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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Painted Bride Quarterly gratefully acknowledges:


American Poetry Review, for its publication of Tina Barr’s “The Crossing”;
Ploughshares, for its publication of Tina Barr’s “Public Garden Above the Rhone”; Poetry, for its publication of Tina Barr’s “Circe”.

THANK YOU. THANK YOU. THANK YOU.

Linda Blackaby
Gretjen Clausing
Denise Sneed
And the rest of the gang at the PFWC

Leonard Gontarek & HMV
Pamela Mertsock
The Pontiac Grille
Greg Gaughn and Number 9 Productions
Brian Dillworth
Blue Moon Jazz Cafe
Virgin Sextet
Yusef Komunyakaa
Stephen Berg
David Bowie
Frederick Barthelme
Morris Rosen
Catherine Hennessy
BVA
PVLAA
Jennifer Oliver
Christine Havrilla
David Dondero
Lisa Zeidner
Denise Guess
Stephen Dunn
Robert Lewis
Steven Volk

Front cover photograph: Thomas Sayers Ellis
Presence

They never aged, my mother's hands, I still hear
her voice but her body
is scattered ash. She
comes back now, in fragments,
as I steer my pick-up through this September
mist, in a light that makes the red
lift off the leaves & hang above us,
radiant. You are in the seat
beside me. An hour ago
you cupped your hands in the tub & raised them up,
an offering of steam. Susan & Peter

ride in the back, shield each other
from the wind. I see them
in the rear-view mirror, they face

where we've just been, see

what we've just seen, only later, from
behind - the elderly couple
walking single file, the police cruiser

waving its lights, the white boxes
of the beekeeper. I don't know

how bees build honeycomb, or spiders
their webs. I don't even know
how a telephone works, how your voice reached me
all the way from Iron River, fed

across wires or satellites, transformed

& returned. I don't understand the patience
this takes, or anything
about the light-years between stars. Think

of an astronaut, big silver hands
& gravity boots, and the effort spent

to keep his body from flying off into space. Think of
the first time your grandparents listened
to a phonograph, the needle falling to black
vinyl, a song without a body. Think of the names
you see on a map, think of all these towns & rivers
before they were named, when “Liberty” & “New Hope”
were a large rock, a stand of birches. In this light
even the yellow line that keeps us
from the oncoming traffic
seems to float above the tar. Wildflowers
grow in the meadows that line this back highway - St. Johnswort,
Sweet William Catchfly, Heal All. We’re driving 66 mph

& one maple is coming up fast, on fire. I begin,
\textit{it’s like those fireworks we watched explode}
\textit{over the East River, but it’s not enough}

to say this. By the time Peter & Susan see it
\textit{it will already be past, rushing away from us as if falling}
into a grave, the electricity drained out of it, the world

between \textit{something is happening & something happened.}

It's what I'm afraid of, the speed with which everything
is replaced, these trees, your smile, my mother
\hspace{1cm} turning her back to me
before work, asking over her shoulder,
\textit{how does this look?}
Listenerland

From a soundproof studio Al Green sings
I’m so tired of being alone, his eyes
turned upward because up
is his idea of heaven. Apollo’s there
somewhere, failed, stranded
22,000 miles from home, the captain unsure
they’ll make it back. Upstate a guard
lies dead in Attica & no one knows
what will happen next. Janis Joplin snarls
it’s all the same fucking day man. A star
moves past my window, untethered,
lost. Al Green falls to his knees,
a prison guard drops to the ground,
my eyes close, the radio static, everything
falls into something else & we try
to hold on to the falling. We can’t even find
90% of the universe, and 20 million Americans
don’t believe we ever walked on the moon.
Look up. The light flickering from that star
is older than Moses, an infant
cast off on a palm leaf, expected only
to drown. The astronauts are surrounded
by suns, the radio dead & nothing
is getting any closer. The light
is from stars that burned out
a million years ago. It’s taken that long
to reach them. Al Green is asking
for help, his forehead dotted
with sweat. The same atoms that make up his brain
were drifting alone in the universe
for billions of years, when there wasn’t even
an Earth for them to call home, and no human
to even imagine it. Look up: that lonely,
that lost. Six billion years ago
if these atoms had a consciousness, they
might have imagined an earth like this one,
they might have imagined us. The radio
glows its dull arithmetic, it says,
this is going out to all of you out there
Goats

I hate them the way an astronomer despises the approaching dawn—that one tiny star should white-out so many from our field of vision. Goats do that to me: take away a part of my life I would rather not let go of. My life returns, of course, but different. Slightly irrevocable.

I patch their huts by day. They are always trashed by the night's wind, or else a careless billy rushing home from a feast of fermented apples. I mend the huts and the next day they require maintenance again. I feed the goats—filling their wooden troughs with tree bark, horsemeat, and vegetable broth—so that they will leave me alone. So that they will grow fat and lazy. I don't care how loudly they implore me, I won't chase after them any more. I have no more time for goats.

Do not be fooled by the diamond-glint of their eyes. They bring you only to crystals, fool's diamonds.

As a child my grandfather brought my family here, to my aunt's property in Arkansas. It was this same aunt who first lied to us children about the power of goats, how they could lead you to riches. My cousins and I would spend the entire summer roaming with her herd of goats, while the adults sat near the lake, in the shade, sipping cool amber drinks and laughing. I was terrified, but nonetheless dragged along through the humid woods crawling with spiders, frogs, and snakes. The goats weren't afraid of snakes. One would dig its front hooves down into the moist soil and kick the life out of a copperhead with its hind legs. My cousins would squeal with delight at the death of each snake, while I silently trembled at the ferociousness of the killing hooves and the glint of the goat's eyes which reflect nothing of death.

Once in a while, a goat would stop, jostle the undergrowth, "Baal" with glee, and sprint off. One of my cousins would grovel around in the dirt for the quartz-crystal, wipe it off with spit and hold it up, gleaming, to the sun. I only found one crystal, ever, and the moment I touched it, a goat knocked me away, crushing three of my ribs. One of my cousins recovered the crystal and, later, at home she offered it back. But I didn't want it. The goats conspired against me all day, and I dreamt about them that night. I only felt safe when we stopped at a creek to rest and eat. A goat might butt me into the water, but it wouldn't follow. I had at least that wet space apart from them. A goat is like a wild dog in that way, in that it would sooner attempt to camber up a tree than wade deeper than the top of its hooves into the running water of its own reflection. Even a goat has its fears.

I was shrivelled like a prune at the end of each summer, but it was better than wearing a bruise the size and depth of an apple. I could breathe slowly, calmly over the rippling waters of the creek. The
other children laughed, but soon grew bored and left me to the water. I even came to welcome the moccasins. I didn’t touch them, nor did they touch me. I admired how their bodies whipped through water like water itself. I wanted to be like that, wholly a part of something else.

Eventually, the sun would sink and give the sky back to the stars. And I would slip out of the creek, sensing my way home from tree to tree, while the goats slumbered in their huts and the adults deadened themselves with whiskey. My cousins would screech and spit as I passed through the doorway, and cut me with their crystals.

But they are all gone now: their ashes shoveled into the family tomb or gone to take jobs in the city. I am left with all this land and all these goats. All these goddamned goats to care for...that I would kill if I had anyone else.
Junk Travel Through West Memphis

Woman with a starshell light behind her eyes
turns slowly on the sugar of a ride cymbal,
and moves her hands towards the Pleiades

she imagines strung across the dancehall floor.
Other hands are soft on her white taffeta,
and the fingers everywhere in her things

only add their flashing brushes to the torsion.
What a love this is, at the core of quiet music
where rings and wallet can be gladly given over.

Shoes, too, and a bracelet with eight red stars
swinging from the band are calmly offered to those
in desperate need. Her frayed hem sweeps up,

and the bassist at his hat rack lifts an arm
to this backwards-rushing bride. She unfolds
the packet of her tin foil heart, and invites each one
to touch it. She wants them all at her cotillion.
What matters is the glow inside her hilltop mansion,
though the eaves are overrun with Spanish moss

and the portico is strewn with broken glass.
The rough alloy in her brain's blood shimmers,
sets in place, and slows her steps to Zion down.
The Great Tenor

Sad to hear his personality is less great than his voice embracing *Ave Maria, Nessun Dorma, Vesti La Giubba* as if the joy, hope, and suffering of the world has coalesced into one fire-hydrant gush of sound—
to hear he is, in fact, a grouchy primadonna

who speaks only of his own magnificence, belittling those hired to make him look good. Still, Wagner, Dostoyevsky, Strauss proved

that great achievements don’t require great humanity. “Sir” Charles Barkley was right to say, “I’m an athlete, not a role model.”

My informant is no great soul, certainly—more like a laryngeal virus out to chop a giant down to its own size.

So what he’s right? Who expects the kidneys to do calculus; the brain to purify the blood? Heroes’ failings leave a place for us.

We can be the bones that hold the body up, the lungs that guzzle air, the bowels that do the necessary dirty work.

We can be stomachs, simmering the stew of life; phagocytes, policing blood; red corpuscles—friendly waiters serving

muscles, brain, and lungs, bringing trays of oxygen to every cell, giving them strength to write symphonies, to slam-dunk, to sing.
Typos

I've laughed at them in others' work—
"I'll have two tacos and a burriot..."
"Nice shit," he said, lowering his gun—

so I try to be a sport when my poem reads
"I just ant to get her buried and go home..."
"...shy and king and lacking confidence..."

They'll know it's want, I tell myself. They'll know it's kind. Still, would Wagner have enjoyed aouga horns in "Liebestod"?

My kingdom for a hoser would have gotten Shakespeare booed. Chilling, how little separates brilliance from nonsense,

triumph from catastrophe:
one slight stumble the difference between
King Chulumbo at 35 to 1,

and a drive home without the rent;
one chromosome between $E=mc^2$
and the Special Olympics. I was wrong

to laugh before. Hell is words not saying what we mean: The time the waiter asked "How's everything?" and I said "Fine,"

though my blind mother's steak was charred, her glass gilded with orange lip gloss. The last night I spent with Sharon,

when I meant to say, "I love you. Marry me," but what emerged was "Get the fuck out! And don't slam the damn door when you go."
Mapmakers

On paper David’s mother had won everything. But watching his father flip eggplant slices with a spatula on the poolside grill or seeing him hit speed-dial to call his new girlfriend, David suspected that his father had won something else, something better. After the divorce, his father had moved to a new apartment building, one with a swimming pool, brick walls, a courtyard, hardwood floors, and lots of other single, unattached people. David equated everything in his father’s new life—the apartment, the strange new clothes, the black leather couch, even the jar of laundry quarters on the dresser—with an independence and felicity that was vaguely unfair to his mother.

On breaks from college, David would come home and stay with her. She seldom left the house. In the evenings, he went out for dinner with his father and his father’s new girlfriend Debbie. He would report back to his mother only the worst things about the woman. “She used ‘recompense’ when she really meant ‘compensate,’” he might say to her as they sat on the couch in front of the TV watching Letterman. “And she once had a job modeling underwear.”

His mother seemed not to listen, but then, fifteen minutes later she might turn from the TV and ask, “Where did you say she modeled underwear?”

At the end of break, David would return to school with a sense of heartache that was as heavy and lasting as the gifts his mother packed into his duffel bag the night before he left: mystery book, sweaters, desk calendars, tie racks, and once, at Thanksgiving, a six-CD boxed set titled “The Best of Broadway.”

For spring break, David invited a friend of his, an exchange student, to come home with him. He was tired of dealing with his parents alone. Raul was from Spain, and, like David, had a reputation in the dorm for being odd and quiet. He wore tennis shorts and warm-up suits, Wilson caps, socks, shoes, even ties and blazers with little crossed rackets on them. He had mournful eyes and a sad, almost penitent way of entering a room. He used English competently but spoke little, and everything he said sounded like a question or an apology. His walls were bare; clothes and books spilled out from suitcases on the floor, as if he were still making up his mind whether to stay in America or flee. They did not know each other well, but ate meals and sometimes walked to class together so as not to have to go alone; they were happy just to understand what the other was saying. When David’s mother picked the two of them up at the train station, Raul pulled a Tupperware container from his bag and, without saying a word, handed it to her. Inside was a pound cake. “Ah-ha,” she said, staring at it through the sweaty plastic. “It’s delicious.”

“You boys are on break,” she said when they arrived home that day. “Why don’t you go sit by the pool and I’ll bring you some lunch?”
David and Raul sat down in deck chairs outside. The sky was blue, streaked with long, thin clouds like the vapor trails from a hundred airplanes; the day was warm. David took off his sweater, and laid it on the deck. The yard was scraggily; she had not raked in the fall. Daffodils, some of them in bloom, poked up through weeds on the embankment near the pool. His mother had taken off the pool cover since the last time he'd been home, and he saw that a few of the Mexican tiles that lined the sides had fallen out of place and were lying on the bottom. The water was green and still; on the top step of the shallow end was a drowned centipede. The whole place seemed new and strange to him, as it did every time he came home after being away.

"Your hair," David said when his mother brought sandwiches outside. "I like it." Her hair stuck out in kinky waves, and it was slightly blonder. It made her look tired.

She smiled and tossed her head once. "I'm volumizing," she said. "Isn't it fun?" She sat down at the foot of David's deck chair, patted his shin with one hand. She stopped smiling. Her skin seemed very pale, almost transparent, and the features of her face were delicate and thin, pinched now because she squinted. Her eyes were red. She didn't seem like she should be out in the sun.

They sat in awkward silence for a few moments as they ate. "Raul used to be something of a tennis star in Spain," said David. He had learned this on the train ride down. Raul had not seemed comfortable talking about it, and now he smiled and nodded, but looked away.

"Is that right?" David's mother said.

"When he was little, he was almost famous."

"Maybe the three of us can go play while you're here?" she said. Raul waved a bee away from the plate of sandwiches. There was the low rumble of jets in the distance. "Did I tell you? I'm taking Tai Chi. It's mostly for meditation, not defense."

"Is that so?" David said. He imagined his mother, on Tuesday nights, in black spandex going to class alone at the Y, and he felt so much pity for her that he looked away.

She brought them all slices of Raul's pound cake. It was sweet and tasted like orange. She turned to Raul. He was nibbling on a piece of pound cake like a gerbil. "Parlo..." she said, struggling, "Parlo español..."

"Mom, cut it out," said David. She was quiet for a minute. She held up her slice, pointed to it, and said something, broken and slow, in Spanish. Raul answered her with a relieved laugh and "Sí." She smiled.

"You're only going to embarrass yourself," David said. He gave her an exasperated shake of the head, like a fortune-teller giving a warning that he knew would not be heeded.

His mother ignored him and began asking Raul questions, exactly what David couldn't tell; how many sisters, brothers, maybe, something about Spanish wine. David went inside to get himself a glass of milk. When he came back out, Raul was pointing to the plates of food on the table, saying their names in Spanish. David's mother repeated them.

That night, as expected, David's father called and invited the boys out
to dinner. They went to one of his favorite restaurants, a place called Pulcinello's, with black formica countertops, white tile, art deco posters, and sparkling mineral water in wine buckets. The restaurant was busy and crowded with people who, like Debbie and David's father, looked as though they exercised a great deal.

David's father asked him if he'd chosen a major yet. David said that he liked art history and talked about a Picasso drawing his professor had pulled from a locked rack in the art gallery after class one day to make a point about abstraction.

"Picasso was brilliant," Debbie said. "But the man was an asshole."

"That's OK," said David's father. "You have time to decide. Teaching art history would be a fine profession."

"I'm just saying I like the class," David said, and the table was silent. Raul smiled at them, nodded.

His father wore a crisp blue blazer over a white T-shirt and jeans. He looked very tan, and had ordered a bottle of wine for the table. "How's your mother?" he asked when the appetizers came.

"Fine," said David. He poked his caponata with a fork. "She's taking Tai Chi." His father snorted and laughed. The table was silent again.

After dinner, they went to the natural history museum at Fernbank. It was open late on Friday nights, and, in the absence of school groups and children, seemed to draw the same sort of crowd as the restaurant. Couples with drinks in their hands stood in front of saber-toothed tigers and chunks of meteor or peered into glass cases of taxidermied wolves and emus.

David looked at a display case showing various pieces of moon rock; behind him, he could hear a conversation. A young woman was talking about having her car towed, how furious she was every step of the way. "Who can blame you?" the man she was with kept saying "Who can blame you?"

In the center of the atrium was a glass case with a three-dimensional map of Atlanta. There were tiny metal trees with clumps of green hair, green stubble to represent grass in the parks, little metal cars, and small, faceless amorphous people. Raul stood by the map, pressing buttons on the side panel to light up various sites: Peachtree Plaza, Olympic Stadium, Woodruff Park.

"Where is your building?" he asked David when he came to stand by him.

"My building?"

"Your mother's house, yes."

David looked at the map. He thought of a dream he'd once had, shortly after his parents divorced, in which the sections of the city, moving slow and purposeful as hump-backed whales, drifted and split, rearranged themselves into something new, "This is downtown," he said, shaking his head. "My house wouldn't really be in there." Raul looked disappointed. "My house would be more that way," David said, pointing to a spot on the atrium floor about ten feet outside the map. "Northside. Over here." They walked to the spot.
“It is here?” Raul said, tapping on the floor.

David looked at the map, considered, then tapped a spot about ten inches away. “More here.”

“Yes,” said Raul. He crouched down on the floor, tracing with his finger. “Is that not the brick building near your mother’s house? And then the green, her trees? Her street and sidewalk?”

“Yes.” David said. “We should find my father’s place, too.”

“Here it is,” David’s father said, pointing to a spot on the floor. He had been at the bar and handed Raul and David each a drink. “Maybe we should pencil it in. Is that your mother’s house there?” David nodded. His father looked at the spot for a moment, shaking his head. “I can just see it.” He began tracing lines on the floor with the toe of his shoe. “There’s the pool, the garage. Here’s my old car...And there’s Caroline.” He considered the spot for a moment. “What do you know? She’s talking about me.”

“She never talks about you,” David said.

“And what’s she saying?” He leaned over as if listening to a tiny voice coming from the floor. “‘David, your father is a greedy bastard,’ she’s saying.”

“She never talks about you.” His father shrugged and took a sip from his drink.

Debbie waved to them from the entrance of the “Predators of the Past” exhibit. “Hey, Neil,” she called. “David, Raul. You gotta see this.” She directed them to a video screen inside.

The screen showed computer-animated dinosaurs fighting, a brontosaurus and a little spikey carnivore. “Tough little guy, ain’t he?” she said. David liked the way Debbie spoke. She was from Richmond, Virginia. She had long blonde hair, airy and preened as feathers, and beautiful lips with creases so thick that her red lipstick didn’t fill them. She usually wore boots and jeans, a loose white Oxford shirt. She taught high school drama and lived downstairs from David’s father. In spite of the things David had reported to his mother, there was nothing unlikeable about her.

The brontosaurus on the screen fell, his mouth open, his neck twisting like a loose hose. There was blood, and the spikey one began to eat. When it was finished, the carnivore turned from his kill and walked off, twisting his tail in a way that was almost sassy.

“It is rough,” Raul said.

“He’s off to find a drink,” said David.

“Born free,” his father said. He put one arm around David, one around Debbie, squeezed. They all watched the empty screen for a moment, without saying anything, and then it began again.

Over the next few days, David took Raul to different spots in Atlanta, many of which Raul asked to see, remembering them from the map. At Underground, Raul bought a “Gone with the Wind” bath towel, and when the two of them reached the top of Stone Mountain, he saw a boulder that was entirely covered with pieces of old gum, some spelling
out words. He smiled and said, "We don't have in Spain, no." On
Thursday, David's mother took them to play tennis; Raul tried laughing
along when David missed the ball or rocketed it over the fence, but he
seemed genuinely embarrassed by how bad David was. Eventually David
just watched as Raul hit the balls one at a time to his mother and
coached her, in Spanish, on her backhand.

On their last night in town, David's mother threw a "party" for them
and invited Debbie and his father. That evening, David came into the
kitchen to ask his mother if they should wear ties.

She was making deviled eggs for the party, and stood over the stove.
She lifted a hard-boiled egg from the pot with a spoon and placed it on
a paper plate where it wobbled and steamed. For a moment he stood
silent at the kitchen door and watched her. She was humming softly,
nervously. Over the steaming pot her face was flushed and wet, her brow
wrinkled. A strand of hair hung down over her face, and she swept it
away, but it fell back in the same position. He was filled with so much
love for her that he felt frightened, sick. When she saw him, she shook
her head. "I'm hopeless," she said. "I can never tell when a hard-boiled
egg is done."

"You could use a timer," he said.

"I can never find it," she said.

David began opening and closing drawers. "Or you can just leave them
in until they crack and overcook." The drawers were impossible; in them
he saw coffee spoons, rubber bands, the handle of a coffee mug, the head
of G.I. Joe, screws and scotch tape, a bit of PVC piping, but no timer.

"You know I'm hopeless," she said. "It might be in the garage. When I
was painting the bookshelves, I used it to time between coats."

David gave an exaggerated sigh and went out to the garage. The night
was clear and warm, crickets made it sound like summer, and mayflies
spun around the lights when he clicked them on.

The solemn quiet in the garage, the preserved and dusty things there,
made him think of the natural history museum. On the floor, like a
child's furious scribbles, were the markings from where he had roller-
skated the day the workers poured the concrete on a winter afternoon
when he was five. In one corner was an abandoned science project from
sixth grade: a tornado machine. Hanging from hooks were his father's
tools, weed-whacker and leaf-blower, a pick and an axe like taxidermied
birds of prey.

His parents' old bikes, dusty, clunky, and black, leaned against one
wall, a little red bike he'd once ridden was behind them. The sight of the
three disused bikes filled him with sadness. He had a new bike at school,
his mother didn't ride anymore, and his father now rode something
costly, French, and weightless. The old bikes reminded him of the frozen
families of bears and wolves he'd seen preserved in scenes behind glass—
mother, father, child—arranged to represent the lives of some rare and
delicate species on the verge of extinction. He remembered a summer
evening when he'd lagged far behind his parents on the bike trail at
Callaway Gardens. His parents had separated, riding the loop in oppo-
site directions, and his mother had found him, crying and alone, by the side of the path. They rode on together; in the growing darkness, they could hear his father calling long before they saw him, and they called back.

He saw the timer next to the toolbox on the shelf in the back of the garage; it was splattered with green paint. When he came back inside, he heard laughter in the kitchen. Raul was at the table, mashing the boiled egg yolks with a fork. He was focused on the eggs and did not look up from the bowl when David came into the room. David's mother smiled and put her hand on Raul's shoulder. "Raul knows how to do them," she said.

David's mother seemed out of place in her own home: she wore all white and sank too deeply into the couch. She kept standing to offer them drinks and food. When they refused she would offer them something else. "I have little pizzas in the freezer if you don't like the deviled eggs. Debbie, are you a vegetarian?"

David's father had brought Polaroids of an antique Scottish sword he was considering buying at an upcoming auction. "If it could speak," he said to David, but didn't complete the thought.

"That's just like a game I have the kids at school play," Debbie said. Her finger stopped tracing circles around the rim of her wine glass. "They have to do a monologue in the voice of their most prized possession."

"And what do the little monsters say?" David's mother asked.

"Well," Debbie said. "It's funny. I get lots of kids who do their cars. Some stereos. My favorite was a girl who did her purse." She put her wine glass down. "Nell, why don't you try it? Do the sword for us."

David's father laughed and shook his head. Debbie pleaded with him. She turned to David's mother. "He's never this shy when it's just him and me," she said.

"Can I get anyone some more wine?" David's mother said. When no one answered, she looked like she might cry.

The living room was swept and clean: books and papers were in neat stacks on the end tables. The furniture looked startled. David's mother had lit candles, and the coffee table was full of food.

David and Debbie began talking about Picasso. David's father flipped through the Polaroids and passed them to Raul, who considered each one. David saw an exchange of looks between his father and Debbie that he suspected his mother saw as well; Debbie caught his father's eye, looked at her watch, and pouted. He wondered what Raul thought of his family and if their behavior would be reported back in Spain.

"I could use some more wine," his mother said, tilting her empty glass. "David?" Before David could move, Raul stood and began pouring for her.

Raul was wearing one of his tennis ties and a blazer. His hair was slicked back, and it glistened. He did not look at David's mother, but smiled as he poured. When he was done, he bent over and whispered something into her ear. She was so surprised at first that she leaned away. What he said was so odd, so out-of-place, that David nearly flushed
when he heard it. "She is prettier than you," Raul whispered. "But you are...more...real."

He sat back down. David's mother took a few nervous sips from her glass. David's father turned to her. "I hear you're taking Tai Chi," he said. "Yes—" she said. She blinked. "Yes." She looked at Raul—he took a bite of a deviled egg—then back at David's father. "Good for you," he said.

There was a long silence. David's mother put her wine glass down on the coffee table with a noise. "I'm the best in the class," she said. "Is that so?" said David's father.

"Yes." she said. "Would you care to see?" David's father raised his eyebrows, but didn't say a thing. His mother brushed off her lap and stood. She dimmed the lights. From a neighbor's house came the beat of rock music; it was loud and seemed to be getting louder. "Stupid kids," said David's father.

"Poor Caroline," Debbie said. "She must have to deal with this every night."

If David's mother heard them, she did not give any indication. She closed her eyes, stepped into position, and began the movements. She turned in slow motion on the balls of her feet and spoke the names of the moves in a whisper: "Monkey goes to market. Tiger goes over the mountain." She moved her hands slowly through the air, as if caressing something invisible. Debbie and David's father gave each other uncomfortable looks.

When she finished, she did not open her eyes right away. She looked young, and stood perfectly still. In the glow of two candles, her cheeks were red. David felt lost and dizzy, almost headless. He did not know what caused his mother's crooked, mischievous smile, he felt as if he were looking at something, like a meteor or a comet, so far away that it was impossible to tell if it was coming or going, or even if it was moving at all.
Revisiting Sonia Sanchez

A few years back at the Painted Bride Art Center, I believe a Wednesday in October, Sonia Sanchez had completed yet another public reading. I was sitting up front, next to Jessica Hagedorn, the poet and novelist, who leaned over and whispered without breaking her rhythmic clapping, “We are in the midst of a very huge mind, a genius. She deserves so much more.” It was a declaration of puzzlement at the lack of significant support and recognition of such a grand figure as Sonia Sanchez. Along with Hagedorn, a diverse group of students and loyal fans were bestowing Sanchez—like hundreds of audiences before had also done—a thunderous ovation befitting royalty. And why not?

Sonia Sanchez is the Laura Carnell Professor of English and Women’s Studies at Temple University. The author of thirteen books including the recently released book-length epic poem, Does Your House Have Lions? (Beacon Press:1997), she has been recognized by the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom, the Pew Fellowship in the Arts, and the National Endowment for the Arts. Sonia Sanchez has traveled extensively as an activist/artist, lecturing and reading her poetry in Cuba, the West Indies, England and the People’s Republic of China.

Recognized as one of the most original and talented African-American poet/activists to emerge out of the Black Arts Movement, Sanchez has an almost prophetic ability to transform her life experiences into insightful tellings of our human condition. Does Your House Have Lions?, utilizing the difficult terza rima as its form and written in three voices, is a compassionate exploration of the life of the poet’s brother, a migrated Southern man whose death from AIDS becomes a “ritual of memory, forgiveness, and song.”

I revisited Hagedorn’s befuddled comments after reading Carolyn Forche’s Against Forgetting: Twentieth-Century Poetry of Witness. Neither Sanchez nor any any other black women poets (June Jordan, Mari Evans, Audre Lorde just to name a few) are included in the anthology; I particularly sought out the section “The Struggle for Civil Rights & Civil Liberties in the United States (1900-1991).” Although exclusions of black women are still de rigueur in contemporary literature, often rationalized by aesthetic or space restrictions, the implications are still profound.

We, at the Painted Bride Quarterly, are delighted to feature Sonia Sanchez’s work in our pages. Her importance as a literary figure is inestimable. Her involvement in socio-political struggles here and abroad has not deterred her creativity nor weakened the force of her thought. A writer of enormous integrity, Sonia Sanchez has served as a model
citizen in an age of non-citizens for almost three decades and is determined through her craft, her scholarship, and her activism, to make us more humane.
For Sweet Honey

I’m gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die.

I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die.

i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes
amid rumors of death,
calling out to everyone who would listen
it is time to move us all into another century
time for freedom and racial and sexual justice
time for women and children and men time for hands unbound
i had come into the city wearing peaceful breasts
and the spaces between us smiled,
i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes.
i had come into the city carrying life in my eyes.

And they followed us in their cars with their computers
and their tongues crawled with caterpillars
and they bumped us off the road turned over our cars,
and they bombed our buildings killed our babies,
and they shot our doctors maintaining our bodies,
and their courts changed into confessionals
but we kept on organizing we kept on teaching believing
loving doing what was holy moving to a higher ground
even though our hands were full of slaughtered teeth
but we held out our eyes delirious with grace.
but we held out our eyes delirious with grace.

I'm gonna treat everybody right
I'm gonna treat everybody right
I'm gonna treat everybody right til I die.

I'm gonna treat everybody right
I'm gonna treat everybody right
I'm gonna treat everybody right til I die.

come. i say come, you sitting still in domestic bacteria
come. i say come, you standing still in double breasted mornings
come. i say come, and return to the fight.
this fight for the earth
this fight for our children
this fight for our life
we need your hurricane voices
we need your sacred hands

i say. come, sister, brother to the battlefield
come into the rain forests
come into the hood
come into the barrio
come into the schools
come into the abortion clinics
come into the prisons
come and caress our spines

i say come, wrap your feet around justice
i say come, wrap your tongues around truth
i say come, wrap your hands with deeds and prayer
you brown ones
you yellow ones
you black ones
you gay ones
you white ones
you lesbian ones

Comecomecomecomecome to this battlefield
called life, called life, called life...

I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die.

I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield
I'm gonna stay on the battlefield til I die.
6.

Today.
We begin.
A second century of beginnings.
Daughters of great-granddaughters.
Daughters with eyes deeper than flesh.
We begin.
For we are always at the starting point.

We begin
today
with this woman, Johnnetta Cole. A Southern Black woman.

And we hear her beginning voice
telling us that the dead are never dead.
Their breaths quiver in our shaking hips.
Their voices echo the dew laughing in trees.

We begin
with this woman.
Naming the world as she moves,
"Building for a hundred years hence, not only for today,"
leaving no piece of earth unbaptized.
And we children of all races, daughters from Mozambique
and Soweto, Florida and Mississippi, Cuba and Nicaragua,
outlive our mothers.
And hold our ancestral blood in our hands.

We begin
at this commencement
hearing our foremothers' voices calling to us.
Listen: They made me give her up. My last child.
He came and took her and i screamed,
called out to Shango and Damballah and Olukun and Jesus
and Massa to jest let me hold on to her a whilst longer.
Just a few mo days til her eyes got usta seein
without me. But they took her anyways. They took her
whilst i wuz praying on my knees, and i walks slowly now,
my feet rooted to this earth, my footsteps echoin her
brown laughter..."

We begin today with these women. Camille Cosby and
Johnnetta B. Cole and all these past and present
Spelman women.
Smelling the evening from under the Sun.

We begin as they twist and turn,
as they call out to our Sister Aunties, Sister Mammies,
Sister Mamas, and tell them that their daughters and
sons dance in our veins. They have heard their
daughters’ laughter in the wind.

These two women. These Spelman women. Shaping their
passion, involving themselves in work that brings life
to the middle of our stomachs— call out to our
ancestors to us and our children yet to be born.

_Ebe yiye. Ebe yiye. Ebe yiye_. It’ll get better. For we have the tools now.
We have the skills and the power. We have the love of self and of our
people to make it better.

_Ebe yiye. Ebe yiye_. For you Mama dear. For you Mama Sukey
moving in and out of plantation doors. For you Mammy
Teena toiling in the noonday sun. For you young Mama
strutting you big legs down 125th Street in Harlem. For you
Lil Bits. Throat cut in a Chicago alley, for a fix.

_Ebe yiye_ because of our love. Our unity, our strength. Our will.
These two sister women. These Spelman sister women.
Promise you it’ll get better for you and me.

_Ebe yiye. Ebe yiye. Ebe yiye. Ebieee yiyeeee_.

We begin.

° It’ll get better.

From: _Wounded in the House of a Friend_
Beacon Press
Introduction of Toni Morrison, and Others, on the Occasion of the Publication of Her Book
Race-ing Justice, En-gendering Power: Essays on Anita Hill, Clarence Thomas, and the Construction of Social Reality

Of course it ain't strange that you're here in my bedroom to accept my nomination of you as Supreme Court Justice. Barb and I both know how important bedrooms and beds and bathrooms are to you people... Yes indeedy-by-golly-by-gee...What you say, Barb? From the outhouse to the White House;

Of course it ain't strange to this journalist that you will not be on the golf course when you ascend to that throne of justice. You (and every other Black man) know the ball's too small;

Of course it ain't strange for the New York Times to delight in your accomplishment of weight lifting. We all know that Black men's bodies are important to them, to women, other men, Phil Donahue, academics, voyeurs, scientists, journalists, oprahwinfrey, undertakers, prisons, long winding trees;

Of course it ain't strange for this Senator to love your laugh, to regard it as “second on my list of the most fundamental points about Clarence Thomas.” Yes indeedy-by-golly-by-gee....Your smile. Your grin. Your loud laugh. That comes from deep inside and shakes the body into an American shuffle stirs the soul and I rest under this proud tradition of your people;

However, it is strange that this dark vindictive-looking woman could come charging into these hearings with her accusations – allegations – of sexual harassment, sexual misdoings, sexual intimidation. She is evidently put up to this by those “special interests” people or she must be crazy or jealous or deranged or a scorned lover or jealous or a lesbian or insane or disturbed or a hater of lighter-complexioned women or jealous. I mean she wasn’t raped or nothing so what’s her problem? Where did this college – law school – educated witch, this ball busting traitor to the race, this dumb Black female screwing it up
for all Black males trying to succeed, get on with this sexual harassment stuff? Where she come from anyway? Who's her mama?

And it is not strange that Mr. Thomas was not disqualified immediately at the first charges leveled against him. I mean, we mean, what does she mean by sexual harassment, what does that have to do with work and advancement and compliance with the rules? After all, doesn't she know she's Black and female and unmarried and in need of a job protection advancement verification? I. We. The men. The country. The world. Have never heard of a sexually harassed Black woman I don't care how smart she thinks she is; I mean she's only a Black woman. Anyone know who's her mama?

Finally it is not strange that we are here with these "exquisite wordsmiths" who have forged a place for us to begin to understand the madness of this western psyche, the madness of men bonding in public against all women. These writers. These men and women have come to dissect. Delineate. Decry with brilliance the homicidal nature of a country that continues to pit Black men and women in arenas of combat so the executioners can cream in private with their own pornographic fantasies of how long and black and how sweetly black it smells.

It is not strange that we have men and women of conscience here tone who in defending and defining Black culture defend the country. The world. Humanity as well.


And you. My sisters and brothers. This audience of men/women/students who are here to hear. Listen. Listen. Listen.
This Is Not a Small Voice

This is not a small voice
you hear this is a large
voice coming out of these cities.
This is the voice of LaTanya.
Kadesha. Shaniqua. This
is the voice of Antoine.
Darryl. Shaquille.
Running over waters
navigating the hallways
of our schools spilling out
on the corners of our cities and
no epitaphs spill out of their river mouths.

This is not a small love
you hear this is a large
love, a passion for kissing learning
on its face.
This is a love that crowns the feet with hands
that nourishes, conceives, feels the water sails
mends the children,
folds them inside our history where they
toast more than the flesh
where they suck the bones of the alphabet
and spit out closed vowels.
This is a love colored with iron and lace.
This is a love initialed Black Genius.

This is not a small voice
you hear.
haiku
(for mungu and morani and the children of soweto)

may yo seasons be
long with endless green streets and
permanent summer legs.
Sister's Voice

this was a migration unlike
the 1900's of Black men and women
coming north for jobs. freedom. life.
this was a migration to begin
to bend a father's heart again
to birth seduction from the past
to repay desertion at last.

imagine him short and black
thin mustache draping thin lips
imagine him country and exact
thin body, underfed hips
watching at this corral of battleships
and bastards. watching for forget
and remember. dancing his pirouette.

and he came my brother at seventeen
recruited by birthright and smell
grabbing the city by the root with clean
metallic teeth. commandant and infidel
pirating his family in their cell
and we waited for the anger to retreat
and we watched him embrace the city and the street.

first he auctioned off his legs. eyes.
heart. in rooms of specific pain.
he specialized in generalize
learned newyorkese and all profane.
enslaved his body to cocaine
denied his father's signature
damned his sister's overture.
and a new geography greeted him.
the atlantic drifted from off shore
to lick his wounds to give him slim
transfusion as he turned changed wore
a new waistcoat or solicitor
antidote to his southern skin
ammunition for a young paladin.

and the bars. the glitter. the light
discharging pain from his bygone anguish
of young black boy scared of the night.
sequestered on this new bank, he surveyed the fish
sweet cargoes crowded with scales feverish
with quick sales full sails of flesh
searing the coastline of his acquiesce.

and the days rummaging his eyes
and the nights flickering through a slit
of narrow bars. hips. thighs.
and his thoughts labeling him misfit
as he prowled, pranced in the starlit
city, coloring his days and nites
with gluttony and praise and unreconciled rites.
Last recording session/for papa joe

don't be so mean papa

cuz the music don't come easily now
don't stomp the young dude
strain over his birthright.
he don't know what he doing yet
his mornings are still comin

one at a time
don't curse the night papa joe

cuz yo beat done run down
we still hear yo fierce tides

yo midnight caravans singing tongues into morning.
don’t be so mean man
one day he'll feel the thunder in yo/hands

yo/arms wide as the sea
outrunning the air defiantly.
you been ahead so long
can't many of us even now
follow the scent you done left behind.
don't be so mean man un less

you mean
to be mean

to be
me

when you mean
to be
mean.
Philadelphia: Spring, 1985

1.

/a phila. fireman reflects after
seeing a decapitated body in the MOVE ruins/

to see those eyes
orange like butterflies
over the walls.

i must move away
from this little-ease
where the pulse
shrinks into itself
and carve myself in white.

O to press the seasons
and taste the quiet juice
of their veins.

2. /memory/

a.

Thus in the varicose town
where eyes splintered the night with glass
the children touched at random
sat in places where legions rode.

And O we watched the young birds
stretch the sky
until it streamed white ashes
and O we saw mountains lean on seas
to drink the blood of whales
then wander dumb with their wet bowels

b.

Everywhere young
faces breathing in crusts.
breakfast of dreams.
The city, lit by a single fire,
followed the air into disorder.
And the sabbath stones singed our eyes
with each morning's coin.
c.

Praise of a cureless death they heard
without confessor;
Praise of cathedrals
pressing their genesis from priests;
Praise of wild gulls who came and drank
their summer’s milk,
then led them toward the parish snow.

How still the spiderless city.
The earth is immemorial in death.
fragment 1

alone
deranged by loitering
i hear the bricks pacing my window.
my porcs know how to come.
what survives in me
i still suspect.

how still this savior.
white suit in singing hand.
spitting mildew air.
who shapes the shade
is.

i am a reluctant ache
authenticating my bones.
i shall spread out my veins
and beat the dust into noise.
blues

will you love me baby when the sun goes down
i say will you love me baby when the sun goes down
or you just a summer time man leaving fo winter comes round.

will you keep me baby when I’m feeling down ‘n’ out
i say will you hold me baby when i’m feeling down ‘n’ out
or will you just stop & spit while i lives from hand to mouth.

done drunk so much of you i stagers in my sleep
i say done drunk so much of you man, i stagers in my sleep
when i wakes up baby, gonna start me on a brand new week.

will you love me baby when the sun goes down
i say will you love me baby when the sun goes down
or you just a summer time man leaving fo winter comes round.
A poem for my brother
(reflections on his death from AIDS: June 8, 1981)

1. death

The day you died
a fever starched my bones.
within the slurred
sheets, i hoarded my legs
while you rowed out among the boulevards
balancing your veins on sails.
easy the eye of hunger
as i peeled the sharp
sweat and swallowed wholesale molds.

2. recovery (a)

What comes after
is consciousness of the morning
of the licensed sun that subdues
immoderate elements.
there is a kindness in illness
the indulgence of discrepancies.

reduced to the ménage of houses
and green drapes that puff their seasons
toward the face.
i wonder what to do now.
i am afraid
i remember a childhood that cried
after extinguished lights
when only the coated banners answered.

3. recovery (b)

There is a savior in these buds
look how the phallic stems distend
in welcome.
O copper flowerheads
confine my womb that i may dwell within.
i see these gardens, whom i love
i feel the sky's sweat on my face
now that these robes no longer bark
i praise abandonment.
4. wake

i have not come for summary.
must i renounce all babylons?
here, without psalms,
these leaves grow white
and burn the bones with dance.
here, without surfs,
young panicles bloom on the clouds and fly
while myths tick grey as thunder.

5. burial

you in the crow's rain
rusting amid ribs
my mouth spills your birth
i have named you prince of boards
stretching with the tides.

you in the toad's tongue
peeling on nerves
look. look. the earth is running palms.

6. (on) (the) (road). again.

somewhere a flower walks in mass
purchasing wholesale christs
sealing white-willow sacraments.

naked on steeples
where trappist idioms sail
an atom peels the air.

O i will gather my pulse
muffled by sibilants
and follow disposable dreams.
Of Beginnings, Journeys and the Writers' Food: The Dark Room Collective

"To begin is the thing...." This phrase often comes to me as I struggle to bring a poem across the threshold which ushers inchoate images and ideas into thought into words—that longed-for spark or flash is the "initiating," after which the real work of making the poem starts. It applies, of course, to so much of the activity called creativity, so much of the activity of life itself.

So it was as well with the origin of the Dark Room Collective. It was enough, we thought, to bring together a group who were mutually engaged in telling our lives with words—with little thought of where we might find ourselves years hence, other than that we might become, somehow, writers. To have begun was the thing.... Eight years later, our group has grown in number and as artists whose individual voices have become strong and distinct.

This issue of the Painted Bride Quarterly presents a sampling of the Collective's writings with stories and poetry by newer members, Jahnne Harris, Kambui Olujimi, Audrey Petty, and David Wright, as well as that of Vera Beatty, Nehessaiu de Gannes, Major L. Jackson, Natasha Trethewey, Artress Bethany White, and Kevin Young. Vera Beatty added her efforts also as a co-editor of this section with Marion Wrenn and Kathy Volk Miller of the PBQ. (Thanks, V! ) And as a founding member of the Collective, Thomas Sayers Ellis—in customary fashion—contributed his unerring vision and unflagging energy to this endeavor.

In her essay titled "The Writer's Greens," de Gannes considers her journey to writing, the circuitous trajectory from her father's plans for her to the acceptance of her own desires. It is a narrative interspersed with a recipe for cooking greens, a meditation, really, on the "aromatic guesswork" of writing. Each of the writers here has traveled her or his own trajectory to writing. Some of us have gone the route of the seemingly ubiquitous writing programs, which many believe, gives one a passport into the world of American letters. But as Black writers, these programs have challenged us beyond the rigors of craft. We have faced, even there, indifference, ignorance, and challenges to our freedom to "speak the truth" of our own lives. Others of us have nurtured and guarded our love for words since childhood, concocting our recipes—letting things simmer, adding ingredients, spicing judiciously—and only now, in adulthood, venturing to share them in print.

In the beginning our purpose was to support a reading series which provided a forum for our "living literary ancestors" and mentors, and to nurture and support each other. But it was the sustaining practice of writing in community just as much as the activism of building a community-based reading series for writers of color that kept us engaged in collectivity. Traveling together to different cities to read our work has given us exposure and a collective identity, and it has allowed us to share in and gauge our individual growth as writers. The works that follow are a testament to that ongoing process.
For the UnFortunate Traveler III
(Non-Believers)

I Got’a Halo Over My Head
and a Gun in My Hand
by 13 all my Heroes were
Martyrs or Magicians
EscapeArtists or StormChasers
and being an UnderDog
a foregone Conclusion.

Got’a Halo Over My Head
Got’a Gun in My Hand
as an UnderDog, I Prayed for Faith
I made Gods from Old
Sam Cooke and Coltrane albums
pieced together with Play Ground
FolkLore. I Made
My Own Gods,
My Own Gods
Flesh and Blood.

I Got’a Halo Over My Head
a Gun in My Hand
can’t be the Long Shot King
Forever. Statistics are Tyrannical
as Termites.

Got’a Halo Hula Hoop
Scratched Up and Colors Fading,
Almost ready for the Salvation Army.
I’ve seen Deer defy HeadLights
and Know that Dying’s the Last thing
to be Afraid of, to be Afraid of
Even with Nostrils Flaring and Mirrors Taunting
You that “You’ve Peeked Early and Burnt Out
like Over-Sexed Minors.”

Got’a Nickel Plated Pistol
Bullets sometimes Boomerang,
ricochet.
Misfires. There is No Safety
Fists Clenched and Strangling
Betting Stubs Voiceless as
a thousand Lost Dollar Bills in the bottom of a trash bin.
Gamblers’
Fists Clenched and Contorting
Faces of Horses two lengths Behind,

I am UnRaveling Exponentially
Under my Own Rage
Under my Own Velocity,
There is little Victory
can give to Me in the Time
it has taken Me to Win.

I Got'a Halo Over My Head
and a Gun in My Hand
The Circus will Always be Tragic.
Romantics
  for Bonnie and Clyde

I have seen the Sun
in its Death and Death
No Sharper than Blades
of Grass draws Us together
like Knots on Stage,
as if for the Last Time
We will Escape;
like Houdini
like the Sun.

and these Tracks
Bend and Twist Against
their will like the Men that
Bent to Build them.

hear their Souls
Grinding up Underneath the
Train, Ghosts Chains Clanging until
everything’s Straightened Out.

You and Me
We will Never be
Bonded like that.
Dos Cabezas 1982

former collection of Andy Warhol

Cabezas means friends
or so we thought—the gap
in Basquiat’s teeth

What me worry?
a generation
between both men—

Warhol with hand raised
pensing or perhaps
picking his nose—

Basquiat’s snout flat
broad brushstrokes, hair
bushy. Right after

meeting official Warhol,
B headed
back home to paint

the pair, returned
to Andy’s Factory,
the canvas still wet

as a kiss. A gift. Sold
at auction their faces fetch
five times the asking—

feeding frenzy
over the newly
& nearly

dead—Do I hear
a hundred thousand—
not two friends

we learned
but two—translated—
heads.
Oxidation Portrait
of Jean-Michel Basquiat 1982

How many people
did Warhol pay
or over lunch ask
to piss across
the canvas,
its silk-

screen of Basquiat,
hair in Mickey
Mouse knots?

How long
till the urine
fought

the copper
paint, began
to rust?

rot? before
his portrait
grew green

& gold, spotting
his face
like liver,

a leopard, like years
later, spleen
gone, the heroin

started to eat,
stark communion,
his skin?
All the Underneath

(An Excerpt)

She doesn’t blink, leaning toward the flying white ropes that can leave a quick welt if she’s not careful. It’s getting late and Grace is past tired. The ropes seem almost soft now as they wipe against the cooling dark sky one at a time, then snap the ground, as steady as Grace’s breathing and the buzz of crickets, somewhere, everywhere, invisible with their hearts rattling in their throats. Closing her eyes, she jumps in, around and between the ropes now, rising rising snapping her fingers as Rhonda and Sookie turn medium fast and count off Grace’s easy numbers five ten fifteen twenty twentyfivethir tyfive fortyfivefif tyfive si Grace looks down at the hanging shoelace that must have stopped her. “Yeah Gracie. You did good.”

Grace turns and there is Tish alone, under the fat tree down near the corner. She’s on her knees with an empty jelly jar at her side. Sometimes Tish asks to play, but Tish still turns doublehanded. If enough girls are jumping, Grace will help her, stand behind her, guide her syrup slow skinny arms until she is turning good enough for no complaints. Tish is better at jumping, she doesn’t have to stand inside the ropes to start, like Sookie’s little sister. Tish jumps in with her eyes open and can hot tamale and touch the ground. She can jump Irish. Grace takes Sookie’s end and starts turning. She sees Tish, out of the corner of her eye, tripping after the flash of a lightning bug, her mouth halfway open, almost making a smile.

“Faster y’all.” Sookie holds one hand on her hip and rolls her eyes. Grace and Rhonda speed up and Sookie bunches her mouth and jumps in, facing Grace. Starts doing popups right away, her arms folded in front of her chest. But no one starts singing Mary Mack, maybe cause the streetlights are about to come on anyway—Grace isn’t sure. She doesn’t mind the quiet.

“Grace?” Rhonda asks. Grace can feel Rhonda getting tired, so she taps her foot and puts more of her mind into her arms, trying to be steady for the both of them and pick up the speed. “Why’s your uncle like that? Is he retarded?” Grace’s face feels hot but she keeps tapping her foot and listens to the rope. Rhonda is never mean. She is Grace’s best friend and Grace feels like slapping her. Grace knew the neighborhood must have noticed him when he came to visit, carrying groceries with Momma or taking walks or fetching drinks at Mr. Boone’s. She wonders how Rhonda has seen him. Sookie’s still doing popups, looking at Grace straightfaced but like she wants to know too. The streetlights ease on and make the three of them into easy shadows on the grass. Sookie finally stops jumping. “I think I must have got at least a million.” She smiles up and makes a quick, airy whistle. “My titties hurt,” she whispers to herself and bends to the ground for her change purse. Grace hands the rope to Rhonda, who folds and folds it over her arm. Grace shakes her head, keeps her
voice down. "My uncle's fine." When Uncle Brother was young, he was good in math and he played basketball and had girlfriends. Momma said he said he went to college and taught high school for a while. "And don't be calling him retarded. He got hurt once, that's all, and the medicine he takes makes him be like that." Rhonda nods, looking faraway and serious. "Sorry he hurt himself. Is he nice?" Grace says, "Yeah. He is." She kneels to tie her shoelace, looking for Tish, who is closer than she thought, sitting on a fireplug with her jar full of light. That's all Momma would say about the way Uncle Brother acted. When Grace was little, one night, after prayers, she asked Momma, "Is he crazy?" and Momma changed, her voice got quiet. She kept her eyes closed when she said that it was his medicine, then kissed Grace on the forehead, tucked her in and shut the lights. Grace walks over to Tish and taps her shoulder. "Dag. Wait. Momma didn't call us yet." Tish twists her face, gets up and walks as slow as she wants to. "But you know it's time. Come on. And don't even be getting an attitude." Rhonda and Sookie are already crossing the street. Rhonda will keep looking back until Grace finally holds her hand up for goodbye.

"It's their hearts." Tish is next to Grace now, smiling, holding the big jar close to her face. "This one's heart beats the same way as mine." She points near the top and a bug flashes on. "That's not where their hearts are at, you dummy." Grace is sure of this, but Tish just sucks her teeth and keeps pointing. "Come with me tomorrow, we can go around and check all the underneath for rollypolicies and squirmies." Grace stays quiet. Sometimes Tish will shut up if Grace just stays quiet. "You can help. Maybe if we try, we can turn over those big bumpy rocks in Miss Moody's backyard. You'll see." Tish pulls up her shorts and skips ahead, trying to make sure she has the last word. Finally she slows down to walking fast, her arms stretched out and up, the jar leading them home. Watching the twinkles shift, Grace finally feels peace. "Ooooh Grace. What if this jar could fly? I'm going to sleep with these right next to me and in the daytime, in the morning I'll let them go and, and only I'll know who they are." They're almost home, no more than a hundred steps away. Mr. Taylor's sprinkler is still on, drenching his rosebushes, the white trellis behind. And Momma's just ahead, barefoot and yawning under the porch light, waiting to braid their hair, to tell them stories, and tuck them in.
The Writer's Greens

select leaves that are a deep, generous green
avoid rusting edges—a sign of wilting
leaves should be moist, not dry
choose as many bunches as you have strength to carry

The first time I heard Rita Dove's "Sunday Greens," I was sitting in the dark. In a small theatre with folding chairs ascending an incline of wooden stairs and a stage stretching from the feet of the first row occupants to a blue scrim of a horizon, the ocean is hardly lit. Ordinary light coming from the wings casts shadows on books bobbing the floor at odd angles. Some are closed, serenely floating, others flared and open with their spines up, riding water as a bird might ride the air or a collard leaf a cutting board.

This faint, but ordinary light coming somewhere from the wings—a stage door left open? a dressing room bulb? a lamp directed for such theatrical effect?—suggests a space beyond performance; the places where the floor goes black and filtered light ends. Out of this ordinary blackness into a space I have imagined as water or the ground of culinary preparation, six bodies present themselves. In the shadows, each will stoop to scoop a book from the floor, move to the microphone standing front and center and present a poem that is not their own. It is the prevalence of ritual, an ancestral reading.

Natasha Trethewey, the first member of The Dark Room Collective to read that night, November 20, 1993, in the Painted Bride Art Center in Philadelphia, has a voice that brings the south north. She begins, "Sunday Greens," and pauses, and then...

Even now that I have read the poem both aloud and silently to myself, recited it to prep school and freshman college classes, listened to a recording of Rita Dove intoning, "She wants to hear/ wine pouring./ She wants to taste/ change. She wants...," the poem is most whole, most itself, in the sound of Natasha's voice. It is this way with first love I suspect. Not the first time one believes one has fallen in love, but the first time one experiences love, not with a member of one's bloodline, but with the stranger who has become intimate through the gifting of language and action. It is the way the shape of the word love, its form as well as its content become inextricably bound to a sound of voice. This is the way, I suspect, one falls in love with a poem.

it is best to cook collards
the same day you rescue them fresh from market
(if picked too soon, they will be tough, so
place leaves in freezer to simulate late summer frost)
if you must wait, wrap them loosely
in paper & place in lower compartment
avoid too much moisture before green disappears into yellow
Two years earlier I had come south by train, riding the Montrealer further south than ever before. I have taken this train to New Haven, even as far as New York, but it goes all the way to DC. This midnight morning, I’m riding it into Philadelphia. I’ve purchased a sleeper for the first time, because I want to arrive fresh for my interview. It’s odd riding the rhythms of rails in a horizontal position. Train voyages, even these sixteen hour over-night ones, have always been about bending one’s body into the lap of an economy seat. To lie flat on one’s back, while the train does its dance of rocking from side to side is disorienting; I’m afraid I’ll fall off the bed. The bed is really a bench seat that one pulls out and up, similar to the motion with which one releases a sofa-sleeper, and even sitting up, facing forward or glancing to the side and out the window feels foreign in this private compartment.

Train travel has always been about people. True, one hopes for a train that’s not too crowded, perhaps both seats to one’s self, a relatively quiet car, and a heating or cooling system that works to ease the season of one’s passage. But there is comfort in persons inhabiting my visual and auditory space. Even if words aren’t exchanged, the presence of others helps me to locate my seat. Journeying back from the café car, awkwardly riding the dance of the rails, we seek out the now familiar faces like beacons signaling home. Because each face is making a similar journey, you trust in this movement through space, which you suspect is a movement through time. Nothing of one’s existence outside the membrane of this hurtling caterpillar can touch one here. Because, I still do not have the economic means, or is it desire, to possess the accoutrements that would contradict this statement—cell phone, lap top computer equipped with modem, even a pager—trains remain for me a mode of suspended transportation, vehicles of transformation.

So, I discover on an April night in 1991 journeying south through Vermont and Connecticut, the luxury of sitting alone on a train in a private compartment with a private seat and a private window is not one I am eager to afford; I spend most of my trip in the lounge car, reading rather than drinking, but enjoying the quiet company of strangers. True I am quiet, the strangers most often are not, especially in a lounge car. I am an audience of sorts, and I do confess to eavesdropping. Voices fascinate me—the way they shape language to fit the body’s meaning, the way a story is told or a conversation crafted.

*when one is hungry for greens*
*make certain one has greens*
*collards and kale and mustard are greens*
*spinach will not withstand the writer’s process—it steams too quickly*
*& requires far less water; spinach*
*is kin to salad greens;*
*greens are kin to meat*
My father, before his death on April 15, 1983 at the age of forty-five, always wanted his children to study in the United States of America. A man who had ascended the levels of higher education through hard work and talent and the scholarships rewarded his gifts and endeavors, who had been a member of the first class of engineers to graduate from The University of The West Indies, in Port of Spain, Trinidad, and who had moved his young family to Canada in order to pursue a scholarship opportunity to complete a Masters in Chemical Engineering at The University of New Brunswick, he was of the impression that U.S. schools offered a broader, yet challenging education, that would better prepare his daughter and son for climbing life's ladders.

When my father pursued and accepted a position with a multinational oil company in Saudi Arabia, a move that required me to attend a boarding school, and after I had chosen and been accepted to a hundred year old Anglican boarding/day school in the heart of Toronto's Forest Hill with morning chapel and what I decided was the best uniform option of the private girls' schools, a gray box-pleat skirt, white blouse with sailor collar trimmed in burgundy, a black, burgundy and gray tie and burgundy blazer, and oh yes, the prescribed pair of black male oxford shoes, he confessed to me that he had not taken the overseas position, still he would have tried to send me to The Bishop Strachan School For Girls; he wanted me to study hard and learn well the ways of rich, white folks. You see, he had visions of me becoming a patent lawyer, and when it became clear I had not inherited his affinity for the sciences, but rather my mother's passion for words, he gave in and modified the outline of my future; I would become a corporate lawyer.

In fact, in one overseas conversation during the autumn of my twelfth grade, a few months before his passing, but not my graduating year, since high school goes to grade thirteen (or its contemporary equivalent, “OAC's”) in Ontario, my father warned me quite emphatically, and I believe out of love and concern for my well being, but not at all with the intention of being prophetic or dramatically ironic, "Over my dead body, will you pursue an Arts degree."

I will never forget the landscape of this conversation. I am standing in the hallway; it is the top floor of the boarding section, the twelfth grade wing, where I and my close friends of the past two and a half years have secured the most desired rooms. I am the head of one of the Boarding Houses, St. Hilda's, having been elected grade representative my first year, and assistant head my second. My good friend, Heather, who is head of St. Monica's, the other Boarding House, lives a few doors down. Melissa my roommate, whose family also lives in Saudi Arabia, is most likely sitting on her twin-sized bed in the room with the sloping ceiling that we share. The door to our room is most likely open behind me; the phone is directly across the hall from our room—prime real estate for the consumptive ethos of late adolescence. The walls are an ambivalent white; it seems safer to remember them as gray, which is an improvement over the hospital green that greeted us that September day, when Melissa and I were the only ones to arrive at the opening of the boarding department in our uniforms.
I wasn’t certain whether I should wear my uniform or not, and having just come from mass with my mother, aunt and grandmother, for check-in day was a Sunday, I thought it safe to wear my church clothes. As my aunt steered the car into the circular drive of the boarder’s entrance. I spotted Melissa, not that I knew her nor her name at the time, dressed in her uniform, and striding across the green lawn with a piece of luggage in hand, and, of course, I went into a panic. Quickly, my aunt drove a few blocks away to some distant friend of the family, a stranger really, well at least to me, but someone my grandparents had known in Guyana, and implored him and his wife for aid. So it was that I changed into my uniform in their downstairs bathroom, and the strange, but familiar gentleman agreed kindly to tie my black, burgundy and gray tie. I admit his knot served me dutifully for four years. I learned the boarder’s trick of simply loosening and tightening the noose, slipping it on and off each week day and required church Sunday, but never once disassembling the intricate twists of fabric; few of us were certain we could imitate such form.

Melissa and I, however, thinking we had divined correctly the intricacies of prestigious boarding school culture, were the only ones dressed in gray box-pleat skirts, sailor collars and burgundy blazers that warm September Sunday. We certainly recognized each other at any rate as new, as strangers to those gray brick walls. For the next three falls we would look from the window that overlooked the boarder’s entrance and recognize ourselves in unfamiliar and fearfully innocent faces. There were always at least two burgundy blazers amid the jeans and shorts, t-shirts and sweatshirts of the veterans and newcomers who arrived already fluent in what my father might refer to as the ways of rich, white folks. These are not his words exactly. The form of what he said, the exact way in which he shaped language to fit the definition he desired for his child’s success, eludes me now, but the weight of what he said remains.

select a pot & give way to instinct
in the choosing; appreciate
size & weight, the way grooved handles greet your palm
remember: cast iron reciprocates the flavor of soul
stainless steel will serve the dreamer’s purpose
under no circumstance should aluminum be used

all instructions may be successfully applied
to your choice of bowl and colander and knife
disassemble blues, desires, life

I’ve selected a black linen pants suit and a scoop-necked, woodcut-printed shirt from Indonesia—saffron, cayenne and green announce themselves on black fabric. I have gathered my locks in a silk scarf, and since it is morning and the train has pulled out of New York’s Penn Station, I finish my breakfast and retreat from the dining car to my soli-
tary seat by a window, to center myself in the now.

Today is a day in April and I am traveling south by train, farther south than I have ever been by train. True, I have been to Houston and Miami, but that was while my father was still alive and under a different set of circumstances. Now, is the day I am traveling to Philadelphia to interview at the department of African American Studies, the only academic program in the United States, in the world for that matter, that offers a Ph.D. in African American Studies. I have already been accepted to NYU’s graduate program in cinema studies, but on another ride aboard the Montrealer earlier the same spring, this time traveling north, returning to Canada from a Black Writer’s Conference hosted at Medgar Evers College in Brooklyn, New York, I begin to consider this other direction. It’s about choosing battles I say to my friend Judy, who is also a writer, a Black woman, born in the Caribbean and raised in Canada.

At NYU I will have to convince my thesis advisor why I want to depart from privileging a western and eurocentric paradigm and study Caribbean, African and African American film in the context of other African and Diasporan cultural productions; at Temple University, I will have to convince the Afrocentrists, why I refuse to assimilate the sexist and nationalist limitations of their paradigm.

Now my view of the outside world is lightening; a faint and ordinary light outlines the landscape of the North East corridor. In the beginnings of daylight, the caterpillar membrane seems less impermeable, more translucent—the movement inside no longer separate from the flow of air outside the grooved aluminum cylinder. As the AmTrak train makes its way through New Jersey, I remember how it felt to enter Tisch School of the Arts that weekend in March. Judy had been with me, and when we entered the building, we were two Black women, spectacularly invisible amongst the hallway movements of student-artists well-versed in the ways of white, if not the ways of rich, white folks. I experienced an alienation to which I am not unaccustomed, but one which I have grown weary of accommodating. Perhaps it is this contradiction, between the anticipation I had treasured through my undergraduate years, pouring over the NYU catalogues, and this realization that I would have to work to earn acceptance of my presence, that has moved me in this before unseen direction. It is not so much the acceptance of my talents or abilities, I have been accepted, even received phone calls encouraging me to come, come south to the big apple—but acceptance of my narrative, a history inextricably bound with my identity, the way a face is wedded to a sound of voice.

assemble garlic & ginger
& cayenne & allspice & gently
rinse each leaf, running your fingers into green
feel the grit to remove the earth that clings

open out each leaf, a hand: palm up
ribbed spine towards the cutting board, the ground
layer green on green & roll, then slice
metallic ribbons: iron, zinc, copper
green gives way to gold

Now, the train is leaving Trenton, New Jersey, and I cannot anticipate the time and distance between here and Philadelphia’s 30th Street Station or between here and the writing of this autobiographical essay, which I suspect fails to meet the aesthetic demands I have now, in a now that is not the same now, so rigorously asked of my students’ papers.

And as the train pulls into what I now know as North Philadelphia, I turn my eyes from my inner narrative to the life outside my window in time to witness an older man and woman, deep, deep brown skinned tending to a community garden. In this moment I choose; by the figures, two bodies, bending towards earth in the ordinary light of a North American morning, I am transformed from not knowing to knowing. Within the year, I will live in North Philadelphia at the corner of 18th and Diamond (how I end up here is another poem about Yoruba priestesses and Germantown and break-ins and destiny). I will live directly across the street from the Church of the Advocate, hear echoes of a young Coltrane exercising his craft in the legendary basement, and come to know elders who cultivate greens in their postage-stamp lots. Within two years I will learn to cook greens; they don’t grow in Canada and in the Caribbean we make callaloo from dashine leaves, which when too ripe will make your hands and throat itch.

glaze the pot with cold pressed oil
ignite the element & wait

Unable to anticipate the unknown, little did I know that night when I crossed the threshold from foreigner to intimate, witnessed six figures stooping to gesture towards the watery ground of their own creative development, and heard for the first time the voices of six young African American writers who had ridden the train south from Amherst, Boston, Providence and New York, having come north from DC, from the Carolinas, from Haiti—Thomas Sayers Ellis, Sharan Strange, Janice Lowe, Patrick Sylvain, John Keene, and Natasha Tretheway—reading the poems of Rita Dove, Yusef Komunyakaa, ntozake shange and their own, that on the third anniversary of the Dark Room Reading at The Painted Bride, on November 20, 1996, just five years and three months after my arrival in Philadelphia, in a Brown University seminar on African American poetry taught by professor and Poet Micheal Harper who had introduced Dove’s “Sunday Greens” to Thomas Sayers Ellis who had introduced the poem to Natasha Tretheway, I would stand, a graduate student in a fine arts program, delivering my notes towards a poem on missing links. Little did I know I would be speaking of greens.

until the world inside the hollow shimmers
cautions: do not wait for it to smoke! add
crushed garlic & ginger stirring
with the back of the spoon

add handfuls & handfuls of greens, witness
the deeper green inside of green, how green
gives way to green, releasing water
add water, cover & steam: season with sea-
salt, allspice, fresh parsley & cider
vinegar, sweet basil, a bay leaf, even curry

or cumin; poetry is aromatic guesswork:
use the eyes at the back of your head
Regency Laundromat

On Broad Street,
    two blocks north of Girard, she appears
anointing her body with bleach;
    forehead & wrists, nipples & knees,
his & her towels, wringing down an avenue
    of sea-green tile, banks of charismatic yellow
rinse-lights like a rosary of fingers
    murmuring Lay it down, child
lay it down & she longs to
    redeem this life, dash about elegantly,
climb into the steel drum of a gas-driven icon
    chanting Seven and a half minutes of very,
very hot air, Oh Sweet Jesus, only twenty-five cents.
    & this time she is beautiful, really
beautiful. Hands divining comfort
    the way mother taught her. Fingers running
down the selvage, corners tickling her chin,
    sweet smelling flannel pressed full
against herself, full against the out-stretched edges
    of a thirsty wedding bed & she longs to
lie down, but holds in her unfolding. Each night
    becomes her private Juvé morning
& she like she was some carnival queen; soiled
    sheets ripping & pouring in a swirling
calypso of shame. In her eye every scar is a sequin
    to be polished out of hunger for light;
the cruel light of mirrors—arching,
    refracting her bone-weary planet—
a diamante of bleach-eaten stars.
The Hunters

There is a record of this life, a birth certificate, the blood on the boots of the photographer, this photograph, testimony

The boy was dead before their arrival, the police, a long processional of chalk lines, tape, silent lights, how could he not be, three bullets to the head, neat, no brains showing

He was pushed, jerked, forced into this fall that ended with him, rocking, balanced on the hip bone, both hands almost praying, fingertips barely touching and what is the proper way, for a body to fall, losing life, emitting energy, simultaneously

This photograph capturing the last grace, a grace that belies how this boy, not having a choice, did not breathe, allowed a new hunter to crouch gingerly, unbalanced in blood and shoot
Sowing Tamarind’s Seeds: A Cross-Gender Odyssey

My mother had always said that my head was as hard and black as the seed of the fruit she had seen fit to name me after. I remember this as I sit in a corner of my room, fingers supporting a crippled tongue like a five-fingered crutch. This morning I woke up screaming and couldn’t hear myself. Tried to slap words from my cheeks like a jaded coquette into love. An hour later, still no sound in my room except the wet echo of tears running under my palms and collecting between my gums and bottom lip like salty snuff.

When you wake up with no voice there are few places to stamp the blame, but I believe that demons came to steal my voice while I slept. What I can’t figure out is why they chose me. Out of millions of men, what did I do so wrong that would require the curdling of my vocal chords as punishment? I have a steady job, call my grandmother once a month, and pride myself on making love discriminately and fastidiously. Still, somehow, my name made it to the list of some secret Satan’s circle and my number finally came up. Their pronouncement: “Tamarind Ezekiel Crawford you have spoken your last irreverent word.” And they, sneaking in on splayed horny feet, sandpaper toes scratching at my throat, crept away into the night, my voice trapped in a croaker sack bouncing against a scaly back.

Damn silence is driving me mad, a quiet humming like legions of polite mosquitoes. A silence so subsuming it’s difficult to even hear myself think. I want to build noise. Walls of it so high that I won’t be able to climb over the top, and no one will be able to climb in after me. In the kitchen I bang cabinet doors open and shut. Their metal hinges split with tormented cries, and I can almost make myself believe that these cries are coming from my own throat. I stumble back into the living room, throw myself against the walls, and create a new symphony of bone crackling through flesh, and the pain is so loud now I have to wrap my hands around my moaning skull. Anger is my best buddy until my body finally crumples to the floor in defeat, refusing to conduct anymore.

Maybe I slept for a while. I’m not sure. A smell brings me to my knees, and I sniff at the air around me like a cornered dog, a scent like thepliant folds of Adessa’s sex contracting beneath me. I try to call out her name like a conjure word of salvation, ‘Dessa, who claimed that I had needed her too much. But ‘Dessa, wasn’t love supposed to be a symbiotic emotion? Didn’t you need me too? Her resounding, “No, who needed a man that didn’t know who he was first?” Oh, Ms. Sanctimonious I could use you now. If I could just fill you this damn silence would go away. No, that’s not it. Okay, okay, I lied. I don’t need you, I just wanted you. Could live without you any day. I know how to be alone. So come back now. God just come back, open your legs and give me some-
place to speak from. Adessaaaal No sound comes though, and her
remembered scent curdles, burns, and falls like ashes from my nose.
Then I’m forced to acknowledge that the smell of pickled fear is rising
from my own body, and I can’t crawl far enough away from it.

I shake my head back and forth to clear the grey memories hanging
around it like a veil. Something wet and sticky sliding along my arm is
distracting me from the smells that have been pushed out of my body by
fear. Forcing my tear-glued eyes open, I see all this black ink everywhere
and a half empty bottle out of the corner of my eye. Putting two and two
together, I figure I must have knocked it off my drafting table amidst my
earlier antics. I get into this trance-like fixation twirling my arm this way
and that, the ink plowing tributaries across my skin, and feel my own
body becoming the new object of my desire. I realize that I have man-
aged to create my own hieroglyphics and settle down to try and decipher
them. I cannot believe what I see. Etched here on my arm is everything
that has happened to me since I woke up in this sorry state. The splash-
es, trickles and jagged blooms of pain.

That’s when I realize that I am not alone after all. I feel her wooing me
from inside this male self. It’s not Adessa, but another woman. One even
more oddly familiar somehow. I feel her creeping slowly up into my con-
sciousness.

“Tamarind, you were never alone,” she says, “you forgot about me.”

Okay, I still can’t speak right, not with words anyway. But we’re talk-
ing, and of course my question is “Who the hell are you?”

I just feel her smile, and that’s when she drops the bomb.

“I’m Tamarind Ezekiel Crawford,” she says.

Just leaves it at that. Me, I don’t have any more fight or surprise left,
so I accept her/my words.

Now I find myself in this position of thinking I never really knew any-
thing about me. I have to question everything the old self I was did or
said.

“Were you with me when I was having sex?” I ask because this is the
first thing on my mind.

“Yes, every time.”

“But how could I have not known?”

“You did. But you only acknowledged me, said a prayer to me, when
the women you were with reached orgasm.”

It goes on like this because I have to know. Of course, the more I find
out, the more the distance grows between me and that old Tamarind
that I was. She slowly coaxes it all out of me; that old self, like disease
microbes. I marvel with her at the vanishing of that old mask of myself
I had created outside of my body. Momma’s bad boy. God’s plaything.
Adessa’s sex toy...

Madness or not I’m telling you this woman is in me and is me. I’m not
talking breasts and sex either. It’s just this eerie kind of vibe, but she’s
real enough alright. It’s like that painter Basquiat’s relationship with
heroin, how it chased the language from his blood onto his canvases. I
really dug the brother’s work. That wild language he was creating before
he O.D.'d. I wonder now what might have happened if he had found her first. Then again, maybe he had, but tried to shut his "her" out again. Which got me questioning if all the brothers had one, or if I was just a sucker. But, no. The way I felt before her was more frightening than what I'm feeling now. She's telling me that my body has become my new tongue and I know that we have managed to outwit the little voice stealing demons that thought they had left me without a word to stand on.

I think that a day has passed. Self-absorption doesn't carry a watch. I went out to the store and bought some paint—white, red and black. Screwing the lid off the white jar, I dip in a finger, digging the viscous feel of it.

Her voice speaks to me, directs my hand into painting these wild shapes all over my body. I am a freak now. Black man without words. But I'm creating this new language and her voice is telling me that everything is going to be okay, she was going to teach me how to rewrite my history, our history.

It takes about three hours for the paint on my body to dry, and for us to decide that we are ready to step out cloaked in our new language. Hell, what's revelation if you can't share it? No one is out on the streets, and I can hear the soft pad of my bare feet against the cement. Even this reckless walking doesn't scare me. This naked body is cloaked now in something beyond my complete knowing and control, but faith is running deep.

Rounding a corner, I see this group of young bloods hanging out in front of a wall, like they don't have any mothers to answer to, spray paint cans clutched in their hands. I start to check out the neon symbols they're busy creating. Feel an echo within me at their jabs, and slaps at immortality. They're scribbling legends on a wall, while I have become a walking one. My feet carry me closer to what they are creating. I check out their ego boosting, name dropping in black, pink and orange paint and I know that this is where it will have to begin. I can tell us getting hot with urban missionary redux zeal and we just have to share it. I am about five feet away from them when my inner alarm goes off, and pulls my feet to a stop.

Their eyes dart over me and I watch as the slouches melt away from their bodies like grease into a hot frying pan. Their mouths drop open as if they have seen their first coffin and are told by a superstitious adult that 'Yes, they are for dead bodies, so stop staring.' I can tell by looking into those six pairs of eyes that they are digging our display, even if they haven't quite broken the code for our 'glyphs.

Then one pair of eyes changes. Decides that these patterns are an affront to some established order and proceeds to flip out a knife. I just wanted to help them out, you know? Lay out the historical plan to save them a few hundreds years of trying to get there. But she is whispering in my ear, educating me. "Too much bad history Tamarind. They don't even recognize your story anymore." And I think, hell, I don't even have any pants on, and it's getting real cold fast. I try to shut her out because all I know is that it isn't about the language right now. I see those 100%
Grade A male masks sliding back into place and I know what they mean. These guys are all too ready to speak outside the body, on our body, with blood. So, in the time it takes for me to think a curse and her to shout a quick prayer chaser, I spin on my heel and start to run in the opposite direction.

My toes are gripping and releasing loose gravel, my breath exploding in my chest, and I know that I have to make it. It is all about protecting this body until the time is right for it to enter the scene for real. Until they're ready to see the real myth of man.
Rock The Body Body
for Cornelius Eady

1.

One summer night I learned the art of break
dancing from a guy I’d known as Moon
in exchange for algebra lessons on Mondays.
a member of the Pop-Along-Kids,
Moon taught me how to flick my wrist
& make a wave. “Check out The Electric Boogie,” he said & worked like a robot;
one hand extended, the fingers curling &
uncurling as the arm-joints & shoulders, in one
fluid motion, follow each other like butterflies.
I half-watched, trying to mimic the simple
Placement of feet, but mainly, I thought
of all the girls that would soon form a circle
as I created illusions with my body.

2.

Mostly Saturdays, I would pass out
Of sight on the dance-floor at Chestnut
& 13th beneath the vertiginous globe
swirling as if each country were a beam
of light. But nothing brought me
closer to the body politic than
when I thrust my arms out on rhythm
& swung my torso, pirouette-fashion,
doing The Cabbage Patch! Half
of what I knew of living I discovered
in a disco: the deft execution of bones,
eyes, muscles or something so basic
as keeping in step with your fellow man.

3.

You could be at a gay club with your girlfriend
who insisted on your accompanying her
so that you might broaden your horizons
& be struck in awe at the elegance
of movement in a dance you heard someone
mention vaguely as Voguing. The sight of men
Prancing about like royalty, stretching out
Limbs, pampering their features is enough
To inspire a frolicsome bone in your body & join
The fray. The sound of a man beckoning you
To Work & work. Now turn & pose is enough
For you to believe its all a conspiracy. But you
Don't fight it. You like molding your face,
Twirling in a constellation of men.

4.

At 12, I did The Freak with Nikki Keys
In the stairway of the Blumberg Housing Projects
As the music came to us on the eighteenth floor
Like the need for language or the slow passing
Of jets. A dare, we were up close, all pelvis
Taking in measured breaths before going down
like a flock of park pigeons. We could have crushed
Pebbles, thrown fine specks of dust
At the moon. We formed the precise motion
Of well-oiled gears fit to groove. This was three years
Before I would have sex for the first time,
Before I would discern the graceful tangle
Of stray gods, the bumbling dance of mortals.
The Philatelist

I'll never forget my grandfather's face
The night he learned the U.S. Postal Service
Issued a pane of commemoratives

Honoring black, jazz musicians. Distasteful,
He argued when the Post Master released Elvis'
Gleaming smile & lock on a speculative

Stamp. In his album, he'd included Coleman
Hawkins, Jelly Roll Morton, Charles Mingus,
And his favorite, Jimmy Rushing. Nothing could

Bring my grandfather, a southern man
Who saw the whole she-bang, the whole bogus
American dream amounted to no good,

More hope and quiet pleasure than this gain
When stamp collecting signaled change.
Saturday Matinee

When I first see *Imitation of Life*,
the 1959 version with Lana Turner
and Sandra Dee, I already know the story
has a mixed girl in it—someone like me,
a character I can shape my life to.
It begins with a still of blue satin
upon which diamonds fall, slowly at first,
and then faster, crowding my television
with rays of light, a sparkling world.

In my room I'm a Hollywood starlet
stretched across my bed, beneath
a gold and antique white canopy,
heavy swags cut from fringed brocade
and pieced together—all remnants
of my grandmother's last job.
Down the hall, my mother whispers
resistance, my step-father's voice louder
than the static of an old seventy-eight.

Lana Turner glides on screen,
the camera finding her in glowing white,
golden haired among the crowd.
She is not like my mother, or
the mixed girl's mother—that tired black maid
she hires—and I can see why the mixed girl
wants her, instead, a mother always smiling
from a fifties magazine. She doesn't want
the run-down mama, her blues—

dark circles around the eyes,
that weary step and *hush-baby* tone.
My gold room is another world.
I turn the volume up, over the dull smack,
the stumbling for balance, the clutter of voices
in the next room. I'll be Sandra Dee,
and Lana Turner, my mother—our lives
an empty screen, pale blue, diamonds falling
until it's all covered up.
As of Yet, Untitled

And then there was Stump, standing at the end of the bar. Stump was of burly build and surly disposition and dark, as black as the vinyl of a brand-new album. And he’d always be there, leaning one elbow on the dull wood, a few places removed from his nearest neighbor, his cap tipped back on his thick crop, sipping Kentucky bourbon whiskey and indifferent to the happenings at the Three Jacks’.

Darryl reads the bold ten year old print—‘I SEEN IT,’ scrawled on the frayed and faded lima bean green napkin that the Three Jacks’ had used as coasters—he remembers Stump and he smiles. He lays the fragile napkin—diaphanous paper as soft as cobwebs—on the open book in front of him and sits up in his study carrel. Then, reaching back, he digs his hands deep into his jacket pockets for any other ancient treasure he might uncover there. Nothing: just grains of sand and gray-blue lint.

He remembers: it was one of the other two Jacks—Jack Johnston, in fact—who’d given Darryl this jacket, the Beezville J.H.S. ‘Fightin’ Bees’ Supporters Club jacket, his first summer in Fitzgerald so long ago. “Protect you from that stinging West Texas wind,” Jack Johnston had said. The jacket is gold and has a black and gold bee on the back with bulging chest and angry eyes. When Jack Johnston gave it to Darryl, it was too large for him, but he’d kept it and wore it anyway, even on burning days. He saw it as a passport into his new community. Later, at Fitzgerald High, Darryl had put it aside for his letterman’s jackets, though—a new passport into a different community. After his first year at faraway college, in the snow and ice tundra of southern Minnesota, Darryl resurrected the long-forgotten covering. It fit well now, was the sort of thing that seemed to be ‘in’ with the arbitrary campus fashions and, under his letter jacket, was impenetrable armor against the piercing winds that ravaged the icy Great Plains in late fall.

Darryl reads the wall clock, over the row of study carrels: it’s only twelve-thirty, still more than a half an hour before his next class...

The Three Jacks’ was a somber place early in the day. Darryl remembers, lit to a gloomy gray: the perfect habitat for a creature like Stump. The bar ran the length of the side wall and, in raised rhinestones, read “Three Jacks” along the front. (In darker print, “Two” was still visible beneath the “Three.”) It was covered in black naugahyde that squeaked when Stump’s forearm would separate or reunite with it, lifting or lowering his glass. Darryl spent most of his first summer in Fitzgerald lounging at a table at the back of the Three Jacks’, doodling on a napkin-coaster or coloring in a book, watching Stump and the goings-on, because, since he was only ten, Jack Mitchell forbade him from even approaching the bar.

Evenings, the Three Jacks’ became a different place from the Jacks’ of the afternoons. All the lights would be lit, and it would be packed with
coming and going crowds. The only other business in the Flats was a Toot N' Totem convenience store, so older folks gathered at the Jacks' on their way home from work, to laugh and play, and to exchange the news of the day. Stump, of course, would already be gone by the time the working crowd got there.

Stump's uncle, Grandpa Thevenet, would often wander into the bar evenings. All eyes would be focused on Grandpa Thevenet when he came to the Jacks'. He was just the opposite of Stump. Tall and wispy like a dandelion in the wind, the color of leaves in autumn and with an accent that nobody else had, Grandpa Thevenet loved to make others laugh. Grandpa Thevenet used to say it was him who'd given Ezekiel—that was Stump's real name: Ezekiel Abraham Lee—the name Stump when Stump was much younger, but of the same stocky build and sour disposition.

"Zekiel," Grandpa Thevenet would say he'd said to the boy, after having caught him brooding on the sofa for no apparent reason, "boy, you got te character of a stump in a forest a pines." The name stuck because everyone knew this was true. "Sides," Grandpa would add, "that boy wan't never no Zekiel." And all the folks huddled at the bar would laugh.

Jack Mitchell's laugh always seemed to echo over those of the others. It wasn't that Jack Mitchell's laugh was loudest, but it was always the most distinct to young Darryl. Jack Mitchell made it a habit to be around the bar evenings, a smiling figure to the side, laughing when the others laughed. He'd be gone most afternoons. "Got to see a man about business," he'd say to Darryl, doodling at the back. "Don't you go running off too far from here." And he'd lumber out the door.

Darryl never went anywhere. He didn't know anyone. But Darryl didn't mind. When Jack Mitchell was out, Darryl would play dominoes with one of the other two Jacks, and they'd tell Darryl stories about Fitzgerald and the Flats.

"Young brother right there," Jack Johnston would say, pointing to a lithe figure leaning over a pool cue, "played football at S.M.U. Jump from here to the moon if he took it in his mind to. No lie. Led the whole Southwest Conference in interceptions his last year." Then he'd caress his moustache with his thumb and index finger. (Jack Pickering's face was bare.) "Didn't nobody take him before the ninth round, though," he'd say, "and nobody seemed to want to keep him. Now he back here."

The young brothers owned afternoons at the Three Jacks', and Darryl loved being there then. He could listen to the Jacks' stories about them all day long. They were like TV stars to him. Every scorching day that first summer, the young brothers would come in two's and three's to the bar. Stump would already be there, off to himself at the end. (Although Stump didn't look much older, he never seemed to be one of them.) They'd acknowledge Stump with a quiet nod that Stump would return—or not—then they'd congregate around the pool tables to shoot "eight-ball" or "cut-throat" and to talk smack and, occasionally, to fight.

It was on one such day that Darryl first spoke to Stump: after Jack Mitchell had gone on business, and while Stump was watching the bar
and Darryl was watching Stump, and a blade flashed. It glittered in the
cool-black hand of Bollie Smith. Everyone in the bar froze, charmed by
the glisten of the blade, but it was the glistening smile in Stump's coal-
dark face that mesmerized Darryl. Normally closed like curtains, his face
had cracked itself wide and showed bone. Darryl had never seen Stump's
face do that. According to Jack Pickering, no one had.

Jack Pickering broke up the fight before it ever really began. He got
Bollie Smith to pocket his knife and the two young brothers to shake on
their way out the door. When Darryl turned back toward Stump, Stump's
face had returned to its usual indifference. But Darryl had seen it. He'd
seen the smile that lit up the Three Jacks' when everybody was too busy
watching cool-black Bollie Smith and his knife to even notice. Darryl
had seen it and couldn't contain himself. He'd hopped out of the chair
at the back and strutted up to Stump at the bar. "I seen it," he'd told him,
then continued out the front door...

"Yo Darryl."

"Hey," Darryl responds by rote. It's John Bardey. "How you been?"

"Kicking," John Bardey says, still moving past and toward the eleva-
tors. "I got a class, got to fly," he says. "Take it easy."

John's from Hyde Park in Chicago. Another brother. One of the few. He
and Darryl had gravitated toward each other at the beginning of their
first year, Granny Smiths in a bushel reds, but John's declared a pre-med
major. He has different school demands and different parcels of free
time, and they hardly see each other. "Later," Darryl says to his receding
back.

The wall clock reads one-fifteen; Darryl has his class now, too. He
arranges the falling-apart napkin carefully between the pages of his book
(The Rise of Western Civilization, he's supposed to be learning about
Zeno's Paradox), heaps the books into his backpack and gets up to leave
the general library. With Stump and the Three Jacks' and Beezville J.H.S.
floating around center stage on his mind, Darryl walks out into the tight,
cold air toward Olin Hall of Science. (There's your paradox, he thinks, a
philosophy class held in a science auditorium.)

"Darryl," he hears, "Darryl Young!"

Darryl turns and sees Professor Courtland, his Introduction to
Religions teacher, waving and trying to run him down.

"G'd afternoon, Darryl. I'm glad I've run into you. D'you mind if I walk
with you?"

It doesn't sound like a question. "Sure, Professor Courtland," Darryl
says. "I'm going to Olin."

"I've been meaning to speak with you, Darryl," Professor Courtland
says, and he smiles.

They walk on, more casually than Darryl thinks he has time for.
Professor Courtland says, "This is your first year, isn't it?"

"Second."

"I've been with the college, oh, nearly twenty years now." Darryl nods.
"I've seen students come and go and modes of thought and of presenta-
tion. You know, it was Colin Winsom and me... You know Colin, of course, don’t you?”

“Sure,” Mr. Winsom is the Director of Minority Affairs.

“Well, it was him and me who first pushed for the establishment of the Multi-Cultural Center here on campus. D’you follow me, Darryl?”

“I think so,” Darryl says, not quite following him.

“Darryl, what I wanted to tell you was this...” Professor Courtland stops and looks past Darryl. “Well, I just wanted to say that I appreciate your animated participation in class.” Darryl had gotten excited and a little mad during the last class period, doing the section on spirituals and slave music; it must be to this incident that Professor Courtland is now referring.

“Hey, Professor Courtland...”

It’s two upper class women that Darryl knows only by sight. They stand in front of Darryl and the professor—“How’s your class going this term?”—neither acknowledging Darryl until Professor Courtland says, “Why, here’s one of my better students,” pointing at Darryl and smiling. The two nod and smile.

They say they have to go to class, and then they’re gone.

“Fine girls,” Professor Courtland says, and he continues forward, placing a hand on Darryl’s shoulder as they walk. “Now Darryl, I want you to know that you’re an invaluable part of our discussion section, being black and from the South. For me as well as the others. You bring a dimension to the class that most middle- to upper-class white students have had very little contact with. I appreciate that.”

Darryl remember the spiritual classes, and he says, “Thank you.”

It wasn’t that Darryl really knew anything about spirituals or slave music—Jack Mitchell and his mom never went to church and, barring a few times with Two, neither did Darryl. But when so many of the others in the class kept turning their eyes toward him for clarification or some sort of confirmation, Darryl felt like he should know...something. So he’d argued with a stringy-haired guy in a tye-dyed t-shirt who was likening spirituals to reggae. And Darryl now tells Professor Courtland, “Thank you,” but it doesn’t feel like the right response.

They walk along in silence, Professor Courtland’s hand on Darryl’s shoulder. Stop at the entrance of Olin.

“Darryl, I’m going to be quite frank with you. Do you know what the words ‘gruff’ and ‘cryptic’ mean?”

“Sure,” Darryl lies. He can guess at “gruff,” and the tension sprung suddenly tight between them gives him some idea about the essence of the other word.

“Well, that’s the manner in which you present yourself to the class. In my opinion, you’d have much more success winning your peers over to your point of view if you’d try to understand...”

“Maybe I’m not trying to win them over to my point of view, Professor Courtland,” he hears himself saying, which seems an inappropriate thing to say to a professor, particularly to a white-haired one.

Professor Courtland shoots back, “Darryl, I understand very well what
you’re saying, but I want you to think about what I’ve told you. I’ve been here forever and I’ve seen everything. Follow the advice of an old crony.” And he bursts a quick, staccato laugh that doesn’t fit.

“I have my class now,” Darryl says, turning to enter the building, Courtland’s hand falling into empty space.

This is how Stump would shed a conversation that had become cumbersome.

“All right, but take my words to heart...” he hears called behind him.

Darryl, entering the building, waves over his shoulder.

“I’ll see you in class on Tues...”

When Darryl gets back to his dorm room after class, he looks up the words “gruff,” then “cryptic” in his dictionary. He smiles. Darryl can imagine as the illustration beside either of these words the image of Stump at the end of the bar at the Three Jacks’, back home in Fitzgerald, Texas. The lima bean green napkin-coasters. The pool tables and hanging lights. And Bollie Smith and his blade, and the resplendent ivory flash on that coal-black backdrop.

Darryl crawls onto his bed and leaves this place, cold and white and so far away. He leaves the Professor Courtlands and general libraries and Zeno’s Paradoxes and remembers back, past high school even: back to when colors didn’t imply race but rather crayons in a box, to when meal-times were sacred and spankings still a possibility and chocolate milk was the drink of preference. Darryl remembers back to that day when he’d seen it.

He’d waited outside the bar for Stump to leave, then followed him.

“Where you going?” Darryl asked.

“Why?”

“I just wanted to know,” he said.

Stump said nothing. He continued walking.

Darryl followed, his legs churning double-time to keep up, two steps behind. “Do you have a house here in Beezville?” he asked.


Darryl took off the jacket, turned it inside-out and tied it around his waist, then raced back up to Stump. “Is it ok if I wear it when I’m not around you?” he said.

“What?”

“Is it ok if I wear my jacket when I’m at home or at the bar and not around you?”

“You do what you like then.”

Stump lengthened his stride and Darryl quickened his step. “Stump?”

“What, boy?”

“What’s ‘dinigratin’ mean?”

“It means them White folks took all us niggahs and made us live in this shit-dump on the outside of town, and then they calls it ‘Beezville.’ This
here ain’t no Beezville.”

“What is it then, Stump?”

“Home, boy,” Stump stopped to say, “home.”

“Oh,” said Darryl.

Stump veered off the dirt road into the high grass and reeds on the side. Darryl hesitated, watching Stump’s back be swallowed up by whis-
shing cattails. Then he followed him in.

Walking through the reeds was hard work for Darryl because often they were taller than him. He squinted and pushed a path through this junc-
ple. Stump pulled ahead some, but Darryl kept his dark blue cap in sight above the brush. Finally, Darryl emerged in a clearing by a creek. The water seemed soft but shone like sheet metal. Stump jumped across and

laid back under a tree on one half of a collapsed concrete bridge. He

pulled the brim of his hat down over his eyes.

“Best place in the world when you need some peace and quiet.”

Stump’s mouth moved, but the rest of him slumbered. “So why don’t

you hustle on home so I can get some.”

“Ok,” Darryl said, settling-in on a boulder in the sun about ten feet away. “I seen it today, you know,” he continued, “when you smiled.”

“Happens, boy. Now why don’t you get on.”

Darryl stared at the would-be ogre. “Jack Pickering said you didn’t ever

smile, but I knew that you had to because everybody does.”

“Yeah,” Stump said. His breathing became heavy and regular, his back

seeming to sink into the concrete, when suddenly he sat up, his hat

shifting askew on his head. “Boy, ain’t you got no friends? Why don’t

you go off and play somewhere?”

“No, I don’t, except the Jacks, but they’re always busy. We just moved

here. I don’t hardly know anybody.”

“Where’s your momma? You know her.”

“She’s at work.”

Stump stared at the boy an instant, then laid back and covered his face,

seemingly resolved to sharing his peace and quiet.

“Stump?”

“What, boy?”

“Did you really kill your wife?” Darryl asked.

Jack Pickering told Darryl that he had. One afternoon while Darryl was

waiting for Jack Mitchell to return from his business, when the bar was

empty and neither Jack was doing anything pressing, Jack Pickering

explained that, a few years back, before Darryl and his family moved to

Fitzgerald, Stump had been living with a midnight-sky black woman

from Georgia, and after a few months, she disappeared. Just like that.

“You can still hear folks talking about it to this very day,” Jack Pickering

had said, the other one, Jack Johnston, chiming, “Leave that boy alone,

Pick.”

The rumor was, Jack Pickering continued, that she’d wandered into

Fitzgerald and had no place to sleep and nothing to eat and was so many

miles away from home, so she’s taken up with the first man she met:

grumbling and groaning Stump. She couldn’t stand it. First chance she
got she was gone, some said with the black Greyhound bus driver who did the Amarillo-Liberal, Kansas route. But others, folks who knew Stump, said that one night she and Stump were fighting and she took a knife to Stump, so he knocked her down and it killed her. Then he hid her body off in the boonies somewhere where no one would find her. “No one ever asked any questions, though,” Jack Pickering had said, “and old Stump never offered anybody answers.”

“I mean...” Darryl said, looking at the thick brush, at the quiet stream, at the tops of cattails whipping, then towards Stump, “you didn’t, did you?”

Stump didn’t move, but his alabaster smile flashed in the shade of the tree. “Who told you that, boy?”

“I just heard people talking.”

Stump sat up and adjusted his hat. His teeth gleamed, his voice purring like a cat. “Boy, you been watching me all day long. All summer long.” Darryl shifted his hips, the rock digging into the flesh. “Now, d’you think I’m the sort of person who’d do something like that?”

“I don’t know.” The insides of Darryl’s stomach tickled, like when he would sneak out late at night, when all the lights were out all around, and throw rocks into the creek behind his house. “I think you could, maybe.”

“But d’you think I did?”

“I don’t know, Stump.” His stomach pulled all the rest of him down into it, and he wished he hadn’t asked. He couldn’t even see the tall buildings of downtown from here. “I guess I hope you didn’t.”

And Stump’s smile drained away. “All right then, boy.” He pulled the brim back down over his eyes and sunk back into the concrete slab.

“But did you, Stump!”

Only his mouth moved. “I guess I didn’t then.”

Darryl heard the quiet stream again, the wind shifting through the reeds.

“Stump?” Darryl said, his breath quick but halting.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad you didn’t.”

“Nnn...”

Darryl leaned forward over his knees. “Stump?”

“What boy?”

“You did it again.”

“What?”

“You smiled again,” Darryl said. “I seen it.”

“All right, boy. Just don’t go round telling folks.”

Darryl stared at Stump. His chest rose and fell, heavy and regular again. The sun was setting and a cool breeze caressed Darryl’s face. This felt like the first ride without the training wheels: once the ride ended he wasn’t sure that he’d be able to get it going again, so he didn’t want it to stop. But Jack Mitchell would be waiting at the Three Jacks’ to take Darryl home.

“Stump?”
"Boy?"
"I gotta go, Stump. It's getting dark."
"Go on then."
"But can I come back here again sometime?"
"Do whatever you want," Stump said from behind the brim of his hat. "Don't matter anybody tells you different, you do whatever you want in this life."
"But will you be here?"
"I don't know."

A turquoise dragonfly danced on the water at Darryl's feet.
"I gotta go, Stump," Darryl said. "I'll see you at the Three Jacks'."
Stump didn't say anything.

Darryl got up and worked his way back through the brush. It was getting dark and was difficult to see. He came out on the dirt road again and headed back into the Flats towards the Three Jacks'. Jogging along, Darryl felt his face smiling. A dog that he didn't know loped up, tongue dangling to one side, and strode beside him. It looked very happy, too.

The dormitory is unusually quiet. Darryl's roommate, Todd Odomes, still isn't back yet. Darryl gets up from his bed and goes to his desk. He sits there for a long time.

Leaning his head in his hands, he tries to remember the times that summer he spent with Stump, and during the summers after that, throughout junior high school. With Stump there was no discomfort in silence, no forced conversation when neither had nothing to say, and many days they just sat together at Fell's Broken Bridge, fishing or napping or doing nothing at all. Darryl didn't really see Stump much after that, though, after he got to high school. Things had changed. And now Darryl's miles away.

"Hey, what's up..." Todd bursts in.
"Not much," Todd hears himself say. By rote.
Todd removes his coat, his hat, his boots...

Darryl goes back to his bed, stretches out. He tries to keep remembering Stump over the stirring of Todd's here and there undressing.

"I got a quiz tomorrow," Todd says, now only in white boxers, walking toward his bed across the room from Darryl's. "Mind if I cut the light?"

"Naw. Go ahead."
Todd says, "You gonna sleep dressed?"
"Maybe."

The room goes dark, and Darryl listens to Todd rustling in his sheets.

"Hey, man," Todd says, "is everything all right?"
"All right?" Darryl stares at the dark. "Yeah."
"I mean, everything's cool with Cathy, right?"
There is silence.
"I mean, I haven't seen her around much lately."
"Everything's cool," Darryl says.

He hears Todd shift in his sheets. "Okay, man," Todd says. "Talk to you tomorrow."
His breathing very quickly becomes the sound of sleep. Darryl listens to it. Listens to Todd's sleeping.

Todd's from a suburb of Minneapolis. He's white. He'd always lived in the same house with his parents in a white suburb of Minneapolis. That's all he's ever known or can remember. Like Cathy Collins. She played lacrosse on a high school team.

Locked in his clothes under his sheets, Darryl lays awake most of the night, reliving all the memories he can drudge out of his mind, because it's dawned on him quite suddenly that, if he doesn't practice them enough, then the details might disappear and he'll be left only with a wide, empty feeling that has no palpable substance. The loneliness, he fears, would then be too great.
For Tiger Woods

I think first he would describe the morning as bright. Sunny. Not yet sun-filled or luminous. Just Wait. And I could say instead, for him, the sun has not fully risen, its rays are peeking through the trees, beginning to color the day. Yet, he sees the sun, watches it rise this particular morning, and wants to explain its movement in his sky. Itching for the words.

The word for this day is amiable. Friendly. He wants the other words, their sounds. He wants to say to his wife, sleeping for good, look at this (blank) sky. Isn't the sky so (blank)? And where are you? Is it prettier, (blank)er? Is there wood for me? Just wait. He opens now the pocket dictionary he carries with him to work, to class, to the bathroom, to the bed. Conviction. Inquisitive. At the moment, he would say it is sunny.

Four babies grown, married, settled. And he wants the sounds. I be luxurious in his mouth, along with the third biscuit and salted butter, when seated at the table he made with his own hands. Does he think the biscuits will taste better?

He will get on the bus in a minute and ride it until he can lift wood planks onto trucks and dump them in earth holes, eat lunch with his friend from up the street, one from down the street, and another from two streets and around the corner. A bucket of original recipe and more biscuits. Less mouth talk and then the lifting again, the stretch of the arms and the legs, oh how they can bend, the morning sun in his head itching out of his mouth. Did I say how I would describe what I see? Beautiful.

Two buses leave ten minutes apart, and one takes him to the college where he studies. Studium—studere, neuter gender. I know the word I picked, because he is studying. And I aint studn you. The friend from two streets and around the corner is on the same bus. Amiable talk. Supportive. Non-verbal. Tacit. The features of the bus change, and he says to his friend, Did you look up the word?

Heh heh I know, he says, ain't these words easy? By the time the equivalency test roll around hell I'll know the whole dictionary, he says. They laugh with their heads down, into their chests. I want to ask her to hep me wit this stery I'm tryin to write on. What kind of stery? his friend looks over at him. Heh well, you know, just life. I been keepin these lil notebooks round in the paper rack in the bathroom. I use to leave notes for her in the morning, pin notes to the ironin board. I started readin one I filled up last year and it was like talkin to her. I know she use to read through em.

Ask the lady at the school if you can show her somethin sometime, maybe she can hep you put it in some kinda order you know? his friend says, looking down at his right hand. Well, he says.

Three stops left, and the bus hums along the road, into another picture. The dictionary helps him through this moment of transition, of transformation. Loquacious. Avarice. Cyclamen. Lucidity. Dumb for the days he feels he has let pass, never scratching his itches. Excuses. Don't matter no
way what you do you'll never get ahead. Just do what you know. Don't get involved in the white man's business cause he always do the books.

Head itching still as they get off the bus. I'll say somethin', he says to his friend, maybe not today but soon. The smell of wood in his nose. Maybe today? I want him to say. Eyes open scan the wall pictures, the fixtures, to make sure once again he is walking, with his friend, into a room to a desk where he puts his bag on the floor, takes out the notebook and textbook to put them on the desk, holds a pencil in his hand, steadies the dictionary in his lap.

How are you doing Mr. Monroe? Mr. Thomas? she says to them. Splendid day wasn't it? Yes yes. His head itching. If everyone would take out their homework assignments, she says, on subject-verb agreement, then we'll begin. The class responds, hesitates...Doesn't she like their nakedness? The fat thighs they think need work but that still do their job. The crust in the eyes and spit around the mouth she would never say she sees. What would that acknowledge?

She begins on page 98, sentence one. Would anyone like to diagram the first sentence on the board? she asks, her eyes in room orbit. Ms. Delaney? she says. Ms. Delaney carries her notebook to the board walking to its far right where she spies the biggest piece of chalk. I'll do number one and two, Ms. Delaney says to her. Three others, including his friend Mr. Thomas, follow her lead and walk to the board to finish the exercises.

Ms. Delaney's letters round out the others, the os and as grateful and indignant, announcing that everybody get eye crust and don't be fooled. Ms. Delaney holds the chalk between the J and A of her five-finger airbrush design, points at the board to explain her work, because we is a plural pronoun but also, we can handle and are handling this here. To correct them as they finish, the instructor illumines places in which verbs were plural but subjects were singular and tells the class again that plural pronouns still require plural verbs, even if proper names have not been given.

But what if the they, says Ms. Delaney, is a big they? Not the they like them in this class, but another they that can be one person sometimes but is still they? All eyes on you instructor. Oops. That you is a typo. They want to know whether she knows that she can have spit around her mouth and be all right.

They is always plural, the instructor answers, and denotes one or more persons, not usually one. That's one of the basic lessons of this language, the fact that singular subjects connect with singular verbs and plural subjects connect with plural verbs.

But do y'all feel me? Ms. Delaney says and looks at Mr. Monroe.

Thank you for your answers, says the instructor, and now we'll talk about some of the journal entries everyone has been working on for the past two weeks. Does anyone want to discuss the ways in which keeping a journal has helped them to understand something better? Mr. Monroe?

His friend looks at him then down. Mr. Monroe holds the pencil and explains. I've been basically tryin to learn the vocabulary words. Like
today, the word is amiable, and I know that means friendly and nice. I guess I just like adjectives.

How so? asks the instructor.

He swallows and continues. Sometimes I just need to describe thangs by writin them but I lose the words before they come up cause I don’t know if they right anyhow. There are so many words to pick out a dictionary I ain sure where to begin even. I just flip round through it though.

A writing assignment, says the instructor. After you do your homework tonight, write for twenty to thirty minutes putting into a sentence some of the vocabulary words you have learned. Try to recall them by memory first, and then write something using all of them. So far I think we’ve learned about sixteen or so words? How have you been using the words Mr. Monroe?

They smell the wood on him now, smell it as he cuts out a leg, another leg, then a cane for lil Brother. To get rid of eye crust, they hear in his voice, you wash your face, but don’t get mad at the eyes. He scans the instructor at once, takes in her dress, the black pantyhose underneath, the run showing the white of her left shin, the scarf holding her hair, and thinks of his wife.

I thought, he says, we were just suppose to write down the definitions so that’s all I did with them tell you the truth. His friend waits for him to say something more. Anything. He drums his pencil on the desk and says, I been thinking about writin somethin big too, but I don’t know where to start. I guess I need to focus on the test coming up, he laughs and looks at Ms. Delaney.

Ms. Delaney leans up from her seat, What do you wont ta write about?

Well, just my own stery, he says, twisting to face her.

I have another assignment, says the instructor. Look up the word autobiography and we’ll talk about it tomorrow so that we can help Mr. Monroe and others in class who are thinking about developing some of the thoughts in their journals. For centuries, important people have documented their lives and the times in which they lived by writing their own autobiographies.

He’s talkin about a reglar ole stery, Ms. Delaney says, not no biography.

We’ll talk about it in detail tomorrow, says the instructor, but right now, I want to have progress reports with the three students I mentioned this week, so that we can go over grammar strengths and weaknesses and focus on areas that need special attention. Ms. Bradshaw, I’d like to start with you.

His friend watches him drum the pencil on the desk and stare at the instructor, the way she removes her books from the chair at her desk so that Ms. Bradshaw can sit. Important people. She did say that and he did hear her say it.

But I want to tell him to keep his nose on the wood, to keep the wood in his nose, because then they will be his words, his pictures, and wait a minute, I can hear the talk now, the Where in the hell did he come from? What is going on? I can hear it already. Just wait.
Painted Bride Quarterly is proud to announce the winner of the 1996 Chapbook Contest judged by Yusef Komunyakaa.

Winner: Tina Barr

“In sixteen finely-tuned poems, Tina Barr's The Fugitive Eye traverses a substantial psychological and emotional tableau. This poet's straightforward compass needle quivers over a lived territory, with nuanced detours through a fruitful imagination, and her poems are always important imagistic ventures into our modern psyche. Here's poetry that entertains and challenges. Through mythology, pragmatic psychology, and a near-blues insinuation, The Fugitive Eye coaxes us to see ourselves in truth-seeking reflections. This collection works because each poem dares the reader.”

Yusef Komunyakaa
Circe

The brim of my hat knocks your shoulder
as we stand, close to one another.
And up the aisle, towards four priests
walks Penny, on her father’s arm,
er her train straightened by a bridesmaid.
I am looking around at the relatives
I met a month ago, at the bridesmaids’ hair,
curled and brown, at the winged icons,
scrolls, angels, doves.

Afterwards we stop in a deli.
You say you don’t like my hat,
broad-brimmed, straw, edged in black
to match the splash of black across
my dress, over scarlet, purple, lapis.
On the village lawns, chickadees
and robins preen themselves;
the sod, rolled out, pressed down,
reaches to the tarmac border.

Now, as just before sleep,
I am looking far down, coasting over
fields, plains, hills, roads that open
out before me, and I see myself in miniature
beside your tiny figure,
Small enough for the top of the cake,
your stiff body, that slopes a perfect
triangle from shoulders to waist.
You wear a pale suit.

I can see your dark hair, the back
of your neck where I once shaved
the new-grown hair. I rise away. I turn.
The hull splitting when you came to me.
From that distance I let
you see a vision of me. Your heart,
like a snail, turning its blind head
towards me. On my skin, the trails
of your fingers glistened.
So I put aside my guise: wings, feathers.  
Last night you braced me  
against the hotel wall and collapsed. Hero.  
Now there is the rest of your journey.  
You’ll find some girl, marry her.  
Withdrawn, like a snail, male and female  
in the same body, sufficient.  
You turn the spoon over and over,  
adjust the cup in its saucer. Swine.
The Crossing

Like a needle, probing under skin
to lift a splinter, grass slit
the side of my heel.
Shells slid, clinked over and settled
as I walked the crush of mussels,
bent and stroked one shell’s insides—
mother of pearl, purple and ivory.

I stooped to pick beneath
wide eels of ripple-edged kelp
and green sea lettuce.
Waves had laid those trails.
I squeezed bladder-wracks’ fish-tailed ends—
burst pockets of air.
In the smell of drying seaweed
horseflies bit and bit.

Crouched in the bluejay that afternoon,
Chris pushed his face towards mine.
I flinched; the mainsail jibed.
Flung windward, the boom swung
inches above my bent neck.
In my palm I carried
the burn of the jib sheet,
the jerk of the wind.

Among the heaps of mussels
that last minute before dark,
the sun drawing its red haze over them—
I had imagined a touch,
not his, but yours.
I am thinking of the way
we walk side by side in the heat
and how I welcome your mouth,
your breasts like mine.

I give way to it, give back
the way a yawl does when the wind
luffs and rips
until it fills the spinnaker
and the prow dips
and pulls
and the hull skids forward.
Public Garden Above the Rhone

In the public garden
that hangs in the air
above the Pont D’Avignon
where seven popes ruled from their fortress,
you hold my arm, while the wind
swings the purse from my side,
billows my skirt above my thighs.
But here, no one looks—
and if I hold your arm,
two women who touch,
no one turns his head to stare.

The German girl’s skirt
rises and luffs in the wind.
A young man, on one knee
takes a picture
as she presses her skirt down.
The mountains Cezanne painted
bulge behind her shoulders.

But what he cannot take
is a picture of the wind
as it shows itself
running currents
on the terraced lawns below,
lifting each sliver of grass,
trougning and gulleying.
And he cannot capture the comet trails
of its path, visible in the grass,
waves of heat sheening.

In this country wisteria
grows in a museum courtyard
and I can gather
the weight of its blossoms
to my chest and inhale its scent.
The lady who runs that hotel
smiles and pleats the edge
of a napkin at her table.
Painted Bride Quarterly is proud to announce the winners of the 1996 Poetry Contest judged by Stephen Berg.

First Place: Leonard Kress
Second Place Winners: Sharon Black & Judith Westley
Spiritual Exercises

after Saint Ignatius

Try this next time. Walking home from the elevated train
pay close attention, as you always do
to sights along the way. Like the abandoned
lace mill, its red bricks floating mortarless

on shaky foundations, the whole structure crumbling.
Like the Gypsy Church, silent now
no young brides in parade, no men
puffing away on the stoop, no queen taking

possession of the neighborhood after slow
and regal descent from the bus. Hear—if you can
the tambourine snap and sizzle. Let all chords
be augmented. Match your step to its summons.

Or like the produce depot. Loiter
by crated Jersey tomatoes bursting
through their scars, the last
of them this year. Cradled corn, unshucked.

Cannonball stacks of honeydew. This one
though, is somewhat different. It has
three stages. First, scatter their seed
so that enough roots in the sidewalk cracks

enough to make of this neighborhood
a verdant garden. That done
place yourself irrevocably outside
as if some corner tough or bouncer were hanging out

like the Archangel Michael barring the way
back in. Then make that same fruit rot.
Choke on the stench of fermenting nectarines
wafting through the alleyways. Lured bees

and yellow-jackets, their sting. Lessons
like these are easily learned
so it's time. As you hoist yourself up
to the el platform, up

the ante, board the train. Avoid
the chatty word processor, the drowsy teller
the fidgety account exec. If one is available
take a seat. A large youth occupies
no more than half of it. His hair is trimmed
so close his scalp shines through. Rock music
seethes in his ears, a garish tie lassoes
his neck. Bookless on his way to school

he will not budge, not even when the Little Flower
girls embark, their stiff hair, icon nimbuses
gilded by the morning sun. And on his one slab-like hand,
the only limb exposed, note the wound:

a football spike, almost fresh, encrusted.
It's really there, bright as lipgloss, round as a token.
The trick to this exercise is seeing
that it's not an exercise. At all.
Chemotherapy Love Poem

I've tried everything, every sort of exorcism, which gets me thinking what we need is a kind of chemotherapy for the heart, an extreme medicine for sure, reserved only for those with no hope, whose longing has ravaged every organ system of their body. I can see them now, the terminally love-sick arriving jet-lagged from all points of the globe, their swollen hearts heavy as sod, only to be greeted by a lot of forms to fill out—though these read like confessions by the time you are through (we all ask for more paper). Then conferences with the doctors and there, too, you must describe your love, what did he look like, why did she leave, on and on you spill your guts out—funny how they really seem to listen and as they listen they are mixing just the right combination of poisons to target your particular strain of infatuation. Finally it's time to roll up your sleeve, begin the I.V. and so flood your heart to its toxic brink of non-feeling. Oh, maybe you'll have a vague memory of having loved, say, your mother, or you might mouth "no" under your breath if you witness a bunch of thugs beating with baseball bats an only slightly nerdier version of your brother, but basically by the final treatment you are numb. Numb to all you ever loved: the oboe, diner mashed potatoes, NHL hat tricks, Van Morrison, Nancy Wilson cause she sounds like Jimmy Scott, Jimmy Scott cause he sounds like Nancy Wilson, Surrealism, ice cream on waffles, Alaska (though you've never been there), New York (even though you have), Ferris wheels, blue spruce, green herons, runway models, cream of wheat, of course poetry—especially Stevens, Neruda, O'Hara, all moody bodies of water, a fish your daughter named Mr. Window, a slug your son named Sluggie, Dr. Zhivago, Edward Scissorhands, old porches with hanging swings, and your favorite lovers now clumped with the ones you merely tolerated calculating how to let them down easy, not to mention the one that broke you down, brought you to this state, this madness—you can look at her now like you're looking at a used wedge of lemon from someone's ice tea or mess of lobster and that's when you know you're cured though at the follow-up visit you can't exactly thank them with a heart-felt shake, they know that, still you go through the motions, you ask when the rest will come back. That's when they tell you about the hair of cancer patients, how it returns, so the complexion, so too your dry, ash-white heart will fill itself up again—one day you'll kiss the flowers and the snow and maybe even the dust in the road (though now if you wake up at night
don’t be surprised if you’re thinking about the price of store brand tuna in 6 1/4 oz. cans). Give it time they say and they want to make sure you aren’t driving yet, they tell you as you’re signing one more release that patients have been known not to stop for pedestrians, not even when they hit them, they say those are the ones we really cured.
The Absent Ones

for my father

The relatives have ordered flowers in thick bundles,
arranged in baskets and in vases on every inch
of table top, with cards from everyone my mother knew,
except my father. He rushes in before the blessing,
with a dozen roses so red they’re almost black.

Propping his knee against a chair, he writes a note.
The pen moves slowly, in big round strokes
across the small square card. I imagine that he traces out
the path of some caress, followed long ago
before the illness, the divorce, the family feud.

My mind’s ear hears him saying things he’s always liked to say.
“A place for every thing and every thing in its place.”
Some hands push back a bunch of holly and carnations
to clear space for his bouquet. “Life is a struggle.”
His final syllable ascends and flutters, a small white flag.

“Les absents ont toujours torts”—his salute
to our flair for settling blame on someone who’s not there.
My dad sits with me and my sister in the front pew,
roped off by tradition for the chief mourners,
as if grief, like guilt, is assigned and suffered in degrees.
The entire row is empty except for us. We are now three.
Painted Bride Quarterly is proud to announce the winners of the 1996 Fiction Contest judged by Frederick Barthelme.

First Place: Judith E. Doherty
Second Place: Alicia Erian
Vermin

I am on my way to the Korean corner store for a pack of Marlboros, but just before I get there I hear some noises coming from it: gasping and grunting, as though someone is working out on a particularly brutal exercise machine. These noises stop, and instead there is smashing and splintering. Then two youths streak out over the five-way intersection and disappear on foot down the street immediately opposite, the continuation of this one, which has a kink in it. There is still time for me to see that they are not youths but children, one carrying a baseball bat and one with a handgun; and that I know the one with the gun, although I am not going to say so if the opportunity is later offered me.

I went to high school with his mother, who decided when she was fifteen that she would be a lawyer. She had Jamal instead, the same year, and now they live in a crack house with no electricity or plumbing. When they get around to it they throw their accumulated waste products—an amalgam, a potpourri—over the chain-link fence on to the adjoining vacant lot where there used to be a house. That one was bulldozed before the novelty of the Mayor's ordinance wore off. The City no longer has the resources to render Jamal and his mother and her other children homeless and so their own dwelling still just about stands.

In the end I was the one who graduated from high school, probably because I knew—among many other things which have served me no better—that there has to be a preposition after "graduated." I have children, too, but they were both taken away from me. When I finally made it through drug rehabilitation—I have stayed clean for two years now, and miraculously, I am uninfected—my son and daughter had no idea to begin with who I was. When they first remembered, or when someone told them that they did, they wet the bed every night for two weeks following each supervised visit with me, and so the visitations were ended. Because of the blur of my old white-out days, I am not quite sure of their fathers' names; I took their money to buy the oblivion, and did not always ask them, or know what date it was. My children call their foster parents Mom and Dad and have bicycles and Prodigy and live in the suburbs. I have not spoken to them for more than a year.

Mr. Ho at the variety store never takes even the most basic security precautions: not even a grille on his door, nor a buzzer so that he can let in only those customers he already knows. He has known Jamal since he was a baby. We have all been bugging Mr. Ho about it but he is a Born Again. He is a widower and now I remember that his only daughter was murdered on her college campus somewhere in the Midwest four years ago. He says he is in God's hands; and it seems that God has made His mysterious and no doubt wondrous final move.

Mr. Ho is on the floor, in front of his counter. There is a great puddle where his head would have been, with things floating in it. But some of them are candy bars. In his mind—when he had a head—was he thinking:
supervised visits: a baby rat, trying to scurry under a bureau with a huge egg, nearly as big as itself; trying to clamp it between its toothy but inadequate jaws and failing, and then with great ingenuity pushing it with its nose and rolling it over and over toward its dark, secret hidey-hole with its sinister little pink hands. Now he is fiddling at one of the leg openings of my short tight shorts. And then his fingers hit home and I am astounded to find myself murmuring and beginning to move with him. Now I remember reading somewhere that a traumatic event can cause some people to become exceedingly aroused. But it baffles me that I should rather suddenly be included in their number, given that this is what I used to do for a living.

The ground floor of his house, like everyone else's in this neighborhood including my own, is just one narrow, burrow-like living room with stairs halfway along and a gloomy kitchen area at the far end. He lives like a pauper and has almost no furniture apart from an easy chair and his T.V. and refrigerator. There is no stove. Another rumor says that he cashes and saves every cent of his pension in coffee cans which he hides in his basement. We do know for sure that he sometimes takes bus trips to Atlantic City, his only on-the-record indulgence, and that he sometimes wins a great deal of money.

His body is light brown and hairy and shapeless, and his extremities—all of them—are tiny and pinkish. I have never seen him so excited, or known him to perform so adequately. He wastes little time on foreplay, after the initial groping on his threshold; he dispenses altogether with the numerous ancillary techniques I have painstakingly taught him (at a reduced rate since he is a retiree). I take him, on the sticky vinyl floor at the humid and foul-smelling kitchen end of the room; and by now my personal interest has almost entirely flagged. But as he pumps and sweats and grunts and coughs, I start to cry again, for I seem to have transformed him into Mr. Ho, who never so much as touched my hand. The crisp blue and green cotton of the Hawaiian shirt I sometimes used to iron is pressing and crackling against my cool breasts, and it smells of Arm and Hammer, and I am rubbing the immaculate fabric between my fingers as we wrestle respectfully together in his tidy bed above the store; and at last—at last—the friendly smooth face is back in its proper place again and I pray for a way to fix his head there on his shoulders forever.

“'You always been the only one,’” moans Mr. Rodden, stealing his lines from the soaps as he pounds away inside me. “'Ain't never been no one else since she passed. Oh. God. Let's get married, Lisa. Please. Oh, Jesus. Oh, Lisa. Oh, Jesus, Jesus.”

Well, maybe that's true, I reflect; and maybe, if it's also true about the coffee cans, I really will marry him... maybe even if it's true, too, about the little girls and boys...

There are three roaches crawling in single file up the yellow wall by his ancient, vibrating ice-box.
He has no phone. But later as I am resting my back against the refrigerator door and dragging on my third looted Marlboro, the police begin to bang on his door anyhow. Mr. Rodden does not smoke, because of his asthma. One of the cops is Tinker, also a former client of mine. He went to elementary school with one of my brothers, and his body is better than Dennis Rodman’s. He is married, with three kids, but it never really bothered him that everyone in the neighborhood—including his wife—knows he uses prostitutes. Or rather, visits them, and pays them to provide the cover he still requires; for I think he may never be ready to come out.

I do not know his new partner, who is a ginger-haired, spotty white kid; a head shorter than Tinker but at least twenty pounds heavier. He is very young and appears nervous, but this is probably only my cliché. The backs of his hands are covered in a sandy down which extends along the whole length of his knuckles, right to the base of each of his chewed-up fingernails. He has the paws of a werewolf, and they are startlingly inconsistent with the bland, rubbery, good ol’ boy face which glistens sweatily as his eyes dart around the grimy space.

“How are you doing today sir ma’am,” says Tinker, with no acknowledgment of our acquaintance. “I’m sorry to say it looks like there appears to have been an unfortunate incident at the convenience store directly across the street from where we are presently at. A violent incident—it appears, in fact, to be a homicide. Plus it appears they may have took certain items from the store. May I ask did either of you see or hear anything unusual in the vicinity of the convenience store, earlier this afternoon?”

Thank you for shopping here, says the plastic bag of goodies, about eight inches away from his large left foot.

It troubles me that Tinker is choosing and enunciating his words so carefully, since he normally talks exactly like the rest of us; it troubles me that he may be doing it for the benefit of his new partner. The teenwolf has not yet spoken, and I am prepared to bet that when he does, he will address us as “youze”; but this is not really the point.

“No,” I whisper. “Nothing at all.”

The teenwolf is staring in an unmistakable way at my breasts, now both fairly discreetly contained within the coral stretch top—although I have to admit it probably is a size too small. Could Tinker have discussed me, on some other occasion, with his lascivious pink rookie? Pointed me out in the street; suggested he approach me for initiation into the customs and ways of our neighborhood? ...The kid speaks.

“This Korean—either of youze know him at all?” But he is highly flushed now, perspiring in rivulets, and I do not think his own question
has his full attention.

"Mr. Ho. His name is Mister Ho!" I manage to refrain from calling him "sonny"; to refrain from raising a fist into his face. I manage to stop it coming out like a furious sob. I am heartily grateful that Tinker is with him.

"Yes: I...know him," I continue, more calmly. "I sometimes do...used to do...some work for him. You know...just like, from time to time?" Now I am no longer enraged, only so desperately weary that I think my voice is becoming inaudible.

But Tinker hears me, and I see him raise his eyebrows very slightly; and I curse him for forcing me to add: "Like, you know, cleaning?...helping around the store?...But I haven't been there lately."

"Why you lying?" yells Mr. Rodden. He knows about Tinker and me, of course, or rather he believes he does. Tinker has taken great care to let everyone know.

"Lisa," says Tinker, quite gently, "Lisa: we got other witnesses."

"O.K., so, yes ...all right ...I went for cigarettes; and he was dead. But I swear that's all I know, Stanley. Truly."

"Huh! She lying. Know that Jamal Jones? Don't never go to school? Kid be around here all the time, and now he start saying shit about me, like I interfere with him, mess with him? Gimme a break! Jamal was there. Oh, yeah, trust me, she seen him, don't matter what she tell you. She seen him; I seen him. He the one you looking for...Officer Tinker. Officer! Huh!...Oh, yeah: Jamal Jones the one you after." He snorts, and then chuckles derisively: "But you take care now...Officers. Approach the subject with Ex-treme Caution. He may be Armed and Dangerous."

He continues to cackle until he glances at me and sees my expression. Then the malevolent and unspeakably foolish old man abruptly stops grinning, and his squeaky, hoarse laughter freezes and dies. And all four of us are silent, while the huge avocado refrigerator shakes the room with its humming.

...so this is how it has to be....I'm sorry, but that's the way it is...

If it really turned out to be true about the coffee cans, we could even find a house together which was not necessarily in another neighborhood like this—sufficiently far away, but different only because we could be quite certain of being completely unknown there. No; we might even go somewhere safer still, right out in the suburbs, where I would be able to listen to the cardinals as I trimmed our luxuriant waist-high hedges. Maybe we could find a house like the one where my children are being raised by their foster parents, out there where you can cycle up and
down the street without ever being caught in the crossfire.

My parental rights have already been terminated. My court-appointed attorney advised me there was no point in contesting it. She was born two blocks from here and was in my graduating class, but she only just made Honor Roll. She tells me that before the end of this year, my children will have been adopted.
Dinner With Bob

I'm mad at my friend Marge, who claims she's terminally ill. I want to
tell her how I feel, but I know she'll just say, "How can you say that
when I'm sick?"

I don't mean to imply that Marge is lying. It's just that she never seems
sick. She's in love with a married man, Bob, who gave her a cellular
phone, and when he calls her on that phone and tells her to meet him
somewhere, she goes. Then, when she gets home, that's when she's sick.

Marge doesn't have the energy to go out and meet people who aren't
married. Because of Bob. If you ask me, every time he calls her and tells
her to meet him someplace, she should go someplace else, where there
are single men. She needs to meet someone she can be sick with all the
time. On her own schedule. Then she could give him a cellular phone.
Call him when she's not sick and tell him to get over there.

I could say it's none of my business, but the fact is, Marge makes it my
business. She tells me about it all the time, trying to get me to say that
it's OK for her to go out with a married man. And at first I thought it was.
OK. She is sick, after all.

But then I changed my mind. Because of Edward. He's my fiancé and
he says it's wrong to go out with married men. He says after we're mar-
ried, he's not going out with anyone. That's a joke Edward plays on me.
But he's not kidding about Marge. He thinks she should give the phone
back.

Edward is a negative cutter. He cuts the film negative for commercials,
movies, TV shows. It's a pretty high stress job because you can't make a
mistake. Once you make a cut, it's there for good. But that's OK because
in his eight years of cutting, Edward has never messed up once. His
steady hands and slow, cautious approach have learned him a nice liv-
ing.

The only problem is, because Edward works freelance, he has to drum
up a lot of his own business. The best way to do this is to attend film fes-
tivals, where he can pass out his card and meet scores of people who
need their negatives cut. So last month, Edward and I flew to California
from Manhattan, where we live, for the San Francisco International Film
Festival.

This is why I'm mad at Marge: She invited us to stay with her while we
were in San Francisco, and then she wouldn't give Edward sheets. Well,
that's not exactly true. She gave him some, but I could tell she didn't
want to, which in my mind, is the same as not giving him any.

See, Marge had us sleeping on two chairs that folded out into twin beds
in her living room. So we either needed two twin sheet sets, or one dou-
ble, which we could stretch over both beds. This was what I was secretly
hoping for as the three of us stood in front of Marge's linen closet, trying
to decide what was best. But Marge said she didn't have any doubles. "Just
twins," she said, and she handed me a set. Then she shut the closet door.
"Whoops!" I said. "Can Edward have some, too?" I figured she must’ve just forgotten about him. But then Marge looked at me like I was crazy. "I guess," she said, and she opened the door to the linen closet back up really slowly.

"Excuse me, Marge," Edward said, "but is this a problem?"

"No, no," Marge said. She was lifting up different sheets in the closet, as if she were suddenly unfamiliar with them.

"It’s just that I think I need some sheets," Edward said.

"OK," Marge said. She was still rummaging.

"I mean, I wouldn’t want to sweat on your chair."

Marge didn’t say anything. Finally she found a pink set, which she handed to Edward. "Its just that I iron all my linens," she said, "and I’m sick. It’ll be a lot of work to have to iron those again."

"I could iron them for you," Edward said, "before we leave."

"Don’t worry about it," Marge said. Then she waved her hand and went in her bedroom, as if she’d already forgotten the whole thing, and we should, too.

I looked at Edward then. He opened the door to the linen closet and put the pink sheets back. "Shhh," I said, because I didn’t want Marge to hear him, after all that fuss. She scared me a little.

That night, Edward curled up behind me in protest. He wouldn’t sleep in his own bed without sheets, but he wouldn’t take sheets from Marge because he felt she didn’t want him to have them. "I don’t want any sheets that can’t be given freely and graciously," he’d said, his breath hot on my ear.

Poor Edward. For the life of me I couldn’t figure out what Marge had been thinking. She was the one who’d invited us to stay, after all. She must’ve known sheets would be part of the bargain. Not only that, but she’d always been such a gracious host to me in the past, giving me linens, cooking her Italian specialties. Once she even taught me how to make her secret sauce: deseeded, peeled tomatoes with mushrooms she had picked herself, in better days, on a hillside in Italy.

But I’d been alone those times. Edward and I hadn’t met yet. Still, I found it hard to believe that Edward was the problem. Marge had been so happy for me when I’d met him. In fact, she was the one who’d encouraged me to go after him, even though he had a girlfriend. "You have to," she’d said. "He sounds like a good one." So I did. And Edward left his girlfriend. We hadn’t even kissed yet, but Edward said just wanting to kiss me was reason enough to leave her. I told Marge this and she sighed into the receiver.

The thing was, I thought Marge and Edward were getting along great until the problem with the sheets came up. And while it was true that whenever Marge started talking about Bob, Edward wasn’t able to be supportive, he never said anything like, "I think you should leave him, Marge," or, "You’re making a big mistake." He just tried to busy himself with other chores, like taking Marge’s dog out for a walk, or reading the schedule for the film festival.
Anyway, the next day I bought Edward his own sheets and everything was OK. We all went to a screening at the film festival that night—Edward, Marge, and I—and pretended nothing had happened. Or at least, Edward and I did. Marge didn't seem to remember anything had happened in the first place to even need to pretend about.

Then, in the middle of the movie, Marge's cellular phone rang. She had a hard time finding the shut-off button in the dark, but finally she did, and then she went ahead and had a conversation with Bob right there. That was OK with me, but not with Edward. It was bad for business. But I could tell he was really biting the bullet, Marge being my friend and all.

When Marge got off the phone, she leaned over and whispered, "Bob wants to meet us all now," and stood up. Bob had been trying to get away from his family all weekend to meet us, so I guessed we should probably go. I stood up and kicked Edward's shoe to make him stand up, too.

Out in the lobby I could tell Edward was unhappy, but there was nothing I could do about it. Marge was so excited. It seemed like if we didn't go with her, she would make us stay in a hotel. Looking back, I'm not sure why I thought that was such a bad idea. It wasn't like we couldn't afford it. But it would've seemed shameful somehow. To have failed as houseguests.

Well, we got to the restaurant and Bob never showed. But then Marge wanted to stay and have dinner anyway, in case he made it for dessert. So we did. And Marge explained to us for the millionth time why it was a good idea for her to stay with Bob. Why the pros outweighed the cons.

Later, back at Marge's place, Edward and I made love. We did it in Edwards bed, so Marge wouldn't smell us on her sheets when she washed them. I lay on my side, and Edward lay behind me, as we slept the night before. We barely moved.

Afterwards I went back to my own bed, so we would each have more room. But Edward couldn't sleep. "These new sheets are too scratchy," he said, and climbed in with me.

He soon fell asleep, his breath turning sour for the night. I tried to switch beds then, because I didn't mind scratchy sheets, but Edward wouldn't let me. He grabbed me and pulled me to him. I tried to get up again and the same thing happened. "Edward!" I whispered loudly, thinking he was really awake, and teasing me, but he didn't respond. His mouth was open and he was snoring lightly.

I settled back in. Edward put his head on my chest and began to drool. It was for this that Marge had refused him a set of sheets. The moist, smelly mess of him. The body attached to the voice.
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