

Aquila Review

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Submissions

Aquila Review publishes original art, creative nonfiction, drama, fiction, music, nonfiction, and poetry. Unsolicited interviews and reviews will not be considered. Manuscripts are not read during the summer months.

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To the Reader
Doris Davis

Think of this as your invitation,
your fleeting attention sought here. I know

you could be lying in the sun
soaking in a Grafton novel,
anchored in the mind of a Kinsey Millhone

or navigating Anne Elliot's psychic landscape,
locked in Austen's vision.

But since you're here, and I have only a few lines left,
I want to put in a plug for poetry.

Where else could you invest so little
for at least a moment of pleasure?—
for that *momentary stay against confusion*,
if I may borrow.

So, relax, kick off your shoes,
get a glass of wine if you'd like,

perhaps look out the window
at how the light shimmers off the magnolia leaves
after this morning's rain,

or how the thrush tilts her head to the right,
not far from the squirrel
balancing on his fat rump.

Consider the wonder of your knowing
what I am thinking right now,
though we are separated by time and place,

that as writer and reader, we meet on this page,
companions on Earth,
that tiny ball whizzing through the vastness of space,

itself bent on the fulfillment of its own destiny.

A Wake!—A Short Wacky Drama
Rebecca Burroughs

Characters

MADY MENDOZA, 30s, director-in-training of the Morning Glory Funeral Home
PERNIA BATES, 40s, SPENCER's wife
SPENCER BATES III, 40s, PERNIA's husband

Setting

All action takes place in a viewing room in the Morning Glory Funeral Home. The time is the present.

(Eerie blue lighting rises. An open casket rests on a slightly raised bier; nearby is found a large spray of roses. A coffee table covered by floor-length cloth and topped by a coffee maker, coffee supplies, glasses, and a pitcher of water stands near the door to the hall. A trash can hugs one table leg. PERNIA sits in a chair by the casket with her face in her hands. Her bag is in her lap. Muzak plays softly. SPENCER sneezes and sits up.)

SPENCER: Roses, for God's sake!

(PERNIA jolts upright. SPENCER climbs out of the casket and grabs the floral spray. He sneezes.)

You know my allergy.

(SPENCER, dressed in a nice suit but wearing only socks on his feet, takes the spray and, at arm's length, starts to jam it down a trash can by the table. PERNIA watches and then leaps up to stop him.)

PERNIA: I paid two hundred dollars for that!

SPENCER: You what?!

PERNIA: *(Grabbing the spray.)* I love roses! And since you never, in twenty-three years, bought me any, I decided to give myself a treat. *(Muttering.)* I knew it. I knew it. I should have had him cremated.

(She marches back to the casket and replaces the spray in its stand. SPENCER takes a paper napkin from table and folds it over his nose like a protective mask.)

There. And you can't do a damn thing about it! You're dead!

SPENCER: Bull! Just a temporary coma. I'd be fine if you'd get rid of those damn roses!

PERNIA: Over *my* dead body!

SPENCER: *(Teasing.)* Yes. I want your blood.

PERNIA: Oh, go bite yourself, Dracula. You're just a figment of my imagination.

(She laughs. SPENCER throws the roses into the casket and slams the lid closed.)

SPENCER: And I suppose a dead man did that! Don't you get the picture? *(Deflated, she sits.)* All I had was a minor car wreck. A little brain damage—

PERNIA: Hah! You were born brain dead.

SPENCER: But smart enough to know the difference between a coma and comatose. You had me unplugged!

PERNIA: Wanted to do it myself. But the nurse wouldn't let me.

SPENCER: And now I'm back to even the score.

(PERNIA leaps to her feet and tries to push SPENCER back into the casket. They struggle.)

Fighting an illusion, are you? Now who's the basket case?

PERNIA: Vegetable!

(SPENCER gently pushes her back into her chair.)

SPENCER: Face it, Pernia! You're not through with me yet.

PERNIA: Where's my valium? This is just a little panic attack. That's all this is! Be calm. *(Chanting.)* Ohm . . . ohm . . . ohm.

(PERNIA grabs her bag and crosses to the coffee table while doing her chants. She gets a glass of water and swallows a pill. SPENCER, laughing, sits on the casket. She swallows second pill and sits.)

All right. All right. Have it your way. What's it going to cost me to get rid of you?

SPENCER: Good. Down to business.

PERNIA: Isn't it always?

SPENCER: *(Straddles the chair by her.)* In three more days, I would have had to declare bankruptcy.

PERNIA: Impossible. You've been trading night and day for six months.

SPENCER: Pernia, what planet have you been living on? Wake up, dear girl. At least I saw the crash coming.

PERNIA: Which crash?

SPENCER: So I sold all our investments and bought a number of perfect yellow diamonds.

PERNIA: Diamonds! You gave our money to DeBeers! That . . . that thief. DeBeers!

SPENCER: Oh, here we go again.

PERNIA: His miners see their families only once a year! They've committed genocide in Botswana against the Bushman tribe to take their land for mining. Spence, De Beer's Diamonds is raping Africa—her land, her people!

SPENCER: Oh, my God, Eleanor Roosevelt. Is there no liberal, do-gooder bandwagon you won't jump on? Enough. Let's get on with this! I don't have forever. Now, I put the diamonds in your vase with the marbles in the bottom. Did you bring it?

PERNIA: Why should I help you, you cheat?

SPENCER: Did you bring the vase? In the trunk of your car, remember?

PERNIA: Where are your shoes? You look so ridiculous.

SPENCER: They pinched. (*Looking inside the casket.*) I left them in here. (*Leaning far inside.*) Somewhere near the foot—

(*PERNIA shoves him into the casket. He immediately sits up.*)

SPENCER: That didn't hurt a bit. I didn't feel a thing. Not a thing.

PERNIA: I've known *that* for a long time.

(*A noise sounds in the hallway. PERNIA closes the lid to the casket. MADY MENDOZA, the funeral home's director, enters shyly. He carries a clipboard.*)

MADY: Excuse me, ma'am. I'm the director, Mady Mendoza. Perhaps we should leave the casket open since his friends haven't come yet.

PERNIA: The only mourn . . . visitor stands before you. Greed mattered more to him than friends or reputation.

MADY: How sad. I don't have any friends, either.

PERNIA: Why ever not?

MADY: Think about it. (*In an overly friendly voice.*) "Hey, I'd like ya to meet my pal, Mady, the undertaker, a casket huckster." Face it. I am way not cool.

PERNIA: Call yourself a body snatcher, and they'll love ya. So why do you do this?

MADY: It has dignity. And we help families who grieve. Excuse me. Do you . . . I mean . . . the choice of music. I've never been in charge before. First day and all. Is the music okay, uh, satisfactory, madam?

PERNIA: Muzak? Only the dead should have to listen to this sentimental claptrap. Does that answer your question!?

(MADY backs up and then stops.)

MADY: Completely. Clearly. Yes, madam. Yes, indeed. I'll turn it off immediately. Uh, one more thing. I just got here, you know. Not up on all the bodies. Oh, excuse me! I am not familiar with all of the deceased. Across from here is the bulimic girl. Then Mrs. Bessie Pringle is next door. Poor thing. Died of boredom, her husband said. *(He looks at his clipboard.)* And you're . . . hm. I don't see anyone on the schedule for this room. This would be?

PERNIA: Mr. Mendoza, this is Spencer Aloysius Bates the Third.

MADY: I'm just a first.

PERNIA: Morning Glory. I love the name, but I didn't realize this is a black funeral home.

MADY: Oh? Ah, yes. Of course you would notice. But we're open to all groups. Myself, I'm an Afrino.

PERNIA: An afro?

MADY: No, no, no. Hah, hah. Easy mistake. I'm an African-Latino-American. Afrino. A sorta *nuevo* ethnic.

PERNIA: A double-hyphen American. Very good. Exactly how the world should look. Are you the owner?

MADY: No, no. I'm the director-in-training!

PERNIA: Admirable. But you are in charge?

MADY: Oh, yes. With my very own clipboard.

PERNIA: And keys?

MADY: You want me to lock this room for the night?

PERNIA: Since I'm not familiar with this, uh, territory. Do you by any chance have a *casket* with a lock?

(A loud sneeze erupts from inside the casket. PERNIA pretends she did it.)

MADY: A lock? I don't think so. Don't they usually stay where they're put? But I'll call the owner. Maybe a hardware store could—

PERNIA: Here are my keys. Would you please have someone bring in the vase of lilies out in my car trunk?

(MADY exits shaking his head. SPENCER pushes aside the casket's lid and sits up. The Muzak stops.)

SPENCER: Locked casket. Hah. You don't get rid of me that easily.

PERNIA: Stay where you are! Ohm . . . ohm . . . ohm.

SPENCER: See. *(He climbs out.)* I told you this was all momentary. Even Mady said I'm not on his clipboard list.

(SPENCER gives her a smug cuff on the shoulder. Then he pats her shoulder, as if he's sorry for everything.)

PERNIA: Don't.

SPENCER: What?

PERNIA: Touch me like that.

SPENCER: Like what?

(He strokes her hair.)

PERNIA: That.

(SPENCER rubs her shoulders.)

SPENCER: Huh?

PERNIA: Ten . . . tenderly. I know your game. You're trying to soften me up so I'll get you the diamonds. Well, it's too little, too late.

SPENCER: Now that hurts! Worse than when they stitched up my belly.

PERNIA: An autopsy! I knew it! I knew it! You are *so* dead!

(A noise sounds in the hall. SPENCER jumps back into his casket. MADY enters.)

MADY: Here's the flower vase from your car, madam. And a locksmith's on his way. We aim to please. No request is too bizarre. Oh, so sorry. How insensitive. Anything you need, just holl—uh—press *(He points to the wall.)* this button. I'm only a soft, melodious—but not sentimental—ringing tone away.

(MADY exits. SPENCER climbs out of the casket, picks up the roses, and crosses to PERNIA at the table.)

SPENCER: I wish I'd bought you flowers more often.

PERNIA: You used to bring flowers just to say you loved me. Spence, why have you stayed with me?

(SPENCER sneezes and puts the roses in the trash can.)

SPENCER: Because you're the only woman who enjoyed winter driving with me over Colorado's mountain passes.

PERNIA: The back way from Ouray to Silverton. The most narrow, scariest road in Colorado.

SPENCER: Yeah. The one with all the avalanches.

PERNIA: When you edged around the last one, there wasn't more than an inch between us and a sheer drop of a thousand feet. That was our last close—

SPENCER: Close call. You were so cool. You just laughed.

PERNIA: That's so I wouldn't scream.

(He takes the lilies out of the vase and empties the vase into the trash can. Beads and a mesh bag fall into the can. He pulls out the bag; it contains diamonds.)

PERNIA: So. What's your plan? Take your loot and fly off to some exotic island with a bimbo?

SPENCER: These aren't for me, Pernia. They're for you.

PERNIA: Me?

SPENCER: Get yourself a ticket to an off-shore paradise, and the IRS can't lay a hand on you. *(Handing her the diamonds.)* Here. Enough rocks to keep you in muumuus for the rest of your tropical life.

PERNIA: Paradise, Spence, is what we had and then lost. *(She hands the bag back to him.)* Besides, you know I'm not a crook. So, why?

SPENCER: Nothing else to do. I knew you'd come to hate me. No surprise that you pulled the plug.

PERNIA: Oh, I didn't pull it. Nobody did. I wouldn't let them.

SPENCER: But I heard you.

PERNIA: Sure. I was pissed . . . but out in the hall, I told the doctor to wait a while longer.

SPENCER: Then I did the right thing. But I had to come back to make sure you got the diamonds. Even if you do hate DeBeers.

PERNIA: I hate the company, not you. Not at first. But these last years, Spence . . . you've had no time for me . . . us. Business, business. And where have your adrenaline thrills gotten you? Falling asleep at the wheel. An over-the-edge wreck.

(A noise sounds in the hall. SPENCER jumps into his casket. Blackout. MADY enters.)

MADY: Mrs. Bates, are you all right? Oh, dear. Oh, dear! What can the matter be? I paid the electricity bill. I'm just sure. At least, I think I did. Oh, dear. Oh, dear!

(MADY turns on a white light. PERNIA lies slumped against the casket; a bandage has become visible on her forehead. No vase, lilies, or diamonds are present.)

MADY: Mrs. Bates? Madam, wake up. Your husband's on his way to get you. He said your accident must have confused you because you drove off after calling him. Oh, dear. Oh, dear!

(PERNIA rises and opens the casket.)

PERNIA: He's not here. He's not here.

MADY: I brought you in and gave you first-aid. Then I found your number and called him. I *knew* there wasn't a body scheduled for this room. He's rushing to your side.

PERNIA: I've got to stop him. He's going to have an accident. *(She pulls her cellular phone from her bag and dials.)* Answer, damn it! Answer . . . please.

MADY: While you're waiting, I'd like to show you our deluxe demonstration model.

PERNIA: Spence, damn you, don't fall asleep!

MADY: Our finest mahogany silk-lined—but without a lock—casket. You can sensibly prepay all your funeral expenses now or join our very friendly, pay-by-the-month club *(PERNIA runs from the room; MADY yells after her.)*, and your money back if not completely satisfied! Wait, that can't be right.

(A small sneeze sounds behind him. When MADY turns, the casket lid rises, and a hand reaches out and drops a rose to the floor. The hand hangs limply.)

MADY (CONT.): Aargh!

(He leaps back, dropping his clipboard. He looks around slowly. He lifts the hand and places it back into the casket with obvious distaste. Then he slams the lid and backs away.)

Oh, dear. She's right. We do need locks! Aargh!

(He races to the door and flips out the light as he exits.)

Blackbird
Kaytlen Smith



The Tool Set
Corinne Patterson

I run beside him,
 trying to keep step with genius.
I watch him through the camera lens—
 the camera he taught me to use.
 So many questions!
 Days filled with answers.
Hammer, saw, nails—
tools to build my future,
a future opened
by my grandfather—my Papa—
by his hand—the one with a missing thumb.

Mother's Love
Bianca Kisselburg

Her heart soaring high,
She walks upon the white sand,
Watching me play,

Knowing as leaves fall
The time will come once again
To leave her safe arms.

Never does it freeze
Or blow away in the wind
But forever stays

Shining down on me,
A warmth from someone true
That grows brighter . . . always.

A Sister

Tamara Richert

A sister.

Steadying my shaking hands
When I've just realized the truth.

Stroking my silken hair
While I fill my pillow with emotions.

Loving my imperfections
Even when there's no love left.

Forcing me to sway away the loneliness
To the faintly playing guitar.

Watching me drink away my sorrows
From the Jose Cuervo Gold Tequila bottle.

Talking me to sleep
On my side of the empty bed.

Standing in my way
From making the biggest mistakes of my life.

My sister.

Treasures

Laurie Bayless

In a child's hand,
a rock becomes a gem.

In a child's ears,
your voice sounds like a hymn.

In a child's mouth
are words filled to the brim.

In a child's mind,
your face will not grow dim.

In a child's eyes,
the future is not grim.

Memory and Music

Doris Davis

When I was four, my mother took me to visit a neighbor, a Mrs. Briggs, who lived in the house next door. I remember her as a willowy woman with auburn hair swept up in a bun on the top of her head while recalcitrant strands of hair floated in wispy curls around her neck. Probably attractive, she exists now only as a hazy figure of the imagination, but her grand piano remains vivid, anchoring one of my earliest memories.

My mother—always a practical woman—must have realized early on the appeal this piano held for me and used it as a babysitter while she and Mrs. Briggs drank another cup of morning coffee. All the mornings, though, have merged into a single memory of my encountering the piano for the first time.

In memory, the room wears a cloak of shadowy grays. The Venetian blinds filter the morning sun, reducing it to streams of light that outline the two windows. The piano sits in front of one of them, stretching out its curved body without consideration for any other piece of furniture. Floor-length drapes layer the room with more shades of gray.

I know the piano belongs to Mrs. Briggs. I am curious about this big object. “If you are very quiet, if you play softly,” my mother tells me, “you may sit at the piano for as long as you like, but you must sit politely on the piano bench. And do not kick the piano,” she adds, for already I am on the bench, my short legs removed from the floor by a foot. Mrs. Briggs snaps on a floor lamp whose circular beam highlights the keyboard while the rest of the room appears now in silhouette.

How did I know what “play the piano” meant? I have no memory of hearing or seeing Mrs. Briggs play, who, I will learn later, is an accomplished pianist and respected teacher, nor of seeing pianos at church (Did I go to church then?) or on television, which had already come to children in southern California by the early 1950s. But as instructed, I do play. I play only one note at a time, starting with the notes in the treble, reassured by their soft, high pitches. They are friendly sounds, shaped like baby pearls, I think, although the keys I press are hard and slick. Sometimes, the key sinks down without a sound. I play another, pushing it harder, and I hear it ring inside the belly of this great thing. I do not venture to play black keys. They are raised. Perhaps they are only for special guests to play, for older children, although my mother did not say I could not play them.

I bend over to the left, and then I scoot to the end of the bench. I press down a note in the bass, more forcefully than I have the others. The deep sound scares me. I want to cry. It is a heavy, echoing sound of sadness and gloom. The note vibrates through the shadows in the room, jarring even the cobwebs in the room's corners. I am not brave enough to play another of these notes, but I content myself with the soft ones. I play each gently and separately until my mother comes for me.

Only later—perhaps the next year—do I become aware of the piano's great power, how even I—a small child—can stand on one of the piano's pedals and create a fantastic cacophony of sound—a rich, wild texture of music that will resonate throughout the entire house and (though I don't know it at the time) hold me for a lifetime.

Part of the Tapestry
Linda Kaufman

We are part of the family,
Part of the tapestry
Whose sacred threads record
Our mothers past.

Threads of gold, amber, regal blue,
From Sarah and Rebekah, too.
This sacred cloth is ours
To weave at last.

What colors will we choose?
How strong will be the ties?
We must weave this cloth with care.
It records our peoples' lives.

The stories that it tells,
The laughter and the tears,
We will weave them all together
Through the years.

For we are part of the family,
Part of the tapestry
Whose ancient threads reveal
Our peoples' past.

Threads of silver and magenta, too,
Rachel and Leah pass to you.
This sacred cloth is ours
To weave at last.

This sacred cloth is ours
To weave at last.

Part of the Tapestry

Lyrics and Music by
Linda Kaufman

Lyrical (90-100)

N.C.

Cm

Cm/B

Cm/A

mf We are part of the fam - i - ly, part of the tap - es - try whose

mf

Fm

G⁷

Cm

sa - cred threads re - cord our moth - ers past. Threads of

Cm

Cm/B

Cm/B^b

Cm/A

gold, am - ber, re - gal blue from Sar - ah and Re - bek - ah, too. This

Fm G7 Cm C7 Fm7 Bb7

sa-cred cloth is ours to weave at last. What col-ors will we choose? How

Ebmaj7 Eb6 Dm7 G7

strong will be the ties? We must weave this cloth with care. It re -

Cm C7 Fm7 Bb7 Ebmaj7 Eb6

cords our peo-ples' lives. The sto-ries that it tells, the laugh-ter and the tears, we will

D7(b9) Dm7 G7 Cm Cm/B

weave them all to-gether through the years. For we are part of the fam-i-ly,

Cm/Bb Cm/A Fm G7

part of the tap - es - try whose an - cient threads re - veal our peo - ples'

Cm Cm/B Cm/Bb Cm/A

past. Threads of sil - ver and ma - gen - ta, too, Ra - chel and Le - ah pass to you. This

Fm G7 Cm Fm

sa - cred cloth is ours to weave at last _____ . This

My Little Feet
Terri Grice

My little feet take me places—
through the mud and many spaces.

I stomp and leave my footprints behind
for my mommy to happen upon and find.

Each print is unique with traits of its own,
some leaving behind relics of where I've gone.

So if you ever see footprints, think of me.
This is my stamp on the world, you see.

This Little Piggy
Colleen Narens



Family Tree

Ronni Henrico

Lines that flow back to the beginning of time.
Secrets hidden in the bowels of the earth,
The old oak, eyes full of wisdom,
The origin of man and woman,
The fantastical, the evil, the mystical, all ordinary,
 All begotten from the same root.
Faces in the shadows, overgrown with moss,
 Covered by time.
My heritage, old as antiquity, full of freak shows,
 Hard, rough, messy,
With wolves waiting in the distance to consume my cartoon life.
Time takes, consumes like fire
As we play Monopoly with life.
It all boils down to one tree.
One apple, one piece of fruit, the wrong fruit, the wrong branch, the wrong tree.
My tree,
The tree that gave me life,
The tree that nourishes me,
The tree that mapped my future,
The tree that will watch over me in death.
Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,
So we feed the next generation of trees.

Irie
Colleen Narens



Look Behind

Jacqueline Goldson

I am from the white-flecked
band of sea.

I am from the white-sand
beaches of Negril
with cockles and mussels
and everything nice.

I am from pimento groves
picked and stashed in the sun.

I am from the land of Blue Mountain
coffee with a scent so strong
as it wafts through the air.

I am from the land of
the upside-down egg box,
where generations have run.

I am from the country of
Look Behind.

I'm from There *Doris Davis*

I'm from oak trees and mimosas,
from a mother who thought God
created Saturday mornings for dusting,
and a father who loved his Chevy truck
and grew zinnias in his vegetable garden.

I'm from the *you-can-always-work-harder* crowd,
the energetic crew of house builders and dream catchers—
from those never satisfied with the present,
for the best is always around the bend—
from those whose out-to-lunch sign read
“Gone to California.”

I'm from country women named for jewels—
Opal, Ruby, Pearl—who shared recipes
and obituaries at family gatherings,
from men who played dominoes on Saturday night,
slamming the pieces on the kitchen table.

I'm from the *I-told-you-so*
and the *You'll-be-sorry* gang,
from Uncle Walter who lost his arm in the South Pacific
and Jerry who went to 'Nam to get the wounded
but couldn't help himself.

I'm from houses with attic fans
and fried apple pies,
from a family with the *make-do* philosophy of life.

I'm from schools with jump ropes and seesaws,
the one with the pigtails in the school picture,
the teacher's pet who thought life would be as simple
as making straight A's, as easy as folding laundry,
as perfect as Annette Funicello's smile
when she caught the camera's eye.

A Realization Brought by an Intruding Guest
John McCarthy

Characters

THAN (THANATOS), a confident and calm man with a business-like attitude
TYRELL, a common-looking man of timid nature and awkward stature

Setting

All action takes place in Tyrell's apartment. The time is the present.

(Lights rise on TYRELL's apartment. Lights remain dim. One can make out a nightstand, a couch, a table with two chairs, and some clothes on the floor. TYRELL enters. He appears excited. In his hand, he squeezes a letter. He throws it down on the table with a simultaneous exclamation.)

TYRELL: I finally got accepted! They're actually going to publish me! This is great. *(He takes a seat.)* An accomplishment without a witness requires a cigar.

(He places his feet atop the table in a dignified manner, produces a large cigar, wastes no time lighting it, and let out an over-dramatic sigh. A noise is heard in the hallway.)

That could have been one of two things: the cat being too curious or the cross falling from above my bed. I need a new nail to hang it upon.

(THAN enters.)

THAN: I'm sorry about that. I have a tendency to trip and sometimes fall.

TYRELL: Who the Hell are you?

THAN: Someone in need of . . . conversation.

TYRELL: Or someone in need of exiting my house?

THAN: I'd very much like to talk to you. Please. (*He puts his hands in his hair to show no threat.*) I mean no harm.

TYRELL: I don't know who you are. What do you want? I just want you to get out.

THAN: Please. I just want to talk. I heard you remarking that you just got published. What's that about?

TYRELL: Just sit down. (*Cautiously.*) I've just received publication for the first time, and I would like to boast a bit. If you take a seat and share this cigar with me, I don't see why I should be hostile and unwelcoming.

THAN: Thank you.

TYRELL: (*Hesitantly.*) May I ask why you're here?

THAN: This is what I do.

TYRELL: Trespassing is sure an odd profession.

THAN: So is writing. It seems only fools think their thoughts are original enough to write down.

TYRELL: Hm.

(*He passes the cigar to THAN.*)

THAN: Well, congratulations on getting published. (*In a sly, inconspicuous tone.*) Shall I expect your novel to be on the shelf soon?

TYRELL: (*Chuckling.*) Oh, no, no, no. A single poem of mine was picked up by a small press somewhere on the east coast. Nothing admirable.

THAN: You sure seem excited.

TYRELL: Of course I am . . . but as far as external recognition goes, there is nothing to say.

THAN: You're an existentialist, aren't ya?

TYRELL: A what?

THAN: Are you a writer?

(He hands back the cigar.)

TYRELL: *(Smugly but still hesitantly.)* Obviously.

THAN: Maybe half of one.

TYRELL: Is that an insult? I have half a mind to kick you out of my house. Are you a thief?

THAN: Not yet.

TYRELL: What of mine have you taken?

THAN: *(Quite seriously.)* Nothing. I haven't found anything valuable yet.

TYRELL: What am I thinking? Get out of my house.

THAN: Just hold on. I'm messing with you. I'm a lonely person. I just want to talk.

TYRELL: *(Looking at him cautiously.)* Get out.

THAN: Do you have a copy of the poem that is getting published?

TYRELL: Of course.

THAN: Let me read it.

TYRELL: *(Putting out the cigar.)* Very well.

(He stands up and pulls said poem from his pocket. He extends the poem to THAN, who takes the poem and skims over it.)

THAN: Not bad. It was somewhat good. Halfhearted, mostly.

(TYRELL yanks the poem back.)

TYRELL: I don't take kindly to that kind of abuse!

THAN: It's just criticism. It's a writer's best friend. I thought you would know that. Have you ever had your ass kicked?

TYRELL: Excuse me?

THAN: Have you ever been physically beaten to where you were in pain and spilling blood in a manner considered dangerous?

TYRELL: No. And why should I?

THAN: It teaches one the place of inferiority.

TYRELL: Have you had your face pummeled before? If you don't—

THAN: I have been looked in the face.

TYRELL: That pious tone of yours is going to garner you a nice lifestyle of fists if you don't leave.

THAN: You're not going to hit me. You would have done so already, and you're too indifferent about my presence to act.

TYRELL: *(Angrily, with sarcasm.)* Are you my superior or something? Get out!

THAN: This conversation does clearly define the extraordinary from the subservient.

(TYRELL sits down in a state of extreme agitation.)

TYRELL: Please get out! Is your intrusion here going to take much longer, or are you just going to insult me all night?

THAN: I don't know. Sometimes, I'm quick.

TYRELL: *(As if held back by an unseen force.)* You're lucky I haven't called the cops. I don't understand why I haven't.

THAN: It makes no difference.

TYRELL: Do you want to go to jail?

THAN: That is the most arbitrary question I have ever heard. I find it funny that you're attempting to threaten me with hypotheticals.

TYRELL: You talk like a damn book.

THAN: You talk like an infant and write like an idiot.

TYRELL: Get out!

THAN: I can tell you're not a metaphysician.

TYRELL: Metafiction?

(THAN laughs loudly.)

THAN: You're a stubborn fool.

TYRELL: You're a criminal. I want you out of my house now.

THAN: I'm more of a sophist, really, if not a lifesaver.

(He laughs at the irony.)

TYRELL: You're an asshole. Get out!

THAN: Once I'm in, I can't leave this mansion of many apartments. Unfortunately, I haven't found anything of too much value in this mansion. I'm sticking around in hopes you'll just give me a diamond, if not the whole crystal.

TYRELL: *(Confused.)* So you are a thief.

THAN: Um. Theoretically.

TYRELL: Enough of this talk. (*Pleading.*) What can I do to get you to leave?

THAN: Give me something of value.

TYRELL: Fine. Go to my room. Underneath my bed, there is a little box. In it is one thousand dollars. I keep it for emergency relief. I need to be relieved of you. Take it.

THAN: Dollars?

TYRELL: Yes, dollars. Federal Reserve bank notes. It's all yours.

THAN: I need something of value.

TYRELL: You can do a lot with one thousand dollars.

THAN: Not what I like to do. Besides, money is even more arbitrary than jail.

(*TYRELL places his head in his hands.*)

TYRELL: What can I possibly give you?

(*THAN remains silent for a few beats, staring at TYRELL.*)

THAN: I need—

TYRELL: I'll give you anything. Ask me more questions. Just leave. I want to work on a few more poems and enjoy the small minor success that has somehow miraculously come my way.

THAN: I wouldn't bother. The publication of your poems—rather, poem singular—will be attributed to luck and the editor's ignorance. Your poem is like a molecule of water brushing a whale's skin.

TYRELL: You don't know what you're talking about. My poems are worth publication, and with a little more luck, I'll be associated with the anthologies one day.

THAN: (*Laughing.*) Hardly. Are you familiar with negative capability?

TYRELL: No, but I'm willing to learn if it will get you out of here.

THAN: It's too late for that. Your world view is too narrow to accept the uncertainties that opened the apartments of your Norton idols.

TYRELL: I can make sense. I can talk sense. Tell me! I want to be a better writer! I'll be better for it!

THAN: I'm not capable of telling you. After your youth you were given a chance to enter into a plethora of abilities. Unfortunately, luck hasn't made itself known to you and your environment. It's only showed you the common despair of being negative and not its capabilities. You resemble, at best and under a microscope, a pathetic Schopenhauer . . . if Schopenhauer had average things to say.

TYRELL: (*Pathetically.*) I gave myself to writing, though. It's what I love.

THAN: Many things fail to reciprocate. That's why self-awareness is a good thing. Believing in guidelines and myths produces nothing but what I'm looking at right now.

TYRELL: (*Sounding almost defeated.*) Can I salvage anything?

THAN: That's why I haven't left yet. You shouldn't be so persistent on seeing me go. I can help you, and you can give me something I want. Let me ask you a question. I'm surprised this topic hasn't come up yet, as I am often associated with it. How do you view God, Tyrell?

TYRELL: I was happier with Him.

THAN: Was that because you weren't happy or confident enough to believe in Him yourself?

TYRELL: Uh . . . I know that I feel guilty now.

THAN: Is that because you read a little theory, like Nietzsche, and the exposure of a little reason allowed you to reject the idea of what He could be?

TYRELL: I suppose.

THAN: The trace of guilt that remains seems to be hindering your sense of direction. Your thoughts seem to be orbiting the same guilty fixation. You have rejected the burden but kept the burden.

TYRELL: (*Sadly.*) That makes sense.

THAN: Even now you are letting me define things for you. I'm afraid this conversation will continue, but I should let you know that you should have stuck with God. You don't have the self-assurance to be anything else.

TYRELL: I guess I've never thought of it that way.

THAN: I know. That's why I have stalled with you so long. I don't know why, but I have a tendency to take pity on people like yourself.

TYRELL: Excuse me?

THAN: I'm not insulting you. I'm preparing you.

TYRELL: Okay. (*Nervously.*) What else is there?

THAN: You can't see God, but you can see yourself. Not everyone can see himself wholly. The mass of men aren't aware of their unconscious, and it is this hidden part of yourself that determines who you are and how you live. I think it has been called the superego, among other things. This incognizant state also parallels the idea of God. It makes sense that if humans were able to bring themselves into an understanding of their subconscious they could effectively bring themselves in touch with God. Are you following me?

TYRELL: To the best of my ability.

THAN: It is to the best of your need. (*He clears his throat.*) In effect, those people who choose to believe in God are unable or unwilling to accept themselves wholly. And a man who is unwilling to choose either stance is less than human. (*Long pause.*) But it makes no difference to me either way. No one is right unless he finds something out by himself, for himself.

TYRELL: I appreciate what you have to say, but I still feel guilty.

THAN: I am sorry.

TYRELL: Me, too.

THAN: Ah, well. It doesn't really matter. Even though I can't find any value here, I will still get what I want. (*He checks his fingernails.*) Are you familiar with the Italian proverb about the king and the pawn?

TYRELL: Yes. (*He chuckles nervously.*) Will I see you where the two of them meet?

THAN: I am already there. I'm beyond any sense of what we just made sounds about, and so is what I'm going to take from you, regardless of value. I am the victor over the fort of folly. I have one question, though. What have you learned?

TYRELL: I know when I'm going to die.

THAN: You're a little smarter than I thought . . . but correct your statement.

TYRELL: I know when I'm dead.

THAN: You can do better.

TYRELL: I know I'm dead.

THAN: That is not satisfactory.

TYRELL: I'm dead.

THAN: Right you are! What you feel right now is how you are. How do you feel?

TYRELL: Dead.

THAN: That is the fate of fact and you. I'm only here to reassure.

(*Sporting a protruding grin, he motions as if he's tipping his hat. Blackout.*)

Winter Woods
Agnes Tirrito



Kurama No Hi Matsuri

Daniel Jones

“*Sariya saiyo, sariya saiyo!*” chant the participants of the festival as they hoist their fire-breathing dragon torches, spitting and sputtering smoke, down the road while smoldering ashes float to the ground.

“*Sariya saiyo, sariya saiyo!*”

The chanting of the carriers and the dancing of the flickering, shimmering fire from the torch reverberates in my head and reflects off my eyes.

“*Sariya saiyo, sariya saiyo!*”

Pushed from all sides by the eager crowd, I flow with the onlookers along the sides of the narrow street. Finding an open area between the crowd, packed like sardines in a can, and the buildings behind me, I stand in a grassy alcove and continue my viewing.

* * * * *

On that cool and crisp October afternoon, armed with my camera and extra batteries, I witnessed my first Shinto festival. I could barely control my excitement while sitting in the bus next to the seminar house where I had been living for the past three months. Managing to maneuver my way through the Kyoto train system was surprisingly easy. (I still had to switch trains three times before I could board the Kurama line.) The train was packed with school children heading home and people going to the festival.

After I arrived at Kurama, a small town nestled in the foot hills of Kyoto, I quickly noticed the large crowds of spectators awaiting the event. A large statue of a demon’s head caught my attention more than anything else. The demon was quite comical with its bright red face and long nose. Another demon’s head stood close to the first one; this demon had a long beak jutting from his green face. I knew the demon’s name: *tengu*, a treacherous shape-shifting creature that resides in the mountains. Since I had arrived well before the festival began, I decided to hike up Kurama Mountain. As I approached the foot of the mountain, I passed through a large *torii*, the traditional red wooden entrance of Shinto shrines.

A small, menacing statue of a smoky gray dragon guarded the nearby shrine. The dragon’s unwavering eyes spoke of untold stories of pilgrims who had made the long journey up the mountain to the shrine. Now those eyes viewed me, and I became part of its memory, mixing with pilgrims and priests from long ago.

With the dragon's eyes upon me, I lifted a ladle from a nearby rectangular stone container about three feet long and two feet wide. I scooped the water into the waiting silvery cup, and I poured the water over each of my hands.

The cool liquid slipped through my fingers, washing the impurities from me, and spilled upon the ground. The mountain accepted the water, carrying my impurities into the pebble-covered ground.

As I stood staring at the *torii* before me, I wondered about the countless numbers of people who had come before me for the last thousand years to perform this same ritual and walk this same path. I passed through the *torii*. It consisted of two wooden beams standing firmly horizontal (wide enough for three people to pass through side by side) and two wooden beams resting vertically on top (spaced apart and extending slightly beyond the horizontal beams).

This *torii* marked the entrance to the mountain's path. On the right and left stood enormous Japanese cedar trees. Shimenawa, zigzagged strips of white paper attached to a straw rope, were wrapped around the trunks, signifying their sacredness.

After viewing the shrine, I continued up the mountain, snapping many pictures along the way. I noticed a number of other small shrines and *torii* along the way. Next to one of the small doll house-like shrines flowed a small crystal-clear waterfall. Many of these shrines were dedicated to Jizou, the guardian of the ghosts of small children. The Jizou statues, with their tranquil smiles and smooth shaven heads, stood firmly atop the velvety moss.

I marveled at seeing so many spiritual monuments in such a short span of time, and I wondered what lay beyond the path—what secrets the mountain hid from view. Japanese folklore about the demons that inhabit the mountains flooded my mind, and I half expected to see some of them among these other incredible sights.

After much walking, I finally came to a large temple located close to the summit. This temple was similar to many of the other temples I had seen. The white building was trimmed in red with a dark layered-tile roof. A few gathered people burned incense, perfuming the air of the temple grounds with sandalwood and aloe. From this vantage point, the sun could be seen sinking behind the mountains. Night was beginning to set in.

While making my way back down the mountain, darkness settled around me. The only sources of light were the numerous small lanterns that lined the path. Upon seeing these stone lanterns, I had the feeling that I had stepped into a long-forgotten past. I used the soft glow of the fluorescent lamps to guide my way back to the foot of the mountain.

By the time I reached the bottom, the festival was in its first stages. I was not allowed to stay close to the mountain's base, where a bonfire was lit as a small shrine was hoisted into the air. A nearby police officer kindly motioned for me to join the crowd of onlookers who were behind the roped-off areas.

I had a poor view of the festival's start due to the press of people, which, to my surprise, included many foreigners. Eventually, I moved with the crowd, winding down the streets of Kurama like a gigantic snake. I finally managed to find a good spot on the street to view the processions. I shivered in the chill of the October night's air, and I realized I had forgotten to bring a jacket.

The beginning of the *matsuri* (the festival) featured children carrying small torches sporting smaller flames. Adults helped the children along the way. While the children made their way down the street, they yelled a short chant to stay synchronized. As the festival progressed, the adults lit and carried larger torches, heavy and massive wooden clubs topped by burning heads.

I became worried that the falling hot ashes would burn the torch-bearers. I felt drawn to the warmth and glow of the flickering lights as the night became colder. Following close behind the torch-carriers, other participants played traditional Shinto music. Flutes and drums filled the air. My mind was overwhelmed by all of these cultural experiences.

I was witnessing an event born long ago, and nostalgia filled the air around me. This festival was being conducted just as it had been hundreds of years ago. I felt honored to play a part in this important and wonderful tradition.

The festival continued well into the night, and I knew I needed to wake up early the next day for class. At around 10:00 p.m., I decided to leave and catch the last train home. I was disappointed that I could not stay until the festival ended at midnight. I have heard that the finale is quite dramatic.

The trains back home, especially the one leaving Kurama, were packed. I arrived back at the seminar house around midnight, and I talked with some of the other students who had attended the festival. I fell asleep comforted by the customs and traditions of old Japan.

When I woke up the next morning, I wondered if what I had experienced the night before had all been dream. I could not wait to experience what the next festival would bring.

Moonlight
Kaytlen Smith



Night Visitor

Gergely E. Kovacs

It was another Saturday night—another trip to Mercer Bayou. Taking out Jason’s boat and having a campfire had become common practice over the past few months. I learned to look forward to these trips, which offered relief, a kind of sanctuary, from my everyday problems.

That last night was particularly memorable. I saw the Milky Way for the first time in my life. Because I grew up in a heavily populated metropolitan area, our galaxy had always remained hidden from my sight, burying itself behind the orange glow of the polluted sky. Over Mercer Bayou, the starry sky was a faint blur, barely recognizable but still electrifying.

The wildlife was particularly active that night. We saw several white herons, hawks, an armadillo, and even a couple of alligators, their red eyes shining mysteriously in our spotlights. The most exciting event, however, was the visit of a razorback.

Sitting by the fire, we were deep into a conversation when Jason suddenly held his hand up, indicating he had heard something. In the next moment, he jumped from his chair, cursing and pointing his flashlight into the woods.

“What is it?” I asked, a bit scared.

“A boar!” Jason replied, but by that time, I could hear the noise, too. I could even see the animal’s shadow in the bushes only a few yards from our campsite.

I immediately started looking for a weapon, but, of course, I couldn’t find anything—not even a lousy knife! For a second, I became worried. I had heard how vicious boards could become when they felt threatened. As I looked for ways to escape, however, my anxiety quickly turned into excitement. The unexpected visit of the creature was extremely energizing. I could feel adrenaline rushing through my veins.

“What do we do now?” I asked Jason.

“Try to make as much noise as possible.”

We grabbed whatever we could find lying around the campsite to make noise. Jason started yelling, and soon I joined in, banging two glass bottles together. Unfortunately, in my nervous zeal, I broke them after a few seconds. We continued trying to look and sound as intimidating as possible. Though to an observer we certainly looked like idiots—yelling, jumping, and banging—the boar seemed to think otherwise, and it soon retreated back into the woods.

Relieved that the situation was apparently resolved, we sat down with our hearts beating a little faster than usual. The whole episode lasted only about a minute, but I know I will remember it for a long time.

Bad Ideas

Tamara Richert

I love bad ideas.
Those ideas keep me free
In a world of constraint.

Like finding myself drunk at four a.m. in an empty bar.
Or in the bed of someone I consider only a friend.
And falling in love with someone I don't even know.
These are bad ideas,
And I love bad ideas.

Like eating that entire chocolate cake
Because it makes me forget life for a moment.
Or overdrawing my bank account
Because I had to have that pair of red high-heeled shoes.
And staying up all night
Because it makes time seem like it is standing still.
All those are bad ideas
Because I love bad ideas.

Like dancing in the freezing rain in the middle of winter
Just to feel my own skin.
Or missing that appointment to prove
That the rules do not apply.
And lying about my age to feel young again
For another moment.
These are all bad ideas,
But I love bad ideas.

Like saying that horrible word that I can no longer keep inside.
Or wearing that jet-black wig so that no one will recognize me today.
And eating that meal alone to convince them that I need no one.
I, too, have bad ideas.
I'm in love with bad ideas.

Because they keep me alive
In a world full of constraint.

Seriously Scared Stella in Scars and Stripes
Lacey Huffman



Golden Pride
Georgina Akins

Lying in the sun all day,
In a meadow all alone.
On the hill he lies still,
Never sharing his bone.

Bones in the Dust

Zachery Hancock

Thumb in the hollowed socket, cradling the backbone and feeling its ridges, he shoved what was left of his pa into the burlap sack. It was scratchy on his fingers and itchy against his bare back. He dropped the sack into the hole that he'd dug and began filling it in with dark soil. Once he was finished, he patted the ground with the flat of the spade. His feet were moist from the morning dew and the blades of grass curling around and between his toes like bands.

A yellow hill stood ominously in the distance; it was silent even with the wind sifting through the weeds. A shadow fell across his back from an old, gnarled oak that was dying and had seen many seasons. Throwing the shovel over his shoulder, he walked across the pasture. The herd yawned mournfully as they lumbered out of his way. Peeking up over the yellow hill, the sun spread its blanket of light out across the pasture.

He shielded his eyes from it with the back of his hand as he walked. Ducking beneath the barb wire fence, he crossed into the yard. The house stood as it always had, but it looked a little different to him now. Brown shutters fluttered in the wind like the wings of a butterfly. The shingles were black and glistening in the morning sun. Ma was on the porch, rocking back and forth in a creaking chair easily a thousand years old.

"He was dead," she said.

"Yeah."

She wore a dress with sunflowers on it; her graying hair was bound in a bun on top of her head. "Ya know what happened?"

"Wudn't much left of 'im."

"Want some coffee? I made some."

"Naw, ma'am. I'll be all right."

"Would ya like tuh come inside?"

"Reckon I will."

He helped her up out of the chair. They swung open the screen door and stepped into the house. A smell something like childhood and old age twisted up in a knot. A slight hint of bacon grease hovered above that . . . and coffee beans (stale and foul to him). They walked down a narrow corridor lined with old black-and-white photographs of unsmiling faces in overalls, shoeless farmers in a land of dust. The house stood behind each of them, and their faces were shaded as if they were only shadows silhouetted by sun and clouds.

She helped herself to a cup of coffee and sat down slowly in her chair. He could hear her bones pop as she sat . . . like air sacks blowing out. Sitting across from her on the sofa, he stared into her face. Lipless and grim, her mouth was drawn across her face by an artist who lacked all sense of happiness. Her eyes were pale images, sagging and withered—only hints of what they were once.

He couldn't remember her any other way, but he was sure that once she hadn't been this way. Once, she hadn't been so gray. In the dim sunlight coming in through the window dust particles floated about carelessly. With the light just in front of her and with her as still as she was, a person might think she was a corpse. He buried his hands in his pockets and leaned back. He could feel the springs in the old sofa digging into the back of his thighs.

"It's cold," he said.

She didn't answer. He turned his eyes to the window. He could see Pa's old Ford parked in the driveway—tires flat and fenders rusted, chrome bumper's paint peeling. It was chipped away by the elements like a sculpture with silent eyes and dimming colors.

"Where will ya go?" he asked.

"I ain't goin nowhere," she said, bringing her cup of coffee to her mouth and sipping from it. "I ain't goin nowhere at all."

"Ya cain't stay by yourself. Have ya heard from Sis?"

She didn't answer. Her eyes were fixed on him. It made him uncomfortable.

"Ya don't even have a car."

"Ain't nevah had one. Ain't nevah needed one."

"Pa ain't 'round no more. Ya need tuh git one."

She grunted, a sullen sound void of all emotion save contempt. He crossed the room and went into the kitchen. He opened the fridge and took out the carton of milk. He went to pour himself a glass, but as he did, clumps plopped out of the carton like mud; the smell was rancid. He coughed and poured the mess down the sink. He walked over to the coffee pot and touched it. It was as cold as ice. He wondered how long it had been sitting there. She called the coffee fresh, but it'd been there for some days . . . maybe weeks. Maybe it had always been there. He went back into the den with a glass of water.

"Figure we could sell the steers tuh old man Curey down tha road. He'll take 'em off ya hands, I'm sure," he said, standing over her. She was staring forward into nothing. "Ya listenin', Ma?"

"I ain't deaf, boy."

He ran his fingers through his hair. "It's cold. Gonna be a cold winter, I reckon. Ya cain't be stayin here by yaself."

"I can."

"Ma, please. Ya cain't."

She glanced up at him. "And where ya figurin' I'm goin' tuh go? Tuh ya place? Tuh ya sis's? Hm? Maybe a nursin home? Does that sound good tuh ya?"

"Ma, why ya gotta be like that?"

"I ain't bein' noway. Noway at all. I ain't bein' nothin'."

"Yer bein difficult. It ain't gotta be like this."

She closed her eyes. He knelt beside her. He took her hand in his and found that it was clammy and cold like a dead fish. She smelled foul like dirt and grime, and when he reached up to touch her face, it felt of old leather drawn too tight.

"I ain't dyin'," she said. Her eyes opened, and her head turned down at him. "I ain't dyin'. I'm jus' fine. Ya hear me, boy? I'm jus' fine."

He didn't know what to say. He opened his mouth to speak but closed it again. There wasn't anything he could say.

"Must'a fell down out thur. Got stepped on by one-a them steers." She sipped her coffee and set it down on the end table. "He shouldn't of been out thur. He knows better than that. Just tripped and fell down. Maybe he couldn't get up. Maybe he yelled out, but I was washin' the dishes and didn't hear 'im. That's what it was, I reckon. I jus' didn't hear 'im."

He stood and walked back over to the window.

"Happens sometimes, don't it?" she said.

"What happens?" he asked, looking out the window.

He watched a truck drive by on the old country road. Tall yellow grass waved at him in the wind. There was a blue, cloudless sky. Something was up there, maybe, beyond that blue. Stars. Moons. *Some folks will tell ya this, and some will tell ya that*, he thought. *They'll tell ya there's a heaven, and they'll tell ya there's a hell. They'll tell ya there's a purpose to it all. Yeah, I guess there is. Sure. I'll believe that.*

"Billy came by jus' last week lookin for 'im," she was saying. "Said he needed some help with his tractor. Ya know yer Pa, always workin with his hands. He was that kinda man. Good, strong hands, he had. Always busy and about. Always doin' somethin'. Workin' all the time. But I had tuh tell Billy that I hadn't seen yer Pa in nearly three days. I reckon by then he'd been dead for some time. I ain't no person that be knowin' much about nothin', but I reckon a man cain't live for long out thur by hisself hurt and all like he was. Reckon he wouldn't have wanted to. God knows I wouldn't. If I was trapped out thur, I'd wanna be dead. 'Jus' take me now, God!' That's what I'd say. 'Jus' take me and fly me on!'"

He glanced up over the fireplace and saw Pa's old shotgun mounted up there like a statuette of some ancient, timeless tradition. He thought of graves without names and bodies without souls. He turned back to Ma and saw that she was looking out the window at Pa's old truck. Her hands lay in her lap, overlapping one another. She looked tiny and fragile, like bones with only the thinnest layer of skin stretched across them.

He glanced down at his own hands and saw that they were still dirty with the soil he'd used to bury Pa's remains. Wiping his hands on his pants, he crossed the room and kissed Ma on the cheek. Her eyes turned up to him, and he saw his own reflection in them. I look so thin, he thought. Like bones in the dust. So still she sat . . . as she always had.

She'd sat in that chair and looked out the window all the while Pa was fixing tractors and herding cattle—him always busy and her always still. Nothing to do, nothing to see, nothing to hear. Nothing at all to live for but sitting there in front of that window and staring outside . . . and sipping her coffee, maybe.

"What've ya been eatin'?" he asked.

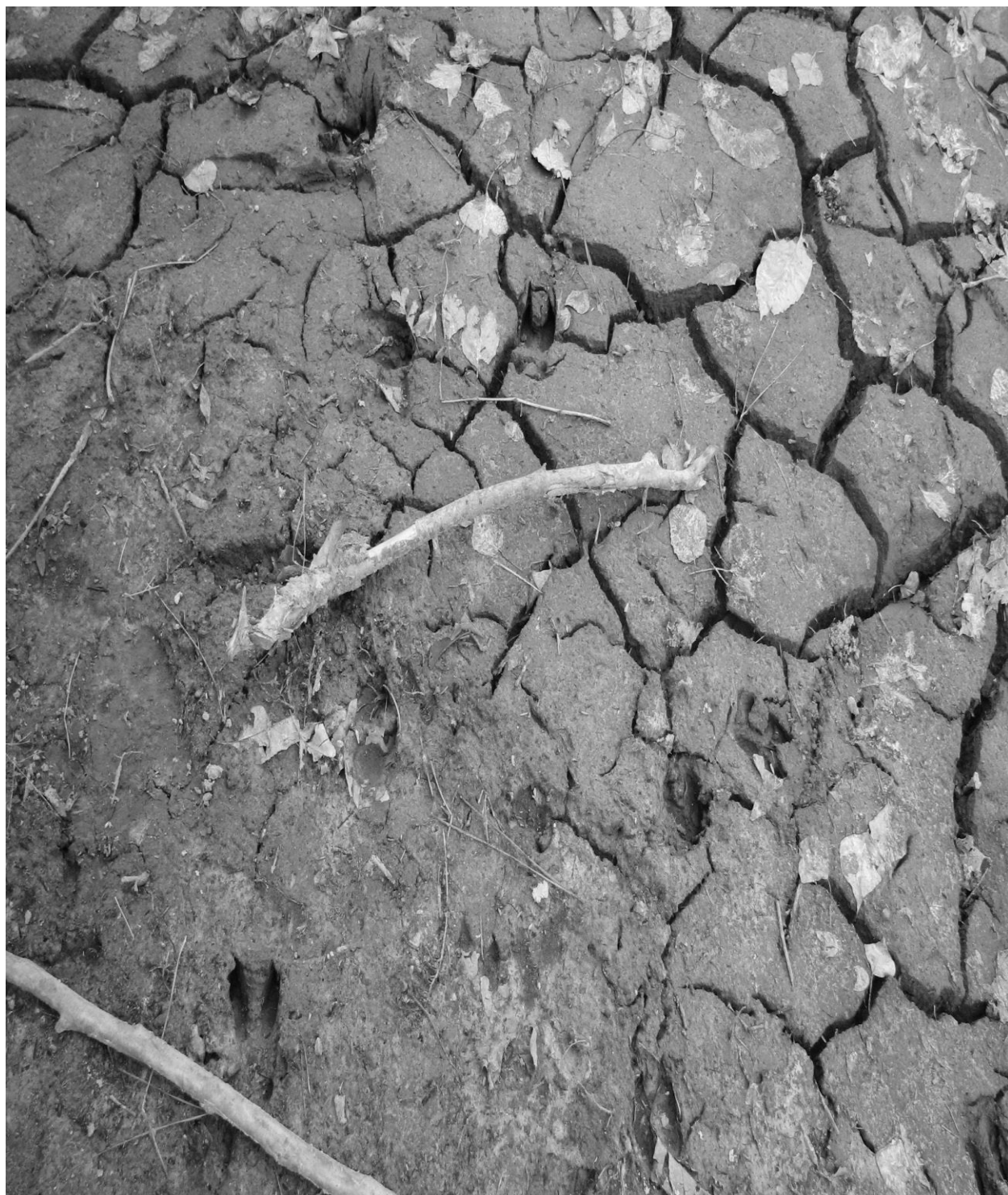
She shrugged. "Ain't been eatin' nothin'. Pa ain't been here tuh hunt me no meat."

"Ya gonna starve, Ma."

"I ain't nevah starved before."

Looking at her through this dimming light and thinking of Pa's bones stretched out across the pasture, he wondered for a moment which one of them he had just buried and which one was sitting here before him.

Drought
Agnes Tirrito



Disaster in Haiti: A Sestina

Tim Cotten

Downstairs, closer now, lookers gape
At scrape where once buildings stood,
Leaving bloody, jagged concrete remains.
Second-story apartments tumbled down
On fathers, mothers, and their babies;
They lie inside somewhere, buried deep.

Twins in common beds sleep deep
Underneath where stones now gape
At stains, the tears of crying babies
Looking to where mothers stood
Before the upstairs became the down—
The broken limbs are sad remains.

No home downstairs remains.
No hope exists along the streets, so deep.
The buildings all have tumbled down.
Foundations once strong let the bedrock gape
Up where the mighty structures stood.
There lived the families, the cribs of babies.

Financial futures peer at failure for the homeless babies.
Homegrown businesses rest in mere remains.
The rebels where the 'hood once stood
Walk the downstairs streets where deep
The trash grows high; trash collectors gape
And give the more-than let of people down.

Blood of innocence is still leaking down,
The gore of policemen covering babies.
News reports leave the word to gape
At television screens showing pitiful remains
Where Mother Earth shook her downstairs deep
To correct where rock and fossil layers stood.

Bring down the ground on plans. Men stood
In confidence as their time came down
From birth to early grave holes deep.
No chances left for karmic babies
Birthed now with memories of dead remains,
Their island raped; their dumped bodies left to gape.

Here stood the town that tumbled down.
Downstairs in the earth, deep-bellied babies
Sleep with remains. The world can only gape.

Goddess of the Dry Sands
Laurie Bayless



Red/Decay

Brittny Ray

A strange flower grows from your mouth. Your teeth become smooth stones for children to skip across water. Your toes turn to green clover . . .

He can tell by the way she stitched the tear in the seat of his tan pants with red thread that she'd started again. After sixty-three years and no children, she'd become funny that way. Fussy. Sassy. "The way red women can be," his father said. The beaded cover on his seat always slid, but it kept the heat from his back. It was his last fare of the day, and he wished he could find the nerve to speak to this one. Most drivers have mastered the art of providing a smooth ride with pleasant conversation . . . so much so that it distracts the passenger from the fact they're being taken on the least direct route possible.

Yet he could never think of anything witty or clever to say about the weather they were having this week; he wasn't good at being a public counselor like a hairstylist or a barber. He just kept quiet and let the wheel glide with ease, almost autonomously, between his fingers. He continued driving with only the heave of the air conditioner blowing lightly and the music down low.

At the stoplight, he turned the tape over, secretly embarrassed by knowing no one uses tapes anymore. From the backseat, the young woman leaned forward, placing her hands on the seat beside him, and said, "What is that?"

"Oh, this thing? Well, it's a cassette. This cab is an older model. I should really—"

"No, I meant the song playing."

Feeling awkward and startled, he replied, "I'm sorry. I didn't know that you could hear it. I can turn it down more . . . or off if it bothers—"

"Actually, I was hoping you could turn it up a little more."

Now this is certainly new, he thought. No one in all the years he had driven his cab had ever really spoken to him, let alone been curious about his choice of music.

"It's Roy Ayers. Probably a little before your time, I'm afraid."

He laughed to himself.

"Yeah. I know this one. My uncle used to play it."

At this he lifted his eyes to the rear-view mirror, catching a glimpse of the top of her head, a soft velvet-brown ball. He felt encouraged to carry the conversation on.

"If you don't mind, may I ask how old you are?"

“Not at all.”

“I hope I’m not prying.”

This was going well.

“No, of course not. I’m twenty-two.”

Twenty-two. Eons away from where he was now. He didn’t know ears at twenty-two could even detect this music nowadays; he thought it had become a kind of new-age dog whistle. The only time he had even heard of his type of music being used was as embedded bits of fossils spliced in between the rhythms of some hip-hop artist raiding his mother’s vinyl somewhere.

“Twenty-three in June.”

“Hmph,” is all he said.

“Imagine that.”

He wanted to know more about the young woman—more about her uncle and what other music he had played. Had he exposed her to Monk, Donald Bird, or P-Funk? Where was she from? Did she sing? If not, why not with a voice like that (sweet, slightly grainy, comforting)? He wanted to know why it was she wore her hair that way when so many other women had their hair processed these days, even Josephine.

He remembered the texture of real hair between his fingers in his day, how it always smelled like some sweet oil and coconut, and the way it seemed to hug back upon itself to the scalp when a woman laid on it . . . but the trip was up. He hesitated a moment, gripping the wheel before gingerly lifting his foot from the pedal and letting the bee-colored cab roll to a languid stop. He was sorry to see her go. He hadn’t even seen her face.

“How much do I owe you, sir?”

Such a respectful young lady, too.

“\$24.75 with the toll.”

“Okay. Here you go.”

She opened the door, but then, with one foot out, she got back in again.

“I’m sorry, but can I just sit here for a minute until the song is almost over? My favorite part is coming.”

He wanted to tell her it would be his pleasure, but he just parked the car and said happily, “Sure.”

He’d hoped she felt how pleased she’d made him. They sat there for a while, not saying anything. He could recall the first time he heard the song, where he’d bought the record, but, somehow, he knew that choosing to remember it this way would be better.

“Feel what I feel, when I feel, what I feel, when I’m feeling . . .”

It was as if a firefly had lit up in his belly. He tilted his head down a little to hide a smile.

“In the sunshine”

She gathered her things to leave this time.

“‘Everybody Loves the Sunshine,’ right?”

“Yes!”

He turned around just in time to catch the side of her face as she turned around saying, “Have a nice day.” He watched her slender brown body disappear in slices as she walked down into the subway. He had always appreciated the way a woman looked in a yellow dress—like candy in a pretty wrapper.

He sighed and briefly looked at the flecks of silver and spice in the trimmed beard around his chin. He felt the dull nag of age and tension in his shoulders. If he had only been a bit younger or she a little older Things may have ended differently then. He maybe could have talked to her longer, and the smell of strawberries, chamomile, and roses she’d left behind would have been stronger, too.

Before he headed back to the station, he lifted himself slightly from the seat with a little effort—just enough to reach into his back pocket for his wallet. The leather had broken down well over the years, as fine leather does, like a well-worn baseball glove. Only the gloss was gone, but the texture was smooth and soft. Familiar. Yes, like an old reliable glove. In it, from the very back (behind his license and an old ticket stub of the last movie he’d seen), he took out an old Polaroid, strategically bent and somewhat tattered at the edges.

He’d kept up with the photo for over thirty years even though he’d cut off most of the woman’s head when taking it. She could only be seen from her nose down, but you could still tell that something must have been funny; she was laughing, her front teeth big and awkward and beautiful with a small gap between the front two wide enough to slide a dime through.

Her hands, the smallest prettiest hands he could ever remember seeing, were suspended beside her face, revealing all the brown creases of her palms and fingers, every prediction about life and love. Two coral bracelets rested on the skin up towards her elbows.

He wanted to remember more about that day, but all he could recall was that everything about it (everything in it) was spring—the auburn blossom of hair around her head and the babies’ breath held within it. His youth and the way he’d felt—all was spring. The young lady in the cab reminded him of this feeling. He wished she could have stayed longer; he could have captured enough of the full moon of her face and the scent of her perfume to remember her, but now all traces of her were washed away.

He squinted his eyes while they were closed, trying to grab some sliver of her for himself, something to hold like a broken cherry blossom twig in his memory. She had skin like earth wrapped in sunlight, speckled with copper and coral. There was an orb of velvet hair. He lifted his red-stitched rear again, gingerly put the picture back in its place, and rewound the ancient tape, alone and at ease. He let the song play once more as the sunlight outside bled itself out across the sky and escaped him. He drove on with both hands held firm on the steering wheel, as he always did.

Your skull becomes a broken hour glass of floating dust; your pelvis, a nesting den for tender pupae

When he got out of the car to wipe down the back seat (his ritual when closing a shift), he heard a burst of laughter behind him. He looked around in surprise. Then he quickly stood upright and turned around, remembering the red scar at the back of his pants.

“Looks like someone’s on the rag again!”

He still couldn’t figure out how everybody knew about his wife’s peculiar ailment. Even more frustrating, he wondered why every one of his coworkers found such a thing so amusing. After the death of his second wife, Paul, a short fat man with hair too black to be credible, had gotten another woman so young she’d probably just started bleeding at all, while Sal, a former undertaker from Brooklyn, had a wife so old and pale she looked as if she’d shed all the life out of herself years ago.

Yes, Josephine was mean, a wee little hateful thing, but he empathized with her condition. She hadn’t always been this way. For whatever it was worth, he felt like the clockwork nature of her “lady’s time” meant there was still some kind of life in her, that she was still around and alive and kicking no matter how many of those tiny blows landed towards him.

“Man, scout’s honor, all jokes aside, I just wanna tell you how bad I feel for ya man!” Sal said.

I wish you wouldn’t . . . talk to me at all, that is. Bernard wished he could say that, but, as with his passengers, he could never find the guts to say anything the way he wanted to.

“Thank you, but we get along just fine.”

“Fine?! Man, she done stitched a damn red set of tracks up your ass that could carry you from Georgia straight up and down the Mississippi! Boy, that old Jo is mean. I’m tryin’ ta tell ya! I don’t know what it is about them lil’ old bitty

women make them so mean. No, sir. That's not how I likes my women at all! I take mine's sweet and big!" Paul said.

Bernard's cell phone rang.

"Hey there, Josey! How you feeling?"

"Bernard, now don't start with asking me no silly questions! I'm just not in the mood! Are you still at the station? I need you to go to the store and pick me up some of those . . . *thangs*."

"Okay, Jo."

She was speaking so loudly that he tried to turn down the volume, but he accidentally put her on the speaker phone.

"Now, listen. I don't want none of those *thangs* with wings, and don't come back here with nothing thin as wafers, neither! Get two, three, boxes just in case, Lord forbid, I'm not delivered from this mess next month, help me Jesus . . . Bernard! Are you listening?"

Still trying to turn the speaker off, he placed the receiver up to his mouth saying, "Yes, darling."

"Well why aren't you saying anything, and now why're you talking so loud? Bring me an onion, too while you're there, would ya? And don't stay down there carrying on with those hoodlums at the station, either! I don't see how you—"

He couldn't find the right button, so he just hung up. He would pay for that later, he was sure. The men were now doubled over with laughter. Some of them were holding each other for balance and crying giggly tears while Paul and Sal bobbed and rolled like two buoys on the floor. Calmly, Bernard walked away, got back into his cab, and left, driving faster than usual towards the supermarket and Josephine, who was waiting at home.

He picked up three boxes of Always and an onion that looked like a large pearl. He searched the check-out lines for the usual girl he went to, but, finding her gone, he had to choose between a middle-aged lady he'd never seen before and the grandson of a couple he and Josephine used to know who had apparently just started on as a cashier.

"Your change is \$7.15."

As the woman handed Bernard his change, bag, and receipt, she said, "You know, a lot of men wouldn't do what you're doing. I don't know why. It's really a natural thing. Somebody must be her granddaddy's little girl!"

He smiled weakly and headed back to his car. He had never really gotten angry at Josephine before, but the whole thing was becoming a bit of a bother and more than a little ridiculous. *From now on, she can get her own damn pieces of cotton. That's what I should tell her.*

He drove home, and when she met him at the door, he said, “Hey, Josey.”
“What took you so long?”

An insect breaks its cocoon in your ribcage . . .

He woke up thinking about his father. Maybe he had dreamed of him. He’d been estranged from Bernard’s mother before her death, and now his own children wouldn’t speak to him. Bernard had never had a problem with his father, not even during his parents’ separation. He wanted to keep in contact with him, but his fear of being the odd one out among his siblings kept him from going against anything they said.

“Josey, you think I should call Father sometime today? You know, just to make sure he’s still getting around?”

They were still lying in bed. Josephine, in her nightgown and glasses, was working the cryptoquote, and Bernard, on his back in a slate-and-blue pajama set, cocked his head toward her, waiting intently for an answer.

“Hmph. And for what?” She said it as if it were a statement—blunt, with no type of opening or window. It was definitely an answer to his question.

“Oh, I don’t know. He’s just been on my mind, that’s all. Maybe you’re right, Josephine.”

He glanced up at the water damage in the ceiling. It looked like a giant stain from a coffee cup. He turned over and tried to steal a kiss from her only to have her block his attempts with her folded-up newspaper, cringing away as if they hadn’t been married for the past thirty years, as if his very presence so near to her was obscene.

“Boy, go brush your teeth! Don’t come over her kissing on me with your mouth smelling like sin and turned milk!”

Bernard decided to take a shower. He let the water from the shower pelt his skin without moving. He tried to hold his head under the streaming jets, but he couldn’t stand the water rolling into his nose. He was trying to conjure up a day in April of 1976 when he’d met a sandy-haired woman with a face covered with freckles like a handful of poppy seeds. Josephine. Josephine.

There was a time when he would wipe a whole song clean of its lyrics and just chant her name over and over. He would always love her (he had committed himself to that, at least), but these days, he was finding himself looking at the nostalgic picture in his wallet more frequently . . . and he felt bad for blithely investing all his idle affection in another woman.

He couldn’t even remember her name, or how, with her eyes, the rest of her face may have looked. All he had was some feeling. He knew it was pitiful, but

going back to that place a few moments of every day served as a kind of wistful anodyne deadening his anxieties; he might never have a reciprocating moment with another woman again.

He put on his robe, sat down on the covered toilet, and gently maneuvered the picture from his wallet, taking care not to smudge the photo with his moist fingers. He used to sneak it in with him, but now he carried it in (like anything you would take into the bathroom) without Josephine ever noticing. He gazed down into the woman's half of a face and entertained himself with a familiar mind game.

He imagined getting into his cab, driving back home to Florida, and looking for the woman. The fantasy was always kind, omitting time and logic and the probability of her obviously living her life elsewhere happily without him. Guided by sentiment alone, he arrives at a home with a walkway lined with violet and yellow flowers. He walks up to the door, and, before he can even knock, it opens. Her face is the center of a sunflower, but he recognizes her by the lines of her brown shoulders. When he hands her the picture, it turns into a bouquet of queen bees. A laugh flashes through her face, and she says, "What took you so long?"

Before he can walk into the house, there is the startling sound of banging behind him. In a flurry of a thousand bees, the sunflower lady shuts the door.

"Bernard! Come on outta there! Either you fell in, or you're in there doing something else! If that's the case, you might as well go on ahead and finish up because there'll be none of that business going on here! And you better not have one of my good catalogues in there with you, either!"

Some time during the commotion, Bernard dropped the photo in a damp spot on the floor. He scooped it up and waved it frantically in the air as if it had just been developed.

Damn it, Josephine! he thought. *Damn it, damn it, damn it, damn it, damn you! God help me, if it's ruined! Damn you!*

The insect wriggles from its shell your body a rigid playground . . .

The picture wasn't completely damaged, but there were a few small scratches on the surface, revealing strange, thin menageries of hidden colors beneath the film. He decided that he would hurry up and get dressed, skip breakfast, and take it to the photo shop to be repaired.

The boy at the photo shop looked at him as if he were crazy.

"You want me to do what?"

"I said, 'I'd like to have this Polaroid fixed.' Will that be a problem? You act as if it can't be done."

“Um, yeah. It will be a problem. This is a Polaroid, and we only do digital stuff here. Plus, you can’t even see all of the person’s face in the picture. It just seems like it’s more trouble than it’s worth.”

What does this boy know about anything? Bernard thought. He couldn’t be more than eighteen or nineteen years old. He didn’t know anything about missing a woman or wanting a woman. He probably hadn’t known a woman since he’d been in his mother’s womb.

“Well, is there anything you *can* do?”

“I guess I could try to laminate it.”

“If it’s not too much of a bother for you, would you, please?”

The clerk snatched up the picture from the counter and walked to the back of the store.

“And be careful! It’s almost thirty-five years old,” Bernard yelled to the boy.

“I can see that,” he snapped back.

After about fifteen minutes, Bernard was back in his cab with his photo. The edges were smooth and protected. It still had a few scrapes on the inside and a crease where the fold used to be, but he felt that he could hold onto it for another thirty years or so now. He decided that Josephine’s behavior had gone far past unacceptable.

“There’s going to be some changes around here now,” he said aloud to the half face secured beneath his thumbs.

It took him two whole hours to find a passenger, even working with the dispatcher at the station. Finally, an older man flagged him down at the corner of a bus stop and a drug store in front of a building for assisted-living residents; the man carried a newspaper and a small leather suitcase. Bernard didn’t know the address he was given, but the older man said that he would direct him. They traveled farther and farther towards the outskirts of the city on back roads coated with wet clay.

When they finally arrived at a little house ravished from the outside by roots and ivy, the old man instructed Bernard with one finger to wait a moment. Although he had to rip away at the growth to get at the door, he knocked several times and waited. Bernard watched the little man walk around the porch, snatching at the vines, trying to look in the windows. Finally, he walked back to the cab with his paper and his suitcase. He slowly leaned into the back seat.

“I guess nobody’s home.”

“Would you like for me to take you back now, sir?”

“I thought surely someone would be here still.”

The man was quiet, looking out the window towards the home.

“Is there anywhere else you’d like to go?”

“I haven’t got any money to pay you, I’m afraid.”

“I’m sorry, but . . . you haven’t got anything?”

“No. Not anything.”

The man asked if he could wait a few moments to see if anyone showed up at the house. Not wanting to upset the man any further, Bernard waited for a little more than an hour with the man in silence. Nothing stirred but the low murmur of his stereo. When they made it back to the apartments, Bernard told the man the ride was free of charge.

“I may have a little something upstairs if you’ll wait right here.”

“It’s not a problem, sir. I haven’t been out that way in years. It will probably do me some good.”

It wasn’t until Bernard had gone back to the station that he realized the man had left his leather suitcase behind. Bernard went back to the high-rise apartments, but when he asked about the man, a woman and a man playing cards by the window told him he had checked out of the apartments later that day for good. When Bernard opened the suitcase to see if the man had left any kind of identification, all he found was a piece of a tattered moth’s wing.

On Saturday morning, he woke up to the smell of fried bacon and burned toast. After showering and making up the bed, he set the old man’s brown suitcase by the door.

“And just where, may I ask, are you off to?” Josephine asked, peering at Bernard over her the rim of her coffee cup.

“I’m going to see Father today. I’ll be back sometime Monday in the afternoon.”

“Now, see, I told you that was nonsense before, didn’t I? I don’t know why you have to be so hard-headed! And you haven’t even asked me anything! I guess you’re just gonna tell me what you’re gonna do now, is that what it is?”

He scraped the burned side of a piece of toast clean and slathered it with apple butter.

“Now, Josephine,” he said tentatively. “I’m a grown man. I’m not a boy, and you know it. I don’t have to ask for your permission to see my own father.”

He had never spoken to his wife in this way before. He buttered another piece of toast. He could feel himself begin to tingle in the pit of his underarms. *Stand firm now, Bernard. Don’t lose your nerve.*

“I don’t know what’s got you in a funk this morning, talking all out of your behind, but I can tell you this much: You can go on down there if you want to and miss work, but you’re just gonna be wasting your time and money. If he wanted to

talk to you, he would have called you! I don't know why you ain't got sense enough to understand that like the others! But you're not just going to sit up here and talk to me any kind of way, Bernard! Not in this house to me you won't!"

Remembering he hadn't packed his toothbrush after brushing his teeth this morning, he got up from the table and walked to the bathroom with Josephine following.

"You're probably telling a story about where you're going anyhow. Boy, you think I was born a fool? You're probably headed somewhere to see some woman you met off somewhere! I knew you were spending too much time up at that station!"

"Josephine, what are you talking about, woman? I'm sixty-five years old! Who in her right mind wants to fool with an old man who drives a taxi?"

He couldn't understand what had gotten into her. It wasn't so much that she was making a fuss—after all, he would have been surprised if she hadn't—but he couldn't understand why she was so set against him seeing his own father. During their whole marriage, his father and Josephine had interacted very little. The few times they had met, his father had been nothing but warm and cordial.

As for the other matter, the only other woman he was interested in was sealed and folded up in a bulge in his pocket many years and miles beyond his reach. He hated to bring up Josephine's condition, but there was no other explanation for this kind of behavior. He was trying not to show his anger, but he felt something in him beginning to fray.

"Josephine, I'm going, and that's all there is to it! Now, if you're crazy enough to think I'm going to see another woman, then come on and go on with me! If not, I'm not going to sit here and argue with you! And when I get back, we need to make an appointment for you to see that doctor again because you are going plum crazy, and I just can't take it! I'm tired, Josephine, of you treating me like a dog when I put up with mess no other man would put up with for you! Now, I don't want to talk *no more*! I'm gone!"

Toothbrush in hand, he made his way back down the hall, past the years of wedding portraits on the wall, and into the kitchen. He picked up his keys and the suitcase from the floor.

"Well, I may not be well, but at least I ain't a damn fool! Go on, then! Get out of here, then! But if you leave, you might as well stay! You ain't gonna treat me like he treated your mama!"

Even with her yelling, he had become calmer now. He stopped to think about his decision. He knew she didn't mean what she was saying, but his confusion about it all was making him lose his nerve. His mind went back to the little old man ripping vines down, searching for any trace of someone he knew had

existed . . . and he knew he had to go. He opened the door, but before he could get out, Josephine, with the speed of someone half her age, snatched the suitcase out of his hand, making it hit the ground. It cracked open, spilling its contents on the floor.

“You just won’t listen, will you? Well, I’ll tell it to you this way: You go down to Florida, and you can visit your daddy at Oakdale Cemetery. He shot himself in June, and your brothers and sisters didn’t know how to tell it to you.”

Bernard shut the door with his back still facing his wife. He could hear that she was crying at the table behind him, but he didn’t want to see her face. He didn’t want to get snagged into offering her comfort or accepting any condolences from her. He gathered his things from the floor and placed them back into the suitcase.

He went into the bedroom and sat down on the bed. He couldn’t think about what his wife had just told him. He couldn’t think about his brothers and his sisters. He couldn’t imagine his parents at all. He did the only thing he knew he could always do. He left the house, got into his cab, and drove to work.

Weeks went by without anything being said about that day. Although he hadn’t treated her differently, Josephine seemed to go out of her way to hide herself and tiptoe silently and lightly around him like a shadow. The satisfaction he had once gotten from being behind the wheel, kneading the tar of the streets compact and flat, no longer moved him. He had fallen out of curiosity with people, places, and things.

His passengers flowed in and out of his presence like mute phantoms through a revolving door. He felt abducted; he couldn’t remember the places they’d taken him. Each time he began another trip, the car picking up speed and causing the landscape to blur, he believed he saw a body shifting from a bold bar of color into a halo of pale dust, like a series of pictures flipped rapidly from the corner of a book’s first page to its last.

The woman had whined for weeks in the folds of his wallet, and while he had forgotten everything else, he felt bad for neglecting her. He raised the seat of a new pair of pants Josephine must have bought and noticed in doing so that parts of his body ached. The woman’s smile in the picture was still the same, and his muscles loosened in the redemption only a woman with no eyes could give.

His mind wandered into the sweet spaces in between the sunflower lady’s words: “What took you so long?” The question tilted upward like a beckoning wave. The image distracted him from the needle in the dash nodding toward empty. He steadied his foot on the gas pedal and drove toward where he felt he heard laughter.

It had taken Josephine three washes to coax her flat, sandy hair to curl into tightly furred tiny fists. The air from the bathroom lingered heavy and sweet from a jar of Blue Magic grease she'd found hidden behind a row of unopened small cardboard boxes; they'd fallen backwards like hollow dominoes when she'd opened the cabinet door.

She dialed Bernard's phone number, her nails glossy from a new coat of polish, and she frowned at a chip threatening to crack the reddish orange halos resting below the knotty bone of her delicate wrist. Bernard had once said her hands looked like something made for a child; they were like pretty playthings.

"You have reached the voicemail box of . . ."

She normally hung up at the voice of the automated woman, but instead she walked idly back to the bathroom to the sound of her husband's recorded voice.

". . . Bernard. Quick."

How funny that he seemed uncertain of even his own name.

"Bernard," she steadied herself by staring directly into her eyes in the mirror. She knew he would never get the message. He wouldn't even know how to retrieve it, but she spoke with the certainty of someone expecting her, and she watched her lips slide like a tide over and away from the small separation, a sliver of a black key, a pause in the otherwise harmony of her teeth.

"This is Jo. I've made dinner. Some things I thought you might like. I didn't know how long you'd be, but I'm here. Give me a call if you think you'll be a while, but until then, I'll just keep it on the stove waiting. All right. Well. That was all."

She punctuated the message with a hesitant "'Bye!" and scolded herself for spacing her syllables out as long as whole arm lengths, as if her words were waiting on his arrival to bend themselves and fold. Catching one last glimpse in the mirror, she noticed how time had caused her face to melt.

Finding the house too quiet as she set the table, she slipped a record from its paper slip; she imagined herself uncovering some ancient hidden relic, and she laughed. She sighed as the needle echoed the cracks, pops, and whispers of a lost time and universe where before every song began the listener waited in reverence. What kind of world was this where no one knew the sight of sound twirling on a black stage? No one knew how the arm clicked "Amen!" at the end like the sound of two precious bracelets kissing. No one knew what pictures sound conjured as it moved.

Snowbird
Agnes Tirrito



Tiny Foolish Birds

Susan Maurer

So I have loved and lost as
many have.

And raged and wept
and called and been rebuffed.

I ask, "Then will I ever love again?"

The questions rage like soldiers to be met.

The answers flee like tiny foolish birds.

My Duchess

Daina Land

To My Lord the Count de Chaney:

My name is *Fra* Pandolf. I attest that this testimony is faithful and true. I am a painter of no little importance. I have painted portraits of some of the wealthiest people and some of the most notorious in all of Europe. Once such commission placed me at the Duke of Warmouth's door on a considerably pleasant day in June of 1768. I recall the day with great clarity because it was the day I began my masterpiece. Leonardo da Vinci has his *Mona Lisa*. I have *My Duchess*. One major difference is, however, that my portrait is destined to be unobserved due to the arbitrary character of its present owner, the Duke of Warmouth.

On the above mentioned day, my servant Hans and I were waiting to be led somewhere into the recesses of the grand castle at Dorian. As I stood observing the elaborate artifacts surrounding me, I again praised God who had gifted me with a profitable talent. Without the aptitude of my craft, I would have never been allowed entrance into the society of a man so feared and venerated as the Duke of Warmouth. He was the envy and prize of all who earned a living from their chosen craft. He was open-handed and paid a great deal to have items acquired by the furthest names in artistry for the purpose of affluence. Therefore, when I was solicited to paint a portrait of his charming wife, I blessed my good fortune and began to confer with him to set a price.

While I was thus recalling the cause of my employment, a servant appeared. He escorted us through the cavernous halls of the great house. As we traversed the vestibule, a moment's glimpse was all that was afforded us of the rooms we passed. I admit that a glimpse was eyeful enough. The rooms were arrayed in unimaginable splendor, the likeness thereof mine eyes had never seen. Rich brocade tapestries and superbly painted portraits lined the walls of every room we passed. As we came upon an open doorway, both my servant and I craned our necks in an effort to see into the elaborately decorated areas.

In one, exotic fruits and deliciously prepared game fowl lined a massive wooden table. The aroma wafted down the corridor and greeted us with the alluring scent of a good meal. This room was followed by an equally stunning library where six-foot logs crackled in a massive hearth and rich cherry-wood shelves lined the walls with leather-bound collections.

Our destination, I knew, was to be one of amiable comfort and extensive lighting; therefore, when we neared a doorway which spilled sunshine like liquid

gold onto the Persian rug underfoot, I guessed rightly that we had arrived at our predetermined meeting place. The room was filled with clear glass windows that shone mirror like, reflecting the contents of the room within its three-by-five wooden panes. Warm gold and sea-blue hues transformed the room into an indoor haven where an artist could turn in any direction to be inspired.

Left alone to prepare, my servant and I began the task of preparation. His undertaking was to set up the easel and apply paint to the pallet while I, on the other hand, arranged possible settings for the Duke to choose from. It was my customary habit to allow patrons to determine the background from a prescribed group of options. I found this practice easily appeased their desire to put me in their charge while causing me the least amount of artistic frustration.

While I was yet at my task, the Duchess entered with an entourage of ladies and servants. There was a great sashaying of gowns accompanied by an even greater rustling of women's fans and clicking tongues. My first inclination was to throw them all out of the room, but having dealt with influential people before, I waited until the Duke's arrival to ascertain his wishes before I demanded my own. Painting was not my only art, you understand; the other was observation. A good painter does not only observe the minutest details of subtle lines, rays of light, and expression, but he must also observe the unseen attributes such as tension, feeling, and aggression. Any man can splatter paint on canvas, but it takes a man with understanding to work the models.

As the energy of the women gave way to pandemonium, the Duke entered, ceasing their prattle. In my exuberance, I bowed my thanks at his coming, to which he crossed the room with a purposeful stride to shake my hand. I then inquired of his design of the portrait before seating the most lovely of all women. I asked that the others be excused to allow me the silence conducive to my work habits. This request was instantly undertaken, and I was allowed to observe my subject, the celebrated Duchess of Warmouth and her husband, at my leisure. She sat stoic and uneasy, fearful that he might in some way be displeased by her behavior.

As I readied my canvas, I heard him strictly warn his wife as to how she was expected to behave in my presence. He told her that under no circumstance was she to be beguiling or show her obvious pleasure at being painted. Nor was she allowed to wallow in her thanksgiving, which he hissed he knew was her customary habit. He continued by telling her he wanted her to be portrayed with a dignity she did not possess naturally; therefore, her adherence to his demands would be severely enforced.

This dialogue, I confess, I found odd. I was not accustomed to the Duke or to his ways, but over the course of my habitation there, I became intimately

acquainted with his discrepancies and jealous outbursts. He was, in all my dealings with him, a man not to be trifled with, and in the presence of the Duchess, he was sardonic and exacting, so much so that it caused her bloom to discolor and fade. Too much of any one element is grievous to a delicate blossom, and she, the most beautiful of the flora, was overpowered by the saturation of his presence.

The Duchess wore an ornate plush velvet gown encrusted with pearls and embellished with gold thread sewn in the popular fashion. The brightness of thread was a sharp contrast to the deep and luxurious burgundy fabric. Her hair, unlike the braided style commonly worn by women, had been brushed to a sheen and lay in soft auburn ringlets about her face before cascading down to rest near her thin waist. Her pale powdered skin contrasted greatly with her dark doe-shaped eyes, which were outlined by heavy dark lashes. She alternately bit her lips and pinched her cheeks to bring some color to her countenance. The effect was acute. She was magnificent to behold.

My admiration played across my features openly, and the Duchess upon seeing it smiled sweetly, infuriating the Duke. While we were thus engaged, a small servant girl laid a tray of refreshments upon a table at the Duchess's side. The Duchess blushed a thankful reply as she made eye contact with the youth. The girl, being thus praised, bowed deeply and smiled. This, too, enraged the Duke of Warmouth. From my position adjacent to him, I could see his hand encircle her wrist like a vice. I do not exaggerate when I tell you she whimpered loudly. Nor do I lie when I tell you that there were bruises where his hand had been.

The Duke then came to my side directly and explained his desire: "Dignity, man. I expect her to look the part of a Duchess even though, as you see, she refuses to act like it." He told me this sternly, demanding my adherence to his will.

"Of course, Your Royal Highness, sir," I responded, understanding and respecting the position of Duke if not the man himself. However, after my extended dealings with the man, I can assure you that respect is an element I do not possess concerning him. He is in every way unworthy of such exaltation.

Over the course of many months, my servant and I were available to the Duchess at any hour of the day. We were offered a small room each for the length of our visit, which we were expected to be in possession of . . . or, rather, it was expected to be in possession of us. I was seldom called concerning any officious capacity and was there solely for the Duke's convenience. I, however, cared little at the beginning as I was being handsomely paid. My disregard changed over the course of time as I heard, viewed, and witnessed the abuse of the Duchess.

I will not lie. I found her intriguing. To paint her was my joy. To observe her was my obsession. I admired her way with the people; she was alike to them

all. Whether they were servant or guest, each received the same attention and respect. They delighted her, and she bore her station well as a lady refined who knew her duty and her lot. It was only in the Duke's harsh presence that she seemed reserved.

Knowing her difficulties, I would often converse with her as I painted. I felt that we became friends over time. She would speak about her day, and I would instruct her in the little nuances of observation in artistry. I would, perhaps, expound upon the existences of the colorful hues in her hair or how the light played along the recesses of her neckline.

She would smile so softly and genuinely at my words that I found myself entranced in her presence. Her joy could be clearly seen lightly touching her cheek. I painted it there, you know—her blush at my words. The effect was stunning. No, sir, do not be fooled if you have been played upon by the words of the Duke. It was not by his presence that the woman glowed warm. Nor did his appearance cause “the faint half-flush that dies along her throat.” That, too, I assure you was produced when she was in my presence alone.

You may be wondering how my subject's life ceased when it was evident at my drawing of her how she teemed with life effervescent. On our last day together, her smiles were sweet and given to all. Even the Duke himself was smiled upon. Yet upon him her smiles did not reproduce the effect they had on all others. I saw his eyes. They teemed with an unbridled passion which caused my heart to grow faint. I could see the murderous intent as it played upon the iris and steeled itself along lines of his mouth. As I have said, I am a man of observation. It is my craft.

My painting I could no longer linger upon without suspicion; therefore, when he arrived to look upon it, I announced its completion all the while having insinuated that perhaps his portrait might be next. As he looked at the drawing, his eyes again overflowed with rage. He examined it; however, it faithfully reproduced her. Her smile, her glow, her sweetness of temper—all were represented upon that canvas. I knew then . . . I knew her smiles would “cease altogether.” This realization was a cold hand upon my throat which suffocated me and caused me to make ready a grand scheme of escape. I was expected to leave the following morning, and, somehow, I had to encourage her to flee.

After receiving my full payment, I excused myself from his presence to prepare for my departure. To my servant, I gave all of my belongings and some of the Duchess's (which I stole away without her knowledge) and then sent him on his way aforetime that we might leave in the middle of the night unhindered. I, as you may imagine, did not trust that I would make it out of Dorian alive. The Duke's countenance toward me had changed drastically when he saw the finished

painting. I had captured an alluring quality that he had been unable to attain from her himself.

Dusk gave way to night, and I waited. My ear was attuned to the preparations of the servants going throughout their nightly ritual of securing the house. I heard the Duchess as she walked along the corridor, making her retreat to her private chambers. The Duke, also, I listened for. He stopped eerily at my door and listened to me in turn. Thankfully, I had earlier thrown the bolt home. The door was secure. He lingered there for some great time, listening to me breathe while I listened to him do the same. At one point, I heard a slight creak upon the handle and saw a small beam of light flicker through the keyhole. My blood congealed in my veins, and my throat almost betrayed me and screamed. The nerve I had felt in the light of day plummeted in the dark of night.

The time passed slowly, and my fear escalated with each passing moment the Duke delayed at my door. My pitiful plan of escape now seemed crude and rudimentary in the bleak darkness, and I wondered how I might simply save myself. Having at my disposal a garden window, I began to imagine my flight alone. I thought to myself as I lay shivering and waiting for his departure from my door that his murderous intent was aimed solely at me. This thought gave me comfort. It excused me from my chivalrous plan and allowed only for my escape and subsequent self-preservation.

While I was thus engaged, I began to hear a series of whispers. I stealthily removed myself from the bed and stole along the wall like a burglar. I calculated every step and tested the flooring before putting my full weight upon each new board. It was evident that there were many men in the hallway. The Duke had left my door to join the men who were now gathered before the Duchess's room. The Duke gave his men commands to follow at his bidding and left the multitude waiting at her door after he himself had entered.

I could think of no way to save her. As one lone man with neither saber nor sword against a crowd of armed men, I was undone. I heard the scuffling of feet and then the struggling. I listened to every moan and heard every whimpered cry. I saw through the keyhole men with lamps before and behind whilst in the middle they carried her lifeless form down the corridors of the castle.

When morning's light shone a slight grey sliver across the distant sky, I removed the bolt with careful trepidation and silently made my way down the hall to the kitchen, praying that orders had not been given for my demise. The farther down the corridors I traversed, the more distinctly I heard the hushed whimpers of the servants. Following the noise of them, I found myself in the great dining hall, where my Duchess had been laid atop the table among freshly plucked rose petals.

Around and about on every side were the men and women of the household, whimpering and wringing their hands like children. Baskets full of flower petals were being carried forth to adorn their Duchess. The room upon sunrise was filled with the most glorious light. Hues of gold and crimson flooded the room to rest upon the deceased. She was clad in her cotton sleeping gown. Her long auburn hair lay serenely across her ivory shoulders. Her lips, her cheeks, and her throat all glowed in the warm crimson-colored light of dawn. Peeking from behind one tendril of her smooth auburn hair, which lay curled against her lily-white throat, repugnant fingerprints scowled at me.

I will remind you, sir, that I am not unaccustomed to the exotic nature of the wealthy, having long since painted their forms. The Duke's behavior, however, was nothing short of murderous. Therefore, upon hearing of the pending matrimonial arrangements between him and your daughter, I felt it my duty to confer my knowledge of his previous wife.

It is by the request of your envoy that I have taken the liberty to convey my narrative. I write this letter with great trepidation, I assure you. I realize that I am trifling in the business affairs of men who are by no means my equal. Admitting to my knowledge of the Duke's questionable conduct could prove to be disastrous to me. However, my conscience assures me that it could be far more disastrous for your lovely young daughter to proceed unwarned; therefore, I make bold my plea on her behalf.

Sir, I assure you, if this circumstance were a matter of acquiring a prominent name or a display of social acquiescence to a sincere man, I would have no need to interfere. However, I sincerely believe that the proposed union could result in your daughter's death at the perilous hands of the Duke of Warmouth. This testimony I do attest to for the sake of one who is young, vibrant, and filled with the promise of life, to which a mere title is of little worth.

Your Servant, Ever Faithfully,

Fra Pandolf

Monsieur Pandolf:

I have received your letter. Your account, I agree, causes one to question the Duke of Warmouth's motives for marriage. It is acceptable in my circle to make such arrangements to further the rank and respectability of a family. I am, however, not so cold as to do so at the peril of my daughter's happiness—let alone her life, which is precious to both her mother and me. Your validation of my envoy's fears has been a great help in determining the outcome of this proposal. You will be happy to note that I have rejected the Duke's offer of marriage to my daughter.

Also, at my wife's request, I bid you come to our home to paint our family portrait and, perhaps, produce paintings of each of our children as a gift to her.

Always in Your Debt,

The Count de Chaney

Candy

Bianca Kisselburg

My mommy gave me lollipops
Of red and white and blue.
I licked them down till they were gone
Then stuck them in her shoe.

My mommy gave me choc'late bars
That melted in my hand.
I wiped them on what first I found.
Now Daddy has my brand.

My mommy gave me gummy bears.
I chewed upon them all.
Grandma told me not to swallow,
So now they're in her shawl.

Chocolate Galore
Colleen Narens



Andy
Kara Hopper

Andy
Buys lots of
Candy from the
Downtown store.
Every day, he
Finds a reason to
Help himself to more.
I saw him
Jumping one day; the next he was out flying a
Kite.
Later in the week,
Maybe candy being the cause,
No one saw Andy
Out at all.
People began to wonder and ask
Questions.
Rumors began.
Some people said Andy was dead.
Too bad they didn't
Understand. Andy was just
Very busy in his room
Where he was trying
X-tremely hard to get unstuck!
Yep! You see, his
Zipper was stuck!

Round and Round
Bianca Kisselburg

Round and round we go each day.
Kevlar makes us turn and stay.

Dunlop made us first pneumatic,
Drove the racers quite ecstatic.

Once upon a time were bands
Made from iron bent by hands.

Now we're rubber and gum wall.
That protects us if we fall.

Round and round we go each day.
Name us now so we can play.

It's Tee-Ball!

Michael Birthright

Children laugh and play.
They even run the wrong way.

Dirt rises from their hands.
Parents watch from the stands.

Some stay calm
and watch a kid hit a bomb.

Others throw a fit,
but there's something they forget.

Their children hear every word
they say—things a major-leaguer hasn't heard—

and back at third,
that little one repeats every word.

Some would take it back
while others want some slack.

The problem is . . . I don't recall
cursing in tee-ball.

Crumbs

Gretchen Cobb

Balanced high on her mount, she scrapes away,
Body spinning, jumping, flying around.
Crumbs of her life tumble into decay.

Fresh scrapes blanket her hands, the sting will stay
In her mind, capturing feet above ground.
Balanced high on her mount, she scrapes away.

Falling into whiteness, her tears betray
Her eyes while her body and soul are crowned.
Crumbs of her life tumble into decay.

A new hunger arises day by day,
Darkness balanced, her fragile life unbound.
Balanced high on her mount, she scrapes away.

Dreams of heroes emerge from careless play,
Her scrape with the nevermind—lost and found.
Crumbs of her life tumble into decay.

Light on the mountain top, warmth to surround.
Pieces of her old life, empty and drowned.
Balanced high on her mount, she scrapes away.
Crumbs of her life tumble into decay.

Sor Juana: Finally Defeated or at Last Redeemed?

Teresa Wilder

Juana Inés Ramírez y Asbaje began reading at age three. She devoured her grandfather's library first. Then she asked her mother if she might dress as a boy so she could go to the university in Mexico City where there were many more books. Juana Inés played with words in the way other children played with toys; at age eight, she won a contest sponsored by the local church for composing the best poem—appropriately enough, the prize was a book (Cruz, *Woman* 28). At nineteen, Juana Inés bested forty of Mexico's most renowned intellectuals whom the Viceroy had summoned to a contest of knowledge.

According to Diego Calleja (*Sor Juana's* first biographer), the Marquis de Mancera described her victory thus: “[I]n the manner that a royal galleon might fend off the attacks of a few canoes, so did Juana extricate herself from the questions, arguments, and objections these many men, each in his specialty, directed to her” (qtd. in Paz 98). As her literary career blossomed over the following decades, *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* became known as the “Tenth Muse” of the Americas, the Mexican Phoenix (Larvin 272).

Despite her impressive achievements, the last two years of *Sor Juana's* life were marked by accusations, controversy, and a deliberate renunciation of literary life. This paper will briefly examine two opposing interpretations of that act of renunciation which inform current debate among her literary and religious devotees.

Contemporary and modern sources agree upon a handful of facts regarding this seventeenth-century author and twenty-first-century Mexican icon. *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* died in April 1695, having lived for approximately forty-four years. She was born out of wedlock to a *criollo* mother and a Spanish father, and she was raised on her grandfather's prosperous *hacienda* (Arenal and Powell 2).

Juana Inés was a child prodigy whose talents in literature, music, and science—combined with her physical beauty and sophisticated social skills—eventually made her a favorite of the vice-regal court in Mexico City. From age fourteen, she lived as a lady-in-waiting and favorite of *Vicereine Doña Leonor Carretto*. In her privileged position as the trusted confidant and companion of the *vicereine*, she danced and flirted with Mexico City's elite—and she obsessively continued her studies.

Juana Inés became a cloistered Hieronymite nun on the day before her twentieth birthday, and she remained a nun for the rest of her life; yet during those cloistered years, she continued her academic studies and produced a steady stream

of both sacred and secular poems, plays, music, and essays. She maintained communication with the social and intellectual elite of Mexico and of Europe. She amassed a private library which is variously estimated at between 1,500 and 4,000 volumes—likely the largest in the Americas at the time. Her published works brought her national and international fame. They also brought criticism.

The locutory of *Sor Juana*'s convent became a salon (a popular meeting place where the social elite and literati enjoyed witty conversation, poetry, and music). Daily guests included the viceroys and their wives. Bishops and other church authorities sometimes attended. During her first twenty-seven years in the convent, *Sor Juana* received the patronage and protection of each viceroy in turn, and she became close friends with two of the *vicereines*—the Marquesa de Mancera and the Condesa de Paredes—dedicating many of her poems to them (Arenal and Powell 9).

Two years before her death, *Sor Juana* suddenly gave away her books, her musical instruments, her brass telescope, and her collection of curiosities (including an Aztec *quetzal*-feather headpiece) (Arenal and Powell 14). She signed statements renouncing her writing and studies and repenting of worldliness, and she devoted herself to the religious life of the convent (14). She performed severe acts of penance. When an epidemic struck Mexico City and spread to the sisters of the convent, she nursed the sick. She, too, soon caught the disease and died.

The traditional religious view (the official view of the Roman Catholic Church) records *Sor Juana*'s renunciation as a long-overdue step in her process of growth toward spiritual perfection. The renunciation was an act of true repentance. She had not previously been single-minded in her devotions—distracted by her social contacts and her intense studies of secular arts and sciences—and by giving up intellectualism and committing acts of penance and humiliation, she attained a higher level of devotion to God. Her self-sacrifice in humbly caring for the sick and the dying was evidence of her sincerity. Her own death while serving others was an appropriate sacrifice.

Diego Calleja, the Jesuit priest who wrote the first biography of *Sor Juana*, (published in 1700 in Madrid) agreed with this view of *Sor Juana*'s renunciation. He approvingly notes that the only personal possessions which she kept after the renunciation were a few small books of devotions and some hair shirts (Altman, Cline, and Pescador 233). Calleja had corresponded with *Sor Juana* for years. He liked her and admired her poetry. He did not include in the biography some of the more negative details from her life (such as the rift between *Sor Juana* and her confessor, Antonio Núñez de Miranda). His stated perception of her renunciation

and repentance states that “in the year 1693 the divine grace of God found in the heart of Sister Juana its dwelling place and abode” (qtd. in Paz 459).

Present-day Catholic commentaries share Calleja’s view. According to the New Advent *Catholic Encyclopedia*, *Sor Juana* was “one of the most distinguished of the authoresses” to write in the Spanish language, but the quality of her writing was uneven—implying that her writing became increasingly spiritual and thus of higher quality as she matured (Ford). This source states that *Sor Juana*’s romantic love poems and popular verses “championing the cause of woman against her detractor, man” belonged to her early writing career (Ford). However, *Sor Juana* continued to write in these genres—along with religious forms—during her entire literary career (both before and after becoming a nun).

Many Catholic critics—contemporary and modern—disapproved of not only the content but also the style of some of *Sor Juana*’s lyrics. This criticism was important because, under Spanish rule, all writing was subject to Church censorship. *Sor Juana* had a deep grounding in classical mythology, and she often drew her imagery from it rather than from Christian mythology. In addition, European trends influenced her more than most of her New World contemporaries because she was in direct communication with many other writers, artists, and scientists from Mexico and Spain.

An alternative view, hereafter referred to as the modern view, is that *Sor Juana* was a brilliant writer and scholar, the New World’s first feminist, a woman-before-her-time, whom the Church attacked and finally silenced (Green 77). Her renunciation marked the turning point in her life. Having been forced into submission by Church officials, *Sor Juana* lived her final two years in crushed defeat. She died a broken woman.

Proponents of this interpretation emphasize the importance of the protection which *Sor Juana* received from the viceroys and their wives—beginning when she entered the court at age fourteen and continuing until the late 1680s, when a combination of factors left her vulnerable to pressure from hostile Church authorities.

Perhaps most significant was the departure of the Marquès and Marquesa de la Laguna when their assignment to Mexico ended in 1688. *Sor Juana* was left without their powerful protection. For the past decades, *Sor Juana* had been under the patronage of each viceregal couple in turn. She had been an intimate friend of two of the *vicereinas*, and the cautious balance of power which existed in Mexico between court and Church gave them the ability to shield her from jealous clerics and courtiers. The new viceroy was not hostile to *Sor Juana*, but—being uninterested in literature and the sciences—neither was he an attendee of her salons.

A second factor in *Sor Juana's* sudden vulnerability was the appointment of a new Archbishop, an event which coincided with the Marquès's departure. The new Marquès, Francisco de Aguiar y Seijas, was a man strongly unsympathetic to both secular theater and female authors. Lacking a protector, *Sor Juana* soon came under Archbishop Seijas's critical eyes. He was not pleased to learn that the popular secular play, *Amor Es Más Laberinto*, which was performed in 1689 to welcome the new viceroy, had been authored by one of the nuns now under his authority.

Archbishop Seijas was forced to notice *Sor Juana's* writing again the following year when Manuel Fernandez de la Santa Cruz, the Bishop of Puebla, published—without *Sor Juana's* permission—an essay which she had written critiquing a sermon given several years earlier by a Jesuit priest. Bishop de la Cruz was a long-time acquaintance of *Sor Juana*; however, he had been a rival for the position of Archbishop, and some historians believe that *Sor Juana* was somehow caught in the dispute between the two clergymen. The Bishop not only published her essay (under the seemingly flattering title, “Letter Worthy of Athena”) but also wrote and published an accompanying condemnation of it under the pseudonym *Sor Filotea*.

Sor Juana defended herself in a thoughtful and carefully crafted reply known as “*La Respuesta*,” which is perhaps her best-known piece among modern scholars. *Sor Juana* had been criticized in the past, particularly by her own confessor, Father Antonio Núñez de Miranda, but the publication of her essay had brought the tension between her and her superiors into public view. *Sor Juana*, now without her accustomed protection from the viceregal court, was vulnerable to attack. When Seijas threatened an inquisitorial investigation of her beliefs and ordered her to sell her books and stop publishing, *Sor Juana*—painfully aware of her untenable position—finally submitted to her authorities' strictures (although arguably not the spirit of the strictures) (Larvin 271).

Mexico's Octavio Paz, Nobel Prize recipient and renowned literary figure, has written a definitive modern biography of *Sor Juana* which represents this view. He points out that, contrary to Calleja's account, more recent research indicates that *Sor Juana's* cell contained jewels, money, promissory notes, documents, and approximately one hundred books—including books of poetry—when it was inventoried following her death. From the list of items found in her rooms, Paz concludes that “some part of her remained unvanquished” even after her capitulation to Church authorities (467-68).

Paz sees *Sor Juana's* touted conversion as akin to forced confessions such as those made by twentieth-century Bolsheviks brought before Marxist judges. He agrees that she was eager for reconciliation with Church authorities and that she

sincerely believed Catholic dogma; however, he posits that her 1694 penance was due to fear and the need to survive in a society controlled by absolute bureaucracy rather than because of any sense of personal wrongdoing. Paz compares the language of her signed confessions with that of her other writing, and he concludes that the confessions were merely devout formulas of the time. Although they were signed in her own blood, these confessions were not composed of her own thoughts and words, for “orthodoxies are not satisfied with punishing dissent: they demand confessions, repentance, and retraction from the guilty. In those ceremonies of expiation, the faith of the accused is the surest ally of the prosecutors and inquisitors” (Paz 469). Standard literary references do not directly address the sincerity of *Sor Juana’s* confession, but they do describe “*La Respuesta*” as a key document in women’s emancipation.

Probably the best-known—and most often reprinted—of *Sor Juana’s* poems is “On Men’s Hypocrisy.” Written in the opaque, punning, and flowery style of the late Baroque period, its theme is the double standard applied to sexual behaviors of men and women. While the poem’s tone is playful, the message is serious and pointed. Some excerpts from this poem follow:

Whether you’re favored or disdained,
nothing can leave you satisfied.
You whimper if you’re turned away,
you sneer if you’ve been gratified.
.....
So where does the greater guilt lie
for a passion that should not be:
with the man who pleads out of baseness
or the woman debased by his plea?
Or which is more to be blamed—
though both will have cause for chagrin:
the woman who sins for money
or the man who pays money to sin? (Cruz, *Poems* 24-28, 49-56)

Modern critics relish the cheeky puncturing of male ego and assertive female voice of this poem. “On Men’s Hypocrisy” appears not only in standard anthologies of Mexican literature, but on the Web site *Isle of Lesbos* (an Internet presence for lesbian-rights advocates) and in recent collegiate studies of early modern feminist writing (such as Stephanie Merrim’s recent book)—facts that illustrate how various contemporary groups have found resonance in *Sor Juana’s* thoughts and claimed her as an icon for their causes. One textbook currently in use

in American universities introduces this poem's author as "an early exponent of women's rights, [who] lamented the disdain with which female efforts were greeted and the subordinate position of women generally" and wrote "On Men's Hypocrisy" to express her "disenchantment" (Meyers, Sherman, and Deeds 199).

There is not, and never can be, any definitive answer to the intriguing question of why *Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz* gave up her beloved books and spent the last months of her life in bloody acts of penance; yet scholars and historians— influenced by their own times, cultures, and interpretations of historical fact— continue to draw and expound upon such conclusions.

Whether *Sor Juana's* final actions were the result of coercion or her own freely-made choice, her soul remained her own. Specific lines in the poem "Disillusionment" provide an apt commentary for the puzzling final two years of her life:

In loss itself
I find assuagement:
having lost the treasure,
I've nothing to fear.
Having nothing to lose
brings peace of mind:
one traveling without funds
need not fear thieves.
.....
No more worries for me
over boons so uncertain:
I will own my very soul
as if it were not mine. (Cruz, *Poems* 16-24, 28-32)

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About the Contributors

Georgina Akins is an undergraduate student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

Laurie Bayless holds an associate's degree in child development. She has been a teacher's aide with the Liberty-Eylau Independent School District for nine years, and she is a BAAS major at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She plans to enter the Alternative Teaching Certification Program after graduating in spring of 2012.

Michael Birthright is a junior at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. He is happily married to the love of his life, Melanie, and they have a gorgeous daughter, Lilyan, who frequently makes leaving for class or work difficult. He enjoys almost all sports, being on the beach, and, most of all, spending time with his family.

Rebecca Burroughs is a playwright and poet currently living in San Antonio, Texas. Her scripts have been given numerous public readings, and she has won awards in several juried writing contests.

Gretchen Cobb recently earned her master's degree in English from Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She currently teaches English composition at the university as an adjunct instructor.

Tim Cotten was born in Texarkana, Arkansas, at the old Michael Meager hospital on September 10, 1947, and he has lived most of his life in Texarkana since then. He graduated from Texarkana College with a two-year degree and then earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in counseling psychology. He is self-employed in his family business, and he enjoys writing both prose and poetry. He plans to continue writing forever, trying to improve in every way in the field.

Doris Davis is an English professor at Texas A&M University-Texarkana and the director of the East Texas Writing Project. She enjoys playing the piano and spending time with her grandchildren.

Jacqueline Goldson is a public-relations travel specialist and a graduate of the University of the West Indies (Kingston, Jamaica) and Scuola Internazionale di Scienze Turistiche (Rome, Italy). She has designed and implemented numerous strategic public-relations campaigns for the Jamaica Tourist Board. She migrated from Jamaica to the United States and currently works as a substitute teacher while

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Terri Grice was born in Canton, Texas, in 1969. She is married, and she has three grown children. She currently seeks to earn her bachelor's degree in applied arts and sciences from Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

Zachery Hancock is twenty-two years old and a resident of Arkadelphia, Arkansas. When he's not reading and writing, he's working at the local Wal-Mart. He thinks he knows a few good stories, and he hopes, more than anything, to continue telling them in the future.

Ronni Henrico has been a high-school English teacher for thirteen years. She has five children, and she grew up in southern Louisiana, to which she feels close roots.

Kara Hopper is an undergraduate student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

Lacey Huffman is an undergraduate student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

Daniel Jones is a native of Texarkana, Texas, and an English graduate student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. He attended the University of North Texas, where he received his bachelor's degree in English literature with a minor in Japanese language. Daniel also attended Kansai Gaidai University in Osaka, Japan, through UNT's study-abroad program, where he completed the one-year program for Asian studies. Daniel's interests include literature, writing, traveling, and Japanese culture. He plans to teach English in Japan after completing graduate school.

Linda Kaufman has been a co-director of the Beth-El Players in San Antonio, Texas, since the group's debut in 1994. She has written scores for ten musicals, and she has been awarded two San Antonio Globe Awards for Best Musical Score. She writes a monthly column for the *San Antonio Jewish Journal* ("Mishugas"), and she has released a CD featuring selections from her columns and her compositions.

Bianca Kisselburg is an undergraduate student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana.

Gergely E. Kovacs is not a native English speaker, but he has become comfortable using the language while earning his master's degree at Texas A&M University-Texarkana during the past seven years. Writing in English is now one of his favorite pastimes. He keeps a journal and tries to write in it as often as possible.

Daina Land has been a stay-at-home mother of five children for the past twenty years. She is currently enrolled at Texarkana College, where she is studying to become a teacher. She loves to write, and she does it as often as her schedule permits.

Susan Maurer, a resident of New York City, has published nine poetry collections, and she has received four Pushcart Prize nominations. Her latest book (*Perfect Dark*) is available online from Sweden's Ungovernable Press at the press's Web site (www.ungovernablepress.weebly.com).

John McCarthy presently resides in Springfield, Illinois. Slaving as an undergraduate, he also competes as a runner in collegiate cross-country events and interns with the magazine *Quiddity International Literary Journal and Public-Radio Program*. This is his first publication of a play. *Paradise Floats*, his latest chapbook, will be published soon.

Colleen Narens teaches English at a local high school while she labors to complete her master's degree in English from Texas A&M University- Texarkana. She enjoys running, traveling, and spending time with her family. She is a firm believer in recycling to save the world and dancing to save your soul.

Corinne Patterson aspires to become a published writer of novels for young adults. Currently, she studies English and history at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She resides in the small town of Redwater, Texas, with her husband and her five children. Corinne's hobbies include attempting to learn to play any musical instrument she can get her hands on, dabbling with a room full of arts and crafts, and reading until she cannot see the print any longer.

Brittney Ray is a resident of Texarkana, Texas, and a graduate student at Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She has recently turned to writing professionally, seeking to expand people's awareness of her region and her culture.

Tamara Richert believes her strongest creative influences are the trials and tribulations of life. She loves literature and writing, which continues to be a mode of self-expression that grants her release from her daily chaos.

Kaytlon Smith is a graduate of Texas A&M University-Texarkana. For her, writing and other creative projects are means for both self-expression and self-discovery. She enjoys reading, painting, and organic cooking. In addition to spending time with family members and close friends, Kaytlon loves spending time in nature, especially while indulging in activities such as hiking, camping, and canoeing.

Agnes Tirrito is employed by Texarkana Independent School District as a master teacher at Westlawn Elementary's Professional Development School, where she mentors teachers in training and teaches fourth grade. She is an adjunct faculty member at Texas A&M University-Texarkana, and she is a co-director for the East Texas Writing Project (a National Writing Project site). Her interests include cooking, photography, fishing, and the arts.

Teresa Wilder holds graduate degrees in English and history from Texas A&M University-Texarkana. She currently lives and teaches in Fayetteville, Arkansas.

Lauren Wilson is a fourteen-year-old who attends North Heights Junior High; she is in the eighth grade. She's obsessed with reading, and she reviews the books she reads on her Web site (www.theherethenowandthebooks.com). She's also obsessed with music, photography, and astrophysics; and she enjoys mixing those interests whenever she can. Living with her parents, two pups, and a crazy cat, she hopes to explore the world and figure out the answers to all of her random questions.