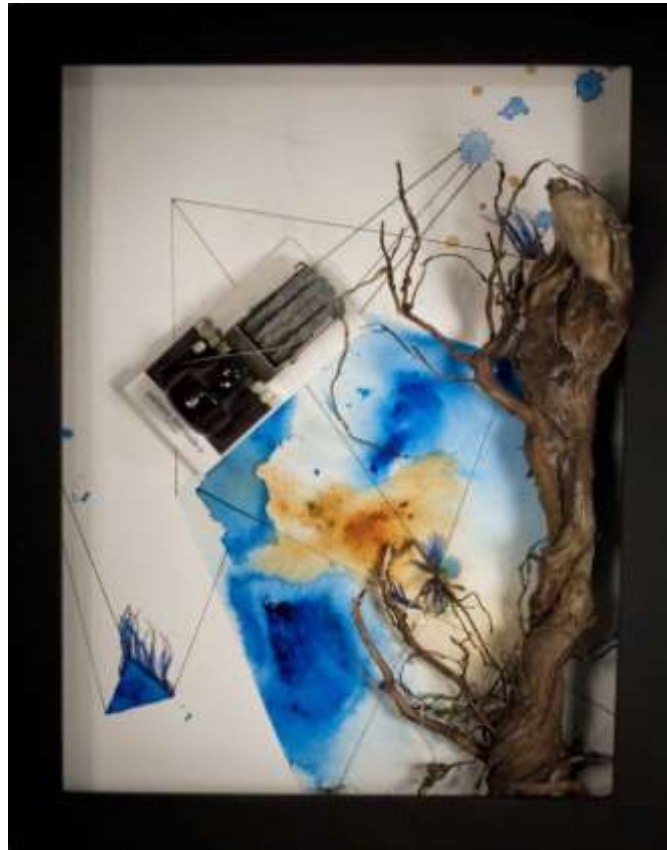


**Issue #13, July 2009**



from the series *Little Deaths, Little Breaths* (2009)

Medium: Moss, Nautilus shell, brass bell, spool of thread, magnifying glass, light bulb, electron tube, encyclopedia, sheet music, vials, image of bird.

by Sarah Walko

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## #13 Letter from the Editors

Dear readers,

For many of you, and for us, it's past the middle of summer and going faster every day. We hope you enjoy this issue, that pouring over it and our newly designed Archives page (we've been busy—PDF format for all 12 back issues!) will slow time a bit. These are words to be savored.

The theme this time, as always, is not predetermined, but also “as always” showcases the accidental coherence of all the pieces that rise to the top of the pile each reading period. We feel all the writing in #13 speaks to The American Dream. We'll let you decide for yourself where we/the writers are employing sarcasm!

First, we want to comment on **Sarah Walko's** stunning mixed media art, four pieces of which frame the sections of this issue with a hodge-podge, little-bit-of-everything feel...but contained, controlled by borders (which could stand for pages, state and country lines, laws, shortcomings, and any other margins evoked by the writing here). Again, savor. There is plenty to find in the squares of these images.

The poetry section opens with two strong, observant poems by **Doren Robbins**, both of which express a poignant sadness: in “Tamale Place,” the speaker laments before an image of the Virgin that “we shouldn't need, of all things, a virgin / for comfort, but a different life,” and in “The Gods of Hate Were Always Human,” another speaker asks “who wants to read about” these things? while enumerating methods of torture, only to conclude heavily: “More than I thought.” **Ellen Hagan** follows with rhythm and sound after beautiful sound in “If Names Were Prayers,” then **Charles Rafferty** offers his take on the state (physical land and present condition) of “Illinois.” **Lynne Potts** next gives us commerce, pollution, and judgment in “The Chikita Man,” and fortunately some lovely craft as well, and then **Marina Richards' "Singing Bird"** tells us less about birds than about adolescent boys. From one bird to the next, **Alana Sherman** follows with “Feathers” and a desire to reconstruct our pasts by reassembling our relics—if only. **Bridget Bell's** speaker is on a similar mission in “On Decorating,” and even **Brian Fanelli** is trying to capture what's been lost in “First Date, Last Date” (and yes, “fuck two-party politics, man.”). In **Brian Malnes' "The Gingerbread Condo,"** a little boy is dreaming of what could be (in uber-American capitalist/consumerist terms); perhaps he should read Fanelli, Sherman, Hagan, Robbins, before he becomes Richards' “Boy had a calling”? In this issue, it goes Malnes' boy to **Adam Pellegrini's** man in “Shopping at Target for a Pregnancy Test,” then to the more abstract predictions of **W. Luther Jett's "Imaginary Almanack."** In **Jessica Cuello's "Water Snake,"** a female speaker begins at a young age to distrust her own vision and memory, and **Jen Karetnick's "Zeal and Its Aftermath"** closes this issue's poetry section with another imaginative little boy and an “aftermath” that is no less likely to occur because we are merely predicting it.

This issue's Gray Area is comprised of a creative nonfiction piece by **Josh Indar** called “Door to Door.” A young boy's entrepreneurial spirit trumps his fear of

awkwardness and a beat-down from his apartment complex's female adolescent leader...well, for a little while, anyway. As Indar tells us, "a failing home business [is] the highest expression of the American Dream."

For fiction, we're offering up three pieces with three very different main characters. **Becky Eagleton** tells us a convincing and funny story about a neighbor who has an answer/fix for everything in "The Guy for That." **Anthony Vieira's** "Devil Got My Woman" is southern, dialectic, musical, and disturbing. Finally, **Cynthia McGroarty** closes the issue with "The Summer of Jacob Zook," a story about two teenagers with very different backgrounds who, in the course of meeting and beginning their unusual relationship, trade places being the one who wants to get out of their small town and see the world.

If you didn't realize The American Dream—old, new, false, or true—while reading #13, we hope you can at least admit that these writers have glimpsed their own versions of it. This issue is packed to the edges with delicious details—may you languish over them like the August sun on the nearest horizon.

Best,

The Editors

## #13 Poems



from the series *Little Deaths, Little Breaths* (2009)

Medium: Book sliver, moss, brass bell, sticks and stones, computer keys, sheet music, shells, encyclopedia, constellations, convex lens, rediscoveries.

by Sarah Walko

TAMALE PLACE

This white junky hanging over the table piled on his separate ash heap  
scratching his uneven pointed side burn bums a smoke from me  
when I pass and I lay my pack down—then that whining voice full of gratitude like  
it was a script in his head, he calls out to a guy walking in, the guy who must have  
his goods, "Aaaayyy Señ—yor Tor-taaa."

The Mayan Venus in front of me arranges her housekeeper's supplies.  
I'm waiting for my breakfast Tamale in the Toltec.  
The Saint Francis of restaurant flies blows on his plate,  
moving his tongue from one corner of his mouth to the other.  
He never lifts his hand, he watches the flies on his rice,  
a compassionate strain tilting his lips, both eyebrows raised.

I don't know what happened to Francis or his descendants,

I don't know why we never fully believed in the Saint of Tolerance,

I don't know what happened to us.

In line in the Toltec with immigrant masons that work for shit.  
A laborer wearing one stringy kneepad counted through his change.

Saint Roach stood on his back legs to examine the cherry peppers  
nesting with hard-boiled eggs.

You get used to the plastic carnations.  
You get used to the portrait of The Virgin smiling over crushed chili  
and fruit flies.

You get used to the gas and lard smell coming out of the kitchen.  
The descendants of Quatzecotl make the tamales,  
the Plumed Serpent himself ate nothing better.

And you can't deny it, even while the beatings go on at the border,  
even while the homely Beluga, the whales of cancer,

once known as "The Canaries of the Sea"  
wash up from their toxic ocean bath

on Saint Lawrence beach—you can't deny

the tamale-pleasure, because it's a lifetime

of picking up the version of the Blood Sacrifice you're born into,  
and the Blood Sacrifice Language you use to get it down.

In the lucky pile of signs I talk with to myself I work  
the same collective slang—a sort of pidgin Saint Francis,  
a little pig Latin line-cook Don Quixote, the straight-away

language of my Blood Sacrifice choice.

In The Toltec in line in the morning, as if it were the Virgin of Guadalupe  
I waited it out for all night. Lupe's the only one who could spice this meat.

I was safe in The Toltec, another lucky part of everything else  
not bombed and poisoned flat, not homeless, not starved into the ground  
at the end of that 2004 December. That's all.

I walked back with flour tortillas I couldn't finish—I served out of a bag  
what I saved to the man who sat there in the day, everyday, all day,

the man grinded down to that spot, it was his corner in the day,  
he was The Day-man, at his grass border, his fire hydrant, that spot,

his stylazine, prozac, demoral, zanax whatever it is  
he receives to finally conk out on. I could only bring

what I saved from what I couldn't eat anymore of.  
I could have just been tired of it. I couldn't even look

at what was under his nails.  
Handing the food over, I smiled "the goodwill smile."

In line, in The Toltec, I admired how the Virgin bends  
from her heart compliantly as though moving closer

from her calendar on the wall.

And we need her closer.  
As close as she can get.

But she's not coming down from anywhere.  
If you asked me about her gesture I would say you're asking about

a language that is irresistible, a language that often works in every way,  
because it's the language of the illusion of comfort,

of assurance—a language out of whack  
with the example of goodness,  
because we shouldn't need of all things a virgin  
for comfort, but a different life.

The Virgin of Guadalupe caught me  
in the eyes of the woman working the counter.  
She gave me “a look”

because I bickered with the guy beside me  
about who was next in line—

because I had forgotten how the strands of red peppers  
hang their sleeves, lapping the delicious garlic strands—

because their shaved heads bow  
over the 500 Mary's of needle tracks—

because the crucifixion for the meat of tamales—

because the Saint Francis of jalapeños and flies—

because the Jesus of corn meal and lard.

THE GODS OF HATE WERE ALWAYS HUMAN

But it's the gods of hate I'd like to figure out.  
The battery cable on the rectum—on the nipple—the cock head, the eye lid,  
the usual. They could give it a little—but they give it a lot.  
I'd like to say, "They don't know chemicals in the ammunition cause  
missing organs defected infant cartilage stumped limbs." I'd like to say,  
"The raping wasn't an easy plan." I'd like to figure them out.  
I'd like to figure out the pleasure of making money that way,  
the pleasure of authorizing the procedures. I won't.  
You know the Gypsy saying, "May crows bite off their balls."  
*May crows bite off their balls.* They won't.  
Our satiric culture critic estimates when the cattle-prod  
electro-shocking a demonstrator will be on the voting pamphlet's cover—  
but it already happened—without some of us noticing it happened—without  
actually needing to happen. Maybe permanently happened.  
I'd like to figure out the hate. The Gods of obedience  
were always stronger. Who wants to read about duct tape used for bandages  
on detainees untreated wounds, who wants to recount how the officer monotonous  
through a megaphone to a mostly unarmed village: "Surrender  
or commit suicide"?—More than I thought. You won't figure out the hate.  
What is left undestroyed?—even the bee hives are torched when they  
take out a village, the added measure for killing crops,  
common pathological knee-jerk continuity. The impulse, the plan  
not to torture, not to bomb, not to suicide bomb, not to poison farmland water,  
not to napalm, not to crucify, not to gang rape, not to shoot all the goats,  
not to mass grave, not to pogrom or not to pogrom—always had less power.  
More necrophiles than biophiles, more Mengalas than shmengalas.  
I'm not the only one who gets their victory.  
I shut down the torture pictures, I turn off the poem  
one of their scholars wrote to defend them.  
May a catheter enter his poem.

IF NAMES WERE PRAYERS

for my old/new students from PS 315, bronx, ny

shaheim hanley. daisy santos. carolina blanco. saleh fata. guadalupe grande. esteffany martinez. jamel allen. eliani santos. edgard bocio. dennis martinez. ali khan. angela cruz. and on. and on. hands. palms facing in. the bowing, the crossing. the fingers spread, the ashes. the chorus of song.

shaheim hanley. shaheim  
is the wind for sure. sh, a whisper. ah,  
the sound of a peeling fruit, mango, sha-  
heim, the hem of a dress, the mellow  
melt-down, lazing, lounging, an out-  
back name, shaheim, a slow hustle, a  
game of darts. sh, the sound of quiet,  
crisp air. sha, song. some reggaeton,  
shaheim, the long bus ride.  
home.

guadalupe grande. big. big. big. beach  
ball, the wide sun, a full, fat rainbow slurpie,  
guadalupe, the sound of grapes growing  
from earth. guadalupe like the rolling of  
marbles, marmalade, maravilloso, the new  
words i am rolling around. the tread of  
sneakers. grande, the world, a mix of letters  
that drop like avenue blocks under my feet.

ali khan. ali. a-li. ali khan. the distance, a  
wide measuring device. ali, the zoom of the  
number 4 train, frequent flier miles, wings, of  
planes, of birds. ali, the settling dust if it  
settles at all. khan, coffee beans, khan, thyme,  
smashed garlic. ali khan, elementary, the  
simple lay out, the un-complexity of language.

and there are more. names walking stride through my busy, busy mind. continue.  
and on, and on.

ILLINOIS

Our friend pointed out the Sears Tower,  
the Loop, the path by Lake Michigan  
where the pretty people jog. We were tourists  
for a day, drinking beers and eating  
whatever was local, wanting  
to know the place completely—  
or as best we could without paying taxes  
and oil bills. He said he knew  
a woman who got drunk and drowned  
in the lake after taking off her clothes.  
He said there was always a plane in the air  
above his home. He said he was mugged  
in front of his apartment in daylight,  
that he saw the kid a week later  
at a 7-Eleven. My friend just tried  
to be invisible. He could tell the kid was mean  
and beyond the laws he lived by.  
On the way back to the airport, caught  
in traffic, we stalled beside a highway median  
filled with prairie grasses. A plaque told us  
this is what Chicago was covered with  
150 years ago—that it was the best soil on the planet,  
that the city pushed out of it like a mushroom,  
damp with poison, damp with commerce.

THE CHIKITA MAN

yellow in the Chakita truck next to us is dying  
(I'm in a bus) of smoke hung in lungs yellow  
as bananas going from green to brown,  
in a tunnel of smoke exhumed from cement  
mixers, panel trucks, vans, taxis, flat beds, pick-ups;

bananas as yellow lungs painted (even laden)  
on the side of the truck just when the Times says  
Pulmonary Obstruction Disease (which I have)  
is chronic and prolific, caused, it turns out, by  
fumes and smoke, city air, and a bit of bad luck;

but the banana man could stop, stay awake another way—  
say chew gum or wonder how a bus will pass, some snit  
in a fly-by seat (me) judging another one's lungs; and is it  
right I ask you, that I, amidst the coughing vans and trucks  
with my uppity hands in my lap, do most of the fuming?

SINGING BIRD

A single stone shot killed the Singing Bird.  
Pop,  
and its feathers spiraled down,  
making a nest around the corpse  
beyond the corn fields,  
decorating pine tree,  
migrating to other towns.

Boy is all glee.  
No one would know who did in the  
Singing Bird.  
Daddy and Uncle Taft hunted,  
but not Singing Birds.  
Deer, fish, mallards, the usual.  
Boy said it.  
Told on Daddy and his brother's brother,  
Ned.  
Said they got permission from  
the government.

Boy didn't care.  
He saw the paper they gave.  
Scoffed.  
This made him smile.  
What was one Singing Bird?  
What was wrong with one killed when millions still sang?  
He kept his sling shot  
Boy figured he didn't need the piece of paper.  
Nine-years old.  
Who would care?  
Not Daddy.  
Feathers twirled, blood in small rain.  
Boy had a calling.

FEATHERS

for Doug

A cardinal flies into the window  
over and over again attracted  
by reflections of a pine more enticing  
than real branches and needles.  
The bird leaves blood and fluff  
on the pane. Everyday I find plumage  
I cannot identify: white and gray,  
yellow and black or downy shimmering  
brown and turquoise. Somewhere I heard the color  
is not in the quills  
but in the way light shines against them.  
So the bluebird's feather's cerulean—  
the starling's oil slick rainbow—  
all an illusion.  
I collect the feathers  
from the grass or the path. I can't ignore them.  
They are talismans I preserve  
as if someday when I have enough, I could,  
if only I could, put them together and a bird  
would take off into the trees.

ON DECORATING

This drywall has never been strong enough to reject burrowing nails.  
An evenly pounded pair to make a makeshift jewelry box,  
from metal alloys I'll hang my necklaces:  
silver-skinned reptile chains, compacted seaweed stones, a pair  
of frozen swans captured in a black pendant.  
I like it better backwards: necklaces flipped to  
laces for the neck. So many things sound prettier in reverse.  
Out fell the tiger's eye from its wire encasement,  
centerpiece of the necklace you made for me. I intend to fix it.  
Who needs pictures with so many jewels to drape around the walls?  
Surround myself with pretty things.  
Surround myself with pretty.  
Surround myself.

FIRST DATE, LAST DATE

Keep her with whiskey-stained breath,  
pink combat boots always untied,  
hair streaked green and blue,  
a frayed Crass patch pinned on her checkered skirt,  
her black and white zine, *Paper Dolls*,  
stapled together, tucked under her arm.

Keep him seated before her at Café Roach,  
proud in his black motorcycle jacket,  
nodding as he listens to her say,  
“Fuck two-party politics, man.  
With a few power chords and mike,  
we’ll launch a revolution we can dance to.”

Forget that she’ll go back to being blonde,  
wear stockings and heels that click clack to the office  
where she’ll sit and stare at a computer screen.  
He’ll still be there, hands cupped around cold coffee,  
staring out the window where he used to watch her  
puff a smoke and crush it under her boots.

THE GINGERBREAD CONDO

Once, in a TV dinner memory  
I slipped into my Lego cornered  
room. Past the dog-eared nursery  
rhymes and green army men tucked  
behind the pasted tongue depressors  
that were the high art of my youth.

I traveled under the bed, far beyond  
the plastic Hot Wheel tracks. Where  
Mister Potato Head, his one eye  
a gleam, cheerfully beckoned me  
to go deeper still.

So I crawl, a boy worm, my blankie  
in hand. Navigating the impossible  
dark beneath those springs. Through  
the dust bunny desert. Into a field  
of sea green shag, unfathomably  
deep. Lost in 80 square feet, of blue  
painted room that would make Aunt  
Bea weep.

It is here, in the dark, I see the future,  
my past, and all that I want. A fairy  
tale world of lights upon motion. Of  
teddy bear soldiers beating bright bass  
drums. With Pop Rock stars and giant  
Pez statues spitting out pastel blocks  
that make grand candy walls.

And at the center of my sight stands  
a gingerbread condo. A Tonka  
Hummer out front. Inside, Barbie,  
her hair in a bun, makes tasty  
treats in an Easy Bake Oven.

SHOPPING AT TARGET FOR A PREGNANCY TEST

I am a hug waiting  
to happen, says  
the baby's bib  
in pink from its row  
of duplicate  
potential hugs  
hung beneath  
assorted caps  
and tees all  
sharp in fluorescent  
light on pressboard  
reaching maybe  
eight feet toward  
the lofted support beams  
and sheet metal  
suspended over us  
so often without  
our noticing—

our heads rocked  
back to see  
those steel limbs  
and electric fingers,  
kinked guillotine  
teeth, which,  
by force of nature,  
want to dislocate  
and find the floor.

IMAGINARY ALMANACK

blue hippopotamus month:  
take stones to the river.  
cast them in.

abalone-shell month:  
rake the sand two times  
each day until it shines.

month of large, droning bees:  
gather small objects  
in a shallow grass bowl.

walking-about-with-hands-on-hips month:  
do not neglect  
to set out food for the ants.

old men dancing month:  
it is time to consider  
taking up a new discipline.

month of unexpected mudslides:  
some say this is the best month  
for weaving new cloth.

yellow-leaf month:  
take more stones to the river.  
leave them on the bank.

hurrying month:  
lie down beneath many blankets.  
remove them slowly one by one.

month when all the women sing:  
surely you have not forgotten  
to spread fruit on your roof?

red foxes with green eyes month:  
bury all your broken pottery  
under the full moon.

everything-thrown-into-disarray month:

settle all your accounts  
and write poetry.

amber necklace month:

be on guard against small breezes  
and those who keep their eyes hidden.

month that no-one can properly explain:

do you imagine you can find  
advice here for every situation you may encounter

WATER SNAKE

Before the day ended, the stars  
came out: white lisps  
in the sky. My brother lined his army

along the bank of grass;  
dug legs into the wet earth; buried  
torsos under rocks. I swam near, afraid

to touch the bottom. We called the dark  
spots near the rotting dock *The Leeches*.  
On a plastic float, I kept my legs

pulled up. In shallow water near his soldiers,  
I saw a long black snake. It moved  
silently, curved. I didn't shout,

never told the cousins or grown-ups in the house.  
Then I wondered if I'd seen it. Memory,  
black eel, ribbons through murky

waters before language: shapes  
without names: the gape of sounds.  
When I was two, my brother banged his head

on the floor each time a stranger  
came and our mother left us.  
He hates me for my witness.

ZEAL AND ITS AFTERMATH

for Taegan Charles

My best friend's son believes he can turn his eyes different colors by staring hard at various objects. "Watch me, Mama Z," he commands, fixing on a black menu cover at Sushi Siam, then raising his gaze to mine:

"Now look at my pimples." I straighten my lips into chopsticks, don't mention that his *pupils* were already as dark as the low-sodium soy sauce pooling in ramekins next to the glistening fish.

My son, instant convert, offers Taegan his belongings for trials: blue Transformer sneakers, his red Gameboy. "What happens when you stare at ice?" he asks. "They turn white," Taegan says. "And in the mirror?"

He is stumped. "Silver, I think." But he comes back from the bathroom disappointed: "They stayed the same. There were only the colors of my self." Then the clarity fades; he beams at his mom, and makes his eyes go blonde.



DOOR TO DOOR

Having just dropped out of a transcendental meditation group, my parents had decided to give nudity a try, so they were grasping at any opportunity to get me out of the apartment and get on with their hairy, white lifestyle. The problem was, I had some questions.

“Why do girls not have wieners? Where does the pee come out?”

For a free spirit, my mom was squeamish about biology, so she usually left the explanations up to Gary, my stepfather. But he had the opposite problem, launching into definitions that were so detailed and graphic, I always came away with even more horrifying queries.

“So, when a man gets burning pee crabs and puts his sperm into a baby, does the baby come out on fire?”

This question was hovering like a B-52 in our living room one afternoon when there came a knock at our apartment door. My mom jumped up to answer it, her skin peeling loudly off the couch.

“It’s my parents!” she squeaked, peering through the eyepiece in the door.

She grabbed for the nearest sarong and opened the door a tiny crack, allowing my grandparents to explain that they just happened to be in the neighborhood and decided to drop by and tell us about a great new idea they had. My folks, who usually avoided my grandparents like the plague, seemed strangely glad to see them just then. After a short, whispered conference, they decided we should all put on clothes and listen to their scheme.

My mom’s parents were teachers by trade, but in our home, they were notorious for being serial entrepreneurs. Instead of spending their summers on a cruise ship like normal old people, they filled their off-days running a series of unprofitable businesses. They sold soap, key chains, vitamins, flashlights, brass statuettes, novelty playing cards—anything as long as it was useless and tacky. They hawked their wares in sun-baked parking lots, from beneath a flapping, blue tarp attached with packing tape to the side of a rusty, old Winnebago. They never made any money, but even so, they insisted that running a failing home business was the highest expression of the American Dream, and my grandmother assured me it was a hell of a tax-write-off to boot.

But their bad taste and inability to pass up a bargain was always their downfall.

On their latest excursion to the cavernous depository of poorly-made crap known as the wholesale outlet, they had purchased an odd lot of vaguely psychedelic greeting cards, which they hoped to sell on the swap meet circuit. The problem was, the cards were hideous, even for the deranged aesthetic standards of the 1970s. For reasons known only to the manufacturer, the cards were illustrated with tortured fluorescent visions of holiday icons that looked like neon pinto beans, with round, shimmering eyes and squared-off, three-fingered hands. The Easter

cards featured a pink bunny-bean tossing eggs around in a meadow. The Christmas cards asserted, in a font reminiscent of the “POW”s and “KA-BLAM”s of Batman comics, that one should have a “HOLY NIGHT!”, a phrase supposedly bolstered by the accompanying illustration of a gaggle of bearded beans cavorting in a manger. My grandparents couldn’t sell the cards for a nickel a piece at the swap meet, but being products of the Great Depression, they couldn’t bring themselves to throw them away either. So their plan was to front me the items so I could sell them door-to-door. That way, they’d recoup their investment and start me on a path towards economic self-determination.

“You can make a lot of money with these, Josh!” my grandfather told me. “You’ve got the cute, you might as well use it!”

Maybe they rationalized that I would learn a lesson in the value of a hard-earned buck, but deep down I think they also realized what third-rate capitalists they were, and decided to test me early for the money gene in hopes that I could someday, somehow, prop up the family upon their retirement. They certainly couldn’t look towards my parents for that purpose, as my mom and Gary changed their career plans almost nightly, flitting from acting to computers to art to geology, each time just barely avoiding having to work in any of those fields.

So I agreed to join my grandparents in the resale business, and at first, it seemed like I might redeem the family name with my pluck and gumption. I spent hours in preparation, organizing the cards, sorting them by holiday and arranging them carefully into my blue, Pan-Am shoulder bag. My grandparents threw into the deal some candles from their own collection—heavy, textured glass cylinders that bulged in my bag, nearly popping the threads from their seams. To diversify my line, I tossed in some of the liquid soap my grandparents had sold us years ago. These came in small, unlabeled bottles of bluish-green goo that smelled vaguely like pine and rubber, and nobody in our home (or anyone else’s as far as I knew) had ever found a use for them.

With my inventory accounted for, I set to work on making myself presentable. My wardrobe was standard for Southern California kids in the late ‘70s, consisting almost entirely of corduroy shorts and Hang-Ten T-shirts, the kind with the little footprint embroidered on the chest. That outfit may have been classy enough for most kids, but I was more ambitious than that. I wanted to dominate the local soap, candle and card market. I imagined every other kid in the neighborhood out knocking on doors with a shoulder bag full of merchandise, and I knew if I was going to beat the other guy to the sale, I was going to have to stand out. But in rummaging through my dresser drawers, I was confronted with my first obstacle as a small business owner. I didn’t look like a kid you’d want to buy anything from.

It could have been that my idea of how a salesman should appear was somewhat warped. After all, my parents’ idea of dressing for success was sandals and a hat. The only salesman I could think to emulate was a guy named Herb Tarlick, whom I’d seen on TV selling ads for a struggling radio station called WKRP, in a fictional city called Cincinnati. Herb was a flashy dresser, whose usual outfit

consisted of green action slacks, a plaid blazer and a pair of white patent leather shoes.

My problem was, everything I tried on seemed to match. No combination of shorts and a Hang-Ten shirt could command the awestruck attention of a Tarlick ensemble. The man had style! Somehow, I understood that anyone confident enough to leave the house in such clownish apparel had exactly the kind of fortitude it takes to move product. I briefly thought I could make do if only I had Herb's white belt and shoes, and I was thinking of asking my mom and stepdad if they would buy me those items when they bounced naked past my bedroom door. They locked themselves in their room, and as soon as I heard the first chords of Fleetwood Mac's *Rumours* album come blasting through the wall from my stepdad's stereo, I knew I was on my own.

So I abandoned the plebian fare of my dresser and began searching through my closet. Hanging from the wooden rod was a pair of authentic German lederhosen, which my parents had had a lot of fun dressing me up in. I once wore them to a weird art party they took me to, where I was subjected to a lot of post-modernist jokes I didn't understand. On a whim, I took down the lederhosen, untangled them from their hangar and forced my chubby legs into the smooth, leather shorts. I struggled to loosen the shoulder straps, forcing the buckle-poker into its stiff, leather hole.

Either I had grown or the lederhosen had shrunk, because even with the straps let all the way out, I could barely get them around my shoulders, and when I did, the shorts rode painfully up into my crotch, creating a leather wedgie that made me walk like a playing card. If I'd known then that I would one day become a writer, I would have worn the lederhosen no matter what, because the image of me trying to sell gift items to my neighbors with suede-chafed thighs and squashed little boy balls would have really taken this story to new heights.

Alas, I could not see that far into the future, so I settled on a tan, nylon suit my grandparents had bought me for the rare occasions when they would bribe me with donuts in exchange for attending church with them. I wetted my head under the bathroom faucet and combed my apple-shaped hair. Then I shouldered my merchandise and stepped outside. The fading voice of Stevie Nicks cheered me on from our apartment, urging me to go my own way as I closed the door and set off down the stairs, feeling conspicuous and suddenly a little bit afraid.

It wasn't the selling that made me nervous, as I had always been the kind of annoying kid who could strike up a conversation with anybody. Often, after assaulting some unknown adult with random facts and unanswerable questions, said stranger would begin looking around for whoever was supposed to be in charge of me with a look that could only mean, "Who is this creepy kid and why won't he leave me alone?"

Now, that same creepy kid was armed with a heavy bag of sundries, which gave me free license to besiege a captive audience. I had no problem knocking on doors and wasting my neighbors' time. After all, the people I would be bothering

were adults, and adults, to me, seemed mostly harmless. But I was deathly afraid of the other kids in our apartment building, and for good reason. Having been tried and convicted of being an unabashed weirdo, I had been placed on the enemies list of the local kid mafia, an organization run by a 12-year-old girl named Keesha. She was a gaunt, merciless beauty in her long, striped tube socks and purple satin shorts, and she ruled the entire block from her headquarters at the swingsets.

Usually before I went to play, I took the precaution of peeking out my bedroom window to see if Keesha was there, holding court with her minions. She and her gang had caught me the week before, as I was rolling around the concrete play area on my new Sure-Grip roller skates. I hadn't seen her approach, so she took the opportunity to latch the chain-link gate and post a guard there. Then, she directed a couple of the faster kids to chase me around, while the others waited in strategic places so they could assault me as I skated by. They kept me rolling around in circles for what seemed like hours, gliding through a gauntlet of tiny fists and badly thrown Now and Laters, until one of Keesha's lieutenants defected and let me go.

I wasn't hurt, but the incident left me paranoid, so when I reached the bottom of the stairs I scanned the parking lot, tilting my head to listen for Keesha's horsey laugh. When I was satisfied that none of her spies were lurking around, I tugged on the strap of my bag and embarked into the wide world of sales, feeling extremely grown-up but looking like a Khaki knock-off of Hervez Villachez.

The first door I knocked on was opened by a fat man in gray shorts and a San Diego Padres T-Shirt, which clashed with his San Diego Chargers beer cozy. He looked over the top of my head at first, then looked down, expressing what looked like a mixture of surprise and disgust.

"Yeah?" he barked.

Nobody had told me that it might be a good idea to have a spiel prepared, so I was forced to improvise a quick pitch.

"Hi, yeah. I'm going around, all over the place, in the apartments, and I'm trying to sell these cards I've got in my bag, and, um, yeah... I have these cards that you could buy, or some soap or candles or something, so do you want to see them they're like fifty cents or you could pay a dollar if you want."

He screwed up his face and shook his head. "No, no. Don't want any."

The door closed and I stood there in disbelief. What was wrong with this man? Couldn't he see how cute I was? I reached up and pushed the doorbell again, and again he opened the door, looked over the top of my head, then looked down with the same discouraging expression.

"What do you want?"

I opened my bag, pulled out a greeting card (three beans holding hands beneath the sun-parted clouds), and thrust it at him, saying, "These are some great cards, you should buy one. Fifty cents!"

I saw his fingers tighten around the beer cozy. The can inside made a soft crumpling sound.

“I’m trying to watch the game!”

He closed the door again, harder this time, and again I stood there dumbfounded.

“You’re a crazy man!” I yelled at his door, an action that immediately caused panic to rise in my stomach, and I ran off towards another block of apartments, still clutching the now-wrinkled card.

As I lugged my merchandise from door to door, I quickly learned that there were certain types of people I could expect a sale from. I began to categorize potential customers, narrowing them into a target demographic of old, lonely ladies and newly married women, the two groups most likely to respond to my breathless soliloquies regarding the merits of bean-art stationery.

“You could send them anywhere in the world, to anybody in the world and they would get them and think that is so cool! They would probably want to send you one back so if you bought two cards you could send them that one and then they would have one to send back and they wouldn’t even have to buy it because you bought it for them!”

But even that brilliant oration didn’t work on every old lady. A few of them invited me inside for a snack, which at first seemed to indicate that we would be negotiating a rather large sale. In reality, though, an offer of cookies usually just meant they wanted to hold me captive on a plastic couch while they mumbled out croaky tales of dead husbands and life during some unspecified war.

“You remind me of my grandson,” was a common refrain, as was, “Do your parents know where you are?”

They didn’t, but I was too crafty to admit it. At this point, I was being driven by something beyond simple greed. Owing to my parents’ cruel policy of withholding sugar from me, I was desperate for cookies and candy. So I would sit on these ladies’ floral-patterned furniture and stuff my cheeks with treats until my host got up to look for another photo album, at which point I would grab my bag and run for the exit, shouting, “Gotta go, bye!”

On the doorstep of one such woman, I made a horrifying discovery. I had just finished telling her about my line of exceptionally illustrated Christmas cards, when she said something so bizarre it seemed to actually burn in my ears.

“That’s nice dear,” she said, “but we don’t celebrate Christmas.”

“Don’t celebrate Christmas? What’s wrong with you?”

“No, there’s nothing the matter...”

“Because everyone celebrates Christmas!”

“No, dear. We’re Jewish. We don’t celebrate Christmas.”

Now, I had heard of Jewish people, and I had a vague recollection that I’d even met one or two, but I had no idea they were so strange and backward in their holiday customs. They looked just like everyone else. The woman peered over her glasses.

“Well, that’s OK,” I said, “because I also have Easter cards and they’re only fifty cents too, or you could pay a dollar if you want.”

“I’m sorry but we don’t celebrate Easter, either.”

“You don’t have Easter? Why not?”

“We’re Jewish. We don’t believe in Jesus.”

“Jesus? What’s he got to do with anything?”

For years, people had been telling me about this Jesus guy, always in the context that he was better than me somehow. “He walked on water,” “He touched a leopard,” “He brought a bunch of fish to a party.” Jesus, Jesus, Jesus. If it wasn’t for Jesus, I thought, I’d have sold this lady six cards by now.

My feet were starting to hurt, and my shoulder was already sore from the bag strap. I’d walked almost from one end of the apartment complex to the other, and all I had to show for it were three quarters and a sticky pocket full of ancient butterscotch candies I’d swiped from some old lady’s candy dish. I began to blubber:

“If you don’t have Christmas and you don’t have Easter then how do you have anything at all—I’ve got all these cards and they didn’t give me any Jewish ones they’re all for regular people and I’m trying to get enough money for food because we’re so poor my parents don’t even have any clothes...”

“All right, all right.” The woman muttered. She disappeared into the apartment while I shuffled furiously through my stack of cards. When she came back, she placed two quarters in my palm and took the first card I offered. She squinted at it while I wiped my eyes.

“What is this card for?”

She showed it to me. It featured a hot pink bean astride an orange horse, and the bean was swinging a lasso over its head. The inscription read, “HOW-DO!”

I shrugged my shoulders. “I don’t know. Guess that’s up to you,” and trotted off before she could change her mind.

It had been a long day. There were still plenty of doors I hadn’t tried yet, but I felt satisfied with my take, so I decided to work my way back home, only stopping at apartments that seemed to be in need of greeting cards. I kept on the lookout for telltale signs of my core customers—a wooden cross tacked to the door, a diorama of moth-eaten dolls in the windowsill—anything that shouted to the outside world, “I am old and forsaken! Sell me something I don’t need!”

So when I came across a door decorated with a hand-knit tapestry of a lime-green owl with wooden marbles for eyes, I decided I would try for just one more sale before I called it a day. I rang the bell and the door was opened by a large, black woman. She was drying a glass with a dish towel, and instead of asking me what I wanted, she uttered a dismissive “Hmph” and turned on her heel, yelling, “Keesha! One of your little friends is here. I told you I don’t want no bunch of kids in my house. This ain’t no Boys & Girls Club.”

I realized in a flash that I had stumbled into the lion’s den, and this realization shocked me into a state of paralysis. Keesha appeared at the door sporting a red Kool-aid mustache. When she saw me, her lips parted in a feral sneer, and she stared down at me with what all the kids knew were her patented “Crazy Eyes.”

“What are you doing here?” she demanded.

“I’m here for your mom,” I stuttered, realizing that the phrase had come out wrong, yet not knowing exactly why.

“My mom?! What do you want with my mom?”

Keesha’s mom appeared behind her. “Now what’s all this? Keesha, what did you do?”

“I don’t even know this boy, momma!” Keesha protested, sending me a glance that transmitted perfectly a vision of the severe beating I would receive should I say anything about the roller rink of death she had subjected me to.

“I have, um... I’m selling stuff.” I managed to blurt.

“What stuff?” Keesha’s mom was more suspicious than interested, but I saw an opportunity to make her shut the door in my face.

“I’ve got cards for Christmas and Easter, unless you’re Jewish—I’ve got horse cards for that,” I rambled, grabbing a stack of cards and thrusting them toward her. “And I’ve got soap and candles and um, some butterscotch candies...” I tore through my bag and pockets, handing her anything that wasn’t money. I didn’t think about making a sale—I just wanted to leave—but the more I talked, the more receptive Keesha’s mom became. She started to smile and thumbed through the cards, handing the candles and soap over to Keesha.

“I like these. This one’s nice,” the woman said. Keesha’s Crazy Eyes had gone indignant. Reduced to a candleholder, she scowled at her mom, then at me, then back at her mom again. The woman kept showing her the cards, pushing them into her face. Keesha swatted at them like they were flies.

“Look at this boy out trying to make himself a dollar. Keesha, you could learn something from this boy. Look at him all dressed up so cute. Baby, go get momma’s purse.”

Keesha pushed the candles and soap at me and went into the apartment, coming back with a red, leather wallet bursting with coupons and photographs. The woman fished out a bill and presented it to me, then jerked it back to her bosom before I could grab it.

“Give me three cards for a dollar?”

I nodded my head. The woman thanked me and tussled my hair before turning back into her apartment. As soon as her mom was inside, Keesha grabbed me by the suit and pulled me up onto the threshold with her.

“You are dead,” she whispered, before shoving me away and slamming the door. I started running on the momentum of her push and didn’t stop until I was climbing my own stairs on the other side of the complex, panting and red, a salty trickle of snot extruding from my nose.

When I got inside, I saw my stepdad naked on the couch, watching *Streets of San Francisco*. My mom was banging pots and pans around in the kitchen.

“Hey, where have you been?” Gary asked.

“Selling stuff.”

“Oh yeah, how’d you do?”

“Pretty great. Did you know Jewish people don’t have Christmas?”

## #13 Fiction



*There are nine-and-sixty ways of constructing layers  
and every single one of them is right (2008)*

Medium: Ingredients.

by Sarah Walko

THE GUY FOR THAT

On Christmas Eve, Edgar stood outside his neighbor's house. He often stood there, on Christine's flagstone patio, armed with a box or carton or package. Yesterday, he brought five pounds of peppered bacon. The day before, a case of generic allergy tablets. Though Christine had moved in three years ago, she'd not yet invited him inside. But Edgar, too, in his latest epic poem, could not pen any verse that would lead his hero through her door, though he was armed to the teeth and chasing a dragon.

Edgar was a bulk man. He bought in mass. On any given day, there was a case of yellow mustard in his pantry. When he decided to experiment with brining, he mail-ordered fifty pounds of black olives. The day after the ice storm, he bought two chainsaws, a case of oil and cut down three of his trees, whether they were damaged or not. When he needed new underwear, he ordered twenty boxes of white briefs off the Internet.

Edgar hired in bulk as well. He had a yard guy, a wood guy, a welder guy, a steaks guy, a haul-off guy and a haul-in guy. He had a computer guy, a furniture guy, a tax guy, a car guy and a trailer guy.

He even had good health in bulk. Twenty years without a dental check-up had yielded no cavities. Seven nights a week of red meat dinners left him with a below-average cholesterol count. His bowel movements were frequent and plentiful. He had a full head of black hair, and age had added only more to his nose, ears and back. After fifty years, his fingers were still nimble and could play any one of his eight guitars or his mandolin, banjo, or three keyboards. But music was only a hobby, along with fishing, train sets, sausage making, triathlons, coin collecting, taxidermy, roses and writing epic poetry.

Christine stood on a ladder, stringing lights in the young dogwood next to her kitchen window.

"I got a pole for that," Edgar said. He was eating pistachios which he pulled by the handful from his coat pocket. "I'll get it."

"Got it!" Christine said quickly. "And three more just like it in the garage. You sure you won't take them back?"

"You might need 'em."

Christine climbed down the ladder, folded it and leaned it against the side of the house. The ladder looked rickety, and Edgar was glad she was down safely. He decided Christine's thin form and fragility were a lot like the ladder's, though hers did not seem the result of cheap manufacturing or too much rain. More like neglect, he thought, and his eyes scanned the bricks, the roof line, the drooping gutter over her bedroom window. He pointed at the metal's dip that spilled leaves and twigs.

"I got a gutter guy," he said. "I'll get his number."

Edgar hurried across their adjoining yards to his house. The exterior was like all the other small, brick structures on the street, but the interior was a Southwestern landscape, a maze of canyons, where the walls were not rock, but boxes and packages and sacks and crates and stacked pallets and bags. Edgar expertly negotiated a path that led to a large wood-working saw. Beyond that was a foldable card table that held a rock tumbler, and under the table was a plastic bin with a sticky note: "feathers." Across the table, sat a refrigerator and a sink, between them, a drum set. Behind the set was a cardboard filing drawer from which Edgar grabbed a business card for his guttering man. On his way out, he deftly snagged a case of jars from under the sink.

He ran back across the yards, hoping not to be too late. Christine was still there, kicking pistachio shells under her juniper bushes. She hugged herself and stared at the setting sun. She might be cold. He had a coyote fur from a botched taxidermy sitting right inside his front door. But maybe it was too big for her. There was that box of beaver furs in the hall he was sending off to get stitched together....

Christine faced him, her arched eyebrows pulling together as she stared at the case of jars he thrust out.

"Cheese Whizzo," he said. "Got another case in the house. Keep 'em."

Christine did not take the box. "How about just one jar?"

"Perry might need 'em. Melt some on a cracker in the microwave," he said. "Or just eat it straight up. Kids like the stuff."

Perry was Christine's fourteen year old son. Her mouth drooped when Edgar mentioned him.

"He's spending the holidays with his Dad," she said and turned a fierce glare to the orange and yellow horizon.

Edgar nodded. He knew that. Yesterday, from between the sawhorses in his bedroom where he was planing down the swollen edge of a closet door, he'd watched the boy trudge out to the idling Mercedes with a duffle bag. The driver drummed the steering wheel with gloved fingers as Christine hugged Perry's unyielding body. Taking off his safety goggles, Edgar had stared at Christine standing and waving in the street, like a tattered banner in the wind, long after the car had disappeared around the curve.

Christine was still now, and Edgar put the case of Cheese Whizzo at her feet and then held out the business card he'd promised.

"My gutter guy. Fix you right up."

She took it wordlessly. He pulled an orange from his pocket this time.

"Got a guy mails me these from Florida every Christmas."

Christine looked at the orange.

"It's a navel. No seeds," he said. "Keep it."

Christine sighed and with her other hand took the orange, slid it and the card in her coat. She had not yet moved to go back inside, and Edgar felt a little giddy and knew he needed to offer her *something* more.

"You gotta Christmas tree?"

“Not this year.”

Edgar was relieved. “Got an extra. Artificial. Comes with the lights on it already.” He turned, picturing the tree in the storage of his stairwell.

“I don’t want the tree.”

“Gotta have a tree. It’s just under the stairs,” he called over his shoulder, “in easy reach.” Once inside, Edgar marched through columns of stacked crates towards the stairwell’s low storage door. The tree was in a black plastic bag, towards the back. He wrestled it out and lugged it to the front door, and across the yards, breathing hard. He’d toppled a pile of potting soil bags on the way out, but could restack it later.

Christine’s small body was still visible, huddled against the deepening afternoon, and Edgar felt a growing excitement. She’d never waited twice for him before. The tree was the right thing.

“I don’t want the tree,” she said.

“I got it right here,” he said and patted the sack slung over his shoulder. Edgar was undaunted. She had waited for the tree.

Christine straightened. “I will *not* take the tree.”

He’d heard that tone only once before from Christine, when she and Perry were struggling with their lawnmower, last summer. Edgar had itched to go to them as they turned the mower on its side and examined it. The boy had thrown up his arms and stomped to the street, kicked the curb. Christine had fiddled with the undercarriage, the starter cable, the sparkplug, all the while talking to the boy, reaching for him. Edgar could stand it no longer, had grabbed a toolbox and charged across the yards. She’d noticed him at the last second, had whipped her head around where she crouched at the base of the mower.

“I’ve got something for that,” Edgar’d said, unloading his tools in a neat line on the grass.

The boy, Perry, had walked past them in slouching strides.

“Just call Dad,” he threw over his shoulder before storming into the house.

Christine had watched her son leave, and then turned a stony face to Edgar.

“No thank you,” she’d said.

Edgar bent down and began repacking his tools. “I gotta guy can fix that right up. I’ll get his number,” he’d said.

“I don’t want the number.” Christine had straightened, her arms dangling and empty-handed.

Like the tools and his mower guy last summer, the artificial tree was *not* the right thing.

Edgar lowered the sack and let it rest against the case of Cheese Whizzo on the flagstone patio.

“You like praline ice cream? Got a couple of gallons in the garage freezer.”

Christine pulled her brown hair back in a single fluid motion and fastened it with a band she took from her wrist. The action was a beautiful economy of movement, and Edgar was impressed. A narrow shock of white hair streaked back

from her right temple like a contrail. She crossed her arms again, nodded at the bagged tree.

“What do you *not* have?” she asked lightly and pushed at the sack with her toe.

Edgar ducked his head and smiled. For the first time, with him, Christine had made a joke. He knew it was a joke for he had everything, didn't he?

Christine stepped backwards, towards the house, and Edgar panicked. She rubbed her hands quickly together and blew on them in short bursts, her breath coming in little streaming mists that smelled of sugar. Edgar's chest tightened, for he sensed that this was the right time to bring the roses. Because she had waited, *twice*, because she'd made a joke, because the rakes and the doorknobs and the pecans and the *Reader's Digest* collection and everything else that had traveled in his arms for three years across their yards had not been the right things.

“You like roses,” he said matter-of-factly.

Her eyes widened and she placed her palms on her red cheeks. “Yes,” she said softly. “I do.”

Edgar sprinted across their yards and through his door, through the cargo piled against the walls, along the floor, stacked like crooked pillars throughout, some piles even reaching the ceiling, towards the sweet scent of roses in his back room and the thirty-six, five-gallon tubs of potted roses that stood in a rough semi-circle around a low stool. Claspng a pair of pruning shears that lay on a stalagmite of packaged cake mixes, Edgar sat and frantically began cutting stems.

Rose blooms of pink, salmon, crimson, peach, lemon, ivory, and magenta, some drooping, others straining upward, filled the clearing and draped across Edgar's stooped back as he clipped blossom after blossom.

He knew Christine liked roses because she smelled of them. Often, when he handed her something after carrying it to her house, the scent would waft out from her neck or hands or when she turned to close the door behind her. He'd started raising the roses three years ago. Kept them on the back porch most of the year but moved them in every winter where he'd force blooms year round.

He panted, shallow fearful breaths.

The room was getting dark, and Edgar donned a head-band with an attached flashlight to continue his work. Moonlight played through a large picture window and threw the spiky rose stems in silhouette. Edgar could see Perry's bedroom window and the reading light that burned brightly from where it was clamped to the boy's bunk-bed. A single beacon that Christine'd left on, Edgar realized. The rest of her house was dark. He'd decided against turning on his own lights because Christine liked the dark. Her house often seemed to sit in a shadow, the same gloom that sometimes hovered over her soft features. The boy, now *his* bedroom light would burn long into the night, but the glow from Christine's front bedroom was usually out by nine.

Edgar had worried she didn't have enough light bulbs and had delivered a carton to her house the week after she'd moved in. He remembered the curious

stare she'd given him. Her bedroom and the whole front of the house still went dark at nine.

He'd bought the roses the day after that.

Edgar finished his stem-cutting and then hesitated only briefly before also beginning the task of snipping off the thorns. His heart pounded, but she had waited twice and he had hope. Quickly scooping up the mass of blooms, he clutched them to his chest, and leaping over a capsized tub of tambourines, he lurched from the house. When he saw Christine's petite form leaning against her house, he slowed and crushed the blooms to his chest to stave off a sudden bout of dizziness.

Still catching his breath, he stood before her. Her face was awash in the blueness of the moonlight. She squinted at something behind him, and he turned, could barely make out the trail of roses across their yards. He still had plenty in his arms, and held them out to her. She covered her mouth, and above her hand, her eyes watered.

"I got something for that," he said and balanced the load of blossoms in one arm to retrieve the handkerchief from his back pocket.

Keeping one hand over her mouth, she gingerly took the white linen and balled it in her fist.

"Why so many?" she whispered.

"You might need 'em."

She dabbed at her eyes and shook her head slowly.

"But there's only one of me."

Her voice was like a puff of spring dandelion, wisping by him, and he wanted to reach out and cup it in his hand. But his arms were full.

She had waited and was still waiting, but the mass of roses was not the right thing, as he had feared, in his worst moments, tending the pots in his backroom. Edgar slowly placed the bundle of roses on top of the case of Cheese Whizzo. His mind ransacked his house and all its contents, searching futilely. Roses for Christine had been his savings, his fallback, his nest egg in case of dire need.

The wind whipped through the trees and whisked seed pods through the air, stirred the leaves into a whirling, snapping circle on her lawn.

Christine sank deeper in her coat, and Edgar knew he was running out of something and it seemed to him that it was time, minutes and seconds rushing past him carried on the points of sycamore leaves. He imagined standing in their formless wake with a large net or tub or crate and diving for them, trying to trap them. But now Christine was turning towards her door, pistachio shells and wind-tossed rose stems about her feet, errant petals in her hair.

He couldn't leave and followed her right up to the storm door. She looked at him over her shoulder. His empty hands trembled in his pockets. Her face softened, and her lips parted slightly. Edgar felt suddenly suspended in the winter air and realized he'd never been so close to her before.

“You have something?” she asked and smiled slightly, just a minute tug at the corners of her mouth, but he noticed it, as small and singular as it was. He recognized how complete her face was, how one extra pore or eyelash might mar the perfection of her features.

“You don’t need anything,” he whispered.

Edgar held his breath, for it seemed to him that the yards and the street and his ponderous house, stuffed like a gorged snake, slithered away behind him and left him weightless and naked at the vessel of Christine’s sparkling face.

She turned to him, held the storm door open with one hand and brushed her fingertips against his arm. He floated in a stillness, in a bubble devoid of everything save hope and himself.

“I have you,” she said quietly and moved aside.

Edgar stepped across the doorsill.

DEVIL GOT MY WOMAN

Skip sold his guitar in Vicksburg and was nine days on the road when the storm hit. He'd had steady work playing with Will Crabtree, but then things went bad with Annabelle Davis, and he just couldn't stick around anymore. She hung around Will, but he was a pimp and pianist, a great and lunatic hulk of a whiskey'd up con man. He never knew if she was a whore or just some lonely sweetmeat who knew she was getting hustled. She had that creamy cocoa skin he knew his Da' had loved, and Skip guessed it just moved into his blood and bones. Skip's family had always been dark, "Purple bruises in the night, boy," as his Granny Yula had liked to say. His Momma was light-skinned and stupid and too sweet to live. Been dead for almost seven years, since 1917, when he was fifteen years old.

That was in Bentonia, and he didn't want to go back but figured he probably would. He'd dropped out of school, already good on the guitar, started to take up the piano. He'd worked on road crews, in lumberyards and sawmills, all around Ruleville, Mississippi, up and down the Yazoo River.

He walked the levee now, thinking about old ladies digging their heels into the church stairs, wondered if he'd see his father again, they hadn't talked since the old fool found God and a widow in Arkansas. It was all horsehair rugs and sawdust and shy white girls there. Here it's all rain and the thick, cloying humidity. Someone named Rossman threw a table at him at some bar in Jackson, and goddam if he didn't want one last hot little kiss from Annabelle. She don't kiss long, but nips you in fierce little bites, maybe trying a piece of your soul. Maybe 'cuz it burns her. That's what souls do.

He hadn't seen the sun yet today, but it was out yesterday. Highway 61 curves away from the river somewhere around Signal, and that's where he'd been headed, but Skip decided to stick with the river. Felt good to watch the black mud slowly devour Mississippi, after all, and eventually the buzz of a thousand things in the darkness gets to be something you can't imagine having lived without. He missed his fuckin guitar so he sang louder, calling it to just echo with his need, and be out there waiting for him, Anna-girl too, but to *Hell* with that crazy little whore. Didn't matter. It was always Anna and Bentonia and Yazoo City. Mona Lee and Roberta, white lightening in black jars and Mary-Beth. Thunder in Katie Mae's backyard, running half-naked and blacker than the Texas night. Stormed like it is now. He walked away from the road and starting howling, the same piercing falsetto that send pangs through every girlish eye he found.

*"If I sent for my baby, and she don't come...I sent for my baby, and she don't come, get my 22-20, shoot her dead and run!"*

Sometimes the nights roared back, and then there were days like this one, and Skip was wondering which he wanted forever, maybe, or at least until he got to Signal. His chest suddenly tightened and he couldn't find a breath. Scared shitless,

frozen in terror—and then it passed. He looked around, stopped singing, and saw the fishing shanty.

"Glory be," he said to himself, and lurched along a thickening path of mud and tree branches, the wind whipping up the Delta swampland up around him. He walked around to the doorway facing the river and walked inside and saw Annabelle, bent against the wall and fucked by Will, by his father, by a tall white man with no eyes. She laughed and grunted and writhed and shouted Skip's own name just once, delirious, eyes squeezed shut and he yowled like the kittens his Uncle Walter had crushed to death under his boot heel, just because he had too many hanging around his tobacco shop.

He went sprawling in the mud, instantly filthy. Chiggers jumped into his shirt, his jacket was layered in the nastiest shit a swamp has to offer, and he'd just seen—well, what? And someone was laughing at him.

An old man sat with his back against an ancient eucalyptus and holding a long, hard-carved fishing pole. The pole was taut and quivered in the rain, the line vanishing into the silver water. You couldn't really tell where the sky ended.

"Fancy Moses, son! You filthier than your Papa after twelve days in Baton Rouge!" he yelled to him, and then sprang for the pole as a monster snag bent it nearly double. "Ye Gods, Nehemiah! Look at that!"

Skip stared at him, then looked at himself, on his back in the mud, so he stood up and stretched, tried not to crack his knuckles (they'd been aching for hours, though not as bad as some nights back in Vicksburg, yeah?), and walked to his side, watched him struggled with the pole.

"What was that you called me?"

The man ignored him. "Lookit! Aw, hell yeah! Ride it like a Chinese dragon!"

"Hey! Put that thing down! Look at me!"

"That's your name, and you know it! Now help me!"

The old man thrust his pole at Skip and jumped back.

"Whoa! Hey, no, here!"

"You gotta get him in here, boy! Go for it!"

"No, now take your pole, you old bastard!"

"Bring 'er in, Skip!" the old sonuvabitch shouted, and clapped him on the back. Skip lost his footing and let go. The pole was swept along by the current, into that endless, roiling black and blue sky. The old man bellowed laughter, slapped his thighs, and marched back through the mess of a levee into what Skip figured had to be his shanty.

"Hey! Ah, shit!" He almost slipped and didn't want this last suit any dirtier, so he followed, shouting. "Hey! Who are ya! What you doing out here, and how the fuck you know me? Eh? Old-timer!"

But the old man would just laugh and shake his head, his long, white coils of hair shaking around. He stroked his beard and vanished into the shack. Skip stood outside and let the rain soak in his skin. He wiped his jacket and pants down but it

was gritty and had a fine brown layer over the dark blue wool. Old men, Skip thought, old men and another old mothafuck, as Will Crabtree liked to growl.

"Ah, Christ-Jesus," he whispered, and went inside.

"Well, well. Nehemiah James. How come you out here all dirty and rained on, out at the edge of the Delta? Come now, speak on it and sit a spell."

He was sitting on the floor, his legs drawn up to his chest, his eyes glittering in the shadows. There was nothing in here, certainly not his old lady, or ex-old fuckin whored up little lady, yeah? *So why ain't you movin', son?* That was his old man. He buried that voice, growled it down.

"Who are you?"

"Me? Just another sucker on the vine. A pan-fried peckerwood, as a friend of mine used to say, but he's no longer my friend, so does it matter?"

"What? I don't know what that is, but—"

"Backwoods cracker, like my old and blistered pappy. Or was that you? Oh, but didn't they like to call you 'Nig the Chig' back there in Bentonia? And Will heard it, and that skinny nigger from Jackson, Bo Carter? Henry Stuckey, too? You know he thought he saw you once in Sidon, crawling up the gutter, looking old and feral. Taking the Keith Richards route so early, Nehemiah? Damn shame."

Skip was stunned. He tried to scream, but he could only squeak: "Don't call me that!"

"Sit down, Skip. Take a load off. Ease on in. Let it ride. Stack the deck. Try to take snot off a suede jacket, like they say in Hell's Kitchen."

"Mister—"

"Call me Mel. Close enough, I'll warrant. Not that names mean much. Do they?"

"My name is Skip. You call me that, nothing else, you hearin me now?"

"Gotcha."

"I know those guys. Except for Keith whoever. Don't know him. How you know me so well?"

"Oh, it's the simplest thing. There's stories hidden in every step, every motion. Molecules collide, an infinite chain reaction of Being and Passing, that's all. I can smell 'em. Stories everywhere. And you, my boy, you're something special."

Sure he was. Skip knew it, right? Had to be, had to convince yourself you were to survive, at least in the life he'd been given. He smiled a little and took a seat on the cold hardwood floor. He should've been freezing, but he just wasn't. This old fool threw off some kinda heat.

"Gotta radiator up yer ass, old man?" Skip said, edging away from him a little. The old-timer grinned.

"Call me Mel."

"Yeah, okay. So how you know me, Mel? We ever meet before?"

"Maybe. I doubt you saw me, but I know you."

"Well ain't that fine."

"Ain't it? Finer than a gal from Carolina," Mel said. He closed his eyes then, and sang a song Skip knew all too well. Sure, he ought to! He wrote it, after all.

*"In Illinois, in Illinois, I hope I see you in Illinois..."*

Skip stared at him, knowing he ought to be just pissed off, but he couldn't. He just wasn't mad, because for one the old bastard sang it pretty well, even though Skip had only wrote the thing three years ago and sang it five times.

"How you know that one?"

Mel opened his eyes, a broad smile arcing through his long beard.

"Heard ya, kid. Heard ya in that mining camp between Drew and Louise. And I heard you were in between Lola and Arlene, them cousins from Louise. Camp boss almost caught ya, huh? Heh!"

"How do you know my name?"

"That ain't what you wanna know. Ask me a real question."

Skip thought awhile. Sure, he had a real question.

"Fuck makes me so special?"

"There! Honesty! So rare, and getting rarer. Shit, it won't really be too long until they start spraying *Frodo Lives!* on subways, or shouting *Clapton is God!* Eggghh. Clapton. Most overrated white boy ever. You know what's gonna happen to the music you play? Stolen by limeys and Yankees. What Clapton did to 'Crossroads,' now there's a damn shame...that Bob Johnson's song. Can't just fuck it up for the hell of it!"

"I don't follow ya. Clapton who? I don't know no Bob Johnson."

"Oh, that ain't important. I got a little ahead of myself. Gets hard to remember where I am sometimes, you know? Shit, everyone knows that Charley's God, anyway."

"Charley."

"Yeah."

"Charley Patton?"

"Yeah! You know him?"

"Kinda. Saw him at a birthday party for some mulatto girl back at the Woodbine. I grew up there."

"Yup. You didn't ever work, though, Skip. Too busy with a secret screw or four with those pretty white girls came by to play with Freddy Woodbine's daughters, hey?"

Skip smiled in spite of himself. Yeah, he was a slick fuck. He knew it. Sure. Who cares? He heard Charley's croak in his head then, so real if he turned around...

Charley was in the corner, strumming his Harmony, on one of those high stools he liked so much. Skinny old Charley Patton, looking like he came all pressed and polished as always, smooth hands that never saw any work beyond pounding a piano or slapping around Bertha Lee. Charley gave one of his sliver-smiles and dropped into "Mississippi Boll Weevil Blues," one of his best. He winked at Skip, then stared at some point beyond them all, like always. His voice was wild and rough with decades of whiskey and road-dirt and Dunhill. His eyes were dead.

*"You a little boll weevil, tell me where's your little home, mmm-hmm...baskin in the sun, gonna crush your little head, Lordy..."*

Skip wanted to say something, maybe ask that bastard if he took the seventeen dollars Skip lost somewhere, and then he turned to look at the old man. He saw a long, curled a shadow stretched and then *doubled* somehow. Hell, he didn't what the fuck he was seeing: a pair of eyes like chips of fire, floating in the blackness that swam and bubbled. It looked like a man, then a floating nightmare, and Skip watched as a rose of light opened where a man's chest might be, and Skip looked, and Skip saw

*A thousand visions, revisions, near-misses, a naked, youngish man with long hair and a beard, struggling to escape a bathtub somewhere and Skip knew it was Paris but couldn't know it, never been. A tall black man was holding him down, then slips out through a window. Another cat, copper skin and crazy clothes, choking to death on his own bright green vomit, a needle bucking in his vein, a clot of blood growing around his arm. He looked at least half-Indian, Cherokee maybe, or Choctaw. Like Charley, Skip thought, and then he was falling, then he was nothing, just a speck in a mass of infinity. He saw terrible things happening everywhere, children murdered by their parents, a group of adults tearing each other to shreds in a church, his own mother dying before his eyes, again and again and again. He saw Annabelle, dancing on the tables at Judd's back in Vicksburg, saw her stagger up the stairs with Will Crabtree. He saw a laughing man with blood red eyes. He saw himself, old and gnarled, clutching his chest and falling, falling. . .*

It all went away, and Skip was tearing through the night, branches whipped him in the face, clawing at his jacket. He ran on, and stopped when he saw a cabin. *I've had enough of this*, he thought, but he knew he had to go in there. He sure didn't want to. Maybe he won't. Skip takes a breath and turns back, running straight into Charley Patton. Dead eyes, flyblown breath, and teeth stained black. This wasn't no Charley.

"No," he says, "I sure ain't. But you gotta go in and see what's gotta happen. It happens all the time."

"Naw," says Skip, "I don't wanna go in there!"

"You got to, Nehemiah. You got to see what's a-waitin' for all us who serve Someone."

"I serve myself!"

"No, you got to serve somebody, and we serve Someone else. Ain't the Lord's music, you know."

"No. *MY* music. That's all there is to it."

"You know what the future's gonna bring to the blues? Electric guitars. Fusion. Hip-hop, Trip-hop, mass-produced shit for a brain-fried world. That's about it. Go on in and see why."

Skip looked at him, watched him melt back into the shadows. Those dead eyes burned into the night, and after a few seconds they were a pair of campfires

across the river. But this wasn't Mississippi anymore--was it? Maybe, maybe not. He didn't know. It was too dark.

That was then the tune came into his head, like always, out of nowhere. He hummed it out, could almost taste the strings, but the guitar part always came later. Words came first.

*"I'd rather be the Devil, than be that woman's man, lay down last night, lay down last night I lay down last night, could not take my rest... wind was shrieking like a wild beast in the West - "*

He lost his concentration when he heard somebody screaming from the cabin.

Skip went to the door and pushed it part of the way open. He looked in, his eyes wide and dry and horrified.

A dark-skinned man with one weird, bulging eye was howling, snarling, staggering naked from the narrow bed in the corner. He knocked a bottle of whiskey to the ground, and started to puke up yellow and red, whiskey and blood and bile, clawing at the pine floor.

"Bob? What's matter?" his lady was naked, at the edge of the bed, watching. Not surprised. She grinned, and padded nude across the floor. Skip ducked back but she just smiled at him and winked.

"Told you to leave Clara alone, Bob."

Robert Johnson shrieked and lurched toward her. She swatted him away, and he curled up on the floor, kicking the kerosene lamp over. The burning oil lit on his legs, and Skip could hear the sizzle, smell the frying flesh. The girl sighed and picked up the whiskey. She drank it down, leaned over Bob, and spewed it in his face, laughing. She grinned, and Skip could see her teeth: pointed and jagged and stained black. Dead eyes. Burning, burning into his. She walked toward him, and vanished.

Bob howled and snarled like a dog, the fire leapt up around him, and Skip could only run. The night laughed down on him, silent as judgment and evil as he was. At least the rain had stopped.

THE SUMMER OF JACOB ZOOK

In my seventeenth summer, Jacob Zook and I walked along the road that wound through John Lapp's farm and found a path through the new green corn. Jacob held my hand and pulled me gently behind him. We were both trembling.

We came to a large patch of dirt studded here and there with the brown nubs of corn that had refused to grow. Around the clearing were straight, healthy stalks that enveloped us in primordial silence.

"Here," he said, turning around to see whether I approved. His eyes were blue and faceted. His sandy blonde hair fell in soft waves around his face.

"This is good," I replied.

Jacob looked down toward his plain black shoes, his hand in his pocket. A breeze blew up and rustled the corn.

"Can I kiss you?" I said. He looked up and smiled a calm smile. His expression hinted at something old and wise inside him, something that ran down deep like the root of a tree. It drew me in and gave me comfort.

I moved closer to him. He grabbed the brim of my straw hat with one hand and swatted a fly from around my face with the other. He leaned in and put his mouth on mine. His lips were soft, full, warm. I wondered whether he had ever kissed a girl. I looped my hands around his black suspenders and pulled them down from his shoulders. His hands on me were shy.

"You can hold me tighter. I won't break," I whispered.

We kissed again and again, the faint smell of hay and peaches rising from the skin of his cheeks. I peeled away my tight bell bottoms and unbuttoned my gauze blouse. Jacob stepped awkwardly out of his black trousers, which were too short—always too short—and pulled off his plain blue shirt and his white underwear that looked like it had been washed many times.

"Pretty Katy. You're as pretty as a flower," he said.

He skimmed my bare back with his calloused hands. We dropped down to the dirt. My head hit the ground with a thud and we both laughed. I moved my hands around to his buttocks, which were ripe and firm, and pulled him into me.

"You will have to tell me how," he whispered between quick breaths.

I had been with two boys in my life. One went to my high school in Paradise and one, an acquaintance of my friend Judy, was from Gap. They had been careless lovers—greedy, selfish boy lovers—more interested in their forbidden beers or the latest Grateful Dead album than in me.

"Slowly," I said to Jacob, my lips washed by the waves of his hair. We moved together and then he exhaled a soft moan and was done. I held him inside of me and kept going until I felt my own pleasure.

"That was good, Katy?" Jacob said. He pushed himself up to look at me.

I giggled softly. "Very good, Jacob."

We lay for a while, looking up at the green corn all around us and above it the hazy blue sky. “I’m sorry about your dad,” I said.

Jacob’s father had died of a heart attack that spring. My mother had announced this news one day as she took the last drag on a cigarette she had smoked down to the filter. “Dropped dead at thirty-eight,” she said, plunging the stub into an ashtray and pushing streams of exhaust from her nostrils. She knew Jacob’s family, had done seasonal work off and on for them and some of the other Mennonites in Paradise, mostly delivering goods in our station wagon. I knew Jacob only to say hello. I wasn’t interested in really knowing him until one day when we began to talk and it was clear that he was not like the others in his clannish community. He was curious and funny, and his eyes seemed drawn to the horizon.

He told me his family had left their Amish order to join the Mennonites before he was born. It was unusual but it happened, he said. A family or even a small group would reject the cold demands of Amish life. He attended a Mennonite school with his brother and sister. On a detour home one day he found himself in the public library, surrounded by hundreds of new worlds—“*Robinson Crusoe*, you know that one?” he had asked me, and I nodded even though I had never read it—and from then on he was taken by books, and every week he sneaked away to the library and took home a new book and hid it under his mattress.

When his father died, he took the job on John Lapp’s farm. John Lapp didn’t seem to mind that the Zooks had defected.

“We are very sad without my father but we get along,” Jacob said, rolling over to face me. “We can live with my uncle as long as we want to.”

“Did you love him very much?” I asked, and in that moment I envied Jacob his dead father and his shy, pale mother, their shared grief, the quiet, gentle comfort they must have taken in each other, their place in something permanent and deep.

“Yes, very much, Katy. Don’t you love your father?” Jacob fixed his eyes on me. I looked up and searched the sky as if there were something to see.

The person I had loved most in the world was my grandmother, my mother’s mother, whom I lived with for entire summers on the outer edge of Paradise when I was younger. I never understood why I went there, but I didn’t mind because my grandmother was a kind woman with a big smile who read me stories and took me to the movies and sometimes treated me to breakfast at the diner, although I liked her breakfasts of pancakes and sausages and chocolate milk better.

When I was 12, she died suddenly and then I had to spend my summers at home in our shabby little ranch house that reeked of cigarette smoke.

“I’m leaving here, you know, after high school. Getting as far away as possible,” I finally said, and then I felt Jacob move his face next to mine.

“So does this mean we will not be married, Katy?” he said. His voice was serious but when I turned to look at him, he was grinning.

I pinched his ear and smiled. “We better go,” I said.

We dressed ourselves and started back to the road. We kissed goodbye before emerging from the corn. As I went toward home, I thought about how Jacob had teased me. Of course we could never be married, even though just then I thought being married to Jacob could be quite pleasant, if I hadn't seen another future for myself, a future far away from Paradise.

Jacob and I went to the cornfield almost every day that summer. Sometimes we kept our clothes on and just talked. Jacob brought fresh corn bread and butter or sandwiches wrapped in a large handkerchief. I brought Coca-cola for me and milk for him. Whenever he brought his dog, Pike, we threw scraps of food in the air and watched Pike jump after them, and laughed when he sat up and barked for more. Jacob worked for Old Man Lapp three days a week and had chores to do around his family's farm every day, so we met late in the afternoons.

"Where are you always running off to? Wouldn't be a job, would it?" my father said one day, not waiting for an answer as he shuffled by on his way to the refrigerator. By that time of day the beer was always thick on his breath. My father and I had never been close, and after he'd lost his job, he was like a ghost in our house, heard more than seen, trapped in a nether world.

When I got to the cornfield, I hugged Jacob and kissed him hard. "Sometimes I think going to Vietnam would be better than living at my house," I said. Jacob listened patiently, smoothing my hand with his fingers. Then he told me that his second cousin had run off and joined the Marines and ended up in the war.

"What happened to him? Is he still there?" I asked.

"He got hurt bad. He's in a hospital down in Coatesville."

"Well, don't you go and do anything stupid like that," I said. But I knew he wouldn't. I knew he was safe in Paradise, and always would be.

By the middle of August, Old Man Lapp was getting ready to cut the corn. Jacob and I made the most of the time we had left, exhausting ourselves in hungry lovemaking that left us sweaty and dreamy. We lay among the thick emerald stalks, tracing each other's faces, talking about the books we read and our lives before we knew each other. It was pleasant to watch the sun go down from our small enclave, where the shape and color of the corn seemed ever changing against blue then indigo then grey sky.

I was going to be a senior when classes started at my high school that fall. Jacob had one more year at the Mennonite school.

"What will you do after you get out of school?" I asked him two days before the corn was scheduled to be cut. He was twisting my long brown hair into a braid in a distracted way, and when he finally said, "Don't ask me that, Katy," I knew something was wrong.

"What's the matter?" I asked him, but he only flipped the braid across my face and hit my nose with the end of it. "We better go," he said.

I thought all night about what had happened. I wondered whether my plans to leave Paradise the next summer were the reason for Jacob's reaction. I wondered

whether I still wanted to go. The next day, our last day in the corn, Jacob brought me a small bouquet of fresh mums. "For my flower, for all my blessings," he said.

I kissed him and told him that I still wanted to see him after school and on the weekends.

"I will be pretty busy, Katy," Jacob said, looking down at his shoes.

"Don't you want to see me?" I asked.

"Yes, more than I want to see anyone," he said. "I, I have some things I need to do."

We agreed to meet the next afternoon at the ice cream stand on Cow Path Road. I waited there that day, watching the yellow jackets buzz around the sticky trash cans, but Jacob didn't come. I knew somehow that I might never see him again. As I walked home, I told myself that it was just as well, that Jacob and I lived in different worlds, that now I could leave Paradise with a clear conscience. But I cried all the way back, wondering why Jacob would abandon me after our passionate time together.

The next day I asked my mother in a vague way about the Zooks. "I don't know what those people are doing," she said in a husky voice that seemed on the verge of a cough. She was in the armchair watching television in the smoky living room. A full ashtray was in her lap. Her mouth, wrinkled prematurely around the lips, was pulled down in a frown. "They haven't given me any work for three weeks. They don't understand I have a louse for a husband and a household to run. Now I've got to take in extra mending, and that isn't exactly a living."

Her old shears lay on the sewing table in the dining room. They were like her, dulled by time and wear but still sharp enough. The sound of my father's snoring came from their bedroom down the hall. My mother seemed not to hear. For the first time, I felt sorry for her, and I knew that I would not become what she was.

I went to the cornfield every day for a week and walked into the cut stalks, which were beginning to turn yellow and brittle. I don't why I went. I guess it made me feel close to Jacob. On the last day, I found a small, black button. It had come from Jacob's trousers. I kissed it and closed my hand around it, and suddenly it felt like a relic, an object discovered from a time long ago.

One day, I worked up the nerve to go see his mother. I walked up on the peeling porch that wrapped around his uncle's brick farmhouse and knocked. Anna Zook came to the door.

"Hi, I'm Katy Rhoads," I said.

"I know who you are, dear. Is there something we can do for you?"

"Yes, I mean, I haven't seen Jacob around for a while and I was wondering whether he is okay."

Anna studied me through the screen door and said, "Would you like to come in?"

The house was furnished with thin braided rugs and well worn tables and chairs positioned against the walls. The smell of something baking drifted from the kitchen.

“How about some lemonade?” Anna said.

I followed her and she motioned for me to sit at the kitchen table. I was not sure what I was going to say, how I would explain why I’d come. I wanted to say ‘I love Jacob.’ And I did love him. I knew I did that last day together in the cornfield. Anna handed me the cold glass and I sipped. I loved Jacob, and I didn’t want to leave Paradise.

Anna poured a glass for herself and sat down. She looked younger than I remembered. “Jacob is gone, Katy.”

“Gone?” I could utter only that one word.

“He left last week. He put a note on his bed.” Her eyes welled with tears. “I have faith that he will come back.”

“But where did he go?” I asked.

“West, to find work, to find answers. Jacob always had many questions.” Anna looked at me knowingly. “You are a good friend of my boy, yes?”

“Yes,” I said and I started to cry. We talked in the kitchen for a while. Anna was kind and patient. Then I had to go.

One day soon after that I came home from school and found a postcard in the mail. It was from Jacob. He was in Nebraska, working on a farm. “I am sorry I had to leave. I did not know how to tell you. I love you, Katy” was written in the bottom corner next to a drawing of a flower. There was no return address.

I went back to the Zook’s farmhouse to tell Anna about the card. She seemed cheered by the news and we drank lemonade and talked about Jacob and school and her life as a girl among the Amish. Sitting in the sunlight that streamed through their long kitchen windows, with her white mesh cap removed from her head, she didn’t seem that different from me. “We both miss my son very much, don’t we?” she said, and she reached across the table and put her small hand over mine.

Every month or so, I got a postcard from Jacob. Sometimes he was in the same place; sometimes he had moved on, moved on to a new world. I always visited Anna to tell her, and sometimes she had gotten a letter, too. I graduated from school the following June and found a job. A year later I moved out of my parents’ house and enrolled in the community college. But I continued to live in Paradise for a while.

Jacob’s postcards eventually stopped coming. But Anna got the occasional letter, which she shared with me when I went to visit her on the last Sunday of every month. Jacob always asked her to say hello.

I found a job in administration at a nearby hospital and began dating the man I would eventually marry. The day before Christmas in 1975, a small envelope arrived in the mail. It contained a letter and a pressed red flower. It was from Jacob. He told me he was working as a construction foreman and was going to be married. He closed the letter by saying “I will never forget our beautiful summer, Katy. Love always, Jacob.”

I will never forget, either, I thought. I will never forget the summer of Jacob Zook.

## #13 Contributor Bios

**Bridget Bell** is an Ohio-born writer living in Brooklyn, New York. She holds her MFA from Sarah Lawrence College, and volunteers as a creative writing instructor for junior high students. When not reading or writing she bartends at a pub in Manhattan's financial district. Her work has been published in *SUB-LIT*, *The New Ohio Review*, *The Blood Orange Review*, and *Folio* among others.

**Jessica Cuello** is a graduate of Barnard College and teaches French in Central New York. Recent poems have appeared or are forthcoming in *Copper Nickel*, *Harpur Palate*, *Melusine*, *Muse & Stone*, *Literary Mama*, and the anthology, *Zeus Seduces the Wicked Stepmother in the Saloon of the Gingerbread House*.

**Becky Eagleton** lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma. Her story "The End of the Road," will be published in the Fall 2009 *Fifth Wednesday Journal*. She is working on her fourth novel.

**Brian Fanelli** is a native of Pennsylvania and a regular contributor to the Philadelphia-based music magazine *Wonka Vision*. His writing has also been published by *Breadcrumbs Scabs* poetry journal, *Alternet*, and *Alternative Realities*. He is currently enrolled in the M.F.A. program of Wilkes University and working on his first full-length collection of poems, *Front Man*. He also serves as an editor for the e-zine *Unbound Culture*.

**Ellen Hagan** is a writer, performer, and educator. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize, and can be found in the pages of *Failbetter*, *La Petite Zine*, *Check the Rhyme*, *42opus*, *Submerged*, and *PLUCK*. She is a regular contributor to *Underwired Magazine* and was named a winner of the Next Great Writers Competition at the Carnegie Center in Lexington, Kentucky. Ellen is an Affrilachian Poet, and has received grants from Kentucky Foundation for Women and the GSA Toyota Alumni Fund.

**Josh Indar** is a California writer and musician with an M.F.A. in Creative Nonfiction from Antioch University, Los Angeles. His work has appeared in *Word Riot*, *Pop Matters*, *The Utne Reader*, *10 Spot* and several west coast newspapers. He currently lives in Chico, Ca, with his wife and two kids, where he tutors homeless and foster youth and plays guitar in *Severance Package* and *Black Fork*.

**W. Luther Jett** is a native of Montgomery County, Maryland, and has published a chapbook of poems and original graphics, "A Leather Dress Fur Mother." He began writing shortly after learning how to hold a crayon and started transcribing his ideas onto paper shortly thereafter. His poetry has been published in numerous journals, including: *The GW Review*, *Syncopated City*, *Synæsthesia*, *ABRAXAS*, *The Burning Cloud Review*, *Scribble*, *Beltway*, *Innisfree*, *WordWrights!*, *Minnetonka Review*, and *Main Street Rag*. He will be a featured performer in the up-coming 2009 Capital Fringe Festival in Washington, D.C.

**Jen Karetnick** is the author of the chapbooks *Necessary Salt* (Pudding House Publications, 2007), *Bud Break at Mango House*, which won The Portlandia Group's bi-annual chapbook competition (Portlandia Press, September 2008) and *Eve and After* (Southern Hum Press, forthcoming), which was a finalist in the Women of Words chapbook competition. Her poems have appeared in journals including *Barrow Street*, *Cimarron Review*, *Gastronomica*, *Georgetown Review*, *Greensboro Review*, *North American Review* and *River Styx* and are forthcoming in *Alimentum Journal* and *OCHO*. She is a 2005 recipient of a Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg Award for a lyric poem and a finalist in the 2009 Patricia Dobler Prize. She received her MFA in poetry from University of California, Irvine, and her MFA in fiction from University of Miami. Jen works as a dining critic, travel writer and creative writing teacher at Miami Arts Charter School.

**Cynthia J. McGroarty** worked as a reporter at *The Philadelphia Inquirer* until 2006. She recently received a MFA in Creative Writing from Rosemont College. Her work has appeared in *Newtopia*, *The Schuylkill Valley Journal* and *The MacGuffin*. She lives in Paoli, PA, with her husband James J. Kirschke.

**Adam Pellegrini** is currently enrolled in the MFA program at the University of Maryland, College Park, and working on a thesis in poetry. As well, he co-edits *Cartographer Electric*, an online literary journal he and his friends piece together every so often. His work has appeared or will appear in such journals as *Pebble Lake Review*, *Blood Orange Review*, *Paterson Literary Review*, and *Harpur Palate*.

Work by **Lynne Potts** has appeared in *The Paris Review*, *AGNI*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Art Times*, *Southern Poetry Review*, *Western Humanities Review*, *Cincinnati Review*, *Oxford*, *Backwards City Review* and other journals. She is presently Poetry Editor at *AGNI* and was formerly poetry editor of the *Columbia Journal of Literature and Art*. In 2004 she was awarded the HD Prize by the Poets Project in New York. In 2007 she won the *Backwards City Review* poetry contest. She has been awarded

fellowships by the Virginia Center for the Creative Arts and Ragdale. She lives in Boston and New York.

**Charles Rafferty** received a 2009 NEA Fellowship in Creative Writing, and is the author of four full-length collections of poetry: *The Man on the Tower* (which won the Arkansas Poetry Award—University of Arkansas Press, 1995), *Where the Glories of April Lead* (Mitki/Mitki Press, 2001), *During the Beauty Shortage* (M2 Press, 2005), and *A Less Fabulous Infinity* (Louisiana Literature Press, 2006). He currently teaches at Albertus Magnus College and in the MFA program at Western Connecticut State University. By day, he works as an editor for a technology consulting firm. He lives in Sandy Hook, Connecticut, with my wife and two daughters.

**Marina Richards** is a former advertising agency and freelance writer from Boston. Her fiction, poetry and essays have been published or are forthcoming from *The Hawaii Pacific Review*, *Writer's Digest*, *The Humor Press*, *Pear Noir!*, *Up The Staircase*, *Six Sentences*, and *50 to 1*. She lives with her husband and pets, and is thinking about getting some goats for her lawn.

**Doren Robbins's** poems and short fiction have appeared in *American Poetry Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *The Cafe Irreal*, *Hotel Amerika*, and other periodicals. He has published one short fiction collection, *Parking Lot Mood Swing: Autobiographical Monologues and Prose Poetry* (Cedar Hill Press 2004). His recent collections of poetry, *Driving Face Down* (winner of the Blue Lynx Poetry Award 2001) and *My Piece of the Puzzle* (2008) are published by Eastern Washington University Press. After working over twenty years as a broiler chef and a carpenter, he became a teacher of composition, literature, and creative writing. He works at Foothill College.

**Alana Sherman** poet, essayist and teacher, lives in Woodbourne, NY with her husband and dogs in an 1834 farmhouse. She is a member of the Alchemy Poets Workshop, originally founded in 1963. Currently she is at work illustrating and writing a children's book, as well as completing a new volume of poems. In addition to her writing, she is a community developer, working to preserve The Old Stone House of Hasbrouck.

**Anthony Vieira** was born in Lodi, California in 1978. He recently returned to his beloved Northern California after three years of film school in Los Angeles. He continues to write and make films when he can. He lives in the Easy Bay with his girlfriend and their three dogs.

**Sarah Walko** was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She attained her Master of Fine Arts from Savannah College of Art and Design and her Bachelor of Arts from University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland. She is currently the Executive Director of Triangle Arts Association, a non-profit arts organization in Brooklyn. She has participated in numerous artists workshops and residency programs and works as Art Director with the independent film collective Santasombra which has shown at International Film Festivals around the world. She is currently working on new sculptures, drawings, sound and multimedia film projects and has exhibitions coming up in July, August and September of 2009 in New York.