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W E S T V I E W

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3. Include a brief biographical sketch for our contributors' notes.

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W E S T V I E W

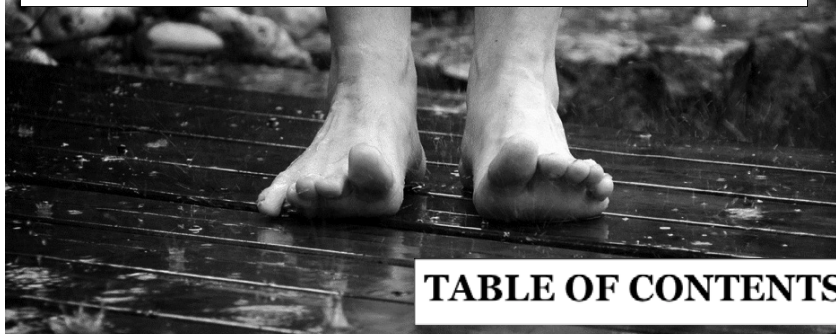


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The Red White and Blue Pony

by Dennis Ross

always disappeared behind a barn
or haystack just before Susan looked,
stretching up to see from the car window,
but her teasing sisters always saw it.
Susan looked hard, really wanted
a glimpse but was just too late.

Now wrinkled with white hair
and unsteady walk, she has worked
in Eastern Europe, has seen the Three
Rivers Dam in China, geyser fields
in Iceland, ancient icons at
the Hermitage Museum in Russia
questing for the hidden magic
of the red white and blue pony
always just beyond the next rise.

One explorer wanted only a glimpse
of a snow leopard in the Himalayas
and settled for seeing the blue sheep.
Others seek a Grand Unified Theory
or the perfect jewel of language.
Only the search matters. Even
an imaginary pony or apocryphal
chalice can give you the world.

Flying Woman

by Dennis Ross

The horses stand asleep in the pasture,
and the full moon tacks between clouds;
even the bluebells doze in the grass.

Where are you this luminous night
made for drifting like a will-o-wisp
or a song through the tree branches?

I feel earth-bound now for many years,
a long ache dragging stone feet.
Come again, woman of the quiet night,

of the moon, and the sacred grove,
and help me fly again and soar,
or were you, too, only part of a dream?

Birds and Trees

by Richard Dinges Jr.

If you believe, birds
speak from trees. Unaware,
we hear trees sing
sweetly, calling an audience,
a feathered following
gathered in shadows.
Before leaves burst,
birds erupt from limbs
and gnarled fingertips,
fully formed in flight,
learning their voice
to practice in spring
and sprout their own
to fill the tips of wings.

Oh No, Guadalajara Won't Do

by Beth E. Goldner

My mother and I met Rhonda on the bus ride

from San Diego to Mexico. We were going to Guadalajara for my mother's semester abroad. Rhonda was travelling farther south to Mexico City.

"It's terribly polluted," Rhonda said, "but the city has more silver foxes and, dear, every woman—that means you, Annette—who is over the age of forty and single needs a silver fox."

My mother and I exchanged glances, but her eyes told me to keep my mouth shut. Rhonda's familiarity with us after only fifteen minutes was unnerving, even for my mother, whose openness to the world had increased exponentially over the course of the year.

"What's a silver fox?" I asked.

Rhonda sat in the aisle seat across from me. My mother, at the window seat next to me, pinched my thigh hard.

"What?" I turned to her. "It's just a question."

"It's okay, Annette. Both of you are on an adventure, taking a bus to Mexico, right?"

Rhonda turned back to me, her hands shaping the air as if she were holding a basketball.

"A silver fox is a rich man who is old, but not too old—he can still be the lover you need. He is rich not just with money, but also with body and soul, you know what I mean? Sylvia, when a fox runs, they appear to be flying, almost swimming through the air, yes? So you have to be strategic, not just fast, if you want to catch them."

Rhonda looked at my mother.

"They like American women, Annette. Most of them live in Mexico City, but I've seen some in the Mediterranean, mostly in Greece."

Rhonda made me nervous with her big flat face and heavy mane of frizzy red hair.

"We're going to Guadalajara to study," I said. "My mother is going to study ancient ruins."

"Oh no, you don't understand, Sylvia. I'm a student, too," Rhonda said. "One should never stop being a student. We should all be students of Life."

It had been less than a year since my father left us, during which my mother dyed her hair blonde, got a nose job, and began therapy. She started cursing, became a vegetarian, and told me that although Jimmy Carter couldn't get those hostages out of Iran, she was voting for him again, goddammit. She enrolled at Point Loma Nazarene University to study archeology, and, despite only one semester completed, she convinced the Dean of the Humanities Department to let her spend the spring studying the ancient pyramids at Iztepete for twenty-one credits. When my dad took issue with my being pulled out of the eighth grade for three months, she hissed at him on the phone, "If you get to have a midlife crisis, so do I."

I did not want to go to Mexico. I wanted to be tethered. I wanted to board the school bus every morning and feel the hum of the smooth lanes of I-5 every weekend when my father would drive us to Carlsbad to see his widowed brother. But I did not want to stay with my father, either. When he left us, he denied it was because of another woman: a woman, according to my mother, named Diana. Instead, he claimed he felt so empty that the core of who he was had disappeared, that he needed to escape that emptiness. I assumed I was part of his core, so if it disappeared, then so did I.

We took a cab from the bus depot to the Alcazar Hotel on Avenue Revolución, right in the heart of the Centro Historico district. We were staying there until the University housing opened up the following week. Our room was stark and airy, with wooden floors and high ceilings, walls painted adobe and no pictures or

art hanging. Rhonda abandoned her original plan and decided to stay a few days with us, getting a room next to ours. "I think I'll just make my way down there slowly, as it were," she purred to my mother with a wink.

"She's a hoot and a holler," my mom said when we were alone. "A real kook, and Spanish speaking at that. This could be fun. And helpful."

"I don't know. She uses our names too much when she's talking."

"Your name is the most personal thing you can own. It feels good when somebody repeats it."

When we had checked into the hotel, Rhonda pointed to the bellhop, whose nametag read "Lujano." He was twenty at most, with long arms, a square face, and green eyes. His teeth were crooked but bright against his brown skin and green eyes. In that moment, pieces simply fell together for me—the profile of his face, his soft palms, the smell of cigarettes, the shadow that followed him as he moved. It wasn't about sex or romantic love, for I had no true understanding of such concepts. But it was the first step toward understanding what it meant to really want something. I had taken pictures since our trip began, snapping an entire roll on the bus ride alone. But I didn't want a picture of Lujano. I wanted only what my eyes saw in that moment.

Rhonda elbowed my mother, whispering that she should start with somebody young, a brown fox, before moving onto a silver fox.

"I'm not sure I want a silver fox," my mother said.

"Oh no, of course you do. Look at you, Annette. You won't have these looks forever."

My mother's once stiff, focused demeanor had given way to a relaxed posture. Her head delicately leaned back and to the right just a little, as if she was offering her neck to men, her smile not so much a smile as a smirk. She touched her wrists, tracing the blue veins and circling her palm with her index finger. She was all leg and breasts, and she grew her once severe bob haircut that she flattened daily with an iron into a mass of loose curls.

Although she had purchased a suitcase-worth of make-up when my father left, she mostly wore only heavy mascara and pale pink lipstick, which turned the pout she wore, a permanent scar from the divorce, into a promise of softness. She wore tight shirts that showed lots of cleavage, but she seemed embarrassed, as if she was challenging herself to be herself. And all of these things she did were so unaffected: My mother smoldered without knowing she smoldered.

"I doubt you'll be in Turkey on archeological digs when all is said and done," Rhonda said. "You need to think about your future."

My mother's eyes widened, and her face dropped as if she just glimpsed the next twenty years of her life that she hadn't truly given thought to since my father left.

"I'll walk you through this," Rhonda said. "Just watch me with Lujano. He's mine, though. I saw him first. But take notes."

Lujano had made three trips from the lobby to our rooms carrying our luggage. Rhonda touched his shoulder repeatedly as he moved about placing suitcases in corners next to beds. He looked confused and over-smiled, except to my mother, who he gave a soft and measured nod, a gesture only I seemed to notice. Rhonda tipped him generously in American dollars.

"See, Annette," she said when he left. "Did you see that? Did you see how much he smiled at me?"

We unpacked, showered off the bus smell, and sat in the hotel dining room. My mother let me have a sip of her wine, and Rhonda kept looking over her shoulder, sighing. After twenty minutes, she asked for the check.

"There are no men here. No real men. We're going to try another hotel."

We went to the dining room of three more hotels on Avenue Revolución and, at each, my mother and Rhonda had a drink. Rhonda kept her eyes on all corners of the room as well as the door to see who came in and left.

"Swing your hips, Annette," she said as we walked into the

fourth hotel of the evening. "Be your body. Do you know what I mean?"

My mother moved her hips to the left and right, her face pressed in concentration.

"Is this right?"

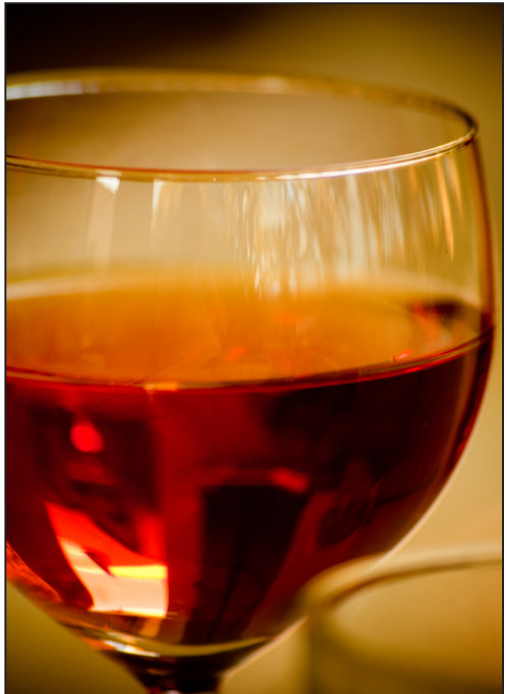
"Don't try so hard. I said be your body. Swing your hips. Don't careen them back and forth."

We settled into our table. Rhonda ordered more drinks, and, although my mother was clearly on the verge of being drunk, Rhonda was lucid and alert. It was after eleven, and I knew if I were to lean over and rest my head on my mother's lap, a thought so embarrassing on any other occasion, I would fall asleep.

The hotel dining room was crowded with middle-aged men, and Rhonda murmured to herself, "Come on, gentlemen, here we are. Come on." After fifteen minutes, my mother insisted we order a meal and that we weren't going to another hotel. The waiter arrived at our table carrying drinks we did not order.

"Finally," Rhonda sighed. "Finally."

Two gentlemen came over. They wore black suits, and their gray hair was combed back with pomade. They stood closely behind my mother, and their stubby fingers lined with gold



pinky rings touched the back of her chair. They spoke in Spanish with Rhonda, who invited them to sit down.

"They say that you are womanly, Annette, like a Madonna. Isn't that nice?"

My mother flushed and she pulled at the skin of her elbows. "Silver foxes," I mouthed to my mother. She squeezed my hand and turned, not looking at me for the rest of the meal. Rhonda reveled in the attention as she managed the task of back-and-forth translation for all of us, telling the men we came to Guadalajara to visit a dying relative who worked at the American Embassy. More drinks arrived, and soon my mother was slurring her words. The men made large gestures with their hands, telling Rhonda that they had a limousine and that Javier, the one who was missing the upper portion of his left ear, owned a restaurant. Javier invited us to come to his home in Mexico City. On a bathroom break, Rhonda clapped her hands together and said that they liked us very much.

"Javier told me my Spanish is perfect. Annette, he said that I have a romantic voice. I think that's what he said. Sometimes when they speak fast, I get confused. You should laugh when a man confuses you, okay?"

During dessert, my mother's bra strap slipped from under her dress, resting on her arm inches below her shoulder. Javier's eyes fixed on the pink satin. He caught me watching him watch her and nodded at me.

"Mexico City is magical," he said to my mother, with a sudden and commanding English. "Your daughter will love it."

He turned and looked me in the eyes, grinning, and stared for that one extra second that is one second too long.

Later, Rhonda sat in our room while we readied for bed. My mother talked aloud to neither of us in particular, saying that Diana was no Madonna and my father was no fox.

"So there, so there," she repeated as she took off her stockings.

"Why did you say we had dying relatives?" I asked Rhonda.

"Always prey on the sympathy of rich men. We will be going to Mexico City. I'm certainly going. Javier seemed quite taken by me. Your mother is beautiful, moreso than me. I'm in touch with these hard truths, Sylvia. But he kept speaking Spanish, even though he can speak English. Clearly, he fancied me. But we can all go. We will all stay with him."

"I told you already, we're here to study," I snapped at her.

My mother didn't notice that my voice had risen. She stared into the mirror, wearing her silk robe, playing with her hair.

"We'll see," Rhonda said. She patted my shoulder and said in a low voice, "You know, your mother is escaping the ruins by coming here, not looking for them."

My mother took a slip of paper out of her purse.

"Javier gave me his number," she said, and she giggled. "I caught a silver fox. Maybe I don't need a brown fox first. Can I go straight to the silver fox? Will I have to make love to him? I mean, right away? I have only been with—Sylvia, shut your ears for a moment—one man. This was foolish? No? Maybe not? Is this too much like high school? But I'm in college, right? Ha ha! What do I do with a fox?"

"Interesting, interesting, Annette," Rhonda said, ignoring my mother's questions, taking the paper from her hands, staring at the numbers, her smile too wide.

"We're not going to Mexico City, are we?" I said to my mother.

"We'll see." She patted my head.

Somebody knocked on the door. Lujano walked in holding a single dahlia and a small card. There wasn't even a measurable moment in which I thought the flower was from him for me, but I could imagine how it would feel if it were, how it could make a crowded city in a foreign country more like home because somebody wants you there.

"De Javier. Para la senora," he said, looking around, not knowing which one of us to give the dahlia to.

Rhonda took the flower from him, opened the small envelope and read the card, her brow furrowing.



The next day, my mother and I spent a quiet afternoon at the hotel pool. I sat on the steps of the shallow end. My parents did not know I couldn't swim. We didn't belong to a swim club, and, despite being only a twenty-minute drive to the beaches of North County, my mother wouldn't even dip her feet in the cold waters because she was so frightened of sharks.

Rhonda had left early to spend the day shopping at Mercado San Juan de Dio. She smirked at my mother when she refused Rhonda's invitation to walk through the squares and parks.

"Jesus, Annette, you are missing out on this rich culture. There's a square called Plaza de la Liberación. Liberación, Annette. You are liberated now. You have crossed borders. Why are you at a pool?"

When Rhonda left, I asked my mom if we could go to campus and see the buildings her classes were in. Universidad de Guadalajara was only blocks away, and I wanted to see if there was a student union or a statue of a famous Mexican on the quad. My mother said, "Hmm," and asked me if I thought Javier was good looking. I told her he was old. She lay down on the cement right next to the water, flat on her back with a hotel towel folded under her neck. Her right hand moved back and forth in the water, and she occasionally placed her finger on the top of her forehead and traced a straight line down the bridge of her new nose.

"I think we should go to Mexico City," she said.

"You don't speak Spanish," I said, a pause between each word.

"Honey, that's okay. Javier speaks enough English. We'll stay at his home. He has lots of bedrooms."

"How do you know that?"

"He told me. He called me."

"He called you? Where did he call you?"

"On the telephone. That is how people call each other."

"I mean, did he call you in the lobby or the room? When did he do this? Last night?"

"This morning in the lobby. Now, Sylvia, relax. When you are in another country, you have to submit yourself to the world. It's only an invitation. I haven't decided yet what I'll do."

"What about school?"

"What about it? School isn't going anywhere. And I'm not saying we should move there, for Christ's sake. I'm just saying maybe we should visit for a few days."

"Did he invite Rhonda, too?"

She moved her head from side to side slowly and I tapped her shoulder, needing to know if she was stretching her neck or saying no. She stroked my hand and said, "Hmm."

Lujano came outside holding a Scrabble board and gestured me toward the table. He lined up Spanish words, watching me make English words against them. I kept score, and he laughed as my numbers piled up higher and higher. He looked over at my mom several times, and I finally said, "She has big boobs, doesn't she?" He smiled and stared at my mother.

"Annette," he said, and he rubbed his calves.

"Sylvia," I said, pointing at myself.

"Sylvia," he repeated, slowly, still staring at my mom.

"Lujano played a board game with Sylvia today at the pool," my mother said to Rhonda. "I think he has a crush on her."

"Doubtful," Rhonda said, studying her nails.

I reddened with embarrassment. I was pudgy, my face riddled with pimples.

"Oh no, now, Sylvia, I did not mean to insult you," Rhonda said. "Don't take it that way. It's just that you are a child. It's your mother he is interested in. She is an American woman. He's a silver fox in the making."

"He's a bellhop," I said. "That won't make him rich."

Rhonda laughed so hard spit came out of her mouth, and her fake smile spread across her face. I wondered what a real smile from



her looked like.

"Both of you stop," my mother said. "He's a nice boy, even if I don't understand a word he says." And she sashayed out the room to get ice from the hallway.

"He likes my mom's boobs," I said to Rhonda. "He stared at them the whole afternoon. Javier likes my mom, too. She has all of the foxes. You and I have none. But that's okay, right?"

"You know not what you say, Sylvia," Rhonda said, clenching her hands.

"I don't think you have insides," I said, turning on the television and upping the volume.

Rhonda frowned and shook her head.

"Lujano is looking for an American woman's citizenship. Yes, your mother is beautiful, but that's not what he's interested in."

"I'm going to tell her you said that."

"Oh no, you won't," she said with a shrug. "You have no idea what it is like when a man stops loving you, Sylvia. But you know your mother, and that is enough."

My mother walked back into the room and Rhonda announced she was skipping dinner and retiring to bed early. She wore a white bathing suit that was too small, and her dimpled thighs shook with each step she took out the door.

"Did you say something to upset her?" my mother asked.

"Nope."

I walked into the bathroom to put on my bathing suit. I heard the phone ring.

"Hola, hola," my mother said, laughing. "Bueno, bueno. Soon, maybe. Maybe soon," she said.

I stared into the mirror and smacked at my midsection, disgusted by the sound. My mother was so deep in conversation she didn't notice me leave the bathroom and walk outside. I went to the pool, where I found Lujano sitting at a table near the deep end. He was in his bellhop suit and smoking a cigarette. He saw me and

waved, gesturing me toward him. There were two parts of me, again. There was the part that thought he was just being friendly and the small pinprick-sized part that thought he would wave me right into his arms, that the smoke from his cigarette would swirl around me and protect me from any choice that I or anybody else would make.

I stood in front of him and touched his hair. He rose quickly, startled. He touched my shoulder and shook his head as if he was deciding what he should do next. I walked backward, held my arms up, waiting for the expression on his face to change to a firm realization that he was going to have to take care of me, that he was going to get his suit wet, that I was going to have water envelop me and make room in my head for my mother. I kept walking backward to the edge of the pool, then I turned around, faced the water, and I jumped in. The cold surrounded me, and I swallowed water. I did not thrash because I felt at peace with everything. I was not frightened because Lujano would not let me drown. It seemed to take forever for him to call my name, to figure out that I couldn't swim, and when he did, the water had already begun to win.

When I came to, all I could focus on was that the strap of my bathing suit had fallen off my right shoulder, and my small breast was exposed. Rhonda had convinced my mother and the hotel personnel not to call the ambulance, explaining that a hospital would do more harm than good. I was flat on my back, the cement still warm from the day's heat. I couldn't stop coughing.

"Lujano's father is coming," Rhonda said.

"What are you talking about? Is he a doctor?"

"I have no idea, Annette. But your daughter is not going to a hospital. We're in a third-world country, for Christ's sake."

My mother began to cry, and she squeezed my hands so hard it hurt. I threw up twice before Lujano's father arrived. When he did, he looked me over, tapping my forehead and examining my ears. He held my hands against his chest and prayed in Spanish.



He whispered to Rhonda.

"She's fine. She's fine," Rhonda told my mother. "Eduardo said that she needs to eat two avocados and that we must go to his church in the morning and light a candle for St. John Chrysostom. He's the patron saint of epilepsy."

"What are you talking about? Sylvia doesn't have epilepsy," she yelled.

"I know that. But maybe somebody in Lujano's family does and they need all the help they can get. Stop asking questions. And, listen, we are going to his house for dinner now."

"No, we aren't. I need to get her to bed," my mom said, shaking her head at Rhonda.

"To decline this invitation is rude."

I began to cry because I was scared that my mother would still say "No." I wanted to see Lujano's house. I wanted him to hold my hands to his chest in prayer. Lujano squatted closely next to my mother, his eyes fixed on mine, fearful.

Lujano's house was in the Sector Reforma, an industrial district with a small residential area not far from the city center. Weeds and withered rose bushes lined the front yard. When we arrived, Lujano's mother yelled at Lujano and his father, pointing at us, her voice in a frenzied pitch. Eduardo hollered back, his words just as quick and urgent. Rhonda did not engage with them, nor did she translate. She drank wine and hummed to the transistor radio that played Spanish music. I wasn't hungry, but Lujano's mom poked me in the shoulder and pointed sharply, saying "Eat, Eat, Eat," my plate piled with plantain fritters and tortas ahogadas, sandwiches filled with pork and hot sauce. Everything tasted like chlorine, and it hurt to swallow, but I didn't want to leave. Lujano sat next to me and smiled. He touched my mother's shoulder on and off during the meal. Once, he took his index finger and rested it on her thigh. Rhonda watched and nodded her head, to herself it seemed.

Curtains were useless against Mexico's sun, and my eyes opened

early to find Rhonda, not my mother, in the bed next to mine.

"Where's my mom?"

My bed covers were on the floor, and I was sticky with sweat. The air conditioner in our room made more noise than it cooled the air. The previous night had ended late, and I had gone to bed alone, leaving my mother with Rhonda and Lujano at the pool.

"She's in my room," Rhonda said.

"Why?"

"Sylvia, I need to explain to you what it means to be a woman, what having needs—"

"Shut up," I said.

"Sylvia, your mother should have everything. When you are older, you will understand. I know you don't like me. It's okay. I'm going to Mexico City tomorrow to stay with Javier."

"He thinks my mom is coming, you know."

"I'm not sure what you mean," Rhonda said, getting out of bed.

"He called her. And she called him."

Her head cocked, and she sat next to me on the bed, sighing at me.

"I just want to go home," I said. "That's all."

She took my hands. I felt the wedding band that she wore on the index finger of her right hand. I wanted to know if it was her husband's, if she was divorced, if he was dead. She was a talker and nosy, but she said little about her own life. But I didn't really want to know the answer about her ring because the answer would be too big and too much. I stroked the band over and over and stared at her pockmarked face, the gray hairs sprouting from her roots, and rows of wrinkles across her forehead. She smiled, wide and relaxed and true. She looked pretty.

"You choose your home every day. So, just say to yourself, 'Today, it is Guadalajara.'"

I went to shower, and, after, standing in a towel, I went through my mother's make-up bag. I applied mascara, heavy and thick. I



found an unopened tube of red lipstick and blush. I painted my lips and face heavily and filled my thin eyebrows with a dark liner. I heard the hotel room door open, my mother's voice, then a man coughed, followed by rapid-fire conversation in Spanish with Rhonda. "Just once more," he said, "just once more." Rhonda kept talking loudly with her fake voice, a high-pitched inflection, and my mother laughed.

I opened the bathroom door. The curtains of the hotel room were pulled back and I could see the back of Lujano's head in the distance as he walked down the stairs. My mom squinted at me.

"What are you wearing on your face?"

"Make-up," I said.

"You're twelve years old."

"Thirteen."

"You've been thirteen for two months. You are closer to twelve than you are thirteen."

"That statement makes no sense," Rhonda chimed in.

"Shut up, Rhonda," my mom said. Her eyes were bleary and red, and she looked skinny and child-like in her baby-doll pajamas. The bottoms were inside out.

The following morning, Rhonda was gone. My mother searched the pool area and the restaurant, and when she couldn't find her, she checked the front desk. Rhonda had left a note. "Annette, my sweet friend, I have gone to see Javier. I called him. I told him you won't be coming, that you were staying in Guadalajara and must study. You have school, Annette. You have so much to learn. Tell that daughter of yours to go home. She's not ready for all of this, Annette, not at all."

In a warbled voice, my mother instructed me to pack. She rifled through her purse. "I just can't find that number. I just can't find it."

I went to the lobby while my mom did her hair and make-up. I saw Lujano standing tall at the revolving door, hands behind his back.

The tassel on the right shoulder of his bellhop suit was missing. I walked to him and pointed it out. He looked at his left shoulder and yanked it off. We burst into laughter. He jiggled the tassel at my nose and bared his crooked teeth. I wanted to run my finger down the bridge of his long nose. I took the tassel from him and put it in my pocket. He took in a deep breath, and his face turned curious.

"Annette? Donde?"

I went back to our room. Fall My mother was taking clothes out of the closet, and she handed them to me, piece by piece. She refused to iron since our father left and had taken to putting her clothes in a steamed bathroom to get out the wrinkles.

"Hang my pink blouse and the white pants. It's a little much for the bus. It'll wrinkle, I know, but pink has always been my color."

"I don't think it will wrinkle much," I said, walking toward the bathroom. "I think you'll look fine."

I turned on the shower high and hot and shut the bathroom door. I didn't know what my mother would do with us that morning. Maybe she'd send me home and go to see Javier in Mexico City and argue with Rhonda, or bring me with her. Maybe we were both going home. I imagined calling my father, him picking us up in the lobby, Lujano watching in confusion. Or maybe he would pick us up in the lobby of a hotel somewhere between Guadalajara and Mexico City. I could see the three of us on the taxi ride to the airport: me, not talking to him, and my mother, silent and angry for me calling him—or her being relieved but yelling at him about how all of the foxes wanted her.

The bathroom filled with steam, and I could no longer see my reflection. I heard my mother call for me, but the shower was too loud so I didn't know what she said. I took the tassel from my pocket and cleared the mirror with it, my reflection showing in parts with each swipe, but then quickly fogging up again.



Riding to Devil's Kitchen

by Donna L. Emerson

I ride Moose today,
a deep chestnut gelding.
Sixteen hands, strong, steady gait and slow.
His soft nose likes my hand;
his darker mane lifts as I riffle it.

His eyes hold me still.
Deeper than dark pools, the shape of wide almonds.
What is it about a horse's eyes that makes me feel seen,
known, when they look at me? I'm lost in them.

Familiar, the press of stirrups.
Their certainty.

Alan, gone now eight years,
showed me how to ride easy in the saddle,
loving the sound of horse hooves on a path, their echo,
the sound of leather pressing leather
as our bodies moved up and down
with the horse's gait.

Astride this horse, wider than I remember horses,
my haunches stretch, widen.
The warm feel of his body comforts me.
Leather reins in my hand natural for going this way and that.
The distance to the ground just right
for viewing wetlands and woods.

We amble to Devil's Kitchen, near Lassen.
My hands can't help stroking his long neck,
even though I have to pull him back from eating leaves.

Moose's muzzle nuzzles me when I remove the bridle.
I hold an apple in my open palm.
He gobbles it up, careful not to bite fingers,
slobbering up my arms.

Alan joked when we were teens
that girls like to ride horses
because they feel stimulated by the ride.
I told him that was not true.

Girls love horses because a horse's eyes draw us in.
We can't see the bottom. Only know we want to go there...

A Nice Boy

by Austin Watford

Across the street lives a very nice boy with brown eyes like muddied brick and teeth like tiny fence posts. He wears a white cowboy hat on top of his head, and you can see him running in circles on the road outside your house, shooting his fingers like pistols and shouting at imaginary bad men. Every morning, he delivers your paper, and you give him a small treat: a candy or some toy you dug out from a cereal box. When he grows up, you will remember him fondly, telling your spouse about how his mother told you that he is doing well in school, and when he graduates, you will be invited and sit clapping just as hard as his family. One day, though, you will turn on your television to see his frowning face, and you will learn why his fingernails were always caked with red and why your cat once brought you the corpse of a squirrel whose neck had been snapped and whose hands had been pierced with green thumbtacks.



The Great Escape

by Daniel Alexander

If there is a force in the universe the equal of gravity, it is the eternal draw of boys to mud. Stephen Hawking could have used the draw of mud and the possibility of lost and forgotten treasure to create his first model of a black hole. I spent a lot of time on the river with my brother, although not as much time as I would have liked, and learned a lot. Afoot on the river, there are rules for mud and quicksand. First off, anyone who has spent much time on the river knows that old sloughs are nastier and more dangerous than quicksand. It is hard to sink more than knee-deep in quicksand. I know. Over the years during a thousand trips to the river, I have tried. Just keep walking.

A thin kind of mud soup with a light crust on the top is a different kind of critter. Sometimes, the crust will be all curled up and dry. Sometimes it will have just a bit of water on top. Regardless, an inexperienced person who tries to cross a slough may find themselves up to their waist in mud. You are going to sink, but the mud is not going to close over your face. From experience, I know that a person caught in deep mud can usually lay down and slowly swim out. I also know that when you are caught, there are no treasure chests down there that a fool can stand on to keep from sinking.

On a perfect spring day, my twin brother and I made big plans to spend the day on the river and surprise our parents with fresh fish for supper. As soon after lunch as possible, we made our escape. Along with poles and a stringer, we brought a bucket to help carry the fish and any treasure we might stumble upon. We found a good fishing hole and, by two o'clock, had two nice bluecats on a stringer. Finished with the larger project, we explored fishing holes, found Indian and robber ambush sites, and hunted buried treasure.

By mid-afternoon the wind faded to nothing, and the day became unseasonably warm. Above us, the tops of giant cottonwoods



marked the river's passage and gently rustled in what little breeze they could catch.

The day was ours, and we were in no hurry to waste it on productive behaviors. We loitered, ran, and jumped the tributaries that make up the South Canadian. We slid down muddy banks to the water's edge and skidded on our bellies across bog holes. And we discovered the mother lode, an old mud slough.

We found long sticks and within minutes finished probing all of the most likely spots in the bottom of the slough for old wagon frames or boxes of bullion. The mud must have been more than four feet deep. None of our sticks touched the bottom or anything we could identify as a treasure chest. Jimmy was the first sacrifice himself to our research. He made a short run and plunged into the mud. As soon as he stood, the victim of an imaginary arrow, he sank to his knees and fell forward into the deepest part. I had to make the same sacrifice, and dragging him from the slough filled another forty-five minutes with leaps of faith, treachery, and sudden twists.

Later, in the interest of science and to make our research complete, we took longer sticks and personally verified the depth of the mud from the edge to the middle of the slough. The measure of the mud was the same measure of our heroics and peril. We escaped trap after trap.

Finally, exhausted and caked in layers of brown silt, we returned to our original task. We waded out into the channel to clean the accumulated mud from our pants, took off our shirts, dunked and washed ourselves before we returned to the task at hand. While

our shirts dried, we caught two more catfish and added them to the stringer.

Before we turned for home, we dropped the fish into the bucket, filled it with fresh water, and carried them with us as we moved down the river. As we walked, bored with easy fishing and games, we decided to go for a real challenge. Jimmy remembered our father and his brother Thurlin, “Uncle Bud,” talk about something called “noodlin.” Bud had described wading along the bank to find the deeper cuts and stumps under the riverbank, then how they reached into the den to find a hiding fish. They described how they would grab a catfish by the jaw and drag it into the light of day.



Armed with our stunning ignorance, our first try almost broke us from the process. I went first and found nothing. When Jimmy shoved his hand down under the riverbank and felt for a fish, something alive tried to slide past his hand. He grabbed and, after a moment of wrestling, pulled out a huge black snake.

Over many years, many knowledgeable people have told me that poisonous snakes, specifically cottonmouth snakes, do not live on the South Canadian. I don't care what they say, what Jimmy pulled



out sure looked poisonous. Not only did it look poisonous, but the snake seemed to think that we had picked the wrong time to jerk him so rudely from his haven. When Jimmy saw what he had, he flipped the snake free of his hand, and we both shot backwards as fast as we could crawl!

My turn came again, and while we giggled and laughed about the snake, I moved down the bank about five feet and reached under another half-buried log. Stunned, I found something deep within the cold, black water and slid my thumb into its mouth. Then, I grabbed hold of its chin with my fingers and after moment of struggle, dragged a magnificent, iridescent blue channel cat to the surface.

As the catfish flopped and we wrestled with him to prevent his escape, a dirt clod rolled down the riverbank and splashed water into our faces. Startled, we looked up to see Snag and Benny Green Teeth standing on top of the bank with hands on their hips and big smiles. They looked down upon us and smiled, as predators having just discovered something warm and crunchy for lunch. We knew them by a little more than reputation from our little one room schoolhouse and them catching us a long way from home was not good.

Stunned, we could not believe we had been discovered and so completely surprised. The river was our treasure, wiped clean of the trails of other explorers by wind and rain. We never expected to see anyone else here, and we were in deep trouble.

They stood on the riverbank directly above the place we had left our boots. If they took our boots and hid them, we were goners. Walking barefoot through three miles of canyon and sticker patches would be bad enough, but going home without boots just was not done! The humiliation would never end. Everyone who heard the story would nod and agree, "Them dummies just forgot where we stashed them. It is just bad blood." Our parents would be the butt of public ridicule and shamed by our carelessness. For their effort to rescue us, Snag and Benny would become local heroes.

Benny graduated from the eighth grade the year we started school. His teeth were the obvious source of his nickname. Back then if

you wanted to lose your appetite, all you had to do was sit across the table from him and watch him grin. We heard that Snag had returned from a long and unplanned visit to some other part of the state. After the school fire, he had seriously needed to be somewhere else and had taken the Greyhound to get there.

We breathed a collective sigh of relief when Snag stepped past our boots and slid down the bank to the water's edge. In the next second, whatever reprieve might exist from his failure to discover our boots ended, and we knew for certain our lives were over.

Snag quickly gained momentum, and before we could move, he grabbed us both. I did not know how cruel laughter could be until Snag grabbed us both by the nape of the neck and plucked us from the sand. With my feet a foot and a half from the sand, he shook me like a terrier shakes a rat then he spun around and chunked me downstream. I flew ten feet then landed and skidded another five before coming to rest in a small mud hole.

Stunned from the impact but still game, I rolled over and tried to stand. While I struggled to find my senses, Snag tucked Jimmy under his arm and walked to me. When he got near enough, he laughed and kicked me in the butt. I flew another four feet before I dropped flat on my belly. Sure of himself, he walked to where I lay, placed one of his giant feet between my shoulder blades and pushed me into the mud.

Trapped beneath his foot, I thrashed while he laughed. When I finally wiggled free enough to catch my breath and clear my eyes, more mud and sand dropped onto my face. Trapped in Snag's arms, Jimmy's feet dangled above my head.

As soon as they wrapped us up, Snag asked Benny, "What do you think we should do with these punks? Maybe we should teach 'em a little respect, you know, and give 'em a little what for."

I still remember Benny's hair-raising, high-pitched, squeaky laugh. The sound still reminds me of barbed wire that is stretched too tight then twangs and squeals through the staples as it breaks. The sound of his laugh, the image of his green teeth underneath a ragged bowl haircut, and the few long black whiskers on his lip that he never learned to trim still fill my body with adrenalin and the



need to do violence.

Maybe the way things started, they had only intended to play with us, like everything was just a joke, and then go on about their business. They didn't offer us the choice.

Trapped in the mud, I twisted again to see what Benny was doing. On the bank, he reached deep into his pocket, pulled out an old yellow-handled Case pocket knife and began to cut willow switches from the bank. As soon as he had a handful, he slid down the bank and threw a couple to Snag.

Snag tucked Jimmy tighter under his arm and reached with his free hand to grab the switches. As soon as his hand filled, our world got real ugly.

Snag laughed as he alternated between hitting me with the switches then swinging at Jimmy. After all these years, I still wake to the hiss of the switch as it sliced through the air. I still remember the feel of my skin as it sizzled and burned through my thin cotton shirt. Years passed before I learned not to sleep in the same place where the memory of those switches is stored.

Jimmy got hit two or three times before he managed to twist away from Snag's grip, and we got a break. When Jimmy hit the ground, Snag reached to grab him, but caught a handful of shirttail and shifted his weight from my back. Free of his weight, I rolled in the mud and wrapped my arms around his boot. Once I had a grip, I did my absolute best to bite his calf and pants leg off.

When my teeth locked down on boot leather, pants, and Achilles tendon, Snag screamed. As the pain in his leg overwhelmed his sense of purpose, Snag lost his interest in Jimmy. He turned, shifted his weight to the leg I held and tried to kick me in the belly. He would have hurt me pretty serious if he hadn't slipped in the mud. As it was, his foot caught my ribs and, weighted with mud, slid by and continued upward. When he landed on his back in the mud hole, I tried to escape. When Snag's feet went up in the air, his hands involuntarily opened and released Jimmy's shirttail from his grasp.

Free, Jimmy took two steps back. I lay on my belly in the mud, and

for just a moment, time stood still. I thought Jimmy would run to hide, for safety or for help. He had enough of a lead. Even so, he did not cut his losses and run. In all our life together, Jimmy never did run. Instead, Jimmy looked at me. His eyes flared and his face filled with a loon-crazy, brittle smile that stretched from ear to ear.

Jimmy turned and made a running dive for the hole he'd just noodled. When he took his first step toward the riverbank, I knew his plan. If drowning in the mud then and there could have helped him on his mission, I would have been the first to hold my own head under.

As Jimmy turned, Benny dived and tackled him by the ankles. When Jimmy fell, he plunged his arm deep under the riverbank.

With his arms full of kicking legs, Benny rose to his knees and tried to drag Jimmy away from the hole. While Jimmy struggled against Benny, kicking and screaming, he stretched to reach farther into the hole. When I saw Jimmy go stiff, I knew what he had found.

Life shifted from normal speed to slow motion.

Jimmy's arm came out of the hole with the head of a huge and very angry snake trapped in his palm.

Jimmy rolled onto his back while Benny dragged him clear of the riverbank. When Benny saw what dangled from Jimmy's hand, he recoiled, frozen in terror, and dropped Jimmy's feet.

With his leg free, Jimmy rolled forward and stood to confront Benny. What Jimmy faced was not a fair fight. Nothing I have ever known is ever face-to-face or fair, but that didn't stop Jimmy.

When Jimmy's eyes were level with the second button on Benny's shirt, he focused, arched his back, threw his arms back, and drew himself into a living bow. He became a sorcerer with the power of the universe in his hands. With his back arched and hands behind his back, Jimmy squared himself to Benny and inhaled as if to draw power from the air. When his lungs were full and his back taught, he released his breath in a scream of fury, thrust forward with his back and both arms, and when his arms were fully extended, he opened his hands to release one very large and angry snake.

Jimmy's curse plus four feet of snake and a handful of mud flew



arrow straight into Benny's face. The snake's body smacked against Benny's head then dropped to his chest and right shoulder. The mud hit him between the eyes.

Speechless, Benny's mouth moved as if he could chew air. The noise did not start until the snake twisted and wrapped itself around Benny's arm and neck. In response to the movement of the snake, Benny screamed and began a strange kind of dance. First he shuffled backwards two steps then hopped straight up and down. On his third jump, he twisted and jumped backwards two steps. Later we called his dance the "Jump Back, Get-The-Snake Off-Boogie." Benny screamed, ran, and hopped in place, all the while flinging his arms about as if he were trying to shake water from his fingertips.

Behind, Snag sat on his knees open-mouthed and watched Benny dance.

Of course, Jimmy added what he could to the panic. He screamed, "Look out, it's a cottonmouth! It's poison!"

Benny finally grabbed the snake by the tail and shook it free. As quickly as the snake released Benny's arm, Benny twisted and flipped the snake over his shoulder. Clear of Benny, the snake twisted and floated through the air like a miniature helicopter rotor.

The snake hit Snag on his chest and draped over his shoulder. When hit, Snag recoiled from the snake and landed on his back in the mud.

This turn of events absorbed all of Snag's attention, and like a little crab escaping a mud hole, I slid away and crawled sideways until I could stand.

As I watched, Snag pushed himself up from the mud hole. His feet slipped, and he rocked back then sat down on his crossed ankles. With his feet and legs trapped by his butt, he couldn't move. When he realized his legs were trapped, panic swept his face and his eyes popped wide open. Unable to run, he screamed and hopped around on his knees as he tried to free himself. While he hopped, his arms flapped and waved as he tried to grab the snake and somehow not touch it. When he finally gathered the strength to

touch the snake's skin, his hands refused to close.

When Snag started to hop, the snake had enough for his part, he had already been airborne twice that morning. He decided to end that nonsense and wrapped himself around Snag's neck. Once the snake had two coils around Snag's neck, it began to wriggle and slither toward the top of Snag's head.

When the snake moved, I helped Snag as much as I could. I screamed, "It's poison! It's a giant Arkansas rattler! It's ten feet long! Oh God, it's gonna bite you!"

Released of his own peril, Benny fell farther into the panic than Snag. He screamed, "Oh God, if it bites you, I'm gonna have to make a tourniquet and amputate something!"

When Snag recognized the word amputate applied to him, his desperation became a living work of art. Snag struggled and slapped at the snake. The snake retaliated and bit Snag's hand. When Snag slapped the snake loose from his hand, the snake turned and bit him on the nose. Once in place, the snake locked its jaws and tried to hang on.

As Snag's mind filled with terror, he could only stare cross-eyed at the snake that dangled from his nose.

With Benny and Snag distracted, Jimmy took off. He headed upstream and angled toward the slough we'd explored earlier.

Startled by the snake and Snag's screams, Benny dropped most of the handful of switches he carried. He returned to try and catch Jimmy. When Benny turned, I could almost hear the neurons in his brain protest as they fired. He took two steps toward Jimmy before he came to his senses and ran back toward Snag.

Benny wanted to help his friend, but he did not want to touch the snake. Instead, he picked a willow switch from the ground and stepped toward Snag. He tried to slash the willow across the snake and knock the furious reptile from his friend's face. He didn't manage to knock the snake free, but before he realized the willow switches would never do the job, he did manage to raise huge welts on Snag's face. Exasperated, Benny finally threw the switch away. As he turned to his desperate friend, Benny looked down, and

realization struck him like a ten-pound sledge. He had a tool in his hand that could solve all Snag's problems, his yellow-handled Case knife.

As he took a swing at the snake with the knife, Benny screamed to Snag, "I'll get him! I'll save you!" His first horizontal swipe cut completely through the tip of Snag's nose. When Benny saw the thin line of blood, he changed his technique. Instead of trying to slice the snake away, he began to stab at the snake's head. He missed twice, and twice the blade plunged through Snag's cheek.

Finally, more frightened of Benny than the snake, Snag staggered to his feet. When he tried to move away from Benny, he stepped backwards and tripped over me. When Snag fell, he grasped the air for support, found the snake by accident, grabbed the tail and pulled. When he hit the ground, he had the snake by the tail, and the snake had him by the nose. For a moment, stunned by the fall, both Snag and the snake lay motionless. When all the motion stopped, the snake turned loose of Snag's nose and unwrapped itself from his neck. Free, the snake slithered across the mud hole to disappear under the riverbank.

Under the influence of Snag and Benny, a beautiful day on the river and a simple fishing expedition managed to go completely south. I was still trapped under Snag's legs, while slightly upstream, Benny drooled, and to the side, the snake slithered to safety. Ten steps farther upstream Jimmy initiated the greatest plan of this century.

At last, free of the snake, Snag gently touched his face. When his fingers touched his nose, he squealed and pulled his hand away. He recoiled even farther when he recognized the blood on his fingertips as his own, from his cheek and the slice on his nose. Furious because of his injuries, he rolled off me and said, "Maybe we need to do some cutting on them little sons-of-bitches what's caused this." He touched the blood on his fingers to his tongue and said, "That will sure enough teach them to respect us."

Before Snag finished, Jimmy took off running. When he had gained enough distance, Jimmy stopped and hurled the most deadly insult he could imagine. In a singsong voice he taunted, "Nanny nanny boo boo. You can't catch me."

Pitiful as it was, that taunt got the intended reaction from Benny Green Teeth. Although Benny had never established much of a reputation as a high jumper, he was a better runner than Snag. With twice the height and leg, he was a far better runner than my brother.

For his plan to work, the lead he took had to be narrow and Jimmy did the best he could with what he had. First, Jimmy swung wide and ran around the mouth of the slough.

When Benny saw Jimmy run, he said to Snag, "I'll catch that little prick, then we can make them pay for what they done to us."

Snag nodded and said, "You catch that one while I hold this little prick here."

When Benny took off after Jimmy, Jimmy started to cut back toward the riverbank. Benny guessed Jimmy would try for the bank, grass, and willows to escape. God loved my brother that day because Benny took the bait, and Jimmy's plan worked.

In seconds, Benny halved the margin of safety, the distance that protected my brother.

As fools can be predicted, Jimmy's choice of distance and angle worked.

Benny hit his full stride before he hit the slough. His first step into the slough went down about two inches. His second step went down a foot. With one foot caught, his own momentum pitched him face forwards. Benny started to scream when he fell, and his eyes were wide open as the mud silenced his terror. He mud-surfed another five feet before he skidded to a slow stop about two thirds of the way across the slough.

When he finally oozed to a stop, with his mouth and eyes filled with mud, the bow wave of mud pushed by his face flowed across the slough and touched the bank just at Jimmy's feet.

If Benny had been born with the tiniest bit of a clue, he would have just used a combination of low crawl and breaststroke to continue on his belly to safety. Sliding across the slough would have been a bit nasty, but easy. Fortunately for our team, Benny could not do it the easy way.

The first thing Benny did was to push up to his knees and try to stand. When he tried, he immediately sank to his crotch in the mud. That he was on his knees and his feet were sticking up from the mud behind him was irrelevant. He could not see his knees or his feet, so they had to be lost somewhere below. As he continued his fight to stand, he tried to pump his legs and escape the mud. Gravity continued to work as it always does, and in seconds the mud and water rose past his belt buckle.

For the moment, compared to Jimmy, I was not doing so well. When I turned to run, Snag grabbed my collar and, for just a moment, watched Benny begin his chase after Jimmy. Confident of the outcome, he bent down, picked up one of the switches and turned to focus his attention upon me. He popped the switch in the air a couple of times and satisfied, he smiled and began to hit me. Up close, even if he hadn't had me by the collar, I couldn't outrun him or get away. He got in some good licks before Benny coughed mud from his mouth and screamed for help.

I never asked Jimmy if he had planned what followed or not, but for all the time we had afterwards, he always acted as if he had.

Trapped, with mud covering his nose and eyes, Benny sobbed in fear. Snag turned from me, and we both watched as Benny tried to push himself upwards and away from the mud. Benny succeeded in rising for just a moment before his arms disappeared into the mud beneath him. Although he was lying on top of the slough, Benny's panicked mind recognized only that he was in deep enough for the mud to touch his chin.

Informed by too many movies, Snag recognized Benny's peril. As he looked around, he dropped me and ran toward the bank. Frantic to save his friend, he pulled a winter-killed cottonwood branch from the pile against the riverbank. He must have thought he could use the branch to drag Benny from the mud.

Across the slough, while Snag dragged the limb to the edge, Jimmy threw mud balls at him. The mud balls presented no threat. They either disintegrated in mid flight or landed fifteen feet short.

Snag retaliated by breaking a branch from the limb. When he threw the branch, it flew across the slough like a boomerang and struck

Jimmy across the face.

Freed of Snag, I finally managed to drag myself from the mud and stand. When I pushed up, the first thing I saw was the whirling stick smash against Jimmy's head. Across the slough my brother dropped to the sand, his hands covered with blood.

Enraged by the injury to my brother, I ran to the riverbank and ripped a four-foot-long and three-inch-thick cottonwood limb from a log half buried in the sand. As God is my witness, I did not intend to help Snag pull Benny from the mud! Even today, when I ride through the cottonwoods on the river, I look upwards at the branches and wonder how I ever tore that piece of wood from the trunk

While I broke the limb free, Snag gingerly inched forward into the mud and carefully extended the branch he carried toward Benny. As Benny twisted to catch the limb, I heard Snag's ignorant, peckerwood accent when he said, "When you get out of there, we are really going to make those little shits pay for what they done."

Even to this day, I wonder at his statement. Maybe human nature is such that even long after there is nothing but legend and dust to feed their claim of joy and victory, mean-spirited people still find purpose mining bitter ashes, where only shame should thrive.

Across the slough, Benny nodded in understanding and twisted in the mud just enough to grab a better hold on the branch. With a freshgrip, Benny shifted his weight and leaned forward.

Off-balance when Snag tugged the limb. Benny twisted and fell face first into the mud. Once again, he turned the wrong direction to make an easy escape.

When Snag bent forward, he too lost his balance. For the next ten years, that instant was momentous, my sole claim to eternal glory.

I charged Snag from behind and at full speed hit him square in the middle of his butt with my shoulder. As much as I would have liked it, Snag didn't go flying. As I bounced off him, he did fall face first into the mud and his momentum carried him to the middle of the slough. He slid to a stop within six feet of Benny.

When someone hurts your brother, it lights a dangerous kind of fire. Years later, I read about Berserkers, and I understand just a little of



what happens inside them. My sense of time and right or wrong dissolved into a hurricane of incredible energy and violence.

Later, in a voice filled with awe, Jimmy described what had happened. He said, "You drug that big stick behind you and waded into the mud, crawled onto his back, stood up, then smacked Snag across the head and shoulders with that rotted cottonwood limb until there were no pieces left to beat him with. With no more of the stick to whack him with, you jumped up and down on his back like you was a hammer and he was a nail."

I do know that every time Snag tried to push himself up from the mud and twist to reach back to catch me, his arms were forced downward by his weight and disappeared into the mud. To help with what I could, I swung the limb with all my strength and tried to drive him deeper. I must have hit Snag on the head and shoulders a dozen times before the limb broke in half. I don't really remember.

Finally exhausted, I studied the broken piece of wood from my hand for a moment before I looked up and realized that Jimmy's mouth hung open as he watched me. There was some blood on his face, but nothing that looked serious. Satisfied that Jimmy was safe, I began my retreat. Still filled with spite, I stepped forward and used one foot to push Snag's head back into the mud. Content, I walked down Snag's back and legs before I tossed the bit of log about midway between Snag's legs and the bank. I stepped back to gain a little momentum then ran and jumped across most of the mud. The piece of wood I had tossed to the midpoint became my last step before I reached safety.

After I made my escape, the opportunity of a lifetime opened before Jimmy. When I turned and pointed to the bank, I wanted him to run for the brush meet me in the willows. I would grab our shoes and meet him on the trail home. Instead, he shook his head to decline my plan and motioned me to move back. Puzzled, I stood at the edge of the slough and watched him start his second greatest run.

There are things we do which should be preserved in stone. Regardless of success or failure, the stone should stand forever, an eternal monument to courage, love, and faith. On that day, Jimmy earned such a monument. When he threw the snake, that act

became his first moment of eternal glory. His second moment came when he had baited Benny into the chase. What he did next sealed his reputation forever.

He turned and ran away for about twenty steps. He paused for just a moment and considered the distance. Satisfied, he dropped to a crouch, opened his hands, and ran toward the slough as hard as he possibly could.

Across the water, I heard his bare feet smack against the sand and saw the gouts of sand fly as his toes curled with each step and grabbed for traction. Small spurts of sand flew from his feet as he accelerated.

Even now, forty years after, I can still hear the rhythm of his acceleration. I can feel the wind in his ears, as if my own. The sound begins with quick taps and grows until the impact of each footstep overlaps and explodes into a single hissing pattern of pure white noise.

Two feet from the edge of the mud, the prints in the sand end. Jimmy gathered himself, and with his knees tucked into his chest, made a flying leap. At the top of his arc, Jimmy opened his legs and stretched as if he were Rudolph Nureyev. As he landed, his legs came together and both of his feet smacked down square in the middle of Benny's back. The impact of Jimmy's sixty pounds drove Benny's shoulders and face deep into the mud. Jimmy took one more stride then launched himself from Benny's mud-covered butt.

Stuck in a trap of his own making, Snag saw it all happen and could not do a single thing to save himself. He screamed defiance, indignation and outrage as Jimmy left Benny's back and launched himself again.

Again, in midflight, Jimmy's legs stretched and reached as if he were a dancer on stage. This time, his right foot came down upon the top of Snag's head. His weight and momentum shoved Snag's astonished face and indignant voice deep enough that fresh mud splashed against his ankle. With another single, short stride, Jimmy launched himself from Snag's butt, and his left foot found the remains of the small log I had left behind. On his last stride, pure glee lit Jimmy's face. He paused as he passed me, looked over his

shoulder and said, "It's time to go!"

Before he could pass out of my reach, I grabbed him, and we both spun about. As he stood safe beside me, I remember the purest joy when I brushed the bits of mud and hair from his face and found no damage, well, no damage that would not disappear in two or three days.

Despite their pleas, we left the predators trapped by their own actions in a version of the La Brea Tar Pits.

We both scampered to the riverbank. In passing, I scooped our fish stringer and bucket from the water. In seconds, we were on top of the bank and had our socks and boots on. We ran toward the canyon and home.

Behind, screams of outrage and fury faded with distance and confirmed that both Snag and Benny were yet alive and well.



Hands

by Lauro Palomba

societal wreck
all hands on deck
nobody cares
hands foul or fair

status restored
hands calloused deplored
decorum demands
scrubbed scented hands

betrayal supreme
hands cut from the team
shameless repeat
at the hands of elite

They Used Mulberry Tree

by James Treat

1

the arrow they used for small game
would be made with blunt head

the arrow they used for
killing deers and buffaloes would
have the flint arrowheads on the
arrow

the bow would be of bois d'arc
wood hickory or mulberry wood

the indians in early days did not have
what is known as a gun
but the indians had a weapon

what is known as a bow and arrow

2

they would take the bark of the
trees and would boil them to make
the dye and after the dye was made
they would take out the bark
and use the colored water to dye
the goods or any other kind of articles

they would put the goods in the
colored water and boil it real hard
until the cloth had taken the color

they would use walnut tree bark
to dye goods a dark color
they would use cedar tree bark
to dye anything light red

and they used mulberry tree bark
to dye any kind of articles yellow

the indians in early times did not have
the dyes like we have today and so this
was how they made their dyes

3
there was plenty of nuts

namely pecans
hickory nuts
walnuts and
chinquapins
wild fruit and berries
were also plentiful
namely blackberries
dewberries
strawberries
huckleberries
cherries
plums and

mulberries

the culture of fruit trees was little known
on account of so many wild berries and fruits

i know that my people were civilized

and it stands to reason that if they
were the rest of the creeks must have
been

Willie Tiger, b. ca. 1881

Watashe Painkiller, b. ca. 1852

Jake Simmons, b. 1865

Late Night Infomercial I

by Austin Watford

“My abs are rock hard! Rock hard for summer!” he says. He is screaming it so loudly that his wife runs to him like he’s dying horribly. When he sees her, he says “Honey, look at these rock hard summer abs!” and she is very suspicious of them.

“I bet they are brittle winter abs, brittle like a dried leaf and that they would shatter if I tested them.”

He gasps and yells, louder, “They are for summer! Hard like granite for the UV rays! Like diamonds for the heat! Here, take this cinder block and test them! You’ll see that they are made for the blister rays of the hot-time sun!” His wife tosses the cinder block at his abs and they shatter.

“You see? You see, husband of mine? Winter abs, fragile like a glass duck bought at a gas station, weak like a corpse with no muscle and only ancient bone!” and her husband sulks off into the bedroom and calls in sick to work.



We Had Good Things

by James Treat

my father and mother were driven
from alabama to oklahoma
when the last creeks were forced to leave
 they did not want to leave their
home and everything they had
 they loved their home and country

but were forced by the government to leave

 they had little to eat and
suffered many hardships
 they were treated very rough

i plowed my own ground and

made and gathered my own crop
then they moved me off of my land
and rented it
 i dont get much money
 i have good land in the south
canadian bottoms near hanna
 i have about fifty or one hundred
pecan trees on it but i have to pick
cotton for other people and gather corn
for them to get my bread
 after the land was rented someone

burned down the log house my father
built

i live now with another indian
woman who is alone
i work for her
i work hard

we would dry the deer and bear meat
by cutting it up into big pieces
and running a stick through it

then cut a limb with forks in it
and make a rack and hang it up to
dry

we had good things to eat
wild honey

blackberries grapes and plums for fruit
but we did not eat much fruit because
we liked meat and corn best

Uppahake Watkoche, b. 1855

Asylum

by Lauro Palomba

The Hospital for Idiots and Imbeciles
once, the guide historically recalls
now scream and shackle free
these doleful corridors
of plaster and tiles
peeling, cracked, worn
rooms emptied of distress
still operable for nightly sport
haunted tours, paranormal fright

in this misnamed refuge
they caged them in
bewilderment, anguish, despair,
wire and stone
for laziness, egotism, greed
(themselves so upright);
for masturbation too
six obsessed variations thereof;
restless sexual manias
added to excitements of the mind
drugs, politics, religion
disappointments, desertions
menstrual derangement
novel reading, oh yes
on and on, demented, delirious
the sorry list of flaws;
a subtle theme, in a nutshell:
dissent and defiance



the correctives dutifully applied
imbalances redressed
egalitarian and liberally
kindly icepick lobotomies
heartfelt jolts of shock
bracing baths to burst the blues

how well they succeeded
at contriving their relief
effacing the afflicted
from house and street
counterfeiting death
never clueing in
where lunacy rooted and resided
where it always has
outside these walls

Straw Men

by C.R. Resetarits

The strong man sits at the window of his trailer. The big top poles are set, canvas laid out. Smaller tents at the rim of dust and prairie grasses are already up and flapping for attention. Breezes blow high and low, differently. He hears them playing through cottonwoods lining a gulch at the farthest edge of the fairground. The sound falling through trees, rustling up from field grasses—symphonic, layered—is almost enough to soothe the beast. Almost.

How'd he let it happen? How'd he come to this moment, sitting idle, watching the day? He has a dreadful thought: what if he comes to like it, this idiot trance? What if the strength of rage and spite and a daily bottle of whisky ebb away or change direction like the wind? He reaches for the bottle beside him and drinks to test that the effects of whiskey, at least, are still true. Yes indeed, and so back to the window his eyes drift.

A man on horseback rides in among the bones of the big top, handing out smiles and thumbs up like a pixie scattering dust.

The strong man turns more fully to the window, resting his chin on its sill. Why'd it hurt so much to lose to a small-time, crippled circus owner? One step, one leg-dragging step, from ordinary carnie crap. Not even a worthy foe. Pathetic. How'd he let it happen?

The man on horseback swings off, body moving like some smooth elegant bird of prey, arms spread, perfect balance. His landing is art, the grace of God, but then the man hobbles over the earth like a broken sparrow.

What sort of witch would choose a hobbled fool? Look at him. Look.

BERNARDO'S FALL FROM HIGH WIRE. Maybe he didn't fall, probably jumped. Could have. Saw the others go, thought he'd catch hell, took a dive. The only thing is, after that, he ought to stay low, hell-bent, crippled in and out, nasty, mean as a long no-net fall. But the



ninny can't manage that.

"I'd rather have died clean out," the strong man mumbles.

He grabs for something to throw. It's a stool this time: the one that had been holding his bottle. He grabs the bottle with one hand and hurls the stool with the other, across the tiny trailer, bang against the dented far wall. Then he sucks on his gold elixir until he grows numb and nearsighted.

Outside, the hobbling man hears the bang and turns toward it. The crew, as usual, follow his lead. At the other end of the field, one of the male lions lets out a wail. The crew joke and make rude comparisons.

The crippled man smiles, shakes his head.

"Let me know if you have any trouble with the set up."

"Sure thing, boss," the men answer in chorus.

"Don't you worry any, Mr. Bernardo," one man offers, as the others nod. "We won't let Sammy near you or Gina. Got the cat gun on him most of the time."

"Not worried."

Bernardo smiles gently. He hobbles back to his horse. Hands on horn, his arms and good leg launch him into the air, where he hangs, body shimmering, for a second or two longer than expected. He drops into his saddle and rides off.

The crew turn again toward the trailer, which is silent now, and joke amongst themselves, 'cause neither Sammy nor Bernardo have noticed yet that the crew has been slowly parking Sammy's trailer farther and farther from the mess tent. Each move, each new town, each old 4H field. Just a foot farther away. Bernardo won't think it's funny when he finally figures it out. Sammy will roar. And the collective crew will laugh until their collective balls hurt.

Lec, the youngest and brightest of Calder's Laundry Deluxe delivery men, picked up the circus laundry two days before down around Lebanon. The manager wants delivery at their next stop, the county fairgrounds. It's a rush job and a lot of laundry for lots of different



names. Foreign-sounding names. Circus folk. They promise another world, a better way. Lec believes there are many better ways.

Lec spots the big top, striped red and blue, and above it ribbon flags of purple and orange, whipped up in the air by the wind. Scattered to the side and behind the big tent sit the reds and yellows of the circus wagons and the blue and orange striped awnings of the concession stands; underneath it all, the greening prairie rolls, big hurt-blue sky overhead.

Late spring seems a good time for the circus, Lec figures, as long as it don't rain too hard. Better than county fair time, dead-dry August, the prairie packed down to nothing after a summer full of 4H camps and barrel-racing events and hog shows and car shows and every odd show under the sun. By August, the yellow dust is flying in dull whirls, and the heat is flying in slow, oppressive waves. No time for a circus. You want your circus sharp and fast and bursting with color and noise. The way you want your life. Early June, end of May, busting green, not worn down and August yellow-brown. Nope. Not for him. Lec is busting with color and noise, just busting. He feels good, although maybe a little too tight around the edges, a little too much friction, maybe the threat of the fire in his belly breaking through and consuming the air all around him, but that can't be helped, that's part of his landscape too, lots of deadwood scattered among the green, ready to go.

Lec thinks sometimes about joining the circus; that is, he thinks





about running away from home. And if you need to run, then why not someplace marvelous: carnie folk, world-wonders, animals, clowns, tricksters, acrobats, daredevils, and contortionists. A world all rightly odd, fluid and flourishing, on the move. It's good to be on the move. Much better to be unusual and moving than stagnant and stuck like his old momma. Oh, she's a case alright, floundering, laying in beds of pee and howling like a snap-trapped fox, wallowing, rotting, sucking everybody in, like a sink hole, a bog, a run of stinking swamp. He shakes these thoughts off. Maybe it ain't her fault she's crazy as a loon. Maybe. But it sure feels like she's damn guilty of something.

The circus though, how very different it is! The circus is all about air and shimmer. What he admires most about the circus is how it swings for the sky, half of the acts up in the air, the others too quick to pin down. Circus people move through rarified spaces, and then they pick up and move on altogether. Progress. That's how Lec sees it. Of course, he's on the move too. Moving up in the world. Old Calder himself is barking for Lec to be taken off the delivery route soon as possible. Needs him as an assistant, another set of eyes. Lec's going to be his right-hand man. So Lec is, on this crisp, sweet-smelling morning, especially thankful to be making this delivery, maybe his last, right into the heart of the one world, one way, that truly mirrors his heart and his appreciation of things that soar and shimmer and live to move.

Lec stops at the circus manager's trailer. The manager's wife tells him to drive the truck down to the dining tent. There's a large, cleared circle of trampled ground in front. Beyond the clearing, trailers radiate back into the tall grass. A team of jugglers is practicing in the area, but they move to the side as soon as they spot the truck. Lec parks and gives the jugglers a big grin.

"Here with your laundry," he announces, waving a generous hand at the words "Calder's Laundry Express" painted on the side of the truck. The jugglers nod and disappear between trailers just as the manager's wife reappears.

"Here's my ticket, kid, and money."

Lec finds her shirts right away thanks to the alphabetized, box-and-



rubber-band system he's concocted. Nothing quite as comforting as a well-ordered delivery. Only thing he might like better is the simplicity of a white cotton shirt, crisply folded and pinned onto a stiff rectangle of cardboard. Oh, Lec longs for order, loves straight lines, gentle curves, beautiful patterns. The circus grounds are full of these, and Lec's feeling mighty fine.

"Laundry up," the manager's wife speaks into the bullhorn. "Laundry up." She tugs a rope hung just outside the dining tent, and a bell peals.

"Listen, kid," she says over the waning ring, "anything that's not come for just shove in the door back of my trailer, and I'll take care of it." Then she gives Lec a wink and a gentle pat on the arm before disappearing into the wave of circus folk heading down the trailer lanes.

Quite a crowd, although remarkably quiet and slow. They line up without fuss, money and tickets in hand. Lec marvels at the diversity, at the trim athletic bodies. And all acting so natural and unconcerned. The way people ought.

The line goes quickly. Easy change. Patient tempers. Most smile a flat, mute smile and turn away.



Sammy follows the crowd. He's still numb and myopic. He looks around for her. She'd be keen, no doubt, on getting his shirts now.

The crowd around him is a bit of a rush, as much a terror. He notes the way they steer clear, the way they watch him from the corners of their eyes. He hasn't been out among them in years. Every morning, he works out alone with weights behind his trailer. Afternoons, he works on his acts. He is base-man for two, the acrobatic Franco brothers—a trio of cousins, half-breed gypsies, stinking idiots—and the contortionists, May and Linn Sue—silent, judging sorceresses. Beyond them, Gina has been his link to the outside world. Gina stood in line for his shirts and brought trays of food, kept him supplied with the workaday details of circus life. He'd never listened, never said thank you. Beat the hell out of her more than once, winced and roared at her mentions of marriage and children. Drank. Drank some more. And then she moved out, as if something had changed, as if some line had been crossed. He'd like to know what, where. He'd like to know what the hell happened.

There's a crowd at the mess. There stands the delivery truck with a young buck in uniform handing out orders. Sammy walks straight for the head of the line and steps in.

With only a fourth of the line left to go, a large, muscular man wanders into the clearing. He seems older than most, although his body is bulky and fit and tight. He wears a black cotton t-shirt stretched over his bulging frame and black sweatpants, bare feet. His skin, where visible, is rubbery, tanned, damp. His hair is black, unconvincing so, like a poorly polished shoe. His face is too taut, the eyes squinting disdain, the mouth a permanent sneer. The bulky man walks to the head of the line and steps in between two dirty looks: "Stop it, Sammy," the one in front says, "Get to the back," whines the other. Sammy says nothing. Adjusts his stance a little, claiming more ground.

Lec doesn't want to hassle but gives Sammy a disapproving frown and asks for his ticket.



Sammy doesn't particularly care for the frown the delivery kid is giving him. Uppity.

"Hagenbecker," Sammy says. "Samuel Hagenbecker. Four shirts. Best be there."

"Five dollars even," the kid says crisply, holding the bundle out.

Sammy reaches for it, but the kid weaves it through his hands and away.

"Sorry, sir. Payment first."

"Payment? Well, hell, I don't have any money on me."

Damn that woman. Making a spectacle of him still. How was he to know to bring money?

"Give me the shirts, and I'll go get some."

The kid turns and puts the shirts on a table behind him.

Sammy can hear the silence of those behind him loving this scenario. Sammy getting his, once again. What to do with more anger, though? The night she left, he tore a hole in a nearby town. Feeling the fool. Overnight in jail. Bernardo there with bail in the morning.

"If you're not ready, sir, please step aside."

Night she and Bernardo married, he began punching holes in the circus trailers, peeling tin peeling hands. Hours at some local clinic. Following week kind of tricky holding on to those wiggling twins and twits with his fingers all bandaged. Forced to concentrate, to forget. Now there seems a need for another hole in the world.

"Jackass," Sammy mutters, and then he reaches up in a flurry, grabs Lec's shirt, and rips it clear.

The quiet line behind Sammy releases one long unified groan, then backs away and begins a round of condemnations, albeit in soft, wind-chime tones.

"There's collateral for ya, lover boy," Sammy says with a laugh, waving the front of Lec's tattered shirt.



Lec stands a moment dumbfounded. The hem of his short sleeves still ring his lean, muscular arms, and the back of the shirt remains stuck like glue to his sweating back. Down the front of him, though, it had been torn clean away, revealing the muscled chest, rippled abdomen of a boy gone man who's been digging ditches and hauling other people's crap since he was twelve. If Lec were inclined to notice, he would see the glimmer of appreciation for a body well-formed in the eyes of those lined up back of Sammy. The physical is, after all, their livelihood. Aesthetically, empathetically, reactively, the crowd is appreciating Lec something fierce, wondering just how the boy will handle the situation.

Lec doesn't wonder, though. There isn't much left in him for wonder. Nothing much that isn't already fueling the fire of his indignation. Old man Calder has showed him respect. Calder has, and Calder's a hell of a lot more important than this dumb ox in front of him now. Lec's tired of taking shit from people, tired of their inability to see his sincerity, his promise. Calder's care has shown him a better way. Maybe it's time he showed a few of the world's losers a better way



too.

“Asshole punk,” Sammy slurs and then swings one of his giant-size fists.

Lec ducks, steps in, still bent, and then comes up quick right under Sammy’s jaw, comes up hard with his fist and the whole of his young body, comes up springing from thighs wound up as tight and tenacious as a new run of climbing peas. Up Lec goes and up goes Sammy’s jaw, pressing in pieces for a moment up against his cheekbone.

Sammy stumbles back, sprouting blood, falls almost into the crowd but then rights himself and makes a jagged run for Lec. Sammy drives forward, straight back into the judgment of Lec’s second swing, which comes from the side, shooting like a comet born from some busted up galaxy. The comet hits, and Sammy’s head goes right on into orbit, his big bulky body trailing after. He falls to the ground, still for a moment or two, then damn if he doesn’t crawl to all fours, back up to two.

Sammy crawls up from worm to rat to wavering man. Stands. Stumbles toward the kid again, swinging weakly, almost giddy, at the swarm of black moths hovering around the kid’s head.

The kid steps clear. Sammy feels the dull pull in his bruised body as his empty swing hurls through air, willing, pensive. The kid steps in again—pound, pound, pound—body blows. The kid is laughing now, pumped up, ready to go. Sammy stumbles for him, falling, but the kid pulls clear again, or nearly. The kid is stepping away but not quick enough. Sammy grabs his leg and starts to roll, twist, taking the kid with him. Then the kid does an amazing thing. Sammy marvels at it. The kid heaves his shoulders and body into an airborne dive, pulling the leg free, rolling away over the gravel, out



of Sammy's reach.

The boy's not laughing anymore. He's crying, burning with rage. He thought he was invincible, but, for a second there, with Sammy wrapped round his leg, the kid panicked, felt fear. Sammy understands that he wants to run, wants out, but Sammy can't let him go. Needs to make him stay and give him, give them both, a new way. There's no going back.

Sammy pulls up once more to knuckles and knees and a swaying stand. The kid keeps circling, holding his stomach, gasping for air.

The circus owner Bernardo finally comes hobbling over from the mess tent to see what all the racket is about.

"Motherlovin', sisterbuggin', dunce," Sammy sings out as he sways.

Lec's had enough. Just wants to get on with it. Score's settled, damage done. Enough. Doesn't anyone know when to stop? Makes him sick to his stomach. So Lec lets go. Pounds, punches, rages blind. Isn't any sort of fun. Just dumb, undammed mayhem. Not easily begun, hard to stop. Four guys in overalls and Bernardo finally pull Lec off. They sit him down at the edge of the clearing. Bernardo slowly talks him down, calming hands on head or neck while the boy exhales what remains of his rage and then heaves and gasps for air.

Poignant, pathetic, and a bit of a marvel, too, or so it seems to play across Sammy's swelling face as he lies quietly, hugging grass. His softened glaze is focused on the boy and Bernardo for a while, but then the wind picks up, drawing his eyes to the cottonwoods, and the shadow of a smile drifts across his face.



Green Arrow vs. Hawkeye

by John F. Buckley & Martin Ott

It was during the twentieth annual Secret Crisis of the Infinity Hour, after Emerald Ocular exited the issue, entered the metaquantum splitter,

devolved back into Clint and Ollie, hit hot showers, then hit the bar at the Inn Beyond Eternity, that it began with a thumb war. Green Arrow used his fingernails

from snorting military-grade speed to time shift his middle finger into the palm of Hawkeye, who gripped and ripped on the blond beard, kid gloves now off.

DC's finest bowman bent with both force and finesse a pool cue over his opposite number's noggin, splinters stuck in his scalp like wooden cowlicks.

Marvel's arrow slinger was used to using everything as a weapon, including his rage. He kicked the eight ball into the light above, casting them both into darkness.

But Oliver Queen was used to night hunts from surviving months on that desert isle. With a rubber band and a stray golf pencil, he punctured an eardrum.

Clint Barton was used to relying on all his senses,
circus kid learning to trust the touch of bow and sword,
the curves of spies, the wife who was a songbird

and killer like Oliver's own. As clearly as he
smelled the blood streaming down the side of his head,
he sensed the spunky tights and beer breath,

the purple of his outfit a bruise surrounding him.
He danced with the man gripping his own quick hands
to the music of glasses tumbling, rogues cackling

about compound heartstrings and fancy footwork,
the dizzy syncopation of their pain-soaked rumba, dual
archers stamping at insteps, aiming for arches.

The crisis of worlds became the union of soldiers
accustomed to firing and aiming simultaneously to survive,
draw and hold, breath and stance, target and desire.

Double Zero

by John Zedolik

What's better than a useless dog?

Two at the door matching, barking,
crowding the glass and double-fogging

it with hot-nerve spittle that can
only run down to dry

and smear in silence
stick to the surface

since no wind of natural threat
will blow it in, and no one will
tumble it down into shards
and step over with dirt-clotted
boots, leaving malice on the tiles.

Certainly not I, the neighbor, who wishes
no harm but still earns no tail-wagging

and friendly tongues from the passing
to and fro over grass worn soft
by my toothless tread.

Gazebo in the Park

by Dennis Ross

Walnut shells are centered
on the concrete gazebo floor
all within a small circle.

A small child's gathered treasure?

I slip away to the lawn,
and the world pond quiets.
A grizzled squirrel carries in a walnut,
holds it like a chalice, gnaws out the nut,
and leaves the shell within the circle,
then repeats herself time and again.

A squirrel shaman? An artist?
An eccentric?

If I dump a bag of shelled walnuts
into the circle,
would I encourage a new religion,
reward an artist,
or just froth the mind of Crazy Alice?

Familiar Wounded Birds

by Tracy S. Youngblom

Jesus Christ. I'm at my kitchen table perusing the paper Saturday morning when there is a tremendous crash. I startle and jerk and tear two small handfuls of newspaper, one off each edge of the Business section.

Another bird. My wife lures them here with feeders on iron hooks stuck in the lawn right outside the big bay window. All manner come and eat and make merry—cardinals, juncos, chickadees, nuthatches—Jesus, my command of bird names has increased—and every once in a while one flies into the glass and falls to the deck.

I read that birds do that for strange reasons. They're not blinded by glare, contrary to popular opinion. They see so well that when they spot reflections of trees in the glass or open sky they think it's a new universe to explore. Off they soar to a bitter end.

Experts have their theories, and I have mine. I think the birds see



their own reflections and mistake themselves for another bird because they also peck away at the fake glass on the feeder itself, even though it's clouded with seed hulls and slime from various bird breaths. They'll attack to protect their supply of food or a prospective mate. How do they know it's not their prospective mate? They really are blind. Blind to their own ambition. Blind to the power of their desires. Christ, do birds have desires?

I tape the torn pieces back onto the Business section, pick up Variety and snap it open, and then, Jesus, there's her picture, my old girlfriend. Well, she liked to be called that. I didn't mind, though I sometimes saw other women. She's got a book of poetry just published, her first. I'm happy for her. You can't begrudge someone what they consider their good fortune.

She showed me some of her poems when we were dating, and I commented appreciatively. But once when she showed me a poem about pure lust (another guy, not me), I did ask her why she hid her passion. It was a fair question. She was so wholesome. Jesus. Not someone who would want to nibble a man's neck, bite off his shirt just to taste his skin. How could she write that? She never did that to me.

Her picture looks good: playful eyebrows, stunning cheekbones, those brown amused eyes, the color of river water. I would know those eyes anywhere, even though the photo is black and white. She was a little older than me, divorced with a couple kids, but that hadn't damaged her in any way. And the thing was, I don't think she had any idea how good she looked. Once I told her, while she was undressing, that she had a great ass. She actually blushed.

We broke up, obviously. I had explained after the first few months I didn't see a future for us. I'd be obligated to sign on for a family. And though I never told her, I was wary of dating someone who didn't enjoy a drink now and then. She wanted to keep dating me anyway, so I carried on in a noncommittal way.

It's 7:00. Early May. The morning is perfect, except for the familiar wounded bird, the cloud of bird-oil it left on the outside of my window. I can smell the flowers: forsythia and lily of the valley and lilacs my wife tends. My knowledge of flowers has expanded as



well; I'm a regular nature guru now. I remind my wife of this when she complains about my lack of involvement. "Vocabulary is the first sign of involvement," I tell her, "the most important sign."

My wife won't be up for hours, but I wake at 5:00, 6:00 if I'm lucky. These early mornings are my time. When the sun rises and the world lights up, I can feel myself soften. It's a funny thing, that feeling: heading out to get the paper, before the wind wrings tears out of you, your eyes are dry as leather. It stings when one sensation bleeds into the other.

Once, when my old girlfriend and I were out for an early morning walk, I told her I used to run track in high school. She asked me to run a little ahead of her so she could watch my stride. Why I remember that, I have no idea.

I breathe in the fresh air, not polluted yet with exhaust and racket from lawn mowers, smooth the paper on the table. I take out my iPhone and my glasses, enter a few dates of her upcoming readings. Maybe there are some poems in her book about me.

I fold and crease the paper, get up to stretch my legs, glance out the window at the frenzy of sparrows gleaning broken seeds from the lawn. How many could I hit with a single squeeze of the trigger, one good spray of birdshot?

The thing is, I don't think I've properly settled the past with my old girlfriend. Sure, I enter dates in my phone, but I'm just curious. That photo could be old. Maybe she's gotten fat and gray. I may want to see for myself. We did date for a year, even if it was casual.

It's like I've had her on my mind for some time, a hum under the surface, the Musak I can't ignore. When I've found myself pissed at Jeter's rare error or Mickelson's chip shot, I've really been irritated with myself. Here I am, married, comfortable and settled, enjoying what she wanted. I am, now, the man she thought I was then—successful, even—and I could maybe make a difference, seeing as I did break her heart. I could check in, make sure she's all right, not gloat, just show some concern. Jesus, she sobbed when I left for good.

Right away, I find a link to her personal website. I don't have a

personal website. I have my business website for real estate (specialty: duplexes and fixer uppers) and that connects to my LinkedIn profile, so you can find me either way.

Christ, she hasn't wasted much time promoting herself; all of her scheduled readings from the paper, plus others, listed there in bold type. There's also a link to her Facebook page.

She's gotten married to a man whose name she withholds, thinking of me, I suppose; it says "Married," not "Married to Brad Perfect." She's "wildly in love" with him. I don't need to say that I wish her the best, then, since she's already got some version of best, her version, not surprising. Her husband appears often in her photos. Next to many of them, she repeats she's "wildly in love" with this ordinary guy: here he is on a boat, holding a fishing rod. Big deal. Here he is at some party, smiling at the camera as if he's just invented beer. Handsome but pathetic. And here they are in wedding photos, not professional ones, just ones some guest—one of her kids, probably—took of them. They stand facing each other, grinning. How cute. In one photo, her palm rests gently on his cheek.

When I left, she did that to me, her hand trailing down my neck as I backed away, saying more loudly than I meant to, "Don't cry."

She got married the same year I did, four years ago. Married happily, for love. Everyone's dream. She's not gray-haired or fat, her husband's lean, clean cut. They are the perfect fucking representation of marital bliss. They're "wildly in love." I can't believe she'd settle on a guy who has nothing to brag about except a fishing boat. Is it even his?

I close Facebook, erase the dates in my phone, gulp the last of my coffee, stalk away from her image. Stop and lean my head heavily on the glass, glance down at my striped shirt which does not quite hide my gut. I have an Open House later; I'll shower and change into something roomier. Through my reflection I see the bird, sunken and without its former sheen. Its feathers settle onto its form: bones, skin, what gives it shape? I really want to know.

I'm too late. She is living her dream and posting it openly, her way of making a lasting accusation. She's made up her mind about me;

that much is clear. There's nothing I could say now. In one of the wedding photos, she even had a glass of champagne. She wouldn't drink with me, but with this guy, it's a new game. I can't believe I felt bad for her when she discovered I'd slept with someone else.

I used to watch her brush her hair, and I loved to hold her hand, and help her cook, and I told her once, "You're amazing, so tender."

She clearly didn't appreciate me. I had washed the dishes at the end of that weekend, knowing she'd be home Sunday night. I had changed the sheets. Everything looked orderly; since she had let me stay at her house while she was out of town visiting family, I wanted to leave it nicer than when she left (she wasn't always the neatest person). It was late November, unseasonably cold; that's why I never thought to take out the bedroom garbage. I had split by the time she got home, but she obviously found the used condoms later, sticky and funky smelling, lining the bottom. Smelled them, probably.

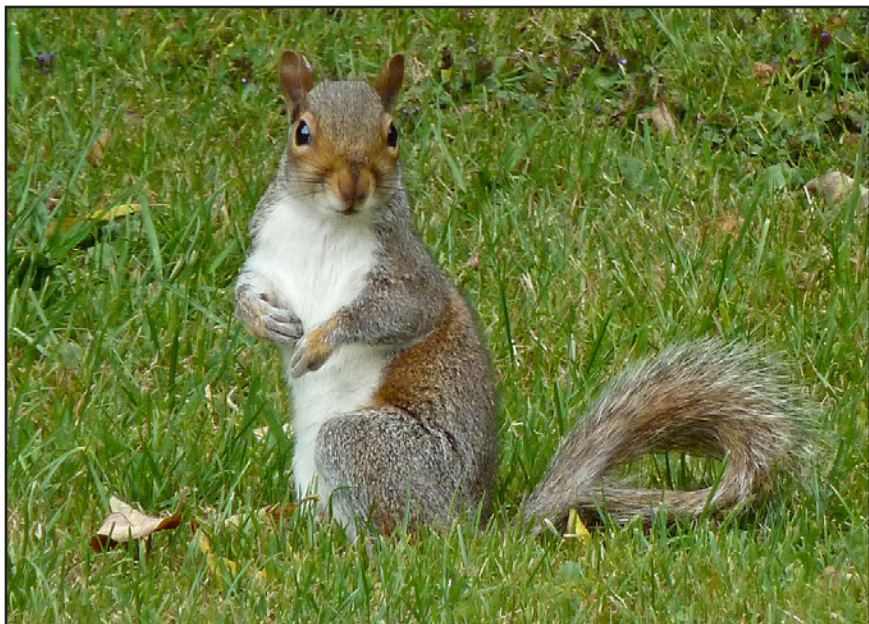
My wife stirs upstairs. 8:30. I hear her heavy footsteps on the way to the bathroom, the morning routine, the flush.

I wanted her to be angry. Anger would have been a warning, at least. When she called to say we needed to talk, I went over unsuspecting (and stupid, probably) and walked right into the great morass of her sadness, where I was almost trapped. Of course I wouldn't answer any questions about it. We weren't serious. There was nothing to answer for.

I stood there like an idiot, at her mercy, waiting for the waterworks to shut off, the whispered, persistent questions to cease. How could she throw this misery in my face? I could have defended myself against anger. I could even have stalked out, thrown a harsh "good riddance" over my shoulder, if she'd been angry.

Finally I left, backing away from her hand on my cheek—what else could I do?—the air so thick with woe I couldn't even turn around and leave like a man. I had a lingering view, tears leaking through her fingers pressed over her eyes. She had the slimmest fingers—delicate, but strong too.

The swarm of birds at the feeder disperses in a flurry—a squirrel,



shimmying up the pole. Christ, they think they own the world. Rushing outside, I wave my arms and threaten the bastard, perched now on the crest of the pole. He stares at me, defiant, like they always do. I can see his tiny fingers—paws?—gripping the metal, the tail whipping back and forth like a goddamn victory flag. Son of a bitch.

I don't realize the small landscaping stone has left my hand until I lurch forward with my right foot on the follow-through. He flinches—either I've hit him or he's a master actor—lets out a squawk, scurries down the pole and into the flowering crab, where he assumes a watchful position. He thinks he's so clever. He thinks it will be easy to wait for me to leave, then return to wasting the bird seed meant for the chickadees.

I have a solid life, no one has to tell me that. I have real maple syrup, a retirement account, a wife.

Until I have to leave for my Open House, I'm going to sit on my own goddamn front step, cradling this small handful of sharp stones, waiting for the menace to return, so I can drive it away again.



Speeding Through Kansas

by Richard Luftig

These semis
are prairie
schooners:
sailing west,
speeding past
cornfields, barns,
frontage roads,
scatters
of windbreak
trees. And the towns:

all *video-land*
second-hand
stores turned
hand-to-mouth,
brick-to-dust,
falling in,
fading fast.
They hold out
false fronts,
false hopes

and even now
can't admit
how anything
sown into
this wind-blown,
silt-loam
land could
ever be
destined
to survive.

Drought

by Richard Luftig

Out in the back of farms,
dead, rusted tractors wait,
impatient for a winter bath.

It has been dry here so long
that even ducks have forgotten
how to tilt back their heads

and drink from the skies.
Little left that is not
ash-gray dirt, just dust,

cross-hatched with tracks
of long-gone sparrows,
and these parched, fallow

fields are left to eke
out a life on their own.
They sit: scarred, seed-

to-sedge. Sand-blasted,
erased, year-in, year-out,
like some ignored spinster,

who wants, waits, wishes
for more but is always
too afraid to ask.

Yeast

by Louis Gallo

The telephone, my father used to say, pitches its tent in death's camp. In our family anyway. So when my mother called the other day with news that Tina Roveri had died of a yeast infection, I was not surprised. My family serves as an obituarial conduit: we spread the news, we keep tabs, we solemnly attend wakes and funerals. Well, that other person I am did, but the I-who-I-am-now has vowed recently to avoid anything funereal.

"Who died?" I asked Mom cautiously when she called.

"There you go," she groaned. "You remember Tina."

I really did not, though of course I vaguely remember the Roveris. They had a lime green Buick with chrome-edged holes punched into each bulbous fender. My cousin George and I would sometimes sneak over and stuff dead leaves into those holes for the singular reason that holes ached to be stuffed. We knew nothing of death then, had no idea that every hole is a potential tomb. Death always comes later, after the fact.

"She lived right across from us on Columbus Street," my mother sighs. "Sure you remember."

It is a high treachery in my family not to remember every person who has crossed our paths. Since we left Columbus Street when I was eight, I don't recall much. Well... there's a lie. I remember everything, even more than my mother, who, despite her grim tidings, always manages to find a magnolia or two amid wreckage at hand. My mother is a saint. In this sense, I feel rapport with former president Nixon whose mother was also a saint. But I don't remember Tina Roveri. She has slipped from the old gray matter like the penny I once dropped from the Empire State Building.

"Donnie and Betty's older sister," my mother goes on, "she helped you up when you fell off your bike. Oh, you should have heard yourself shriek. I like to died when I saw the bike on top of you."

"When was this, Ma," I asked, "1901? I remember Donnie and Betty. We played together sometimes. We didn't like them much. They were serious creeps. Donnie used to fart all the time and blame it on his sister."

Mom becomes very silent when vexed then lets you have it. "You and Ruthie adored those children. You ought to be ashamed. I hear Donnie's an alcoholic now."

Ashamed? If she only knew how ashamed I am, but not because of Tina Roveri. I didn't know Tina. My mind drifts to a recent Boeing crash. CNN flashed a photo across the screen of an entire family who got wiped out. Then they cut to a still of their now empty house. Neighbors described the family as enthusiastic, happy churchgoers and community leaders, all the pluses. I am cynical beyond measure, laden with remorse, spiritually defeated, a sore thumb and general detriment to the community. It should have been me on that plane—only I don't fly, precisely because they go down and because it is unnatural to board a tube that will glide thirty thousand feet above ground, held aloft by some arcane tentacle called a vacuum. There is much to be said for nature after all, even if it always breaks your heart. My recent traffic with nature limits itself to a miniature herb garden I planted on my balcony for medicinal purposes. How I love to sniff the sweet basil and rosemary. How could such potent, stern aromas not cure everything?

"Marcus? Marcus?" I hear my mother dimly.

"I'm here," I mumble.

"Did you drift off again, Marcus? Really, you've got to do something about that drifting. Why don't you see a doctor?"

"I don't see doctors," I say. "You don't either. In this family we don't see doctors, remember?"

"A lot of good it did Tina Roveri."

"She didn't see a doctor?" My ears perk, hairs bristle on my wrists. My family has always believed that doctors are immersed in disease and will have no trouble spotting one the minute you set foot in their office. We use my Uncle Edwin as proof. Edwin never saw a doctor in his life until the day he found another oozing pustule

under his arm. The pustules had come and gone for years, but this time he decided to consult a physician he'd read about in the Times-Picayune. The physician proclaimed that all disorders of mind and body could be cured with apple cider vinegar. To make a long story short, Uncle Edwin checked in and died a month later, pickled in vinegar.

My mother babbles on about yeast.

"People don't die of it," I remind her.

"If they wait too long they do," she says with as much threat as she can muster.

"I read somewhere that bee pollen cures yeast."

"She must have been scared. Scared people wait, like your grandmother. She had that breast tumor for nearly twenty years and didn't say a word about it. That's what killed her."

"Twenty years," I sort of laugh.

"You remember Tina, come on."

"I swear, Ma, I don't. Or maybe I do. Didn't she wear wide dresses with all the tree designs?" A sudden flash from remote childhood jolts my brain: what was lost and buried erupts from layer upon layer of psychic debris like a thousand-year-old seed suddenly bursting through the lava to bloom.

"Palmettos!" My mother is delighted. "She wasn't that much older than you and Ruthie, but at that age even a year counts. God, I can't believe we're so old now. We used to be younger than everybody. Now look... gives you the heebie jeebies."

I find myself paying close attention to the phases of the moon these days. I don't feel quite right unless it's full. Otherwise the sky seems vacant and sad and not a little hostile. When did I begin to seek signs in the stars and planets, (not that I believe the gibberish you read in the newspaper)? The other day my horoscope advised Virgos to scrutinize their investments and consolidate debts. So I took out a loan. I pay one dollar less a month now on the debts but overall owe for ten more years.

"Well, honey," she says, "it's getting late and I'm tired. Come see

me soon?"

My mother has only recently become tired. I don't like it one bit. She has that old person's fuzzy, gurgled voice and says her leg hurts. Go to a doctor. She has never recovered from Dad's premature death, nor have any of us, especially Ruthie, who claims he favored her. This favoring business has major implications in my family. The favored one struts about as if awash in an imperial glow. Our grandmother favored me. I strutted about in an imperial glow. But those who bestowed the favoritism are now dead. My sister and I don't glow anymore. Ruthie and I inherited terror from our father. Our mother is somewhat immune and still enters the Publisher's Clearinghouse Sweepstakes, sends birthday cards to all the latest generation newborns (she even knows their names) and visits a few ancient relatives clinging to life in geriatric wards. Despite her leg.

Another earthquake in Armenia has just killed eight hundred people. An eleven-year-old serial killer was sentenced to death by lethal injection. Fourteen children perished in the Boeing crash. A new virus that devours human flesh at the rate of one square inch per hour has surfaced in Pennsylvania. A half moon bleats in the sky. The IRS has decided to investigate my casualty loss claims. How can I prove the shrubs were worth eight thousand dollars? Check prices, I'm tempted to suggest, call Michigan Bulbs. It was our Midwest ice storms that did them in, two ice storms a week apart.



The entire Midwest, where I lived for four years, frozen under a massive sheet of the stuff. Ice has become a symbol of evil to me. I can no longer bear cold drinks. I sip Coke straight from the can but only at room temperature. Tina Roveri waited too long. Yeast flourishes in warm, moist cul-de-sacs of the body. Who can go on what with Arctic storms and tropical microbes determined to level the City of Man?

I thought about my cousin Walter, distraught because he had been fired for parsimony.

“That’s what they told me,” he had choked, “parsimony. I was too parsimonious. I’m probably the first human being in history to be fired for parsimony. I need the money. What am I going to do? Cecile needs an operation.”

It was probably heartless to urge Walter to grow herbs, but what can one say? I, too, would have fired him for parsimony.

One can only do so much. A month ago I gave my mother a pathetic freezer bag full of dried spearmint leaves.



Last Day

by Richard Dinges Jr.

Gray hair and bald
pates clash with office
attire, suits passe,
now a casual
mix of khakis
and jeans. Words stutter
on jowls and eyes lose
focus from crows
feet. Keep your face
stoic although cheeks
sag. Nothing lasts
forever. After all
the cake is devoured,
pack your box
and go gently
into the parking lot.
No one watches
from a wall of windows
at your back.

A Note to My Unemployment Insurance Carrier

by Richard Luftig

I am sending you this email
that you can read each Monday
instead of my appearing every week.
I thought it would save us both trouble.

To use your phrase, I have
been actively looking for work.
Nightly, I talk to the bar-keep
over at Jack's Grill to see if

he knows of anything, and just
the other day I wrote Bill Gates
with some improvements he
could make if he just hired me.

Down at Rebecca's Café,
I regularly read the want ads
from old copies of the weekly
Pennysaver but there seem

to be precious few openings
for brain surgeons. However,
I am happy to report
that I am making progress

with the beautiful red-haired
woman with the sweet scent
of strawberry shampoo
who sits every day at the table

next to mine and eats a pecan
muffin, drinks herbal tea
and reads letters from a past
lover. I am getting close

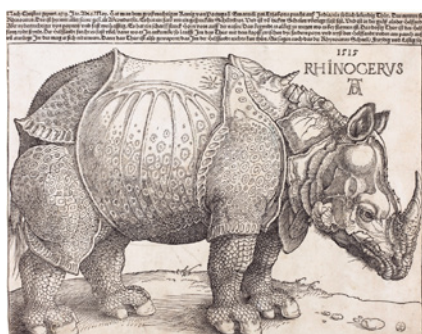
to asking her to join me
at my regular table, and I
will report each week
with details as they occur.



Dürer's Rhinoceros

by Thomas R. Keith

It wears a suit of armor
As the Earth wears its crust of plates:
Gravity-moored, it shifts only
Slowly, grudgingly, but its shrugs
Can swallow whole towns, whole cities.
The pockmarks on its great plates
Trouble it no more than the Moon
Is bothered by her black crater-dents.
Behind its neck valley piles up
Upon valley; from its snout, a mountain
Twisting crab-claw-fashion to heaven;
Tree-roots have grown in its chin,
So long unmoved. It could no more
Charge in fury than a Buddha-statue
Could leap up from its lotus-pose:
It has years still to go before
The thought that percolates in its brain-bulk
Bears fruit enough for motion.
Only its eye betrays the spark,
The meat-life in the stone-and-bone
Cuirass, the dumbly stolid mind
That offers no response to time's
Vain provocation: ten thousand waves
Of entropy will strike its shell and roll
Back to the sea before it deigns to blink.



Green Apples

by Richard Dinges Jr.

Tempted by gravity,
apple tree limbs
bow low, weighted
by green fruit only
a bit of blush,
too tart for me,
green apples a taste
I outgrew long
ago, when a bite
was a dare, and
bellies ached late
at night, when moons
hung heavy and sweat
was more than salt
that stung wide open
eyes that looked for more.

Contributors

Alexander, Daniel

Born in '49, Daniel Alexander is a resident of western Oklahoma for the past fifty years and on several occasions, a Southwestern Oklahoma State University graduate. He has been through ranching, oil and gas field, counseling and teaching phases. He is happily married with two adult children who step beyond his limitations. He is now able to indulge his passion for good stories. This time however, he can create a unique universe, and he hopes you enjoy.

Buckley, John F. & Martin Ott

John F. Buckley and Martin Ott began their ongoing games of poetic volleyball in the spring of 2009. Since then, their collaborations have been accepted into more than seventy journals and anthologies, including *Barrow Street*, *Drawn to Marvel*, *Map Literary*, *Rabbit Ears: TV Poems*, *Redivider*, and *ZYZZYVA*, and gathered into two full-length collections on Brooklyn Arts Press, *Poets' Guide to America* (2012) and *Yankee Broadcast Network* (2014). They are now writing poems for a third manuscript, *American Wonder*, about superheroes and supervillains.

Dinges Jr., Richard

Richard Dinges Jr. has an M.A. in literary studies from University of Iowa, and after many years, he no longer manages business systems at an insurance company. *The Journal*, *Abbey*, *Comstock Review*, *Ginosko*, and *Red River Review* most recently accepted his poems for their publications.

Emerson, Donna L.

Donna holds a Master's in Social Work (UC Berkeley) as well as a license in Clinical Social Work. Living in Petaluma, California with her husband and daughter, she's just retired from teaching at Santa Rosa Jr. College and her clinical social work practice. Donna's recent publications include *Calyx*, *Sanskrit*, *The Place That Inhabits Us*, *Poems of the Bay Area Watershed*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, and *New Ohio Review*. She has been nominated for a Pushcart, "Best of the Net" and received an Allen Ginsberg

award (2015). Her four chapbooks include *This Water* (2007), *Body Rhymes* (2009), *Wild Mercy* (2011), and *Following Hay* (2013).

Gallo, Louis

Louis Gallo's work has appeared or will shortly appear in *Southern Literary Review*, *Fiction Fix*, *Glimmer Train*, *Hollins Critic*, *Rattle*, *Southern Quarterly*, *Litro*, *New Orleans Review*, *Xavier Review*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, *Missouri Review*, *Mississippi Review*, *Texas Review*, *Baltimore Review*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Ledge*, *storySouth*, *Houston Literary Review*, *Tampa Review*, *Raving Dove*, *The Journal (Ohio)*, *Greensboro Review*, and many others. Chapbooks include *The Truth Change*, *The Abomination of Fascination*, *Status Updates*, and *The Ten Most Important Questions*. He is the founding editor of the now defunct journals, *The Barataria Review* and *Books: A New Orleans Review*. He teaches at Radford University in Radford, Virginia.

Goldner, Beth E.

Beth Goldner is the author of a story collection (*Wake*) and a novel (*The Number We End Up With*), both published by Perseus Books. She lives in the suburbs of Philadelphia, and she works as a protocol associate, developing clinical trials in radiation oncology.

Keith, Thomas R.

Thomas R. Keith is originally from Austin, Texas. He currently resides in Chicago.

Luftig, Richard

Richard Luftig is a former professor of educational psychology and special education at Miami University in Ohio now residing in California. He is a recipient of the Cincinnati Post-Corbett Foundation Award for Literature and a semi-finalist for the Emily Dickinson Society Award. His poems and stories have appeared in numerous literary journals in the United States (including *Westview*) and internationally in, Canada, Australia, Europe, and Asia. Two of his poems recently appeared in *Ten Years of Dos Madres Press*.

Palomba, Lauro

Lauro Palomba has taught English as a Second Language and done stints as a freelance journalist and speechwriter. Approximately fifty of his stories and poems have appeared in Canadian and American literary journals.

Resetarits, C. R.

C. R. Resetarits has new work out now in *Litro #159, Crannóg* (Pushcart nominated story), and *Stand*; out soon in *The Wisconsin Review, Reed Review*, and *Jelly Bucket*. Her poetry collection, *BROOD*, was published by Mongrel Empire Press in 2015. She lives in Faulkner-riddled Oxford, Mississippi.

Ross, Dennis

Dennis Ross taught and did research at Iowa State University. Now retired, he has gone back to his first love, writing poetry, as a second career. He has about 180 poems published. *Relatives and Other Strangers*, his first chapbook, appeared in Finishing Line Press.

Treat, James

James Treat is the author of *Around the Sacred Fire: Native Religious Activism* in the Red Power Era and the editor of several volumes of native literature. His essays and poems have appeared in *American Indian Culture and Research Journal, American Quarterly, Contemporary Verse 2, Cultural Survival Quarterly, Fourth Genre, Indian Country Today, Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment, Muscogee Nation News, Native Americas, Orion, Studies in American Indian Literature, Tribal College Journal, Verbatim Found Poetry*, and other academic and literary journals. Treat is an enrolled citizen of the Muscogee (Creek) Nation. More information about his work is available at <https://jamestreat.wordpress.com>.

Watford, Austin

Austin Watford is a former SWOSU student and a current OU Law student. He lives with his wife and no children in Norman, he's never been published anywhere, and he's deathly afraid of spontaneous combustion.

Youngblom, Tracy S.

Tracy Youngblom has published one poetry chapbook (*Driving to Heaven*, 2010), one full-length poetry collection (*Growing Big*, 2013), and has one poetry chapbook forthcoming (*One Bird a Day*, 2018). In addition, she has published numerous individual stories, essays, and poems in journals such as *Shenandoah*, *Wallace Stevens Journal*, *New York Quarterly*, *Foliate Oak*, *Qu*, *DMQ Review*, *Dogwood*, *frostwriting*, and other places. She teaches English full-time at Anoka-Ramsey Community College and creative writing courses in the community.

Zedolik, John

For thirteen years, John Zedolik taught English and Latin in a private all-girls school. Eventually, he wrote a dissertation that focused on the pragmatic comedy of the *Canterbury Tales*, thereby completing his Ph.D. in English. Currently, he is an adjunct instructor at Chatham University in Pittsburgh. However, he has had many jobs in his life including archaeological field assistant, obituary writer, and television-screen-factory worker, which—he hopes—have contributed in positive ways to his writing. He has had poems published in such journals as *Aries*, *Ascent Aspirations (CAN)*, *The Chaffin Journal*, *Common Ground Review*, *The Journal (UK)*, *Pulsar Poetry Webzine (UK)*, *Third Wednesday*, *U.S. 1 Worksheets*, and in the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*. He also has numerous poems forthcoming this year. His iPhone is now his primary poetry notebook, and he hopes his use of technology in regard to this ancient art form continues to be fruitful.

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