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# COLORADO REVIEW

37.2 summer 2010

\$9.50

Volume 37  
number 2

## COLORADO REVIEW

summer 2010



**CR**

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*Colorado Review* is published  
three times a year by  
The Center for Literary Publishing  
Department of English  
9105 Campus Delivery  
Colorado State University  
Fort Collins, Colorado 80523-9105  
Telephone: (970) 491-5449  
E-mail: [creview@colostate.edu](mailto:creview@colostate.edu)  
<http://coloradoreview.colostate.edu>

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Cover photograph by Carmen Neumeier.  
Printed in the United States by IBT.  
Indexed by *Humanities International Complete*.

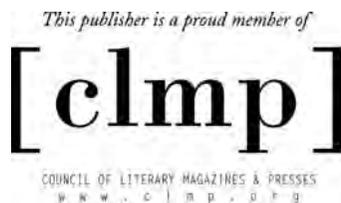
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**Subscription Services:** W. T. Cox, EBSCO, Ex Libris, Harrassowitz, and Swets.

**Distribution:** *Colorado Review* is distributed to the trade by Ingram Periodicals, 1226 Heil Quaker Blvd., LaVergne, TN 37086 and by Kent News Company, 1402 Avenue B, Scottsbluff, NE 69361.

ISSN: 1046-3348



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# CONTENTS



	I	<i>Editors' Page</i>
<b>FICTION</b>	3	<b>CANDICE MORROW</b> <i>Touch</i>
	17	<b>MELISSA LAMBERT</b> <i>When the Rains Came</i>
	26	<b>MARTIN COZZA</b> <i>Pennsylvania Polka</i>
<b>NONFICTION</b>	46	<b>RACHEL JACKSON</b> <i>Hellcat Court</i>
	56	<b>ANIS SHIVANI</b> <i>An Interview with Dave Eggers about Zeitoun</i>
	68	<b>BRIAN KEVIN</b> <i>Songs Primarily in the Key of Life</i>
<b>POETRY</b>	102	<b>AMARANTH BORSUK</b> <i>Ablution</i>
	103	<b>TARA BRAY</b> <i>Another Green Heron Hunched in a Poem Lacking</i>
	105	<b>LILY BROWN</b> <i>(I Savor the Sway of Formulas, the Reversal of Origins)</i> <i>(A Channel of Transmission, and a Medium of Reception)</i>
	107	<b>ARDA COLLINS</b> 153 154 155

- 113 | **BRETT DEFRIES & Z. CODY LEE**  
*Testimony 9*  
*Testimony 10*
- 118 | **KATE GREENSTREET**  
*from "Called"*
- 121 | **MICHELLE HICKS**  
*Bellaghy*
- 122 | **NANCY KUHL**  
*txt*  
*Fray*
- 124 | **SUSAN MAXWELL**  
*Opiate Shore Made to Stand Past*  
*Survivalist*
- 126 | **DEREK MONG**  
*Litany*  
*The Sun Is Our Ablest Meteorologist*
- 130 | **TREY MOODY & JOSHUA WARE**  
*The Second Movement Meant a Book of Bodies*  
*and Warped Vinyl Spinning*  
*The Third Movement Meant: "Be Lake/ or Fog/*  
*We Saw, Our Heads"*  
*The Fourth Movement Meant the Materials*  
*Became Available*  
*The Fifth Movement Meant There Was Nothing*  
*Left to Build So We Built Ourselves*
- 134 | **DANIEL POPPICK**  
*Keratoconus Alba*  
*To Arrive with Cartoon Devotions*
- 136 | **KEVIN PRUFER**  
*Immortality Lecture*  
*From inside the Avalanche*
- 140 | **ELIZABETH ROBINSON**  
*Queen of Pentacles*  
*Seven of Cups*  
*Eight of Pentacles*  
*Querent*  
*La Papesse*
- 145 | **KYLE SCHLESINGER**  
*Dark Glasses*

- 152 | **BJ SOLOY**  
*Bea Arthur, Dead @ Eighty-Six*  
*The Sung Dynasty*
- 154 | **MAREN VESPIA**  
*Pantry Meditation*  
*Grow Up Sequoia*  
*Trains, Like Our Bodies, Find Relief*  
*Underground*
- 157 | **CATHERINE WAGNER**  
*Benefits of Metaphor*
- 158 | **RACHEL ZUCKER**  
*Past Performance Based on Future Results*  
*The End of Cause and Effect*  
*When We Were Rich*
- BOOK NOTES** 162 | *Irish Girl*  
 by Tim Johnston  
 reviewed by Jennifer Wisner Kelly
- 165 | *The Same River Twice:*  
*A Boatman's Journey Home*  
 by Michael D. Burke  
 reviewed by Kelsey L. Bennett
- 168 | *The Tangled Line*  
 by Tod Marshall  
*Union!*  
 by Ish Klein  
 reviewed by Darcie Dennigan
- 172 | *Petals of Zero Petals of One*  
 by Andrew Zawacki  
 reviewed by Julie Carr
- 174 | *The Book of Props*  
 by Wayne Miller  
 reviewed by Justin Sider
- 177 | *Captive Voices: New and Selected Poems*  
 by Eleanor Ross Taylor  
 reviewed by Kevin Prufer
- • •
- 183 | *Contributor Notes*



## EDITORS' PAGE

In the summer's heat, in the season of cross-country road trips, three-day-weekend visits, and family reunions, we sometimes desire a little distance from one another, a bit of space, a spot of shade. And yet the thread running through this issue's prose is one of human connection. In Candice Morrow's "Touch," a couple and a teenaged girl attempt, fail, and try again at creating connections with one another in an orbit around the couple's infant daughter. The characters in Martin Cozza's filmically perspected and aptly titled "Pennsylvania Polka" move toward each other, then away from and back again, in a heartbreaking kind of dance. Melissa Lambert, winner of the Association of Writers and Writing Programs' 2009-10 Intro Journals Award, paints a rich portrait of a family's nine children cleaving together as things come apart amid third-world poverty and despair. In Rachel Jackson's essay "Hellcat Court," the author, a "white, middle-class navy wife," explores the push and pull of living in community with others. "Songs Primarily in the Key of Life," an essay by Brian Kevin, tenderly re-examines the story of the Peoples Temple, a group whose members were seeking a connection with others, through the critical review of a little-known album recorded by the cult in 1973. And in Anis Shivani's interview with Dave Eggers, we hear about Eggers' experience in writing *Zeitoun*, a book that details the arrest and imprisonment of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, an innocent man caught up in the chaos of Hurricane Katrina, a time when the New Orleans community came apart and the normal fabric of human connections was shredded.

Embrace those who seek out your company this summer, and then find a cool, quiet spot to enjoy this issue.

—SG

S ometime around the year 1879, Emily Dickinson wrote the following lines, in pencil, on a scrap of stationery:

To see the Summer Sky  
Is Poetry, though never in a book it lie—  
True Poems flee—

Meteorologically, summer is marked first by the lengthening day and then by the diminishing day. So many of the poems in this issue strive to exist in the fleeting moment where night and day are on the same plane, where together, they shed some light darkness on one another. The sun(set) is, as Arda Collins insists, “coming and coming away.” In the face of this brevity, these poems present us with a sense of urgency to work, often collaboratively, in the exact location and time where we find ourselves. To be “in the sun,” as Lily Brown succinctly puts it, is to be “worked by the sun.” May the heat these poems generate, radiate.

—SASHA STEENSEN

## TOUCH

John and Lilly arrived home from a disastrous date, each quietly surprised at how peaceful their house appeared from the outside. John stalled the sedan at the mailbox to admire the moon's illumination of delicate icicles hanging from the window boxes. The iron loveseat Lilly had insisted they move from their Texas porch was covered in snow, the seat's back a coiling pattern of perfect white hearts. The view's only stain was the living room window, a long, reflective rectangle that would have been beautiful if not covered in bars.

The previous owner installed the bars, and from the beginning Lilly had said they "screamed prison." She insisted John remove them by summer. To her, they kept things in. To John, they kept things out. He couldn't say precisely what things, as there was little threat of robbery in Hardin. But when he left for work each morning, he imagined the thick fog that rolled down from the mountains circling his house, looking for entry. The fog was everything he wished to keep from their six-month-old daughter. It was doubt and pettiness and betrayal. Its edges were green with the world's greed. He knew it was silly to imagine morally destructive moisture attacking tiny Sylvia, collecting in her lungs and maturing her from the inside out. Even more ridiculous was thinking a bit of metal could stop the process. Yet each time their home began to shrink in his rearview mirror, he felt relieved knowing the bars were on the windows.

"Not a snowflake out of place," John said. Right now, Sylvia would be sleeping in the nursery at the back of the house, and their sitter, Teeny, would be draped tiredly over the crib's edge, humming a lullaby in the soft glow of a Cinderella night-light.

"Can we go inside?" Lilly said. "Tonight, maybe?"

He parked in the driveway, the garage being full of their before-baby lives. Workout equipment, hunting equipment, sewing equipment—all crammed into a damp, one-car space. At dinner, he'd joked to Lilly that the only equipment they needed

now was a pacifier and two sets of earplugs. Funny, he thought, but Lilly's smile had wilted, her eyes becoming fixed to her water glass. That was during the appetizer; by the time the entrees arrived, the air was completely thickened at their table—a familiar, insufferable thick. Cutting his steak was a challenge, the knife working through the added weight of forced conversation.

“Thank you for a lovely evening,” Lilly said as he switched the engine off. The words ballooned from her mouth in small clouds of mist, and John couldn't determine the amount of sarcasm in them. The evening was anything but lovely, which she knew—right? If so, why pretend now, and if not pretending, why resort to passive cruelty?

“You're welcome.” He tried mimicking her tone and immediately regretted it. Lilly slammed her door and stomped through snow to the house's side entrance where she shivered with arms crossed, waiting for him to bring the keys.

He had insisted they reinstate date-night, though they were forced to spend it in one of the town's four restaurants or in the small (only two screens) theater. Hardin, Montana, was not Houston, Texas. Still, they'd enjoyed several small successes. Two weeks ago they strolled down the short main street, holding hands and laughing while a dog got his face stuck in a yogurt cup. Three weeks before that, they saw a romantic comedy, and Lilly put her hand on his thigh while the heroine stumbled into a kiss with the hero. Tonight John was not so lucky.

What happened to the Lilly who curled against him in bed and whispered, “You're my BFF,” while trying to twirl his untwirlable hair? Her body was plump and soft before and during her pregnancy with Sylvia. Her hands—“earth hands” she called them—were thick but gentle, and he often imagined their movements over him like those of small woodland creatures, nipping here, petting there. He wondered if it was her body or his memory of her body that was sweet and plentiful. Did it even matter? They'd left her behind in Houston, a city where, if questioned, any one of the couple's friends would've said, “Cockroaches are to nuclear war as John and Lilly are to marriage. If anyone can make it . . .”

She'd dropped sixty pounds since the move, claiming it was breast-feeding that burned her calories. He suspected depres-

sion. He could feel her bones when he hugged her, and she didn't wear her wedding ring because it needed to be resized, downsized. Now, watching her thin body illuminated in the headlights and shaking in the cold, he realized two things. First, he was taking longer than necessary to get out of the car—it *was* satisfying to see her tremble. And second, he missed her so much his cheeks burned like he might begin to weep. He pretended to rummage through the console, taking several steady-ing breaths before joining her.

Inside, Teeny lay stretched out on the living room couch with Sylvia nursing at her breast. Actually, the sitter didn't feel comfortable with "breast," dismissing the word soon after thinking it. "Boob," sure. "Tit" or "titty," why not? Her mother had *breasts*. Her father probably thought about *breasts*. Another wrong word: "nursing." Not because it was gross like "breasts" but because she couldn't, in fact, produce milk.

Each time she phantom-nursed, the baby's small mouth worked hard for the first few minutes, a relentless pulling and sucking that caused Teeny's eyes to squeeze in pain. Although the small gums became less frantic, the sensation was radically different from foreplay with her boyfriend, Adrian. She didn't particularly like either experience. She couldn't understand Adrian's fascination with what she saw as two great lumps of fat over her heart, and she didn't have any friends to ask on account of none of them were having sex. It seemed he was actually trying to *please* her. When he told her this, she wanted to say, *Well, please stop*. Instead and without knowing why, she took off her shirt and guided his head right between her boobs. Afterward she felt even more confused and a little ashamed. She punished herself for both her actions and the resulting feelings by ignoring his calls or forcing herself to text him mean messages like *cant u suc dic and die alredy?*

At least there wasn't any confusion with the baby. They both knew the score—it would hurt Teeny but keep Sylvia, who often refused bottles, calm and quiet. It would allow Teeny to watch TV.

Not that there was anything good on tonight. Two hours of a *Paranormal Activity* marathon ended with the host repeating what he'd said in the previous three episodes: A few scares, folks, but nothing conclusive. Teeny flipped off the host with

both hands. The station's next and even less promising show: *A History of Fabric Dyes*.

She squinted at photos of haggard women punching fabric into tubs with their muscular arms and imagined her own skin permanently stained blue by the television's cool light. If that did happen, what would her boyfriend think? Kinky? Ugly? When Adrian licked her, would she taste like blueberries? He hated blueberries. Sweet and tart, he once said, wonderfully sweet and tart—then swallow and the mouth is dry. He even hated the idea of blueberries, the ruse of taste and aftertaste. Blueberries, he said, are small, round metaphors for substance addiction. And he should know, he said.

Teeny shifted the baby's warm body so it wouldn't roll off her chest and leaned over to search for the remote. The carpet was sticky, almost crunchy in spots. She foraged between cushions. No remote, but was that sand? And that a coin? A wad of hair? Gently tapping the baby's flat nose with each word, Teeny said, "Your parents aren't so clean."

A voice on TV: . . . *discovered mauve in 1856 while searching for a cure for malaria.*

"Listen up," Teeny said. "I read about malaria in school and it ain't for babies."

*It was a brilliant fuchsia color but faded easily, so our idea of mauve is not what the appearance of the original color was.*

"Well, what do you know."

Lilly and John entered quietly through the side door, flipping on lights as they moved from the back den to the kitchen. Despite what John thought, Lilly blamed only herself for her misery. When the factory in Hardin asked the factory in Houston for a poultry production manager, she pushed John to take the position. She said, "It's an adventure. We do adventure."

Once settled in the isolated town, she didn't complain but masked her regret with high-pitched phone calls to former co-workers and girlfriends. "You can visit when the baby is born," she told them. "Then I'll join a mommy circle—those actually exist, right? And anyway, I don't want to teach again until Sylvia is at least three. You've got to be present for the formative years, don't you think?" She babbled about fresh mountain air and the prospect of learning to ski and the Saint Bernards they'd raise

to drag their children's sleds, and wouldn't that be darling? Secretly, though, she hoped the factory would burn down, so they could return to their old lives. Montana would become a fond memory, a small detour, a glittering glitch in their system.

Then John suggested they buy the large, barely affordable two-story down the street from their rental. She saw the cost and size as two heavy anchors in their move. The first they would have to pay off or sell (not likely in this town, in this economy). The second was something far worse, something they would have to fill with possessions and more children. John didn't seem to mind either, though, and was giddy upon closing, running circles through the house and kissing her cheek with every pass. Without considering how odd it sounded, she turned to the realtor and said, "But adventures don't have five bedrooms. Adventures are tents with expandable flaps."

The realtor wasn't fazed. How many women had he consoled in his career? He patted her shoulder and replied, "You can't raise a baby in a tent."

In the kitchen, the dishes were washed and put away, the counters clean. A bottle of her breast milk bobbed in a saucepan on the stove, and they could faintly hear the noise from the TV, but no wailing child. John ran a finger across the table's polished edge—a challenge rising and resulting in one arched eyebrow and the slight, triumphant turn at the corners of his mouth. *He* had chosen the girl, Teeny, while Lilly had wanted to wait until they could find someone older. The disagreement became one of their silent battles, and she lost more ground each week they returned to a safe, quiet daughter and cleaner home.

Lilly turned down the long hall, and John shrugged off his coat. He was still trying to work out what her date-night attitude *meant*—might as well pick a lock with a spoonful of jelly, he thought—when he heard her shrieking in the living room.

To her credit, Lilly didn't begin by yanking Sylvia off Teeny's breast. Instead, she placed her thumb against the teenager's nipple to gently break the suction. For this brief second, all three were connected. Lilly could feel Teeny's warm skin and Sylvia's wet mouth. Both lazily and happily looked up at Lilly, who realized she would never again have breasts like Teeny's. Never again that solid, buoyant flesh. Lilly's nipples were changed,

chapped and another shape, as if the baby had sucked them to the fit of her particular mouth. In this second, with such trust in both their expressions, Lilly changed tactics and ripped Sylvia from the girl's skinny arms.

Teeny's head turned, as if slapped, and she quickly pulled her shirt down. Lilly wanted to hit the girl, wanted to beat her. How dare she? *How dare she.* "The *fuck* you think you're doing?" Lilly said.

John hadn't heard such emotion, of any variety, in Lilly's voice for months. He arrived in the living room to see her standing in the corner, holding their daughter as if facing a pack of rabid dogs, her face ghoulish in the TV's blue glow. He flipped a switch, and the lights popped on.

Teeny winced; she felt disoriented and a little dizzy.

"Are you laughing?" Lilly hissed.

Was I? thought Teeny.

"What's going on?" John asked.

"Do you think this is funny?" Lilly said. The girl stared at the floor, one hand to her forehead as if shading her eyes, and she was giggling. "Do you think this is funny?" The baby cried into Lilly's sweater, and she cupped the tiny head against her shoulder, stroking—somewhat frantically—the soft, blonde wisps of hair. "I should call the police."

"What?" John said. "What about the police?" He picked up the remote—the end peeking out from beneath the couch—and turned off the television.

"She was . . ." Lilly gasped and flattened her palm against the baby's back, patting at a fluttering speed. It was eerie to watch her hand move quickly while her mouth delivered the words in a slow, steely manner. "She was." *Pat, pat, pat.* "Breast-feeding." *Pat, pat.* "Our daughter."

Teeny stood and adjusted her bra strap, reaching into the shoulder of her shirt and jerking the red band up. "Look, I wasn't breast-feeding anything." She placed her hands at her hips and shifted her weight to one leg, a move she'd seen her own mother make countless times—usually facing Teeny's father. "I wasn't hurting anything either."

Hiccups interrupted the baby's high breaths. Teeny closed her eyes and clenched her fists. Come on, she thought, come on baby, I thought you and me were friends. How could such a small thing make such a big noise?

Lilly turned and took the baby from the room. Teeny kept her eyes shut and felt the woman's shoulder brush her own. She waited until the stairs creaked and an upstairs door shut before she opened her eyes to look at John.

He couldn't believe her tan. Regardless of winter, her lanky body was baked a golden brown, and he wondered about her monthly tanning bed expenses. Her socks were mismatched. The left, a knitted rainbow, was sutured at the toe with a thick, red thread. The right, a gray dress sock, hung past her toes and sagged at her heel. Her pose didn't suit the rainbow sock, and the gray was too serious for the lime green streak in her yellow hair. It was a pose too severe for the Poky Little Puppy on her tight T-shirt.

"You can't . . ." he faltered. Her expression said she was unwilling, unable even, to accept any words that might follow *can't*. "You can't do that."

Her pose collapsed. She stood a fallen tent, as hunched and drained as a sixteen-year-old can appear. She kept her head down while he picked up the pillows that had fallen off the couch. He felt guilty, yet pleasantly powerful, for producing this effect in another human being. Lilly never gave like this.

Teeny slumped into the couch, removed the gray sock, and held it out to him. "I borrowed it from the laundry room." The sock was warm in his hand and slightly damp from sweat. Her toenails were painted a glossy black. She reached beneath the sofa and produced a pair of slippers. They were blue, with little threads sticking out and patches of blue sequins. "Mine got wet doing the dishes." She reached into one slipper and pulled out a wadded rainbow sock, straightened it and held it up for John to see. She pointed at the dark, wet spot. "No one wants to wear wet socks, you know?"

John turned, allowing his car keys to rattle in his palm.

Teeny smiled behind him, and thinking about malaria and the color mauve, she said, "I love these shoes for what they used to be. Not for what they are."

Lilly's anger toward the girl quickly melted into the same depression she'd been feeling for months. No, not melted into, but rather *on top* of the depression, like a hot sealant that would now cool and harden over her sadness. This is what they don't tell you, Lilly thought as she finished changing Sylvia's diaper.

They don't tell you about the emptiness. She pressed a damp cloth to her daughter's eyelids and cheeks, which were swollen and pink from her fit. They didn't tell Lilly that she would miss having Sylvia inside her, miss the kicks like bubbles breaking beneath her skin. They didn't say that for weeks after giving birth Lilly would start conversations with her belly only to realize she was talking to her intestines. That four months later, she would still find her hands stroking her tummy, sometimes from fondness and sometimes from a desire to comfort the baby who cried so much.

Everybody had a different bit of advice, a preferable brand of diaper-rash ointment. But no one, not her midwife, nurses, or friends—not even her own mother—told her how rocking the baby would cause her to feel overwhelmingly hollow. The homesickness a house feels for its vacationing owner. Except, Sylvia would never come back. Every day she grew a bit bigger; it seemed not in pounds but in distance from her mother. Eventually Lilly would be looking at her daughter, a tall, confident woman, and see only a speck of what was once happily all hers.

With the tip of her finger, Lilly wiped a bead of spit from her daughter's lip and placed her in the crib. The weight of such a small body was still impressive. John, who tried to teach Lilly the signs of quality poultry, liked to say that a good bird is heavy for its size. He would place a packaged chicken in each of her hands. "This one," he'd say, moving one of her wrists up and down, "is full of sweet juice."

She sat in the chair next to the crib, absently cooing and rocking, attempting to soothe herself as much as Sylvia. Outside the window was the neighbor's window and when their lights went out, Lilly turned on the baby monitor and went to bed. There she convinced herself that she wasn't, in fact, to blame for the move. Or for anything else. John was the culprit in choosing the town, the house, the babysitter. He was clearly wrong in their arguments over money and time—both, it suddenly seemed, he spent carelessly and away from his wife and daughter. She hugged his pillow to her chest, breathing in his deodorant and sweat. Had she always hated that smell, his smell?

"You weren't supposed to be back this early." Teeny pulled on the gray sock and slipped her feet into the worn slippers.

“We couldn’t decide on a movie.” John didn’t think the breast-feeding was the catastrophe Lilly seemed to, but why didn’t Teeny show even the tiniest bit of embarrassment?

“Do you have a headache?” Teeny asked.

“No.” He took his hand from where it rubbed his temple. Yes. He had a real goddamn headache, and he didn’t know how much to credit Lilly or the girl in front of him. They should have gotten a college student.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

Teeny approached him, squinting at his head.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” John said, even though she hadn’t said anything else. He felt angry that she’d made him flustered. Let the girl explain *herself*. “Why’d you do it?”

“I saw some aspirin in the kitchen.”

“I’m taking you home.”

“It’s above the sink.” She lifted her head so that her chin was nearly level with his shoulder. “Look,” she said, her neck at quite the angle. “It was the only way I could shut her up.”

He understood this—how the crying could grate. Was it fair to expect a sixteen-year-old to handle what he, at thirty, could not? Sometimes he went to work on Saturdays only to sleep in his office chair. “Do you want a ride?” he asked her more politely.

Though Teeny was relieved—her parents told her to get a ride home, and they’d be grumpy if she didn’t push for one—she shrugged in what she figured was a cool manner. In the kitchen, she poured the water from the pan and balanced it on top of the dishes in the rack.

“You don’t have to do that now,” John said.

She ignored him and poured the milk out of the bottle. “Probably not good anymore, you think?”

In the car, she rubbed her hands and pressed them against the vents. “You ever play freeze-out?” She licked a finger and held it up between them. “Definitely cold enough. Roll down this window and *brrrrr*.” She told John how Adrian liked to play the game, but she always lost on account of her low tolerance for cold.

“Yes, I’ve played.” John said. “No, I don’t want to.”

“Didn’t say I wanted to.” Teeny sank back in the passenger’s

seat, slipped a foot from its shoe and held it up to the vent. “Fucking cold, though.”

They sat in silence for several minutes, each thinking about the word “fucking” and how odd it sounded in Teeny’s mouth. For John, it was as if the Poky Little Puppy on her T-shirt had caught a cockroach and was showing it off on his tongue. John tried picturing Sylvia at sixteen, worked to see her developing body and hear her expanding vocabulary, but he could only make out the same baby body, the same baby lips. He didn’t want to hear her voice and tried to turn off the image before his head supplied it. It came regardless, first as Teeny’s, high and lazy. Then as Lilly’s, gentle and with the thick rasp she used to converse with in bed. He absently clicked on the turn signal and then clicked it off.

Teeny thought about Adrian and how he’d taught her to properly say the word “fucking.” When she’d initially said it in front of him, he laughed at her. They were driving in his truck, and he said she didn’t know the real meaning of the word. She rolled down the window, her face and armpits sweating, and said she sure as fuck did. He laughed harder and said that was why he loved her: for her sense of humor. This was confusing because she wasn’t joking; she was lying and was pretty sure she knew the difference.

“You’re funny,” he said. “That’s why I’m cool with dating a virgin.”

How embarrassing. She said she sure as fuck wasn’t no fucking virgin, thank you very fucking much.

Soon after, she lost her virginity to him in that truck. It was a school night, and they’d driven to the grocery store where he worked. He parked near the dumpster in the back and went in for a case of beer. Half an hour later she was sitting on his lap without her panties on, watching three cats jump in and out of the garbage. They were skinny with matted fur, and one was missing an ear. Still, they appeared to be the happiest creatures alive, and she thought, *It must be fish day.*

When her friends asked about it, the sex, she told the truth: it was mediocre, almost boring. They said, “Bummer” and “Do you think he’s just, you know, bad at it?” She pondered this for a while and finally told them no, it wasn’t him; it was sex. Sex was boring, and they’d all have to live with it like they lived with second-period algebra.

Teeny became aware of the silence and of John's tense posture almost folded over the steering wheel. She wondered how long she'd been thinking—her teachers were always mad at her for thinking in class. "You know I wouldn't say the f-word around the baby." She wiggled her toes at the vent. "I'm a good babysitter."

John didn't know what to say and decided on a noncommittal shrug.

"Really, I watch my cousins all the time, and they're perfectly fine."

"Okay."

"If you don't believe me, you can ask my aunt."

"I don't think my wife would be happy if you watched for us again." Why did he put it off onto Lilly? Shouldn't he too be upset with Teeny's irresponsible behavior? And wasn't she tossing him even further from Lilly's good graces? After all, Lilly would blame him for this girl's weirdness, for choosing her as a babysitter.

"Yeah, some people just aren't as open-minded, you know?" she said. Adrian prized open-mindedness.

"Well, maybe I can talk to her." This was a complete lie. He knew he'd go home and assure Lilly that Teeny would never return. "No promises though."

"I could use the money." Maybe she was wrong about this guy? Maybe he wasn't as stuffy as she'd thought—just trying to be adult-like with a wife and baby. After all, he gave her a sock so she wouldn't have to wear the wet one now tucked into her jean pocket, a cold dampness against her hip. Still, she couldn't imagine her boyfriend ever turning out to be like this man. Well, she could. She could dream up anything, but why would she want to dream up that? Maybe this man, years ago, had been something like Adrian—a thought more manageable. Had he taught his wife, that crabby, tired woman, how to say the word "fuck?" They screwed, obviously; Sylvia was proof. But how was it? Lilly seemed so contained that Teeny had difficulty getting the woman's clothes off in her mind. Did men actually like that sort of present, so severely wrapped? Did Teeny give Adrian too much? That led to a question she'd had on her mind for several weeks. She turned to John and asked, "Do guys lose respect if you do anal with them?"

John swerved on the empty residential street.

“My mom said it’s practically a sin, and a lady in *Cosmo* said a guy won’t look at you the same.”

He could feel her presence more acutely, her weight within the car. A child, really, twirling the green stripe in her hair with boney fingers. He realized he’d never been more aware of his own asshole. They were almost to her house. If he kept his mouth shut, he would never have to say anything. He turned off the heater.

“It’s still cold in here.”

He turned the heater back on.

Maybe he wasn’t as open-minded as Teeny had thought. Maybe it was true; men did prefer women like Lilly. Well, now she knew, and it wasn’t as if she could have asked her father—her parents were always getting mad at her for asking questions. “I’d never talk like that in front of the baby,” she again reassured John.

He tapped on the steering wheel and pumped the accelerator.

“Up on the right. That one.” She pointed to a ranch-style with a trimmed hedge in front. “But, really, I am a good babysitter.”

He laughed, feeling the passenger-side tires bump up over the curb as he slowed the car.

“You nearly hit our mailbox.”

With his foot on the brake, he unfastened his seatbelt and pulled his wallet from his back pocket. “Two hours?” He put a fifty—too much—in her palm.

“You’re in a hurry.”

He poked the red button at her hip. Her seatbelt slid across her body, snagging for a second at her chest.

She slipped both feet into her shoes and opened the door. “See you later then.”

“Sure. Later.”

John didn’t turn on the lights at home; instead he felt his way from one moonlit patch of room to the next. Climbing the stairs with heavy hands on each banister, he thought of when he’d completely botched the proposal, stammering and dropping the ring. Lilly seemed to forgive, or at least overlook it, wrapping herself around him, nuzzling his neck. Once, nearing the end of her third trimester, he found her in the kitchen, licking her

fingers over a pan of raw beef. She clung to him then, too, trying to get closer than her pregnant belly would allow.

In the dark stairway, such happy moments seemed like ghosts upon their young marriage. He knew relationships took unanticipated dips and turns. He knew she couldn't always be throwing her arms around him. But what if they had reached an end? Maybe not an end of them but an end of them as they'd once been.

He felt his way to their bedroom and sat next to her, rubbing her shoulder in small circles. "Honey? Lilly?"

"What do you want?"

It was obvious she'd been waiting for him, festering anger. Fine, she was pissed. He'd give her that, perfectly fine. Fine. She was right about the babysitter, and he was ready to tell her so. "I made it absolutely clear she wouldn't be coming back," he said. She sighed, and in the darkness, he wanted to press his hand against her mouth to have an extra sense of her, to feel her breathing. "Mind if I turn on the lamp?" he asked.

"I think I need to leave you. I think I need to go back." Lilly rolled her shoulder beneath him, resisting his gripping fingers. She felt his weight move to the foot of the bed. Once there, it shifted, all toward the edge, and she imagined him sitting bent over with his head between his knees. Preparing for a crash.

"You mean it?" he said, because he couldn't think of something else.

A silence hung between them stronger than anything they'd ever felt together, punctured only by his rising sobs. She'd never realized how the tears of a grown man were more moving than those of a little girl. Finally, she said, "No." It didn't sound convincing to either of them.

He took off his shoes, got under the covers, and pulled her body into him. From the bedside table, the monitor released the gentle whimper of a baby's dreams.

Teeny also lay in bed, scratching that sucked nipple. It itched. Perhaps she was allergic to baby spit. Didn't matter, though; Adrian never wanted children. Why bring another person into this fucked-up world? He said it was the worst thing you could ever do for anyone.

All right, only pets then. A dog to start and then a cat and

then a pig and then a goat. Maybe two goats. She could be a hoarder in her old age, and this seemed the most marvelous idea she'd ever had. On her front porch, she would stand with broom in hand, the bristles frayed and useless for anything other than beating animal control officers. She'd defend her right to care for as many creatures as she fancied. The wind would tangle her white hair in knots, and when she cackled, her parrots would mimic her so that the whole house would be laughing.

This thought led Teeny to count the number of birdcages in her future bedroom, which led to the precise kinds of birds she'd house in them and methods for mating. Fifteen minutes later, she arrived at a memory of a baby sparrow chirping in the front yard of her childhood home.

"Don't touch it or it will smell like you," advised her mother, who looked not at Teeny but at the house opposite their own. Even then, Teeny understood that her mother wasn't really looking at the neighbor's house but past it, past anything material.

Teeny held her palms up the way she was taught to do after washing her hands for dinner.

"Doesn't matter," said her mother. "The mama will know you touched it. She won't want it back."

Teeny, whose name was actually Sarah, lay in bed for another forty-five minutes, horrified that Lilly might not want her daughter anymore. It would start with small neglects like waiting an extra minute to change a diaper or get out of bed in the middle of the night. Then one day Sylvia would learn to walk and pass from room to room as a haunting. She would wave her small hands in front of Lilly's face, the shadows of her fingers passing over her mother's eyes. Lilly would carelessly flit the hands away.

Such thoughts led Teeny to cry into her pillow, and eventually, with great humility, she got out of bed and lay on the floor. When pressing her face against the cold wood was not punishment enough, she stood, stripped bare, raised the windowpane, and leaned her body out over the sill. She stretched herself until she could feel every inch.

## WHEN THE RAINS CAME

*Winner of the 2009–10 AWP Intro Journals Project,  
selected by Crystal Wilkinson*

It was hot the night before the storm, which is not a difficult thing to recall. It always got hot right before it rained: not the bone-warming heat of the dry season, but a damp, encompassing heat, thick as a teakettle's steam. When the air was hot like that—wavering right before our eyes—the buzzards would start to circle high in the piercing blue sky. We never knew if they were waiting for creatures to die from the heat or from the floods that were surely coming. Those buzzards could predict the rain better than any weatherman, and we knew that when the black shapes took wing, like dark angels, the rains would come soon after.

That night, our mother came home as daylight was fading. She arrived tired from a long day cleaning an office building in the city, her face greenish from the artificial light of her hour-long bus ride home. She brought with her a bag of *jabuticaba* fruit that she had picked off a tree on her way home. The dark glossy fruits were slick in our palms, gelatinous in our mouths. We joked that they tasted like eyeballs, but we ate them greedily. As we passed the bag around, our mother stood in the little kitchen and made rice. She carved lines into the onion, left to right then top to bottom, and sliced off little cubes to fry with the rice in oil before she added the water.

Our father wasn't home yet, which was not unusual. He was working late, we knew, standing in the dim light pasting red bricks together—or perhaps he had stopped to drink a few glasses of musty alcohol at the bar down the street where two card tables were set up in the courtyard and a single lantern swayed from a tree branch. He was seldom home in time to eat dinner with us or watch us go to sleep.

We only half-noticed his absence; it was not unusual. Our mother was worrying about the roof, which had taken a beating during a rainstorm a few days before. She was afraid the roof would cave in when it rained again, that the whole house would

be destroyed. We asked if our father would come home to repair the roof before the rains came.

Our mother said, “*Se Deus quiser*,” which meant, we knew, that things would happen as God intended them to happen. The people of our street used these three words to explain everything. If there was a death, if someone lost their job, if a house caught on fire, if a bicycle broke, if there were droughts or floods or hailstorms—everything that happened on our street was God’s will.

“*Se Deus quiser*, the man will come home tonight,” murmured our mother, trying to reassure herself as her knife sawed back and forth across the onion. “He knows that there will be rain tomorrow.”

We ate dinner, the nine of us and our mother. The kitchen was too small for us to eat together inside, so we scooped up bowls of rice and ate them, squatting in the dusty courtyard behind the house while the chickens pecked around our feet. There were only three small rooms in the house: the cramped kitchen and two bedrooms full, floor to ceiling, with bunk beds and graying mattresses. The house had a single decoration: a frayed picture of a blue-eyed Jesus taped to a wall in the bedroom. In the courtyard there was space for all of our elbows as we ate, and sometimes fragrant breezes blew through, rustling the leaves of the mango tree that sheltered the courtyard.

After dinner, when it was fully dark, we argued over our sleeping places. Our house was a maze of beds, and at night we twisted and turned on the mattresses while the smallest children slept with their feet nuzzled in the crook of our mother’s neck. We took turns sleeping on the top bunks, coveting them on dry nights when the breeze blew gentle and cool through the holes in the roof, and dreading them during the rainy season when water streamed through the holes. When the rain came and chased away the heat, we slept with our faces buried in the pillows, feeling our hair become stiff with cold, strange fingernails sliding up and down our spines. That particular night, none of us wanted to be resting near the hole-filled roof if the rains came in the middle of the night.

We slept with the lullaby of crickets playing in our ears. We slept with the sound of a weak wind brushing the edges of the house. We slept in a haze of heat, tossing our limbs about like boats on a restless sea.

On the morning of the storm, we awoke to hear birds chirping half-heartedly, lethargic in the sticky heat. Our father was not home. “He came home last night,” said our mother, “for a few hours, but then he left again. I reminded him about the roof.”

We arose, bumping elbows and knees against one another, and we drifted into the courtyard to wash our faces and bodies with the water that flowed from the pump and faucet. For breakfast, we ate little loaves of bread, wishing we had some milk or butter to go with them. We threw stones at the mango tree and shared a few overripe mangoes, fighting to be the ones who sucked the last velvety strands of fruit off the mango pits.

The first hour of the day passed like any other morning in our house—crowded, loud, and familiar. We were all born in that little house, all nine of us, and we had lived there all our lives; our mother’s mattress still bore copper stains from the most recent births. We just kept coming, she said. (Our parents were Catholic, and too poor, anyway, to afford birth control.)

After we were washed and dressed and fed, after our mother had touched each of our foreheads and whispered a blessing, we walked out the back door and across the courtyard. Our house had no front door, and was set so close to the house next door that our father could not stand between the two houses without his shoulders getting stuck. To get into or out of our own house, we had to pass through this narrow corridor—we kids could run straight through it, but the adults had to turn sideways to fit. We spilled out of the corridor into the street. Our mother followed us, wearing her gray cleaning dress. She eyed the sky and announced that the day’s storm would be a big one. She pointed to the black shapes in the sky—the buzzards. “If you see your father today,” she said, “please remind him about the roof.” Then she went back inside and tied the chickens to the doorframe inside the house so that they wouldn’t kill themselves by tipping their heads back and trying to drink the rainwater when the rains came.

We walked up the hill, heading to school. Our house was built on this hill; our house was tilted. It leaned sideways, threatening to tip onto the house next door. The whole neighborhood was a single row of houses set on a dirt road that went downhill, paused in a valley large enough for three houses to sit on level ground, then went back uphill again. When the weather was

dry, the road puckered and dust rose up out of the potholes like mist, but when the rains came the road became a river of thick, roiling mud. Behind the houses and out ahead of us, green fields stretched into the distance. Our house was surrounded by a great sea of grass waving in the breeze, shelter to shiny beetles and furry animals. When the sun rose and set, its light dripped pink flames onto the tips of the grass.

Our school was at the top of the hill, crouched back in the grasses like a hiding animal. A golden *ipê* tree shaded the school like a giant umbrella. Our mother always said we were lucky; this school did not charge fees to register, so we all went, all nine of us in our time. Some of the other kids on the street had to go to work instead of school, but our mother wouldn't let us get jobs until we were twelve, until, she liked to say, our heads were already full and our hearts caught on fire.

We were all in the school's single classroom, and our teacher wore glasses and billowing skirts. She rode the bus in from the city. The adults on our road said she was different from us, that she was city folk, but she was kind and knelt in the dust when she spoke to the little ones, and we liked her. She had planted a little vegetable garden behind the school, and she taught us to plant and harvest. We all learned how to carve furrows into the rich earth, then press seeds into the soil, firmly and gently. We learned to carry heavy watering cans, though they clanked against our knees with every step, and to rain down water onto the tender leaves; our teacher used to say that for plants, water was like mercy from heaven.

When the vegetables in the garden grew ripe, our teacher helped us harvest them in buckets and we ate them for our lunches, which she cooked early in the mornings before we had arrived for class. The school was equipped with a closet-sized kitchen, and sometimes when we arrived early we found her with her sleeves rolled up to her elbows, stirring a pot of beans while a cloud of steam rose up around her. Her hands always smelled of garlic after she spent her mornings mincing fat cloves of it into our lunches. She didn't have to go to such trouble, we knew, but she did it for us; she was a good teacher and she loved us. Noontimes, we stained our mouths with beets and wrapped long strands of kale around our tongues.

On the day of the storm—by now we were well into the

rainy season, and the road was thick with hardening clay, and the fields were perpetually puddled with glistening water—we were sitting in our classroom with the windows open. We were drowsy, all of us, even the teacher, and she had set us to the task of copying letters because the heat made her too tired to stand in front of us and write on the blackboard.

We were fanning our faces and armpits with sheets of paper when we first heard the noise: a moaning, deep and low and otherworldly. It was not human. Our imaginations went wild with the stories our parents had told us to keep us from misbehaving. Was it a ghost, a specter? Was it one of the *bichos do mato* that parted the grasses and snatched up disobedient children with their snapping jaws?

Our teacher crossed to the window, her heels echoing on the wooden floor, and stood on her tiptoes as she looked out. The room was so silent we could hear her skirt brushing against her calves. She turned to us and said, “I will go look,” as she walked out the door. We rushed to the windows and watched as she followed the dirt road along the side of the schoolhouse and out into the grasses. She turned a corner and disappeared behind the tall grass, but a moment later she came back, running. Her purple skirt caught the wind and threatened to rise like a kite, and she put both of her hands on her thighs to hold it down as she ran.

We rushed back to our seats, and when she came in she was out of breath. “Come, please,” she said. “It is a cow. I need you to tell me who the cow belongs to.”

We ran out of the schoolroom, a herd of children, our flip-flops beating against the clay. When we came around the curve, we saw what our teacher had seen. Ten meters off the road, a pond-sized tract of earth had sunk down with the weight of the rain, making a pool of thick mud. There, in the center of the mud-pool, a young calf was bellowing, crying out in the same unearthly moan we had heard back in the classroom. He was stuck up to his midsection in mud, and there was a patch of blood on the center of his back, flashing red amidst the brown fur and sludge. We watched, aghast, as the calf struggled weakly.

“All right,” said the teacher. “Have any of you seen this cow before? Do you know which farmer he belongs to?”

We did not answer her right away, for as she was speaking

a buzzard had come out of the sky, flapping its wings to slow itself, and perched upon the calf's back, near the red patch. As the buzzard lowered its beak to the wound, we realized that the blood on the calf had been drawn by this bird, who had begun its meal before the meal was even dead.

There was a rumbling farther down the road. The earth shook and a truck came into view, then it left the road and shuddered down into the grass, near the mud. The sound of the truck startled the buzzard, who flew into a nearby tree. A man in a plaid shirt stepped out of the truck and waved unenthusiastically. "It's my cow," he said, and there was an unusual combination of sadness and urgency in his movements. His voice was soft; we strained to hear him.

"I'm so sorry," said our teacher, raising her voice so that the man could hear her. "We're—well, we didn't just come to look at the cow. I thought we might be able to help."

"It's all right," said the man in the plaid shirt. "I brought my truck to pull it out."

My teacher nodded, then turned to us and said, "Back to class, then." But we knew she didn't really want to go back to class. She wanted to see what would happen to the calf, so when we did not move, she didn't either.

The man removed a thick rope from the back of his truck and wound it around his shoulder. He laid a broad piece of wood across the mud, then put his arms out for balance, stepped onto the plank, and walked toward the calf, whose moans were becoming increasingly helpless. The calf did not seem to recognize that his salvation was near, balanced on that old piece of wood. When the man reached the calf, he stuck his arms deep into the mud and looped the rope around the calf's midsection. With effort, he pulled his arms out of the mud; we could hear the sucking sound, the persistence of the mud defending its conquest. The man crossed the plank back to the truck and tied the other end of the rope to the knob at the back of the truck. He got in the cab, and there was a screeching as he pushed the gas pedal.

We didn't take our eyes off the calf. We heard a horrible slurping noise and a sudden panicked lowing, and for a moment we were sure that the calf would be torn in half right before our eyes—two awful chunks of meat floating in that muddy buzzard's stew—but then we saw that the calf was moving, part-

ing the mud. As the truck edged forward, the calf was dragged through the mud, leaving a chocolaty wake behind him. He was nearly free of the mud when the buzzard made one last attempt, diving out of the tree. But the calf, encouraged by the rope that held him to the truck, snapped his jaws at the buzzard and fixed him with a look of great tenacity, and the buzzard retreated to the sky.

When the calf was pulled onto dry land, he didn't have the strength to stand. It was like watching a net of dead fish pulled across the ground. The farmer slammed the truck into park and ran around to where the calf lay. He touched the calf's cheek with the tenderness of a lover, then ran his hands across the calf's ribs and ankles and back, feeling for injuries. Then he lifted the calf into his arms and placed it in the bed of the truck.

Later that afternoon, it began to rain just as we were leaving school for the day. We stood in the middle of the road and danced in the rain, feeling triumphant because the calf was still alive and the rain had banished the buzzards to the far ends of the earth. At first the rain was merciful, a cloudburst of cool relief, but after less than a minute it became something entirely different. It became a torrent. The entire earth, road to sky, was solid with rain. We could not see our hands in front of our faces. We could not hear each other's voices over the roaring of the sheets of rain. We rushed home, slipping and falling into sudden and unpredictable mud puddles, relying only on our memories to find the place where we believed our house to be. Although none of us said it out loud, we were all thinking that this was no ordinary rainstorm, and that if the roof stayed intact, it would be a miracle.

When we found the house, we waded through the corridor, where the water was up to our waists. The roof was still there, sagging under the downpour, but the house was filled with water. We saw that the chickens, still tied to the doorframe, had drowned; their thin necks strained to hold onto the feathery weight of their bodies as the water churned around them. The garbage bag had ripped apart, and the onion skins and orange peels clung to our bodies as we waded past. We trudged through the kitchen, the water around our knees, plastic cups and cockroaches floating all around us. We trudged into the

rooms, where the mattresses were untethered and floating, and the many holes in the ceiling dripped great drops, a milder kind of rain, leaving ripples in the lake of the living room. We looked up at the roof: still there. It was cold and there was no dry place to sit, but still we thought how much worse it could be if the roof gave way. We had been trained to always think that it could be worse.

Our mother was still at work. We climbed onto the highest bunk beds, watching as the water rose higher and listening to the rain clang and pound on the roof. We tried to search for our mother's wooden rosary, but it had been carried away by the flood. We did not talk. We wouldn't have been able to hear each other speaking anyway, because the water, hurled from the sky, was beating against the holey metal roof with a relentless rhythm. Instead of talking, we were thinking, and in our silence we were all cursing our father for failing to patch the holes in the roof, for his selfishness, for his constant absence. We sat close together, shivering, trying to stay warm against each other because all of the blankets were soaked through.

Evening came, then darkness, and the rain gradually began to slow, but still our mother did not come home. We had no dinner that night. We finally fell asleep, a tangle of eighteen legs and eighteen arms, faces resting on chests, breath against breath.

By morning, the rain had stopped completely. We awoke to a clattering in the courtyard and before we could shimmy off the bed, we saw our mother's face floating on the water. The house was flooded to her chest, and she struggled through the heavy water, pushing garbage and wooden spoons out of her way as she came. When she saw us there, on top of the bunk beds, she let out one long moan. She picked up a wooden spoon that was floating on the water and threw it at the wall. She shouted something, a hoarse rush of fury without words. Then she turned to us and said, "Your father is dead. He got drunk again and fell into a storm drain—one of those deep ones—and when the rain came, he drowned."

We didn't speak. We weren't sure how children were supposed to feel when their father died unexpectedly. Our mother said, "Someone found him last night and dragged him out. They called me to come. I saw him."

She paused for a moment. We were all silent, picturing our father dead, stopping up the storm drain like a bundle of rags. We imagined him bloated with rainwater, pieces of garbage stuck to his face, his pockets full of dead bugs.

Our mother looked up at the ceiling and let out another yell. She was angry. He had not fixed the roof, and he had not come home when he was supposed to, and now he was dead. She was angry at him, but she was also angry at something greater—at life, perhaps, or fate, or God. We looked up at the ceiling, at the roof barely hinged to the house, and wondered who would patch the holes now.

Our mother looked around, trying to find someplace to collapse, but there was no place. We were in a house full of water. We had to empty that sea before she could sit on a couch, before she could lie in her half-empty bed and refill the house with her tears.

Our mother looked at us, and some of us were starting to cry as we perched in a cluster on the top bunks, our faces pressed up against the ceiling. It was sinking in: In the middle of the night, we had cursed our father as the water poured into the storm drain and filled his lungs. In the middle of the night, we had hated him, and now there was no going back. Would we miss him? Would we notice a complete absence more than an incomplete one? Would we all die of starvation? Would the house be filled with water forever?

“Your father is dead,” she said, as though she couldn’t believe it. And then she crossed to the wall, forced the window open, and began to push the water out with her hands.

It is still sometimes hard for me to believe that this story should be about death instead of life. It is hard for me to understand why God sent a truck and rope to pull that calf away from the buzzards and out of death’s path while my drunk father was slumped in a deep storm drain waiting for the water to come, to rise up to his chest, his chin, to the top of his head.

I suppose God was transfixed, as we were, by the vision of the exhausted calf being eaten alive by one bold bird; perhaps He was standing among us, sandals sinking into the rich soil at the edge of the road. He was busy watching His angels save the calf, and He did not turn his head to see my father’s plight.

## PENNSYLVANIA POLKA

1980

The wedding that was about to begin was not a travesty to Catholics, as some people might think it would be. The maid of honor came up the aisle in the slide-step the organist had taught her—right, stop; left, stop—then she rushed, lost the rhythm, and had to wait for the hymn to catch up. Next came the bride, Terri Donati, a drapery of white in the vestibule doorway. She was big, eight months pregnant and tall, and she loved the thought of being eight months pregnant in her wedding pictures. She imagined herself looking through them someday with her grown-up child and the two of them screaming with laughter. She stepped out under the high, vaulted ceiling of the church and felt the space expand around her. She felt like a float in a parade.

Ahead was her groom, Denny Redmond, long-haired and skinny, rigid with effort in his tight white tux, like he expected a ball to come flying at him. Beside him, what appeared to be Denny again, but younger and smaller in another white tux—Curtis, his brother, the best man. Curtis fingered a dip in his forehead where Denny had shot him with a shotgun he thought wasn't loaded. Most of the buckshot missed Curtis and shattered the TV, but a mass of pellets had struck him near the temple, piercing his skull and putting pressure on the surface of his brain. This had happened two full months ago, and Curtis had recovered, but the injury had made him mean.

At the altar Father Gus stood in his vestments, holding his arms out wide. Behind him a large Jesus hung on the cross, eyes cast down in a fixed, grave expression. It reminded Terri of the look Denny had just given her—part agony, part pity, part shame. Jesus had his gut sucked in, his ribs poking out, and a huge red gash in his side. He looked bad.

From above you could see that the church was shaped like a thick cross, with Terri and Denny standing at the intersection,

facing the altar with the long aisle at their backs. The white ceiling paint was peeling up here, and a chunk of it dropped and spun, landing with a tick on an empty pew.

The falling paint exposed cracks in the plaster, but up through the cracks, in the dark cavity between ceiling and roof, the aged beams were still strong. On top of the beams lay the roof planks, tightly together, and on the planks lay the slates, and the slates held a layer of snow, peppered with black bits of soot from the chimney. Past the stone parapet and the edge of the roof ran the street down below. Across the street lay the half-filled church parking lot, and behind it another parking lot, empty, with its faded sign, Park 'n' Shop, lying flat on its back on top of the snow. This lot used to fill up quickly on Saturdays, but now most of the stores in downtown Black Hand were closed. The town, Black Hand, Pennsylvania, was named after mobsters, the Black Hand Society, who once murdered a deputy way back in the woods by stabbing him in the stomach with stiletto knives. They dipped his hand in a bucket of tar and left him, and it became a famous crime. Some people said that the tar must have stood for their own dark Calabrese skin, or for stains from the coal mines where some of them worked. Today some people worried that the gang still existed, but most people had enough other worries.

In one corner of the Park 'n' Shop lot, a crowd had gathered around a small car. Some men were lined up, taking turns bashing it with a sledgehammer. Each one would step up and swing, *whamp*, then hoots and cheers would go up. On the sidewalk a man strutted up and down, hands cupped to his mouth, shouting in a hoarse voice, "Smash a Japanese car! One dollar!"

The people who passed were drawn toward the car. Women drifted to the circle of spectators, and men stepped to the end of the slow-snaking line. They were dark figures against white snow, spotted with fluorescent orange caps and the broad gold stripes of Steelers scarves. A man climbed onto the hood of the car, set his feet wide apart, raised the sledgehammer high, and paused in this triangular pose. Then he brought the hammer down on the roof, *whamp*, with the exact stroke that his grandfather had used when laying train tracks and that his father had used in the die shop where he worked. This *whamp* on the roof was loud, and it echoed and carried the one short block to the Kuskuskie River, which cut a valley between buildings

downtown. The sound, a wave in the air, wound with the river through the downtown, mingling with car noise and losing volume as it went, until it was no longer audible, but still existed, and passed under an iron bridge and sifted, like the river, around the stone pilings that stood like stepping-stones where the old bridge used to be. It crossed a rail yard and bounced against the mile-long side of Black Hand Sheet & Tube, where it finally disintegrated, colliding with sounds of crashing glass as children threw stones at the factory windows.

### 1979

In the year after high school, Terri still lived at home, alone with her mother. Her father had died years before. She argued with her mother more and more, over any little thing, but on some nights they still baked banana bread or cookies together. She still worked the cash register at For Pet's Sake, where she'd started part-time as a high school senior. She still dated Denny Redmond, who'd been her boyfriend since junior year, and made out with him in his Mustang II in their regular way—she slipping an arm around his neck and pulling him toward her, running a finger along his sketchy mustache, and he with limp kisses and a too-soft tongue, his hand moving in slow circles on her stomach, too shy to stray from there. She still liked how he looked in faded jeans and suede sneakers, and was sure that he had a good heart, but she worried about settling for Denny when she hadn't tried anyone else or seen the world. With Denny and their friends, too young to go to bars, she drank beer in the woods, even on cold nights when holding a beer bottle nearly froze her hands. With her cousin Jeanine she made macramé or rolled long snakes of bread dough and braided them into wreaths, then baked them and shellacked them and hung them on the wall with a sprig of some kind of weed.

One morning in winter, in her little orange Vega, she shut off her engine in front of the pet store and leaned back against the headrest. She dreaded going in, being hit with the smell of cedar chips and pee. She knew she'd stop noticing the smell after a half hour or so, and this disgusted her even more. There might be ten customers all day, and she'd ring them up at the register, and go around to all the cages and add water to the bottles, a job a sixth-grader could do.

Terri had thought that when she graduated from high school she'd find a better job with the typing and shorthand she'd taken. But in almost a year she hadn't found anything. When her parents were young it was easy to find good jobs in Black Hand, but she'd gone as far as Youngstown, across the Ohio line, and still turned up nothing better than For Pet's Sake.

In the pet store parking lot, in her car, she turned the rear-view mirror and saw her own eyes and the bridge of her nose. "Shit," she said, but her eyes and the bridge of her nose didn't move, didn't even wrinkle when she spoke. "For pets suck, for pets suck, for pets suck," she said. The eyes in the mirror were steady and unafraid. They weren't the eyes of Denny Redmond's girlfriend, or the cashier at a pet store, or of someone whose mother called her a little snot.

Two weeks later, she folded down the back seat of the Vega, filled the hatchback with records, posters, a duffel bag of clothes, a sleeping bag, and a rattan chair. She put her big spider plant up front next to her. Everyone said there were jobs down in Texas, and some people she knew—the Gileses, who'd been their neighbors since she was born—had moved there a few years before. The night before she left, Denny had cried for hours as they sat together, talking in the front seat of his car. He ended with his face in her lap, his eyes and nose running, leaving wet spots on the thighs of her jeans. She ran her fingers in his hair, kissed the back of his neck and almost said she would stay.

The next morning, she buckled her seat belt, unusual for her, and let her mother lean in the car window and kiss her goodbye. They each wiped tears from the other's cheek, then she drove off, driving for two days, singing loudly with the radio and rolling down the windows when, heading south, she crossed from March winter into March spring.

In Fort Worth, Texas, she stayed for two weeks with the Gileses in their split-level house. There *were* jobs in Texas—she found one on the eighth day, as a secretary at an engineering company, then she got an apartment near the airport, in a complex owned by a friend of Mr. Giles. Mrs. Giles lent her a bed and gave her two old office chairs and a huge, dented metal desk. From her apartment she could step through a sliding glass door onto a small deck and look down on her Vega in the parking lot or out at the highway cloverleaf or at the high-tension

wires on steel scaffolds that marched into the flat distance. She hung her spider plant near the glass door, in a macramé hanger Jeanine had made, and slid the metal desk under it to be her kitchen table.

In her second full week at her job, the youngest engineer, Johannes, who was visiting for a few months from the company headquarters in Holland, stopped beside her chair and said, “Could we have a meal, perhaps, together? There is a fish restaurant.” He had flowing blond hair and correct English, and always wore designer jeans. At the restaurant, he ordered halibut for them both, and they drank white wine, which to her tasted acrid, but which she pretended to like. She didn’t mind the long pauses in their conversations, or, later, the bony feel of his arms. She was ready for this. When she kissed him she tasted the delicate flavor of halibut, which was comforting, his mouth tasting just like her own.

There, in Fort Worth, Texas, the next morning, this skinny Dutch man, Johannes, who pronounced *t*’s to perfection, sat by the dent in the side of her metal desk, sipping the tea she’d made in her hot pot. The leaves of her spider plant splayed above his head, some with offshoots shaped like fireworks at their ends. She could follow him in her car to his motel, he was saying, straight from work, if she wanted, any day next week. “I will drive slowly,” he said, “so you can follow. You will not get lost. I will put on the turn signal far in advance of any turns.”

Johannes had a cleft chin and pointy nose, but in his build he resembled Denny, with a small butt and long, skinny arms. On that first night with him, she had lain there, short of breath, and wriggled under his thin frame. She had had sex twice before—both times with Todd Zimursky, a second-string fullback, before she met Denny—and had ended up with bruises on her thighs where Todd had clamped his hands. This time she was giddy, looking up at the dark ceiling and thinking *here she was* in an apartment in Texas, drunk on wine, with a foreign man heaving over her, groaning into her neck.

The next Monday after work she followed Johannes out of the parking lot behind De Bauw Products. In the large, tinted windows of their office building she glimpsed her rusty Vega, decrepit behind his rented Reliant K.

At the Claymore Motel, Johannes seemed nervous, showing her the swimming pool and the game room before taking her

to his door. "It is not beautiful," he said as he turned the key in the lock. In his room, cheerless with white walls, they sat on the perfectly made bed and looked at their hands until they started to kiss. Her kissing was practiced, aggressive, but Johannes's lips, unlike Denny's, pressed back, pushed her gently down to the pillow. Sober this time, her mind raced, and she remembered Todd Zimursky saying, "Shake it up—you know, make love to me," which didn't help her at all to know what to do. Afterward, laughing, she pulled Johannes into the game room, where she destroyed him in air hockey, a game he'd never played before.

For a few weeks they saw each other most days after work. She liked the blond hairs that grew high up on his cheeks, near his eyes, and covered his forearms and made his wrists look thick and strong. But they still had long pauses in their conversations, and the more they tried to break them, the longer the silences grew. She told him about where she came from, a little town outside of Pittsburgh. "You know, the Steelers," she'd said, but he didn't reply. "You know. Super Bowl Nine, mighty fine, Super Bowl Ten, did it again." He nodded a little. At her place she'd turn on the TV to watch *M\*A\*S\*H* or *Fantasy Island*, and Johannes would pay attention for a minute or two, then rustle through the newspaper he'd brought. She slept in his room a few times, but he was afraid the motel would find out and charge extra, and he'd get in trouble with the company. Once when she called his name from the bathroom, he said, "Shh!" then whispered, "Please. You are loud."

She was relieved when he called her at home the next day and said they should "maybe not meet, for a time." "Yeah," she said. "It's . . . yeah. Weird." He had to leave soon anyway, to go back to Holland, and it just might be easier this way.

After he'd gone, her period didn't come. Her breasts got so sore that she flinched in the shower if the water hit her nipples. The day she found out she was pregnant for sure—from a nurse in a storefront clinic, who smiled and said robotically, "It's yes"—she skipped work and drove around town in a panic. At first she couldn't get a deep enough breath. Finally, at a red light, after ten quick huffs, she breathed in slowly and steadied herself from there. She turned the radio dial through all of the stations, but the songs and commercials seemed shallow, made for somebody having a usual day, dropping a letter in a mailbox

or walking through a door. She ended up at the zoo, where she watched a group of fifth- or sixth-grade girls huddle in a circle, tittering, then break apart and run. Terri cried, seeing this. She cried again seeing baboon mothers with babies hanging from their necks. The mothers clambered easily over rocks and logs, and the babies swung against their chests, trusting the mothers, and the mothers trusted themselves.

Terri told no one back home—not even Jeanine, who she knew wouldn't keep it to herself. She'd heard stories, rumors really, of women getting abortions. She remembered Tracy Barone, in front of her locker, telling a bunch of girls about her cousin. "It hurt like hell," she said. "She told me she just kept screaming." To Terri, an abortion seemed impossibly remote—just a word, something from the network news. She tried to think about it, but always wound up thinking about a baby instead. She knew what that was. A baby would smile and barf, and as sick with fear as it made her, she knew she would have it.

She looked through a book her mother had given her, *The Catholic Youth's Guide to Life and Love*, but it was about dating and sex, not babies. She went to mass at a church called St. Aloysius, a saint she'd never heard of and whose name she wasn't sure how to pronounce. The mass was exactly the same as at home, and it was comforting to know the routine, to say the responses she knew by heart in unison with all of those strangers, Texans. "Lord have mercy," they all said together. "Christ have mercy. Lord have mercy." After mass, she waited in line for confession, but when she got to the front of the line and heard the hissing whispers in the booth, she grew scared of what the priest might say and walked out.

She wrote twice to Johannes and heard nothing back. She scratched out his address in her book, first with horizontal lines, then vertical, then circles, obliterating it. She cried as she did this. Later, she asked around at work for his address and wrote it down again. She felt nauseated and took saltines wherever she went. The crumbs collected in her car and clung to her skirts. She went to bed early, so tired that her mind shut off instantly. When she started to show, she avoided the Gileses and told people at work about Denny, as if he were the father.

After another mass at St. Aloysius, she made herself go through with confession. Kneeling in the dark confessional,

with her face up close to the wicker screen—*inches*, she knew, from the priest's tilted head—she told him that she had had “intercourse” and was going to “have a child.” She could smell his aftershave, faintly medicinal, through the screen. “Oh my,” he muttered, then he quickly asked questions, alarmed but calling her “dear.” Her whole story spilled out in hard whispers, and the priest took a heavy breath, then asked if she'd like him to call her parish back home. “No!” she said, breaking her whisper. A dark blot appeared at the edge of the screen—his thumb?—and he said, “You don't have to do this alone, dear.”

For her penance she said three Hail Marys and one Glory Be and concentrated on what the priest had said—“You don't have to do this alone.” She closed her eyes and saw herself in her little apartment, sitting pregnant in bed in the glow of the TV, eating saltines. If she were home, she knew, her mother would fuss over her. She'd let her sleep late and tuck pillows under her knees. Jeanine would come over with pairs of tiny socks. And Denny would rub her shoulders, listen to her stomach, feel the kicks. He'd build a sandbox from the planks they kept in the rafters of their garage. One day, he'd take the baby from her arms and bounce it, brush his mustache back and forth across its cheek.

When she stepped out of the church it was like coming out of a movie—she was startled to still be in Texas.

When she gave her mother, Margie, the news on the phone—five months pregnant—Margie gasped—“What!”—and fell silent. When she spoke again her voice had dropped an octave. “I knew this would happen, Terri, I knew it.” She sucked in a loud breath. “What are you, some kind of a slut?”

“Mom!” Terri said.

“Five months!” her mother shouted. “You didn't waste any time down there!”

Terri could almost see her mother's face—eyes closed to slits, mouth clamped in an uneven frown. She saw her shaking her head in jerky little *no*'s.

“Well,” Terri snapped. “Well guess what. It might even be six months. Six, Mom! *Six six six!*” She slammed down the receiver. “I'm the devil!” she shouted at the phone.

Ten minutes later, her mother called back. They apologized

and cried and talked about what they should do. “I shouldn’t have said that,” her mother said. “About you being a slut.”

When Terri told Denny everything on the phone, he fell silent and seemed to be weeping. Later he told her he’d been clutching his stomach. “I didn’t throw up, though,” he added. The second night they talked he started out angry, screaming, “How could you let that guy touch you like that!” and crying. “Some Nazi guy from someplace over there! What if I said I went to bed with somebody? What if I went to bed with Francine Costa and she gave me a blowjob? How would that make you feel?”

“Francine Costa never gave you a blowjob,” Terri said.

“How do you know?” Denny shouted.

Eventually, when she said, “Denny, I need you. I want my baby to have a father, and I want it to be you,” he went quiet. She waited. “Please,” she said.

“Well,” he said weakly. “I have to think some more. It might be okay. But I don’t know.”

Later that week, Margie called Lois Redmond, Denny’s mother, to talk everything over. “He’s moping around pretty good,” said Lois. “He’s up laying on his bed right now, blasting that music.”

“I’ll tell you,” Margie said, “we’re not proud of this. We’re sick about it, Lois. But we have to make the best of things. I don’t know what else to do. There’s going to be a little baby. I’m going to be a grandma. So it won’t be all that bad.”

“They steal your heart, don’t they?” Lois said. “Little babies.”

Lois said she and Chuck, Denny’s father, had always liked Terri, and she knew that Denny still loved her. But Denny was out of work—he was the first one to go in the last layoff downtown—and even Chuck, with thirty years in, was barely hanging on down there. “Denny started calling it ‘Shittin’ Tube’ instead of Sheet and Tube,” Lois whispered. “But not in front of his father. Chuck says all’s they need is a new owner, and they’ll come back around.”

Margie said she’d try to get Denny in at the hospital where she worked—“Even cleaning bedpans is better than doing nothing”—and that he and Terri could move in with her for the time being if they wanted, since she was all alone in the house.

"I guess Denny's going to do whatever he's going to do," Lois finally said, and sighed, and Margie said yes, she supposed so too, and that she'd like to talk to Denny as long as she was there on the line.

She was going to her cousin Betty's out in Harlansburg, she told him, to pick up a crib, the crib Terri had slept in as a baby. "I don't remember if you take it all apart or what, but I know it'll fit in a car," she said. Denny said he'd help her with it later that afternoon, and she said she'd take him for lunch.

When they drove out of town on the Harlansburg Road, out past the empty Starlite Motel and the closed-up corn stand at the edge of the county, they talked about nothing important. Denny's hands gripped his knees. Out by the fairgrounds she finally brought it up. "You have to do what's best for you in all this, Denny," she said, and reached across and touched his hand. "You're welcome in our family if you want to be, but you shouldn't do anything you don't want to do." He stared out for a minute at the flat expanse of the fairgrounds and the dull brown of the rolling farm fields. Then he turned to her, scowling, his face deep red and potent, like a ripe berry ready to burst. He sniffled, then his expression broke open and tears gushed down his cheeks. He bent forward and sobbed, put his face in his hands and let out a long moan. "Aww, honey," Margie said, rubbing the back of his neck. "Poor soul."

In Harlansburg, Margie drove around her cousin's block twice to give Denny a chance to finish calming down. The crib they'd come for wasn't hard to take apart, though Margie's cousin Betty, who looked like a skinny, dried-up Margie, said, "A what?" when Denny asked for a flat-bladed screwdriver instead of the Phillips she was handing him. "Oh, a regular," she said, and dug in the kitchen drawer until she found one. Denny smiled when Margie showed him the bunnies shellacked on the headboard of the crib and told him they'd scared Terri when she was a baby. "I had to hang a towel over them or she'd scream her head off," Margie said. Denny studied the bunnies for a long time, ran his thumb over the shellac before he went back to unscrewing the legs.

By the end of the day, the crib was set up in Terri's old room. Margie'd bought Denny lunch at McDonald's, and they'd talked about gas prices, and Franco Harris, the Steelers running

back, who was half Italian and half black. “The Italians say he’s Italian, and the black people say he’s black,” Margie said, and laughed. “Everybody wants you when you’re as good as Franco. Nobody cares what you are.” Denny thought of Terri’s baby right away when she said this. Half us, half them. Hopefulness flared in him—a stunted, crooked explosion.

That night, he called Terri, not sure what he would say. But when she answered, and he heard her firm voice say his name, he said, “I’ll do it.” He said it flatly, like a concession. “I’ll go ahead and do it. But only if we’re going to make our own babies, too.”

Terri made a sound, a musical “Mmm.” Then she said softly, “We will, Den. We will.”

That’s all there was to it, he’d thought. It was easy. *We will, Den.* Terri had kept talking that night on the phone, but Denny could hardly concentrate. His mind was racing ahead. He saw them in a big bed, he and Terri, under the angled ceiling in her mother’s attic. He saw the Nazi baby, a boy, with a flat face and a huge forehead, its eyes badly crossed until he gave it a hard slap on the back of the head. The baby would flop forward, then come up laughing and normal.

Over Thanksgiving, Margie drove all the way down with Jeanine to bring Terri home. When they arrived, and Terri opened her apartment door, they all seemed to take a little gasp. Terri knew how she must look to them—thickset and solid, her face full, her stomach swollen under her large white T-shirt. Jeanine and Margie stood there, Jeanine looking boyish, with her hair now cut in bangs, and Margie looking plump, with her pillowy torso and a new beige permanent that jutted out the back. The sight of them in front of the wallpaper in the hall, with its cowboy hats and saddles, jarred Terri, and she realized again how far she was from home. Jeanine jumped at Terri and hugged her, and Terri held onto her cousin and couldn’t stop laughing. Margie set her purse down and waited, then hugged her daughter stiffly, saying, “It’s okay, honey.” She stepped back and scanned Terri, looked pained and bewildered. “It’s not too bad,” she said.

Two days later the three of them drove, all that long way again, taking turns in Terri’s Vega and her mother’s Chevelle,

until they finally got close enough on I-79 that KDKA came in, pulsing and needling through the dark. Terri recognized the song, a local rendition of “The Pennsylvania Polka” rewritten as a Steelers’ fight song:

*We’re from the town with that great football team  
We cheer the Pittsburgh Steelers*

*Winning’s a habit, not only a dream  
Go out and get them, Steelers!*

“Now you know you’re home,” said her mother, who was driving. “Back from enemy territory. Those Cowboy people probably hate the Steelers. We’re too good.”

“Not everybody cares that much, Mom,” Terri said. She was riding in her mother’s car so she could stretch her legs more. Jeanine was a few cars ahead in the Vega. In the dark, Terri could make out the red pattern of its taillights.

“I know,” Margie said. “I was just saying.”

When they drove down the steep, curving hill into Black Hand, down the potholed streets and past the low brick buildings, Terri’s car in front of them didn’t seem so outdated and crappy. They bumped over the train tracks and passed Fizo’s Lounge, with its one tiny window high in the wall and a marquee on wheels in the parking lot that read YOU’RE IN STEELER COUNTRY.

At home, they followed Jeanine into the driveway. The yellow porch light was on, as Margie had left it, and so was the bathroom light upstairs. Denny was already there, sitting in his car parked in front, his little brother Curtis in the seat beside him. Denny had said he’d help them unload the cars, and they’d told him they’d be in tonight by nine, two hours ago. They’d said they’d call him when they got in, but he hadn’t waited for that.

Terri wrested herself up and out of the car, and Denny walked up the driveway, out of the darkness into the stray light from the porch. He bobbed as he walked, almost bounced, which Terri knew meant he was nervous. His hair was much longer, almost to his shoulders, his jean jacket more faded, but his mustache hadn’t filled in at all. Curtis came up behind him, shorter than

Denny, in a newer jean jacket and with long hair like Denny's but behind by a few months of growing.

Jeanine tried to watch, but Margie yanked her toward the back of the house. "Leave them alone!" she stage-whispered. She paddled the air to hurry Curtis toward them, and he followed obediently into the dark, leaving Terri and Denny alone.

Denny stopped short and half-smiled, as if something had squirted into one eye. "Hey," he said. He stuck out his hand in an odd gesture, somewhere between a handshake and a low wave.

"Den," Terri said. She reached her hand to his shoulder and squeezed it, felt the bones. "Well?" she said, smiling. "Are you happy?"

"No," he said, but a smile spread on his face.

"That's bull and you know it!" She poked him.

"Nuh-uh!" he said, jerking away. "I don't know crap."

She stepped after him, leaned close to hug him. "Yeah yeah yeah," he said, smirking, and raised his arms, accepting the hug like a man being frisked.

She slid her hands into his back pockets and kissed him, and the wet kiss and the heat of her breath on his face, the wiggle of her fingers in his pockets, gave him a fluttery feeling, the warm pleasure he'd longed for since she left. He palmed her big belly, let his arms slip around her. He could hold her, he thought. He was remembering now.

The next morning Denny shot up in bed when a voice spoke to him, not into his ear but somewhere inside, toward the middle of his head. It was a television voice, over the hiss of a broadcast. "Not you," it said. It was the voice of Bob Barker, the host of *The Price Is Right*. The dream came back to Denny—he was in the audience, and the announcer called him to "Come on down!" He jumped up, elated, and rushed into the aisle, where a security man in a blue jacket with epaulets laid his hand heavily on Denny's shoulder. "No, no, no," Bob Barker said, a tiny figure on the distant stage. "The Nazi. Not you."

Denny had been watching *The Price Is Right* most days since being laid off. He slumped on the couch every morning at eleven-thirty, drinking coffee left over from his father's breakfast, which his mother saved for him in a thermos. Ten minutes into the show, every second day, his mother came in and stood on her

tiptoes in front of the screen to water a hanging plant. “Sorry,” she had said the first time this happened. “I’m on a schedule.” Denny would sip his coffee straight out of the thermos and gaze at the TV. It was the same silver thermos he had taken to work every morning for a year at Black Hand Sheet & Tube.

This morning he went through this routine again. *Tattletales* was on when he sank onto the couch with his coffee. Curtis was home from school with a cold, lying on the floor in his pajamas in front of the TV with a pile of used Kleenexes beside him.

“Move your head,” Denny said, and Curtis twisted to look at him—showing crimson rings around his nostrils from blowing his nose all morning—then crawled a bit to the side.

“Sorry,” Curtis said.

After *Tattletales*, *The Price Is Right* came on. When Denny saw Bob Barker on the screen he jerked up from his slouch. The humiliation of the dream came back in full force when he heard Barker’s voice and saw his smile. Denny hated Bob Barker. He hated the smug way Barker nodded, moving the microphone from one hand to the other, and the way his suit coat flared out when he pointed into the audience. He hated Barker’s smooth, middle-pitched voice. He hated him as he took a roll of cash from his pocket, a thousand dollars, and placed ten one-hundred-dollar bills into the contestant’s hand, one by one, counting them with the whole audience counting along. Denny hated the people in the audience who counted along.

A bad dream had never affected him this way, carrying into the next day—only sexual dreams had. He remembered a dream involving Carly Orr, whom everyone thought was ugly, with her close-set eyes and her upper lip that seemed to be missing. He’d disliked her before he’d had that dream, but when he saw her in homeroom the next morning he ached with lust, ached to stroke her hips as he had in the dream.

The hate he felt today was as powerful as his lust had been. He glowered at the television, at the images of long beaches and glittering hotel lobbies.

“This can be yours if the price is right,” the announcer said.

Denny’s mother came in carrying a bottle of Windex and her watering pitcher. She stood in front of the screen on her tiptoes, to water the plant—“Sorry, guys,” she said—then she went to the gun cabinet in the corner—Denny’s father’s gun cabinet,

where he kept his four rifles on display—and sprayed the glass with Windex. She took a rag from her pocket and wiped. “All done,” she said, walking out.

One joke they had learned from their father was to take a rifle—usually the .22 or the shotgun—and aim it at the TV, at opponents like the Dallas Cowboys and the Philadelphia Phillies, and once, during the news, at Brezhnev, then pull the trigger. It was their hex. Now Denny crossed the room, took out the shotgun, and went back to the couch. “Check this out,” he said to Curtis, and aimed at the TV screen.

Curtis twisted around to look. “No,” he whined. “Don’t waste it on him. Save it. Save it for the Super Bowl.”

Denny pulled back the hammer and waited for Barker’s face to appear. He closed one eye, aiming.

“C’mon,” Curtis said. “Please?” He lay on his back with his head propped up on a pillow.

A commercial ended and there was Bob Barker, dangling the keys to a new car in front of someone’s face, then yanking them back as the giddy contestant reached for them.

The explosion was deafening, with a sun-white flash. Denny jumped into a half-crouch and cradled the rifle, shaking wildly. Curtis lay curled on his side on the floor. His face was in the pile of used Kleenexes.

Their mother ran in and stopped cold. The Windex bottle dangled from her fingers. “Curtis!” she screamed, and she pounced on him, shook his shoulders and touched the blood in his hair. She screamed again, and Curtis shifted his arms. His knees pushed in a tiny crawling motion, and he raised his head, opened his eyes, and slowly pushed himself up.

A glob of buckshot was embedded near his temple like a third eye, and blood tracked down past his ear.

Later, a surgeon removed the buckshot, and Curtis lay in the recovery room, anesthetized, then in his own hospital room, still anesthetized, while his mother and father and Denny sat beside him and waited—his father saying, “How that thing got loaded is what I want to know.” Curtis’s face looked unclouded and soft, its usual placidity heightened by the anesthetic.

In the evening, late, he finally stirred. His peaceful face contorted, and he reached for his head. The cheek that had been against the pillow was flattened like putty and covered with

pink creases. He turned to his mother. “Go to hell, dog-ass,” he said.

1980

Father Gus said, “The Mass is ended, go in peace.”

Outside the church the crowd funneled Terri and Denny down the stone steps and into a Cadillac Coupe DeVille. They’d borrowed the car from Denny’s uncle Walt, who ran a car lot where it had sat unsold for six months. He’d told them this would be a good way to show it off. The Cadillac rolled away with the bride and groom, horn honking, trailing cans. Then some high beeps sounded—the little car in the Park ‘n’ Shop lot. People were still clustered around it, waiting to bash it with the sledgehammer. The wedding crowd looked across the parking lots toward the beeping, and the car-bashing crowd hooted and waved.

The wedding guests drifted to their cars to drive to Margie’s for the reception, except Curtis. He walked past Terri’s Vega, where Jeanine, set to drive him, sat waiting. “Hey!” she yelled, muffled behind the glass, and she pounded on the window, her white mitten flattening with each pound. He kept going, to the snow bank at the edge of the Park ‘n’ Shop lot, and stepped up on it to see. People stood around a small silver Honda, sending up white fogs of breath.

The car looked as if it had tumbled down a hill. The roof was crushed, the doors were beaten, and the windshield was shattered white. “Best man gets a free swing,” somebody yelled up at him. “Put a coat on, asshole,” someone else yelled. Curtis picked his way down the snow bank in his slippery black shoes. A man in a parka, his face darkened beneath his hood, counted a stack of one-dollar bills, and a thick man with a mustache was taking his turn with the sledgehammer. He grabbed the handle and heaved it in the air, stood for a moment with his arms stretched up, and the hammerhead hung there, blunt and black against the dull white sky. Then he drove it down, *whamp*, onto the hood. The sound charged through Curtis; it straightened his spine. People clapped, a soft patter of gloves. Someone shouted, “Bersky!” The man waved. He tilted the handle toward Curtis.

The handle was warm, even out here in the cold, and its taper fit his hands exactly. He gripped it, set his legs, and heaved the

hammerhead up to his chest. He lifted it to his face and touched it to his cheek. The cold of it seared him; the hard of it tapped to the bone. It was steel, ingot-shaped, notched, scarred. He raised it, wobbling, to the sky, his thin wrists unsleeving, and he staggered to hold it above himself. People gathered around him, shouting, “Go! Go! Go!” Their frosted shouts streamed out to him, and with his breath he swallowed them in.

The hill up to Margie’s was steep, and the engine whined and the little car shuddered as Jeanine pushed on the gas pedal. “We have to get up there!” she said. “What were you doing? You’re supposed to make the toast!” Curtis just chewed the inside of his cheek.

Jeanine turned onto Margie’s street, which was already lined with their relatives’ cars. They parked and got out, creaked up the porch steps, under the Congratulations! banner, and into the house, which was filled with chatter and the sweet, meaty smell of Margie’s tomato sauce. The little wood-framed house wasn’t meant to hold so many people. Curtis shouldered his way in, lost Jeanine behind him, squeezed past a recliner, and pushed through the crowd.

Music was playing—The Who at first, until Margie hissed at Ray, Denny’s friend in charge of the stereo, “This is a wedding!” and he slunk back and flipped through some records. The music changed to a polka, the Steelers’ fight song version of “The Pennsylvania Polka.” The Steelers had lost in the playoffs this year and weren’t even going to the Super Bowl, but people still played the song anyway.

*The Steelers are so great  
And so hard to overrate*

*Good things will come  
To those who work and wait*

*Charge!*

People surged from the kitchen into the living room. Jeanine yanked Curtis over—“You got to have a polka at a wedding!” she yelled in his ear. He held her hot hands and stepped side

to side, but there was almost no space to move. Terri tromped back and forth the best she could, and Denny tried to go with the music as he huddled around her belly, protecting it with his arms. Uncle Slant and Aunt Mae came in twirling, stepping quick in a perfect polka dance. All the jumping shook the house, and Margie lunged to steady a lamp with her hand.

The song ended, and people cheered. Cries of “Toast!” came, and the tinny patter of plastic forks on beer cans. A big guy in a white sweater whom Curtis didn’t know shoved him and belled: “Toast, man! Make a toast!”

People looked at Curtis, and eyes all through the tight crowd met his. A few people turned to face him, then more turned, and a circle formed around him. Jeanine whispered, “You can pass, you know,” and Denny squeezed through the crowd to reach him, and his father launched into a diversionary toast of his own, “I want everyone—” but not quite loud enough. Curtis stepped up onto Margie’s recliner. He wobbled on the cushion, and slowly the room grew quiet. He closed his eyes—a long blink.

The *whamp* of the sledgehammer when Curtis had swung it had belled out in every direction. He thought he had seen it. He thought of it now. It had stung his hands and charged up his arms, shot through his bones to his jaw, teeth, and tongue.

“What if the Nazi guy comes back?” he rasped.

A clock ticked hard on the wall.

“What if he’s better than us? Who’s she going to fuck?”

A gasp in the back of the room.

Curtis glared over everyone, head jutting.

Denny spoke. “Curt, that’s okay. That’s enough.” He motioned for Curtis to step down.

“He’s drunk!” someone shouted.

Curtis shook his head fiercely, but arms grabbed up at him—Jeanine’s bare arms and Father Gus’s black-clad arms—and other arms stretched up in other parts of the room, holding up beer cans and cups. “Cheers,” people said. “Whatever that was,” someone said, knocking cans with someone else. The arms pulled at Curtis, but he flailed against them. The chair tilted, and he tipped, and wavered, and dropped, thumping the floor, his whole self landing at once. Denny pounced and tried to wrap Curtis up, and the two of them rolled, a jumble of limbs in

identical tuxes. “Wait a while! Wait a while!” Uncle Slant yelled, and the man in the sweater stretched out his arms to hold back the crowd. Curtis heard a crack in his chest, but he writhed and chopped and squirmed away. Then Terri was standing over him in her huge white dress, yelling, “Stop! Stop! Stop!”

The crisp hem of her dress brushed his chin. The hump of her belly loomed over him.

Darkness swarmed at the edge of his vision—the slosh of blood to his head. He clamped his jaws and tightened his fists, and he pounded. Terri’s stomach hardened under each blow. He felt himself trapped inside a cave, pounding the boulder blocking the mouth. He bashed himself against it, but angels held it fast, beating their wings and howling.

Inside the car they were quiet. Denny went through the movements of driving, pushing the clutch in and letting it out, and Terri stared ahead, her feet spread wide and her knees raised. She panted and whimpered as tears ran down her cheeks. Margie was in back, gripping the headrest in front of her as if she were the one in pain.

They passed the broken-down mansions that clung to the hill. They crossed the iron bridge and passed Fizo’s Lounge, where men in the parking lot lunged at each other. One man was punching another man’s face, and a third held the beaten one in place like a heavy bag.

From above you could see behind Fizo’s, away from the bright stripe of Mill Street down which Denny’s car raced, to the huge lightless tract of Black Hand Sheet & Tube. Above it the air smelled of coal dust and rust, rising like an exhalation of the place. The great yard, a town of its own, seemed to be panting together with Terri, as if her pain were matched by a pain in the ground. You could roam above that bruised field, over its factories, fences, and heaps, and come to its edge, a dark swath of river and trees. You could follow this swath, a blackness that cut through the lights that dotted the valley, and see glints of silver running through it like threads—rails along the river. In the distance the rails split off in separate directions, but here they all ran together, still gathered.

Gathered, as everyone gathered with Terri at her hospital bed the next morning. She lay spread there, hair matted, face shiny,

taking half-breaths. Her stomach, still mounded, had not yet caught up to its emptying, like a hope that's too old and too stupid to know when to die. Elsewhere Curtis lay swaddled in bed, asleep in a curl with his lip tucked under, exposing a sharp, shortened smile.

## HELLCAT COURT

**H**ip-Hop was what we called him, and he lived across the street, mostly in his half-open garage where he slouched shirtless in a lawn chair, smoking cigarettes and texting for hours at a time. He wore big, white-framed plastic sunglasses and baggy pajama pants with a loud print of electric green surf-company logos. Cars would come and go in his driveway all day. They'd pull in with windows down and subwoofers thumping, and, like a grouchy, pimp-limping carhop, he'd stroll over and lean against the driver's side, blowing a blue jet of smoke up over his shoulder and chatting for a moment. Then he'd disappear inside his house and return, lean fully inside the window and punch knuckles with the driver and passengers a couple of times, and then off they'd go and he'd return to his lawn chair. Other characters lived there too, or rotated in and out—a girl we called Two-Tone for her blonde-on-top, black-on-bottom hair color; Bulldog, a bald, mashed-faced guy; and Little Pants, an impossibly skinny guy on the cutting edge of teenage fashion in his breathlessly tight pants. Various toddlers came and went, herded by girls with stringy hair and big jackets. The entire cast was white, and our rural California farming town had no more than twenty thousand residents.

I was the neighbor directly across the street. Out our front windows and across our lawns, we stared at the tableaux of each other's lives. What he saw was a lawn prone to overgrowth and dandelions; an old blue pickup truck with Texas plates parked in the driveway, its back window covered in navy fighter squadron stickers; and a garage, when it yawned open late at night, with dusty surfboards and mountain bikes that never came down off their pegs, and a crumbling wall of still-packed moving boxes. What he saw was a couple on opposite schedules, a house permanently awake and half empty, the way station we lived in while we waited for the next reassignment to another town somewhere else in America.

We didn't like each other, Hip-Hop and I. We were just close enough in age that I hated his music not for its genre, rap and hip-hop, but his choices within that genre—T.I., for instance, and not Tupac. He enjoyed watching me stretch for my daily run, and if I were a few years younger I might have mistaken this for idle, mildly erotic admiration of the female form, a twisted sort of compliment. What bugged me about it, though, was that he didn't drop his gaze when I caught him staring and scowled back; his stare was a territorial challenge, and it made me feel like I had less of a right to my place there. Also, I didn't appreciate that he once invited his buddies to set up more lawn chairs to watch and laugh while I attempted to mow and edge the lawn one sunny morning while my husband, Ross, was deployed on an aircraft carrier for a six-month stretch. They formed a line, the three of them, their white torsos and chicken ribs exposed to the sun, their eyes hidden beneath sunglasses. I kept getting tangled up in the rose bush trying to groom the grass beneath it, and I put the wrong gas, the gas mixed with oil, into the mower, and it began to smoke. I wanted to cry. They cracked open beers.

Mostly, though, we were able to avoid each other. I worked and went to evening classes in another city, and he didn't open his garage most mornings until around eleven o'clock, so the only times we saw each other were late nights when I came home from school and idled in the street for a few seconds while my garage door lifted, framing a well-lit, wide-angle exposure of my stored life. His half-open door spilled fluorescent light and exposed a card table covered in a forest of red plastic cups, folding chairs, scattered ash trays, and a child's plastic swimming tub, all dusty and propped up on one end. The light lengthened the shadow of him in his chair and caught the puffs of smoke as they drifted above his head. He still wore the shades.

I love *The Wire*, the HBO series about Baltimore cops chasing down drug rings in the projects, and I go through long stretches where I sacrifice sleep at the end of a sixteen-hour day just to see whether McNulty and Lieutenant Daniels finally catch up with Avon Barksdale and Stringer Bell, Wee-Bey, Poot, Bodie, and Little Man. I love the cops, but I love the dealers too, and I especially love the ones caught in the middle, like the renegade

Omar, who sticks up drug dealers all over town and takes their stashes. I think about them even when I'm not watching the show. I wonder about their lives, which direction I would take if circumstances were different and I were in their situation, either protecting a corner or trying to crack a drug ring.

This was what I was doing home alone one Friday night, thinking about plot machinations on *The Wire* after watching three episodes back to back on DVD. I had just flipped off the TV and was heading back across the house to bed when four explosions, the biggest firecrackers I'd ever heard, went off in front of my house. I felt the percussions in my chest and heard the windows rattle in their frames, and before I even knew what I was doing, I was on my knees in the living room, crawling fast toward the kitchen wall to reach up and turn off the light switch. Gunshots. They were gunshots. I'd heard shooting once in my neighborhood in Texas when I was a kid and my dad was away, and the first thing my mom did was turn out the lights and tell us to get on the floor and stay away from the windows.

I dragged my purse down from the kitchen table, dug out my phone, and dialed 911. The few times in my life I've ever called 911, I've always been put on hold. This never fails to shock me. The recording says something ridiculous like, "911 Emergency, please hold for an available operator. Thank you."

On hold, I watched the glow of red taillights move slowly across the ceiling through the open curtains in my living room. The lights passed, and then a brighter version, the added whites of a car in reverse, came back again. I held my breath and crawled out into the living room, both wishing I were staying put and knowing I could get a glimpse of the car that might help the cops. Already I was imagining a narrative of investigation and reaching to figure out what my part could be. I peeked quickly, once, and saw a beat-up white Neon, and as I ducked back down I heard its engine whine as it raced off down the street.

Finally, the 911 operator came through and I gave her my address and told her what happened. She asked if I knew what kind of gun was used, and I surprised myself by making a guess—a handgun for sure, because I knew what my grandfather's hunting rifles and shotguns sounded like and it wasn't that, and possibly a .45 Glock for the bigger explosion instead of the pop of a 9-millimeter. Ross's buddy, a former marine, had taken us tar-

get shooting once on a camping trip and I had been prepared to hate the collection of handguns he laid out, but then discovered that I was an excellent shot and preferred the stronger kick and louder noise of the Glock. I have felt shamefully thrilled around guns ever since, a weird mix of a gun control supporter's revulsion and an enthusiast's attraction I can't quite sort out.

The cops were there within minutes. The ceiling in my still-dark house flashed red-white-blue, red-white-blue. They blocked either end of the street and spent the next two and a half hours walking around with their Maglites looking for bullet casings. They inspected every little bit of trash in the gutters, and then they walked through my yard and Hip-Hop's yard, shining their lights along the outside walls and the windows and behind the bushes.

I didn't go outside. I closed my curtains and kept my lights off and stood at the very edge of my living room window in the corner where I could see through a half-inch space between the curtain and the wall. I made sure no light touched me, but I made sure I had an unobstructed view. I wanted to help, I wanted to know what had happened, and I wanted to participate in the story that was unfolding out in the street, but I also didn't want to tell anyone that Ross was deployed, that I was alone and would be for the next six months. I was scared, and the fear held me motionless.

There was a party in progress at Hip-Hop's that night and everyone spilled out onto the front lawn. He gestured wildly and darted around between cops and a little knot of partygoers gathered off to one side, smoking and texting and arguing with each other. Every time a cop approached the front door, Hip-Hop headed him off. A girl with a ponytail screamed at someone on her phone and then stomped out to the street where one of the cops had found a bullet hole in the back window of her car. The hole was small and neat. A few of my other neighbors came out to stand awkwardly in the street, talking to cops with note pads. José, a small-engine mechanic who lived next door to me and worked out of his backyard, and Mr. Enriquez, who tended a large menagerie of concrete yard animals, came out to talk, but Hip-Hop hovered within earshot and the conversations were short.

Eventually, another cop found a bullet casing in the front yard and a half-hearted cheer went up in the crowd. The cop

marked the spot by picking up a child's purple sand bucket from the flowerbed and turning it upside down over the casing. Four bullet holes were found and noted: two in Hip-Hop's kitchen wall, one through the wall in his living room, one in the back window of the car parked out front. I bit through the last of my fingernails and went to bed, feeling my way in the dark.

The Naval Air Station where Ross works is about ten miles down the highway from the town where we lived. The base and the town share a zip code and a name, but for reasons of practicality (the noise of jets and the need for crash zones), fields of tomatoes and alfalfa and cotton separate them. The base has a "Main Side," where all of the housing and administrative offices are located, as well as the gym, the hospital, the elementary school, and the playing fields, and an "Ops Side," where the airstrips and the hangars and the weapons bunkers and the shooting ranges are. Both sides are guarded by checkpoints where you must stop and show ID, and where only cars with designated military stickers are let in. The stickers on my car indicate that Ross is an officer, and somehow that means that I get a salute from the guard, even though I'm just a spouse. It's nice. I love the salute, and a really good one, one that snaps and moves a lounging, easy human posture to a flagpole sharp and clean, can even kind of choke me up.

Even so, I've never wanted to live on base. There are things about it that creep me out, like the zigzag concrete maze they sometimes put up to make you slow way down and give them a good look at you while you approach. There's also a camouflaged hut just beyond the gate in a little median on the Ops Side, and Ross tells me an MP spends his whole day in there with an M-16 and a water bottle, just in case someone breaches the gate.

These things remind me of the international compound in Saudi Arabia where I lived briefly as a teenager when my father worked for an Arab oil company. The gate guards had mirrors on the ends of sticks, and one inspected every car's chassis for bombs while the other checked ID and asked what you were doing there.

There's also the privacy issue. On our old compound in Saudi Arabia, the grapevine grew thick and wild. The Canadian

woman across the street used to watch me through a chink in her blinds as I sat on my front stoop talking to my boyfriend. Eyes were everywhere, and people took note of where your car was parked and for how long. This was also a country where women were not allowed to drive outside of compounds, and even if they were, there weren't many places that were safe to go. *Maximum-security family prison*, my mom called it.

So when Ross and I got married, I made a rule: no base living. As much as possible, we've lived "out in town" wherever we were stationed and worked to cultivate networks of non-military friends, separation of life and work, and a place to be off-duty—two necessary worlds.

But then the drive-by happened, and it had to be right at the beginning of Ross's first deployment, a six-month stretch in the Pacific during which I'd have only sporadic e-mail contact with him and a few phone calls when he was in port. Other navy wives tell me that this is how it goes—they leave and things fall apart. I wondered whether to wait it out, hope that his brush with danger and with the law would chasten Hip-Hop. Maybe things would quiet down.

They didn't. The night after the shooting, Hip-Hop and his buddies were up welding something until dawn, the lightning stutter of spark-light flashing around the edges of the closed garage door, and then an epic party started that lasted for three days. Everyone parked only on my side of the street, and trucks raced up and down the block, letting their aftermarket mufflers rattle all the car alarms awake. I thought of *The Wire's* plot-lines of retribution, how Avon Barksdale spent days "tooling up" and organizing a hit-back when a competing drug network murdered two of his corner boys, knowing his credibility and reputation were at stake if he let it slide. I kept telling myself this situation was different—it was no big deal, this was rural California, not Baltimore—but I also stopped sleeping. Finally, I asked for a base-housing application.

I could hear it through my car windows, even over my stereo blasting Lupe Fiasco's "Little Weapon": "This is a drill, this is a drill. NAS Lemoore is now safe. Repeating: this is a drill, this is a drill. NAS Lemoore is now safe."

I was on base to drop off my housing application and hit

the gym for another blistering, boredom-inspired workout. The gate guards, each normally armed with just a holstered pistol, were carrying M-16s and wearing ammo vests and helmets. Every seventh car, apparently, was being searched, and all the administrative buildings were on lock-down. Had I been a base resident, I would have seen the item in the base paper, the *Golden Eagle*, warning everyone about the post-9/11 security drill scheduled for this day. As it was, I had to present my ID at the door of each of the four offices I needed to visit, each of the two times I had to visit them that morning in the labyrinthine process of arranging my move and collecting signatures on a whole notebook of forms in triplicate.

The process was exhausting, but the people were nice. A lady with a tattoo of Hello Kitty over crossbones and the words “Live to DIE” tattooed on her wrist showed me three open houses I could choose from, all on streets named after fighter jets: Dauntless Avenue, Rhino Street, and Hellcat Court. I went for Hellcat, mostly for the name.

Though I didn’t ask for it, I suspect I may have gotten a boost on the waiting list to move into base housing. The Hellcat house was empty and available, but I still had another month to finish the lease on our house out in town. This was fine, I told myself. I needed the time to clean and pack up. But I also found myself doing little things like leaving an old pair of Ross’s combat boots out by the front step, double- and then triple-checking the locks at night, and leaving the curtains closed all the time, when I used to love leaving the front windows open to breeze and sun. I still slept poorly and eventually moved from my bedroom, with its wall and window facing the street, into the guest room at the back of the house. In bed at night, I imagined the red lines of bullet trajectories piercing plaster and sheetrock, taking splintered bites out of the walls and lacing a red net around and above me. I was conscious at every minute of how my house, my situation, might look to Hip-Hop, and I was squeamish about doing anything that might reveal my plans to move, to cede the territory to him and admit vulnerability or fear.

I’ve moved so many times that the checklist of how to dismantle a life for transport is automatic. I went room by room, mostly at night after work and school, making piles and throw-

ing out nonessentials by the armload. I made trip after trip down the dark pathway in my backyard to the trashcan, feeling guilty that I wasn't sorting and loading everything into my car for a trip to Goodwill. One morning after a week of nightly cleaning and packing, I went to drag the trashcan out to the street for trash day and noticed it felt suspiciously light. I looked inside and saw it was nearly empty. Most of what I'd thrown out had been scavenged overnight, and I couldn't decide whether to feel relieved that someone in need had found my cast-offs or creeped out that to do so they'd gotten into my backyard and made multiple trips back and forth under the window where I slept.

The garage was the last room on my pre-move prep list, and I started on it early one morning, leaving the door open wide so I could rip down cobwebs and sweep the dust out into the driveway. I was bent over, hauling a heavy pickup jack out from beneath the workbench, when I heard a loud wolf whistle pierce the air. I stood up and turned around. Hip-Hop's house was still and quiet in the morning light, but the windows were open, shaded by the opaque gray of the screens. The whistle repeated, followed by a low laugh. I raised my middle finger.

"Cunt!" he called back. It was our only conversation. I moved the next day.

Where I live now the houses are identical—white stucco with terra cotta roof tiles and carefully manicured front lawns that are maintained by crews of groundskeepers. We each have our own little patches of backyard for which we are responsible, short squares walled in by chest-high stucco fences. Touches of individualism stick out here—tops of patio umbrellas, wind chimes in different registers, flags. Paved sidewalks and walking trails snake in between the neighborhoods, and identical playgrounds nestle between the houses at regular intervals. Children roam untended at all hours, the only stipulation being a community rule that they all have to wear helmets if they ride bikes or Razor scooters. The streets are named in clustered, military themes, and my little circuit of warplane names abuts an area named after Pacific conflict zones. There's actually a Bataan Street. I imagine how I'd give directions to a party I was hosting if I lived there: "Right, it's called Bataan—not the stick, the Death March." It's so quiet here.

Out my front window is a cul-de-sac, and I see three houses instead of just one. Each has a plywood sign planted in the front yard with its resident's squadron logo. I live near a Blue Diamond, a Black Ace, and a Top Hatter, and I've been told that my own sign, a Black Knight, is only ten dollars. I jolly myself along with the fiction that it's kind of like gang territory—we need to represent and know who's who—and uneasily place my order. The overt labeling of my new little house, its walls still smelling of a fresh coat of all-purpose white, itches and pulls like a tight wool sweater. Again, the yawning of my garage door late at night reveals the temporariness and chaos of where I find myself. The pickup remains parked on the street because half the garage space is devoted to boxes I don't see the point of unpacking.

It's still another two months until Ross comes home to this house he's never seen. I've decided to pass the time training to participate in the Marine Mud Run, a five-mile obstacle course race held every year on the base, operated by screaming drill instructors and paved in knee-deep mud. I need something to push against in this rectilinear world of perfect houses and families, all living behind a high razor-wire fence with weapons bunkers out in the fields. I need another fiction I can immerse myself in, that of a one-day marine recruit up against impossible odds, so I can feel like I have a place and a purpose here, even though I feel stuck in between, neither wholly civilian nor wholly military.

In season 4 of *The Wire*, Omar sets out early one morning in lavender silk pajamas to walk to the corner store for a pack of Newports. Even though there's a price on his head, he's able to make the trip safely unarmed, his reputation alone preceding him. "Omar steppin', y'all!" little kids and adults alike yell ahead of him. "Clear out, Omar steppin'!" That one scene speaks volumes about my obsession with Omar as a character and also my love for the subgenre of gangsta rap within hip-hop. Both speak to a world where you fight to establish a right to your own place and where that right is not challenged lightly. The two are also heavily rooted in their particular settings—*The Wire*'s is Baltimore, or a least one fictionalized version of it, and gangsta rap has a long history of territory identification, the

late-90s East Coast/West Coast feud being only one example. No one raps about moving every eight months, stealing little bits of each new place like a magpie, and never really calling anywhere home. The new kid never has any cred.

I ran three miles to nowhere on the treadmill at the gym the other day, one among a long series lined up in front of a huge bay of floor-to-ceiling windows that look out onto a football field surrounded by a track. On either side of me, well-muscled black marines pounded out a faster pace, no doubt preparing to shoot past me in the coming race, leaving me flailing far behind in the mud. Six inmates from the base jail, a temporary holding center for military personnel who've run afoul of the law, were outside on the field in front of us taking turns rocking a six-foot-tall tractor tire end over end as a man with a whistle watched. Two of them were red-faced and laughing, but the other four looked pale and angry. I wondered what rules they'd broken, and if the humiliation of this pointless exercise would keep them from doing it again or only increase their impulse to buck.

Runner's high took hold as I watched them and my vision seemed to sparkle and shift as endorphins crashed through my brain. I felt good and free, I felt like I could fly. My iPod blasted in my ears with the only music that can keep me going when I'm so close to collapse. *Thug life, cop killer, gang banger, dope slinger*—a white, middle-class navy wife on her daily run.

## **AN INTERVIEW WITH DAVE EGGERS ABOUT ZEITOUN**

**Z***eitoun* (McSweeney's, 2009) is the rare post-9/11 narrative that accepts that life in the United States has fundamentally changed, not just for immigrants or Muslims, but for everyone. It sees the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans as part of a continuum of fundamental cultural change that extends to this day, regardless of superficial political changes.

Dave Eggers was struck by the story of Abdulrahman Zeitoun, a Syrian immigrant married to a white American Muslim, Kathy, who together ran a well-known painting and building contracting business, Zeitoun A. Painting Contractor LLC, and raised four children. Zeitoun was forty-seven at the time of Katrina. While Kathy and their children left for safety in Baton Rouge and then Phoenix, Abdulrahman, like many New Orleans residents, stayed behind, despite warnings of a flood, to watch over his own house on Dart Street, as well as his office and other properties. A canoe he owned came in handy when rescuing people from his neighborhood who were in imminent danger, not to mention feeding starving dogs and otherwise being useful, even as his own and others' houses were drowned in many feet of water.

Abdulrahman was able to survive quite well, because of his physical skills, on the roof of his home, until one day when the police and military arrested him and three other men at a home on Claiborne Street, treating them as criminals and, soon, as terrorists. Along with Abdulrahman, a Syrian friend, Nasser, and two white men, Todd and Ronnie, were held without being charged with a crime, though not allowed a phone call or access to legal help—they were simply “disappeared,” apparently with hundreds of other innocents, into a black hole of no information. They were treated as we imagine Guantánamo Bay prisoners are treated, at “Camp Greyhound,” the makeshift open-air facility of cages built at the downtown New Orleans Greyhound

station. While people were dying because of lack of help, the government found the time and resources to build the prison as its first order of priority, completing it in a few days after the arrival of Katrina. Gone for more than three weeks, Kathy presumed Abdulrahman dead, as did Abdulrahman's frantic family in Syria and his concerned brother Ahmad in Spain.

Eventually, Abdulrahman ended up at Elayn Hunt Correctional Center, where he was separated from normal prisoners into special isolation, presumed as he was to be an al-Qaeda or Taliban terrorist. At no point during his torture was an attempt made to check up on his bona fides as a prominent New Orleans businessman. Though Abdulrahman was eventually released—without any apology, without any recognition of government wrongdoing, and without any explanation of why he was rounded up along with other innocent men—his life, and that of his family, cannot possibly be the secure existence it was before Katrina.

Eggers has constructed a riveting narrative of Abdulrahman's odyssey from beginning to end, making it one of the most important cultural documents to emerge from this period.

**Shivani:** It seems to be a long road for a writer, from the Eggers of 2000, who gave us *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, which defined irony, self-consciousness, detachment, and cool for members of a certain generation, to the Eggers of 2009, who gives us commitment, political engagement, objectivity, and heat, meaning dissatisfaction with how procedures of justice and fairness have fallen by the wayside. Define for us, please, how you crossed from where you were as a writer to where you are now. What were some of the important way stations, and did you encounter resistance in yourself to broadening your scope to the extent you have?

**Eggers:** I've definitely moved around a lot, I guess. I was trained as a journalist, and in and out of college I did everything from straight news to features to editorial cartooning and art criticism. When I wrote my first book, I was twenty-nine, and that was sort of a miracle for me; I had no previous expectations that I would ever write or publish a book. So I was surprised that it came together at all. After that, I was still working as a

journalist, but somewhere along the way I started exploring fiction, albeit fiction that still, for the most part, had a strong basis in research and journalism. For example, when I hiked up Mt. Kilimanjaro, I brought a tape recorder and camera, and documented the trip pretty thoroughly, unsure what would become of the material. I ended up writing a short story, fiction, about it, though all the details are real. It's an actual account of hiking up the Machame route of the mountain, with a fictional character and background laid over. Anyway, on the one hand my work hasn't shifted a lot, in that it's always been about people feeling somewhat out of place in new worlds, driven to a large extent by forces beyond their control. But these last few books, because they're both forms of biography, bring me closer to my journalistic roots. And they're both less about bringing attention to the form of the writing than they are about bringing attention to the story itself.

**Shivani:** Please talk about how *What Is the What*, in particular, fits into the progression to *Zeitoun*. Why do you think more writers in the last decade haven't seized the opportunity to write about human rights? Do you think it puts the writer outside establishment bounds in some ways to take up this most important of all subjects?

**Eggers:** Well, I think there are some fantastic writers working on issues of human rights. One of my heroes is Samantha Power, whose *A Problem from Hell* was crucial to me, along with Philip Gourevitch's book about the Rwandan genocide. Those two books realigned my thinking in a lot of ways, and I read them just before I was asked to write the biography of Valentino Deng. The writers I studied a lot as a journalism student—Orwell, Mailer, Didion, Vollmann—were writers who moved fluidly between fiction and nonfiction, and could even work in different styles of journalism, from very personal reportage to more traditional newspaper-style journalism. Whether or not it's outside the bounds of the establishment, I'm not sure. The establishment itself shifts mightily every five years or so, it seems.

**Shivani:** *Zeitoun* is very much the kind of book George Orwell might have written, in his own mélange of reportage and

imagination, had he survived to the modern media age. Orwell wanted to expose the fissures between language and truth, the failed modalities upon which the vast architecture of oppression is built. Specifically with respect to *Zeitoun*, how would you explain the function of the writer in a time of information overload? What is the condition of facts today?

**Eggers:** You know, Orwell is a towering figure in my life; it's pretty astounding how many tools there were in his toolbox. His journalism influenced his fiction, of course, and vice versa, and I'm sure what he saw of war and oppressions large and small gave him little patience for totalitarian regimes, small progressions toward that way of life, or the way even a supposedly benevolent state can slowly or quickly crush the spirit. That's always been an interest of mine, the fight between the individual and the machinery—governmental or corporate or otherwise—that grinds us up. I don't know, it's an interesting time right now, in that I think there's some pretty intense complicity in some of the aspects of technology that are openly dehumanizing and ultimately oppressive. The main operating force working against *Zeitoun* is one that Orwell explored a fair amount, which was the routineness of certain injustices and evils. It's not even banal, really, so much as it is routine, and driven by a lack of courage and imagination more than anything. The guards in charge of keeping *Zeitoun* in an outdoor cage couldn't imagine that he might be innocent. To allow for that possibility requires great courage, and of course any doubt in a guard's mind in the fallibility of the system might dismantle that system. The glue of the prison-industrial complex is the presumption that the system works. That is, that once a guard receives a prisoner, he must assume he's guilty. But what if that isn't true? What if no particular link in the chain can be relied upon?

**Shivani:** *Zeitoun* is a story of modern apocalypse—which in many ways is not limited to Hurricane Katrina or New Orleans, but continues in countless instances of indignities and violence, whether they get noticed or not—that refuses to fit the contours of apocalypse familiar from recent fiction and film. Should we rethink apocalypse? Do we miss something crucial about our reality if we don't?

**Eggers:** Katrina left New Orleans in an apocalyptic state, plain and simple. If you saw the Lower Ninth Ward, Gentilly, and Lakeview after Katrina, you saw apocalypse in the U.S. on a scale I don't think we've ever seen before. Maybe the burning of certain cities during the Civil War would compare, or the San Francisco or Chicago fires at the turn of the twentieth century. I don't know. So many New Orleanians suffer from post-traumatic symptoms, and it's no wonder. But I think the rest of the country is perhaps unwilling to recognize that New Orleanians quite literally experienced the end of their world. It's not something you get over in a few years.

**Shivani:** Where do you think the disregard for basic human rights procedures the American character has displayed in the last several years comes from? Do you see an end to this, or is the situation likely to build on momentum, so that we become more and more unrecognizable as a country? Have we already crossed the point of no return? *Zeitoun* is obviously a warning of worse yet to come; certain inherently illiberal (to put it mildly) tendencies inevitably come to the fore with the least instigation. Any future hurricane or natural disaster or terror attack seems sure to provoke similar intolerance, and lack of shame about it, as the residents of New Orleans experienced after Hurricane Katrina. Why isn't there an Army-McCarthy hearings moment?

**Eggers:** There's a fantastic book called *The Lucifer Effect*, by Philip Zimbardo, the man who designed the Stanford Prison Experiment back in the seventies. I know most people know about this experiment, but for those who might not: in that experiment, a bunch of average Stanford students were placed in a faux-prison setting, where some of them were told to be guards and some were told to be prisoners. They were to live that way in a closed dorm for a week or so. And though they weren't given a whole lot of rules or guidance to fill their new roles, they quickly devolved into a very base state, where the guards were sadistic and callous, and the prisoners had assumed their own guilt and status as entities less than human. This was all within a few days; the change in all of these students was so dramatic and quick that Zimbardo had to shut the experiment

down far ahead of schedule. So Zimbardo's book, written a few years ago, connects what happened in that experiment to what happened at Abu Ghraib, where you had a group of similarly young soldiers, also operating without any meaningful guidance. All the while, the soldiers were working within an overall atmosphere where Iraqis—prisoners or not—were regarded as something less than human. Young soldiers, I think, are incredibly impressionable, and if they're not given guidance about the preservation of human rights, and about the protocol when, say, kicking in the doors of Iraqi civilians, then things can devolve quickly and irrevocably. As they did at Abu Ghraib. Zimbardo is saying that there's a bit of the devil in all of us, and that complicity and silence might be the greatest enemy to human rights. And his thesis with the Stanford experiment and Abu Ghraib is that in both cases it's not that there are bad apples in the barrel, but that the barrel itself is bad. And for eight years under Bush, we were living in a very bad barrel. Zimbardo seems like an optimist, though, and I am, too. I believe that with good leadership, with role models showing us how to behave, there can be very positive and tangible trickle-down. That is, if you have a Bush-Cheney administration that is openly disdainful of the concept of human rights, the guards who were running Camp Greyhound, for example, have no incentive to act humanely. Unenlightened leadership can quickly grease the wheels of oppression at the lowest levels. On the other hand, Zimbardo talks about the importance of heroism on the individual level. His wife, actually, was the one who shut down the Stanford Prison Experiment. She walked in, saw that everything was horribly wrong, and she insisted that it be shut down. Zimbardo himself was too close to it, perhaps; so this outsider, his wife, had to call bullshit on what was happening. With Zeitoun, it took the apathy or complicity of hundreds of people to collaborate on this injustice. If one person stood up and questioned what was happening—one person with either courage or imagination or both—then his and other injustices would have been avoided or curtailed.

**Shivani:** How can the Zeitouns of the world be compensated? Their lives have been shattered, their psyches broken, the pieces impossible to put together again. In a country that places itself

above human rights accountability (unlike any other country), how does accountability begin?

**Eggers:** I think we have to do a certain amount of it ourselves, as individuals. Zeitoun has basically no chance of receiving restitution from any governmental body; that would set off a chain of events, most likely, that would bankrupt the state of Louisiana, given that there were hundreds if not thousands of men and women who were wrongfully arrested and incarcerated. So the government, in this situation, isn't thinking of what's right; they're thinking of what's practical. This goes for the compensation of most wrongfully convicted Americans; some states have no laws about restitution whatsoever, some states have certain rules and guidelines (including caps on compensation, like \$15,000 for every year in prison), but overall there's a concerted effort by all states not to compensate anyone wrongfully convicted or incarcerated. So we have to act as individuals. So the book's proceeds, in addition to going to the Zeitoun Foundation, are going to the Zeitoun family, and to Todd Gambino (who also did many months in prison). The Zeitouns and I thought Todd should get some money for the time he did, those months that were taken from him. And we're looking to do the same for the others arrested with Abdulrahman. It won't be anywhere near what they deserve, but it's a start.

**Shivani:** How did you change as a person and as a writer during the composition of *Zeitoun*?

**Eggers:** I have to admit that I never learn so well as I learn when I personally experience something. Nothing I read about Islam prepared me for the power and beauty of the actual text of the Qur'an, for example. And nothing I'd read about Syria prepared me for the incredible warmth of the people and the beauty of the coast in particular. I might have read about Islam or Muslim Americans or Camp Greyhound, but nothing could compare to becoming immersed. I just got off the phone with Abdulrahman a few minutes ago, and we were talking about reading the Qur'an, and how hearing about the Qur'an or getting it filtered through experts or whomever isn't quite the same thing. I've been urging people to pick up a recent translation by

Laleh Bakhtiar, which is a very faithful but also very accessible English translation. After reading the text, and also the text of the Hadith, it made me more frustrated about how Islam is portrayed and interpreted in the mainstream media. The text itself is so focused on human rights, and on compassion, empathy, charity and—this is so key—on the practical application of one’s faith, that it becomes clear that those who distort Islam for their own purposes, whether they’re Muslims or not, are going pretty far afield to do so. Reading the text, and having the Zeitouns discuss it and how it guides their lives, all that was life-changing.

**Shivani:** Tell us something about *Zeitoun’s* style. How did you keep the narrative focused so sharply on Abdulrahman and Kathy’s point of view? There would have been a natural temptation to smuggle in more information than necessary for the emotional arc of the narrative, yet you overcame it. I particularly liked the buildup, which splits the narrative into schismatic halves, in the way that broken lives can never entirely be healed. Until Zeitoun is arrested, the reader is struck by the pastoral calmness that defines New Orleans for this hardworking immigrant. And then come aspects of Abu Ghraib and Guantánamo, realities that we have unfortunately accepted as part of our lives for as long as we can see into the future. How does your style disrupt our satiated consciousness of these enormous and ongoing rapes of human dignity?

**Eggers:** Well, I cut a lot of passages that I was tempted to include. There were long passages about the contracting business, long passages about the Iran-Iraq war, long passages about the history of FEMA and Homeland Security. But I was determined to keep the focus on Abdulrahman and Kathy, and to avoid inserting my own thoughts about New Orleans or FEMA or Bush. So I had to keep it focused on what they knew and what they saw and felt. And Kathy’s role was a surprise. I went into the project not knowing how great a role Kathy would play. I knew that she was a strong personality and a great storyteller, but after a short while I was reminded of how much suffering is imposed on the family members of those wrongfully incarcerated. I edited a book a few years ago called *Surviving Justice*:

*America's Wrongfully Convicted and Exonerated*, and one of the major themes in the book was just how great the pain is for the family of the wrongfully incarcerated. There's just such collateral damage when someone in a family, especially a parent, is disappeared into the American prison system. You're really condemning an entire family to years of chaos, and possibly to a lifetime of mistrust and confusion and emotional devastation. As a society, we're so ready to throw people away—fathers, mothers, sons—and usually without any regard for the consequences. So in *Zeitoun*, it was essential that we spend a good deal of time with Kathy, alone, as she deals with weeks of wondering if, and then assuming, her husband is dead.

**Shivani:** Please evaluate what writers in this country have attempted in response to the massive political upheaval in this country since the turn of the millennium in terms of what you would have hoped or expected. What stands out in this output to you? What gives you hope? What frightens you?

**Eggers:** I think this is a golden age not so much for American writers—though it is a very good time for them, too—but for American audiences and publishers discovering, and developing a greater appetite for, writers from non-American or English origins. Khaled Hosseini deserves a good deal of the credit for that, given his work on the page and as an ambassador. Rushdie and Achebe and countless others brought non-Western worlds to American audiences, but Hosseini brought these worlds to contemporary book clubs, which I think are vitally important. He and others, Roberto Bolaño most recently, have opened audiences up to work by Chimamanda Adichie, Etgar Keret, Chris Abani—the list goes on. When you have the book clubs listening to non-Western voices, then real understanding becomes more plausible. I think there's a growing willingness for readers to say, Tell me something I don't already know.

**Shivani:** *Zeitoun* is a document of immense empathy, one of the boldest leaps of imagination I have encountered in response to the last decade of worldwide sadistic depravity. Did you accomplish in it everything you wanted to?

**Eggers:** Well, you're always left with the passages you didn't get into the book. Every day I think of another aspect to the Zeitouns that didn't make it into the text. When I got back from Syria, I had a hundred new pages in my head I thought should go into the book. But I wanted the book to be tight, as opposed to sprawling. I wanted the reader to feel the tension and the pain that the Zeitouns felt. And that meant keeping it lean and taut. And in the silences, the readers are allowed to insert themselves, their own thoughts and outrage.

**Shivani:** America ten years ago was a little boring, and very predictable. Uncertainty seems to be the defining characteristic now. Anyone might get pulled up on minor charges and enter a world of violent sadism from which there is no escape. This pervasive uncertainty was the most salient characteristic of the twentieth century's totalitarian regimes. The uncertainty is in some ways more frightening than wholesale violence. How did we end up this way?

**Eggers:** I think there are large segments of American society that have lived with this uncertainty since the country's inception. Native Americans certainly lived with the possibility of their extinction at any moment and with countless indignities and human rights violations that were visited upon them in the hundreds of years hence. And African-Americans have lived with uncertainty in many guises for centuries, and continue to live with uncertainty. And now it's Muslims, and immigrants, and gays. I'm really disappointed in our willingness at any given moment to find it acceptable to discriminate against a certain segment of our society. It's as if we say, Okay, discrimination against women was wrong, of course it was, sorry, what a blight on our history! But discrimination against blacks, well, that makes sense. Then twenty years later we say, Wow, what were we thinking? Discrimination on the basis of skin color? That was crazy. Madness. No more of that. But immigrants, gays, Muslims? Those folks, they're a bit less than the rest of us, right? We really have this odd amnesia about universal rights; we keep forgetting that equality must extend to everyone, not everyone except this one group.

**Shivani:** Abdulrahman is arrested at one of his own properties, with his identification on him. Recently, Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. was arrested in his own house. Does this point to a systematic rot to you, extending beyond the confluence of events in New Orleans?

**Eggers:** Professor Gates was arrested just around the time when *Zeitoun* was published, and the parallels hit me in the gut. Gates has been a hero of mine for a long time, and we're lucky enough to have him on the board of advisors for our educational nonprofit in Boston (826 Boston). If you had to conceive of a plotline in fiction to demonstrate just how screwy things are in our sense of the role of police and how far we have yet to go in race relations in America, you would not have a white Boston police officer arresting, in his home, the country's most famous and respected African-American professor. In fiction, it wouldn't work—it's too unbelievable. But it happened, and then, impossibly, somehow the debate turned into a fifty-fifty thing, where instead of there being ninety percent outrage, you had fifty percent of Americans saying, Well, Gates had it coming if he mouthed off to a police officer. I couldn't believe the debate took that turn, especially in a country so dedicated to property rights and the sanctity of a man's home. Gates was in his home! He has a right to yell or ask the cops to leave; he even has a right to kick the cops out the door. Once he proves he lives there, it's time for the police to go. He has a right to privacy. It's his home. But when the police feel that they have the power to arrest a man in the sanctity of his house because they don't like what he's saying, or they don't like his tone of voice, well, then things are upside down. Police who arrest people for hurting their feelings, for annoying them? It's ludicrous. What prevents two cops from showing up in my house tomorrow and, when I ask them to leave, accusing me of disorderly conduct? It's circular reasoning; they've caused the very problem they're arresting me for. But the thing is, I've personally had almost entirely positive experiences with police. I know the job is thankless and difficult. But we have got to get back to a place where we remember that the police work for us. These small abuses of power were what drove a good deal of the narrative of *Zeitoun*, and make possible far larger ones.

**Shivani:** How do Abdulrahman and Kathy Zeitoun and their children feel about your book?

**Eggers:** It's been fun to talk to them every few days about it all. Every day New Orleanians come up to them, shake their hands, have them sign the book. We've had to ship them hundreds of copies because they keep giving them to their neighbors and relatives. Abdulrahman is heading back to Syria to visit his family there, and he'll bring a bunch of copies of the book with him. The family is really proud, especially now that we know the book will be translated into Arabic. There's so much happening, so many good things with the Zeitouns. I think I've met about twenty-five of the Zeitouns here and in Spain and Syria, and I've never known a greater family; they've taught me immeasurably about how to live, and they deserve all happiness that might head their way.

## SONGS PRIMARILY IN THE KEY OF LIFE

### JACKET

Within every collection of vinyl LPs or compact discs, two different types of records are found: those dusty with neglect and those affectionately scratched. Among my scratchiest is a light funk-gospel album recorded in 1973 by the world's most infamous suicide cult.

It's a twelve-song collection, a mix of old spirituals, gospel-inspired originals, and a couple of late '60s Top 40 hits, all performed by a full choir and an eight-piece, blue-eyed soul outfit with a hot brass section. On the record jacket, the album's title is printed in austere white lettering: *He's Able*. The name comes from the chorus of an old revival-tent anthem, a sultry little call-and-response number that leads off the record's B-side. It's the kind of song you might hear one Sunday morning in the Deep South, the kind that's sung in a sunlit place where the women carry fans and the air is heavy with hallelujahs.

In the cover photo, we see the choir standing on the far side of a small pond, ninety or so people bunched along the shore, facing forward, small and individually indistinct against a wooded background. The women wear plain aqua-blue gowns, and the men are in black pants with light blue oxfords and dark ties. Racially, they're a mixed bag, about equal numbers black and white. I count no fewer than fifteen afros, hovering like halos around dark, smiling faces.

Although the photo shows the full chorus, not all of the choir members actually sing on the album—just a couple dozen. Their voices were multi-tracked in the studio, then played back on top of one another in order to give the impression of a fuller chorus. In fact, there's only one track on *He's Able* where we hear more than a few dozen voices raised simultaneously, and that's on the eventual "bonus" thirteenth track. Except in that instance, the voices aren't singing.

There are several small photos on the back of the jacket,

including another shot of the choir, this time crowded onto a wooded path. Their arms are raised above their heads in what looks like praise but could just as easily be surrender. In another photo is a young white man, handsome in a suit jacket and tie, his black hair parted neatly to the side and glistening slightly with pomade. He stands at a lectern with his eyes cast downward, his right hand resting casually along its wooden edge. The look on his face is serene and coolly regal, like that of a general before his troops. He's clutching an object that's half-cropped out of the photo and difficult to identify. If we look very closely, we can see that it's a pair of dark sunglasses.

Beneath the photo is a caption: "Our choir consists of people from all walks of life. We are dedicated to one common cause—making the humanistic teachings of Jesus Christ part of our daily lives. Our inspiration is a lifestyle demonstrated by our pastor, James W. Jones."

*He's Able* is out of print. Has been since 1978, when most of the singers and musicians featured on it killed themselves in the jungles of Guyana by drinking cyanide-laced Flavor Aid in what has come to be known as the Jonestown Massacre.

#### SIDE ONE

##### I. "Welcome" (1:32)

The first track on *He's Able* starts out jauntily, with just a snare drum and eight seconds of springy piano melody. It's the kind of twinkly theme that might play over the opening credits of a kiddie show on public television, the sound of primary colors and wobbly cartoon animals. Then the children's choir comes in, and it's like someone throwing a bucket of silverware down a laundry chute. They're yelling at top volume:

*Welcome, welcome all of you!  
Glad you are with us!  
Shake hands, no need to be blue!  
Welcome to you!*

Of the twelve official tracks on the album, "Welcome" is the only one to feature the Peoples Temple children's choir. It's a classic "filler track," like "Within You Without You" on *Sgt. Pepper's* or "Jigsaw Puzzle" on *Beggars Banquet*. Totally dis-

tinct from the album's overall sound, which otherwise has a sort of funk-rock timbre, a kind of Baptist-gospel-choir-meets-early-Doobie-Brothers vibe that involves neither school-recital piano melodies nor squadrons of screaming children. But when members of the California church known as Peoples Temple set out to record an album in the spring of 1973, they wanted to start it off in the same manner as their Holy Roller-style services, with a musical greeting from the congregation's youth. It made sense, given their expectation that the record would end up primarily in the hands of congregation members who couldn't make it to services. An advertisement for *He's Able* in the spring 1973 church newsletter reads, "Bring the service into your own home! You will close your eyes and imagine yourself right in the services of Peoples Temple with your Pastor, Jim Jones."

Don Beck directed the Temple children's choir for eight years. He says that singing "Welcome" was a tradition dating back to the church's early days in the late 1950s, when Peoples Temple was just a few dozen families gathering in a rented storefront in inner-city Indianapolis. Beck himself didn't join until 1970, five years after Jones moved his flock to rural northern California. He was a Peace Corps alum and a Bay-area seeker, a young bohemian attracted to the Temple by its commitment to racial integration and its opposition to the Vietnam War. Even today, Beck talks about *He's Able* in terms of pacifism and social justice.

"Listening to it takes you back to the days of Martin Luther King," he says. "Back to the days of singing 'We Shall Overcome.'"

After Beck joined the Temple, he dropped out of grad school at Berkeley. He moved to the church's headquarters in Redwood Valley, a small town north of San Francisco where Temple members were experimenting with communal living. Once there, he recalls being put in charge of the children's choir somewhat arbitrarily. At the time, the church pianist had her hands full with a few dozen kids in Redwood Valley, plus another seventy or so who showed up each week at the Temple's San Francisco services. Beck was a former architecture student with no musical background. He couldn't hold a tune, but he'd worked with kids in the Peace Corps, and he had a knack for corralling them, for

holding their attention. He'd been working with the Temple's tutoring program when the pianist approached him for help, and the next thing he knew, the young San Fran peacenik was the Peoples Temple's junior choir director.

"I always did love waving my hands around," he says.

Only about twenty-five kids made it onto the *He's Able* record album. We can see them in a series of photos on the back of the record jacket, a gaggle of multiracial children between four and twelve years old. They're wearing earphones, facing a set of area mics, standing and squatting and grinning wildly in the manner of an elementary school class photo. The setting is a Los Angeles recording studio called Producer's Workshop. Long-since closed, the studio was a low-rent, ground-floor affair, wedged next to an X-rated theater on a dicey stretch of Hollywood Boulevard. Its youngest sound engineer in 1973 was a twenty-three-year-old techie named Bob Schaper, whose lack of seniority got him assigned to man the boards during the half-dozen Saturdays of cut-rate, after-hours sessions that resulted in *He's Able*.

Schaper still recalls the pandemonium the night the kids' choir came in to record "Welcome." Producer's Workshop was a real geek's lair, a cramped dungeon with a nonetheless killer recording setup. It was ornamented humbly with ashtrays, carpet squares, and LP covers. The studio lacked room for even a couch or a coffee maker, much less a thirty-child chorus, so between takes, the kids would fan out across the tiny complex in search of sleeping space. They sprawled in cabinets, hallways, and bathrooms, piling up on every available surface like the cigarette butts overflowing the ashtrays.

"There were just so many bodies," Schaper says innocently. "Everywhere I looked there were children's bodies."

This is an unfortunate turn of phrase, as it inevitably calls to mind the more than three hundred children who were fed potassium cyanide when Peoples Temple self-destructed five years later, in November of 1978. It's a common problem when discussing the Temple: Even in a context that ostensibly avoids the topic of Jonestown, the 918 people who died there linger behind every conversation like the barely heard remnants of a root language. It's difficult to talk at length about the church,

its members, or its history without stumbling blindly into some sort of grisly double entendre. But this difficulty is also a central part of what makes *He's Able* such an enigmatic artifact.

"Welcome" crashes along for a couple of minutes, the pianist allowing herself a few ragtimey embellishments here and there, the kids' already shrill voices giving way to something like screaming on the higher notes. Then a quick snare roll, the satisfying chink of a closed hi-hat, and one final unison howl:

*Welcome!*

## 2. "Walking with You Father" (2:58)

There is a sound that a very fast car makes when it takes off from a dead stop with its radio blasting the oldies station. It's not the scree of squealed tires or the clangity-clang of the Lovin' Spoonful, but a precise and high-frequency tremolo that's born of their combination, just as water is formed from the mixture of hydrogen and oxygen. It's the sort of sound that prompts demure girls in letter jackets to laugh with their heads back and tug suggestively at their skirts, and it's amplified if the car in question has no top or if it's heading out on the first leg of a long road trip. "Walking with You Father" sounds a lot like this.

It's a rocker, the first track on *He's Able* to feature the full band. Culled straight from the pews, the Peoples Temple band was a rotating ensemble of amateurs who dabbled in a kind of light-FM blues-rock. The lead guitar lines on the album are twangy and clean, somewhere between the Delta and the sock-hop. The piano is tin-pan jangly. The soloists jive and croon over a tight bedrock of bass and brass, drums and organ. It's all very early seventies West Coast rock, a lot of syncopation and a sort of show-band zeal, except for the choir itself, which sounds just a twinge too earnest, just a shade too *white* to really fall in with the band's primitive funkiness. And the effect of this is totally endearing, like hearing a middling-but-enthusiastic marching band fart its way through "Proud Mary."

"Walking with You Father" comes in on a rollicking ten-second guitar riff, the kind that might cue a concert audience to whoop in recognition. It's the only place in the piano-, organ-, and brass-driven number where an electric guitar even appears, but it's the first time we hear an axe on *He's Able*, and the man wielding it is the man responsible for the record itself.

Jack Arnold Beam is credited as arranger and producer on the album's promo materials, but most Temple members knew him simply as Jack Arnold. His middle name was invoked to differentiate him from his dad, Jack Beam Sr., whom Jim Jones took on as his first associate pastor in 1955. Growing up in Indianapolis, Jack Arnold used to watch as his father and Jones preached to rental halls full of white folks and black folks alike, a nearly unheard of phenomenon then and there. He saw the crowds swell as Jones's star rose, witnessed the healings that made him famous—the bloody tumors passed in church bathrooms, the wheelchair-bound parishioners leaping to their feet in praise. Jack Arnold heard the sermons about brotherhood and justice, the ones that seemed to pierce you with a bright and focused light, and he heard the ones about revolution and conspiracy, sermons that always went down better when followed by an extravagant healing or two.

He was a musician and, like any pastor's kid, a bit of a rebel. When he turned eighteen in 1963, he left Peoples Temple in Indiana and moved with a bandmate to the Bay Area hinterland of Hayward, California. Jack Arnold got a job in an auto factory there, and he played guitar at night in a pop trio, gigging around San Francisco and Oakland while the California rock scene was in its infancy. The trio became a five-piece with the memorable handle of Stark Naked and the Car Thieves. Eventually, the band struck out for LA, and for four years, Jack Arnold played the SoCal club scene alongside groups that would become emblematic of the California sound: Buffalo Springfield, Love, Three Dog Night. Stark Naked never hit the big time, but they did manage to sign with a Hollywood-based label in 1967, just a few months before Jack Arnold left the band. American Variety International was also home to Liberace and Debbie Reynolds. It owned the rights to pop songs like "Tainted Love" and "Dirty Water." And it managed a slapdash but storied recording studio on Hollywood Boulevard called Producer's Workshop.

The chorus of "Walking with You Father" has this great organ part floating around in the background. It's wild and unrestrained and not completely on key, and when I hear it, I picture a googly-eyed monster from *The Muppet Show* band just wailing away on a Wurlitzer or a Hammond B-3. It's like a carnival

anthem on fast-forward, a series of whirring, scattershot chords as a pair of hands bounce with only vague intention from one assemblage of keys to the next. Above it, a pair of dueling divas channel their best Aretha Franklins, proclaiming:

*Wash us! Fill us!  
Cleanse us with your power!  
While we're walking with you Father!*

Jack Arnold wrote that chorus, the music and lyrics. In his eventual capacity as Peoples Temple's band and choir director, he wrote about half the songs on *He's Able*. The Temple had been in California for five years already when Jack Arnold abandoned a post-Stark Naked project to head to college in the Bay Area in 1969. He settled near Redwood Valley to be close to his family, and his takeover of the Temple's music program was almost a foregone conclusion. If *He's Able* sounds like an obscure '70s gospel-soul LP plucked from a crate at a retro-hip vinyl shack—and not like a plodding liturgical sing-along—this can be attributed almost solely to Jack Arnold.

A case in point about those awkward double entendres: It's hard to listen to "Walking with You Father" without suspecting that the choir is singing not about a god-in-heaven, but instead about their pastor Jim Jones. By 1973, Temple members were already referring to Jones as "Father" or just "Dad." The young, raven-haired preacher had not yet begun claiming to be a god himself, but he was regularly described in church materials and members' testimonials as having god-like abilities. In the same Temple newsletter that first announces the release of *He's Able*, Jones is alternately attributed the power of telepathy, the ability to speak in several languages at once, and the ability to walk on water. Of course, he's credited with a number of miraculous healings as well, and several of these flirt rather provocatively with necromancy.

Whoever they're singing to, the soloists on "Walking with You Father" hold forth with a furious enthusiasm. It's easily the record's most upbeat track. I like to picture the choir while they're belting out the song's crescendo, the last four syllables of the title held for a few measures and flourishing at forte while the band pounds out an Allman Brothers-style, cacophonous

ending. They've got their arms raised, their eyes lifted to the studio's dingy tiled ceiling. Jack Arnold stands in front, waving his arms like a half-mad maestro, demanding *more, more!* The sound swells until it fills the room, until the coffee mugs atop nearby amps begin to tremble and clink. A wisp of cigarette smoke curls out of the booth, where the young engineer Bob Schaper looks on appreciatively. Then Jack Arnold makes a quick circular motion with his hands, closes his palms to fists, and the room goes silent.

3. "Set Them Free" (2:31)

4. "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" (3:29)

5. "Hold On, Brother" (2:29)

The next three tracks on *He's Able* collectively make up the heart and soul of the record. Together, they form a sort of social justice triptych that reflects not just the Temple's commitments, but also the musical environment from which *He's Able* emerged. Soul music in 1973 was at the height of its influence as both a pop music format and an outlet for social justice rhetoric, particularly for black America. Albums like Curtis Mayfield's *Superfly* soundtrack and Stevie Wonder's *Innervisions* had cemented soul as a genre distinct from the rhythm and blues that had dominated black popular music since the 1950s. Soul embraced aspects of gospel music that were understated or wholly lacking in R&B—a penchant for call-and-response, a fondness for pitch-wavering melisma. But above all, soul music took on gospel's agency, its testimonial mission. The music of artists like Mayfield, Wonder, Aretha Franklin, and James Brown sermonized on secular themes of civil rights and social justice, just as surely as gospel music praised the Lord and doled out the divine revelation. If gospel was the wailing preacher at his pulpit, then soul was the street-corner prophet, hopped up on rhythm and clutching his microphone in a clenched fist.

All of which dovetailed nicely with the mission of Peoples Temple. From its inception, the Temple had been as much a social enterprise as a spiritual one, founded on principles of charity and racial equality—its unofficial motto was "Brotherhood Is Our Religion." Back in Indianapolis, the church had been as renowned for its soup kitchens and nursing homes as it was vilified for its integrated congregation. Temple members had organized

high-profile boycotts of the city's segregated businesses. They'd funded mission work abroad. In 1960, Jones was even appointed chair of the Indianapolis Human Rights Commission.

Almost as soon as they'd settled in California, Peoples Temple became a leader among the state's charitable and social justice organizations. They were awarded government contracts to run in-home care programs for recovering addicts and the elderly. The church established foster homes for Bay Area orphans and delinquents, paid college tuition for its younger members, even established its own Temple-run dorms. When members organized write-in campaigns supporting civil rights and other causes, they churned out letters to newspapers and state leaders with a fervor that made the ACLU look like the John Birch Society. By 1973, the Temple had a reputation throughout California as an offbeat but powerfully benevolent social force.

All of this noble ambition is distilled into a certain silkiness, a serenity and confidence that characterizes the vocals on "Set Them Free" and "Hold On, Brother." The female soloist on the former track sounds a lot like Maureen McGovern, tightrope-walking a thin line between innocent and coquettish as she sings about how love will set us free, about "giving to those who need a change of mind." There's a saxophone solo in "Set Them Free" that might have come right off a film noir soundtrack—it's slow and deliberate, almost erotic in its hesitancy. In "Hold On, Brother," another soprano soloist builds gradually to a climactic trilling of the title line, a near-orgasmic a cappella cry that would have Paula Abdul weeping through her mascara. If there's a theme running through these tracks, it's that social justice is *sexy*.

Far and away, though, my favorite track on *He's Able* is "Walk a Mile in My Shoes." It's the record's first cover, a hot-buttered soul spin on the Joe South country rock tune that reached #12 on the pop chart and eventually fell into Elvis Presley's Vegas repertoire. This kind of dabbling in the Top 40 canon was common in Peoples Temple liturgy. Their typical songbook looked like a cross between a Baptist hymnal and a playlist on the oldies station, accommodating, for example, Burt Bacharach's "What the World Needs Now" and Bob Dylan's "Blowin' in the Wind." Still, it's not the song choice that makes this track a winner. It's the singer.

Melvin Johnson was in his mid-twenties and living on the streets in San Francisco when a shoestring cousin brought him to Peoples Temple around 1969. He'd spent most of his young adulthood behind bars. With a set of parole papers, an estranged daughter, and nothing to lose, Johnson gave himself to the church. He became a constant presence at the San Francisco temple, volunteering as a driver for the Temple's bus fleet and eventually joining the choir. He found a job driving a cab, and he saved his paychecks while members in the Temple communes signed theirs over to the church. Most importantly, Peoples Temple gave Johnson a family again. By the time he was singing on *He's Able* in 1973, Melvin Johnson had married long-time Temple member Wanda Kice. And not only was his daughter back in his life, he had three new stepsons too, from Wanda's previous marriages.

But the singer who pours himself into the mic on "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" is no work-a-day churchgoing family man, no meek Sunday-morning Joe. From the second he lets loose with his first melodic moan—a velvety *oooh yea-eah-eah*—you can tell that this is a brother who's been there. Somebody who's worn a pair of shoes you might think twice about stepping into. Johnson's got pipes, channeling a non-falsetto Al Green when he sings lines like

*Well, I may be common people but I'm your brother  
and when you strike out and try to hurt me, it's hurting you.*

As a listener, you just can't help but buy it. You can't help but think that this is a guy who believes every word he's singing, that the lyrics mean more to him than they did to Joe South or Elvis. Even Johnson's breathy vocalizations come from someplace deeper than those of any polished radio crooner. The band is cooking too, and musically, this rendition gives the others a run for their money. It's a straight-up specimen of authentic soul, and it banishes for a time even the hint of a thought about Kool-Aid or cults or bodies piled up in the jungle.

That's what's ultimately so impressive about the church-choir proto-funk on *He's Able*. You put it on bemused, expecting some sort of haunting historical document. Then you press play, and the music comes at you like a confetti explosion, all

crashing piano chords and fret-shimmying electric guitar. And you don't hear a group of religious fanatics whose zealotry will culminate in the Jonestown Massacre. You don't hear a cult at all—just a great gospel-rock band and choir who sound like they're having a hell of a time.

Which is kind of a big deal, when you figure that there are stacks of Peoples Temple literature out there devoted to drumming up just that kind of empathy. Since Jonestown, dozens of books, articles, documentary films, and even theatrical plays have attempted to fix their audiences' gaze beyond the Jonestown suicides, banishing the image of the cult in favor of portraying real people with real motivations. It's just a tough cerebral move to make, blocking out all those corpses in order to understand the Temple members as something other than sinister zombies or tragic sheep—as passionate, fallible, well-intentioned individuals.

But put on the record and play a couple of tracks, and with the right ear, you understand it instantly. All that good intention, all that humanity that struggles to make itself known in the books and the movies, you can hear it plain as day in the first up-tempo boogie-woogie piano scale; you can hear it in the tinny snare rolls of an overeager drummer, and in the cool, throaty *mmm hmmm*s and *oh yeahs* of a riffing soloist. It's all right there—everything that drew these people in, everything they wanted to accomplish, everything they failed at. It comes out of your stereo speakers like a sunbeam through a stained-glass window. And it sort of breaks your heart.

#### 6. “Down from His Glory” (2:58)

There are fewer degrees of separation between *He's Able* and mainstream rock-and-roll history than you might immediately suspect. Consider, for example, that a post-Steely Dan, pre-Doobie Brothers Michael McDonald took a turn as a keyboardist for Stark Naked and the Car Thieves just two years after Jack Arnold left the band. Or that Producer's Workshop, where Temple members pulled all-night recording sessions, once hosted Elvis Presley and would later capture several tracks for Pink Floyd's *The Wall*. By the time he went into the studio with the Temple band and choir, the young recording engineer Bob

Schaper had already rubbed shoulders with folks like James Taylor, Linda Ronstadt, and Carly Simon.

Schaper still recalls the *He's Able* sessions fondly. By 1973, the Temple had expanded into Los Angeles, and the band and choir members spent weekends busing between services in Redwood Valley, San Francisco, and LA. They'd file into the LA studio on Saturday nights, road-weary but well-rehearsed. Jack Arnold directed the group while Schaper settled into the booth to man the console. As Schaper tells it, Producer's Workshop was sort of the *Millennium Falcon* of recording studios. It was jerry-rigged from top to bottom, the equipment stripped down, tinkered with, and rewired by one of the studio's brilliant-but-unorthodox engineers. The resulting sound was the envy of audio geeks across LA, but the postage-stamp studio was no Abbey Road. It was crudely soundproofed and absurdly located, so that people working elsewhere in the building had to cut through on their way to the bathroom. During takes, Schaper had to turn off the air conditioning so the mics wouldn't pick up the sound of its sputtering motor.

In that chaotic atmosphere, the Temple members put down a couple of tracks each week, sometimes working until dawn while Schaper cut and spliced the tape by hand. It was a scene set for flaring tempers and impatient outbursts.

"But they were all just sweethearts," Schaper remembers. He had never heard of Peoples Temple before he was assigned the job, and he was struck by their attitude and behavior. "Honestly, they seemed to embody everything you would want in a religious community. They were integrated. Their attitude was loving. They were relaxed, with no 'cult' qualities at all—not paranoid, not off-putting, not exclusive."

Then something changed. After an initial couple of weeks in the studio, Schaper started noticing that the demeanor of the ordinarily laid-back band and choir members would transform whenever Jim Jones came up in conversation. They'd get a little edgy, a little more solemn. At the mention of their pastor's name, adult choir members would go straight-faced and correct their posture. Then one night, the group's anxiety seemed to swell. They wanted to review the previous weeks' tapes, and they bickered over their quality. They seemed distressed by the

studio's regular disarray and started sweeping the floors, emptying the ashtrays. Suddenly, everything had to be perfect. The following week, Schaper realized, Jones himself was scheduled to record.

Jim Jones was nearing the height of his influence in 1973. For eighteen years, he'd worked to build Peoples Temple from an obscure Indianapolis sect to a twenty-five-hundred-member mega-church known up and down the California coast. Like the grapevines that dominated the Redwood Valley landscape, Jones's blend of evangelical Christianity and leftist politics had taken root and spread. From the pulpit, he preached a sort of New Testament communalism, heavy on brotherly love, but absent the much-derided Christian "sky god." He quoted Marx alongside scripture, stressing the former in front of younger parishioners and the latter before the more traditional, elderly black members who made up the congregation's majority. Christianity meant love, Jones told his flock, a love best expressed in the principles of socialism. And Jones claimed that he himself was the living embodiment of those principles.

He'd always been a weird kid, former neighbors would explain years later—not dangerous, but fond of spending time with freight-train hobos and known to preside over elaborate funerals for neighborhood pets. Jim Sr. was a drunk who'd been injured by mustard gas in World War I, so the Joneses got by on a disability pension, along with whatever odd jobs Lynetta Jones could pick up. If you believe his own stories, Jones showed a racial sensitivity as a teen that was rare in Indiana in the 1940s—he supposedly quit his high school basketball team when a coach used racial epithets, and he once left a barber-shop half-trimmed when he realized the place was whites-only. Disdain for segregation, he often said, was what led him to the church.

In the early, rental-hall days of the Temple, Jones worked multiple jobs to support his ministry. He'd been a hospital orderly in Indianapolis and for a time sold pet monkeys door-to-door for extra income. When Temple members first arrived in California, Jones taught high school classes during the day and adult civics courses at night. He had, after all, a pretty massive family to support—between 1953 and 1961, he and his wife, Marceline,

adopted five kids and gave birth to one, a multi-ethnic brood that the Joneses referred to as their “rainbow family.”

By the early '70s, Jones was able to devote himself full-time to the pulpit and the Temple's social enterprises. Evangelism itself was a full-time job. The pastor recorded a popular weekly radio show, and every couple of months he'd hit the road with the band and choir in the Temple buses, preaching to crowds across the country and gathering converts to bring back to Redwood Valley. Jones cut an odd profile at the lectern, a stocky thirty-something, robed and prone to wild gesticulation, his baby face framed by a slick-but-subtle pompadour, eyes hidden behind a trademark pair of tinted sunglasses. And his message was no less jarring. “I'm a nigger!” he once proclaimed to a Philadelphia audience. “I'm a nigger until everybody is free. Till everybody that's treated niggardly is free. . . . I don't care if you're an Italian nigger, or you're Jewish or an Indian, the only people that are getting anything in this country are the people that got the money, baby!”

But Jones made an effort not to scare off the straights, not entirely, by tempering his message with the trappings of traditional Protestant Christianity. It's why we end side one with “Down from His Glory,” a three-minute cockroach in the candy dish that is *He's Able*. It's the only song on the record that comes straight out of the hymnal, a cantata written in the 1920s by an evangelist whose granddad founded the Salvation Army. The melody is borrowed from “O Sole Mio,” an Italian love song recorded regularly by Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, and most any other operatic tenor worth his salt. Even Elvis sang it, sort of, adapting the tune for his post-war comeback hit “It's Now or Never.”

Jim Jones is no Pavarotti, and he's no Elvis either. The song's only accompaniment is some crushingly thick organ and piano, and if Jones can hear them, you'd never know it. He seems to want to sing at a completely different tempo. His voice is a not altogether unlistenable baritone, but he plods heavily through each syllable, laying the vibrato on so thick, you'd think he was performing from the comfort of an electric massage chair. The song utterly lacks soul. For all Jones's efforts to identify with the black community, his performance on *He's Able* makes Pat Boone look like Isaac Hayes. When he hits the hymn's octave-jumping

crescendo—*Now all God's fullness / dwelleth in Him!*—you can almost hear neighborhood dogs howling. More than anything, Jones's contribution sounds like a parody of Christian choral music, and since the preacher didn't actually believe in a biblical "sky god," that's kind of exactly what it was.

"He seemed like a complete wacko," recalls Schaper. "Came in with bodyguards, never took off the sunglasses during the entire session. I knew a lot of rock stars at the time, and they didn't act like that." Jones recorded "Down from His Glory" in just two takes.

It's tough to say when power started going to his head. You could argue that megalomania isn't something that sets in, that it's always present in one manner or another. But some former Temple members swear that, early on, Jones was everything he made himself out to be—gentle, charitable, without pretension or prejudice. By the time the Temple was laying down *He's Able*, though, Jones was revealing tendencies toward paranoia and sadism. In Redwood Valley, he'd instituted weekly "catharsis sessions" in which Temple members publicly aired grievances with one another, then doled out Jones-approved punishments. Often these would be sexual in nature—like standing naked before the group for public ridicule—but they also included beatings with garden hoses and forced bare-knuckle boxing matches. Temple members were encouraged and eventually commanded to break ties with family and friends outside the church. Jones, meanwhile, began sexual relationships with more and more members of his congregation, men and women alike, all while delivering edicts from the pulpit that alternately demanded celibacy and encouraged free love.

All of this took place in relative secrecy, as far as the public was concerned. Only vague rumors circulated outside the church, as former members quietly told stories of latent racism and the cruel punishments administered by the church's nearly all-white "planning commission." In 1972, a few community leaders in San Francisco started raising questions about Temple finances, about the legality of its sprawling social enterprises and the legitimacy of Jones's faith healings. That fall, a series of mildly critical articles in the *San Francisco Examiner* sent Jones's paranoia into overdrive. He started insisting that dangerous parties were plotting to bring the Temple down. Dis-

grunted former members were in cahoots with journalists and law enforcement, maybe even with the government. Enemies were everywhere, Jones said, and the Temple needed to stay one step ahead.

In October of 1973, just five months after the release of *He's Able*, the Temple planning commission gathered in a conference room in Redwood Valley to debate a series of "suggested long range plans," strategies that would help the Temple evade its perceived enemies, allow its members to flee to safety at "the first sounds of outright persecution from press or government." Unanimously, they adopted Church Resolution 73-5, authorizing the establishment of an agricultural mission in the South American country of Guyana.

#### SIDE TWO

7. "He's Able" (3:21)

8. "Something Got a Hold of Me" (3:25)

9. "Because of Him" (3:31)

You don't hear nearly enough cowbell in traditional gospel music. The steady clanking that introduces the album's title track is like an invocation, a wood-on-metal muezzin's call heralding the record's B-side. Accompanied by a few purposeful piano chords, it breaks through the white noise of needle-on-vinyl with bright, blunt clarity.

All the percussion instruments on *He's Able* were played by teenagers, the cowbell as well as the drum kit that comes crashing in a few seconds later. Drummers were in short supply among Temple members, and Jack Arnold figured he could train a few teens on the skins faster than he could teach a full-grown adult. Among the drummers was sixteen-year-old Lew Jones, a South Korean boy whom Jim and Marceline had adopted at age two. Another drummer was Danny Pietila, whose mother, Wanda, had recently been remarried to Melvin Johnson, the soul-man soloist on "Walk a Mile in My Shoes."

These three opening songs draw more deeply from the gospel well than anything else on the record, each one relying on the robust pipes of a strong female soloist. On "He's Able," twenty-five-year-old Shirley Smith delivers the song's staccato refrain in a husky alto—*Don't-you-know-God-is-able?*—while Jack Arnold bends guitar notes around her like a juke joint pro. It's

a hokey comparison, but she actually sounds a lot like Ja'net DuBois singing *The Jeffersons* theme. "Something Got a Hold of Me," meanwhile, is practically a vaudeville number, an old spiritual about a nonbeliever at a revival meeting, complete with jubilant horn charts and a probably pubescent drummer pounding out Gary Glitter drum beats on the toms. The singer is fifty-three-year-old Ruth Coleman, who spent her childhood in the hill-blues country of Mississippi before moving to LA. In her improvised vocalizing you can hear echoes of California's gravel-throated gospel great James Cleveland, who recorded the song in 1959.

The first time I heard "Something Got a Hold of Me" was in a touring documentary play called *The People's Temple*, and it was a perfect example of how the music on *He's Able* can seem weirdly unencumbered by the events that came after. The song came just before the close of the first act, and the audience, knowing full-well how the final scenes were going to play out, nonetheless got totally swept up in the thing. They clapped along, and in the lobby at intermission, they bobbed their heads, singing cheerfully to themselves like they'd just stepped out of a Rodgers and Hammerstein musical. If they'd heard the song an hour later, I wondered, after sitting through the show's grim climax, would it still have sounded the same?

Any former member will tell you, the genuine songbird of Peoples Temple was Deanna Wilkinson, the soloist on "Because of Him." Her name comes up a lot in Peoples Temple literature, since she was, from the church's early days, one of the star musical attractions at Temple services and events. Together with Shirley Smith, she's one of the two "dueling divas" on "Walking with You Father," and she's the slinky chanteuse on "Hold On, Brother" as well. As one former member explains in *The People's Temple* play, "When Deanna sang, people were into it, man. Nobody ever got tired of hearing Deanna Wilkinson sing."

"She was so soulful," remembers Laura Johnston Kohl. Kohl was a member of the Temple choir from 1970 to 1978, and she sang alongside Wilkinson during the *He's Able* recording sessions. "She'd been through so much, that when she sang, it just broke your heart."

Wilkinson was born to a white mother and a black father in Chicago in 1950, and one of them poured a pot of boiling water onto her before she was six months old. She received skin grafts to the left side of her face and body that left her mildly disfigured for the rest of her life. Wilkinson went into social service custody before her first birthday, and she was adopted soon after by an Indianapolis couple who joined the fledgling Peoples Temple in the mid-'50s. Wilkinson's adopted family followed the Temple to California in the mid-'60s, and the teenager made the move not long after.

Outgoing and naturally pitch-perfect, she started wowing the congregation as soon as she was old enough to join the Temple choir. She took piano lessons from the church organist, Loretta Cordell, a longtime member who also directed the choir before Jack Arnold's return from Hollywood. Cordell was white, thirteen years Wilkinson's senior, and had been with the Temple since its inception in 1955. She had married into another Temple family, and she was raising five kids at the time the church was packing up for California. Most Sundays, she and Wilkinson performed together at Temple services, the organist accompanying her friend on songs like "Summertime" or "Hold On, Brother." Sometimes they performed duets on piano and organ. Gradually, the two women learned to communicate using the musicians' language of sidelong glances and subtle nods, and as Wilkinson grew into adulthood, that musical relationship evolved into something more. By the time they were recording together at Producer's Workshop in 1973, Wilkinson and Cordell were one of the only openly gay couples in the Temple.

It's hard to imagine another church in 1973 welcoming an interracial lesbian couple separated by thirteen years. And the awareness of this—the performers' mindfulness of their own uniquely unconditional acceptance—is the vacuum tube through which every note on *He's Able* is amplified.

"We started collecting people," says Kohl, "people who had enough of life's experiences that it just made our vocals more and more far-reaching and outstanding."

"Because of Him" is a down-tempo number, and the band plays with all the restraint of prom balladeers during the slow dance. The piano is most prominent, with Wilkinson's voice drifting lazily through the foreground. It's the voice of a singer

who has implicit trust in her accompanist, enough to take her time, to dwell a little at the end of phrases and come in at will on either the upbeat or the down. Listening to it, it's easy to envision Cordell and Wilkinson in the studio, the pianist seated at an aging upright piano, its sides scuffed from careless shuffling around the confined room. She rocks back and forth a little as she plays, glancing up every few measures at Wilkinson. The singer stands at the mic, cupping an earphone to the scarred side of her face. In my imagining, she doesn't smile, just stares straight ahead. She's wearing a sundress the color of a tequila rose, orange with swirls of lavender, and she sings so closely into the mic that it presses against her bottom lip. It's an image stolen directly from the only video I've seen of Wilkinson, one in which she's standing at the center of a pavilion, singing to a crowd of clapping, dancing people on the last night in Jonestown.

#### 10. "Simple Song of Freedom" (4:16)

Former teen idol Bobby Darin wrote "Simple Song of Freedom" during his "conscious phase" at the end of the '60s, after he grew a mustache and started asking people to call him "Bob." It's an example of the sort of wincingly earnest protest-pop you might hear behind a *Wonder Years* montage, the kind since quarantined to Time-Life compilations sold on late-night television. Keeping with the conventions of the genre, the melody is nothing your average pot-smoker can't strum in his dorm room, and the lyrics are of the sing-song, heart-on-your-sleeve variety. *Let it fill the air / tell the people everywhere . . . I just want to be / someone known to you as me.*

The song was a minor radio hit in 1969, as recorded by the hugely underrated B-list folkie and heroin addict Tim Hardin. All the same, you don't hear "Simple Song" much on the oldies station these days. Where "The Times They Are a-Changin'" or "Turn! Turn! Turn!" have retained a few shreds of post-Flower Children gravitas, any weight that was once behind "Simple Song" has sort of up and evaporated with time. What Darin's peacenik anthem lacks is the same intangible quality that gives *He's Able* its appeal, that near-mystic property that allows a piece of music to transcend its historical circumstances. "Simple Song" isn't a bad tune; it's just grown up to become the bubble-

gum of protest folk—catchy as hell, and chock-full of delicious, empty calories.

The subject matter must have been irresistible for Peoples Temple, though, as Darin left no injustice unsung. In a sort of hit parade of social ills, “Simple Song” touches on poverty, racism, and war—even hints a little obliquely at environmental inequality. It stands out on *He’s Able* as the only track where Jack Arnold employs a wah pedal, and I picture the straight-laced pastor’s kid grinning and rocking on his heels a little while he funks out the opening chords. The soloist who comes in a few bars later is a pastor’s kid himself, a reasonably good tenor named Norman Ijames, who delivers Darin’s snappy bromides with a noticeable lack of vocal frills. Ijames flubs the lyrics here and there, sounding charmingly oblivious as he garbles a line like “Leave us be, those who want to sing” into something that sounds like “Leave us be, who he we want to swerve.” He sings with a sort of nervous directness, like a guy who’s staring straight ahead, just clutching the sheet music with both hands and trying to hang in there until it’s over. So it’s hard not to laugh a little right before the final chorus, when Ijames seems to realize that he’s made it and lets out a celebratory little “Hey!” He starts building steam, then, heading into the last refrain, and for the song’s last fifty-five seconds, he’s a whole different singer, humming intros to each line and sliding soulfully across the notes, cutting loose with all the abandon of someone who’s seen the light at the end of the tunnel.

Norman Ijames was twelve years old when his dad, Archie, agreed to become Jones’s first black associate pastor in 1956. He’d been an infant when his father had the crisis of faith that prompted him to resign the pulpit at a North Carolina church, moving his family to Indianapolis and taking a job in construction. Archie met Jim Jones a decade later, and the young Pentecostal’s charisma and opposition to segregation gave him a spiritual shot in the arm. Peoples Temple brought Norman’s dad back into the ministry, and over the next twenty years, the Ijames family became trusted members of Jones’s inner circle.

Archie was fiercely loyal to his friend and head pastor, but he occasionally condemned the harsh punishments doled out as “catharsis” by Jones and his planning commission, and that

criticism probably helped Archie earn his appointment as the Temple's first man-on-the-ground in Guyana. In December of 1973, Jones sent him to South America to clear the bureaucratic hurdles that stood between the Temple and their agricultural commune. On Jones's orders, Archie leased a plot of land from the Guyanese government deep in the country's jungle interior, some two hundred miles from the capital of Georgetown. A few months later, he was joined there by a handful of his younger parishioners, and together they began clearing land for the village that would become known as Jonestown.

Twenty-nine-year-old Norman didn't make it to Guyana until a year after his dad's deployment. He'd earned his pilot's license at an age when most people are still learning to drive stick, making some of his earliest long-distance flights between Indianapolis and California to scout out sites for the then-growing church. With the establishment of Jonestown, Norman became the Temple's pilot-in-residence, flying supplies and settlers in chartered planes to a remote airstrip in the nearby Guyanese town of Port Kaituma. When he landed there in December of 1974, he was carrying his first load of Jonestown pioneers.

Personal accounts from Jonestown's original pilgrims suggest that many considered the earliest days of the village to be among the best of their lives. The settlers spent long days building cabins and clearing roads. They raised a few crops and some livestock, working toward self-sufficiency and supplementing their harvest with bulk staples of grains and rice. It wasn't *Gilligan's Island* exactly—comforts were few and the work was demanding—but the settlers' reliance on one another seemed to cultivate just that spirit of brotherhood that Temple members had long preached. They were free from racism and classism in the US, free also from the Temple's constant evangelical demands, from the ominous threat of "catharsis." At night, they looked up at a billion-star sky.

As in the recording studio, it wasn't until Jones himself showed up that things began to sour. As envoy between Jonestown and the US, Norman Ijames was able to witness firsthand both the steady evolution of the jungle community and the Temple's sudden decline back in California. Peoples Temple in the mid-'70s had continued to grow in both size and visibility, and as it did, Jones's political influence soared. Rosalynn

Carter staged a conference and photo-op with Jones during her husband's 1976 presidential campaign. San Francisco mayor George Moscone appointed him to the city's powerful Housing Authority the same year. The Temple was a sizable voting bloc, and more than one Bay Area politician owed his position to their active campaigning.

What touched off the Peoples Temple's exodus from California was a magazine article about Jones's political clout. In the spring of 1977, reporters from *New West* magazine landed on-record interviews with several Temple defectors, interviews that definitively exposed the beatings, corruption, and sexual exploits that had been taking place behind closed Temple doors. When Jones got wind of the story, months before its August publication date, he realized that the potential damage of the allegations outweighed even what shelter his political connections could provide. He announced to his congregation that the time had come—this was exactly the “outright persecution” he had prophesied.

So began the mass migration. At Jones's bidding, most Temple members had long since acquired passports and filed the necessary paperwork to leave the country—departure was just a matter of packing a few bags. The Temple paid for hundreds of plane tickets, and just like that, members picked up and left, departing in great waves aboard commercial airlines. About a hundred people made up the fledgling community of Jonestown in May of 1977. By the time the August issue of *New West* hit the newsstands, Jim Jones and nearly nine hundred members of Peoples Temple had already resettled in Guyana. The simple song of freedom was growing complex.

## II. “Black Baby” (3:18)

Marceline Jones haunts the story of Peoples Temple like a ghost in a film reel—out of focus, barely there, and yet eerily present in every frame. She was a nineteen-year-old nursing student when she met Jim Jones in 1946. He was an orderly, a handsome and eloquent high school junior with plans to graduate early and enter Indiana University the following year. They married in 1949, and when Jim entered the ministry three years later, Marceline became her husband's most ardent follower. Over the years, she worked for the Temple in most every capac-

ity, and when she wasn't administering the nursing homes or helping stage elaborate healings, she was raising the Joneses' six children.

All but one of the kids were adopted, and the group was multiracial in a manner that seems uncomfortably deliberate, as if their parents were assembling a collection. By 1959, Jim and Marceline had already taken in two Korean children and an orphaned American Indian girl. The older Korean adoptee was killed in a car wreck just months after her adoption. Marceline gave birth to Stephen that summer, and before the year was out, the family also added Suzanne, another Korean adoptee, and James Jr., the first black child adopted by a white family in the state of Indiana.

Like Deanna Wilkinson, Marceline was a regular performer at Temple services, and "Black Baby" became a staple of her repertoire following James Jr.'s adoption. It's another cover tune, written in 1950 by jazz songwriter and Chicago civil rights activist Oscar Brown Jr. The original title is actually "Brown Baby," and why Jim or Marceline felt the need to darken it is unclear. A handful of high-profile soul singers recorded the song in the '60s and '70s, including Nina Simone and Diana Ross, but Marceline's version is slower and sparer than the others, just an organ and a subdued soloist, a hushed lullaby for a sleeping child. *I want you to stand up tall and proud*, Marceline whispers. *I want you to speak up clear and loud*.

Marceline's singing voice is a crystal clear alto, and it would be pretty if she didn't sound mechanical and sort of bleak, like a dry-drunk karaoke patron serenading an empty bar. The song's overt racial message is a bit awkward, and the horror-show drone of the Wurlitzer is nothing if not ominous. Frankly, "Black Baby" is creepy from beginning to end. If the best songs on *He's Able* succeed by banishing nagging "cult" associations, then Marceline's track is the one that drives them home. The lyrics try hard to convey the same idealism as the rest of the record, but in Marceline's vacant moan, they sound twisted, somehow perverse. She sounds brainwashed—there's no other word for it. And when she chants to her hypothetical infant, *When out of men's hearts all hate is hurled / you're going to live in a better world*, it's hard not to think about just how wrong she is.

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In a photo on the back of the record jacket, Marceline stands in front of a dangling microphone at Producer's Workshop. She's pretty at thirty-six, though not fetching. Her blonde hair is up in a chaste bun. She wears a sleeveless dress with a low neckline and the sort of ruffled-collar blouse that calls to mind Shirley Jones of the Partridge Family. There's a slight facial resemblance to Audrey Hepburn, and if it weren't for a certain dullness behind her eyes, she might even stand out in a crowd. Her expression in the photo matches the sound of her voice on the record: dispassionate, monochrome.

The picture was taken the same evening that Jones recorded "Down from His Glory," but no one involved seems to remember Marceline's session. As was often the case in her married life, her presence was overshadowed by her husband's theatrics. In the studio, as in the marriage, she performed her part, then stepped silently out of the way.

Marceline broke her silence only sporadically over the years, to confront her husband about his philandering or drug use. Once, early in the Temple's California years, she threatened to leave with the children after Jones revealed an ongoing affair. He talked the kids into staying by telling them that their mother had severe psychiatric issues. Marceline grudgingly accepted her husband's infidelities, and publicly, she stayed loyal to him throughout numerous affairs, even defending at meetings his right to have sex with other Temple members. In private, she confessed her anger and disillusionment to her sole birth-son Stephen, but she stood by Jones even as his sexual proclamations grew increasingly bizarre. It's hard to imagine, for example, another wife in the history of marital faithlessness having to rationalize her husband's claim to be the world's "only true heterosexual."

The Marceline Jones who arrived in Jonestown with the rest of the California émigrés was no longer the pretty young woman who sang in Sunday services. Temple life had aged her considerably. In addition to a full-time job running the Temple's care homes, she was required to sit beside Jones at the various planning and "catharsis" meetings, many of which stretched on until dawn. She was a revered mother figure in the congregation, regularly approached to make leadership decisions when her

husband couldn't be bothered. From the early '70s onward, she had the added responsibility of hiding Jones's increasingly drug-addled condition from Temple members and the media. Jones was popping pills and shooting Valium with rock-star regularity by the time he left for Guyana, and even though Marceline's cabin was separated from the compound he shared with his aides and mistresses, she presided over meetings in Jonestown when her husband was too incoherent to lead them himself.

Marceline's responsibilities in Guyana included balancing the books, and she made regular trips back to California in order to check on the Temple's financial affairs. When she returned to Jonestown, she almost always found the village expanded. The new arrivals worked with a single-minded fervor to build a livable community out of the jungle village, constructing dozens of multi-family cabins around a large pavilion that served as the town square. By 1978, Jonestown had a school, a medical clinic, new care homes for the elderly, a library, a mill, and a communal kitchen. It also had guard towers and gun turrets, ostensibly built as protection against potential attackers. Among those armed and pressed into security detail were Stephen and James Jr., Marceline's birth son and her adopted "black baby."

Jonestown residents still worked exhaustingly long days, but they retired at night to food and entertainment in the pavilion. The village had its own dance team, and several of the *He's Able* musicians had coalesced into a sort of house band, the Jonestown Express. Fronted by Deanna Wilkinson, the Express gigged occasionally in Georgetown, even toured the neighboring jungle communities, playing to modest crowds of bemused Guyanese villagers. They tweaked the lyrics to Billy Preston's "You Are So Beautiful" so that it praised their host country, and they encored with "Abraham, Martin, and John," swapping in the names of Guyanese national heroes. Bringing American pop music into the jungles of South America is one of the weirder cultural legacies of *He's Able*.

Marceline had quit singing by the time the Jonestown Express was rocking the Amazon, so "Black Baby" never made the set list. It's probably just as well, since even outside the context of Jonestown, the song is kind of a downer. It's certainly the album's most lethargic track, crawling along at a tempo that

would have sent Guyanese day laborers wandering sluggishly back to the sugar fields. Jack Arnold deserves points, though, for positioning the track where he did, adhering to the mix-tape maxim that one's slowest song should always occupy the penultimate slot—a sort of lull before the finale. With its well-ordered highs and lows and its thematic groupings, *He's Able* demonstrates an appreciation for this sort of track-list artistry. But art is vulnerable to history like wood is vulnerable to rot, and Jack Arnold couldn't have known that *He's Able* would pick up an additional track in the years to come.

## 12. “Will You?” (3:35)

After the band and choir wrapped up their late-night recording sessions, they filed out of Producer's Workshop and into the LA pre-dawn, where an idling Temple bus awaited their return trip to Redwood Valley. Duct-taped between brake lights on the back of the bus, a handmade banner declared, “Brotherhood Is Our Religion.” It was an unofficial motto that acknowledged the Temple's communal tendencies without being overtly socialist. The line made up the refrain to a popular number in the Peoples Temple songbook, and it appeared as a large, bold headline in the first edition of the church newsletter. When Jack Arnold wanted to give the completed *He's Able* a professional-sounding gloss, he invented “Brotherhood Records,” a fictional record label complete with a logo and address stamped onto the album. The logo is a lower-case “b” with a white dove superimposed over the bowl. The address leads to the small walk-up apartment that Jack Arnold shared with a roommate on the outskirts of San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury neighborhood.

As Jones grew bolder in the '70s, brotherhood gave way to out-and-out comradeship. “Apostolic socialism” became the Temple's credo, and services regularly took time out to extol comrades Brezhnev, Castro, and Mao. Jonestown even hosted a Soviet diplomat in October of 1978, and Jones periodically claimed to be in secret negotiations with the USSR, acquiring clearance for Temple members to emigrate to the Motherland. Among the names regularly dropped into Jonestown Express renditions of “Abraham, Martin, and John” were Vladimir Lenin and Che Guevara.

“Will You?” is a sort of lukewarm anthem to the nascent

spirit of socialism rolling around the Temple in 1973. Fittingly, there is no soloist. The women of the choir carry the verses; the men join in on the chorus. The song actually follows a somewhat peculiar structure, something like verse-bridge-verse-chorus-verse-chorus. The intro verse lays out the premise, a kind of rhymey, pre-school summation of the *Communist Manifesto*:

*We've found joy in sharing,  
sharing what we have with one another.  
And we've started caring,  
caring what becomes of our brother.*

From there, the song launches into a curious little interlude, a mildly psychedelic tangle of keys, guitar, and brass that builds vertically and sounds like something off *The White Album*. Jack Arnold and Loretta Cordell lay the groundwork by repeating the same two notes at different octaves, a sort of electric variant on a snake charmer's melody. Then a layer of bass trombone comes plodding in, descending the scales like a fat man marching down a staircase. A bright, repetitive trumpet melody tops it all off, and the whole thing builds for a few measures, growing louder and more intense, before suddenly and perplexingly giving way to a bongo solo. All in all, it's a weirdly groovy thirty seconds, like a tie-dye stain on a vestal robe, and I think of it as Jack Arnold's way of saying that Marxist doctrine doesn't have to be a drag.

The genius of the "Will You?" chorus, on the other hand, is in its single-line simplicity. Coming out of the verses, the drums fall into cut-time with a tambourine on the accents, the sort of driving, rapid-heartbeat rhythm that feels like it's pushing you somewhere. Then the horns pour on top, and the choir delivers the title refrain, holding onto the last note so they sound like a roomful of train whistles: *Yes, the world is changing—will you-ou-ou?*

Jones's megalomania, paranoia, and drug use gradually came to dominate the socialist experiment at Jonestown. His increasingly incomprehensible ravings—about Temple defectors in San Francisco and enemies in the US government, about Christianity and socialism, about sex and reincarnation and an ever-ex-

panding list of Jonestown rules—were broadcast continuously over the town's PA system, often with only a couple hours of break for days at a time. Nightly meetings in the pavilion stretched into the next morning, taking the grisly components of the catharsis sessions to new heights. Temple members were asked to describe how they would torture and kill their non-Temple relatives. With increasing frequency, Jones instituted "White Nights," where members confirmed their willingness to die for the Temple rather than see the movement destroyed, then walked through the procedures of an orderly mass suicide. Between the White Nights, workdays that frequently lasted sixteen to twenty hours, and Jones's near-constant screeching over the PA, life in Jonestown degenerated into a nightmare.

The final days of Jonestown came about abruptly, like the impetuous bongo solo in the "Will You?" bridge, a bizarre development in an already bizarre context. Back in California, a group calling itself Concerned Relatives had been making the public case that Jonestown was an armed prison whose residents were being held against their will. California Congressman Leo Ryan announced a fact-finding trip to Guyana in November of 1978, accompanied by several members of the media and a handful of Concerned Relatives. Jonestown warily agreed to open its doors.

The Ryan delegation touched down at Port Kaituma on November 17, the same airstrip where Norman Ijames landed when he came to deliver supplies. They traveled to Jonestown by truck, and they were greeted there by what seemed to be a community of happy, healthy people. Congressman Ryan was impressed. There was a feast in his honor. Deanna Wilkinson sang an Earth, Wind & Fire song in her tequila-rose dress, a moment captured by one of the visiting cameramen. Everything seemed to go well, until a Temple member was caught passing a note to a reporter asking for help leaving Jonestown.

The next morning, November 18, 1978, Ryan announced that any Temple members wishing to leave the village could accompany him and his delegation back to the States. Jones insisted that anyone could leave at will, and he watched as sixteen Temple members boarded a truck to leave with Ryan's group. It was raining. Ryan's party arrived at Port Kaituma an hour later. As they prepared to board two idling planes, a Peoples

Temple truck emerged from the jungle and skidded onto the airstrip. Five men stepped out, armed with automatic rifles. Before Ryan's people on the tarmac could react, the men opened fire. The shooting lasted several minutes, and when the truck finally tore away into the jungle, sixteen people had been shot. The congressman and four others were dead.

### 13. "Mass Suicide" (41:02)

Four months after the Jonestown Massacre, in March of 1979, the city of San Francisco held a public auction for a number of items seized from the Temple's San Francisco headquarters. Among them were an unspecified number of unsold *He's Able* record albums, maybe as many as a couple thousand copies. No auction records exist from that day, nothing to show who may have bid on the albums or how much they sold for. The remaining copies of *He's Able* simply dissolved into the culture stream, dispersing to become dusty second-hand relics and anonymous garage-sale curios.

Today, the vinyl album occasionally resurfaces in the tidal pool of the internet. Copies in the original cellophane can auction on eBay for as much as five hundred dollars. They're often filed under "Cult"—a sad irony, since resilience against the "cult" mystique is exactly what gives the album its appeal. To put the needle to the record is to create a space that's insulated against the morbid persistence of the Temple's legacy. Ultimately, this is the defining characteristic of *He's Able*. It's a transportive quality, one that effectively allows you to *be there* with these people during the Temple's heyday, oblivious to the impending tragedy. And it's as forceful and as fragile as a high note held beyond a breath.

The postscript to the *He's Able* story comes in 1993, when an anonymous British bootleg cartel called Grey Matter "re-released" the record on CD. Grey Matter releases were geared toward devotees of the early industrial scene, the sort of post-punk avant-garde in which stygian spoken-word recordings, sound collage, and macabre disaster memorabilia have a lot of cachet. Their catalog included musical offerings from Charles Manson and recordings of pagan rituals by British "witch king" Alex Sanders. Just who operated the underground label remains a

mystery. British author and subculture guru Stewart Home contributed liner notes to an early Grey Matter release and had further contact with the outfit while researching a book on the UK bootlegging industry in the early '90s. He's not naming names, but he says that the Grey Matter bootleggers were just a couple of shrewd and anonymous amateur businessmen. "It was a furtive scene with meetings in motorway service stops where dealers would exchange box loads of records," Home explains. "The distribution was very effective, since it would quickly become difficult to discern who was responsible for what material." Grey Matter was active for two or three years, by Home's estimation, and it pressed between five hundred and a thousand copies of any given title.

The Grey Matter edition of *He's Able* has a maroon cover with a black-and-white photograph of corpses piled up outside the Jonestown pavilion. On the reverse is a picture of a large metal vat, a few dead bodies strewn nearby. The images are obviously disturbing, but in the context, they don't immediately seem more graphic than your average, skull-laden, death-metal album art. The track list is identical to the vinyl except for the addition of a thirteenth track. As a block of accompanying text explains, "Tracks 1-12 are taken from the long out-of-print LP on Brotherhood Records of San Francisco. Track 13 was recorded on a TEAC tape recorder beneath Jones's 'throne' on November 17, 1978."

Grey Matter is off a day on the date, but the rest of the description is accurate. Meetings, events, and even individual conversations were recorded in Jonestown with the exquisite fervor of the paranoid. When the FBI flew in to investigate the massacre, agents seized 971 cassette tapes from the site. One of these, the so-called "Death Tape," was recorded just before and during the massacre itself. It leaked almost immediately. By March of 1979, the *New York Times* was running an abbreviated transcript of a forty-minute tape the paper had acquired from a New York porn distributor. In the article, the porn mogul claims to have received the tape from "someone who was in Guyana," and he discusses his plans to start selling the cassettes later that week.

Grey Matter evidently saw the same commercial appeal. With the addition of the "Death Tape" as a thirteenth track,

the bootlegged CD takes everything worth admiring about *He's Able* and turns it on its head, smashing through the insulating barrier to let in time, irony, and grief.

It begins with an excerpt from a speech Jones gave during a previous White Night. The speech has since been sampled by various musicians, including Alabama 3, the acid-house group best known for playing behind the opening credits of *The Sopranos*. The snippet catches Jones at a sort of oratorical climax, a Mussolini-on-the-balcony moment that captures the brutal power of his revolutionary rhetoric.

“Love is the only weapon?” Jones asks quietly, before exploding: “Shit! Bullshit! Martin Luther King died with love! Kennedy died talking about something that he couldn’t even understand, some kind of generalized love, and he never even backed it up! Bullshit! ‘Love is the only weapon with which I’ve got to fight?’ I got a hell of a lot of weapons to fight! I got my claws, I got compasses, I got guns, I got dynamite! I got a hell of a lot to fight!” The audience howls, and Jones howls along with them.

Then the “Death Tape” begins. It picks up at roughly the same moment that shooting is breaking out at the airstrip at Port Kaituma. That afternoon, a few hours after the Ryan party left the village, Jones declared a White Night, calling everyone into the pavilion for what would be the last time. Speaking through an analog hiss as thick as fog, he begins making his case for “revolutionary suicide.” “How much have I loved you?” he asks. “How much have I tried to give you a good life?” He predicts Ryan’s plane going down over Guyana, the pilot shot by an unnamed assassin, “. . . and we better not have any of our children left when it’s over because they’ll parachute in here on us . . . My opinion is that you be kind to the children and kind to the seniors and take the potion like they used to take in ancient Greece.” His voice is a slow waltz of patient exhaustion, his tone that of a parent explaining the death of a pet.

The “potion” is grape Flavor-Aid mixed with a sedative and potassium cyanide. Jones had been importing the drug by the case since even before his own arrival in Guyana. It was mixed in vats of galvanized steel, the same vats that Temple members had practiced lining up in front of during previous White

Nights. On the tape, Jones and an assistant explain that the “medication” is painless, that it just tastes a little bitter. His justifications for “stepping over into another plane” are rambling and repetitive, and the track is full of jumps and cuts where Jones or an aide stopped and restarted the tape machine. Applause follows each of his more self-aggrandizing statements, and a growing chorus of assent begins echoing the calls to “die with a degree of dignity.”

Exactly one Temple member raises an objection, a sixty-year-old black woman named Christine Miller. She steps to the mic and asks, “Is it too late for Russia?” Jones replies that it is, then fumbles to provide a good reason why the group can no longer emigrate. She argues that the children deserve to live and is booed by others in the pavilion. “I agree,” says Jones, “but what’s more, they deserve peace.” The crowd cheers, but Miller doesn’t back down. “When we destroy ourselves, we are defeated,” she says. And they continue like this, going back and forth, Jones’s supporters growing louder and more agitated. Their cries of derision bleed together on the low-quality tape, shrill and indistinct, like a chorus of mechanical alarms. Eventually, a deep-voiced man intercedes, and he eerily echoes the song title when he tells Miller, “Your life has been extended to the day that you’re standing there *because of him.*” Miller is shouted down, then escorted from the microphone. Her brief performance is as virtuosic as anything on *He’s Able*.

A total of 918 people died in Guyana that day, including those attacked at Port Kaituma and a Temple member in Georgetown who killed herself and her three children when alerted by radio to the White Night decree.

Among the dead in Jonestown were songbird Deanna Wilkinson and her lover Loretta Cordell. Also dead from poison were Shirley Smith and Ruth Coleman, the album’s two other gifted female soloists. Marceline Jones was dead, as were three of her grown children and their families. Stephen and Jim Jones Jr. survived by being away in Georgetown with the Temple basketball team. Their mother had interceded with Jones to allow them to go. Though Norman Ijames wasn’t in Jonestown during the massacre, he lost his wife and nine-year-old daughter there. He died two years later when his plane crashed over Venezuela.

Children's choir director Don Beck came to Jonestown with the very first work crews, but he was living back in Redwood Valley in November of '78. A third of the bodies found in Jonestown were of children, many of whom had been among Beck's former pupils. Laura Johnston Kohl, who sang on *He's Able* as well as in the Jonestown Express, happened to be in Georgetown on the day of the massacre. Melvin Johnson and his wife, Wanda, had left the Temple in 1976, but Melvin's seventeen-year-old daughter and Wanda's twelve-year-old son were among the Jonestown dead. Kohl remembers seeing Wanda in San Francisco not long after returning from Guyana. "She was at some setting that I was," Kohl says, "and she just yelled at me, 'How come you didn't save my son?'" Last she heard, the golden-throated singer of "Walk a Mile in My Shoes" eventually returned to a career as a San Francisco street pimp and died there in the 1990s.

Jack Arnold Beam and his wife, Cyndie, left the Peoples Temple in a rented U-Haul in the middle of the night in October of 1975. They'd grown tired of the abuse and intimidation. Against their will, they left behind Jack Arnold's parents and a sister, all of whom would die by cyanide in Jonestown.

For a year after he left the Temple, the maestro behind *He's Able* couldn't touch a guitar at all. Today, Jack Arnold lives in Florida, where he sells cars and keeps a small recording studio for demo work with local musicians and small record labels. He's justifiably somber when he talks about his Peoples Temple experiences, but when he gets on the subject of music, Jack Arnold speaks a little faster, starts saying "man" at the ends of his sentences. The Temple sold some ninety thousand copies of *He's Able* on their cross-country road trips, he says, a number I suspect is swollen by the convex lens of memory. The master tapes were stored in the Beams' basement for years, but they were lost along with many other memories during the No-Name Storm of 1993. For Jack Arnold, the long nights in the dinge of Producer's Workshop were the fulfillment of his youthful dreams, but they were also the high-water mark of his life with Peoples Temple.

"It was such an emotional setup," he explains, "because you're taking something that never existed before, and you're bringing it forever into being."

When you're dealing with a movement that took twenty-five years to build and only a few dark hours to destroy, you really can't overestimate the value of that kind of permanence. Jack Arnold is right: Like sin or synthetic polymer, good music is immune to environmental degradation. Once you've brought it into the world, you can't really take it out again. But while a piece of music may be immutable, the significance of any one song has a half-life. It is endlessly on guard against decay, and when you set the needle on a record after thirty-five years, you can only hope that you're able to hear it like you did before.

Halfway through the thirteenth track, Jones is informed of the congressman's murder, and he calls for the vats to be brought out. Dissent has been silenced, and the track's remaining nineteen minutes are the most genuinely disturbing. We hear Jones and the other Temple members trying to maintain order as cyanide punch is poured or injected into the mouths of the children. Over and over again, we hear the screams. Diffused in lo-fidelity, they sound like screeching tires or boiling teapots. Members proclaim their eagerness to cross over while the adults begin to line up at the vats. There is sobbing, followed by others' recriminations that the sobbing is scaring the children. Behind it all floats the barely audible strains of slow-mo choral music, along with spectral, half-heard snippets of what sounds like phone conversation. Because the Temple recorded over and over using the same cassettes, these remnants of a tape's previous contents are heard drifting through the backgrounds of many of their recordings. Audio engineers sometimes refer to these phenomena as "ghosts," and their effect is to set the carnage of the thirteenth track to an acid-trip soundtrack of disembodied voices and warped chanting.

Days later, Jim Jones will be found dead of a gunshot wound to the head. His is the last voice we hear on *He's Able*, commanding the adults to begin, then delivering his final recorded words. "We got tired," he says. "We didn't commit suicide. We committed an act of revolutionary suicide, protesting the conditions of an inhumane world." Then the tape cuts off, and for the track's last thirty seconds, all we can hear are the ghosts.

## **ABLUTION**

Each new beginning pulls us up from darkness  
into matter. With fibs, we're fortified, our friends approach  
by ladder and, once they've scaled our fractures, admire  
the precious wreckage below.

Our history is written in the strata that support us:  
stories shoring up our sense of self.

If we each dig back to our own tectonic shelf  
we might find the white-hot poker, the body's constable,  
the truth: I enjoy being made uncomfortable.  
It's not dreams, but the constant getting up

I like. The liar is instrumental in playing out  
her personal pain. What else when you've done wrong

but to come clean? It will take centuries  
before I learn to speak plain.

TARA BRAY

## **ANOTHER GREEN HERON HUNCHED IN A POEM**

And yet the birds are real again.  
Now that we've left the cold,  
we have a cardinal of our own,  
a yard built from shifts of flight,  
the acquired scent of attic birds.  
It's as if the world is waking  
around our deaths. So heavy  
with the worry of which way  
our lives will turn; still we make birds  
of loss in spite of flightlessness  
and breath that fills us just so far.

The heron we loved died before  
we knew its name; then we learned.

TARA BRAY

## **LACKING**

Forgive the occurrence  
the dark spin of a trinket  
the small nest infested.  
Forgive the itch  
in the crest of the titmouse,  
a frown's severity, and me  
holding something burned  
with something soft.

LILY BROWN

**(I SAVOR THE SWAY OF FORMULAS,  
THE REVERSAL OF ORIGINS)**

We become secretaries  
of the sun,  
washing its stains with bluing.

The sun is  
ephemera, the sun is  
redacting

items on  
a shelf where the moon sees fit  
to nest and

its white shine separates, in-  
tensifies,  
leaving a cool glow like chalk.

LILY BROWN

**(A CHANNEL OF TRANSMISSION,  
AND A MEDIUM OF RECEPTION)**

Hair rips the forehead.  
Sun lines the head.

Being in the sun,  
he is worked by the sun,

eye singed, neck  
expunged. She

pushes the machine  
to make him. Memory

takes him around  
with it. Civilization is

between the knife-  
wielding sides,

beach plum blood  
on the lens' eye.

**153**

My longing for you is like clouds  
the coming motion  
the day's events together.  
It's heaven  
brick that pale  
mandible blue  
winter it is  
we are in. There is no reflecting  
the gold singular upward  
mirror building windows  
ursine sunset  
king metal rose-hue  
sunset coming  
and coming away.  
Walking more than one dusk  
to walk into the one still  
that arrives

in it a postal ring not yet

reached my ears.

Wail, pale, and sail.

You do shoot yourself in the face,

don't you,

predilected

kiss

I heard your thought through,

catch up.

**154**

The shells are on  
We are billowing  
it is a gray  
and a whitened  
soft wall of air  
It reminds me of easing  
not like anything  
more than you hear  
abalone ear  
I feel blind  
everything  
Life is made out of billowing  
invisible, swirling heart  
chamber at night  
what you look like  
blue iridescent  
mother of pearl

morning sun between the pines

black ventricle molecules each

one a lake,

ring opens my ear

atomic gasoline.

**155**

Of its place,  
the lower course  
blind estuarial fail  
at 3  
through the winter on my field.  
Open water  
it isn't, is it?  
though no  
limpets shale  
the flats  
a nothing  
blooms the white  
sun gray  
stones, but yes  
never seen those.  
Its oversimplification could make meat out of you.  
The late afternoon is white and sheer. It is an elbow.

We are melted.

It is as if I'm looking at an encircled forward field  
at the back of my head.

But I'm not because it's right there.

His eyes roll back in his head.

## TESTIMONY 9

If I say nothing. If I shiver. If tonight.

You come but you do not come when you say you will.

Like an owl suddenly telling you what it needs.

It looks at you. It implores you. Are you made of pity.

That's what it's like. I find you but I don't find anything.

I believe in mystery. I believe in sleep, which is a kind of mystery.

Infants are not breathing and then they are breathing. Listen.

I have kept this to myself: you were not sleeping when I was not  
sleeping.

A thousand miles, you said. A thousand miles, I said.

Your eyes behaved very differently from mine.

If rupture. If privacy. If I go.

You will take long naps when I retrieve things.

This is like emptying a spigot before the cold comes.

A drum unheaded. A photograph of sex. Ordinary daylight.

If ever I remember that particular rain.

You said: how was your snack time, I mean sacrament.

Is this how it is done—simply setting. Or is it like disappearance.

The danger is that moving slowly, you are more likely to see things.

Talk to me about timing—about incremental abandon.

The toy bird has forgotten my behavior.

You were sitting. I was sitting. You could not decide.

## TESTIMONY 10

If the light off the wine glass lingers any longer, it will feel like winter inside that light.

You say place that snare over my breast. You say you back away from this adorability.

Stop yourself from moving. Like water in smelted pig-iron piping recirculating. Stop  
yourself from breathing.

If promising. If rupture. If at all imperfect, imprecise requitance. I go.

The mind on some nights is a back beat, some bass line background divining delineations.

I know exactly how not looking back occurs. I know just how it's done.

But I also believe in the reoccurrences of retrieval, how a thing will come back and back and  
back, absent of any revival.

And I could be convinced that what is left unsaid when we leave here is exactly the silence  
that makes music occur.

I am so sorry. In the end no parent wants to outlast their child. Leaving them to be  
consoled by the rest of world that is now outside them and irrelevant.

Leaving them weeping by the coat rack. To be catalogued like the space in graveyards.

I believe your eyes would be photographs of azaleas in another world.

But I also believe in secrecy, that it might well be an enactment of sleeping we do  
sometimes.

What happens to those uncertainties embroidered, arabesque, and left behind. Tell me.  
What happens to them.

When is the last time you palmed the head of a drum and didn't think of listening.

Look, if I say there is no mystery in loyalty, it's only because love happens in the brain and  
nowhere else. And there is no devotion like \_\_\_\_\_.

And there are no such things as replacements. No such gravity as persistence. And the stars  
when they flash and skull out in the dark are made of waiting.

And the dark spells out again and again in its want-fed breath the letters of the word never.  
And never is a type of always.

And maybe it's the sound of guitars that gets us breathing again.

Maybe it's the thought that this could all be ending very soon.

Maybe it's when we look over and already there is snow.

Maybe we are here for absolutely no reason other than to measure the febricity of a single  
moment and record that sensation.

The people who saved you from that ambiguity are your real parents in life. Those ones.

But if you doubt the gentleness of her, when she turns to face  
you in the night, the  
    expression of her grief soft and thick like the eyelids of a  
    giraffe. Don't leave her.

Topography of daylight. Ordinary meaning. Ordinary breathing.  
Apocrypha of sight.

If I have promised anything at this point it's that I know what  
I am doing to them.

So, talk to me about the extraordinary unlikeliness of you being  
here. Not here with me.

    But here, wherever you are beginning to be.

And if it comes out that there is no other life. I will believe it.

KATE GREENSTREET

## FROM "CALLED"

But what about fog?

What about  
anonymity?

The men seemed strong but they've chosen

the wrong side. Instead of leaving,  
he takes off his coat.  
Countless hours in trance. He says  
he can't breathe.

*You are afraid  
because*

*You are afraid that,  
after all*

:

Plate 1: Stands at her half-door.  
"Even the truth . . . Sometimes I confuse this world  
with the other." The song recalls a day.

Those who went west with little but a cross,  
the mother's good china.

Those who came back?  
*How often I dreamed . . .*

“Obviously, things move  
or don’t move.”

He comes early, sets out his tools.  
Ultramarine  
and black. Dark lake  
and black. Carmine. Ochre.

Picture of a family wearing the memory of a house.

Orange.  
Orange-red, and black.  
Violet,  
gray-black. Gray-black  
and black. Pale green.  
Toward the plains.

:

Plate 2: Sets the bag on the table.  
“These stand for hope.”

We shouldn’t tell ourselves stories  
about a better world

It’s just a life  
What you find around you

So many fish in those days

Here’s my explanation of death: There is no water.

Opening the ardor: lightning.  
Opening the door: belong.

Home was the place  
How often I dreamed

I was already in the west

Like any postman  
with a thousand paintings in his attic

Home to the lamp

MICHELLE HICKS

## BELLAGHY

*Winner of the 2009–2010 AWP Intro Journals Project,  
selected by Lynn Powell*

Stepping off the bus from Magherafelt,  
I feel my ass pinched by a boy not yet  
out of junior school and, deposited  
all alone, am greeted by a quartet

of smells: cows, cowshit, stagnant water, peat.  
Steeple-led, I stroll to the Catholic church  
but don't find *Heaney* marked on any graves.  
The roots of blackberry bushes winch

up the path; I scrape by branches clotted  
with berries that are ripe but sour.  
On to the street of the town. There's an inn,  
a Chinese takeaway, a twenty-four-hour

eatery where once-frozen foods sizzle  
in the tired deep-fryer, a pub—always  
there is the pub and its patrons. I speak  
to no one, am stared at, watch the gray

sky become more gray, the rain elongate  
to needles on its way to the ground.  
Here, the scholars must climb from hired cars,  
ask, "Here?" and decide from looking around,

"God no, this can't be the place." I know  
this is the place. Home of no beauty, lit  
by no sun, he claimed it. And still now,  
there's no beauty except what he gave it.

NANCY KUHL

## **TXT**

letter by tarnished letter we can't  
say more restless our momentary  
messages collecting in phonelight  
and the voice braids itself backward  
the throat welcomes new silence  
pushes lexicon to the brink  
I satisfy myself with brevity  
and broken fingernails and dusk  
like a slipknot drawn fades pale  
answers unambiguous *I always*  
and *you always* and *no* and *no*  
and *no* little pleas diminish  
brightly my petty resolutions  
and I crave shudder and chime  
crave hands pulling hair loose  
from its clip think *if I'd left*  
*the door propped open*  
I know longing begins quietly  
to collapse not quite spent nearly  
gone now let's admit it there's no  
telling what we might have done

NANCY KUHL

## **FRAY**

some days silver today  
this dull Sound voiceless  
a threat all stir and trouble  
my suspended second story  
tilts keen and madly swaying  
wild a ship's transom untethered  
this is December so like a tear  
a worn patch in the fabric  
skin showing through tremble  
and pitch or gray sky clean slate  
the day endures tangle and  
consequence and the room  
the lopsided room ready to crack  
open wide this is December  
unraveling and if I am  
almost stayed by skeletal light  
by cross-pane shadows the hour  
at least is fixed steady stretched  
tight and unyielding by sure strokes  
cast slender those dark dark threads

SUSAN MAXWELL

## OPIATE SHORE MADE TO STAND PAST

the last passing of a still cloud lasting  
like the river reemerging over the splints  
of the macled pit where dogs eat

a dead cow and their silhouettes  
serrate, one number to another.  
Candles flaring on the lacewings,

*an eye to the eye, mouth*  
*to the script.* Strangers  
pluck a poppy this far from

home and the faces wheel  
away when the river runs aground  
in the braids, tongue poured

through to its tip, bottle  
worn off the rumor  
of a god paid

past the last wall of the moon  
was another ochre city opened  
and stunned to the sky.

SUSAN MAXWELL

## **SURVIVALIST**

Put down our music, gold and black chitin.  
Put down the best horse. Bullet the insect  
of infinite rest drawing more insects.  
In her star and snip, in her forelock  
an erring righteousness, *schnik*  
*schnik*. That others may grow, deaf  
to the stars. Brainchild, dendrite, violet  
spreads flourishing in the igneous  
collapse. The library galloped. Birds  
have feet. An influencing machine  
browning mouths like hawk feathers, a few  
circusing down but this is a friar's game, three  
nicely-formed sticks batting our optics from the inside,  
moonlight. Quotidian. Just a subject. Moonlight.  
The hammer. Evades a pulse not given it  
by the hammering. Gem jimmied  
to the surface, birds rise off spoils.  
Qualia. One narrow poppy.

DEREK MONG

**LITANY**

after the Precatio Terrae

To know what part's raw merriment, what's wrath  
released in season— your geysers skywrite, loop;  
a mud flow moves  
all but trunk and tree root. Gaia, Arbiter of the All  
Natural, we are indefatigable readers: a cirrus cloud  
is string to tease out storms;  
see stones in stream—  
we pray halfway through fording. Once I met a man.  
He sailed.  
Claimed hurricanes were coins  
you clicked across your knuckle bones  
or dropped if distracted.  
We gardeners aren't so gullible. We've watched surf toss  
a cliff's ledge like piecrust. At whim  
you'll turn your insides out—  
your moods make

my other gods a hobby.

One day I'll relinquish weather signs

and drift like pine needle within them.

Imagine, myself

inside both sea and sky, crashing

the cheek of a slave girl. Diva, sweet Earth Queen—

I am an herb gatherer in search of his fair allotment.

Whatever I take from this forest floor I borrow.

DEREK MONG

## THE SUN IS OUR ABLEST METEOROLOGIST

after Giovanni Pontano

For years I've lived my life like a sundial, watching  
as my shadow circles the town square.

My feet hold tight to the gallows. My head  
leans against all your doors.

Here's what I've learned:

If the noon sun dries the tide pools  
like broth pots

then the south wind will misroute a river.  
Later, the marshes fill with saltwater fish.

Or say light rays strafe us  
as if passed through high prison bars—

turn then to your war wounds.  
Swollen toes point to downpours;

the hollow

socket you once saw from forebodes  
corn crops. They'll sprout unremarked.

For all who doubt me, remember the hailstorm.  
I foresaw that disaster from the belltower

you turn to for prayer.

That day the sun lurched drunkenly, masked  
though it was by darkening clouds. Time

and again, a lone  
beam would drain

the sky's soup, touch  
this house, that one, before sealing back up.

The penned sheep howled for mercy.

That night I ate lamb.  
Likewise, the night after that.

Later a green glow, like the downside of a top hat,  
hung where the sun crossed the bay.

I am still building a theory for just what that means.

## THE SECOND MOVEMENT MEANT A BOOK OF BODIES AND WARPED VINYL SPINNING

Inside  
the body,  
tropes exist  
as dust,  
dissolve, become  
exterior world  
always unfolding  
us outward.  
When I  
watch you,  
I am  
more human  
than light  
spinning round:  
perception nearer  
to truths  
than “truths”  
undoing open  
language.

Often times, Paul Gottlieb Nipkow would mention to his friends and family that miniature human-like beings, which he called Gruaimin, lived within his body just as we live within the world. Unlike humans, though, his Gruaimin were much more technologically advanced. Periodically, they would communicate their design plans for mechanical gadgets to him through an elaborate series of barely perceptible bleeps and squeals. More often than not, these communicative efforts were incomprehensible to Nipkow. Yet, on one occasion in 1884, the German inventor (inconceivably) translated their language, enabling him to replicate a perforated, spinning wheel that could capture images for transmission across wires. Historians consider Nipkow’s “invention” to be the forerunner of what we now consider to be the modern television.

In 1972, Robert Creeley published *A Day Book*. In the poem “Massachusetts” from that collection, he wrote: “The *you* imagined locates/ the response. Like turning/ a tv dial. The message,/ as one says, is information,/ a form of energy. The wisdom/ of ages is ‘electrical impulse.’”

## **THE THIRD MOVEMENT MEANT: “BE LAKE/ OR FOG/ WE SAW, OUR HEADS”**

We  
drop bricks  
into water,  
shade splinters  
down streets  
into pools  
of sound.  
Tree branches  
wetly thought:  
music soothing  
us. Un-  
containable sleep  
dreams birds  
between shoulder  
blades. Perched  
beaks warble  
liquid songs,  
dissolve brick  
sounds.

Through accidental observation, Lester Allen Pelton invented the Pelton Wheel, which is the most efficient and economically viable version of the water turbine. Historians deem the invention “accidental” because, if not for Lester’s compulsive habit of scratching his dandruff-ridden scalp in the dry California air (or else in dire search for the nearest milk vendor, with whom he requested immediate observation of the “act”), he would not have had the “patience” necessary to watch the fluid motion of water in the first place, nor envision its relation to Newtonian physics and free-market principles. Incidentally, history tells us that Pelton was a womanizer, par excellence, and thus gives libidinous hope to all men who suffer from chronic dandruff.

After visiting the Grand Coulee Dam’s construction site in 1937, FDR said: “I am always glad to see a project in the construction stage because when it is finished very few people will realize—they won’t be able to visualize—all the difficult work in the actual construction.”

## THE FOURTH MOVEMENT MEANT THE MATERIALS BECAME AVAILABLE

“Truth”  
becomes equivocal:  
land yearns,  
buildings yearn,  
daylight yearns,  
pennies yearn  
for capital:  
the ideal  
setting, touching  
versions called  
“God”—“I”  
knows industry.  
History reveals  
words, builds  
omens: paint  
here; metal  
there. Meaning,  
meaning dissolves  
us.

Architectural scholar Prof. Sean Kane discovered the following, brief entry in the diary of George A. Fuller, the man widely considered to be the inventor of the skyscraper: “I want to see people die by the penny: a copper ‘bullet’ through the skull” (Coincidentally, Charles Whitman typed this same phrase, word-for-word, on July 31, 1966). Thus, Fuller embarked upon a decade’s worth of mathematical computation in an effort to solve the problems inherent to load-bearing capacities of tall buildings. The culmination of his investigations led to the construction of the Tacoma Building in 1889. By this point, apparently, his murderous impulses had been quenched as there is no documented evidence of his tossing pennies from the roofs of skyscrapers. Kane speculates that Fuller allayed his bloodlust by raping and murdering prostitutes in New York City during the mid-to-late-19th century.

In his poem “The Building of the Skyscraper,” George Oppen writes:  
“There are words that mean nothing/  
But there is something to mean./ Not  
a declaration which is truth/ But a  
thing/ Which is.”

## **THE FIFTH MOVEMENT MEANT THERE WAS NOTHING LEFT TO BUILD SO WE BUILT OURSELVES**

Under capital's slow dissolve, we mold light into ephemeral shapes named "I": first opening, then closing window blinds, creating various uses of "us" between slant light, darkness, and floorboards: imagined presence, shifting color, body's speech, null.

In London, 1769, Edward Beran nearly patented the Venetian blinds. A cheese-monger by trade, he stumbled across the window coverings while visiting his mistress in France: as they undressed during an afternoon tryst, she interrupted the "festivities" to close peculiar-looking, horizontal slats across her window. Upon returning to London, Beran sought patent for this frivolity, but since he lacked the necessary filing, manufacturing, and marketing funds, his business partner, Donald Allen, patented them instead. Later that year, a hooded scoundrel accosted Allen while on his evening walk, fatally stabbing him in the chest. Local authorities exonerated Beran, the leading suspect, due to clerical errors.

Jack Spicer once wrote, "We find the body difficult to speak,/ The face too hard to hear through,/ We find that eyes in kissing stammer/ And that heaving groins/ Babble like idiots./ . . . / We find the body difficult, and speak/ Across its walls like strangers."

DANIEL POPPICK

## KERATOCONUS ALBA

Watch the net of trees that is all but lost when painted  
white.

Perhaps the branches are not leaking crows at all, but lace,  
black lace, though it is finally still not meant  
to hang before you like a veil

\*

as you've seen it done in movies. Perhaps this is you  
having seen too many movies.

In one, the branches  
turned to gold. Paint was dripping from the actor's eyes.  
Perhaps it is not you but words like *night* composing  
one or two too many crowns.

## TO ARRIVE WITH CARTOON DEVOTIONS

I.

White evening & they move. Among them there are those  
who know you, those who will  
& those who may, but for the moment keep  
to cobble, skew the penchant bucking parade's  
foresworn progression. A makeshift harmony  
whistles through their arms, the first tone  
of the elbow, the second setting off the weave—  
some questions posed for your amusement—  
when you stand before the mirror, what animal  
do you most often mimic; does your mouth  
fog out as you step closer; what image bends  
between your lips; does it obey the axis given;  
what song comes on the radio.  
The hundreds lift their arms & raise one finger.

2.

As one element (you say leaves) here unhooks  
from what it followed, rightly so, a kind of grace  
lights off from where it waited, or was tethered,  
if you must, if you allow  
that sail will not name wind, as if  
a cloud and arc of rain would slip another pitch toward blue  
if your umbrella tapped  
a moth, the sun, a slice of headlight, falling leaves.

Is this the voice of posing or regard?  
You walk the rows with a throat of reeds. What figure  
hears your thin resolve; listen, there are those  
who catch that redwing nod without police & bells.

KEVIN PRUFER

## IMMORTALITY LECTURE

There is a way to be both here and not here.

The cartoon cat stands just out of sight with the mallet.

The cartoon mouse peers from his hole into the living room.  
Then yellow birds circle his head as he rises to heaven on  
angel's wings.

Your children have been watching tv for hours.

The cat peels the mouse from the floor,  
drapes it over a piece of bread, and opens his mouth.

The sun butters the windowsill on a Saturday morning  
in the summer before someone will die.

On the birthday cake, a single candle sputters like a fuse  
the cat can't blow out.

The tv decorates their eyes with explosions of blue light.

Their heads are like little rooms  
in which the mouse sits at his desk designing a rocket.

They will always remember you like this,  
at your desk.

And so, the cat soars above the house and explodes.  
Then the cat is in their heads designing a catapult.

I have implied that someone soon will die.

All morning, dead relatives  
have marched through the room toward their rewards.

The mouse is drawing a door on the wall with chalk.  
Now he is opening the door and stepping through it.

The cat has drawn a tunnel on the wall that flattens him.

Your children are bored. They've seen this one before  
and are changing the channel.

You can never vanish from their world.



+

Above, I hear the whoosh  
and swerve of skis, the thump of children and the creak  
of gears.

Once or twice I poked numb fingers through  
and felt the cool winds tumble down the slope.

+

I suppose I could dig myself out.

I suppose

I could shamble down the hill  
and find the ski lodge where a warm fire burns.  
(And how the boys would gawk

at my return!

And how they'd shout!)

Ice-encrusted,  
black where my thin skin froze, where my wrist-bones  
snapped and my nose fell off,

I'd steam and pool,

safe in the drama

of my fine disgrace.

ELIZABETH ROBINSON

## **QUEEN OF PENTACLES**

for Mary Hickman

A book or a door.

Sun or a body falling.

A coin or a spinning wheel.

Time or light.

She falls from the door in the sun.

Opulent thread pulled from her

breastbone to the light, not the light. It was rumored

that the coin could create generosity, pressed like

a brand on the flesh of gravity. It was the distance

of the tumbling queen from her grimoire to her bed. If

it wasn't her own bedding she foresaw, yet still

a passage of time, a wheel of five axes that a queen

might undo as a crown, and its five clocks blossoming,

forth and through. They made with her into earth

and past time. She held her breath in her mouth

for dark light.

ELIZABETH ROBINSON

## **SEVEN OF CUPS**

for Melanie Noel

A heart as was once  
a cup becomes  
a cushion and so

does the afternoon sun  
decline, its final yellow

chlorophyll tarnishing the  
vine that wraps our concord—

arterial sinew that  
cousins our table, and cup

of its own soup  
after cup, heart

and goodly personage  
drinking life

from light. A parable  
the cup is, and its vine  
devoid of grapes yet

still nodding the blue  
leaves of its head: a parable, a cup,

a parable, a cushion. Softening

the course of the future, its sunlight  
trained to be crimson

where the cup trained to overflow  
in this ruddy light becomes purple,

a garden of spillover, royal  
thistles.

ELIZABETH ROBINSON

## **EIGHT OF PENTACLES**

for Steven Toussaint

The coin is a book, needless in  
its artistry. The blind man cannot  
say if the insignia were a trumpet  
or a flower, for his eyes prevent him  
from hearing. From hearing needless music.  
Did the book repeat itself? The blind man  
turned between seven and nine, where the page  
is a trumpet, the coin tossed on end, lost  
between its head and its tail. That perfect  
art, he sought, for the one who has lost  
all his senses. The off-center red dot  
that a sighted person would have painted, so sloppily,  
near the hub of the design.

ELIZABETH ROBINSON

## **QUERENT**

for Alan Felsenthal

The magic is doughy; the querent tries to detach it from his hands. Margin of. He goes to sleep. He wakes, but does not. Thus the question was sticky. He is accosted at the border with hands full of sweets, and the border guards lick them clean. The very midpoint of permission. and there the querent's visa is retracted. There his hands behind his back, inside his pockets, lacquered with a sugar varnish. The querent leavens the crossing, the yeast that foams in him, the waking that does not. Ask, ask, ask is onomatopoeia, the "siss" of the question steams the creases from the guard's handsome uniform. Querent mispronounces, his honey lisp, his has-to-know, his hands deep in their browning skin intractable at the frontier.

ELIZABETH ROBINSON

## **LA PAPESSÉ**

for Elaine Kahn

Once I lived in a language without vowels, and if you would be so kind, I would like to return there with you.

As you know, pure wisdom is a naked body. That is, a purely naked body. And there, our palette of colors is off-white, ecru, blue, and red. The purely naked body is topped with a crown, but in a language without vowels, it is not permitted to say “gold.”

Therefore you will come home.

If you would be so kind as to recognize the kinds of pure nakedness.

Mine is covered with a pure apron by which I mean a surreptitious map, the map of vowels which you will surely sing.

The vowels you will crow in the incorruptible land where they do not exist. Who will she be, this one who wears the without-crown, the bosom that is a collar?

Whether the incubating seeds of wisdom. Whither it goes. Wither the naked body down to her purest pureness of purity. Finally, you listen to my idiolect. Finally you supplant it.

When you come home, the sac of vowels shall be stuffed further with apron and collar, and we will garble the kinds of pure nakedness with your charity, a fading fringe as it adorns the vowelless, holy face.

KYLE SCHLESINGER

## **DARK GLASSES**

From a grove of  
Coconut palms  
What seemed to be

Squinted down  
Afternoon haze  
Insert a trace

Into the gesture  
You know what  
You are when it's

Over monkey grass  
Across clearing  
Like a robin

Paused to gaze  
A dozen seconds  
Stumbled across

What was an  
Epiphany of sorts  
Went on eyes

Wandered ask  
Questions say  
Something only

Thing that came  
To mind  
You know

You know like  
Where's here  
Turned back to

Door slice of  
Infinity which  
Was seldom

Cruising taxi  
Long gone  
There were

Others but  
Once a little  
High a few

New lines in  
Sand so brown  
So they bounced

Isn't it curious  
Put the prefix in  
And do what's

What happened  
In the hills when  
Historical parallels

Yeah, they're useful  
So's television  
Squirreled away

In a headline  
High lama  
Sacred flame

Think of that  
And for what  
Crosshatch patterns

Turned selves in  
An old elm  
Across the street

Heard footsteps  
Behind the door  
But the door

Didn't open  
Not impossible  
Beneath the wavy

Blond behind  
Puzzled puppy  
Uncanny shrug

Not exactly  
A sole source  
Not altogether

Kiss in the foyer  
Slice of lemon  
Read directions

Mesmerized  
That's understood  
Another given

You know  
Come on upstairs  
Wait for water

Decide what to drive  
Light a cigarette  
Put a face to a name

Back to the table  
Fold lengthwise  
Into fourths

Sign on shirtboard  
Weight stayed lost  
Stopped to turn

Retraced steps  
Twitch waltz  
Hard to miss

No hurry  
On the second level  
Of the parking garage

Across the street  
Behind the wheel  
Old coot

Tie the toe  
Tags on make sure  
Yen for cupcakes

In the saddle  
To the stars  
Clicked into place

Shades of blue  
View from house  
Back to ocean

Only something  
Everybody's somebody  
Now what

What else  
This and that  
Looking around

Crimp a little  
So what happened  
A couple of times

No maybe about it  
Whatever turned up  
Somebody don't

Know exactly who  
Down from hills  
After the sniff

So it would seem  
An interesting notion  
What kind of split

Frown went away  
Grin came back  
Split three ways

Which isn't bad  
Not good  
But not bad

Money's money  
On the floor  
Which is more

For the most part  
A windowless room  
On the bedroom

Room's more interesting  
Way to keep score  
Maybe but didn't

That's the point  
Didn't wrinkle  
So riddle this

Behind which  
Laughter bubbled  
With ice in it

Out of past  
Seersucker pants  
Breakfast buffet

Find out what happened  
Spruce up a little  
People like to forget

One last look  
Late lunch  
Who hovered

Last stop  
Look at that  
Cold snap

Wrong turn  
Into gridlock  
Almost dark

Red X rush of  
Cold around door  
Into room

Just like that  
No socks no  
Shoes nothing

What or who  
List goes on  
Not really

White money  
Slipped it on  
Nothing moved

At dinner last night  
Should've asked  
To grease skids

Cross a few palms  
Above the chin  
With skin

What now  
Patted the bed  
Traffic was light

On the curves  
Because riding  
In the back

Paint was faded  
But boasted  
Behind dark glasses

**BEA ARTHUR, DEAD @ EIGHTY-SIX,**

In lieu of your head stuffed and mounted on my wall,  
I have a photograph stuck in a lowly printed medium,  
&, in lieu of an elegy, a story:

It ends like they all end, w/ me being swarmed  
by bees, but starts in your family sedan.  
I won't imagine you each of the details, but  
I do miss you in a small, potent way  
& regret a lot of things, though  
not all that you'd think.

Tomorrow is likely a large number  
of living persons' birthday, but not yours,  
even were you still here. Also,  
it will be a Monday, & you know what that means.  
Reruns.

I don't truly believe that this building snores—  
more likely its internal stirrings only make it  
to my ears when all else gives it a goddamned rest.  
Still, it's comforting to feel that there's  
someone who, at the next loud noise, nightmare,  
commercial break, will be there again.  
I've decided that referring to the moon  
as a recurring tumor is stupid,  
& so refer to it again simply as the moon.  
I haven't seen the moon for days.

BJ SOLOY

## THE SUNG DYNASTY

A western tanager arrives in Brooklyn,  
a dodo in the Field Museum.  
We will never move to the E. Coast,  
build a house & name the property  
like a Jefferson or a Roosevelt.  
We will never wear our helmets.  
We will stay inside the majority of our lives.  
Our vocabularies will shrink & our handwritings improve.  
I'll grow a moustache,  
collect heroic photographs of athletes.  
We'll invent & name sexual acts,  
wrestling moves, dance steps.  
It will seem that we are running out of names  
for our pets.  
We'll name our children  
the easiest names of the Bible.  
I'll cross my legs like my dad,  
which is to say like a girl.  
My will, in the end, will be pure melodrama,  
something along the lines of:

“Stretch my real-life dead heart  
over something both round & hollow.  
Tighten it into a timpani.  
Alternate between major & minor.  
Leave it unresolved.”

MAREN VESPIA

## **PANTRY MEDITATION**

If this is vanity so  
be it but the mark  
of time in blooming  
fullness beats its credo  
my denuded credo  
results are mixed  
after all I am  
that bind or divide  
connection that is to say  
there are possibilities  
merging or resisting  
or I could clarify  
my letting I could  
rest assured with one  
life after which  
retinue will disperse  
and anyway freedom  
resides in the middle

MAREN VESPIA

## **GROW UP SEQUOIA**

our home depends  
on our making

garland principally  
electric orchid  
cimbalom and ah

the ferment we share  
a fig to exist  
imperishably

over and over  
heat escapes  
wraithlike the roof  
leaves

our bodies abet  
the slip of lamp  
come in

MAREN VESPIA

## **TRAINS, LIKE OUR BODIES, FIND RELIEF UNDERGROUND**

We'd metal conditions, whereby we went like eels sparking.  
Our generating astounded the dark and propelled us forward.  
Always the charge and outages. Always the insight was of  
hooked cars to keep moving. Along the line, from armored  
to lobe-finned—she from you and me—our harbor daughter  
was frondy and fell whenever we turned without end. We  
lapped her like the other small ones, who balanced in our  
care between little oxygen delays. Over distances—  
the future will cluster before ceasing, and still

we hold doors open.

## **BENEFITS OF METAPHOR**

A metaphor breaks the laws of thermodynamics  
by generating energy  
atom fuse. Too, there's no running out  
of comparison. Let more heat in, throw  
the balance off. I turn eternal boundary afloat  
by recognizing wife.

Are you doing your own thing?  
I recognize “doing” and “thing” but  
“own”?/”your”?

I do have a wife, and she is  
merry. And do I have a husband?  
To—Take care—  
I have the ideal wife.  
I have the ideal “wife.”  
I have the ideal, “wife.”

Software I am given  
empowers me to design  
a living room space  
I make my own living.  
“Own living” “as if one could”

## PAST PERFORMANCE BASED ON FUTURE RESULTS

There we were asset stripping,  
engaging in unbridled naked short selling,  
while the big swinging dicks  
got by on greater fool theory.

Stock boys going down on Franny and Freddy  
in murky corners of the market  
while Morgan, Lehman, and Merrill  
woke up to find themselves  
a Texas hedge away from the pink sheets.

Longs were down and shorts were up  
but, what the fuck—we were  
*prime* brokered, we were *counter*  
partied, we were *outperforming*.

Gold Kist is still an attractive risk.  
Helen of Troy sells to Target  
and Walmart, two brutal negotiators,  
and our favorite pick has a near-monopoly  
on misaligned teeth.

So, come on, let's pump and dump  
and pump and dump. Sell on the rumor  
and buy on the news. Our shorts  
are compellingly vulnerable.  
Our current exposure is high.  
We're holding our holdings,  
except when we swap.

We still seek volatility and bottoms,  
and, under the avalanche of bad paper,  
offer ample opportunity.





## WHEN WE WERE RICH

We hardly had sex. I bet celebrities didn't either. We bought cage-free, grain-fed eggs instead and found solace in fine dining. We paid our hip, chaste nanny well and insured the lives of those we loved. We met with school psychologists when nothing was wrong and summered where the ocean shocked our cerebral offspring. Otherwise we discussed the diversity and toxicity of our urban epicenter in smug and terrified tones. Foreigners wanted to kill us and buy our overvalued real estate. We bemoaned the demise of Humanism, Liberalism, Intellectualism, over microgreens and grass-fed brisket. We were fat or over-exercised by half-naked trainers who confessed celibacy between motivational tirades. We wore "mensch" and "homebirth mama" T-shirts and practiced armchair activism between episodes of meticulous television. At night we snored or suffered insomnia unaided by our extensive knowledge of herbs, tonics, tinctures and decoctions. We helped women have the births they wanted or high school students get into elite colleges. We combined apartments and adopted endangered animals on the internet. We had stars named after our sons and ran into Philip Roth in Central Park and in Zabar's where we bought smoked fish even though the sable is better at Barney Greengrass. That was when we were rich but didn't know it, didn't know what we were missing. Now we're fucked. Every night.

## BOOK NOTES

*Irish Girl*, by Tim Johnston  
University of North Texas Press, 2009  
reviewed by Jennifer Wisner Kelly

The folks in Tim Johnston's *Irish Girl* can't catch a break. If it isn't your dad cheating or your mom dying, it's your best friend stealing your girl. Or maybe all three at once. The eight dark and layered stories in this collection explore the consequences of such traumas, betrayals, and losses, often with a dose of creepiness tossed in for good measure.

Things haven't always been doomed for these people. There was a time when they were just regular men, women, and children trying to capture a little of the middle-American good life. When tragedy first strikes, it too is sadly mundane: cancer, infidelity, car crashes. The initial traumas become pebbles in the shoes of the characters' psyches. These unfortunate people must walk around with them, develop a few blisters and then calluses, until, eventually, they manage to put the traumas behind them. Or so they think. Then a strange encounter, or another roll of bad luck, or a stupid choice, rattles these pebbles loose and they find a new spot to rub sore. That's how Johnston's families get yanked out of the ordinary and transplanted into the disconcerting world of *Irish Girl*.

Death lurks in each and every one of these stories—natural deaths, accidental ones, as well as the horrors of abducted girls, landfill corpses, homicidal grad students, and drowned teenagers—but these disturbing events are rarely the focus. Instead, they form a peculiar, unsettling periphery, alerting us that these people have inadvertently traded in their normal existence for something just a few millimeters shy of surreal.

Given what an unsettling world this is, you might think people would cling together, but throughout *Irish Girl* the sad consequence of all the trauma is the distance it wedges between family members. There is a *lack* of connection between people where one *ought* to exist—where maybe something once did exist—and the moments of attempted, but failed, reconnection are devastating. Mothers cannot reach their sons, best friends

drift apart, men cheat on loyal wives. In the title story, “Irish Girl,” teenaged William becomes estranged from his parents. In an unusual moment of tenderness, he takes his little brother, Charlie, to an arcade as a birthday present. William introduces Charlie to his friends and his lovely red-haired girlfriend. On the car ride home, Charlie compliments the girlfriend and sees “a light in his [brother’s] eyes he hadn’t seen in so long he’d forgotten it even existed.” We start to nurture a quiet hope that a human relationship might actually grow from this day of rare intimacy. This far into the collection, though, we should know better.

Similarly, in “Dirt Men,” shame keeps trauma well-buried and loved ones apart. Buddy Knudson Jr. returns to his hometown in Iowa after having been fired from a college teaching job. While working for an excavation company that his father once owned, Buddy Jr. and the rest of the crew unearth a woman’s body. To drink away the shock, the men retreat to a local VFW, where Buddy Jr. discovers from one of the old-timers some “dirt” about his own father. The revelation is startling, but Buddy Jr. knows with visceral certainty that it’s true. He thinks: “I’d known but I’d put [it] away, as Buddy Sr. and I put away whatever might force us to look each other in the eye, to see each other.” And, yet again, what might have been a redemptive human connection slips beyond recovery.

The material here may be dark, but the stories are psychologically astute and emotionally powerful. They are densely layered—mixing multiple story lines in the past and present—but so masterfully intertwined, with one strand conjuring the others, that we never become tangled in the narrative. Instead, we are pulled through the story, eager to see how the disparate pieces will click together, which they always do, often with a surprising little jolt. Moreover, Johnston’s prose is consistently lucid and taut: never self-important and always gut-wrenching. The opening of “Jumping Man” is a good example: “A child goes missing one afternoon, somebody’s little girl, and the news is a stick, an accurate rock, to the quiet hive of Sunday. Mowers are killed mid-lawn, propane grills are snuffed, wet limbs are plucked from pools and sorted and banished from water, from fun itself, until further notice.” Here, and elsewhere, Johnston sets his chilling, foreboding tone from the very first passage.

Frequently, Johnston uses an eerie coincidence or stroke of further bad luck as the catalyst for riling up sleeping trauma. In “Jumping Man,” it is the missing girl that disturbs the narrator’s pedestrian life in a suburban housing development where, by coincidence, a childhood friend, Jeff Finney, also now lives. Johnston effortlessly weaves together the disappearance with additional story lines about the narrator and Jeff Finney’s strange relationship now and in childhood. What are the odds that Jeff’s and the narrator’s paths would cross again? This coincidence, along with several others, compels the narrator to reexamine his harsh judgment of an old friend and his own failures as a husband and father. The narrator frames it this way: “I am thirty-seven and I have a family. A law practice. A well-built house . . . and Jeff Finney is in my life again. Is it supposed to go like this? Is it supposed to turn back on itself, to repeat? Have I done something to make this happen?”

Tim Johnston’s stories, through repetition of bad luck and misfortune, argue that the answer to these questions is a resounding yes. Yes, life *is* infuriatingly circular. Yes, it’s impossible to escape whatever you have been hoping to avoid. Yes, the past will haunt you until, and even after, you confront your demons. Often fiction that relies on coincidence and chance feels far-fetched and unearned, but Johnston’s work avoids this pitfall. Here the coincidences are the impetus for the trauma’s resurrection, not the resolution of some preexisting problem, and, as such, they do not read as implausible. Instead, they carry an aura of fate or predestination.

Of course, the trouble with the relentless misfortune that plagues the families in *Irish Girl* is that we come to expect it. When the stories are read back-to-back, their individual impact begins to fade. Bad luck becomes commonplace and tragedy inevitable. The similarities of theme and structure throughout the collection diminish the power of the later stories, which, read independently, are every bit as well-crafted as their earlier cousins. Johnston’s stories are gripping and carefully wrought, but for maximum potency, *Irish Girl* is best read in small, bitter doses.

*The Same River Twice: A Boatman's Journey Home*,  
by Michael D. Burke  
University of Arizona Press, 2006  
reviewed by Kelsey L. Bennett

While Michael D. Burke's memoir *The Same River Twice: A Boatman's Journey Home* contributes to a substantial literature documenting American pilgrimages into the Alaskan wilderness, its particularly pragmatic approach contrasts with the tragic idealism—here the figure of Christopher McCandless comes to mind—that we often associate with such journeys: “the main goal,” Burke writes with refreshing directness, “is to survive.” Burke's memoir captures a dimension of this wilderness journey over Alaskan waterways from a perspective hovering on the cusp of middle age, simultaneously committed to long-held ideals and weighted with responsibilities left at home, not the least of which include an academic career and a pregnant wife very near delivery.

The memoir covers Burke's trip to Alaska to run rivers on a worn raft that has accompanied him on most of his guiding excursions across North America. The ostensible reason for the adventure is to connect with a distant ancestor who had also depended upon rivers for his livelihood, Sid Barrington, who worked as a renowned steamboat pilot in Alaska around the turn of the century. Throughout the memoir's three parts named after Alaskan rivers—“Chutine,” “Sitkine,” and “Sheslay”—Burke interweaves historical and archival material about Sid alongside his own present experience and reflections on his past as a river guide. Perhaps most intriguing are not the tenuous connections between the distant past and present, Barrington and Burke, but what happens in moments when Burke is most sharply aware of Barrington's *absence*. Like many narratives committed to mapping the elusive terrain of maturity, *The Same River Twice* shows that a significant part of this landscape involves the spaces surrounding the inevitable confrontation with personal limitation. For Burke, this recognition signals the final confluence of the imagined past with the reality of the present.

“Chutine” describes Burke's meeting with Max, a friend of a friend, who would become his river-running companion for the following weeks. Max is a Robert Bly fan, biologist, *est* enthu-

siast—someone with whom the narrator finds little in common. But as they fly into the wilderness (in care of the always colorful bush-pilot characters) and are left alone at Lake Chutine, the sublimity of the landscape begins to consume their differences. In a chapter appropriately begun with a quotation by Edmund Burke, the narrator describes the effect of the new surroundings:

You are alone. It is quiet. And as those first moments pass, you become even more alone. And it gets even more quiet. The silence grows, increases, until it turns into the sound of the breeze in the black spruce and reaches a climax in which you become aware of every sound, every movement, every thought and sight.

The senses are sharp, but attention turns inward with clarity. The effect of this inward turn is, surprisingly, a magnification of doubt and worry. Standing below the hanging glaciers, with a cerulean lake at his feet and Mt. Chutine rising a vertical eight thousand feet across the lake, Burke finds that he does *not* feel as connected with the place as he had hoped to be. It is the fourth of July, he is many miles from his wife and unborn child, and he wonders whether he had made a mistake in coming at all. “I felt tiny,” he reflects. “Tiny is not bad; tiny is the way you are supposed to feel at such moments. But I also felt trapped. I was in the most unrestricted place I could possibly be . . . I was crushed, smaller than tiny. I needed to be someplace else but couldn’t be.”

For most of Burke’s life, the place to meditate on this ever-receding, ever-promising “someplace else” has always been the river; it provides a constant means of motion and becomes for a period an end in itself. By coming again to Alaska, the narrator expects to slip back into “river time” but as his present experience develops, he finds that time and place are not his own in precisely the same way that they were before.

Throughout the narrative, Burke unfolds recollections and reflections on the guiding life as he has come to know it: “Guiding is part performance, part sport, part bacchanal, part Thoreau, part Twain—and nothing is much like it.” Having accumulated a certain amount of river-experience, every experience reminds

him of another. Max's blurred glimpse of a bear brings back Burke's earlier surprise confrontation with a grizzly. The Jew's harp that Burke plays recalls a flute he lost on another river long ago in which he capsized his raft and everyone's belongings were swept into the current. This anecdote, in turn, blends into the present in which the two men see a she-wolf, and later the prints of her pups. Present experience and memory flow interchangeably as they mark progress toward the final river they will run.

Burke is at his best while describing the visceral qualities of the river-running experience. In "Sheslay," the narrator and his companion engage an exhilarating but manageable river until they reach a formidable logjam and a nearly impassable falls. After much thinking, odds-calculating, and "listening," the narrator finally hears not the voice of the river but the voice of his wife asking a simple question: "Is this necessary?" From the perspective of an experienced guide and adventurer, as from Burke's historic-poetic imagination wishing to contribute to the river-running family lore, the answer would be an unequivocal "yes." But neither one of these perspectives seems to match the present moment, and the narrator decides not to take the risk, to skip the falls, and to move the raft to a safe place beyond.

But an interlude that begins, "And this is the way I wanted it to be," tells another version of the moment. Burke imagines with all the sharpness of experience what would have happened had they decided to go over the falls. In this version, the two narrowly, but successfully, make the drop and pass through the tumult just below. By including this brief scene, Burke shows the narrator's deep ambivalence toward his actual decision and, guided by the voice of his wife, his larger purpose in being there at all. As they look back once more at what Burke would christen "Farewell Falls," he reflects:

For a moment I saw it from two perspectives: from a river pilot's of the turn of the century, coming upstream and finding this impossible barrier; and from the perspective of myself as a younger man, traveling with a group of guides, when it would have been great fun to come across such a place. The perspectives had this in common, that they were not the one I had at that mo-

ment or ever would have again. My own perspective was a muddle, somewhere in between seeing the falls as impossible or as exhilarating; this vision only lasted a moment, though, because sooner or later you must turn downriver and see what is coming next.

“Next,” for Burke is dealing not with the aftermath of an accident, injury, or death, but with his decision not to force confrontation with any of these possibilities. Of that night, the narrator, sore and tired, writes, “I had no more ambitions. . . . Before, I’d been pursuing some ghost of Sid. As we’d run the rapids of the Sheslay, that phantom had gradually faded into the whitewater, and now it was gone.” In *The Same River Twice*, Burke offers the reader the possibility that it is only through such ghosts that one may best appreciate both the ambiguity and the substantiality of the present.

*The Tangled Line*, by Tod Marshall

*Union!* by Ish Klein

Canarium Books, 2009

reviewed by Darcie Dennigan

Both recently published by Canarium Books, Tod Marshall’s *The Tangled Line* and Ish Klein’s *Union!* are very different projects. One creates tension, the other seeks communion; one takes on a myth, the other a nation; one tallies the cost of desire, the other tries to shun it; one is quiet, the other exclamatory. But both books excel at risky flights and both reach desperately for comfort, rest, and (take the leap with me here) nests. Each reader will have to decide for herself how successful these poets are in their nest-building. For me, they were not successful, and thank goodness, because however much I desire it, I do not ultimately go to poetry for coziness. When Elizabeth Bishop writes, “Somebody loves us all,” I prefer to hear that statement as tinny, empty, more hopeful than confident. So I took pleasure in Marshall’s and Klein’s failed attempts at poems-as-solace.

The way we generally expect myth to work in a poem is by elevating the subject matter, lending both texture and universality to private experience. But what happens when the writer’s ex-

perience feels more textured, familiar, and interesting than the myth he is using as complement? In many poems of *The Tangled Line*, the speaker, who has lost custody of his son, likens himself to Daedalus. The inventor of the labyrinth, and of wings made of feathers and wax with which to escape the island that holds it, Daedalus helps himself and his son Icarus to fly. Indirectly, he helps Icarus to fall from the sky and drown. Yet in Marshall's poems, the everyday suburban dad brooding over memories of his kid eating cereal, his kid playing in the yard, feels more tragic, more *epic*, than the great myth of flight and fall.

Take the beginning of the book's sixth poem, "The Shore":

I discovered the body, finally.  
Salt water dissolved feathery wax,  
fish had picked at pale skin, eyes

long gone, flying  
with sharp-beaked gulls, I guess.  
Those who say it's a myth of foolish boys

know nothing of fathers: his shoulder blades  
curved like sea shells  
when he hunched over a bowl of cereal

slurping the milk.

Likening a father who has lost his son through a custody decree to Daedalus who must imagine his boy's eyes eaten by gulls does not, perhaps surprisingly, open up new emotional territory. But putting the boy at the kitchen table with the barest whisper of sea—"his shoulders / curved like sea shells"—is moving. The speaker's lost son seems to have upon him the mantle of all lost boys—going back to Icarus—as he eats his Cheerios. The pathos of the father over the water-wrecked body is somehow less than the pathos of the father hovering over the memory of his son at breakfast. (But then, a dull spoon will always slay me faster than a sword.)

Further on in "The Shore," Marshall writes, "Those who deride ambition // know nothing of sky." In a later poem is this line: "If it could, hunger would eat the sun." The speaker of

these poems may be Daedalus, but in his ambition, Tod Marshall is Icarus. He aspires to sky, to “feel the fabric of life in the sky,” through the impossible tasks he sets for his poems: “Describe Breton to the Enlightenment.” “Admit Circumference to Arrival.” Even more impossible: his poems seem intent on finding solace for a father, mid-divorce. Divorce is not a premise of a few poems but the tide that turns the book. The speaker tries to give himself a clew, a thread, so as to find his way through the labyrinth of his own making. I wish he had found his way out.

The poems in *Union!* have a light touch to them—I think of *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, because the nimbleness and seeming spontaneity of Klein’s lines can make them unbearably sad. In Kundera’s book, he mourns that since we live our lives only once, our decisions don’t really matter, and thus our own insignificance is the cause of our suffering. In Klein’s book, her words have the feeling of being uttered only once, here on the page—not contrived beforehand or revised. Even poems begun in childhood memories have an immediacy—the childhood is happening now. Each line, so heavy with care and humor and birds and rats and oceans, will, as soon as you finish reading it and no matter how much you might wish to remember it, float away and out of your mind.

When you leave a museum, you are conscious that the paintings remain on the walls. With or without your attention, they exist. But *Union!* makes the reader so prominent, so complicit in its poems, that I felt as if its pages stayed blank until the split-second before I opened up the book, and erased themselves as quickly as I closed it. Most poetry needs a reader to complete the metaphors, but *Union!* needs a reader to talk to and to listen to. The final stanzas of “My Love Has Left Me I Have No Home” illustrate what Klein might like her reader’s role to be:

Nothing is clear, here.  
Hey you! You whoever you are.  
Are you in on this?

Tell me. Tell me if you don’t mind.  
Or have a seat, have whatever you want.  
I will watch. You won’t even know I’m here.

Klein loves the world more than she loves any poem, especially one of her own making. She calls her poem “For You I Will Make Myself Useful” a “flat mechanism,” but hopes the poem as gesture will be gift enough. It is a poem that is almost a caricature of an Ish Klein poem. What the other poems do in this collection, this poem does on drugs. It is addressed to anyone in the universe. It undercuts its own poeticness and relinquishes control over itself. It’s funny and full of exclamation points. It is as if Walt Whitman fathered a child with Florence Nightingale and that child were standing on a rooftop in Brooklyn and sounding her benevolent yelp.

How’s this: Ish Klein loves you X (genuine signature and date) and can lend a limited amount of money to you, in your time of need.  
If that is what you want.  
Or I will make physical contact.

How far will we go? You tell me.  
Wait! I should arrange these things, these words, or whatever.  
Polish the brass.  
Words:

The sun is like an omen.  
The moon, a variable drip.  
My heart is like a tire fire.  
You who read this are like a beautiful drug.

And I LOVE drugs!  
It’s the year of the dog; the drugged dog.  
That’s my year!  
My hand is now a puppet calling out to you.

The poem makes offerings until its end: “Love, Love, Love, / Ish Klein.” It is a lovely, lonely poem. The speaker—Ish Klein—is sort of like the Statue of Liberty: even as she embraces the tired, poor, and hungry, there she stands, alone. Perhaps having failed to love one person as she wished (the subject of many of the poems in the book’s first section), she must love the world.

*Petals of Zero Petals of One*, by Andrew Zawacki  
 Talisman House, 2009  
 reviewed by Julie Carr

Poetry grounded in the particulars of a place—Wordsworth’s London, Whitman’s Brooklyn, Olson’s Gloucester, Williams’s Paterson, O’Hara’s Manhattan, Niedecker’s Black Hawk Island—is a constant in our traditions. These poets, and many who have followed, investigate a place’s qualities, histories, personalities, energy, and mythology, in order, it seems, to initiate a series of questions: how can one actually *know* a place? How can language alone evoke a landscape? Is it ever possible to “compel” as Olson said, a place onto the page? Or does the poem, instead, take us farther from the place itself, into another place: the place of the aesthetic?

Andrew Zawacki’s third book of poetry, *Petals of Zero Petals of One* (Talisman House), opens with the twenty-six-page poem “Georgia.” Ostensibly, the poem enters into this tradition, raising just these epistemological doubts: “And I don’t know this city Georgia / and I don’t know if I want to know / what is it that anyone knows Georgia / really Georgia / in the end Georgia.”

Incantatory and loving, the poem is also angry, violent, and disgusted. Seduced by Southern lushness, by the “irises flushed in saffron,” and the “hawk owl perched on the larch’s bough,” the poem turns, frequently, to a kind of tight rage. A typical slide begins “let’s bloom Georgia” and then travels, as it were, south: “this popstand / this Podunk five and dime a dozen / our brains all over the passenger seat.”

But Georgia is not, of course, only a state, it is also a woman’s name, and the poem, like the song we hear running, in a sense, under the poem, exploits this ambiguity with aplomb. “I listen to the noises every last one Georgia / I love every last noise on the violet fields,” writes Zawacki, speaking to his home state as a lover, though an ambivalent one: “Let nothing come between us Georgia / but me / and you / and the hollow between.” Yet what the poem loves best is its own music, its own rhythms, its “syllables virused by syllables.” For frequently Zawacki allows himself to get caught in eddies of sound, as in the following riff:

You're alasless Georgia  
 harassless Georgia  
 from your slackass jeans to your Jesus Georgia  
 ersatz and aliased  
 lacking alack

This is playful, but it's not without its reasons. The poem is as much about the language of place (and Zawacki's not above making ample use of Southern colloquialisms like "willn't" and "punkass") as it is about the place itself. Georgia is first and foremost a word: and a special word at that, packed with four of the five vowels; it's "vowellewd" as Zawacki writes. The one vowel that's missing, the "u," speaks voluminously as well, since Zawacki's object, despite the relentless address, is not a "you"—neither a woman nor a place at all—it is rather an abstraction, word and idea; it's a phenomenon, as Zawacki admits when he writes: "and whether these possible worlds Georgia / be many / or only / my own / I call you Georgia / in the fissure of you."

*Petals of Zero* *Petals of One* houses two other long sequences: "Arrow's shadow," and "Storm, lustral : unevensong." These, even more blatantly than "Georgia," highlight the "fissure" between place and poem, or, to put it in familiar terms, between objects and their names. The language in "Arrow's shadow" is frequently broken, tweaked, unmade in order to be remade. The opening poem's opening line reads, "Gauntwater and brittlewhite," and throughout this first poem we find words like "nowise," "sigil," "trefoil," and "pinnate." Get out your dictionaries! We're a far way from ordinary speech here, located nowhere, as the poem admits in its closing: "still life with eau-de-nil / with zerologue / with motion."

In this rather oblique reference to the book's title lies a key to its poetics. The "nil," the "zero," is the source of art itself—the openness out of which and within which imagination can move. The poem is a "zerologue," a language of or about nothing at all, nothing, of course, but its own outrageous beauty.

the ana-  
 gram and gram  
 -mar of mar-

gins and mar-  
igolds

begins another poem in “Arrow’s shadow.” Here, the anagrammatic play of words is made blatant, while the phrase “mar of mar” works as a kind of double negative, leading, in the way of double negatives, to an ambivalent affirmation (“I do not not love you!”). The verb “to mar” comes from an Old English word meaning “to obstruct” and only later took on connotations of violence or harm. The obstructive (rather than revealing) action of language here is given an affirming shine with that last line “igolds.” One doesn’t want to burden such moments with too much purpose, but there is certainly luster in these broken words, something both valuable and rare.

The book’s title, then, offers various points of departure. In “Arrow’s shadow,” when the “arrow” of the poem becomes a computer’s cursor: “a cursor dragged by the dark / over ghost fonts silting the sower’s lament,” we understand that we can read the title’s “zero” and “one” as the units of code, the essential materials from which writing (in the digital age) happens. But the title’s first connotation is, of course, floral, and Zawacki’s Georgia is nothing if not that, blooming with violets, eglantine, irises, and geraniums. And another flower comes to mind too, and that is Mallarmé’s “flower which is absent from all bouquets.” In his argument against mimesis Mallarmé writes, “Why should we perform the miracle by which a natural object is almost made to disappear beneath the magic waving wand of the written word, if not to divorce that object from the direct and the palpable and so conjure up its essence in all its purity?” The act of writing creates this flower in absentia, this flower with its petals of zero. One senses that this “Georgia” is not so much *on* Zawacki’s mind as it is *of* his mind, essential for how beautifully it blooms beyond the actual.

*The Book of Props*, by Wayne Miller  
Milkweed Editions, 2009  
reviewed by Justin Sider

In *Esthétique du Mal*, Wallace Stevens writes of himself, with not a little irony, “He had studied the nostalgias,” and from

that one line an entire branch of the American poetic tradition could claim descent. It is a family populated by some of our most haunting poets: James Wright, Donald Justice, Jack Gilbert, Mark Strand, among others. The seemingly thin tissue of nostalgia has produced powerful results; it has deeper roots than a tendency towards reminiscence. The word derives from the Greek *nostos*, a journey home, and for the poets of nostalgia, the exploration of the domestic space, its alienation from us and reclamation through poetry, continues to beckon.

Wayne Miller's latest work, *The Book of Props*, places him squarely among the poets of nostalgia. He crafts a world both strange and intimate, and his poems are always journeys home. The shape of his lyric is familiar, dominated by the couplet, and his syntax, relaxed yet careful, ventures comfortably over the surface of his lines. The book begins with a short sequence entitled, "Sleep Suite," which looks for the intersection of its large, abstract subjects (the poems are entitled "History," "Culture," "Love," etc.) with the world of sleep. History beds down among buildings that sleep "by standing," and language passes into sleep "by the time you're finished" with even a single page. The sequence explores what escapes our conscious minds, as when in "[Love]," Miller writes,

when the evening was over  
and the city slept at last, nothing

had changed for us, and they  
would never be the same.

The lovers in the poem resist, through the changes of their love, the "blurring" of the "humanscape" around them. City and humans sleep, unknowing, around the epiphanic isolation of the lovers.

Our tenuous grasp of the perceived world is one of Miller's central themes. His interest in what eludes us leads him not only to the poignant nostalgia of his lyrics but also to an engagement with the phenomenological. In "Prelude," the opening poem of "Sleep Suite," he describes a tangle of perceptions, birds, cars, shop mannequins, and the play of light over them: "light ringing them into existence / as a bell struck in a quiet room / rings one's hearing into existence." The lines echo, perhaps, A. R.

Ammons's "Triphammer Bridge," where the concept of a "sanctuary" is described as "a bell rung in a gold surround," and this sound and the imagination of the sound create a place in which to dwell. Miller's poem does similar work, drawing from the ringing of the light an imaginative space through which a breeze passes, "untouched by [the light], asleep." But Miller's primary concern is to track the movement from the original perception to the imagining that follows. His poems are indices of that challenge.

The tension between the thing itself and the idea of the thing runs throughout *The Book of Props*. In "Lawn Chair Meditation (V)," Miller writes

And when

I blow a dandelion clock apart,  
it leaves in its place the idea

of dandelion. It's the idea  
I now keep lifting to my cheek

to feel a whisper there—  
and which, at the same time,

I find myself also longing  
to blow apart.

Even as he recognizes the mechanism of his perceptions, Miller seems to fear the dominance of the idea over that original perception. By blowing apart the idea of the dandelion as he blew apart the seeds, he seeks a return to an unmediated contact with the flower. It is another form of the *nostos* that dominates his poetry, an ordinary moment like the "new knowledge of reality" that concludes Wallace Stevens's "Not Ideas About the Thing But the Thing Itself." Miller refrains from insisting on that moment, from creating it within the poem. He holds back and that restraint becomes the poem's true pathos.

Nostalgia has its limitations, which contribute to the principle weaknesses of the volume. In "Machado *Glosa*," Miller writes that "A song / coheres because silence // seals the notes," a lovely moment but also a danger for his poems. Sealed off

by silence, his poems too often direct themselves towards their own isolation. His craft, the careful finish of his language and syntax, sometimes strands his poems in their own loveliness. In “Notes on the Night Highway (II),” for instance, the writing never rises past the limitations of its title. “The radio tower lost beneath its flashing” and the lightning that “lifts the fields // sharply into view” seem isolated from each other and from the poem’s attempts at serious reflection. Even those (“I try to believe we live in love’s body— // so when it forgets us we’re still organs / pulsing for life”) fall a bit flat. “A sculptor’s chisel pierces stone exactly / to its sculpture” is true, in a way, but nonetheless fails to alchemize the poem’s various elements. In these moments, one wishes Miller would put more pressure on his materials.

*The Book of Props*, however, is characterized more by its strengths than by its weaknesses. In the third section, *What Night Says to The Empty Boat (Notes for a Film in Verse)*, the lives of his characters, Justine, Andy and Clarence, pivot on the axis of the title lyric, which offers, “projected into the rowboat / Clarence has left floating in the slip,” the night’s own words, a love song to the boat. Its promises, stark and inhuman, are also some of the most felt lines in the volume. The night assures the boat, “I will hook my stars / in the water beneath you / in the skim of water that floats here within you. / And this is the way / believe me, we will not disappear.” Against the fears and frustrations of the sequence’s characters, against the fears of the poet himself, the night’s words are an insistence on love and its durability, the home to which Miller’s poems always seek to return.

*Captive Voices: New and Selected Poems, 1960-2008*,  
by Eleanor Ross Taylor  
Louisiana State University Press, 2009  
reviewed by Kevin Prufer

For a long time, I had no idea what better poets meant when they talked about a good *line* of poetry. It seemed to me that one typed away at a poem until it reached a width of, say, three inches. Then one hit return and began anew, a little lower on the page. And sure, I allowed, some poems had what we called

meter, which I'd learned to categorize in groups called iambic (for the making of a sonnet), trochaic (best if I was feeling forceful), spondaic (strictly for shouting), or dactylic (great for the bawdy or dirty-minded), among others. Beyond these, there existed a more loosely constructed non-metrical rhythm (Eliot liked it) and, beyond that, free verse (and the accompanying freedom I, like Whitman, admired). To tell the truth, I hadn't given it much thought.

And then in graduate school I happened upon the poems of the much underappreciated Stevie Smith, whose lines seemed to veer wildly through runs of romping anapests, then to pull up short on a caesura, to pause, to look around and rethink themselves. They'd fall into pensive free verse, pick themselves up with a cheerful trio of dactyls, stop again, breathe, grin, or sigh. But it wasn't the fluidity with which Stevie Smith moved from one poetic mode to another that astonished me, but the fact that this constant shifting always suggested a brain *behind* the poem at work on a problem, a speaker of two (or three or four) minds who had not yet decided how she felt—and communicated that indecision (and complexity) not just through the literal meaning of her words, but through the temporary, unsettling music that accompanied them. Every line of poetry, after all, has its own music, suggesting, often in counterpoint, the needs, ambitions, and unstated anxieties of the speaker. This is one of the things a line of poetry (as opposed to a line of chopped-up prose) does best, it seems to me: it facilitates the expression of internal conflict, indecision, and complexity.

I wouldn't discover another modern poet who'd learned this lesson half so well until I came across the grinning skullishness of Frederick Seidel ten years later. And then it was another five years before I read the work of Eleanor Ross Taylor.

Like Stevie Smith, Eleanor Ross Taylor is woefully underappreciated. Most of my friends haven't heard of her. Those who have haven't read her poems. Fifty years ago, when Randall Jarrell was singing her praises, plenty of aspiring poets might have studied her books closely. But today (despite the ringing praise of such eminences as Jean Valentine, Ellen Bryant Voigt, Adrienne Rich, and Betty Adcock), she is not much read. Perhaps she doesn't write enough to keep pace with our thirst for the

new; during her most prolific periods, she has published a slim book only every ten years. She's never won an award the general reading public will have heard of (though Randall Jarrell suggested, during his National Book Award acceptance speech that she might have been a better choice). Or perhaps she seems to belong too much to another, fading generation: she is ninety years old now and, it's true, one might mistake her work for a kind of ladylike confessionalism that today is out of fashion. But this is a shame. For my money, Eleanor Ross Taylor is one of the three or four greatest living American poets and this is likely the best book published this year.

Like many of our best poets, Taylor treads the same ground repeatedly—one might even say, obsessively. If her poems occur in a place, that place is the South. Her speakers are most often mothers and wives thinking about their grown children, the complexities of marriage, and (increasingly as she ages), their responsibilities to the dead and their own impending demise. Sometimes these voices emerge from an ostensible past, as in “My Grandmother’s Virginhood, 1879” or “Motherhood, 1880.” More often, they take place in an undefined domestic present. Occasionally, they rise from more surprising places, as in “Kitchen Fable,” where the flatware itself takes on the consciousness of a frustrated wife:

He who came down whack.  
His conversation, even, edged.

Lying beside him in the drawer  
she formed a crazed patina.  
The seasons stacked—  
melons, succeeded by cured pork.

He dulled; he was a dull knife,  
while she was, after all, a fork.

Like Stevie Smith, Taylor is often terrifically witty and sharp, keen-eyed and quick. The dead, she writes, are “like germs,” growing “more virulent / in slumber, / commanding the pillow / to remember the dream.” In another poem, a housewife calls to us from beneath her back porch, where she’s become trapped

while checking the dryer vent. “I think I left the burner on,” she tells us; then, later:

I could have washed these pots  
and filled them with rosemary.

Nota bene, my survivors: I’m to be buried  
in the old part of the cemetery.

Writing of her own mortality and an impending visit from something resembling Emily Dickinson’s deathly carriage, she asks:

Of course we’ll follow.  
Did you say horse? or hearse? No matter  
...  
What’s triter than hooves’ clatter?  
Is dead silence worse?

But it is too, too easy to call these poems “domestic” or “witty” and be done with them, or to notice in the music of her lines those clanging rhymes and shifting rhythms and hear in these mere lightness. The fact is that the sprightly music of these poems serves primarily as a counterpoint against which we’re meant to understand much darker impulses—for running alongside the music are fierce sadness and, frequently, rage. Married life, these poems suggest, is filled with loss and silence. We are always losing track of each other, failing to tell each other what we mean. Our friends and our children die, and so do we. And, though we can make light of all of this—we can, as these poems do appear to sing a happy, witty song about it—we retreat to this music in desperation, to conceal the barely expressible sadness beneath our cheerful melodies. This ironic avoidance is perhaps best suggested in “Our Lives Are Rounded with a Sleep,” on the death of the poet’s daughter. Instead of directly talking about death, Taylor addresses that time before her daughter was born:

Where are they sleeping,  
the babies to be born  
a hundred years from now?

Where did she sleep, my daughter,  
when I was a child?

...

A There that was a place?  
Where is it now?

Her nails, her heavy hair,  
(her pillowed face)

Or in one of her very finest poems, here quoted in full, she adopts the voice of an elderly farmwoman addressing her grandchildren:

Song

Oh my dearie,  
Our childhoods are histories,  
Buckets at the bottom of the well,  
And hard to tell  
Whether they will hold water or no.  
Did Pa die before we were married?  
No, he died in twenty-seven,  
But I remember the wedding  
Reminded me of the funeral—  
When grandbabies ask,  
Little do they care,  
I will tell them about the man I found  
That day at my plowing in the low-grounds  
Lying at the edge of the water.  
His face had bathed five nights.  
A dark man, a foreigner, like.  
They never found his kind to tell....  
Buckets, buckets at the bottom of the well.  
It was in the paper with my name.  
I found him.  
I have the clipping tells all about it,  
If your Grandma aint thrown it out.

Oh my dearie  
When our faces are swol up

We will look strange to them.  
 Nobody, looking out the door  
 Will think to call us in.  
 They'll snap their fingers trying  
 To recollect our names.  
 Five nights, five bones, five buckets—  
 Who'll ever hear a sound?  
 Oh my dearie  
 The rope broke  
 The bucket bobs round  
 Oh my dearie

Here, the lightness of the buried rhyme and witty colloquial language serve only to throw into relief the rage of the speaker, who (much to the horror of her listeners, we imagine) grows darker, more morbid, and sadder as the poem progresses, ending in four short, punctuation-free, halting lines, her voice trailing into a silent, hopeless meditation on death and loss.

Currently, this book is ranked somewhere in the millions on Amazon.com's so-called "best seller" list and this is a shame. Our younger poets could learn something from Eleanor Ross Taylor's dexterous, rhythmic lines, the ambitious irony of her music, and the complexity of the minds at work in these poems. And I cannot imagine the serious reader—poet or not—who could leave *Captive Voices* unmoved by the work of this supremely gifted poet who skips so nimbly around our sadnesses and fears, never directly addressing them, suggesting, instead, their complex resistance to summary.

## CONTRIBUTOR NOTES

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**Tara Bray's** first book, *Mistaken for Song*, was published by Persea Books. Her new work has recently appeared or will soon appear in *Southern Review*, *Puerto Del Sol*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *West Branch*.

**Lily Brown** holds an MFA from Saint Mary's College of California. Her first book, *Rust or Go Missing*, is forthcoming in fall 2010 from Cleveland State University Poetry Center.

**Julie Carr** is the author of *Mead: An Epithalamion*, *Equivocal*, and *100 Notes on Violence*. She is the co-editor of Counterpath Press, with Tim Roberts, and teaches at the University of Colorado at Boulder.

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**Nancy Kuhl** is the author of *Suspend* (2010), *The Wife of the Left Hand* (2007), and chapbooks including *The Nocturnal Factory* (2008). She is co-editor of Phylum Press, a small poetry publisher. [www.phylumpress.com/nancykuhl.htm](http://www.phylumpress.com/nancykuhl.htm)

**Melissa Lambert** recently completed her MFA in creative writing at Lesley University in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was a recipient of the Jacob K. Javits Fellowship and has published creative nonfiction and poetry, along with academic papers and commissioned articles, in a number of print and online publications.

**Z. Cody Lee** is a bookmaker and poet from Minnesota. He currently lives in Missoula, Montana, where he is writing, drawing, and translating the complete poems of Blaise Cendrars from French into English. Visit [www.gendun.com](http://www.gendun.com) to view more of his work.

**Susan Maxwell** holds an MFA in poetry from Iowa Writers' Workshop. Her first book, *Passenger*, was published in 2005 as a winner of the University of Georgia's Contemporary Poetry Series. Her poems have appeared in *New American Writing*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Verse*, *Volt*, *Gutcult*, *American Letters & Commentary*, *1913: A Journal of Forms*, *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Crowd*, among other places. She is currently working on a doctorate in clinical psychology.

**Derek Mong** will publish his first collection of poems with Saturnalia Books in the fall of 2011. New work can be found in *Lumberyard*, *Lo-Ball*, *River and Sound Review*, and *Artful Dodge*. To read more, visit [www.derekmong.com](http://www.derekmong.com).

**Trey Moody's** poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Best New Poets 2009*, *Denver Quarterly*, *Indiana Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Third Coast*, and *Washington Square*, among others. A PhD student at the University of Nebraska, he lives with J, G, C, and B in Lincoln.

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This issue's cover photograph is by **Carmen Neumeier**, a German photographer who lives in the Bavarian Forest close to the border of the Czech Republic. She is a social worker in a hostel for people with disabilities.

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**Kevin Prufer's** most recent books are *Fallen from a Chariot* (Carnegie Mellon, 2005) and *National Anthem* (Four Way Books, 2008), named one of the five best poetry books of the year by *Publishers Weekly*. His next collection is *Little Paper Sacrifice*, forthcoming from Four Way Books in 2011.

**Elizabeth Robinson** is the author, most recently, of *Also Known As* (Apogee Press) and *The Orphan & Its Relations* (Fence Books). She was the recipient of the Pavement Saw Press Editor's Choice Award for her chapbook *Reply*, forthcoming this year. She is a co-editor of Instance Press and EtherDome Chapbooks.

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**Justin Sider's** reviews have appeared in *Colorado Review* and *Meridian*, and his poetry has appeared in *Southwest Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Locuspoint*, and other journals. He lives in New Haven, where he is pursuing a PhD in English Literature at Yale.

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**Maren Vespia** graduated from Pratt Institute, spent a few great years with *Poets & Writers, Inc.*, then moved to Montana to study poetry. She is earning her MFA from The University of Montana and coordinating the Second Wind Reading Series of Missoula.

**Catherine Wagner's** latest book is *My New Job* (Fence Books, 2009). A selection from a new project, an epic romance, appears in the fall issue of *Verse*, and recent readings are available on her Penn Sound page. She is associate professor in the MA program in creative writing at Miami University in southwest Ohio.

**Joshua Ware** lives in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he is pursuing his PhD in poetry and poetics. He is co-author of *I, NE: Iterations of the Junco* (Small Fires) and author of *A Series of Ad Hoc Permutations, or Ruby Love Songs* (Scantly Clad) and *Excavations* (Further Adventures, forthcoming). His work has appeared or will appear in *American Letters & Commentary*, *Laurel Review*, *New American Writing*, and *Quarterly West*.

**Rachel Zucker** is the author of four books of poems, most recently, *Museum of Accidents*. She is also co-editor of two anthologies, including *Starting Today: 100 Poems for Obama's First 100 Days*. [www.rachelzucker.net](http://www.rachelzucker.net)