

Dawn M. Comer

## The Thing Is...

**Author's Note:** What you are about to read may well disturb you, but Arabella Cosa's experience of life at "The THING? Mystery of the Desert" is by no means exceptional. Alienation accompanied by an innate sense of difference, even freakishness are, after all, common traits of Tourist Attraction Trauma. What does distinguish Arabella's story (or to be more specific, "letter") from other accounts gathered by the National Association of Tourist Attraction Survivors, is her acute awareness of her confused situation as *brought upon by and verbalized to a tourist outsider.*

NATAS believes that without this person (believed to be "I.M. Luvlee," writer of "Songs Sung in the Desert" which has also been reprinted here), Arabella would never have reached this self-awareness, would never have shared her story, and would never have left any clue as to her disappearance and untimely death. Tragically, this letter was found alongside Arabella's body in a remote desert area some fifteen miles from her home.

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**"Death in the Desert," Arizona Range News, June 23, 2005**

The body of sixteen-year-old Arabella Buena Cosa was discovered in the San Pedro desert on Tuesday evening, June 22, by Dragon police detective Lucian Romero.

Cosa's parents, Isabella and Bill Cosa, had reported Arabella missing the night of June 21. Father Bill Cosa had told police that Arabella had left at sunrise that morning, telling them "she was just going to 'commune with the desert,' which sounded kind of odd to us but, well, that's just Arabella for you."

Mother Isabella Cosa declined to comment.

In a press conference this morning, Detective Romero described the body of Arabella Cosa as "reverently mutilated." When asked what that looked like, Romero shrugged and said, "Well, parts of the body had been cut off, but very purposefully. They just were not there anymore." Cosa's appearance, Romero said, was "placid, almost holy" despite the mutilation.

Further investigations, Romero said, will focus on "a letter to an unknown 'dear one'" believed to be I.M. Luvlee of Cleveland, Ohio, found in the "neatly folded pile of clothes" near the body. Romero declined to comment about the cause of death, other than to say that "no evidence exists of an outside perpetrator."

Arabella Cosa was born in Dragoon, Arizona, on December 21, 1988. She attended Dragoon High School where she was a member of her school's National Honor Society chapter and also worked at the family business, "The THING? Mystery of the Desert," 2631 Johnson Road, Dragoon.

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My dear one,

*"Once there lived a queen in a palace  
of bones in the middle of a desert."*

So began your story. Now I will share mine.

Once, just once, I would like to keep a friend for more than forty-five minutes. But I live at the home of "The THING?" and people just keep moving on, moving through. Men, women, children, all pay their dollar to walk through my dad's long metal sheds, enduring all the weird stuff he takes care of, enduring the bad "The THING is" jokes, enduring it all just so they can get to "The THING," the Thing of all things that has been

waiting for them at the end. And when they reach that Thing they are always disgusted, every one of them. I have seen them recoil, have listened to their conversations, have heard the same lines over and over and over again.

``Grotesque!'' declares the man, looking down through the plexiglass case.

``Certainly is!'' says the woman beside him.

``Why would anybody want to own such a thing, let alone display it?'' the man says, turning away. ``It's so shriveled up, so ugly.''

``Why,'' says the woman, peering down through the plexiglass, ``I can't even tell if it's a man or a woman.'' She leans in for a closer look. Looks away. Leans in again.

``Honey, do you think it's real? A real person?''

``Sure it's real,'' the man, walking away from the case and towards the exit, calls back. ``What kind of a freak would fake such a thing?''

The woman takes one last look, shivers, shrugs, and follows.

And then they are gone, having spent a dollar to see The Thing they do not like, The Thing they do not want to understand.

Everybody who has ever stopped to see The Thing while passing by Dragoon, Arizona, on I-10, has walked through my backyard. In the rectangle of land surrounded by my dad's corrugated metal sheds are trailers; I live with my parents in the pale cream-colored one with the brown shutters and the three spindly trees in front, one with half its limbs missing, bearing just a couple off-balanced branches of green. When families pass through the sheds, I ``psst!'' at the kids and sometimes get them to leave their parents and spend a little time with me. ``Do you live here?'' they all ask in wonder, thinking that living in a trailer must be so weird. And when I say that I do and ask if they want to meet my pet snake Molly, they always say yes because, if I've gotten them to come and talk

to me in the first place, I know that they are the ones brave enough to stick around.

I know, though, that I am just a freak show for these would-be-friends, a thing to talk about when they go back to their schools at the end of summer. For the kids who live around me, with whom I go to school, I am also a freak, and my whole family with our boa constrictor Molly and our alligators and Dad's "Very Special Exhibit depicting ancient methods of torture," is a freak family. It's kind of fun being a freak family during the summer when most of the tourists go through, because people like freaks in small doses. But during the rest of the year when I'm at school, being a freak who is part of a bigger freak family is no fun at all.

At school, I'm either teased or avoided. Though I've hardened myself against responding, the teasing still bothers me, and I hate the names my classmates call me, names set up to humiliate me and my family. Trailer trash. Mummy fuckers. Everything in-between. I eat my lunch alone, and after lunch I sit alongside the other misfits on the gym bleachers and read books about other places and times than Dragoon, Arizona in 2005. Sometimes I even create new places in my head or write them out on paper, places where nobody gets left out of basketball games or lunch table conversations, swordfights or dragon racing. Nobody. Not even me.

But more than being teased at school, I hate being avoided, overlooked, invisible. This is less the case with my classmates than with my teachers and has been for a very long time. My second-grade teacher Miss Stumpt was the first to tell my mother that I was smart, "gifted" even, the first in a long line of teachers to send me to the library when I had finished with class work, the first to leave my education up to me. And I liked going to the library, liked reading all I could get my hands on, but I never did like having no one with whom to discuss what I had read.

But in the summer when there is no school, none of this matters. I have no history with the tourists, no context for

them to judge me so readily, no risk to have to take, and if I want, I can play up being a freak in ways that may not be wholly true but that give them something by which to remember me. So the kids—whether six or sixteen—who pass through during the summer, who follow me to play Frisbee in the yard or even come into my trailer, they give me somebody to talk to and to listen to, if only for a little while. And when they leave, I can, if I want, imagine what it would have been like if they could have stayed longer, to actually count them as friends. Most times, though, I don't bother since none leave much of an impression and more are coming through all the time. So most times this not-keeping-a-friend thing doesn't matter so much to me. Most times I'm ok with forty-five minute friendships.

Last Wednesday, though, last Wednesday was different.

The Thing is, I loved you and you left. I understand you didn't have a choice, that your parents moved you on, that even if you had been in control you still would have left because leaving would have been the best thing for you, that Dragoon, Arizona, has nothing to offer a teenager from Cleveland, Ohio. I understand all that. But, still, the Thing is, I love you and I can't get rid of that.

The Thing, this Thing, is a monster. Had I just never met you I would have been relatively okay with who I was. I took a certain pride in belonging to a family that, by choice of location and occupation, set themselves apart as freaks. I took a certain pride in being set apart in that way, and that unusual pride helped me to explain to myself why I was always so out of place, so out of sync with the rest of the world. My pride was a defense mechanism, to be sure, but most days it worked to keep me from utter despair. Within my family I at least thought I had a place—surely I could play the role of freak as well as they—but had you asked, I could not have said what that place was exactly, how I fit into this attraction my

parents maintained for all the world to see. But as I had never thought about all these things, really, my life was not so very bad—it felt comfortably unnatural and abnormal, like the life of a child whose parents run a tourist trap should feel.

But then you came walking through my backyard, catching my attention before I could catch yours, and you smiled at me and waved, and I smiled and waved back. We sat beneath the half-tree beside my trailer, and there you read to me a story you had written about a queen who ruled a desert from her palace of bones, and I swore I could have written it too. My too-small world expanded, all my defenses fell away, and I loved you more deeply than all the books I've read, more deeply than I love my parents, more deeply even than I love my pet snake Molly. Within minutes of meeting, even before the start of your story, my heart lurched and I knew, just knew, that this was it, that this was the Thing I'd forever been waiting for. And I loved you. But I didn't know how much until you left.

When you left and my mind wandered to think of you, I had this deep ache and thrill all at once, like I had been punched in the gut with something I'd always wanted. I could not have you. That much I knew. I could never even contact you, as I didn't know your address, your phone number, your email, or even your name. You had said you would give all that to me, but by the time you were prepared to do so, your parents had seen the Thing at the end of it all, and I knew from their pale unsettled faces that they had hated what they had seen as much as they claimed to love you, so there by the half-tree in front of the door to my trailer, they snatched you away, insisted the time to leave was now, and you were gone.

And when I went back to my trailer and slumped onto the couch in front of the turned-off TV, knowing my life would never be the same, knowing I would surely die in this desert place all alone, all my mother could say was that I needed to get off my butt and

get busy cleaning Hitler's car before the lunch hour was over.

Even though I am one in a family of supposed freaks, since meeting you I can verbalize at least one thing that sets me apart as a different sort of freak from the rest of them. I want to create other lives, other worlds, out of words. I want to imagine worlds greater than my own, live out lives that have both more and less promise than my own. I want to escape into somebody else's mind, body, and soul, if only for a short while. I think I've actually known all this for a long time, but since meeting you I can put words to this longing. I want to be—no, I am by my very nature—a writer.

Still, I know that this is not acceptable to a mother who is a freak only to the extent that she can profit from it, putting on her desert mystery goddess routine as she sells dollar tickets to The Thing, as many as three hundred on a good day. And this is not acceptable to a father who believes the only lives and worlds worth knowing and living are the ones we have been given, the physical ones grounded in the here and now. In my father's view, the only worthwhile way to be a freak is to collect freaky objects and display them for people to look at and say, "Wow! Whoever runs this place must be a real freak!" never realizing he's just a businessman with unusual merchandise.

It's not that I can't appreciate my father's decision to buy The Thing years ago, that I can't appreciate his interest in preserving curiosities and oddities. I can appreciate his interest; I just can't keep his distance. While my father can keep from seeing his strange driftwood monsters with their contorted forms and blazing red lips as anything more than strange pieces of driftwood with faces painted on, I can't. I see the monsters in my nightmares, see them take on lives of their own and use their big red mouths to devour all that I love. Sometimes I even think I understand them.

As for Molly, dad likes her because

she's a big boa constrictor and people like to look at big boa constrictors, and mom likes Molly because drawing people in results in more money. I like Molly because she can do what I cannot—she can swallow other creatures whole. I feed her whole live wriggling rats and watch as she swallows them down. Sometimes she curls herself into a tight circle, mouth resting on her tail, and I have wondered lately what would happen if she took to swallowing herself whole.

That's what I want to do, devour myself. I cannot do what I imagine Molly could if she had the will to, so instead I want to carve up my flesh and swallow the pieces down bit by bit until nothing remains. To be my own source of nourishment. To need nothing but me to become nothing. As best I can recall, Narcissus looked at his reflection, fell in love, fell in, and drowned, but he is not me. Not by a long shot. Facing my own face in the mirror is something I've never been able to do, my eyes always averting my eyes, so the fate of Narcissus will not be my fate. No.

I want to disappear, to absolve myself for loving you too much and myself too little. I have taken small cuttings from unseen places—my thighs, my buttocks, my breasts—have tasted my own blood, have felt on my tongue the smooth slick texture of my own flesh, my own blood. Cannibalism? No. This is communion. Flesh becomes bread, blood becomes wine. The ultimate feast. I forgive my own sins even as I commit them. The ultimate redemption.

I recognize that pain is an impediment, but pain can be conquered. There are ways to numb the nerves, certainly, but if I am to eat myself alive, I must be open to the pain, to the full reality of what I am doing. I will confess, too, that such a communion raises practical concerns, that at some point I can't help but fail, will be unable to surpass my humanness. After all, even if I start with the surface flesh and move on slowly towards the most important organs, at some point I will die and leave part of me behind. Maybe at the moment of eating my own

heart. Maybe at the brain. At some point, this communion feast will fail and I will die, leaving flesh and blood and brain and heart, unable to eat any more. And even as I do commune upon myself, my body will war against me, seeing to its own repairs, its own regeneration, even as I long for, work for, my own end.

This reality frustrates me beyond reason. I have tried and tried and tried to think of some method by which I can have everything end up even with, at best, only my jawbone remaining as evidence of my former existence. Like in IQ where you jump pegs with pegs in an effort to end up with only one, the rest cleared off the stubby board. But even when you win the game, there's still always one left. One damn plastic peg left standing alone on the board.

This much I know: In this communion feast, I must be alone. No sharing of body and blood, no passing of bread and cup, no public declaration that I'm part of any greater body, that I'm sharing this meal with anybody but myself. It must just be me, alone, in private, in a closet somewhere or under some stairs or hiding in my locker after school has ended, someplace where there is room only for me and a blade. Even better, out in the desert, the blazing sun my only companion, drying me out even as I bleed myself dry. Nothing to hide me from all who will not pass by. For my communion, there can be no separation of body and blood, no separation between blood shed and body broken. Instead, there is only bloodandbody, inseparable, indivisible, both for me and from me for never and ever, amen.

I look at The Thing in my father's shed and see a shriveled up body, blood and fluids gone, leathery flesh remaining and, beneath the flesh, giving the flesh shape, brittle bone. Somebody long ago sucked life from it somehow, but such an end is not for me. I want all of me gone, especially flesh and blood—that's the only way to make communion work. If anything has to remain, let it be bone. Let it be my skeleton. Let it be that

frame on which rests all that matters least to me.

And what has any of this to do with you? You whom I love? Nothing. Maybe nothing. But maybe, just maybe, everything. I must believe this has everything to do with you. I must believe you would understand what I am saying, that you would have thought the same thoughts, felt the same feelings. In that deepest part of me that not even I can know, I am convinced that this must be the case. I just want the pain of loving and losing you to go away.

I am more than just a freak. I am sick. I know that. I read what I have written and I try and wrap my mind around this self-communion thing, and I know that I am sick with no chance of a cure. I am a freak in the way the rest of my family is not. I cannot market my freakishness for money or turn it into a sideshow or advertise it on billboards, and as much as I'd like to, I cannot take it on and off to suit business hours. I know that at the very core of who I am, I am a sick, sick freak in a way that my family could not even begin to comprehend. This is why I must consume myself, must practice self-communion until nothing remains. Oh, that I could only succeed! That such a thing were possible!

The thing is, I love you and you left.

The thing is, I do not know who I am apart from you.

The thing is, I am also glad you left. Your leaving was best for us both. For what if I had wanted to devour you instead of me?

And so I am writing you this letter you will never read because I must. Maybe it doesn't matter that you will never read it, that I will never again see you. Maybe what matters is that I am writing, that I met you, that I have changed—no, not changed... become aware—because of you. But right now I'm in this awful stuck place; I can't move backward, and I can't move forward, and all I can think to do is erase myself from where I am.

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*The following story, believed to have been written by the addressed of Arabella Cosa's letter, was first published under the (presumed) pseudonym "I.M. Luvlee" in The Cleveland Quarterly's annual "Youth Make a Difference" issue (Spring 2004, Volume XIV, Issue 1).*

"Songs Sung in the Desert"  
by I.M. Luvlee

Once there lived a queen in a palace of bones in the middle of a desert.

Queen Dessicada ruled over dry things and dead things, over cacti and corpses. This, though, was not as it had always been. Ages ago she began her reign as Queen Succulent and she ruled over a verdant rainforest full of waterfalls, fruit trees, and subjects—animal and human alike—who loved her most dearly. Queen Succulent reigned with such kindness and generosity over her lands, and her subjects loved and trusted her and each other so much that they linked arms and legs, mouths and belly buttons, breasts and elbows, and became a living, breathing, palace of flesh surrounding the Queen whom they loved.

All was well in Queen Succulent's lands for many a year until one day a witch whose vision was poor entered into the land and did not like what she saw. Where everybody else saw a palace whose very walls pulsed with joyous life, the witch saw only a magnification of what she saw every morning in her own bathroom mirror—embarrassingly naked bodies that weren't at all pretty but that had moles and scars and parts that were too fat and parts that were too lean, eyes that were too small and feet that were too large. And just as she did every morning, the witch did everything she could to keep from looking at the palace, looking down at her feet, up at the sky, and when she thought she was safe enough, closing her eyes.

From a long ways away, Queen Succulent spied the witch and, given the witch's

penchant for running into and tripping over all manner of objects, it was clear to the Queen that the witch was trying everything she could to not look at the palace, but for the life of her, the Queen could not imagine why. When the witch reached the palace gates, Queen Succulent met her outside and welcomed her in, just as she did every traveler. The linked arms that made up the gate parted and ushered in the witch before linking again, and a multitude of voices chorused a welcome. The witch (whose hearing was also poor) did not respond.

From her moment of arrival, the witch cursed Queen Succulent for her palace of people and her welcoming ways. "Don't you know better than to take in strangers?" barked the witch. "Who knows what a stranger might do?" The Queen was taken aback by the witch's reaction, so new was it to her, and she had only in all her life met friends, never strangers, and so did not recognize the witch as such. So Queen Succulent persisted in showing the witch kindness, in offering a bed for the night, a bowl of warm lentil soup, a glass of strawberry wine. But the witch just shrunk further into herself, pulled her thistle-weed cloak tighter, and glowered at the Queen. Still, when the Queen left, the witch guzzled the strawberry wine, devoured the lentil soup, sprawled in the bed, grumbling under fleecy blankets that all she was given and all she consumed was miserable.

Days went by and the witch was made welcome in the castle. She ate more lentil soup, drank more strawberry wine, slept more nights in the bed she had been given. Queen Succulent watched and wondered over her—never had she seen one so sad, so alone, so in need of touch, companionship, love, yet the witch would have none of it. The witch also watched Queen Succulent, but rather than wonder over the Queen, the witch despised her. Not only was her palace made of people, but people surrounded her all the time, smiling at her, singing to her, touching her in ways that made the witch terribly

uncomfortable, made her itch to even think of such contact. Never could she imagine smiling at or singing to others, let alone touching and being touched, and being in the presence of people who wanted to do all three just made her pull her thistle-weed cloak tighter around her so that if any should try and touch her, they would soon regret it. But though the witch could have left at any time, she stayed and watched Queen Succulent with her subjects, and she despised their mutual desire to touch, to love, to protect each other with their own flesh and keep everybody safe from harm.

One day the witch approached Queen Succulent's throne and demanded that people stop touching, that the palace of flesh be disbanded and that rocks and sharp glass be used for the palace walls instead. "Walls are for keeping people out," the witch hissed. But Queen Succulent, puzzled, asked why people should be kept out when walls could grow big enough to let all people in. "No they can't," insisted the witch, whose vision was so poor she could not even see how things worked in this particular land, to see that everyday the walls were growing and expanding as more people, even she herself, entered into Queen Succulent's domain. And though the witch told the Queen that she had powers that could make her regret this decision, the Queen did not change her mind.

Queen Succulent was a good woman, a kind woman, a woman who wanted for everybody to know love, even the witch who had shown no reason to deserve it. She had seen how the witch cringed when she and her subjects drew near, had seen how she used her thistle-weed cloak to keep everybody away. She had even seen the witch in her private quarters put her cloak over the mirror before undressing before it. Everything she had seen. In all of this, in every minute she had been with or listened to or watched the witch, she wanted that the witch should be loved, should know love, and though she sensed the risk to herself was great, Queen Succulent knew what she must do.

If there was a mystery to be solved regarding the witch who disclosed nothing about herself than that she had "powers," it was this: even had the witch so desired, she could not be touched, could not be held or loved or comforted ever, for she carried within her flesh a curse that made everything she touched wither and die. This was the thing Queen Succulent did not know, though even had she known, knowledge of this thing would not likely have stopped her. One night after the witch had cast her thistle-weed cloak over the mirror in her room, Queen Succulent went, alone, to her. A candle burned on the mantle above the cold fireplace, enough for a little light but no warmth. The Queen shivered a little and in doing so, announced her presence wordlessly. The witch spun around and tried to cover herself from the Queen's vision while leaving the cloak over the mirror. Exposed. She must either be exposed to the Queen or to herself, and as she knew that exposure to herself was more than she could bear, she covered herself as best she could from the Queen with her arms and hands and left the cloak where it was.

In front of her, Queen Succulent saw what she had seen every night after the witch disrobed before her covered mirror. She saw a body. A woman's body. A body no more and no less beautiful than any of those in her lands. And then Queen Succulent did what she knew she must despite the witch's cowering. The Queen embraced the witch, just as she embraced everyone who entered into her lands for whatever reason. But as the Queen's great love flowed out of her and into the witch, the witch's flesh curse crept inside the Queen. After the Queen's embrace, the witch snatched her thistle-weed cloak from the mirror, as much an angry, unloving woman as before, and even though she had been healed of her flesh curse, she still had no desire for touch or for love, still despised Queen Succulent and all her subjects. The only effect the Queen's embrace had on the witch was to send her fleeing from the palace of

people, cursing and spitting as she sought shelter in the jungle wilderness.

All in vain. Such was Queen Succulent's conclusion after the witch went running from the palace, unloved by her own force of will, her own shield of selfishness. This saddened the Queen, but she was still grateful for all the others in her palace and in her lands who did love her and who allowed her to love them in return. Joy came from them, life came from them, love came from them. But Queen Succulent had only a moment to think this before everything and everybody she ever knew began to dry up and die.

One touch. One touch was all it took. One touch of her hand to the shoulder of the child whose body helped make up the doorframe to the witch's room. One touch and the child sighed, wilted away, shriveled up, skin turning to powder beneath Queen Succulent's hand. She didn't know quite what to say or do, but suddenly where her hand had touched flesh, it now touched bone. The child was gone. And then this thing, whatever it was, spread from the child she had touched to the others making up the doorframe, and then the door, and then the walls of the room, and all throughout the palace until all had been touched, all had died, all had disappeared except for the bones. The palace shuddered, sighed, and sunk in on itself, bones locking around her. Within hours, her palace of people had died, and all their flesh had withered and fallen away. The green forest turned brown, a blazing sun rose, and soon all that remained was destroyed by fire. Grief gripped the Queen and she cried out against this curse that was so undeserved. That her subjects, all her subjects, should die, and by her hand: this was the most bitter truth of all. All but one, one who had ventured beyond.

Though Queen Succulent had loved all her subjects equally, she had a special fondness for Sestine, a young singer who entertained her with songs and poems and who was away on a tour of the outerlands when the curse took

hold. On Sestine's return to the palace some months following the disintegration of the palace, Sestine saw the Queen through the tangle of bones that now imprisoned her in her palace, and though the singer's impulse was to break through the tangle of bones and rescue her, the Queen warned, "Come no nearer! I am cursed!"

"What has happened, my great Queen?" cried Sestine who could see not only the destruction of the land and subjects, but also the queen's great sadness and loneliness.

"I have been cursed," howled the Queen, so great was her despair. "I have been cursed by a witch I gave my love to help. From now on I shall be Queen Dessicada as everything under my touch withers and dies. See what has become of my palace of people?" she sobbed, motioning with her hands. "They have become a palace of bones."

The heart of the singer went out to Queen Dessicada, "Please, let me come to you," Sestine pleaded. "I bring in my pack peaches from the Freestone orchards and water from the fountains of Afar. They, along with thoughts of your great kindness, have sustained me on my long journey, and I know they also will restore you."

And though the Queen wanted nothing more than to let the singer enter, to let Sestine bring water and fruit and poetry and song, she knew that she could not bear the life that she could not leave if she dried up the one person who was most dear to her.

"Go!" shouted Queen Dessicada, more harshly than she had intended. "Turn and run away from here, away from me. I could not bear to have you die along with all the others. Oh that I too could die! That I could wither away and send my soul elsewhere! But as I can only cause others and not myself to wither, grant me this one wish. Go out and deliver your water and fruit, your poems and songs to another. Enrich another's life instead of mine. If I can believe you are beyond where I can see, doing what I can only imagine, then I will have some small measure

of joy in this domain of the dry and the dead.''

And so Sestine, the Queen's beloved singer, went away saddened but knowing it must be done. She delivered fruit and water not to another, but to the desert, singing poems and songs to the air around, the sky above, and the sand beneath. And around Sestine sprung up the most unlikely of plants, plants like giant thistles with unpleasant prickles and spikes that not even the singer could touch. And though this saddened Sestine, still the singer was grateful for their company, no matter that they could not touch. One day, Sestine was sure, these plants would burst and spill water over the sand, water that would work its way back to Queen Dessicada and her palace of bones. One day, Sestine believed, the Queen would live again, the palace would spring to life, and all would know that the source of their life was the water and fruit, the songs and the poems sung by another in the middle of a desert.

Christina Yu

## A Note for Visitors

*for Runit Love-Pancholi*

Come this way  
through the booby trap  
of garbage bags  
and hat-sized racoons  
making love between them.  
The avalanche  
of TV dinners will stop  
tumbling out of the fridge  
to let you pass the mirror,  
the stubble-peppered sink  
where a whore and a faggot  
meet after their respective episodes  
of passion. Try that mouthwash  
martini on the cork coaster  
of Greek lovers coupled  
in a position we tried once.  
If you can guess  
which one of the six cabinets  
holds the nest of fruit flies,  
you may kiss  
the pregnant belly  
that floats from body to body.

Rumit Pancholi

## Mired

*for Christina Ting Yu*

I find you cutting tofu with a chopstick  
because there are no clean knives left.

What becomes of that eventual sweat,  
dragging through dark corners of your face

as my finger moves slow along the surface  
of your dusty television screen?

A peeking eye reflects through that sliver,  
sees that photo on the mantle, turns

into that smiling man cupping a trophy.  
He looks like his father; so much

for taking his lead, you smirk, realize  
that I am standing there, watching you

drop that chopstick into a sink full  
of water, mired in the cuttings of knives.

Lisa De Niscia

## Pepper

It was unusually warm that Sunday afternoon in late October, and the creek's cool water felt good on Elizabeth's bare feet though she wasn't sure why she bothered to take off her shoes and socks before stepping in. She wasn't sure why she bothered to fold her socks and place one inside each shoe. Or why she carefully sat her shoes side by side making sure that the ends of the laces were tucked beneath the folded socks. Or why it mattered that she didn't want her dog, Pepper, to pull the socks out of her shoes. Stay, Pepper, stay like a good boy was what Elizabeth said to her Springer Spaniel, the dog she had loved for half of her life of thirteen years. "Stay," she said as she took several more steps, the water soaking her pants to right below her knees.

The creek was at most three feet deep and only in some places, but that was deep enough thought Elizabeth as she saw her father, stepmother, and three half sisters in their living room. Elizabeth watched from their front lawn through the picture window, and Elizabeth wondered how long it would be before they noticed she was standing there. She wanted to throw stones at the window, she wanted to wave her arms, but she also didn't want to disturb them, for it looked like they were having so much fun talking and laughing. She wanted to rush in and join them, but she couldn't bring herself to do that either. Instead, she turned around and ran towards the creek, just a short distance from their house. "Don't follow me," Elizabeth said to her dog as they both ran. "Go home, Pepper, go home." But Pepper didn't go home, and Elizabeth kept running towards the creek.

Elizabeth took a few more steps into the water, and as Pepper splashed behind her she wondered what it would've been like if it was her mother in the living room, and Elizabeth wondered, as she had wondered most of her life, why her mother had to leave when Elizabeth was only two years old, why her

mother had to move so far away, why across the country to Albuquerque. Elizabeth turned around and grabbed her dog, carried him out of the water. "Stay," she said as she set him down a few feet from the water's edge. Pepper shook furiously, and Elizabeth tasted the cool water droplets. She wiped her face with her forearm and walked back into the creek, but no sooner had she taken two steps before Pepper followed. And once again Elizabeth carried her dog out of the water and plopped him down near a tree. This time she didn't say anything to him before heading back into the creek. And this time, like the last time, Pepper followed his mistress.

Elizabeth tried to ignore Pepper as she waded down the creek, walking as if in slow motion, but she glanced at him swimming beside her, and she wondered if the water was too cold for him. She wondered if his paws were cold. She wondered how long he could paddle like that. She suddenly stopped and watched Pepper paddle onward until he turned around and looked at Elizabeth.

"You can't keep following me in here," Elizabeth said, and she couldn't continue to watch Pepper paddle madly, so she walked out of the creek.

Elizabeth sat on the ground next to her shoes. She unfolded her socks and tugged them onto her wet feet, and she didn't like the way her wet feet felt in her dry cotton socks. As she reached out to grab a shoe, Pepper took the left one. Elizabeth hurriedly put on her right shoe and hopped on one foot chasing after him. He suddenly lost interest and flopped down, panting. Elizabeth crinkled her nose as her hand grasped the slimy shoe. She attempted to wipe saliva off with a brown leaf but that only made her shoe dirty as the crisp leaf disintegrated into little brown bits. I'll be sure to remember to take my shoes off before I go inside was what Elizabeth thought, but when she got home she forgot about her shoes as Charlotte, her stepmother, greeted her at the door.

"What happened?" Charlotte said when

Elizabeth, noticeably wet, stepped into the foyer.

“Pepper ran into the creek and wouldn’t come out,” Elizabeth said as the rest of her family gathered around her in the living room. “I had to go in after him.”

“Was the water warm or cold?” Elizabeth’s sister, Joyce, said.

“That water must be full of germs,” her other sister, Virginia, said.

“You better change or you might get sick,” said the third sister, Carol.

“That dog needs to go to obedience school,” Elizabeth’s father said.

“No, no, no,” Elizabeth said hugging Pepper. “He’s a very good dog.” Then she let go of Pepper and said, “Watch.” Elizabeth took off her left shoe and threw it across the living room. “Fetch, Pepper, fetch.”

And Pepper did.

Alan Lindsay

Merrimack, N.H.

What, when I return,  
as I did today, to the place  
where I was raised, am I—  
knowing that I will never find it—  
looking for?

And why,  
as I drive the old streets, marking  
all that has changed, holding  
out for something

recognizable, why  
am I reporting all I see  
and all I miss  
to you,  
invisible beside me?

Nosing among new-named streets,  
blank buildings whose histories confront  
me  
with aimless urgency  
old spots among the smear of the new:

the McDonalds where I used to work,  
the house of the old friend's parents  
with his name still on the mailbox,  
the spot where Sandy,

on the day before we all left for  
college,  
knowing she was the one in the world  
I most wanted to love  
leaned in at my window  
and made an offering of goodbye, and

the place I last saw Kathy  
before she died.

I know that here is where the text of  
whatever it is  
I go back to read  
must be read. But I don't know why,

before I set my eyes on how little  
of all I remember remains,  
before I gave over the questions again,  
I was already writing these words,  
to you.

# No Private Language

*The sender of the shopping list is not the  
same as the receiver, even  
if they bear the same name....*

*Jacques Derrida*

My lists of essential things  
achingly composed,  
my dashed off notes,  
of what I might forget to do  
in time, are all for someone  
I can never know, can never meet  
however long I pace row on row  
the parking lot, pressing and pressing  
the panic button, scanning desperately  
the silence—something

like my dad I guess  
who left before I knew my name  
and did not report in  
until the day I heard he'd leaped  
and missed  
a moving train.  
It's how it is:  
a shame.  
Someone who does not exist  
is not calling your name.

James Matthew Wilson

## Acedia

*At the Civil War Memorial. City Cemetery,  
South Bend, Indiana.*

Some numinous thing I'd like to say, but  
guilt  
    Before oracular high-flung sentiments  
    Requires that what's been said is also  
meant,  
And so my eyes cleave to the moldering silt.

Some miseries I'd like to offer witness,  
    But that is not my blood-churned scalp,  
and not  
    My shrapnel tiling the dust, and not  
My father's gravestone unchiseled and  
unpolished.

The broken eaves of the green mansion bend  
    Beneath the weight of snow and limbs, the  
crescent  
    Of sky above its chimneys opalescent  
With dry light, where all speech comes to an  
end.

    But who were these? These wraiths of  
singing bone  
    Who knew Heaven's guilt and left me here  
alone?

James Matthew Wilson

## Balloon Man

You know the sound balloon strings make  
when they been cut;  
Tied to split knuckles, how they limply  
dangle there.  
If Mac comes in and groans again and rubs his  
gut,  
I'll say, "At least you got a job. The kids  
just stare

At me, and then up at the red, the rubbery  
green."  
He knows the economics, so that's all I'll  
say:  
Ten-thirty a.m. I give up and cut each  
string,  
Then go to take a stool at Chuck's. If kids  
won't pay,

Then I don't gotta stand, a clown at the  
grocery  
Until the sun has made my glasses steam and  
glare,  
And I wish I could type or something. Who  
wants to be  
A broken vendor day in, day out? Rotting  
there,

The stench of vulcan in your nose, the cheap  
twine cutting  
Into your right hand's gritty reddening  
knuckles. The left  
An only, last and loyal pal, its fingers  
clutching  
The groaning flip-blade in its plastic-  
handled heft

To cut those unsold helium balls -- the  
useless things.

But Mac doesn't hardly sigh or swear at  
me no more,  
Or ask, after I quit my work, if I will bring  
A few bucks home from Chuck's. He knows that

he has scored

Points on an old wound in the ribs that hurt  
like lime  
Sizzling on my finger-cuts. I bow my head  
When he gets home from work and wipe the tar  
and grime  
That grocery parking lot have smeared on it.  
I'm dead,

Those little pimply brats say, when they come  
and gape  
At me and the bright swelling sores of my  
balloons.  
On a good day some brat with his allowance  
apes  
Me, buys a green and blue, and I am flush by  
noon.

I don't care how they go, though it helps to  
sell, I guess.

I'm neither lame nor small, I cannot  
sing a song,  
But with a low and hungry swipe at her pink  
dress  
My free left hand sends little Isabelle  
along,

Since she just like her mother speaks too  
much. The rest  
Stare from the corner of their eyes on the  
far curb.  
Unless I start to scratch my sweating pits or  
chest,  
Then they look wide and whisper something. I  
disturb

Grown women, but the brats come with their  
popsicles  
As if I were a hobo clown fired from the  
circus,  
To see if I'll bend down to take a few flung  
nickels.  
Of course I will, the fucking kids. The  
things that hurt us

Most aren't the hard humiliations of a job,  
Or knowing I'll never screw their mothers in  
their Festivas'  
Back seat, but wondering if some other  
drooling slob  
Has beat me to my stool and is shooting my  
tequilas.

Mac knows that kind of man, though he  
will never be one.  
He's got a girl, an Olds, in poker always  
two-pair,  
While I take what I can, like a dog in mating  
season,  
Or a balloon man in the spring happier than  
you are.

Chris Gerben

## after the movie

It came as a revelation  
a relief  
to finally realize  
to finally define it  
as a stillness  
that overcame me  
that overcomes me  
each time for hours  
after the varying fact

But it's a redefinition  
a redefining  
this stillness that  
I want to be  
poignant  
such as noting—  
or using—  
an antiquated urinal  
in some elongated  
restroom full of couches  
that there are  
pedals  
near the ground  
and now  
signs eye level  
that read under clear tape:  
`push pedal  
to flush'' to explain  
which makes so much sense  
to chuckle  
why'd we change?  
or can we  
change back?  
should we, but,  
that is not stillness  
It is

walking from the theatre  
down a darkening  
series of streets on  
Saturday—Washington and  
Division and Huron  
and Ann

usually so loud  
tonight even here there  
is stillness  
buses glide and  
a fire engine  
rolling with lights  
twirling overhead and  
police cars close behind  
even here there  
is stillness  
But this isn't

about just sound  
or images or  
moments in crowded space  
when I'm alone  
and walking back home  
when I don't want to  
talk and I know  
why and I don't know  
why

tonight like many nights  
I dial your number  
and look both ways  
crossing Huron and  
at the digital screen—  
your number—  
looking, holding  
with my ungloved hand  
so cold  
I think of immersion  
and ice water  
I think of Shackleton  
and what it means  
to be a man  
and what it means  
to love  
a man  
to you  
to home  
I'm getting closer again  
I close my phone  
and the memory of intention  
is erased

for now  
I run up steps

repeating in my head  
as I have  
the entire walk  
between there and here  
It is  
a revelation  
a relief  
this definition  
this redefinition  
this awful stillness  
at last

David Ewald

## Can't Keep the Spider

So we're watching *Arachnophobia* on video—just my parents, my sister and me—in our darkened living room when something happened strange enough to distract me from the screen. My father, see, he was sitting on the couch with us when the movie started, but after a few minutes, as soon as the credits were through rolling and the guys were roaming the jungle searching for the nastiest ugliest most deadly spiders, and my father knew these spiders were going to come out soon, he did something strange. Or some *things* strange, I should say. First he drew his legs up so that his knees were against his chest. Then he ducked his head down between his knees several times. He looked like a little kid that had lost a coin in his crotch. I ended up watching him instead. He was sitting right next to me and I just had to smile at his antics. Halfway through the movie my father took to the carpet and laid there curled up. I saw him close his eyes at the part where the spiders drop from the ceiling of the house they're invading. And in the end, when the biggest spider of them all shows itself, my father actually yelped.

When the movie was over and the credits were rolling, he got up from the carpet and stretched.

“That was good,” he said.

“You were scared,” Mom said.

“Daddy, you closed your eyes,” my sister added.

He denied these accusations and promptly went to bed before they could say anything else that might embarrass him.

I thought he'd been scared too. I'd never seen him scared before. I was only twelve at the time and still had a ways to go.

Just to make certain of my father's fear, I asked Mom before going to bed that night, “Dad's really scared of spiders?”

“Oh yes,” she replied.

“What kind of spiders?”

“Oh, all kinds, I think.”

“Even daddy long-legs?”

“Probably even those.”

“Daddy long-legs are some of the most lethal spiders in existence, but they don’t have big enough mouths to bite us. I read that somewhere.”

“What a memory you have.” And then she kissed me on the forehead. Her answers had somehow given me confidence.

So knowing that my father had this weakness—that he was scared of something—really fascinated me. And spiders. I could take advantage of the fact that he was scared of spiders. They weren’t intangible the way ghosts were, or radiation from the microwave.

I went outside one day after school, around the side of the house, walking close to the wall, until I came to the air conditioning unit. Behind the unit was a thick electrical cord that snaked in through a hole in the wall of the house. This hole was the lair of a black widow spider I’d been observing for some time already.

The spider wasn’t around this afternoon, nothing in its web. I decided to change that. I walked across the gravel and through the small square patch of lawn in the center of our yard, past the water-plant covered ridge and into no-man’s land. I called this area of the yard no-man’s land because (a) I was interested in World War I (or any war for that matter), and (b) the place looked like a wasteland, dry and barren with rocks dust-caked and strewn everywhere. I saw cracks in the ground. Fissures, I thought. You could fall into them at the slightest tremor. Swallow you whole, down you go.

I found a stick nearby, picked it up and carried it over to the nearest anthill. Red ants moved about sluggishly. That would have to change. I stuck the stick deep into the ants’ home and they went instantly wild, incensed. I let go of the stick, which was still stuck in the hole, and stepped back as the ants rushed my feet, seeking out the

enemy who'd attacked from above. They were nearing my shoes; I had to act quickly. Already a couple of reds were on the stick. I grabbed the stick and ran out of no-man's land, down the ridge and across the lawn and gravel, back to the air conditioning unit on the side of the house. As I ran I watched the ants to see how far they'd come down the stick. I watched how close they were to my hand. I was smart. When they came down the stick, almost to the end I held, I grabbed the top end with my other hand and flipped the stick and the ants over. I did this three or four times before I reached the air conditioning unit, so the ants never got to my hands.

I came up close to the spider's web and touched the stick to it. The ants ran down the stick and onto the web. They wriggled there but couldn't get free. I smiled, watching them trying to free themselves when it was obviously so hopeless. I poked the two ants with the stick; they tried grabbing on to it but they were already too stuck in the web to save themselves.

The motion the ants were making would signal the black widow sooner or later. I just wanted it to be sooner instead of later. So I helped the spider out by moving its web around with the stick. The web shook but didn't break; it was much too strong to fall to pieces that easily. I didn't want to break the web anyway—no, I wanted that widow to come out and feast. But the thing is it didn't come out. I must have sat there by the side of the house, gravel digging into my knees, looking at that messy web for about half an hour before giving up and going inside. I figured the spider didn't eat until night and besides, I had better things to do.

I went into the living room and played Nintendo. That kept my mind off the spider for a while, but still I wanted to see it that day, before night. I wanted to capture it, not just watch it. I had to have it.

I grew impatient as I played. The video game wasn't doing anything for me. I decided to go back outside and see if the widow had

come out of her lair yet, and sure enough, one of the ants was missing from the web. I felt good. That meant the spider had come out and devoured one of them. I was sure it would come out again soon, and I wouldn't have to wait long and feel such strong impatience.

I picked up the stick from off the top of the air conditioning unit. Then I tapped the web again with the stick, and this time the black widow came out. It moved so quickly that I just had to take a step back, because I'd read these stories from people who swore that black widow spiders are excellent jumpers. This one lady said she'd been rummaging around among some boxes in her garage when she came across this widow in one of those boxes. The widow just sat there, watching her I suppose. She thought it was dead. But as she leaned in close, it suddenly leaped at her! She screamed and fell back, fearing for her life, and lucky for her the spider landed on her blouse so she was able to beat it off with a shoe before it could touch her skin.

That's what I read anyway.

I didn't know if this particular black widow was in a jumping mood or not, but I wasn't going to find out. I knew that if a black widow did bite me, I probably wouldn't die. I'd get awfully sick, though. Widows are really able to kill only old people, unhealthy people and babies—that's why I'd never let my grandmother into the garage if she wanted to go in there for something. I'd always do it myself. She'd look at me with this strange, scrunched-up face, but I didn't mind that look. I only thought, *I'm saving your life, Grandma*, and tried to transmit that sentence to her through my powers of psychic communication, the same as the radiation rays from the microwave. I was the microwave then. Or trying to be, anyway.

Garages used to scare me because of the black widows, but by the time I was twelve I'd overcome my fear. My father, at the age of forty, still hadn't overcome his.

The black widow I was dealing with now hadn't jumped; I could breathe easier.

Surprisingly this one was ignoring the second ant. Maybe it was full. That didn't matter, really, because the spider wasn't going to be out here much longer. I ran back inside the house and grabbed a Tupperware bowl from out of an overhanging cabinet. Then I went back to the web and waited. The black widow just sat there in its web, not moving. Maybe it was getting ready to jump. I braced myself.

``Are you playing with the spider again?''

I groaned. My sister really annoyed me then.

``No duh,'' I said. ``Here, help me catch it.''

She stood by my side. ``With what?''

``With your hands, stupid.''

``I'm not stupid.''

``Yeah you are. You're just too stupid to know you're stupid.''

``That's mean. I want to play your Nintendo.''

``You want to what?''

``I want to play your Nintendo.''

``You...want to *play*...Super Mario Brothers 3?''

``Yeah. Why not? Come on. You're not playing it now.''

``I am too playing it now. I'm just taking a little break, that's all.''

This was a new development, my sister wanting to play my video games—any video games, really. She had never asked to play Nintendo before. Had she suddenly gotten smart or something? I would have to watch this development closely.

``Maybe later,'' I said. ``After I'm done with my game, maybe. Or tonight.''

``Okay. But you know you're gonna have to let me.''

``Don't you want to help me show this black widow to Dad?''

``No way. He'll kill you.''

Maybe he would kill me. I hadn't thought of that.

``Fine,'' I said. ``Go watch the microwave for now.''

``Dumb-ass.'' She punched me on the arm.

It didn't hurt.

Kristin left. I stood there holding the Tupperware, thinking of all the ways my father could kill me. He could drown me in a toilet, or stick me in the bathtub and then throw a plugged-in toaster into the water. That happened in a James Bond movie I watched with him once.

There were all sorts of options available to him, but none of them seemed like interesting ways to die. I'd have to think harder. And I'd have to think later. Right now I needed to get the black widow into the bowl, without my sister's help since she was being such a wenis.

Then I really thought hard and decided I'd need two bowls for this job. So I went back inside and came out with a glass dish about the same size and diameter as the Tupperware bowl. The black widow was crawling for its lair. I'd have to act fast. I held the Tupperware bowl upside-down above the web. I held the dish just below the widow and its web. Then, with a quick slam, I put the two together and there—there! The black widow was mine, caught in between the dish and the bowl. That pleased me.

Lucky for me, I could see through the dish up at the spider. It was struggling, bouncing around, having quite a tough time trying to break through the barriers. No use, of course. You can't bust out of Tupperware—not if you're a spider anyway.

I ran back into the house, anxious to get things going. My father wouldn't be home until later that night. I looked at the time on the microwave. 4:42. I had about three hours to annihilate.

I played Nintendo. But this time I played a different game, which I didn't last long at. So I turned on the TV and watched a good portion of the basketball game. That's how I spent most of those three hours. Before I really got comfortable out there in the living room I put the black widow container on top of the refrigerator. I didn't keep it with me in the living room because I thought the TV might have an adverse effect on the

spider. Maybe the flashing images and glow would make it go wild, or sedate it. Either way I couldn't have that with my father coming home. The top of the refrigerator was the safest place, far out of range of the microwave, which would give off its radiation rays and probably cause the spider to mutate into something monstrous. I couldn't wait.

Every fifteen minutes or so I'd check on my spider just to make sure it hadn't died on me, or knocked the Tupperware bowl over and gotten out. Whenever I checked, the widow quieted down and sat still. It was really a very good little pet. I wondered if it was watching me. I thought that would be cool, but I'd heard that widows couldn't really see in daylight. That would make the night so much better.

Mom came home a little before seven. As usual she was tired and immediately started rummaging around in the cabinets, looking for something to eat. She would cook dinner later, but for the moment she needed snack foods that were never there because my sister and I always ate them.

She came into the living room where I was just finishing up the basketball game.

"Where's the Triscuits?" she asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"You haven't seen them around, have you?"

"No."

"Does your sister have them?"

"I don't know."

"Where is she?"

"Her room."

Instead of going to my sister's room, Mom returned to the kitchen. I heard her open the refrigerator. That's when I jumped up from the couch and ran to warn her.

"Mom!"

She was bent over, just picking out a few TV dinners to microwave. She turned to me. I pointed at the top of the refrigerator. She looked up but didn't seem all that surprised by what she saw. "Oh," she said, and set the dinners on the counter. "Did you find that in here?" I shook my head.

``Out there?``

I nodded.

She didn't seem concerned that there was a potentially lethal spider sitting trapped on top of the refrigerator. She didn't show concern that the only thing separating her from possible death was plastic. I was surprised by Mom's calm demeanor and, also, a little scared of how she wasn't reacting, like she'd been turned into a zombie-mom by the radiation rays from the microwave. Maybe she'd gone into shock from seeing the spider. That would be something to tell Brad when I saw him at school.

``We can't have that in here,`` she said without looking at me.

Uh-oh, I thought. I wouldn't be showing the black widow to my father tonight. I waited for Mom to continue, but she didn't say another word and instead concentrated on fixing our dinners. She looked the boxes over as if she were inspecting something more important than food. That meant our conversation was over. She hadn't exactly given me an order, so I didn't know what I was supposed to do with the spider. Nintendo called. I went into the living room.

Mom took a few minutes before coming out and giving me the order for spider removal.

``Get rid of it, Kevin.``

``How?`` I held back from pushing start on the controller. I didn't really want to play this game; I'd beaten it before.

``It's your responsibility. Black widow spiders are dangerous.``

``I know, Mom. How?``

``Oh take it out front, I don't care. Just get it out of the house before your father sees it and has a coronary.``

I turned off the system and went back to the kitchen, where I took the spider's cage down with both hands. ``Oh...okay,`` I said, trying to make it seem as if she'd really hurt me by not letting me keep the black widow in the house. Mom didn't notice my attempts to gain her sympathy.

Not surprisingly, I'd lost focus by this point. Why had I brought the spider inside?

To show my father, sure. But there was more to it than that. I wanted to scare him, just because I'd never scared him before and now, for the first time ever, I knew of something that truly frightened him.

I'd even thought briefly of putting this arachnid under his pillow. Maybe it would lay its eggs there. Maybe it would bite him. I'll never know because I took it outside to where the rose bushes were in front.

The porch light illuminated the way. Almost as soon as I stepped outside, I heard a low rumble, a car, and looked up to see my father pull into the driveway. The headlights lit me up. The spider must have freaked because I could feel skittish movement from within the cage, and for a moment I also felt fear. That left me, though, because I realized my position: here I was holding this Tupperware bowl and this plate together, and my father had just gotten out of his car. My chance, right here.

He approached me. "What d'ya got there, Kev?"

"A spider," I said in a low voice.

"What?" He leaned in closer.

"A spider," I repeated, and then, loudly: "A *black widow* spider." I held up the cage so that it was directly in front of his face. My father's eyes widened. He sucked in air quickly, sounding like a whistle.

Then my father ran inside the house. I stood there smiling, and less than a minute later the front door burst open and my father stepped outside, a can of insect spray in each hand. He came toward me, slowly. I didn't dare move.

"Set it down, son. And step away from it."

I obeyed. He rushed forward and kicked the Tupperware bowl off and away. We both stood there, close beside each other, looking down at this black widow spider that wasn't moving at all. "I killed it," I said.

"Let's make sure," he said, and shook both cans.

The spider moved. My father screamed and started back toward the front door. "Don't go

near it!" he warned.

My spider crawled away from the dish, toward the rose bushes. I let it go. I looked for my father, but he'd already gone inside.

Dinner was even more tense than usual that night. After he'd finished eating, my father got up from the table and rummaged around underneath the kitchen sink. He brought out four cans of insect spray and walked over to where I was still eating my dinner. He tapped me on the shoulder and motioned for me to follow him. We headed for the door.

"Where we going, Dad?"

"Spider hunting," he answered.

We went almost every night after that, until the novelty of it wore off and we returned to the way things have always been between us. But I will always remember those nights. On those nights he insisted that I go with him all over the place—around the sides of our house, into the garage and then around the fence in the backyard. Searching. Black widows only come out at night, you see. That's what he said. I wasn't entirely sure about that. We did find widows most nights, and with my father it was always the spray. One time Mom tried talking him into using a different technique: "Why don't you use a shoe, or a broom, like I do?" But he'd just shake his cans and go about his business, a true professional.

Those nights usually lasted late. Once, it was nearing midnight and he still hadn't found a black widow to satisfy his urge. They'd probably all moved to the hills by then.

He was still as obsessed as ever when I entered high school, only then I refused when he asked me to go hunting with him. By that time, I had better things to do.

Danna Ephland

## Notes for Needle

take a number,  
take a seat, sit  
on your hands, take  
a deep breath, let it  
go like a long-haired man  
traveling west to water

and work, your chair  
scraped to the heaping desk  
no roll or swivel, tight  
over paper, you scribble  
nonsense & orders:  
    take this,  
take that. pack it all in a bag  
canvas strap pulled across  
a yellow summer shirt

your twenty reasons blackbirds  
down the page, or a blue heron  
landing across the creek, leaving  
discernible marks:

    your life span,  
the rent, a head count of friends  
assembled on the porch last night,  
what time the sun set, how long  
the man will be gone, how far  
the west coast is from here as if  
you haven't counted a thousand  
times since leaving

take a magazine, take  
your pulse,  
take a fall,  
a dive, take a sip,  
a drink, sink, scratch,  
pull out your hands

## Needle and the Ditch

Needle stares at what's left  
of a deer in an early November ditch.  
Curl of ribs, limp chain of vertebrae,  
skull nearly whole with no eye, broken  
legs in a pile and one hoof.

Needle knows these bones.

*Pick up a piece,*  
the bones suggest. Needle's palms itch, but  
she hesitates. Not sure she belongs in these  
woods.

Like a car wreck, repulsed and relieved,  
Needle is drawn, can't move on.

Needle squats in dead grasses bursting  
with seed. The bones stare back. *Touch us.*  
*Take us home.*

Collecting the bones in her shirt,  
Needle pulls its tail up to hold them.  
They enter her body. Death  
as close as this ditch to the road.

## Needle Moves In With Louie

on Roosevelt Road, just down the street from  
Fitzgerald's Blues Bar.

Actually Louie's moved out. Needle hasn't  
seen him since the closing.  
Polite man, a little jumpy, signing over the  
two bedroom bungalow.

When the walls speak, Needle turns up the  
music, she doesn't want  
to hear an old song, the one they played last  
night at the blues bar  
when Needle ducked in the ladies' room on  
purpose to miss it, didn't

want to spoil the party for buying her first  
house. Her friends  
didn't understand her awkward exit. Needle  
wonders if they listen  
to lyrics while she is gone. She sits in the  
stall longer than she  
needs to. Needle's hearing is good, she  
regrets. It always has been.

The walls speak. She can hear them in the new  
house. Needle  
cleans away more than dirt. Louie's temper is  
all over the place,  
deep in rugs she lets professionals clean.  
Needle wipes marks,  
unscrews hardware from door frames, pulls  
down thick curtains,  
throws windows open to air, runs water until  
it's cold. It was Louie.

Out front Louie introduced Needle to his  
Camaro, called it his *girlfriend*.  
Louie smirked toward the house where a woman  
sat in the corner staring  
at a newborn. He called her *the wife*.

Needle scrubs  
while Louie looks on.  
She doesn't want him here, didn't ask for  
this. Surrounded by chain link  
fences and brick bungalow walls, tidy yards

with lawn ornaments, with  
flags, Needle heaves grass seed where Louie's  
dogs paced it all away.

Corey Madsen

## Snow In Darkness Will Fall

They were just ten miles out of Elk Rapids, easing through a desolate strip of snow-covered state forestland, when Chase said, "Dad, the road's gone."

Gerald was hunched over the dash, searching the light of his headlights for the tire tracks he'd been following, but from the front of his truck on it looked like the ocean floor.

"I can still see the ditch," he said. "And no more comments like that. Not while I'm trying to concentrate on the road."

He turned the knobs of his truck radio until the static receded around a single distinguishable voice, and then cranked up the heater. He held his hand to one of the vents until the air coming out felt hot enough to evaporate the fog on his windshield.

"Great. Five more inches by morning. I'll be plowing this guy's driveway all night."

As they coasted through an unblemished intersection, Gerald gave the steering wheel a few lazy pulls back and forth, leaving two snakelike imprints behind him in the soft red glow of his taillights.

"What are you doing?" Chase asked.

"Just goofing around." He straightened the wheel and flicked on his high beams, but all this did was illuminate the falling snow. "My God, this is the worst I've ever seen it."

"How much further is it?"

"I don't know," Gerald said, this time trying his wipers. "A few more miles, maybe."

He glanced at Chase to make sure he wasn't smearing the condensation on the windows again, and found the boy sitting still with his hands in his lap, watching intently as snow came racing at the windshield like a vicious swarm of moths. He was dressed in his brother's old hand-me-

downs: a red knit winter's cap with enough snags in the threading to make his father self-conscious whenever he wore it out in public, a pair of cheap Thinsulate gloves worn through at the fingers, black snow-pants that made a *swish-swish-swish* sound whenever he walked, and a perfectly good down winter coat that both he and his brother had ruined by wiping their runny noses on the cuffs. Looking at the boy now, with his hair sticking out the bottom of the cap, Gerald wondered when the last time was his mother had given him a haircut.

"Why don't we play a game?" Gerald asked. "You pick."

Chase tucked his chin inside his jacket, which once would have made Gerald weak with affection, but now seemed like a habit a nine-year-old should have outgrown.

"I don't know any games," Chase said.

"Of course you do. Stop doing that with your chin."

"Aren't you supposed to be watching the road?"

Gerald turned up the radio so that it would be difficult to talk over and tried to zero in on a Rolling Stones' song that couldn't fight off the static. When a set of headlights appeared in the distance ahead of him, he tapped the brakes and returned both hands to the wheel, leaving the song to be swallowed in the hiss of competing frequencies. This could be a drunk driver heading home from one of the roadside taverns out this way. The longer it took for the vehicle to draw nearer, the more certain he became of this.

"Are you buckled up, Chase?"

"Yes."

The vehicle soon passed, but just before the shape of its headlights revealed to Gerald the shape of a full-sized van, the driver flashed his high beams. In what almost felt like return fire, Gerald flashed his back.

"Fucking prick."

Since he now had bits of coloration floating through his vision, he rubbed his

eyes with his knuckles, knowing this was useless but liking the odd sense of relief it brought him anyway.

“Why do you have to plow out Mr. Lipscomb’s driveway all the time? I thought Mom said he was the one who’s always out shoveling.”

“He pays me. Besides, do you know what would happen if I didn’t plow him out? They’d probably find him dead at the end of his driveway.” He stopped rubbing his eyes. They were beginning to adjust to the indiscriminate blackness that was a Michigan highway at night. “The man just doesn’t know any better.”

“Why doesn’t he just live in Chestnut Ridge with grandma and grandpa? Then he’d always have someone to do it for him.”

“He already has someone to do it for him.”

Chase sat quiet for a moment, but it was clear from the look on his face that he had something else to ask.

“What?” Gerald said.

“Why do we have to plow out his driveway so late?”

“When the hell else am I supposed to do it?” He reached over and zipped Chase’s jacket all the way up, since his scarf was falling out. “Remember what I said about asking so many questions?”

Within five minutes, they pulled into a long driveway that led uphill to a two-story house with smoke pluming from a stone chimney. Even before he hit the gas Gerald knew that a vehicle had not been up this way since the last few snowfalls. The accumulation of snow was so thick he could barely tell where the side of the driveway stopped and woods began.

As he steered his truck through each snowdrift he could hear a gentle scraping against the undercarriage and the low whine of engine belts getting wet. More than once his view of the driveway dimmed as a fresh blast of snow smudged out his headlights, but accelerating caused just enough wind and vibration to clear it away. He wondered if

he shouldn't have just dropped the plow from the moment he'd made his turn.

"This could take me all night," he said. Chase looked over at him and seemed unable to decide whether or not it was worth his time to complain.

Gerald parked his truck in front of the man's garage and thought twice about shutting off the engine. It had to be less than ten degrees outside, and the first thing he noticed looking out of the windshield was the row of gigantic icicles hanging from the eaves like knives. The front windows let out a dismal yellow glow, illuminating deep footprints that led, in different directions, from the garage toward two separate doors. Once again he was left puzzling over which was the one most preferred by its tenant.

"C'mon, Chase. Let's go see if anyone's home."

He got out of the truck and took the leftward path, since the snow had been somewhat packed down. It led to a side door beneath a part of the overhang that was bearing the weight of a large broken pine branch. They tried their best to plant their feet directly inside the boot prints, but snow had filled them. He immediately regretted not having left his truck running—they could've used some headlights. The wooden siding, half-stripped of its white paint from the weather, made for a brittle hand rail, and the surrounding woods gave him the strange feeling that if he were to let Chase wander off for only a second, something would jump out and grab him.

"Here," he said, reaching behind him. "Hold my hand."

Eventually they came to a small concrete stoop that had been recently shoveled, though some snow had since drifted on each step. While the storm door was closed, the inside door remained ajar, spilling light across the cleared concrete.

"I've got snow in my boot," Chase said.

"Hush up."

Gerald went up the steps and stomped his

boots on the welcome mat, which only made snow cave in on his feet. He rapped hard on the inside door.

"Mr. Lipscomb? It's Gerald Buckley, come to plow out your driveway."

He let himself in, since the old man—a retired sheet metal worker—had a habit of leaving his hearing aids sitting on the table.

Shivering, Chase nudged past his father and let his face redden in the warmth of the interior.

"Goddamn it, Chase," Gerald said, grabbing him by the back of the coat.

"You're tracking snow into his house."

They removed their winter caps, unzipped their coats, and took off their boots, and when they were done, they followed a series of overlapping rugs and tasseled runners into a dim room that Gerald had always considered the living room, though two other rooms in the house could have just as easily qualified. Chase, who was already lagging behind, seemed wholly incapable of matching up the spaciousness of the house—the cathedral ceilings, the sprawling hardwood floors, the kiln-dried pillars of pine—with his father's descriptions of its inhabitant.

"Where did Mr. Lipscomb get all of this money?" he asked, his snow-pants making that velvety swishing sound.

"Let's try to be polite."

When they came into the living room, Mr. Lipscomb was sitting in a leather recliner with a blanket thrown over his legs, as if someone had arranged him that way. Every time Gerald intruded upon him, the man gave the impression of having done nothing for hours but stare off into space. He was thankful to find him fully dressed this time—in what seemed like the uniform of the Northern Michigan retiree, a button-down navy blue shirt and gray slacks—and not in his long johns.

"I hope you don't mind us letting ourselves in," Gerald said.

The old man made a slight movement with his arm, a weak attempt at an affirming wave.

It was gestures like this that convinced Gerald that one slip on the ice would've left this man scattered in bits on the ground. He was the kind of person who would receive mention in the local paper on every birthday and be grandmaster of every local parade until the day he died.

"Who's this handsome devil you've brought with you?" Mr. Lipscomb asked. His voice had always surprised Gerald. It sounded as steady and as youthful as the voice of someone Gerald's age.

"This is my son, Chase," Gerald said, and added as an afterthought: "He wants to build airplanes when he gets older."

He had no idea why he said this, but it instantly struck him as something the old man would appreciate. He could feel Chase bristling beside him, but there was nothing he could do about it now. He would apologize later.

"How about that," Mr. Lipscomb said. "Airplanes."

"I need to go to the bathroom," Chase said.

"You just went before we left."

"You know," Mr. Lipscomb said, "I have quite a few model airplanes upstairs."

"Dad," Chase said.

"Listen, Chase. He builds model airplanes, too."

"When you don't have anyone around anymore, you have time to build just about anything."

In his mind, Gerald was sorting through the ways to bring up the subject of payment without seeming impolite or uninterested in the man's sad little hobbies. But he felt dangerously close to having to sit through hours of detail about each carefully crafted piece of junk Mr. Lipscomb kept suspended from the ceiling of an upstairs room with fishing line. Gerald had a lot of plowing to do, and the longer he stayed inside this house, the longer it would be before he could drive home and climb into bed.

While Mr. Lipscomb continued talking and went to grab something from the bookshelf,

Gerald had to slap Chase's hand away from his jacket. He was still pleading about going to the bathroom.

"Stop it," he said, and then spoke in a louder voice to the old man: "I think we'd better get going on that driveway. It's getting late and if that snow doesn't stop soon, I'll have one hell of a time making it home."

"What's that?" The old man turned around.

"I said I might get stuck here if I don't get plowing."

"Well, if you need to," Mr. Lipscomb said, "there's a guest room upstairs."

Chase was pulling at his jacket again.

"We're not staying here, are we?"

"No," Gerald said, watching, with a great deal of pity, as the man continued his conversation without them. "Go get your boots on."

"I think Mr. Lipscomb's showing me Navy fighter jets or something," the boy said.

"Don't argue with me."

While Chase ran down the hallway to get his boots, Gerald approached the old man, who scanned the shelves talking about an old blue-colored manual being there somewhere. It occurred to Gerald that it might be devastating for an elderly man who lives alone to find that the attentive half of his audience had simply stopped listening and left the room. There was a whiff of desperation even in the care he took sorting through his old books.

"Where's that little beagle of yours?" Gerald asked, and then he remembered to speak louder. "I'm surprised I haven't seen him running around."

The old man turned around, to Gerald's relief, having forgotten who he had been talking to and just what had brought him over to the bookshelf in the first place.

"Randall?" he said. It took a moment for Gerald to realize this was the name of the dog. "I'm sorry to tell you, Mr. Buckley. Randall is not with us any longer."

"Oh," Gerald said. "Well, I'm sorry

to hear that." He paused for a moment, but the silence was just as difficult to endure. There was no moving on to other subjects; he would have to repair the damage. "Our neighbors, they just lost a dog. Great big German shepherd. Went running out into the road one day and got clipped by a delivery van. Seems like everyone's losing pets these days."

He looked at the floor and tried to look as if he were keeping the memories of some childhood tragedy at bay. But the sad, the disgusting part of it was, he'd made it all up.

"I wanted to get another dog," Mr. Lipscomb said.

"Mr. Lipscomb," Gerald said. "Sir..." But he couldn't, for the life of him, figure out how to bring up money now.

An almost breathable silence stretched between them. It occurred to Gerald that the right thing to do in this situation was to embrace Mr. Lipscomb in some way—to put a firm hand on his shoulder or to give him a kind of awkward, desperate pat on the back, the kind he'd feel obliged to give his father. So Chase's voice calling from the entryway was almost like an act of mercy.

"My son's calling me." He looked away from the man and shouted: "Be right there."

Mr. Lipscomb was looking around the room, as if trying to find a thread of conversation that had simply floated away from him.

"I think my son really wants to get plowing that driveway."

"Sure," the man said. "Lot of snow."

"Did you want to pay me now or should I come back in after I'm done?" He hated giving the man the option like this, but there seemed no way out of it.

"Oh," the old man said, patting his breast pockets. "Just give me a moment or two to locate my wallet."

Oh, for Christ's sake, Gerald thought.

"Dad..." Chase called from down the hallway.

"In a *minute*, Chase!"

He watched the man snail around the room, lifting up the corners of magazines and old newspapers, sliding his puckered hands in between couch cushions, sorting through blankets. The blankets—how many blankets did this man have? They were everywhere: draped over the top of the sagging brown couch cushions, hanging from the arms of chairs, wadded up on the dusty tops of end tables. It was as if the man were trying to shield himself from some terrible, unstoppable presence with layers of cotton and wool.

“Mr. Lipscomb, sir. Do you need any help?”

The old man glanced up from a long oak end table, where he had been wading through gutted mail and advertisers, an overflow of things that he had probably meant to sort through at one time but forgot.

“It just takes me a while to remember where I put things.”

Gerald watched the man for a few more moments and then walked out of the room.

“Change of plans,” he said to Chase. “Take off your boots.”

Chase, having just finished tying his laces, let his arms go limp.

“Why?”

“You’re going to stay inside with Mr. Lipscomb and help him find his wallet.”

“But you said you’d let me drop the plow.”

There were times like this when his son was absolutely right, and the responsible thing to do was admit he’d forgotten. But if there was one thing more unnerving to him than being dishonest with himself, it was to be proven wrong so condescendingly. Chase seemed to anticipate this outrage, since he was now giving Gerald the kind of wounded look he reserved for times when his misery was unavoidable, and he meant to expose before all who could see the cold and utterly selfish hearts of his parents. While Gerald knew he probably shouldn’t even bother, he dropped to his knee and put his hands on the boy’s shoulders. He looked Chase in the eyes

the way he thought all practiced parents did, as if he were gazing into a book that he had read countless times—one he understood completely, word-for-word.

“Listen, I really think it would mean a lot to Mr. Lipscomb if you just visited with him for a little while.”

“Where are you gonna be?”

“I’ll be right outside in the truck. There’ll be nothing to worry about.” He let go of his son’s shoulders and studied his face. From what he could tell, the boy considered it, at the very worst, an unpleasant chore. Satisfied, Gerald stood up. “Does that sound okay?”

Chase didn’t say anything. He tucked his chin inside his jacket and stared at the floor.

“Don’t do that,” Gerald said. “You look like you’re four years old, for Christ’s sake.” He made the boy look him in the face. “Tell you what. As soon as he finds his wallet and hands you the money, just hustle on outside and I’ll let you drop the plow. Just make sure you stand by the garage and wait until I see you. Do you hear me?”

The boy nodded.

“Okay.” Gerald grabbed each of his boots and slipped them on. “Now you make sure to be nice to Mr. Lipscomb. Remember to speak up, so he can hear you.”

He opened the door and slipped outside, shutting both doors tightly behind him. At that instant, a guilty feeling gripped him with the force of the cold, and instead of getting to the driveway, he turned around and watched his son untie his boots and pry them from each foot. He stood on his tiptoes so that Chase could see him when he turned around, and when he did, Gerald waved him on, mouthing something like *It will be all right*. When Chase was gone, he turned around and nearly stumbled off the stoop, as his eyes were much too used to the light inside to have prepared themselves for the thick, nearly unpierceable darkness of the woods. Finding his footing, he noticed that the snowflakes were now as big as quarters.

In the hour it took him to plow the driveway, he thought about the old man. Though at times it felt like a pain in the ass, when he was finally out in the truck plowing the man's driveway, the honorable feeling it gave him—doing something generous and getting little in return—almost made it seem worth it. And the more he thought about it, the more these feelings of duty and compassion—of finding something in his own character that by far outshone all his various imperfections—accumulated like the ceaseless drift of snow that was forever impeding his progress. That he never once saw Chase standing by the garage, waiting for his chance to drop the plow, did not bother him in the least. If the company of his son lent even the slightest bit of happiness to what short time was left for the man, then Gerald felt he had done something redeemable. How could someone be an asshole and still do something as selfless as this?

While the metal blade scraped and thumped over the hard-packed snow, he pictured Chase and the old man gluing together the wings of a model airplane in some cozy upstairs bedroom, a smile on the man's face that perhaps recalled days when he taught his own kids how to build things. But Gerald wasn't sure if the man had ever had a wife, let alone kids. This thought alone made him feel such sadness, he was sure he wanted to stay for the hot chocolate the man almost always insisted he have afterwards.

When he had finished pushing most of the snow out across the highway, and the rest had been dozed into a mound next to the garage that was taller than the truck, he killed the ignition and listened to the engine tick and settle for a few moments before climbing down out of the cab. The air was almost too cold to breathe; it stung his lungs and eyes. But instead of rushing inside to get warm, he stuffed his hands in his coat pockets and took a long, satisfying look down the length of the driveway at the work he'd done. There were bits here and there that he'd missed, but the smooth, glistening path of packed

snow and blacktop he had cleared was admirable work. Though the spots of asphalt were slowly dusted with white, there was something oddly fulfilling about having thwarted the elements, if only temporarily.

He was almost giddy with pride when removing his boots in the entryway, and surprised at himself for actually thinking about refusing the man's money. He tried to conjure the look on the man's face, but couldn't get past imagining the awkward time he'd have explaining, and then repeating his reasons to him. Still, there seemed to be no better way to cap off the night than to reveal to this dependent man the depths of Gerald Buckley's generosity, even if it meant it would cost him money in the winter months to come. For how in the hell could he charge him again afterwards?

He was almost sure that they were upstairs, completing the intricate model airplane of his daydream, when he walked into the room and found Mr. Lipscomb and Chase both on the leather recliner together. Even though his son was getting too big for this sort of thing, it touched Gerald to see that his son had indulged the old man by sitting next to him on the arm of the chair to look at his navy fighter jet books or whatever the hell it was they were doing.

"All done," Gerald said. "Your driveway's good to go."

"I was just explaining to your son how we specially manufactured metal for the F-22s."

"Well," Gerald said. "I bet that made Chase's day." He gave them both a smile that felt, for the first time in many months, genuine. "All right, kiddo. You ready to hit the road?"

If there was one thing Gerald could tell about his sons, it was when they were upset about something. And when he looked at the boy now, he could see immediately that Chase had gone into one of his moods. There was something cold and blank about the way he sat there.

"Looks like someone's tired," he said.

“Say goodnight to Mr. Lipscomb.”

He wondered if Chase had said something to offend the old man—he had a tendency to be a little on the abrasive side, something his mother was often left to apologize for. Once, she and the boy had been in the grocery store, and he had asked, within earshot of the lady he was referring to, why that person over there would put so much food in her cart when she was already so fat. Silence for him was often one of the side-effects of remorse.

“Hope you guys had a good visit,” Gerald said. “I’m sure you had lots to talk about.” He put his hands in his pockets and, realizing he looked uptight, withdrew them just as quickly. “That driveway took a lot longer than I thought.”

Despite the uncomfortable feeling he had, he was not done talking. There was an empty, oppressive quality to the room that kept him filling the awkward gaps with self-sustaining, meaningless speech about the abundance of snow, the various driveways around the county that kept him busy most of the winter, a few of the problems he was having with his plow. He kept wondering why Chase wouldn’t move, and soon he felt the thin fabric of his jabbering beginning to wear away until he was left standing in the middle of the room in quiet shreds with nothing to do except pretend to admire the woodwork on the stairway banister. And just like that he realized he was exhausted and wanted very badly to go home.

“You about ready, Chase?”

Finally Chase slid off the arm of the chair, and when his feet hit the floor, Gerald noticed something that put a chill in his blood. He didn’t know what the hell it was, but there was something almost alarming about the way his son was behaving. The more he stood there and thought about it, the more he realized something was wrong with this whole damn scene from the moment he came in the door, his son sitting so unusually close to the old man, with that empty look on his face. And just when he thought he was able to piece together just what was so unsettling

about it, it was gone.

"I sure do appreciate all your help," Mr. Lipscomb said. He turned his gaze to one of the frost-covered windows. "Boy, it's still snowing like the dickens outside, isn't it?"

Gerald nodded mindlessly. He looked down the hallway at Chase putting his coat on, his movements careful and deliberate. Then he turned to look at Mr. Lipscomb and, for the first time in his life, felt with overpowering certainty that he was capable of wrapping his hands around a man's throat and watching him suffocate to death.

"There's no charge for the driveway," Gerald said. "We'll be going now."

He left the man sitting in his recliner and walked slowly down the hallway, wanting badly to look back but never doing so. When he reached the entryway, he and Chase went through the dreary business of pulling on their boots and tying them.

"Just forget them," Gerald said. "You can tie them in the truck."

He held the door open for Chase and guided him out onto the porch. When they were both safely off the stoop, it was all Gerald could do to keep from picking the boy up and carrying him the rest of the way.

Once they were back on the highway, he could barely focus. All he could think to do was put the truck in four-wheel drive and speed down the two-lane stretch of highway as fast as the weather would allow. He wondered if his wife would still be up when they got back.

After a while, he glanced over at his son and found him doing the same thing he had been doing since they'd started driving: staring out the window, watching the snow-capped landscape pass by.

"Everything okay?"

Chase looked at his father and nodded. There was something frighteningly casual in the way he did this. As if he were bored.

"Did you have an okay time at Mr. Lipscomb's?"

The boy shrugged. There was nothing to

decipher in this.

“Is anything wrong? Did something happen there that I should know about?”

“No,” the boy said. He stared at the seat for a moment and then looked out the windshield. “You’re driving really fast.”

Gerald looked up and gave a little jolt, realizing that he had never found himself barreling along so fast in such miserable conditions. He let his foot off the accelerator and allowed the truck to coast to an acceptable speed, keeping a tight grip on the wheel and listening to the soft, barely audible spray of snow hitting his wheel wells, and when he had it down to 30, he forced a smile at Chase, though he could feel himself sweating.

“Everything’s okay,” he said. “Your dad’s been driving in this stuff all his life.”

He steered with greater attentiveness, as if to prove he was being careful. Then, as they passed the state park: “Mr. Lipscomb didn’t do anything *strange*, did he?”

The boy was studying his father now. He looked genuinely puzzled.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “Why are you asking me this?”

“It’s just, I don’t know,” Gerald said. “I just thought he may have done something while I was out plowing, is all.”

“Like what?”

“Never mind.” He focused on driving. “I guess the answer is no.”

The snow continued to fall. They were still about ten miles from home, and though Gerald was driving under the speed limit, he couldn’t get them home fast enough.

“Are you buckled up?” he asked.

“No,” Chase responded. His honesty surprised Gerald.

“Well, do your father a favor and buckle up.” He reached over and patted his son’s leg. “Okay, pal?”

**Sarah Bowman** and **Mark Matson** live in Orlando, Florida, with their son Niall and their dogs, Jack and Rocky. In 2007, Sarah earned tenure in the Department of English at Wright College, one of the City Colleges of Chicago. She has taught and/or facilitated Literature and Rhetoric courses online for Boston University and the University of California Irvine. Mark continues to work on his paintings, political cartoons, and writing. Currently, they are artists in search of an audience.

**Stacy Cartledge's** first book, *Within the Space Between*, is due out from Spuyten Duyvil at some point. He recently entered the tenure-track at Delaware County Community College near Philadelphia, where he lives with his wife and three children.

**Dawn Comer** lives in Defiance, Ohio, where she does occasional editing work and teaches creative writing at Defiance College. She continues to have one cat (Bruce) and one husband (Todd), though she now has two children (Elliot and Lucy). Lately Dawn has been reading way too much about Asperger's Syndrome and Autism Spectrum Disorders, leading local friends to predict her next book will deal with ASDs. And even though she swears she's not planning anything like that, she will admit they are most likely right. But first she must put the finishing touches on *Born Beneath Pedro's Sombrero*, *Raised in a Corn Palace*, home to "The Thing Is..."

**Clare Christina** is a writer and freelance editor recently transplanted to Queens, NY. Her work has been seen and heard on stages all over Chicago and in several homemade chapbooks and zines. Clare is currently doing research for a novel about Austin, MN in the early 1990s and organizing with the NYC chapter of The Icarus Project, a radical mental health collective. She received her BA in English from St. Cloud State University and her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Notre Dame.

With a grant from the Puffin Foundation, **Renée E. D'Aoust** is currently completing *Travels with Truffle: A Canine Tour of America*. She presented "American Flamingoes," a monologue based on her journey across the country, at the 2008 &NOW Festival. D'Aoust was awarded a 2008 National Endowment for the Arts Journalism Institute for

Dance Criticism Fellowship at the American Dance Festival. She has received two "Notable Essay" mentions in *Best American Essays* (2006 and 2007), won 2<sup>nd</sup> Place in the 2007 essay contest sponsored by *New Letters*, and has numerous publications to her credit, including, most recently, *Open Face Sandwich* and the forthcoming *Reading Dance*, edited by Robert Gottlieb (Pantheon 2008). D'Aoust holds degrees from Columbia University and the University of Notre Dame—she lives in northern Idaho and teaches at North Idaho College.

**Amy Faith De Betta** remains in hiding in the desert, loves her Sig Sauer, the sand and the heat, tries very hard never to take herself seriously and is desperately trying to finish a novel while ignoring the distractions that amuse her. Go Irish!

Not much to say really, says **Lisa De Niscia**. I'm unemployed in Los Angeles, and it's gonna be HOT this weekend though it's only spring. I'm not complaining. I love the heat. Terrible about that dude who was killed by the shark a few days ago at Solana Beach. Wonder how Hoosiers are gonna vote in their primary. Watched a crazy car chase on local TV yesterday. See, not much to say.

**S. D. Dillon** received his MFA from Notre Dame in 2004. He then worked for three years at various New York publishers before returning to his native Michigan last fall to work in the green energy industry.

**Mary M. Dixon** has an MFA in creative writing and an MA in theology from the University of Notre Dame, an MA in English from the University of Nebraska and a BA in Art, English, and Education from Hastings College in Nebraska. She teaches writing classes for Hastings College, Liberty University, and Regent University. In addition to writing, she produces visual art. Her upcoming book, *Eucharist: Enter the Sacred Way* is due out in the summer 2008 from Franciscan University Press.

**Tony D'Souza** is the author of the novels *Whiteman* and *The Konkans*. He and his girlfriend are expecting a baby girl in August who they plan on

naming Gwen. They live in the sticks in northern California near the Oregon border where the grass is green and the trees are tall.

**Jaclyn Dwyer** is currently enrolled in the MFA program at the University of Notre Dame. Her work has appeared in 3:am Magazine and is forthcoming in The Cortland Review. She recently interviewed A. M. Homes for the Notre Dame Review and was awarded a full scholarship to the New York State Summer Writers' Institute.

**Danna Ephland** lives in Kalamazoo, Michigan where, according to Susan Ramsey, "...you can't throw a brick without hitting a poet." A poet and veteran teaching-artist, her poems have appeared in magazines including Indiana Review, Rhino, Permafrost and Letterhead. She is especially proud of a collaborative poem with poet Paulette Beete which appears in an anthology by Soft Skull Press titled, Saints of Hysteria: A Half Century of Collaborative American Poetry.

This summer **David Ewald** ('03) will move from San Francisco to Denver, where he is set to begin teaching at Front Range Community College in the fall.

**Esteban (Steve) I.V. Galindo** lives and works in Orange County, California. He's published a little here and there, but mostly in The Capistrano Dispatch. He'd like to get out a little more but his wife says he has to stay home. He'd like to introduce his son to the Batman and Indiana Jones film franchises, but his wife says that Junior is still too little. He'd like to land a show on The Food Network but his wife says that Emeril has more charisma. He loves his wife.

**Chris Gerben** is a PhD student at the University of Michigan. He can be reached at his website—<http://www.umich.edu/~cgerben>

**Sean Keith Henry**, M.F.A. 1996, was born on a beautiful island in the Caribbean. He is the author of published stories in Callaloo, Salamander and Obsidian II. His novel "LIMBO" was published by Akashic Books, New York in 2004. He lives in Southern California but also divides his time between Trinidad and Norway. His second novel is forthcoming!

**C. Kubasta** lives in Wisconsin & enjoys the perks of adjunct teaching: no committee meetings. She recently won Marian College's undergraduate adjunct teaching award, which makes her feel slightly better about not writing or submitting enough.

**Alan Lindsay's** novel *A.* was published in 2004. His novel-in-progress, *Living with Tina*, will have been published, God willing, under some title or other, in 2010, providing it will have been finished by then. His other publications—poems, plays, essays, short stories—numerous enough, he supposes, are mostly impossible to find, and hardly worth mentioning.

**William McGee, Jr.** is a graduate of the Notre Dame Creative Writing Program. He lives in Joliet, Illinois with his wife and two daughters.

**Corey Madsen** received his BA from the University of Michigan and his MFA from the University of Notre Dame. He currently resides in Carbondale, Colorado.

**Tom Miller** lives in Pittsburgh, where he works as adjunct faculty at Duquesne University and moonlights as an EMT. His work recently appeared in *Knock*, *Brown Paper*, and the anthology *Dark Distortions*.

**Rumit Pancholi** received his MFA in Creative Writing from Notre Dame in 2008. He's concurrently working on his second book of poems, a collection of short stories, and several other quasi-prose projects. While at Notre Dame, Rumit received honors from *Black Warrior Review*, *The Atlantic Monthly*, and *Iron Horse Literary Review*, among others.

**James Matthew Wilson** will become Assistant Professor of the Humanities at Villanova University this fall. His poetry and critical essays continue to appear in *Contemporary Poetry Review*, *Modern Age*, *Christianity & Literature*, and other places.

*Creation Stories*—a chapbook of poems by **Amy Wray Irish**—is now available from Green Fuse Press at [www.greenfusepress.com](http://www.greenfusepress.com). Amy (MFA 98) has also been published in *100 Words*, *Apocalypse*, *Ariel*,

Neologisms, River King Poetry Supplement, and Wazee ([www.wazeejournal.org](http://www.wazeejournal.org)). She continues to write and reside in Colorado with her husband and son.

**Christina Yu** is a 2008 graduate of the MFA program—where she was the Diversity Fellow, a Sparks summer intern at Hachette Book Group, and proud captain of the Innertube Water Polo team. She is also a 2005 graduate of Dartmouth College—where she was a finalist for the Rhodes scholarship and awarded the Perkins prize for excellence in English. Her fiction appears in Gargoyle, Indiana Review, and the 2008 Robert Olen Butler Prize Stories anthology.

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## The writers at Notre Dame 2008:

Back Row: Jaclyn Dwyer, Runit Pancholi,  
Alicia Guarracino, Jarrett Haley, Raul  
Jara, Jared Randall, Grant Osborn, Kristen  
Eliason, Veronica Fitzpatrick, Brian  
Lysholm,  
Mike Valente, the brow of Justin Perry

Front Row: Brenna Casey, Christina Yu,  
Rachael Lee, Desmond Kon, Susan Blackwell-  
Ramsey, Silpa Swarnapuri, Stephanie White,  
Jessica Martinez, Ryan Smith,  
a very dapper Darin Graber