



Ai

m a g a z i n e

issue 5. fall 2016.

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THE CREATIVE PATH
OF ALLEN ESKENS

POETRY REVIEW OF
DARREN DEMAREE'S
Not for Art nor Prayer

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ARTISTS & AUTHORS

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William Cass



William Cass has had a little over ninety-five short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines and anthologies such as *december*, *Briar Cliff Review*, and *Conium Review*. Recently, he was a finalist in Glimmer Train's short fiction and Black Hill Press' novella competitions, received a Pushcart nomination, and won writing contests at Terrain.org and *The Examined Life Journal*. He lives and works as an educator in San Diego, California.

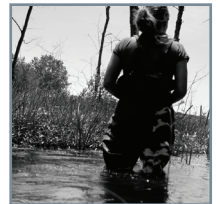
Gordon Ćosić

Born in 1956 in Ćacak, Serbia, in 1975 Gordon Ćosić finished school for graphic design and since 1976 has lived and worked as a graphic designer. In 1985, he won the RK SSO "Daring Flower" award for creativity. In addition to graphic design, Ćosić is engaged in painting and photography. His works have been included in several group exhibitions, including an exhibition of miniatures at the City Gallery in Uzice.



Kathleen Deep

Deep is an artist and photographer whose creation of image making includes merging alternative processes, mix media and hybrid workflows. Deep's images have been exhibited in Oregon, Texas, Connecticut, upstate New York and NYC, including web magazines and gallery publications. Samples of Deep's ongoing creative writing prose "To Slow the Sinking" have been included in various web and book publications.



Darren Demaree

Darren C. Demaree is the author of five poetry collections, most recently, *The Nineteen Steps Between Us* (2016, After the Pause). He is the Managing Editor of the Best of the Net Anthology. Currently, he is living in Columbus, Ohio with his wife and children.



Jack Freeman



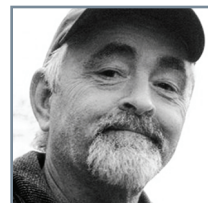
Jack Freeman is a student at Wichita State University and the host of the educational podcast Nine Minute Poetry. His work has appeared in *Common Ground Review*, *New Welsh Review*, *Off the Coast*, and elsewhere.

ARTISTS & AUTHORS

IN THIS ISSUE

Brad Garber

Brad writes, paints, draws, photographs, hunts for mushrooms and snakes in the Great Northwest. Since 1991, he has published poetry, essays and weird stuff in such publications as Uphook Press, Barrow Street, and other quality publications. In 2013, he was a Pushcart Prize nominee.



Melinda Giordano

Melinda's written pieces have appeared in publications such as Lake Effect Magazine, Scheherazade's Bequest and Circa Magazine, and she is a nominee for the 2017 Pushcart Prize. Melinda was also a regular poetry contributor to CalamitiesPress.com with her own column, "I Wandered and Listened."



Mitchell Grabois



Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over a thousand of his poems and works of fiction appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize, The Best of the Net, and Queen's Ferry Press's Best Small Fictions for work published in 2011 through 2015. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. To see more of his work, google Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois. He lives in Denver.

Saloni Kaul



As a poet, Saloni Kaul has been in print for 47 years, first published at ten. She is a critic and columnist with leading dailies and has been recognised in broadcasting since 1977. In August of 2015, she was *Eye On Life Magazine's* featured poet with a suite of four poems. In addition, she has poetry in the *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Poetry Quarterly*, *The Horrorzine*, *Poetry and Paint Anthology*, *Misty Mountain Review*, and *Inwood Indiana*. Upcoming poetry shall be published in *Sentinel Literary Quarterly* (October 2016) and in *The Voices Project* (May 2016).

Michael Keshigian

Michael Keshigian's tenth poetry collection, *Beyond*, was released May 2015 by Black Poppy. He has been widely published in numerous national and international journals most recently including *Red River Review*, *Illya's Honey*, *Blue Pepper*. In addition, he has appeared as feature writer in over a dozen publications with 6 Pushcart Prize and 2 Best Of The Net nominations. More information can be found on his website at <http://www.michaelkeshigian.com>



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

IN THIS ISSUE

Jennifer Lothrigel

Jennifer Lothrigel is a poet and artist residing in the San Francisco Bay area. Her work has been published in Trivia - Voices of Feminism, Narrative Northeast, Poetry Quarterly, The Tishman Review, Corvus Review, Five Poetry and elsewhere.

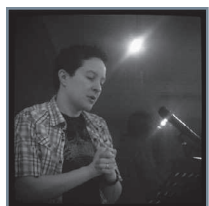


Linda Monahan

Linda Monahan is an author, poet, and flower priestess whose work exalts the feminine and affirms oneness with all beings. She lives in Mount Shasta, California with her wife and four rescue animals.



Sarah Frances Moran



Sarah Frances Moran is a writer, editor, animal lover, video gamer, and queer Latina. She thinks Chihuahuas should rule the world and prefers their company to people 90% of the time. Her work has most recently been published (or is upcoming) in Acentos Review, Tinderbox Poetry Journal, Bop Dead City and Chiron Review. She is editor and founder of Yellow Chair Review. She may be reached at www.sarahfrancesmoran.com

Keith Moul

Keith Moul's poems and photos are published widely. His latest chapbook, *The Future as a Picnic Lunch*, will be released shortly by Finishing Line Press. Moul's poems and photos appear widely. Four of his books have recently been published: *The Grammar of Mind* from Blue & Yellow Dog; *Beautiful Agitation* from Red Ochre Press; *Reconsidered Light*, a collection of Keith's poems written to accompany his photos, from Broken Publications; and *To Take and Have Not*, also with Broken Publications.



Chiemena Ndukwu

Chiemena Ndukwu is the pen name of Paschal Ndukwu Chiemena, who was born in and writes from Biafra, a nation under slavery. His poems are often laments of the people in his society. At times he also writes on his involvement in freedom fights and personal experiences. He is a published poet, novelist, essayist and playwright. His name has been found on the cover of many books either as contributor or author. Now 21, he has won awards and recently won the ABC Literary Award. He started writing at 14.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

IN THIS ISSUE

E.K. (Rick) Newton, III



E.K. Newton, III was born in southern Indiana. He became bilingual at an early age, and has lived all his adult life in a bilingual/bi-cultural household. Although a language teacher/cross-cultural trainer by profession, Newton has loved creative writing since grade school. His experiences within various cultures, having lived in Panama, Puerto Rico, Mexico and Spain, plus three decades of volunteer work with immigrants in the US, inform his writing. In retirement, he has finished a novel and numerous short stories, including two published in the past sixteen months.

Adrian Patterson

Calling the Southwest his home, Adrian Patterson spends time outdoors to find pieces of the real world that fit inside his camera frame. He enjoys luring small animals with food and sitting under cacti for long hours waiting for the perfect light.

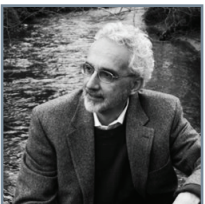


Ron Riecki

Ron Riecki's non-fiction, fiction, and poetry have been published in River Teeth, Spillway, New Ohio Review, Shenandoah, Canary, Bellevue Literary Review, Prairie Schooner, New Orleans Review, Little Patuxent Review, Wigleaf, and many other literary journals.



David Anthony Sam



Born in Pennsylvania, David Anthony Sam now lives in Culpeper, Virginia with his wife and life partner, Linda, and serves as president of Germanna Community College. He has two collections: *Dark Land*, *White Light* (1974, 2014) and *Memories in Clay*, *Dreams of Wolves* (2014). His poetry has appeared in over 50 journals. Sam was the featured poet in the Spring 2016 issue of *The Hurricane Review* and in 2015 was twice nominated for the Pushcart Prize.

L.B. Sedlacek

L.B. Sedlacek's poetry has appeared in publications such as *Pure Francis*, *The Broad River Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Third Wednesday*, *Mastodon Dentist*, *Big Pulp*, and others. L.B. received an MA from Wake Forest University and is the author of 11 chapbooks.



ARTISTS & AUTHORS

IN THIS ISSUE

Laura Tanenbaum

Laura Tanenbaum is a writer and teacher whose work has appeared in publications including *Narrative*, *Cleaver*, *Entropy*, *Dissent*, and *Open Letters Monthly*. She teaches at LaGuardia Community College, City University of New York.



Reed Venrick

Reed Venrick teaches English at Chiang Mai University in Thailand.



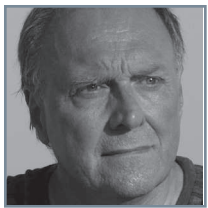
Bruce Wise



Bruce Wise is a creator of numerous heteronyms. Ubs Reece Idwal is the heteronym for his Pacific Northwestern poet's persona.

Ubs Reece Idwal is a poet of the Pacific Northwest, like Theodore Roethke or William Stafford, and is an intimate not only of Bud "Weasel" Rice, the nature poet, and Urbawel Cidese, the lover of metropolises, but also universalist R. Lee Ubicwidas.

Bill Wolak



Bill Wolak is a poet who lives in New Jersey and teaches Creative Writing at William Paterson University. He has just published his thirteenth collection of poetry entitled *Love Opens the Hands: New and Selected Love Poems* with Nirala Press. His most recent translation with Mahmood Karimi-Hakak, *Love Me More Than the Others: Selected Poetry of Iraj Mirza*, was published by Cross-Cultural Communications in 2014. Recently, he was a featured poet at The Mihai Eminescu International Poetry Festival in Craiova, Romania.

Mike Zimmerman

Mike Zimmerman is a writer of short stories and poetry, as well as a high school English teacher in the South Bronx. His previous work has been published in *Wilde Magazine*, *Cutbank*, and *The Painted Bride*. He is the 2015 recipient of the Oscar Wilde Award from Gival Press. He finds inspiration and ideas from the people and places he loves. Mike lives in New York City with his partner and their cat.



EDITOR'S WELCOME

"It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair. . . ."

-Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859)

It seems a fitting start to this issue devoted to the nadir, the zenith, to consider these famous lines penned over 150 years ago. Yet they make uncanny sense in November of 2016, when globally we are witnessing the very best and the very worst of humanity. Have we made progress as a species, as nations, as communities of citizens, as global citizens?

This summer travelling through Iowa I was delighted to find a rest stop not far from Iowa City, where the celebrated Iowa Writers' Workshop is located. Imagine, a roadside rest stop with the typical brick building, picnic tables, shady trees, emerald cornfields and lush grass, an unlikely setting indeed for the proud display of lines from some of Iowa's best known authors, their words cut into metal panels that shield picnickers from the occasional gust of wind or burst of rain. My favorite proclaims these words written by Ted Kooser in *The Poetry Home Repair Manual: Practical Advice for Beginning Poets* (2007):

There's no money in poetry because most of my neighbors, and most of yours, don't have any use for it. If, at a neighborhood yard sale, you happened to find the original handwritten manuscript of T.S. Eliot's "The Waste Land," you could take it to every quick stop in your city and you wouldn't find a single person who would trade you ten gallons of gas for it.

It seemed a strange contradiction, sky, branch, leaf and light shining through the words as ordinary people from all over the U.S., maybe all over the world, sat on the concrete benches, elbows on the tables' wooden planks, reflecting upon Kooser's prophecy between sips of Coke and quick bites of their bologna or tuna sandwiches.

For poets, it seems the worst of times, until we find Geoffrey A. Landis' Cleveland Poetics blog posting (2009) entitled "There's Too Much Money in Poetry!" With the help of a quotation from Dana Gioia's 1991 treatise "Can Poetry Matter?" on the proliferation of academic positions devoted to creative writing programs, Landis defends his thesis, ending with the question: "What about poetry that people actually like to read?" (I admit it freely—as an undergraduate, "The Wasteland" had me stumped as well.)

In 1991, Gioia could probably never have imagined the poetry explosion made possible by the World Wide Web. Now, people can easily publish online for free and find their niche audiences. With the help of software programs, they can (and do!) create websites and publish books without paying for costly print runs if the more reputable presses with a bit of cash aren't interested in their creative work.

Hosting visitors on a tour of Napa Valley wineries years ago, a sommelier assured the crowd of tasters, "If you like it, it's good!" Sure, there existed and still exists a small cadre of experts trained to know Dom Perignon from Cold Duck, those with discriminating palates, but U.S. wine products wouldn't be worth billions if the unindoctrinated weren't out there somewhere swilling down moscato purchased for under twenty dollars a bottle.

EDITOR'S WELCOME

Neither Emily Dickinson nor Walt Whitman were recognized for poetic genius during their own lives, yet they are now listed among the very greatest, if not as the greatest American poets ever to have lived. Melville's epic novel *Moby Dick* (for godssake, read it if you haven't!) was rejected by critics, who were hoping for something more like his shorter travel works *Typee* and *Omoo*. Dickinson didn't think much of Whitman's work, and I wonder. Would either have been discovered at all in contemporary times, maybe like Carrie Underwood on American Idol, given the rollicking sea of blogs, websites, and other publications that represents American poetry, short fiction, or the novel today? What would have been their online hangouts?

I confess—and I'm not sure when exactly it happened—there isn't much on the front shelves of the typical bookstore I'm interested in reading, celebrity cookbooks and self-help fast reads, political figures promoting themselves with the help of ghost writers. I am not alone. Remarking on a book she had quickly thumbed through, a book by Bill O'Reilly I had been sent by a well-intentioned friend, one of my former students looked up at me and said, "I don't think Native Americans would like this very much!" It seems my favorite shelves are shrinking. Thank goodness for the online archives, though I still love most the company of a true literary masterpiece, one that demands I peruse page by page.

Robert Graves is attributed with having said, "There's no money in poetry, but then there's no poetry in money either." I found this quotation online and was reading in Yahoo!Answers the fascinating list of associated topics when I was rudely interrupted by TexasDebtRelief.org's invitation to offer me a loan to pay off my presumed debt. I don't even live in Texas, so I found my way back to the best answer on the meaning of the quotation, posted by Tammee 8 years ago: "You don't write poetry for the love of money," "having money takes away all beauty and creativity that poetry gives."

Posted questions include the following:

What does this quote mean?

Does anyone actually like poetry?

What are some good Sayings about money?

"What's your interpretation of this quote: 'If you want to know where your heart is, look to where your mind goes when it wonders?'"

I used to believe an affordable college education might answer those questions—and others—but as things stand, I believe it still could. Right? I respect that Grandma Moses was indeed an artist, one who didn't see the value of studying the work of others. Yet it is a marvel to ponder the paintings of Salvador Dali as he perfected the techniques of those who had gone before in preparation for the creation of his own masterworks.

Browsing my smart phone for answers to the question, "Does poetry matter?" I'm overwhelmed by the instantaneous, fairly recent list of assessments from *The New York Times*, CNN, *The Huffington Post*, even NPR, and it seems the jury is still out on this one. Surely, the future of the short story and the literary novel hang in the balance as well.

EDITOR'S WELCOME

Is it the best of times, or is it the worst of times for writers? Unarguably, it is entirely a matter of perspective. At one point in my own life, as I was struggling with a poem and acknowledging my own lack of “greatness,” I realized that a human mind could do worse than to write silly ditties on trite topics filled with clichés. What if, what if every human mind were engaged in such a pursuit, genuinely engaged, for at least one hour a day? What if some team of researchers were to discover such a practice could reduce weight gain or curb depression? We could certainly do worse (and have done) as a species. I wouldn’t mind it a bit, but I would be bothered if in our postmodern pastiche of fragmented narratives and information bloat we were unable to contemplate the beauties of the most adeptly crafted stories, poems, novels, and essays currently being written.

I know from my own graduate experience in writing programs, pretty good ones to which I am indebted, graduate courses and copious reading alone can’t make a poet or a fiction writer or an essayist. But in my case, my classes provided a safe haven, untold valuable mentoring from my instructors, and it was many years before I realized what they had told me was absolutely true: you

have to read, read, read. You have to be open to informed criticism, respecting those who have blazed the trails and have gone before. Writing well is exceedingly difficult, as all good writers know. To reject tradition, to write without the direction of a master teacher is to attempt to chart your own path through the Amazon (or the Yukon) without a map. Why would anyone do that? It takes years, yes, years, to learn to write a well-crafted sentence, whether it be Faulknerian or Lawrencian, or Hemingwayesque. It takes decades to evolve through the phases of one’s one styles, themes, structures and subjects. I suppose it could be done without the aid of a qualified instructor or mentor. But I wouldn’t want to try.



EDITOR'S WELCOME

On the subject of offkey songs, Robert Frost offers us a short poem, "A Minor Bird":

I have wished a bird would fly away,
And not sing by my house all day;

Have clapped my hands at him from the door
When it seemed as if I could bear no more.

The fault must partly have been in me.
The bird was not to blame for his key.

And of course there must be something wrong
With wanting to silence any song.

To the burgeoning, lively group of untrained novice writers out there seeking immediate publication, I say, drink the wine you like. And while you're drinking it, read Frost's simple poem. Read it carefully over and over. Read it out loud. Study its rhythms, its rhymes, the alliteration, the nuance. Pay attention to the punctuation: is it doing anything important? Then, read "After Apple Picking," "Birches," too many absolutely heartbreakingly lovely poems by just this one poet to name here. Read them, and realize that it took Frost decades in some cases to find the right words to complete his lines.



Erin O'Neill Armendarez
Editor in Chief

POETRY SPOTLIGHT: DARREN DEMAREE

Aji Editor-in-Chief, Erin O'Neill Armendarez, reviews Not for Art nor Prayer

It is early August, a week before another frenetic semester begins, and so finally I commit myself fully to writing the review I had promised the author last fall, who is surely preoccupied with matters of more importance at this point than my stray thoughts upon his words. Other editors weighed in months ago. Yet I take my promise seriously, as I take the book, and the honor and privilege of having been asked.

Demaree has confessed that coffee and pie are usually enough to get his words and ideas flowing (2015, Gyasi). Likewise, I have found sustenance, an iced coffee with coconut milk and a warmed chocolate croissant. Situated in a local Starbucks near a large window that lets in the New Mexico sun, I mull through previous reviews of *Not for Art nor Prayer* (8th House, 2015) and the interviews of the poet I have found online. I pause to look at his photo and to read his bio, considering carefully my notes on his manuscript. The editor in me notices the occasional misplaced or missing apostrophe and the misused semi-colon in a couple of these reviews. A well-educated millennial has recently assured me, the speed of online publication just doesn't allow time to place punctuation marks as accurately as in days of yore. Pushing error aside, hopefully without seeming too judgmental (after all, I am positioned here as critic) the critic in me wonders: is a review just a high five these days? Is it an advertisement? Or have I become too old (oh, yes, I am old), too irrelevant, to understand the changes in the way writers approach one another's well-crafted work?

A poet myself, I have of late browsed through all the available lists online, lists of the best literary journals on the net, lists of the finest literary magazines of all time; many (most?) of the "best" don't even bother with online submissions. They don't have to. Ah, it was always a jungle, the pursuit of a career in poetry, a career perhaps (always?) best pursued from the right place with the especially right mentors. Looking carefully at Demaree's poems, I think of my own love of the craft, and my own abandonment of the desire to work my foot into that literary door, the one where my name makes it into the *Cambridge Companion to American Poetry* or some other similar benchmark of success as an American poet.

That aside, the poet in me certainly realizes that Darren Demaree has all the makings of one who might kick that door wide open, if he hasn't already. Though he knows there will probably be little financial reward, Demaree pursues his craft vigorously, honestly and in earnest.

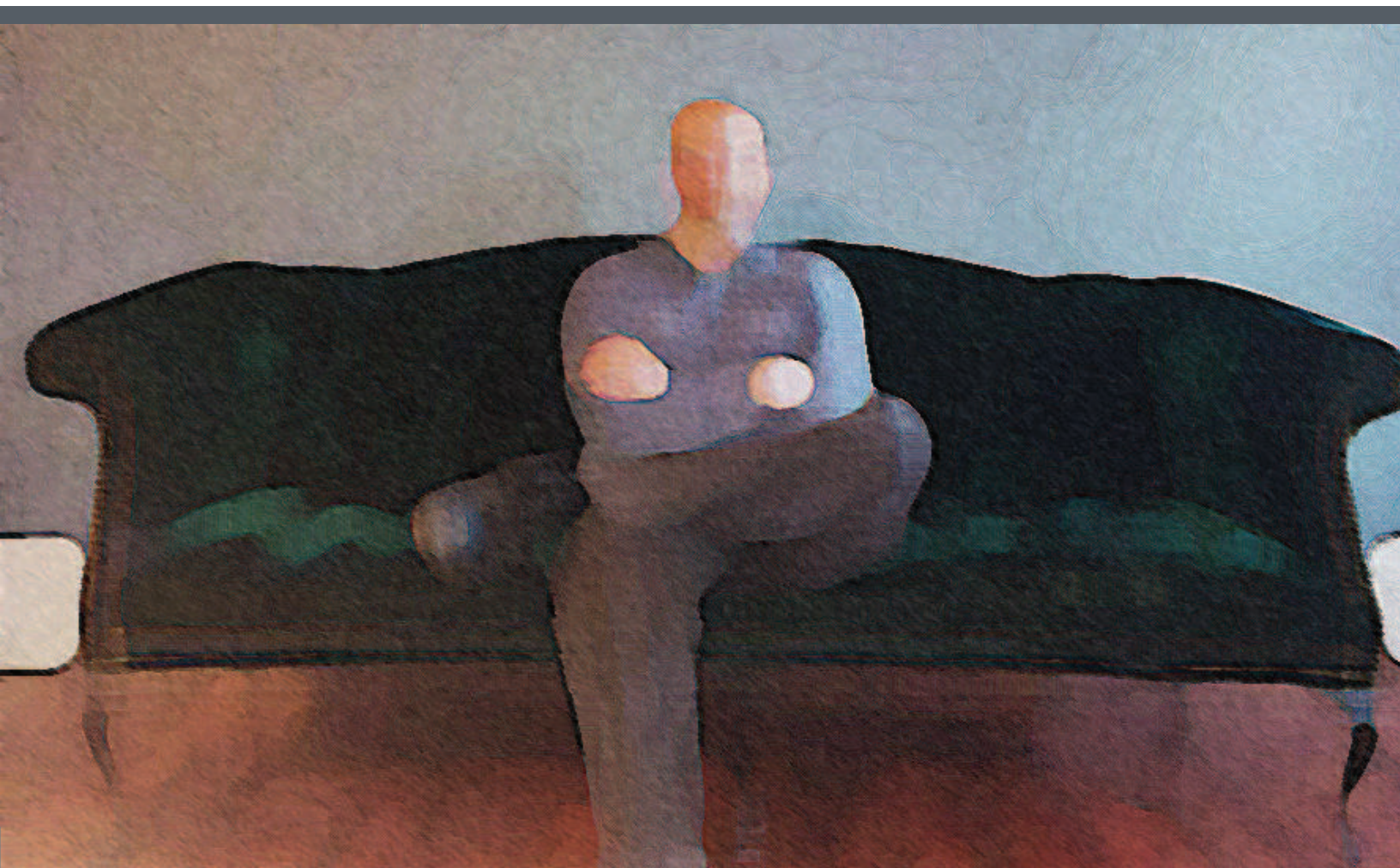
The online interviews shed some useful light on his approach to prosody. A 2015 review with Geosi Gyasi of Geosi Reads shows the very practical aspects of Demaree's life and work, where he discusses relationships with publishers and the importance of establishing his own voice as emergent from existing tradition. He talks about finding time to write, and his debt to previous poets.

Of his poems, Demaree comments (Gyasi, 2015), "I'm able to find real energy to move the readers through them. The difficult thing is to find some music and structure to that energy that can magnify it," "it" being the energy of the poem. Hence, from the poet himself, we have been given a strategy for analyzing and ultimately evaluating the music, logic, and craft of his lines. And as any serious poet will tell you, we enjoy varying degrees of success.

We work, and sometimes, quite by accident, without even really trying, words line up like electrons in a current to speak a truth we hadn't fully realized until the poem was written. Other times, we struggle to deliver the song and structure the energy of a poem demands. In *Not for Art nor Prayer*, as in almost any book of poetry, readers may find poems offering evidence of ideal success along with admirable attempts not fully matured to fruition.

In his 2014 interview with Rhonda Lott of Menacing Hedge, Demaree described the exhausting work involved in the production of his collection *Temporary Champions* (2014, Main Street Rag), revealing the sensitivity and vulnerability typical of a talented poet. In order to understand his subject fully, he immersed himself in the horrible physical and psychological violence of the boxing death of Kim Duk-Koo, hoping to reconcile himself to the disturbing realities omnipresent in a culture that perpetuates a sport like boxing. He researched exhaustively and viewed and reviewed the actual fight with sustained intensity hoping to resolve his own anger about "what happened to both of them [Kim and Mancini, the boxer who killed him in a fight]." Courageously, he made this assertion concerning a sport many celebrated writers and film-makers have glorified: "Boxing is a terrible, brutal sport, and one we should have abandoned a hundred years ago." In this interview, as opposed to the dilettante who knows only to write on obviously popular themes or who seeks only to emulate what has been successful for other poets in the past, readers discover a poet genuinely obsessed with the pursuit of a question that gnaws down to the soul.

Demaree follows the same sort of impulse through *Not for Art nor Prayer*, tracing the boundaries and the connections between one human being and another, offering in the shorter, earlier sections jagged, glittering lines that scintillate like pieces of broken glass. Sometimes, they reflect the sky, or some other brilliant, extraordinary light, and other times, not so much, but in every case it is apparent that Demaree has thought carefully about the way each poem operates toward magnification of whatever he's attempting to reveal. He has



made every attempt to force music from his structures, hoping the occasional disjointedness will successfully echo the fragmented, incomplete nature of his own sometimes untrustworthy observations.

Let me respectfully suggest that this book might have been pared down ten to fifteen percent with no ill result, adding more weight to the gravity of the better poems that would have carried it. On occasion, Demaree goes too far in finishing a poem and decompresses the energy he attempts to fix (as in “Adoration 109” and in “Adoration 30”), and on occasion, as in “Adoration #28” and “Adoration #56,” the structure and line breaks seem more elaborate than the energy and idea of the poems require. Possibly, with more traditional, less broken line structures, these poems might have been pushed into longer poems with more development toward their ideas. On the other hand, in “Adoration #88” and “Adoration #100,” Demaree has succeeded in tightly crafting shorter, more cryptic poems that force deep irony into pleasing harmony, juxtaposing innocence with violence, and a diminished capacity with overflowing generosity.

In “Emily as Luminence Deflected”¹ and “Emily as Sometimes This Comes Close to an Attempt at Alchemy,” while music and structure should probably not be disputed, there may not be enough information to fully appreciate what is being said. True, the lines are nicely crafted in sound, in rhythm—the lines flow beautifully. Unfortunately, the ideas cannot be fully accessed by readers. The strongest poems in the collection seem to be those where the poet succeeds in not only dazzling us with beauty, but also in giving readers enough detail to fully appreciate the specific contraries posed within.

This is no easy task, given the ambitious nature of the collection as expressed in the title and in the epigraph from Robert Hass (“The Origin of Cities,” Praise, 1979):

She is first seen dancing which is a figure
not for art or prayer or the arousal of desire
but for action simply. . . .

In choosing this epigraph, Demaree implies not only his subject but also his intent to borrow from Hass in terms of style and craft and in terms of attempting to show things as they are, especially his wife Emily, through the subjective lens of the human psyche. At best, he succeeds in rendering the unknowable (Emily) through the lens of the not fully known (the poet’s own mind and being). He conjures authentic aspects of the true Emily not only for himself, but for readers as well, offering us flashes of her as she is. The difficulty is established quite clearly in “Emily as the Aftermath of a Vibrant Image,” where the persona of the poem attempts to see Emily through “an eye that lacks/craft, lacks fiction”; the poem’s persona realizes, “. . . I/have framed her/& lost completely//my sight for her.”

Several of the Emily poems successfully blend concrete image with emotion to create irony and metaphor, beautifully synthesizing structure, energy, and idea into music that haunts readers with images not easily forgotten. In “Emily as the Campfire Gathers the Branch,” Edenic flowers dipped into fire “without cause or care” invoke the ruthless wounds inevitably and deliberately inflicted in love. In “Emily as by Choice This Time,” an old cat digging toward the roots of a tree exposes deep love tinged with fear and possible mistrust, the difficulty of reaching the dangerous places where honest understanding and the unforgivable might simultaneously intersect.

Such a brave, ambitious book deserves a closer look. Money toward the purchase of *Not for Art nor Prayer* would undoubtedly be well spent. Hopefully, Demaree’s books have already reached the attention of highly respected critics who have recognized the quality of his craftsmanship. Kudos to Demaree for his insight, his hard work,

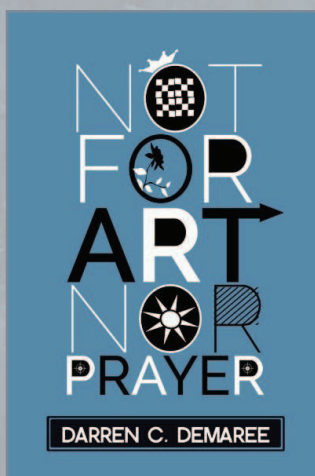
his talent, and his persistence. Poets are truly like gold miners panning among the sands and tides of their own minds, impulses, and intuitions. It is difficult work exploring the facets of each nugget—is it pyrite? Or is it the real thing? Will it sparkle and shine to illuminate, to delight, and to fascinate the minds of strangers who are miles, even eons away? *Not for Art nor Prayer* delivers much, offering glimpses into a reflective intellect engaged in meditation upon the prismatic nature of human experience. To gaze from one angle is to be blind to the view from another. Yet it is possible to derive some principle for unifying the various facets of color and shadow—Demaree’s work suggests that perhaps the act of writing itself could be enough—writing, brisk, hot coffee, and a slice of apple pie.

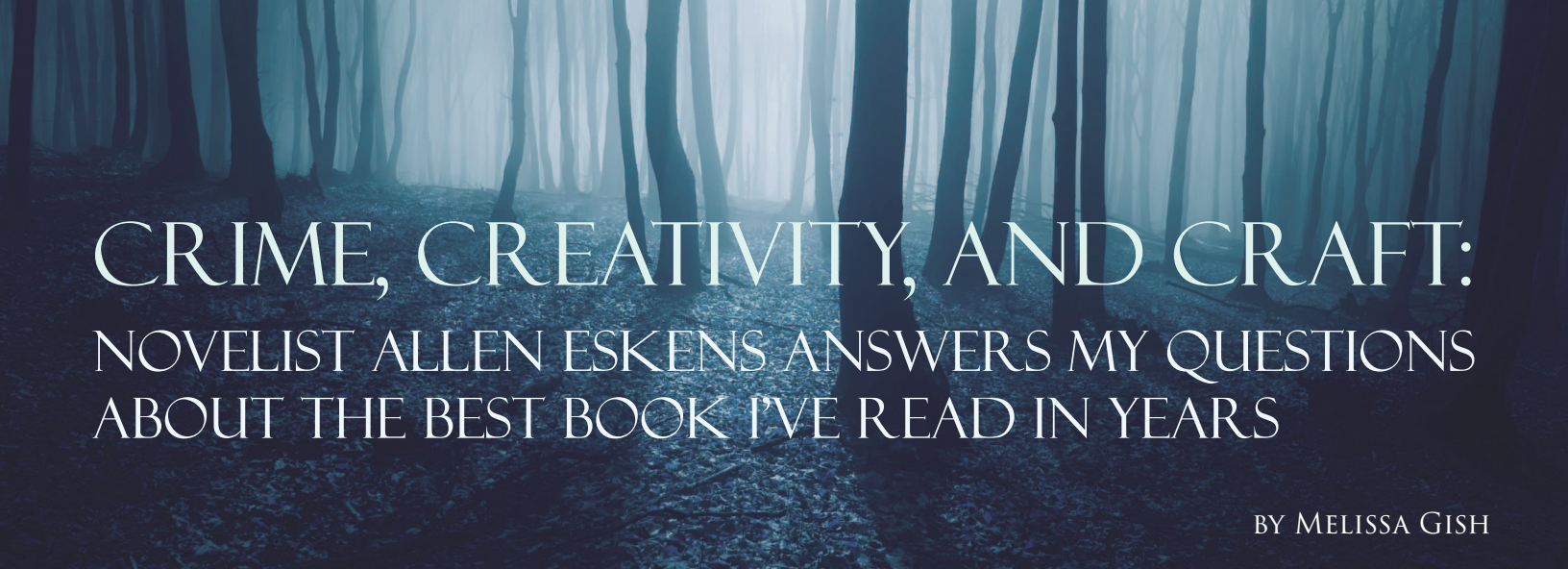
¹The word “luminance” is spelled “luminence” in the title of Demaree’s poem.

Read more by this author.

***Not for Art nor Prayer* is available for sale through 8th House Publishing (November 2017).**

<http://8thhousepublishing.com/8thHouseStore/not-for-art-nor-prayer-by-darren-c-demaree.html>





CRIME, CREATIVITY, AND CRAFT: NOVELIST ALLEN ESKENS ANSWERS MY QUESTIONS ABOUT THE BEST BOOK I'VE READ IN YEARS

BY MELISSA GISH

I get a lot of emails about a lot of books from a lot of people. But one particular email last year stood out, and I read the book that was recommended. In the debut novel by Allen Eskens, *The Life We Bury* (Seventh Street Books, 2014), the protagonist and narrator, Joe, is a college student tasked with interviewing an elderly person for a class assignment. Instead of the standard biography, however, Joe hears a remarkable story of murder and claim of innocence from Carl, aging, cancer-stricken, and released from prison to spend his final days in a nursing home. I don't read a lot of mystery thrillers because they tend to be formulaic. But this one sounded a little different. *Kirkus Reviews* describes *The Life We Bury* as "a solid and thoughtful tale of a young man used to taking on burdens beyond his years—none more dangerous than championing a bitter old man convicted of a horrific crime."

As it turns out, this book is a lot different from other mystery thrillers. That's because it's not only about a mystery. It's about alcoholism, disability, and family relationships; about war and rage and guilt; about building trust and growing friendships; about betrayal and redemption. It reminded me that as writers, we don't have to subscribe to traditional notions of genre and also that nothing is more important than craft. You can have the cleverest plot, most interesting characters, most intriguing mystery to be solved . . . but if the story isn't well crafted, then none of those other things matter. Here is a book that I, as a reader and a writer, admire as the new standard of contemporary genre-bending literature. I had to find out how such a book came to be, so I sat down to talk with Allen Eskens at his law office in Mankato, Minnesota.

Eskens has been a criminal defense attorney for twenty-five years. *The Guise of Another*, his second novel and the first in a series, was released in 2015. *The Heavens May Fall* debuts this fall, and the third in the series will follow next year. Looking at this list of four novels in as many years, I asked Eskens the obvious question: "Are you a lawyer who writes novels, or a novelist who practices law?"

Eskens explained, "When I wrote *The Life We Bury*, I was a lawyer who wrote novels, and now I'm more a novelist who still practices law. I'm a criminal defense attorney. I know police procedure, I know investigation procedure, I know courtroom procedure, but I didn't want my first book to be any of those things. I didn't want to be known as a lawyer who writes novels because there are a lot of them out there. And so my first thought was *I'm not going to write a lawyer or a cop as the main protagonist, so who am I going to have?* I sat on my porch swing to come up with ideas, and then I remembered this assignment that I did in college, and that's where Joe came from.

"I'm naturally drawn to mysteries because of being an attorney or vice versa. I went to one of the seminars at the Iowa Writers' Festival. It was on mystery writing. This guy gets up and says, *by this page, this has to happen; by this page, this happens. It's this formula, and by the end of the seminar*, he said, *that formula is what you do; you do that formula, and you'll write a mystery.* And I walked out of there so depressed. I said, *I'm never going to write a*

mystery because I don't want to ever write based on a formula. And it wasn't until I discovered Dennis Lehane and Tom Franklin and people like that that I realized my job is to expand that formula, expand that genre. The point of the book is that I don't want to just write within the genre. I want to try to expand it and play with it and do things that make it different.”

This genre-bending is one of the things I admire about *The Life We Bury*. But I wondered how such a book made its way onto bookstore shelves, considering just how indefinable it is in terms of marketing.

Eskens revealed the answer: “I decided I was going to go the traditional route. I was going to keep writing manuscripts until I got an agent, and then I was going to keep writing manuscripts until I got a publisher. And I figured once I got an agent and publisher, then I can go through my manuscripts and say, ‘Here’s also what I have.’ I got rejected by 150 agents. They’re looking at marketing. *This book is like these other books, so I’ll put it here. And here’s how you market it, and here’s how you sell it.* My book comes to the door and it’s like, *I don’t know what this is.* I kept hearing from agents, ‘Well, we’re not sure where this would fit on store shelves.’ When I wrote my book, if I was thinking ‘marketing,’ I wouldn’t have written that book. It’s a mixture. It’s what I wanted to write without thinking ahead in terms of marketing, so when it came time to get an agent, it was difficult. Luckily, I found an agent who was new. And I think that’s why she didn’t see the marketing problems. But people liked the book. My marketing vice president said ‘It’s riding a tsunami of word of mouth,’ and that’s what’s happening. It came out in 2014, and it didn’t hit the bestseller list until January 2016, and it’s just been growing slowly and steadily.”

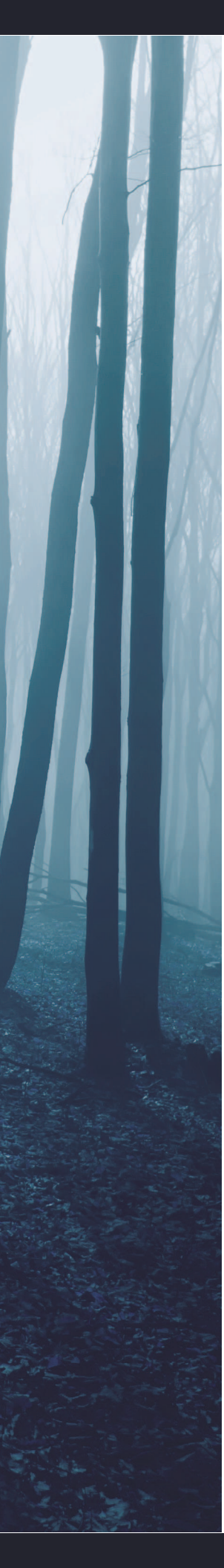


Another reason I like this book so much has to do with what Eskens said about writing what he *wanted* to write. I’m inspired by the fact that despite the constraints of marketing, this book is a success. We talked about people writing for a specific market. That might be okay for some folks, but if you *want* to write something, then just *write it* . . . worry about selling it after you’ve written it.

I wanted to know more about Eskens’ impetus to write fiction, so we talked about where that came from and how it developed.

Eskens described his early years: “It never actually dawned on me until I was in law school. I was doing my third year of law school. I had gone to college as a theater major, and I had this creative side that I had developed during the course of my high school years and early college. I was mainly a dancer, but I crashed my ankle, and I thought, *Well, I really can’t do what I want to do.* So I got a degree in journalism and went to law school. But there was this creative side to me that was yearning to be expressed. I won this major award in law school, and when they told me I had won the award, my first thought was, *I bet I could write a novel* because I’d been thinking, *How do I express this creativity?*”

“But then I really didn’t think I had the talent. I never even took a creative writing class since high school. So when I realized that I had the ability to learn something very complex such as the award that I got, I could learn what it took to write a novel. When I got out of law school, I just started writing short stories, realizing that I had no idea what I was doing. So I started reading books on writing and took a ton of classes. I took all the classes [in



an MFA program] that I thought would help me become a better writer. I also took classes at the Iowa Summer Writing Festival and the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis. It taught me a lot. It was a good thing to do.”

Eskens basically invested twenty years in learning and practicing the art of fiction. I asked him about the most valuable things he learned from these experiences, and he said, “Craft. I think so many people nowadays think, *Well, I’ve read a lot of novels, I can write one.* And they’re not the same thing. It’s like saying, *I’ve plugged in a lot of appliances, so I can wire my house.* What it comes down to is understanding that a writer is not just telling a story; he’s crafting a story. He’s making you feel things that you don’t realize he’s doing. And it’s this whole idea of looking behind the curtain when you go and take these classes. So when I read now, I think, the author’s putting this in there for this reason, and he’s doing this or she’s doing this for this reason. And I’m dissecting what the author’s doing. You have to read. You have to read a lot to be a writer. You start to see, *this writer’s doing well; this writer’s not doing well.* People read me and say the same thing: *He hit the mark here, but he missed the mark here.*”

This led us to a discussion about what Eskens reads and where his strongest influences come from. It turned out that we both admire the same authors specifically for their ability to bend and reshape the genre.

Eskens explained, “I like writers who will take a genre and expand it. Writers who are comfortable just sitting within the confines of a genre, I don’t really enjoy reading as much. Dennis Lehane’s *Mystic River* is a book I recommend. It’s a mystery, but it’s much more. It takes the story of three boys, who are now adults, and it tells how what happened to them when they were kids has affected and changed their lives. And it’s brought to a head because of this murder mystery. So the mystery is just there to get them all back together and be a catalyst for their reactions to each other. And I love that. It is technically a mystery, but it expands the genre. And this is what I did with *The Life We Bury*. The story of Joe and his family is the story I really wanted to tell. I use the mystery as a vehicle to tell the other story. That’s what *Mystic River* does. Tom Franklin’s *Crooked Letter, Crooked Letter*. Again, wonderful writing, and it’s a mystery, but it expands the genre. I love when an author tries to expand the genre. And that’s what I’m trying to do. So anytime I start a project, I have my genre-type plot, and then I think, *Okay, from there, let’s build on that. How do we expand that?*”

I wanted to know more about how Eskens constructed *The Life We Bury*. For starters, why first-person point of view?

Eskens said, “When I’m writing in first-person, I can get inside my character’s head, and I can be snarky, I can be morose, I can be *that* emotion, I can write in *that* emotion. When I’m writing in third-person, I have difficulty getting that deep inside the character’s head. So I much prefer first-person. But the plot dictates. *The Heavens May Fall* is third-person because I have to have multiple points of view.”

The Life We Bury is populated with a variety of believable characters, from Joe’s alcoholic mother to his autistic brother Jeremy to his friend Lila. Where did the characters come from?

Eskens explained, “In my practice, I come across a lot of people. For example, Kathy—when a parent is such a bad parent that the county has to step in, that parent has due process rights to challenge that. As a young attorney, I would take those cases, and so I met a lot of people who were like Kathy. She was an amalgamation of my experiences doing that. Jeremy comes from somebody I actually know. Everybody else is just kind of a mix of myself and external information.”

We talked about the value of dialogue in making characters and their interactions real. Here’s what Eskens had to say about this:

“I talk to myself. *How do I get this information to the reader?* Do I do it just by saying, ‘Oh, by the way reader, here’s some information?’ I, personally, don’t like that. I call them ‘asides.’ There’s attention, and there’s aside. Attention is beginning a chapters with [Joe talking in *The Life We Bury*] ‘I know I’m not a handsome man, but . . .’ and then he tells the story of his first girlfriend, Phyllis. The point of that is to deepen his character, to put more pressure upon what’s going on between him and Lila, and to give some more information about his home life and the life of his mother. And aside is where a narrator will say, ‘Phyllis was my first girlfriend in high school’ and then give a little one-paragraph narrative to fill in the exposition. I actually hate that. It’s lazy, in my opinion, and it’s easy to do, but I try to avoid that at all costs because there are better ways to get exposition. And so, when I’m outlining, I’m thinking, *How do I get this information? Is this through dialogue? Who am I going to have Joe talking to?* Lila’s there, a lot of times, just for exposition for the reader—that’s the technique. So I’ll create characters that Joe will be talking to in order to get exposition so I don’t have to do aside.”

This led us to a discussion of Eskens’ use of outlining to not only create characters but also develop creative strategies to juggle plots and subplots.

Eskens shared, “I think outlining is fundamentally important. I think that you can be more complex, you can have deeper characters, you can have deeper subplots. I have a sketchpad—because I’m a little more visual, and legal pads are too linear—I’ll put down different ideas. I’ll put a question at the top of the page: What’s the character’s motivation for doing this small bit for this chapter? and then come up with ideas and scratch off the ones I don’t like and use the ones I do.

“I’ll spend three months, at least, just daydreaming and outlining before I start writing, and I usually have a bullet point for each chapter—here’s what the point of the chapter is—and then I will use my craft that I learned to expand upon it. I don’t know how you can write novels without outlining. I just don’t know how they do it. The one I’m writing now—I came up with an idea last night that’s going to have an impact on every step of the way. If I had started writing this before I had that thought, I’d have to rewrite with that new subplot involved. And so by having these subplots already in place, I can go back and forth between two characters, between two ideas.

“As for characters, I think if you’re going to have an evil villain, that villain should have a backstory so you know why he’s evil. Sergeant Gibbs [in *The Life We Bury*] was a little flat in terms of not having a backstory, but his part was so small that I thought that giving him a backstory would give him too much of a presence in the book, so he was just a bad guy. He was a catalyst as a bad guy, but he wasn’t the villain throughout the book. He was just a catalyst for that one incident. For my main characters, I usually have an outline that doesn’t make it into the novel. I know their birth; I know how they grew up and who they were as kids and what happened that shaped who they are today. It’s easier for me to create characters as I’m going along if I know who they were in the past. I’m a huge fan of outlining. I outline profusely.”

We concluded our conversation with a mention of the book’s future. While reading *The Life We Bury*, I kept envisioning the story playing out on a movie screen. I believe this book would make a terrific movie. Eskens

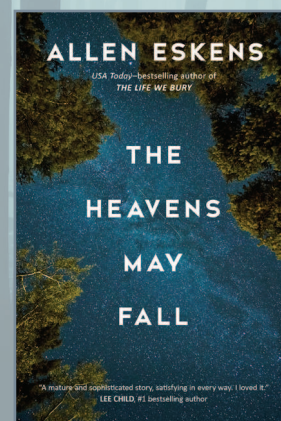
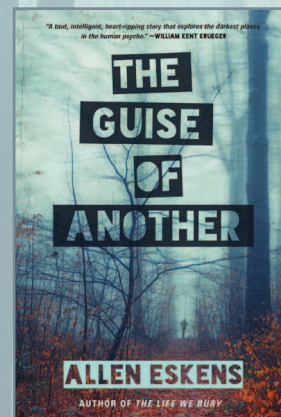
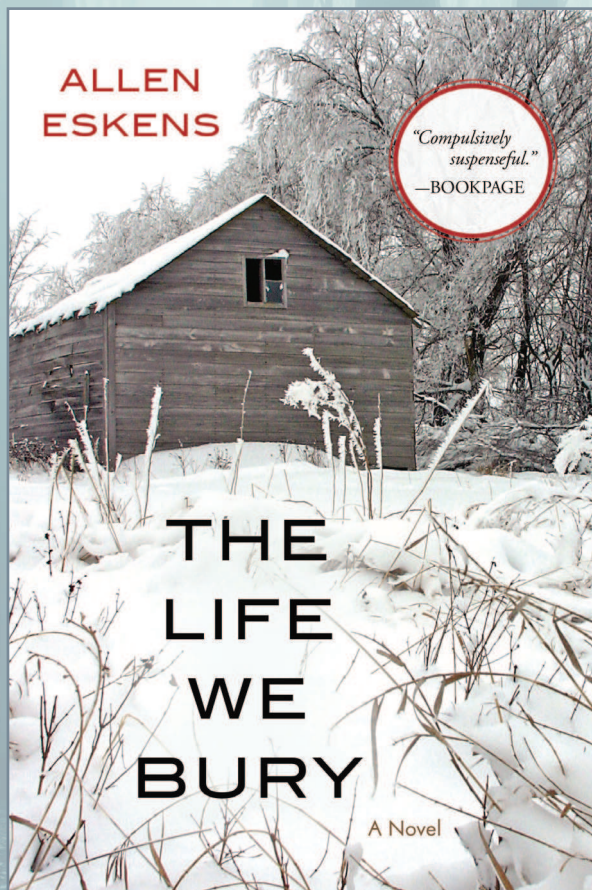
agreed: “I sold the option. There is a production company in New York, Next Wednesday Productions. They are working on getting funding for a movie.” Can we trust them? I asked. Eskens seemed confident: “When I talked to my subagent, who handles movie rights, the subagent said, ‘With a lot of books, that will be a concern: that they’ll take your book and turn it into something different. But,’ she said, ‘your book has all these working parts that fit together, and you can’t change it a lot without making it a completely different story, and why would you buy the rights to do that?’ We had a lot of people who were interested in it, but we ultimately got a production company that we think will honor the story.”



The Life We Bury is the recipient of numerous awards and accolades: Winner, Left Coast Crime Rosebud Award, Best Debut Mystery; Winner, Barry Award, Best Paperback Original; Winner, Silver Falchion Award, Best First Novel: Traditional; Finalist, 2015 Edgar® Award, Best First Novel; Finalist, Minnesota Book Award, Best Genre Novel; Finalist, Anthony Award, Best First Novel; Finalist, ITW Thriller Award, Best First Novel; Suspense Magazine, Best Books of 2014 (Debut); MysteryPeople, Best Debut Novel of 2014; Library Journal, Editor’s Pick, Fall 2014; Amazon, Editor’s Pick, Books We Loved, 2014

Look for *The Life We Bury* (2014), *The Guise of Another* (2015) and *The Heavens May Fall* (2016) by Allen Eskens from Seventh Street Books. Visit <http://alleneskens.com>.

Read more by this author.



The Overstuffed Philosopher Company

Shakespeare begins with little black bags we fill with dark specks of Styrofoam, like small sacks of forbidden rice. Then, we cover the bag in imitation-silk pants and carefully stitch on mock leather boots. We are the factory boys. We are doll makers, mass producing famous Western thinkers. This week, it is the great bard of Stratford-upon-Avon whom we send churning on a conveyer belt through the tiny hole in the wall. The other boys bring a sexless torso to attach onto the crotch and a Styrofoam-filled ass. I have the smallest hands, so, to finish, I sew on a tag that reads “William Shakespeare: The Overstuffed Philosopher Company, Brooklyn, NY” and, in the smallest print the eye can see, “Made in China.”

In the past, we have made miniature Sigmund Freud’s, Fredrick Nietzsche’s, Karl Marx’s, and even a toga-covered Socrates. Why Brooklyn needs so many philosophers, I don’t know. I imagine Brooklyn as I imagine all cities: a collection of graffitied walls and frenetic people blurring by.

The oldest boy, who likes to be called Mao, has been here the longest. He knows the most about doll-making, and calls himself our factory leader. And it is Mao who insists that each doll brings us closer to the honor of learning about these western philosophers. He was born the child of a poor cobbler and seamstress, and takes it upon himself to inspect our work. He was the first one who thought to divide into teams and taught us how to backstitch, buttonhole stitch, chain stitch and cross-stitch. Every morning, when the conveyor belt begins its churning, Mao springs from his sleeping mat and reminds us of our place in this damp, dimly lit cellar they call a factory.

“The instructor, I’m sure, is from the British Museum. My parents told me. Remember: ‘We’re not wanton flies, O band of brothers,’” Mao says this morning. Lately, he botches a Shakespeare quote at the start of every day.

“That’s not quoted accurately,” I tell him.

“Don’t worry, Long. Even you can go from carp to dragon,” Mao replies.

“What?”

“The legend? It’s a famous legend my mother used to—my mother tells. There once was a carp who swam against the roaring current of the Yellow River. He worked, and he worked, and he worked, even when it seemed hopeless. Days, weeks, months passed and he swam, making only a centimeter of progress here and there. Still, he worked, and he worked, and he worked. Finally, many years later, he reached the tallest peak on the highest mountainside in China. Then—once he passed over the peak, the gods make him into the first dragon as a reward for his effort. Work is our salvation,” Mao finishes his story with a forced smile.

“Work is work,” I say, trotting off to my sewing station. I find strange comfort in Mao’s undying loyalty to these lies we’ve been told. Sometimes I watch him sleep, so peacefully, his head drunk with a potent legend he’s swallowed too much of. It must be nice. My own head is a beehive, buzzing with the details of our confinement.

The other boys lie about who they are and where they are from, pretend they aren't the poor, vulture children of destitute fathers and ragged mothers who sold them off for an easy yuan. Our families let the Boss lie to us. A summer camp for special students, he says to every family. I sometimes wonder if we aren't going to spend the rest of our lives in this factory, paying our parents' debts while the darkness pools around us on the workroom floor.

Our entire day happens in the confines of this one brick room. It is here that we eat and stitch, bathe and sleep. There is a small basin for bathing and a toilet in the corner, fifteen tatami mats, and a small library of Shakespeare's plays and sonnets and *The Interpretation of Dreams*—all in English—on a heartwood bookshelf. Light is supplied through three windows too high up to see out of. The rest of the room is taken up by the sewing stations and two systems of conveyor belts: one to bring the materials for the dolls in, another to bring the finished dolls out. When we finish with all of the morning materials, we are served lunch, which is brought in on the same conveyor belt. It is the same for dinner. So unvaried is this routine that I start to drool after we finish the final doll, and I hear the conveyor belt's sound, signaling, not more work, but the imminent arrival of food.

I'm sure I can't be the only one losing hope that we will ever see life outside of this one brick room again. There must be others longing for a means of escape. When I am alone with Li Xiu, I ask how he came to be here.

"Good morning, Li Xiu," I say, the sun slicing through the high up windows of the factory as the engine running the conveyor belt starts with a metallic cough, bringing in the first of the morning materials. This is the sound of our alarm clock.

"Long," he nods. Of all the boys here, Li Xiu is the most practical. He snaps at boys who switch positions or try new ways of getting the work done. He is practical and stern, tall and terribly thin, with such sunken eyes and tight skin he has an alien quality. We often exchange understanding glances when some foolish boy makes a mistake.

"How long have we been here, would you say?" I ask as we walk over to pick up materials from the conveyor belt.

"Too long," he sighs. "They say we are just here for the summer, but I know it's been longer."

"I've been thinking the same thing, and it's driving me insane," I say, and I mean it.

"I'm here for my father's debts. All son's will pay their father's debts in time," Li Xiu tells me.

"But they said—"

"That we were coming here for a chance to learn philosophy, inside and out, and to get ahead in school. Those words were lies."

"What about your brother?" I ask.

"He cries every night into the tatami mat. We've all been lied to."

"Then why do you work, Li Xiu? Don't you ever dream of getting out of here?"

"I must believe in the payoff if I stay and work. Maybe our family gets paid per doll," Li Xiu looks away from me towards his brother, who is carefully stitching together a boot to Shakespeare's left leg.

"Why do you work, Long?" he asks me.

I spend a long time staring at the tatami mats where we sleep. All I can think of are the shadow puppet plays my father and I used to improvise summer nights when I was a child, casting darkness onto the wall—the shafts of a shadow arrow, the moonlight intimations of love (oh, how my mother laughed at these), the conjuring of

magicians and dragons in the darkness with the puppets and the candles. I feel like a shadow puppet myself as dawn's dim light spreads over the factory floor. "I work for now, but I also still dream."

"They cannot forbid us our dreams," Li Xiu smiles, and then we start to work.

As I sew the tags on each Shakespeare, I recall how my grandfather wadded in and out of rice patties and raised chickens and killed them for his dinner, saving the head and the wings and even squeezing out the blood. He kept his farm until he died, which coincided with the rise of Deng Xioping and the death of Mao in the 1980s, the disgracing of the Civil Servants, and my father's eventual suicide. I recall how, after that, my mother fled, in her own kind of disgrace, and took me back to grandfather's farm. She wore a widow's garb, paraded it around like a New Year's Mask. In her grief, each day she folded more inside herself. Meanwhile, I wadded into rice patties. I raised chickens and killed them for dinner. And yes, I saved the head, and the wings, and the blood. It was shortly after my thirteenth birthday that the Boss paid us a visit. It was Spring, between the planting and reaping of the rice, our last few scrawny chickens were cowering in their shack as if they knew we were low on food.

The Boss arrived like a ghost—no car, no cab, just a suitcase and an extremely starched dark blue Western suit. I remember he had a shaved head, but seemed to be no particular age, looking familiar or famous, in that way that handsome men sometimes look, and he had a distinct walk: slow, controlled, his hand barely moving as he approached from the foggy road. I was hauling a bag of chicken feed when I saw him striding towards the main house.

"Sir?" I said.

"That is quite a heavy bag, son," he said. "Is it hard for you to lift that on your own?" His voice was low, and it seemed to split through the fog and reverberate, echo along the farm.

"No sir," I said. "I know I look small, but I work hard."

"Indeed? Excellent, excellent. Strength, yes, this bodes well. Strong for such a slight boy. Son, might I speak with your father?" he asked.

"Sir? There is—only my mother, sir," I said.


"Ah—yes. I see," he said, as if understanding something that had not been made clear to him before. I noticed a brown cigar in the pocket of his white linen shirt underneath his suit coat. "Well, let's go and see her then, shall we?"

And we did.

Betrayal is worst when it is unexpected, the snake beneath the flower, and a mother's betrayal is the most unbelievable, even in the end—who knew a love so fundamental could be extinguished with hardly a flicker, like a candle at the end of its wick when you didn't even notice the wax had been melting all along, and then you are suddenly left sitting in the dark. How could I have known my mother would hawk me like a piece of unpolished jade from her junk drawer?

"Make me proud," were her last words to me. She did not watch as the Boss ushered me away.

"Long, concentrate on your work. Get your head out of the clouds," Mao calls out, bringing me back from my memories. After that, I went back to my mechanical routine, one Shakespeare after another, all day, till the room grew too dark to work in and they sent our food in on the conveyor belt.



Now I approach Li Ying, the other twin, who I know will be more of a challenge, being walled in with delusions. Unlike my short and rail-thin frame, Li Ying is long and muscular and lean, with royally slanted eyes and veins like snakes running up his arms. It is as if he lived off of his twin in the womb. I myself barely reach his belly, being the youngest and smallest of the boys here. He claims to have taken the virginity of six girls in his hometown, and insists he is descended from the Qing Dynasty. Yet—this is the boy who cries himself to sleep at night despite, at the same time, looking so much like a man.

“Hey oyster face, got a minute?” I ask.

“Fuck off,” he says, appearing to be intent on eating.

I take a seat on the stool across from him, where Li Xiu usually sits. “Tell me, how much have you learned about great western thinkers since we’ve started here? Although I guess this is a lot like school, isn’t it? Promise to teach us something great, and we end up making little play things,” I say.

“I’ve learned nothing. I can’t read English, so I can’t read—” he gestures toward the books on the shelves as he chews.

“I could show you,” I say.

“I know why you’re here. Li Xiu told me—” he says.

“What lies did your parents tell you? What lies did the Boss tell you?” I ask.

“No lies. They told us we were here to work and study. Now we are working. In a few weeks we will take courses,” he says. His anger is dangerous; I can see that now. But still, I press.

“There are no courses. They bring us food on a conveyor belt. This cellar they call a factory is not a school; it’s a jail. We might never get out—they said we’d only be here for the summer, but doesn’t it already feel like longer?” I say, raising my voice enough so a few other boys can hear.

“In a few weeks we will take courses,” he says again, looking at me dreamily, like someone still waking up from a nap.

“You’re wrong,” I say as I walk away. “In a few weeks, unless something is done, we will still be working. And we will work, and work, and work. That is what we were bred for. Vulture children, paying for our ancestor’s sins.”

Over the course of the next week, I hear thirteen variations of the same story. Each of us came from the poor families of farmers or mill workers, and each of us was told that we would spend the summer working and learning Western philosophers “inside and out,” which now sounds like someone’s idea of a sick joke. At the time, we all wanted to learn, to run toward knowledge and away from our families. The young always think they can outrun unhappiness. Each of our parents signed the same contract which none of us ever saw. Then, each of us was led away to a waiting car, where we were given luke warm tea which made us fall asleep during the long ride. Later, when we woke up, it was with the darkness of the factory pooling around us for the first time. We all arrived within a few days of each other. The conveyor belts

started and a single finished Sigmund Freud doll rolled out and then all the materials of an unfinished Shakespeare appeared. Mao taught us, a little at a time, to stitch him together like machines.

The last boy I approach is Mao, a mincing, intolerable fool babbling on about carps and dragons. At first, I thought he was a spy for the Boss, he seemed so intent on work and hygiene. As they say, suspicion is the companion of every unhappy man. But Mao's head is so dark with all the lies he is confined to, it is like the unlit factory at night. Yet, deep inside himself—winding through the conveyor belts and the sewing machines and thick brick walls—he must also know we are trapped here. I've noticed how he glances up at the windows each day at dusk as the light fades.

I wait until he heads into the basin to bathe and follow at a distance—Mao bathes every other day, soaking himself sometimes for an hour, curling up with a book from the shelves. Whether or not he can read them in English, I don't know. He is a Mongol, unlike most of us, so his face is rounder and his skin is a leathery brown. My mother was part Mongol, though it showed only in her skin, not her face, and for a moment I think of that final goodbye, her tigress orders to me, and I feel the hot rage boiling behind my eyes.

"I can hear you there." Mao says, pointing to my head. I then step forward and take a seat next to the tub, folding my arms up on it to face Mao.

"What do you hear, boss boy?" I ask. I talk to him gently, as if I am coaxing an animal out of a cage.

"Whispers at night. You and the other boys plan to challenge my role as supervisor. Like Brutus challenged Caesar."

I lean in so that I can feel the steam from the tub on my face. "Don't forget, Brutus killed Caesar."

"Some are given an education, others must earn it. The instructor, I'm sure, is from the British—"

"Museum? You lie. To everyone, to yourself. Tell me why," I say, surprised by my own fury. "My mother fooled me into coming here, lied to me. I hope to god she's saving the money they send her for our next lives. I'm spending the rest of this one stitching on tags in this factory unless something's done."

"We all suffer from our pasts. Don't dwell on it. Soon we will—" Mao whispers, so softly I bring my face closer to his.

"Take classes?" I whisper back, finishing his sentence again. "No. We'll find ourselves very old in the pit of this factory. We have to do something now."

Mao says nothing, continues to bathe himself.

"The other boys say you had younger siblings that you cared for like a mother. That's why you mince around here claiming to be our supervisor. They say your parents died, and you think your brothers and sisters are getting some money for each doll you make. Is that why you don't care about making it out of here alive? Is that why you're letting yourself get sucked dry?"

Mao steps out of the basin and snatches the towel. "Shut up," he says, as if my words haven't touched a nerve, but his hands tremble as he dries himself, looking even smaller naked and deflated of his pride, just a gangly kid with a small patch of hair on his stomach.

That night, Mao crawls over to lay on the tatami next to me. He whispers that I am right. His hot breath in my ear wakes me up. Right about him, right about everything. It is time to do something. He opens one of the books he took from the bookshelf.

“Why now?” I ask.

“Do you remember the legend of the Carp and the Dragon’s Gate I mentioned?” he asks. I shake my head, wanting the comfort of hearing the story again. “I didn’t tell you how I saw the story. Legend has it that a carp with the strength to swim against the Yellow River’s current, reach the top of the Gate, and swim up the waterfall will be transformed into a powerful dragon. I kept thinking these dolls are like that: if we just show enough strength, we will have our chance. But I have kept track of time in the back of these books—” he shows me a tally of the number days we have been here presented in sloppy pencil scratches covering two pages.

“How many?” I ask.

“Summer was over two months ago,” he says. Acknowledging this aloud, Mao’s eyes flood.

A horrible feeling comes over me, and, although I have been longing for others in this cellar to share my sense of a need to act, now that it’s time, despite the beads of sweat dripping slowly down my spine, I shiver.

“What now?” Mao asks.

“We need to get others to see things as we do,” I say.

In the darkness of the cellar, Mao and I whisper about the book to Li Xiu and a few others we trust. Loyalty is a gift, and anyone who gives it too freely is no better than a wild dog. It takes time to convince them. Finally, we agree on a plan, and the next morning, when the materials come rolling in, we sit, cross-legged, on our tatami mats. There are six of us. After a few minutes, the other boys become annoyed because, like any unhappy family, we need each other.

“Xiu? You know I can’t do the back side of the boot without someone to hold the front in place,” Li Ying says. He knows what is happening. He glares down at us with his arms folded, pushing out his biceps.

“We will not continue to be slaves here,” I say.

“They work us for sport,” Mao says. The six of us sit calmly on our tatamis for the rest of the day. Without us, it takes the other boys almost all day—the sun in the window sinks low and darkness begins to gather on the factory floor—and when they finish, instead of food, the squealing conveyor belt brings in another set of materials.

“What!” they scream. They are sweating and bleeding from rushing through the extra work, picking up our slack. An insult to their work, the new materials gleam purple like a bruise in the sick, dim light of the factory. Two other boys leave the workroom floor and slump onto their tatami mats.

Li Ying, still working, pokes his finger once again with a needle. He flips a workroom table in a single, deft movement, and stalks over to us like a tiger.

“You will work,” he screams at his brother. Blood drips out of the open cut on his finger.

Nevertheless, he grabs his brother by the arm and starts to drag him to the floor.

Three of us immediately respond by grabbing Li Xiu’s feet and torso and for a moment it is a sickening tug of war. Suddenly Li Xiu screams and then there is a loud snap as his brother yanks his arm in rage.

Li Xiu’s arm is swollen to twice its size in a few days. We keep cool compresses on his head to help with the fever, but he moans and moans through the night. It has been our third day without food; we drink water from the tub and slink about the room, playing nurse for Li Xiu in shifts. His brother sits by his tatami mat staring at the

cellar floor. On the first day, we scratch notes onto pieces of paper and send them on the conveyor belt, “One boy very sick, please help.” After getting no response to our note, the next day we send the materials back down the conveyor belt, untouched.

As I stare at Li Xiu’s arm, swollen like a grapefruit, I understand what I must do. I gather Mao and Li Ying around Li Xiu and tell them in whispers. “I will go through the conveyor belt to the other side of the wall.”

“It’s too small, you’ll be crushed, you’ll suffocate,” Mao says.

“It’s our last chance. I’ll get to the other side and explain what’s happening, or I’ll find the doors they brought us in and open them. I’m just small enough to fit, I think. Now, before I lose my nerve.”

Li Xiu smiles at my plan. He’s too weak to talk.

Mao, Li Ying, and I walk slowly, across the room, our footsteps echoing in the quiet brick room, to the conveyor belt. It feels like a funeral march, the longest distance I’ve ever crossed. I think of my mother’s last words to me. I think of slitting the throats of chickens, I think of slitting the Bosses throat, I think of the sweet nothing after death, I think of being shipped off to Brooklyn in a box with a bunch of dolls. The only thing visible on the other side of the conveyor belt is darkness. Mao sits at the switch and asks if I am ready. I lay as flat as I can, stretch out my arms on in front of me like a diver on the thin belt.

“Press it,” I say.

The machine begins its churning, and, as I slide forward, feeling the pressure of the wall tightening around me, the darkness enveloping me, I close my eyes and think of a carp turning into a dragon.

When Push Comes to Shove

"If you can fill the unforgiving minute
With sixty seconds' worth of distance run,
Yours is the Earth and everything that's in it,
And--which is more--you'll be a Man, my son!"

-from the poem "If" by Rudyard Kipling

Out from the shadows through the doorway of his hut, Chencho surges at you. Even from this distance you can see his face. It is tight with anger—his dark eyes flash twin-bolts of fury in your direction as he closes the distance between you.

Dammit, you swear under your breath, here you are again—right in the middle of your recurring nightmare—the nightmare that, until now, you'd thought you'd escaped. After all, by coming here to this remote village half-a-world away from the war in Nam, you figured, you'd gotten as far away as possible from it. But it seems like no matter what you do, you can't shake it. You'd try to tell yourself, it's karma. But you don't really believe in that Eastern stuff, so that's a non-starter. Well then, how about Biblical? Something like, the sins of the father... visited on the sons...? Well, maybe, except that both your dad and granddad—and even your great grandfather for that matter—they were all upstanding, moral men—the whole family, nothing but straight-laced, God-fearing, tea-totaling, monogamous, abolitionist, tithing Baptists. Yep, you have to admit they had all the bases covered. The only exception, you know, the black sheep—the exception that proves the rule—an ancestral third-cousin—twice removed—now, that guy was a real jerk—stole land from the Wampanoags back in colonial days—but he felt the fierce hand of The Lord's swift vengeance, didn't he—yeah, an arrow straight through the heart as he stood in the doorway of his log cabin, dead at the tender age of thirty-seven—yep, the slate wiped clean—no outstanding balances—so it's not Biblical either.

Actually, truth be told, if you dare to be honest—if you dare to be brutally frank with yourself, you know exactly why Chencho's coming after the two of you—yeah, you understand precisely why this nightmare keeps presenting itself to you, don't you—why it pursues you, and why, even though it morphs from one form to another, it is essentially the same bad dream—and you understand that all of its forms are about one fundamental attribute of your flawed nature—and you understand why you will go through this agony again and again—why this bleary-eyed, enraged farm-hand is coming at Lucas and you—yeah, you know and understand the situation and how you bring it on yourself, how you are eternally caught in this moment until you... Chencho has slowed his pace. He's now about twenty yards away, but he is definitely still coming. He shakes his head, probably trying to clear the effects of the alcohol. He's lurching from side to side. He is unsteady, but there's no doubt, he is coming. The rage-storm is still frozen on his sallow face. And now that he has emerged from the hut into the late afternoon sunlight, you see he has a machete in his right hand! Moving toward you, he waves it above his head and the weapon's long razor-sharp blade flashes in the sunlight as it slices the sodden air. For a moment you are enthralled. How graceful, you think, it's just like a hawk circling in the swirling currents and updrafts in search of its hapless prey. But then you realize, My God, Lucas and I are that prey! Your instincts are screaming, Run! But your voice is lodged in your throat.

The next instant a guttural epithet assaults the air when Chencho's sandal slips on a rock. He stumbles awkwardly forward but quickly regains his balance. Gathering himself, he yells at Lucas, calling him a Son of the Great Whore.

For his part, Lucas does not move. He appears impassive. He stands his ground, just inside the narrow opening in the barbed-wire fence. And you are just behind Lucas in the fence's opening. You have set yourself in the breach. Although your mind is screaming for Lucas to run, you are mute, your voice and body paralyzed by your fear. So you try instead to lie to yourself, to tell yourself this can't be happening. You try to tell yourself this is just a bad movie. And you want for Chencho to be a Hollywood stunt man – you want desperately for this movie to stop—you want the director in his ascot and beret to shout through a megaphone, Cut! Alright everybody, let's call it quits for today. See you all on the set bright and early tomorrow morn..., but this is not some grade B movie, is it. And Chencho is not a Hollywood stuntman. Chencho is a barrel-chested young farmhand. He's a very drunk, young farmhand and a bully to boot; and he has a cold hard look in his eye. You know the look. You have seen it in the eye of the sneering, black-pajama-clad Viet Cong in your recurring nightmare. You've seen it as he hurls himself at you. It is this look in this nightmare—the nightmare that always ends with you lying face-down in a rice paddy, drowning in ankle-deep water, water tinted red by your own blood—it is this look that has brought you here...

Suddenly the shaking of your body jolts you to the immediate present. Your body is convulsing violently, from fear and from your gasping attempts to catch your breath. Your panicking lungs suck at the heavy air, desperately trying to replace the oxygen you've spent chasing after Lucas all the way up here from the ball field back in the plaza. You have chased after him hoping to stop him, hoping to talk him down, hoping to avert this confrontation before it escalates. But now, as Chencho, his machete poised, weaves back and forth, biding his time, looking for just the right opportunity, you understand that you are too late.

You understand this because you know Lucas and you understand the culture. You know that even though the stick he's brandishing like a club is clearly no match for Chencho's machete, Lucas will not back down; because, in his mind backing down would bring shame and dishonor. And it is precisely the matter of honor that has brought him here. Lucas seeks to avenge his friend Rafael, who lies on the damp earth back at the ball field. Rafael lies there like some discarded rag doll. He is sprawled where he fell, his face bashed in by your softball bat. He was the random target of Chencho's vicious, unprovoked attack. Rafael is conscious and several of the women are tending to him, he will no doubt recover. Still, given the treachery of Chencho's attack, there is no way Lucas will back down.

So you know that nothing good can come of all of this. It's a done deal. You understand the code of honor will not permit Lucas to retreat. And now that Lucas has set foot on Chencho's land, even drunk as he is, Chencho knows that he is within his rights to repel the intruder. You understand this too. That's why you haven't stepped through the fence onto Chencho's land.

Chencho continues pacing back and forth, sizing the two of you up. He appears more than willing to bide his time. Clearly, he's stalking the two of you, trying to figure out the best point of attack. As he moves closer, the all too familiar look in his eye seems to intensify. This look, you have grown to understand, is not just the look of anger and hatred—it is the cold, hard look of death. And you know it's time for action, time for you to get yourself out of harm's way. After all, you tell yourself, this isn't really your fight. But as much as you want to retreat, as always, your fear is stultifying. It has rendered you incapable of moving. At least for the moment, you are rooted to the spot. But your thoughts race ahead. Your thoughts remind you that all of this is really about your fatal flaw,

yeah, it's really about your cowardice. At the same time, these thoughts reassure you, telling you that, like always, in a second or two you'll be off and running. For now though, only your thoughts move, tumbling over themselves chaotically; yet, always carrying the one consistent message of who you are—and why this is happening. They remind you that you are still a momma's boy, a sissy, afraid of your own shadow—they remind you that growing up, you were tied so tightly to your mother's apron strings that she couldn't even leave you at kindergarten the way other children's mothers did because you screamed for an hour the first day when she tried to leave, and so she had to wean you gradually, sitting in the back of the room for the first week, and then excusing herself for an hour or two at a time in the second week, and building from there. Your thoughts remind you that you sucked your thumb until you were ten—and that, at age eleven you were the only kid in the Oak Street Gang to turn tail and run for home when there was a showdown with your rivals, the Maple Street Mauler's—and how from then on, all the other kids called you scaredy-cat. And these thoughts recall for you how you were shunned—a pariah to your peers. And they tell you to remember that things only got worse as you got older—and they remind you how things were made worse by the fact that by the time you were fourteen you had the build and size of a college football lineman—making your cowardly nature appear completely incongruous—opening you to ever more psyche-scalding ridicule and scorn. These cascading thoughts underscore that you were so afraid of physical violence, in spite of your size, that the only sport you went out for was track, because it was the only non-contact sport offered at your high school. And they recall for you that even though you broke the school record for the shot-put and finished fourth in the state in your junior year, the athletic director, who also just happened to be the head football coach, was so disgusted by your cowardice and unwillingness to play football that he refused to issue your varsity letter until spring of your senior year, and only relented then because you were graduating and leaving school.

Your thoughts reaffirm to you that all your life, grade school, high school and college; in the neighborhood, even in family gatherings, no matter where you are, your cowardliness is the constant, and your physical size acts as a lightning rod making you the target of incessant threats and challenges, to say nothing of scathing derision. In fact, an early-September day flashes vivid now—as if you needed reminding—a bunch of you are putting up hay on your Grandpa Jim's farm. The preacher's son, a full head-and-a-half shorter than you, challenges you to a wrestling match. Your own cousins have put him up to it! When you refuse, they all make fun of you. Even your Grandpa Jim gets a wry smile on his face; he...

Oh no! Good God! Lucas has started taunting Chencho now! He just called Chencho a piece of shit, and told him he's as good as dead! You want to say, God, no, Lucas, don't do that. Who are you trying to kid? It's the other way around. You're the one who's good as dead—and me too for that matter, but nothing comes out. Chencho is now livid. The veins stand out on his forehead and neck, like a map of purple rivers.

As you watch Chencho stumbling back and forth, suddenly he stops pacing. What the...? Who? Look at him! Now, he's here? God! It's the guy from your nightmares, the nightmares that started when you were in college, the nightmares that became ever more frequent as your graduation approached, and as the war over there in Nam heated up—heated up, bringing the increasing probability of you being drafted and of you ending up bleeding out facedown in that rice paddy. And, like you say, when you're honest with yourself, it's those nightmares that are the real reason you find yourself here, aren't they. Because you figured a deferment for Peace Corps service was the easiest and safest way out, a legitimate way to avoid the draft, and to avoid your certain rendezvous with death at the hands of this guy, the black-pajama clad nemesis of those very bad dreams. Yeah, that's right, easiest and safest. You were too afraid of the long term consequences to do the honorable thing which would have been to

dodge the draft; to go to prison as a conscientious objector or burn your draft-card and high-tail it for Canada. So to square things with the local draft board, you feigned patriotic idealism. Remember how you quoted the late President on your application, you know, ask not what your country... Yeah, yeah, not exactly intellectually honest, but pretty much what you expect from a coward, pretty much what you've grown to expect from yourself. The bottom line was, you knew if you ended up in Viet Nam, you'd be coming home in a body bag. The nightmare made that abundantly clear.

So here you are with Mr. Death bearing down on you anyway. Your body tenses—time to run, time to run, run, run away, live to.... Time for what you like to call your overly-acute instinct for self-preservation to kick into high gear, time to get the hell out of Dodge, time to make what your college poetry professor called, the strategic retreat. Time to say, Sorry Lucas, old buddy...

Lucas! Up to now in your life, you have been the only real victim of your cowardice—it's only affected you. This time it's different, there's Lucas to consider...what to do? Where will this go? Your mind races through the scenario:

You're off! You feel the surge of adrenalin! You're running as fast as you can—as if somehow either the distance or the din of your pounding blood, or both, will mute Lucas's screams as the thin edge of Chencho's machete blade takes off his left ear and then his arm, just below the shoulder. You see yourself racing down the trail toward your house, not looking back so as not to see that Lucas has folded on top of the blade as Chencho thrusts the machete into his abdomen, its tip severing Lucas's large intestine and finally coming to rest at the base of his spine. Panting and groaning with each footfall, you make your way down the ravine, across the stream and up the deeply rutted cattle trail past a blur of thatched roofed, adobe dwellings to the two-room, concrete block and tile roofed structure with its crumbling concrete floor that's been your home in the village for over a year now. You lunge through the doorway, slam the door closed and bolt it behind you. You watch yourself moving through the heavy shadows into the bedroom, collapsing onto the tightly stretched, green canvass surface of the cot without bothering to pull down the mosquito netting. Involuntarily, your head and knees draw to your chest leaving you in a fetal position. Totally spent from physical and mental exertion, you lapse into a fitful sleep—into a nightmare-riddled sleep in which you are running exhausted through a dense tropical forest, ducking under low hanging limbs alive with coiled snakes, you are stumbling along rutted roads and pathways, scrambling up chest-high riverbanks teeming with tarantulas and scorpions—and as always, you are pursued by the heavy shadowy monster that shapes, un-shapes and re-shapes itself, morphing from a machete wielding Chencho into your snarling Vietcong nemesis and then back. Gasping for air where you know there will be none, you are also aware that this nightmare will recur endlessly. It will be with you forever—and, as if that is not enough, now Lucas's bloody, anguished face flashes before you, his sad accusing eyes asking, why did you abandon me? And you know that this too will have no end.

But wait, there's a second possibility: your mind's eye leaps forward. As before, you're off! You feel the surge of adrenalin! You're moving—but hold on, this is the wrong direction! You're leaning through the opening in the fence, surging forward? This time you're headed

toward Chencho's crazed, bloodshot eyes? The acrid smell of his alcohol-soaked breath invades your nostrils. What the...? You watch yourself lunge at Lucas from behind, taking him by complete surprise, your left arm snaking under his left arm and across his chest. At the same time your right hand drops between his legs grabbing his crotch and hoisting him off his feet.

"Carajo!" Lucas's expletive is more of a stunned gasp as he tries to struggle free, but your spin and momentum are fluid—you have the speed and grace of the champion shot-putter you trained to be but never were. Lucas flies head-first over the fence to relative safety outside it, just another bale of hay, like so many your cousins and you used to pitch onto Grandpa's truck each fall. Still spinning on the follow-through, you now dive for the opening in the fence as Chencho, bellowing like an enraged bull, charges you. The thick choking cloud of his alcohol-sodden breath is almost overwhelming. Out of the corner of your eye, you catch the sun's glint on the machete's blade as it slices toward you and your brain flashes you the image of you with your right arm severed just above the elbow, and then you see yourself in a heap, bleeding-out face-down on the ground right there, just inside the fence... but this image evaporates immediately when, from behind you, Chencho grunts from the exertion of his swing, and you turn and see the machete's carefully honed blade slicing deftly through the late afternoon air, then leveling off, coming in at a right angle to your upper arm. It's coming fast, accelerating! Thwunk! A dull, almost-muted sound. Contact! Your brain waits for the inevitable shock to register. A split second later, the excruciating scream fills the air. What the...? The scream is not yours. And then you realize that, in this version, the blade has imbedded itself a couple of inches deep in the fence post at the right of the opening, almost exactly where your upper arm was just an instant before. The shuddering vibrations from the blade's impact have shot along the weapon to its handle and into Chencho's hand. The scream is his. The unbearable pain has forced him to let go of the weapon. The machete is still quivering in the fence post. In a state of shock and muttering obscenities, Chencho now starts to work to pry the blade from the grudging post.

Once outside the fence, you regain your balance and move quickly to where Lucas has already collected himself. You can see his lips moving. Lucas knows that Chencho will not dare to attack here on neutral ground, so he is undoubtedly hurling angry epithets at his adversary, as required by the code of honor, but you hear only the deafening thunder of your own pulsing heart and gasps for air. Now, you reach out to Lucas. At your touch, his lips purse closed. Without a word, you turn his shoulders down the path and push him toward home.

A precautionary glance back lets you know that the confrontation is over. Inside the fence, Chencho has doubled over, hands on knees. Now he slowly straightens up and begins again to try to work the blade loose from the grudging grip of the fencepost.

As you move along the dusty path with Lucas, your body is seized by a sudden violent shaking that seems to swell from the earth—your knees threaten to give way, your legs feel only barely able to meet your mind's demand to remain erect and keep moving. Somehow you stumble on. Lucas walks silently at your side. Clearly, he is grateful to have been provided an honorable way to retreat.

As you watch this scene unfold, somewhere to the west, the sun drops off the rim of the earth: the evening star, followed by a crescent moon, climbs up from the horizon to the east, and the long dark fingers of evening splay down the mountainsides, stretching toward the vanishing sequins dancing on the sea.

It is not a time for words. The silence remains unbroken, even when Lucas takes his leave of you, hugging you with a quick abrazo and then ducking under the overhang of thatched grass-roof and into the sapling-walled kitchen where his mother has left his supper simmering above the glowing embers of the dying fire.

Moments later, in your imagination, you are back at the two-room, concrete block and tile roofed structure with its crumbling concrete floor that is your home in the village. Latching the door behind you, you grope your way through the shadows into the bedroom. It is too early to go to bed, but you do not light the kerosene lantern. Your legs are still shaking. You are drained, your strength totally sapped. Fully clothed, you flop onto the tightly stretched, green canvass surface of the cot, dropping the mosquito netting behind you.

As you lie there in the darkness, a collage of images from both the immediate and distant past comes at you. Everything's jumbled together. You are dazed, confused. Then suddenly you are back home in a long hot, early-September day, putting up the hay with your Grandpa. You see your cousins and the preacher's son laughing at you, and there's the wry smile on your Grandpa's face as his words float to you, Boys, you cain't never really tell what stuff a man's made of 'til there comes a time when push comes to shove—yep. An' I hear tell a poet once called such a time, "the unforgiving minute ..." Then the image is gone, your thoughts lose shape, and drift slowly away. The soothing balm of heavy sleep gently eases its blanket over your exhausted body and ...

Hold on! There's still another possibility, one where Chencho's machete blade doesn't get stuck in the fence-post. Instead, its razor edge catches you at the base of the neck, severing your....

"Coño, hijoueputa!" The thunder of Chencho's oath slams into your mind: jarred from your thoughts, you look up just in time to see him launch himself at the two of you, catapulting you into the unforgiving minute...the choice is yours: push just came to shove...

Anymore

A chill dawn was lightening as Carl left his apartment and used his cane to limp up to the bakery on the corner. Bells jingled softly on the door when he opened it, and the good smells and the warmth inside engulfed him. He got in line behind two customers at the counter. Sounds came from the kitchen; every now and then he saw the big body of the baker in his white apron and T-shirt move behind the small window in the wall behind the counter.

It took only a few minutes to reach the front of the line. The same thin woman who had been taking his order for years gave him a smile. He returned it and said, "Cardamom bun, please."

She frowned. "We don't make those anymore."

He stood blinking while a car drove by slowly in the street outside. Finally, he said. "What?"

The woman shrugged. "Sorry."

Carl looked through the little window behind her and saw the baker pass. He thought of calling out to him, but just stood there holding his hands closed together on the counter.

"Can I get you something else?" the woman asked.

"No." Carl shook his head. "Thank you."



The same homeless man had sat next to the stairs that led down to Judy's subway stop for a half-dozen years. His shopping cart was always tucked neatly behind the lamppost that he leaned up against there. He held a cardboard sign in his lap that said, "Veteran Out of Work", with a felt hat turned upside down next to him. Sometimes, she dropped spare change into it. More often than not, she didn't. Over time, she came to regard him in much the same way she did the lamppost or the woman who tended the hotdog stand up the sidewalk or the old, mottled mutt who nosed around the trashcans along that street.

The man's dress was consistent. His jeans and sneakers never changed. In summer, he wore a tattered, short-sleeved plaid shirt with snap buttons. In fall and early spring, a sweatshirt was pulled over it. When winter came, an overcoat appeared and a scarf and a knit cap as short against his skull as the clouds his breath made. For rain, he had a cheap plastic poncho, orange and hooded.

Sometimes, he played a harmonica. Other times, he sang the sorts of songs Judy remembered learning in elementary school. Often, he slept. There were magazines in his cart. There was also a sleeping bag, a camping stove, a dented thermos, a first aid kit. His hair thinned over the years, and like hers, began to turn gray. He had sad eyes, sad but kind.

It wasn't unusual for him to not be there for a few days at a time, especially in the bitter cold, so it took her a while to realize he was gone. It was late spring, the buds had all faded on the cherry trees, the days had begun to lengthen sweetly, languidly. She noticed the empty lamppost first on a Monday morning on her way to work, but didn't really consider that he might not return until that Friday evening on her way home when she emerged from the stairwell and his spot was still unoccupied; no shopping cart behind the lamppost, no felt hat on the sidewalk.

A couple of weeks later, she realized fully that he wouldn't be there anymore. She would no longer compare their graying hair, she wouldn't hear the strains of his harmonica when she approached, the lamppost would just be a lamppost. What had happened?

A morning came soon after when she tucked a scrap of paper in a crack at the base of the lamppost on which she had written, “I request the pleasure of your company.” When she returned from work, it was no longer there. But the day had been windy, so it had probably just blown away.



Li Jun had begun playing badminton in high school before he and his mother left China to join his father in California after he’d settled into his new job there in the tech industry. Li Jun continued playing on a club team at his university and won several tournaments. He was known for being quick and spry; he never gave up on a point. After college, he followed his father’s footsteps and became a computer engineer. He rose quickly through a variety of companies until he began his own successful start-up just before his thirtieth birthday. He married, started a family, and bought a large house in the foothills. Through the ensuing years, he kept playing badminton whenever he could. For a long time, he found leagues and competitions in various locations around Silicon Valley. But by the time he attended his twenty-fifth college reunion, his playing had become limited to open gyms on weekends at the local YMCA.

The more he accomplished at work and home, the more he looked forward to those weekend matches. As the years passed, the same core group of players remained, and they came from all walks of life: a grocery store worker, a tailor, two teachers, a symphony violinist, a custodian, and several men, like himself, from the tech world. They played in a random round-robin fashion, and instead of the usual protocol of calling fouls on the opponent, each player cited penalties on himself. There was virtually no arguing that way; the closest thing to trash talk was players making fun of themselves and their declining skills.

When his heel first started hurting on the court, Li Jun shrugged it off. But once the pain began persisting into the following week, he went twice to see his doctor who gave him a cortisone shot each time. That helped for a while, and then the pain returned. It intensified the more he played. He tried inserts in his tennis shoes, stretching exercises, playing on the balls of his feet. Nothing helped.

Finally, he received a referral to a podiatrist who did a series of tests and diagnosed him with chronic planter fasciitis.

“What’s that mean/” Li Jun asked.

“It means you won’t be playing badminton anymore.”

“Come on, can’t you do something?”

“Not at your age. You’re fifty-three. Try swimming. Try a stationary bike.”

At first, Li Jun still went down to the YMCA to watch his friends play and to poke fun at them while they chided themselves. Sometimes, he joined them for a beer afterwards. But it wasn’t the same. It wasn’t.



For their thirteenth wedding anniversary, Tom and Joyce got a sitter for the kids and drove the several blocks to the business section of their town for sushi. They drank sake after ordering, and talked about the same sorts of things they attempted over the commotion of the dinner table at home: how things had been going for both at work, which of them would run the kids to various activities on the weekend, what to do about the dishwasher that kept getting louder and louder. No reminisces, no toasts. In between comments and sips, they watched the chef in front of them prepare their food. When he slid their meal in front of them, they shared a large bottle of Japanese beer, and ate mostly in silence.

They left a little before eight, which was when the play they had tickets for was set to begin. The theater was just across the street. While they waited for the light at the crosswalk to change, Joyce took Tom's hand and said, "Do you really want to go to this?"

Tom shrugged.

"I read another review. It sounds depressing."

"Well," Tom sighed. "We don't have to, I suppose."

"We could take the long way home along the river. Roll down the windows, get some air."

"Okay," Tom said. He looked at her. "If that's what you want."

The light changed and they started across. They passed the theater and entered the street beyond it where they'd parked. Joyce stopped to blow her nose. Afterwards, she didn't take Tom's hand again.

Later, after the kids' baths, after getting their teeth brushed, their room cleaned up, and their pajamas on, Tom read them a story while Joyce got into bed herself. Twenty minutes or so passed before he joined her there. She was lying on her side with her back to him. He slid up against her and she felt his arm wrap around her. His hand started on her stomach, but then moved up gradually until it cupped her breast through her nightgown. She breathed slowly and deeply, feigning sleep. She felt his thumb rubbing the inside of her breast, and she jerked her shoulders a bit in the way he told her she sometimes did while in deep slumber. His thumb kept on moving a moment or two more before it stopped. Several minutes later, she heard Tom's own breathing slow and then fall into his familiar, quiet snore. She moved his hand down to her side and whispered, "I still respect you. I admire you. But desire...I don't feel that anymore."



Ben was eight. He knew something was wrong when his mother was silent after picking him up at the birthday party he'd attended. While she drove home, she stared straight ahead with her jaw set tight. When they walked in the front door together, he saw his father sitting straight-backed on one corner of the couch with his palms flat on his thighs. A suitcase was next to him on the floor. His father's eyes met his. He reached out his arms and said, "Come here, bud."

Ben walked into his father's hug. When they separated, his father's eyes were moist and red. "Sit here." He patted the space next to him on the couch. "Between your mom and me."

Ben hopped up onto the spot, and his mother lowered herself next to him. His father put a hand on his shoulder. Ben looked up at him. His father kept nodding, his lips pursed in a thin line, until he said, "Your mom and I need some time apart."

Ben felt his heart fall. He looked from his father to his mother until she said very slowly, "Your dad does."

His father's voice quickened. "We just need some time to sort things out. I'm going to stay with Uncle Nick for a while. But I'll still be around a lot. We'll do things together all the time."

Ben had begun to cry, his chin in his chest. Suddenly, he looked from one of them to the other and asked, "What about Christmas?"

He felt his father's hand squeeze his shoulder. "We'll still have Christmas."

"Sure," he heard his mother say quietly. Her tone had an edge. "Maybe we'll have two."

“Listen,” his father said. Ben watched him look at his mother. “I’m going to go before this gets any harder.”

His father kissed Ben on the forehead, stood up, and carried his suitcase to the front door. Ben heard it open, then click shut. He heard his father’s footsteps go down the walk. The front gate opened and closed. When the sound of his father’s car died away in the distance, he leaned his head against his mother’s arm.

For a long time afterward, Ben went into his parents’ bedroom closet when his mother got into her nighttime bath. He closed the closet door and stood in the dark among the clothes his father had left on hangers. He stood so his face was up among the trouser legs and shirt tails. Almost six months passed before he couldn’t smell his father on them anymore.



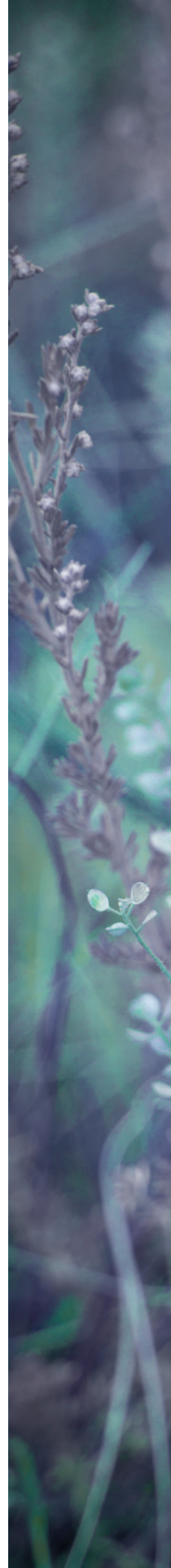
Their only child, Gene, had been born with an undiagnosed genetic syndrome after they both had turned forty. Although they were aware of Gene’s mis-shaped skull, the strange location of his nipples, and the odd angles of his hips, it took a while for Ruth and her husband to realize just how complicated his condition was and would continue to be. After an initial stint in the NICU and almost a year in the hospital’s unit for medically fragile children, the geneticist told them that Gene would never be developmentally older than three months, that he would never walk or talk, that he would always be dependent on adults for his daily living needs.

They brought Gene home and made arrangements to provide the care he needed. Ruth changed to swing shift at work so she could be with Gene during the day until her husband came home from his day job to relieve her; overnight, they took turns getting up to tend to him. Gene had frequent pneumonias that required hospitalizations, and they took turns there, too. During the early years, he had surgeries on his eyes, testicles, teeth, and kidneys, had a G-tube put in for daily twenty-hour feeding by pump. Later, he had a tracheotomy to help control his secretions due to his respiratory problems, a vagal nerve stimulator inserted that they waved a magnet over to help stop seizures, and had a number of broken bones due to severe osteoporosis. Each day and night, he required regular breathing and nebulizer treatments, oxygen boosts if his saturation levels dropped, monitoring of a mister to keep secretions moist, bathing, repositioning, diaper changes, range of motion exercises to prevent atrophy, and frequent medications given at appointed times.

They each also snuggled him, rocked him, sang to him, read to him, and took him for walks in his wheelchair.

When Gene got older and larger during his teenage years, they tried home nursing, but it never worked out, so they got a Hoyer lift to use for transferring him, found movies and TV shows he seemed to respond to, got a special recliner that could vibrate as a secondary seating device for him, and carried on.

The geneticist back in the NICU had also told them that children like Gene rarely lived past the age of five, but he proved her wrong. In his thirties, Gene came through additional hospitalizations for chronic pancreatitis and kidney stones, and over the next decade, managed a gall bladder removal, a fundoplication, and increasing scoliosis. They kept working to make ends meet.



Ruth's husband passed away in his sleep when he was seventy-one. What he'd left in insurance, pension, Social Security, and savings was just enough for her to retire after he was gone, and she began taking care of Gene alone. Shortly after he turned forty-five, Gene had a minor stroke, resulting in the deflation of one side of his face and drooling that had to be regularly wiped away and suctioned. And his increasing weight was becoming more problematic, as was her own arthritis.

A night came when Gene had overlapping respiratory and bacterial infections that required more frequent suctioning and oxygen boosts, as well as diaper changes almost hourly because of his diarrhea. As the night wore on, she eventually gave up on sleep altogether and sat in Gene's recliner in his room. She watched him sleep, listened to the rain fall outside, shook her head, and thought about the years gone by and those ahead. She sat there like that until Gene's sat monitor alarmed, indicating the need for more care. By the foul smell that had begun to fill the room, she knew he also needed his diaper changed again; the intensity of the odor told her it was a big one.

Ruth closed her eyes and whispered, "I can't do it anymore. I don't have any more to give."

She sat very still rubbing her eyelids, the alarm blaring away. Gene coughed hard and she heard secretions explode from the opening in his trach. Finally, she blew out a breath, opened her eyes, stood, and went to him. She wiped away the secretions and drool, raised the level on his oxygenator, suctioned his trach, and changed his diaper. As she did those things, she was aware of the rain stopping and the first birds of the new day beginning to stir up on the telephone wire outside the window. Ruth lowered the rail on Gene's bed, climbed up next to him, and kissed the flattened back of his head.





Old Friends

1.

I once had a friend who was a microwave oven. She heated up quickly, but had a cold heart. I went to high school with her. We kept in touch over the years. She made bad decisions at critical moments. She sabotaged herself. It had something to do with being the child of alcoholics, but I never understood how that worked.

She married a man because she believed that as he aged, he would grow more and more to resemble his father, whom she greatly admired. But as he aged, he became the antithesis of his father. It made her bitter. Her glass door became greasy. You couldn't see what was in her.

Whatever seeds of goodness her husband might have had dried up. He didn't water them. He watered his badness, based on his soul-deep disappointment with life. He grew cruel. He verbally abused their children. I wanted to punch him.

My friend was a microwave. As she aged, the hinges on her door weakened and she began to release dangerous radiation. It dribbled out on the sides, like gravy dribbling out of a sandwich. Her children—their children—grew to hate their father. Still, they warped like him. But there was still hope for them, though there hadn't been any hope for their father for decades.

I talked to her on the phone. I was thinking about all the appliances that I've owned and that have broken down and I've thrown away. Radiation is killing us, radiation from microwave ovens and failed nuclear reactors and power lines and wind turbines.

This friend who was a microwave oven—at night I would imagine myself spinning on her carousel and would get excited and couldn't sleep. I would get up and take a shot of Irish whiskey, but that only aggravated my insomnia.

I had a friend who was a vacuum cleaner. I had a friend who was a dishwasher. I had a friend who was a ceiling fan. My wife tells me that all my friends are marginal, which is the way she reminds me of how marginal I am. She enjoys that accusation. She enjoys accusing me of being a bad man. She tells me she regrets marrying me. Then she calms down and we go on our way.

I would be even more marginal if I didn't live with her. I would be a jumble of broken parts that don't add up to make any one machine.

2.

I had a friend who was a chunk of granite from the Granite State. She was grey and speckled and very heavy. She was deceptively strong. I loaded her into my trunk with some of her brothers and sisters and cousins. I was going to plant them in my garden. I thought it would make my garden unique. I lived many states away from the Granite State. I didn't know if and when I would ever get back there, so I loaded my trunk up.

As I was leaving the quarry, my rear axle broke. I was wondering if something like that might happen. I'd put my trust in God, but God was not worthy of my trust.

It was an old car. It was an old God. This God had a lot of staying power. He was the foundation stone for a world of stupidity. Obviously, my car didn't have staying power. It was what used to be called a "jalopy." It didn't have any value. The *Kelly Blue Book* said it was worth 99 cents, the same value as the autobiography I'd placed on *Amazon.com*.

I abandoned my car at the quarry. Luckily I hadn't filled the tank for my return trip. It maybe had 99 cents worth of gas in it. I abandoned my life at the quarry too. Altogether I was out about three dollars, not enough to worry about. I took a worn sweater out of the back seat and headed down the dirt road which led away from the quarry.

Sleep

I've seen inmates cut themselves with pens, pencils, paper, teeth, cups, plates, books, glass, pins, chipped paint, razors. They can't have razors. They make razors. They smuggle razors in. They turn books into razors. They make cups razor-sharp. They turn pens into needles. Pencils become scalpels.

They cut their hands and feet and stomachs and backs, necks and eyes and tongues and nostrils, wrists and cheeks and foreheads and penises. They cut off fingers and toes and testicles and hair and nipples. Violence multiplies violence. They see it so much that they forget there is pain. The smell of feces is so continuous that you start to believe life is shit.

I go home and listen to Tony Robbins. I try to walk in parks and see peace in the grass. The Lord's Prayer repeats in my head as I drive. I work twelve-hour shifts so that on my off days I only sleep. I go back to the prison and the inmates curse at me, bang on walls and their glass doors and call me "Urkel" and "Butt-boy" and worse. They scream names over names so that words drown, so that there is violence to sound, suffocation to speech.

I tell the head nurse that someone is going to get killed eventually, that one of us will die. She replies, "This isn't a job for everyone." I ask if there is anything we can do to make the environment safer. She says there are forms for complaints. I go to the central guard station and ask for a form. They can't find any. A prisoner in wing G has just cut his aorta. A nurse rushes by. A guard escorts her into the cell. The inmate lies on the floor, blood gushing in spurts with each heartbeat. About one every second. Every second a stream of blood shoots out of his body. There is no barrier between his heart and the world. He has done open-heart surgery on himself. The nurse pushes all of her weight onto the inmate to try to stop the bleeding, but it insists on coming out. The aorta is the strongest muscle in the heart. It is the heart's Olympic power-lifter; it pumps so hard in order to force the blood throughout the entire body. Blood takes about a minute to return to the heart. Except now it rushes to wall, to ceiling, to floor. The nurse stands on the chest, trying to stop the bleeding, her shoes gurgling.

I go home and drink. I get drunk and walk to the swamp near my house. I look for alligators. There are none. Someone told me they stay at the bottom of the lake. A neighbor bought sonar for fishing; he says he can see the alligators lined along the bottom of the lake as he drives over them. He says that they wait. I think of jumping in. I know the flesh-eating bacteria in the water will kill me more likely than the alligators. We had a neighbor's son get killed swimming in these waters. The water is mud thick. It's fecal ugly. Whoever would swim in it is insane. Or free. Mad with thinking you can do anything in this world.

The next day at the prison, an inmate throws bodily fluids in my face. They send me to the E.R. The worry is HIV, hepatitis, E. coli; the doctor eventually enters and tells me it is almost impossible to get these things from a cup of inmate secretions being tossed into your eyes. I ask if he is sure. He's sure. I study his eyes. He seems sincere. He says that if it were blood, one-hundred-percent blood, then that would be different. He says they looked at the inmate's charts and it appears he doesn't have HIV, doesn't have hepatitis. He was tested three years ago and was clean. I ask if he's been tested since then and the doctor says he doesn't know.

On my next day off, I drive towards the park. I never get there. I drive back. I don't want to look at grass. I don't want to look at trees. I go home and stare at my TV screen. I have no cable. The TV isn't turned on. I stare at the empty screen and think of shows I used to watch as a kid.

The next day at the prison I fall asleep in the nursing station. The head nurse wakes me. She tells me I have to do rounds. I go from cell to cell, making sure no one has committed suicide. I look for chest rise. I look for eye movement. It's early morning. The prisoners don't sleep. They lie. They wait. They are shaped into the letter S. They are consonants. They cough. There is no snoring. Ever. The lights are never turned off. Their mattresses are puncture-resistant. They puncture them anyway. They are tear-resistant. They somehow manage to tear them. The glass is shatterproof. One prisoner kicks it in, shatters it. Anything is possible in prison; nothing is possible in prison.

I go home and listen to Thich Nhất Hanh. I try to brainwash myself, listening to him talk so calmly that I forget he's speaking. I stare at his face. His head makes me think of fruit. It makes me hungry. I don't eat. I stare at Thich Nhất Hanh's head. I wonder what I did wrong with my life. I have a Ph.D. in English. I could find no work, nothing survivable, just adjunct poverty. I'd grade community college essays and watch my breath in the winter air of my bedroom, unable to afford heat. I think of my Ph.D., how I'm not allowed to be called "doctor" at the prison. I'm an EMT. An *un*-doctor. I think of pH, the chemistry numerical scale for alkalinity and acidity. If the body is off, there is death. If the body is off—too much sodium, too little potassium—there's heart failure, atrial fibrillation, altered mental status, madness.

I hear the howling of the prisoners. It's at night in my room. I lock my doors now when I sleep. We wear badges at the prison, with our first and last name. A nurse tells me they can take out hits on us if they want to. She says to be mean and nice. She says to frown and be helpful. She tells me to be visible and invisible. She quits. A new head nurse comes on. Typical of the medical field, she looks completely unhealthy. She asks if I'll do a double-shift. I say no. She tells me I have to do a double-shift. Twenty-one hours into it, I stand in front of the glass of a triple-murderer, his body contorted and anorexic. On the cell glass is the photo taken from when he was arrested. A forty-year-old photo. He looks fat and angry in the photo, dumb and shocked. I look at his face now, the eye sockets collapsed as if his eyes are trying to hide from the world. I look at him like he is a blade of grass, imagining there is peace inside his frantic sleep.

38 El Apache

There is no bark left in the dog.
Thunder caught in its throat and
the songbird, still spins with the tornado.

We wonder where the last free spirits roam.

Our arms can't hold all the broken
winds together.

When the coyote howls,
who is left now to answer?

Somewhere, riding the swish of the arrow
we feel the chanting that we lost.

We cower beneath all the things we've forgotten.

My great-great grandmother ran with the water.
Now, we can't recollect her footsteps or her laughter.
The river still runs but it no longer rages.

My mouth moves but no sound escapes.

Inside that silence my war cry whispers.
Inside that whisper
a world dies.

Kathleen Deep
Untitled Skyscape



30 El Camaron

The sea always knew it wanted me
well before I did.

I have nightmares where the only
remedy to life is flight
or holes.
Leave
or hide.

It's not a nighttime fear.
Mostly day-gripping.
The way the air chokes and even with a smile
it twists my arm to breaking.

I think how good the sand would
feel.
How to be buried beneath would be
liberating.
How much stronger I'd be
gone.

The shell they gave me is crepe paper
and I've been stabbing it with words.

The things I've tried to kill inside me do not die.
I sit my heart in fire and it does not burn.

I think if I burrowed in sea water and foam I'd stay alive.
I'll try not to starve on hope
and when the tide comes
I'll fill up with its sunshine.

22 *La Bota*

They teach us to place the boot on their necks.
Are we not more fortunate? The way we're lucky with our teeth.

The dog is a soft spring shower. The gentle sway
the rain plays after the thunder strikes.
Who tied our hands behind our backs and asked
us to growl?

There's no honor in breaking. In the whip or the
lash. The cardinal has a song and it's always
been about our destruction. Not what's eventual
but what we cultivate.

The wild horses aren't wild anymore. Even un-tamed
their eyes show shackles. Show how our
hands are bound and we aren't kind anymore.
The storm is us. Upright and sweeping.
Hands that make monsters. Hands that make boots that crush.

Are we fortunate with these hands? Are we gods?
The way the wolf howls does it break your heart
that they worship us? So like the Gods we kneel for.
Like the ones we slaughter for.

Make fire, speak, touch, dance - dance with the beat
that aches. Forget innocence and constellations.
How much kinder they are. Heart-broken. Broken.
The way we break things with purpose.

The boot. The hand. The mind. The desire to bend
things meant to be wild. Iron and bars.
Concrete and circumstance. Eyes that are chains,
despite the free wind.

The way we march for a greatness unknown.
Trample the Earth, lie to ourselves
and our mothers. Sing and forget,
we're small underneath the boot.

Beauty is our Best Invention

To see morning light slant down such fine lines,
we jog between the vertical rows of planted
pines, leaping between the promise of

evergreen trunks, slim and flaking chips, coupling
our hands round, gripping bark, grasping
long-leaf needles and bare-root seedlings now

grown tall on this sandy ridge, reminding
us of precise symmetry framed so loosely,
this “slash pine,” so called, and risen

in saline sands from an Atlantic brine
into parallel spaces and equally-spaced
pine-post places, rising sap into boughs

of cumulous clouds that shower these swamps and
hammocks on this ridge circling a wetland,
the “conquistadores” laughed to call “La Florida.”

But then. When my bare feet reach the end of rows,
we take humid breath in shades of salt and sweat,
graced by elliptical curves of pine cones, while we gaze

back through the mist of vertical rows to see what a forest
of pines has revealed when planted with our own hands:
beauty, the best invention of the human kind.

Seeing Through Triple Veils

Gazing up the vertical lines of Hama-rikyu Garden,
blue pines and butterfly ginkgo leaves, where my Sunday jog

hurries on along the memory of that hill-side tea farm
near Matsuyama, where I sketched long fence lines

recalling blueprints you sent; even now I straighten angles
from the corners of the rocky hill jutting into the sun-

fogged field, and the salty sea blooming just over the hill,
as I muse on the mystery, unique maybe to human

perspective—seeing two things at once; how anyone
doubts the sight of autumn ginkgoes and pines so true

to triangles and butterflies and yet visualizes stone fences
on a mountainside hundreds of kilometers away; yet

stepping into my Shibuya flat at dusk, I raise a weary hand
to brush the dusty screen away and peer back through

the net of a twilight coming on, realizing I peer through
three veils at once: present scene, memory, and window screen,

where here on a sun-risen island in a foggy sea moving in,
my eye was the first circle, after all.

Fish Scales

-for Ianthe as she completes a painting

You have come to certainty;
God nor I gave you much help;
some times a fight with order,
time after time vivid colors
flash from you to your canvas.

Then too, when your mind finds
new conceptions, yet alters
course through tangles
of illusion, or swims
from you like a swarm
of fish, darting in silver scales,
sure only within its own numbers,
know we all weigh weaknesses and secrets.

Years ago, in Paris,
I purchased a heavy *History of Art*,
in English, and carried it
from one essential photo to the next,
thinking to sit and enjoy some day,
in mock retirement,
its sweep of forms,
its color contrivances,
its savage, private histories,
the public mysteries of art.

If by any chance, on a morning
you suffer for your art,
your vision will not distil,
fingers fight the brush (wrong brush,
wrong fingers), or a new sun blasts
your canvas until the colors run,
know we all shield our lust
until its discharge points us to our goal.

Higher on Steptoe Butte: A True Possession

In spring not precarious, the old road circles up. I steer constant left,
quickly rising beyond the colonel's base perimeter, to hold my grip.
I gasp at oncoming views, jostled by ghosts from desperate moments
in the butte's history, troops outnumbered and taunted by tribes, buzz
of bullets presenting souls to Christ, collecting them as hills near dusk.
My emotions drift among shadowy undulations in the wheaten kingdom.

Clouds, I remember now, touch my face, drops condense down my cheek.
This past was populated by desirous converting to righteous: life so short
such a rock would mark with graves a true possession, if tribes wiped out.
Bones decay, time comes round like the road, to sweeten consoling wheat.

That's my yarn, compelling me forward into intimate chance, rich in both rue
and triumph, delights of others here to plot meridians, to linger in a trance,
to compose a chant, to adore finer distinctions that mere seconds can create.

This fall chaff will gild the sky, swirling over and among harvesters' chugs,
the visible road a lace to tie Steptoe's hushed escape to his swelling myth
and Colonel Wright's knee-jerking vengeance to a policy of extermination.

Some Facts about My Father

His favorite movie is Duck Soup,
followed by The Seventh Seal.
I have long taken this pairing to mean something.

Groucho's given name was Julius.
Julius was the name of my father's father.
Julius ran a laundry, lost his memory,
died while other Julius cracked wise on TV.

Like Groucho with our magic words.
Punxsutawney; antidisestablishmentarianism
Squeaked them three times; please let me go.

Won't you be serious?
How my mother's exasperation could flood a desert.
She didn't sign up to be Zeppo or Margaret Dumont.

I never knew my grandfather & so liked to think
Groucho as my father's other father.
A shield from Old World cruelty.
The god of silliness.
The god of MGM.
The god of never let the pitch go by.
The god of the art of punning.

A pun is the lowest form of humor,
and therefore the most exalted.
I learned my first the year I learned to talk.
The year Groucho died.
The year, somewhere on the other coast,
my father lay on the lawn.

On the other coasts where Old World Marxists and Nobel winners
Wash ashore and ring out their swim trunks,
The coast where there are no plaques on the gates of discovery.

A room of a life's work: the unfathomably small.
The psi is described as a flavor-neutral meson
consisting of a charm quark and a charm anti-quark.
Approximating the unfathomably long-ago once was.

I am certain that, sometime in the late 70s,
fussing in his lap, I made a sound like a duck.
I'm sure his glee as great as my mother's grimace
It's a charm quack!
No glee like that lost glee: the once-young father.

How he'd been waiting for the set-up,
like Groucho for the cigar-mouthed duck,
for the magic word that wins you fifty bucks.

All of creation had been made for this,
all the quarks pulsated for the sake of his joke.

How I would have straightened up.
How I realized my work: to relieve my mother,
to put on my best Margaret Dumont.

A three-year old dowager, leotard in lieu of pearls.
How I straightened my back, batted an imaginary fan.
His face big as a planet, his laughter shaking the sky.

Kathleen Deep
Mixed Media - Untitled



House #3 (Francesca Woodman)

“We face our laptop and it snaps a picture or records a video. In this position, taking photographs feels exactly like not taking photographs, and being recorded is just like being. Perhaps this is why Woodman, who produced in her entire life fewer pictures than are uploaded to Facebook every second, has lately been attracting our attention.”

-Elizabeth Gumpert, New York Review of Books

Foot emerging: skirt through wall through floor.
The floorboards miss their workers.
They're gone from the old country
Gone from the old man's hands.

These old-world floorboards washed up in Rhode Island
Smash a slice of screen.
The floor a window the earth comes in.
The window a wall the skirt comes through.
The skirt a window your sex comes to.

Television should show only the past.
Old man from the old continent.
How his old cameras circled young boys.
Nothing of the present, not even the weather.
How insufficient, the old man's cry. We must stop, yes.
But more essential to destroy.

The secret about skirts is the hem.
The secret about sex is that people don't like it.
The secret about art is that people do.

Does my journal read as a book?
I assume someone is reading it.
The weather from twenty years ago.

One must, in the service of work
with however much difficulty,
make one phone call a day.

The phone a window the wall once wore.
The wall a skirt your sex once more.

Natural Childbirth

Because you don't want to say,
Cut me open.
Too much self-regard, too much pity.
Because any pity is too much.

Because of the way women in the movies
roll to one side the morning after.
Wouldn't be the first time I went to bed with a man
and woke up with a note.

Because you don't want to say,
Put me under.
Because like your vegan friends, you can't say,
Put him down when he sleeps.
Because the words matter or nothing does.

Because of Spaulding Gray in Thailand.
Here they do everything a woman can do with her vagina
except give birth.

Because you don't want to say,
Scar. Because they kept the promises.
How wonderful our wizards.
How they get us through with barely a mark.

Because Ceasar's mother died.

Because of these young boys everywhere.
Their avant-garde smiles.
Their exquisite sadnesses.
Their sex so pure.
Their blood squeezed down.
 One grain of rice to throw in the pot.

Because you don't want to say it.
Because a girl of twelve knows not to say it.
But every time these boys say it,
Cock Balls Shit Cum.
You have to say it.
Cut. Scar. Womb. Egg.

Because of a name on a form.
A diploma on a wall.
Holding him before you do.
Or passed him to a nurse.
Her name nowhere.
Because you thought of finding him but thought better.
Because of the picture on your phone,
Beeping while you slept.

Wouldn't be the first time.
Asleep as two, awake as one.
Because the last time.
Asleep as one, awake as two.

Prayer Like a River

I went to the creek
to hold my hidden sorrows

cupped in my hands
beneath the clear water
near the mossy edge

until my body
felt free of obligation
to anyone,
except the smooth blue rocks
beneath my feet.

The stream wrinkled up
the time-written messages
across my skin.

Weightlessly danced by rushing currents,
I lifted my hands to my heart center,
matched up the life line of each palm,
and pressed them together,

then fell my forehead to the tips of my fingers
and wrote a new destiny.

Your Face Is My Gauge

We are in this race together
Whoever can run can join,
But victory is for one person
And the, your face is my meter
We are tired together
You try hard not to show it
Though I tell you I am,
But then, your face is my indicator
We are friends together
I try my best to be honest
Yet you never trust for once,
But then, your face is my pointer
You can tell all about me
I merely say you told about
me
Because you have told me nothing,
And yet, your face is the teacher
You can ask me of what I'm thinking
Really and frankly I will tell, but when I ask,
Try as much to hide
But then, your face is the chronicler
In my friendship with you
I am sure I am the guardian
Although you claim that you are
But then, your face is my gauge.

The Other Day

Examine mother that there are no grasses on the field again
The marks on the soil are too many to count
The other day, they were the mark of Antelope that father hunted
Before that other night was the masquerade dance practise
I am sure this would be a grass weeding at night, say it and I believe it Mother
Observe mother that there are metal pieces marked red all over again
The red painted spot are greater than my hairs
It once was the annual hunting festival
Prior was the 'mere Combat practice'
I will believe it is again if you tell me it is.
All the children everywhere are crying mother see;
All mothers carrying their aging children is the population of our village women
The fathers did go on 'a men communal Vacation'
They will return whenever they want, I know
Just say it, stop pretending and say it wasn't a war, I'll believe you

Godspeak in the City

house fire in town
this sunday—
tree limbs
quake in the pale midday.
cloud lines above become
electrophoresis
in the blue
& cardinals
dive toward the sirens
a plume
splinters the skyline
like a roman standard
when a sundog
blooms in cirrus
& wilts from stillness.
our prayers ribbon out—
O God
establish final equilibrium
unleash everlasting fission
& give us endless fuel from light
but first
O God
let the smoke go white.

Adrian Patterson
Number 1



Tiger Rag (Hold That Tiger)

somewhere down the way stands no one
in particular we see no one standing there
wonder at his nothingness call out to him
join us! but he can't walk or fly
in his nothingness no wonder there's
no moon tonight back inside another
refrain of tiger rag you comment on its grease
like fried violins and mandolins you say
i giggle into my water glass perhaps the band
would take exception i retort contemptuously
let's dance and we whirl around again
it's plain to see with your thin hips rotating
who's at fault here the café empty except us
the band one violin one mandolin and a bass
oh and jean the waiter who can't be found
he's stuck around here the poor kid
we don't notice your high heel snaps
tossed in the corner past twelve now
there over the rooftop religion chimes
we don't notice your leonese scarf snags
on a knotted chair back into the corner too
you shed things and i shed things
until the music's our clothing the song's
a grappelli number you knock over
another something i don't know what
through giggles coffee sludge we swig
burns our forearms then the song ends
we're self-aware when the song ends your
wrinkled cotton blouse undone in revelry
the band needs to breathe we gasp back outside
to look for no one who must be hiding

Without

trees, who'd house dampwood termites
in autumn days when all but the jobless
have jobs or class or drink?

Imagine:
a park without trees to be a field without maize or tobacco.
There's no tragedy like cashless land.

Perhaps a prairie state park,
but even those have green:
men and women and kids fat
with fig newtons, beer, and camo backpacks bought
in a Cleveland department store, clearance, 95 per cent off.

And what of the dirt?
It's just dirt, you say;
brown, black, and cold, dotted with unknown white specks.
But no, it's depleted; it's poor; it's saturated with acidic precipitation
so your cash can't grow.

You can't hear me.
This is a nature poem,
you say, and disregard it.
Give me something concrete,
a people poem with women cursing men cursing them cursing us.
Give me a house in a field, but don't paint a landscape.

No, give me the destitution of men who brave
winter and offer respite from the sins
of Hawthorne's worldview.

Don't give me the field;
don't describe the grass and how it grew
like splintered fingers of the sun through snow;
don't espouse tones of empathy for the field mice
curled around one another in a burrow;
don't liken the trees to palace guards,
the sky to ocean foam,
the barbed-wire coils to a serpent constricting a fence post.
We have snow here, see this ice?
We have cold here, see my words?
Don't show me the things of winter.
Write poetry of man, of escalator, of furnace.
Don't tell me the things of winter.

Six Leaves of Creeping Sage

six leaves of creeping
sage in my pocket

followed me, silently,
home

in my nest, there are no
eggs to fuss over

grasses, mud, and thick horse hair
weave my bed

my nest is crowded, though there
are no eggs

the cowbirds keeping cowing
and the forest flies intrude

I long to be an owl, roosting
in dark, quiet places

hidden in the creeping
light of morning

Mirth and Reverence

sweetbreath rolling
between our hearts

electric moonbath
floating through this skin

gratitude blooming like ten thousand snap dragons

their warm exhalations:
elixir of

light

What to Do with Intangibles

Early morning, a little snow
teases the outstretched branches
with the help of the wind.
It is cold, but inside the stove's warmth
cradles the recliner in the lamplight
where he reads poems.
His fingers, thick and calloused,
flip pages enthusiastically
as he notices the shape of his nails,
much like his father's,
no moons rising.
And like his father had done,
it's time to contemplate departure.
One day, the stove unlit, will dispense
the damp aroma of creosote,
the book will lie closed
upon the arm of the recliner.
One day, a relative will enter
and acknowledge
that the house is empty,
no warmth, no breath, no poetry,
an indentation upon the seat
next to the book.
The change will go unnoticed
by the snow, wind, ice, and
those few crows meandering
for morsels upon the buried landscape.
He returns to reading,
the words delight him.
What would become of these joys,
he wonders.
Someone should take them.

Hidden Amid the Stars

It wasn't easy,
living with him,
his moody character
and need for privacy,
the periods of hibernation
that fostered
all night creative fits
while she tried to sleep.
She interrupted him
in the middle of a thousand poems
for household information,
invaded his reverie
on the blue hill mountain pass
as the view sung an ode
in his brain,
even conquered his triumph
over an elusive phrase
when she yelled up
for dinner.
But he clung to her,
his raft on the white water swirls,
stability upon the rumbling current
of perpetual thought.
Often, he floated alone,
submerged in foam,
gagging for the tangible
and she would grab a handful of hair,
yank his heavy head up.
They stumbled through silence,
blundered through varied perspectives,
yet when the storm settled,
they navigated the clarity
of the winter sky
and studied the stars
to find out exactly
where they were going.



A Night Swim

The moon had been in Pisces. For several days it was a slim crescent, providing just enough light for the starry fish to swim in – breathing in the radiance, the austere, pale light.

The luminous curve did not lie on the left or right side of the capricious satellite. It was on the bottom: a drink that will become larger as the moon grows full and generous. Pisces splashed in the glowing ocean as the astronomers waited, marking its orbit across the arid night sky. Like hooks, their numbers and equations would pull the fish from their tranquil sea, trapping them in a net thrown across the galaxy.

And when the mystic trawl drags them from the bright water they will lay gasping against the sky. Stars and planets will swirl around fins and gills, edging against scales – glittering like a diamante skin.

There was no bait that could lure the fish from the moon's pretty shores. They swam throughout the night until the moon became filled with light, forcing Pisces into the dry darkness. Sprawled in constellations, the fish wait – for the waters to recede, giving them a chance to slip once more into the moon's shining waves.

The Weary Star

During the summer, the sun is overpowering, a symbol of Helios' consuming appetite. But with that power there also came weariness – the fatigue of long days spent at the very top of the sky's food chain. During the processional of the mid-year equinox, all clouds and jet streams, every particle of astral dust is consumed in its muscular ascent. Proud of its solstice, the sun is enthroned in the shapely air: a fearsome, melting star.

Throughout the span of each still, expansive day, the sun spends its lengthy rule exerting its strength: bleaching cities, making populations sweat. Beating landscapes into submission, warming oceans until their kelp forests become a frenzy of photosynthesis: it bends its searing gaze onto a lethargic world.

But with dusk's beckoning coolness, the sun begins to sink. It falls into a horizon that is as rich as a courtesan's bed, soft and full of decadent color: lavender and tangerine; burgundy and amethyst. The sun longs to sink into its blushing resting place.

Setting slowly, the blaze of the sun changes during its gradual, subtle fall. Its light is a world of alchemy, an equation that will create a sky of liquid gold. Its gilded profile illuminates coasts and countries before plunging behind buildings and trees.

But I think I have seen the sun in repose.

It was dusk and the shadows had become lengthy and capricious; when light had reached its mid-year richness. I passed beneath a tree, taking comfort in the shadows, and saw rays of heat drenching its dark branches. At the top of its trunk, I saw a blazing apparition – stationary, yet still able to saturate its resting place with a dazzling, white energy. It seemed to me as if the weary star had thought to stop, to rest amongst the cooling leaves.

I don't know how long the tree bore this bright weight. Many hours, surely – for it was some time before I felt the air become cold and dark. What did the tree receive for its patience? Perhaps the sunlight penetrated its skin, illuminating its chlorophyll...and next spring when the tree blooms once more, it will be radiant as each gilded leaf uncurls, full of the living memory of the star that had come to rest.

Day Vision

On a freeway in England
lightly south of London,
up on a hillside.
It had just stopped raining.
Your car was stopped under
the electric power lines.

You were standing with your
thumb out and didn't move
when I stopped my car behind yours.
Steam poured from the engine.
The air smelled of wet tires.

You held your finger to your
lips, and pointed to the sky.
"You affect the light by your
proximity." I stepped a
little closer and considered hugging you.

Later in the evening, the tow
truck came and we followed
in my sedan your head turned
back all the while as you
muttered "we are better
conductors than glass tubes."

Shades of Green

A green beach ball seems out of place
by the side of the road
in the frost
in the cold
its pale green and white glimmer
in the chilly sunlight and
this ball is only a stone's throw from
an elementary school
a church
a graveyard
a youth center
a formal's store
a car lot and
a gospel radio station
all barely awake on this icy December
morning with little traffic zipping by the
round green ball sitting in the grass
waiting for the frost to melt
waiting for its owner
to come back for it
if it isn't somehow already forgotten.

Horse Behavior

The horses always know
they can sense it
the ones who love them so
and the ease you have sitting
back in the saddle
the ease you have guiding
the reins
the barn dog runs between them
leading the trail ride
flushing out a flock of birds
the lead horse stops to munch
the high grass
the horses on their off day
running free and wild
no riders to carry today
burying faces in hay and feed
running back and forth
the ones that do have riders today
are gentle, pure
aging gracefully
encouraging life that
passes through the old red barn.

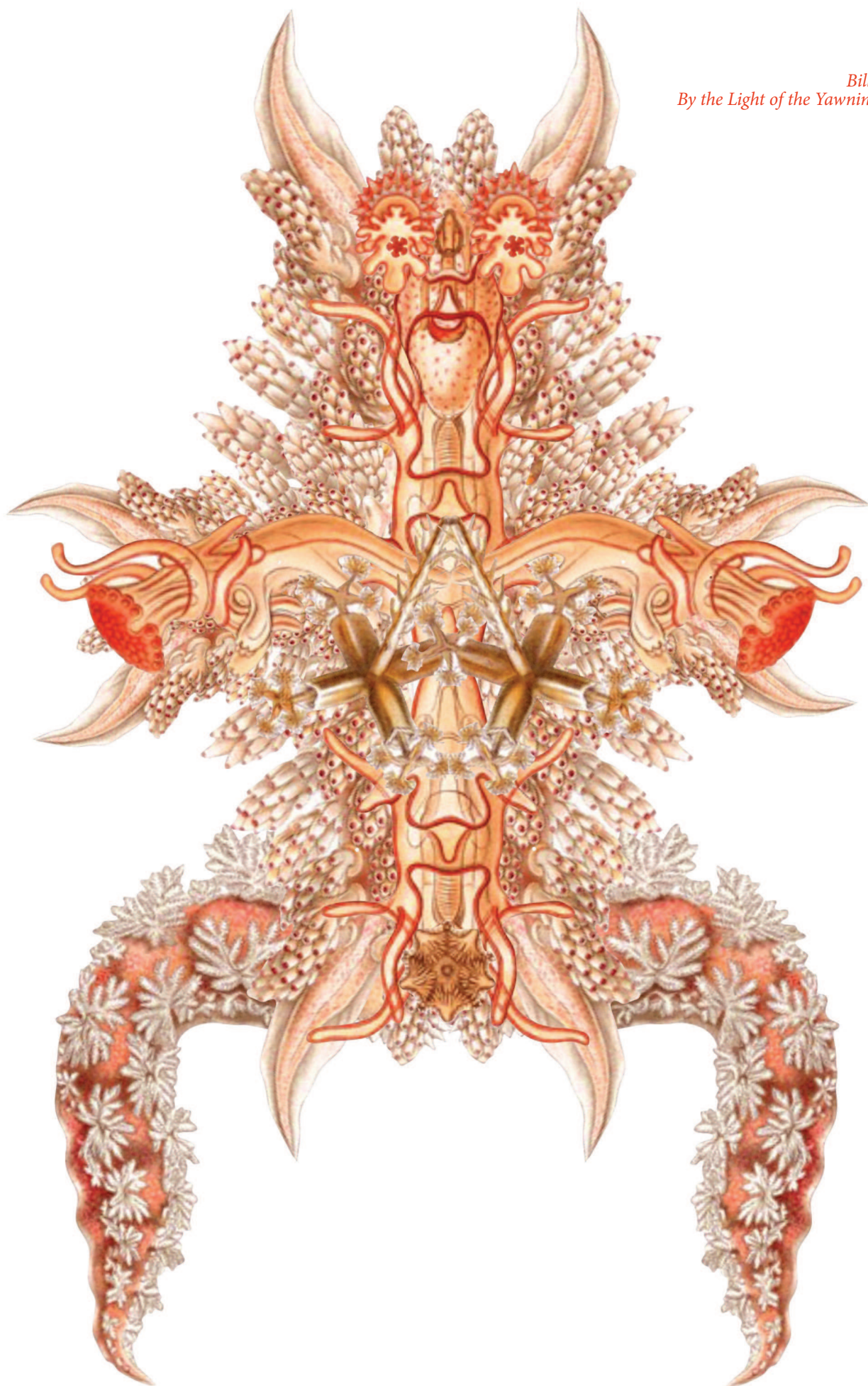
Bondage of the Free

We who free others with mighty words, soon
Enslave ourselves tamely for a pittance,
So piteously tied to thought, word, rune
Or inexplicables ascribed to providence.
So inextricably tied, as to earth its moon,
Man to memory in mind embedded dense;
Attached as weaned babe to its feeding spoon,
Stray images we cling to, constantly condense.
Sculpt'rously shaped from air - Airy's freedom afloat-
We give our word to airlike phantom dream foil
That banyan treelike, longing to be what it's not
Sends free airy roots down to fixed stay in soil.
Free all you can, with word and deed decree,
Still freedom to bond becomes bondage of the free.

Brad Garber
Waiting for Gina



Bill Wolak
By the Light of the Yawning Moon



Deliberations / Elaborations

At times you get carried away by your own thoughts
And lofty flamboyant castles in the air build;
Ideas stretch on wings rhetoric wrought
Like lovers swept off their feet in verse maidens gild.
With ideas forced even the preacher sound
Begins to sound like one talking himself to convince;
His verbal ball of wool entangled, all unbound,
Far from belief he strays, his dreams to evince.
At these times you force your theories on rails of dream,
Preconceived notions eschewing subject resistance;
Like omnipresent author that tightly shapes themes
And dictates, controls character and circumstance.
Exertion in this all in art or life shows up hypocrisy,
Dichotomy between inspirational flow and control's autocracy.

Holy Dip

Where only swimmers fleet and the winged wallow
In luxury, two deep broad rivers steeped in faith
Meet at milewide sangam supremely shallow
Where we can stand and in the sun decorous bathe.
Sleek kishti, barges, bamboo rafts, the confluence span
Like layered chained continuous truss bridge;
Weaved knit Prayers pattals of rose petals sail with elan
At holy dip midst wild geese clouds, paired tame partridge.
Those ashram, dharamshala, pilgrim sprawled encampments,
Striped sadhus (ash smeared), chanting pandas faces gaunt,
Their banners and emblems wave on long poles o'er tents
As on embankments status, sacred wares they flaunt.
Waits orange Hanuman in horizontal seat
To be submerged when monsoon rivers rise by forty feet.

Adrian Patterson
Train Trestle



A Wise One in the Skies above the State of Washington

by Ubs Reece Idwal

O my, the sky is dark and filled with my complexion—clouds.
O my, I am as you are—blue—rain falling on my shrouds.
East, south, west, north, o, everywhere, such varied shapes appear,
a conch, a lotus blossom, mace, and discus, here and there.
I pace across Earth's space and see the rising of the Sun,
o, golden, solar fire, nuclear, ignited One.
The transcendentalists who know the Absolute observe
illusory is all of this which flees Earth's turning curve.
Omniscience overall, o, energy and speeding light,
I see before my eyes the splendor of your strength and might.

The A-tom

Geiger, geiger, counting fast
in the radiation blast,
what poor mortal cared to see
such a scorching symmetry?

In what distant seas or isles
burnt the atom's blazing smiles?
What dread hand dare seek the fire
of its holocaustal pyre?

What dark knowledge and black art
found out what it could impart?
Did that magic priest capisce
furies splitting it unleashed?

What was in that crazed-filled brain
contemplating the insane?
What was on that troubled mind
thinking such should be designed?

When Big Bang burst forth with stars,
was its purpose deadly chars?
Did the Maker of the Lamb
lift the flood-gates of His Damn?

Geiger, geiger, counting clicks,
floating down the River Styx,
what poor mortal fared to see
such a fearful symmetry?

1	3	25	20	16
2	17	14	8	24
21	19	12	6	7
23	11	4	22	5
18	15	10	9	13

Murmuration

Each eyes the nearest six
to gyre and swirl
then fall like atoms
in black thousands
to an earthly shape—

Then sudden stir again
and lift in swift wheel
turn and dip
all golden-eyed
to spy a hope or fear—

A wave of feathers
breaking faster
than their sound,
their raucous
murmuration—

A single signal
becomes the whole
and drops again
to leaf black branches
just budding spring—

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Aji
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