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INTERVIEW

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AN INTERVIEW WITH TOM SLEIGH

By Allegra Wong

Tom Sleigh is the author of five books of poetry, AFTER ONE (Houghton Mifflin New Poetry Series, l983), WAKING (University of Chicago Press Phoenix Poetry Series, l990), which was chosen by THE NEW YORK TIMES BOOK REVIEW as one of the Notable Books of 1990-91, and THE CHAIN, also published by the University of Chicago Press in March, l996. THE CHAIN was nominated for the Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize of the Academy of American Poets and The Nation Magazine. His fourth book, THE DREAMHOUSE, (Chicago, November 1999) was a selection of the Academy of American Poets Poetry Book Club and was a finalist for THE LOS ANGELES TIMES Book Award. His fifth book, FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH, has been published this month (April 2003) by Houghton Mifflin. Among his many awards are the 1999 Shelley Memorial Award from the Poetry Society of America, and a three-year Individual Writer's Award from the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Fund. He has also received grants from the Guggenheim Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the Ingram Merrill Foundation, and the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown where he is currently a Writing Committee member. His work has been widely anthologized, including in THE NORTON INTRODUCTION TO POETRY and POEMS TO READ.

As a dramatist, Sleigh's translation of Euripides' HERAKLES was published by Oxford University Press in January 2001. RUBBER, his new play, was produced last summer as part of the Midtown International Theatre Festival in New York City. RUBBER was selected to be part of "Best of the Fest" by the festival sponsors.

Tom Sleigh's poetry has been described by Seamus Heaney, "as hard-earned and well-founded...it refuses to cut emotional corners and yet achieves a sense of lyric absolution."

AW
I understand you were born in Texas, and lived there until first grade. Next you moved to Utah and lived there until you entered seventh grade. And then you moved to California (San Diego). Would you recount some of your earliest experiences with poetry in each of these landscapes of childhood and adolescence?

TOM SLEIGH
I suppose my first source of poetry was the twin babble that my twin brother and I spoke when we were babies just learning to talk. We didn't speak English for a good year and a half—which caused my parents considerable worry. What, were we idiot-savants (or just plain idiots), locked into our own microcosm of twinness? And then my mother—who has been known to tell "a stretcher," as Huck Finn would say—recounts that one morning she came into our bedroom, and overheard us in Beckett-like colloquy, speaking the first English words she remembers us saying—not mama or

dada—but my brother Tim, shaking the bars of his crib, calling, “Dean Martin!” while I called back, “Jerry Lewis!”

Martin's and Lewis's voices were so much a part of my ear because my parents ran a drive-in movie theater in a small east Texas town, out in piney woods country. You could always count on Martin and Lewis to bring in the cars on weekends. I went to the drive-in movies every night while my mother worked the snack-bar, and my father the projector. We had an old green Plymouth with a huge window well in the back seat. My twin brother slept on one side, and I slept on the other, while my older brother curled down below on the car seat. I always fell asleep just as the movies began at dusk, and the voices coming through the car speakers were like the voices in my dreams, the two intermingling to make a kind of poetry: especially since I thought the voices in dreams were the voices of dead people come to tell you things that you were forbidden to hear during the day.

I think my first experience of a poem proper occurred when I was out visiting my grandfather in Kansas. He was a dry land wheat farmer, orphaned at 11, and largely self-taught. I remember his bald, high-domed forehead gleaming while he recited "The Face on the Barroom Floor." He performed it with verve, and clearly enjoyed playing up the melodrama. He then launched into what he called "the bear dance", which meant he shuffled in circles in the middle of the living room—his own kind of performance poetry, accompanied by the whirring racket of locusts outside in the windbreak junipers, and my mother tinkling out a little show tune on the upright piano. I know this sounds vaguely "folkloric"—the rude, goodhearted prairie sodbusters doing their thing of a Saturday night. But he was thoroughly enjoying himself, as was my mother, and they both were aware of the figures they cut: you could almost see them winking at themselves in the mirror, as if to say, Oh yes, we know how absurd we look—but why shouldn't we look absurd!

I think of the bear dance and it reminds me of one of my favorite paintings—a group of bears up on their hind legs dancing in the forest, but still perfectly like bears, nothing sentimental or anthropomorphized in their depiction: they have the same kind of elegance and artifice and creaturely strangeness as you see in Watteau. And they look far more at home in their dancing than Gilles does in his Pierrot clown whites. Poetry has always seemed a little like that—animal grace in clown whites.

And then in Utah, I remember my mother reading aloud to me from the section in Thoreau's WALDEN about the ant war. I was completely astonished by ants being talked about in that way—satiric and precise and more horrifying than any first person account of the carnage of human war. But equally vivid for me is the strange intimacy my mother felt for the book—a dimension of her character, which moved her outside the category of "Mom" and into the category of "Weirdo." How I longed to understand her pleasure in the words, and how baffled I felt by her privacy inside them. What added to the strangeness was my mother's line up of wigs on her dresser: three expressionless Styrofoam heads looking down at us while she read, as if she had more personalities under each of the separate 'dos' than I'd ever imagined.

I owe so much to my mother: she was a high school English teacher, and a kind of one woman renaissance in a spectacularly conservative, Mormon, mountain town. She taught LORD JIM, which created a scandal one spring semester—LORD JIM, for God's sake! Could it have been that Jim acts like a coward, and explorations of cowardice weren't good for us tender-minded, James Bond/gonad obsessed little blighters? Or was it that Jim was a skeptic, an incomprehensible person to others and himself, that made him such a threat? Not likely. Anyway, LORD JIM! was a battle...and then we moved to San Diego.

The poetry there was the drug lingo I picked up: dude, spade vein, hero (for heroin), lids, keys, dope, weed, Acapulco Gold, Panama Red, Thai sticks, stoned, high, wasted, rush; and then an arcane doper/surfer vocabulary which described various gradations of cool and uncool: bitch'en girl, bitch'en guy which meant you were hip; a woody, meaning someone who was clodhopper stupid and jejune; and hard, which signified egregious uptight mindless aggression. And then I remember coming across a bookstore in La Jolla called The Unicorn, and picking up a book of poetry—blither by someone named Prather—sensitive notations about falling leaves—that I couldn't fathom. I realize now that he was a middle-aged man writing about middle age as if it were interesting: even then I suspected the writing of sentimentality, but the tone was new to me—serious, intimate, introspective—qualities which I found alien even as they attracted me.

But my first real experience of poetry was going to OTHELLO with my mother. We read the play together before we went, and I remember loving and hating OTHELLO: hating him for bragging about himself after he killed Desdemona, and loving him for his torment and sense of high purpose: in other words, Othello was as much an adolescent as I was.

AW
When and why did you, a Southwesterner, become a Cantabrigian (and a New Yorker)?

TOM SLEIGH
I came to Massachusetts to be part of the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown. I was about 25 or 26 years old. I'd lived in Baltimore and gone to school at Johns Hopkins University for two years, and during that time I'd been to visit my brothers in Boston, who were attending the Berklee School of Music. So I already had a sense of the city: a rundown glamour around Beacon Street and the Charles Street Jail. My brother worked in a sandwich shop called The Yellow Submarine, and in those days it was a clearing house for all sorts of drugs. My brothers and I dropped acid on the night of the Perseids and stayed up all night walking along the river, then sitting on the roof of their apartment building on Hemenway Street and watching the meteors fall until dawn. Wordsworth's sonnet about the view from Westminster Bridge captures that night: "...silent, bare/ Ships, towers, domes, theaters, and temples lie/Open unto the fields, and to the sky;.../The river glideth at his own sweet will..." Of course, LSD made the whole thing more raucous and raunchy, but the reflection of the MIT dome in the Charles made the sweetness of that moment part of the "sweet will" that drugs could on occasion grant you.

AW
In your five books of poems, some of the world of Tom Sleigh seems to be the northeast United States and, often, as in THE DREAMHOUSE, your fourth book of poetry, the city of Cambridge, Massachusetts, and in FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH, your fifth and most recent book of poetry, New York City. Is this true? Or is your landscape "the City as a dreamscape of possibilities: a brick and mortar embodiment less of the past than of desire, and more as chorus or antagonist than as a specific, fixed setting."

TOM SLEIGH
My sense of the city tends to the literal. For many years in Cambridge, I lived across the street from public housing on Sherman Street in North Cambridge. And now, in Brooklyn, I live across the street from the Gowanus Houses, one of the larger public housing complexes in New York. Both of these neighborhoods have gone through cycles of slump and gentrification. The income disparity in my neighborhood in Brooklyn is huge, and seems to be getting worse, partly because of the Clinton welfare bill and Bush's Reagan-like policies. So poverty on the street is common, though it doesn't feel right to call it poverty, either. I guess I want to take people one at a time—and to call someone "poor" without taking the time or having the opportunity to know what their life feels like to them, seems presumptuous.

When I first came to Boston, I lived on a shoe string, partly because I was suffering from ill health and had no health insurance. For two years, I really didn't know how I would make ends meet from one month to the next. And then after that, there were periods in my twenties and up into my mid-thirties when I've been extremely hard up for money, mainly because of medical expenses. This taught me something: the sort of scared, harried, helpless dread you feel when you have to choose buying food over getting a haircut, or worrying about whether you can pay your rent or buy a book. Obviously, this has nothing to do with real poverty, but it does color your way of thinking about the city: you look at certain neighborhoods as talismanic of class, of your own class aspirations—and that kind of looking tends to make you focus on details: is the house run down or kept up? Are the porches in good shape? What would it be like to live in that bedroom under that tree on this street?

And by the same token, I tend to take the city one person at a time—I look at faces and bodies with a lot of concentration, and I tend to associate faces and bodies with the way the brickwork looks behind them, with the kind of windows I see those faces looking out of. Human bodies and the material body of the city link up in the way I look at the street, and I suppose in my poems that this can give the city a feeling of the phantasmal, though the phantasmal in my case is more often due to the effect of trying to be hyper-real. Of course, I can see the city as a kind of phantasmagoria of architecture, though I can't sustain that state of mind for very long. In Boston, it's easier to experience the architecture in that way because of the centrality of the river and the way it reflects the city skyline. But in New York, where the scale is so much larger, and the buildings dwarf you, the architecture is fairly resistant to abstraction—at least for me. I suppose that's because the grid of New York is already representative of an abstraction in its pervasive geometry of rectangle, square, circle. For some reason, those ideal shapes insist on themselves, and tend not to lead me beyond them into some other realm.

This resistance to abstraction is made all the stronger by the fact that New York is really a series of quite distinct neighborhoods, and so in that way the scale of the city is more intimate than Boston, simply because Boston feels like a series of towns that grew together. But you get to know a neighborhood—as opposed to a town—street by street, block by block. During the crack years in New York, which are over, for now at least, the gangs and crack cowboys made me much more wary and alert to my surroundings. I once saw two guys with knives, standing on First Avenue and Sixth Street in the middle of the afternoon, robbing one person after another as they walked by. You feel vulnerable, seeing something like that, and you become hyper-aware of who is walking behind you, how much light there is, what you would do if you're attacked. Then street smarts, having a sense of realistic danger, knowing where people hang out and when, become important: and so you focus on your square of the sidewalk, your angle to the corner, the speed of the footsteps behind you. And so when writing about the city, I tend to start with the literal, do something of a space walk, then return to the literal: though the space walk is always dependent on the street. Right now, my neighborhood in Brooklyn feels safe—but I'm alert, and that alertness keeps me focussed on details, careful observation of who is standing next to what building when. And something of that habit of attention carries over into my work.

AW
Who are your literary fathers?

TOM SLEIGH
I'd have to say that Browning for his technique; Wallace Stevens for a certain quality of gravitas, what Keats feels near his death, when he said he was living a sort of posthumous existence; Philip Larkin for his sense of extremity; Pound for his fluidity of conception and hardness of execution; Baudelaire for his music, and intense scrutiny and affection for street life; and Bishop and Lowell for their immersion in the physical world, would be my fathers and mothers.

AW
Who have been your mentors or teachers?

TOM SLEIGH
I'm afraid I'd leave somebody out, so I'll pass over this one.

AW
Why do you write?

TOM SLEIGH
For pleasure, mainly, though it often feels anything but pleasurable. I sit down at my desk every day, for as long a time as I can manage, given the pressures of adult life. I don't write every day—far from it—but I'm always there, always listening in, waiting, hoping, trying to be attentive.

AW
Do you consider yourself a certain type of poet? Do you find yourself belonging to a certain school or writing in a certain style that groups you by name with other poets? If so, which school or style?

TOM SLEIGH
I've always felt to the side of the schools that were prevalent. I was interested in a sort of highly wrought, formal poem when Deep Image was the period style. Then when New Formalism came along, I was far too interested in the sort of highly cadenced free verse of Basil Bunting to fit with that program. I want to be the kind of writer who can draw on Ginsberg and Merrill, Duncan and Gunn. I prefer Mina Loy to H. D. The debate as to whether poetry should be referential or non-referential, whether to be a Constructivist or an Expressivist, is an interesting one, but not very helpful when I sit down to write. I believe with Randall Jarrell that poets are rather helpless, that their subjects and orientations toward language choose them: will has never seemed a substitute for imagination, and without imagination you have nothing. Best not to know too much all about it.

AW
For whom do you write? Mary Oliver's stranger in a distant country hundreds of years from now? Perhaps Liz Rosenberg's "insomniacs, grievers, depressives, lonely-hearts, hopefuls, and children...and giving voice to what is already in them that needs a voice"?

TOM SLEIGH
Proust once said that he wanted to write the truth about the lives of the people he'd known, even though it was most likely a truth that they wouldn't want to read. I don't think he meant that the truth would reveal ugly things about these people—only that they weren't interested in living through words what they lived in mind and heart and body. I don't believe in the idea of writing for posterity—it seems patently ridiculous and grandiose. Posterity? Ay yi yi! If I write for anybody, it's for my friends, to please them, bug them, to give us something to talk and joke about. On the other hand, I write because I want to keep the language in "an interesting state of repair"—a phrase by Ed Dorn that I came across in an essay by Donald Davie. I want to write in a way that can't be pinned down, that isn't about "finding your voice", but finding a voice for one particular poem. My sense of an audience is pretty sketchy, and I want to keep it that way—though I'd say that Cavafy and Thom Gunn are my ideal readers.

AW
Do you agree with this statement by Borges?
"Truly fine poetry must be read aloud. A good poem does not allow itself to be read in a low voice or silently. If we can read it silently, it is not a valid poem: a poem demands pronunciation. Poetry always remembers that it was an oral art before it was a written art. It remembers that it was first song."

TOM SLEIGH
Of course Borges was blind, so that's a consideration in his conviction. But I can't think of any poet

whose work I admire that I don't enjoy hearing read aloud. Whether or not this has to do with poetry as an oral art, or simply because I like being read to, I don't know. I remember hearing Alan Dugan read aloud: he flattened the o's in his poems to Brooklynese and it made a huge impact on me: before I heard him read, his poems possessed a stentorian quality about them—then he ran a buzz saw through that apparent eloquence, and I saw how raw and oppositional and uncompromising a writer Dugan was and still is.

AW
What is your advice to a young poet, and by young, I mean someone of any age who is young in the discipline of poetry. Would you advise him to follow your path? And what has been your path?

TOM SLEIGH
Read, and read in such a way that you become on a first name basis with all the great poetry in English. There's no substitute for walking the terrain of English verse: most younger poets have an aerial view of their art, or else they think that reading poetry in translation is the same as reading in their mother tongue. The language you're soaking in is the translator's English—read Sir Thomas Browne's wonderful strange English, and any page of any translation, and you'll see the difference. Think of yourself as a language sponge, something like Augustine's conception of God's omnipresence, soaking in every form of contemporary speech, from rap to advertising to government double talk. But also cultivate your vertical sense of the language, it's historical density, the way each word has its own separate fate.

AW
This spring you are teaching at New York University. You also teach at Dartmouth College. Has teaching creative writing influenced your work in a positive way? How do you think the plethora of creative writing programs across the country is affecting or influencing literature?

TOM SLEIGH
I don't know. I love teaching, and immensely enjoy being able to talk to students about their work and their hopes for their art. But I don't have any views on the matter as to whether writing programs are bad or good for literature. Pound once said that you have to pay the bills, and certain periods of history offer certain kinds of employment. I'm delighted that my period of history has given me teaching. I've worked nine to five and freelanced and cobbled together a living working various part time jobs: I wouldn't want to have been a janitor in a law office all my life. I don't worry about literature. Who reads J. V. Cunningham anymore? Not many younger people, but he's still a superb poet. As is John Crowe Ransom and many another. You don't need armies of readers, you need one reader at a time who's capable of understanding what you're doing. It sometimes bothers me that many students don't read, or much care about the history of the art—but then that shows up in their work as a certain thinness of sensibility. On the other hand, the sources artists draw from are eclectic. And besides, I believe with Frank O'Hara that if you prefer the movies to poetry, then by all means, go to the movies.

AW
What are you writing now, poetry-wise?

TOM SLEIGH
I'm trying to complete a sixth book of poems. But I don't want to say much about it, except that it contains a long poem in shorter sections which is very eccentric: a mixture of history, autobiography, and what I know about the theater.

AW
Twenty years ago, Houghton Mifflin published AFTER ONE, your first volume of poetry. This April they have published FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH, your fifth volume of poetry. What is the texture of your new volume?

TOM SLEIGH
I started writing these poems after a serious bout of illness. Whenever I am ill, it inspires a certain kind of paranoiac intensity that makes me see in small things large metaphysical and historical correspondences. For example, in the poem called "Newsreel," the speaker is reliving a version of the entire Cold War era, from the doomed glamour of celebrities like Marilyn Monroe, to Communist-inspired paranoia of the Other as evinced in monsters from outer space movies, to middle-class Americans' fetish obsession with their cars, to the fear of nuclear Armageddon, also a feature of outer space movies. And the poem also plays with systems of representation, and how they break down, and how they generate meanings wildly at odds with their apparent ideological ends, as in the conclusion of the poem when the projector stalls and everything is obliterated except for a hair projected on the screen.

And this illness-induced paranoia became something of a first principle for all the other poems, perhaps culminating in the poems which obliquely refer to that "World Trade tower thing", as lots of people in lower Manhattan took to calling it a few days afterwards. During the writing of this book, I felt a sort of metaphysical drift in the air that tended to point toward a Rimbaud-like reality at once sublime, atrocious, and banal. I no longer feel that intuition with the force of delighted and maybe terrified conviction that I did. If it was a delusion, it wasn't the kind you need to be treated for.

In FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH, I was also pursuing what I thought was a perceivable connection between historical fact and a personal sense of Fate: I guess you could say that the world was less of a collage and more a symbolic whole, without my ever actually thinking that that unity was anything objective, like a car.

I also spent a lot of time reading PLOTINUS, in Stephen Mackenna's beautiful translation, as well as reading in depth about war as a social phenomenon, colonialism in Africa, and a lot of Beckett. I was also deeply effected by living in Brooklyn and Manhattan, and the multiple layers of sensation that overwhelm you as you walk the streets. I think my poems show something of that complex

layering of experience in their obliquity and slightly hallucinatory intensity. And a trip I took with my uncle, and some of the other old soldiers he fought with during World War II, back to Alsace-Lorraine where we went around to various towns and fields and completely unmarked places of battle, deeply affected my sense of historical time—I saw how a certain kind of historical rhetoric tends to enforce historical amnesia, and that it's almost impossible to keep the aura of memory from being contaminated by it. In contrast, my uncle's stories were anything but polished anecdotes, but they were amazingly vivid, quirky, and open-ended in terms of what they might mean. The poem "For Robert Owen Sleigh" came out of this trip. And several trips to the Azores, volcanic islands off the coast of Portugal, gave me a sense of geological time which becomes a metaphor for emotional processes in many of the poems, particularly "I Came to You." I spent a lot time hiking the rims of the dead craters of the twin volcanoes on Sao Miguel, which are shallow lakes now; and in exploring the still active thermal tide pools, where I went swimming almost every day. The sensual pleasure of those experiences also makes it way into the poems. Finally, a trip to Cuba let me see the Cold War as it played out on the other side: to see Che and Fidel through a different lens, in which US foreign policy pushed them farther toward the Soviet Union than they had any desire to go. When you walk around Havana, there is absolutely no advertising of any kind, except for slogans advancing the Revolution. So the politics of my childhood caught up to me as an adult, and effected poems concerned with war, such as the poem, "Nomad."

AW
When Allen Tate was told that one of his new poems resembled an older poem, he replied, “It had damn well better.” In what ways is FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH different from your previous volumes of poetry? In what ways is it a continuum?

TOM SLEIGH
I love Allen Tate's poems, even though his writing is completely out of fashion. But in fact, I like the part of Tate where he sounds most colloquial, and least like Eliot. I've probably said more than enough about FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH in the last answer.

AW
I understand you sometimes draft a poem one thousand times. Would you tell us about your creative process?

TOM SLEIGH
Many drafts, lots of patience—and you save every scrap. Then just when you think it's done, the whole thing comes unraveled, you cut it, you revise it again, you make it feel fresh by leaving it a little shaggy.

AW
In what three ways have you matured as a poet during these twenty years?

TOM SLEIGH
I don't know. I'm really too much at the mercy of the process to answer.

AW
Do you think a poet's power increases, as the poet grows older?
For instance, Stanley Kunitz, now 97 years old—has his work become ever richer and richer? Or have age and the acquiring of wisdom little to do with creation?

TOM SLEIGH
Again, I'm not sure. Obviously, getting older had something to do with Wallace Stevens's complete reorientation from thinking of the Imagination as generator of the world, to his belief in one person's limited, contingent imagination as a local participant in the world as it already exists. On the other hand, in a late Yeats' poem, he has the tag line, said with more than a little irony, "Men improve with the years." Wisdom is often making virtues out of your necessities. Yeats's sense that "bodily decrepitude is wisdom" is more a torment than a recommendation.

AW
Mark Rothko said of his murals: “They are not pictures. I have made a place.” Poet Laurie Sheck says, “It is something I aspire to in my poems—to make a place—a landscape of psychological and spiritual texture. Not a narrative, but a place made of words.” What kinds of visual and aural qualities do you work toward in your poems? What difficulties do you struggle with?

TOM SLEIGH
My process is pretty much a mystery to me. So I'll have to pass on this one.

AW
I like the spirituality I find in many of your poems. “The City” and “Augusto Jandolo: On Excavating an Etruscan Tomb” (THE DREAMHOUSE), “Some Larger Motion” and “The Souls” (THE CHAIN) come to mind immediately. Would you say this is due to your religious upbringing, your empirical knowledge of illness and death acquired by walking the streets of “the City,” your history of reading, or because you find spirituality “looks good on the page” ?

TOM SLEIGH
My only formal religious moment was when I was a boy in a Presbyterian Church, listening to Reverend Fox, whom my older brother had once hit in the back with a water balloon, telling the story of Saul rising up Paul. I heard the story, how the man was knocked off his horse—but the only thing I could think about was what happened to the horse—was the horse OK? Did the horse feel better about his rider? Did Paul give more oats to his horse than Saul did? I'd say also that my personal experiences with illness, of which I've had my share, and my concern about the horse, are at the root of my sense of the spiritual. And I'm intrigued by the idea of spirituality looking good on the page: but of course once you publish the page, it would cease to be spirituality and turn into rhetoric, into poetry—into a material object, a "mere" book.

AW
Rilke said of Cezanne: “Surely all art is the result of one’s having been in danger, of having gone through an experience all the way to the end, to where no one can go any further.” How might we apply this to your life and your poems? What dangers have you experienced?

TOM SLEIGH
Drugs; a potentially fatal blood disease that I've lived with for almost twenty five years—I've outlived the mean by fifteen years—; and my own, completely unoriginal, self-destructive impulses. I love Rilke's poems, but his views on art often leave me wanting to take a shower: he can be so affected and grandiose and silly sounding—especially when you think of an old curmudgeon like Cezanne, who saw danger in not getting to work, in not having something constantly to work on. On the other hand, as Eliot once said, "The bottom is a long way down." And I hope my poems swim down as far as they can, stick their heads in the muck, open their eyes, and take a good look around.

AW
Dangerous and dark work also comes from love. What loves have you experienced?

TOM SLEIGH
I once spent a night high on LSD on a beach in San Diego pretending to be a seal among a pack of seals. They stank, had awful dog breath, and were nicked and cut, with welts here and there on their mottled gray and black skin. I loved these seals as I love my brothers and my family: for all their creaturely, bodily, three dimensional fragility and potential for harm. And sometimes in the city I get a sense of human bodies as being distinctly animal, and I feel a great sense of joy in that, though I often wonder if I'm losing it. And my wife's brilliance as an artist, her beauty and kindness, also make me aware of love's dimensions.

AW
“I love exceptional beings...I give their deformities frightening, grotesque proportions...things which may give you nightmares,” said Balzac. Might we call some of your poems’ characters (those we find in “In the Park,” or in “The Tank,” from THE CHAIN and in “The Grid” from THE DREAMHOUSE) Balzacian grotesques?

TOM SLEIGH
I hope not, though I can understand why someone might think so. If anything, I'd like to think of The Speaker in the poem as a grotesque: after all, he's the one seeing the people in whatever way he sees them. I hope that these poems also convey the limits of The Speaker's subjectivity. Balzac's characters have their own autonomy from Balzac, and I hope the characters The Speaker depicts have something of that same autonomy.

AW
I understand you’ve been reading or re-reading Samuel Beckett these past few years during your

writing of FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH. Why Beckett? What specifically did you read by Beckett? How did your reading of Beckett influence FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH?

TOM SLEIGH
I read Beckett's plays and his collected shorter prose. I'd read the novels before that, but there was something about the scale of the plays and the shorter pieces that seemed applicable to poetry. The way the syntax double backs on itself, the obsessive qualification of this perception by that one, then the reconsideration and re-reconsideration, the vaudeville and one liners, and above all the sweetness and sorrow underneath the deadpan, are what I love—hopefully, some of that informs this new book.

AW
You read deeply about war as a social phenomenon during your writing of FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH. Would you expand upon this?

TOM SLEIGH
I've been fascinated by war for many years—partly because I grew up during the Vietnam War, and partly because it serves as an objective correlative for the vagueness of "history". War seems to be one of the most important grids against which we measure what it means to be human at any particular moment. I think the abstraction of war to a civilian population vs. the physical terror and elation it inspires in combatants, and the way those two things get registered by a culture, exaggerated, erased, glorified, demonized, is crucial in knowing exactly what a culture has learned to value. Also, you can't avoid the starkness of war, no matter how apolitical you think you are. It invades your consciousness and can't be shut out. And so war is one of the central themes in FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH.

AW
You began writing the poems in FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH after a serious illness. Did your illness clarify life, as in “Ending” (WAKING); deepen love as in “After a Long Illness” (FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH)?

TOM SLEIGH
Yes to both questions. The process felt messy, horribly so at times, but the clarification and deepening did occur.

AW
Did it give you permission to voyage? as in part six of “I Came to You” (FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH)? And if so, what was your voyage like?

TOM SLEIGH
Like going down with all hands. The moment in the ballad about Sir Patrick Spens when the only

hint that you have that the ship has gone down is the weird cartoon image of the Scots' lairds' hats swimming above their heads. But you do see a lot on your way to the bottom.

AW
I have seen the drawing referred to in "Child's Drawing: 'Child Holding a Ball at a Funeral'" (THE CHAIN) at the Jewish Museum in Prague. How is the boy in this poem similar and dissimilar to the boy you once were? What is the memory link between individual life and history here? Or is the poem "simply" an example of "negative capability"?

TOM SLEIGH
To a certain extent, the boy in the poem is a displaced alter ego, but only the author would be interested in that. More importantly, the poem tries to record the wildness and strangeness of a child's pleasure in playing with balls and how that pleasure turns into a confrontation with history as embodied by a Nazi. The human body is always the site of historical trauma. That's why so much energy goes into the myth of history, of making history seem like a force above and beyond human actions. It's difficult to stay sane if you reject history as a notion, and instead focus on the depravity of human beings. Look at Dostoyevsky. Look at Tadeusz Borowski, the Polish concentration camp Häftling, who wrote THIS WAY TO THE GAS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN, and who features prominently as beta in Milosz's THE CAPTIVE MIND. Look at Primo Levi. In a way that is much less extreme, think of how people reacted when they heard that there was a sniper loose in Washington, D. C., and began to consider the prospect that he could be coming to a city near you. No wonder we rely on history to do our dirty work.

AW
What was the storytelling like in your family as you grew up? Were you told legends and fairy tales? Which ones? Or were you told family folklore (family stories, cures, recurring dreams)? If so, what are two or three pieces of folklore?

TOM SLEIGH
Storytelling was the province of my mother—but she read aloud to us more than told us stories. My first book was D'AULAIRES BOOK OF GREEK MYTHS, which she read to us. My grandmother told us stories, one outrageous one about a bunch of rattlesnakes that crept into a milk tank and got so hot they filled the tank up with snake sweat and drowned. And my grandfather told stories, one about being in jail and participating in a kangaroo court in which he was the defendant and the jury. He acquitted himself, but still spent the night in jail.

AW
In "Newsreel" (FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH), there is a mention of the speaker's mother working the snack bar of a movie drive-in, the speaker's father working the projector. Did your parents work at or own a movie drive-in? How did your parents feel about your interest in becoming a poet?

TOM SLEIGH

I answered the first one earlier. My parents were delighted that I just didn't go down in flames—as I seemed about to do when I was in my teens and head over heels in love with drugs. So anything that marked a turn away from that kind of obsession, to a less obviously self-destructive obsession, was a welcome one. But once I made the shift, they have always been supportive. My mother, who is a wonderful judge of poetry, once said to me, after she'd read one of my poems, "Hopkins is a good poet." And then we both laughed, I took the poem back, and kept on working.

AW
The temporary displacement of the narrator in “Newsreel” reminds me of the temporary dislocation of self in Elizabeth Bishop’s “In the Waiting Room.” Would you expand upon this universal “oddness of self-recognition”?

TOM SLEIGH
I suppose it's the inverse of feeling the animal quality of people's bodies. I guess you could say in that poem that it's the self-consciousness of seeing Marilyn Monroe's image blank out when the film breaks which sparks off that moment of self recognition—though the self remains strange to The Speaker, almost like the alien species searching out Earth as a potential home.

[editors' note: please see the poem "Newsreel" in this issue of FULL CIRCLE JOURNAL]

AW
I like “Crosswalk” (FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH). Were you influenced by Whitman’s “Passing Strangers”?

TOM SLEIGH
Not that I know of. It was more my understanding of the concept of Bardo, and the various stages the dead soul goes through as it migrates from this world into the other world.

AW
“Meat Market” (FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH)—what is the creative source for this poem besides the current changes in the meat packing district of Manhattan?

TOM SLEIGH
Prostitution and the kinds of city spaces that accommodate it: cathedral districts, warehouses, abandoned 19th century factory buildings.

AW
I like “Ice Age” (FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH). I am reminded of an exhibit of the remains of a prehistoric man in one of the collections at the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin. What was your influence or creative encounter for this poem?

TOM SLEIGH

I saw Simon McBurney's theater piece called MNEMONIC, which was based on the Ice Man found frozen in a glacier between Italy and Switzerland. He's now in a freezer on permanent display to the public.

AW
You refer to Sunday in a few of your poems. What is it about Sunday? What is its symbolism in your poetry? And does the symbolism change through the years—from "Sunday Drive" (WAKING) to "The Safety of Sunday" and "The Denial" (THE CHAIN) to "One Sunday" (THE DREAMHOUSE) to "Joy On a Sunday" (FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH)?

TOM SLEIGH
Sunday is the most dreaded day in the week for me: the day before I have to go back to work, the day before I haven't completed my taxes, the day when my focus ought to change to the million and one tasks that I let slide because I sit every day at my desk without exception. But I don't change my focus: the anxiety is a small price to pay for staying in touch with the muse.

AW
I understand you spent the first week of December, 2002, on the Flathead Indian Reservation in Western Montana, marking the second time the American Voices program has sponsored a poet's visit to the Reservation. What is the American Voices program?

TOM SLEIGH
A literacy program that does outreach to American Indian reservations and inner city kids. It's the best program of its kind and I wish Ruth Lilly had left some of her money to the National Book Foundation, which sponsors it. If there were more programs like this one, it would change significantly the attitude that people have toward poetry. It's a great program, run by an excellent young poet, Meg Kearney.

AW
While you were on the reservation, how did you instruct the students and faculty at Salish Kootenai College in the art of poetry?

TOM SLEIGH
I met with classes and talked about my work, their work, and poetry in general.

AW
What are the themes we might find in their poems?

TOM SLEIGH
Various kinds of addiction, jail time, loneliness, love of children: the full range of human experience, only a lot less cushioned by money.

AW
You were interviewed on SKC's radio station by SKC English Instructor Woody Kipp, who is also a published author. The two of you talked about the role of poetry in Native and Western-European cultures, and you read a poem you'd written during your visit, inspired by a hike into the reservation's North Crow Canyon. What is the role of poetry in Native American culture?

TOM SLEIGH
I think Woody should answer that one. I only know what I've read—and Woody was at Wounded Knee.

AW
Would you share with us the poem you wrote during your visit?

TOM SLEIGH
Yes.

[editors' note: please see the poem "The Climb" in this issue of FULL CIRCLE JOURNAL]

AW
Are you living the double life of the artist at all times?
Are you keenly aware of that “other Sleigh” as Borges was aware of that “other Borges,” the public figure about whom he reads with mixed emotions: "It's the other one, it's Borges, that things happen to."

TOM SLEIGH
Not really. Nor was Borges, I bet. Whatever creature I am when I'm writing poems, I don't want to know too much about him.

AW
How does your work as a dramatist play off of and feed into your life as a poet?

TOM SLEIGH
Playwrighting is not for control freaks, and all poets are control freaks to a certain extent, including Allen Ginsberg. After all, the poet is his own little theater, a combination director, writer, actor. But theater is mainly collaborative, and you are almost always part of a team. It does no good to insist on the sanctity of your words if the actor who's performing them can't make them work. So you go back and rewrite. I love the high you get working that way, but it's a medium that's not for the faint of heart. Pressure pressure pressure is the name of the game. Never enough money, never enough time, and always the sense that something could have been done better. On the other hand, the process of making a play is completely absorbing, and when a play works in front of an audience, it's a complete high.

AW
What does the future hold for Tom Sleigh?

TOM SLEIGH
More scribbling, I hope. Reading. Drinks with friends, preferably between 4:30 and 6:30 at Buswell's on a soft day in Dublin. Protest marches and anti-war work for the foreseeable future. Miles and miles of swimming in ponds, oceans, and pools. And then more scribbling!

AW
Thank you!

ELIZABETH ARNOLD

PASTORAL

I'm haunted by a foreign coast I
drove along, then walked,

my cat, the rooming house—I had
a job; this was to be

my home. But "this was" wasn't, was
lost. *I* was lost, the cat

—two cats, home being relative
to them.

*

The sparrows like a cloth out of the grass
then disappearing into branches, woods

whose mountains met our car hoods by the school.

*

I walked across the field alone
along a path cut

back against the grain. A hill rose,
I rose with it,

looked back, saw the house the sun hit,
looked again

(farther on) and it was gone.
At the field's edge, cut

from forest (dense), a man-sized hole
where the path

turns from sharp stubble into
root-ribbed dirt.

I tunneled into it. And then
the stream. And then

I went to sleep.

~

ARS POETICA

for Tom Sleigh

'Perfection of a certain kind may [. . .] be achieved,
or at least approached

Goethe, via M. Arnold in a letter to his sister

[where form is everything] without knocking yourself to pieces,
but to attain

or approach perfection in the region of thought and feeling,
and to unite this

with a perfection of form, demands not merely an effort
and a labor,

but an actual tearing of oneself to pieces.'

CHIP DAMERON

IDES OF MARCH

Even when the wind blows
hour after hour, dry as an open mouth,

people think their cars will return
from the mall or the office to their homes,

night might bring coolness and closure,
something might pry loose the roof

of the world and lave their lives with wet
smells and sounds and fits of laughter,

and when your eyes glisten in the rain
I forget what the wind seemed to say.

JIM DOUGLAS

BIG ROCK ROAD

This is the first place I lived
where the name matches the physical
description, where our house actually
sits on a small mountain of granite
a rusty red, where pastel green lichens
scrabble with dark green mosses
for a meager living on the craggy faces
of these rocks, where from my study
window I can see for miles, and where
I watch cars stop and open their trunks,
pickups pause and lower their tailgates,
while the drivers and passengers
quickly load chunks of our primrose
stones, pilfering them in broad daylight;
I doubt if they consider it stealing
at all.

CHARLES FISHMAN

ESCAPE ARTIST

For Tim Eric Hanneman

1.
What is a tangle of chain
when the mind is shackled?
a straitjacket when the heart
is bound and tamed?

We know this struggle to gain freedom
to bend the bars of our bodies
and sail seaward or float in spangled silence
toward the stars.

We shake in our bones, like him.

2.
Yet his slow passion moves us:
his deep patience his will to outlast
steel to defeat all that is frail and fettered
that is vulnerable to change.

For we are his witnesses,
and it is for us he strains to break free.
When he bends backward and rocks
on his head until the weight of living

on this planet has all but crushed him,
breath withdraws and blood lies down to sleep.

3.
He rocks and shakes and eases, link
by link, the thousand manacles
of earthly life: farewell to dreams farewell
to hope and grief.

He veers so near to death that we
can hardly speak
and start breathing again only
when he is released.

~

A COOL DAY IN MAY

Costa del Sol, May 1998

1.
They are shoring up the sky re-building it
and drawing down silver ore from the clouds
so that the metallic flat gray light spills
out of them so that ice-floes break up
and the frozen lake that all morning hovered
over the earth dissolves in fractures in shards
in slivers of blue fire

2.
The fratricide of daylight continues:
hillside villas grow balconies of rose geraniums
the sea-brushed walkways fill up with white and salmon
oleander and palm fronds, hissing softly
over an unused pool, droop in the dark sapphire water

3.
They are reorganizing and retrofitting heaven
and cranes disassemble the sky but, in Puerto Banús,
silver light streams down The sulfur of unseen
but acknowledged sunlight simmers a measure
of quiet and self-possession settles into your hands
your muscles release their burden the lengthening silence
unfolds its lexicon of nouns

LUCY FUCHS

GARAGE SALE

Her life laid out on warped and splintered tables,
the woman wasn't there.
"In a nursing home", her daughter said,
making change and chatting
with the man who bought a search light.

Next to the serving spoons,
next to the canning jars,
next to the flower pots, faded pictures.
Reflective cows in velvet pastures,
birds on sun-drenched boughs.

And at the end, a porcelain bowl
still boxed and wrapped in tissue
Put away *for the right time*
When like birds
She bathes in golden light.

J.T. LEDBETTER

THE WASHING OF ROOT AND BONE

Rain gathers on a rock worn away by water
off the Chinaberry Tree, staining the ground like a shadow;

barrels overflow with water that finds Shoal Creek
rolling beneath alders on the Illinois shore,
past farms sunken into wild mushrooms and chokecherry vines

where farmers listened to the soft sounds of swallows
nesting in the broken eaves, then locked the barns
and were buried in their fields, joining others
through the washing of root and bone, while mist rose
of the back of their old horse, grey and silent, the round rock
brimming with water, a wet moon hanging on the mossy rim.

CHARLES EDWARD MANN

BLACKBERRIES

Twin ribbons of macadam
losing themselves in the distance—
the boy on the hill thought nothing
of baseball or skating,
of the grass on which he stood,
of his sinewy arms, his breath rising,
of his father sleeping in the clapboard house
hidden, almost, in a ceiling of maples,
the low scrub ridge of prickly thistle.
His only concern was her scent
as she leaned to pick fat black berries,
staining her fingers, the front of her open dress.

~

THE OLD MAN DRAWS A HORIZONTAL LINE

Huge stones stand as thumbs,
tumbled grey and true to pardon

the fireflies who've plumbed
their falling. The great railroad cut darkens,

a bruise on the mountain's eye.
Hickory trees grow green and harden.

Small animals curl. Winds collide
with post and simple garden.

The young man thinks he's fine.
On clapboard, columbine dies.

What in the spacious heavens is a sign,
at our feet is a mortal burden.

In the dust the old man draws a horizontal line.
Another. A ladder's rungs? A box without sides?

MARK OSAKI

CHINESE CAMP

A rich vein of hating,
a pen to keep them working in
until they dropped,
a guidebook to lead me
through then out to here
where the prospect is only broader
the vein not yet exhausted,
history the pen
big enough to enclose all of us—
yellow by yellow
me by them.

MICHELE HEATHER POLLOCK

INHERENT

You sometimes know how things work
without prior knowledge:
a knack for voodoo dolls,
an instinct for the pins,
innate ability to conjugate
auxiliary Italian verbs,
and you can see right through
the mimicry of moths.
You smell the wind,
counting the ions
to predict the rain.
Do you enjoy thunderstorms?
Or have you just learned to listen
to your own cells' ions buzz?
You have a special fascination
for willow trees,
admire how they can divine,
their cells – just like your cells-
searching, unearthing
something vital.

~

LIVING LIKE OUTER SPACE

I.
maybe gravity is all
in our minds,

water really wanting
to be floating spheres
in which no one
ever drowns,

the Earth
a variegated marble
in the portholes
of our eyes

II.
Could I decide to occupy
both here and there
at once,
one foot in the vast
blackness of star-pierced space,
one tethered to the bluegreen
tops of trees?

III.
If the Earth
really loved us,
she'd let us go,
teach us to fly,
the gravity of such an act
bringing us back to her again.

ROBERT SAMAROTTO

ALTO

She is the trailer trash
of the opera world.
Not sure what to do with her
they cast her as scullery maid,
widow, worn out countess
or dress her in drag
and send her offstage
to deliver a message.

Her song rises
from temperate zones of the body
like a blues singer—sultry
with a hint of cigarettes and gin.

She is an oasis in an absurd world
—the voice the toreador
secretly yearns to hear in his bed.

She is music's tragic heroine
this lady of velvety song
who took the wrong bus
and found herself at La Scala
in love with the third trombone.

~

TENOR

Nature's little parlor trick
leans forward on tiptoe,
neck distended
like an exotic veined flower.

From the parched throat
of this little furnace
comes an androgynous music
a peculiar warbled love song
"words too empty to be spoken."

Reaching deep into the silver purse of his voice
he squeezes out each ball-busting note
working toward the high one
that will steal her heart
—the "money note" she'll wear like a diamond.

But what is this?
While he walks the high wire of his altissimo
she has fallen for a sugary-voiced baritone
leaving our little Pagliacci caterwauling
in the thin atmosphere of unrequited love
as off they go—midrange—
into the crooning, chocolaty night.

DAVID SHINE

SOLAR SYSTEMS

> *The Hayden Planetarium has quietly dropped Pluto from its list of planets.*
> *NY Times, January 2001*

Apparently Miss Cranshaw was wrong
teaching us in third grade that
Pluto was the farthest planet—
the dimly lit neighbor of Neptune,
the last of nine spheres
pierced by concentric circles
on the map she rolled down
from over the blackboard.
Now its icy rocky core exposed
as comet-like. And with an elliptical
orbit, not circular like the others.
How fragile its place after all.
That small, remote body could not
remain in our fixed firmament
just by wandering along its line
and once in a while reflecting
the white light of the Sun.

TOM SLEIGH

NEWSREEL

It was like being in the crosshairs of a magnifying glass
Or the beams of the planets concentrating in a death ray
Passing right through me, boring a hole between

My shoes through the concrete floor al the way
To the far side of the earth. Yet it was only
Not knowing how to get where I was going,

I'd gotten lost in the parking lot on the way
To the cinderblock bunker where my mother
Worked the snack bar, my father the projector.

The drive-in movie screen stretched horizon
To horizon, the whole of Texas sprawled around,
Cathedral-like DeSotos and great-finned Pontiacs

Flickering and sinister in torrents of light flooding
Down the screen. Frozen in that light, I
Might have the disconsolate ageless

Stone-eyed child ornamenting a pillar
In a dead Roman city high up on a desert plateau.
I wasn't even as tall as the speakers mumbling

On and on the way now in my dream of extreme
Old age I hear voices mumbling interminably...
Where does it shimmer, my refuge, grotto of my swimming pool

Lapping in the infinite leisure of the newsreel?
At last my mother appeared from among the cars
And led me back to the snack bar but I still hovered

Out there, turned loose among the shadows'
Disembodied passions striving for mastery
Above the tensed windshields: There gleams

Marilyn Monroe movie star enjoying her fame
In the voluptuous, eternal present tense
Of celebrity being worked over by hands

Of her masseur. Bougainvillea overgrows
Her beach bungalow retreat of peace and pleasure,
The screen nothing now but layer on layer

~

THE CLIMB

for Corky Clairmont and Meg Kearney

The high-roofed gymnasium held its lesson too:
Like a focal point, the rope hung from the ceiling
And we had to climb it hand over hand:

You gripped it hard with your fists and wrapped
Your legs around it as if your life, your very soul
Depended on it, suspended there halfway

Between the roof and the floor,
Your hands feeling the tensile, thready danger
Of each inch upward into the head-clearing rafters.

The other boys below hooted and shouted
So far away you felt as though you'd ascended
All on your lonesome up into the sky:

Now narrow your eye to that single
Pine needle suspended tip down by a thread
Of the invisible made visible

By frost—a filament fine-spun from a spider's guts,
Thread so isolate against the ice-shagged trees
Charged with a spectral shimmering blue

That it could have been a rope let down from
The sky for a dying soul poised to shinny up
And away from all it knows...or else climb

Back down into our heavy atmosphere
Misting with each breath all around us...
Knowable thread spun from the unknowable,

Spun into the nothing that surrounded it
So that that soul could grapple and hold tight
In its difficult progress through the iron-gray air,

Its hands, if it still had hands, surely calloused
Hard by the struggle to hold itself from
Falling into or out of the invisible.

KIRBY CONGDON

HOMAGE TO THE PENNY

Truth is any fact that avoids generalities, shuns abstractions, welcomes the particular, the specific and the unique.

You, for instance, are only one of many, identified merely as a statistic. Nothing differentiates you—simply because you are out numbered by the majority. Any variation you may claim is irrelevant to your neighbors, dismissed by any group, and is lost or ignored in the aggregate.

Having no individual identity, you are neither fact nor truth and, therefore, you do not exist. Or if you must insist otherwise, we will need the assurance of proofs, documents or witness, all of which, also being transient, do not exist either.

So: all troubles—being more than their worth—are irrelevant when, penniless, and truth to life, neither your death nor dying exist.

~

THE HISTORIAN'S CONCLUSION

The threads of our past are tiny, almost trivial, but, like grass, their roots connect one aneurysm to another, one aberration to the next, between one vale of tears and sorrow to yet one more. The old roots sprout, connecting our private toil and trouble to the chance for a glimmer of light, for the sleeping spread of life-giving water and, at last, for the tightly twisted curl of a leaf, the shell like sheath of a bud rolled up tight, or the thin knife of a pale green blade, making us meaningful, however hidden we may be, in the broad rush history. There are those who say we are nothing but egos, whining and sniffling in the dark, or dancing on the graves of the dead. Such truths are evanescent; but we have to have something to believe in as well as deny, so that is what we do, being who we are—angels and devils and, as well, that dull, thoughtless simpleton embedded within both their skins, defining, finally, what it is to be human.

JOAN CONNOR

THE LOCKED ROOM

From A VERMONT TRILOGY

According to Alberto Manguel, Paul Masson, horrified by the paucity of Latin and fifteen century Italian books in the Bibliothque Nationale in Paris, devised a list to remedy the catalogue. He invented all the titles. When Colette protested the use of imaginary books, he responded that he could not be expected to think of everything. But then, he already had.

The author is lining his shelves with imagined books. The author is writing imagined stories. Storied made of ash. One huff, and they're gone. Up in smoke.

A girlfriend told me this anecdote: she is in Paris for the summer. The bookstores everywhere feature Auster.

She mentions this to the bookseller.

"Oh yes," he says, "Auster is very popular here. He is so French."

"I met him," she announces. "He's a contemptuous poseur."

The bookseller winces. "No, no. He is very shy. He is my friend."

She pauses. "Oh yes, but his real name wasn't Paul Auster."

I am in a locked room of ghost books, imagining Paul Auster in Vermont. He is wearing read and black plaid, an orange eye-smarting down vest. He is switching home a heard of spooked cows. Paul Auster is in Vermont, but not vice versa. Does where we compose inform what we compose, or do we always write in locked rooms? The cows ruminate or stroll, seeking Auster everywhere—Auster in the grass, Auster in the much, Auster in the trough, Auster in the stanchions. No Auster.

Paul Auster is hitching up his overalls. He removes a pen from his bib. Outside, Vermont is brooding so quiet that you can hear the sap drip. But he doesn't hear it or the lows of the insubstantial heard. There are no cows in Paris. He listens to other voices, locked rooms. Fanshawe waves goodbye. Bossie, boss—ie until the cows come home. He comes to the last page just as the heard is heading out.

CLAUDE CLAYTON SMITH

FROM LAPPING AMERICA: AN INTERSTATE ODYSSEY

* * *

Twenty minutes beyond the Hudson I-90 becomes the Massachusetts Turnpike. The change is announced by quaint signs with black Pilgrim hats. The Berkshires come next, rolling mountains the texture of green wool, their steep slopes and long grades punctuated by long chicanes hewn right through granite. More than anything that gray granite means New England—along with the pines that dominate the hills, including the scraggly kind that cling to rock ledges.

The sign for Amherst meant Emily Dickinson. *I like to see it lap the miles/ And lick the valleys up.* In that poem she's describing a train, of course, but as an undergraduate—like my own students—I thought it was a horse. No matter. Today, "it" was my torch red Corvette lapping the miles, thundering *like Boanerges* through western Massachusetts, where the pretty highway is much like Connecticut's Merritt Parkway, the road I traveled frequently as an undergraduate between Stratford and Middletown.

The similarity brought John Updike to mind. In his short story "Packed Dirt, Churchgoing, A Dying Cat, A Traded Car," the speaker, who happens to be a writer, is making a final journey along the Merritt Parkway in a '55 Ford he's about to trade in. He picks up a hitchhiker—a sailor—who is puzzled by the writer. "What's the point?" the sailor asks finally. And the question is answered in the story's last line: *We in America need ceremonies....* Such as paying our respects to an old family car.

Or paying our respects to the Interstate System.

Traffic was heavy through Springfield, the sun disappeared, and the clouds began spitting rain. I reached my cousin's home in Southborough at four o'clock, my driving done for the day, four hundred and twenty miles from Buffalo. Located just fifteen minutes west of Boston, Southborough is an upscale community off I-90, just inside the I-495 beltway.

"One of the main reasons we chose this place," my cousin Dennis explained that evening, "is because of immediate access to I-90 and 495."

"On the Interstates we can be anywhere," his wife Michele added. "In Boston, at our businesses, or with family in Connecticut."

"Both Michele and I grew up with I-95 in our backyards," Dennis went on. "*Literally*. But my favorite is I-81 in Virginia. It's as if God unrolled the asphalt through the Appalachian Mountains and Civil War battlefields. Then, of course, there's the Big Dig right here in Boston."

He meant I-93. The outdated elevated Interstate through the heart of the city was coming down, to be replaced by a massive tunnel under Boston Harbor, a three-mile stretch linking central Boston with the South Boston neighborhoods at the eastern end of the Massachusetts Turnpike.

Officially called the Central Artery Project, the "Big Dig" is one of the most challenging Interstate projects ever. Planned for completion in 2001, it was currently five years behind schedule and costing three million dollars per day. To pay for the overruns, state officials were planning to double the tolls, cut funding for other road projects, and renege on a promise to eliminate regular driver's license renewals in favor of lifetime licenses, measures that would not even make up half the deficit.

"It'll be great," Dennis concluded, "if they ever get it done."

Joining us later, cousin Patricia put a realistic end to the conversation.

"I work for Colonial Trucking," she said. "I manage their traffic throughout New England. Without the Interstates I wouldn't have a job."

* * *

According to the Associated Press, Boston ranks fifth in the nation in terms of the total number of hours the average driver spends each year in congested traffic. Sixty-six hours in all—nearly *three full days*—stuck in traffic.

Hoping to avoid contributing to that statistic I left Southborough at a tardy nine Wednesday morning, headed for the Canadian border in Maine to plant my first ceremonial flag. But my intentional delay proved futile. Almost immediately I was swallowed up by the first traffic jam of my grand lap, cars screeching to a halt one after another to join a five-mile queue for the toll at the end of I-90. It took me an hour to negotiate the fifteen miles between Southborough and I-95 North, creeping along in first gear, clutch in, clutch out.

The country landscapes were behind me now, replaced in Framingham by large glass-and-steel corporate office buildings on both sides of the highway, then a drought-ridden brown and weedy median, then a rusty guardrail and an intimidating wire fence. The gray day—a cool sixty-five degrees—did nothing to help, and the resigned faces of the Boston commuters saddened me deeply.

How could anyone face such humiliation on a daily basis? It was inhuman, three lanes of traffic spreading into half a dozen toll booths, then immediately converging again, competing for every inch of space, jockeying into position for I-95 North or I-95 South. Earlier that summer, when I-90 was clogged with vacationers heading to New Hampshire and the coast of Maine, toll collectors had simply waved the traffic on through. That was not the case today. Today was part of the daily grind. And the toll would be taken.

According to the International Bridge, Tunnel and Turnpike Association, only fifty-five toll roads existed in the United States in 1992. But twenty-seven new pay-as-you-go expressways are currently underway in fourteen states. Designed to alleviate congestion, toll roads actually create their own congestion when cars and trucks stack up at the tollgates. But the slow disbursement of federal funds makes them necessary. Electronic payment lanes equipped with scanners are on the drawing board, but until they become widespread, Interstate snarls will remain a way of life. With at least one serious consequence. More babies are being born on the Interstates these days than ever before, as traffic jams prevent pregnant women from getting to the hospital on time.

Low to the ground in the 'Vette, I feared the big trucks wouldn't see me, that I'd get wedged beneath their bumpers and dragged away. The few trees, drought-dry and brittle, mirrored the commuters' despair. The frustrating hour made me realize how lucky I am in Ohio, living half a mile from campus, just a brief walk to work. But at the moment I was stuck in Massachusetts, my little Hot Wheels Corvette trying to turn north on that great relief map in my mind. With nothing to do but stare at mudguards. And read the Interstates signs.

Caution. Reduced Salt Area. I'd never seen that one before. New England winters being what they are, the Environmental Protection Agency monitors the spreading of rock salt to avoid contaminating local water supplies. Low salt can mean an unhealthy diet of slick roads, and in Boston the traveler is duly warned.

Sometime after ten, as soon as the traffic began to pick up, I stopped for coffee at the first available spot along the western edge of the city, where the woman behind the counter promptly wished me good *mawnin'* and told me all about her *dawta*. Her delightful accent revived my spirits. I was in Boston—cradle of the American Revolution—and I began to wonder if Paul Revere had ever sounded like that. *To ahms! To ahms! The British ah coming!*

Outside, I struck up a conversation with an elderly man who resembled Groucho Marx.

"The Interstates," he growled, "is all politics. That's all there is to it. Politics. Take Boston, this Big Dig. It's going to be a nice improvement, but who's paying for it? I'm a member of the National Republican Committee, and I know for a fact there's a surplus in Washington." He began digging through his wallet, as fat as a coupon caddy. "I got my membership card in here somewhere. I'd rather vote for a dead Republican than a live Democrat. The *government* should

pay for the Interstates. There's a surplus in Washington. I'm a member of the National Republican Committee. I got proof."

He was still digging for that proof when I excused myself to get back on the road.

Half an hour north of Boston, a long entrance ramp curves through tall ledges of brown granite and an overhead sign announces *Maine, I-95 North*. New Hampshire isn't even mentioned, although it comes first, a twenty mile stretch beyond the Merrimack, the tranquil river Thoreau once traveled for a week, alternately rowing and drifting, recording his thoughts. Old twin bridges shaped like protractors span the Merrimack and soon a similar bridge rises high above the Piscataqua, with a wide aerial view of the New Hampshire countryside. Then you're dropped into Maine—*God's Country*, as the sign proclaims.

The sign was right on target, for Maine looks newly created by a glacier. Colorful outcroppings of rock dot the rolling terrain for miles. Huge boulders lay by the roadside. The trees get taller and more sturdy, especially the pines, their ragged sawtooth tops ringing the horizon. Some are spindly, their branches several feet apart, thinning to mere tufts higher up, as if gasping for air. Others, with their severely sloping branches, look like folded beach umbrellas, the kind of pines you find in illustrated fables. Among the deciduous trees the white birches stood out starkly.

In Portland, Maine, there's a Home Depot, a Toys 'R' Us, and the type of strip mall stuff you see everywhere. But then civilization begins to dwindle for good, with much less traffic and far fewer trucks. Portland is a cutoff of sorts, a welcome point-of-no-return as you head north. Coastal inlets follow, lined with sailboats and homes that look like lighthouses. A pick-up truck ahead of me was towing a sleek cabin cruiser named *Oyster Bay*. Another hauled a yacht called *The Pequod*. Which made me think of Ahab. Then *The Perfect Storm*. Then hurricane Floyd.

Heading north into Maine you pass rest stops touting *Lobster Available*. A billboard says *Ayeh*, a trademark expression I never heard. Then an Interstate sign announces *Downeast*, an actual location. As in Boston there are Reduced Salt Areas, then an entirely new warning—diamond-shaped yellow signs with the silhouette of an antlered moose, topped by a red border with white letters. *Attention!* Apparently these Maine moose were to be taken seriously.

Rivers and streams made the long drive intriguing. Again and again dark waterways cleaved the forests, opening the deep terrain to tantalizing glimpses. To my left, water wound into the interior, to my right it ran for the sea. At the York River a low bridge crossed tidal mudflats, then came a host of rivers bearing Indian names— *Saco*, *Kennebec*, *Mattawampkeag*, *Penobscot*. Some were narrow and shallow, others wide and deep, thick branches overhanging every shore. The streams were smaller than the rivers and much prettier, almost brooks, rocky and rippled or sandy and smooth. Several bear Indian names as well—*Soutapoustock* and *Cobbevescontee*. Others names were charmingly literal—*Birch Stream*, *Salmon Stream*, *Fish Stream*, then one identified by just a

letter, *"B" Stream*. I wanted to explore them by canoe, wade them for trout, or simply float them lazily like Thoreau. But I was barreling north, the Canadian border on my mind.

* * *

The day continued overcast, the early afternoon sun bouncing in and out, the temperature up to seventy-two. The farther north I went, the greener the wide median became, the brown grass giving way to grass that needed cutting. In one stretch a lone worker on a tractor was mowing the median, flooding the 'Vette with the pungent odor of damp clippings. In some medians willows grew in thick groves, with tall marsh grass in standing water. Then a birch forest divided the highway, dense enough to obscure the southbound lanes.

From Augusta to Bangor the ride was peaceful, marred only by the inconsistent sun. Then in Orono I reached a personal milestone—the farthest north I had ever been on I-95. Scouting colleges when I-95 was in its infancy, I had taken a Greyhound from Stratford to Orono to visit a boyhood friend at the University of Maine. Maine had overwhelmed me then—too wild, too far north, too far from home—and I had traveled with a lump in my throat, unable to imagine myself studying in such lonely territory. Now I was facing that lonely territory once again, en route to the Canadian border to stick a flag in the ground.

To gather my courage I stopped at a rustic rest area, half an acre of ground at the base of an eroded hillside, beneath a canopy of tall trees. Large gray boulders, green with moss, lay among the exposed roots of pines and oaks. There was no grass—just dirt, leaves and pine needles—and a small brick comfort station with a roof of wooden shingles. Two pavilions, also shingled, held mottled picnic tables.

Occasional trucks whined by on the highway, followed by total silence. Squirrels and chipmunks rattled in the underbrush. Only three or four cars were in the parking lot. One man stared at my license plate, didn't know what to make of it, and headed for the men's room. Another told me he liked the 'Vette's color, but he seemed too tight-lipped for further conversation.

North of the rest area I had the road to myself, except for occasional trucks hauling logs on flatbed trailers. Whenever I passed one, the air filled with pine perfume. Piled high in a triangle, the logs were held fast by thick chains, their sawed ends like pink slabs of prime rib.

Suddenly something flashed in the median several miles ahead—a small blaze of light that kept reflecting with varied intensity. Mesmerized, I studied it for minutes, then slowed down as I drew near. A bouquet of flowers was snagged high in the foliage, a variety of white and yellow flowers from which long blue ribbons fluttered. It was as if a couple had just been married on the shoulder and the bride had tossed her bouquet too exuberantly. Around the nation I would see many wreathes marking the site of fatal crashes, but here in Maine the median was unmarred, the trees and bushes intact—no indication that a car might have been blown off the road by one of

those big logging trucks. I preferred the over-excited bride launching her bouquet—before embarking on an Interstate honeymoon, perhaps—an image I held in my head until the flashing disappeared in the rearview mirror.

In mid-afternoon, choosing an exit at random, I discovered an old general store with clapboard siding and a loosely shingled roof. Out front, a large, bearded biker stood in jeans and a black leather jacket, munching a Hershey bar and cleaning the windshield of his Harley. A fireman from southern California, he had ridden north to Washington then across to Maine and was on his way south to Florida, participating in a long-distance road rally. Like me, he was worried about Floyd, which he had heard was now battering the Carolinas. Still headed north, I tried to laugh it off.

"You doin' the four corners too?" he said. "I thought *I* was the only nut on the road!"

I asked him what it was like to ride a motorcycle on the Interstates.

"Trucks are a headache," he said. "I'll be doin' eighty and suddenly a truck'll pass me and I'll wonder what the hell's goin' on. Otherwise, I just do a lot of daydreamin'. I sing songs and think about everythin' but work. When I get back home, there'll be a banquet for everyone who makes it all the way 'round. They give you a certificate, and one of these." He rapped his thick knuckles on the windshield. It was covered with cartoon stickers like merit badges. Then he popped the rest of the Hershey bar into his mouth. "But the four corners is nuthin'. I've done the iron butt Interstate tour—a thousand miles a day for eleven days. That's why they call it the *iron butt*."

The Hershey bar had made me hungry, so I went inside to get one for myself, and when I came out again the biking fireman was gone.

From the general store it was only eighty-five miles to the Canadian border, just beyond Houlton at the very end of I-95. The road was ascending now up a long inclined plane, and for the final half an hour I didn't see another car. Parallel to the highway and far to the west, a massive mountain upreared a pointed head, falling away to a range of smoother mountains that seemed to be going exactly where I was—into the sky and beyond.

A town called New Limerick got me thinking. *There once was a man from New Limerick, who....* But the available rhymes were too naughty. I thought of the bearded biker instead, then checked NPR. President Clinton had declared the Carolinas a disaster area. Floyd was predicted to make landfall that evening, coming ashore as a Category 3 storm. And Gert was now a "Cat-4."

But I-95 was beautiful, rising and falling with scenic vistas—like that big blue lake on my left, where the pines come steeply to the water's edge and the sky rides the smooth hills piggyback.

By four-fifteen I was five miles from Houlton (pop. 5267), the terrain rugged and gorgeous, wildflowers lacing the way. One mile out I had to chuckle—*Houlton International Airport*.

Probably for Canadian geese. But I had seen no geese, only crows. I had seen seagulls in Ohio and a flock of starlings in New York, and nothing but crows in Maine—enormous rooks hopping about their roadkill, ruffling their feathers whenever I whizzed by. *The caw of the open road.* I was getting punchy. I had come four hundred miles from Southborough, Massachusetts, and was about to plant my first Interstate flag.

At the Houlton exit came a sign for Route 1, the dear old Boston Post Road. I'd be taking it later to spend the night with a friend in Presque Isle. John Steinbeck had passed through Presque Isle with his dog Charley, and an old friend of mine had just moved there several weeks earlier. It somehow seemed fated. More Corvette karma. But first I had a ceremony to perform.

For months I had been trying to imagine what it would look like at the very end of I-95, the initial site of my symbolic Interstate thank-you. Well, I-95 comes to an end in a bleak and lonely stretch of high ragged pines. You know it ends because there's a blue and white chevron-shaped sign on the shoulder, atop a tall metal pole. *END 95.*

Laughter is a funny thing. It sounds hollow when you're alone. You might *chuckle* to yourself, as I had done at the oxymoron of *Houlton* and *International*, but how often do you really crack up when you're by yourself? Yet there's a first time for everything and mine was at hand.

End 95. At the sight of that sign I howled, pulled onto the shoulder and jumped from the 'Vette. The road had just been paved and smelled freshly of asphalt. There was no one around. Several hundred yards away, across the median in the southbound lanes, sat a Customs house not much bigger than a tollbooth. Excited, I popped the hatchback and rummaged among my things.

The millennial banners I was carrying were eighteen by eleven on a thirty-inch stick. They sported crisscrossed American flags on a solid blue background. And right in the center, in a star-spangled burst, they said *Millennium 2000.* Fearing hard ground because of widespread drought, I had brought a hammer and a foot-long star drill—a kind of Philip's-head screwdriver without a handle. Kneeling at the base of the sign pole, I pounded the drill into the ground, wrestled it out again, and inserted the flag. Then I saluted and the ceremony was over.

It occurred to me that I ought to take a photo, but I wanted to be in the photo myself, and there was no one to help. After a few minutes one of those logging trucks rolled by, but I would have felt foolish waving it down. It was getting late—already after five—and I was expected in Presque Isle within the hour. Then another truck rolled through, and another. Just as I was about to give up, a northbound Bronco pulled off the shoulder about a hundred yards away, and out popped a winsome teenage lass. I waved, she hesitated, then came on over.

It was just like in the movies.

"What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like *this*?" I said.

She laughed, pointing across the way. "I work at the duty free shop. It's not much of a job, but it gives me time do to my homework."

I explained what I was up to, handed her the camera, and she snapped my picture beneath *End 95*. Then I made a U-turn in Canada and took off for Presque Isle, much to the amusement of the elderly official who waved me through the Customs gate.

As Updike has written, *We in America need ceremonies.*

No matter how small or informal.

RENEE CASSESE

SUMMER TOMATOES

Fine white sprigs of hair stuck up from Dad's pink scalp like seedlings. His strong and yellowed hands were spread prayer like in his lap on the starched pale hospital sheet. His skin stretched web like from bone to bone. A stainless steel tray held his untouched lunch. Turquoise eyes smiled beneath the damage of cancer and chemo and promised to be here for a long time to come, lying to me for the first time.

It was early August so he asked, "How are your tomatoes doing?"

"Wonderful," I told him. "The Early Girls are finished, but the Beefsteaks are ripe and new flowers are coming. Here, I brought you some."

I dipped my hands into my straw tote bag, unveiled the tomatoes like rubies, and placed one in his hand.

He lifted it to his face and breathed in the acidity sweet aroma. Even pleasant smells bothered him now and I saw the half concealed wriggle of his nose as he lowered the fleshy red orb.

"You take them," he said. "For the boys."

He stroked the taut red skin with a callused thumb before he handed the tomato back to me.

"Here's something you can enjoy." I placed a clay pot of red and yellow dahlias on the steel tray.

"My favorite flower," he said.

The smile in his eyes gave me a measure of security I should not have had.

I went back to my chair at the foot of Daddy's bed and draped silence around me like a shield. The air was punctuated with antiseptic hospital smells and sounds of a baseball game on the television above our heads. Dad was a die-hard Mets fan and he was irritated by the team's inability to make some much needed plays. The crack of the bat against the leather ball had a ring of finality to it, but I missed the metaphor.

Visiting hours ended. I kissed the dry skin of Daddy's cheek, smoothed my hand

over his head and squeezed his hand. I backed out of the room, taking a last look at his smile.

"See you tomorrow."

I didn't know, when I went to work the next morning, that I had seen his eyes, deep as the Mediterranean, for the last time. But when the phone rang at midnight I knew he was gone. And all the words we never said were gone too.

The house was black and still as I sat at the kitchen table waiting for my son to come home so we could drive to my mother's house. Fresh picked garden tomatoes were cradled in a wooden bowl in the center of the table. I lifted one to my face and inhaled. The memory comforted me like Grandma's blue quilt.

I was six years old again and helping Daddy dig up the gardens for spring planting. His strong, winter white arms lifted shovels full of musty brown earth until a neat rectangle, carefully bordered in white twine, offered soft mounds of rich soil to the sunlight. I sat in the corner of the garden and let dirt sift through my fingers. The dirt on top was warm and dry, while underneath it was cool and damp and stuck to the creases in my knuckles.

Daddy dug perfect little holes with his hands and filled them with the spidery roots of tomato seedlings he bought from the White Post Farm down the road. Beefsteak, Ox-heart and Supersonic tomato plants stood in neat rows like obedient school children. They raised their leaves to receive water the garden hose spat out like a snake.

Moonlight lit the kitchen and a warm breeze touched my shoulders as I replayed those summers from childhood.

We would wait eagerly for the first tomatoes to come. First the yellow flowers, then the tiny green baby tomatoes. At dusk we caught fireflies and watched the tomatoes turn yellow, orange and finally, in mid July, they reached the dark red peak of ripeness. We guarded the first red tomato until Daddy came home from work to inspect it and declare it ready to be picked.

He freed the red orb from its vine and cradled it in his large bronze hand like the head of a newborn baby. We followed him to the kitchen and found our seats at the round wooden table. Daddy placed the tomato on a plate and sliced through the succulent red flesh with the silver blade of the kitchen knife. The sweet fruit was quartered and a piece given to Mom, my brother and me. Daddy savored that first taste of tomato. He closed his eyes as he wrapped his smile around it and wiped pink juice from his chin with the back of his hand.

LAUREL MARSHFIELD

OLFACTORY MEMORY

Memories called forth by the sense of smell are more powerful than those of sight, or hearing, or touch. So I've read, and so I've experienced moments when the pleasant, rubbery odor of a pencil eraser or the wet-dust scent of rain will return me instantly, vividly, to a time in my past.

Walking to the train on my way to work one May morning, a brief olfactory flashback bloomed in my awareness: the chill perfume of metal, dust, wood, and stone, emanating from a building being renovated, gave me instantaneous recall of the late 1950s, when my parents and I would wander through housing developments being built in a suburb of Boston.

Arriving at one of these dispirited settings on some random Saturday, we'd tramp around among the machinery and the mud, my parents busily comparing this house with that, and what was preferable about each. Always, there were little souvenir blocks of wood and short lengths of metal tubing, and pieces of tile in pink and white and blue that the builders had left scattered on the ground. Sometimes, I'd gather a few pieces of tile or tubing and take them home (clustered in the corner of a drawer, they would evoke a world utterly different from my own, and so become a form of treasure).

Occasionally, we'd enter the shell of a house, crossing a teetering board that jutted through a doorway spattered with new cement. Once inside, there would be the skeletons of the walls, two-by-fours lined up like rows of skinny trees, and here and there, gray metal outlet boxes that would later become light switches. A dining room was going in next to the kitchen in this one; you could tell by the way the "trees" divided up the space they enclosed.

Walking around, past sheets of dank tarpaper and coils of multicolored wire, past a cement-encrusted wheelbarrow and leaden stacks of white sheetrock, we'd pick our way down what appeared to be a hallway -- only to arrive at a gaping hole that revealed a sudden, stairless drop to the basement's naked dirt floor. Retreating, we'd go on to another house, my parents debating what they would add, and what subtract, from the basic design.

Sooner or later, feeling the urge to be elsewhere, I'd start a campaign to get us on our way. Reluctantly, by seemingly infinitesimal degrees, my parents would turn back toward our car. Much later, while driving to church some sun-spackled Sunday, we'd slow down as we passed the finished houses, and my parents would look, comment on some finished feature, and then drive on.

The visceral history of our lives—secret and never shared, and available only rarely to our own conscious awareness—is held, as if suspended, within our senses, muscles, and cells. The deep physicality of our lives' experience connects us within ourselves. And with that same visceral propensity, connects us with every other life, as well.

So it is that certain settings cause us to resonate. We feel our viscera shiver like a wind chime, and a belled tone all but resounds in our ears.

There is another childhood memory conjured by the sense of smell: one that seems to me emblematic of the intimate interplay between our physical senses and the emotional patterning of our being. That memory is from the years I lived in Texas and, at age five or six, liked to watch my father shave. I liked the familiar, soapy ritual of his stirring-up suds in a porcelain shaving mug, imprinted with a blue schooner on two sides. I liked standing on the toilet seat cover for a better view, liked watching while he lathered the stubbled plain of his face, and pulling taut the skin beneath his jaw, guided the razor downward in successive smooth stripes, clean of soap.

From that vantage, at that age, he was to me heroic. He had subdued the hazards of the blade in the metal enfoldment of his razor. He had navigated the bony contours and sensitive hollows of his face. That he could do this dangerous, difficult thing symbolized for me that unknown world both my parents lived in, and *I could not enter*, though I lived beside them every day.

Seeing the suds and razor produce my father's smooth pink skin, I wanted to smooth life's danger and difficulty as he did. I wanted to fulfill the unknowable obligations that the morning ritual of shaving prepared him for, even as I sensed he was hurt without knowing it by my mother's indifference to his magnificence and skill.

When he was finished, the sweet alcoholic sting of his after shave lingered in the long hallway where he had walked from the back of the house to the front and, in the heat of a Texas morning, slowly, sadly, disappeared.

CARY BARBOR

GLASTONBURY ABBEY

I stared out the tiny window of the plane at the guys driving carts around the tarmac. The crisp *bong bong* I heard from the cockpit didn't register right away. I wondered what it would feel like to drive the cart. I wondered how fast they went, how far you could get in one. I could see Boston Harbor off in the distance. Rows of small whitecaps, as in a child's drawing, blew across the surface.

I got off the plane, walked to the main concourse, and spotted the monk instantly: Scotch-tape-repaired glasses; goofy, enthusiastic grin; short. I shifted my eyes away from him and hiked my duffel bag higher on my shoulder. *I could easily slip out sideways*, I thought, *just get on a plane back to San Francisco.* I stood looking at him before he saw me. *This guy Come on*, I urged myself, *just go before it's too late.* I belched loudly—
damned indigestion—and looked down, embarrassed.

That was when he saw me. "David? Welcome!" he said, and stretched his arms out into a hug. I stepped back and turned away slightly. He put a hand on my shoulder and sighed. "Welcome," he said again, quietly. "Let's go get your bags."

"Oh no, this is it. I'm all set."

"Really?" He tucked the sign he held ("Glastonbury Abbey") under one arm and rubbed his chin. "Alright. Well, maybe you've got the vow of poverty down already," he guffawed, and held out one arm to guide me toward the parking garage.

From there he drove us to Hingham, a tiny seaside town south of Boston where the abbey was located. From my seat in the car, I could glimpse the ocean. A small firecracker of glee exploded in my chest, dispelling the doubts I had had at the airport. With this kind of location, Renato would have no problem getting out of the country quickly. Fast and easy. The road ahead of us shimmered black with a fresh coat of asphalt.

We pulled in near a small stone chapel. The abbey grounds, pungent with the smell of wet leaves, stretched in all directions. My escort, whose name I had already forgotten, prattled on about life at the abbey, pushing his thick glasses back up on his nose. I interrupted him: "So what time's dinner?"

After dinner I met with the abbot. Compact and solid with closely cropped white hair, he told me all about the Benedictine order I had just joined, who they were, and what they expected from me. He told me that it was the letter of recommendation from Cardinal McMahon that had fully convinced him to invite me in. The letter was there on his desk. Their census was down, he said, and they were happy to get good people. It got the bishop off his back for a while too, he chuckled. I smiled and nodded, glancing at the letter and remembering how proud my buddy Joey had been when he created the letterhead on his computer. Looking at it now from upside down, I realized that Joey had misspelled "diocese" as "diosese." I looked up at the abbot, my eyes wide. *Did he know? How could he have missed that?*

But he was looking down, putting two folded brown robes in a paper sack for me, and going over the house rules. The abbey takes in guests, he told me, groups of people who come for retreats. One of my duties would be to bring breakfast on big trays out to the guesthouse. I nodded and said it would be my pleasure. *Why don't I just come clean to this guy?* I thought. *Tell him I had a change of heart and walk out now. Simple. He must have seen that mistake on the letter. He's messing with me.* But he gave me a big smile and handed me the sack. Acid roiled in my stomach; I felt nauseous.

A couple of days after I got there, I was on breakfast duty. The Angels had been doing well when I left and I wanted to see whether they were still in the running for the Series. I stopped for a minute in the guest library and sat down with the sports page. Some of the guests smiled at me. I guess I looked funny, a brown-robed monk hunkered over the *Globe* sports section. Well, fuck 'em. They got their breakfast. I turned back to the box scores.

But when the brother in charge of the kitchen happened by, he gave me a withering look. I folded the newspaper onto the table and walked back out through the dining room. I checked quickly to see whether the guests needed anything more. They didn't.

Later that day the abbot called me in for a talk about the joy of serving others. I tried to look contrite. *Does he know I'm a fake?* He held my eye contact a minute too long. It gave me the creeps. I looked down at the rug to avoid him. I kept looking down until he dismissed me.

That day after Mass, I'd gotten down to business, slipping two jeweled chalices and an engraved gold plate out of the sacristy. I'd found a few small Giulio Romano drawings in the guesthouse too. Not a big haul, but at least it would prime the pump; let the buyers know I meant business.

I flashed back to grade school, Sister Mary Joseph catching me stealing in the school store. "Today it's a pack of gum, my boy, tomorrow it may be a car. But either way, the mark on your soul is as black as those scuffed shoes you're wearing." She paddled me after school that day and I'll always remember what she said: "What you're stealing is your own soul's chance at heaven."

Christ, what if she was right? What if there is a heaven and hell? I lit a cigarette. *I'm screwed.* I called Renato to arrange a 3 a.m. pickup. He estimated a fair amount of cash, and I told him to let the buyers know there would be bigger items to come.

The night was as dark and unforgiving as granite. I met him where the abbey's woods met the main road, way at the back edge of the property. His pickup slid up almost silently. The headlights illuminated young white birches until they seemed to float in the black forest. I withdrew the objects from beneath my brown robe. He inspected them, then wordlessly handed me a small roll of big bills. I tucked the money into my underwear and walked back to the abbey.

One morning the following week, my chore was to organize a closet in an unused wing of the brothers' residence. The monk in charge of buildings and grounds handed me a bunch of keys on a shoelace. A medallion of St. Benedict weighed it down. I took them and nodded. "Thanks, brother."

The closet was about the size of a small bedroom and I could see when I opened the door that there was a lot of junk piled around the perimeter. I flicked the light on and glanced around. Against one wall, ten or eleven paintings were wrapped up in newspaper and stuck in a couple of mover's boxes. *Holy shit*, I thought; *Jackpot*. I looked through them quietly, making a quick appraisal. Probably 17th century. Maybe three or four of them would be worth something. I double-checked the artists' signatures and decided on two Postigliones, one Vasari, and one Badessa. I started boxing them up again — they all fit into the biggest box—and shoved as much newspaper around them as I could find.

I set the box with my paintings near the closet door and continued working, straightening up the rest of the things in the closet and burying the rest of the painting boxes behind some rolled-up carpets. The dust from the room clung to the skirts of my robe.

As I moved things around, I uncovered nests of dust that sent me into a raucous coughing fit. I stepped into the hallway and into the next room, which had a door to the outside. I opened it and stepped outside to get a little air. I thought I would break a rib, I was coughing so hard. I gulped a few breaths of the cool air and coughed some more.

If I were still in school, I'd think this was punishment for the stealing, I thought. I coughed some more, and felt some stomach acid back up in my throat. I tried to take a deep breath, and launched into more coughing.

What happened to my life as a debonair art thief? I thought bitterly. This sucks. I could just move the paintings back inside and leave. Get out of here tonight with the cash I have.

I went back into the closet and did one last overall straightening and sweeping. That set me off on another coughing fit, but a shorter one. I stood at the closet door and looked around. The place looked clean and organized. I carried my box into the next room and through the door to the outside. I patted the ground to make sure it was dry. I set the box down just outside the door. I'd move it later, when everyone was in evening vespers. I took another big gulp of air to clear my

lungs, but that only caused more coughing. I leaned over and put one hand on the wall, coughing and feeling as though I might throw up. After a few minutes I stopped. I hocked up a big gob of spit and shot it to the ground. I stood up straight, breathing shallowly, tentatively, and headed back inside.

Back in my room, I called Renato. Reached him on the cell—excellent luck—and arranged to meet him that night. Again at 3 a.m., same place. When I told him what I had, he dropped the phone. I could hear him lighting a cigarette, trying to stay cool, but he and I both knew this was hot shit. He offered me the price I expected. A little more, actually. I took off my dirty robe and put a clean one on over a t-shirt and jeans.

At dinner, no one had much to say to me, which was just as well. After I ate, I found the abbot and told him I wasn't feeling well—I'd have to miss evening vespers. He laid a hand on my shoulder, smiled sadly, and told me he'd say a prayer for me. I took a few steps, then turned back to look at him again. *Did he know?*

I went to my room and lay on the narrow bed. I opened up the window and smoked a couple of cigarettes while I waited for them all to go. It was perfectly pitch dark out now. I stubbed out my last cigarette on the windowsill, shut the window, and left my room to walk down to the abandoned wing. I opened the door to the outside, and found the box of paintings, just where I'd left it. I propped the door open with a thick branch so I could get back inside. The box was heavy and clumsy to carry through the woods, even the short distance to the gardener's shed. Especially in the damn robe, which I kept tripping over. The door to the shed was open, of course. They never locked anything in this place; it killed me.

I stuck the box along a side wall. I knew it would be undisturbed until later tonight. I closed everything up again and headed back to my room to wait and smoke. On my way back I saw a log, lying on the forest floor, decomposing. I nudged it with my foot and busted open a nest of termites, industriously destroying the thing. I drew my foot back sharply and walked back to my room.

That night, just as we'd planned, I met Renato and his pickup out at the edge of the woods. He wouldn't give me the cash until he looked over the paintings, which he had to do by headlight. Anyway, he saw the artists' signatures and was satisfied. He handed me another roll of bills—much fatter this time. He drove away with the box propped up beside him in the passenger's seat like an anxious kid peering over the dashboard. I pulled the brown robe over my head, balled it up tight, and chucked it to the base of a tree. The smell of wet leaves—fertile and rotting—overcame me. I walked by the side of the road a ways, bending damp twigs into the soggy ground with my feet. I felt for the lump of cash in the back pocket of my jeans, shoved my hands into my front pockets, and walked.

RK BROWN

TWENTY

I can see it now, in the small room, no noise but the trees outside making a sound like crumpled banknotes. It was during the first year after I escaped from one of the poorest places in England and, after many moves, ended up in the richest. I'd managed to find a job in a decaying Victorian institution in a small Surrey town, working with visually impaired people, which survived on the charity of the very rich for the disadvantaged, somewhere between kindness and guilt. You could see the clients as soon as you arrived in town, white canes tapping through meticulous flower borders and tall garden walls.

The institution sat surrounded by great century old trees, part stately home, part red brick school. It had been just that, a school for the blind, and although the years of disability rights and community care had softened it, the high ceilinged rooms and corridors still had that humbling, oppressive feel. Most of the clients were past retirement age, but they'd first arrived as children. Imagine a school that you could never leave.

As part of the job I got a little room to live in, with a small window set in the thick wall, like windows in prison. Every morning I was awoken by sunlight filtered through the canopy of trees, the whitewashed room feeling somehow part of nature. It was like living in a garden or a forest, the building surrounded by trees, the town surrounded by fields. It was so different from the noise and chaos of the city where I grew up that it had the feeling of a dream. I spent all day with people who couldn't see me, watching them move around with that unsure sleepwalker's gait, and at night I wandered around the empty, quiet, dark streets and unlit country lanes, unseen again. It was a tiny town and I knew no one. I could go almost weeks between conversations, sitting alone in pubs, walking around, just me amidst the greenery.

It might sound funny, but I even forgot my birthday. I picked up my mail from the gigantic entrance hall with its mosaic floor and dark wood panelling and the pigeonhole was stuffed with brightly coloured envelopes addressed to me. My first birthday alone and everyone had remembered except for me.

That night, halfway down a cheap bottle of wine, I sat at my window listening to the coo of pigeons and the calls of other birds I couldn't name, the rustle of squirrels jumping tree to tree, absentmindedly pulling on a top that was tighter than the ones I usually wore. That's what I'll do, I thought, I'll get dressed up and get myself noticed. So I did, in that half fumbling, half-excited way that you do when you're drunk.

The walk into town through semi-country lanes, where the first winds of autumn had burned the tips of the leaves orange and brown, went in a drunken blink. Arriving at the nearly empty pub I sat, my back to the fire, slouched in my chair and drank, squinting at the various rustic coaching-house paraphernalia that decorated it.

Usually anxious, the wine made me feel like I had another two skins on over my own. Drunk already, I didn't think anything when a man came and sat down at my table and introduced himself, lighting a fat cigar.

We chatted. He was in his forties, face smooth and red, thick grey hair on his arms and around his bald head and sticking out of his open necked shirt. Gold rings sat on his thick fingers, a heavy silver watch on his wrist. Blowing smoke, he laughed raucously and his grey eyes crinkled. He looked like a man you'd see shaking hands at a by-election wearing a blue rosette.

He asked where I was from, then laughed.

"I'll bet you're all good labour lads up there, eh? Not much money up there. I'll bet that's good northern bitter you're drinking?" He was right. "How old are you? Twenty-one? No, I don't suppose it matters these days, does it?"

I told him I didn't know anyone. He nodded and looked me straight in the eye. "I've been so lonely too, since my wife died of cancer, it's terrible isn't it? Still, you've got to get on with business haven't you? How old? Old enough to like your beer, eh?"

I remember thinking we were just two men who had seen the loneliness in each other, as he bought me pint after pint. Come closing time he asked if he could walk me home. I told him I was okay, but he came anyway, and we talked loudly through the deserted, leafy streets, walking quickly, the moon making great long shadows of us and the trees.

When we got to the giant main doors, up the driveway, he asked if he could come in. I told him that we couldn't have visitors at night, so he sat close to me on the cold, damp grass in the shadow of the bushes and smoked, talking in whispers.

Touching my arm he asked if it tickled. I said no. He touched my neck. Still no. Then my chest, and finally slid his hand down the front of my jeans. "I bet you like that."

We moved backward into the bushes, wet leaves brushing my face, the smell of soil mixed with whiskey and cigar smoke. I looked up at the moon through the dark trees as the world span "You like that, don't you?" he hissed. Somewhere an owl hooted and I closed my eyes.
"You're an old hand at this," I said. I felt nothing.
Afterward he kissed me, bristles sharp on my face, and pushed something into my hand, before making his way quietly back through the trees.

Inside, I stood invisible as a client passed me, her old feet echoing in the empty entrance hall. In my room I opened my hand and spread the thing out on the table.

He never, ever, acknowledged that he had ever seen me when I often saw him around town, smiling with his wife and children. In another time I would have been a stable lad or a farm boy, rich meeting poor.

I can see it now like a flashbulb memory, somewhere between kindness and guilt as the trees whispering outside, a crumpled twenty-pound note lying on top of a twentieth birthday card.

MICHAEL J. DAVIS

THE DEAD, THE LOST, THE DREAMING

Today, in the white room, we are compelled to move our hands. There is the smell of cleanser. Sometimes, when the window is open, there is the smell of manure, of old rubber. Antonio looks at me. He says, "I love you so much, I could eat your shit."

"My shit's too good for you," I say. "Eat your own."

And he smiles at me with that gap in his teeth.

Doctor Fitzhue forces us to move our hands. He stands behind us. My right hand feels as though the bones are being pulled through the skin. But, if I don't keep trying to make a fist, Fitzhue will come over and do it for me—which is much more painful. Then I will laugh uncontrollably, and everyone will be upset; everyone will hurt more. Sugarpie, a large, black man without calves, will piss on himself again. There are five men with ruined legs, three of us with crippled hands, ten with damaged backs. Many men piss on themselves when they are in pain or afraid. This is something I have learned.

Sweat runs down Antonio's neck. He is grinning at his left hand. *"Hijo de puta,"* he says as the fingers slowly curl.

Today, in the white room, only one man has pissed on himself, but Doctor Fitzhue is still angry. He stands in front of me. "Thomas Bird. Wake up. What do you love? Do you love your mother, boy?"

I am thirty-three. I have flown the P-47 Thunderbolt and the Mustang. I have put families of Germans to the torch, razed whole villages to ash, watched men, old women, babies fall in the streets like leaves. Doctor Fitzhue is twenty-two and has never seen combat. He lives with his wife in nearby *Val-de-Grâce* and calls me boy.

"Another letter," he says, placing it on the stack of letters inches from my hands.
I look at myself in the mirror that covers the wall. I'm in the big baby chair. It's an adult-sized high-chair with a table that rotates to the front and straps to keep the body in place. I look at my shaven head, my sunken eyes.

Six unopened letters from my mother.

"Don't you want to hear from mom?"

"I'll open it," says Antonio.

I stare into Fitzhue's eyes. He knows I want to kill him. I stare at him with an image in my mind, flowing right through my eyes into his: my thumbs digging into his throat—the look on his face, like a stuck pig, caught in that space between this world and the next, skin turning purple around my grip.

"Come on, Bird," he murmurs, "flip me the bird."

Antonio twists his right hand, the undamaged one, around under its straps and sticks up his middle finger. "Hello Captain," he laughs.

I move my hand towards the stack but can't close my fingers to pick anything up. Fitzhue watches me, then takes the letters away. And I'm almost grateful to him for that. No one speaks. In the corner, Sugarpie taps his head against the white plaster wall and hums. Antonio is sniffling. I watch the stillness of my face and think of nothing.

Know what evil is and then look at the world. We drop out of the clouds and they hear us like rats to the owl's wings. See them run. See bouquets of flowers by the side of the road, the white cane bent from impact, columns of smoke, houses restless and burning, bullets in the air like a million seething wasps. And the thought comes, as it always does: I am *not* evil. I am a force of nature. I am not evil.

This is the sky. This is the hand of God. This isn't me. This is their time, their destiny when blossoms of fire open in the air. Their houses, their bodies melting into cobble on the street. I bring the current sweeping them away. I am the courier, the message burned into stone, into blackened splinters.

Today, those of us who can walk were taken out to the dirt field where junk is incinerated. We paced in a long circle so our leg muscles won't shrink. We breathed the burning rubber. Whenever we do this, Antonio finds tarantulas and keeps them balled-up in his fists. Now, it is night. We are strapped down so that we do not hurt ourselves in sleep. But Antonio's right arm and leg work enough that he can undo his restraints. I wake to his sour breath, to his tongue sliding over my lips.

If you are very still, a tarantula will not bite. It will climb your cheek and slip down the side of your nose; it may stop on your pillow and rest. Eventually, it will be gone, stumbling onto the shiny, green floor, into someone else's bed. Antonio strokes my thigh through the covers.

I watch him and feel the legs of the tarantula.

Its hair. Its soft, tentative touch on the skin of my neck.

I am motionless beneath it.

I look at Antonio and think of spraying Kirchen, ripping veins of fire into houses, across fields and streets. We brought the post office to the ground and penetrated its basement where everyone was hiding. The rats' nest cracked, and they ran out burning. A woman shaking fire in her hair like water. A fat man thrashing on the ground. I remember images in still: the dead, the lost, the dreaming standing in the road. Antonio grins above me in the dark. He squeezes my thigh. I shut my eyes.

The frost has come but not the snow. It is Autumn, late September, and the fields around the hospital have turned dirty white. Lieutenant Artaud sits with me at the dayroom window. We watch the empty fields, the fixed, gray sky, the outbuildings of *Val-de-Grâce* tiny on the horizon. The picture never changes.

We do not talk. Yesterday, Fitzhue taunted me with the letters, but I don't think of that. Tomorrow, he will do it again, call me boy, slide the envelopes right against my fingers, but I don't think of that. It is enough to simply sit with Lieutenant Artaud and not speak.

His legs are made of wood. He can't make them work. Most days, he sits at the dayroom window in his bathrobe: bald head, faded tattoos covering his arms, he is impassive—looking at *Val-de-Grâce* where he grew up, where his wife and daughter wait for him to come back from the front. I think of his wife and children along with him. And, watching this unchanging distance, I think of myself, as a child, waiting at the window for my mother to come home. I remember linen curtains rising, filled with evening. And soundless rain beyond. Voices and tires on the wet street outside. Waiting up, through those long hours my mother spent running our small market, what could be said, what could have possibly mattered but feeling quiet with the damp, feeling the air, how the wind moved?

I used to open the window and watch leaves on the maple trees dip and weave, imagining arcs of wind from clouds to branches to my hair lifting in sympathy with the dusk. And my memory still holds the papery light of gray, brittle days, dissolving into wet nights that seemed to move so slowly. "I don't believe in sorrow," Antonio screams as they strap him to the bed. "I don't have regrets. I can fuck—I will fuck anything that moves." And I see Sugarpie, sitting by the door of the dayroom in his wheelchair, hiding his face. He has begun to weep.

Lieutenant Artaud's breath comes in soft, even rasps. Neither of us turn to look down the hall at the French interns punching Antonio in the stomach, twisting even his bad arm underneath the straps.

But we know.

None of us are here by choice: Americans, British, Portuguese, French—we're under orders to recover, to become presentable again. Each of us carries certificates, papers, writs under national seals, that all say the same thing: it is for the morale of the people, for the war effort, for dignity that we must recover before we are sent home, this final order that none of us can carry out. Down the long, white hallway with the green floor that glistens like the surface of a lake, we hear Antonio scream, "*Sucios*. Fucking whores." Soon he will be laughing. He was once a chef with a wife and three children.

Sugarpie was a carpenter. I was a teacher.

Lieutenant Artaud is not interested in anything. He stares at *Val-de-Grâce*. He blinks. And he continues to breathe.

There are 9057 kilometers between here and Los Angeles, where my mother waits, playing the piano after work or combing the bars with the torrents of women of every age and description, looking for older men, discharged men, younger men too sick or weak or crippled to go to war, anyone. My father died before I was born. And I know she's lonely. Sometimes, I think she's been waiting so long for me to come back safe that she's forgotten how to do anything else. 9057 kilometers between me and my home. I can feel each one, each discrete unit of distance keeping me in this place. Here there are wolves that hunt at night. I listen to them crying and think of Venice beach. I think of the ocean pounding the sand, of all living rooms tuned to *The Shadow* sounding in the air over the beach, over all the unadulterated space of this Los Angeles that I miss so much, where I ate and slept and bathed and smoked and watched a column of Sherman tanks rolling down Van Nuys Boulevard.

I carry the sound of those wolves over this hard ground in my mind like a burden. And even their howls seem heavy, deliberate, portentous—so far away from the sounds of home. And I feel even the absence of sound as I fall asleep. At the piano, middle-C is always ringing. The note is a persimmon of heat, of event—a rouge-colored bubble, drifting, while my mother eternally reaches up to smooth the cheek of a man I may or may not know. The rusted, iron owl I kept on my bed stand looks at me, has always been looking at me, the flat roof of our house sagging with rain, my father's headstone forever sinking into the earth. And the silent image of our old, black hound trying to stand, its legs shivering, lips curling back unconsciously over its fangs. I enter the gates of sleep, back in my childhood form—still imprinted in the past, still waiting by the window.

I look at myself in the mirror, baby-bald and sallow this morning. Antonio broke the beveled glass in Fitzhue's office door. And now Sugarpie reads my mother's letters out loud. This is the first day Fitzhue has not taken the officers' transport from town. And we gather in the white room—even Lieutenant Artaud—to hear my mother speak.

Dear Thomas, Sugarpie's voice is southern and low and, for a moment, I think it is the most beautiful sound I have ever heard, *I miss you greatly*. His broad shoulders hunch as he reads, chin on his chest, ornate "Sugarpie" tattooed thick green on the dark of his neck. *The sky is clear these days, and nobody takes the drills very seriously. The Sorensen boy comes to the market a good deal and says how he's mad that they won't let him fight and do his part. I tell him you would know better than me. Maybe you would like to write him and give him some advice.*

Sugarpie's voice breaks. Antonio lights a cigarette with his good hand and looks at nothing. I think of the airfield near *Noirceur-sur-la-Lys*, the night I woke to the groan of a patrol coming out of the sky. Outside the barracks, forms of dark planes moved on the field like giant animals.

A small, brown tarantula crawls slowly across the floor. We hear Artaud back in the dayroom at the end of the hall. Perhaps it is the memory of those planes. Perhaps it is that Sugarpie will not continue, the way the tarantula moves, stunned by hospital light. Or the sound of Artaud loudly drawing air in sharp, broken gasps that makes me join him, watching *Val-de-Grâce* burn. Smoke and red-orange blasts stab the horizon like the dirty, driving rain on the window, turning the grass from white to brown again.

I want to tell Artaud that nature and fate have come down, that we'll never see Fitzhue again, that I know about this message, about the shapes of animals on an airfield at night, about Venice Beach and my mother and wolves and loss.

But, instead, I'll say nothing because the pain I endure, just resting my hand on his shoulder, is more real than anything else. More real than even the scintillate orange of windows blowing out, the running, polished blade, the venom boiling in the vein. Turning away, Antonio laughs and burns a hole in his wrist with the tip of his cigarette. And I'm laughing too, staring at the flames while Sugarpie weeps. And I know we won't ever hurt any worse than this.

IRVING A. GREENFIELD

SYLVIA'S BIRTHDAY PARTY

She was sixty and decided weeks before the event to make a birthday party for herself. Sure or afraid that wouldn't be too many birthdays in her future, she planned this one with meticulous care. The guest list—if it could be called that—wasn't long. She always had a problem with friends. Being a gregarious person, she could make friends easily. But she never had learned how to keep them. So, the list was necessarily narrowed down to members of her immediate family: her mother, her brother Robert and his wife Anne; their two children, Larry and Donald; and her husband, Martin. There was another sister, Rose, a year younger than herself. But they hadn't spoken to each other for close to eight maybe ten years. She wasn't good with numbers unless they were related to the cost of item, whether it was for clothing or something for the house—an apartment in Astoria, Queens.

She summoned her brother and mother by telephone, telling each of them that though her birthday fell on the previous Friday, she would have her birthday party on Sunday. "I'll have chicken soup, roast chicken, meatballs and spaghetti and cookies and an ice-cream cake," she told Robert, whose response was considerably less than enthusiastic. She had served the same dinner since she'd married Martin thirty years ago. It was in fact Sunday dinner. The only variations were the cookies and the ice-cream cake.

"It's called for three, but you can come at a quarter to," she said.

"We'll be there," he answered.

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Except for roasting the chicken, all of the cooking had been done on Friday and Saturday. All she had to do was heat the food and serve it. But there was still one major task purposefully left undone until Sunday morning. After breakfast and before she dressed for the occasion, she and Martin covered the living room carpeting. The kitchen and bathroom floors with huge strips of Kraft paper the made a crunching-like sounds whenever anyone walked on them. That finished she set the table and made sure that the chicken in the oven was not overdone.

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By two-thirty, Sylvia and Martin were dressed for the occasion. Sylvia was big woman, taller than Martin by at least two inches and taller yet when she wore spiked heeled shoes, which was wearing.

Yet, she had a sense of style and managed to look well, while Martin, who was a handsome Latino-type, who wore his clothes with a casualness of a man secure in the knowledge that anything he'd wear would look good on him.

Originally, Martin was from Portugal, but other than snippets of information that put him in Brazil, Canada and Mexico before coming to the United States, his past was opaque. Almost from the time he arrived here, he had worked on the docks as a longshoreman and over the years had moved up to a supervisory position. Unlike Sylvia, who was usually hysterical about something, he was a calm, quiet man.

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At ten minutes to three, Sylvia saw her brother's blue car from the window pull up to the curb. "They're here," she announced. Behind her, she heard Martin go to the door and open it. But she stayed at the window. Her sister-in-law and her mother carried small boxes, and Larry, her elder nephew carried a bouquet. Robert escorted their mother, who would be ninety in September and had one glass eye and little vision in her other eye, as a result of having a detached retina.

Sylvia didn't much like her mother. She may have even hated her and when her father was alive, she didn't care for him either. But it was her mother who she blamed for most of her misfortunes, including the end of her first marriage when she was nineteen, a botched abortion that followed and so much more. As for her brother, though nine years younger than herself, he seemed older and wiser. He was an electronics engineer and his work made it necessary for him to travel.

When everyone was in the apartment, Sylvia kissed all of them, leaving her mother for last.

Robert, his wife and sons wished her a happy birthday and her mother managed to mumble grumpily, "Sixty years is nothing, Wait until you reach my age."

"Mom, you promised not to start," Robert said.

His mother didn't answer and Martin ushered them into the living room and offered them drinks. Though it was late March, the day was very warm. Larry and Robert asked for cokes; Robert, a gin and tonic; and Ann, a white wine on the rocks. His mother-in-law wanted a beer. Osteoporosis had bent her. Her face was crisscrossed with wrinkles and there was a large calcareous mass on her forehead. Beer was her favorite drink, when she could get it, which wasn't too often. Her taste for beer went back to the time when her mother owned a saloon on Pike Street, in lower Manhattan. But that was when she was a girl, not much older than her grandson, Larry. Sylvia was her first born. Robert was her last child. He was an accident. She was forty when she became pregnant with him. He was a difficult child. He loved the streets. At fifteen he ran away from home. But somehow he managed to graduate from college and made something of himself, though she didn't for a minute believe he worked for the government. If he worked for anyone, more than likely it was the

mob. She was convinced of that, but kept her opinion to herself. As for Sylvia, she was born a fool and would die a fool. When she was younger, she was "boy crazy" and a "clothes horse." She was still a "clothes horse."

Martin served the drinks, while Sylvia put munchies on the coffee table in front of the couch.

The conversation drifted, touching on the weather, the price of food and other innocuous topics, until Robert, who resembled his father, even to the basso sound of his voice, said, "I'll be leaving on Wednesday on another business trip. I'll be away for a month."

"So where will you be going this time?" his mother asked.

"Africa," he answered.

"Africa is a big place," she said. "If something happens to me how will Ann get in touch with you?"

"Nothing is going to happen to you," he said, after sipping his drink.

"How do you know that?"

"You're too cranky for anything to happen to you. Certainly God doesn't want you yet, or he'd have taken you awhile back, and as for the Devil—you'd only give him a headache with your crankiness."

"Is that the way a son should talk to his mother," she asked, her eyebrows jiggling up and down.

Robert put his arm around her. "Sure, especially when he becomes to nosey,"

"Ann, you watch him. I hear those African women are sexy as hell. They just give it away."

Ann laughed. "He's old enough to say *no*."

"All men are yes men when it comes to pussy," he mother-in-law said.

"Better watch yourself," Robert said to his mother, "or I'll have one of those witch doctors cast a spell on you."

"Not this old bird," his mother said.

Robert couldn't say that he loved his mother. Love was something that was missing from the family. Like a pie with one slice gone, and no one knows where it went. But it was never there to begin

with. It took him some years of living to look learn that it was never there to begin with. But he did respect her. She was sharp. A survivor.

"This is a beautiful chicken," Sylvia informed them from the kitchen and called Martin to carve the bird.

Larry leaned close to his father and whispered, "She always says that, just like she always has the stupid paper down whenever we come."

"Think of it as - - " He was at a loss for an explanation that would be meaningful to an eleven year old, who'd rather be any other place than where he was.

"Mom says, she's nuts," Donald said, joining the conversation.

"Well, I wouldn't go that far," Robert said. "I'd rather leave it as being peculiar."

"What's all the whispering about?" his mother asked.

"The boys wanted to know the name of the witch doctor who'd put a spell on you if you got out of hand," Robert said.

"Very funny."

"That's not his name," Robert answered.

"Everyone at the dinning room table," Sylvia called.

Robert helped his mother off of the sofa.

"Has she got that damn paper on the floor?" she asked, as they walked into the dinning room.

"That's what the boys were whispering about."

"Well, I don't have to whisper about it," she said loudly. "I don't like walking on paper. It gives me the heebie-jeebies.

"Oh Ma, don't start," Sylvia said. "We're going sit down and have a lovely dinner."

"Ma, take it easy. It's her birthday," Robert said.

"The hell it is. Her birthday was two days ago," she shot back. "It's just damn stupid to celebrate after or even before the day the person was born on."

"It's not important," Robert said, settling her into a chair and taking the one next to it.

Martin brought out a platter with the sliced bird on it, while Sylvia gave everyone a portion of chicken-fricassee.

Dinner went well. The boys particularly like the spaghetti and meatballs, and Ann complimented Sylvia on the fricassee.

"I used more wine than I usually do," Sylvia said.

"Too rich for my taste," her mother commented, though she ate all of it and sopped up the gravy with a piece of bread.

When the main course was finished, Sylvia served coffee and brought out the ice-cream cake with HAPPY BIRTHDAY SYLVIA scripted in pink cream across its diameter. Martin put six candles into it and lit them.

"Make wish," Ann said.

Sylvia, child-like, closed her eyes, puffed up her cheeks, and blew across the wavering yellow flames. All of them went out.

Everyone wished her a happy birthday, except her mother. She said, "So she's another year older, that doesn't mean that she's a year smarter."

"Mom—" Robert began.

"Don't *mon* me," she answered petulantly. "Sixty is no different from fifty-nine or sixty-one."

"Okay mom," Ann said, taking hold of her mother-in-law's hand. "We made it different because all of us are here to celebrate it."

"Martin, you cut the cake," Sylvia said, fighting back tears.

"If I see something, I think you'd like, I'll bring it back for you," Robert told his sister, hoping to ease her anguish.

"What about bringing something back for me?" his mother asked.

"Maybe a witch-doctor or a sweet pill for a cranky old lady."

"So you say," she shot back haughtily.

"A tongue twig," he said.

That stopped her. She looked at him. What she saw was a gray form hardly distinguishable from the background. "What's that?" she asked.

"It keeps a sharp tongue from wagging."

"You made that up."

"Don't bet on it."

After the ice-cream cake, it was time for Sylvia to open her presents, and for that Sylvia said they should go back into the living room.

There were only two gifts. Larry had given her the bouquet when she had kissed him at the door. The flowers were already in a fluted green glass vase and prominently displayed on a small end table next to a high back, black leather chair opposite the sofa.

Sylvia opened her brother and sister-law's gift first. It was wrapped in silver- paper and sealed with a gold sticker embossed with the name STUBBEN GLASS. The paper gone, the box was a dark purple, hinged affaire and inside of it, surrounded by green velvet was a cut glass octagon etched with various sea creatures.

"Oh it's beautiful," Sylvia exclaimed. "Here, Martin, look at it." And she passed it to him. "I know just the place to put it." She kissed her brother and sister-in-law and said, "I love things like that."

Her mother's gift was also wrapped in a glossy green colored paper. The kinds that people buy after Christmas at half price, which they use to wrap the following year's gifts.

"My neighbor wrapped it for me," her mother explained.

The paper was securely fastened with scotch-tape that Sylvia was forced to rip off. "A cigar box," she exclaimed. "A cigar box!" Bewildered, she looked at Martin.

"Open it," her mother said.

Sylvia picked up the lid. "Oh my God what have you done to me," she cried. And she turned the box over. Nails, nuts and bolts, bits of wife and a few stones fell on to the paper covered carpet.

"I gave her what she deserves," she mother said calmly. "I gave her–"

"I hate you. You destroy everything. You've destroyed my life," Sylvia screamed and ran into the bedroom.

"Take me home," she said to Robert. "I did what I came to do."

"You did something terrible," he answered.

She smiled and her eyebrows jumped rapidly up and down. "She'll remember her sixtieth birthday party until the day she dies."

"And what will you remember?" Robert asked.

"Soon, nothing," she said. "I'll remember nothing."

DENNIS MUST

THE HIRELING

"I have just the man."

The dispatcher acted upon the flimsiest of evidence when he advised callers.

A surgeon wanted assistance dressing his foundation beds. I arrived to several yards of hemlock shavings pyramiding his driveway. A bright green wheelbarrow cradling a silver shovel sat alongside. All day I fed him the mulch. He insisted I leave the shovel in the driveway.

"I can't risk your using it anywhere near me. My hands are my life." At day's end we shared a pitcher of pink lemonade, and he paid me in paper dollars fingered out of a mason jar.

The second house sat alongside a steep wooded hill. The paterfamilias said he was hurrying off to the airport, but, "This is what I want done."

In rainstorms water sluiced off the ridge, washing away patches of their newly sodded lawn. A trailer load of paving bricks had been stacked in his driveway. "Take the bricks and construct a gutter down the incline, directing the water away from our residence and dooryard. You look like an intelligent young man with brawn."

I was protected from the sun by dense foliage, and, whereas the surgeon hadn't trusted me to wield a shovel in his proximity, this employer was giving me carte blanche to construct a Roman waterway.

At noon his young wife watched me leaning against my car, eating a sack lunch. "Won't you come inside?" she said. "It's air conditioned in here, and I've made iced tea."

The pair owned a handsomely appointed Tudor. A Picasso hung in the foyer, a Braque over the kitchen table. I identified them. She pointed to several other copies on their living room walls.

"Man Ray, Corot, Ben Shawn, and, yes, Matisse's *Boy at the Piano*. A favorite of mine, too," I said.

She buttered herself an English muffin. "What are you doing here, Mr. Hart?"

"Building a wonderful sluiceway down your hillside," I said.

"My husband doesn't even know these painters."

I didn't reply.

"Did you have enough to drink?" she asked, standing.

"Yes," I said, taking the remains of my lunch back outside.

With pick and mallet I traced the path the furrow would take down the ravine. Two yellow birch saplings I had to uproot. The channel the water had cut was virtually a straight chute from the crest to the dooryard. My masonry waterway would snake in wide and graceful curves through the maple, oak, and birch, to its end in a rubble catchall far removed from the house.

Day two the wife placed a milk bottle of iced tea alongside my car at noontime. I waved from the hillside shadows.

I began laying the bricks in the runnel on day three. The hillside wound was no longer a serpentine humus scar cleaving the deep green moss and leaf cover. The brick waterway opened wide at the chine, gradually narrowing until it began to twist and turn luge-like away from the house, hundreds of feet below. I didn't stop for lunch that day, the results to the eye so satisfying: a dust-red aqueduct, firm and unbroken against the vicissitudes of nature. It was looking ancient.

At half-light the owner stood in the dooryard watching me lay the last brick.

"Why didn't you make it fall straight?" he asked, bemused.

I glanced up at his wife who stood watching us with her hands on the porch railing.

"Pay the gentleman, Frank. Or Man Ray will stop by for lunch." She found this very humorous, and waved her arms as if to dismiss us both. "Christ, it's lovelier! A Magritte appendectomy in our hillside. Besides, the guy knows every damn work of art we have hanging on our walls. I told you when you called the State Unemployment Office we might get more than you bargained for."

The very next morning as I sat waiting in the day laborer pool, the dispatcher summoned me forward again. "Hart, you know we do random checkups? The most recent missus had some good things to say about you."

"Oh, yeah?"

"She said you made a beautiful landscape painting. I thought I'd sent you out to dig a trench. What the hell did you do?"

"These people presume you hire out mules."

"Well, here—this one came in this morning."

"Where and what is it?"

"In Shadyside. They want a full-time gardener."

"I don't think I'm qualified."

"I inform them we only vouch for a man's willingness to work. Look, they get a horticulturist at minimum wages. You both win."

Its brick newly pointed, the Hubbard residence was a fine copy of a Samuel McIntire Federal with six over six fenestrations and enameled forest-green panel shutters set on an acre of land at the end of a cul-de-sac. A wooded conservation area bordered its property line. Both the husband and wife greeted me when I stepped out of my car.

"How do you do, Mr. Hart? We phoned your most recent reference. Our plantings are all rather proper, but frankly, both Lydia and I agree, uninspired. We need a resourceful hand to stamp these grounds with his personality.

"Your hours will be from eight to five, and any day it rains for more than two hours without interruption, you may go home. We've set up a spare room for your use upstairs in the carriage house that has its own sink and commode. It also boasts a table and chair where you may eat your lunch—take one hour, please—or plan new flower beds. How does it sound?"

"I've very little experience in gardening. I'm merely a day laborer."

"Ah, dispense with the humility."

"Well, I am willing to study."

"There are source books in the carriage house. There's a pair of clean coveralls hanging up in there, too, if you don't mind. You'll be furnished a new change at least twice a week."

We shook hands.

"Your pay envelope will be waiting for you Friday mornings on our back porch in the event you want to make an errand that noon. Lydia will start you out in the a.m."

It's very difficult keeping a sense of who you are when others insist that you conform to their notion of themselves. The tan coveralls were British-made, had brass buttons, and a conceit of cuffs. In the carriage house sat several pairs of green Wellingtons, most of which fit. Lydia suggested that I begin by sprucing up the flowerbeds, deadheading the roses, and freshening the mulch about the foundation plantings. In the rear of the carriage house were slat bins of cedar, pine, and hemlock mulch, renewed each spring by a local nursery.

"If the heat becomes unbearable, Mr. Hart, I'd suggest you retire to your carriage house atelier and read up. If you are occupying your mind in our behalf, like studying horticulture, we know you are working."

One aspect of my duties, of course, was to keep their expansive lawns groomed. Except for the trim work where I used a finely tooled, again British made, push reel mower, I sat on a tractor that pulled several of them. Lydia described for me the lawn pattern that she and Elijah Hubbard wanted the mowers to lay down. The sketch hung in the carriage house, describing the quadrant where I was to begin, when to make turns, and where to close. The chiaroscuro looked like a grass quilt.

"You can tinker with the tractor, too, Mr. Hart. Make it hum to your satisfaction. That, too, is part of your job. If it takes a day getting it to work exactly to your satisfaction, so be it."

The second week of my employment, Lydia Hubbard had pinned a note to my change of coveralls.

"I'm having a few guests over for tea this morning, Mr. Hart. Around noon we will be traveling to Wayside Inn for lunch. I want you to chauffeur us. You needn't eat your lunch before as I've reserved a place for you there, too. Your outfit and cap you'll find in the closet in your room. The key to our Packard alongside. The purple coneflowers need weeding out. Perhaps you can cut the beds back and leave some transplants for my guests. I'd very much appreciate that."

I spent the morning spading the echinacea, tossing most of what I dug up in the compost bin. I did pot and set aside several clumps as she requested. A full-length mirror hung on the back of the closet door. Inside, a pair of black chauffeur breeches, one starched white shirt with black four-in-hand quick-tie, a double-breasted chauffeur's jacket, and a patent-leather billed cap. Leather leggings hung on a lone hanger.

At noon I pulled up to the house's porte-cochere. Mrs. Hubbard and her two lady friends I assisted into the back seat. A glass partition in the Packard separated the driver's compartment. I could

barely hear the women's light banter over the hum of the twelve-cylinder engine. Looking straight ahead, as I presumed a chauffeur would do, I drove with two hands on the wheel and arrived within the half hour.

"Mr. Hart, when you are finished parking the automobile, go inside and tell the receptionist you're my chauffeur. She'll have a place waiting for you."

"Oh, please, ma'am. I'm not hungry."

"If we eat, so do you, sir. Come, ladies."

Louie the Fifteenth apple-green armchairs surrounding linen-dressed tables set with bone china, sterling silver, and crystal goblets, dotted the Wayside's cool interior. Its ceilings were uncustomarily low for an eating establishment of this caliber, but most of the patrons like Lydia Hubbard were over fifty. Women in stiff white shirts with bow ties and flared black skirts, waited on them. A Creole sang and played a medley from
"Oklahoma" on a Bösendorfer at the far end of the room.

"Lydia Hubbard's man? Right this way please."

I was ushered into the kitchen. Identical table appointments, except the lone chair was a plain arrow back. The busboy attending Mrs. Hubbard's party served me, keeping me apprized of what courses the ladies were working on, and alerting me at the demitasse and dessert phase to warm up the car.

"They might treat themselves to a cordial today," he winked.

He returned with a shot glass of Grand Marnier. Alongside he placed two breath mints.

On the journey home, Mrs. Hubbard had me stop at a farm stand. After I deposited her guests at their estates, she slid open the glass partition and dropped a sack of un-shucked corn alongside me in the passenger's seat. "Take the rest of the afternoon off, Mr. Hart. It was delightful; we must do it again soon."

So it is with some sadness and regret that I relate the following.

By the close of the initial month's employment, I'd amassed a considerable amount of know-how regarding horticulture. The first visible sign that the Hubbard's took delight in was when I moved the blue hydrangeas away from the yellow achillea. "I never did like that corner of the garden," Lydia exclaimed one morning. "It was a most gauche color combination."

That very same morning, I looked up from the foxglove bed and noticed a young man standing several feet away on the lawn eyeing me. He was about my age, and we shared the same build, hair color, and blue eyes.

"Hello. Who are you?"

"Toby," he said.

"Oh, a friend of the Hubbard's?"

"I've been watching you for several days." He spoke with the lilt of a young college professor. A certain irony in his voice, a playfulness in his mien.

"From afar?"

"Up there." He pointed to the rear of the McIntire house, the windows of the room on the second floor on its north-end corner. They were covered by green opaque window blinds.

"Learning my secrets, are you?"

"Yes." He shared the amusement.

"Did you catch me in the chauffeur's duds?"

"Charming. Mother drew my attention to you."

"Toby Hubbard?"

"Terence Edward Hubbard. And yours?"

"Buddy Hart."

"You been a gardener long, Buddy?"

"A month now. And you?"

He backed away, retreating into the shadows of the three massive willow trees that boarded the small stream running at the edge of their property.

I continued my work, planning to join him at lunchtime. But he wasn't about. At quitting time I glanced up at his room. One of the blinds had lifted, and he stood stiffly in it, wearing a pinstriped

antique New York Yankee baseball uniform. As if he were a poster I was looking at pasted onto the glass.

Two days later, midmorning at the rose bed, Toby startled me once again.

"You're a professor, aren't you, Mr. Hart? Once fall begins, Mother will have you sit across the Chippendale dining room table from me and commence our tutoring sessions. I'm very much looking forward to it. I presume we'll begin with Qume and logic—our first course. Kant and Hegel, our second. Then begin to study Joyce and the *Odyssey*. About noon would be right when the sunlight is sparkling on the mahogany breakfront. Then we must break for a game of ..."

"I'm the gardener, Toby."

"Just as easy being the professor, Mr. Hart. You'll find texts, a table, and a chair up inside the McIntire house, and a very pleasant reading lamp with a paper shade that casts a warm light over any text. In addition, there is a single bed covered with a log cabin quilt, and a cloth rug to protect your bare feet from the cold oak plank floors on damp mornings. Down the hall is a bathroom we will share. It has a key on the inside. We need never to intrude on the other.

"Do you have friends? Perhaps after our daily lessons, you could invite them over when Mother goes to her afternoon luncheons. We could gather in Father's den, sit in the overstuffed leather chairs, put our feet up on boar ottomans, smoke Cuban cigars, and listen to music of our own liking. I prefer Satie. How about you, Mr. Hart?"

From the back porch Mrs. Hubbard was watching Toby and me. Momentarily she stood next to him. "Come, Terence. There's no cloud cover today. I don't want you getting too much sun."

"What did he say to you, Mr. Hart?" She'd returned to the cream and strawberry lily bed upon leading Toby back inside the house.

"He wanted to know the botanical names of all the flowers, ma'am. I was teaching him what I'd learned."

"Oh," she said, nonplused. "By the way, Mr. Hubbard and I have been meaning to inform you that your hoary alyssum patch on the south side of the house is beginning to look scraggly. Will you attend to it, please?"

I'd heard it from other employers before. It was their tone. The householder with the copies of Braque and Man-Ray on her wall—she began counting the hours after our truncated lunch that noon. And Friday, when I'd customarily get to wear the chauffeur's costume, Elijah Hubbard came home early from work to accompany Lydia and the women to the Wayside Inn.

The following Monday, I noticed my coveralls were the soiled ones I'd taken off at week's end. I mowed the west lawn that morning, then proceeded to prune the rhododendron about the Federalist mansion.

"We must wear the same suit size, don't you think?"

His stealth unsettled me once again.

"Thirty-nine long?" I said.

"There's a tailored khaki gabardine two-piece along with a chamois-yellow shirt and rep tie inside a garment bag on the back seat of your automobile, Mr. Hart. I want you to have it."

"A rep tie, too, Toby?" I said, hoping to humor him.

"Princeton. It's where you went, isn't it? What was your eating club? Don't forget to invite the others, Mr. Hart. We'll sit in Father's study just like you said. I'll break out the gin and bourbon. Just men, now mind you. And brush up on your Hume and Locke. When the weather begins to turn, those texts look quite lovely lying about the empty rooms."

Lydia Hubbard was upon us.

"Mr. Hart, fall is imminent. There's a small bonus inside for you." She palmed me a tallow-yellow pay envelope. Toby had rushed back into the house. She in his draft.

I recovered my personal belongings from the upper room in the carriage house, and planned on hanging Toby's gift in its closet. But the back seat of my car was empty.

On the way out of the circular driveway, I glanced up at his north corner windows. He stood in the chauffeur's suit wearing a cracked smile.

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Elizabeth Arnold grew up in northeast Florida and attended Oberlin College, the University of Chicago, and the MFA writing program at Warren Wilson College. She has taught at the University of Chicago, the University of Montana in Missoula, Warren Wilson College, and, now, the University of Maryland. She has received a Whiting Writers Award and fellowships from the Bunting Institute at Radcliffe, the Fine Arts Work Center, Yaddo, and the Bread Loaf Writers Conference. Her poems and essays have appeared or are forthcoming in SLATE, TRIQUARTERLY, CHICAGO REVIEW, ANTIOCH REVIEW, POETRY DAILY, KALLIOPE, SAGETRIEB, TIKKUN, and CAROLINA QUARTERLY. While researching her Ph.D. dissertation on the British poet, Mina Loy, Arnold discovered a complete, unpublished manuscript of Loy's novel, INSEL, which she edited for Black Sparrow Press in 1991. Arnold's first book of poems, THE REEF, appeared in 1999 from the University of Chicago Press.

Cary Barbor

Cary Barbor lives in New York City. Her first published story, “No Shoes in the Ashram,” was nominated for a Pushcart Prize. She was recently a Knight Journalism Fellow at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, where she studied malaria in western Kenya and botulism in Alaska.

Mark Brown

Mark Brown grew up in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, an ex-industrial city in the north east of England, before drifting southwards, eventually ending up in Deptford, south east London. At present he divides his time equally between writing, being unemployed, and editing for ABCtales.com, the UK’s most popular creative writing website.

Renee Howard Cassese

Renee Howard Cassese has lived on Long Island her whole life. Presently residing in Seaford with her husband Frank, who is an artist and chef, she is eagerly looking forward to the second half century of her life. After fifteen years as a special education teacher, Renee now works in education administration, but she is writing fiction and personal essays and aiming toward making freelance writing her full time job. She has two adult sons, Jesse and Rob and a lazy beagle named Lady Samantha.

Kirby Congdon

Kirby Congdon is the author of eleven books of poetry, the latest, CAT POEMS (2002), two books of prose, and a collection of criticism. His poems and stories have been included in over two dozen anthologies, and many of his poems have been set to music by three different composers here and Australia. Ray C. Longtin is compiling a collection of Congdon's letters for the Kenneth Spencer Research Library at the University of Kansas where his work is collected in-depth.

Joan Connor

Joan Connor is Associate Professor in Fiction Writing at Ohio University and a member of the faculty at the University of Southern Maine's low residency MFA program. She has published two collections of short stories: HERE ON OLD ROUTE 7 and WE WHO LOVE APART (University of Missouri Press). Frederick Busch selected her third collection, HISTORY LESSONS, as the AWP Award Winner for 2002, which will appear later this year from the University of Massachusetts Press. Her works have appeared and are forthcoming in: THE OHIO REVIEW, THE SOUTHERN REVIEW, THE JOURNAL, ARTS AND LETTERS, TRIQUARTERLY, THE GETTYSBURG REVIEW, THE KENYON REVIEW, CHELSEA MAGAZINE, MANOA and SHENANDOAH among others. She is a recipient of an Ohio State Arts Council grant. She lives in Athens, Ohio and Belmont, Vermont with her son, Kerry.

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Chip Dameron's latest books include HOOK AND BLOODLINE (2000) and GREATEST HITS (2001). More than a hundred of his poems have appeared in such literary magazines as MISSISSIPPI REVIEW, TAOS REVIEW, and SOUTHWESTERN AMERICAN LITERATURE. He teaches writing and literature at The University of Texas at Brownsville and Texas Southmost College.

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A recipient of the 1998 William Saroyan Fellowship for Fiction, he is a graduate student in the Ph.D. creative writing program at the University of Missouri-Columbia, and former fiction editor of the journal CUTBANK. His work has appeared in THE SAN JOAQUIN REVIEW, DESCANT, COTTONWOOD, THE JABBERWOCK REVIEW, THE MID-AMERICAN REVIEW, and received an honorable mention in the Prentice Hall Writing Contest 2000.

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Jim Douglas's poems and short stories have appeared in many journals and magazines but most recently in: BLUE MESA REVIEW, THE CHARITON REVIEW, GREEN HILLS LITERARY LANTERN, NORTH DAKOTA QUARTERLY, AND PORTLAND REVIEW. He lives in

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Lucy Fuchs

Lucy Fuchs writes and gardens in Ambler, PA. where she lives with her husband and cat. Writing reflective articles for garden magazines led her to poetry, which has appeared in NORTHEAST CORRIDOR, SCHUYLKILL VALLEY JOURNAL, AUROREAN, and KIT CAT REVIEW. Her book reviews were published in the LITERARY MAGAZINE REVIEW, and the SMALL PRESS REVIEW. Forthcoming is a memoir-essay in the IOWA REVIEW. A book of her poetry IN ANOTHER LIGHT was published, as well as the collection of essays, CONFESSIONS OF A GARDENER .She was awarded first prize in poetry by the Imperium Proviso press.

Irving A. Greenfield

Irving A. Greenfield is seventy-four years old and has been writing most of his adult life. He has had several novels and short stories published. Married to the same woman for over fifty years, he has two sons and two grandchildren. He teaches at Wagner College in Staten Island.

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J.T. Ledbetter is Professor of English at California Lutheran University in Thousand Oaks. His poems have appeared in POETRY, THE SEWANEE REVIEW, THE NEW YORK QUARTERLY, THE PRAIRIE SCHOONER, and others. Fiction, Creative Non-Fiction, and Criticism has appeared in THE WALT WHITMAN REVIEW, THE EXPLICATOR, UNDER THE SUN, THE BIG MUDDY, THE PACIFIC REVIEW, THE BEST OF CROSSCURRENT, and others.

Charles Edward Mann

Charles Edward Mann has an MFA in Creative Writing from Warren Wilson College and was the 1988 Bucks County PA Poet Laureate. He's currently working on a manuscript based on the photographs of Joel-Peter Witkin. His work has appeared in AMERICAN POETRY REVIEW, THE THREEPENNY REVIEW, THE GREENSBORO REVIEW, THE SOUTHERN

HUMANITIES REVIEW, THE NEW YORK QUARTERLY, THE CREAM CITY REVIEW, IMAGES, THE CUMBERLAND REVIEW, THE ANTIETAM REVIEW, WISCONSIN REVIEW and many others. Also a chapbook: AFTER THE PLEDGE OF ALLEGIANCE (Pudding House Publications, 2000). Charles' work has also been nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

Laurel Marshfield

Laurel Marshfield is a freelance writer living in Philadelphia, who grew up largely in Massachusetts, Maine, and Vermont. She is at work on a book of literary nonfiction titled SENSUOUS, VIVID, REAL: NURTURING THE ABILITY TO BE. Her work has appeared in THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER, MAIN LINE TODAY MAGAZINE, PHILADELPHIA MAGAZINE, and a zillion trade publications in various industries: healthcare, insurance, law, finance, general business.

Dennis Must

Creative Arts Book Company, Berkeley, CA, recently published Dennis Must's collection of short stories, BANJO GREASE. His stories have appeared in WRITER'S FORUM, SALT HILL JOURNAL, SOU'WESTER, BLUE MOON REVIEW, CROSSCONNECT, EXQUISITE CORPSE, ALSOP REVIEW, BIG BRIDGE, LINNAEAN STREET, among others, and have won numerous awards. He lives in Massachusetts with his wife and two daughters.

Mark Osaki

His work has appeared in various journals and anthologies, including: THE GEORGIA REVIEW, CARRYING THE DARKNESS—THE POETRY OF THE VIETNAM WAR (Avon, Texas Tech University Press), SOUTH CAROLINA REVIEW, MEN OF OUR TIME—AN ANTHOLOGY OF MALE POETRY IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA (University of Georgia Press), BREAKING SILENCE—AN ANTHOLOGY OF CONTEMPORARY ASIAN AMERICAN POETS (Greenfield Review Press) and the ONSET REVIEW. Mark has received awards for my poetry from the Academy of American Poets, University of California at Berkeley, San Francisco Arts Commission, Seattle Arts Council, HIRAM POETRY REVIEW and the National Endowment for the Arts. He received a BA in English from UC Berkeley, and his MFS and Ph.D. from Georgetown University. He is a former combat officer and Foreign Service analyst. Currently he works for Disabled Sports USA, a nonprofit organization that provides therapeutic programs and advocacy rights for disabled individuals.

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Michele Heather Pollock is currently pursuing her MFA in Creative Writing from Hamline University in St. Paul, MN. Her chapbook, REGARDING MEMORY, was awarded the 2002 Poetically Speaking Chapbook Award and was printed by Cross Keys Press. Her work has

previously appeared or is forthcoming in WATER ~ STONE and POETRY MOTEL, among other journals.

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Robert Samarotto taught music and humanities at the University of Wisconsin/River Falls, has served as musical director of the Guthrie Theater, and as poet/musician member of the ensemble Zeitgeist, frequently toured Europe and the United States. He has recorded for Sony Classics, OO Records, and New Albion Records. John Schaefer at WNYC Radio in New York presented his collection of poems, THE LITTLE PIANO BOOK. He has collaborated as librettist with composers Eric Stokes and Randall Davidson and on The Vegetable Book Project with visual artist Patrice Marvin. He has been a recipient of grants from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Jerome Foundation and the McKnight Foundation. His poems have appeared in: LATITUDES 32-49 (N.), SHINING TIMES, BRYANT LITERARY JOURNAL, MINNESOTA CONNECTIONS, WALKING ON WATER, OFF THE COAST, AMBERGRIS, BUCKLE&, THE CURBSIDE REVIEW, FALL OUT, MILKWEED CHRONICLE, and THE MINNEAPOLIS TRIBUNE.

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David Shine graduated from Columbia University with a B.A. in English and Philosophy and received a J.D. from New York University School of Law. His work has appeared in the magazines WAVELENGTH and SPECTRUM. He lives and works in New York.

Tom Sleigh

Tom Sleigh's books include AFTER ONE, WAKING, THE CHAIN, THE DREAMHOUSE, and a translation of Euripides' HERAKLES. His new book of poems, FAR SIDE OF THE EARTH, is forthcoming this spring from Houghton Mifflin. He has won the Shelley Prize from the Poetry Society of America, an Individual Writer's Award from the Lila Wallace/Reader's Digest Fund, and grants from the Guggenheim Foundation and the National Endowment for the Arts. He teaches in the graduate writing program at New York University and Dartmouth College.

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Claude Clayton Smith is professor of English at Ohio Northern University in Ada, Ohio. He is the author of five books plus a variety of poems, short stories, plays, essays, and reviews. He has translated and edited two volumes of Native Siberian literature, and his own work has been translated into five languages, including Russian and Chinese. He holds a BA from Wesleyan, MAT from Yale, MFA from Iowa, and DA from Carnegie-Mellon.

Susan Terris

Susan Terris' new book FIRE IS FAVORABLE TO THE DREAMER will be published in 2003 by Arctos Press. In 2004, Gary Metras at Adastra Press will publish a letterpress edition of her chapbook POETIC LICENSE and Marsh Hawk Press will publish her third full-length book NATURAL DEFENSES. Her journal publications include THE ANTIOCH REVIEW, THE MIDWEST QUARTERLY, PLOUGHSHARES, MISSOURI REVIEW, LYNX EYE, *and* SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA ANTHOLOGY. With CB Follett, she is co-editor of a new journal, RUNES, A REVIEW OF POETRY.