsteady hands shoot  
an azimuth oscillating  
northsouthnorth?  
so tired  
enough

to sleep inside sleep  
but there is no room  
with the pant of  
fearful breath  
between sobs  
from a crack in the wall  
where a cross was scratched  
in sorrow  
and prayers dry  
to dust collecting  
in endless sands of opacity

## Town and Sky *Alexander Pappalardo*

THERE IS A FEELING that accompanies driving into Eastern New Mexico for the first time, a sense of confusion when you find yourself driving out the other side of town. You realize that you've reached the edge of where people make their homes and not much except scraggly grass and weeds cover the next few hundred miles. The reactions differ. Some grumble in resentment at having to live in either Clovis or Portales for the next few years. I've heard of wives crying once they see "the main street" in Clovis and realize how different this town is to the cities they grew up in. Others don't seem to mind, too busy with friends or work to notice anything except the occasional dust-filled windstorm or invasion of tumbleweeds, but the feeling is much the same. You keep looking for more, but you don't find it. The sky overhead stretches an impossible distance from one horizon to another, and if you're like me, you feel as if everything might fall into the sky. The town is so small, and the sky so big. There is little to distract you from the disparity, there is nowhere to hide from the heavens above, and the feeling makes you uncomfortable. We're immigrants, people like me, and it is an interesting journey trying to fit in between the divisions of the town's society, between the sky and the town below.

After about three months of living in Clovis, I surprisingly managed to convince a girl to go on a date with me. She was a dairy farmer's daughter who lived a ways south of the tracks. I remember very little of the drive to her house that evening, but I know I must have driven from the affluent military-dominated north part of town through the poorer sections of the southern end of Clovis to get there. Like most spring evenings, the sky was clear and a tinge of cow manure

was in the air. I made a note not to complain about the smell since it was the by-product of the farmer's wealth.

I knew this girl was very close to her family, so I proposed a tour of the dairy farm as our first date. I wanted to get to know what her family did, and what the place she grew up in was like. I thought the gesture was a very diplomatic one for a foreign emissary such as myself. A boy from Northeastern Pennsylvania would have to try hard to be in a more out-of-place situation. I grew up with sprawling towns that blended into one another, with cities only an hour away where the skyscrapers crowded the sky and only allowed slivers of the sky to look down on pedestrians. Where I grew up, the trees and forests of the nearby hills bridged over my head, arching over the roads and covering the hillsides so you could rarely see any significant distance. That world was close and small, and filled with hundreds of different people working in a hundred different professions. They had rich last names like Stach, Zachrzewski, Vlcek, or even my name, Pappalardo. This place was not the same. I felt the giant reddening sky staring down on me, inquiring what business a second-generation Italian wearing converse shoes and a hoodie had walking around with a girl who lived in a multimillion dollar home and had all the mannerisms, looks, and kindness of a princess.

I pulled up to her house and rang the doorbell, my phone buzzing in my pocket. Initially I mistook the vibrato in for another one of the occasionally loud "moo's" the cows would bellow. While I read a text from a friend, she opened the door, dressed for the occasion in jeans and a t-shirt from a volleyball team she had played with some time ago. She was a wonderful girl for giving me a chance, and for the way she moved her long brown locks of hair and smiled shyly. She was wonderful for a lot of reasons. I planned to be confident



and polite when talking to her parents before we strolled around the farm. I'm not a bad guy; I had nothing to fear from an over-protective father.

"Come on in," she walked back inside and I trailed along. I always wanted to take a decisive role in a date, but it always seemed I was someplace foreign. I didn't know the rules, so I ended up in more of a passive role. "Let me go grab my flip-flops and we'll go ahead outside."

I said alright, and talked to her mother about the sorts of things I did for the military, how long I had been in Clovis, what I liked about it – in short, a polite talk to determine my caliber. The daughter came back and told her mom we would be back in a while. She smiled knowingly.

I was impressed by the way this girl wore flip-flops on a crap-covered dairy farm, and seemed to not be bothered by the now-pungent smell. We had only walked a hundred yards before we came upon a dead cow, bloated and purpling on the side of a driving path. It obligingly added to the already-deepening odor.

"They take the dead cows here with a front-loader," she said matter-of-factly. "They don't pick them up until Tuesdays though, so sometimes they sit for a while." I don't know why the scene surprised me. In a place with ten thousand head of cattle, it would make sense that they would die fairly often. That they should be so nonchalantly stacked like a load of trash to be taken away was a little unsettling for some reason. She told me we were going to the place where they stored the milk next, and we made our way over, making small talk and telling stories of our pasts. I forgot about the dead cow.

We arrived in a room that smelled of bleach and other unidentifiable odors. The bleach, I knew, was for the floors.

Two enormous tanks protruded from a wall, with an equally shiny assemblage of pipes.

“These hold enough milk to fill three tanker trucks full of milk,” she said proudly. I was impressed.

I asked, “How often are these filled up?”

“Every day. Three truckloads a day, but it all goes to the cheese plant.” The cheese plant, I later learned, took in 150 train cars worth of milk a day, creating 750lb blocks of cheese and enough whey protein to fuel a metropolis of meatheads. The entire dairy market in Clovis was centered around this single plant that made one out of every six cheese slices in America. Those were big numbers, and she was a part of that. “Do you want to milk a cow?”

I shied away a bit as I looked further into the building where the cows stood in pens, but remembering that I wanted to be confident and daring, I said, “Of course I do!” Never mind that they kicked a little and their hind parts were smeared with dung. She showed me how to tug on the utters just so and I tried my hand at it long enough to feel like I could tell someone I had milked a cow if I was ever asked. Other than a cat and dog at home, I hadn’t dealt with domesticated animals, certainly not ones that weighed hundreds of pounds. They made me uneasy, and didn’t seem as happy to see me as my pets had been. Further along a couple of Hispanic men, potentially Mexican although I couldn’t say, attached a device that collected the milk with a practiced quickness that spoke of countless hours doing much the same thing. I tried to attach the device, failed, and the cow kicked with disdain, flinging poop onto my shoes.

“How many people work here?” I had seen a few other Hispanic men driving front-loaders or carrying things. Some would say hi to the girl, recognizing that she was the farmer’s daughter, but they kept a respectful, even

disinterested, distance and she didn't seem to notice them much.

"A few dozen I think. I'm not sure. My father employs as many as he can to help out." I learned later that this particular dairy farmer was one of the most respected of his peers. I would back that claim as well.

"Do illegals work here at all?" She laughed, reminded of past memories.

"Sometimes the border patrol cars come to check. A lot of the workers scatter all over the place. Some even jump into the holding pond and bury themselves to hide." I was flabbergasted. I'd seen the holding ponds on the way in (although I'm not sure holding pond is the term she used). They were two semi-solid repositories of manure, each the shape of a square with sides about a hundred feet long.

"They are that serious, huh?"

She didn't seem fazed by the willingness of a man to bury himself up to his neck in the collective shit of ten thousand cows. She actually used to empty the ponds every summer with a front loader when the ponds dried out. Apparently you had to be careful doing so, because if you dug too deep and left a side too high, a wall of excrement could collapse on you and bury you. People had died that way, buried in feces. And to willingly bury yourself to escape the notice of a border patrol agent...

"Yes, they're good workers."

We moved on, walking along the edge of the gated area where cows ran back and forth, then stopped to crowd the fence to stare expectantly at us. They either didn't have much to do, or thought we might feed them. Probably both. She looked at the cows and then at me.

"I'll tell you something, but you have to promise not to make fun of me."

I nudged her playfully. “I’m not sure I can promise that. I probably wouldn’t have made fun of you until you mentioned it.”

She looked at me, pleading with her eyes and smiling.

“Alright, I promise.”

“You sure?”

“Yes, I said I promise.”

She looked back at the cows and then at her feet.

“Sometimes, I’ll come out here and sing to the cows.” I looked at the cows, and they did seem a pretty enthusiastic audience. She sings to animals, how very Disney of her. I told her how I could see that might be fun, and suggested we do a duet sometime.

“My favorite song to sing to them is ‘Can You Feel the Love Tonight?’”

I had already told her that “The Lion King” was my favorite movie of all time, but the song choice made my heart jump a little. Maybe this could go somewhere. Maybe in this dry desert land there could still be love and hope, and hidden things the sky could not expose. Even for a stranger like myself. I imagined us singing to the cows, and learning the business side of the farm so I could take over for her father one day. It wouldn’t be such a bad life maybe. I wasn’t in love, but my mind couldn’t help run out the simulation of life to its potential conclusions. She was already showing me how to love the things she had grown up with, the vast and beautiful sky, the stars, even the cows whose stench, now scent, was at times carried inconveniently into town. She was most impressed with the sky, that enveloping open and flawless sky that marched above the earth, above those who worked below and hid in holding ponds.

We walked along a little further, looking into a couple more buildings with functions I no longer remember. She

took me to see the heifers, the cows, the new calves, the mating bulls, pregnant cows, and more kinds of cows than I ever thought could have existed. It was like the cities back home, except now the diversity lay with the animals and not the keepers.

“We’ll walk up between the fences and go back inside.” The sun had just set a brilliant orange. The sky darkened. I felt I was in another world, with a beautiful girl next to me and the heavens beginning to open up as the moon rose in the East. The road she suggested walked straight between two massive pens of animated cows, who ran in circles past us once we got near enough. That might be the part I remember the most vividly. Her and I walking side by side, thousands of cattle running past us on either side kicking up clods of dirt and manure. We were showered nearly the entire way back to the house, almost a full quarter of a mile. It reminded me of the part of the wedding where the bride and groom walk out of the church, and the congratulating friends and relatives shower the newly-weds with rice or bubbles. We both found the parallel amusing.

We talked for a while longer in the house before I left. I thought back to the dead cow, and then the cows she would sing to. They were amusing to her, she maybe even felt affection for them, but there were so many of them that their death didn’t mean much to her. It seemed that way anyway, I might not be giving her enough credit. She loved her family, the sky, her world, but the cows lived a different life outside, and so did the workers. And so did I.

That was our undoing actually, that I lived a different life as a military pilot, and that I came from such a different place. It was just as well; I was never the prince she needed. Maybe more of a hired hand to the crown, or an advisor to the king; that wouldn’t do for a princess. She’s actually

engaged to another guy who grew up in Clovis and had been away for a while. He's tall, looks like Elvis and went to school for seminary. She let me go as easily as she said goodbye to her cows. Maybe easier, since the cows belonged to this particular landscape and I did not.

I drove home that night though in high spirits, my mind on the next date and hopefully more to come. At some point I must have crossed the divide between the poorer areas of Clovis back into the part of town with the nice identical looking homes. The divide, I was told, was somewhere around 14<sup>th</sup> street, becoming more distinct at 7<sup>th</sup> street. "If you live south of that," I was told, "you'll be robbed." That's the only thing that lived south of town. Robbery. It was a strange day looking back, but the experience was a good introduction to the town I now live in. I'm only the newest form of immigrant to Clovis. Before me came the dairy farmers, who came with the promise of free water rights to the land, and before them came the other farmers and those who arrived with the railroad. I'm not sure who preceded them, but the original inhabitants have long since been disenfranchised of their rights to the land. It's a place with a rich history, this land I live in, but at the moment it seems divided at the waist. There seems to be the town, and the all-encompassing sky. One of these abounds in grand shows of light, color and design: storms raging through the night, sunrises and sunsets illuminating an enthralling combination of streaming and billowing clouds, the stars and the Milky Way spanning a night sky so clear that you feel that you could be floating through space. The other is absent-mindedly observed: a drab mixture of brown and sometimes green weeds or crops, cows milling about and cookie-cutter houses springing up in the North while the houses in the South remain rundown. Not much passes between the two,

save an occasional storm sweeping the ground with rain or a dust-devil trying to throw the earth back up into the pale blue sea above. I find myself somewhere in between. This is a new place for me.

# I wanted to see the ocean.

*Hiroko Fujima*

“I WANTED TO SEE THE OCEAN,” she said.

“Why you use the past tense? You can see it if you want.”

“Here? How? There is no sea in this dry, southwest land.”

“We can go to the west, to the end, and we can see the sea.” His eyes are still fierce, she thought, though the white of his eyes are now yellow, with a delicate web of blood. —Should I smile to him, for his affection?— And she looked at the dusty ceiling.

“Do you want me to raise your bed a little?”

He heavily raised himself from a thinly-cushioned wooden chair, his companion for quite a while, with his knees slightly bent. The handle was squeaking, and she felt his scrawny hands shaking. Need some oil, she thought but did not tell him. He has already done so much for me. I should have known.

“I have never seen the sea but thought I have...all those years. I guess because I have not cared about the sea so much. It was like ... it is always there.”

“And now, I realized that I have never seen it,” she sighed. She did not want to smell her breath because she knew how it smelled. It was the smell of parched dirt with a brown, withered creeper.

She sluggishly scratched her head and combed her dry, thin hair. Her veined fingers were blended into the used-to-be blonde, ashy white hair.

He looked at her while turning the handle, but suddenly felt that she was not here anymore.



Then he slowly shifted his eyes and was moving toward the windows, with bent knees and slightly twitching hands.

He opened the windows squeaking and thought they need some oil.

Light was intense. Amorphous white, red, and yellow were continuously emerging and disappearing behind his closed blue eyes, but he was feeling a silent breeze.

Surrounded by the flat, endless, amber land, he inhaled deeply. It was the smell of parched dirt with a brown, withered creeper.

But he felt it was the smell of the ocean, though he had never been to the ocean, only seen it too many times on TV.

He languorously turned around and said, “We are in the ocean.”

## Up in the Sky *Brian Petkash*

SHUSTER WOKE HIM FIRST. A growl followed by his slipping out the hole Jerry'd created for him to come and go.

Jerry peeked out one of the many cracks where board and cardboard sometimes failed to meet. Firefly-like flickers of light popped up and down the ravine of Kingsbury Run. Odd, he thought. He was used to some light—the glow from the nearby steel mill furnaces often lit the black sky—but this was something different. Near the top of the ravine, he thought he saw the silhouette of a large truck, but he hadn't heard anything, not since the last Rapid Transit train roared by an hour or so ago. Then he was blinded. A large light shone from that silhouette, caused him to pull back sharply from the crack, to rub his eyes. For a few seconds he could only see the afterimage of the light and the side of the hill, the shanties and lean-tos that dotted its surface. Dogs barked—Shuster?—and men shouted.

Jerry thought of the criminals scattering on the cover of his worn copy of *Action Comics*, his most prized possession, thought maybe the Mayfield Road Mob descended upon them all. Hadn't Shimmy, that old gray-haired 'bo who lived two shacks over, bragged that he'd put one over on one of the bookie joints in the Flats? He'd heard they killed for less. He wished Shuster was here, but at least he had his traps.

Jerry tapped his *Action Comics* cover, smiled. Boys had created Superman: boys! (And one of the boys, the artist, was named Jerry!) Only a few years older than he, graduates of an East Side high school. Okay, so he didn't graduate high school, nor, likely, would he ever, but his drawings weren't half bad, he thought, as did a few of the other hobos, the few he trusted (and only those he'd let read *Action Comics* and hadn't laughed). His dreams were simple: draw comic books,

create heroes who could overcome this Depression, who could demonstrate the best humanity had to offer, the human potential.

Jerry was the youngest in the hobo shantytown of Kingsbury Run, but the older men, the forty or fifty other homeless piled together like cordwood, treated him as an equal, mostly. And even though his grandpa was long gone (the loss of the farm caused first a stroke then a fatal heart attack) and his mother was long ago institutionalized (the loss of both farm and father caused first depression then mania), Jerry enjoyed his limited life. He ate almost every day, he had his own shanty in the gully of the Run (constructed from bound slats of wood and cardboard scraps and a tarpaper roof held in place by fragments of broken concrete), he had his own drawings of men performing feats of derring-do filling one wall of his shack, and he had his own dog he called Shuster that, while it wasn't really his, was his enough.

He couldn't allow what little he had to be hijacked.

His traps were simple. Short sticks, no more than a foot long, with rubber bands stretched end to end. One end secured in a notch he'd carved with his fingernail, the other end set as near to its edge as possible. He'd set the traps in three places: inside the door (a piece of rotted wood, really), under his cot (an old cut-down barrel that no longer fit him), and next to Shuster's bed (a pile of newspapers that, the smell suggested, served as more than a bed, although given the smell of the Run in general, who could tell?). If anyone that wasn't him or Shuster entered their shanty or approached their beds, the traps would fire and cripple feet and ankles and knees. The impracticality of these traps doing anything other than, maybe, briefly startling an intruder wasn't lost on him. But a man who was super could lift cars over his head

and smash them against boulders as criminals fled in terror. If there could be a Superman anything could happen, right?

Jerry checked his traps. Each was set, poised to spring. When he peered through the crack again, he saw men with flashlights—twenty or thirty of them—pouring down the hill, moving between the shacks. He thought he saw the outlines of guns in many of their hands, backlit by that bright beam that shone above. One man who appeared to be the leader (he kept yelling at the others, pointing them around the camp) held an axe. The Butcher? All the 'bos talked about him, how he cut up his victims. But the Butcher was one man, not an army, an alligator who hunted the swamps alone. It had to be the mob; Shimmy had doomed them all.

The sound of doors and walls being bashed in, followed by violent and slurred curses, filled the night air. Jerry saw the leader use the axe handle to bust through one door—Gina's, he thought, the camp's lone mother figure—saw her dragged out, lashing kicks at any of the men she could reach. One man used handcuffs on her ankles. Not the mob ... the police? Jerry's heart pounded, sweat surfaced on his face and arms and legs. What had we done? Jerry thought. Where was Shuster?

He lay in his barrel bed, pulled newspapers over him, hid as best he could. Even held his breath for ten, then twenty, then thirty seconds at a time. To keep the papers from moving up and down, giving him away.

Footsteps came closer. Jerry let out a huge breath, sucked in, held it. There was a hammering at his door. He thought he heard a rubber band snap mere moments before his door was hit, hard. The door fell in against the empty bottles he'd collected earlier that morning and the noise caused him to let out a small shriek, but it must have been lost in the bottles' clinking and clanking. The papers weren't

ripped off of him, a flashlight wasn't shone directly in his face, handcuffs weren't slipped over his too-thin wrists, and no one shouted, "Got a kid here." His breath held again, his composure recovered, he hid. Amid the hoboese shouting, amid the commotion and chaos, a voice that sounded like the man Jerry figured to be the axe-wielding leader could be heard shouting, "Take them all to Central" and "All fingerprinted, no exceptions."

After a few minutes, the noise drifted down and up the ravine, away from Jerry. Trucks started and pulled away above him. Jerry peeked. The uniformed men were gone, replaced by men in shiny overcoats and oversized helmets. A few held containers that they swung toward some of the shanties. The other hoboese were taken away, yet here he was. His traps had worked.

He propped up and repositioned his door, rearranged the fallen bottles, and pulled the papers over himself. Dark thoughts of what he had escaped filled his mind but were quickly replaced by warm thoughts of his pencil-and-charcoal drawings and Superman.

The sound of the fire woke him before the smoke, before the heat. It crackled and popped, caused metal to scream. Before he knew what was happening, his shanty was filled with smoke, he couldn't breathe. Shuster came darting in, tail between his legs, and slinked into Jerry's bed. The dog was hot.

Jerry peered out through one of the cracks. His eyes burned and watered. The entire Run was in flames. "No," he shouted. "No! Stop! Stop!" But who could hear him over the din?

He rushed to the door but the fire was too close. He tried to knock down the wall nearest Shuster's bed, but he slipped on a pile of shit and lost his footing and he went down

with a *whump*. Above him, seemingly staring down at him, were his drawings. Men of barrel chest and iron arms, men of exceeding strength and limitless power.

Jerry plucked each drawing off the now-smoking wall. He got back into his bed, gathered the drawings to his chest with one arm, held Shuster tightly with the other. He closed his eyes, pictured a caped man striding through the six-story flames and putting out the fire with one long extended breath, turning the bright orange night sky to black. He pictured his traps springing with such force that their explosive wind whispered the fire into nothingness. Jerry felt Shuster shudder beside him.

Jerry soon lost consciousness. He wasn't aware when the flames licked at his barrel bed, he didn't notice when his drawings began to smolder, he didn't hear the walls give way, nor did he feel the rock-laden roof collapse on top of him.

The papers quoted Eliot Ness as saying if you can't catch the alligator, drain the swamp, but they said nothing of Jerry, of the firemen unearthing him to find his clothes melted to his body, his hair scorched off, one arm still clutching the body of what could only be a dog. There was no trace of his drawings, of Superman.

Days later, the front page told of two young men, Henry Helf and Frank Pytlok, who caught baseballs that had plummeted 700 feet from the top of the Terminal Tower. Seven hundred feet! They wore steel helmets, the papers said, and they had missed the first few attempts as the balls, traveling 200 feet per second, slapped the pavement of Public Square and bounced thirteen stories into the air. But each made a catch, each set a record. The human potential. Glorious.

## Lady with Goat *Resa Alboher*

WITHIN A PRIVATE RAILROAD CAR on the grounds of the Tampa Bay Hotel, in her rosewood coffin gently lined with letters from her lovers, Sarah Bernhardt slept a restless sleep and dreamt of manatees swimming in graceful arcs in the morning fog drifting in off the river. As her dream unfolded, the manatees glided through reflections of glistening silver minarets as rays of sun burnt the fog to disappearing mist and all became the kind of harsh daylight an actress should avoid at such a, well, delicate age. So strange, she wondered in her dream, to see minarets in an American city.

Earlier that evening, she gave a brilliant performance in the hotel casino to an audience of nearly two thousand fans. They had waited all day, and no doubt some of them all of their lives to see the Divine Sarah, and to hear her famous voice. Her voice was unforgettable. No one gleaned tragedy in quite the same way. She did a monologue from Racine's *Phaedra*, some famous moments from *La Dame aux Camélias*, and for a startling finale, the soliloquys of Hamlet. I am the only woman on earth to dare play the Great Dane, and the only actress worthy of the challenge, she said to herself in her sleep.

As she slept in her coffin, she murmured lines from Hamlet and continued to drift from dream to dream. The sun again had disappeared and the fog now turned to a misty rain and mixed with the scent of rosewood, as her favorite lover Jacques Damala was suddenly there in the river swimming with the manatees. Her Damala in life had withered into an early death from morphine and despair, but in the dream now was a tangible presence filled with vibrant breath and disturbing, magnetic charm. That charm had

nearly killed her. It was the same charm that had forced the great actress to drop everything in her Paris life and follow in heated desperation this devastating actor to St. Petersburg, Russia, a city she found as disturbing as Damala had been to her. Between evening performances to sold-out Russian crowds (and how the Russians adored her), they would walk along the canals, getting drunk on the dazzling summer light, then drink absinthe after absinthe together in the actors cafés in theatre basements and would lose track of days and nights in wild lovemaking and artistic frenzy fueled by the madness of the absinthe, the tragedy they had performed on stage and the intoxicating midnight sun. But there he was now emerging out of the foggy river, part Damala, part manatee reaching for her across the glistening minarets, and now he was flying, he was a flying manatee-man, which seemed to make sense to the Divine actress, who rose like smoke from her rosewood coffin and seemed to diffuse herself into the water and the fog and around the actor at the very same time and she asked herself metaphysical questions not unlike those she asked when portraying the Great Dane. And now Damala was shaking off water from his seal-like flesh as if he were a loyal dog and she could feel the droplets of water soothing her as she lay in her rosewood coffin. Each droplet felt like a caress from this departed lover. It seemed to make sense that this manatee-man and this smoky actress were the essence of tragedy now, she said to herself as they drifted down the riverbank, she as translucent as he now, two ghosts drifting along the river which reminded her of the famed Petersburg river to the point that she was unsure of which city they were in until the minarets reminded her and she gazed at these minarets glistening with gentle rain.

How beautiful she said, and gestured in a way that only a theatrical grand dame could gesture. I am a ghost so



this all makes sense, she said out loud in her rosewood coffin. After you died, I became a ghost, she said directly to the manatee-man. He had taken something of her vital essence with him to his grave. How did you do that, she asked him with a trace of wonder in her voice. The scent of the river on his wet fur was his only answer. Well, my craft is all the better for it. How can one understand tragedy without tasting loss and death? But still, she missed what he had taken from her, and she wanted it back now. She was about to ask him for it back, this essence, this something that he had stolen, and tried to think of what language to use to a being part manatee, part man, but was then interrupted by a musical sound.

Did you see the lady with the goat in the hotel lobby? It is an intriguing statue. His voice was more like a song, not quite manatee not quite man. I never go in to hotel lobbies, the Grande Dame whispered in his ear, then put her airy lips close and tasted the silt from the river in his fur. I am happy to stay in my rosewood coffin, she whispered. One must practice for death. She could nearly taste his earlobe as it had tasted in life as she whispered to him. It was a familiar taste of deep earth and moss. Of riverwater and of something else.

Tell me about the lady and the goat. There is not much to tell. It is a statue, but something else too. I am the lady and you are the goat. It is always like that with us my dear. Damala laughed and pulled the actress close as the rain got stronger. She shivered and could feel his fins around her smoky ghost-flesh, and his manatee whiskers tickled her face as he reached in to kiss her, a kiss that tasted of freshwater fish and of something else. She wondered where the sun was. She wanted to see the minarets glisten on the water's surface and maybe she wanted to see something else as well, but in

the loneliness of her rosewood coffin the rain kept falling,  
and the river gave no reflection at all.

## Dry Bones *Manuel Traviço*

A skull, of a bull  
Perched on a rotting post of wood  
The background, a blood red sunset  
With hints of a lack of oxygen  
Smeared across the panorama  
Saguaro Cacti, erected across the  
Barron waste land  
Representing generations of life,  
While the skull represents generations of death

Dry heat is what they said,  
But so is fire  
Build canals! Sow the seeds! Inhabit this  
Illustrious land full of opportunity

Well, I dug the pathways for water  
Our life source  
And I built an adobe home on the  
Sand, dirt on dirt  
Shoot, when bullets weren't flyin' a  
Sandstorm was, dirt on dirt surrounded  
By dirt  
The rain never came  
Only clouds, the size of the nickels I  
Would never earn and yet  
My crops remained sown

Mirages rise  
Like clear incense  
Because the sun beats that which has  
Never experienced a cloud layering

Any sort of garment  
But rather this place was  
Exhausted of life  
Before feet ever stepped on it  
This place was exhausted of water  
Before the canals were built  
And the water evaporated as soon as it crawled  
On to it, leaving us thirsty

Bienvenido, step into my home  
You will see my wife and kid's bones  
Dry sitting in their latest position  
On the dusty couch, waiting for papa to  
Come home.  
See me at my crop which remains  
Sewn, you will see my spine  
Dry from the heat, and my bones  
Garnishing the ground next to the rake.

It is a dry heat they said,  
Well so is fire.

## On the Edge of Gravity *Manuel Traviço*

Sitting, or rather floating  
Contemplating, People Watching  
I took a small break, I propelled myself  
Away from my satellite work site Just for a second  
Or a couple thousands of them

My body, encased in this suit floats  
I am not sure if I am upright, sideways or  
Upside down,  
I guess out here it does not matter  
Nothing seems to matter  
I am literally outside of my world  
Beyond my dreams  
This is true escape from

Earth

Home to all of my troubles and concerns, loves, thoughts,  
relations memories, self

A blue mass, a sphere, I can see  
Everything  
I see the clouds traveling across our home  
Like little chicks staying in a pack  
But going to their mother hen, land,  
Earth  
On the edge of darkness, I see the veins  
Of our cities, cars, planes, houses, fueling  
Humanities' cause of expansion and  
Cultivation, or something,  
I tend to forget what our purpose was  
When I can see everything through what  
Seems like the eye of God

As though I do not belong out here  
As though I should be the one  
Giving the purpose

I literally hear nothing,  
Not even a ring in my ears  
Nothing, probably because  
I am holding my  
Breath  
Trying to listen to the  
Earth  
Rumble, or hum,  
Or something

Maybe it is the loneliness, or that  
Depression they trained me to cope with  
Whenever I am out here for too long  
But sometimes, while I am floating  
People watching, watching me  
I get this idea, or thought,  
Or something  
That I should  
Creep in a little too close, to the edge of  
Gravity  
And feel it pull

# Sonny and Cher's Stardust Cousins

*Wendel Sloan*

DURING A VISIT to the Grulla National Wildlife Refuge, southeast of the tiny community of Arch, N.M., in Roosevelt County, an archaeologist from Eastern New Mexico University told me as recently as 600 years ago natives walked for days to butcher bison mired in the mud of the salt lake.

Even the bison who weren't killed by natives — who may have traded their meat for corn, squash, turquoise and other goodies from nearby tribes — have been dead almost as long. The natives who made it to a ripe, old age still died by 50.

Though most creatures are fairly interested in continuing to breathe, the only entity that survives the temporality of individual life is the river of DNA.

Richard Dawkins said of DNA: "The genes themselves have a flint-like integrity. The information passes through bodies and affects them, but it is not affected by them on its way through. The river is uninfluenced by the experiences and achievements of the successive bodies through which it flows."

Even chaotic hydrogen gases in far-off galaxies seem driven to birth stars that spawn planets the right distance from their solar ovens to create tributaries flowing with new rivers of DNA.

Swimming up one of those tributaries on an as-yet unborn planet — where lightning striking a primordial pond possibly ignited strands of DNA into primeval life — may be fish similar to Grulla's extinct species.

Perhaps billions of years later, as birds swoop down after the fishes' offspring to keep their own river of DNA flowing, natives will hungrily shadow bison-like creatures on the water's edge, culminating in a mysterious dance of life and death between divergent creatures converging in time.

And long after Earth has been incinerated by its own star, that planet's newest stars — Sonny and Cher's stardust cousins — may warble “Boys keeping chasing girls to get a kiss.”

And the beat goes on.



## Retaining *Jordan Runyan*

She still wears her retainer  
Every night, even when  
She doesn't wear much  
Of anything else.

She wears it like she wears  
The ring her mother bought.  
It was just a gift,  
But it's stayed on her finger

Like a chastity belt,  
Even though it was never  
Meant like that.  
That's just how she sees it.

Two decades isn't long,  
Not in history books, anyway.  
She's not quite there yet.  
Give her time.

Should she stop wearing her  
Retainer when she's twenty?  
She doesn't really have  
A reason to stop.

And, besides, she's always  
Thought she'd stop wearing it  
When she took the ring off.  
And she'll take the ring off

The day she makes new vows.  
She doesn't need to talk  
In bed just yet. Not while she's  
Biting down on her virtue

With teeth that only chew  
And a tongue that's never  
Been touched by an intruder.  
She'll be twenty soon.

Twenty and still wearing  
Her retainer every night,  
Behind virgin lips that chap  
Too easily. She wears it,

Her chastity, in her mouth  
And on her finger;  
Because, she need not talk  
Or touch just yet.

## Upon Exiting *Jordan Runyan*

The darkness was different  
As they stepped out of McDonald's.  
It had been dark before, but now  
It was a brown sort of dark,  
Made of fog and the smell  
Of distant dairy farms.

The Cold had conceived and was  
Pregnant with the Moisture's baby.  
*Congratulations, you're having snow.*  
Due sometime tomorrow, by the  
Looks of that odd brownish haze.

So, walking through the expectant Cold,  
They talked about the weather.  
He said, "It's all foggy out here.  
You should write a poem about it."

She shook her head. He was always  
Telling her what to write about.  
Not that she didn't listen.

"I might," she mused, thinking that  
It was more than likely she would,

Like the Cold, be a proud mother soon.

## Reproductive Rites *Don Mitchell*

WHEN I TOLD RUTH I was going up to San Leandro to see about buying a jaguar she hardly blinked. I was surprised. Later she told me she thought I'd been going up there to look at a car -- maybe an XK-120. This was before she learned of my interest in exotic pets, or much else about me. I had hoped my intimacy with dangerous animals would impress her.

As it turned out, the jaguar was too big, and too expensive. At the time I was supporting myself by washing glassware and animal cages in the university hospital's infertility clinic, while I waited to learn whether I'd be going east to graduate school or west to Vietnam.

I enjoyed the lab's animal room, but not its other two. One had the clinic's centerpiece -- an artificial uterus. It was stocked with fetal mice which we were usually unable to keep alive for more than a day. The other had hundreds of flasks of frozen urine from women who wanted to make babies. We analyzed their urine, chasing their progesterone and estradiol rhythms. The women produced urine faster than we could analyze it. The technicians were pleased when the urine was within three weeks of having been warm. My job was to scrub the bottles and beakers, then rinse them in sulfuric acid. The acid stripped any fugitive hormones from the glassware, and occasionally skin from me.

My urine room boss was Angie, a hefty Chinese woman who from time to time would be called to go puncture people's hearts. She said it wasn't too difficult once you mastered the basic technique, which was to fling the apparatus at the chest as if it were a dart board and the whopping great syringe and needle, the dart.

It was better in the animal room, where the cages only had to be washed in detergent and rinsed in Betadine, a less dangerous substance. I didn't encounter Betadine again until a midwife washed my first wife down with it when she was giving birth, about fifteen years later. I recognized it immediately, even over the thick, complex odors of a delivery room.

The animal room boss, Stub, was an ex-jockey who taught me how to use a dental probe to tell if a mouse was in heat. It took a practiced eye, and a steady hand. If they were set to go we looked at the mating chart and tossed them in with the right male. Sometimes they got at it quickly, and sometimes it happened overnight. Eventually there would be mouse babies in the cage, and I'd need to be careful knocking out the bedding. If the artificial uterus didn't need any babies I took them home for the marmoset, to garnish its monkey chow. It bit their heads off first.

The woman up in San Leandro did have a wolf cub, which she let me have for ninety dollars. I didn't ask about its origins, nor did I give much thought to what might lie ahead. I had not yet understood the difference between raising a small, relatively docile primate and a large, potentially threatening carnivore. A friend who had done intensive Greek in summer school insisted that the cub be named Lykos, which he swore was Greek for wolf. I liked the sound of it.

Ruth was surprised when she came over. Not just because what she'd thought was going to be a car I could drive her around in turned out to be a spiky-haired little thing with a Greek name, but because it immediately bit her, drawing blood. Lykos was never cute, but I became fond of him.

He spent the summer with me up in the Portola Valley, and so did Ruth. She had a year to go. Lykos had somewhat less. He stopped gaining weight, became listless, and didn't snap with his usual force. When I took some stool into the lab, Stub and Angie claimed it was loaded with parasite eggs, and doubted that Lykos would live much longer. I don't know how much longer that might have been, since he escaped from his pen the next day, and disappeared. I searched among the manzanitas, live oak, and tall grass but never found him.

I missed Lykos, and worried about possible consequences if he lived. I watched the papers for reports of wolf sightings in the foothills. There were none.

When I went East to graduate school Ruth didn't follow me but my exotic pet habit did. Its next spasm yielded a cebus monkey named Bishop Wilberforce. The Bishop didn't work out as a pet but made a dandy anatomical specimen. I still have some slides of the muscles and tendons of his forearm, teased out, lifted, and separated by dental probes. The Bishop was often brought out at parties. His image is preserved as a homemade Christmas card, in which my girlfriend and I play Mary and Joseph to the swaddled Bishop's Infant Jesus. His halo was smaller than ours.

Eventually he and the little styrofoam cooler in which he was kept disappeared somewhere in the basement of a woman whose ex-husband's father had played a major role in developing the first birth control pill.

We had sent the Bishop off to another shore with phenylbarb, which my friend Alan had gotten from his stepfather Bela, an emigre Hungarian doctor in Milo Center, New York. Bela thought nothing of sending us back to Cambridge with a syringe and the lethal substance we needed to transform Bishop Wilberforce from a cranky, neurotic

monkey into a baby Jesus. He was grateful that I'd rid his barn of pigeons with my sixteen gauge double barreled Hans Marchner weapon stolen, my dad had told me, from a German farmhouse during World War II. I suspect he'd have helped us out anyway.

Bela was the first person I knew to serve mineral water at dinner. I thought it strange.

I never had gotten a Jaguar, but I had become a sports car fan. I wanted Alan to run us down to Watkins Glen so I could see the race course there. He wanted to go to Elmira and look for women to pick up, instead. Twenty-five years later I married a woman from Watkins Glen who had learned to drive on the Grand Prix course. Her brother raised leeches. We once went to Milo Center and tried to find Bela's barn. I think I got the right side street, but I was unable to recognize the barn, pigeons or not.

I don't know what became of Ruth, either. After I'd been in Cambridge less than a year, I heard that she was going to get married. I sent her a copy of a massive anthology I'd gotten from a book club, in an attempt to convince her not to. I've still got a picture of her and Lykos -- Ruth with her bouffant hairdo, Lykos pulling on a towel. It's in a old box along with the one of Bishop Wilberforce's arm, the simian baby Jesus, and an unpaid bill from the book club.

# Unexpected Strong Yellowish Late Afternoon Light After a Storm

*Don Mitchell*

GUSTS OF WIND ARE LASHING the horse chestnuts, in the unexpected strong yellowish late afternoon light after a storm. They're showering petals onto the parked cars, and you know that diligent owners will sweep them from the clearcoated new ones, but that the junkers will wear their floral capes for days. You have no word for this in English but you have in you your other people's single word *asinalua*, which describes the light and its circumstances precisely but has never been expanded to include the wind and the horse chestnuts and the automobile finishes.

The woman sitting crosslegged next to you on your Chinese rug turns and kisses you, which is unexpected because you've only just met. You know she's been watching the horse chestnuts and the wind and you think she's probably aware of the quality of the light, but she cannot know the word *asinalua* because you are the only person outside of six degrees thirty minutes south, one hundred fifty five degrees east, who knows that word.

You keep it to yourself because it contains secrets of your life there, secrets you'll later reveal little by little as the petals blow or otherwise scatter from your memory, which may happen more quickly or more slowly than they disappear from the automobiles. Probably more slowly, because your memory is not clearcoated and smooth. Some petals have cleaved to its surface. Some have worked their way into cracks and will remain for a long time.

You decide to alter that word's meaning, that word *asinalua* that no one nearer to you than eight thousand miles



knows, which you can do because you've no one to say it to or hear it from who knows its true exact meaning. You don't want to give her that word now, because doing so would fix it, would invest it with a particular meaning, and it's too soon for that. It's still growing.

And so shortly after the late afternoon sun breaks under the black storm clouds, *asinalua* blossoms into its new meaning: sitting on a Chinese rug as a strong wind lashes the horse chestnuts in front of your house, showering petals onto parked cars, all in the low yellowish light of late afternoon, while a woman suddenly and delicately kisses you.

It comes to you much later, in another late afternoon when the light is flat and uninteresting and the wind is doing nothing, and the horse chestnuts are about to lose their yellow leaves, marking how long it's been since you sat on the Chinese rug, that you will tell her you want to teach her a word in a language you know, and it's a single word that means *I love you*. And you'll say the word, *asinalua*.

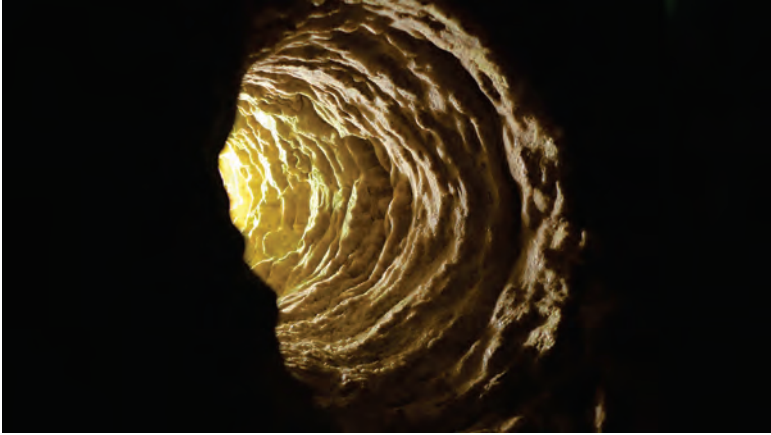
## Ruth and the Wolf *Don Mitchell*



## Seal *Angie Lee*



## This is No Cave *Laura Steele*



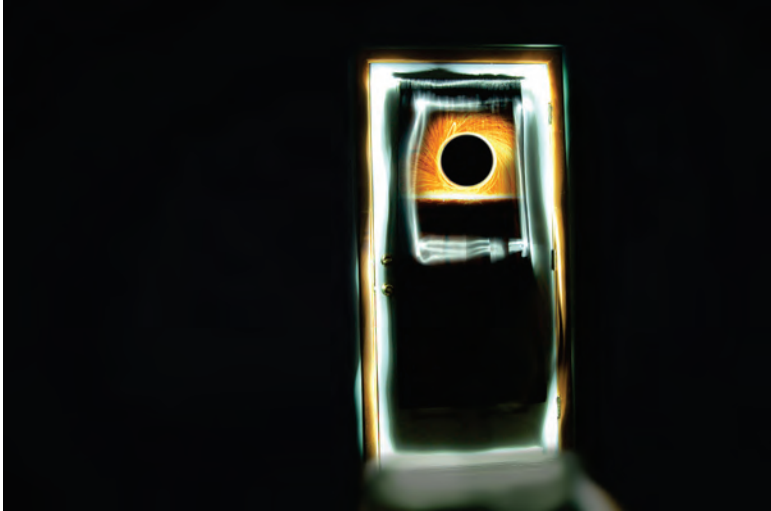
## Hamlet's Watch *Laura Steele*



## Gold Night Lights *Laura Steele*



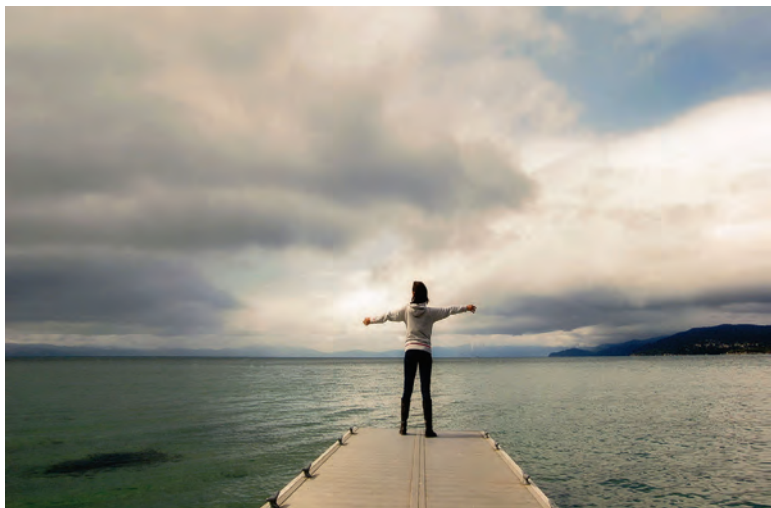
## Door of Sauron *Sara Wright*



## El Portal *Sara Wright*



## Hiroko Tahoe 1 *Holly Bayly*



## Hiroko Tahoe 2 *Holly Bayly*



# Two Kids Who Grew Up Together:

*Thomas Lord*

He's skeleton-thin,  
A concave face  
Defined by craters  
Small and large,  
Eyes like shock-white orbs with dense,  
pooled pupils.  
And he's sinewy,  
Like a piece of chewed wire.  
It seems his parents  
Kick him out once a week.  
Can't get a job  
as a clerk at a gas station.  
Been in and out'a rehab.  
Surprisingly,  
He's never done any Time.

I'm embarrassed to go out in public,  
Eyes hide behind Aviator lenses,  
Housed in cheap bent frames.  
Shaggy hair,  
Face unshaven,  
Hyper, sweaty, paranoid.  
I'm so alone in a rented bedroom,  
Bent on the tragic end of Charlestown.  
I'm a graduate,  
That passed by the skin'a my ass,  
The gray hairs on my dad's head,  
The nervous mornings when his blood pressure's up,  
The hole in his wallet,

The visions of his  
That a *Baccalaureate* cost him,  
The dreams that my education  
Pissed on with indifference.  
I'm terrified of Life,  
And I fantasize about  
The impossibilities that Hollywood sold me,  
A convenient scheme to sweep me  
From The Town that I Grew Up in.

My home town is a pretty little town,  
Huddled around a mountain,  
Voices lost in blizzards' cruel whirl.  
Ghosts of my childhood haunt the smokey autumns,  
Waltz between the pines  
To a slow Viennese piece  
Called "Memory".

You're a fucking loser  
If you stay in the town you grew up in.  
That's what this culture sold us.  
Small towns like the one I'm from  
Are sucked dry of their talent,  
As the motivated  
With means  
Flock to greater places,  
With grander names,  
Scenes renowned around the nation,  
Slang and accents of their own,  
A solid corps of those who "made it".  
And if you find yourself  
Without means  
Or without method,



Without generous parents  
Or without motivation,  
Without direction,  
Without purpose,  
Without an outlet,  
You find yourself surrounded  
By the rest of the dregs,  
The best of what's left,  
The stringy meat on the dry bones of slim pickins,  
And you're all now so dependent upon one another,  
In the mass absence  
Of your collective futures,  
The only ones left,  
The only ones that matter,  
The last link  
In a once-limitless chain.

The Common Enemy hides behind  
Silly squabbles,  
Foundations of our crack, fall, and ruin,  
Laid decades before our birth.  
We're all literally  
"goin' nowhere".  
So we cheat each other  
For quick cash  
And sell each other bad vibes,  
Cooking off the cut  
From the toxic karma  
That we grudgingly accept  
At the point of a needle,  
The crippled tip of a broken base-pipe.

## Feed Me *Gregory Rapp*

LUKAS FONE VEERS HIS OLD TRUCK off the paved state highway onto a dusty gravel driveway leading to an abandoned trailer home. He slows down the pickup a few feet away from the house, easing the truck into park. He finishes off the bottle of the convenience store's cheapest liquor. The sour mash whiskey burns as it travels its way down Lukas's gullet. The liquor's warmth gives him some comfort, something he needs at this point in life. Lukas tosses the empty bottle out the driver's side window. Empty the clear plastic bottle bounces off the gravel drive before lodging itself in a patch of tangled, browned weeds.

Lukas sits back in the driver's seat. The local radio station plays the latest rock 'n' roll and pop music hits for its afternoon programming. Nothing but the musical beats comes through Lukas's clouded, disturbed mind. The musical lyrics are gibberish, a language not deciphered by man or his machines. The musical beats are primitive songs echoing within the ancient valley's confines. The beats are programmed into the genetic code of the musicians; they are notes without a distinct origin or conclusion, an unexplainable asymptote plotted by some unnamed mathematician. Without thinking, Lukas twists the radio's metallic knob to the right, cranking up the radio's volume. The music crackles and thumps from within the inner workings of the ancient speakers, flooding the pickup's cluttered cabin with the shrill, thumping notes of heavy metal music. The deep bass rattles the windows and Lukas feels each deep note reverberate in his chest cavity.

The station's music choices begin to eat at Lukas, infuriating him and feeding the hungry beast in the basement. The piercing staccato of guitar scales and deep bass bring

forth something he has tried to suppress for some time. Anger and madness seep between the cracks of the basement he built to cage an inherited monster he trapped there long ago. With recent events replaying in his mind's eye, the monster is trying its hardest to get out. The mortared stone and concrete foundation is faltering—cracking and chipping away with each successive crash and howl of the monster. The reinforcing steel bars are bending, snapping like cheap scrap metal in the mouth of the scrapyards' backhoe grapple. He doesn't want to feed the monster. Lukas's father fed the monster. Lukas's uncle made the same mistake, ignoring all of the warning signs, laughing in the face of danger. The monster consumed both of them, gnawing at their souls like a dark, nebulous mass of chemical smoke choking out the sunlight; their internal cries for help muffled by the monster's bloodcurdling howls.

Lukas grabs the unopened plastic bottle of liquor sitting on the passenger seat. He stuffs the bottle into his coat before opening the driver's side door. Leaving the loud cacophony of dueling electric Strats, machinegun drums, and off-key lyrics, Lukas listens as the beast halts its primal advances. The monster knows that Lukas has defeated it, but only barely this time. It is a pyrrhic victory, or so the monster screams at the top of its fiendish lungs as Lukas moves away from the pickup. The cool mountain breeze slowly drowns out the monster's taunts like a gentle wash of spring melt making its way into the valley. The rustle of dried leaves hanging by their ever-faithful petioles adds to the noise, washing away the remaining primeval snarls of the monster.

A white-rust sentinel guards the cracked concrete walkway trailing to the steps of the abandoned home. Pieces of yellowing and dirty mail protrude from the sentinel's gaping mouth. Its red, L-shaped arm is pushed into the

upright position, ready to strike those who violate its space. The sentinel's pine perch has cracked and warped from the years of neglect and rough valley weather. The sentinel's riveted aluminum skin has lost its original vibrant colors.

Lukas remembers spending weeks pounding the sentinel's rivets with a ball-peen hammer and a tungsten bucking bar. He learned to cut pieces of aluminum to same perfection as a tailor who cuts silk with eye measurements and scissors. The shop teacher inspected every element of the mailbox. "Avoid large head gaps," the shop teacher would say, watching Lukas's progress and usual frustration. The old man's wide-rimmed glasses would fall to the tip of his nose as he inspected each rivet with his homemade gauge. "Hold the bucking bar perpendicular to the rivet," he would yell, before grabbing the tools to show Lukas the proper riveting procedures. "Deburr your holes! I want perfection—nothing less than that!" The Québécois shop teacher always frowned, mumbled, cursed, yelled but never offered praise for quality work. He was the master craftsman teaching reluctant apprentices the mysterious arts of metal and wood. He rarely spoke about one's quality work. That was not in his nature, nor is it in the nature of any skilled artisan to do so. A slight nod was the closest thing to affection or acceptance of one's work that the Québécois gave to his apprentices. Everyone in shop class wanted that paternal nod. Even Lukas worked until his hands were either blistered or bruised in order to earn that small, almost condescending acknowledgement of one's quality craftsmanship.

Lukas moves over the uneven gravel surface, inching closer to the sentinel. He takes each step slowly, so as to not lose his balance. The cheap alcohol in his system causes Lukas's head to spin somewhat; a wave of nausea overcomes his entire body. Knees buckle and hands slam down onto the

gravel drive. Sharp pain erupts as jagged pieces of gravel tear into the flesh of Lukas's knees and hands. Tightness in his stomach moves upward, snaking through his internal plumbing. The taste of bile, stomach acid, and hooch fills Lukas's mouth before his gag reflex forces his clenched jaws open. Warm acid mash pulses from the back of his throat onto the dusty gravel below. A few dry heaves follow but the nausea dissipates within moments.

Lukas pushes himself up from the gravel, head spinning and mouth dry. He saunters over to the mailbox, cautious of the uneven ground. When he finally makes it to his destination, Lukas is panting and sweating some. He leans against the mailbox, allowing his body to rest for a few moments. Another gentle breeze picks up, traveling down valley walls covered in ponderosa pines and haphazardly strewn weeds and local fauna. The breeze sways the tops of the pines. The sweet scent of pinesap fills the air, calming Lukas's mind and body.

Lukas grabs the collection of mail yellowed by the elements and dusty from countless dust storms. A few pieces of mail have the county's official seal printed on them, reminding Lukas to vote in the upcoming elections. Faded glossy advertisements from local businesses stick to one another like pages of old *Playboy* magazines. The remaining pieces of mail are from some obnoxious collection agency hoping to contact the family of Stephen Fone about lingering debts.

Lukas shoves the mail into the aged mailbox. He stares long and hard at the mailbox, deciding what angle of attack he should commit to. The pine pedestal is withering away from dry rot and neglect; the mailbox wobbles with each waft of mountain air. Lukas counts one, two, three—*kick*; the sentinel tumbles off the wooden pedestal before

crashing into the weeds below. He snatches up the mailbox and tosses it toward the truck. The aluminum contraption clangs as it skips and skids across the gravel before slamming into the stripped and rusty side of the pickup.

Turning his attention to the house, Lukas stops and gives the trailer home a thorough looking over. It's one of those doublewide mobile homes from the seventies, complete with wood paneling and a corrugated-steel roof. The house itself is missing half-a-dozen or so wooden panels. Many of the windows have fallen out from neglect, with a few windows shattered by the rocks from the slingshots of bored Rez kids looking to pass the time. The front door hangs by a single rusted hinge. The door swings this way and that at a crooked angle as chilly winds pass through the abandoned house. A misshapen antenna, reminding Lukas of a bronzed waffle-fry, sits atop the trailer's caving roof surrounded by faded black tires. The tires are there to keep the corrugated-steel sheeting from blowing away in the hurricane-like gusts of wind experienced in the isolated mountain valley. However, the tires have failed to keep a rogue piece of sheet metal from flying off the roof into a patch of pale spindly aspens. Dead trees and thick weeds dominate what was once the front yard, if it could even be described as that. A massive trunk of a long-dead cottonwood juts from the sea of browned and wiry weeds like a volcanic island from the choppy, thrashing waters of a violent ocean. The place looks like hell. It was never really that impressive to begin with, but the times seem to be taking a toll on the place.

The house was a place where his family spent plenty of barren Christmases, Easters, and long winters cooped-up inside. It's the only thing left from Lukas's past. His mother died in a nursing home, with screaming life-support machines and an indifferent medical staff surrounding her. Lukas's

brother, Antony, was another story. Antony joined the Corps, coming out with the usual gung-ho mentality and shaved head to boot. He died during some roadside ambush when the platoon's El-Tee got the brilliant idea to throw an incendiary grenade into a fully loaded and disabled MRAP. The old man had the good sense to get himself killed in a spat over the valley's bootleg spirits and meth production with rival cooks, distillers, and distributors. Lukas tried to live a different story. He left the Reservation behind him at seventeen, taking what he could in cold, hard cash to start his own business. He was the only one who made it out alive, which seemed to bother him less and less each day.

Lukas begins walking toward the concrete steps leading into the abandoned house. He pats himself down for the cheap Bic lighter he bought at the gas station. Sifting through pants and coat pockets, he finds the lighter in a tangle of crumpled dollar bills and plastic candy wrappers. The warm, smooth plastic sticks to his fingers as Lukas familiarizes himself to its shape and texture. The cold steel and flint at the top shock Lukas's unsuspecting fingers.

Lukas walks up the familiar concrete stairs. The concrete has seen better days as well. Gaping cracks allow weeds to percolate to the top. Slivers of concrete are scattered about the stairs. Lukas nudges past the decrepit swinging door and enters the living and dining room area of the trailer home. A massive pile of his mother's belongings dominates the space. Cuts of dry pine and oak brush surround the pile. The pungent scent of gasoline, diesel and fuel oil fills the enclosed space. The carpet's pads make a squishing sound as Lukas makes his way toward the pile.

A low-pitched growl escapes from within the bowels of the trailer home—somewhere near Lukas's old bedroom. The lighting within the house is limited to natural light, which

is fading fast as the sun inches below the crest of a nearby mesa. Lukas grabs onto the fiberglass handle of the hatchet hooked to his belt. The coolness of the handle brings a feeling of comfort and security. The growling grows louder and becomes more distinct. The sound is familiar to Lukas but he cannot place it. His heart rate begins to elevate to the point of sheer panic. The sobriety brought on by fear begins to take hold of his numbed body and mind.

*Why have you come to my dwelling?* A thunderous voice asks, but the owner of that voice is nowhere to be found. Lukas edges over to the small room between the kitchen and his old bedroom.

“What the hell do you want,” Lukas yells, ripping the hatchet from its sheath. “I thought I locked you away!”

*Did you really expect to hold me prisoner? Your father tried and your uncle after him.*

Lukas pushes himself up against the particleboard wall holding his hatchet close. Lukas keeps the Bic lighter at the ready in his free hand. The sound of the creature’s footsteps are nearly muted by the ancient shag carpet. The bedroom’s subflooring quietly creaks and moans under the creature’s great weight.

*Why are you so afraid of me? Your family has come to accept me and feed me. I am very hungry. Will you feed me? It’s quite easy—simple really.*

Lukas stops when he is within arm’s reach of the bedroom’s doorknob. The growl is now unbearable. The deep notes pound against Lukas’s chest, vibrating his lungs and causing his heart to beat irregularly. Tightness in Lukas’s chest forces his eyes to water instantly as his knees buckle from an unknown weight. Without warning, the bedroom door flies open.



*Will you feed me, Lukas? It is easy. I won't bite your hand like some untrained Rež mutt.*

A dark, electric mist surrounds Lukas, sapping him of energy and cramping his muscles. Lukas tries to hold his grip on the hatchet but he begins to feel it failing. The hatchet's bit deteriorates as the mist consumes it without effort. The hatchet's handle is then torn from Lukas's hand by the mist. It too is consumed, pulverized by the mist.

*Did you think you could kill me, Lukas?*

Lukas flicks the lighter in his hand. The cheap lighter's flame catches whatever is still left of the concoction dumped haphazardly onto the carpet nearly an hour before. Bright orange-yellow flames grow, spreading across the shag carpet like the roots of a large desert tree seeking precious sources of subterranean water. The liquid flames splash onto the neighboring walls and climb toward the yellowed ceiling, catching the mist off guard.

*What did you do?* A beastly voice howls. The mist retreats into the bedroom, hoping to outrun the flames. Lukas feels the heat of the conflagration against his skin. He tries to move but his right knee has locked. He forces himself into the old bedroom, slamming the door shut behind him. Flames inch underneath the thick wood door, attempting to claw their way into the dimly lit room.

*Do you really think the flames will kill me?*

The dark mist materializes in front of Lukas. He spots a jagged piece of wood on the floor. It's something once used for whittling by Lukas and his older brother. Dust and spider web silk cover the uneven splintery surface. Lukas snatches the piece of wood from the floor.

*That's cute. The beast growls playfully. What are you planning to do with that? Play fetch?*

Lukas forces his body to stand upright, his right knee still useless.

“I want to be left alone,” Lukas shouts.

*Your forebears said the same thing, but I don't follow commands of mere mortals. They too were reluctant servants, unwilling to feed me when I was hungry. They soon gave in when they realized I was an integral piece to their earthly fates. A greater spirit guides our predetermined paths. Our fates are a tangled web, inseparable until the very end.*

Lukas pushes all of his weight onto the uninjured knee. He strengthens his grip on the piece of wood. He sucks in the dusty, damp air into his lungs and plunges into the darkness. The monster lets out the bloodcurdling howl of a mortally wounded beast. The darkness dissipates, leaving behind dark, foul-smelling blood on the carpet. The roar of the fire begins to eat at the bedroom door. Lukas doesn't take the time to check if the monster is really dead. Instead, he squeezes his tired body out of the broken window, cutting himself on slivers of aged glass.

Lukas stumbles over to the truck and leans against the lukewarm metal of the hood. The trailer home's roof collapses as the fire consumes the supporting framework. The snap and crackle of the fire fills the air. Black tar-like smoke bellows from the holocaust inside the trailer into the azure sky above. The howls and growls of the monster no longer resonate inside his head. Lukas exhales a sigh of relief at this new development, but something inside him doesn't expect this to last.

## The meadows *Sean "Sham" Bobo*

Clouds like out of focused UFO's hang in the sky.  
My eyes walk the road home,  
we're driving on the backs of ghost.  
desert devils tumble on like weeds  
memories taste like dust.  
hallow angels perched like crows  
claws&kaws, roosters of the dead  
first light singers.  
U can't hurt what's not yours.  
u cant kill what's not real.  
innocence abandoned in a rush of endorphins  
wet paint on a old billboard drips  
promises,  
like a porcelain smile.  
viva la meadows!  
a headstone city blooms likes lilys  
from dust.  
snake eyes in a garden  
green Eden smells greed and ashes.

## **barks of the bull horn (drama on Broadway) *Sean "Sham" Bobo***

Bull dog men walk platforms towards rail reapers, sleepers  
keepers of box cart bundles.  
passenger puddles cuddle discomfort with nervous eyes.  
a heavy horn thunder chugging along  
vibrates the heel to toe soles worn down by the miles  
moving along open tracks heading east for harvest.  
highlighter hipsters chasing subterranean cools  
hold menthol fireflies off barbwire lips.  
trips like this make my sunset skin cringe  
the details pan handle too close to home.  
dust punks begging to dance in the twilight  
like mosh pit mites looking for a fight.  
im torn to write as the bull horn ignites  
the bark of a dark pens bite.  
trying to capture the street shows of Broadway  
before sober eyes of daylight.

# Thrush *Brittany Connolly*

## Monday

I FOUND MY FIRST LOVE in an old soda shop. Monday. She drank cream soda from an intricate green glass, coaxed her straw toward her with her tongue. She looked just like me, so much that I worried that I was missing a long lost twin. I thought of my bubble-snot sister and realized that my sibling and I had no resemblance. I must have beamed down from a distant planet, a sort of *Escape to Witch Mountain* deal, where my “twin” was attractive and I wanted to fuck her, despite the incestuous implications of *wanting to fuck her*. Instead, Melly, my blood-sister, is plagued with psoriasis from her forearms to her neck, her *r*’s become *n*’s when she speaks (something she never grew out of), and, not to mention, she has a drippy nose—the reality of my situation.

I approached the girl and said, “You look like me, don’t you think?”

“Shit, no,” she said, sipped her frothy fountain drink with purple lips, “You look like me.”

After three cream sodas, I gave her a shiny necklace that I slipped off my neck and onto hers. An owl charm on a long chain, *Owl You Need is Love* inscribed on the large ring around it, the only thing I had that she didn’t. I said I wanted to see what it was like to make love to myself. She kissed me hard, as if to say, “OK.”

Had she been a man, the chain would have hit me square in the face with every thrust, the dangling bird hitting my nose, my eye, as I’d squint to see him from behind all the silver. But she was soft, like me, and she kissed like me, and she smelled like me, and I knew her body like I knew my

own, and vice versa, and it was harmony, and no jewelry came barreling toward me when we were together.

I DISCOVERED THAT MY LOVE had a birthmark that looked like a wine stain in the shape of the state of Texas on her lower back, one to match mine, and I traced around the velvety skin with my fingertips and could somehow feel it on my own, raising my goosebumps, like a grapefruit's rind, from their dormant state as I touched her. I imagined our life together as I rubbed my prickled legs against hers, talked about the weekends.

## Tuesday

THE WEEKDAY GRAVEYARD shifts at BI-LO were stimulating. Only the most rare and antisocial of human beings shop during the wee hours of the morning, apart from the occasional RN or night security guard who'd attempt to get their grocery needs met during their breaks between their 14-hour rounds. I got to enjoy the insomniacs, searching for self-worth and Valerian root in Pharmacy Aisle 9.

There appears to be a sense of urgency when shopping in the middle of the night. People seem to *need* their pork medallions, tampons, Vaseline, Granny Smith apples, *Her Pleasure* condoms for the lucky lady who likes the feel of ribbed latex, paper towels, aspirin, Vagisil, baby shampoo, and Oreo cookies at 3 o'clock in the morning. Late-night shoppers love them some Oreo cookies. And their 2% milk. I get to scan none of it.

Machines were taking my job. Apart from them, our crew of three (stock boy, manager and checkout clerk) outnumbered them 3 to 2. Scully, night manager (and

Sigourney Weaver stunt double, I'd tell people), kept me on out of pity, and to keep up appearances. *Can't have these robots running the place*, she'd say. *I'd lose my job, too, if that was the case.* Two of the four self-checkout aisles had their service lights lit, with my measly station being the only human-run aisle open. Nine times out of ten, someone would choose a self-checkout aisle over me. Did I reek? Was there spinach in my teeth? Did I *offend*? I'd let the scanner hypnotize me with its *boop, boop, boop* as I listened to it from six aisles away and scraped gunk off my rotating belt that hadn't rotated in hours. *Please pick up your change from below the scanner. Thank you for shopping at BI-LO.*

Nunez was the stock-boy-man. We were on a strict last-name basis in the graveyard shift, which somehow made us feel more important, like FBI agents or doctors, saving the world one artichoke dip sale at a time. Nunez was always wasting time pissing into the mop buckets in protest before cleaning the men's room. He hated when Scully made him clean anything.

"Shit all over the walls, man," Nunez said. "Shit *ev-ry-where. Tú me estás jodiendo.*" His fly was undone and I could see his white underwear peeking out in a modest bulge behind the zipper.

"Wear gloves," I said.

"Who shits on the walls? Hand prints, man. *Shit hand prints.* On the walls." He gestured wildly.

"Boys. Girls are cleaner."

"Nah, man, girls bleed," said Nunez, scratching his eye. "I'll take shit over that any day."

"Not on the walls."

Scully eyed us from the cigarette station in the front of the store, pretended to clear her throat while stocking cartons of Virginia Slims Ultra Slim Menthols behind the

paned glass. There was a balding man browsing the herbal prostate care items in Pharmacy Aisle 9, the only customer in the store. It was 3:07AM. Tuesday.

WHEN I GOT HOME, my love was there with breakfast and a glass of White Zinfandel, and she asked me how work was as she watched me eat and painted her toenails a light peach color to compliment mine. My love stayed up all night waiting for my return, arranging my DVDs and books in alphabetical order around the apartment. The cats were fed. They napped on the bed that was beautifully turned down, with pillows arranged in all the right places and the fluffy blankets, folded, a candle burning on the bed-side table that my love said she had made. “I found the wax chips and the scent oils in the kitchen. I hope you don’t mind. It’s blueberry cobbler.”

“That’s my favorite scent, but I’m allergic to them. Blueberries.”

“Me too,” my love said. Of course she was. And we sat around the candle and sniffed and sniffed until we fell asleep in wanting.

## **Wednesday**

ON WEDNESDAY WE DRANK our frothy cream sodas à la mode, now an unspoken ritual, at the old soda shop, and what do you know, another girl that looked just like me, and my love, as well, walked through the door. She noticed us, we noticed her. She walked over, said, “You look like me, don’t you think?” and my love said back, “Shit, you look like us.”



It suddenly became confusing to the three of us, so we did the polite thing and asked her to have a drink to mull it all out.

We navel-gazed and bullshitted as we sipped fizzy ice cream from the tall green glasses, and I caught her staring at my love, and my love staring right back! I have to admit, I was a little *green*, as we did not know much about this new woman, besides the fact that she looked like us, and as I took my love's hand in mine and softly squeezed, I stared at the new girl too, and she was just as beautiful, lips equally plum, and I wonder if I'd mistake her from my love, wondered if I'd stop her if her plum lips were on me, knew that I wouldn't. Stop them.

She wrote her number on a napkin with her purple lip-gloss, slipped it across the table to my love. I memorized it.

MY LOVE HAD A PERMANENT BLUSH on her cheeks, like she was always aroused or embarrassed or seconds away from revealing a secret, but her blush was all the pinker with that crumpled number in her pocket, and it derailed me. "Why'd you keep it?" I asked her, and my love looked at me as if to say, *what, this old thing?* and tossed it behind her back into the empty trash pail. I studied her eyes. She didn't blink once.

I was a prime deceiver, and I had to wonder if my love was really just the same way. I worried about whether or not I had to be worried, and she saw it in my furrowed brow, my nail-biting and knuckle-cracking. My love played with my hair and told me not to fear. "This is right," she said, "This is just right," and bit into an apple as she hummed our favorite songs to me, chewed, then hummed, then bit, then chewed, and I did not sleep that day.

## Thursday

I USED TO BE A STOCK WOMAN, until I passed out in Bread Aisle 1 topping off the cinnamon bagels. The smell was too sickly, too sweet. It knocked me out, but I miss being the stock woman. I used to have something to do from 11PM-7AM, some real responsibility. Now I just polished the rotating belts out of habit and rearranged the chewing gum packs, tick tacks, Ferrero Rochers, read the tabloids, *someone popped out another one, she named her baby what? Celebrities.*

“THIS THING SETS THE MACHINES OFF,” the man raised the hook that replaced his left hand, gave it a little shake before he put it back in his coat pocket. Then they were on the belt, items: Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Oreos, 2% milk, Yuengling Light.

“Alligator bite,” he said. “Ripped it clean off.”

I didn’t ask. He kept talking. “They killed the big guy and gutted him, found my hand. They said they could sew it back on but the stomach acid did a number on it. Cooked it like Ceviche.”

“Did it hurt?” I finally voiced my interest.

“Probably hurt a fuckin’ lot,” he said. “Can’t remember. So, probably.”

“That’ll be \$10.24.” He paid with his good hand.

“Later, alligator.” He hung the bag over his hook and waved it in the air without looking back.

“Did it *hurt*?” Nunez mocked. “¿Qué tipa pendeja!”

“The dude flashed me his hook. I was caught off guard, give me a break.”

“I’ll give you a break alright. You’ll need one after all of this.” He gestured to his crotch, humped the air.

"You're, like, sixteen," I said. "Have you ever even made a girl orgasm?" I asked Nunez. "I mean, really, seen her 'O' face and everything."

"When it comes to Nunez, the ladies come first." He winked. "*Double entendre.*"

"How do you know, though?"

"Ain't it obvious, man? The moans, oh, the moans. A guy can tell."

"How do you know it isn't faked?"

Scully chimed in, "The ol' fakeroo. Classic."

"Yeah, so, how do you know?" I asked.

"I just know, a'ight? The ladies don't fake it with me. They don't got to."

"When I was in college," Scully started, "I was seeing this girl, Penny. She was freckled everywhere—I mean everywhere—anyway, long story short, I never knew if she was enjoying herself. She carried on like some Japanese schoolgirl in a porno pop-up. With guys, you can at least tell. There's evidence. I had a girl friend that was paranoid. She'd check the rubbers after he'd... you know."

"Nasty," Nunez said. "Garbage digging for jizz? Tha's nasty." He picked up his mop, "I've got better things to do than listen to two chiquititas gripe about getting off." He walked toward the bathrooms, puffed up like a peacock, prepared to spray the floors gold.

"I'm not buyin' it," Scully said. "He's a virgin." She went back to her perch at the cigarette stand, which was elevated maybe a foot or two above the rest of the store's floor, counted the money in the cash register. I thought about my love. *How could I tell?*

I DOUBLED UP ON THE LAVENDER sea-salts and lilac suds during my Thursday bath. I wanted the bubbles to

envelop me, hide my hands and their deeds from feline onlookers as they sat and peered from the toilet seat. My love watched TV from the rec room, lines from *American Beauty* traveled through the hallway. *There's a lot about me that you don't know, Mr. Smarty Man. I have plenty of joy in my life.* My love wouldn't join me in the tub. I touched myself, bitter, imagined the new girl with her plum lips and felt the satiny-slick wash away from my fingertips as it mixed with the water. I came in silence. I heard my love moan from the couch. The cats spied.

That night I shaved my legs and kept them to myself.

## Friday

THE PHONE CALL WAS BRIEF. "Pick me up, six o'clock," she said. We drove an hour to the beach. The cold front chilled the February air and we could barely smell the sea salt. We warmed our lungs with smoke from stale clove cigarettes that had been in my trunk since I quit last winter, and we stayed in the car and basked in the scent and taste of Christmas, the burn of mulled apple cider. Her hands were soft. Softer than mine. She traced the freckles on my arm and asked me what my fears were. I asked her why she needed to know, and she said our fears are what make us human. "I need to know you're real," she said.

I told her that I thought about my parents dying, waking up one morning and them suddenly not being there, not rousing when I shook and shook their bodies, their cold skin. It was a fantasy I had, a recurring dream. An inevitability. That was the scariest part. It was going to happen.

She held her cigarette and watched the black paper smolder and shrink down to the filter, said she didn't have parents, that they had been gone for a long time. Not dead or anything, just off in Somoa, Tunga, New Zealand. She said they never called, said she stopped getting postcards on her birthday three years ago. *Dead to me*, she said.

"I was engaged once," I said.

"To a man?" she asked. I smiled.

"This is something he would have done. This isn't me."

"Who are you?" she asked. I told her I didn't know.

"Stick out your tongue," she said. I asked why, she said, "Just do it." And as I stuck it out, she licked my tongue. "I wanted to see what it felt like," she said.

"Reptilian." I said. "A fingerprint." We headed back at eight o'clock.

I tasted blueberries.

I WENT THROUGH A 25-CENT PACK of Juicy Fruit gum, but the taste of blueberries wouldn't leave my mouth. I bought a toothbrush and some toothpaste from Toiletry Aisle 11 and excused myself to the ladies' room. It smelled like piss, bleach and Nunez. I brushed my tongue until it was sore and noticed a tiny red bump in the middle beginning to swell, like taste buds sometimes do when a person is ill or when teeth can't tell the difference between tongue and food. Hives, I thought, and waited for my throat to close in anaphylactic shock, but it didn't, and I rinsed with a strong, sea-foam colored mouthwash that tasted like spearmint.

Still, blueberries.

I sucked on my teeth, chewed my cheeks, tried to eat away the flavor of fruit, hoped that the iron taste of the blood from my bitten lips would mask it, but it didn't, and the

bump on my tongue inflated, becoming the size of a small marble by the end of my 8-hour shift. At home, I iced the bites, my bloated tongue, and the only flavor I could sense was *cold*.

## Saturday

I WOKE UP CHOKING ON LITTLE LEAVES. They had sprouted from the sore as I slept, grown out of the red crack in my tongue that was swollen and thick and heavy in my mouth, so much that it took effort to move as it seemed fixed there, behind my teeth, in a puddle of sweetened drool.

I was afraid to pluck them out, afraid I'd swallow one, afraid I'd choke to death on this vegetation in my mouth and knew, without a doubt, that I couldn't go to work. I called my mom first. She had kept a garden in the front lawn, regardless of the fact that she focused mostly on vegetables, and was great at killing plants.

"Mom," I said, calm, slow, "what does it mean when a swub starts *growing* on your tongue?"

"Melly?" She said, "What on earth are you talking about?"

"No, mom, it's me."

"Don't make fun of your sister. That isn't nice."

"Thewe's someting on my tongue, *growing*."

"Is it a tumor? Oh god, sweetie. Go to the doctor. I had a friend who had a tongue tumor, they had to cut skin from her arms and legs just to fill in the hole. And then she died."

"Mom, it's not a tumow. It's like... a twee."

She paused for a moment. “Are you smoking the grass again?”

“Mom, thewe is a twee on my tongue. What. Do. I. Do?”

“I’m not qualified to help you in the event that you start sprouting weeds. And you won’t stop sprouting them until you stop smoking them. Call a doctor. Love you, bye. Bingo night, don’t call back.”

I wasn’t brave enough to look on WebMD for the answer. I’ve been thrust into panic attacks over a simple toenail ache before, the Internet telling me it was a blood clot and that all hope was lost and that I’d be dead within hours. I flicked the plant on my tongue. There was no way I could do my job with that thing in my mouth.

“Scully,” I said, heard the self-scanner yakking in the distance, “I’m thick. I think I have thwush.”

“What?”

“THWUSH.”

“*Thrush?*”

“Yetthh.”

“Gross. Where have you been putting your mouth?”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“Well,” Scully sighed, “I mean, we will survive if you don’t come in. And I was going to have you clean the bathrooms tonight, too.” I heard Nunez yell *fuck!* from what sounded like Pet Food Aisle 14. “Nunez says get well soon.” *Feel better, frittata*, he yelled.

“Give me a few days,” I said.

“Eat some yogurt,” Scully said.

THE WET GREEN WEED stood about an inch tall and tickled the roof of my mouth. When I stuck out my tongue, it brushed the tip of my nose. I examined it in the mirror. It

appeared to be a miniature mint bush or young marijuana sprout, and the newborn leaves looked serrated, menacing. To my relief, they weren't sharp. My scissors were.

I worried that cutting the thing off of me would end in profuse bleeding and a horrible, strange death that would make headlines in all the papers, as if the roots of the thing were using my lifeblood to grow and its stem, a large green vein. But I risked it, and it snipped right off without a single twinge of pain, right down to the stump of it, and a little green nubbin was all that was left. I figured it would fall off like a scab in a couple of days and my tongue would sink down to its normal size and my speech would return to normal.

I LISTENED TO THE COCTEAU TWINS' *Carolyn's Fingers* on vinyl, watched the single white cat hair on the record twirl 'round and 'round, and I could feel it growing, the bud on my tongue getting taller, sprouting leaves, light purple beads. They plumped up, turned violet, then blue, berries.

The doorbell rang. I thought of my love, thought of the new girl, and the thing grew, still. And my love stood at my door with a mouth full of green and she asked me what had happened and I asked her, "Did you ever call that number?" And we sat together in the living room as the cats played in the vines that overflowed from our mouths onto the shag carpet, batted around fruit that fell to the floor.

"Is it my fault?" she asked. "Did I do this to you?" And I said no, that she hadn't, that I had asked for it.

We soaked our tongues in weed killer and it seemed to do the trick. The bushes on our tongues shriveled, dried up, fell off like old warts.



## Sunday

IT WASN'T ENOUGH, though, as we rested, facing each other on the queen bed with the cats. We felt an itch, a collective swelling in our bones, like each joint was pulling away from us, a sort of growing pain that seemed to burn. We watched as ivy sprouted from our fingertips, entwined around us as if we were a structure, an old cobblestone shack on an abandoned lot, a foundation built on guilt. We were wrapped in lianas. Chartreuse shoots tied our ankles and bound our knees, and we were joined to each other as the plants overthrew us.

We met each other's eyes before the florae grew out from within them, and her gaze was trusting, like she accepted this fate. I wonder if my gaze reflected the same sentiment, knew it didn't. I knew my eyes were scared, sorry.

She leaned into me, tasted my lips and the weeds shot out through my throat, and into hers, and the bushy vines braided around each other, and we were a tree, a tree thick and lush, rooted within us there, on that bed. And the fruit that dropped from the greenest of leaves was blue.

# On a hillside, by a gravestone

*Peter George*

You can imagine the crossroads—  
for me, it's gravel and dust.  
Row bounding row,  
green and unending,  
believing but failing to trust.

Turn to the left cross the bridge  
over water, moving, but slowly,  
by homes gently falling.  
Over decades unchanging—  
passed churches brushed white.  
And you can keep going—  
but it all ends in night.

Turn to the right and the small town  
is waiting.  
Every face is every face and  
every wave is expected.  
Each greeting well-practiced,  
Polished,  
Reflected.

But me,  
I go at the horizon  
and spit that shifting gravel  
with great and growing anger  
back to the heart  
of where I started.  
Knowing that all choices return me

to that same old crossroad,  
that coming together of this way or that.

But then I could not imagine,  
and neither I guess could you,  
that these roads are not the problem.  
That it's vision, not engines,  
that constrain all our futures.

Futures:

Multiple outcomes not bounded  
by math, not known, by rote,  
not told by your father,  
not lost on your mother  
not hinted at on any Sunday.  
Not proposed,  
promised,  
or pressing.

Lifting out of that early morning  
mist, ghosting over the water  
brown but shallow, which always  
knows, it goes to the sea.

So wake up early—and alone,  
and look where no one's looking.

Who imagined covered bridges?  
Planks protecting planks from water  
both below and flowing,  
and above and falling.  
A lot of protection allowing

you to move forward  
when all around you conspires,  
by tradition thick as gravity,  
by expectations weighted by  
everyone you've ever known.  
All of them whispering:  
"Why don't you stay?  
Why would you go  
when everything near, dear and quilted  
is waiting to keep you in comfort, warmly embraced forever?"  
Or at least until you take your place,  
upon the hill,  
above the crossroad.  
Neatly tucked to sleep,  
beneath,  
a stone with your name,  
etched.  
And waiting for endless days  
and rains  
and dusts  
and winds  
to wear you away, like  
Rebekah Ashton Miller  
Wife  
b. 1838  
d. 1871.

## Good Sell-By Dates and Bad Decisions *Katie Bickley*

REALLY, EVEN BEFORE EVERYTHING HAPPENED, I should have known that going to Allsup's at three a.m. was a bad idea. As my ideas go, it was maybe not the worst, but in retrospect, Elizabeth probably could have done without milk for another, say, six hours or so.

I'm sure you're just clamoring to know what happened.

Let's start with a little explanation.

I'm in college, and my roommate, Elizabeth, is kind of a peach. Not in a bad way necessarily, but she definitely has a few qualities that I would not, given my druthers, pick in a roommate. Like her thing about milk. I mean, you knew this was going to come back to the milk, right? Elizabeth just absolutely loves it. It's all she drinks. Which would be fine, but I have this really severe dairy allergy where I literally cannot touch the stuff, or touch anything that has recently had dairy on it. Elizabeth, bless her, is normally pretty careful about it. Except one day she was making herself some tea with milk and didn't tell me she used my spoon to stir some sugar into her dairy-infested beverage and then I used the spoon and there was this whole E.R. trip which you don't really want to know about—and anyway, the result of that is she promised not to keep milk in our mini-fridge anymore.

Anyway, even though she was the one who volunteered to make our space a dairy-free zone, the day before the Allsup's incident, she was getting sort of hostile about it. Even though it actually wasn't my fault. She hadn't had milk in the room for about a month, and let's be honest, I don't remember exactly what she said, but it was some kind

of insult to my dairy-allergic character, and we had this huge fight. Over milk.

I'm just going to repeat that again, to make sure you understand how stupid this is.

Over *milk*.

Normally, I am great at not feeling bad about these things, except it was Elizabeth's birthday the next day, so when I finished my homework, at about two, I had this great idea: I was going to go buy a gallon of milk and sneak it back into our mini-fridge and surprise her. Maybe I could get a little ribbon or something to tie around the lid. Allsup's wasn't far away at all. I'd be gone fifteen minutes, tops.

Elizabeth is one of those people who could sleep through a hurricane, so it wasn't exactly that hard to leave our room without waking her up. The problems started once I got to Allsup's.

Problem #1: Because, as Elizabeth said during our fight, I am a terrible and unobservant and overall inconsiderate human being, I didn't know what kind of milk Elizabeth drank. Whole? Skim? Two percent? This was the smallest of my concerns, in case you're wondering.

Problem #2: After I had selected whole milk, I discovered that there was absolutely no one else in the store. No cashiers, even. Sure, the lights were all on, and there was a vehicle outside so I knew there was somebody around, but no one was there to let me buy milk that I would never drink and was actually a little nervous about even purchasing.

Problem #3: So I was standing there at the counter for several minutes, right, hoping that Elizabeth wouldn't wake up while I was gone, and there was still nobody there at all. But behind the counter was a door that was slightly open, which I figured could possibly lead to a break room or something.

Also, at this point, I was kind of exhausted. Just throwing that in there.

Instead of doing the sane thing, which of course would have been to put the milk back in its case and go home and forget the whole thing, I went around the counter and peered in the doorway, which is when I heard the door at the front of Allsup's open, and also when I heard, "Freeze."

I froze, mostly, but I also threw my hands in the air like I had seen people on TV do when they were arrested, and I also looked over my shoulder to see who was talking to me. So basically I didn't freeze at all.

It was this guy in a black ski mask, with a gun in his jacket pocket, pointing at me. How cliché can you get?

Now, looking back, I sort of wonder what the guy thought I was doing exactly, holding a gallon of milk above my head like that. Then, I was terrified.

"This," said the guy, "is a hold up."

I was not processing anything very well by this point, and my first thought was, well, good, because I'm already *holding up* this milk, and then I started laughing, you know, the kind of laugh that comes out completely involuntarily when you're really, really tired. It was like that. He probably thought I was crazy.

"What's funny?" he demanded.

I managed to pull myself together enough to say, "Nothing," and then, "Can I put my hands down?"

"Um, yeah, I guess," said the guy. "I have a gun," he added, even though I could pretty clearly tell that, since he was pointing it at me.

"Yeah," I said. "Okay." I lowered my hands and also my milk. "Can I help you?"

"Give me the money out of the cash register," he said.

“I don’t know how.”

He stopped for a minute, and we looked at each other, and suddenly I realized that he must have thought I worked there. Or maybe not. Surely most Allsup’s employees at least can manage the cash register.

“I could go get the manager,” I said. “I mean, I guess. I don’t know who the manager is, here. Or where I would find them.”

He was just staring at me, which I took, in my deluded state, as a cue to keep talking.

“I think the cash register is probably, like, bolted down to the counter or something, or I would just give you that. Also, I think it would be pretty hard to not be noticed, if anybody saw you.” I squinted at him. To tell the truth, there was something familiar about this guy. I guess it had to have been his eyes, because what else was there for me to recognize?

“Hey, wait,” I said, “are you in my Econ class?”

The guy jerked his ski mask down lower over his face, which mostly just stretched the eye holes. “What? No.”

“Yeah,” I said, “I think you are. You sit two rows in front of me, right?”

“I am *robbing* this *store*,” said the guy, who was definitely from my Econ class.

“Dr. Montoya was sure on a tear the other day, wasn’t she?” I don’t even have an excuse. I was so tired. In my defense, the danger of the situation seemed less great since he took his hand out of his pocket and the “gun” shape disappeared.

“I—”

“I sometimes don’t take very good notes in Econ,” I said. I was still holding my milk.



“You can borrow—oh, goddamn it.” He took off his mask.

Problem #4: the door opened again, while Econ-class-attendee-by-day, Allsup’s-robber-by-night guy fixed his hair.

“Is your name Howard?” I said, hoping that whoever had just come in was an employee, here to relieve me of my position behind the counter, which somehow seemed kind of permanent suddenly. “Henry? I feel like it’s something with an H.”

“Matthew,” he said.

“Oh! Right. I was close.”

“Carrie?”

I looked up with dread in my heart to see Elizabeth standing in the doorway of this godforsaken Allsup’s, staring at me as I held my gallon of milk and had a friendly conversation with my ski-mask-clad, gun-toting classmate.

At the moment, the full level of absurdity didn’t really sink in. It since has, I assure you. Anyway, I decided to act like everything was normal. “Hey, Liz,” I said. “What are you doing here?”

“Getting milk. I promise I’ll be careful with it, I just couldn’t take it anymore. Why are you standing behind the counter?” She glanced over at Matthew, and whispered, “And who is this?”

Where to begin? I decided to start with the simplest part of it all.

“This is Matthew,” I said. “He’s in my Econ class.”

## Through the Rain *Lake Baker*

Descending upon us come the storms of life  
While our pain feels like the stab of a knife;  
And the clouds gather with a sound of thunder  
To inspire our fear and pull us under.  
And though we run far and wide,  
The darkness comes over us like a crashing tide.  
At last our hope is lost and out we cry,  
But to us a friendly voice draws nigh.  
It helps us out of the dark and into the day,  
Back onto our lighted way.  
But there is nothing for the Voice to gain,  
Except to pull us through the rain.

# Notes of a Dirty Old Genre

*D. Shawn Hunton*

Yab Yum, *Dharma Bums*  
Freely jaunting *On the Road*,  
*Howling* mad *Wild Boys*.

*Naked Lunch* aside,  
Atop *Big Sur*, *Visions of...*  
Wine confused Buddha

Beat generation  
failed to deliver dharma.  
Better luck next life.

## Contributor Biographies

RESA ALBOHER is a founding editor of *St. Petersburg Review*, a staff writer for *Rewire Me* and *Mango Salute*, has work published or forthcoming in *Blackheart Magazine*, *Scapegoat Review*, *The Edison Literary Review*, *The Breath of Parted Lips: Voices from the Frost Place, Volume 2*, *DMQ Review*, *Maintenant 5*, *Have a NYC 2*, *Radar Productions* and *El Portal*, holds an MFA from University of Tampa, and is working on fiction and essays collections based on two decades of living in Russia.

LAKE BAKER is from Albuquerque, New Mexico and is studying Public Relations at Eastern New Mexico University. He has a passion for learning about various societies and their impact on history.

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SEAN "SHAM" BOBO is a poet and MC based in Long Beach, California. Raised in California's Inland Empire, his works are an often psychedelic and romantic blend of poetry and hip-hop. Check out his hip-hop band the West Coast Avengers at [westcoastavengers.bandcamp.com](http://westcoastavengers.bandcamp.com) or his own work at [soundcloud.com/seanbobo](http://soundcloud.com/seanbobo).

KAYLEEN BURDINE is a junior at ENMU, studying English and Theatre. Writing is her favorite hobby. She hopes to one day make a living editing novels and writing her own.

BRITTANY NICOLE CONNOLLY is currently pursuing her MFA at the University of Tampa, while making ASMR videos on the side ([youtube.com/brittanyasmr](https://youtube.com/brittanyasmr)). She is 25 years old and a lover of all things creative, bizarre, and fabulist. She has had her work appear in *The Alarmist*, *Sheepshead Review*, and *Quarter After Eight*.

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ANGIE LEE is an artist and writer living in Los Angeles. Raised on the top of a water tower in Los Alamos, New Mexico, Angie holds an MFA from Cal Arts and has exhibited in both the U.S. and Europe. She blogs at [Moonquake.org](http://Moonquake.org), tweets @fromaged, and believes the moon is made of cheese.

TOM LORD is a confused kid in his mid-twenties. He graduated from Arizona State University, with a BA in English (literature). Presently, Tom resides in Somerville, MA, and is seeking candidacy in several graduate schools around the US, with the hopes of working towards a Masters in Public Policy. He writes to keep himself out of jail and the madhouse, and will continue honing the craft.

DON MITCHELL is a writer and ecological anthropologist, born and raised in Hilo, Hawai'i (where he graduated from a public high school -- in Hawai'i, that's important). He has published academic works, poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and both published and exhibited photographs. He recently published a story collection, *A Red Woman Was Crying*, and is working on a novel set on Bougainville Island, Papua New Guinea, where he did fieldwork. He lives happily in Hilo with his college girlfriend, a poet and yoga teacher, whom he lost for forty years but, lucky for him, finally found.

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BRIAN PETKASH was born in Cleveland, Ohio. A graduate from the University of Tampa with an MFA in creative writing, Brian is both a teacher of high school English and a marketing professional. He lives in Tampa, Florida.

GREGORY RAPP is originally from southern Colorado, where he spent his days writing, prospecting for gold, and getting lost in the San Juan National Forest. He operates a small magazine called *Republic of Letters*, while working on a MA in English literature.

JORDAN RUNYAN is an English major/Creative Writing minor at Eastern New Mexico University. She has always wanted to get her work published. Now, having achieved that dream, she has hopes to learn French and eventually meet Tom Hiddleston.

WENDEL SLOAN is the director of Media Relations at Eastern New Mexico University, and also writes a weekly column which appears on Sundays in the *Clavis News-Journal* and *Portales News-Tribune*.

LAURA W. STEELE is an archaeology graduate student at ENMU who enjoys skiing, motorcycles, good books, margaritas, and the beach. Some of her favorite photographers include Ansel Adams, Dorothy Lange, and Edward Weston. In her spare time, she likes to sit and contemplate life with her rabbit Solzhenitsyn and make trips to her homeland of California.

BETH COX THOMAS currently lives and writes in southern California, but was born and raised in Portales. She has also lived in Las Cruces, Albuquerque, and Santa Fe. Her work has appeared in online and print venues including *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, *Contrary Magazine*, *PANK Magazine*, *Keyhole Magazine*, *Corium Magazine*, and *SmokeLong Quarterly*.

MANUEL RAUL TREVIZO is a Mexican American born in Albuquerque New Mexico. He is a Spanish Major endorsed in Secondary Education with a Minor in ESL. He is a Christian and therefore hopes to provoke deep thought and inquiring about the true meaning of life through his poetry.

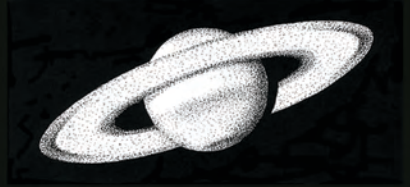
SARA WRIGHT is a senior at ENMU, majoring in Animation and minoring in Music. Apart from animating and playing the French horn, she is also a photographer and ceramicist. In the future she hopes to make a living selling and sharing her art.











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