

WEST TEXAS

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Review

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Poetry



Hemorrhaging

C. WADE BENTLEY

We made it to Detroit in a green station wagon leaking fluid from every possible orifice or coupling or flange and pulling a U-Haul trailer with a jerry-rigged hitch so tenuous the jerry-rigger wouldn't put a warranty on it beyond his parking lot. And we made it through the morning after that Thanksgiving night when our son didn't wake up, when scan after scan showed dark in his brain where there should have been light, made it through the coma days and nights when the residents and their white-coated pack of interns chattered and clucked, compared clipboards then moved down the line, leaving us to watch the fluids drip from his burr holes, stomach tubes, and IV poles. But let's face it—something is always leaking out or away.

Maybe the hydraulics aren't what they once were. Could be you have to pump the brakes or coddle the transmission on cold mornings, even siphon gas sometimes from the Subaru to the F-150. What is it that lets you know when it's time to pull the plug? When you're spending every other weekend with the mechanic? When you waste the whole Sunday drive along Ponte Vedra Beach checking the gauges? Or maybe it's simply when the harmonics of the engine at idle, the plain white-noise hum of the everyday resonates at a frequency you no longer recognize. It's like the same code-red call you've heard overhead a dozen times, listened for the crash cart to come barreling down the hallway, only you're pretty sure, this time, it's coming for you.

Insomnia

C. WADE BENTLEY

I can just make out the raccoons barreling along the top
of the fence in a ghostly freight train, each dark boxcar
bristling faintly in the moonlight. My night thoughts pick up
speed alongside until each hops aboard, opening its sad
bundle of accoutrements, sipping from long-necked bottles,
leaning back to listen to the clack of tracks, the muttering
racket of coons rock-paper-scissoring for what's next.

“Would Any of Your Friends Enjoy Adultery?”

ACE BOGGESS

— Goodreads post-review popup box

Something to be said for unfamiliar hands,
lips angled along a different path,
scents not like the Irish Spring,
lavender oil, or vanilla you recognize
coming from another room.
Would you seek the knowledge of it
like falling through a thousand sub-links
starting from one on a Wikipedia page
about Lord Byron, say, or Gary Kasparov?
I imagine the hope feels better than the orgasm.
I imagine new sounds of laughter.
Yesterday, I posted this question on Facebook
after it flashed unexpectedly like flirtation,
but my friends, I suspect, were afraid to click *Like*
lest someone think they wanted more.
Maybe in their quiet neighborhoods,
their houses had no doors; just
porch steps & welcome mats,
Van Morrison crooning from a stereo upstairs,
his voice reaching sidewalks, streets, &
passersby who stare down at their feet.

fifty-three

LOUKIA BORRELL

strange number candles on the rainbow cake
the five more frightening than the three
and I smiled, softly, never believing I
would get here, live this long, I made it
maybe forty more, who knew, I said and
the kids laughed as I held my breath and blew,
thinking of a different birthday,
remembering myself at twenty
in the halter dress on the front porch,
cigarette dangling from my delicate
fingertips, Heineken bottle meeting
my cupid's lips, and the boys and girls
who kept going through the porch door
that kept swinging open and closed

Bastogne

ZACHARY CAHILL

When we were 10 years old and
It snowed so much that
Everything was suffocated
Smothered with white
We would take our bb guns and
Play war
Making shelter underneath
The pine trees, cut off from everybody
Just us and dirty sandwiches
Talking about girls in class
Wondering what beer tastes like
It must be great
Wondering how to play guitar
It can't be too difficult
Wondering why we were poor and
Why both our fathers drank so much
And why yours hit you at
The dinner table earlier for drinking
Too much milk
And why mine couldn't seem to
Drive straight
And if everybody else's dads hit them too
Or drove with a beer between their legs
But then it was time to be quiet
And huddle close
In our foxhole, the Germans
Were advancing and
It was cold

Anti-Chlorinated Feminism

ROSEMARIE DOMBROWSKI

The gospel of the journey is realizing
that eating is a political act,
that the Woodstock of the mind
is everywhere on a tiny planet like ours,

that the inventory of the body
is equivalent to
the trauma that comes from
crop-dust in our eyes,
carcinogens in the crotches of our panties,
black women doing the math
that put white men on the moon.

And there are always
more questions for consideration—
like admitting that it's hard to tell who's shooting
while we're praying with our eyes closed.

Casper's Law

JOSEPH DORAZIO

Casper's Law of decomposition states that a body left in the open air decomposes twice as fast as if it were immersed in water and eight times faster than if it were buried underground.

Consider how the writhing beetle, sacred scarab,
dispatched by ants—consumed
becomes the colony; or the Buddhist monk
defleshed and to the vultures tossed
rests scattered in the firmament; but
the mummified—formaldehyde infused
and casketed—aren't food for anybody;
delaying Casper's Law they lie in state
in palls resurrected by floods
washed up on someone's lawn.

My Nobler Self

ALEJANDRO ESCUDÉ

A blurred, late afternoon sun, drizzle and fog,
a comfortable feeling inside the heated car
on the rush hour freeway, a side glance
to the grizzled handyman, the woman checking
her phone—but I come back to that sun,
my lowercase i, my urban infinitude,
my garage calculator, my electronic dog snout,
there is the mood of this bric-a-brac year,
the fantasy of identity, the romance of romance,

the terra firma of family, blurred as that sun,
lukewarm as that sun, industrial as that sun,
rainy sidewalks and rust on the crossbeams,
that neutral sun that follows or that seems
to follow between apartments and squat skyscrapers
with glass facades, but no advertising on this
slow day, just the elemental, both hands
on the wheel, unshaken, a blanket I can't quite feel
then feel lining the inside of my body.

Thanksgiving

SHAWN GIRVAN

My father, from
his wheelchair,
reminisces about
his grandfather,
who had a glass eye
and sold lumber
during the depression
When men were men
my father says,
almost under his breath

My father, with just
a hint of passion,
gives an address
on *The Grapes of Wrath*
and *Bound for Glory*
Even though he knows
I've read the books
When times were tough
my father says,
almost under his breath

My father smiles
faintly, when the subject
turns to baseball
The Mets and the Yankees,
and the Cubbies
No Thanksgiving prayer is offered
Not like before,
when my father could walk
I'm glad they finally won
my father says
His family says, *Amen*

Larix

M.A.H. HINTON

my dear
feeble-tongued academic

your beloved Latin
seldom does the job

but in this one case
at least
the Latin name is the best

Cicero will not come down
that smoldering mountain again

the plains will remain empty

the great buffalo herds
will not return

but if you hike high enough
and know the places
where they grow
just below the tree-line
soft-bristled larches stand
mendicant-like
petitioning the climbing sky

Into the Snow-Sea

M.A.H. HINTON

ripples
on frozen snow
remind us of waves
on a restless lake

on the coldest of days
we long to dive
into the snow-sea
that surrounds
our little town

to kick down deep
through the layers
of winter days
to where we know
the first days
of summer
are already waiting

Dust

M.A.H. HINTON

I will tell you now the things I know

the high summer sun setting
a magpie flying
cottonwoods shimmering

a daughter's hesitant smile
my wife's radiant one

cold beer on a hot afternoon
warm bourbon in a quiet bar

a good book
a good game
a poem

George Jones singing
Coltrane playing

dust
dust will claim everything

every glance
every gesture
every word
spoken and unspoken

everything

and in the end
dust becomes stardust
and blows away

Nature Morte: The Rail-Trail

NOAH KUCIJ

First the railroad withered at the tendrils,
lines bled poor by sprawl and blight
returned to forest floor.

Sometime later men came swinging cutlasses,
unloading miles of stone
so we could cross the town by foot.
We conspired to crush the path to dust
with sneaker soles and strollers,
hold the trees apart with sky.

Last time there I waded past
my knees in vetch and ragweed, skirted
gaping ruts up to the bridge, its rotted
floorboards flushed into the creek. Around
the old train's new last stop, a splay
of sun-clean bones, some mammal's, and
a woman's underwear, robin's egg
blue—both shed without
a sound while we were elsewhere.

Praying for Thieves

CHARLENE LANGFUR

No excuses. The garden's crops burgeon
more than ever before. Chard growing in the yard
in the thick of the night. Pea pods growing up bamboo poles.
I dug up the potatoes yesterday before sundown.
The point is there is enough time to start over here.
After rueing and counting up loss, how many apples
and apricots the wild pigs stole off the ground, losses
losses along with the plan I made for a larger garden, acres
all lost when you left me for someone else and took
everything you could with you. The records and
the record player, the Navajo and the Apache rugs,
the ones I kept on my lap on cold nights after long days.
You said it would make me lucky, your gifts carrying me like
magic. Acquisitions of the heart is what I call them now.
Today I'll pick a few green apples later in the day
when they are still hot from the sun. And bake them
with cinnamon in a glass dish. Sautee potatoes with garlic,
and a little onion. With all these I begin again. A feast
by moonlight. That's right. Some kind of delight
all over again. Deep light all over it. A little meal,
the best is yet to be, I say. It's the only way.

Looking through Plath's Mirror

KEVIN MCDANIEL

*I am not cruel, only truthful—
The eye of a little god, four-cornered.*
— Sylvia Plath, "Mirror"

I don't see
a forgiving god,
but a reflection
of the man
I was back then
with hairs not retreating
to the bathroom sink,
a flushing face
without dark circles
or the birth
of crow's feet.
I look slender
from a side profile
in blue jeans sucking in
a trimmer gut.

I see
this former self
drowning
and swallowing hard
in view
of the mirror's
soothsaying attempts.
Wide eyes gaze back
like a thrashing river bass
whose lip is speared
by a barbed hook.
It's the catch
fishermen
cast for and lie
about the most
or terribly forget.

Last night, two years after your death, Mom,

JESSE MILLNER

I dreamed you lived in a tiny apartment in Chicago
beneath some factory that churned out silverware,
and the whole time I visited, we could hear
the clanging of knives and forks being born upstairs.
You had me check out a leak in your bedroom
and indeed there was a little trickle
dripping down, probably ruining the drywall—
so, I said you'd better get a handyman right over
before the mold set in. In this dream, mom, you'd
never fallen to dementia. You still walked with
a steady gait and when you spoke, every single
word made sense. When I awoke
the factory had vanished, so I made coffee
and whispered to myself the way we do
when dreams end too soon and the morning
burns outside the kitchen window, sets
this latest world on fire.

Waldport Once

RODNEY NELSON

I might have arrived from lunar space
or out of a cave so the village
had everything I was wanting
 salt air
and the taste of crab that went
with it

a gray afternoon that seemed
not to go by and a thunder beach

I had been without everything
so what the village gave I wanted
and took the extended morning in
 knowing
the tomorrow's tide would bring
no sleep
 that I would be a watchman
at the spume end of the breakwater

August 4, 2014

DOUGLAS NORDFORS

Because world war, the idea, the execution,
officially spawned 100 years ago
today, today

I will think like a trout, and head
upriver, even
under countless layers, perfectly smooth, of ice

I will keep going, thrashing through underwater
rapids, resting at times, not content,
intent

on reaching the place where I will
lay one egg,
and not two, and certainly not three.

Gulf

ROBERT OKAJI

for M.V.

Which looms wider, its sky or water? The birds, here, too, reconvene in greater streaks. This morning I stomped around Paisano, examining the grasses and soil, the rocks and various configurations of clouds, and listened to experts discuss prescribed burns and how the land's contours can determine sequence and efficacy. The mockingbird whose territory we occupy has disappeared. Perhaps he's just moved on. I heard a red-bellied woodpecker yesterday, but never saw it, and of course the rattlers at the ranch are still underfoot, just less apparent this time of year. I looked closely, as always, but never spied one. What else did I miss? The rich people on the bluffs bulldoze habitat, poison creeks and erect their Italianate villas, caring not a whit for the breeding warblers or the landscape, although they might pony up a few bucks for an environmental charity if sucked-up to properly. Given a choice between the two, I'd pick the snakes every time; they don't smile or offer spiked drinks and stories of their conquests, and usually warn before striking. Even a minor deity might take offense and crack open a new fault in the earth between this place and theirs, widening it by inches with each presumption, every falsehood, whether shaded in unrelated facts or illogic, until that shifting space could be spanned solely by a bridge planked with truth and good manners, and, yes, by mutual consent. Looking back, I find many examples of these bridges collapsing *in utero*, but we keep trying. Your story of the gulf coast storm reminded me of weeks spent on calm water, and seeing, no matter where I turned, blue meeting blue, from horizon to horizon, the sky never broken by bird or cloud, born anew each day, always looking between, never down.

Mr. Richardson's Nails

GEORGE PERREAULT

On the acreage he'd bought, a long-
desired hayfield adjacent to his own,
a battered barn he'd torn down, piled here
and there, board and beam, the bones
of another structure oft risen in his head.

Between hayings, squash rows weeded,
were times we'd sit, the summer boys,
lean with hammers and pry bars to work
from the weathered wood, nail after nail,
most of them rusted, some badly bent,

and these we'd straighten, hands and backs
aching, imitating his farmer's patience.
tap tapping them back toward utility
years before recycling was a word, just
making do in the old Yankee way.

The rescued nails would clank into buckets,
one by one, building a minor wealth, though
some were beyond salvage, and yet these,
these too were gathered, rattling another tin
like souls condemned to eternal flame.

But not wasted, the old farmer said,
those go into the manure pit, adding their iron
to the soil. Fire, he said, fire needn't leap
into the sky, the smallest candle illuminates
the sacred verse, lights the entire world.

Unemployed at 50

DREW PISARRA

Force-fuel caffeine sip by pseudo-sip,
then sit under air-conditioned plants
that flap firm thermoplastic leaves
beneath full-spectrum light. Source unknown.
Never was that green. Not once. Not ever.

Sweaty palms translate the resume
from quaint dot matrixed irony
into something suspiciously Cyrillic.
Ink bleeds a thumbprint that won't commit
while this world can't help but swirl.

20-somethings whiz by, indifferent.
20-something thoughts inside my head.
Even the wall clock reads 20 after...
But after what? The hour hides.
A second hand sweeps by.

Why be here, here being
perched on a loveseat sofa
made of poromeric leather,
said sofa facing two glass doors
that open onto nothing really.

In time, doors will open. A redhead
straight from the box with nails
laminated jade will beckon
a silent gesture that informs:
It's time to begin. It's time to go in.

Hazardous Occupations

DREW PISARRA

No one benefits when people
rob newly found dinosaur bones
or resort to grave robbing
or the defacing of temples.

And yet I look at the 54 mailboxes,
in the lobby of my building
and think of the well-behaved lives
that go along with them.

54 opportunities to rob a bank
or orchestrate a Ponzi scheme
wasted. 54 chances to forge
a check for a million-dollar
potential, long gone.

Perhaps quieter crimes
are being committed. Maybe
4G is demeaning her daughter.
Maybe 3J won't pet his cat. Meow.

Two mailboxes in the lobby stand
broken. Their doors flap open
like two tired robot dogs
with metal tongues. Ruff, ruff.

Someone should loot one.
More likely the Super will
seal them shut like tombs
and let the mail pile up
on the window sill for eternity.

Spartacus

KENNETH POBO

I scroll through pictures of beauty,
roll from December back through March,
one gorgeous flower after another
sliding by quickly,
no stopping, like drinking hot
chocolate too fast—even still,

I stop scrolling when I find a picture
of a Spartacus dahlia.
The red makes me want to live in it,
turn my whole life red,
this dark shade.
Peace would come, I know it,
though Spartacus was a gladiator,

hardly peaceful. The fierce red
battles with the sun
who sometimes loses,
sinking behind the shed,
a yellow badminton birdie.

The sun never stays vanquished.
As July ages into August, the blossom
starts to weaken. The stem
props up the red remnant,
the bloom fighting until the end.

The Missing Women

TATIANA FORERO PUERTA

I used to have a career,
now I'm sequestered by a moat
of breast milk and dunes of diapers.
My hair is so knotted it's home to that raccoon
that lived in the trash last week.

I used to stay up late to write.
Now I watch the dawn's light
caress a little crying face
that looks just like mine.

In the delicate moments before the
clarity of day illuminates the roles we've chosen,
my son and I weep together

for all the missing women,
the ones who thought
they could keep themselves but
ended up with their shadows

on milk cartons, each day after
childbirth multiplying their sorrows,
counting their children's' breaths,
trading them in for their own.

Green Tea

BRADLEY SAMORE

As I write in my notebook with its yellowed pages
yellowed not from age but from the green tea I spilled
I remember pulling it from the flood
dripping and limp
then setting it on the porch to dry

I remember finding it the next morning
wrinkled and wavy
the pages rustling like dry leaves

I remember sitting on the couch
not knowing what to write
just sitting there with a blank page
the faint smell of tea still on it

You Want it Darker?

GERARD SARNAT

“Ring the bells that still can ring
Forget your perfect offering
There is a crack in everything
That's how the light gets in.”
– Leonard Cohen borrowed from Sufi
poet Rumi (1207-1273) for *Anthem*, 1992

Fretting Presidential election results coinciding with release of the album in this homage's title, I relistened to a 2006 LCohen breathless podcast—poignantly on a radio show called *Fresh Air*. The Godfather of Gloom, a.k.a. Laughing Lenny, repeats his hoarseness story about probing a doc after vocal cord endoscopy to explore deep inside, “So do I have it now?” to which the ENT specialist responded, “None yet.” But such an ominous warning drove him off cigarettes although not til 60 pack-years probably'd sowed their destruction further down where dormant crabs crawled from lungs to fester in vertebrae. That is why DRemnick's recent *New Yorker* profile talked around the dapper gent of *Blue Raincoat* fame reclining in a blue medical chair to ease back pain. Though neither spokesmen nor obituaries have specified cause of death, should you ring the bells lightly, a hunch is metastatic cancer's the probable cause for rush-rush jobs to let loose concluding music as the very private man also sought out a knowledgeable sympathetic interviewer—same guy who had just done a brilliant piece on Dylan. I knew in my bones when in the master's presence at Los Angeles' Disney Concert Hall, tonight likely would be our last waltz: 3 1/2 hours of spry fit-as-a-fiddle love from the older of two Jewish brother-troubadour's Tower of Song. A moment's time plus 60-70 pounds down to concentration camp non-fighting shape later,

this gracious sane role-model, our patron saint of sorrow
and redemption, passed away into his visionary's sleep.

Lost City

SCOTT T. STARBUCK

17-year-old Alana from Arkansas who was raped by her fourth stepfather
loved violets and old Westerns.

She lived in a school bus at the end of a dirt road
and had no visitors save the few who could be trusted.

Once we found a note in a bottle in nearby river
that merely said “Help me” leading to made-up stories

far truer than either of us admitted.
After drive-in movies, she sang Irish tunes,

and freckles on her left cheek lit a constellation
of Ursa Major. Later, I dreamed her hands were a moonlit pond

that could drown cockroach ghosts emerging
from my alcoholic father’s voice and my shaving cuts,

that my writing lived by huge propane storage tanks
that could explode anytime.

Neruda at the Wedding

TIM SUERMONDT

My wife reads the love sonnet,
nailing the pronunciation of “propagate”
she feared she might stumble over.

The young bride and groom seem to take
to the poem and applauded with the others.
I nod and pat by wife’s knee the moment

She sits back down beside me—and I wonder
if decades from now someone will read
a poem of mine at a wedding, giving the bride

and groom the same sense of delight.
I should know better, but love’s prospects
are endless—just ask Neruda who could turn

schmaltz into genius and lead us singing
to the seashore—just ask the young bride and groom
who feel indestructible—and ask my wife

who folds the poem and rests her head on my shoulder,
quietly telling me she’s had no regrets, how she’s
even come to adore me in my profoundly rumpled suit.

Port Townsend

TRAVIS TRUAX

The last ferry ends the day with a shout the squalling gulls follow in.
The racket from the dock is the old captain's wife. The homes above town,
Victorian and pale, don't believe the cliffs' prediction: rock and rain
share a plan to someday bed-down below the sea. Of course
you never want to leave. Never want to undo the sound of a single oar
or the pretty picture the sun is dropping down behind the bar. Never want to
untie the net of fish hung along the deck or unclick memory's
best chance at finding home. You never want to strain your eyes
this far north, or forget the way a breeze tastes. Even the age you felt
upon arrival is the placid bay's way of saying stay, forget the morning ferry.

Short Fiction



My Heart Runs on Chlorophyll

SHEILA ARNDT

The night of the winter solstice, bitter cold and snow hard on the ground, she dreamed of yellow roses. Not fields of yellow roses like so many suns stretching out before her like a vast solar system, but of one singular plant over which she could bend close. Eyeing drops of rain pearled on petals from pale butter to mustard, and the way each flower's fragrance bloomed brightest on the hottest of afternoons, on its insistence, reminded her of learning about love for the first time. When she woke she said aloud to no one, "My heart is an organ that runs on chlorophyll."

Wrapped in a robe, she went downstairs to start the day's coffee. Putting a kettle on the stove and turning it on high, she stared out the window. Perhaps a painter would see beauty in the gradations of white to grey to darker grey to black, but all she saw were the shriveled leaves of the lilac and rose hips that shook on their stalks as the wind whipped through the yard. She closed her eyes and thought of the yellow roses, and then of roses colored deep and bloody reds with names like "Cleopatra" or "Juliet" or "Joan of Arc," of roses pale pink called "Sylvia," that only bloomed once in the spring and then fell like so much confetti, and of roses yellow and red called "Ketchup and Mustard" and "Everyday Life" that stayed all summer and smelled like nothing.

The scent of lilacs overwhelmed her every spring, sweet and warm on the air, a perfume so sugary she could taste it on her tongue. Not wanting to give up a moment of pleasure until each bud was spent, she'd leave her windows open while they blossomed even as they grew slightly sour with rot. Night jasmine worked its way over her skin, its scent so heavy she could feel it tracing lines on her body like tiny rivulets of liquor. She'd lie in the dark, naked on top of the sheets, eyes closed, watching the perfume push through the window screens like an invisible smoke. It would touch her toes first, slick like satin or oil, and would slide up her legs, slipping down the sides, over hips and ribs and tits until it licked her neck like so many tongues and saturated her hair until the jasmine and her body created a new scent and it reminded her of the time when, after an afternoon of fucking, a man had said, low and with pleasure, "This room smells like pussy." She poured water from the whistling kettle into the French press and said aloud to no one, "My heart is an organ that goes dormant before the first snowfall."

She fell down onto all fours, hands and knees pressing into the grime of the linoleum enough to cause pain as it made landscapes of red relief in her skin. It was both pleasure and pain. She heaved from some place deep in her stomach. She wretched hard, over and over, vomiting up nothing but bile and saliva. Throwing up

nothing, excising this nothing, hurt like hell, like when she backed into a rose bush and thorns caught in her skin, tearing tiny pathways in her skin, leaving little dotted lines of red.

She finally felt something moving up through her body, firm and heavy and large. The convulsions of her stomach muscles were violent and pushed the mass up her esophagus to her throat and now she was choking, terrible. Swallowing hard, hoping to force it back down, her eyes filled with water and began to run and her stomach balled again, forcing the mass forward. There was no way to swallow it back down. She kept retching and now spots were in her eyes and the edges of the world grew dark and she finally vomited out a bloody ball the size of a fist. Gasping hard, snot running from her nose, she started crying with pain and relief. Picking up the mass and clearing it from the slime and mucous that coated it, it remained black to all appearances. Like any self-respecting gardener, she scratched at the surface with her thumbnail, looking for promise of life. With the roses she'd been looking for the palest of greens, but here, any hint of red would have done. Her nail easily dug through to the center—soft, grey, and long gone.

She closed her eyes and started heaving again. This time what started coming up felt light, felt lifted, like so much velvet coating and kissing what had been ripped from her before, soothing her insides and leaving her warmed like early spring. Her heaving now was like that of a dog when pauses in the middle of the floor and its stomach clenches over and over following a strange beat and, watching them, one can imagine a journey from internal to external. Her mouth opened on the last heave and what came out was a flood of petals. They burst out of her lips in a stream that continued until the kitchen floor was covered in a carpet of the palest yellow and she collapsed. Standing and moving to the table, she pushed down the handle of the press, poured a cup of coffee and added cream 'til it was the color of earth ready for planting.

From Princess Hemingway's Diary Written the Morning of March 12, 1996, The Day of Her Death

ANDRÉS CRUCIANI

Torn out by a young D'Andre Hemingway, what follows is a page from his sister's diary—a premonitive entry written the day of her murder.

But dare we? ... Under a blue moonlight, tracing a ranger's crunching footsteps below dark canopy—'In the cage to your left, homo urbanus rarely found outside his concrete environs'—dare we deviate? to follow the crooked trail into the forest's dense ribcage? hand-in-hand into the wilderness? What if—? ... through shrubbery our legs scratched by endless thorns, arms rashed by sumac, a moon walled by leaves. Darkness. Palms before us, stumbling, crawling, not knowing from where we came. Our shouts return. Here only the black firecrackers of infinite bugs. What brushed our skin? Onwards, groping, chewing our hearts, wondering what have we done. Innumerable night unfurls before us. We forget day. If only we'd marked our retreat. If only we'd stayed. Here, a hopeless desolate misery. Our knees and hands cut, we lost each other long ago, we are... alone... And then a dim blue light jigsaws the thicket ahead. We race forward & in the clearing find each other. The full moon radiates maternally on an iridescent lagoon, Look. The water laps, our nakedness shimmers, perhaps we won't return, perhaps

Mercy

KATE LARSEN

The heart of the black heifer pulsed between my thighs and the heat of her leeched through the denim into my own skin. I stroked the conical face and fingered the skull that they draw pictures of in books, smoothed the coarse hairs from eyes to nose. Her ribs heaving with breath shook me in time with them, and the pickup lurched through potholes and over frozen mounds of feces. The leg would be splinted, powdered colostrum mixed and poured down her throat until she learned to suck the cold rubber nipple. She would grow, and stand, braced by blue plastic and duct tape; she would take ill, and die, within two months.

. . .

The old man had lived for long years after his wife who tried her damndest to outlive him passed. He shriveled away in the depths of Juniper Village, a block down the street from the brick home he longed to return to. He was quiet, and proud. They let him keep his pride as spittle dotted with Copenhagen leaked from his aging lips, as granddaughters explained who they were each time they came. His blue eyes grew bulbous with that watery red tint that only old blue eyes attain, the irises faded with cataracts. Always the unanswerable questions, queries of dead brothers and wife, the wish to go home, the tender admission that he never knew why she stayed with him for more than fifty years. When the throat cancer was discovered, it was decided quietly in the hallway that no action be taken. It took cancer short months to complete a task the nursing home spent three years delaying, drawing out indefinitely with pills and powders and opinions, and he passed quietly, alone, in a room with plain walls and ugly linoleum, shrunk to two-thirds the height of his youth, alone. Alone, with no witness to life's final insult.

. . .

When the bald-faced cow did not come for hay is when he worried. A bull with a sore shoulder sat yards away from her, a hypochondriac as only a one-ton bull ruled by testosterone can be. At his approach she strained upward, panicked, but her hindquarters failed her, and she sank with a low sigh. He pulled her tail the next time she tried, he pushed and encouraged and sweet nothings fell on her dumb ears, and both conceded. She was watered and left for the night, returned to the next day with a steel jaw to clamp to either ileum. Hydraulic power groaned against the weight of her and pulled the hind end upward, where she found she could not get her front feet under herself. Three struggled with her, pulling her ears, pulling the spotted white head skyward, pleading and encouraging, and she quit. She quit and lay the dirty white of her face nose-down in meadow grass. Two hundred faces like hers watched wide-eyed, and it was pondered whether a bovine knows humility, to distract from the

metallic sounds of the slug sliding into the chamber, the snap of the butt meeting the barrel, the insidious clicking of the hammer drawn backward.

The shot is never as loud as is expected, and in a moment blood seeped from her nose. She was lowered, and freed from the hoist, and as her feet were chained to the Dew-Eeze arms the calf in her womb could be seen in its death throes. It was remarked that her last offspring was rather puny, anyhow, and the corpse of the wasted black white-face was piled in the filled-up pit atop fifteen calves that succumbed to disease.

...

It was in the dark with the doors closed that the conclusion was reached, the time arrived at. Having lived always on his own terms, he saw himself as a producer, a doer, not one who is done for; not a burden. Alone, with no witness of struggle, no slow descent into living decay, no pain, no pride lost, a final prayer, the sound of nightmares: the subtle metallic slides and clicks and snaps of the pistol, steel that is ever cold laid against skin. In the morning his wife who was ever in poor health slept late, awoke to silence, and merely peeked through the door she cracked.

Weeks later the information would arrive from people experienced in examining the dead that the heart was approximately two minutes, give or take, from a massive heart attack; she was meant to find him departed that day one way or the other. His way saved himself considerable pain, perhaps...

Perhaps more painful than loss is the remembrance of what was. If one were to forget, or to cease dragging dead things to light, as a net dragging a lake for corpses and lost weapons, but let the things that no longer speak or think rest quietly in God's grace, in His peace, the heart might cease to tremor. After all, the dead things no longer feel pain, but the living do.

...

When he asked why we must leave, I thought it was reason enough that there are too many dead things here, but how does one explain that? Perhaps if I spoke the words he would feel the same, and we would move on to a place where the air is not clouded by remembering. The world here is haunted by ghosts alive and passed.

To the Woman Who Made my Father Mix CDs

CHRISTINE LASEK

He kept them. In a dusty box. In the alcove under the basement stairs, behind the Costco-sized package of toilet paper, the trio of mustard, catsup, and pickle relish that we'll never use. Hidden, until my father's heart attack, my mother's need to get out of this house.

He kept them and I can tell he used them. The slim jewel cases in blue, purple, orange, are warped and fogged. I imagine the cases crammed into the glove compartment of my father's '94 Taurus. Left to bake on the fabric-upholstered passenger seat. The discs themselves safely inside the ten-disc changer my mother got him for Christmas.

Each CD has a folded-paper insert with the track listing. You gave each one the same title: *To Dave* with the date. You signed each creation "With love, C. R." The first was dated March 13, 1998.

I try to imagine you, C.R. From the music on the CDs, you must have been from the generation between my father and me. There are tracks from bands like Roxy Music and The Cure, alongside Counting Crows' "Round Here," Stone Temple Pilots' "Interstate Love Song"—old songs that were still on the radio when my boyfriend drove me home from high school theatre practice. I feel the absence of Pink Floyd, of Bob Dylan, of Led Zeppelin, of the music my father still occasionally listened to on vinyl as recently as last year.

Did we meet? During the only Doeren Mayhew company picnic my family and I attended? Maybe your highlighted hair was in the Rachel cut, or your black satin heels were unfit for the grass around the pavilion, or you tucked your billowy forest green-colored blouse into a belted skirt. The day of the picnic was overcast. I wore a black cotton sundress printed with daisies, which hung on my wispy fourteen year old frame, arms and neck tacky with sunscreen. My father sweating in a golf shirt pulled tight around his middle. My mother's glass of candy-pink white zinfandel fogging in the humidity.

Or maybe it wasn't as brazen as that. I can almost believe the CDs were the beginning and the end of your relationship—you compiling them, my father listening to them, ardent but forever separate. My understanding of my parents' marriage faint but still intact.

I smuggle the dusty box out of the house. Tiptoe up the basement stairs, and, while my mother is busy in the back bedroom, out the side door. I put it in my car.

I don't tell my mother about it, but I wonder if she knows. Maybe not about the CDs, but about what they represent. After my father's death, the first thing my mother got rid of was his music collection. The albums saved since college. Cardboard sleeves carefully preserved, some still wrapped in disintegrating plastic. I had wondered at her decision, but was too shocked by my father's death, too afraid of my mother's grief, to question her actions.

Do you know, C. R., that my father's dead? That he died of a myocardial infarction? That he kept mowing the lawn until he collapsed? That the lawn mower kept going, through wood chip mulch and the pansies my father painstakingly planted every spring, before crashing into the side of the house?

It is dark by the time I leave the house. Sweaty and dirty, with the kind of emptiness that is only felt after wading through a lifetime of accumulated possessions, weighing their importance, throwing away what doesn't make the cut.

But when I get to my own house, I find myself hesitant to take my father's box inside. As if secretly taking the CDs from the house only stretched my loyalty to my mother, while that step over the threshold and into my life would break it.

So I stay in the car. Engine off. Windows cracked open. Testing the battery as I listen to each CD, in chronological order, until long after midnight. There are five in all.

The final one, *To Dave January 10, 2000*, is my favorite. Tracks from Toad the Wet Sprocket, Depeche Mode, Annie Lennox.

Drifting in and out of sleep, the final track snaps me awake, "Everloving" by Moby, and I am back, after the open house my parents threw for me for my high school graduation, class of 2002, after the chicken, the coleslaw, the potatoes, after the chocolate cake decorated with a plastic graduation cap with real tassel, after the water balloon fight, after the guests have gone and my parents have given me one last gift, a check for \$1,000, "For school books," my mother said, and Moby's *Play*.

"It sounded like a transition album to me," my father explained. "Like moving from one state of being into another."

I turn the car off. Go inside. To shower, to bed. The next day, I'll worry about what to do with the CDs. With everything else. But right now, I'm just glad it's over.

The Chef's Surrender

MICHAEL PACHECO

When the Japanese saw their people killed by the thousands at Hiroshima and Nagasaki, they knew they'd lost the war. Kikuchi was lucky. He was Japanese, but he was also a cook on the USS Missouri, the same battleship scheduled to host the signing of the instrument of surrender by the dispirited Foreign Minister Mamoru Shigemitsu. As a chef, Kikuchi had never been called upon to kill another human. All he had to do was prepare meals for those who did.

On this bright and sunny day, the ship's crew had eaten and the mess hall was almost clean. Kikuchi saluted his commanding officer as he passed by him in the hallway.

"Sir!" Kikuchi said, "Request permission to speak, Sir."

The officer stopped and faced the cook. "Permission granted."

"Sir, I know my duties are down here in the galley, but I have a personal interest in seeing the Japanese officials when they come on board."

"You do?"

"Yes, Sir. I mean, I'm an American and I want to see them surrender." Kikuchi gazed down at his shoes. "They've caused my people a lot of pain."

Kikuchi started to worry that he may have overstepped the bounds of respect for a commanding officer.

After a moment of silence, the officer grinned. "Not a problem." He looked at the cook's name tag. "Kikuchi."

"Yes, Sir."

"Where you from, Kikuchi?"

"San Francisco, Sir."

"Good, okay then. Be on deck in thirty minutes."

"Aye, Sir."

When Kikuchi climbed up to the deck level, he saw what must have been about three thousand soldiers and officers from every branch of the military as well as

dignitaries, all standing in formation. Kikuchi knew he'd stand out in the crowd as he was still wearing his kitchen whites, so he remained in the corridor doorway.

He saw a group of Japanese men, six soldiers and four civilians. The man in the black tuxedo and top hat he recognized as Shigemitsu. All of them stood rigid at attention. Apparently, the Americans weren't ready to begin the ceremony as General Douglas MacArthur was not yet present.

"Hey Cheffy! What are you doin' up here?" It was Benson, one of his mates from down in the galley.

"Just curious, like everybody else," Kikuchi said. "What's the holdup?"

Benson grinned. "Not sure. I bet Big Mack is just makin'em wait on purpose."

Just then a commotion on the deck grabbed everyone's attention. The Japanese officer standing next to the Foreign Minister took a few steps toward the American interpreter. The interpreter translated the soldier's words to an officer standing nearby. The officer nodded and pointed to two armed Marines. A small murmur ran through the crowd as the armed escort led the Japanese soldier in the direction of the door hatch where Kikuchi stood.

Kikuchi and Benson stepped aside as the escorts led the uniformed man to the nearest head.

"When you gotta go, you gotta go," Benson said.

They both grinned and turned back to the deck where General MacArthur and others were filing in. After a few minutes passed and the crowd had settled in, Kikuchi saw a strange frown on the general's face as he looked in Kikuchi's direction. Apparently the tables had been turned on the general and it was now he who was waiting.

A third Marine accompanied by the interpreter was sent in the direction of the head occupied by the Japanese soldier. Kikuchi was standing about twelve feet away when he heard the interpreter call to the soldier through the door. The interpreter spoke in the soldier's native tongue.

"Sir, come out now. Everyone is waiting for you. We can wait no longer."

The three Marines stared at each other as they were met with silence.

The Marine who had accompanied the interpreter rattled the door to the head, but could not open it. He looked back at Kikuchi. "Hey!"

"Yes, Sir," answered Kikuchi.

"What kind of lock holds these doors shut?"

Kikuchi had never thought about what guarded his privacy when he was relieving himself. He looked at his friend standing next to him.

"It's a simple door latch held in place by gravity," said Kikuchi's friend. "I can pick the lock, if you want me to."

"Get over here and do it ... Now!" growled the Marine under his breath.

Benson rushed to the door and fished a nail clipper out of his pocket. Within seconds he had used the file part of the clippers to slip the latch off its hinges and unlock the door. He stepped aside as the Marine pushed the door open.

"Jesus Christ!" said the leatherneck, taking a step back.

Kikuchi gasped as he peeked around the Marine and saw the Japanese soldier lying crumpled on the floor. A pearl-handled pocket knife lay next to the dead man as blood continued to spread in a circular pattern over his stomach area. The dead man had taken off his cap, shirt, and military dress jacket and hung them neatly on a wall hook as if preparing to take a shower. His knee-high boots sat in the corner.

"What the hell are we gonna do now?" the Marine asked his fellow soldiers. He looked at the other two Marines. "We needed this dead guy to sign that damn surrender treaty. Those other Jap soldiers already refused to sign."

The second Marine scanned the corridor in each direction as if looking for eavesdroppers. Then he locked in on Kikuchi.

"We'll use him," he said, pointing his chin at Kikuchi.

"Use me for what?" asked Kikuchi.

"This is a photo-op for big Mack. Damn Japs have already surrendered. We just need someone to pose for the picture." The second Marine grinned slightly at Kikuchi. "That's you, buddy."

"This is crazy. I'm not that kind of Japanese," Kikuchi said. He felt like bolting out of there, but with three Marines staring at you, that's not a viable option.

The first Marine pointed at Benson. “You. Take off the guy’s pants and give them to the chef ... now!”

Benson obeyed and grimaced as he undressed the Japanese soldier. He handed the dead man’s clothing to Kikuchi. “Sorry, Cheffy. It’s all for the greater good.”

With great reluctance and trepidation, Kikuchi put on the Japanese uniform. He was a good sailor who loved his country, America.

The Marines escorted the “new” Japanese soldier back to his position next to Shigemitsu. The Foreign Minister shot a puzzled look at Kikuchi, who tried to avoid the diplomat’s gaze. Kikuchi then faked a signature for the photo. The surrender was complete.

Heaven and Hail

~A Texas Tale~

CHARLES TREVINO

During the scorching summer of 1885, Blaze Two-Feathers emerged from the hills of the Great American Desert and trekked down the dried-up riverbed of the Rio Concho. He landed smack dab in the middle of Scoville. Most folks figured the incredible heat had forced him out of the blistering caprock, but Blaze Two-Feathers had a much hotter reason for coming to town: Miss Jolene Paducah.

That Texas gal could make men cry with one taste of her chili pepper pie. When beaus came calling to sample her sweet, spicy dish, tears would gush from their eyeballs, and snot would stream past their lips. And though each fellow felt like a furnace of fire, nothing could quench his burning desire for the flavory, savory concoction and cook. The fact remains that all of Miss Jolene's suitors and flames would sizzle, fizzle, and then skedaddle right out of town, having failed her valid and reliable, true-love test. Hence, she remained cold-hearted, haughty, and tough, 'cause no man was ever good enough.

Blaze Two-Feathers was here to change all that.

Through the drought-stricken town and with its citizens in tow, Blaze smelt his way right to Miss Jolene's door and clanged her dinner bell.

She greeted him with an icy glare and waved her barbed-wired whisk. "You here to give us a go?"

Blaze Two-Feathers grinned.

"Well mister, around here courtships are short – all done in a day. I fill that belly with some nice tasting fire; you fill that riverbed with my fondest desire – cold, flowing water. You fail – you hit the trail. You succeed – it's you and me, indeed. Agreed?"

Blaze Two-Feathers nodded.

She turned to the crowd. "Y'all head on 'round back for this little test, 'cause I've just brewed a batch of my bubbly best."

Blaze Two-Feathers yanked a sheet off the clothesline and tied it around his neck as he took a seat in the heat.

Miss Jolene offered him a plate and spoon, but he grabbed the skillet and ladle.

He eyed the combustible pie, shoveled it up, shoved it in, and swallowed it down – whole.

He made motions for more as he glowed from yellow to orange to firecracker red.

But Miss Jolene poured him some tabasco tea with jalapeño honey instead.

Between slurps and burps, his breath shot out purple, blue, and finally bright white.

His forehead flowed with precipitation, his mouth dripped with condensation, and his ears steamed with evaporation. He was in heaven.

He took a look at the cook. A chill shot up his spine. Blaze Two-Feathers gave Miss Jolene Paducah a smile that she knew was for her and for her alone.

He then jumped up, flapped his arms, tapped his toes, and danced to his heart's content.

Soon up in the hills a raincloud began to form. It grew larger, darker, and nearer the harder Blaze danced.

The people cheered.

Miss Jolene started to shiver and shake. How could this shabby stranger waltz in like a whirlwind and win her hand so easily? Was he truly the *one*? She had to be sure. She hurried to toss together a fresh and fiery, potent and powerful, searing and scalding, chili pepper pie – deluxe.

She stirred as fast as she could, causing fumes to rise and a swirling wind to begin. The harder she stirred, the stronger the fumes - the stronger the fumes, the gustier the wind - the gustier the wind the dustier the air, until finally a genuine west Texas storm sprung up and spun straight toward the oncoming cloud.

The crowd gasped as the storm and cloud collided. The sky flashed with sheets and streaks of lightning then exploded into claps and crashes of thunder.

Neither the cloud nor the storm would budge.

The test had turned into a contest.

Blaze Two-Feathers danced feverishly.

Miss Jolene Paducah stirred peevishly.

For two hours hail plummeted the hills.

It became clear it was a standoff, with the storm prevailing by preventing the cloud from coming to town.

Blaze Two-Feathers stopped dancing. The dark cloud disappeared.

Miss Jolene Paducah stopped stirring. The strong wind ceased.

For the next few hours an inferno steeped with intense heat and crushed hopes. No one moved, until Blaze Two-Feathers made his way back to the table and dipped in the ladle.

As he munched, crunched, and scrunched, Blaze gazed upon Miss Jolene.

This warmed her heart. Miss Jolene Paducah gave Blaze Two-Feathers a smile that he knew was for him and for him alone.

He tipped his hat.

Their eyes spoke silent words of what-might-have-been, but both knew he was obliged to return to the desert, defeated.

As he strolled out of sight, a shimmer, like a teardrop, rolled out of the hills.

People whispered, "A mirage?" But soon icy water gushed forth, filling the riverbed.

Miss Jolene Paducah bent down, plucked out a fish and then another. She called to the crowd, "This water's freezing, with fish for the taking. It's time for celebrating."

Everyone jumped in to catch fish for a feast – for engagements are even shorter than courtships in west Texas.

Miss Jolene set out to retrieve her groom.

The townspeople prepared for a wing-ding of a wedding.

Since they figured the sweltering heat had melted all that hail in the hills and caused the Rio Concho to flood and spill over to Scoville, they made Blaze Two-Feathers the town hero.

However, he and Miss Jolene were never-again seen.

To this day, Texans tell the torrid tale of the true-love test, and how Miss Jolene Paducah still wanders the wilderness in search of her beloved, Blaze Two-Feathers. Where at sunset, orange, pink, and red fumes can be seen wafting from her chili pepper pies into the west Texas skies.

Essays



Two of a Kind

WILL CLEMENS

For most of the 1970s, we lived in a newly built, two-story townhome in Fairborn, Ohio, sixty miles northeast of Cincinnati. While any given Revolutionary War buff would salute the three-bedroom townhome in the style of the red brick buildings on Gloucester Street in Colonial Williamsburg, a post-colonialist would razz its design amid other Colonial-style townhomes on Charleston Court, Georgetown Court, and Monticello Drive. But where we lived was not altogether Colonial retro. Our detached, two-car garage, for instance, had an electric, remote-controlled door (an invention beyond even Ben Franklin's imagination), and our family car was a cream-colored, 1976 Plymouth Volaré wagon with simulated woodgrain on its exterior side panels—a zeitgeist like the Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser in *That '70s Show*. For the year we Americans celebrated the Bicentennial, that Plymouth model was, believe it or not, *Motor Trend* Car of the Year.

As the summer of '77 gave way to fall in the only city in the world named Fairborn, my parents were in their early forties, Dad an assistant professor of geography at Wright State University, Mom the learning disabilities tutor at Black Lane Elementary School. About a month into the first grade at Black Lane, I was looking forward to staying up late to watch the World Series on our color TV. But for the first time in three years, my favorite team was *not* in the series. I had been inspired to tee-ball stardom in part by the Big Red Machine's back-to-back World Series wins and the comic convergence of Michael Ritchie's *The Bad News Bears*. Chris Barnes played Tanner Boyle, the Bears' raucous shortstop with a Napoleon complex. I was peaceable and tall (for my age) yet identified with Tanner because of his long blond hair and *esprit de corps*. The summer of '77, my first season in tee-ball, I batted cleanup and went errorless for my team, whose only name was that of its sponsor, Handyman Hardware.

On a Saturday afternoon in mid-October, we boarded the Plymouth, Dad at the wheel, Mom in the passenger seat, I on the backseat bench holding a new baseball, Ed Bruce's "Mammas Don't Let Your Babies Grow up to Be Cowboys" on the car radio. We turned left onto Normandy Drive, right onto Stoneybrook Trail, left onto Armstrong Road, headed west along farmland, turned left onto Black Lane, and drove south past the school into the Rona Hills subdivision. As we wound our way through Rona Hills toward Yellow Springs-Fairfield Road, Bruce's song ended, and Tammy Wynette's "Kids Say the Darndest Things" began. In the driveway at the Wimsatts' three-bedroom ranch-style home, Dad put the Plymouth in park, and I gripped my baseball with anticipation.

Curt Wimsatt, my best friend from Black Lane, raced out of the house to our car. He opened one of the cream-colored, faux wood-paneled doors and slid onto the backseat beside me. His mother, Rosie, waved goodbye from the doorway. Curt had freckles and brown hair, but he was also sporting a sweatshirt, jeans, and sneakers and gripping his own new baseball, white with red stitching, like the uniforms of our favorite team.

After we arrived at Tatone Buick, just north of downtown Fairborn, next to where State Route 235 abuts Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, we walked into the dealership, where a long line awaited. Several other grade-school boys with ants in their pants were in front of us. Curt and I craned our necks and stood on the tips of our toes to see the Binger Banger seated at a table on a small stage at the front of the line. About fifteen minutes passed—and there we were, looking across the table at our hero in a dress shirt and sport coat. A stack of duplicate, postcard-sized glossy black-and-white photographs of him from the waist up, dressed in his Reds' home uniform, *number 5*, stood about two inches high on the table.

"Boys, I see you got some baseballs," he said with a drawl that I recognized from westerns.

Curt and I nodded, speechless, starstruck.

"You want me to sign 'em?"

"Yes, sir," we said in unison.

The homer banger from Binger, Oklahoma, took the baseballs one after the other in his lion's paw. I thought of that famous photo that shows him holding up *seven* baseballs in just *one* of his hands. I wondered how a paw that size could fit in a catcher's mitt.

Curt and I each collected a baseball and a photo autographed by the player whom we knew, mostly from Topps baseball cards, as the 1968 National League Rookie of the Year, 1970 *and* '72 NL Most Valuable Player, ten-time All-Star, nine-time Gold Glove Award-winner, and back-to-back World Series Champion with the Reds.

A man, who looked like superstar singer-songwriter Neil Diamond, ushered us from the table and stage. But Curt's attention turned to a well-dressed, young blonde woman standing next to a new, red Buick there on the showroom floor. Curt asked me if I thought she looked like Jill from *Charlie's Angels*. The Neil Diamond lookalike overheard. "She's Mr. Bench's girlfriend," he pointed out.

“Can we get her autograph?” Curt asked.

“Oh, no,” the man said. “Well, wait, hmm ... wait here,” he revised, chuckling, as if recollecting that “kids say the darndest things.” The man walked over to her and relayed Curt’s inquiry. She smiled, blushed, and nodded. The man motioned us over.

Seated beside each other on the backseat of the Plymouth, heading for home, Curt and I compared the fresh signatures on our new memorabilia.

“You think he’ll be a Hall of Famer?” I asked.

“You can bet on it,” Curt said.

In January 1989, Johnny Bench was elected to the National Baseball Hall of Fame in his first year of eligibility, appearing on ninety-six percent of the ballots. Later that year, Curt and I would see our achievements in sports—American Legion Baseball all-star games, varsity letters, league and state recognition—in the rearview mirror. We took separate roads ahead, Curt to Miami University, and I to Indiana University, each majoring in history.

In 1999, Bench was one of two catchers named to the All-Century Team’s thirty-man roster. In 2015, at the eighty-sixth All-Star Game (played at Great American Ball Park in Cincinnati), Hank Aaron, Bench, Sandy Koufax, and Willie Mays were honored by Major League Baseball as the four greatest living baseball players, according to MLB’s tally of 25 million votes by fans between April 8 and May 8. Perhaps the cliché “Behind every great man, there’s a great woman” applies to Bench, who was married to Vickie Chesser 1975–76, Laura Cwikowski 1987–1995, and Lauren Baiocchi 2004–present. Nowadays, a Bench signed baseball may fetch upwards of a Benjamin; a signed postcard-sized glossy black-and-white north of \$25.00—but if it has Paula Williams’ signature in red Bic on the flipside, it is, as far as Curt and I are concerned, two of a kind.

The Alley

MARK LEWANDOWSKI

When I left my apartment that late April evening I had a spring in my step. I'd passed my comps, defended my thesis, and turned in my last term paper. Within a week I'd say good bye to graduate school and Wichita and move on to my next big adventure: a two-year Peace Corps stint in Poland. I had just one last duty: the final for my ESL class, due to begin in a little over ten minutes.

As soon as I crossed 17th St., the southern border of campus, however, the sirens began to peal. I looked up. The sky had turned the unnatural green that often preceded a tornado. No bird song. The birds always know.

I'd heard a storm was coming—forecasters had been talking about activity in Oklahoma all day—but not all storms turn into tornado watches, and not all watches turn into warnings, even in the heart of Tornado Alley. I hoped we'd be lucky this time.

But the sirens only sound when a tornado has been spotted on the ground.

I had ten minutes to exam time, but the room was on the other side of campus. The sirens continued to scream, the green clouds to roil. I turned left, towards the student union. Its basement was the only tornado shelter with restaurants and common areas and such. I'd be able to watch the news down there while I waited out the storm.

Since it was evening during exam week, there weren't that many people about, but those still on campus were running for shelter. I cradled my book bag into my arms, now streaked with sweat from the gelatinous humidity, and followed ten or twelve others, down into the basement of the union.

I looked around for any of my ESL students. They were a great bunch, dedicated, fearless. Wichita States drew most of its foreign students from Asia and the Middle East. Enrollment had dropped sharply since I began grad school. After Tiananmen Square, most of the Chinese students stopped coming, and the start of the first Gulf War sent many Arab students into cover. The ones left, unlike too many of their American peers, were respectful, and very serious about their studies. All the nineteen students in the class arrived in the United States within the past year; some had just started in January. Soon I'd be in their shoes, a stranger in a strange land, blundering my way through a new country and its culture.

There were only a couple dozen people in the basement. A group of guys in gym clothes dripped with sweat; they'd probably just come from the rec center. Some other kids had books and papers spread across tables. A few people milled about, but most were stationed in front of the televisions hanging from the ceiling.

I didn't see any of my students. Most of them were usually early. By now they'd be in another basement shelter, no doubt jamming a few more vocabulary words into their brains.

I dropped my bag and pulled out a chair.

"Yikes," someone said.

On the monitor pulsed a map of Wichita and surrounding areas. A big red pool with skimpy borders of yellow was drifting in from the southwest. The danger zone of the storm looked bigger than the city, and its center was coming right at us.

Anyone still talking stopped and strained to hear the meteorologist. Soon the hair dressers from the saloon dropped their scissors, and the fast food workers left their burgers under the heat lamps, and clerks from the bookstore deserted their registers, all walking glassy eyed towards the televisions to watch the Big One finally hit Wichita.

...

It's the randomness of tornados that's so frightening.

I've only seen one twister in person. I was still in high school at the time and worked at a Long John Silver's in Overland Park, a suburb of Kansas City. We had no customers, even before the sirens started. The closest thing the restaurant had to a shelter was a walk-in freezer. We weren't going in there. So my manager rolled a joint and we went outside to have a look-see. Only cop cars patrolled the roads. I heard a low, churning whistle; I thought it was my manager, but his eyes stared up, the unlit joint dangling from his gaping mouth. I followed his gaze and watched as the funnel cloud passed over, its eye spinning slowly like the inside of a cement mixer. It couldn't have been more than a hundred feet above us. It dropped lower and lower, making its way to the cross section of streets bordering our strip mall, before plunging into the corner of an auto parts store. Shingles sprayed from the roof, but the tornado simply bounced off and shot right back into the sky.

The Long John Silver's lay in the path of that tornado. Who knows what would have happened had it come down a bit sooner.

In March of 1990 a tornado blasted a path through the small town of Hesston north of Wichita. On the Fujita scale, it measured an F5, the strongest tornado, one with wind speeds exceeding two hundred miles an hour. A few weeks after that “tornado outbreak” my friend Mark and I decided to have dinner at a Swedish restaurant in Lindsborg. We stopped in Hesston on the way. Clean-up was slow. We turned into a cul-de-sac surrounded by new, middle-class houses. One of the houses was simply gone, in its place a basement filled with broken walls and windows. Behind the empty lot lay another basement, and then another, and so on, far into the distance. The houses on either side of the basement directly in front of us looked completely untouched, not even one boarded up window. It looked as if a madman had gone joyriding on a giant bulldozer.

All extreme weather is unpredictable, of course, but it’s relative. I grew up near Buffalo, land of blizzards and lake effect snow. When things start to get bad you close the roads, simple as that. Later, I lived in Louisiana and waited out numerous hurricanes. To a certain extent you can track hurricanes, and even though no one can predict exactly where the eye will hit landfall, the storms are slow moving. If steering in your direction you can always evacuate.

Tornados? Midwesterners might joke about the dangers of living in trailer parks, or fall back on old folk tales, like the notion that a tornado will never cross where two rivers meet. There’s not much you can do to protect yourself. If you’re driving you can stop, jump out, and just hope there’s ditch on the side of the road. One not under a power line. If you’re indoors when the sirens start? Head for the basement. If no basement, a bath tub (or walk-in freezer), and pray a direct hit doesn’t bring the whole building down on top of you. Every spring in Kansas is like the London Blitz.

It’s no wonder Tornado Alley braces itself inside the Bible Belt.

...

We sat and watched the television for more than an hour. Eventually the red pool moved off and the sirens stopped. People started talking again and packed up. I heaved a sigh and wondered what I’d do about the exam.

...

What I didn’t yet know: An F5 tornado had touched down on the outskirts of Wichita. It remained on the ground for over an hour, for nearly seventy miles. At its widest it reached five hundred yards across.

McConnell Air Force base lay in its path. The base is part of the early warning protection system of the United States. Bombers, armed with nuclear warheads, line the runways. Right before the tornado hit the first runway, for no discernable reason, other than tornados do such things, it popped back into the sky. It sailed over the planes before plummeting again, obliterating over a hundred housing units and nine other buildings, including a pre-school and the base hospital.

For the next day, at that very hospital, I had a scheduled appointment for my Peace Corps physical.

When the tornado reached Andover, a suburb of Wichita, it was heading towards the least populated part of town. But then, again, for reasons no one can discern, other than tornados do such things, it turned on a dime, back north, where it rampaged through a residential area.

During that tornado event of April 26, 55 tornados touched down between Texas and Minnesota. Of the 21 people killed, 17 lived in Andover.

...

But as far as I was concerned, life had returned to normal. Outside the union, birds sang again, and bits of blue shoved their way between white and grey clouds. I wanted to linger outside. Wichita State's campus has one of the largest collections of outdoor sculpture in the country. I had the sudden desire to check out some of the statues, or even sit on a bench near some spring flowers and watch the world go by.

But no, I was supposed to start my exam over an hour earlier. I'd have to collect my students somehow. As far as I knew they were scattered all over the place.

In my building the halls were empty. That wasn't unusual. There weren't that many night classes. When I entered my classroom I was met with the expectant faces of my students. All nineteen of them.

"I can't believe you all beat me here!" I said.

"Mr. Professor," Ahmad said. He was the oldest student in class, sat front row center, and was always the most talkative.

"Mr. Professor," he repeated, tapping his watch.

And then it dawned on me.

"Wait a minute," I said. "You've been here the whole time? Since six?"

At least half the class chorused “Yes.”

“All of you?”

“Of course,” Ahmad said. “Very important, this exam. You don’t come, so we wait.”

“Didn’t you hear the sirens?”

“Yes, yes, very loud. Like Kuwait, maybe. What are they for, these sirens?”

Author Profiles



Author Profiles

Sheila Arndt is a reader, writer, and Ph.D. candidate living in the Midwest. She cares about the modern and postmodern, critical theory, New Orleans, Americana, saltwater, garlic, canines, old blues, and new dreams. Her poetry and prose has been published in *The Tishman Review*, *Gravel*, and *Literary Orphans*, among other places. Follow her: @ACokeWithYou_ www.sheilamarndt.com

C. Wade Bentley lives, teaches, and writes in Salt Lake City. His poems have appeared in many journals, including *Best New Poets*, *Rattle*, *Cimarron Review*, *New Orleans Review*, and *Pembroke Magazine*. A full-length collection, *What Is Mine*, was published by Aldrich Press in January of 2015. Further information about his publications and awards can be found at wadebentley.weebly.com.

Ace Boggess is author of the novel *A Song Without a Melody* (Hyperborea Publishing, 2016) and two books of poetry, most recently, *The Prisoners* (Brick Road Poetry Press, 2014). Forthcoming is a third poetry collection: *Ultra-Deep Field* (Brick Road). His writing has appeared in *Harvard Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *RATTLE*, *River Styx*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, and many other journals. He lives in Charleston, West Virginia.

Loukia Borrell was born to Greek-Cypriot immigrants in Toledo, Ohio, and was raised in Virginia Beach. She graduated from Elon University and worked as a reporter and correspondent for various newspapers and magazines in Virginia and Florida. She is the author of *Raping Aphrodite*, a historical fiction novel set during the 1974 invasion and division of Cyprus, and *Delicate Secrets*. Her poetry has been published in *Deltona Howl* and *Blue Heron Review*. She lives in Virginia with her husband and their three children.

Zachary Cahill is a writer and filmmaker currently attending Alma College in Michigan. His work has appeared in *Pine River Anthology*.

Martha Clarkson manages corporate workplace design in Seattle. Her poetry, photography, and fiction can be found in *monkeybicycle*, *Clackamas Literary Review*, *Seattle Review*, *Alimentum*, and *Hawaii Pacific Review*. She is a recipient of a Pushcart Nomination, and is listed under “Notable Stories,” Best American Non-Required Reading for 2007 and 2009. She is recipient of best short story, 2012, Anderbo/Open City prize, for “Her Voices, Her Room.” www.marthaclarkson.com.

Will Clemens earned a BA in English and history from Indiana University; an MA in English from the University of Dayton; and a PhD in English from the University of Cincinnati, where he earned the Ricking Fellowship for Excellence in Doctoral Studies and Research. Clemens edited *All Shook Up: Collected Poems About Elvis* (University of Arkansas, 2001), which received positive reviews in *Chicago Tribune*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Oxford American*, among other media. His criticism

has appeared in *Arkansas Review*, *Journal of Popular Music Studies*, *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*—poetry in *Alaska Quarterly Review*, *Reed Magazine*, and *Southern Humanities Review*, among other publications. Clemens served as an assistant editor at *The Antioch Review* 1997–2004 and has taught literature and writing at Xavier University, Wittenberg University, and Clark State Community College. Among awards for his writing is the 2011 Markham Prize in Poetry.

Andrés Cruciani, a former high school math teacher, left math for writing and received an MFA from The New School where he was an editor for *LIT*. His writing has appeared in *The Green Mountains Review*, *Welter*, *Four Chambers Press* (forthcoming) and *The Sand Hill Review* among others. He is currently represented by Lotus Lane Literary. His work was recently nominated for a Pushcart Prize.

Rosemarie Dombrowski is the founder of rinky dink press, the co-founder and host of the Phoenix Poetry Series, and an editor for *Four Chambers*. She has received four Pushcart nominations, was a finalist for the Pangea Poetry Prize in 2015, and was nominated for the Best of the Net Anthology in 2016 (Sundress publications). Her collections include *The Book of Emergencies* (Five Oaks Press, 2014), which was the recipient of the 2016 Human Relations Indie Book Award for Poetry (Personal Challenge category), and *The Philosophy of Unclean Things* (Finishing Line Press, 2017). She teaches courses on radical poetics, women's literature, and creative ethnography at Arizona State University's Downtown campus. Additionally, she was selected in December 2016 to be the inaugural poet laureate of Phoenix, AZ.

Joseph Dorazio is a prize-winning poet whose poems have appeared widely in print and online, including: *The Worcester Review*, *The Southampton Review*, *New Plains Review*, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, and elsewhere. The author of four volumes of verse, Dorazio's latest collection, *No Small Effort* (Aldrich Press) was released in 2015.

Alejandro Escudé was the winner of the 2012 Sacramento Poetry Center Award. The winning manuscript, *My Earthbound Eye*, was published in September 2013. He received a master's degree in creative writing from U.C. Davis and, among other journals, his poems have appeared in *Lilliput Review*, as well as in *California Quarterly*, *Main Street Rag*, *Phoebe*, *Poet Lore*, and *Rattle*. Originally from Córdoba, Argentina, he lives with his wife and two kids in Los Angeles, California, where he works as an English teacher. In his spare time, Alejandro enjoys birding around the many natural parks in Southern California.

Shawn Girvan's work has appeared in *The Pitkin Review* and *Wraparound South*. Shawn also studied and performed at the famed Second City and IO Theaters in Chicago and produced a critically acclaimed documentary film. Shawn has an MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College and currently resides in Virginia Beach where he teaches Creative Nonfiction at the Muse Writers Center and is finishing a Memoir.

M.A.H. Hinton grew up in Montana, lives in Minnesota, and has been writing for more than 40 years. His publications include poetry in *Spitball* and in upcoming issues of *Aji* and *Temenos*. He has also published several Western short stories.

Noah Kucij's poems appear in *Verse Daily*, *32 Poems*, *Storm Cellar*, *Up the Staircase Quarterly*, and elsewhere. He is the 2016 winner of the Phyllis Hurd Liston Poetry Prize and has twice been nominated for a Pushcart. His chapbook, *Burned Papers*, was published by Toadlily Press as part of its four-poet volume *The Fifth Voice* (2006). He lives and works in upstate New York.

Charlene Langfur is a southern Californian, an organic gardener, a Syracuse University Graduate Writing Fellow and most currently a series of her poems appeared in *Poetry East* and an essay in *Evening Street Review*.

Kate Larsen hails from Colorado's San Luis Valley. When she's not surrounded by cattle or her lovely little family, she is diligently working on the next great American novel or attempting to train one horse or another.

Christine M. Lasek is the author of the short story collection *Love Letters to Michigan*. Her fiction and nonfiction have also appeared in literary magazines including *Midwestern Gothic*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Tampa Review Online*, and elsewhere. She is the Academic Professional for the Creative Writing Program at the University of Georgia. Find Christine online at <http://christinemlasek.com/>

Mark Lewandowski's essays and stories appear in many journals, and have been listed as "Notable" in *The Best American Nonrequired Writing*, *The Best American Travel Writing*, and twice in *The Best American Essays*. *Halibut Rodeo*, a story collection, was published in 2010. Currently, he is a professor of English at Indiana State University.

Kevin J. McDaniel lives in Pulaski, Virginia, with his wife, two daughters, and two chocolate Labs. In recent years, he has taught University Core at Radford University and English composition at New River Community College. To date, his poems have appeared in *The Sacred Cow*, *Lavender Wolves Literary Journal*, *Axe Factory Press*, *The Bluestone Review*, *Clinch Mountain Review*, *JuxtaProse*, *Common Ground Review*, *The Cape Rock*, and *Broad River Review*. In addition, he was a finalist for *Broad River Review*'s Rash Award for poetry and a semi-finalist in *Heartwood Literary Magazine*'s annual Broadside Contest, which was judged by poet Diane Gilliam, in 2016. His poetry chapbook, *Family Talks* (Finishing Line Press), is set for publication in 2017.

Jesse Millner's poems have appeared most recently in *Gravel*, *Wraparound South* and *The Florida Review*. He teaches writing courses at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers.

Rodney Nelson's work began appearing in mainstream journals long ago. See his page in the P&W directory: http://www.pw.org/content/rodney_nelson. He has worked as an editor in the Southwest and now lives in the Great Plains. Recently published chapbook and book titles are *Metacowboy*, *Mogollon Picnic*, *Hill of Better Sleep*, *Felton Prairie*, *In Wait*, *Cross Point Road*, *Late & Later*, *The Western Wide*, *Billy Boy*, and *Ahead of Evening*.

Douglas Nordfors has a BA from Columbia University (1986) and an MFA in poetry from The University of Virginia (1991). Since 1987, he has published poems in major poetry journals such as *The Iowa Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Poet Lore*, and several others, and many other smaller journals, as well as, more recently, new and upcoming online journals. He has published, with Plain View Press in Austin, Texas, two books of poetry, *Auras* (2008), and *The Fate Motif* (2013), and has taught writing and literature at Milton Academy, The University of Virginia, James Madison University, and Germanna Community College.

Robert Okaji is a half-Japanese poet living in Austin, Texas. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Posit*, *Glass*, *High Window*, *Steel Toe Review*, *Panoply*, *Eclectica* and elsewhere.

Michael Pacheco is a member of the Editorial Review Board of *Label Me Latina Journal*. His debut novel, *The Guadalupe Saints*, was published by Paraguas Books in April 2011, and won Second Place in the International Latino Book-to-Movie Awards. His novella, titled *Seeking Tierra Santa*, received Honorable Mention in the 2013 ILBA Best Novel Award. He has been short-listed for the JF Powers Prize in Short Fiction and the *Southern Pacific Review* fiction contest. He also received Honorable Mention in the December 2014 *Glimmer Train* Very Short Fiction contest. Michael Pacheco's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Bilingual Review Press* (ASU), *Southern Pacific Review*, *Southwestern American Literature*, *Azahares Literary Magazine*, *The Gold Man Review*, *Label Me Latina*, *The Acentos Review*, *Boxfire Press*, *Red Ochre Press*, *VAO Publishing - Along the River II*, *St. Somewhere Journal*, *Emerge Literary Journal*, *Writer's Bloc Literary Magazine* (Texas A&M), *Fiction Vortex*, *Valley Voices*, *A Literary Review*, *Circa Journal of Historical Fiction*, *The Veterans' Writing Project*, *The Story Shack*, *River and South Review*, *Writers of the Rio Grande*, *SOL: English Writers in Mexico*, *The Binnacle*, *Yellow Medicine Review*, *FictionMagazines.com*, *Praxis Magazine*, *Diverse Voices Quarterly*, *AirplaneReading* (twice), and *The OFI Press Magazine*.

George Perreault's most recent collection of poetry is *Bodark County*, featuring poems in the voices of characters living on the Llano Estacado. He has received a fellowship from the Nevada Arts Council and an award from the Washington Poets Association, was a finalist for the Backwaters Prize, and has served as a visiting writer in New Mexico, Montana, and Utah. His poems have been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and selected for nine anthologies and dozens of magazines; recent work can be found in *The American Journal of Poetry*; *High Desert Journal*; *Weber – The Contemporary West*; *San Pedro River Review*; *Gravel*; and *Sleet*.

Drew Pizarra worked in the digital sphere on behalf of *Mad Men*, *Rectify*, and *Breaking Bad* but now writes plays, fiction, and poetry. His work has been produced off-Broadway and appeared in *Poydras Review*, *Thin Air*, and *St. Petersburg Review* among other publications. His collection of short stories, *Publick Spanking*, was published by Future Tense.

Kenneth Pobo has a new book forthcoming from Circling Rivers called *Loplop in a Red City*. His work has appeared in *Mudfish*, *Colorado Review*, *The Queer South Anthology*, *The Fiddlehead*, and elsewhere.

Tatiana Forero Puerta's poems have appeared in *Licking River Review*, *Moon City Review Anthology*, *Juked*, and elsewhere. She is a 2017 recipient of the Pushcart Prize, and nominee for Best of the Net Anthology. She holds a BA in philosophy and comparative religion from Stanford University and an interdisciplinary MA in philosophy and creative nonfiction from New York University. Originally from Bogotá, Colombia, she lives and teaches in NY.

Bradley Samore currently lives in North Carolina and is a high school English teacher. In 2016, he was chosen as Beginning Teacher-of-the-Year in Palm Beach County, Florida. Bradley previously worked for the Spanish Ministry of Education as a culture and language assistant in Asturias, Spain. He has been published in *SLAB Literary Magazine*, *Avalon Literary Review*, *Star 82 Review*, and *Words Apart*.

Gerard Sarnat authored four collections: *HOMELESS CHRONICLES from Abraham to Burning Man* (2010), *Disputes* (2012), *17s* (2014) and *Melting The Ice King* (2016). Work from *Ice King* was accepted by over seventy magazines, including *Gargoyle* and *Lowestoft Chronicle* and *The American Journal of Poetry*, and featured in *Songs of Eretz*, *Avocet*, *LEVELER*, *tNY*, *StepAway*, *Bywords*, and *Floor Plan*. Since then new work has been featured in *Dark Run* and *Scarlet Leaf*. For *Huffington Post* and other reviews, reading dates, publications, interviews; visit Gerard Sarnat.com. Harvard/Stanford educated, Gerry's worked in jails as a physician, built/staffed clinics for the marginalized, been a CEO of healthcare organizations and Stanford Medical School professor. Married since 1969, he has three children and four grandkids.

Scott T. Starbuck's next book is *Hawk on Wire: Ecopoems* (Fomite, 2017). He was a Friends of William Stafford Scholar at the "Speak Truth to Power" Fellowship of Reconciliation Seabeck Conference, an Artsmith Fellow on Orcas Island, writer-in-residence at the Sitka Center for Art and Ecology, and 2016 PLAYA climate change resident in poetry. His eco-blog, *Trees, Fish, and Dreams*, with audio poems is at riverseek.blogspot.com.

Tim Suermondt is the author of three full-length collections of poems: *Trying To Help The Elephant Man Dance* (The Backwaters Press, 2007), *Just Beautiful* (New York Quarterly Books, 2010) and

Election Night and the Five Satins (Glass Lyre Press, 2016)—along with three chapbooks. He has poems published in *Poetry*, *The Georgia Review*, *Ploughshares*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Blackbird*, *Bellevue Literary Review*, *North Dakota Quarterly*, *december magazine*, *Plume Poetry Journal*, *Poetry East*, and *Stand Magazine* (England), among others. He is a book reviewer for *Cervena Barva Press* and a poetry reviewer for *Bellevue Literary Review*. He lives in Cambridge (MA) with his wife, the poet Pui Ying Wong.

Charles Trevino works as an Interpreting professor (ASL/English) and as a community interpreter. He has previous published both short stories and poems.

Travis Truax earned his bachelor's degree in English from Southeastern Oklahoma State University in 2010. After college, he spent several years working in various national parks out West. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Flyover Country*, *Quarterly West*, *Pinyon Review*, *The Flagler Review*, and *The Eastern Iowa Review*. Currently, he is in Bozeman, Montana.