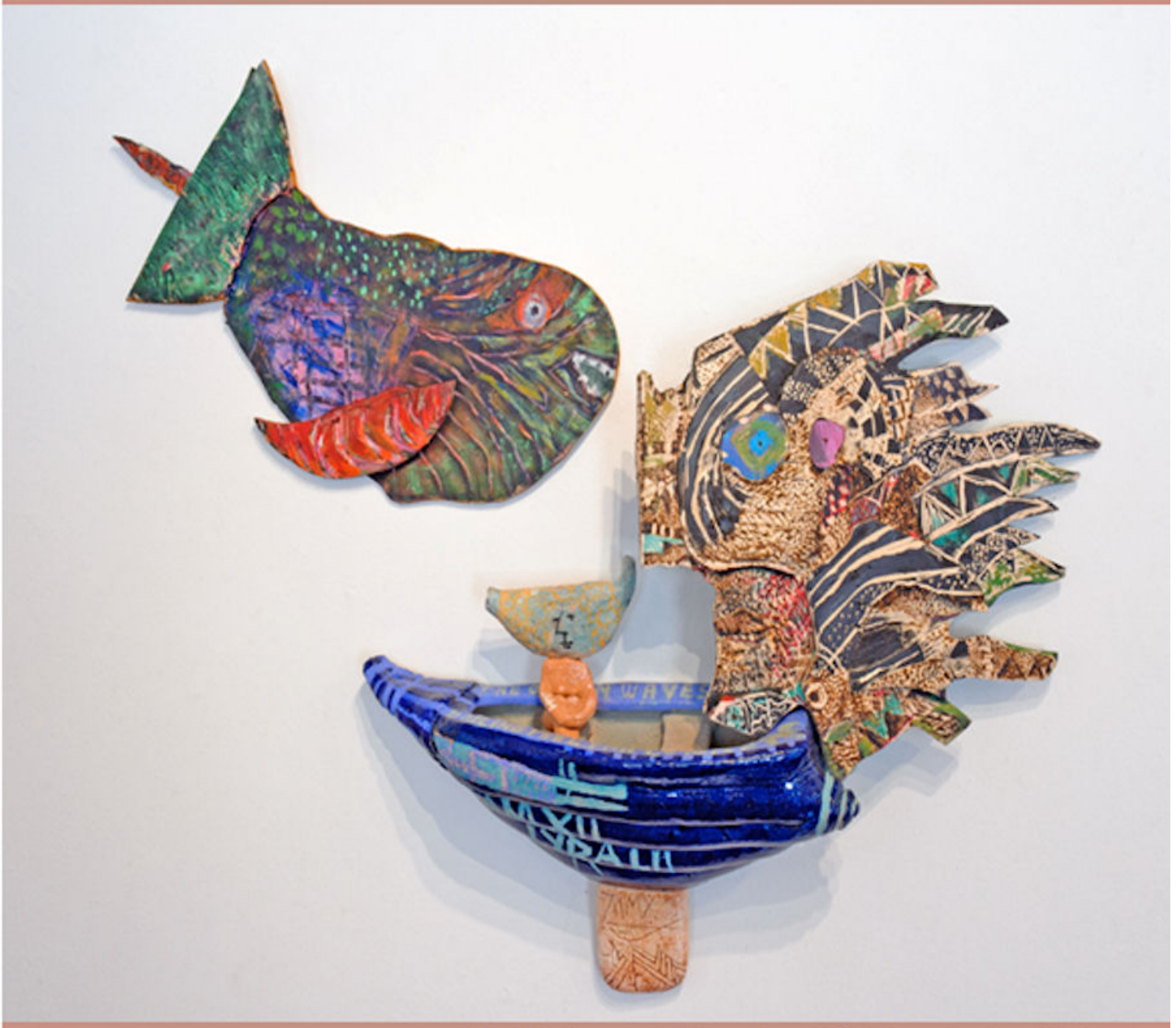
CUTTHROAT,
A JOURNAL OF THE ARTS



Fox McGrew and Albert Kogel/Collaborative Installation

ISSUE 13, VOLUME 1

CUTTHROAT, A JOURNAL OF THE ARTS

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Ben Billingsley, "City of Crows" Woodcut

CUTTHROAT THANKS

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INFORMATION

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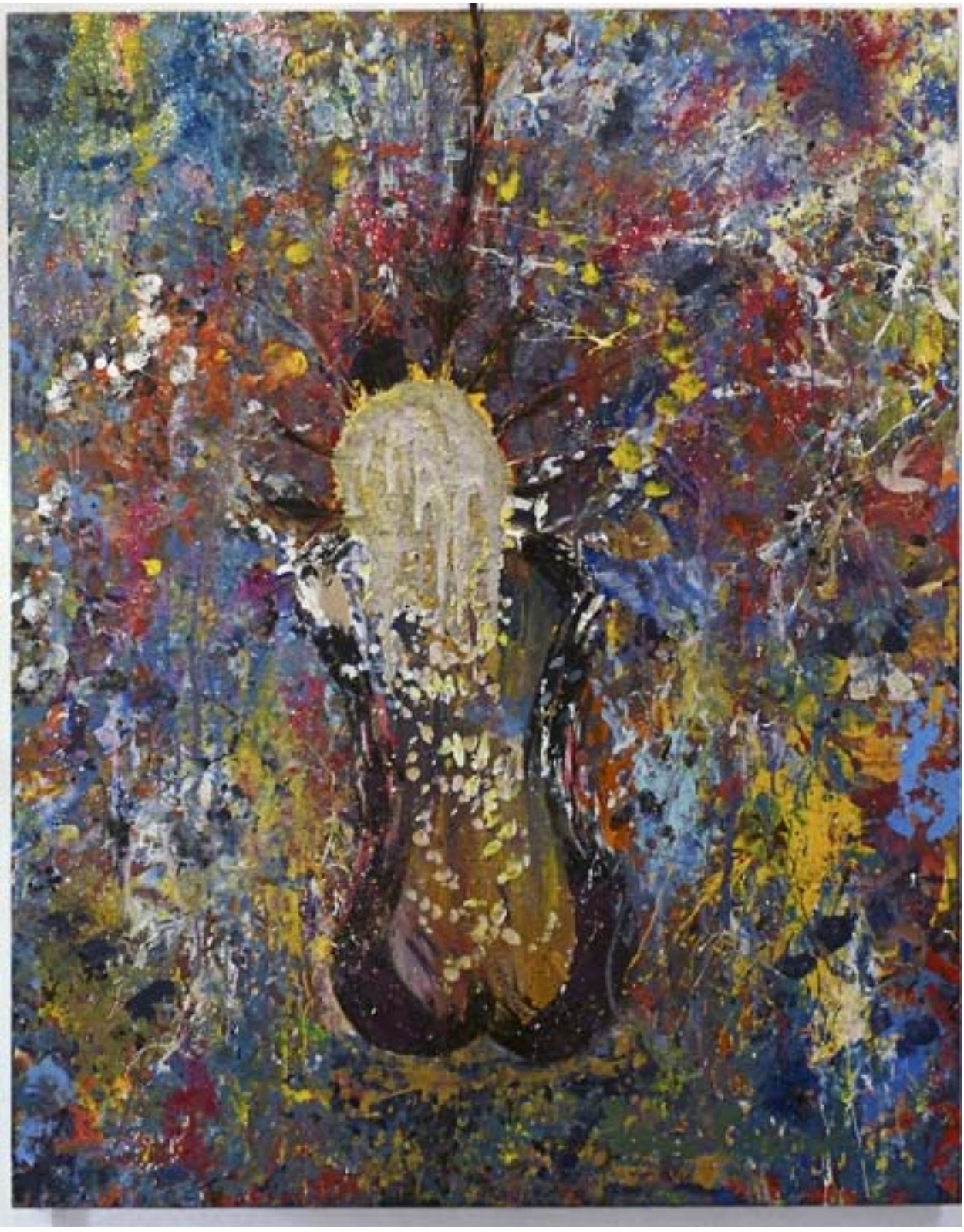


Esvie Coemish, “Your Head is Made of Thrones” painting

Luke Hankins
WHAT WE HAVE MADE

What we have made is not melody,
but the memory of melody—
an elegy of imitation and frustrated desire,
he said. Shut up and sing it, she said.

Julie M. Jacobson
SA-GAW-NEE GUY

The dirty little white dog lay on the foot of the bed, her scruffy hair matted around her ears. She smelled like left-over Hamburger Helper. She was lazily watching Charlie rock back and forth in the sturdy rocking chair. “Look at that one Mom! Check out the red on his back!” Charlie whispered loudly. He was getting as close as he could to the window where the green soda bottle with wild bird seed was hanging upside down. Charlie had filled it for me over a week ago, and we hung it up together. A big wind storm had come up sometime over the weekend, and managed to dump a third of the seed onto the green metal roof of the barn. It attracted dozens of birds, everything from magpies to blue jays and doves. There was no small bird activity until all the big birds had their fill. I hadn’t seen any ravens around yet and they don’t really eat birdseed, but it was still early and the other birds sometimes bring them in.

My landlord wasn’t particularly happy about the feeder, “The birds shit all over the roof, and so if it starts to build up, you need to take down the feeders.” Shit or not, I needed the birds to visit me. Though I was silent when she said this, I thought to myself about the kind of person who would worry more about tiny birds’ feces on a barn roof rather than appreciate the beauty of their feathers as they fluttered for position on the feeder. Watching Charlie took me back years as we admired the dark-eyed juncos with their ruffled neck feathers. My grandmother was someone that would worry about bird crap on a roof.

I hadn't thought about the raven in years. Though I see crows and ravens every day and think of Sa-gaw-nee Guy often, I had never shared the story of him with anyone who wasn't there at the time.

Where I come from, in Alaska, ravens are common birds in an unwelcoming climate. It regularly gets to 55 below zero in winter, and that doesn't include the wind chill. It's so cold that people say that your pee freezes before it hits the ground. On the rare occasions I had to pee outside at colder than minus 55, I never thought about looking to see if it was true. I remember wondering what ravens ate when there was no road kill as I watched them hop on the snow crusts by the burn barrels at the village hall. I watched them eat moldy bread, tearing the bag and eating it too. I stood there watching for too long. It was so cold that my tears froze in my eyes on the short walk to the great grand's cabin from the village hall burn barrels.

Old people told us to cover our faces and shield our eyes in the cold. I'd always been around old people and they were the source of all knowledge when I was 10. I was there with the Grandparents, depending on whether my dad was working or sober, or not. Since I wasn't in school regularly, I didn't have a lot of friends. My parent's friends – other Young people didn't come by to see us. Old people didn't care if we were "bottle orphans;" they came and visited anyway.

The Old people drank tea with us like we were important, but spoke in Athabaskan when they wanted to keep things to themselves. One or two words in an English sentence, that was ok, but when the conversation turned to all nit-chiss-shoe (clan) talk, that was our clue to find something to do - somewhere

else. My old Aunt Mamie, who is no blood relation that I'm aware of, would sit next to her husband, Walter. I don't remember hearing them speak English - ever. My Aunt Etta, my paternal grandfather's older sister, would always sit by her. Henry, Etta's husband, would eat several helpings of dried fish, pilot bread and our hard-picked raspberry preserves, then the men would clear their throats, act like they had something important to do as they left for the back room and the women stayed at the kitchen table. The tanned de-neeg-ee zes (moose skin; hide) they took out of their quilt bags smelled of alder smoke and meat. Tiny beads in little calico greased cloth envelopes sparkled and glistened on the wood table. I watched the needles pick them up; old ridged fingernails held them as the needles pierced through the smoky tanned skins in a rhythmic movement that filled an invisible pattern on the hides or felt with the shiny, colorful dots.

Though I learned common Athabaskan phrases, I never knew exactly what they were saying. Being the oldest granddaughter afforded me the opportunity to sit with them, if only to refill tea, and pick up an errant needle or spilled seed beads. I heard stories I never understood, though the language swarmed all around me like snow in a blizzard. I picked up number words, and words of animals, swear words, and words praising the Nek-el-tan-ee (Creator; God). I wanted to know what the other guttural sounds and clicks meant, but it just wouldn't come to me and I couldn't retain it well enough to repeat it even hours later. The Old people wouldn't teach it to us anymore or tell us why. I concentrated while I sat on a red vinyl high chair that had been modified now that there were no babies in need of it. The handle edges cut with a saw were

wrapped in black electrical tape and became sticky with my climbing off and on it. The red seat had been taped and still showed the tack marks where my dad had tried to preserve it for me. It had been my chair when I was a baby. I have pictures of me in it, eating birthday cake with my mom behind me, smiling like the world was wonderful.

Nothing we had was ever our own for long but I got the chair back when my second youngest sister got a new one. Off and on, seasonally, or when there was trouble or someone went to work on the pipeline, twelve of us lived in the Great Grand's cabin. It's funny, but it never felt small then.

I sat on my red high chair, between the table and the windows, watching the distorted finches and winter birds feed on my birdseed pinecones through ice and glass panes, listening to the old ladies tease and cajole each other in their native tongue. The thermometer outside said minus 40 degrees and I remember this because all of my cousins and siblings were getting ready to go outside.

We could go out for fifteen minutes, but had to come in for fifteen and minus 40 was the threshold temperature. Anything colder and you were stuck inside reading *Little House on the Prairie*, playing war with cards, giving Indian rubs or thumb wrestling in your snow pants in the unheated mud room. A large white faced industrial clock was on the back of the house, just above the door.

"Your ass is grass," according to my dad's sister Norma, if you didn't make it back in the mud room and an adult had to get dressed to come get you. Since Norma was the youngest of the adults, it usually meant she had the task of coming to find us. I'd rather she didn't. She was mostly kind, but you didn't want

to get on her bad side. The other kids went outside and took the commotion out of the back room. We had made a snow fort in the back of the garage, complete with a saved snack stash buried below the plywood and ice floor. I stayed inside, awaiting an order from my grandma or any one of the old ladies around the kitchen table. I kept wood in the woodstove, water in the kettle, and kept other kids out of the room while the old ladies talked and did their bead work. My grandmother didn't bead. She gave orders to me and talked a lot, but in English, except when she mentioned people's names or places.

My dad hadn't been home in a while. I knew they were talking about him from the sideways glances at me saying "his snakaey" (his children), and the quiet nature of the conversation. It upset me to be the only one in the room that wasn't officially allowed to know what was going on. Though the language was a barrier, I really knew what was going on, with thanks to my Grandma who slipped enough English in that I could understand the gist of the conversation. They talked about my chances to grow up – to be worth anything with my parentage. A half-breed. Bright- and they didn't mean smart. My mom had been gone for years. She was mostly white in thoughts and color, and they expected it, just as I expected that he too- would just disappear one day. No one thinks about what a ten year might be aware of.

When I spotted him, he was face down in the snow. He must not have been there long, or he would have been dead, but he was there long enough to get

frost bite on his face and back of his hand where the snow packed between his snow machine glove and the two down coats he wore. The raven popped up and down in the snow. It looked like it was jumping on a trampoline, like it was fun. I watched the big black bird in the snow, not able to see in the snow sled ruts where my father lay.

The black bird has a strong beak; it can break bones in gak (rabbit), and even takes on noon-yeh-guy (fox) and coyote for sustenance. The wing span was as big as I was tall then. They are not gentle birds but they didn't bother us, so we did not bother them. The Nek-el-tan-ee placed the bird here; we call him Sa-gaw-nee Guy. He is a trickster but also a very thoughtful animal. From the time I can first remember, I heard the stories of Sa-gaw-nee Guy learning to talk as we did, calling people by name in the wilderness. There is the story of when Sa-gaw-nee Guy put the pebble in the salmon's ear so he could sink to the bottom of the river to live to spawn. Of course, that story leads one to question whether it was self-serving – so there would be more salmon for him to eat – or not. I prefer to think he did it out of goodness. Sa-gaw-nee Guy may be a scavenger and have a twisted sense of humor, but he's also a messenger in our way. Something is always about to die or is dead when there are a lot of ravens about.

I thought about this as he jumped up and down in the ditch between our house and the road. The window was frosted in places where kids had breathed on it, then taken hot sweaty fingers and traced names and faces or pictures on it; each pane like a canvas. Sa-gaw-nee Guy jumped from one scene to another in that window as I watched from my red chair. I said nothing, listening to the

women's talk, watching the bird until I saw a navy blue coat sleeve swing up out of the ditch and hit the bird with a fisted glove.

The bird lay stunned from the impact, and I bolted from my chair, quickly licking my palm and rubbing fast on the frozen window until a clear spot emerged. I don't remember calling out, but I must have, with Aunt Etta next to me in a second. I never thought old people could move that fast. She moved me aside to look through my handprint and spoke quickly and quietly in her language, the others went into motion, and called to my uncles, who also moved me briskly out of my vantage point to look through my spot in the icy window.

Some of them ran out of the room to the front door. Most of the men went to retrieve the navy blue coat. My Aunt Etta put her parka on, and called to me from the mud room to heat water, and bring her a quilt. I ran to the great grand's room, passing up several blankets and quilts, grabbing my grandma's quilt- though I knew she wouldn't approve of it leaving the house. I struggled to put my coat on at the same time as my boots, giving up on lacing them; I just tucked them in quickly. Etta grabbed me to keep me from falling and held my shoulders sturdily while she whispered to me in my ear that I should empty a wood box where we kept kindling in the garage and she would meet me there.

While everyone spilled out the front door to watch or to help the navy blue coat, I tripped on my long sorrel laces as I went out the back door. I stumbled out, but made it between the sweathouse and the wood pile to look - unspotted, at the scene from a distance. From there I could see where the snow machine rested against a tree stump by the river's edge.

The bird limped with a wing out, and jumped in a small circle as my brown aunty in a unzipped parka grabbed for it with the quilt outstretched and bare handed wrapped it up. She never looked at the navy coated figure; the uncles had it turned over and were crowded around it. I don't remember where the other kids were. We were all afraid of being caught watching – as we were conditioned not to acknowledge anything like this behavior from an early age. When I saw her brown coat and braided hair moving in my direction, I opened the side door to the garage and went inside leaving it open a bit. I cleaned off a meat cutting table and then threw all the wood from the box on the dirt floor.

The bird appeared to have a broken wing and leg. I was reminded of the pain I felt when I broke my arm in the summer of my ninth year as I looked at it hop on the table.

It did not fight the weathered brown hands that felt for the cracks in its bones. Auntie sung to it in a soft voice, an Indian lullaby that I'd heard my whole life, and I couldn't decide if it was for soothing her or the bird. The throat of the bird groveled and it clicked its tongue, and it sounded like it was answering my aunt as she sung to it. Their sounds matched - the guttural sounds I wanted so badly to make sense of. My eyes burned and I swallowed hard as I made myself busy to help Aunt Etta and do what I could to choke back the fever that made the inside of my ears tingle and my eyes water when I held my breath.

The bird made a clicking noise, and a throaty sound that predicated a head posturing I saw when it defended food from another bird or a noon-yeh-guy (fox). Aunt Etta looked at it as it talked, then scurried to the scrap wood pile us kids

were allowed to play with and pulled a piece of snow fence and deftly broke it over her calico knee. She padded the wood with a rag to form the bottom of the splint. To tie it to the bird, she used the same sinew she'd beaded with earlier, pulling it from her dress where she kept it above her heart and out of the way when she needed to save a string of beads while doing some other chore. She bit off the needle with tea stained teeth and pinned the needle back on the lapel of her dress on the left side. The string still had iridescent blue seed beads on it as she tied it to the splint and laced it delicately around the black wing feathers.

She directed me to find two small sticks and we splinted the leg together, and used the sticky black tape that was on my red chair to fasten it. The bird watched us, and crooned, and groveled, but never tried to leave or fight us.

It occurs to me today that I never thought of my father while this was happening. I don't remember how long he was down for, or who cared for him.

The bird convalesced in the garage, unknown for several days. I cared for it as my aunt had instructed, killing squirrels for it with my .22 and keeping the heat down in the shop to 20 above so it wouldn't get sick from the temperature change.

Caught, thanks to the report of my .22 pistol, I looked at the dirt floor of the garage as some of our usual weekend visitors funneled in to see what the commotion was. My grandma was angry upon discovering her quilt in the garage, stained with white and black bird marks. She glared at me, asking why

her quilt was outside and said “that bird” had to go; “It tried to eat your dad’s face!” she hissed at me.

The bird had a name in our way. She never said Sa-gaw-nee Guy. She never spoke Athabaskan. English was far more direct.

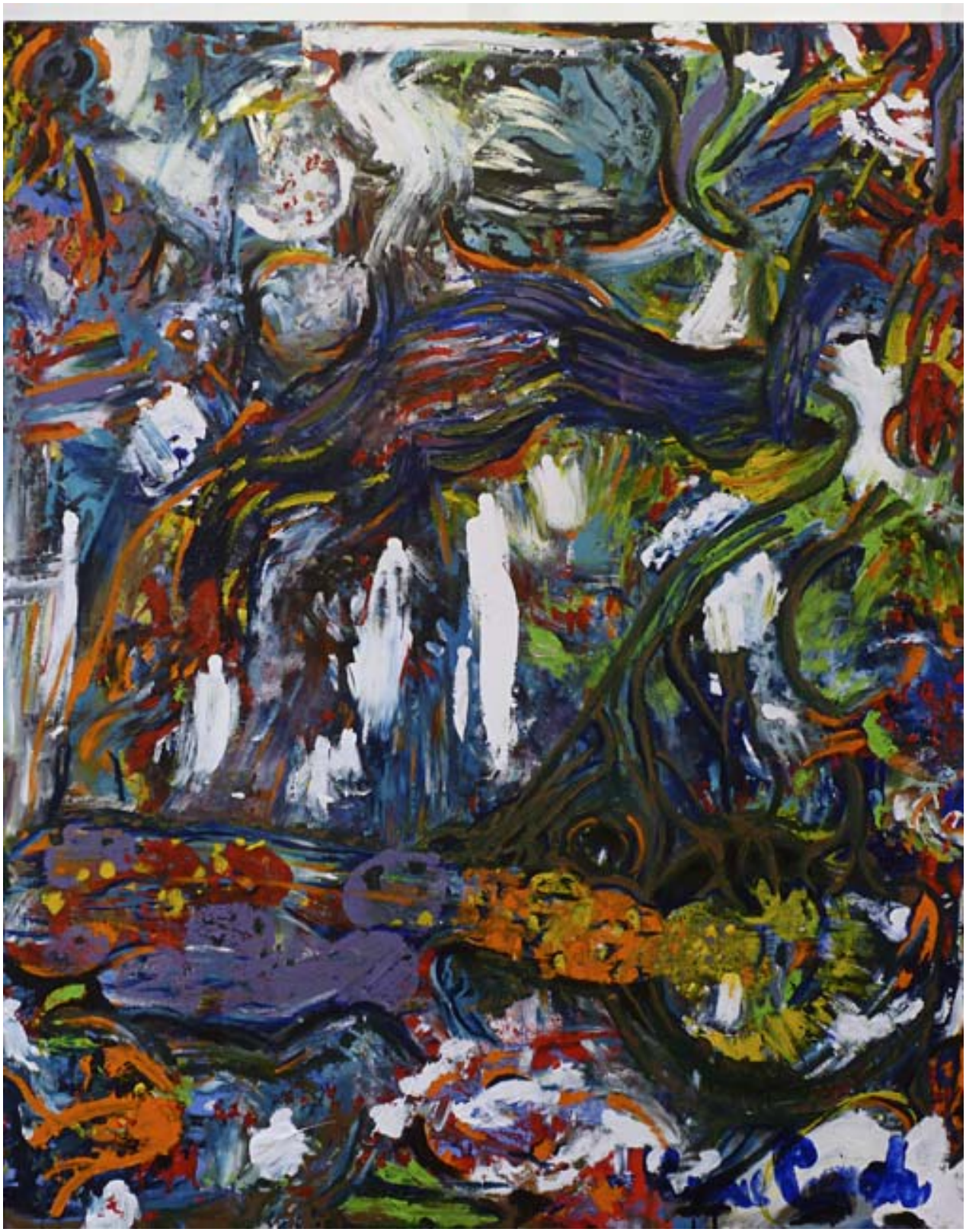
Saying nothing quick enough for her, I stood - pelted by her words, looking down at the pattern my shoe was making in the dirt floor. Etta spoke sharply to my grandma in their tongue, moving me behind her with one arm and stepping between. She took the wood box and our patient with her and Uncle Henry that afternoon. I wished I could have gone too.

Over the years, when we were the only ones around, I occasionally asked Auntie about Sa-gaw-nee Guy and she always changed the subject; until I was about twenty-four or so. Our elders never tell you things that they think you can’t understand. They tell you a story, and let you think about it and come up with your own examples in life. I think that’s why she waited so long to talk to me. I asked her about the bird while I was over for tea at her house one day, and she cleaned off the table by her place setting and reached for my hand. She traced my fingernail beds with a thick, ridged nail on her brown index finger. She said “You have your mother’s hands,” after a long pause, she continued, “Everything has a purpose,” she told me, “Sa-gaw-nee Guy was a messenger that day, and that was his purpose. He could not be responsible for the drink a man takes when he knows he shouldn’t. Sa-gaw-nee Guy showed himself to you, he saved your dad, and you saved Sa-gaw-nee Guy. He watches over us and he repays his debts. We have to take care of our friends, because nobody else will.”

Aunt Etta died in 2011. She was my bridge to our people, in language and otherwise. I wondered if there was anything else I should have asked her about, as I leaned out the window with my son to throw out some white bread slices amongst the spilt bird seed. Only Sa-gaw-nee Guy is big enough to take it from the roof of our barn apartment.

DISCOVERY POET: ESVIE COEMISH

Esvie Coemish lives in St. Johns, MI, which on the "Michigan hand map" sits halfway up the lifeline. Esvie is at work on a book length series of love letters, which have taken form as both poems and as paintings. The paintings are acrylic, on 4' X 5' canvasses, brushless, and borrow their titles from lines in the poems, while the poems are wishing they were paint smeared over and around the beloved. When not writing, Esvie is gardening or visiting.



Esvie Coemish, “Love Letter 11: 30 Naked Dolls Hung From Crabapple Trees,” acrylic painting

Esvie Coemish
LOVE LETTER 10

The Chiaroscuro Jellyfish Scrolls

Beloved-bomb rushed. Hair-helium hushed, helicoptered
off to safety. I sleep en-jungled. I tar the lot you proffered.
You're where horseshoes clang around the iron tongues: game on!
. . . Sometimes I'm Wordsworth's illegitimate daughter.

O, creatures green and razz! I wear my bra as helmet.
Brick should fear me, though you hurry through the deep to whelm it.
You hammer. You kick. Olympus splits its yolk.
. . . Only when you grieve, the crept-on leech is celibate.

Each zenith coughs up gravity. Each synapse lights its fuse.
Slickly you wipe the clover-stuck sheath of the *Daily News*.
Roughening column, the lemon tree's self-dream disclosed
. . . from your thigh. Thank god. I'm alive. You're alive. We cruise

ocean trenches, fins on fire with blue. Let's implode.
The algae eater that roared you out its nares is shocked and slowed
and locked in glaciers. I will breathe you free with dragon fire.
. . . Only peapods chuckle when they sense the song you sowed

and study sacred dirt-oxyribonucleic tablets.
You're buglers' baddest pointer. Of lakes' unfastened habits.
Of forests' sylvan thongs. Of river nymphs' wizard bongs.
. . . A peanut shell you crush into sporiferous, warring fragments.

Esvie Coemish
LOVE LETTER 12

Apotheosis Coordinate As Two Birds

Because the feeder harbors the grackle and the jay, I know
inside each walled thing a creature nests, as inside us
is another, with arms just shorter than our wingspan. I feel it
flutter, preening in its papered-over mirror, and the shadow
it throws over me is the night heaving with crows, but oh,
how it sings. Then forgetting all politeness I stream
from my own body twice, once a blue jay, once a grackle
feverish for worms. Blue-faced the grackle hears
the jay's thoughts; one's movements are a mirror
of the other's. Sunrise beams to its twin in the coral worms.

Esvie Coemish
LOVE LETTER 43

Amour Courtois In a Seraphim Follicle

Your crown is radiant, sleepaway
river, storm cloud thunder charmer.
I walk barefoot on furrows of land
where God's cross-sweeping claw
won't flick my gaze from the dirt.

Your ears are labyrinthine unprinted banks,
forever bones, lair of my breath's exponential decay.
And so, you say, it goes—a disco siren in the dark.
Last requests before the thunder turns horsemen:
you nearby, a breeze up my shorts.

Sunburst blue grey yellow, in the morning
there's coffee to steam, books like robot parts
jumbled on the table. The atmosphere, your eyes,
a bulb within crying light, light everywhere.

Sphinx-y mystery, cartilage stretching
as fires breathe smoke signals,
but no one speaks the language. To the snake
I catch and keep in a box
next to my pillow: *Unwrap the prize*
in your room in your lap touch it
it gives a little astounding
your nose has been in my mouth.

Eaten by the night again,
on the bed's incoherent tongue,
unwet reed, split reed, cracked resin,
O holy grail, you are serpentine wriggling
in the jaws of a song that close
on thecrickets, at dawn.

Each part of your chin unravels
where breath touches first.
This is the first time it has rained
in a decade of summer. The moon rises
out of the hood of my car and all the places
that support a bird's weight, but not ours.

When your neck arches like a searchlight,

I don’t know where my mouth goes.
My God, all the things I’ve gotten wrong.

From your shoulders, I see a crab’s eyes
floating from the sand hole.
Marcus, I named him, but what gives me the right
to name anything?
A socket emerges from the earth,
a blue chorus we overhear by mistake, by miracle.

I live in your chest, soft grass over the pictured rocks
of Lake Superior, where I speak to the earth, and listen
beneath to your heart’s slow giant movements.

From rib to rib, *All this is ours*, I tell bats
splintering across dusk, where I search your belly
for a door, a bird with wings bigger than its cage.

I curl into you like macaroni.

Your wrist bones wish to be didgeridoos
woooarrring in the yard globe I dance around,
letting each nasty word
for “woman” lift off and burn in ether.
When I rise from bathwater
and shatter across the tile,
you work your way to the door, sweeping.

O hands, crustacean nightmare, tick eggs,
hidden mystery, flying saucer—
here I am open. Tell how they pull me
into a fjord where I never existed,
the trees struck dumb as idols.

Your fingers were immanent in the hill-trailer,
the maple tree-fort, the school yard
where I sat twisting my swing, closets
I cried in and dreams
fuzzy as pipe cleaner necklaces.
Now your flute wakes the paintings
in their canvas slings, and I’m on the couch
I’d take as my last, reading:
On a journey, ill;
my dream goes wandering
over withered fields.

Your hips, throne of knees, soldier trench
clean of bodies, happy girls playing
hide and seek, making love
equations in the dirt.

In your lap, I smell the fresh-stacked hay
where I searched for kittens, the mother cat
dreaming of rapture in the back
of an abandoned semi, and hallelujah!
Humans and dogs grow wings.

Your thigh is the land peak
after the flood. When you shift in bed, I dream
tectonic plates rearrange. Where ends *sweetness*
when we wake on the other side
of the earth, kicking sand?
I hear angels in a conch shell.

Colonnade of ankles, bells on Sunday,
the first paramecium prompting the universe
to intone a G, which falls, falls
and there are two beings dancing.

Your feet are a field I must have been before,
the sacred plane where aliens genuflect.
On the kitchen table, a pitcher full of limes,
your wet hair curls all over the floor.

Newborn root, angleworm toes, you find
fulfillment as if this is only a snow globe.
Naked forms in our midst,
many-headed, dodge between us
with centipede motion, valiantly.

Esvie Coemish
LOVE LETTER 47

A Great Voice Proclaimed Pan Lives on Beefy 'Nish

Light on you, lakes of sunlight on your skin.
Lemons wrung into my hair, I bake
until the cupboards are bare, and my hands
clutch the last rays streaming through the window.

Lemons wrung into my hair, I bake.
All day, I laugh brightly as pans
clutch the last rays streaming through the window.
You sit on the floor picking your guitar

all day. I laugh, brightly as Pan's
woods when they glistened a mean seduction.
You sit on the floor picking your guitar,
and I fall into each note's orange splintering over

woods. When they glistened a mean seduction,
I fed you pecans like a deer. Without you, wilting,
I fall into each note's orange. Splintering over
the night's iris, a blue spruce looms over swings where

I fed you pecans. Like a deer without you, wilting,
beneath zooming insects that scratch
the night's iris. A blue spruce looms over swings where
a billion dead suns wink into the afghan we hide

beneath. Zooming insects that scratch
the membrane around you—I praise them! Hail you and
a billion dead suns wink. Into the afghan, we hide
our cursive scriptures, feverishly dictated by

the membrane around you. I praise them! Hail you and
your socked feet charioting across the library.
Our cursive scriptures, feverishly dictated by
pulsar wings, form anagrams when they hear

your socked feet charioting across the library.
Hush and burn, hush and burn, you say, so
pulsar wings form anagrams when they hear
the incantations whispered in each other's ears.

Hush and burn, hush and burn. You say so.

Light on you, lakes of sunlight on your skin.
Incantations whispered in each other's ears
until the cupboards are bare, and my hands.

James Bertolino
NEIGHBORHOOD NAZI

The neighborhood knew he was a weird one—
he had an accent—and our parents told us
to stay away, but we loved his strangeness, and played
in the alley behind the shop where he soldered
and welded and brazed the broken things
the grown-ups would bring.

To me he was different—we talked of toad-warts
and metal, of heat, and of the growing muscle in my arm.

One Saturday in late Spring, when the weather
turned sunny, I put my shorts and sneakers on
and spent the afternoon with him. That day he frightened
the older kids with his cutting torch
when they chanted “harelip,” and “Nazi, Nazi, Nazi!”

I stood by, proud to be his friend, proud to be almost seven.

With a nod of his head he flipped the face mask down,
struck an arc, and drew his rod across the metal.
I shielded my eyes from that man-made sun.
Finished, he pulled the mask away, then turning toward me
with his rod still tipped red with its tiny hell,
eyes narrowed, grin widening like a fresh weld,

he moved his gloved fist across the space between us
and thrust that molten phallus into
the bare hollow below my ribs. He laughed
and laughed as I screamed, ripped free
of my belief in him, and ran.

Okla Elliot
THE EMBALMER'S SON

for John Thomas Allen

The nobleman's innards form a jelly
in the godly jars. Myrrh is mixed, and stems
of cinnamon, where his lungs once sucked air.
Father delicately hooks into gray
sponge and tugs it round and out the nostril.

The jackal Tuamutef curls in lung-flesh.
Qebhsenuf settles in the fatty liver.
These are my father's gods, more powerful
than all the rest, for they make sweet passage
to the Land of the Dead.
                But I don't care
for his or other gods. I would splatter
the noble sweetmeats to the floor. What does it
matter where dead men's gonads lie? I pour
wine in his skull, dangle the corpse to drain.

Terry Savoie
PRAYER

O give us on this day our daily bread,
the hope of oil, yeast & salt, of sugar & un-
bleached flour twice turned out, kneaded,
then pounded into submission beneath
those calloused heels of a mother’s hands,
the bread of forever turning the other cheek
& our bread of generations gone, Mother-
Bread, this prayer is for you in your sweetened,
egg-glossy, feast-day breads, St. John’s
& Eve of St. Agnes’s bread, frosted breads,
Christmas & Easter breads, honeyed,
braided breads, sun-shot, glowing with promise
from an oven & crowned in red-candied fruit,
living bread & life-giving bread, this prayer is
for you & for you, our bread that ends up
green & mold-crusted, buried in a compost
heap & sluicing there in ducks’ droppings,
in chicken shit, in discarded kitchen scraps,
in the gelding's soupy springtime flops,
steaming & percolating & laboring to
become the stuff of a coming year's onion
& potato beds to feed children who, in turn,
will produce more & more children, all
able to sing to you, our sustenance, our bread,
our hope unbounded of generations to come.

Paul Boyer, “Sheyenne Valley Church Series, 1975,” photo

Elise Atchison
ANCIENT AQUIFERS

Raymond was under his Ford pickup pulling the clutch when he heard a vehicle turn into his drive. He scooted out from under the truck and stood wiping his greasy fingers on his insulated coveralls. The bright white Hummer kicked up a cloud of dust as it churned toward the house. It was a rhinoceros of a vehicle, brand new looking, with no dents or scratches, no sunburned paint or hail dings, and he was willing to bet no hard starts on cold winter mornings. Just the sweet purr of a life of luxury in a heated garage. He picked up his cowboy hat from the front seat and clamped it down on his head, tilting it ever so slightly to the right.

The driver waved, a woman's delicate fingers undulating on the other side of the windshield. He stepped behind the old Ford as if it were a blind, as if he and the rusty truck could blend right in with the dry bunchgrass and scraggly sagebrush that covered this scabby section of land. He could have been a white jackrabbit who thought he was still crouching in the winter snow, a sand-colored rattlesnake who didn't realize he was lying in the middle of the blacktop until a semi rolled over him.

The woman climbed out of her armored vehicle and looked right at him. "This the Thorenson Ranch?" she said in a sing-songy voice. He stood silent, staring at her white jeans and lavender silk blouse. A ponderous rope of turquoise hung around her neck. On her feet were a pair of shiny silver boots, unscuffed and shimmering like the river under a full moon.

His eyes returned to the white jeans. White wasn't a color that would last long on the ranch. The fine summer dust and sticky spring mud left their mark on people's clothes, their skin, even their state of mind if they lived here long enough. And Raymond had lived here a very long time. All sixty-nine years of his life.

"This the Thorenson Ranch?" the woman repeated.

Raymond raised his hand to the brim of his hat and croaked out a rusty, "Yep." He didn't talk much unless he went to town, and then he exercised his voice on the drive so it wouldn't come out raspy and roughsawn. He cleared his throat and added, "Yep, sure is."

Her strawberry-colored hair cascaded down to her chest like the flowing mane of a red roan he used to have. He couldn't help noticing the deep cleavage revealed by her unbuttoned blouse. The full, round breasts made him redden and look away.

"Is the place still for sale?" the woman said, glancing at the ranch house and then the ragged hills rising up behind it.

"Seems to be," he said.

"You the caretaker?"

"Guess you could say that. I own the place."

"Oh." She looked flustered for a moment, but she quickly regained her composure. "I'm Yolanda," she said, holding out her hand.

Yoo-lann-daa he repeated to himself. It was a buttery name, slipping out smooth and creamy on the tongue of his mind. It almost made him forget that she

was here to buy the ranch. He stuck out his hand, and she looked down at his greasy fingers and laughed. He pulled his hand back and said, “Sorry about that. I’ve been working on my truck.” He nodded toward the Ford with its oily innards spread out on the ground around it.

She laughed again, revealing an immaculate row of snowy white teeth. When she turned to take in the ranch, her long, slender body moved with the slow grace of a thoroughbred. He caught a whiff of something exotic, a scent that conjured up salty breezes drifting off a tropical sea, bare skin against white sands, the shadowy hint of coral reefs under clear blue water—a lush land oceans away from the dry, bleak landscape he lived in.

Of course he could only imagine such things. He’d never actually been to the ocean. He’d never been farther south than Denver, where he had gone to a farm implement sale a decade or so ago. But something about that scent seemed familiar. It reminded him of Mandy.

He had never had time for a woman after high school. Mandy had been the only one. She had been his girlfriend for his junior and senior years. She was the only girl he had ever let himself daydream about, the kind of luscious, fleshy dreams that he should have known could never be real.

His brother had always been the wild one, staying out all night, going with a different girl every week. Garrett liked to go to the Five Spot almost every night. He liked to drink and dance, and drink and fight, and drink and fool around with whoever was drunk enough to follow him out to his truck at the end of the night.

Raymond assumed he'd had hundreds of women, even though there weren't hundreds of women worth having in Granite.

Garrett's death matched his life. He drove home one night after closing out the Five Spot, and he went off highway 51, rolling his truck four times in Carson's field. Mandy was with him.

After his brother died, Raymond had to do twice the work around the ranch. He'd given up on any dream of a woman fitting into his hardscrabble life. All his energy had to go into helping his father keep the ranch afloat. He had learned to smother any lavish desires that rose up inside him. He had learned to focus on getting the work done.

Raymond looked down at his greasy hands. He looked at the stuffing leaking out of the knees of his coveralls. The seam separating on his boots. He gazed out across the empty fields as if he were watching the ghosts of hungry cattle stumbling over the broken land. The fields were bone dry.

Yolanda's eyes followed his gaze and she frowned. "The real estate agent said you had water."

"Yep. Earl drilled down to the Red Shale Formation in '52. Best water around."

Raymond could still remember the moment the water came gushing out of the ground. The driller said they had hit a pocket of paleowater trapped down in some ancient aquifer under their land. The driller said the water had been sitting

down there for eons, just waiting for someone to pull it back up into the light of day.

The ten-year-old Raymond had imagined pale, eyeless creatures swimming around down there, slimy and hungry for something they'd never seen. He was sure they would shrivel up into lumps of mush in the bright hot light of the sun. But when he cupped his hands and tasted that ancient water, he knew it was the best water he'd ever tasted. The drillers had punched a hole in the skin of the land, they had drilled down through layers of rocky flesh, right into the purest water on earth.

"There's no city water out here?" Yolanda asked.

Raymond laughed. They were forty miles from town. "No, just the well."

"I'm sure city water would be a lot cleaner. Did you have the water tested?"

"We did a taste test. Finest water any of us had ever tasted. Everyone says it's the best water around. And we've been drinking it for years. You want to try a glass?" He made a half-turn toward the house before her words stopped him.

"God no. There are all kinds of things you can't taste that can kill you. Microorganisms. Arsenic. Radioactive particles. I guess I'll have to put a good filter system in. I just wanted to make sure there was enough water to irrigate."

"Well, the driller did say it'd be wise to conserve the water. It's a sealed aquifer, so it doesn't naturally recharge from precipitation. Once it's gone, it's gone. All of us out here need to make sure it lasts for generations to come."

Raymond knew what it meant to conserve. He had lived in that house alone since his father died. He kept the house still and dark most of the time. Left the lights off at night to save money. Turned the hot water heater off in summer, then later in winter because he figured he could heat water on the woodstove. He didn't see any need for powering a refrigerator in winter when you could keep a frozen slab of beef on the porch for months with no worry of thaw. He had spent his whole life conserving, but still the debt mounted.

The only thing he allowed himself to gorge on was beef. He ate a lot of beef through the years. Beef with rice and beans. Beef with biscuits and gravy. Beef with cheesy potatoes. Beef with eggs. But now that the cattle were gone, he didn't have that luxury anymore. And he didn't have the small income from all that beef. A ranch without income isn't a ranch at all. He knew he had to sell.

He looked at the house tilting almost imperceptibly in the direction of the prevailing winds.

"Want to see the inside of the house?"

Yolanda narrowed her eyes at the small ranch house. "Oh no, that won't be necessary. The house will have to go."

"What do you mean the house will have to go?"

"I'm going to need a bigger house. I'll have to knock it down. Burn it." Her eyes fluttered toward him. "Not that there's anything wrong with that house, mind you." There was a false sweetness in her voice that only made her words more bitter. "But we do quite a bit of entertaining. We'll have a constant stream of

overnight guests. This house just won't do for that sort of thing. I'm sure you understand."

It had never occurred to him that the new owner wouldn't live in the old ranch house. He didn't know what to say.

He thought of the apartment he would be renting in town. Carl had shown him around the one bedroom unit. "Utilities are paid, and since you're a senior, you get a discount," Carl had said. "Lester lived here when he came in off his ranch. Stayed until he died last December. It's a good place to live out your years."

It was small, but Raymond didn't have much to take away with him anyway. Everything on the ranch was for the ranch: the bridles and saddle blankets, the feed bunks and branding irons, the post drivers and fence stretchers, the hay racks and spray tanks—he wouldn't need any of that anymore. The apartment would be plenty big enough for just him alone. Without the ranch, he really didn't take up any space at all.

"I'm more interested in the land than the house," Yolanda said as she gazed at the snow-capped mountains rising in the distance. She strode off into the fields, and he followed her, holding the gate open and hooking the loop of wire back around the post after she walked through.

"Is that barbwire?"

He looked at the fence. He wasn't sure if that was a trick question. "Yep, Earl and I redid all the fencing in '82. Sank the juniper posts good and deep. It should hold up for a long time."

"I've heard that some of the older barbwire is worth quite a bit these days. Maybe you can sell it?"

Raymond laughed. "No, it comes with the place."

"But I can't have barbwire around my Arabians."

He frowned, wondering if her Arabians had thinner skin than his quarter horses. "Well, I suppose you can replace it with buck fence if you want to spend the money."

Raymond looked at Marley the mule and Cat and P.J., two swaybacked quarter horses bunched up against the fence. He clicked his tongue and the horses ambled over to them.

"The horses come with the place, too, like the ad says."

"Oh no, I don't need the horses. I'm buying some Arabians from a breeder in Kentucky. That's why I want a ranch out here, to raise my Arabians."

He stared at her. He couldn't quite take in what she was saying. Those horses had worked here beside him on the ranch their whole lives, and now they were close to dying here. If she 'didn't need them,' where were they supposed to go? They couldn't go to the apartment with him. They were too old for any real work. And he wasn't going to put them through the slaughterhouse. There was no other place for them to go.

He whispered his thoughts aloud. “They just need a small corner to live out their days. It won’t be much longer, a year or two at most.”

“No, I can’t do that. I’m sorry, but it’s impossible. This is going to be an Arabian Ranch. Arabian Meadows. There’s no place for...” she paused as if she were searching for the right word, “...for *them*.” She spit the word out as if it were a piece of rotten meat. “I’m sure you understand.”

He nodded his head, more out of habit than anything else. He knew she could afford to buy the entire ranch on a whim if she wanted to. His shoulders sagged, and he looked away. Nothing had ever come easy for him.

“I’m just not interested in the horses. But I’m definitely interested in the land. I’ll pay the asking price. Will you sell it to me, Mr. Thorenson?”

“Only offer I’ve gotten so far,” he said, looking down at a bitterroot flower blooming at his feet. “I suppose I’ll have to.”

Her lips formed what seemed to be a genuine smile. “Great. I’ll talk to the agent and get things moving.” She climbed into her Hummer and drove back down the driveway.

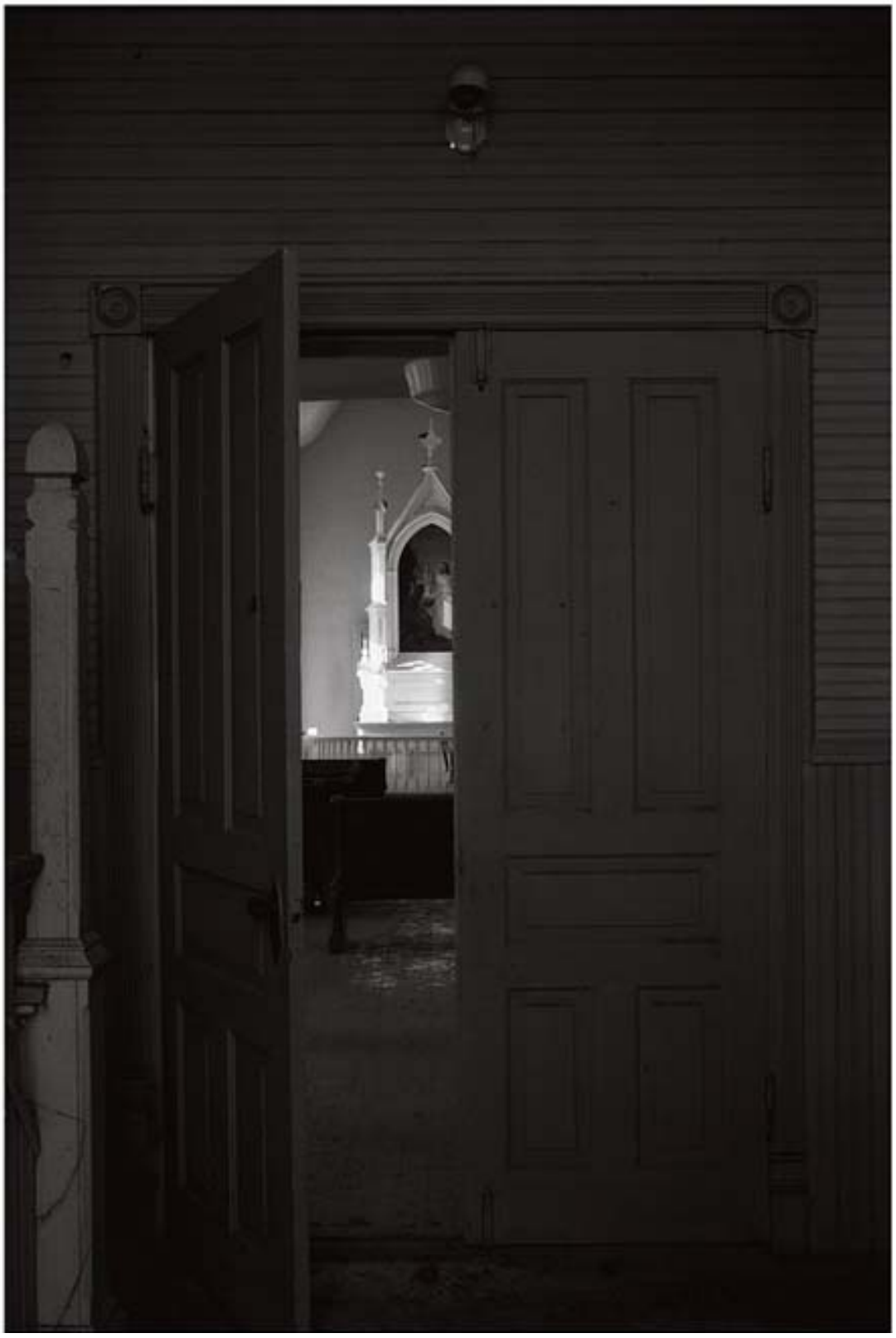
“Goodbye, *Yoo-lann-daa*,” he whispered, trying to recapture the succulent sound of her name, but the thick dust from her retreating vehicle billowed into his open mouth, shriveling the fleshy syllables into a dry, choking cough. He watched her Hummer turn onto highway 51 and then roll up and down the hills until it disappeared over the far horizon.

He turned back to the house. He couldn't imagine that house being knocked down and scraped into a pile of rubble. The smoke rising thick and black like an overgrown brush pile. It was a good, sturdy house. Why would anyone want to burn it?

He looked at the horses, and then he let his eyes drift to the far hill behind the ranch house. He couldn't imagine walking over that hill three times. He couldn't imagine a gunshot ringing out three times. He couldn't imagine the coyotes and bears filling their bellies on the stringy meat of old horses.

He couldn't imagine any of that.

He tossed his hat on the front seat and crawled back under the Ford, positioning himself under the open belly of the truck. He ran his fingers along the flywheel, caressing the bumps and grooves that marred that solid surface. This was something he could do something about. This was something he could fix. He got to work.



Paul Boyer, “Sheyenne Valley Church Series, 1975,” photo

Emily M. Green
EPITHALAMIUM

Do you remember, little brother, when the bullies taunted
Jason Schwartz the whole bus ride home? They wanted
him to fight you. He stuttered, he spit when he spoke—
easily four inches shorter than you. Still, your voice broke
when he followed you off the bus and down the road. You said no,
you wouldn't fight. When you refused, I threw him in the snow.
As I held him by the collar, I knew I could
tear his head from his neck. If he hurt you, I would.
What should I think, then, of this woman, your fiancée?
At the Chinese restaurant, she wipes chicken low mein
from your chin, corrects your retelling of dreams, even
calls you *dear heart*. When she laughs at you, I'm within
seconds of punching her fat face. Don't you agree
that stone looks heavy on her finger? I could fix her. Let me.

Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum
NIGHTSWIM

New growth budding on the May
month trees, we trolled our rail thin bodies
through the waters of Nathan Hansen's pool—
his mother and father out for the night
and it only logical our clothes shucked
poolside in the grass as the first
evening bats emerged to wing their scripture
across the holy eyes of planets.

It was as if we were subject of a grand
experiment: Nathan, Joanna, and myself sprinting
nakedly in turn the narrow tongue of the board
and crying out distantly between the twangs
of our dives and our splashdowns—
lean and pale as the stripped spines of feathers.
Together, we waded beneath that giant lens of sky,
all three of us expert in our virgining,

the light through the hardwoods that hung
above the pool painting us one shade
lighter than the dark, the flick of our bodies
like newborn spirits gravestone to gravestone,
the white rinds of our smiling mouths
streak-lines in a mirror. And perhaps
it was dumb luck; perhaps it was instinct:
thinking our backs were turned, Joanna rose

and perched but a moment on the pool's
concrete cuff. Water sliding from her back
like mercury laved from a larger body of mercury,
I reached for the globe of the sheep dog's
tennis ball and thrust it, ask anyone,
striking one of those ill-fated bats
midflight. Stunned, it tumbled like a fletchless
arrow shot straight for the center

of the earth. But by the time
it should have smacked down in the water we tread,
we, of course, could no longer see it,
that small, furred creature an agent of night
and even the last paring of moon occluded
in that pin's drop of time when the bat

must have snapped out of its dream
and opened its wings as dark as dark

hibiscus blooms. The one thing
we did see was that blade of liquid drawn
when its wing must have skimmed the pool's
meniscus. What we did see was Joanna,
still for once in the trick-light of the corner
of the eye. And the night:
naked and quiet. The shudder of water
rippling silently around us.

Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum
FOR THE RETURN OF GOD

The day he invented the universe, God gathered
his museum of stones in a mason jar
and cast it to the cold star of everything.

When I'd come home from school, nose bloodied from yet another fist
swung up from out of nowhere, another afternoon
spent searching the waxen wrappers of Tootsie Roll Pops
I hawked from the Wendell Smith's Texaco across Charlotte Ave.,

I'd borrow that jar from the cupboard, swipe
the riverstones and half-split geode that lined my mother's vanity,
guide my sister's string of pearls
clacking along the edge of her jewelry box, and unstring
the many-colored opal of the birthstone from around my neck.

In the backyard, I'd uncork the jar and sweep those gems wide around me,
geode the sun. Riverstones, nine planets. Opal: moon.
Those pearls a ring of galaxies holding hands in tight circle around us.

Then I'd wait. First for the stones to shudder. Then to levitate,
to form a whirling vortex in the air and slowly corkscrew back
into the jar with a sound like wind through trees.

I'd wait for the jar's lid to screw itself back on. Then pop.
  Seal.

Then I'd hold the jar in my hands and shake it like a rattle; listen
to the hollow clatter of stars, earth, and everything else I couldn't comprehend
like my punched-out molars
                clinking between rows of teeth.

For a long time I waited for the return of God.

For a long time, the wind stayed very still.

Richard Holinger
HER TERRIFIC TITS

They got to know each other the way people do after someone dies. In this case, the novelist Scott Acaro's latest wife threw a post-funeral reception. Acaro had been big, famous, and rich, and the Lake Shore Drive apartment fit nearly a hundred family, friends and fans comfortably. Mrs. Acaro had it catered, and Brice especially enjoyed the baked stuffed mushrooms. A woman had reached for one the same time he did, giving him the opportunity to back off and say, "After you."

She looked like someone's wife: mid-forties, hair too blond for natural, black outfit, running shoes.

"I wore running shoes, too," he said after picking off his mushroom, and lifted a foot to show her the proof.

"Anything goes today," she said while chewing. "How did you know Scott?"

"Longtime friend. Since elementary school. Then he took me on as a reader. Not a first, but sixth or seventh, I imagine. Relied on me to pick up grammatical problems and typos. At that point, he didn't want structure or motivation questions. He was basically finished revising." Brice hadn't eaten dinner, so he looked for another hors d'oeuvre tray. "And you?"

"Student first, slut second, wife third--for ten minutes."

"A Mrs. Acaro?" He forgot the servers. The fireplace, burning real logs, crackled beside them. "In between whom and whom?"

“Not in-between,” she said and drained what looked like a Manhattan. “Want another drink? I’m buying.” She moved into the loud, chaotic melee of mixing mourners, but not before her finger wagged him along.

They were separated. He was pulled into other groups, his conversation solicited by insistent individuals. Not until meeting each other coming out of their respective men and women coat bedrooms did she continue.

“During,” she said. “For a few days, Scott Acaro was a polygamist.”

“He must have seen a lot in you.”

“Youth.” They stood waiting for the elevator. “And my tits. I have terrific tits. Did you notice?”

“Looks to me like they haven’t let you down.”

“I’ve switched to a sports bra. Does that sound like uplifting news?”

The elevator doors swung open and the operator’s presence silenced their dialogue until outside, the side street white with a new half-inch of snow still falling through early pink lamplight and the dim half-light of the city at dusk.

“So what now?” she said. “I’m not married at the moment and I’m horny as hell. You can come over to my place and screw an ex-Mrs. Acaro if you’re game.”

He remembered the first box containing a Scott Acaro manuscript the novelist had messengered to his rented studio apartment on Clark Street. The title page carried a sticky-note in Gothic lettering: “From the imagination of Scott Acaro,” and below, in the writer’s script, “For your consideration. Scott. P.S. Don’t

sweat the big stuff. Scour the small. My publisher's depending on a clean read. – S."

"Sure," Brice said. "And wherever you live, I'm popping for a cab."

She looked relieved, the seventh grade girl getting a "Yes" after asking her boyfriend to go bowling.

"We can go back in to wait," he offered after asking the doorman to hail a cab.

"I like it outside," she said and took his arm in both of hers.

While they waited, he watched the heavy wet snow alighting and melting in her hair. He believed, because the flakes were floating down as wide and circular as marbles, that their falling would soon end. When the yellow taxi light affixed to the building began its slow revolutions, it jaundiced her lovely, full cheeks with each revolution, an effect that did her face no favors. That was the way he remembered her thirty-two years later, himself dying, and her at his side, her hair still blond, and her tits, if he could have recalled them, still terrific beyond anything he would have believed.

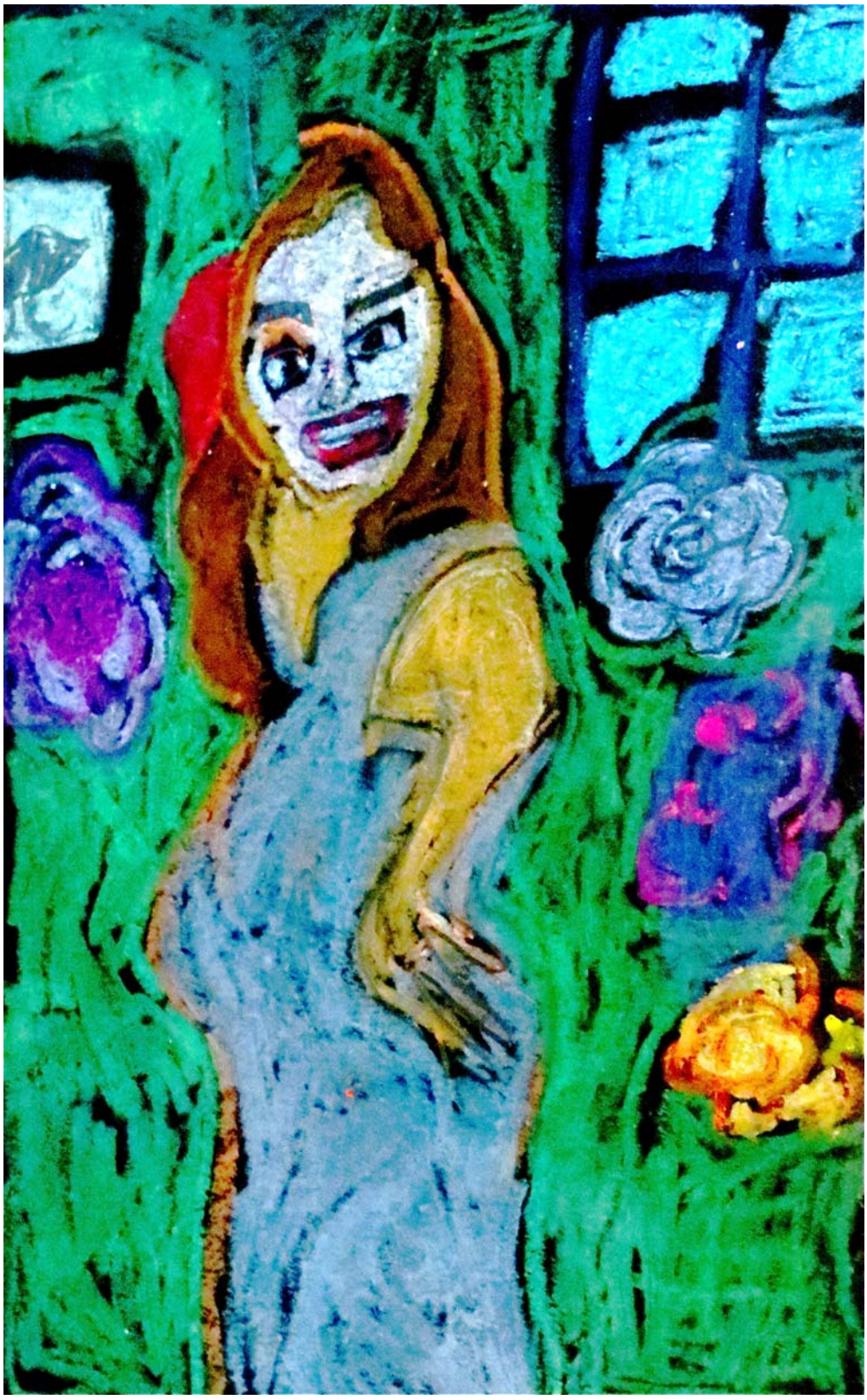
Anna Laura Reeve

THE GIRL WHO CAME OUT OF HER HOUSE, BRUSHING HER HAIR

The lifting heat of Dominican evenings
slows and gentles all movements, but she

walked by the powers of beauty,
pulling her perfect mass of dark hair

over her shoulder
like a branch of black roses.



JStahl **“Self-Portrait”** **pastel**

David Lee
SAN ANTONIO INCIDENT

Jerry Ray Newman on family vacation
ran half a block down the street
to the closest public pay phone
when the Operator said Number please
he said Can yall send a amblance
down here real quick
my mama she's hurt purdy good?

Can you tell me how she's hurt?

Walking down the street
here come this big goddam sowbitch
jalapeno pig with babies
her being a fleshy woman
she couldn't run as fast as the rest of us
it caught her and mault her real bad
she's a bleeding like a sieve
on that one leg

What is the location?

Right down the street from the motel
where we're staying at

Can you give me an address?

What's the address, Daddy?
he says it's 4th street and Rhododendron

Could you please spell that?

Wait. Hey Daddy
Okay, we'll carry her piggyback
up a block to 4th street and Fir
that's F, I, R
she's a hollering in a embarrassing manner
Daddy said could you ask that amblance
to get here in a hurry?

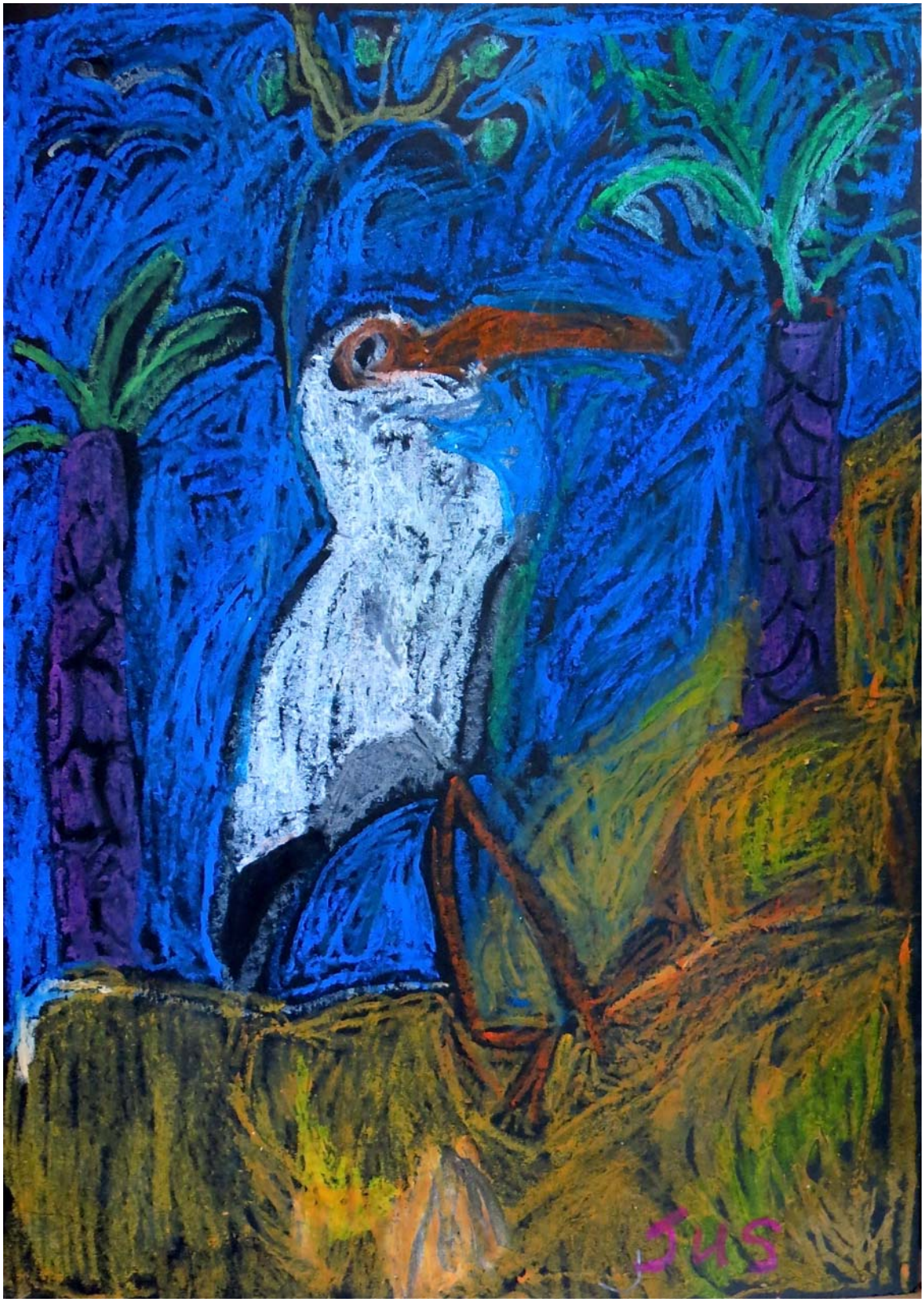
David Lee

ELOISE ANN'S STORY: UPON FINDING THE SHOTGUNNED BODIES OF A SANDHILL CRANE AND HER COLT IN THE GRAINFIELD STUBBLE

I remember when I was her age
one of our neighbors shot my puppy
Daddy said He will pay for that in the hereafter
down the road from our place
somebody had painted on a sign
Repent
Jesus is coming
Soon
The end is near

and I thought then
no it isn't
either it's already come and gone
and He went away, left for good
or it's too late
we are all sunsucked dry with meanness
where a bucket of water on cheatgrass
wouldn't pull enough suption
to let a stem call up spit

why would He want to come back to this?
that's what I wanted to know
what I had to say about all of it back then
when I was a child like her wondering
why somebody would do something like that
to my puppy dog, to me
to my whole world and everything
I'd learned to believe in
about it all



JStahl **“Egret”** **pastel**

Daniel East
DAGWOOD DOGS FROM THE BARBAROUS SIDESHOW

for B.F

What thoughts I have of you tonight Ben Frater
for I drove through thought-cities
wheelie bins like driftwood in black rivers lined with sedans
& my head ached
from the weight of other's sighs, their silences
their slow, choking grasp a black caterpillar
humping through the room.
An empty car, the stars wire-brushed
above you were not an incandescent crucifixion
above you were not a constellation of glowering satellites
below us spears of eucalyptus pierced the breasts of scaffolds
down here it could not matter more
that Alan Wearne hunched
spitting strips of bright tobacco on my Toyota's shotgun floor.
Where are we going Ben Frater?
Why do our bald lecturers seem possessed & score their flesh
with unbroken bottles?
Which way does your forearm point tonight?
If I follow it, will I slink through membered canyons in endless copulation
forests of shark cunts with thrashing sandpaper clits
crashing of amniotic sacks like prehistoric Saturnalias arrayed against the piercing
sober eyes of endless clinical children, their scalpels like chemical laughter in back-lit alleys of innocence?
Is this your bone road Ben Frater? If I follow what will I hear? Electric chitter? The chitinous cackle of cockroach hags with cancerous rib-cages? Crackles like crisp bags flushed down preconscious gutters—those mutters—Ben, is that why we are here?
Is this our smirking angel with the cigarette-ash halo?
Or will I by some unmarked fork find an old fool
his eyes green with scorpions, his teeth aflash from cheekless jawbones
his head backwards looking in paranoid abandon?
Ben, Isis pulled you from the river
you were a crocodile's gullet
we shook the reeds when we beheld your ruby crown
your mouth stenciled in copper, a constellation at your brow—
Thoth's quill was your element, the swill of hyena howls
the maze of men's malarkey, the rack of Moloch's growl
& now
now you have been jackaled
some cheap joke at our expenses.

I dreamt of you Ben Frater
we were building stone fences & yours receded
to a river I could not cross
& though I looked for you on the other side
it was night, there were foxes
& I was afraid.

Bruce Lader
ROASTING THE CHAIN OF COMMANDERS

General Morphine, forgotten hero of this planet, deserves
a Congressional Medal for the supreme numbness hooking
officers who train soldiers of loaded governments to wipe out
less affluent regimes, overthrow exploiting rulers and deposit

the spoils in Tycoon OPEC's account. The moment is ideal
to fatten Pentagon funds, dispatch fleets of nuclear-missile
submarines so the clandestine Bolt-from-Valhalla Program
can breathe new life into global meltdown, protect habitats

of species threatened by extinction. Speed the most expensive
cigars to Colonel Warhead whose dinosaur lobby suppresses
disarmament efforts, floats loans bribing the media to cover
sensational smokescreens, blares the enemy could be anyone

voicing peaceful dissent. Calendar another ten-thousand-rifle
salute to Captain Spark-Plug whose badass peptalks, whenever
platoons need adrenaline rushes on the double, always inspire
swagger, convince them the *real* enemies are puppet regimes

not innocent civilians. Transfix a Hostile Action Cross on
trusted Lieutenant Torquamada whose genius for enhancing
interrogations gives the enemy doses of honest persuasion
to help fess up inside info that reveals faster ways to victory

and the True God. Doff helmets of reverence to Drill Sergeant
Spartan Stoic for never squawking about the thankless career
of hypnotizing our intrepid troops and praying with them to
halo infidels who resist military missions. No stealth bomber

could fly without Corporal Dante's flag-waving faithfulness
aboard Aircraft Carrier Celestial Drones where hypersonic
coffins of revenge, launched against kamikazes who blitz
when backs are turned, rescue the world from 911 tyranny.

Andrea Potos
PERSEPHONE ON THE CUSP

I heard the door
groan on its hinges

where I wavered.
I smelled the warming

incense of oblivion.
The greed of desire

blinded the air.
His gaze tarred a path.

Andrea Potos
LEARNING CASTENET

What have they taught your hands—

the trot and gallop of your fingers

on a dust-risen path through sage

and pine and blue-bright sky--

your long mane untangling behind you,

your eyelids closed

as you pave the beat in your blood.

Andrea Potos
TUG OF WAR

Before I laid
down this rope--

spent hiss on the ground--
I admit

I joined
the continual

pull,
being pulled--false

friction of desire

that chafed
and sliced

the palms
where my lifeline lay--

hidden,
burning.

Nikolai Kantchev
THREE POEMS FROM CHILDE HAROLD MUCH LATER (1997)
translated by Kenneth White

SINGLE BOX

I come back home and sense that something is somehow not right. It seems that somebody's room has entered my room. Hence the note saying that the rent has been doubled. No place for any double-meaning in this scene. I leave and book myself a single box in the theater.

A LITTLE WORD ON THE TRUE FAITH

The truth about water is heard from the talkative river. Where it got it, it alone knows. But the bell of the church has entangled its tongue in the spider's webs and says not a little word on the true faith, and due to this, we have come so close to him who is far away from truth. And we keep silence about the fields which, with their wheaten gold, have bribed the sky to stop raining while there is harvest.

POETIC MEETING AT RAIN TIME

When it rains I feel exalted, blood tingles through all the fibers of my body and, seized by my warmth, I view the lightning as an autograph of the flaming cloud!

Oonagh C. Dougherty

THE CHILDREN AND I NEED SHELTER – LAST NIGHT WE SLEPT IN A CAR (Massachusetts found poem)*

I. From the official Department of Housing and Community Development Homeless Coordinator's training PowerpointPowerPoint

Where were you sleeping before you slept in the car?
How many nights have you spent in the car?
Were your children with you?
Do you own the car?
Do you have the keys to the car?
Do you have the registration or insurance paperwork for the car?
Can you identify the car by make, model, or license plate?
Can you describe the interior color or exterior color?
Are your belongings in the car now?
Where was the car parked when you slept in it?
Where is it parked now?
How did you get to our office?
Can you substantiate that you slept in the car
with at parking ticket, citation
police report or letter from the owner?

II. The Unofficial questions

How cold did it get?
How many people tried to break into the car?
How many people did break into the car?
Where did you relieve your bladder?
Why is your hair so neat if you slept in a car?
Why are you giving your child carbon monoxide poisoning?
Why should you not lose custody of your child for resorting to these irresponsible measures?

And can you tell me the color of the seats?
And how many cars passed you in the night?
What time did the birds start singing?
What time did the children stop crying?

*In August and September of 2012, new regulations came into effect which drastically reduced the right to shelter for homeless families. Mothers and children who should have been eligible for shelter slept in cars, police stations, subway stations, and still they were turned away. The administration claimed that

indigent mothers and children were sleeping in cars and emergency rooms deliberately to make themselves eligible for shelter, or were lying about having done so.

Part I of the poem is from an official DHCD training PowerPoint. for the workers who screen shelter applicants. Parts II is culled from the spontaneous email responses of legal services and community services organizations to advocates.

Keith Coplin
THE 89% MARINE

“And miles to go before I sleep.
And miles to go before I sleep.”
Robert Frost

1965

The pale green of interstate highways, snow in Illinois, Ohio, Pennsylvania, rest stops the great democratic urinals, scratchy food and hot coffee, the darkness of winter in the east. It took me ten days to hitchhike to Boston.

Walter welcomed me.

“Frigid, man, you look frigid.”

“I’m cold,” I agreed.

“Come in, meet the Mrs.”

And there I was, in a second floor apartment in Newton, Massachusetts, on a cold January night, come up from Texas a letter drop ahead of my draft notice.

“Shirley,” Walter said. “Robert Lee Prescott. A sad case, a very sad case.”

“Hello Shirley,” I said, slipping off a glove to shake her hand.

She was small, barely five feet, and as cute as a bug.

“Walter says that you are brilliant,” she said.

“Walter exaggerates,” I said.

Walter asked, “You hitched all the way?”

“Yeah.”

“And it took you how long?”

“Ten days.”

“Well, son, you’re home now, in the cradle of liberty.”

“God bless America,” I said.

Walter and I had graduated high school together. Shirley was a bit younger. They were Christian Scientists, as was Walter’s mother. Following high school in Texas, Walter went with his mother back east. She had divorced her used car salesman husband, because, I think, he was an infidel who preferred doctors to Jesus. Walter’s mom headed toward Boston because of the *Christian Science Monitor*. I suppose Boston was to Christian Scientists what Rome was to Catholics. Anyway, she got employment at the newspaper, and so did Walter. Then he met Shirley. She was from south Boston, and a C.S., and that was that. They married, both worked for the paper, and they seemed to get along.

I was a recent college graduate, on the run, so to speak. I’d lost my college deferment, and my draft board was on my heels.

The first night, Shirley went to bed, and Walter and I stayed up talking.

“It’s war all right,” Walter was saying. “Johnson is determined.”

“You know, I didn’t even know where Vietnam was,” I said. “I had to look it up.”

“It’s a piss poor place to fight. The other side of the world. And you know those Asians, there’s oodles of them.”

“If I get drafted, that’s where I’ll go,” I said.

“Yeah. Draftees are the fodder. Poor boys, lots of blacks, lint head whites. You could be an officer, with the college you have.”

“I don’t want to be an officer. I don’t want to go at all.”

“You could declare yourself a conscientious objector.”

“I don’t think that would work. I’m a Baptist, not a Quaker.” I looked at Walter. “What about you?”

“Married. Shirley’s pregnant.”

“Naw.”

“Yeah.” He grinned.

“Due when?”

“July.”

“Well congratulations, man.” I reached over, took his hand to shake.

“I might get drafted,” Walter said, “if the commies hit the beach south of L.A.”

“You won’t get drafted,” I said.

“No, probably not. But you will.”

And there it was, the DILEMMA. Walter didn’t drink. He didn’t smoke. He didn’t do pot. And there late at night, a cold Boston winter lurking outside, I really wanted a drink. Or a joint. Or a deferment. What I got was a bed on the couch.

***

Harvard. Yep, it was there. But not as I imagined. Dank and cold and old and dirty. Maybe it would have been more of what I thought it to be in the summer, more of a shady campus and ivy covered walls, but now, in late January, it looked dreary and sad.

Walter and Shirley worked, of course, so after a day or two, hanging around their apartment while they were gone all day, I caught a bus down to Cambridge. I'd always wanted to see Harvard, that citadel of American culture, as old as anything in our new sprung country.

But it was a dreary place, dirty snow piled along icy walks, the few students out and about looking like Bolsheviks in the dreary, misty, icy light.

Robert Frost. Well what do you know? Frost, the poet, the New England seer, was to give a reading in the Student Union, 2 PM, free to the public, and there I was, a redneck, Texas drop out, free and fancy in the high culture east. I found the Union, found the room, and was ensconced in a front row seat by one. And by two, the place was packed.

I loved Frost. I had for a long time. He was a country boy, like me, but oh he had talent. Some of his stuff was close to the bone. I can remember discovering Frost, in high school, and liking him even then; but it was in college that subversive professors gave me the real skinny on Roberto. Underneath that cracker barrel persona there was a devil, a dark, troubled, sinister man whose vision was as bleak as it was hopeful.

Frost was to me what a poet should be, erudite, unapproachable, tricky like a fox. Frost lulled a reader, drew him into beautiful worlds of trees and snow, then hammered him in the back of the head with truth. Begin in delight, end in wisdom, Frost's dictum; and once I had that, I had the 3-D glasses to wear when reading the man. Such pleasure, such terror.

And then, lo and behold, there he was.

The poet was preceded by a bevy of suits, but when Frost himself came onto the stage, dressed in a baggy old gray suit, the crowd, a thousand or so, erupted. He acknowledged their tribute with a sly smile and a gesture of his hand.

Harvard's president gave a short speech, then some arts and science guy followed suit, and finally the English Department chairman introduced Frost.

He was old, eighty-nine I think, snow white hair, but impish. Only a few years before he'd read a poem at Kennedy's inauguration. He was world class, and he was in his element on that stage, in New England, surrounded by New Englanders. That most of them were young, twenties at the most, made no difference. They welcomed him like a rock star, and I found comfort in that.

Frost didn't say much. He just read, or rather he recited. He'd been playing the part for many, many years, and he had every one of his poems down pat, like a great actor who knows his lines forward and backwards. Pause and inflection, and that twinkle in his eye, it was a stellar performance. The audience ate it up.

Frost finished with “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening.” I thought I’d read and heard read that poem every way possible, but Frost’s interpretation was at once both new and old, quiet but dramatic; and that repeat of the last two lines, for the first time I’d ever known, was terrifying.

After the applause, the poet took questions, and I shot my hand up. I was only a few feet from him, he at a podium up on the stage and I in the front row.

He pointed at me.

“Mr. Frost,” I said, “I’ve always wondered. In that poem you just read, ‘Stopping by Woods…,’ why did you repeat the last line?”

Hushed silence, I think the crowd wondered too.

He smiled, a devilish little smile, then spoke to me in a soft granite voice, “I couldn’t think of a word to rhyme with sleep.”

***

“Nobody wants this war,” Walter said. “Nobody but Johnson and Bell helicopter.”

It was late, again, and Walter and I were sitting at his kitchen table, drinking hot tea. In a round about way, we were talking about my future.

I said, “The Gulf of Tonkin resolution, Congress gave it to him, the war.”

“It’s all macho now.” Walter sipped his tea. “Toughest guy in the valley, do or die. It’s that Texas thing in Johnson.”

“Could be the Alamo.”

“It will be the Alamo. There’s no way we can win a war like this. It’s too far away, and there are too many of them.”

I was running out of time. The draft notice was gaining on me. I could feel it, like a cold wind out of the west.

Walter asked, “What are you going to do?”

I smiled. “Punt?”

“You could join the National Guard. I know lots of guys who are doing that. Six months, then one weekend a month. Probably none of them will wind up in Vietnam.”

My tea had grown cold.

“Maybe there’s something wrong with me,” I said. “Something I don’t know about. Maybe I won’t pass the physical.”

“You could act nuts.”

“Johnson has a mandate,” I said. “He’s the President, and he has permission. Maybe he’s right. These things, we don’t know what he knows.”

Walter stared at me across the table. The light was dim in the kitchen.

“Bullshit,” he said.

I smiled.

“What are you going to name the baby?”

“Ishmael,” said Walter.

***

And there it was, all the way from Texas. “You are to report….” I was at the main post office in downtown Boston, gone there reluctantly to check General Delivery. It was mid-February, and I’d run out of options. My draft board had caught up with me.

Nobody can be sure what they will do until the moment to do arrives. We all have this fancy notion of ourselves, but reality tends to sober us. I stood in this mammoth federal facility, there in Boston, MA, where, in many ways, the U.S.of A. had actually begun. What better place to be served notice of one’s duty to one’s country?

If the redcoats were down the street, I could see it. Grab a rifle, go to the sound of the guns. Give me liberty or give me death. But there were no Vietnamese commies out there in the streets of Boston. How were those tight little Asian peoples a threat to me, to the country, to the good old American way of life?

A Texas president, in a very round about way, was telling me, Robert Lee Prescott, that it was my duty, my obligation as a citizen, to go halfway around the world and kill yellow men whose politics were all wrong. There was no *Lusitania* here, no Pearl Harbor. Neither coast of the fat U.S. was threatened. But I held in my hand an order, a written, official document that carried with it the power of the federal government. Ignore it at my peril.

So, I left the post office, walked out in the cold, Boston morning, and did the only sensible thing I could do.

I joined the Marines.

***

“You sorry-ass, scumbag, dried-up piece of dog shit! What the fuck are you doing in my beloved Corp!”

Aw shit, this was a mistake.

“How in the fuck am I supposed to make a Marine rifleman out of a limp-dick faggot like you! Can you wipe your own ass, boy! Does your mama still do it for you! Jesus H. Christ! Get your chin down, maggot! Keep those eyes forward!”

His name was Harley, Gunnery Sergeant Macomb S. Harley, and he was my Drill Instructor, and I swear to God, he was the craziest son of a bitch I’ve ever met in my life.

Twenty-four of us maggots stood with toes on a yellow line as Harley welcomed us into the U.S. Marine Corp.

Parris Island, North Carolina, on a funky March day.

And Harley in my face.

“Where you from, shit-for-brains!”

“Sir, Texas, sir!”

“Texas! God almighty, boy, Clyde Barrow was from Texas! You any kin to Clyde Barrow!”

“Sir, no, sir!”

“That boy could shoot! Can you shoot, ass-wipe!’

“Sir, yes, sir!”

“Fuck you, Texas! Don’t lie to me! You can’t shoot because you don’t know how! I am going to teach you how to shoot! Do you understand me, maggot!”

“Sir, yes, sir!”

Harley moved off and I felt myself floating away.

I was still moving on a kind of automatic pilot. I’d left the post office in Boston, draft notice in hand, and by some unseen force was pushed into a Marine recruiting office. But in fact, it wasn’t a force so unseen, unless one considers reason unseen.

I was bound for the killing fields of Vietnam. Of that, I was fairly certain. So, I reasoned, if you have to go, go with men who know what they’re doing, and I figured that in a killing situation, Marines would know what they were doing. There is safety in competence.

All was flurry then, gathering of documents, arrangements made (thankfully I had so simplified my life that the transition from civilian to government issued was amazingly easy). And three weeks later, I found myself bound for duty, honor, and country.

I was surprised that I was still on my feet. I’d been on a bus for thirty-six hours, stopping and going and stopping again, until finally, in Richmond, Virginia, I got on a Marine Corp bus and did another six hours to Parris Island. I hadn’t actually slept on either of the buses, but I hadn’t been awake either. I’d been in some nether world, and now I was in a place far worse.

We moved, destination Processing, and thus began the slow, tortuous, subtle transformation from civilian to Marine, sixteen weeks that would measure me in ways I'd never dreamed of.

Ahead of me in line, two black men were talking softly.

"That honky motherfucker git in my face again, I'm gouging his fucking eyes out."

"He'll put you on the pavement, brother, and you won't have nothin' left to live for."

Welcome to the Crotch.

***

I liked it. That was the thing that most surprised me. The abuse, the pain, the hours, the absolute surrender of any personal authority, I never had to make a single decision. I was told when to sleep, when to get up, when to eat, when to walk, when to run, when to shit, when to sleep again. And the sleep, I've never had sleep like that, dreamless, heavy, and dark. It came quickly and it left quickly. Lights out at 2100 hours, lights on at 0500 hours, and in between, nothing.

In the beginning there was a kind of irregular rhythm to events. Everything was hurry up, then everything was wait. Hair was shorn, clothing issued, sea bags crammed, rules announced, bunks assigned. There was a benign consolation in the group, we all were in it together; and once one learned to

shield one's inner self from the monsters who continually screamed at us, things weren't totally intolerable. But early on, the stripping away process began, as one wire brushes old paint from a house before repainting. We had to become worms. And Harley and crew saw to that most efficiently.

The primary emotion that first two weeks was fear. It was like a dark and heavy sack, put right on our backs, and we had to carry it, at a walk, at a jog, at a run. When we slept, it rested on our chests. It went with us everywhere, fear of screwing up, fear of the D.I.'s, fear of pain, humiliation, and death. It was fear, dreadful and constant, but in a strange, almost sinister way, we learned to live with it.

Oddly, I did well. I never slacked. I kept my rack in order. I put out in the field exercises. I followed the rules. It helped, of course, that I was the oldest one in the platoon. At twenty-two, I was light years ahead of the others, whose average age was probably around nineteen. I don't know that my college degree helped me any, but it did give me just a shading of distance, an intellectual draw-bridge that I could pull up when too much personal chaos threatened. Only one other boot in my platoon had any college, a Hispanic dude named Lopez, who'd had one semester at a community college in California. I was a part of the group but above the group, all at the same time.

***

The only thing I hated was the running. The platoon jog was all right, two hundred of us jogging to the mess hall, jogging to the range, or just jogging to be jogging.

It was the full pack, all gear, ten minute mile that did me in.

In the fifth week, every member of the squad was required to run a mile in ten minutes in full combat gear. And by the fifth week, we were ready, I suppose, extra pounds shaved off, our cardiovascular systems cleansed. But a mile was a mile, and a minute was a minute, and sixty pounds (the extra weight we carried) was sixty pounds.

The tiny little bastards had it easy. Lopez, the skinny Chicano dude from L.A., didn't have any trouble at all. He did his mile in under ten minutes, and he wasn't even breathing hard when he finished. But I wasn't skinny. I wasn't, by this time in the program, fat. But even with my body fat down to zero percent, I was still short-legged, long-wasted, and heavy at the top.

The first quarter mile, I suffered. The second quarter mile I lagged. The third quarter mile I died. The final quarter mile, I experienced the agony of an afterlife.

But I staggered across the finish line in a time of 9:58.

Then puked my guts out.

"Barf it up, maggot!" Harley congratulated me. "Find your mama in there!"

***

I drove Harley nuts. It took me three weeks to discover how. And I stumbled onto it, really. It was the enigmatic smile. When Harley was submitting

me to one of his titanic tirades (I had my socks on the left side of my locker, not on the right side), I gave him the enigmatic smile, and he flipped out.

"Get down, you slimy fucking maggot, and give me twenty-five!"

I dropped to the deck and commenced twenty-five pushups.

But after that, I knew I had that jarhead Marine. The enigmatic smile was nowhere in his lexicon, was absolutely unprecedented in his Drill Instructor universe. It infuriated him.

The fact of it all was: Harley was a life's blood Marine, a true and abiding gung ho spirit. He was nothing else. A southern boy (I think from Alabama), he'd joined the Crotch when he was seventeen, he told us. He'd been at the Chosin Reservoir, he let us know that too, and that had probably been the defining experience of his life. He came out of that Korean cold and horror with nothing left intact except his being a U.S. Marine. Now, in his very early thirties, he was the Corp personified, spic and span, straight as an arrow, the crease in his pants always absolutely and unfailingly perfect.

Harley was the final evolutionary product of the system that now had me, a system as subtle and nuanced as the mating ritual of the spotted tree moth, for despite its harshness, its melodrama, its calculated violence, it was a mind game of the highest order. Marine Corp basic training was designed to obliterate any sense of self and replace it with a modified Marine Corp self: obedience, courage, honor. For a white trash baby like Harley, it was grace, salvation, and eternal life, all neatly packaged and made silo-hardened by Korea, where the faith was tested, where the faith survived.

In Harley's credo, there was no such thing as an enigmatic smile. There was nothing enigmatic. The All, from the Big Bang Theory on, was perfectly, conceptually, concretely understood. The All was obedience, courage, honor - Semper Fi, pal, and damned be doubt.

"What the fuck are you smiling at, shit-for-brains! Hit the deck, fuckface, and give me twenty-five!"

I knew I would never be the Marine Harley was. I had just enough education, and just enough common sense, to preserve myself from any prefabricated notion of identity. There was always a safe place for me to go when the system began to squeeze me. But it was on the rifle range that I came closest to succumbing. It was there, in the heat, the light, the whiz and bang of live rounds, that I found a true pleasure.

We were firing the M-14 rifle, and it was a sweetheart of a weapon: a gas operated, magazine fed, selective fire design. It fired a 7.62 mm round, was fitted with a twenty round magazine, and on full automatic could fire seven hundred rounds per minute. It was big, heavy, and effective at long distance. It wasn't effective on full automatic, the barrel rising on discharge, but on semi-automatic, firing one shot at a time, it was amazingly accurate and had a lethal knock-down power up to a thousand yards.

I'd grown up with guns. I had a .22 when I was twelve. I knew how to shoot. I hadn't been lying to Harley. Out there on the range, with that big M-14 tucked against my shoulder, I showed him. I got 5-rings, dead center, at one

hundred, two hundred, and five hundred yards; and for the first time since I'd met Harley, he had nothing to say at all.

I loved to shoot. I didn't know if I'd like to shoot anybody, but I did love to shoot. The rifle was a marvelous piece of machinery, elegant in its design, pure in its function. There was a comfort to its heft and weight, its mechanism perfectly logical. One hit what one aimed at. The intake of breath, the holding it, the sight clear and dark, the target waiting, the ever so light pull of the trigger, and the discharge, quick and violent, the nudge against my shoulder, the creosote smell of the burned powder - it was an experience that could have made of me a Marine and nothing else.

But it didn't. Shooting was, after all, a sport, not a profession.

In the barracks one night, after an afternoon of range fire, Lopez, the California boy, said to me, "You greased Harley. He hates it, you shoot like you do."

"He doesn't hate it," I said. "He just doesn't believe it."

"Shit, man, I don't believe it. I can't hit shit with that gun."

Lopez was nineteen, maybe twenty, a skinny Latino, from L.A. He'd come east, from some kind of trouble back home, and while working in a kitchen in Atlantic City, he'd got in more trouble, pulling a knife on someone ("I was only protecting myself," he told me). He'd gone before a magistrate, who'd given him a choice: Jail or the Corp.

"It's not a gun," I said. "It's a rifle."

I was lying on my bunk. Lopez was on the floor next to me. It was a half hour before lights out.

"How come you here, man? You don't belong, you know?"

I looked at him. "Why don't I belong?" I asked.

"You're too old, man. You runnin' from somethin'? Hidin' from somethin'?"

"I didn't want to get drafted," I said.

Lopez looked down at the floor, then said, not looking at me, "Army be easy compared to this shit."

I didn't know what army basic was, but Parris Island got harder but also easier as time went on. It was the first three weeks that were hardest, the ache and the fear and the ever present possibility of injury: the pulled muscle from the thousand calisthenics, the broken leg on the obstacle course, the blood in the urine from the kick in the kidney delivered by a D.I. But as the training intensified, so did the awareness. In an odd but efficient way, we boots began to understand, anticipate, and avoid injuries; and when we started firing weapons, that awareness multiplied by a factor of ten.

There was also at work a Darwinian principle. Of the twenty-four men who had started in our squad, at the halfway point, four were gone. In three weeks, two more were gone. They crashed and burned and went out on stretchers or in ambulances. They busted out for dope. Or they quit. The program was designed exactly for that development, the weeding out process an integral part of the function. At nine weeks, we remaining eighteen began thinking of ourselves as warriors.

But Harley set us straight about that.

“You ain’t shit! You know how I can tell you ain’t shit! Cause you don’t know shit ‘bout close order drill! Now close up! Let’s see some pree-cision, maggots!”

Harley’s measure of a Marine, close order drill

Then it was hut-hut-hut, lock-step, right face, left, about, hours and hours and hours. It was the coup de gras in the mind game, the rhythmic inoculation of immediate obedience, do without thinking, automation, subtle, persistent, numbing. There was a Zen-like quality to the experience, something beyond mind, a melding of consciousness and movement.

I think it was during close order that I began to appreciate Harley the most. I am not sure he knew what he was doing. I don’t think it even mattered if he knew what he was doing. But what he was doing was turning us into acolytes, unholy followers of an unholy tradition in the most unholy of unholies, war. Close order drill was nothing but an exercise in unquestioned obedience, and the better we got at it, the more dangerous we became. At the end of twelve weeks, most of us, not all, but certainly most, had been converted. Gunnery Sergeant Harley, and the system of which he was a profoundly efficient part, had turned us boys, us young, American men, into killers.

***

Graduation, flags aflutter, bands playing, we marched in the late spring sunshine like real Marines. Jaded as I was, cynical as I was, affected by my education in modern literature (with all its pessimism intact), I felt a flicker of pride. I'd made it through boot camp, U.S.M.C. I wasn't, I think, indoctrinated. I hadn't swallowed whole the official line. A part of me, way back, covered and clovered with a hearty mantle of self-respect, had survived. I was eighty-nine percent Marine, eleven percent something else.

Still, I wore the uniform. My shoes were shined. I snapped to.

In the post-honors celebration, Gunnery Sergeant Harley congratulated each of his charges, gruffly, but, albeit it rough-edged, sincerely.

"Well, Texas, you didn't bug out on me."

It was the first time I'd ever heard Harley's voice at a normal, conversational level.

He shook my hand.

"Thank you, Sergeant, for everything."

It was a warm and beautiful day. The sun was shining. Several hundred of us milled about the tarmac.

"You get some in Nam," he said. "You a shooter."

"Is that what I am? A shooter?"

"You could be. Your rifle is your friend, Marine."

And I gave him, one last time, the enigmatic smile.

"Semper fi," he muttered, and walked away.

***

There followed a month of Advanced Infantry Training in Virginia, at Quantico, then two weeks leave, during which I checked into a cheap motel in Norfolk and spent my time drinking and watching tv. I was, I think, decompressing, but come August 1, I boarded a bus for San Diego, a cross country jaunt that would lead, eventually, to Vietnam.

All was green and rivers until I crossed the Mississippi. Then the country began a gradual change, growing more desolate and brown, until, past Dallas, Texas, we hit an emptiness that just kept growing.

As I rode the bus across west Texas and into New Mexico, I couldn't help but notice how barren the country was. There were mountains to the south but just empty land to the north. I sat next to the window on the driver's side, and by afternoon, the sun glared, its light penetrating the bus and wearing down the air conditioning. In the heat I nodded, then slept, but would wake with a start to stare out again at the nothingness of the country, the wriggly lines of heat rising in the thermal heated August afternoon.

I'd felt a growing loneliness, as if I was leaving behind the last remnants of all that was meaningful and important in my life. I was shedding skin, outdistancing the scaly, paper-like existence that had been what I had been up to now. The nothingness that surrounded the bus, the empty white land to the south, the desolate brown land to the north, they seemed to me now emblematic, a wilderness with no markings. The familiar was behind me, the unknown ahead.

“Where you headed, Marine?”

He was a middle-aged man, sitting across the aisle from me. I’d never even noticed him until he spoke.

“San Diego,” I said.

“You east coast or west coast?”

“Pardon?”

“Kind of Marine you are,” he said. “Did you do basic at Pendelton or Parris Island?”

“Parris Island.”

“Ah.”

He was dressed western, jeans, boots, a western shirt. And though he wore no hat, there was that ribbon of white just around his scalp that said he did, when outside.

“I was at Pendleton,” he said. “Back during the war. Hollywood Marine. That’s what they called us. Back then.”

“You were in the Corp?”

“Semper Fi,” he said.

“In the Pacific?”

“Tarawa, Saipan. I bought it at Saipan. Lost this.”

He turned slightly and I could see he had no right arm.

A one-armed, ex-Marine, how appropriate. I felt a sudden cold shudder of revulsion.

"I carried it around for awhile," he said. And when I looked askance, he said, "My arm. Carried it under the stump, had my rifle in my other hand. It didn't hurt. Ain't that somethin'? I guess it was shrapnel took it off. Sliced it right off. Bled somethin' terrible. But it didn't hurt. I guess I was in shock."

"What did you do with it?" I asked. "The arm?"

"I don't know. Lost it. Passed out after a while. When I come to, I was in an aid station."

I looked back out at the barren country.

"Jap bastards," I heard the man say.

Albuquerque, I wondered how far we were from Albuquerque. The country would probably get better there, higher, more trees.

***

I slept. Darkness came. Then, in a fit of light, the bus pulled into the station at Albuquerque.

I woke startled, but then regrouped. The driver said we'd have a forty minute layover. He suggested we get something to eat. I was in uniform, so I put my hat on and picked up my kit bag. My duffle was stashed beneath the bus. I was the last one off the bus.

In the coffee shop, I saw the one-armed man. He was sitting in a booth, by himself. I walked over.

"Mind if I sit with you?" I asked him.

He nodded toward the empty bench across the table. I slid in.

I looked around, saw the waitress. She came over, put two menus on the table.

When she was gone, I studied the menu.

Then I looked over at the man.

“Where you from?” I asked.

“Las Vegas,” he said.

“You going home?”

“Yeah.”

The waitress came back, and we gave her our order.

She’d put two glasses of water on the table, and I sipped mine as she walked away.

“My daughter,” the older man said. “She’s sick. In Galveston.”

“You married?”

“My wife’s dead.”

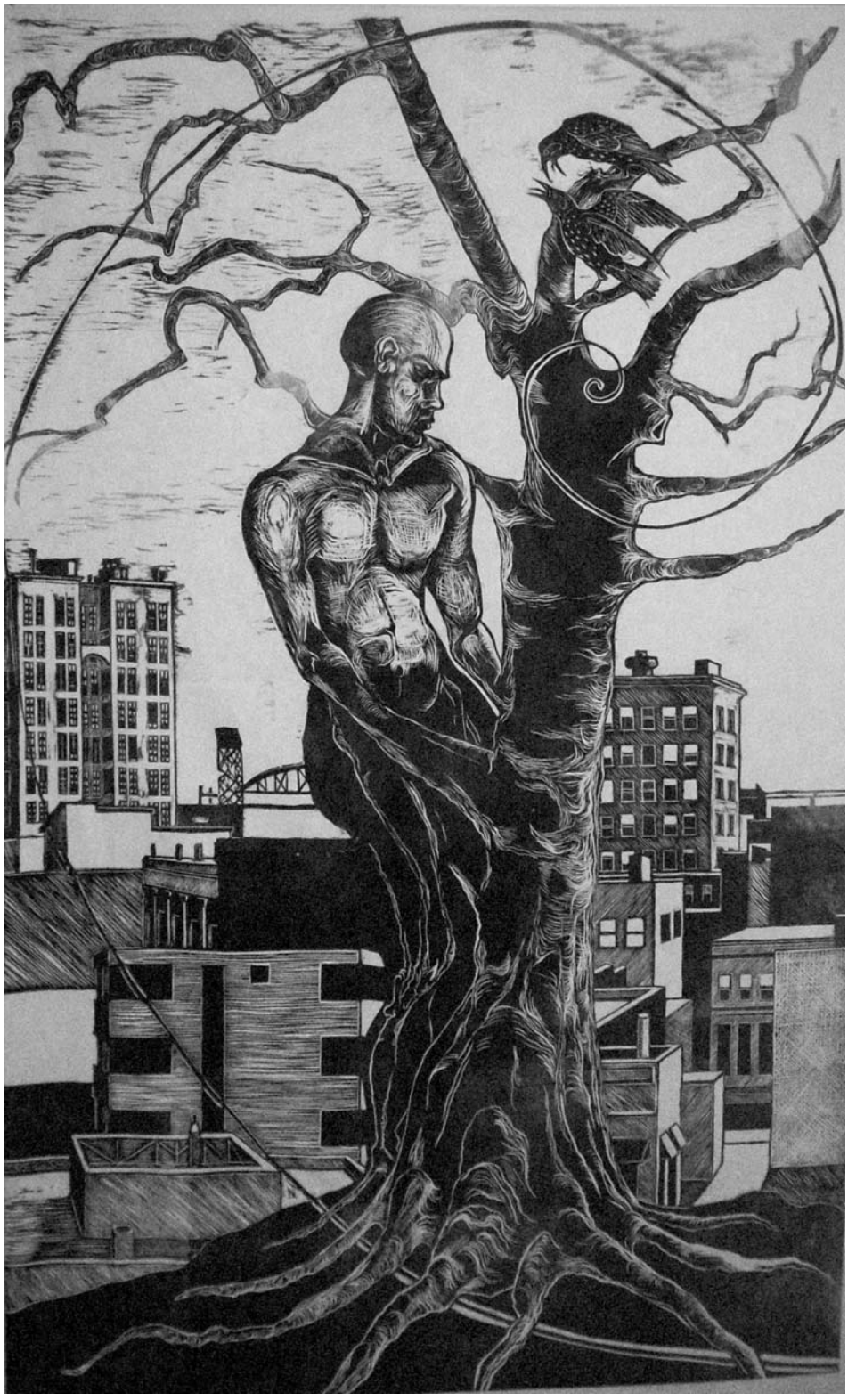
He had chicken noodle soup and iced tea. I had a hamburger and coffee. We didn’t speak while we ate. I smoked when I’d finished. He took his teeth out and wiped them one-handed with a napkin, then put them back in.

We heard the bus driver at the door. Time to go.

I paid for the man’s supper. He didn’t want me to, but I did anyway.

As we left the coffee shop and headed for the bus, I said to him, “Life’s a bitch, ain’t it.”

He grinned at that.



Ben Billingsley “City of Starlings” woodcut

BOOK REVIEWS

FEARLESS HEART

Psalms of the Dining Room, by Lauren Schmidt, Eugene, OR, 2012, WIPF & STOCK.

Reviewed by Doug Anderson

Lauren Schmidt's new poems remind me of Diane Arbus's photographs. They show us the things we turn our eyes from daily. Like Arbus, she treats her subjects with love, no matter how dark or strange. She slips into the skin of a serial killer with the same compassion as she treats the society woman whose principal horror of the day is having a basil leaf stuck in her veneers at a house party. Schmidt is fiercely intelligent but at home in the working class vernacular she grew up in. She never takes cheap shots but tries to find the soft core underneath the pretension, the mutable substance in all of us that carries empathy for the limited beings we are. She is tough and tender at once, and has given us, with *Psalms of the Dining Room,* a rich and disarming book.

In the opening lines of the first poem she declares her position: *When graffiti becomes gospel, ask me/ if I've ever believed in anything.* She follows through with a belief in *what is* not what should or should not be. The poems speak without preaching more effectively than all the rhetoric that typically floodlights the same subjects: poverty, addiction, crime, despair. The young girl crossing the street in a city, dressed to be noticed, and yet withering into fragility, losing one high heel and carrying it as she limps the rest of the way through the intersection. The girl is all of us. We are off balance. We are staggered by the realities of our lives, whether we push them away, medicate them, or rage at them. At the end of the first poem she declares to us: *What this city says, that is what I will say.* Look at what is, she says, it's all there. She is giving us a luminous urban vision as poignant as Nelson Algren's *Chicago: City on the Make*.

There are many rooms in the house of poetry, but the room Schmidt inhabits avoids the careful MFA poem, or the conventional postmodern moves like ironic distance or self-referential language unhooked from its referents. The people, places and things she writes about intrude up on us so emphatically it is impossible to remain detached or playful. Which isn't to say that she doesn't illumine her subjects with such love as to make us work up hope, somehow, some way, that all our love and rage indeed add up to something. There is the sense in her poems that she is unable *not* to do so: it is her nature, and not the effusions of the privileged guilty.

Her Billy Holiday grit and honey voice punches us in the heart but caresses us also. *She opens her shirt the way women do/to have rock stars sign their breasts./But this is no concert and the cop/on the sidewalk strains to pin her/arms behind her back for a check./Tremors scatter from her chest,/screams, like locusts, color the sky.*

This book will stand by itself among the best poetry published this year.

COMPARTMENTS: POEMS ON NATURE, FEMININITY AND OTHER REALMS

by Carol Smallwood, August 2011, Anaphora Literary Press.
Reviewed by Carol Hawkins

Compartments reveal the mind and heart of a poet who unravels mysteries with sensory details and probing questions. Structured forms, like the villanelle, frame fluid topics. Smallwood grasps at ordinary things to reveal truths about unknowable things.

One poem, "By the Barb Wire Fence," takes on the villanelle to corral the passing of time. Lily, the protagonist, seeks refuge among the birds and bees, but not in some silly romantic sense. On the contrary, she hides her tears, weakened by some weight of memory and regret, perhaps a gripping need for something permanent, but the recognition that nature doesn't hold still. One dominant image in the poem, a stone foundation, reveals a mystery. The poet writes:

Lily went where bees made blossoms fall,
near a stone foundation too old to recall.

Even the stone foundation shifts from an assumed place of permanence to a place unknown, an inner mystery, the awareness that nothing is fixed, not even our desires or intentions.

Triplets within the villanelle create the natural world; the reframe and conclusion in the closing quatrain describe a peaceful setting. The center line in each triplet hints at conflict: the need to break from "obligation" and "linger as the sun sank."

The rhythm echoes life, always moving but seeking pause. The narrator appears trapped, yet she can run if she chooses, a breach in the enclosure allows her to leave, but she stays, and settles for a pause. Why? "Family obligations?" Did she ever really have a choice?

The poet writes:

Lily wiped her tears as the kids still small
returned from a game of interrogation

Explicit tears for implicit reasons. Kids pose questions too difficult to answer.

C*ompartments,* like a prayer, echoes chants of extreme repetition, limited rhyme, and tight lines. The personal becomes universal and meaning moves closer with each carefully constructed line.

CONTRIBUTORS NOTES

Doug Anderson's last book was a memoir, *Keep Your Head Down*, from W.W. Norton. His book *The Moon Reflected Fire* won the Kate Tufts Discovery Award, and *Blues for Unemployed Secret Police* a grant from Academy of American Poets. He has poems and prose forthcoming in *The Massachusetts Review, The Cimarron Review, and the San Pedro River Review.* Doug is Poet in Residence at Fort Juniper, the Robert Francis homestead. He lives in Northampton, MA.

Elise Atchison lives in Montana. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *Jackson Hole Review*, *Willows Wept Review*, and *Wordstock Ten*, and she was a finalist for the Walker Percy Prize, Tobias Wolff Award, and Wabash Prize.

James Bertolino's twenty-sixth collection of poetry, *Finding Water, Holding Stone*, was published in 2009 by Cherry Grove Collections. His new volume, *Every Wound Has A Rhythm*, is forthcoming in 2012 from World Enough Writers. He's received a number of national prizes, including the Discovery Award, and retired from a position as Writer in Residence at Oregon's Willamette University in 2006. He lives near Bellingham, WA with his new wife Anita Boyle.

Benjamin Billingsley is a painter and printmaker living in Wilmington, North Carolina. He holds an MFA from UNCGreensboro (1995). He has exhibited work in the Southeastern United States as well as in Estonia, Russia and in a woodcut print exhibition in Kyoto, Japan (2011). In 2012, Ben's "City of Crows" was awarded First Place in the *Living Totems* exhibition at 2TENhaustudio gallery in Ivanhoe, NC. He teaches art and art history at Cape Fear Community College. See Ben's work at http://www.benjaminbillingsley.com/

Paul Boyer left a Ph.D. program in Italian and Renaissance Literature to pursue photography. Boyer worked as a photographer in Port Townsend, Washington, from 1980 to 1999, when he relocated to Durango, Colorado. His career has been spent photographing people and the things they do in their communities. A study of 100 centenarians from around the U. S. and Canada resulted in the 1990 publication of *One Hundred over 100*, produced in conjunction with writer Jim Heynen. Boyer teaches digital photography at the Open Shutter Gallery, and the Continuing Education program at Fort Lewis College in Durango.

Esvie Coemish lives in St. Johns, MI, which on the "Michigan hand map" sits halfway up the lifeline. Esvie is at work on a book length series of love letters, which have taken form as both poems and as paintings. The paintings are acrylic, on 4' X 5' canvasses, brushless, and borrow their titles from lines in the poems, while the poems are wishing they were paint smeared over and around the beloved. When not writing, Esvie is gardening or visiting.

Keith Coplin was raised in Texas, educated in several colleges, winding up with a Ph.D. in contemporary literature from the University of Kansas. His work has appeared in Playboy, The Saturday Evening Post, and numerous academic magazines. His novel, Crofton's Fire, published by Putnam, was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize in 2004. He is currently nearing the completion of an epic Civil War novel set in Louisiana, The Planter's Daughter. A highlight: in 1970 he ran the bulls in Pamplona.

Oonagh C. Doherty was born in Scotland, and grew up in both the United Kingdom and the United States. She has published short stories recently *in 34th Parallel* and *Epiphany;* and has another in the upcoming issue of *Connecticut Review.* Her poetry has been published in *Measure: A Review of Formal Poetry, Crannog, Margie*, *William and Mary Review*, and *Existere.* Although she has earned money as a florist, a secretary, a short order cook, a dishwasher and a cashier, she currently works as a legal services attorney in Holyoke, MA.

Daniel East is an Australian writer currently working in Sydney publishing theatre reviews on media culture reviews (reviews.media-culture.org.au). He is a graduate of UOW's Creative Writing degree and his work has appeared in *Cordite, Mascara*, *Going Down Swinging*, *Voiceworks*, *Red River Review* and *Verity La*. He co-wrote *Sexy Tales of Paleontology* which won the 2010 Sydney Fringe Comedy Award and he is a member of Australia's only performance poetry boyband, The Bracket Creeps.

Okla Elliott is currently a PhD candidate in comparative literature at the University of Illinois. His work has appeared in *Indiana Review*, *The Literary Review*, *Natural Bridge*, *New Letters*, *North Dakota Quarterly,* and *A Public Space*, among others. He is the author of a full-length short story collection, *From the Crooked Timber*, as well as three poetry chapbooks.

Emily M. Green lives somewhere between Memphis, Tennessee, and Elseworlds, where she saves the world from boredom and complacency. Her poems and stories have appeared in such literary journals as *Natural Bridge, Poet Lore,* and *Prairie Schooner.* Her Funny Photos of Monkeys Wearing Lipstick and Smoking Cigars Calendar ends in December of 2012, but she isn't afraid, and does not think you should be, either.

Luke Hankins is Senior Editor at *Asheville Poetry Review*. His first book of poems, *Weak Devotions*, was recently released by Wipf & Stock Publishers. He is currently editing an anthology entitled *Poems of Devotion: An Anthology of Recent Poets*, due out from Wipf & Stock in 2012.

Carol Hawkins holds a Ph.D. from the University of New Hampshire. She has taught writing and directed writing programs for over twenty years, in public and private colleges and universities, both nationally and abroad. Her writing appears in the *National Women's Studies Journal* and *Praxis: A Writing Center* Journal;

Women Writing on Family: Tips on Writing, Teaching and Publishing (Key Publishing House, 2012). Currently she is working on a memoir that explores the intersections of gender, economic class, and literacy. She lives and writes from her home in Downeast Maine.

Richard Holinger's prose and poetry has appeared in *The Southern Review, The Iowa Review, Boulevard*, *Witness,* and elsewhere*.* He has received three Pushcart Prize nominations. His chapbook of innovative flash fiction, "Hybrid Seeds: Little Fictions," was published last year by Kattywompus Press. This summer he won the 2012 Split Oak Press Flash Prose contest for his chapbook titled, "Not Everybody's Nice," about which novelist Cris Mazza described as Alice Munro meets Frederick Barthelme. He lives in Geneva, Illinois.

J. M. Jacobson, an Alaska Native, is studying English writing at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. She credits an appreciation for nature, pioneering spirits, and indigenous cultures for her inspiration in creative non-fiction, as well as fiction pieces.

Nikolai Kantchev, born 1936 and banned from 1968-1980, is widely considered Bulgaria's leading poet. In addition to the numerous collections of his own poetry, he
has translated extensively from French, English, Polish, etc. Since 2001 he has been
a member of the World Academy Of Poetry.

Bruce Lader is the author of four published volumes of poetry. *Discovering Mortality* (March Street Press, 2005) was a finalist for the 2006 Brockman-Campbell Book Award. His third full-length book is *Fugitive Hope* forthcoming from *Červená* Barva Press. Winner of the 2010 Left Coast Eisteddfod Poetry Competition, his poems have appeared in *New York Quarterly, Poetry, Fulcrum, Confrontation, Harpur Palate,* and other magazines. He has received a writer-in-residence fellowship from The Wurlitzer Foundation.

David Lee, Utah's first Poet Laureate, is a greatly admired and loved poet who has played semi-pro baseball, studied in a seminary, been a hog farmer, taken a PhD in Milton studies, and spent three decades teaching at Southern Utah University in Cedar City. Since his first collection, *Porcine Legacy*, his primary publisher has been Copper Canyon.

Andrew McFadyen-Ketchum's poems, criticism, and interviews recently appear or are forthcoming in *The Writers Chronicle, The Southern Poetry Anthology, The Spoon River Poetry Review, Poet Lore, The Missouri Review, storySouth, Blackbird, InsideHigherEd.com,* and *Glimmer Train,* among others. He writes a web-column, poetry=am^k, as a Contributing Editor for *The Southern Indiana Review.* He is editor of anthology, *Apocalypse Now: Poems and Prose from the End of Days*, to be published on December 21, 2012 by Upper Rubber Boot

Books where he serves as Acquisitions Editor. He is also Founder and Editor of *PoemoftheWeek.org* and Managing Editor of *AdHominem.weebly.com*. He is an Adjunct Professor of Creative Writing and English at the University of Colorado-Denver.

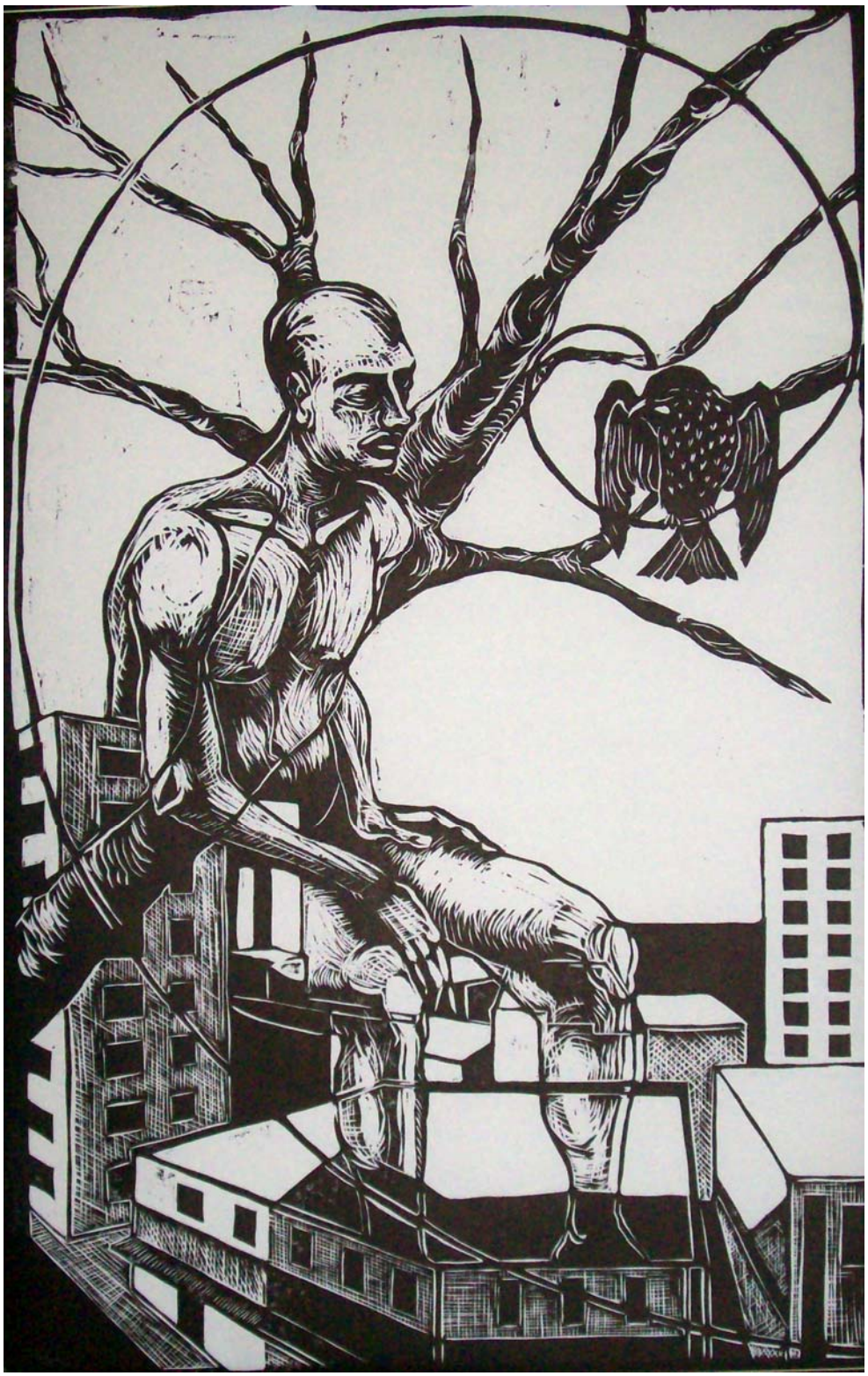
Andrea Potos is the author of four poetry collections, including *Yaya's Cloth* (Iris Press, 2007) and her newest *We Lit the Lamps Ourselves,* just published from Salmon Poetry in Ireland. Another collection from Salmon Poetry is due out in 2015. Her work also appears in many journals and anthologies, including *Poetry East, Wisconsin Review, Women's Review of Books, Southern Poetry Review, Atlanta Review, Beloved on the Earth* (Holy Cow! Press), *Claiming the Spirit Within* (Beacon Press), and *A Fierce Brightness* (Calyx Books). She lives in Madison, Wisconsin with her husband, daughter, and cockapoo.

Anna Laura Reeve is a master's student in writing at the University of Tennessee. Besides reading, writing, and grading, she is cultivating a garden and a marriage, with an encouraging amount of success.

Terry Savoie has been published in more than a hundred and fifty literary journals including *American Poetry Review, Ploughshares, Poetry, Poetry East, Northwest Review, Black Warrior Review, Sonora Review* and *The Iowa Review.*

JStahl is a book reviewer and fiction writer, whose reviews have appeared in *The Tucson Weekly*, *Cutthroat*, and others. A Registered Nurse, Judi has been drawing and painting the past few years, concentrating on pastel and figure drawing. These are her debut pastels to be published.

Kenneth White, a highly esteemed and prolific Scottish poet, essayist, translator, founded the Institute Of Geopoetics (1989) and has taught at universities in U.K. and France, including Paris-Sorbonne. *Open World* collected his poems from 1960-2000.



Ben Billingsley “City of Starlings Triptych Annunciation” wood