

Issue #3, September 2006



Rope and Wooden Bridge

by Melanie Neer

In This Issue...

Poems

Jackie White	<i>What I Forgot</i>	3
Melissa Lindstrum	<i>Sestina at O'Hare</i>	5
Will Roby	<i>The Last Day I Spent with my Brother</i>	7
Clare L. Martin	<i>Life Expectancy</i>	8
Sandra Hunter	<i>For the Babies</i>	9
Harriet Leach	<i>Does the Clay Ask the Potter?</i> (two excerpts)	11
J.R. Solonche	<i>Two Short Speeches for Sisyphus</i>	12
M. Alan Cox	<i>Instructions for Form 41-F</i>	13
Lynn Strongin	<i>Old Western</i>	14

Fiction

Spencer Mark	<i>Repo</i>	15
Lowell Mick White	<i>Rocket</i>	23
Jo Lynn Pack	<i>Displacement</i>	31
Christopher C. Vola	<i>The Rope Swing</i>	34
Carol Roh-Spaulling	<i>Day of the Swallows, 1924</i>	44

Nonfiction

Leslie Wolter	<i>Remembering Atom</i>	51
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Contributor Bios		54
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WHAT I FORGOT

*“something leaves its resting place.... I do not know what it is, but I can feel it mounting slowly;
...I can hear the echo of great spaces traversed.” Proust*

When I dropped him off at “Departures,”
I might as well as have been biting down
on that ‘petite madeleine’:

car exhaust and tires swishing dull February
snow against new snow flaking, flew me back
to childhood’s sweet sizzling grease, fried chicken
mom made every August for my birthday.

Suddenly too warm, I pulled away
from the tow-zone curb, steered into
the parking garage gray-slabbed

like the cave-muffled rocks avalanching
my last night’s dream, on our last night,
his birthday, not the smooth cascading

as when we slid along mountain shale and kept
climbing, unafraid. I climbed the escalator,
then stopped, hesitant, wanting more
than our car-door final kiss, but what to say

when I find him at the terminal
thinking we’ve already parted—
approaching the United gate, I see him engaged

in conversation with someone
he could turn easily
into a new friend. If someone

were to take my picture now, it would
look like the photo of my great Aunt,
choked in an awkward frock, a timid girl

stunned against smiling; it would become
just another memento, pearl-gray like
that February rehearsed during this one

because another man has asked
for my hardest memory:

from what distance did I watch him
walk down the jetway and fade,

watch myself not call out to him,
watch him not ever turn around.

I felt the same scratchy heat
of roof shingles in summer
when I used to crawl out

my bedroom closet window.
I had forgotten:
I used to like watching jets go by.

SESTINA AT O'HARE

Okay— so you're not
the love of my life.
But then I can't explain
why I want to know
if you like your toast
burnt or medium light.

There may be a *slight*
spark: that's friction, not
forever. Say I make a toast
at our hypothetical wedding— *Life*
is strange as soap, you know—
as if that explained

the antibacterial orange, explained
away the bottle of light
pink cream next to it. I know
Dial's not Dove. Dial's not
what I buy. But if we lived
together, I'd have to be prepared. So my toast

would be a plea. My toast
would beg collaboration, not explanation
for colored liquids or the ways I live.
If I marry, I want to flick on the light
in the bathroom and feel comfort, not
an urge to color coordinate. No,

not soaps anyway. Do you know
what I'm getting at? Do you burn your toast
all the time or just at lunch, not
unless you're dunking it in 3:00 coffee? Explain
why I care, explain how you light
up when I ask the details of daily life,

why I work to keep this living
when I can't stand you and can't stand knowing
it's not serendipity. Two hours and my flight
takes off for continental breakfasts and French toast
on china plates. Once, I explained
how I hated china. You forgot, and I'm not

Melissa Lindstrum

upset, but I'll have you know I like my toast
a shade lighter than cinnamon. I explained
that once, too. My life, you don't notice.

THE LAST DAY I SPENT WITH MY BROTHER

He asks if Lubbock was built on a hill.
I tear the cigarette filters off for him, his pills
scattered on my counter like a galaxy.
An ancient needle taps against
an even older teacup; the hazy smoke he makes,
the smell of dope and pregnant paint.
I feel as if I've been invited to the king's fox hunt.
His hiker's pack is full and damp, he only coughs "Alaska"
between tics and gentle velvet laughter.
A fishing boat, or crab deck, or any dry spot
big enough to tuck his body into sleep—
it is this distant moldy home he's after.
I'm making him read "Junky". He's on the final chapter.
The skin around his eyes is bubble gum.
I watch him push the pills into his arm.
The television's on, they're selling plans,
they're singing to my brother and me. The room
is hot and cold at the same time. He sighs.
I try to tell him how it feels to shed a rhyme,
or what it is to wake up to a bird's song and not worry.
But we sit together, lunch in bags between our feet,
and the web some spider'd spent epochs to build
taps against the back of my neck. We perch,
our backs against the wall. Falafel balls
and baba ganouge; Phillip holds the spoon
like a broken limb, his hands are glowing
in the heathen noon light from the doorframe.
A bird sits on the window. It is graceful as a pineapple.

LIFE EXPECTANCY

The nurse at my side has no love.
She watches TV, eats Chinese & takes my pills.
Switches my sopped diaper for a fresh
one just before the next sitter arrives.

She tells me crows are eating fat, purple figs.
Gently takes my hand, slips off my rings.
Dropped in her purse, they clink like coins.

I am a moon in the mirror. I've forgotten my face.
I have two bodies. One is a cold trap.
The other is a mist over the bed, a beaded pain.

I can't remember if I have children.
If I did, they would be stones.
I have only slivers of memories—
a dark-eyed girl
follows a ghost into a bathroom,
is knocked into a dream.
In the shower
she flows to the drain.

FOR THE BABIES

if I have to hear about
one more baby being raped
or tortured
or mutilated

I'll have to kill someone

it will have to be some stranger
since I don't know
any baby rapers

at least, I don't think I do

and anyway
picking a random someone
would be appropriate
symbolic

I would use a knife or a gun
or a rope or an ice-pick
standard stuff

I don't know much about the
killing business
but I'm sure I'd pick it up quickly

and after he was dead
the random guy
the tree trimmer
the ice-cream man
the plumber

I'd carve something on his chest
'this one's for the babies'
yeah

but maybe that's not symbolic enough

maybe I should pick someone famous
not like Jay Leno or Ryan Seacrest
but someone people don't like much

or maybe Ryan Seacrest

then I'd use the knife or the gun
or the rope or the ice-pick

and then I'd be arrested
and people would be angry, confused
'why Jay?' 'why Ryan?'

and I'd tell them—
it's for the babies
someone's got to do something

and they'd say—
she's crazy

and they'd tie me up
and put me on a plane
and when we reached cruising altitude
they'd push me out

to fly down
to the wide warm ocean
that would not part gently
but receive me
like a fat slab of concrete
and I'll say—
but this one's for the babies
the sweet sad babies left on shelves
left in boxes
left at home in the evenings
left to unlock the front doors
and sit at the table doing their homework
left to find something,
maybe old pasta or fish fingers,
in the refrigerator
left to remember to lock the front door
left to wait for the footsteps of
the man who doesn't need to break in
to reach them

DOES THE CLAY ASK THE POTTER?

V. Doubt

One more poem, or two, or maybe three
will trace the lines God writes upon my heart.
Here among the sisters who feel called
to serve the diocese or serve their God,
I find myself compelled to try to see
if God has plans for me, if God has words.
I need a saving touch upon my head,
a feeling that can save me from my doubt,
a sense that God is real despite my doubt,
a courage to believe though many doubt.
I've ditched old Jesus time and time again
but it may turn out that he's my friend.
I am reaching for him while my ears
suck music as a treatment for my fears.

VI. The Metaphysical

If I ever learn, the singer sings,
what my heart already knows. I think
I need to sing these lyrics to myself.
I wreck my head by trying to find out
the very simple truths that dwell in me.

My poetry is metaphysical
only when I let go of the science
I was raised with, when I turn my back
on my parents scorn of what is mystical.
Letting go of all this makes me happy.

I think of all the people far away
that I would like to see, to whom I'd say
it's not just some unhealthy quirk of mine
that I am drawn to God, to the divine.

TWO SHORT SPEECHES FOR SISYPHUS

First Speech: While Ascending

I torment my tormentor.
How?
I shut him out of it.
See how I punish myself
by pushing this stone I cut
from this mountain
up this mountain I built.

Second Speech: While Descending

How adaptable we humans are.
After several hundred years,
I learned to sleep on my way down.
I take my time.
No one pushes me.
After several hundred more,
I taught myself to dream the same
dream each time:
To go up the mountain without the stone.
I'm working on the next one now:
I was never born.

INSTRUCTIONS FOR FORM 41-F

Down by the docks there's a patch of weeds that blooms into blue flowers smelling of rotting apples and the wind that blew from your grandmother's rose garden through your bedroom window on summer nights, after you were sent to bed early, before it was dark outside. Pick the flowers, give them to the woman you love she'll be gone before you say you're sorry for the terrible things you said to her mother in the story you wrote—the one that was picked up by a minor anthology even though it was little more than a journal you kept after you graduated with a degree from a prestigious institution, a raging case of pubic lice, and an option to buy an early colonial house for fifty cents on the dollar.

Go left at the bar with the broken mirror, find a building with a child's face preserved as a small smudge, upstairs at the end of the hall there's always a single bulb humming work your way through a maze constructed by slaves who carried stacks of magazines, purchased from the corner, twenty-four hours a day for more than three weeks. At the center a short man wearing a hand-tailored silk suit can sell you the papers proving you inhabit a nest for when the tax-man comes running with a sack and a stick with a point whittled into one end. Slip him a five he'll go after your neighbors with the fury of starving brown bear.

OLD WESTERN

*Even the wind wishes
to become a cart
pulled by butterflies. (Adonis, translated from the Arabic) "Celebrating Childhood"*

An old western: in the hospital on stretchers, frail pale
birds we were wheeled in to witness Gene Autrey & Dale Evans;
That blood orange sun
That trigger-heart

Noon came Bending things

In & out of the culture:
guilt for naming
the nameless

had no strength to break a wishbone:

Downeast we were little Puritans;
buckled into ward-cots
restrainers
blending
like fire
with crackling swale of gun-sheen twilight, slipping the holster off
a dry rattle like a bird's cough
a cool glass of water sleep for the son of woman, and the daughter
not mine nor yours nor anybody's fault.
The whole world glistening like dark salt.

REPO

At half past midnight on January 2, Rick pulls up to Walter's house in his Ram pick-up, still pulling the empty car trailer after a long day of futile searching for the Corvette stolen from his body shop. He was hoping the thief was just a high-school punk craving a joyride and would abandon the '53 cherry red classic when thoughts of prison started smacking some sense into him or when the punk got sleepy enough he wanted to go home. But Rick's been all over town, scoping parking lots, alleys, residential streets, trailer parks.

For a moment, although Rick is looking at Walter's dark, silent house gripped by the frigid night, he sees a garishly lit chop shop full of smoke and sparks, hears the screams of amputated steel—imagines his baby mutilated.

A street light shines down on Walter's driveway and Walter's Goddamned stupid ugly Mercury Marquis, and Rick sees that someone has touched up his vandalism of early yesterday morning.

The spray-painted blue squiggles and "OLD DICK" are still on the car, but added are big yellow daisy-like flower petals to the ends of the squiggles. Added in front of "OLD DICK" is the letter "B" and to the end an exclamation mark so that the side of the car now says "BOLD DICK!" Below it now are the words "HAPPY NEW YEAR!"

Ricks says aloud, "Clever, Linda. Real Goddamn clever." He puts his truck in gear.

A portable sign out front of Taco Shack says "OPEN ALL NIGHT." When Rick walks in, a pimply teenage boy is sweeping the floor, and a pimply teenage girl is behind the counter, looking down at the front of her orange and brown uniform and scratching at something crusty. She straightens up when Rick approaches and beams at him. "Welcome to Taco Shack. Would you like to try our special, the new Buffalo Beef Burrito?"

"Hello, ah. . . ." Rick looks at her name tag, but instead of her name it says "Taco Girl." Rick clears his throat. "You take checks?"

"If it's local."

"Great 'cause I'm starved." He reaches into his back pocket for his checkbook. "I'll have that special Buffalo Burrito and an orange soda."

He leans on the counter to write. Floating all over the pink check like clouds are fluffy white cats that look like Linda's cat, Paris Hilton. Printed at the top of the check is "Linda Deprue Parsons or Rick Parsons." He hands the check to Taco Girl, who gives it a half grin. Rick turns around and watches Taco Boy sweep.

A girl is sitting in a corner by herself. Black hair, black blouse, short black jacket, short black skirt, black eye-shadow, black lipstick. She has a nose ring. She takes a bite out of a crunchy taco that disintegrates in her

hand. When she catches him staring at her, she glares at him. Then she gives him the finger. The fingernail is painted black.

Taco Girl slides Rick's tray across the counter, and he carries it to a corner booth. Just as he starts eating, the girl in black slides into his booth, crowding him against the wall. She flicks out her tongue and wags it, a silver stud glistening.

Rick says, "I don't, ah, know you, do I?"

"Nobody knows me. Listen. I want you to help me."

He nods. "If you need a hand out, I can write you a check."

"You're a hit man, aren't you?"

"What?"

"You got that hit man look."

He smiles. "You're cute."

"Yeah, I'm cute. I know. I want you to kill my mother."

"What?"

She opens and closes her fists several times. "Do you do mothers? I don't care how you kill her, as long as you kill her. You can stab her eyes out or slit her scrawny chicken neck or blow her two ugly faces off. Doesn't matter to me. I just want her dead."

"Two faces?"

Rick looks around at Taco Boy, who seems to be listening and has stopped sweeping the floor. Taco Boy jerks upright, looks away, and starts sweeping again, moving away.

"Like, I don't care how much blood there is or anything. Cause she'll be dead, and she won't be able to make me clean it up."

"You go to the high school?"

"What makes you think I'm still in high school? I'm nineteen. Actually, I'm twenty. What does that have to do with killing my mother? Can you do it right now? I'll write down the address. It's not far from here."

"Ah, tell me, ma'am. How you planning to pay me?"

"I'll write you a check."

"Maybe I got other people to kill right now."

She ignores him. She pulls out a pen and writes on a napkin.

"See. Here's our address. Nobody else is ever there."

"What about your dad?"

"He took off years ago. A *very* smart man."

"What about your mom's boyfriends?"

"I think she's a closet lesbian. Or she's trying to grow back her virginity or something."

"She as good looking as you?"

"Jesus. I want you to kill her, not have sex with her. Besides you'd have to put a bag over her head. I swear. A Freddy Kruger mask would be an improvement. Listen. I'm not going to talk to you anymore unless you're going to be serious. Can you be serious? Can you focus? Do you have Adult ADD?"

“I can focus.”

“Good. Now like I said, nobody’s there. Except my little brother. He’s twelve. You can do him, too. I don’t care. He’s a pain in the ass. The phone number’s on here, too, so you can call any time and make sure she’s there. You’ll recognize her voice. She doesn’t sound anything like me. She sounds like a bullfrog because she’s smoked for like eighty years, like since she was two. If she answers, just say, ‘Sorry, ma’am, I was just trying to call my mama. I guess I dialed wrong. I’m very sorry. I hope I didn’t disturb you. I hope you can forgive me. I hope you have a nice day. God bless you.’ Like that. Be real polite. She thinks polite people and preppie types can’t possibly be psycho. Only rude freaks, like me. Don’t do any heavy breathing or anything because you’ll spook her, and she’ll call the cops. She calls the cops every time she hears a noise outside, like one of my friends coming over after—God forbid—eight o’clock at night, or if somebody calls and says, ‘Is Candy there?’ So be polite as hell. Show her that there are still some decent people in the world. Then go to the house and kill the bitch. So when do you think you can do her?”

She looks him in the eyes, her tongue out, the silver stud glistening. She presses the napkin into his hand. Rick looks at her hand in his. He studies her face, her black eyes. Then he looks her over again. Her legs are bare.

“I bet your legs are cold.”

“I like the cold. Now, are you going to—”

“What’s your name? Is your name Candy?”

“God, no. I don’t have a name. If you get caught, I don’t want you saying who hired you.”

“You like cars?”

She shrugs. “They’re okay. I like the Batmobile.”

“Well, I don’t have a Batmobile, but I’ve got a sixty-eight Camaro convertible back at my house. I need to charge the battery but—”

“How old are you? You’re pretty old, aren’t you? Like thirty? Thirty-five?”

“How old are you? You’re pretty young, aren’t you?”

“I already told you. I’m twenty-one. I have a feeling you’re not going to do my mother tonight, are you?”

They’re in the back seat of his Camaro, parked in his pitch-black garage.

“Oh God, God, yes, Guido!”

“Who?”

“Don’t stop, Guido!”

“Who’s Guido?”

“You’re Guido. Guido . . . the hit man.”

“Rick.”

“Huh?”

He stops. "My name's Rick."

"Don't stop, Guido!"

"You like this?"

"I've never had an old guy before."

"Old?"

"Nothing like an old—"

"Huh?" Rick stops again.

"Don't stop, Guido!"

"Okay. Okay."

"Yeah. I hear guys get better . . . and better . . . with age. Yeah, Guido. Yeah. Until they're like . . . ninety. Then they're like . . . dead . . . dead. Yeah. But like some guy who's like, yeah, sixty, is going to be . . . fan . . . tastic."

Rick stops.

"Don't stop, Guido! Don't *stop*. Hey, what's wrong? Did I say something wrong?"

Rick's truck is the only vehicle on the dark streets, the empty trailer rattling behind. In the distance, Taco Shack is lit up.

The girl mutters, "I'm sorry for whatever I said. Jesus weeps, man."

"It's not your fault. It's nothing. It's just that my wife left me a couple of nights ago. And I got a fifty-three Vette stolen on top of that."

"You've got a wife? Really? I did it with a married guy? That's just too cool!"

"You got a car at Taco Shack?"

"Yeah. Man, I can't wait to tell Kelly. Kelly's my—"

"We're home." They pull into the parking lot of Taco Shack. Rick stops his truck next to a beat-up Ford Escort. "I bet that's it."

"Yeah, it is."

Staring into Taco Shack, he sees Taco Girl and Taco Boy sitting on the counter by the cash register holding hands. While he's watching, they kiss. He keeps staring and wonders why the girl hasn't gotten out of his truck yet.

Then in a voice she hasn't used before, she says, "I really am sorry about whatever I said . . . Rick. Listen. I'd like to see you again."

Still looking inside Taco Shack, he says, "To plan your mother's murder?"

"Maybe we could go ride around in your Camaro when you get a new battery."

"I don't know"

"I really am eighteen. And you said your wife bolted on you."

"Eighteen. That's good to know."

"You got my number."

"I do?"

"On the napkin."

“Yeah.”

She opens the truck door. “See you, Rick.”

He looks at her now, and she seems awfully young. She gets out, closes the door. He watches her get into her car. The Escort sputters, a cloud of gray rising and dissipating in the black sky. She stops before pulling onto the street, and he notices her brake lights don’t work. She turns a corner and is gone, but he can hear her grinding the gears. He looks at the empty passenger seat and says, “What’s your name?”

A couple of neighborhood dogs start barking. All is still and dark in the houses, but the night is vibrant with the barking of the dogs and the idling of his truck in the middle of Walter’s street. Standing in the dim yellow light of the porch lamp, he looks around. He presses the doorbell and fidgets, prepares for the door to open, pulls back his shoulders, clears his throat. He presses the doorbell again. Waits again. Then he uses the door knocker. His breath puffs out into the cold air.

He hits the door with his fist.

“Linda!” he shouts. “Linda! I just want you to know . . . I do *not* care!” He swallows hard. There is no movement in the house. “I don’t care. I don’t care. I found somebody else. *She . . . makes . . . love . . . like . . . a . . .*” He looks around for a word. “A *goddess!*”

Rick pauses, his breath a thick fog.

More dogs are barking.

“I hope mad dogs rip the flesh off your bones. I hope cockroaches lay eggs in your brain. I hope snakes crawl up—”

Rick pauses. Then he slams the door with his fist again.

“I . . . I don’t care! I don’t care that you don’t . . . I don’t care . . . cause . . . I . . . am . . . happy!”

Linda flings open the door. Walter is behind her, slightly stooped, his gray head bent forward, and on his cracked old face is—of all things—a smile. But Rick quickly realizes that it’s the nervous smile of a man anticipating getting his ass kicked.

Linda wags her finger in Rick’s face, the gesture of a schoolmarm. Her robe loosens, deep cleavage revealed. “I’m calling the sheriff next time you show up here. The sheriff used to be one of Walter’s students. One of his *best* students.”

Rick staggers back a step, spreads his arms, his palms out.

“Linda. You used to think I was slick.” He’s repulsed by his own whine.

“Yeah,” she sneers. “Like shit.”

Rick stares at her, then turns away, walks slowly toward his truck.

Linda slams the door at his back.

When he reaches his truck, he pauses with his hand on the driver’s door. Then he reaches into the tool box below the back window and pulls out a ball-peen hammer.

He turns and marches toward the front door of Walter's house, but when he almost gets to it, he veers toward the Mercury Marquis in the driveway.

He focuses on the words "BOLD DICK! HAPPY NEW YEAR!" Each smashing blow of the hammer echoes in the cold night. Linda bursts from the house with Walter several steps behind. She stops half way between the front door and the driveway.

"You're paying for this, Rick."

He swings the hammer again. "Oh, yeah! How about if I just buy you and Walter a new car. I'll just charge it on one of my maxed-out credit cards. Now isn't that the thing to do, Linda? Isn't that *your way*?"

Linda turns to Walter. "Stop him, Walter. Go on, for God's sake. Stop him. Don't let him totally destroy your car."

Walter hesitates. "But—"

Linda shrieks in his old face, "Go on!"

Walter approaches Rick, his long head bowed, his shoulders stooped a bit. Rick pauses in hammering the car and looks at him. Walter has raised his hand. Dangling from his long fingers is a key chain with a couple of keys on it.

"What the hell, Wally? You want to give me your car? This *fine* Mercury Marquis? No, you keep it. If I had to drive it, I'd be puking every second."

Linda hollers, "Tell him, Walter. Goddamn it."

Walter stammers. "Well, Linda and I decided Well, we discussed it this afternoon . . . that you should . . . should repaint it. She says you're a very good body man. Very talented, she says."

Linda sighs, her breath a plume of smoke. "Jesus Christ, Walter. Next thing you'll be kissing him."

Walter's hand comes closer. "Here are the keys so you can . . . can take it to your shop."

Rick stares at him.

Linda says, "Leave your truck for us to drive in the mean time." Walter is shivering, and his eyes are watery. "I understand," he says. He raises his other hand as though he's going to put it on Rick's shoulder, but Rick gives him such a look of horror that Walter drops the hand. "Love is a powerful thing. And a mystery. Fifteen years ago when Linda was at the high school, I never dreamed I know how you must feel, Rick. I'm sure that if we can just be mature about all this—"

Linda says, "We expect to have it back in two days. Good as new. Or we're pressing charges."

Rick looks at her. Then he turns and hits the car with the hammer again. He turns to Walter. "And, Wally, I don't mean not to be *mature* about this . . . but"

Rick whirls to give the car the most vicious blow yet and flings the hammer back over his shoulder. He feels it slip at the height of its arc, his hand suddenly empty, catching in the corner of his eye the spin of the hammer, its sudden impact with Walter's forehead.

Walter stands with his hand on his head. Rick stares at him. Linda stares at Walter, too, her hands reaching out to him but frozen.

Then Walter takes his hand away, and it's covered with blood glistening purplish in the light of the street lamp. He drops to his knees.

Linda wails, "You murdered him!"

"No. I No."

Lights come on in neighbors' houses.

Rick points at Walter, who is still on his knees.

"See. He's okay."

Walter falls face-down on the grass.

Linda comes unfrozen and rushes to Walter and kneels beside him.

"Honey buns!"

Rick shudders, then runs toward his truck, but somebody's in it and is driving away.

"What the hell? Stop!"

Rick leaps onto the running board and tries to open the door, but it's locked. The driver's window comes down, and Rick is face to face with a gaunt figure, the cheeks sunken, the eyes hollowed out by shadows, the nose flattened, the teeth protruding and crumbling.

Rick says, "Holy Jesus!", and jumps down from the running board.

The truck stops.

"You're repo-ed, my man."

Rick watches his truck's tail lights shrink and finally disappear. The car trailer sits in the middle of the street.

He hears sirens.

Linda shouts from Walter's yard, "I called the cops, asshole!"

"Never mind. It was Grim Stanky, the repo man. Why in the hell didn't you make the truck payments?"

"Rick! Reality check." She points to Walter, who is still face down on the grass.

Neighborhood lights are flicking on all around Rick. The sirens are getting louder. "Walter's okay. He'll be okay, I bet. I didn't mean to—" Rick goes over to Walter and turns him over. Walter's eyes are closed. "Come on. Wake up."

Linda kneels on the frozen ground. "Oh, God, is he breathing? Is he breathing? I don't think he's breathing."

The sirens get louder.

Rick notices the keys to the Marquis on the ground. He grabs them and jumps into the car.

It backs out of the driveway with the sluggishness he expected. The vinyl seat is icy and stiff. He can't believe anybody would put plastic-simulated-wood-grain on a dashboard. He slaps the gearshift into "drive" and floors it,

Spencer Mark

the car warily awakening to this new touch, a young man's hand. In the rear-view mirror, swirling lights descend on Walter's house. There's play in the steering wheel. Rick's nostrils flare to the stink of Brute aftershave and Ben Gay.

ROCKET

Just before they left to take their son to the Cub Scout Space Fair, Jennings learned that his wife was having an affair. She told him so herself. The news numbed Jennings: he could barely think straight. He sat on the couch while Betsy went and made sure their son was ready, and then the three of them got in the car and Jennings drove—silently, slowly, cautiously, aware that his life had just changed for the worse—down to the United Methodist Church, where the monthly meeting and Space Fair was being held. Jennings parked the car at the first spot he came to, at the top of a small hill some two blocks from the church. They got out and Jennings looked across the roof of the car at his wife.

“Why did you tell me that?” he asked.

“Because I always tell you everything,” Betsy said. “I always do.”

“Why did we park so far away?” Richard, their son, asked.

“Be quiet,” Jennings said. He turned and walked quickly down the hill to the church.

At the meeting, Jennings stood in the back of the room and watched everyone—all the other men, that is, the dads, wondering who Betsy was sleeping with. There were sixty or so energetic little boys with blue shirts and different kinds of space helmets running around and making noise but he could not focus on them. They weren't even a distraction. All he could think about was Betsy. She hadn't told him—refused to tell him—who she was sleeping with. And she always tells me everything, he thought. Sure! It could be anybody. Betsy was sitting right in front of him on a metal folding chair, talking with some of the other moms, and every time he glanced down at the back of Betsy's head he pictured her on her back with her legs wrapped around a faceless man, with a thin strange smile on her face. He felt sick.

“Are you okay?”

“Huh?” Jennings looked around. It was Joan Jordan, Richard's Den Mother. Den 3—the Place to Be. She had dark eyes and looked worried.

“I asked if you're okay. You don't look so good.”

“I guess I'm fine.”

Joan frowned, as if she didn't believe him, and he looked away, suddenly embarrassed. He could see his son, Richard, standing behind a table holding the rocket they had built. He was chattering away to some other scouts. Showing off again.

“Well, if you say so,” Joan said after a moment.

Jennings shrugged, sniffed, glanced at the back of Betsy's head in front of him, and his heart skipped a beat. The pregnancy test! Fuck! He hadn't even thought of that until just now. A few weeks earlier Betsy had been a bit late and had gotten frantic—almost hysterical—forcing Jennings to make a midnight trip to the all-night grocery store to buy a pregnancy testing kit. And

when the color did not change—when she finally came to believe the test—Betsy had been so happy, almost giddy. They drank a bottle of wine and watched a movie, and made love. And all the time Betsy had been thinking about—him. The other guy. She'd been afraid she was pregnant with his kid. The numbness and shock Jennings had felt vanished, and he was suddenly furious.

“What do you think of the space helmets?” Joan asked.

“What?” Jennings looked back at Joan. In his anger he found he was glaring at her, and he looked away. “Oh,” he said, “the space helmets. They're wonderful.”

Betsy, sitting in front of Jennings, turned around and glanced at him, then whispered something to the Mom sitting next to her, who laughed. Jennings' heart pounded. He took a breath.

“Really,” he said, forcing himself to smile stiffly at Joan, “they're great helmets. You must've put a lot of work into them, huh?”

Joan had a job and was raising a son by herself but always seemed to find time to do artsy-craftsy stuff. She'd made the helmets for the scouts of Den 3 out of empty ice cream buckets, cutting out a panel and replacing it with clear plastic for a vision port, and installing little lights on the top.

“It wasn't that big a deal,” Joan said. She looked over at Richard. “Richard's got the best rocket. I bet you sort of helped him with it a little, huh?”

“Well, no,” Jennings lied. “I just sort of had the concept.”

Joan laughed. “Sure you did.”

Across the room, some scout from Den 5 said something to Richard and Richard handed the rocket across the table to him. The scout from Den 5 was obviously impressed with it. Jennings shook his head.

“Listen” Joan said. “I've got to go. I'll call you this week about the field trip.”

“Okay,” Jennings said. “I'll talk to you later.”

Joan squeezed his arm. “Take care of yourself, Jinx—really.”

“Okay.”

Jennings watched her cross the room and say something to her little boy— another scout, Richard's best friend – when he became aware that Betsy had turned around and was looking at him. She was smiling. He felt like striking her.

“What do you want?” he asked.

“Nothing,” Betsy said.

They were putting on their jackets in the church hallway, and Betsy leaned over to Jennings.

“You could be a little less obvious with Joan Jordan,” she said.

“What?” Jennings took a step closer to his wife and lowered his voice; there were other people in the hallway, of course, and he didn't want anyone else to hear. “What?”

“I wouldn't blame you,” Betsy said.

“You know there's—nothing.”

“I know she likes you. I know she's divorced.” Betsy looked at him. Her eyes were a very dark, almost bitter blue and to Jennings they were unfathomable. It was like looking into the eye of a cat, or a crow.

“Betsy, you're fucking crazy.”

Richard came bobbing up then, wearing his helmet, carrying the big white rocket in his arms. There was a red ribbon stuck to the rocket booster: a second place winner.

“I mean, what the hell—are you trying to make some excuse for what you did?” Jennings was glaring at his wife. “Huh? By making up some shit about me and Joan?”

“Everybody thought the rocket was great,” Richard said.

Jennings looked down at Richard. “Yeah, I saw everybody thinking it was great. I saw you showin' off, too.”

Betsy bent over and helped Richard put his jacket on—difficult, because he would not take the rocket out of his arms. She looked up at Jennings.

“I just want you to know that you have options.”

Jennings stared at her. “No, I don't,” he said. “I don't have anything.” Betsy stood up and shook her head. She patted Richard on the back of his space helmet.

“C'mon, Richie, let's go home.”

Outside it was cool and clear, and Jennings and Betsy walked silently up the hill to where they were parked. But Richard was excited and babbling about the meeting.

“Everybody liked the rocket,” he said. “Everybody wanted to see it.”

“Yeah, I saw,” Jennings said. “I saw you behind that table going, 'This is mine, I built it! I built it!' Just showing off like everything.”

“I wasn't showing off. I never said I built it.”

“Don't lie to me, Richard.”

“I'm not – “

Jennings meant to give Richard a rap—sharp, but friendly—on the side of his hard plastic space helmet, but Richard turned just then to look at him—to say he wasn't a liar—and the back of Jennings' hand burst through the clear plastic and struck Richard on the mouth.

“Ow!” Richard dropped the rocket and put his hands over his face. Jennings watched him, appalled at what he had done.

Betsy knelt down and pulled Richard's hands away from his face.

“Are you okay?”

Richard bobbed his head—it was hard to tell if he bobbed it side-to-side no or up-and-down yes—and took off running up the street to the car.

Betsy picked the rocket off the sidewalk and stood, holding it under her arm.

“Way to go, Jinx,” she said.

Jennings came by Richard's room to check on him before bed. Richard was in his pajamas, sitting under the covers, holding an unopened book in his hand. He was staring at the wall and frowning, and his eyes were brimming with tears. Richard's cat, Mouse, was laying across his lap, and watched Jennings enter the room.

“You okay?”

Richard didn't say anything. Jennings looked around the room. The space helmet with the busted visor sat on his dresser next to the rocket. Jennings felt like crying, too.

He touched the top of Richard's head and looked at him closely. The swelling was already going down, but there was still that damned chipped tooth, right where his heavy gold wedding ring had rapped the incisor. He bent to kiss Richard on the forehead but Richard pulled away. His movement disturbed the cat, who jumped to the floor and stretched.

“Better go to bed now,” Jennings said. “We'll get you to the dentist tomorrow to see about that tooth.” He walked to the door and turned off the light. “I love you, Richard.”

Jennings shut the door behind him, feeling an utter failure.

Betsy was sitting on the couch, waiting for him, when he entered the living room.

“Do you want talk?” she asked.

“I don't see what there is to talk about,” Jennings said. The cold fury returned. “You've lied to me, you've cheated on me, you've destroyed our family—what else is there to say?”

“That's only one aspect of what's going on between us,” Betsy said. “I was wondering if you wanted to talk about what you've done to me.”

“What?” Jennings was dumbfounded.

“You don't get it, do you? You always go around thinking you're so damn perfect.”

“Don't you tell me what I think.”

“You always blame other people for your faults—it's like you can't even see what's going on around you. And you're not even here half the time.”

Jennings thought for a moment. “Yeah,” he said, “I know, I had to go to Cincinnati for that damn TEPPS project, but—well, I had to go.”

“For six weeks? No, you didn't. You could have said you weren't going. You wanted to go.”

That was true enough, but Jennings didn't feel that he had to apologize for liking his job. It had nothing to do with what was going on now, between him and Betsy.

“And then they sent you to Ogden, and then they sent you to Andover, and next week you're going to Atlanta.”

“Well, hell, you seem to get along just—” Jennings had a sudden deadly flashing image of Betsy on her back again, with her legs in the air, and her toes curled. In the vision she was smiling. He swallowed hard. “You get along just fucking fine without me.”

“Yeah, I do,” Betsy said. “I do.”

“Fucking whore.”

“I am not a whore,” Betsy said calmly. She lit a cigarette and blew smoke at him. “If you knew anything at all about me you'd know that.”

“Oh, go to hell.” Jennings was pacing back and forth across the room. It didn't seem at all possible that this was happening.

“It's not too late for you to change, Jinx,” Betsy said. “But you have to make up your mind that you want to change.”

“Oh, piss,” Jennings said. “I didn't do anything wrong.”

“Jinx, you're never here to do anything! Don't you get it?”

Jennings stopped pacing and stood across the coffee table from Betsy.

“Listen,” he said. “Did you fuck him in this house?”

Betsy looked surprised. “That's not important,” she said.

“It's important to me.”

Betsy shrugged. “Well, sure.”

“You fucked him in this house?” Jennings couldn't believe the pain he felt. It was unbearable. He looked for something to smash—he grabbed a lamp and threw it across the room, where it banged into the bookcase, knocking the bookcase over, scattering books and family pictures and Richard's bronzed baby shoes.

“Jinx, stop it!”

Richard sat on his bed in the dark, furious, listening to his parents fight. He could still see in his mind his father's hand come whipping out of the darkness, still feel the impact of it on his lips, and the dull taste of the plastic. His eyes were teary and burning – not over the blow itself or the pain of the tooth but from anger—fury—over the sheer injustice of it all.

He slapped me!

In the light seeping in under the door from the hallway, Richard could see the pointed shape of the rocket sitting ready on his dresser. The rocket was the problem. All Mrs. Jordan had said for the project was to build a rocket out of scrap material, and Richard had gone down into the basement and screwed together a few lengths of spare pipe for the fuselage, and he was trying to fit a nose cone of some sort on when his Dad came down and laughed at his rocket and said, Richard, you know that's not good enough. So they went to the Home Depot and bought three feet of eight inch aluminum vent pipe and came home, and his Dad had spread all the tools and everything out on the workroom floor and got to work building a rocket. His big, club-like hands (he

slapped me!) were very skillful and he quickly attached a big red funnel on top for a nose cone, and then sniped out some triangular pieces of tin for the fins, and riveted them on, and then they painted it white (Richard was allowed to paint a little, though his Dad did the detail work) and then there was the finished rocket—his Dad's rocket.

Richard thought: Dad's just jealous. Everybody was saying I built it—he didn't like that. He wanted all the credit for himself. I didn't even want him to build it—never asked him to.

Something hit the wall of the living room with a thud and then there was a crash, and his mother yelled something.

Richard got out of bed, biting his lip, tears in his eyes. He crossed the room and took the rocket from the top of the dresser.

Betsy knelt over the broken lamp, trying somehow to make the lamp shade round again.

“Damn it, Jinx, all our lives you've left me to pick up after you.” Her voice was thick.

“Oh, sure,” Jennings said, “I suppose you'd rather be picking up after your goddamn boyfriend then, huh?”

“You don't know what you're talking about, Jinx,” Betsy said. “You never do. You just—” She stopped, looking past him.

Jennings turned around.

Richard was standing in his pajamas, frowning, eyes full of tears, cradling the big rocket across his chest.

“Richard, go back to bed,” Jennings said.

Richard threw the rocket on the floor. “I don't want it,” he said. “I didn't ask for it.”

Then he turned and ran back down the hall, stocking feet softly padding on the carpet. The bedroom door slammed.

“You little son of a bitch,” Jennings said, quietly. He looked at the rocket laying on the carpet, and remembered all the fun they'd had building it. Now Richard didn't want it. First Betsy didn't want him, and now Richard. “You little son of a bitch!”

“Jinx, don't,” Betsy said.

Jennings crossed the room and scooped up the rocket.

“Don't do anything stupid, Jinx! Let him alone.”

“Go to hell,” Jennings said. He stomped down the hallway and kicked open the door of Richard's bedroom and hurled the rocket into the darkened room as hard as he could. “Goddamn you, boy,” he said. “You're gonna take it!”

“I didn't do anything!” Richard yelled from the darkness.

“Where are you?” Jennings hit the light. Richard was sitting on his bed, squinting, frowning at his father. “Come here.”

“I didn't do anything!”

“Jennings, don't!” Betsy was standing behind Jennings in the doorway. Jennings kicked the rocket across the room—it banged against Richard's desk and the nose cone came off and rolled under the bed.

“You don't want it, huh? Well, by god, then, you don't have to have it.”

Jennings crossed the room and grabbed Richard by the arm and dragged him out of bed. Richard yelled.

“Jennings, don't be an asshole,” Betsy said.

“He doesn't want the goddamn rocket.” Still holding Richard by the arm, Jennings bent over and picked up the rocket and hurled it at the window. The window shattered but the blind kept the rocket from going through and it fell back onto the top of the desk. Jennings took it and forced it through the blind, shoving at it until it fell out the window into the bushes.

“Stop it!”

“Boy, you're gonna get a spanking,” Jennings told Richard. He tried to pull Richard around in front of him but Richard lunged away and they staggered circling around the room.

“I didn't do anything!” Richard kept yelling.

“Hold still!” Jennings kept slapping at Richard's behind, trying to get him to stand in one place and take his spanking. Richard kept skipping away. “Hold still, damn it!”

“No!” Richard yelled.

“Goddamn you.”

Jennings got one good clap on Richard's bottom, then Betsy jumped over and pulled his arm away.

“Jennings, stop it!” she yelled.

Jennings shoved her back and she sat down hard on Richard's bed. The bed frame broke and the mattress dropped to the floor and Betsy fell backwards with a yell. The cat shot out the door, a dark furry blur.

Jennings stopped circling with Richard and let go of his arm. He stood looking at Betsy, breathing heavily. Richard darted out of the room and ran down the hallway crying.

“I'm gonna call my lawyer,” Betsy said thickly.

Jennings thought that sounded utterly absurd. He smiled in what seemed to be the first time in years.

“You don't even have a lawyer,” he laughed.

“Well by god I'm gonna get one!”

Jennings felt something break inside him—a sinking feeling, an emptiness bordering almost on nausea. It was no use. Everything was fucked. He took a deep breath.

“This is crazy,” he said. “I'm getting out of here.”

“Good!” Betsy scabbled around, trying to pull herself out of the remains of Richard's bed. “Get the hell out of here! It's just like you to run off and leave us.”

Jennings turned and went out of the room. “If you say so,” he said.

“I do say so,” Betsy said. She finally got off the bed and followed Jennings down the hall.

Jennings looked around the kitchen counter until he found his car keys. Then he took his jacket off the back of the chair and put it on.

“And don't come back,” Betsy said.

Jennings looked at her flatly. “I've got to come back,” he said. “This is my home.”

“Not any more it isn't.”

Jennings sighed, exasperated. “Oh, why don't you just run down the street to your boyfriend's house?”

“Maybe I will!”

Jennings went out the door and slammed it behind him. He went down the steps and stood in the darkened carport for a minute, breathing, resting his hand on Betsy's car. What to do?

He looked up. Betsy was looking out the window at him, glaring.

“Go to hell,” Jennings said, quietly.

Jennings walked around Betsy's car and out into the driveway. He looked back at the house. Richard's rocket was dangling just below the broken window in the withered winter branches of an azalea.

“That was a good little project,” Jennings said. He thought of all the other Cub Scouts gathered around Richard at the exhibition table. It really had been the best rocket; the judges probably only gave it the red ribbon because they knew Richard hadn't built it on his own.

Jennings crossed the yard and pulled the dented and twisted rocket out of the bush. Richard didn't want it. Jennings felt suddenly lost—nobody wanted him.

“God damn it,” he said.

Jennings walked around to the front of the house and stood in front of the picture window. There was movement in there—a flash of light, and movement. Betsy was probably peering out at him from behind the shades.

“Fuck you!” Jennings yelled. “You hear me, Betsy? Go to hell!”

A light came on across the street at Mrs. Garcia's, and the old lady's form appeared at a window.

Jennings walked across the lawn to his car. He opened the door and tossed the rocket in and then sat down beside it. It was amazing, really, he thought, how quickly his life had been destroyed—utterly ruined, melted down, smashed beyond repair. Four hours—five? Jesus. He started his car and turned on the lights and sat for a moment, looking at the shiny reflection of the license plate on Betsy's car, wondering what to do next. The rocket lay on the seat next to him.

DISPLACEMENT

Displaced, your shrink says. Distanced. Disaffected. Ineffective, anxious-ambivalent, obsessive and/or compulsive. Abandonment issues. Transference. Depression. Anxiety, social and otherwise. Transgression. Aggression. Delusional.

Impacted molar, you think.

To you, the labels are empty. Your existence can't be represented in language.

Have you thought about taking a vacation, your shrink asks.

In your kitchen: in the past, forgetting, you have mistaken hunger for your weeping ulcer. You sit amidst deli slices of ham, pastrami, and roast beef and a loaf of white bread.

You smell her before she enters the room and you pause. She doesn't speak, but reaches around you, taking a slice of bread from the loaf. Her hand is bright reflective tape against the crimson nails. It's not her color. She is winter.

She leaves. You exhale suddenly, noticing that you were holding your breath.

No one says anything, not at first. When you stopped wearing makeup after college, your mother might have told you that she always thought you looked better without all that shit on your face. When you finally stopped by the house with Erica in tow, you are told, as the good coffee cups are passed into your hands from the dusty hutch, how glad everyone is that you finally have a female friend. Women do not like other women who do not have female friends.

Erica is the bright center of your mother's living room. She comments on the photos that pulse with the faces of impossibly happy children, your sister's. She doesn't notice the dust on the piano, or the water stains on the northern corner of the ceiling. Instead, she notices the large portrait of your dead father hanging in the center of the room, and she fawns over the pictures of a younger you, her nails clicking on the glass. She doesn't comment on the way your eyes look.

But still no one says anything, even after they noticed the glue that had kept you together was losing its tack. They might ask about Will, make veiled references to him over pot roast or spaghetti or coffee, but they could never meet him. There is little left concrete. You say that you haven't been seeing much of him, and they ask why. You shrug, but they are too nice to comment on the encroaching daylight they can from see behind you.

Will was your secret. You kept him in a tight wooden box with brass hinges, away from the rooting of your family and friends. If they were to find out about him, you think, they might destroy him. You met him at a bar, of all places, and he tried compact pick-up lines from the first half of the twentieth century. 1940's fluff. You have a nice face, he said. You didn't want him to know that you were that easy, played it off, but you went home with him anyway. Will was a polite guy, a careful fit. He was exactly your height, and he kept a photograph of his mother on his bedside table. Always find out how a man treats his mother, those women's magazines say.

That was when you were normal and indistinct. But now you're a rip in the crowd. You are a black hole. Energy is sucked into you, and it drains out in concise streams of chaos. Feelings are only brought on when she is near you, and when you experience her, a rush of air, then silence, and you feel at peace.

Will's mother was beautiful and expansive. She breathed, and the house tensed. Light brown hair, smooth. Will waited on her, and she eyed you, your thinness. How faded you seemed. She used politeness, but thought you were insignificant. She barked at Will, and he smiled, touched her a lot. You liked her. Erica was in her profile.

I swear, you kill one, and three come back to take its place, she says. You are in the bathroom, sitting against the lavatory. Erica is before you, standing with one leg in the bathtub, one out. She is in her underwear, killing gnats. Stupid insects that don't fight against death, not like mosquitoes.

Your eyes focus on her porous and downy skin. You try not to look at her breasts, the startling lump in her panties. Focus instead on her skin, her face, angular and exotic, her frosted honey brown hair. The amethyst studs in her earlobe. Her smile, toothy and perfect. Relax, and let go.

There is only Erica, your shrink says, not looking at you. There is nothing else.

But there was Will.

Was Will. Projection, your shrink says. Displacement. The meeting of his teeth at the end of that word unnerves you. You shudder.

If you have trouble understanding what you are, what she is, how do you expect others to react?

And stop speaking to yourself in second person, he says.

THE ROPE SWING

I stare out of the tenth floor window of the Travelers Insurance Building peering at downtown Hartford's business district. It's the end of another workday. The sidewalks are already a river of black suits and brown briefcases flowing into the underground tributaries of bars, parking garages, and bus stops. The last thing I want to do is jump into that mess after a long day of looking at sheets of numbers, sharpening pencils, filing reports, and running to Starbucks across the street trying to remember orders for bagels and White Chocolate Mocha Frappuccinos.

It's 4:30, and I know the call is coming. I can feel it. I juggle my phone between my hands, staring at the digital display when it lights up every few seconds. I should turn it off because I can't think of any good excuses this time. Too late. The phone starts vibrating and flashes the familiar digits, right on schedule.

"Hello?"

"Let's go to the rope swing."

"Billy, I can't today. I have to get to the bank before it closes and I wanted to hit up the gym after that. I feel like I gained at least ten pounds after all the booze we drank last weekend."

"You can go to the gym later, *fat ass*. Come on, let's go to the rope swing."

"But I really have to—"

"I'll see you in 45 minutes."

Click.

Unlike me, and every other 23-year-old college graduate I know, Billy doesn't have a job. He lives in Winfield, two miles from my apartment. He also doesn't have a computer, so every morning he wakes up around ten, fills a plastic water bottle with whiskey, and rides his bike to the public library. He spends the next few hours checking his e-mail, surfing the Internet, and doing whatever else a person like Billy does. Apparently he's also been writing a book. When I ask him what it's about he just says *existence*. All I've seen are some pages full of jumbled pie charts and diagrams that look crazier than any accounting spreadsheet I've had to deal with. I've stopped asking him about it. Whenever Billy gets bored, which usually happens when I'm about to get out of work, he calls my cell phone to find out what we're going to do when I get out of the city. Today, at 5:00, as I'm stuck in rush hour, loosening my tie and breathing in the aroma of the landfill that separates Winfield from Hartford, the only thing on my mind is finding a couch that I can pass out on with a freezing cold Heineken in my hand. But instead, I'm going to pick up Billy at the library and drive another fifteen minutes to the rope swing.

The rope swing is a thirty-foot nylon and polyester string attached to the top of a huge oak tree that bends perfectly over the Connecticut River. No one knows who tied the rope to the top of the tree or who would be crazy enough to do it, but it's always been there for as long as we can remember. There are six small wooden posts nailed all along the trunk, with the sixth being about twenty feet above the ground. Every kid who grew up in our town and who's not a pussy has done it at least once.

It sounds pretty simple. When you want to swing, you grab the rope, jump off a step and hold on tight until the rope takes you in a long arc over the middle of the river. The only problem is that the tree is about fifteen feet from the water, so unless you jump from one of the higher steps and tuck your legs when you jump off, you'll probably bottom out on the hard mud and sharp roots sticking out of the bank. Also, the prospect of a twenty-foot freefall into murky, and possibly very shallow, water is pretty nerve-racking. I've only ever jumped from the second step, and even that scared the shit out of me.

When I finally get off the highway and drive to the library a half an hour later, I see Billy riding his bike aimlessly in circles around the parking lot. When he sees me, he peddles up to my car, smashing his front tire against my bumper. He opens the back hatch and throws his bike in.

"You're late again, Andrew. How come it always takes you so long to get here?"

"You're giving *me* shit? My air conditioning hasn't worked in a month. How would you like to sit for almost an hour in bumper-to-bumper traffic sweating your ass off?"

"I don't know. I'd probably just roll down the windows."

"I'm fucking tired, Billy."

"Last week you said you were going to jump off the highest step, and then you made up some lame excuse because you had to work *overtime*. I'm not letting that happen again."

"When are you going to realize that we're not fifteen years old anymore, man? And besides, I don't even have a bathing suit. It's going to be just you risking your life up there today. But don't worry, I'll say something good at your funeral after you get impaled by a branch or bitten by a water moccasin."

"I knew you would say that, so I brought these."

Billy rummages through his backpack and pulls out his Winfield Academy lacrosse shorts. They've been his lucky shorts since sophomore year of high school when he scored his first varsity goal. I don't think he's washed them since then. The maroon mesh is splattered with an entire spectrum of stains ranging from blue house paint to unidentifiable puke-colored crud.

"I'm going to get a disease if I put those on."

"Stop making more excuses. I washed them a month ago."

I don't believe him, but it doesn't matter because I'm already driving north on Route 75, away from the clusters of apartments and strip malls, towards quiet green woods and tobacco fields.

A couple miles down the road, we turn our heads to the right to look at the old red barn that serves as the headquarters for the O.J. Williams Tobacco Company. When Billy was thirteen, he stole one of the street signs on Stoner Drive, and since every kid in our town tries to steal a Stoner Drive sign at least once during their teenage years, the cops found out right away. They chased Billy through two miles of woods and swamps and when their dogs sniffed him out four hours later, he was hiding in the rafters of the Williams barn. As a punishment, they made him pick tobacco at the Williams farm for an entire summer. It was the hottest summer on record in Connecticut. Billy loved it.

We take a left onto a road that's nothing more than a gravel path overgrown with prickles and other vines. An old green piece of metal reads *NO OUTLET*, but we know better. The trees and bushes on either side of the road open up to dirt parking lot and a shabby Little League field that looks like it hasn't been played on for a few years. There's a faded brown and yellow wooden sign nailed on the outfield fence that's covered in the same prickles and vines. It used to say *WASHINGTON PARK* when people actually played baseball here. Everything's quiet.

Even though no one's around, I suddenly feel embarrassed in my shirt and tie. I wrestle them off as I drive towards the even more overgrown dirt path at the end of the parking lot. We brace ourselves because this muddy twisting death trap has more potholes than a battlefield. After the first branches rake my windshield and after the first bump in the road knocks my jaw against the steering wheel, Billy cranks the radio up and presses his face against the window like a little kid on his first jungle safari.

"Billy, why don't you ever ask our other friends to drive you to the rope swing?"

"John and Alex are in Manhattan. Judd is back in California. Meredith broke up with me six months ago because I *lacked direction*, and Jeff and Dan are too busy destroying their souls so they can pay for plasma TVs."

"I work more hours than Jeff and Dan."

"Exactly, Andrew. You're the only one of us who could afford to buy an SUV after college. Anybody else's car would get *obliterated* trying to drive on this road."

The front axle of my car almost shatters as we dive headfirst into another pothole. Luckily we make it to the rope swing without any major damage. I park my car in a patch of weeds at the edge of a clearing. Even though we're at the river, the road swings right and continues on for about fifty yards to a boring little beach that no one ever uses.

The sun is at face-level and blinds me as I step out of the car. When my eyes finally adjust, it looks like the tops of the tallest trees are on fire in the late

afternoon light. Besides the rope dangling over the water and a wooden bench overlooking the sloping bank, there aren't any major signs of humanity. Nothing's changed since the last time we were here, five years ago, both seniors in high school. Billy was still going out with Meredith Mulligan. God, her tits looked great in a bathing suit.

Billy jumps out of the car, grabs the rope, climbs up to the highest step on the tree, pauses for a couple seconds to look out over the water, and jumps. He plunges towards the ground for a few seconds until the rope becomes taut and just gets him over the bank without plowing into the ground. When his momentum carries him about fifteen feet above the water, he arches his back, lets go of the rope, and completes a perfect back flip with barely any splash. As he swims back and gets out of the water he mumbles something about not sticking his landing and heads right back to the tree for his next attempt.

I watch Billy climb up the steps for his second jump, and when I go to hand him the rope, I'm suddenly pissed off. I've been busting my ass all day, being bossed around like a fourth grader just so I can pay my rent, while Billy's been sitting around drinking and playing computer games. He was a Finance and Sociology double major with a 3.7 GPA. What makes him think he can keep on acting like this? How can he feel so free from what everyone else *knows* you need to do to?

"Hey Billy, have you started looking for a job yet?"

"No, not really. Why do you ask?"

"I don't know, I was down at the bars last Friday for happy hour when I ran into Abby Kingston. You remember her from high school—blonde, tight ass, her father was V.P. of something in New York. Anyways, I was having a drink with her, talking about my job, figuring out how I could get her back to my apartment when all of a sudden my phone rang. Now normally I wouldn't take any calls in this crucial of a situation, but for some reason I decided to answer the phone. Guess who it was?"

"Your mom?"

"Nope, it was my good buddy, the one and only Billy. And I was too drunk to realize that the speakerphone was turned on, letting everyone in the bar know exactly what you were saying."

"What did I say?"

"You went into detail about our last trip to Six Flags. You remember that time? You ate mushrooms and I got hammered and we both puked on a little girl coming off a roller coaster. Well, Abby knows all about it now. Here I was, trying to explain insurance deductibles to a girl I've been trying to fuck since tenth grade, and you made me look like the biggest asshole around."

"Come on, that was funny, and you know it."

"Abby thought it was *hilarious*. She thought it was so funny that she stood up, got another drink at the bar, and went home twenty minutes later with a fucking lawyer from New Haven."

"Aw, you're pissed because I stopped you from getting laid one time?"

“I’m just saying that people think you’re a deadbeat, that you’re not going anywhere, and I’m sick of having to pay the consequences.”

“The fact that you spend so much time worrying about me only proves that you’re less developed than me.”

“Less developed?”

“It means that spiritually, I’ve opened my mind to things most people never think about during their entire lives. I know what’s important, and I know that it’s not sitting in a cubicle for thirty years.”

Before I can even start to make sense of Billy’s bullshit, he jumps off the step and executes a perfect swan dive. It’s my turn now. I grab the rope as it swings back over the ground and start to slowly climb the steps. I decide that I’ll warm up by jumping from the third step, but when I get there, the ground and the water look a lot farther away than I thought they would. I grip and re-grip the rope half a dozen times. When I look down at the water and at Billy swimming, I feel myself start to shake with adrenaline. I get ready and count from ten to one in my head, but nothing happens. From down below, Billy breaks the silence.

“I was thinking about what you were just talking about, Andrew.”

“Yeah, and?”

“Have you ever read anything about Taoism?”

“What?”

“Taoism. It’s an Eastern religion from China, sort of a cross between Buddhism and Confucianism.”

“Billy, at this point, I really don’t give a shit about Buddhism, or whatever it is you’re—”

“Will you just listen to me for one second? I’m trying to explain something to you.”

“Go ahead.”

“Forget about Taoism, it makes things too complicated. I guess what I’m trying to say is that I don’t make plans, and I don’t worry about what’s going to happen to me. Everyone is so preoccupied about the future, what they’re going to do, what I’m going to do, that they can’t have fun. I don’t know about you, but I’m trying to have as much fun as possible every day this summer. This, right here, is what I’m going to do and I’m not looking beyond that. I figure, shit, someone like me, something’s got to fall into place eventually and when that time comes, I’ll be ready. But you need to be ready too, Andrew, because when my destiny comes, I’m not leaving you to be a prisoner in some office building. I’m taking you with me.”

Billy’s decided to stop swimming for a while. He climbs up the bank, still dripping brown river water and muck, and goes over to my car. He feels around in his backpack for a minute until he finds a couple cigarette papers and a

small bag of pot. Even though a quarter mile of thick woods separates us from the closest signs of civilization, I still get a little nervous watching Billy roll his joint on the bench.

“Can you do that a little faster? Cops come down here and mess with kids all the time. They’d fuck us over even worse if we got caught.”

“Now you’re just being ridiculous, Andrew. If anyone decides to drive their car down here, which is very unlikely, we’d be able to hear them in plenty of time to drop our shit in the river. Plus, haven’t you looked around at all since you got here? This is place where people come to party because they know they’ll never get caught.”

He’s right. Old beer bottles, pieces of cardboard, used condoms, and cigarette butts are scattered all over the clearing. I don’t know why I thought it was clean when we got out of the car. Some of the bottles have been here for so long that only their necks poke out of the ground like some new species of alcoholic flower. A few yards away, underneath two gigantic white birches, someone’s dug a circular fire pit that’s about three or four feet wide and a foot deep. The logs and broken pieces of glass look like pretty recent additions to the heaps of trash. People probably come here to get fucked up every night.

Billy is already puffing away at his joint. After his second long drag, he stops, holds his creation up in front of his face and rotates it between his fingers, inspecting it for any imperfections. Apparently he’s satisfied with his work because he takes an even longer drag and nods approvingly. He blows out a thick cloud of smoke and holds the joint out towards me.

“Andrew, take a hit man—it won’t kill you.”

“It’s not that I don’t want to, I just don’t think I can. They randomly drug test us at work, and weed stays in your system longer than anything. You know that. You did go to college.”

“Listen, if you only take one or two hits, you’ll be clean by tomorrow. I know how this stuff works, and come on, I’m offering you free pot and we’re at the rope swing. That’s got to count for something.”

I know I shouldn’t smoke, but for some reason I don’t want Billy to think I’m still paranoid about cops coming. I grab the joint from him and press it to my lips, telling myself not to suck in too hard. Of course I do, and as I’m bent over coughing and trying not to puke up a lung, Billy sits on the bench, feet in the air, cracking up like a lunatic. I can’t talk, so I just lift up my middle finger and keep spluttering.

All of a sudden he stops laughing. Instead of his normal stupid grin, he actually looks serious.

“Come on, don’t get pissed just because I flipped you off. You know I’m only kidding.”

“No, shhhh! Listen.”

Now I hear it, too. A car is coming down the road fast, and it’s almost here. Without speaking, Billy and I sprint behind the birches and lay on the ground, dead leaves and other shit plastering our bare chests and legs. The

only sounds I can hear are the blasting of my heart, the car, and the soft crackling of the joint as Billy inhales.

“Are you fucking nuts? Throw that shit in the water!”

“No way. I paid forty dollars for this bag, and I intend to make the most out of my investment.”

I’m too scared to ask Billy how the hell he managed to scrape together forty bucks to buy a bag of pot when he can’t even afford to throw me five for gas. He’s on all fours, eyes focused on the road, lips pressed around the joint, waiting for whatever’s coming down the road. I’m debating whether I should jump in the river or make a dash through the trees when the police come and arrest Billy.

But when I finally see the source of the noise a few seconds later, my fear turns into curiosity. A white BMW roars by the clearing, not even slowing down when it just barely misses ramming the backside of my car. It continues down the road to the dead end beach. Following the BMW is a small Acura coupe that pauses when my car comes into its line of sight. But apparently the BMW is more important, because after a few seconds the Acura speeds up until we can’t see either car anymore.

“Let’s follow them!”

“No way! I’m not—”

But he’s down the dirt road, back bent, darting from tree to tree. I want to say fuck it, I’m not running, but since we’ve been acting like 12-year-olds all day, I follow him for a few yards. He signals for me to drop down on the ground. We crawl through ticks and poison ivy until we’re peering over the little hill that overlooks the beach. The two cars are parked by the water’s edge forty feet away.

“Did you just see that?”

“See what?”

“The guy next to the Beemer.”

From where I’m crouching, a stump blocks my view. I move to my right, behind Billy, and we see the driver of the Acura, a bald man, bent over with his arms on the roof of the BMW. Inside, a woman with long blonde hair smiles. She’s petting a little white dog, the yappy and annoying kind that you’d want to punt across a room if you got the chance.

“He just did it again!”

“Billy, what the hell are you talking about? Hurry up on that joint, man, I’m not trying to get fucked if that guy happens to be an undercover cop.”

“Whatever, you need to relax sometimes. Look! That guy just stuck his head into the car and made out with that woman.”

“Yeah, he’s trying to get some ass. Something you apparently know nothing about. You could learn a thing or two from him.”

As I’m talking to Billy, the man walks around the front of the BMW and opens the passenger door. He looks around for a second and gets in the car.

The woman rolls up her window. They're tinted, but we have a pretty good idea about what's going on inside.

"But do you see what I'm saying though?"

"No, I really don't."

"Well first of all, they both have to be like 50 years old."

"Old people need love too, Billy. Your parents are probably doing the same thing now that they've managed to get you out of the house after 22 years of torture."

"But do you ever really see married old people making out at sketchy spots like this? My parents don't even like to hug in public, they definitely don't take different cars when they go somewhere to take a walk, and I'm pretty sure they never drive down dirt roads where kids hang out to drink, fuck, and jump out of trees."

"So, they're just single and out on a date. They probably went to dinner or something and decided to stop here for a romantic walk along the beautiful brown mosquito-infested waters of the Connecticut River."

Nothing is happening, we can't see in the car. I look at my phone. It's 6:47 and I've had enough of pretending I'm in middle school. I'm about to tell Billy that it's time to leave, but he isn't done yet.

"Come on. Look at her car. That's a brand new BMW M3 Coupe and she's got a two-thousand-dollar shih tzu on her lap. She's a blatant trophy wife, probably married to a doctor or lawyer, someone who works all the time, someone so wrapped up in their career or their secretary that they never see their wife, not even for dinner. She met this guy at her tennis or golf club. Shit, he could be her racquetball instructor or something."

"What makes you say that?"

"For starters he drives an Acura SRV. I mean, it's nice, but it's not exactly a family sedan or a minivan and it's about thirty thousand dollars less than her car."

"I'm impressed, Billy. You know a lot more about cars and dogs than I ever imagined."

Uh oh, here it comes. Whenever Billy is about to make some profound statement, he scrunches his nose up and cocks his neck to the side. He throws his extinguished joint on the ground and enlightens me:

"While you were busy being a slave to the corporate machine today, I read a famous French novel in the library. It's about this princess who marries this one old guy even though she's the most beautiful woman in the king's court. He's OK, but she really wants to get with this badass duke who wins sword battles and is apparently the hottest guy in France because every queen and duchess wants to fuck him. Most of these women are corrupt, too. None of them even like their husbands; they just use them for money and power and so they all have lovers on the side who they have all these scandalous affairs with, and then—"

"What's your point, Rousseau?"

“My point is that the women in this book are greedy and self-centered, but the pleasure and gossip that they get from their secret lives is what really drives them. The one thing that sets the princess apart from everyone else is her virtue. She refuses to look at the duke even after her husband dies because of her sense of commitment. Eventually, she shuts herself up in a monastery and then withers away for a few depressing years until she dies alone before her time.”

“So she got screwed over for not being a slut? That sucks.”

“Yeah, but it happened in pretty much every other aspect of her life. She never cheated, lied, or disobeyed her mother or her husband. Basically she never let herself have any fun, like those two people over there fucking in the BMW.”

As he’s talking, he gets up, brushes himself off and starts walking back down the dirt road towards the rope swing. I follow, surprisingly interested in what he’s talking about.

“So Billy, you’re saying that we shouldn’t ever get married because it’ll all end up as one miserable, adulterous experience. You’re also telling me that true, honest love possibly leading to intimacy and marriage is impossible.”

“Wrong, Andrew. It’s much simpler than that. We’ll just have to never grow up.”

Standing on the sixth step, I look down at the setting sun reflecting off of the water. Instead of the adrenaline rush that I got an hour ago, I only feel a sort of numb, depressing ache because I know that in a year, this place will be all but forgotten. In twenty years, my only source of enjoyment will come from sneaking around with other people’s trophy wives.

But all my thoughts about the future disappear as I look down at Billy splashing around in the water, seriously trying to have a conversation with a giant blue heron standing a few yards away on the bank. I leap off the step, tucking in my legs and letting out my loudest Tarzan impression. The heron, thinking I’m crazy, zooms away toward a quieter part of the river. Billy can’t stop laughing.

I eat dinner with my parents every Wednesday night. When I walk through the door, I can smell roasted chicken simmering in the oven. My mother’s already set out the silverware and freshened up the table with a vase of red and white tulips from the garden.

The three of us sit down to dinner in almost complete silence. I pull out a magazine and pretend to read it while I eat, but I’m actually listening to my parents. My father says fifty-seven words and my mother says forty-eight in twenty minutes. Both of their comments are about things that happened to them at work today.

After dinner my mother goes down to the basement to fold some laundry and to watch re-runs of *Friends* and *Seinfeld*. My father, still wearing his white shirt and blue tie, does the dishes and plops on the couch in the living room.

Christopher C. Vola

He clicks the remote until he finds the Yankees game he's been looking for. They stay like this for a couple hours until my father falls asleep on the couch and my mother carries the load of laundry upstairs and closes the bedroom door.

I sit in the kitchen wondering if either of them has ever driven down a dirt road with someone I don't know. I hope one of them has.

DAY OF THE SWALLOWS, 1924

I sit on my clean floor and count with little Joo. The child is almost too clever. I say one and two make three. He sees the pear and the apples in my hands and says, "Pear plus apples make fruit." *No, perform the sum.* He frowns to have to do it my way. "Three fruits equals happiness, Mama," he says. Outside our window they are building a tower. From here on the floor I see little men working on scaffolding way up in the sky. It is another day in America. Back home, it is the third day of the third moon, the day of the swallows' return. The day precisely one year ago my mother wept to see my younger sisters fighting among themselves over the few possessions I would leave behind and the private room I shared with little Joo.

Pieces of my memory of one year ago today, add up to nothing whole: Ship plus woman equals horizon. Yellow plus mountain equals sky. Salt plus hunger make wind. These sums are not the mysteries they seem. Here's a mystery for you: each year, a bird no bigger than a man's heart knows how to return home from across the ocean. Perhaps some of them return to the very nests of the year before, wedged between twigs in the treetops, the bits of straw and earth still crusty with snow and faintly scented with the puke and down and shit of the last crop of babies. Here is an even greater mystery: that my sensible head should have become cluttered with dreams.

What tremendous faith you place in the future, old Mun-ji had smiled with her crooked mouth. Get sick and die is what I ought to have said to her. Since I would be sailing across the ocean to join my husband soon, why not utter the very thing we all longed to say to her, troublemaking sorceress that she was? She would have cursed me, and although I never believed in her silly proclamations she would have cursed my family, as well. Best not to set the table for trouble, which finds its own way soon enough. Still, it *was* breathtaking faith to promise myself to a picture of a man who came to me, married me, gave me a child, and promptly left us again with the promise he would send for us as soon as he could. He wrote to us, sent money. But we had already forgotten his face.

I thought the sky should have been coursing with swallows on the day of our departure. We spent most of the passage on the little deck outside of steerage where I wasn't supposed to be but which was the only place I didn't feel sick. Joo and I shared a windowless space with three other women, one of whom had barley breath and didn't wash her armpits carefully enough. The other two had the best pallets only because they had gotten there first. I could

swear the last was a prostitute, sent for by her “Dod-dy” as she kept referring to him. Not that we weren’t all being sent into the keeping of men we barely knew or had never even met. In that close cabin, steeped in the smell of anxiety, I thought I would go mad with sickness and restlessness. On the steerage deck, the salt spray coated my face and throat and hair. Thank goodness my cabin-mates were too sick or depressed to disturb us here. I had worn the light brown muslin Auntie had sent to me, but I stood hatless and gloveless so I could breathe. Joo wrapped his arms around my waist, his face burrowed into the folds of my skirt. Although I had been sick earlier, I leaned into the forward movement, into the wind and sky, urging the ship onward, utterly filled with, if blind to, my future. I licked the spray from my lips like tears.

I’ve been dreaming I am still my mother’s only child. She bathes me, perhaps for the last time in the wooden baby tub. She will wash my scalp, as well. To calm me down, she loosens my braids by massaging her fingers up and down my scalp and behind my ears.

As a young girl I had a recurring dream of seeing my mother’s body in the big wooden tub, her skin pale against the water-stained sides. I approach the tub always with the thought, *Here is my mother. She never rests, but here she is in repose.* Then, upon closer inspection, I discover that of course she is not resting at all. That’s not rest.

No one promises actual swallows on the day. Some years, snow still clings in patches, or the birds descend but nest further inland. The weather you can always count on, however. In all the years of my life the day has featured a brisk and airy blue with a breeze that gallops down from the snowy peaks and sunshine, sunshine that makes your heart whoop and sing.

In preparation, we do the year’s second cleaning. You take everything out—mats, lamps, grain sacks, babies, sandals, linens, and crockery into the courtyard. The older girls go in and wash everything down, sweep and pack the floor. The younger girls tend to the chickens and babies. Then we cook. Then we walk in the fields and eat flower-shaped cakes. Then we feast. Then we walk some more. If you make a sauce, it tastes better than ever on this day. If you plant a seed, it will grow strong and tall. If you take medicine, you are supposed to live a long life free of illness.

Joo and I were quarantined for four days, although they allowed Taesin in to see us. He waited with Joo while they performed my physical exam. Two male doctors, one old and one young. They lacked a Korean translator that day and only after much miscommunication did they realize that a Chinese translator would not do. After that, they didn't even try to explain procedures or why I had to urinate into a cup. Then a nurse tried to tug on my underpants. "Crabs," she explained, raising her fingers like little pincers. I shook my head no. "She has to check," someone must have said. When the nurse saw my soiled rags, she disposed of them and presented me with a box of new ones.

It is true that my husband is both hard-working and good-hearted, as his Auntie had led me to believe. In my short time with him back home, I found these statements to be true. But you'd better believe I did not recognize him when he came for us at the port. Three years later, and he looked like somebody's grandfather, already stooped in the spine and graying fast. In my heart, I cannot blame him, this man who honored his commitment to me through letters over ten long years before we had even met, and three more after our marriage. He is not unhandsome even now, but he looks a bit used up for the age of thirty-four. I ask you, is that what this country does to a man?

In the night, when my husband turns and places his hand on my stomach, I am ready for him. He thinks it is his idea, but I believe that I can will him to place it there. I can will him to place his hand on me, but I cannot will his tenderness; that is his own. In this respect, I have been fortunate.

Be a bird! Be a bird! My father would shout to us as we ran around the courtyard, our arms flung wide, our hair flying, chickens pecking at our toes. He took great delight in us. We thought him strange and fascinating, this tall non-farmer with tidy hands who worked all day shuffling papers for the Japanese and was hardly ever allowed to come home. That's why he died so far away, a man the age my husband is now, who spared us our way of life by leaving it. The missionaries gave him a Christian burial, which was all right with my mother because the missionaries had taught to us to read. My teacher's name was Penelope Starling, a name I could never pronounce correctly. Penelope told me books were like birds because through them your mind could soar.

Some days Joo and I head down Geary Boulevard toward the American produce and sundries stand instead of down Winnetta to Chin's Grocery. There is so much to look at there, including a variety of packaged cakes and cereals, boxed antiseptic bandages for small wounds, and a number of products for styling hair. American women hold their heads up very high and rather forward, as though they are rushing to get to the next place. One yellow-haired woman in good shoes shops every morning at 10 a.m. I have observed her because we are invisible to her. Her little boy, a round eye with yellow hair, walks up to Joo every day and pulls at the corner of his eyes, saying, "Chinky Chinky Chinaman, riding on a rail, along came a cowboy and cut off his tail." Joo is terrified at the thought of growing a tail. Later, I asked Mrs. Ilah Flack, our sponsor, to teach me the English for "You look better that way." The boy's mother seems exasperated with her son's behavior, but she never tries to do anything about it. This morning, when the yellow-haired boy pulled at the corners of his eyes, I told him, "You look better that way." It made him cry, but only because he was shocked that I could speak. His mother seemed equally astounded. The shopkeeper, a gentle-souled *hajukin* merely, shrugged his shoulders at this encounter. The woman rushed her child away from us. Great, now I am a crazy woman.

Once upon a time there was a king who had six daughters. When his wife was heavy with his seventh child, naturally he expected a son. Disappointed yet again, he sent the infant away with a servant instructed to leave her to die in the elements. The princess-child was found by an old couple who raised her as a healer. One day, they brought her a bowl filled with clear water. Look upon your father, child, they told her. She saw a very sick man. She returned to the valley where her father lay close to death, sent everyone away from his bedside, and nursed him from her bag of herbs. In the morning, her father was restored to health. All the kingdom rejoiced, and the father begged forgiveness of his seventh daughter, whom he welcomed back with open arms.

I had always loved that story of the seventh daughter whose absence filled the household. My older cousins liked to act it out as a game. Pick me, I always insisted, in love with the idea of the princess's magical childhood. Banish *me*.

Mrs. Ilah Flack says that the wives of missionaries and immigrants have something in common—we are both strong women. *Don't speak to me of strong women*. Where my mother comes from there is a whole island of them, women

with powerful limbs and voluminous lungs, who dive for their food in the ocean and can hold their breath for an unheard of duration. My grandmother was one of the *cheju haenyo* of Chejudo, the Island of Wind, Rocks, and Women. She spoke a traditional dialect difficult to understand. Although she had sight, her eyes looked like those of a blind woman's, dark and deep, focusing on everything and nothing. My grandmother's eyes turned cloudy in her old age, seeing more than she could say. Mother said that's what comes from dwelling in the depths, holding your breath to bursting time and again.

Mrs. Ilah Flack tells my husband rather wistfully that when she was a girl she dreamed of sailing to France. To *France*? When I was a girl, I dreamed of sailing to the Island of Turtles and Children and the Island of Girls with their Faces to the Moon. There isn't any Island of Turtles and Children my mother would say, so I never told her about any of the other islands—the Island of Scheming Sisters and Other Fools. Island of Lepers and Japanese Whores. Islands of Mudangs and Other Pests. Island of Banished Princesses.

Swallows return. There's not a year when they haven't. Your faith in them, or lack of it, makes not the slightest different to them. They make it a point to get home. Only maybe what's home to me is away for them. Or wherever they alight is home. Or all places are away and no place is home.

It is almost too much. Three days ago, we all became aware of a smell in the apartment that turned from unpleasant to offensive to unspeakable. Neither Tae Sin nor I could locate the source. Perhaps a rat had expired behind the stove. Or something had happened next door. When we passed in the hallway, neighbors began to look at one another with questioning, troubled glances. Who was responsible? None of us contacted the landlord.

Three days ago, Joo had found a stunned bird on the sidewalk. Its wing hung limp, turned like an inside-out umbrella. One eye had been crushed or eaten; the other stared ahead blinking and resigned. I scooped it up with a paper bag and threw it in a crate of refuse in the alley. At this, Joo let out a gasping cry I'd never heard from him. Still, I ordered him to leave it alone. Later, somehow, he must have retrieved the bird, his first act of outright disobedience. It was only when I was in tears at the mysterious stench that Joo led me to his little bureau. In the top drawer was the bird, wrapped in Joo's own paisley handkerchief with a wad of cotton to rest its head. After that, little Joo wanted to be held all day. He couldn't wrap his chubby legs around my waist tightly enough. It's because my waist is disappearing; I am expecting again.

Hunger is good. I feel hungry today. That's excellent news, Mrs. Ilah Flack will say if today is a day she will drop in on me. If I can, I make my way from one physical sensation to another. For instance, I lie here awake knowing that in about an hour little Joo will be up. Beside me, my husband's sleep is as steady as a train chugging through the countryside. In precisely forty-five minutes, before the sun has come up, he will jump into the back of a pickup with his friend Murillo and six other men and be driven through the flattest, driest, most disappointing landscape you can imagine to a field where he will pick the strawberries, green beans, heads of lettuce, and squash which we ourselves can rarely afford to buy.

I remember lying awake in our room at the back of my mother's inn, just before the baby started awake with little bleating cries of hunger. The anticipation of Joo's down-scented scalp, the baby-doughy scent of his pudgy limbs already tickled in my nostrils like citrus and set my heart to a faster beat. My nipples prickled awake and my breasts started to fill. I'd leak a little just lifting him to my breast and as his mouth opened and my milk let down, I was grateful for the sealed-off world of our making, for the physical trivialities of our day linking one moment to the next. The door to our world is so much wider, now. I hand-over-fist my way through the sometimes busy, sometimes too-quiet hours.

Swallows return, always, always. But when you think about it, men almost never do. Centuries ago, a Dutch sailor took his ship around the Cape of ____ and into the heart of a storm. The ship capsized, but Captain Hendrik Hamel, his crew of fourteen survivors, and a hound were found stunned and gasping with thirst upon waking on the beaches of Chejudo. All were fed, examined, restored to health, and then imprisoned, excepting the hound, for the sailors had entered the land of the Hermit King and unwittingly sealed their fate: the King did not suffer the departure of strangers.

Today, as they do every year, swallows alight in Pusan, in Pyongyang, in Seoul, on Chejudo. Today I became an exile. The Immigration Act has sealed the borders indefinitely to everyone on the globe. Those who are in the U.S. cannot get back with any reasonable expectation of re-entry. If you left a wife behind, too bad. If you had hopes your family might join you, think again. It is over for you, over for them, those days. I think of Captain Hamel, living out his days in a place he had never intended to stay. Of how he made do with the life he had found there, among people who took a long time to figure out how to accept him. What must he have thought as he floated on a broken piece of a ship's siding to the shore of his new country, birds swooping and flitting

Carol Roh-Spauling

overhead, skimming the surf, alighting on his head or shoulder, his hair and clothing stiff with the salt of the sea?

REMEMBERING ATOM

I have a tattoo on my left leg, just above my ankle bone. Actually, I have two of them. One is of two little girls of different races holding hands. The symbolic import of this tattoo is rather obvious and universal in its appeal. The other one just below it is a name: ATOM. Yes, I am one of those incredibly stupid people who, in the utter spontaneity inspired by the first blush of love, decided it would be a good idea to engrave the name of my beloved into my skin with India ink. People always seem to think that this decision, made when I was the tender, idealistic age of nineteen, is the height of folly. And, as people often do, they comment with disdain. "Atom? What, are you really into science or something?"

"No, it's a name."

"A NAME? You have a tattoo of a name? What does your husband think of it?"

At this point, I guess I am supposed to feel regret tinged with shame that I was ever naive enough to think that love lasts. I should blush that I didn't anticipate a time in the future when I would wish I could erase the blind devotion etched into my skin. Well, here it is almost twenty years later, and I have yet to feel that regret.

The first time I saw him, I was almost nineteen years old. I didn't really know it at the time, but I was pretty lost. My parents were in Sacramento, preparing to move to Illinois, and we'd had next to no relationship since I had left home and moved to southern California the second I turned eighteen. I had moved for a boyfriend, who after we had lived together for a few months got himself arrested and locked up, so suddenly I had no one to share the rent. Enter all of my delinquent friends who had run away from home, plus three cats. We would dumpster hamburgers from the McDonald's trash and take them to the Quikstop to zap them in the microwave. We would stay up all night playing cards; my friends were all buzzing on speed but I was hyper enough without it. These friends were people with names like Biscuit and Batman; one had a bulldog tattooed on his head. Obviously, we weren't having deep, soul-searching conversations about what direction our lives were taking. I was sad and lonely.

I worked at the theater in town, which was right up the street from town park. My comrades didn't have jobs, so they would hang out there all the time, and I'd show up after work. This one day, seemingly like any other, I came walking around the corner and BAM! There he was, sitting up on the brick wall behind a bench. He was wearing worn-looking black Chucks, and jeans. I think I first saw his profile. His hair. His skin. I was only eighteen, and had no idea that the moment I first saw Atom would end up being one of the most memorable of my life.

So, if you want details, as I know I would if I were reading your big love story, here they are. He had long, sort of golden-brown hair. It wasn't very well combed (ever) so he had little rat's nest bumps all over his head; not stylish enough to be dreadlocks, just uncombed places. Coincidentally, I had the same in my own hair. Not for fashion reasons; I just didn't have the gumption necessary to go buy a brush. It seems so strange to me now that there was ever a time when I was too lazy to purchase a brush, but it's true. My sister remembers that when I would come home for Christmas she would be so horrified at the state of my hair that she would immediately sit me down to work out all the knots with a comb.

So you see, we were each in our state of dishabille and we recognized the kindred sloth in one another. He had these almond-shaped brown eyes with chips of gold in them. I didn't notice the chips right away; that came later. He had that kind of skin that is tan all the time, and the kind of nose that I love, big and important, almost hawk-like. His smile...big, white teeth and crinkles around the eyes. Sideburns, all curly. The thing is, and I can't stress this point enough, I was FLOORED. Never before or since have I had such a visceral reaction to the sight of another human being.

I was palpitating all over. Think jellyfish, pudding, quivering mass of amorphous blobbage. It is definitely not safe to feel the way I did before even learning someone's name. We looked at each other. He was aloof. Actually, anything short of instant elopement would have seemed aloof to me. He had his bike, but my friend asked him if he needed a ride. He had just moved to town from Louisiana. Little bit of a southern accent. Didn't need a ride. Hoisted himself on to the bike and rode off.

I asked around in a frenzy and found out that his name was Adam. Well, that's what I thought. So, I was writing Adam all over papers, napkins, my hands. Turns out it was Atom, the strangeness of which only added to the allure. He came into the theater where I was working the ticket counter a few days later. He was with his parents, but to me it seemed as if he had just washed ashore on a blanket of golden foam, cradled in a seashell. We stared at each other in a pretty brazen way. I wasn't so forward, as a rule. I walked out of the ticket booth and stood watching him as he strutted away. He turned and flashed me a smile, walked backwards for a minute; we stood there just looking at each other.

I don't know about you, but it just never happened that way for me before. Usually, it's like you hang out with someone for awhile and you kind of start to like him, or he kind of starts to like you and you think what the hell? and then you're in a relationship. With this one, I had absolutely no choice in the matter; all the cells in my body took over and there was this magnetic force.

So, Atom started hanging out at the town park all the time and became friends with all of my friends. I would just zombie-shuffle my way through anything I had to do until I could get there. I would periodically say his name aloud and smile. I would check to make sure his bike was there propped

against the wall. We had this whole grinning, eye-locking thing going on, but we rarely talked. There were always lots of people around, and we were busy trying to score some alcohol or otherwise drum up fun in a dead suburban town. This one night, he asked me if I would braid his hair. It smelled like cigarettes and dirt. Aren't those in fact the most intoxicating scents in the world?

Another night, a group of us took some beer up on the roof of the theater where I worked to get drunk and look down at the town lights. I was feeling really brave. He held my hand and helped me climb the ladder. When we were sitting on the roof, I stared at his profile until he turned.

"What?" he said.

"I'm just taking in the view." Who was this Ricko Suave who was inhabiting my body and throwing out cheesy lines? I got a big rush out of being so bold. He smiled.

Lots of other things happened. My boyfriend got out of jail and I had to find a way to get rid of him without ripping out his heart. I managed to do it, but he called with suicide threats for awhile. Love is so dramatic at nineteen. Atom and I didn't kiss until Jim was gone. The night that he left, Atom came to a party at my house. I got wasted, as was my custom at the time. We went for a walk to the park up the street. We sat on a bench under a tree. I was lost, depressed, self-destructive, and ripe for some intense feeling. We kissed.

That was the beginning. The details of what happened afterward are pretty complex. There's a lot of laughing, crying, more yelling than there should have been, some hitting. Drinking was always a major influence, and apologies. On one of those drunken and euphoric first nights, all of my friends were giving themselves tattoos. We had a bottle of India ink and a pen casing with a thread-wrapped safety pin in it.

The pen casing got passed to me. I took it and repeatedly jabbed the safety pin into the flesh above my ankle until it spelled out ATOM. I looked across the room at him and smiled. I remember a time when I was reduced to my lowest, but also soaring. I remember that it took me three years after we broke up to be able to say his name without feeling sick. I remember the feeling that there is no one on earth who has felt the intensity, like supernova blast blinding love. That it doesn't just go away, and I don't want it to. When I feel old, untouched, mature...remembering Atom is a reflex and a right. He is, after all, in my skin.

Contributors' Bios

M. Alan Cox was born and spent his formative years in a rural town in Southeast Michigan. Currently he roves between Grand Rapids and Kalamazoo. He's been granted a BA from Western Michigan University and an MFA from Vermont College. His poetry can also be found online in *Contrary*.

Sandra Hunter teaches at Moorpark College, California. Her short stories have appeared or are forthcoming in *Zyzzyva*, *Talking River Review*, *New York Stories*, *the New Delta Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *Glimmer Train*, *the South Dakota Review*, and others.

Harriet Leach lives with family of choice in Louisville where she tries not to flip out over the symptoms of the world's insanity. She hopes to graduate this fall from Spalding's MFA program. The following poems are from her sonnet series titled "Does the Clay Ask the Potter?"

Melissa Lindstrum is a recent English and Communication Studies graduate of Marquette University in Milwaukee, WI. She has just moved to Nashville to volunteer, and is currently helping out at an elementary school, working to facilitate an intensive reading program for four- to eight-year-olds.

Spencer Mark's books include the novels *Love and Reruns in Adams County* (Random House) and *The Weary Motel* (Backwaters Press) and the fiction collections *Wedlock* (Watermark Press) and *Spying on Lovers* (Amelia Press). His work has received the Faulkner Society Faulkner Award for the Short Novel, the Omaha Prize for The Novel, The CAIRN/St. Andrews Press Short Fiction Award, The Bradshaw Book Award, and four Special Mentions in Pushcart Prize.

Clare L. Martin is a poet-mother-wife. She is a graduate of University of Southwestern Louisiana and currently works as an associate editor with Southern Hum Press. Her work has appeared most recently in *Clean Sheets*, the anthology *Beyond Katrina*, *Southern Hum* and *Farmhouse Magazine*. Clare was a nominated finalist for the 2006 Farmhouse Magazine's Editor's Choice Award, for her poem "4-way stop at dusk" which appeared in *Farmhouse Magazine's* May/June 2006 issue. She is also the playwright of "Waterlines" produced in April 2006 as part of the project "Sustained Winds: Louisiana Artists respond to Hurricanes Katrina and Rita."

Melanie Neer's work has been published in magazines, newspapers, calenders and books, including *Unity*, *Science Of Mind*, *Veterinary Medicine*, *Pets Supplies and Marketing*, *Quiet Moments* (a calendar published by A.R.E.), and a book by Warren Eckstien entitled *How to Get Your Cat To Do Anything*, which includes

seven of her black and white photos. Her work can be viewed at <http://www.angelfire.com/pro2/melneer/photogallery>

Jo Lynn Pack is a graduate assistant at The University of Louisiana at Lafayette. She is entering her second year as a Master's student, and is pursuing her degree in the English department, with a concentration in Creative Writing. Her poetry has been published in *The Southwestern Review*, *Bloody Swamp Poets*, and *Temenos* (forthcoming), and her first chapbook, *Leaving Anhedonia*, was published in 2004 by Sunday Evening Press. Her favorite color is purple, and she is a huge fan of Japanese shock cinema.

Will Roby is a poet and playwright living in the beautiful and massive state of Texas. His poems have appeared in journals including *Melic Review*, *Alligator Juniper*, and *G.W. Review*.

Carol Roh-SpaULDing is associate professor of English at Drake University where she teaches fiction writing and American multicultural literature. Her award-winning fiction has appeared in several journals and anthologies including *Glimmer Train*, *Ploughshares*, and *Amerasia Journal*. She is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize and her chapbook, *Brides of Valencia* won the A.E. Coppard Prize for Long Fiction. She is the author of a novel-in-stories titled *An American Experiment*. Her current projects include a non-fiction book for children about Iowa's immigrant families, titled *New World Iowa* and a new novel, *Her Paris Year*.

J.R. Solonche is co-author of *Peach Girl: Poems for a Chinese Daughter* (Grayson Books, 2002). His most recent work appears or is forthcoming in *Poetry East*, *Rattle*, *Lilies & Cannonballs*, *Cider Press Review*, *Red Hawk Review*, *Lily*, *Apostrophe*, *Red River Review*, and *Pemmican*. He teaches at Orange County Community College in Middletown, New York.

Lynn Strongin is a poet writing from British Columbia, Canada. She is the author of twelve books of poetry and is the recipient of a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, as well as a grant from the National Endowment of the Arts and another fellowship from the American Association of University Women. She her most recent book is *The Sorrow Psalms* from the University of Iowa Press, and she currently serves as a special guest reviewer for *New Works Review*.

Christopher C. Vola is a student at the University of Richmond pursuing a degree in French and Journalism and trying to avoid the real world. His work has appeared in the online journal *VerbSap* and in University of Richmond's literary magazine, *The Messenger*. He currently lives in Windsor, Connecticut.

Jackie White is the translations editor for *Rhino*, an assistant prof of English, Latin/a studies, and women's studies, and a native Illinoisan with wanderlust and great Sox pride. She's published in *ACM*, *Slant*, *Folio*, and *Blackwater*.

Lowell Mick White has had fiction published in over two dozen journals, most recently in *Callaloo*, *Iron Horse Literary Review*, and *Short Story*. In 1998 he was awarded the Dobie-Paisano Fellowship by the University of Texas at Austin and the Texas Institute of Letters. He is currently a Ph.D. student at Texas A&M University, where he specializes in creative writing, teaches prose fiction and freshman composition, and co-edits the journal *Big Tex [t]*.

Leslie Wolter is an English instructor and Co-Director of the Writing Resource Center at McKendree College in Lebanon, Illinois. Her work has appeared in *LitBits*, *Ascent Aspirations*, *Viva Barista*, *Eclectica*, *The Drill Press*, *Prose Toad*, *Poor Mojo's Almanac(k)*, and *Cezanne's Carrot*.