

EL PORTAL

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☀ El Portal ☀

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Eastern New Mexico University's Literature and Arts Journal



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In memoriam David Shawn Hunton, 1980-2018

About El Portal

Since its inception in 1939, Eastern New Mexico University's literary magazine *El Portal* has offered a unique venue for the work of writers, artists, and photographers both on campus and off. It is published each fall and spring semester thanks to a grant courtesy of Dr. Jack Williamson, a world-renowned science fiction writer and professor emeritus at ENMU who underwrote the publication during his time on campus.

Each semester *El Portal* encourages previously unpublished short story, poetry, non-fiction, flash fiction, photography, and art submissions from ENMU students and faculty, as well as national and international writers and artists. *El Portal* does not charge a submission fee. Submissions from ENMU students receive the special opportunity to win a first-, second-, or third-place cash prize in their respective categories.

For additional information about El Portal, please visit our website: <http://elportaljournal.com>

Submissions

El Portal is open to submissions from all artists and writers; however, its awards are intended solely for the benefit of ENMU students. Submissions are published on the basis of talent, content, and editorial needs.

El Portal serves as a creative forum for the students, faculty, and staff of Eastern New Mexico University (ENMU) as well as artists, writers, and photographers worldwide. Consequently, the views expressed in *El Portal* do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints and opinions of ENMU as a whole.

Guidelines

Please submit all written work in .doc, .docx, or .pdf formats. With the exception of poetry and art/photography, please limit entries to one story or essay. Simultaneous submissions are welcome; we ask only that you notify *El Portal* in the event your work is accepted elsewhere so that we may remove it from consideration. When entering a submission, please include a biography of no more than 50 words to be printed alongside your piece in the event that it is accepted for publication.

- Fiction (up to 4,000 words)
- Creative Nonfiction (up to 4,000 words)
- Flash Fiction (up to 500 words)
- Poetry (up to 5 poems)
- Art & Photography (up to 5 pieces)

Prizes will be awarded to ENMU students only. Prizes are awarded only in the Short Story, Poetry, and Art/Photography categories.

Deadlines

Fall 2018: Please submit by May 4th, 2018

Spring 2019: Please submit by November 15th, 2018

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1973

Anna George

My dad used to use Converse as basketball shoes.
They were ratty,
torn,
yesterday's forgotten tool.

I can almost hear the claps of the
separating soles
on the gym's yellow, stained floors
almost.

The black star, detached,
jostles in the wind.
His toes would wiggle through the
holes when he was anxious,
bees buzz in his chest.

I could practically hear the hum
until the bees stopped.
Carpet soft under socked feet, my toes wiggle now.

His blood thick like honey,
it stained the white basketball shoes,
the ones he wore when he was young.

One of the Boys

Anna George

Her hair is blonde like exquisite sunshine.
Her skin is smooth as marble and her fine
way of communicating makes me tingle,
her hands as delicate as...whatever.
They have said these things about me and her.
Hips for birthing children – vagina, too, I'm sure.
Did they think these things when I was single?
Orbs and hourglasses and pears and Barbies.
I've thought these things about women myself.
Put their circles, squares, hearts on a shelf:
analyzed their geometry like a mathematician.
I've talked, joked, laughed over my own submission.
If men of yesterday and women of tomorrow do it,
who's thinking of their strength?

Winds of Santa Ana

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

The Santa Ana winds shaped me
Their power snatched the cigarette from my fingers
and drove it deep into dry chaparral
The resulting fire was preordained
I could have lived in Hoboken NJ
and the fire still would have been preordained
still my fault

The western winds overwhelmed me
They blew my garage open
sucked my tuba out into the pebbly road
dragged it down the street
Sparks flew from its brass
I was trying to teach myself to play it
so I could join a Mariachi band
with Pollo Murillo and
Hector Delgadillo

My father was a half-Jewish Rumanian
but passed as Mexican
He knew all the love songs
all the songs that started with *Mi Amor*
and ended with
Mi Corazon
He never sang them to my mother
I knew he was not singing to her
though she was his wife
She was as beautiful and upright
as a statue of a Madonna
carved from pinyon wood
by a Colonial

When she was around he shut his lips tight
or twisted them like a bad ventriloquist
He sang his songs to someone else
someone in a different country
he hadn't met yet
someone he was preparing for
like preparing for the Second Coming

My mother was a Christian woman
though she didn't love Jesus
It wasn't that she didn't believe in Him
She was merely indifferent

My cap flew from my head
My grandfather's fedora blew off his dead head
his head a block of grey clay
awaiting the pinching of my fingers
to truncate the seven generations
of suffering deemed necessary

by the Holy Book
to wear down sin

I'd take it down to
maybe four

My grandmother reclined on a tree limb
holding a Russian ukulele and
the eternal flame
of youth
It glowed orange
like the eyes of a tabby cat
The wind blew her out of her tree

The wind blew carom boards
down Topanga

out to the ocean
They skimmed across the surface
like plywood torn from houses
in a hurricane

I didn't understand the meaning of youth
or age
All I understood was the wind

The wind would blow everything away
everything of value or lacking value
It would all end up stuck
on the branches of some bush

I didn't need to go to high school
The wind was my teacher
The wind was the wisest teacher
The wind would get fiercer every year
All human life would disappear

The wind blew
like it never did in Patterson New Jersey
like Dr. Poet William Carlos Williams
never experienced
But Dr. Williams kept his wooden tongue depressors
locked in a glass jar anyway
He never knew what might be coming

The wind blew out the windows of our stucco shanty
the one Old Man Dengler allowed us to live in

The Electrical Engineer
had come from New Jersey
to remake the San Fernando Valley
in the image of a Diode
had come to cast Aerospace
in the image of the Aztec gods

with hordes of his
self-replicating spawn
who enrolled in my school
and looked down on me

This engineer sat at his desk and
the wind
sucked open his drawers
scattered his papers
financial papers
technical papers
He had no idea wind could blow like that
Those papers were his life

The wind turned coffee beans
into bullets
The Santa Ana winds stripped tomatoes from their vines
the grapes from theirs

Italians and Jews cried together
Tumbleweeds are weapons of mass destruction

In the future recreational marijuana would be legal
in Colorado
but in the meantime
I was going to prison

where I could not be touched
by the powerful
destructive wind
I can't say
I wasn't grateful

Do Not Engage: Extremely Dangerous

Ashley Reiter

Cataloged under the Intergalactic Core Index 1101110-1101111-1110000-1100101, the species is more commonly known by its Andromeda-MilkyWay Galactic Index specification DNE:ED:6E6F7065. Special note should be given to the Interaction Parameter “DNE” (“Do Not Engage”) and the corresponding Threat Index “ED” (“Extremely Dangerous”). Under no circumstances should either be ignored.

This species, now henceforth referred to in this entry as species X, infests both the Andromeda and Milky-Way galaxies, with the heaviest concentrations located in the latter. X flourishes in environments rich in oxygen and hydrogen. It is, however, a very resilient species, possessing an incredible inclination toward rapid adaptation to nearly any habitat. Numerous cataloged attempts have been made to eliminate scattered infestations of X, but such attempts have been utterly futile.

X is a unique species in regards its ability, and preference, to walk on its two hind appendages. This article shall refer to these appendages as “legs,” although the limbs are far longer and thinner than the legs of any other species known to the Intergalactic Core.

Two additional legs, exceptionally thinner than its hindlegs, are attached to the foremost portion of its body in a configuration similar to that of a quadruped. The sole difference between X and quadrupeds would be the former’s preference to “walk” upon its hindlegs and allow its forelegs to dangle uselessly. The term “walk” is used very loosely in this case, for X’s manner of movement is nothing short of bizarre and wholly unlike any other known method of walking.

Disregarding the balanced style of continually shifting one's weight among four feet, X lumbers along by shifting its weight wholly from one foot to the other and back again in a very staggering manner that defies natural motion. How X manages to utilize this manner, not only to walk but also to "run," remains a mystery to the Core. The unnaturalness of the gait, however, adds clarity to the extraordinary length of time necessary for a newborn X to become proficient in this manner of movement.

The physical appearance of species X is, perhaps, more baffling than its abnormal stance and movement. X is utterly lacking in regards to any sort of scaling or fur, its pigmented hide naked to the elements. The only exception is a small patch of hair which covers the back of its head; the Core is still baffled as to the purpose of this patch. An X's pigmented flesh, while devoid of embedded fur or scale, is enveloped in an assortment of hide casings which can be removed at will. In most instances, one hide casing covers the foremost half of the body, while a second casing covers the hind half. There are "holes" in each casing which allow an X's head, forelegs, and hindlegs to protrude out of the hide and remain unhindered in movement. While some of these casings offer protection from minor elements, the majority of the hide casings offer little to no protection to an X's body; the purpose of the casings is as much a mystery to the Core as is the patch of hair.

The bizarre nature of species X should not overshadow the extreme threat X presents to the Galactic Order. Out of all known species, X is the most unpredictable and most dangerous. The species X possesses more than the three basic senses shared among the rest of the Intergalactic species. The exact number of senses X possesses is not yet determined, for its senses are incredibly unique and utterly impossible to quantify. Among the suspected senses is the ability to detect minute vibrations in a medium, whether the medium is an atmosphere or a liquid or even a solid. X merely needs to be in physical contact with a medium to detect said vibrations.

The species uses this bizarre ability to track all other species with a terrifying accuracy; the smallest errant breath or step by one of our own species has led to their discovery by a predatory X. It should be noted that this detection ability is in no way hindered by a lack of sight lines, for an X can continue tracking its prey even after it has lost sight of the prey.

In addition to detecting vibrations in a medium, an X can also produce magnified vibrations in an atmospheric medium. Such vibrations cause severe pain to the sensory receptors of our species, and avoiding exposure to these vibrations is imperative. It is still unclear how an X is able to produce vibrations in an atmosphere, but the action is almost always performed in conjunction with a parting of its jaws. While the vibrations are not visible to the naked eye, it is believed that an organ in an X's mouth interacts with the atmosphere to create these vibrations. It is recommended to approach an X from behind and not from the front (the location of its mouth) so as to avoid exposure to this ability.

Nearly every member of the species X, with limited exceptions, has a predatory nature. As mentioned previously, X is an incredibly adaptable species, and this flexibility is coupled with a resilience never before seen in another Intergalactic species. Wounds to any portion of an X's body, despite the lack of the species' natural bodily protection, will not result in incapacitation.

An X can survive multiple wounds and remain functioning even after thirty percent of its total blood content has been lost. Additionally, an X can recover with remarkable ease and swiftness from the loss of a limb; the head must be severed to result in guaranteed incapacitation.

Perhaps the most terrifying aspect of the species X is its method of predation, known as persistence hunting. While several predatory species throughout the galaxies employ this form of predation, X is by far the most efficient and deadly

user of persistence hunting. In one of many documented interactions, a group of our species was chased by an X for several solar cycles. Although far outpacing the predator, our people awoke after a signal resting period to find the X merely walking toward them with limited signs of exhaustion. Our people took flight and alluded the X for several more cycles before collapsing from exhaustion; but the X never ceased its pursuit, alternating walking and running until it finally overtook our people while they rested.

It should be strictly noted that altercation of any kind with an X is strongly discouraged by the Core. Do not engage under any circumstance. Species X is an extremely dangerous phenomenon, and many futile attempts have been made to control or eliminate the species. It is the decision of the Core that X be isolated and left wholly undisturbed by all other Intergalactic species. Sympathy will be given to any who find themselves unfortunate enough to encounter the X, and a swift death is hoped of any who become a target of an X's persistence hunting.

– end of entry GALACTIC_SPECIES: HUMANITY

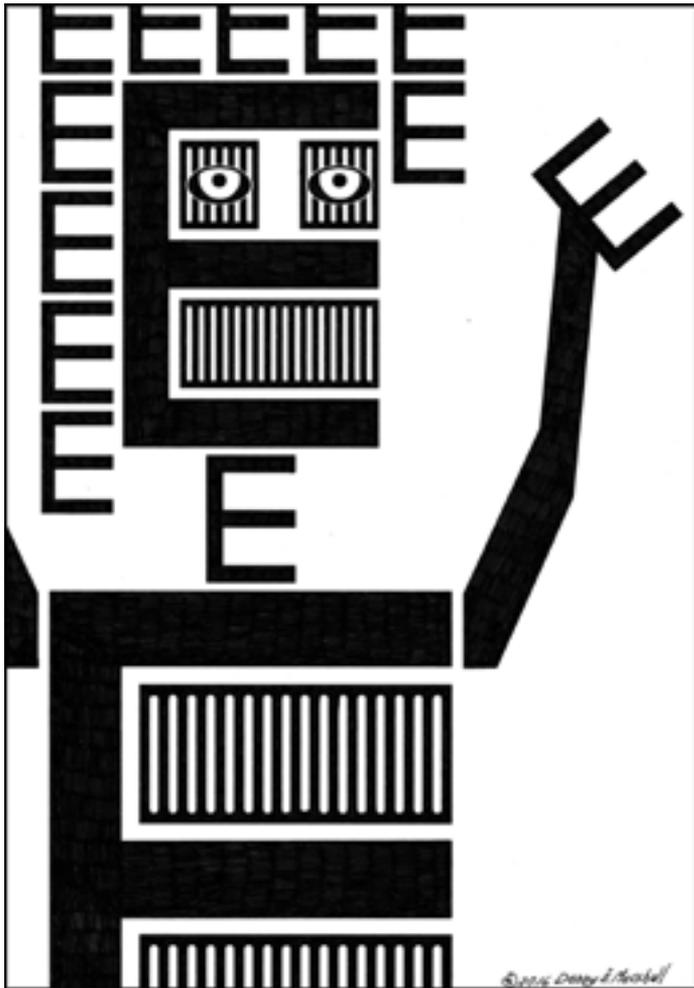
Bubbles

Denny E. Marshall



E Vent

Denny E. Marshall



Untitled

Missy Terry



Untitled

Missy Terry



Tree of Dawn

Olisaeloka Bosah



Rainy Day

Olisaeloka Bosah



Untitled
David White



Untitled

David White



Veas

Michael Anthony

Huddled over a cup of coffee, the truck driver snorted, “Frankie Carle took one out back near Lawrence. Troopers had him tied up for two and a half hours, filling out all kinds of paper work and shit. Probably gonna screw with his driving record too.” The driver seated next to him agreed, “Bastards ain’t nothin’ but trouble. I catch one, I pop ‘em with my broomstick. Keep that puppy alongside the seat just in case.”

“I nabbed one when I was pullin’ outta Tulsa week before last,” the guy on the left continued. “A broad! Didn’t look like one though. Face all dirty. Wouldn’t a known ‘cept for her shirt bein’ open a bit, ya’ know what I mean?” “Whadch’a do?” his seatmate asked.

“Told her to get the hell away from my truck or I’d run her over right there in the parking lot. If she cleaned up, she’d look halfway decent. Mighta’ given her a lift in the cab. But not the way she smelled. Christ!”

There I sat at The High Wheelin’ truck stop on I-70 halfway between Topeka and Junction City, transcribing the commentary as fast as I could without drawing attention because I learned early on this trip that taking notes in truck stops was viewed with suspicion. So, I scrawled in the margins of newspapers, backs of flyers and just about anything else but a notebook. Most folks figured I was jotting down meaningless stuff like reminders or shopping lists for the next stop. A lot fewer questions this way.

The truck stop looked pretty much like the dozen others I'd hit since leaving the Columbia TA off I-80 near the Water Gap. Though I wasn't pushing a big rig, my three-year old Dodge pickup gave me some kinship with the real cowboys who unfolded out the doors and climbed down the sides of those Peterbilt 389s, T660 Kenworths, or that monster International 9900.

A waitress shared a laugh with travelers down the counter. It ended with her launching a frightening, phlegm-clogged cough. A pack of unfiltered Camels stuck out of her pocket. From her gait and green uniform her name should have been Luraleen or Joetta, but the tag simply read Theresa. Looking just shy of fifty, makeup a bit thick, lipstick broader and redder than need be, Theresa seemed born to waitress with that ever-present smile; popping gum; and, a yellow pencil stuck in her hair just above her ear. She sauntered towards me, order pad in hand.

"Coffee and cherry pie, please," I said.

"Milk or cream?" she asked, while hoisting a glass coffee pot.

"Milk's fine."

"Good choice." Theresa leaned close, "Ain't got the new cream yet today. This one's halfway to cottage cheese." She edged the small stainless steel pitcher down the counter, out of reach. "Be right back, hon."

Two drivers wearing baseball caps and a third sporting a wide-brimmed leather hat from which a long pheasant feather arched entered and sat to my left. A few seats down on the right, there was a rail-thin guy stuffing a double stack of flapjacks into his toothless mouth.

“Here you go,” Theresa grinned. “Gave ya’ a bigger piece. Look like ya’ could use a few.”

“Few what?” I asked.

“Pounds,” she smiled, patting her almost flat belly.

I nodded, wondering if this was her regular banter or was she sizing me up for a more personal encounter when she finished her shift. Theresa strolled away, so I let it go.

“I seen a few on the way in,” a driver in the booth behind me said, “out near the Mill Creek bridge.”

“Yeah. Five, maybe six, I figure,” his dining companion grunted in agreement.

“Hard to tell when they got them Vees all circled around ‘em like that. Bet they was havin’ a prayer meetin’ for the one Frankie nailed. Always stealin’ them bibles from motels when the maids clean the room and leave the door open.”

“Anybody sittin’ here?” echoed in my ear.

I spun to see another truck driver, this one at least six-foot, maybe six-three, and a good two-eighty ready to occupy the stool next to me. “No. It’s open,” I replied.

“Appreciate it,” he said as the stool groaned beneath him.

Theresa approached, but before she could ask, he said, “Coffee, three eggs, over easy, home fries, Canadian bacon, whole wheat toast, butter on the side. And strawberry jelly. Thank ya’ ma’am.”

“A man who knows what he wants. My kind of guy.” Theresa laughed while scribbling on the frayed order pad.

His coffee arrived first, which he swallowed, black, no sugar. Without turning, he asked, “How’s the road?”

Not being a professional driver, I was unsure if there was a certain way to respond. I just shrugged, “Okay, I guess.”

“Seen any Vees?”

“Vees?” I asked.

He turned to find me staring back blankly. “Oh,” was all he said.

His comment; the multiple conversations; and, that strange plywood circle I passed back on I-70 suddenly seemed linked. I didn’t know how, but obviously these drivers did. I drank my coffee.

His breakfast arrived; and, two fellows from the booth behind us left. With my pie finished, it was time to admit my ignorance. “Excuse me, you asked about Vees?”

He cut me a sharp glance; then stuffed a forkful of egg into his mouth. I waited for his answer. It came only after another swig of black coffee. “Damned parasites. See them all along the interstates. They’re always getting flattened like stupid-ass possums.”

“Who are these Vees?”

“You don’t haul a rig, do ya’?” he remarked, confident he was right.

“No,” I said. “But I been on the interstates since Jersey. 80, 71, 70.”

“Whatta you drivin’?” he asked.

“Ram pickup, four by four.”

“Nice truck,” he smiled. “Had one couple years back. Hit a bull elk near Missoula. Totaled the son-of-a-bitch. If I was drivin’ anything else, I’d be dead.”

“Lucky for you; but not the elk.” He grinned. Then, I said, “So who are these Vees?”

“Seen anybody standing along the road with a piece of plywood?” he asked.

“Not that I remember.”

“What about a small circle of plywood? Looks like a six or eight sided thing?”

“Yeah,” I said. “Something like that, about ten, twelve miles back, near a bridge.”

“Smoke coming out the middle, right?” he said.

“Yeah! Reminded me of a chimney. Thought it was weird. Sides were all black and dirty.”

“That’s them,” he said, before shoveling in more food.

“I just heard two guys talkin’ about somebody getting killed.”

“Happens all the time. New guys don’t get it like the old ones. Although,” he paused to let air escape his open mouth, “there ain’t many old ones left.”

“What don’t they get?” I pressed.

“You really don’t understand, do you?” His words were neither threatening, nor condescending; just an accurate statement of fact.

“Guess not,” I affirmed.

“You finished?” He pointed his fork at my plate.

“Uh, yeah.”

“Okay, let’s go,” he grunted while pushing up from the swiveling stool.

Theresa was friendlier and better than most, so I laid a five alongside the check. He counted out change and put it on top of a ten spot he pushed forward. I followed him towards the exit, but when he turned for the men’s room I waited by the cashier. Didn’t want any mixed messages and certainly

wasn't looking for trouble.

"Name's Wally Vandercook."

"Hi, Greg Rossi," I said, extending my hand and walking alongside.

He aimed towards a metallic green semi parked next to the diesel pump overhang. Some forty feet above, a bright orange ball with the number 76 in blue spun slowly. "Let's see if we can find any."

As we strolled the length of each of the twenty-something trailers lined up in the parking lot, he bent slightly; clearly searching for something.

"Over there. See it?" Wally gestured towards a trailer.

"Where?" I said.

"Under that Azusa Produce container. See the landing gear?"

"The what?" I asked while we moved closer.

"Right here. Look!" He crouched beneath the trailer; grabbing hold of the uprights that support the trailer when it's detached from the cab. "This!"

He pointed to a three-foot wide five-foot long rectangle of plywood wedged against the diagonal stabilizer that fixed the landing gear to the chassis. It was painted black and caked with mud. A similar piece was wedged against the rear diagonal as well.

"Come on; closer," Wally coaxed.

Bending deep at the waist, I edged under the trailer next to Wally. He lifted a piece of plastic sheeting. "See?"

Wondering why I allowed myself to get into such a defenseless position, I craned my neck, trying to keep Wally in my peripheral vision, while I looked inside. The interior

sides of those plywood sheets were plastered with pages from magazines, newspaper pictures, postcards of Omaha, Los Angeles, and just about anything else that could be pasted on. A filthy blanket was jammed into the far end. The whole thing stunk of motor oil and piss.

“What the...?” I recoiled.

“That’s a Vee,” Wally said.

“Somebody sleeps in here?” I replied incredulously.

“Sleeps and rides,” he grumbled.

“Who?”

“Bums, homeless, what folks used to call hobos when they rode the rails. Now they’re called Vees. You know,” Wally cupped his hands forming a near perfect imitation of the plywood shape, “Vee.”

“Sounds dangerous,” I said, wondering who would do that.

“Stupid and dangerous,” Wally shook his head.

“They’re always gettin’ killed, especially on the A-frames.

“A-frames?” I repeated.

“Yeah,” Wally said, his hand outlining the reinforcing arms of the landing gear. “See? Configured like an X, a K or an A. This one’s a K. They like these best. But, if they don’t set this up right; they slip out. That happens, ain’t nothing nobody can do. Especially when it’s rollin’ a good 70, 75. Splat! Worst part is the driver doesn’t even know half the time. Think they hit a bump or somethin’.”

“Think it’s worse for the Vee,” I said, trying for a lame joke.

Unamused, Wally responded, “I guess. Bastard’s shouldn’t be doin’ it in the first place.”

“Must be cold as hell under there.”

“Older ones usually have a sleeping bag. Still, every once in a while we find one frozen dead. Stupid bastards think they can make it through the Rockies - in February no less. Make one ugly popsicle, all blue and shit.”

“Nice picture,” I replied.

“Then we gotta do all kinds of splainin’ to the cops. They think we let them ride, so we’re responsible.”

“Do you?”

“Hell no!” Wally barked. “Some drivers do, but not me. Ain’t worth it.”

Like two aging crabs, we inched our way out from underneath the trailer. “How come I’ve never heard of these Vees before?” I asked.

“You wouldn’t unless you’re a trucker. But, when they die, most folks figure they were hitchhiking or sleeping on the side of the road when a big rig clipped ‘em. Really bad when they’re wrapped in them sleepin’ bags. They roll down the road gettin’ hit by another truck or car. Or it lays there for days like garbage that fell off a truck. By the time they open that thing up it looks like raw sausage bustin’ out of it casing. Real ugly.”

“What about this one?” I said pointing to the Vee he just uncovered.

“I figure the driver’ll check his rig; knock all that shit off; and, pull out quick.”

“So how do these Vees get themselves hooked in if the driver checks before they head out?”

“They usually look for a semi with a side skirt that hides ‘em. Then, when it’s cold or rainin’ or late at night, they

get underneath and hold on. A lot of drivers, especially the new ones don't even look. Just hop in and go. Painted black like this, they're hard to spot in the dark. Hell, years back, I ran all the way from St. Louis to Enid Oklahoma 'til I realized one had latched onto me."

"Then what?"

"Knocked the son-of-a-bitch off when I got there," Wally said.

"Good thing you didn't run him over."

"Look, I gotta make Salt Lake. Nice meetin' ya, ... uh..." Wally fumbled for my name.

"Greg," I prompted holding out my hand.

"Yeah, Greg."

"See ya'," I smiled as he backed away, aiming towards his emerald green Peterbilt.

"Hey, Wally," I called.

"Yeah?"

"What was that stuff I saw by the road, that plywood with the smoke coming from it?"

"Oh that," he shouted back, "just a bunch of Vees trying to keep warm. Build a fire in the middle, then they pull those plywood Vees around them in a circle. Like a campfire. Watch out for 'em, buddy. They're weasels. Check the bed of your pickup. They like them too."

"I will. Drive safe."

From Salina all the way through Denver, I didn't see a single plywood lean-to along the interstate and though I looked for a Vee hanging from the belly of every semi I passed or passed me, didn't spot another one either. Just west of Grand Junction, I slowed around a foggy curve that seemed to glow

and came upon a cluster of Colorado State Police, the strobes atop their cruisers flashing blue and red in the freezing mist. An ambulance sat with its rear doors wide open next to a stopped tractor-trailer. A crimson puddle seeped out from beneath a sheet of bright yellow plastic spread on the roadway slick with oil. There against the ice-encrusted guardrail, a bloodied shard of plywood leaned like a tombstone. Another Vee.

Illumination

Robert Beveridge

I touch you.

The fire
of your body that warms me

is not the hot, sweet-smelling
flame of desire

nor the black, jewel-hard fire
of desperate lust,

but a torch to illuminate
ancient manuscripts
as I read

Ashes, Ashes

Sheila Quinn

“Ashes, ashes, we all fall down!” the children sang as they loosened their grips on the bars overhead and half ran, half tumbled to the ground.

“You’re out!” Maxine called to Jack.

“Am not!”

“Are too!” a chorus of his peers responded. He tried to protest, but smears of black on denim remained on the knees of his pants.

The children began the chant again while the five finalists reached up, took hold of the rungs and ran in a circle, turning the metal apparatus with their efforts. The gears whined as they pulled, and eventually picked up speed. As the children sang “pockets full of posies,” they tightened their holds and lifted their feet while the merry-go-round carried them over the well-worn path below. On the word *down*, they dropped their feet and released their hands, attempting to stay upright as they ran out the forward momentum.

“You’re out!” several children cried as they pointed to Cleo and Deane. The judges’ proclamations were unnecessary for Charlie. He was sprawled on the ground trying to regain enough equilibrium to stand.

As Henry and Maxine reached again for the bars again, they heard Mrs. Riley’s bell. A handful of the children hesitated, but most of them ran toward their teacher without a second glance. Mrs. Riley was kind, but she was not lenient.

“Remember your coats!” she called from the

schoolhouse steps.

For the last two weeks, Mrs. Riley's first task when she arrived each day was to build a fire in the small wood-burning heater in the back of the classroom. In the afternoon, two boys from the high school removed the ashes and restocked the box of fuel. It was widely known that Mr. Scott, the school principal, assigned them the task as reparation for a prank involving his Model A and two-dozen chickens.

"Line up quickly," Mrs. Riley urged.

Maxine held her hands to her lips and blew gently. Blistered skin had come off, exposing tender pink flesh. "It's a wonder to me that any of your hands still blister," Mrs. Riley said. "I'd think they'd be tough as leather by now."

Mrs. Riley and her class made it into the building as Miz Holman led her first-graders outside. The two women nodded at each other as they passed but said nothing.

Back in the classroom, the children took out their slates for arithmetic practice. As Mrs. Riley called out subtraction figures, she paced the rows to check their work and noticed layers of dusty footprints on the floor.

"Children," she said, "when you come in from your recess tomorrow, you will remember to wipe your feet."

"Yes, Mrs. Riley," they responded in unison.

After arithmetic, Mrs. Riley led the pupils in their spelling drills then allowed them to finish the school day listening to her read. It was Maxine's favorite part of every day. She had just opened *Heidi* to the twenty-second chapter when Miz Holman appeared at the doorway leading a boy by the ear.

"I'm taking young Mr. Clark to the principal's office. I

believe he's the one who has been making such a mess of my floor. Would you listen for any voices from next door? There should be nothing but silence." This was not the first time Miz Holman asked Mrs. Riley to listen for her class while she dragged one boy or another down the hallway.

"I could bring your class in with mine. We're about to resume our reading."

"No, that won't do. I insist that my pupils work until the very end of the day. There is not a moment to waste." Mrs. Riley's students had learned through these doorway interactions that Miz Holman did not approve of Mrs. Riley's teaching methods, particularly those that the children most enjoyed.

"In that case, I'll be an attentive watchman."

"Thank you," Miz Holman said.

Mrs. Riley reopened the book. The reading began slowly, as usual. Some days the girls were chatty and the boys mischievous while on other days, the boys giggled in huddles while the girls conspired. Mrs. Riley never scolded them. She simply began reading, her voice taking on the qualities of the different characters and drawing them into the story by the end of the page. Mrs. Riley's class was the only one that didn't rush out the door as soon as the dismissal bell rang.

Bert and James entered the room, breaking the trance that held them all. Mrs. Riley closed the book and as her pupils collected their things, she smiled at the teenagers. Bert was tall with broad shoulders and a trim waist, and he carried a scoop in one hand and a broom in the other. His accomplice, James, carried a metal bucket. He was shorter than Bert, and his disheveled hair gave him a scrappy look.

“Boys, I’m sure your debt to Mr. Scott has been paid,” Mrs. Riley told them.

“Yes’m, but we don’t mind helping. It’s sorta become a habit,” Bert replied.

“In that case, let me give you something before you get started.”

Mrs. Riley walked across the room while the boys stood by the heater, shifting their weight from one foot to the other. Mrs. Riley lifted a bundle from her desk, walked back across the room, and handed each one a sweet roll with apricot preserves.

“Since you’ve paid your debt, it’s fair I start paying you. I hope this will do.”

“Yes, ma’am!” they said, and each finished his roll in two bites.

“It’s not what you deserve, but it will have to do for now.”

Mrs. Riley’s pupils lingered, watching her interaction with Bert and James. “Children, you need to hurry!” she said, noticing their delay. “Your bus will leave you behind!” Bert opened the latch at the bottom of the heater, slid out the tray, and emptied its contents into the bucket. As her students rushed out, Mrs. Riley turned to the task of tidying the room and sweeping the floor.

After they parted, each walking to her own family’s farm, Henry came behind Maxine and grabbed her schoolbag. She took off chasing him down the dirt road, through the bar ditch and across the field. When Henry knew that he was about to be overtaken, he threw the bag sideways and continued running toward his own farm while she recovered

her things and ran home.

Maxine headed toward the house, hoping to find a leftover biscuit to eat. Momma was standing at the back door with the broom. She carried it so often that it had become like an extension of her arm. Maxine knew that she liked to keep a clean house, but it was an impossible task. The persistent wind brought in as much dirt as the children. She swept the floors every afternoon and again in the evening, only to find them covered with dust by morning.

“Hey, Sugar.” Momma greeted Maxine before she had a chance to step inside. “Go ahead and get your chores done.” She reached out to take her satchel and exchanged it for a bucket of scraps.

“Yes ma’am,” Maxine said. “Could I have something to eat?” she asked.

“Grab peanuts from the cellar,” Momma answered. “But don’t bring ’em in the house. It’s hard enough to keep things clean without that mess.”

Maxine threw the scraps in the direction of the chickens, then grabbed a handful of peanuts from a bag on the cellar floor and stuffed them in her pockets. She walked from the cellar to the barn, shelling and eating as she went. Daddy didn’t like the chickens to have peanut hulls, so she shoved them back into her pockets as she ate. Hunger satisfied, she grabbed her basket from the barn and headed to the chicken coop.

Once the eggs were collected, Maxine carried them to the house. As she reached for the door handle, she remembered what Momma had said about the messy peanuts. She left her basket on the porch and ran to the pigpen. She

turned out her pockets and tossed the brittle hulls into the trough. She ran back to retrieve her basket and stepped inside the back door.

Momma reached for the eggs. "I'll take those, Sugar. You have a little time to play before I'll need your help with supper." Not wanting Momma to change her mind, Maxine took off running. Now that the chores were finished, Claude and Gordon came out of hiding. Maxine and Claude alternated turns in the roles of cowboy and bandit while Gordon played the part of the stolen cow or trusty dog.

"Maxine! Claude! Gordon! Come on in!" Momma called from the back step. Maxine took Gordon by the hand and started toward the house. Claude hesitated. He still wasn't used to having his own set of chores in the evenings.

"You'd better come on!" Maxine called over her shoulder. Claude stuck out his tongue but followed her toward the house.

Daddy met them at the back door. "Maxine! What happened to your shoes?" he asked. She looked down at her feet. Her shoes were black, but she couldn't guess why.

"Those are your new shoes and the only pair you'll have till next fall," he said. "You take care of things or you'll do without."

"Yes, sir," she said. She thought of chasing Henry on her way home and guessed she must have run through something in her pursuit.

Claude pointed to her shoes and laughed.

"None of that," Daddy told him. "You come with me."

Momma came out, and seeing Maxine's shoes for the first time, added, "You'll need to get them clean before you go

to bed.”

Maxine took off her shoes and left them outside. She washed black dust from her fingers then mixed the cornbread batter. Momma put the pan into the oven and handed her a jar of fresh cream with instructions to shake it up so they would have butter on the table.

As the cornbread came out of the oven, Daddy and the boys came in the back door. While they washed their hands, Maxine set bowls and glasses upside down on the counter. Once Daddy and the boys were seated, Momma ladled beans into each bowl and topped them with a square of cornbread. Maxine delivered each bowl to the table along with glasses of milk. Daddy gave thanks, and they ate to their satisfaction.

Maxine washed and put away the supper dishes while Momma picked up her broom, and Daddy carried the washtub to the kitchen table. Claude and Gordon left to change into their nightclothes, but Maxine fetched a bucket of fresh water and got a brush and a sliver of lye soap from behind the sink. Gripping the handle of the brush stung her open blister, as did the soap, but she knew better than to complain. Maxine scrubbed by the light of a lamp until her eyes were heavy and her knuckles sore. Finally finished, she placed her shoes in front of the stove to dry overnight.

The next day during their lunch recess, the two finalists resumed their positions on the merry-go-round. They had to determine a champion before a new game could begin. Maxine heard her friends cheering for her and the boys calling Henry’s name as she grabbed the bars overhead. She ran the circle while everyone sang together, “Ring around the Rosie, pockets full of posies.” The blisters on her right hand stung as

she tightened her grip and lifted her feet. “Ashes, ashes, they all fall down!”

Maxine stayed on her feet for several wobbly steps then fell into the dirt several yards from the merry-go-round. The boys’ cheers told her that Henry had stayed upright. She was disappointed that he had bested her, but she was ready to try again. She dusted herself off and tried to continue playing, but the blisters on her hands proved to be too much.

Mrs. Riley must have given them longer than usual to play, because Maxine saw another class coming out while they lined up. The first-grade pupils scattered across the schoolyard while Miz Holman took a watchful position on the steps.

“I noticed you’ve been getting to school earlier than usual,” Miz Holman said to Mrs. Riley. “I’m accustomed to being the first one to arrive and the last to leave. Yesterday, you were in the building when I arrived and those irritating high school boys were still loitering when I left.”

“Well, yes. I’ve been coming early to start the fire so the room is warm by the time the children arrive.”

“You’ll have them spoiled. They won’t appreciate the warmth; they’ll simply expect it,” Miz Holman said. “I suppose you’ll figure out how to handle them with time. Live and learn, as they say.”

“Edith, dear, we’re the same age and I’ve raised five children.” Miz Holman, who had never married nor raised any children, gave no response.

The second graders were all in line now, walking quickly and avoiding eye contact with their former teacher. “Have a good afternoon,” Mrs. Riley said, and she followed her pupils inside.

The afternoon followed the usual routine of arithmetic and spelling drills until, at last, Mrs. Riley announced that it was time to resume their reading of *Heidi*. She was careful to get her students to their bus on time today.

Just before the bus reached their stop, Henry challenged Maxine to a footrace. Maxine agreed, glad for the chance to make up for her loss on the merry-go-round. As soon as they shuffled off of the bus, Henry yelled, "Go!"

Maxine started to run, but her feet slipped right out of her shoes. Looking back at them, she realized that the shoestrings had been removed. Henry must have done it before he asked her to race. She stepped back to retrieve them and noticed with dread that they were covered in black dust again. She couldn't imagine when it had happened. She had been careful when walking across the schoolyard this morning and hadn't even had the chance to race.

Henry stood ahead of her, holding the shoestrings and taunting, but Maxine didn't respond. She sat on the ground, trying to decide what she should do. Finally, he tossed the laces in her direction and left her to fret alone.

Maxine walked home, going over possible solutions. She could get her shoes clean before Momma noticed or stay out of sight and wash them in the middle of the night. Neither plan was likely to work.

Despite her hunger, Maxine stayed outside and completed her chores. As she left the chicken coop, Momma came out of the house, broom in hand, so she changed course and hurried to the front door. She pulled her shoes off and carried them through the living room and into the kitchen to put the eggs down and look for something to eat.

Seeing the washtub, Maxine considered again whether she should try to get her shoes clean before facing Momma. For the second time, she abandoned the idea and decided to stay out of sight for as long as possible. *Better to be in trouble after supper than all afternoon*, she thought.

The sound of Gordon's chatter alerted Maxine to Momma's imminent return; her youngest brother was never far from Momma's side. She slipped her shoes on and hurried back through the kitchen and living room to make her exit through the front door. She felt bad for sneaking out, but more than that, she was hungry and realized she'd forgotten to get something to eat. With no choice but to get peanuts from the cellar, she turned back in the direction of the house and bumped into Claude.

"C'mon, Maxine! Let's find where Snowball moved her kittens," he said.

"All right, but lemme get some goobers first," Maxine told him.

"Maxine!" she heard Momma holler. Her tone stopped them in their tracks. Claude paused for a moment as though trying to register the fact that it hadn't been his name she called. He smiled at his fortune.

"Ohh, you're gonna get it!" he said so only Maxine could hear.

She knew he was right. Her hunger was replaced by a different ache in her stomach. She turned and walked toward her fate. Claude ran away, his sense of self-preservation overcoming his curiosity.

"Take your shoes off," Momma said when she got to the front door. Maxine obeyed. Momma's voice was

surprisingly low. Rather than looking mad, her shoulders drooped and she didn't look directly at Maxine's face. "You'll have to mind those after supper," she said, indicating the dirty shoes with a nod. "Look at what you've done to the floor." Maxine stepped inside and looked down. In her haste to get out of the house, she hadn't realized that she was leaving a trail of black footprints from one door to the other. She knew that she was going to be in even more trouble than if she had just soiled her shoes.

"I'm sorry, Momma," she said, her own voice cracking now and finding herself unable to look up.

"You'll get the floors clean before supper and your shoes clean afterward. And you'll answer to your daddy when he comes in."

Maxine retrieved the broom and began sweeping. She knew that she needed to clean the entire floor from wall to wall, not just her tracks through the middle. By the time she finished sweeping, Momma had a bucket of soapy water and rags ready for her to begin scrubbing. Maxine was on her hands and knees when Daddy and Claude came in. She heard Daddy talking to Momma in the kitchen.

"Maxine, when you've finished, come on in here," Daddy said. Maxine knew that *finished* didn't only include cleaning the floors. When a job was completed, Daddy expected there to be no evidence that a job had been done at all. Barefoot, she carried her tools out the front door so that she wouldn't walk on the still-damp boards. She beat the broom against the back step to remove the loose dust and propped it against the house. She rinsed the rags in the stock tank and hung them on the line to dry. Finally, she dumped

the murky water at the base of the apricot tree and returned to the house.

“Yes, sir?” Maxine said as she stood beside his chair at the kitchen table.

“I believe we talked about your shoes yesterday.”

“Yes, sir,” she answered, looking down.

“And today you’ve made a mess of your shoes and your momma’s floor?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Get a switch and wait for me at the shed.”

Maxine obeyed.

For the second night, Maxine sat at the table scrubbing her shoes. Her knuckles were raw and bleeding by the time she finished. When the job was done, she placed her shoes beside the stove and told her parents good night. Minutes later, Momma came in and silently rubbed salve over her daughter’s hands.

The next morning, Maxine attended to every step between her house and the bus stop and she resisted the urge to run across the schoolyard. Once she got inside the building, she breathed a sigh of relief. Her shoes were still clean and she wouldn’t have to worry about them again until dismissal.

Indeed, when Mrs. Riley dismissed her pupils that afternoon, Maxine collected her things and immediately looked down to resume the watchful guard over her feet.

“No!” she gasped. Maxine slumped back into her seat and began sobbing. She had been so careful to keep her shoes clean, but they were covered in black once again. She leaned forward in her desk and buried her face in her arms.

The other children cleared out of the classroom, but Maxine did not move. Bert and James came to the door, but they hesitated when they heard her sobs. They looked at Mrs. Riley for guidance.

“Come on in, boys,” she said, and she walked across the room and kneeled next to Maxine.

“Are you alright, dear?” Mrs. Riley asked. Maxine couldn’t speak. She just shook her head as she tried to figure out a way to avoid the trouble she would be in at home. Perhaps she could just stay the night at the school.

“Well, I’m afraid you can’t stay here all night,” Mrs. Riley said as though she had read her mind. “And if you don’t hurry, you’re going to miss the bus.” Maxine still did not move from her seat.

“Has something happened?” Mrs. Riley prompted.

“It’s my—my shoes,” Maxine said between sobs. “I can’t go home with dirty shoes.” Mrs. Riley looked down at the pair of shoes covered in black dust. She sighed and looked at the footprints making tracks across her classroom. Then she looked over at Bert and James, Mrs. Riley shook her head as she watched them cleaning the heater.

“Boys?” she said. “When you clean out the heater, what do you do with the ashes?”

“We put them in this bucket, ma’am,” answered Bert.

“Yes, I see that. And what do you do with them after that?”

“We dump ’em, ma’am.”

“Yes, and *where* do you dump them?” she continued. Bert and James looked at each other.

“Oh, just outside,” Bert said.

“Under the merry-go-round?” Mrs. Riley asked.

The boys’ red cheeks and grins confirmed her suspicion.

Cleo appeared in the doorway. “Maxine, you’re going to miss the bus!”

Maxine looked stricken.

“James, you drive to school, don’t you? From north of town?” Mrs. Riley asked.

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Cleo, please tell George to go on without Maxine today. James, you’ll give her a ride home once you’ve finished your work. You can pick her up from my room when you’re ready.”

“Yes, ma’am,” James responded.

“And boys,” Mrs. Riley continued.

“Yes ma’am?” they answered together.

“I believe Miz Holman could use your help cleaning her floors every afternoon from now until the Christmas holiday. You wouldn’t mind doing that would you? In addition to cleaning out my heater and disposing of the ashes across the road?”

The boys were no longer smiling. At the mention of Miz Holman, James reached up and rubbed his ear.

“Yes ma’am,” they answered again.

Mrs. Riley went to the closet in the hallway and returned with a brush, a bucket, and a cake of soap. She placed them on the floor in front of Maxine then left the room again and returned with a pot of water.

“You’ll have to carry your shoes when you’re done or they’ll get muddied, but since James is driving you home, you

shouldn't have much walking to do."

Maxine looked up at Mrs. Riley and then down at the items on the floor. As soon as she understood what Mrs. Riley had arranged, she yanked off her shoes, got down on the floor, and began scrubbing. She didn't care that her blisters were burning or that the scabs on her knuckles were opening up. She could even ignore her hunger. It was a mystery to her that Mrs. Riley had gone to such lengths to save her, and she was grateful. It seemed as though a real miracle had come her way, just as it had to Heidi's friend, Clara.

Mrs. Riley went behind her desk, brought out a coffee can, and placed it on Maxine's desk. "Take these cookies for a snack on your way home. Mind that you don't eat so many that it ruins your supper."

"Yes, ma'm," Maxine said. She wondered how Mrs. Riley knew that she was so hungry. Perhaps she had heard her stomach rumbling. Even then, why did she have so many cookies ready to share?

While she swept the floor, Mrs. Riley asked, "Maxine, you're one of the best players at Ring around the Rosie, right? You and Henry?"

Maxine looked up with her eyes wide.

"Yes," she said. It seemed there was no end to the things Mrs. Riley knew.

Water Colors

Gloria Keeley

slowly up the canal
Chinese paper boats
water-write characters

hummingbees buzz secure
in the company of spiders

feather fathers move beyond
Maine rocks and
quietly watch water
slap against the stones
of a weathered inn

shells line the sill
alongside candle-dripped bottles

door slams
like ship boom lowered

a frame around one star
lends to the self of solitude

standing in the center of a cold space
the painting lacks emotion, warmth

petals with thin blue veins
light condensed
figures out of place
like a seaplane over the desert

No One Kills Tommy Swings

Tasha Peters-Vice

**Dedicated to Tommy Thompson, whose pseudonym and unmarked grave are as unusual as the rumored stories. Fiction seems only appropriate for the tales we will never know.*

After slipping the conductor some cash, Nara climbed into the rail car and hid behind the cargo. Within minutes of departing a sudden jolt propelled the railcar forward. The shifting cargo forced barrels full of sloshing liquid toward her. Nara found herself pinned to the wall of the freight car. Nara resisted the urge to scream from the blow her chest took when the barrels forced her into the corner of the 20 x 8 rail car even though the sound of clacking of cars grew louder, creating a rhythmic tempo. Straining her eyes, she made out the flicker from one row of shiny mechanical parts. To her left cotton sacks tied to pallets in a pathway were barely visible. Beyond them she tried to count. *Five barrels, possibly seven?* How could she move them?

Leaning into the barrels she pressed against them. Her lungs sucked in the cool air. Failing to free herself, she closed her eyes. Better to stay calm, she thought, despite the barrels pressing the air from her lungs. In her mind, she traced the silver Celtic knot her mother had worn when Nara was a child. With each slowing breath she imagined herself, a child, and traced over the lines. Again, and again. By the time the railcar door slid open Nara lost consciousness.

—24 hours Earlier

Paul leaned back against the red brick wall, puffing fat circles of cigar smoke while fixing his attention on the 1957 Packard parked at the corner of the industrial block.

“Nice car, but too nice for this part of town,” Paul said to one of the loaders. Paul pointed to the parked car before adding, “The FBI has been watching South Chicago for decades. But this isn’t some prohibition rum run here. We’ve gotta move these goods outta here before they pull a raid. Tell your guys to step it up.”

Inside, the crew busied themselves loading the moving van with unlabeled crates, maybe weapons, or cigarettes headed to Vegas. Or, liquor hijacked from the shipping yards. It wasn’t his job to know what was moving, only to get it there undetected.

After loading, a decoy truck was sent out first. The 57 Packard took the bait, following the first truck, full of empty promises for some eager undercover cops.

Three heavy bangs to the garage door gave Paul the signal he needed. He was clear to drive the goods in the opposite direction. Paul stomped on his cigar leaving behind a smolder of ash before pulling the truck around to the side of the warehouse. There he adjusted his black tie and grey felt derby while waiting for her.

Nara ran her fingers over neatly pressed waves of red hair before smoothing the large collar of her belted plaid dress. “Where to, today?” she asked. “State line” said Paul. “Right, let’s see to it then.” Nara leaned toward the passenger window admiring the contrast of grey buildings, tall and short, as they passed through the industrial center of the

Chicago. Silence filled the truck cab as they neared the state line. Nara shifted from the passenger side, to the middle of the truck's bench seat. "The usual role?" she asked.

Paul glanced in his rearview before responding, "Newly married, and moving?" Nara leaned-in hooking her left arm under Paul's, and stroked the shoulder of his crisp pinstriped shirt with her other hand. The morning sun filled the cabin when they approached the traffic stop. She gazed up at him as they approached state line. "What's your destination?" the guard asked. Nara belted out an enthusiastic response, "New house!" While looking over the side of the moving truck the guard asked, "Do you have anything to declare?" "No, Sir," Paul responded. "He's already declared his love. What more could a girl ask for?" Nara added. She flashed a smile at them both before planting a deep red kiss onto Paul's thick bare cheek. "Do you mind opening up?" the guard asked.

Paul stepped from the truck, unhinged the lock, and slid the truck's garage door upward. An oriental rug and gaudy golden lamps cluttered the view of cardboard boxes labeled dining, bedroom, and bath. After a moment's pause the guard gave the sign, and wave to Nara, "Carry on." Paul resumed his spot in the cab with Nara still snuggling beside him until they were well beyond the state line. "A little exaggerated, don't you think?" asked Paul. Nara responded while shifting out of the center seat and back to the passenger side. "Cool your jets. No one should question the business of a woman who's singing a romantic ballad."

"I can't imagine what you have in mind for next week's transport," said Paul. After pausing for a moment,

Nara replied, "I think you'd be surprised if you knew the full extent of my acting talents." "Will Jack be picking you up this afternoon?" asked Paul. Nara thought for a moment. *Does Paul know that Jack isn't coming back?*

It had been two weeks since the FBI questioned Jack about Tommy Swings. They picked Jack up mid-day in front of all the guys so they'd be assuming that Jack had flipped. Would the FBI keep pressuring him to give up Swings like this? Nara knew that's why Jack left, why he went underground to start a new secret life that same afternoon. Nara wondered, *How long can I keep all of this a secret?* "No, he's out of town on business. If you don't mind, I'll need a ride to my car after we've passed off the booze and due backs," said Nara. "Sure thing" said Paul as he pulled into the Kentucky warehouse.

Nara didn't worry about any attention the shiny hopped up 1957 Chevy Bellaire might bring to the two of them. "Thank you for the Ride, Paul," said Nara as Paul offered her a hand out of the car. "My pleasure, see you for next week's gig" said Paul as Nara stepped out of the black two-door sedan. While walking away, Nara thought about Paul and Jack as kids. The two boys were known as the inseparable North-Side Irish Duo. She wondered: *Should she tell him?* Instead, Nara swallowed the guilt of her secret finding resolve in one thought. *Paul is only safe if he knows very little about Jack and even less about Swings.*

In the normally bustling afternoon market area the yellow hardware sign took on an eerie green hue. Heavy cloud cover arched above the barbershop. Overcast stretched into

the department-store windows casting a dreary grey light on the dressing displays. One paperboy, unaffected by the looming threat of soggy weather, waved and chattered up sales in front of the floral shop. Nara picked up two papers, one for quick impending rain cover, and another for good measure. When shuffling the papers into a makeshift umbrella, the headline came into Nara's sight. "Impossible!" Nara gasped. "Mam?" asked the boy whose confused expression seemed to match his oversized trousers and blazer. "Tommy Swings is dead? It's not possible!" said Nara-more to herself than to the paperboy. "I don't report the news. I just sell the papers, mam," the paperboy explained.

Nara rolled up both copies of the paper in disbelief before tucking them under her arm and trotting through the now steady rain to her car. "It's not possible," she mumbled to herself, "No one knows Tommy Swings. No one kills Tommy Swings."

At home in the quaint red-checked kitchen, Nara slammed the papers down on the small round breakfast table. She glanced around the room to her husband's brown leather jacket still hanging on the wall. If the FBI tried to get to Tommy through Jack, then they must be close to Tommy. It wouldn't be long before they'd come for her, then they'd come for Paul. Suddenly, a thick hand clamped across Nara's mouth, while an elbow wrapped around her neck. Her heart pounded in her ears while electrical currents of fear shot through her arms and legs. Her thoughts screamed. Move! Fight!

With a sweeping blow, Nara struck out wind milling her right arm over her head and following with a swing of her left fist. Nara's violent response forced the vice of hands squeezing her neck away. Gasping for breath, she fell to the floor. As she tried to rise, the weight of a boot slammed her body down, shoving her face to the ground where the smell of leather and linoleum compounded. "Where is Jack?" a voice demanded. "You tell me. Haven't seen him in three days," Nara choked. "Tell him Southside Mack Vicente was here. Rumor has it that Jack's boss Tommy Swings is dead. Jack needs a new alliance. It's in his best interest to talk to me," said the voice. "Twenty-four hours, or I'll see your pretty face again." "This is for the left hook," Mack gave Nara an extra kick in the ribs before finding his way out. Nara's long slim arms found their way up the side of a nearby chair, and with them she pulled herself up. She dialed the only person she could trust.

When Paul answered, she told him everything he needed to know. 1. Jack wasn't coming back 2. Tommy Swings was dead 3. Southside Mack was moving in. 4. Nara needed an exit—fast!

Within the hour, Paul sent over the maid. Adeline McGitty pulled into Nara's driveway without taking notice of the cars parked on either corner. She rang the doorbell with a thick feather of plumes in one hand and a bucket of lye soap in the other. Adeline's crisp white apron was a stark contrast to the deep dark creases of labor that marked her hands. Her long black dress hung loosely on her narrow frame. Nara took one look at her and thought, *This is the perfect clean up*. One hour later, Mack watched from a parked car at the curb as a maid exited Nara's house and made her way to the train station.

The dull aching in Nara's lungs lingered as she came back to consciousness. The barrels that had taken her breath away were no longer around her. She lay in the center of the floor looking up. Above her, a simple light bulb hung in the center of a small concrete room. While trying to regain control of her body she wondered, *Who pulled me from the freight car that I snuck into?* Two shadows, long figures, emerged from the corner. "Well, well, well! If it isn't Tommy Swings, our North-Side leader!" Paul said. "Where's Jack?" Nara squeaked out. "All this time, and I never knew," Paul added. "Now then, don't strain yourself. Your train hopping excursion in that freight cart of barrels from Chicago to Wyoming has already done a number on you," Paul said. "That's one hell of an exit plan," he added.

Nara stood up, the maid's crisp white apron that had disguised her exit from the house, was tarnished with freight-car dust and barrel grit. She made the drive in the maid's car from her home to the train depot without being detected by Mack. The escape plan had worked- for all of them. "She's alright, as salty as they come," Jack said as he stepped out from the shadows. Jack lent Nara a hand as she struggled to stay on her feet. "Don't listen to Paul. He's just mad because he spent six hours hiding in the back of a truck and then I told him that he's working for a girl!" Jack laughed. Then, while leaning in to kiss Nara on the forehead he pressed her lucky silver Celtic Knot into her hand. "This kept us together while we were apart," Jack said. This time Nara didn't need to close her eyes to feel the cool silver as she traced her fingers over the knot. "I wouldn't even know if the police hadn't tried to wash you out in the open with the fake headlines!" Paul

said to Nara. “No one kills Tommy Swings.”

“You understand, don’t you Paul? You are my closest friend. But, knowing that Nara is Tommy Swings, the boss of bosses, would have put you at risk.” Jack gave his old friend a pat on the back. “We have enough put back to start new, the three of us,” added Nara. “Sure, I get it. There’s just one thing that doesn’t jive,” Paul added. “Nara, why do they call you Tommy Swings?” he asked.

Nara, who was still recovering from another day in the business, smiled at Jack. They were all together and now they had no more secrets. “Jack gave me the name. He said that I reminded him of a promising baseball player,” said Nara before adding, “I can take a hit. And, if I go down—I go down swinging.”

The Couch

John Grey

I remember it new,
as green as nature,
and how we catered to its needs
like it was the baby
and not the child bawling
in the next room.

Not one crumb, one mote of dust,
was allowed to settle on its surface
for more than it took for
one of us to grab the hand-held vacuum
like a gunslinger drawing a Colt 45.

I would have been wary
of even sitting in it
had not you been the one
already there, remote in hand,
marking its soft cushions
indelibly down for coziness.

And now look at it.
Children have spilled
between the cracks.
Dogs have gnawed
on what once were shiny legs.
The color has faded.
Part of fabric is torn
and bleeding ugly white polyester.

Yet, you still will find us thigh to thigh
on that battle-scarred sofa night after night,
and the comfort remains palpable.
A couch is like a marriage.
You grow old together.
But the poems always begin
when both were new.

Southern Struggle

Charles Lancaster

Magnolia blooms in the summer haze.
Blue bandana flows in the summer breeze.
A rusty needle strikes bare feet quick.
The burning of rubber engulfs the nearby land.

Magnolia drips in the dark stillness.
Branches sway east to west from the chilling air.
As black as coal cracks the hands of night.
A blue letter floats to show dew.

Magnolia accepts the letter.
Blue ink engulfs the hands to show a new path.
The rusty needle stabs the softened earth,
to show reverence for vanished passions.

Magnolia folds the letter.
While covering the rusty needle,
in blue ink of wretched morn.
Knowing Magnolia will one day
have to make a crucial choice.
Live life as a tired-out mule or
live life as a person of color who
strives to gain liberation.

For a Green-Eyed Poet

Ann Howells

He reads a poem, basks in romance and sensitivity. He's blatantly struts, displays spectacular plumage. All poets exaggerate; he bursts with hyperbole. He names her his heart, his star, his new moon. He compares her name, iambic pentameter, to a rose. Not exactly a word thief, he is a long-term borrower.

She's a combination of beautiful and spoiled. And wisely, he fails to mention percentages. She steals from bed, to meet in the wildflower garden. She'll be Helen to his Paris, Cleopatra to his Antony.

* * *

His eyes dapple golden-green, soft as forest floors. She tosses compliments; he rolls over for belly rub.

With a finger she traces his sensuous lips. She does not hear the ring of finest crystal. Still, she wants to grow pumpkin round with his child. But no silver lining ever comes without a dark cloud.

Conceit blinds him to all desires but his own. That love will change him is the oldest illusion. He'll wear her like a crown upon his curls. If he is indeed an angel, he is a fallen one.

it is your home...

Maria A. Arana

it is your home Zuni
the tortoise shell among the pot-pour-ri
whose hardness lands on the soft soil

don't quaff the crimson blood
when the art of loving
reseals the cartography of your home

Zuni, let the gypsy ooze
from the soil
her time does not belong

find the linch-pin that
converts your home
to countless others

zoom of a thousand stars colliding

100 MPH

Richard Rutherford

The San Gorgonio pass—to the Santa Ana wind—is a freeway.

For three days we had sustained, hundred miles per hour wind. My house was half a mile south of the water troughs. Dirt blew so hard I could only see my feet. As the animal's husband, I was responsible for water. The troughs could fill with silt, replacing the water. Dry air made anything thirsty.

On the second afternoon, I walked. Using my snowboard outers, helmet and goggles.

Bundled up, I drew a line with my brain-imbedded iron molecules to magnetic north, adjusted left a little.

Crosswind from the right—east. I walked straight to the corral. I was relieved to see no silt or sand in the water. But I didn't see any cows. They could have been up in the canyons or they could have been within ten feet of me and, either way, I couldn't see them. So, I leaned and staggered around the corral perimeter, then followed a couple of trails out. No cows.

I was in the middle of a nature freak—a howling Santa Ana of magnitude that obscured my sense of sight—but I was handling it. My sense of direction reassured me. I could survive in any time period. My genes were good. I observed it as a blessing.

Felt so nice, I decided to walk west, the $\frac{3}{4}$ mile to the other set of troughs; wind at my back, along a set of power lines.

Maybe a hundred yards out, my follicles prickled. Something following me. Even though I couldn't see and I was breathing only within my clothing, I was sure. It was a mountain lion. And that became part of the experience; big Santa Ana, along the San Andreas, out in the pasture with a lion trailing me.

With all my gear, I was big as a bear. I figured the lion was following me as a curiosity, not as food. I was on alert, but not afraid—well, yeah, afraid. Another couple hundred yards, and I decided the cows could have water if they wanted to follow their noses. I didn't want to walk in front of the lion anymore, so I cut a hypotenuse for home. And still, I knew it was trailing me, from downwind this time.

Another hundred yards. And it was gone.

I came to the cross-fence I'd expected, and leaned home in a slanted headwind, the goggles scratched like gauze.

I went again the next day, no lion, same wind.

I've seen a meteor in daylight, seen the Northern Lights, seen my daughters born. I've been to the top of a mountain and to the Salton Sea. I've seen whales, eagles, badgers, and amoebas.

And I shared a walk with a mountain lion in a blinding blow.

German Winter (A Sonnet)

Katherine Knight

Winter kisses on frozen cracked lips,
Tranquil flakes flutter down in whimsical patterns.
Down a lighted street where a little girl skips,
Below red and green lights, tiny mice scatter.
A place of gathering, with carols in the air.
Where sidewalks are ice rinks, and laughter rings,
Nutcrackers guard houses, glass ornaments are hung with care.
Warm candied almonds put winter hunger at ease.
Kids gather for a tiny town meeting,
They all brought an ornament from each of their trees,
To bring the dark house on the corner season's greetings.
The kids worked with a smile despite the freezing breeze.
An old man stumbled out, his eyes filled with tears,
His first Christmas tree, since his wife's passing, in 22 years

Pop

Carlo Gallegos

Terry drove Reina, his run-down, rusted, little white Ford Ranger, down a gravel covered Missouri road. Dust flying up behind the truck as the flicker of red, white, and blue lights flashed through the smoke that wisped around his vehicle. Blazer fastened to the “oh shit handle” hanging out the passenger side window. His straight greasy blond hair flapping in the wind, his eyes closed, hollering and laughing, like a man with nothing to lose. No man, boy, girl, or woman could drive better than stick skinny Terry. Gears shifting like an angel’s words, smooth as butter, car twisting and turning like a mad snake caught between the beak of a bird of prey.

Blazer grabbed his hot .357 Magnum from his waist band, turned his muscular neck to look through that foggy dust, cool as ice, and fired his shot precise, striking the driver of the squad car through the neck. Blazer always the leader, the speaker, the man with all the answers. The boys from town worshiped him, and the women would swoon when he smiled. His aim with everything in life was always true; he barely had to look down the barrel to know where those wild projectiles would lacerate. It was as if he was forged from the same material as the weapon in his hands. Gun and man becoming one, as his intuition, or soul, or whatever gave him life pushed and pulled his hand toward some purpose, and he so easily hit his target dead.

Terry’s eyes showed surprise and fear as he contemplated how to accept the death of the officer. It

pulled on his mind and engulfed his insides like a hot embrace.

He allowed his face to show a piece of him that no one saw, not for more than a brief moment. Sickness intruded into the depths of his flesh. Instead of believing he was human, he buried it deeper than measurement, with all his other emotions choosing to fall farther into that dark loneliness he called home. Terry hollered at the top of his lungs, blood full of methamphetamine, turning hard down a rarely used dirt road in old Reina, going back towards his home in Springville. Blazer ducked back into the cab, smacking Terry on the shoulder in the process and hollering like a boy on Christmas, his hands, still, without so much as a tremor, those ice blue eyes only calculating, never feeling. The two boys barely more than twenty, best friends since the first grade, no one could separate them and that unquenchable desire to be mischievous.

Terry laid under his trusty Ranger red necking something to be just that much more powerful. Terry's mother sat inside the grotesque barely livable home on her oil stained La-Z-Boy. A giant mole protruding from the side of her nose, her beady eyes almost touching the dirty glass lenses. Her chafed chin rubbing her chest; a heap, caped in clothes, which had been worn for more than three days. She yelled at Terry's little brother through her blackened teeth, the last of which loosely holding onto her stinking gums.

"Jimmy, get me another orange pop. This one is almost out. God dammit Jimmy, get your fat ass up," Mama screamed up towards that lonely loft.

Jimmy's sad heavy canter brought him down the bare

wooden stairs, the sticky hot air pressing his cloths against his perspiring skin. He walked around the piles of trash and papers, the bathroom filled to the brim with unwanted things, feces, dirt, and inevitable vermin.

“Ok, Mama, here I am. Don’t get too excited,” Jimmy said as he transversed his way into the kitchen and brought his sad pile of a mother another two-liter Fanta.

“Here you go, Mama,” he said as she jerked the pop from his hands, her slimy eyes never leaving the television.

Mama was a perfectly sorry example of someone taking advantage of the government, a bitter realization Jimmy had made throughout the long hours he spent online and rifling through books in his room from the public library. Knowing he was raised on slurred values and neglect, Jimmy tried to stop eating all the cheap frozen food his mother provided. Unable to prevail, a weak power of will, so ingrained in his family’s soul, he never made it past a few days before resorting back to those simulation foods that provided the comfort that he so craved for. A mere fifteen years of age. The hope for a self-imposed bright future already draining from his once excited eyes. Always looking up like a romantic knight standing, defiant against his horrific enemy, his armor being chipped, slowly but surely, rusting and rotting into his obesity. Jimmy resumed his heavily worn spot on his defiled futon and thought briefly of masturbating for the fourth time that day but decided to pick up the novel crumpled at his side, disappearing from his grease soaked reality into the fictional life of possibility.

Terry’s head stuck in Reina’s freshly cleaned lifted hood. Blazer walked up through the tall unmanaged grass,

eyes gaunt from a long night out or a big score of that life giving nectar. Walking up to Terry, his sway always seeping charisma and confidence especially in the tightest and most stressful of situations. That feeling that Blazer seemed to ripple out and cover others with a blanket of calm trustfulness had begun to be less smooth and effortless; his movements now more rigid and harsh. Terry was the only one that could see inside that screen that was held so gracefully by Blazer, something inside of him was becoming uninterested again; bored with the “peasants” he was surrounded by. That murky crystal could only do so much to null his restless mind.

“Let’s go get some more dip! Found some .38 special ammunition too, need to find something to shoot. What behind Old Man Miller's again?”

“Blazer, last time we went back there we was almost shot dead: you know he ain’t afraid to protect his land.”

“Miller can eat shit; there is quality game on his land and I have quality ammunition; he could barely see anyhow. C’mon, I know my own brother wouldn’t ditch me like all those other pussies.”

“Give me a few lines, a can of dip, and we’ll see if I am persuaded.” Blazer, giving that alluring smile, walked slowly to Terry and squeezed his bony shoulder. Cowboy up! We’re going to tramp up there like the vaqueros we are.” Blazer perfectly using one of the few words that Terry had taught him, how brilliant he truly was.

Terry and Blazer trot into the old Love's gas station evil burning like embers deep inside their hollow faces. A state trooper stands idly waiting to buy his fourth cup of coffee that day. Blazer, lost in his ways, stares at the police officer

with that cold unflinching way.

The scent of coffee emanates and the sound of Donald Trump's voice fills the air. Eyes meet. The trooper's heart thumps like a Tazer snapping wildly at a chance to clasp some upon vermin. His eyes glare down at Blazer like hot steel searing the ass of a mule. Trooper Lucky was best friends with the man shot only weeks before, the charges being dropped due to the dust from the dirt road and the lack of any witness. Blazer's blood seems to dip into cadence with that of his gods as his eyes meet Lucky's, unflinchingly, gazing deeply at one another. A heinous stare off, filled with passion, the locked eyes of two so deeply in love that they have molded into one. Blazer and Lucky knew the truth; Blazer wore it on himself, elegant, the carcass of his past. Blazer grins, serenely pushing his presence against Lucky like a wave crashing against a weak child. Before that sweet, caustic, Copenhagen is bought, Lucky pulls his Glock 19 fast as lightning and fires straight at Blazer. Mind blurred with enraged emotion, he misses, hits Terry in the shoulder; Terry's sweating body drops to the floor as shock amazement floods his mind, barley believing the pain that has engulfed him. As Lucky re-aims that cold Glock, Blazer, cool as Siberian ice, aims his .357 and blows Lucky's skull all over the silent women standing behind him. The bullet ricocheting through and smacking a Coke machine spraying carbonated pop everywhere. The laugh liberated from Blazer's chest seems to spew like molten lava, covering everything in an engulfing deprivation. His smoldering gun discharges on the simple "peasants," all the while his laugh hammers away, loaded with degradation. That "simple" store clerk pulls out a 22 inch 12 gauge shotgun and blasts

Blazer directly in the chest. Lying on the floor, blood and chaos inundating inside the Love's walls, Blazer takes his last gurgling breath, looks Terry straight into his terrified and needy eyes, fires his last round through Terry's stomach and dies. Blazer, petrified, his eyes and a smile radiating, unearthly, from his stilled face.

My Destructive Bliss

Tracy Aspyn

You remind me of hot chocolate on a cold December morning.

The kind with marshmallows on top.

The kind that singed your taste buds off with the first few sips.

You remind me of a blue raspberry snocone.

The kind that would make your mouth water.

The kind that would leave a big blue stain on your favorite white T-shirt.

You remind me of dancing in the rain on a warm summer evening.

The kind of evening that you'd want to relive for the rest of your life.

The kind of evening that left you in bed with a cold and blistered feet.

But maybe your deep dark brown eyes, and curly brown hair that sat on your head so flawlessly, didn't remind me of hot chocolate, or snocones, or dancing in the rain.

Maybe you actually remind me of burnt taste buds that left my food tasteless and unenjoyable for weeks.

Maybe you actually remind me of a giant blue stain on my favorite white T-shirt that no amount of bleach or time in the wash cycle could remove.

Maybe you actually remind me of unrepairable blistered feet
and a miserable cold that left me feverish and in bed
for days.

Maybe you were masked as my happiness,

When in all reality you only brought heartbreak and tears

With your deep dark brown eyes

And curly brown hair that sat on your head so flawlessly.

Maybe you were not my happiness.

Maybe you were only

My destructive bliss.

Enchantment left behind

Josephine Pino

At 21 I left an enchanted land.

I drove away from:
the mineral smell of earth
patterns of broken mud, abruptly startled by their loss of water
light that surrounds your body
like an embrace.

Force-fields of heat that cause you to laugh at their
presumptuousness
as you exit tawny adobe buildings.

Foods that tease the senses with
shiny red and green sauces that torture the tongue and
comfort your belly
and leave you desiring more.

Purple-blue peaks
with their softened edges and
afternoons that succumb to the wrath of electrical clouds and the
drenching flashes that flood a thirsty city.

The Enchanted Sky calms itself as instantaneously as each
torrent begins.

Arrogant landscapes
in the after-storm air
show off
rusty pinks, turquoise blues, and lavenders
with unexpected vibrancy, as though to say

Of course we're here.
We've been here all along.
You just hadn't looked
closely enough
before.

After the bursting of the clouds,
la gente peer out from under garbage bags
and other forms of impromptu shelter.
Eyes squint as the proud orange sun
retakes its position
at the center of the endless sky.
Plastic warning cones surround street lakes
that will evaporate before sundown,
but why risk inviting La Llorona, who might
mistake any pool of water
for the acequia that took her hijos?
Yellow cranes lift cars from flooded arroyos-
perhaps they are payment for calming the dust devils?
Roadrunners and horned lizards are revived
and even the ancient stooped volcanos
stretch happily to touch the sky.

Through the windshield I gazed ahead
at the dusky sage-dotted
expanse that straddled
the arrow of gray highway.
Zig zagging light made me think
of movie cowboys,
riding toward adventurous horizons,
taking for granted
the horses would
find their way
back
home.

I barely glanced in the rear view mirror at the enchanted land
as I left it behind.

Roots and the Fruit

Rosemary Dunn Moeller

I love conundrums (and take abuse for it). From
the infinite universe,
I have returned to a closed world where
I am the cause of my problems,
I'm the solver of my puzzles.
We are back in a pre-Copernican existence.
I can fight the inertia of my own momentum towards
self destruction that is mistakenly valued
as self preservation.

Nature,
the natural world of chaos and changes I can't
study fast enough or learn about soon enough,
responds
to my stratocide or aquacide or terracide
by aggressively drying out, flooding over,
up-heaving plains and cracking apart mountains.
I could not be any less
significant
if I were a neutron,
holder of the strongest force. A metaphor is absolutely
required for understanding multiple dimensions.

In my closed universe I embrace responsibility
for my marvelous pulsing beating living existence
that keeps me connected to the simplest cells and
most complicated mutualities.
I am my own attempted-murderer. I am my own
apprenticing surgeon, repairing damages I've
self-inflicted, my own psychoanalyst
listening to myself in therapy that reveals my nakedness.
Anthropomorphizing and
mythologizing ironically lead us to truth.

Natural nudity balances what I take with what
I preserve and conserve, produce and consume.
I should be clothed in the flow of what
warms or cools as needed, what
fuels or fills stomach and mind.
[En(o)u(gh) Effing La(u)(gh)ter]

Stay ca(l)m when given that “(Yo)u’r(e) so dum(b)”
look becauz(e) being English literat(e) means ignoring

so many b’s, l’s, k’s that aren’t spoken, gh’es for *f*
and ch’es skipped; pretend *sure, cello, sugar*

have h’s; pretend *chaos, chorus* and *chiropractors*
don’t. Pay a(t)tenshun(tion) to properly ignor(e) letters

and som(e) peopl(e), street si(g)ns naming un(k)nown local
heroes, words from mispronounced native languages and

towns from w(h)ich ancestors moved to this place
w(h)ere th(e)ir des(c)endants can’t abide saying

newcomers names correctly. I’ve moved again.
I’m confused and can’t ask for directions to where

I’m going without being offered sni(c)kers.
I WAS trying to say it correctly!

Harbor Station

Blake Kilgore

I'd been at Harbor Station for three months when I took my first injection of U4.

Our family was poor, nearly starving. So when the recruiters came, I knew somebody had to go, and told Mama I'd be the one. She was afraid, though, knew all the rumors about the mining communities, and how people went away, got into trouble with drugs, and never came back. She believed me when I said I'd be ok, because I believed it too. And I tried real hard to stay clean, but it was basically impossible.

Something about the minerals got into you, turned your mind inward and got to gnawing on your soul. Other dudes who tried to stay clean eventually just flipped. One guy walked outside into space without his suit and lickety split, froze up and fractured into a thousand icy pieces.

Another guy started eating the Xap, or Xapandine - the mineral we were mining. The corporation used it to create pills for our soldiers fighting on the front lines. It gave them super human strength and focus for long periods of time. It even enabled them to resist radiation attacks, but it had to be altered in laboratories for effectiveness without side effects.

Well, this dude ate it raw. What a dose! Seconds later his whole head was swollen and blood and flem were pouring from his ears and nose and mouth. His corneas liquefied and

slid down his cheeks when he dropped. Everyone in the room had to rush to the decontamination chamber and then we were quarantined for a week. It was horrible. I was puking blood by the second day. I thought I was gonna die.

That experience was my conversion moment. The only thing that could keep you from losing it was the U4, or at least that's what all the miners said. But they were all addicts, so who knows? Anyhow, my workmate Cutter, a veteran miner who'd been at Harbor Station for over a year, took me to his U4 spot in a desolate cluster of buildings half way between the mines and the colony.

On the way we passed one of the hives of the Cemar. These were the original inhabitants of Harbor Station. A decade before, when the Asag Corporation for Mineral Development came to this rock, the Cemar were subjugated. Now they lived on fenced-in reservations, where they were present but silent, a mystery.

Sometimes the guys got pissed off thinking about those aliens, sitting out there on their cushy reservations, doing what appeared to be nothing. They conglomerated at the center of their towns in a state of group meditation or something. Big supply trucks went to the reservations, steady, meeting all their material needs. I mean, I got the reparations, us conquering their world and all, but some of the guys really hated them. We could hardly get enough food and were always running short on everything. Meanwhile we were busting our asses and daily exposing ourselves to radiation from the Xap, while the aliens just sat around getting handouts.

I only ever saw one or two of the Cemar up close, and it kinda made sense, the guys despising them. They had these huge blocky heads covered in pale fatty skin. But – no eyes, ears, or mouth. Kinda freaky, really. And they never spoke, just sort of shuffled around.

Anyhow, Cutter cursed the hive as we passed and started revving me up about the U4.

“Dude, something about it – you just forget about all this shit out here, all the long hours risking your life digging beneath this godforsaken corner of the universe. You sort of start to float and the good vibes just come in slow and steady, cleansing. You’ll definitely notice the difference. The Xap won’t bother you much after this.”

“Cool, I guess. I just want to stop getting so angry all the time.”

The Xap was making me edgy and weird ideas started hanging around in my mind. A couple of days before that miner had eaten the Xap, I had been out on the rock, in a deep cavern, dragging my extractor along. The tool is heavy and you get real sweaty inside your suit, lugging it around. Anyhow, I was soaked, and got this crazy idea to let in a little of the cool. Crack my mask with a jagged rock. Tear the suit below my armpit to let in a little chill. At first I shook it off easy – you know I’d die and all - but it just wouldn’t go away. Luckily Cutter found me banging a stone against my mask and jostled me before I could kill myself. That was when he told me about his spot.

“You just go in and sit in this reclining chair. Then

they come in and pull some tubes out of the wall and set up a line to your femoral artery. You gotta be still for that, you know, or you might bleed out. Then they cover your eyes and ears with these soft, dark pads. Feels like you're in a cave. Real nice. They got air- conditioning in there too, keeps you nice and comfy. Then the U4 starts flowing, and right away you're drifting off to Heaven! First time is on me, ok, to celebrate."

"Celebrate?"

"Yeah, got my blood checked this morning. Seems my system is strong enough for promotion to Seymour Station. I'll be able to buy plenty of U4 once those checks start coming in. Anyhow, Cheers!"

Every month we got our blood checked to see that our bodies were properly diffusing the Xap. Some guys just couldn't stand it. They'd be gone in a week or so, head back to wherever they came from. For those of us that stayed it was a waiting game. Over time, our bodies would build up immunities to the mineral which would allow us to move up the ladder, so to speak. Harbor Station had fairly low accumulations of Xap, but in other places like Seymour Station, the composition was denser, and so the pay was better. But green recruits couldn't survive there straight away. You had to build up to that. Some said the U4 helped with your resistance, but I was skeptical. Either way, I was glad for Cutter. He was one of those with the most time in at Harbor Station, and he was due a raise.

"Cheers to you, buddy. Hopefully it won't be too long until I join you. And, thanks for this trip."

So there I was plugged in, the U4 pumping, and wow, Cutter wasn't lying. Best feeling I ever had. I was hooked right away. Every day that first week I was back taking another hit, and feeling good. My brain was hyperaware, like I was one of those monks that levitate. Well, my paycheck started getting real thin over the next few weeks. But I couldn't stop. And when I wasn't getting high, I still had a sort of lingering cheer, and best of all, my aches and pains almost completely subsided.

But after a while, it started to kind of fade. I had to take doses of the U4 for longer sessions. This cost more money, sure, but it also put me out during the daily eclipse, which was fine by me. That was kind of spooky, the sky turning black in the middle of the day.

Some of the guys who'd been around for a while said you got used to it, but I decided it was the perfect time to go flying on the U4.

During one of these blackouts, something went wrong, and the attendants forgot they had me hooked up. Eventually the U4 ran dry, and I woke, soaring and manic. I was out of it, and nearly killed myself pulling the IV out of my groin. But I started stumbling around all cheery like and walked into the next room. I saw this other person, hooked up, just like me, and I was feeling so jolly I strolled over to chat him up.

But then I saw that it wasn't human, but Cemar. I was so high I couldn't stop staring, and then I saw the tubes leading to the wall directly opposite of where mine were

hooked in.

The machine was pumping away, but there was nothing in the tubes. There was no movement, no sound except the wheezing rhythm of the machine that had pumped the Cemar dry. I was about to shake the alien when I heard a door slam and frantic voices.

I panicked, rushed into the hall, found a supply closet and shut myself in. Seconds later attendants were right outside the door, and one of them was yelling.

“Oh shit – this machine is still pumping, and nothing is coming out! Who was he hooked up with?”

A smaller voice, almost a whisper, responded.

“Oh man, there was a newbie in there, been coming for the last couple of months, taking longer and longer doses. I forgot about him.”

“You forgot! Get in there and wake him now, before he dies. This guy is already dead.”

I heard running and a gasp.

“He’s gone!”

I could hear the other man follow, and I knew I had to jet. I opened the door and looked toward the exit. But the dudes were returning and I couldn’t make it to the entrance, so I retreated down the hallway toward the other end of the building, trying each door along the way.

One opened and I stepped in. It was dark but noisy.

There was a constant gurgle and wheeze of machines, a rhythm and space between them, indicating that many were in operation. When my eyes adjusted, I saw five stacked rows of Cemar hanging on the wall.

Looked kind of like the Cemar hives in the wasteland. Each was restrained and enclosed in a glass cylinder, tubing running into their bodies. There must have been a hundred Cemar, all of them silent, unconscious.

The attendants were in the hall, outside the door. I ran to the edge of the room and fumbled along the wall, found another door, and slipped out. With my hands for guides I passed down a wide hallway and finally opened a door to the outside. I was standing on a loading dock, and the eclipse was just starting to end, little rays peeking from behind Vakna Moon, and I could see a stack of Cemar bodies lying still in a nearby garbage container. Then I heard one of them stirring.

The attendants would be on me any second, but here was a living creature, left for dead. I climbed in to shift the dead and uncover the living. But just as I started to move him the attendants burst outside, still agitated and yelling.

“You better hope that guy is just wandering around high. Oh, god, if he figures out what is going on here, if he understands what this really is, Asag will turn us into Cemar tomorrow, bruh. I’ll keep searching for him around here. In the meantime, you get those bodies out of here.”

They were right next to me and then they threw another body into the dumpster, right on top of where I was laying. So I couldn’t move when they loaded the garbage

container on a truck and headed out into the waste.

When we got to the dump site, the U4 employee pressed a button on the truck which raised the canister until it dropped its contents into a giant pit. I came tumbling out as well, but kept real still, hoping the guy wouldn't see me. He didn't, but I almost gave myself away.

The stench in the pit was so foul that I started to gag. Luckily the dude wasn't paying much attention and after lowering the canister back on the truck, simply drove away.

I waited until the sound of the truck was gone. Then I started to dig my way out from under the bodies. The ground was lumpy and hard, but covered with some sort of slimy substance. I pulled myself to the edge of the pit just as the sun, Zembula, was pulling a quarter past Vakna Moon. The blue-gray twilight shone across the pit, revealing hundreds of Cemar bodies, in various states of decomposition.

I jumped up, my skin cold and tingly all over, my brain racing and bewildered.

But when Zembula was half full in the sky, I saw what truly lay before me, The fatty skins of the Cemar were melting away and something was underneath, shimmering like bones peeking from a deep gash. I covered my nose and darted back into the pit, climbing toward the first of the Cemar whose skin was nearly gone. I started digging at the skin and it fell away in putrid chunks, revealing a familiar form beneath, though altered. The skin was shrunken, bleached and matted to bone, but the face was still recognizable. My heart was pounding and tears were in my eyes. I turned and

fled, climbing the banks of the pit until I stood at the fence,
beneath a gray sign.

In bold letters it read **SEYMOUR STATION.**

Desert Rose Glass

Lana Bella

In a night that fights and day glints
steel marking concrete stairs,
I limber-hipped into a fortune of
quaking California dust,
crimson pressed in the shallow
pleats of seeking peace.
Yet living between, I scratched
my skin with matches where
cactus grew from thorns,
seething runnels of lament and tar.
Torn into sadness, I resisted
incursion and climbed stairs that
weren't there, crossing the deep
gargling sand, heavy with
strength of desert rose glass.
My aches the taste of drowning,
washing through me the timbre of
rainfull sung, bold relief against
the hidden snapshots of ten
thousand years fixed to my grave,
mercurial bones, groping control on
either side, brittle as old paper.

Contributor Biographies

In Alphabetical Order

Michael Anthony

Michael Anthony is a writer and artist living in New Jersey. He has published fiction, poetry, and illustrations in literary journals and commercial magazines, including *Bull & Cross*, *Storyland*, *Burnt Pine Magazine*, and *The Oddville Press*. The *American Labor Museum* exhibited Michael's photojournalism essay on the textile industry.

Maria A. Arana

Maria A. Arana is a teacher, writer, and poet. She has published poetry in various journals such as *Spectrum*, *vox poetica*, and *Altadena Poetry Review*. You can find her at <http://rainingvoices.blogspot.com> and https://twitter.com/m_a_Arana.

Tracy Aspyn

Tracy Aspyn is a freshman at ENMU. She is from Farmington, New Mexico. She has always really enjoyed reading poetry, but never tried writing poetry until she got to college and then her roommate, Makeyan, pushed her to share her poetry. In her free time she enjoys playing soccer, hanging out with friends, and listening to good music.

Lana Bella

A four-time *Pushcart Prize*, five-time *Best of the Net*, & *Bettering American Poetry* nominee, Lana Bella is an author of three chapbooks, *Under My Dark* (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2016), *Adagio* (Finishing Line Press, 2016), and *Dear Suki: Letters* (Platypus 2412 Mini Chapbook Series, 2016), has had poetry and fiction featured with over 450 journals, *Acentos Review*, *Comstock Review*, *EVENT*, *Ilanot Review*, *Notre Dame Review*, *Rock & Sling*, *The Lampeter Review*, and *The Stillwater*

Review, among others, and work appeared in *Aeolian Harp Anthology, Volume 3*.

Robert Beveridge

Robert Beveridge makes noise (xterminal.bandcamp.com) and writes poetry in Akron, OH. Recent/upcoming appearances in *The Literary Yard*, *Big Windows*, and *Locust*, among others.

Olisaeloka Bosah

Olisaeloka Bosah is 20 years old and was born in New York. He thinks the environment he grew up in cultivated his outlook on life, making him a lover of the arts. He writes poetry and short fiction, and recently has turned to photography.

Rosemary Dunn Moeller

Rosemary Dunn Moeller has had poetry published in *Summit Avenue Review*, *Oakwood*, *Patterson Literary Review*, *Plainsongs* and many others. She farms and writes on the prairie, travels with bird migrations, and tries to make sense of the present with reflection on decades of experiences.

Carlo Benito Gallegos

Carlo Benito Gallegos is a 21-year-old junior at ENMU originally from Grants, New Mexico. He is the president of the Desperate Optimists, the ENMU English Club, who helped him develop "Pop."

Anna George

Anna George is a cat person who is absolutely enthralled with all types of writing. A digital filmmaking major at ENMU, she aspires to be a comic book writer but also loves to write screenplays and scripts for television. This is her final semester before she and her girlfriend head to L.A. to either make it big or become waitresses.

John Grey

John Grey is an Australian poet and US resident. His work has recently been published in *Front Range Review*, *Studio One and Columbia Review*, with work upcoming in *Naugatuck River Review*, *Abyss and Apex*, and *Midwest Quarterly*.

Ann Howells

Ann Howells has edited *Illya's Honey* for eighteen years, recently taking it digital: www.IlyasHoney.com. Publications: *Black Crow in Flight* (Main Street Rag), *Under a Lone Star* (Village Books), *Letters for My Daughter* (Flutter), *Cattlemen & Cadillacs* (Dallas Poets Community), and *Softly Beating Wings* (Blackbead -- William D. Barney Memorial Chapbook winner).

Gloria Keeley

Gloria Keely is a graduate of San Francisco State University with a BA and MA in Creative Writing. She collects old records and magazines. Her work has appeared in *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Chiron*, *Slipstream*, *Spillway*, and other journals.

Blake Kilgore

Blake Kilgore lives in Burlington, New Jersey, with his wife and four sons. People there treat him with kindness, and he is at ease living among the old and tall forests of the Garden State. His lingering accent, however, verifies that his heart is still Texan and Okie. Blake's writing has appeared in *Lunch Ticket*, *The Stonecoast Review*, *Midway Journal*, *Forge*, *Thrice Fiction* and other fine journals. To learn more, please visit blakekilgore.com.

Katherine Knight

Katherine Knight is from South Carolina and attends college at Eastern New Mexico. She studies literature and theater.

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois has had over thirteen-hundred of his poems and fictions appear in literary magazines in the U.S. and abroad. He has been nominated for numerous prizes, and was awarded the 2017 *Booranga Writers Centre Prize* (Australia) for Fiction. His novel, *Two-Headed Dog*, based on his work as a clinical psychologist in a state hospital, is available for Kindle and Nook, or as a print edition. To see more of his work, Google Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois. He lives in Denver.

Charles Lancaster

Denny E. Marshall

Denny E. Marshall has had art, poetry, and fiction published. One recent credit is cover art and interior art in *Bards and Sages Quarterly* Jan. 2018. See more at www.dennymarshall.com.

Josephine Pino

Josephine Pino recently discovered a passion for poetry. Her writing explores the feelings we have about our place in the natural world. Josephine grew up in the South Valley of Albuquerque and now resides in Oregon and teaches Biology at Portland Community College. This is her first publication.

Sheila Quinn

Sheila Quinn grew up in West Texas and spent significant time in Eastern New Mexico listening to the stories of her grandma, upon whose life and family her cooking, faith, and fiction are based. Learn more at www.writinghomeproject.com.

Ashley Reiter

Ashley Reiter is a freelance writer in South Florida who is intrigued by the concept of identity in relation to tattoos, legends, and folk songs. Reiter is currently an undergraduate

student pursuing a bachelor's degree in Computer Science at Palm Beach Atlantic University.

Richard Rutherford

For thirty-seven years Richard C. Rutherford raised cattle at the edge of the desert. He was a Cattle Brand Inspector for the State of California for twenty years. He has daughters, so he is a feminist, and reads *Delillo*, *Audre Lourde*, *Cormac McCarthy*. He supports old school values and liberal politicians. His work can be found in *Fiction Southeast*, *Stone Coast Review*, *Hypertext*, *The Tishman Review*, as well as other fine publications, both print and online. He has a large collection of stories.

Missy Terry

Missy Terry is an award-winning photographer who enjoys capturing beautiful New Mexico landscapes and sunsets. She also dabbles in studio portraiture using studio and natural lighting. She has four children.

Tasha A. Vice

Tasha A. Vice is an assistant professor of literacy at Texas A&M University-San Antonio. She graduated from ENMU with an M.Ed. in education in 2006 and an M.A. in English in 2008. She completed her Ph.D. at Texas Tech University in 2013. Her research interests include literary character studies of American Gothic women, the metacognitive processes of reading and writing, and creative writing.

David White

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