

**Issue #2, May 2006**



*Venizio Amore*

by Antonio Lombardo

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THE HOLE

I remember your face,  
surprised about what was missing,  
as we stood at Ground Zero,  
looking into Manhattan's new mouth.  
The buildings around the block still  
draped in sheets like frocked statues.  
Rain came lightly around us to fill the desolate gap.  
You said, "I love you..."  
and I thought, 'what a strange time to say it,'  
but the more I thought  
the more it didn't seem strange,  
only sudden.

What comes after a moment like that?  
Tragedy made us hungry.  
We went for pizza, then to China Town,  
the Ferry back to Jersey,  
snapped pictures a skyline  
absent two light-studded obelisks.  
What should have come, what comes now years after,

is the idea that hatred and love are intimate.  
That one rolls into the other.  
That they produce each other.  
What should I have said to you  
to swallow the silence between us?

In that moment,  
the city sounds said more  
than I could say—  
taxis bleated out,  
the flags hanging between the buildings snapped,  
steps on the pavement were heavy as thunder.

I said nothing back,  
and now, somewhere in my mind,  
there is a hole,  
deep with regret.

INTER-VIEW

Rays of light play: with a curtain, that door, two lamps turning off. They refer: to sofa, to ashtray, plate, remote: here? see? Jesus, it's right here. Behind the fallen blinds. You've introduced one word (out) to another word (get): sayings of love and sayings of disgust begin to look alike. Most of the time I keep the basil on the spice rack above the stove. Yesterday, recall, I threw the plastic red-capped bottle at the window, and it rolled, it rolled, and it rolled. Our angles, I know, must choose to meet: by virtue, by the fridge leaning there with screwy legs: really, would you care for coffee? you could rest—the sun is only risen half an angle up, see? we have so much to drink about, to think about in lusty playful ways: every position under the sun, arms and legs stretching. Whatever we see, it lies here with us in bed, rays of light making on my face a half-smile of apology, the reference to *remote: here*, I'll turn it off or pause if you like, drink the coffee brewed for you, the suck of breathing-before: a kiss.

EXCERPTS FROM A SURVIVOR'S JOURNAL

I. (August 25th)

I thought it was strange that it would start raining—so deep into the summer as it was and such a scorcher. But the sunshower was a blessing—no one complaining about the wet t-shirts, no one upset that the torture had been stopped, at least momentarily. And while I reveled in the cooling reprieve, you e-mailed that foul cowardly message, ending an era. Despite the heat, my entire body began to shiver as I thought about how the sage Luddites warned of technology's destructive tendencies and how it would be our ultimate undoing. More rain fell. Nothing left to do, I reasoned, but live like a hopeful jay with a red wound on its blue wing.

II. (September 17th)

Like a hopeful jay with a red wound on its blue wing could make me so late for work. Yeah right. Still, when the battered creature limping on its two determined legs appeared at my door, the grim sight of it stopped me cold. But it must have been nine o'clock already, so I can't blame the fading bird struggling to escape my neighbor's killer feline. The mangled jay chirped what I swear was the word "pity" as blood spilled from its punctured wing like so much wasted sherry. Across the yard, the cat glared at me while licking its eager claws. Noticing the time, I shut my door, stepped over the mat.

III. (October 22nd)

The time I shut my door, stepped over the mat, then fell—hard, ego first—down the icy front steps, you laughed your rude ass off. To be fair, perhaps you didn't notice the snow blushing or hear the crack of my surprisingly brittle arm against the indifferent pavement. But still, *laughter?* I'll always remember that howl more chilling than any New England winter,

even more painful than the break. Message sent and received. Now, as autumn leaves cycle through their emotional reds and yellows—*it's dying time again*—I'm thinking of what falling teaches us, I'm thinking about the things I don't miss about you.

IV. (December 4th)

Thinking about the things I don't miss about you—the onion-skinned alibis, your crass flossing in bed—I sift through some of the shinier thoughts instead: our sex marathons lasting from midnight until noon, lying bare-assed on the patio after, gorging ourselves on your infamous pumpkin cheesecake and mojito. Just folly in the wind now. *L'amour est un oiseau rebelle*. I still have your silk thongs and bookshelves, your cherished jazz cd's, this gaudy scar just under my ribs. Funny, huh? Finally told my nosy therapist your name. *Think of your glass as half-full*, she insisted, *imagine your life regaining its luster, its thunder*.

V. (January 28th)

*Ed, imagine your life regaining its luster, its thunder as you frolic through every hotspot in Milan and Paris*, the unctuous travel agent gushed. But I had to pass on the idea since he couldn't even get my name right and, more than any Euro-jaunt, I was starting to miss the soft rays of summer days, pearl-blue moonlight mild enough that we...I mean, "I" could sprawl out naked on the patio after dark. Alone at my bedroom window, I watched the brazen pigeons openly flouting a blizzard's fury, the sadistic wind bullying long-dead leaves. I decided then to escape the frigid gloom by heeding the Caribbean's lush call, its balmy song.

VI. (February 3rd)

By heeding the Caribbean's lush call, its balmy song tempting like a Siren's mythical hex echoing "Come to me, shy sailor," I was renewed and, before long,

my devastated muscle thawed out after simmering daily in the water glistening there like liquid topaz. I squeezed in a tour of the St. Thomas ruins also: lingering patina of majesty on the sun-dappled flutings, the tamarind-heavy breeze whispering “relent” as it eased through the aged slats of louvered openings, every jagged edge smoothed by time’s rough hand as if to prove that the stalwart can maintain some grace even in the face of adversity and still stand.

VII. (March 10th)

Grace, even in the face of adversity and still standing after guzzling down four guavaberry daiquiris, somehow kept her composure as we sighed goodbye at the airport in Puerto Rico. Or maybe her name was Caryn. Or maybe it was Jose. Whatever. My sojourn on those coddling islands was full of such unnamable joys—every crowded beach and empty barstool another gleaming proxy for *possible cure*. On my reluctant return flight to Beantown, the propellers’ growl replaced the fragile pleading of coqui frogs—yet another example of erosion, of how, as Achebe warned, *things fall apart*, despite all efforts to stop the song’s trembling notes from fading eventually.

VIII. (March 20th)

To stop the song’s trembling, notes from fading, eventually I let it all go. To fuel forward movement, I’ve gone back to snacking on soy nuts and self-pity. Now, in my bedroom mirror, I’m lip-reading intently as my know-it-all reflection scolds “Poor Pagliaccio with your painted moue, you put it on, you can always take it off.” So, along with my thinning hair, I’m brushing away regret. And, like my life generally, my lingering pang of guilt has very little to do with you: last fall, I left a desperate bluejay to face the certain doom of feline bloodlust. Brut-drenched, I must’ve smelled, to him, like rescue. My dear diary: faith may not be what we, what I thought it was. Strange that it would start raining.

WELL, HERE IT IS. ENJOY!

When I set out for Mexico  
seeking the worm  
of truth, you sped ahead  
to Cancun, carved melons  
for drinks until your wrist  
ached, and you swore  
you'd worked hard enough. I didn't  
go to the beach,  
though. Found a tiny village  
instead: its water flavored  
with piss; children's shoes,  
calluses; Death at the table  
in every casa. You caught  
up to me, somehow,  
screwed in those martyr-eyes  
you must keep  
in a jar or a purse,  
and solicited a rhyme  
from me then, claiming  
people could relate to all  
you'd been through  
when you nearly fell  
from stepping over some  
legless beggar boy.

ON HEMINGWAY, FOR HEMINGWAY, BECAUSE OF HEMINGWAY

“...all his life he would remember the curve of her throat with her head pushed back into the heather roots and her lips that moved smally and by themselves and the fluttering of the lashes on the eyes tight closed against the sun and against everything...” – From *For Whom the Bell Tolls*

I read you too early in my life.  
The elephant story  
the beautiful bloody Italy  
each and others  
the Toll Across the Garden of Green Sun Also  
stories of Feast  
before I was 20.

Then I turned poet  
and last night  
watched how people loved you.  
A QUED special.

I remembered Mr. Kester calling me a fool  
because you wrote women  
without faces or looks in their eyes  
but you loved so many  
in bed in character in time.

You remind me of a Kansan  
who couldn't live in his mother's eyes.  
He ran away  
to the Philippines.  
I saw a picture of him at 21 on a hill  
dressed with trees.

I thought of you  
I thought of him

and small towns.  
And I think that is why you wrote  
between the lines.

But I forgot what they said  
about you and your mother  
who cussed at you

for cussing in books.

I forgot most everything and thought I should write  
poetically without words  
for you.

Then I remembered that people die  
when they make love they die when they stop  
to make love  
stop on some sort of mountain.  
I wonder how the earth could have moved.

I wonder how the bullet must have tingled  
every nerve.

SOPHIE

Greg Preston did what he always did on the anniversary of his sister's death—he drank. The Red Star was the third bar he had stopped at that evening. A crowded shit kicker kind of joint, where almost everyone was wearing cowboy boots, hats, and multi-colored long sleeve shirts, the kind with ivory snap on buttons. The place was packed, with sweaty drunken Texans, and the only group that seemed to have some order was the line dancers, their boots stomping the floor in snappy syncopation. Random shouts, noise, and tobacco smoke engulfed the rest of the bar like a ghost. God how he hated that word, ghost. He ordered a shot of tequila to help forget he even knew it, and took a handful of peanuts to suck in his mouth for the salt. He was about to get up and wander to another bar, when he happened to bump into the guy sitting next to him, spilling beer on the stranger's arm.

"Sorry," Greg said, then took another drink. "I didn't see you there."

The young man grunted, and stared forward, taking the last sip of his own drink. To make up for the incident, Greg bought him another beer. The kid was tall and lean, and Greg kind of liked the way his black T-shirt and ratty hair made him stand out amongst all the honky tonk types.

"I'm Greg," he said, sticking out his hand.

The young man took it firmly, "Lucky Dick, nice to meet you."

"Lucky Dick, that's an interesting name," Greg said. He smiled, then decided to order himself another drink. He ended up staying at the Red Star another hour, talking to the underfed kid next to him, who turned out to be a lot more interesting than Greg could have ever imagined. He was a biker, and was crossing the country alone on his motorcycle. Lucky said he had just decided to make the trek one-day, and quit his job to set out on the road, but Greg wondered if that were true. The paranoid way the kid constantly scanned the crowd bouncing around the bar made him think that Lucky was more likely on the run than on a pilgrimage to the Pacific ocean. But Lucky gave off a feeling of anxious danger that intrigued Greg. He had felt like a vagabond of sorts when he was Lucky's age, and the young man reminded him of that part of his life. When he had moved from steamy, crowded Atlanta to the monuments and porticos of Washington D.C., working his way up at Brown&Stevens, the accounting firm; he had lived in a nice enough high rise in the capital, but it never felt like home. When he finally moved back south to South Carolina, he

had finally felt a sense of belonging, deep in the humid summers and syrupy accents he had missed up north.

Greg motioned with his glass towards a woman with bleached hair and an orangish fake tan. “See, look at that,” he pointed at the woman’s low cut blouse, “Advertisement, pure advertisement. Commercialism has completely changed American sexuality. “Stay here, stay here,” he told Lucky, then walked over to the blonde in the low cut blouse, with a collar stitched in red and blue stars.

“Are you looking for someone?” he asked, tugging lightly on her arm.

“What was that?” She yelled into his ear.

“I was just curious to know why a woman like yourself was standing alone. You look like you’re waiting on someone, have you been stood up?”

The woman smiled and turned her back to him. “I’m waiting on my husband.”

“Oh. Well, while you’re waiting you can join me and my buddy at the bar if you’d like,” but the woman said nothing else. She kept her back to him, and her face toward the dancers, as they now clomped backward in unison. To Greg it was an army of bright colors and Stetson hats that hurt his eyes to look at. He stepped away and headed back for the bar, miming a gunshot to his own head. The kid asked what had happened.

“I don’t get it,” Greg started. “If she’s here with her husband why would she be dressed like that. That shirt and that skirt do not say taken. They don’t, do they? Look at it, false advertisement.”

Lucky Dick cupped a hand around his ear. “Huh?”

Greg plopped into his chair. “Nothing.”

“Maybe she’s married, or something.”

“I just said that,” Greg protested. “Look at you, you’re drunk. You’re young, so that’s okay and I bought you all the drinks, so who’s to blame? But you’re gonna have to learn how to hold your liquor if you want to make it anywhere in this state. Texans hate lightweights, or so I understand.”

“I’m not young, I just haven’t had anything to eat today, that’s all.”

“Nothing to eat!” Greg motioned for his tab. He suddenly wondered just how old this kid was. “I’m thirty-four,” he said, “What’re you, twenty-two?”

“Twenty-one,” Lucky corrected, then drained the rest of his glass.

Greg nodded. Two women leaned up on the bar next to him wearing tight Wrangler jeans and red cowboy hats. The one directly on his left had long brown hair and was tapping her fingers restlessly on the bar.

“Hey!” He hollered, trying to get their attention. “This is my friend, Lucky, Lucky Dick.” Greg swayed forward, leering at them. “He quit his job to cross the country alone on a motorcycle. What do you think about that?” The women ignored him, calling for the bartender instead.

“Well, I agree. A guy like that is probably too cool for you anyway.” Greg stood up to sign the credit receipt on his bill, laying a hand on kid’s shoulder when he was finished. “Come on. We’re going to Waffle House.”

He led the way to the door with Lucky protesting he had done enough already. “You’re forgiven, for spilling the drink,” he said.

But Greg waved a nonchalant hand and held one of the double oak doors open to let them both outside. The wind kicked up his brown hair as they crossed the street for the yellow glow of Waffle House a block up. Lucky cursed behind him.

“Does the wind ever stop here?”

“In the panhandle?” Greg asked. “No.”

“It blew my motorcycle around all damn day,” Lucky said, his black engineer boots clomping along the sidewalk. A rock he kicked sailed past Greg and bounced off into the street. “Its a bitch.”

“A lot of things are,” Greg said under his breath, thinking of his sister’s face in her casket. Funny, how most times he could only remember her in the context of lying in that wooden box, when the mortician’s make up had made her look more like a waxy imitation, than her real self.

They sat in a booth towards the back, both ordering a double stack of waffles with bacon on the side. Greg laughed at their shared taste in breakfast food and reminded Lucky Dick to get anything he wanted. The restaurant was

crowded, but solemn. Long faced truck drivers sipping coffee sat alongside the assorted bar hoppers, loudly jerking butter knives across plates of greasy breakfast food.

“You’ve done too much for me, Greg,” Lucky Dick told him. “You got all my drunks,” Lucky laughed at his own mistake. Greg noticed his face couldn’t turn

any redder even if Lucky had wanted it to, since it was already wind burned to an unnatural crimson hue. “Drinks. Anyway, it’s too much.”

“It’s the island way, don’t worry about it. Besides, it’s a company credit card. I’m in Amarillo on business, I live off the coast of Charleston, in a town called Mt. Pleasant.” Greg reached across the table and patted Lucky’s arm. “Point is, it’s the island way to take care of strangers.”

Just as one of the cooks was slopping the batter for their waffles on to the griddle, two women in their late twenties stumbled in, letting the wind through the door and into the restaurant. Elbows locked together, they made their way to the booth directly in front of Greg’s. He recognized their matching red hats from the bar as his nose wrinkled at the light lilac smell that came with their passing. The shorter one, the girl with curly dark hair, deep black eyes, and pointy ears, blushed when she saw the two of them. Greg draped an arm over the booth, thumping a beat on the back of the chair behind him with his hand.

“Yes, Lucky Dick, you were very lucky indeed in meeting me. I’m going to show you how to truly live the island way,” Greg told him. He stood up, brushing his pale blue oxford of crumbs and cigarette ashes, then walked over to the booth with the two women, who were both looking at him now. He could see Lucky out of the corner of his eye, turning to see what was up, and Greg bowed at the waist.

“Hello, how are you ladies tonight?”

The shorter of the two swallowed, “Fine.” Then added, “Sorry about ignoring you earlier.”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.” Greg smiled broadly. “How has your night been?”

“Okay, I guess.”

Her friend put a hand to her cheek. “We got stood up, it’s sucked.” She looked him up and down. “Is it just you?”

“No, no,” he said, then told Lucky to stand up. The kid stood next to him, and Greg draped an arm over his shoulders. “Looks like Tom Cruise, doesn’t he?”

“Not really,” the taller of the two admitted.

“I fear then that you haven’t had enough to drink yet,” Greg said solemnly.

Two hours later, Greg was standing in the men’s room of a bar called The Hideaway, watching Lucky Dick’s back through a smudged mirror. He gritted his teeth to check them in the reflection. A hole in the tile of the wall made Greg stoop to eye level to examine it. It had an oddly familiar shape that his mind shuffled through memories to place and label. Almost like an hourglass, but not quite.

“Which one you want?” He asked as he saw in the mirror that Lucky was buttoning up his worn out jeans.

“Huh? Oh, that.” Lucky walked over to the sink and began lathering his hands with pink soap. “Penelope is the shorter one right?”

“Yeah.”

“Well, she hates me. Marjorie though, she seems to want you pretty bad, so I’ll take one for the team and go with Penelope.”

“Why does Penelope hate you?” Greg asked, picking with a finger at the wall.

“I think I told her I can’t stand brunettes with agendas, or something like that. I’m a little buzzed.”

Greg meant to run a hand through his own brown hair and joke about how disappointing that was, but he was staring at the hole again, trying to put a name to it. Beyond was nothing but darkness, hiding insulation probably. He imagined he could hear the vibrato of electrical lines and pipes humming their way up the wall. He listened hard, as if waiting for the coils and copper wires to sing him the right word. The lime-covered tiles were cold and scummy on his fingers as he rested his weight on his right hand. Lucky asked what he was looking at.

“I’m not sure...” Then it hit him, a keyhole. The chunk missing in the tile looked just like a keyhole, the old skeleton kind, like in the movies, and his parents’ old house in Atlanta. It was an old two story, with white scrolled floorboards and heavy doors with brass handles that were always cold to touch in the winter.

When he was younger, his older sister Sophie had held sleepovers with a few of her friends from school; he had been twelve at the time. At night, and during the day when he was feeling daring, Greg would sneak up to the door to peep through. Afraid any amount of noise would give him away, he would purposefully slow his breath. The beat of his heart was often so loud it drowned out most of the conversation he was trying to hear.

Usually, what he heard and saw was teenage gossip and games, so it didn’t really matter. That was up until the morning he got caught. Sophie must have been fourteen then. Greg had heard her and some of her friends running down the stairs to eat breakfast. The hardwood floors were frigid on his feet as he stepped out shirtless into the hallway, and the smell of cinnamon rolls coming from the kitchen called to his stomach. Down the hallway, Sophie’s doorway was closed, so he tiptoed over to take a look.

Inside, one of Sophie’s friends<sup>¾</sup>Kristen Allison he remembered now<sup>¾</sup>was standing naked in front of a mirror. Her nearly white hair hung to the middle of her back while her hands cupped the bottoms of her breasts, the right one larger than the other. She lifted them up one after the other, as if trying to will them to be the same size. It was the first time he had seen a naked girl except in magazines his friends had stolen from their fathers’, and he could feel himself getting erect. Dreams of busting through the door and rushing her ran through his mind like a racing river, although he wasn’t sure what he would do with her once he had her in his arms, other than kiss her.

Suddenly a warm hand was gripping his shoulder. Not hard, or painfully, but heavy enough for Greg to know it was there. His father stared down at him; his quivering bushy eyebrows seemed to be the only part of his body that was moving. A single finger was raised over his lips, signaling for Greg to be quiet. A motion of his father’s head beckoned him back to his parent’s bedroom.

The bed had been made tight and neat, while a black and white photograph of his grandmother stared out crookedly from the wall. Greg cupped his hands over his pajama pants trying to hide his erection, while his father sat down on the mattress, resting both hands on Greg’s shoulders.

“Gregory, what were you looking at?”

“Nothing.”

“Son, I need to know.”

Greg shook his head bashfully. He looked toward the picture of his grandmother, suddenly wishing he were dead. His father’s hairy hands tightened their grip.

“Was it your sister?”

“No.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes,” He paused then to shift uncomfortably under his father’s grip. “It was one of her friends.”

Nostrils flaring and red faced, his father shook his head and excused Greg to breakfast. He paused in the hallway, wanting to look back at his father, but was unable to force himself to look back. Even at that age Greg knew he had gotten off light, that there should have been more of a discussion about privacy and decency. He probably shouldn’t have been surprised six years later when Sophie’s suicide note, tucked under the bottle of sleeping pills she had swallowed, made lengthy mention of her father’s sexual abuse.

Lucky Dick put a hand on Greg’s shoulder, shaking him. “Hey, man. You alright?”

“I know she used to smile, I just can’t remember it.”

“Who?”

“Sophie.” Lucky looked at him confused and Greg breathed in through his nose slowly. The bathroom smelled like urinal cakes and cigarettes. There were several butts stamped out beneath him. “Doesn’t this opening look like an old keyhole? We used to have some at the house I grew up in, but no one had the keys for them.”

Lucky Dick nodded. He pulled two sets of keys out of his pocket. One was on a translucent red key charm and the other on a black leather fob. "Sorry," he said. "Just my room and motorcycle key. No skeleton keys for secret passageways."

Greg smiled and straightened himself up. "Nothing behind that wall but dust and wall studs anyway. Come on, we got two drunk girls that need to go back with us to my hotel room."

"Yeah, about that. I don't know..."

"Nonsense, kid. Look, we met up this night for a reason. You're my rabbit's foot, Lucky Dick, you can't bail on me now."

He led Lucky out of the bathroom. The women in red hats, Marjorie and Penelope, were waiting quietly at their table. They followed the two men out of the bar and into the street, crossing the empty road to Greg's hotel. Streetlights, traffic stops, and neon signs glowed around them, sharpening the inky darkness of night just beyond the city. He noticed Lucky Dick staring off towards the black humps of grain silos at the stockyards.

"Nothing but hills and scrub bushes out there, you know?" He called out over the wind.

Lucky Dick said something that sounded like "I know," and Marjorie tugged on Greg's arm, asking about the islands off South Carolina. He told her about palm trees and old civil war estates in downtown Charleston. The open air market, with its raised voices and haggling merchants selling basketfuls of bananas and peaches, thrusting crafts and native art toward passerby's, and the old singing black man on Wentworth Street who sometimes lifted his head back to scream at the sun like an electric guitar.

"It's the people," he said in a quick and excited manner. "A bunch of hippie types. We wake up in the morning, and as long as we still got a beach in front of us, and maybe some smoke," he pinched his fingers together and put them to his lips in the universal sign of a joint. "Well, if we got all that then there ain't nothing else worth worrying about."

"You can't live your life only worrying about that," Penelope stated flatly.

“No, but I spend forty hours of my week crunching numbers and details. It makes me want to spend my leisure time worrying over ocean sunsets and palm trees as much as I can.”

When the four of them were finally in his hotel room, Greg ran down the hall to fill a bucket with ice from the machine, and bought a couple of Cokes to mix with the spiced rum he had left on the nightstand. He didn't dare stay by himself too long, for fear of where his mind would wander again. When he ran back into the room, Lucky Dick was sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands folded in his lap. Both women were sitting on either side of him asking what it was like to travel so far on a motorcycle. Greg lifted the cowboy hat off of Marjorie's head and pushed it onto his own. Then he unwrapped the plastic off the complimentary hotel cups, scooping ice into each before pouring the rum and soda. Penelope pointed to a light bruise on Lucky's temple, saying she had meant to ask about it in Waffle House.

“Its nothing. A rock bounced off a gravel truck and hit me when I was riding a few days back.”

“Don't let him fool you,” Greg told the women, handing everyone their drinks. “Outlaw Dick there got in a terrible bar fight with some rival Hell's Angels. He's a dangerous man, ain't that right?”

Greg was only joking, but the startled look on Lucky's face made him wonder if he hadn't come close to something. Marjorie laughed though, and so did Greg,

nestling himself a seat on the sage green blanket, in between her and Lucky. The lonely corner lamp put out enough light to make the room shadowy and dim and otherwise perfect. Marjorie held her cup in both hands, gulping the liquid down greedily, while the other two swirled their drinks, sipping on them casually. Greg rested a hand on her plump thigh and gave it a light squeeze.

“Well, here we all are,” he said, nodding to everyone.

Marjorie smiled, her teeth small and sharp looking, and Greg wondered what they would feel like biting his skin. He was hoping he was about to find out when she took his drink out of his hand and rested it with her own on the floor. With a flick of a French manicured nail she knocked the hat off his head and leaned into kiss him. Her tongue was cold in his mouth and tasted like liquor. As she squirmed her way closer to him, he opened the slit of his left eye, watching Lucky and Penelope. They were sitting looking away from one another. Penelope, with her back to everyone, was crowded onto the corner of

the mattress, studying the blinds covering the doors to the balcony. Marjorie shifted to nibble on Greg's ear when he reached out, brushing his arm across Lucky's.

It was when Lucky lifted his rum and Coke to his lips that Greg stretched a pinkie out, stroking Lucky's thumb gently, and waited for a reaction. Lucky sat motionless staring at the back of the door. Greg wished he could see Lucky's gray eyes at that moment, when he moved his hand further on to Lucky's, then further still, caressing the kid's wrist.

"Oh," Lucky Dick murmured. He drained the cup, his adam's apple bobbing up with each drink, and gently took his hand from the bed. Greg watched him stand up, throw the empty drink into the garbage can, and exit the room, closing the door behind him with a polite click.

Marjorie and Penelope turned to look at the door. Greg leaned back on his elbows and sighed towards the ceiling. The sounds of clunky semis and buzzing import cars could still be heard through the closed balcony doors. He wished someone would turn off the lamp, so he could lie down in darkness and steal these small morning hours from his memory with more alcohol, since tonight was falling apart anyway. Marjorie surprised him though by working her hand around the buckle of his belt and undoing it.

"What're you gonna do?" She asked Penelope, looking her in the eyes.

He watched Penelope, who turned from his face back to Marjorie's with a look of unblinking disbelief. She said she would go sit outside for a while, and slid off the bed, then stumbled through the sliding doors and onto the balcony.

Marjorie shrugged and quickly began undressing herself. She lifted her shirt off with both hands; her lacey bra she unclasped with one. He wiggled out of his charcoal colored slacks and lay completely back on the bed as Marjorie climbed up on top of him, asking if he wanted the light on or off. He told her it didn't matter and she kissed his mouth, sucking on his lower lip. He dug his fingers into her back.

In his mind he pictured Penelope sitting just outside, separated from them by only a double pane of glass and a set of eggshell vinyl blinds. He imagined her pacing impatiently until curiosity won out, and she slid the door open slowly, so as not to make any noise. In his fantasy she stood just outside of the lamplight, watching his mouth open into a gasp, as Marjorie bit down on his neck.

He knew it was empty visualization, but Greg could almost feel Penelope staring in from the shadows. She didn't seem like that kind of girl, but it was something all the same, to fictionalize reality into matching his dreams. In his dreams he was worth spying on in a poorly lit hotel room in Amarillo, Texas, where the wind never stopped, and sisters didn't lock themselves behind doors with Seconal and a bottle of Smirnoff Black Label vodka, or leave horribly confessional suicide notes as a last witness; in his dreams, he wasn't left standing alone at a funeral, staring at the back of his father's head, wondering why.

TO THE PEOPLE WE LEFT

We are cheaters and we are liars. We are sweet and cruel. We are full of whiskey and cocaine. In a borrowed car, we speed through the Texas panhandle and don't look back. The dark swallows us. Our eyes cloud and it's hard to tell if we are driving on ground or sky. We fly through Oklahoma and into Colorado. We decide to turn west.

The days pool and congeal. We can't tell one from the other. It is just after dawn when we reach Nevada. The moon and the sun are both visible above the desert road. They are so close they could almost touch. We pull over and sleep tangled together in the backseat of the car. The day is blinding and white. We wake and stretch and smoke. Our voices raw and our mouths dry we finish the last fifth of whiskey.

We have secrets. And scars. We are together because of both. We grin at each other like cats and silently smoke our cigarettes. We spend the last of our money getting married by a bald Elvis wearing a white polyester suit. His sequins twinkle and wink as we say *I do*.

We promise we won't do to each other what we've done to other people. We promise to be honest and sweet. We promise the same promises we've promised before. We promise this time it's different. We get another drink and we laugh. Driving on stolen gas, we head west again. We want to see the ocean. We want to last until then.

ONE GODDESS

1.

Once upon a time Mother leapt fully formed and armor-plated from the forehead of Zeus, sword in hand, a once-in-a-lifetime howl announcing her presence on satellite Earth.

Mother sometimes has the body of a woman and the head of a lion. She crafts her own arrows from found branches and feathers, she smiths her own arrowheads and swords with the fire of Hades and a stolen Thor's hammer. Mother sands the sides of her blades with stone until the striking edge is sharp enough to slice clouds into rain.

One day long ago Mother said to the world that she would be just that: a mother. To preserve her legacy she would only raise warriors.

And so:

Child number one, Dee, ran out of the womb when Mother exhaled.

Her second child (me) procrastinated for two long weeks. I got distracted by the warm rope texture of the umbilical cord, and I named the afterbirth Charlene and proceeded to tell her everything. Then Mother decided that, dreamer or not, child number two is going to come out. She entered a hospital on her birthday and passed on pain killers to stubbornly embrace bite-a-leather-strap mind-bending agony (minus the whiskey chaser). Mother-masochist forced me into the world completely sober, and with no mind-alteration to make the experience funny, I cried.

Mother said: "You'll be Fine. Just Fine." So I am.

Three years later Mother and the fates delivered child number three, Rae (she came, she saw, she conquered). Three chasing three created good celestial mojo for another push-and-pop labor. Mother said "go" and Rae stretched and yawned and then walked out laughing and slapping high-fives to the doctors. She already got the joke.

Mother left Dee and me at home with our grandmother when she entered the hospital. When we arrived to get an eyeful of our new sibling and potential competition we were wearing the same clothes Mother left us in. We were hungry. I don't remember anything of that weekend, and I'm glad.

I do remember seeing Rae for the first time. I had to stand on ballerina-toes to see through the glass. Father pointed to show me which one was three, (and I was 3 years-old), and the glass blocked his finger from touching but I tried my best to follow it right to Rae. She was sleeping and sort-of smiling and \*poof\* I was big sister, so I grew 37 inches to reflect it, though nobody noticed but me.

Mother looked upon her children and thought of all things three, like the three Zorya of Slavic mythology, sitting in the Big Dipper and reigning in a giant dog to keep him from eating the world. Their names are Morning, Evening, and Midnight. Mother has all her bases covered.

Mother looked at Dee and me already covering three: dirty, smelly, hungry. She stiffened and knew she must raise warriors. She was there to protect her children; she and no one else.

2.

The magic age of 7: the number of days in a week, the week it took to complete experiment Earth, the 7 layers of heaven observed and recorded by the prophet Muhammad, and there are 4 seasons and 28 days in each moon-cycle, and 7 times 4 is 28.

I already like numbers.

Every 7 days Mother takes us to the library. We can get as many books as we want completely free of charge. When Mother reads she sticks the nail of her first finger in her mouth and props her feet up on the coffee table, and if my legs were a bit longer, I would do this too.

I sit next to Mother, as close as I can without crawling into her lap. I read books my teacher insists are “too hard,” but if Dee and Mother read chapter books without pictures, I do too. Compound words are crazy things, two little words hugging each other to try and trick me, but I decipher their riddle. It’s the words with punctuation seemingly tossed in at random to create shortened versions of words that were never long in the first place that confuse me.

“Hey mommy, what’s this word?” I ask.

“Well,” She begins. “What’s the first part?”

“Should.”

“Okay, well, the next part makes it mean ‘not.’”

“It says ‘should not’?”

“Close. Shouldn’t.”

Oh.

I continue reading, sliding even closer to Mother, because I have an idea. If I steal Mother’s memories I won’t have to ask her so much. I can know every word ever written. Mixed with my own memories I could be wise before Tuesday. I slide close enough to make Mother sweat, and memories pop up along her neck in moisture beads. I gather these drops with my fingertips when she’s reading (and not looking), and I place them in my pocket. Later I release the caged memories to crawl up my arm and into my head, and they’re so pretty I decide to keep them. I think her memories are just like a slideshow, because no one could appreciate them as much as me. All I want to know is everything.

I sit at Mother’s side, stealing, until she sighs and scrapes me off with a spatula.

3.

Mother can sew anything. She sews a flower girl dress for a girl who lives down the street named Aphrodite to make extra money. I’m jealous that the

puffy-sleeved peach-colored gown isn't mine, and Aphrodite knows she looks cute and twirls a circle around my envy.

I want her to bow to Mother and call her the best weaver to ever live before Mother turns her into a spider. She acts like she's a princess and Mother's her peasant, but she'll be sorry when she sees my sisters and me are three and fully capable of fury.

Nine: a magical age of anything goes, three squared, the last of the single digits, the age of the lives of a cat. When you multiply any number by nine the resulting digits add up to nine, as in  $9 \times 9 = 18$ ,  $8 + 1 = 9$ . Hebrews call nine and her nine-pointed star "the symbol of immutable Truth."

When I am nine Mother shows me how to sew. We select a pattern together after flipping through the bloated design books in the back of the fabric store. She helps me pick out something simple and flattering: a straight skirt with elastic waist and pockets. The pockets are my idea. I like to hold things: dropped buttons, seeds, receipts, bits of tinfoil, safety pins, memories, tissues for my never-slowng-down nose, and pennies that just might be lucky if given the chance. The verdict comes in at the end of the good or bad day, when I keep the penny or kiss it and return it to the ground in hopes of things turning out better for someone else.

The chemistry between each person and each penny is unique.

Sewing the pockets is my favorite part. Merry-go-round and round the pocket turns through the sewing machine, not a straight line but a circle made to exactly fit my hand. I insist on double-stitching the pockets so nothing leaks out. I learn there are lots of things involved with sewing: colored pencils and chalk and measuring tape, patterns and pinking shears and threading of bobbins, loose stitching and tight stitching and hemming and pressing.

We sew a lilac purple skirt (not so princess, but purple is a royal color) with pockets (pockets!) and Mother adjusts the hem so it rests just above my knees and I can run and kick like a warrior. I celebrate my skirt by wearing it with everything: button-up shirts with flutter-by necks, T-shirts turned blue from crayon-in-pocket dryer accidents, dressed-up with still-white sweaters Dee used to wear and flat-soled shoes purchased at Payless for under ten dollars.

At school I give a report on how to sew while wearing the purple skirt, complete with visual aids that feature examples of patterns and different types of stitching glued on poster board. I have 50 notecards and an addiction to feigning expertise. I get an A.

That same day, another child's mother comes in to talk to the teacher about an on-going discipline problem. The somber parent-teacher pow-wow happens during lunch and recess and none of us know what's happening; the accused isn't even invited to his trial. When we get back from lunch mother leads child into the hallway with a "come here" finger gesture women perfect

after giving birth. From the hallway comes the sound of smacking and screaming and crying and the whole class falls silent.

The kid comes back into the classroom with his head hanging low, and the mother comes back with her face looking sky-falling-gray, and the teacher thanks that mother over and over again: "Thank you so much for coming in, you've really been a tremendous help..." None of us say anything at all.

And we're quiet for the rest of the day, thinking, stunned and humiliated right along with the victim we can't even gossip about, and as we gather our coats to leave the teacher says, "That's much better!" with regards to our behavior that day.

At the age of 9 I know a lot about fury; I know all three of them. I spend the next school year crushing that teacher's head between my thumb and forefinger every second she isn't looking. Even after draining Mother I don't know everything, but I know that if the curses of children don't fall on deaf ears, in this life or the next, Justice will bring the beaten child's revenge.

4.

Mother has many names. Dee and I give her one: Walk-It-Off. We call her this in comic acknowledgement of her motto. To Mother, sickness is annoying, fear is inconvenient, needy is a sibling to burden, and this strange, clingy character should be left alone on an island with a dull knife and a crust of bread for 48 hours to turn sob into howl. I don't go to the bathroom in public for the first 13 years of my life because I'm too nervous. The feeling of father waiting outside and Mother growing foot-tap impatient is enough for me to will my bladder buffalo-sized, until waiting 8 hours is not a problem. Children aren't born with superpowers; they grow them.

Sometime after the hallway incident a counselor arrives at school to analyze and write papers about the big sad eyes of inner city youth. She arrives to encourage us in transparent ways to turn in crackhead parents, missing-in-action parents, or nothing-a-good-smack-wouldn't-cure parents. She tells us that every (every!) mother loves her children more than her husband or boyfriend; she has to, because mothers are a child's only defenders. The other kids and I exchange glances.

"Really?" I whisper to one.

"I guess so," he whispers back. I'll have to ask Mother about this.

"Hey mom, who do you love more, us or dad?" I ask while Mother folds laundry and herself to recover from a day of taping gauze over breakdowns as a psychiatric nurse. I'm sort of helping with the laundry, but mostly questioning.

Mother thinks for a second. "I love your father a little bit more," she says. Oh.

Even gods and goddesses and superheroes have weaknesses, like vanity and envy and kryptonite. Mother has father. I walk it off.

Mother raises warriors. When I or Dee or Rae falls down and scrapes something, we get up. Mother doesn't spray bactine. She doesn't apply Band-Aids. She doesn't drive to the ER for stitches. Mother says: "Cuts heal if they're allowed to breathe."

5.

Mother plants her children to grow beanstalk big. She waters us with a concoction of Vitamin D milk and aspirin and rose petals and kielbasa, and I grow 300 feet tall. I never have to climb anything; all I have to do is reach. When I stretch the trees turn green with envy. One day I'll ride to school on the back of a bull.

Mother takes me to a library sale, and I don't know how old I am. I know I'm older than 7, because that year we didn't buy anything. Mother cried in the grocery store when other families were buying Thanksgiving turkeys and cranberries that come in a can, because she was taking bread off of her receipt. That day I swallowed her expression and let it leave me full. Her face takes up so much space inside me that while I think about food all the time, when it's in front of me I can never eat it all. Father and Mother call the bits I leave, "bites for the faeries." I think it's a good idea to keep mystical things you only sometimes see happy, and if they eat maybe I will, and Mother won't cry.

This is later than 7, maybe-9, and Mother buys me a book with a worn cloth cover and faded water-color pictures. The illustrations feature faces drawn with too many angles, experiments of geometry. These characters have two expressions: a closed-mouth smile and an "o!" to signify surprise or anger, depending on the direction of the eyebrows. They hold hands too much and cover their faces when they cry and don't have the good sense to have knees. The book is called, *King Arthur and his Knights*. I can read on my own, even the words with extra punctuation, but Mother reads it to me because I ask her. I don't pay much attention to the story; my focus is the music box of Mother's voice, the rising of my head as she inhales, the slow drift back to earth as she deflates.

I only care about Morgan Le Fey, because there's almost nothing written about her. All the book says is that she's a witch, which doesn't make her as interesting as what I've already read about witches, like Baba Yaga running around the woods in a house with chicken legs. I wonder about Morgan as my eyes start to close, because I think you need chickens to be a witch. I long for her dark hair and violet eyes (instantly my beauty ideal), as Mother's heart-tempo walks me down to dream.

6 .

Father comes home and Mother gets up and my head feels cold and I wish Mother would come back but she doesn't, because like every other day father's mad about something. Mother makes coffee while angry father takes each angry stair one angry step at a time. I think this will give me a few

moments before I have to hold my breath again, but he calls me upstairs about a dresser drawer I neglected to close. He points at it as if it were a bucket of freshly mutilated animals, while screaming something unintelligible; it's best to enter the early stages of parent-rant catatonic. I kneel to close the drawer and he kicks me in a hard salute; I fall forward to smack knee against cheap, splitting wood. Father storms away to change out of work clothes.

"I hate daddy!" I announce to Mother as I head downstairs. It's time for my pocket to open and for the loudest secret hiding there to run.

"Why?" Mother asks. *Mother, reach for your armor...*

"He kicked me! I left my dresser drawer open, and he kicked me!" *Mother, your sword. You mustn't forget your sword.*

"Why did you leave your drawer open?"

No, this isn't Mother's answer. She's a goddess. I know it. I've seen her face turn from woman to lioness. I have her memories; I gathered them from the back of her neck and placed them in my pocket. *Mother, we have the same birthmark, I was born on the same day you leapt from the forehead of Zeus. If I know anything, I know this. I know.*

Mother?

I retreat to the room I share with Rae, pale with defeat, and Dee comes in quiet and sits down. "Look," she says, and she pulls the drawer out. I watch as Dee re-aligns it. She has super powers, too.

Later father comes upstairs to Band-Aid my knee.

"Do you still hate me?" he asks, after the cut has been covered so it can't breathe and won't heal.

I am 9 years-old, I can go 8 hours without peeing, and I am 300 feet tall; no one has noticed this yet. Mother hides the face of a lion. I hide the face of a warrior with dark hair and violet eyes. She says: *It seems we've found his Kryptonite.*

"Do you still hate me?" he asks, after the cut has been covered so it can't breathe and won't heal.

"A little," I respond, giddy at how small father looks from afar. With a mind-altering experience to make the whole thing funny, there isn't any reason to cry.

## Contributor Bios

**Dave DeGolyer** has had a variety of jobs, from banking to selling ladies shoes to working in the jewelry business to teaching high school, but it wasn't until recently that he decided to finally to pursue his passion of writing. After living in L.A. for a year, writing a handful of screenplays, Dave enrolled in the MFA in Writing program at Spalding University where his focus is Writing for Children and Poetry. He has found the program to be everything he expected and more.

**Rod Dixon** is from Mt. Washington, Kentucky, although most of his time is spent in Louisville. His current projects include compiling a collection of short stories based loosely off the summer he crossed the country alone on a motorcycle and obtaining his MFA through Spalding University.

**David Harrity** is a writer from Kentucky. He is a graduate of Bellarmine University in Louisville, Kentucky. Currently he is working toward his MFA in poetry at Spalding University. His poems have appeared in *Ars Interpress* (arsint.com), *Blood Lotus* (bloodlotus.org), *The St. Linus Review*, *Riverwind*, *Limestone*, *The Minnetonka Review*, and *Kudzu*. His chapbook, *Morning and What Has Come Since*, is available from Finishing Line Press. For more information, you can visit his blog (davidharrity.blogspot.com).

**A.P. Kruse** lives in her husband's house north of Pittsburgh, PA. She will be graduating with a M.F.A. from Goddard College in July 2006. To pay the bills and to pay the bills only, she is a key-poker in a gray office headed by corporate America.

**J.D. Schraffenberger** is the winner of the *Seattle Review's* 2005 Poetry Contest, and his fiction has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *The Louisville Review*. His other work appears or is forthcoming in *Paterson Literary Review*, *Wisconsin Review*, *Poet Lore*, *Brevity*, *Dogwood*, *Poetry Midwest*, *Valparaiso Poetry Review*, *Fourth River*, *English Journal*, *Syntax*, *the strange fruit*, and elsewhere. He is the editor of *Harpur Palate* and co-director of Binghamton University's annual creative writing conference, Writing By Degrees.

**Amanda Sledz** has both a BA and an MFA in Creative Nonfiction Writing. "One Goddess" is an excerpt from her memoir *9 Dreams of Prison*. Amanda has 14 years of journalism experience, and maintains the online journal *Zori3* (www.zori3.org). She lives in Portland, Oregon with 4 humans and 3 cats.

**James R. Whitley's** work has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and has appeared or is forthcoming in several publications, including *Barrelhouse*,

*Gargoyle*, *Mississippi Review*, *Pebble Lake Review*, and *River City*. His first book *Immersion* won the Naomi Long Madgett Poetry Award. His second book *This Is the Red Door* won the Ironweed Press Poetry Prize and will be published in 2006. He is also the author of two poetry chapbooks: *Pietà* and *The Golden Web*.

**Tanda Word** is finishing her Master's in creative writing at Texas Tech University. She has stories upcoming in *The Oracular Tree* and *Underground Voices*. Tanda is currently trying to finish a collection of short stories for her thesis so she can leave Lubbock and move somewhere with trees, hills, and Jack in the Box.