

**Issue #8, March 2008**



*A Duration of Events (Neither Here Nor There)*

screenprint, acrylic, gouache, graphite, ink and shellac on paper, 2006

by Sean P. Morrissey

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## #8 Poetry



### *Lay Down Your Head*

acrylic, gouache, graphite, ink and shellac on paper, 2006

by Sean P. Morrissey

MEMORIZE THIS

*El Gavilan Lodge, Costa Rica 4/18/03*

The Green Honeycreeper.

The green chrysalis of the butterfly.

The green Anole Lizard.

The green leaves of the Cecropia.

The green Aventurine stones in a bracelet.

The green of green of green

in Dracena, Agapanthus,

Helaconia, Water Lilly,

Green Fig Beetle, Green Iguana, Palm Tanager,

Green Backed Heron, Coppery Headed Emerald,

Resplendent Quetzal, Turquoise Browed Motmot, Amazon Kingfisher,

the swirling Sarapiqui River swimming in its banks,

slime, shine, silver green of pooling fishes near a sunken tree.

The green rind of sky at sunset,

green fall of night, the deep green sleep

in the jungle's lap. The restless green dream

clearing it's throat, shuffling the celadon

pages of its story, looking for

neon green letters reading, "the end."

IN A RESTAURANT WITHOUT A NAME

Cold rain makes my decision:  
In here. Statues and seagulls  
stay outside among acres  
of cigarette stubs, pearls

from lost midnights. Streetlights are  
broken tiaras far from celebration.  
OK, mussels and beer: my personal  
assistants, my dependable magi.

The blue window is veiled by  
acrobatic cacti. Only a few souls  
join me in this pleasant purgatory,  
a waiting room for oblivion.

I let insignificance hunt me down  
in the darkening city. We will hook up  
sooner or later. Until then,  
the waiter can offer me all I can desire.

L'ACTUEL: DIMINISHING

I return for the mussels. But  
is this the same restaurant as

yesterday's excursion? Well,  
the French fries are still called

Belgian fries. Again, I'm asked  
by the handsome waiter to wear

a bib. Again, I decline. But  
something has changed, not me.

Can 24 hours rob a place of its  
magic or am I less of a magician?



KATRINA

let me leave in a box,  
that old lady said,  
sitting in the kitchen  
right by the stove  
every burner on.  
that hurricane was  
meant for me,  
my family up and  
left me here, they knew  
it called to me.  
...could smell the gas out by the road.  
life was done, she said.  
she surely meant to die,  
she would not leave;  
she fought to stay,  
we fought to take her away.  
tied her to a gurney,  
put her in the ambulance.  
old lady, no matter what,  
we're not allowed to let you die

i'll not soon forget her  
hoarse clear cry  
as we drove her away:  
let me go from my house,  
in the box i choose.

REMEMBERING TRACY

slipshod summer flushing in cheap  
Mexican heat you dilute the coffee

with eyedrops. There are dolphins  
massing in this scowl flashleaping

from the oceans they belong to. I  
drink, often now that nothing not

even a streetsign was named after  
you. Nothing about death is beautiful  
and when I sit shut in the closet tickled

by a freefall of your clothing I can  
only smell revolvers. Everything is

made of wire after a suicide. My body  
warm since springtime is complaining

some things should not be cast in metal.

SPRING FORWARD, FALL BACK: WHAT ARE YOU DOING WITH YOUR EXTRA HOUR,  
HE ASKED

She made a melody for lyrics she wrote, graded five essays, and checked her email too many times for words that didn't come. She spoke of and sounded the letter H with her youngest son: Hen, House, and Horse, of course. And didn't tell him of a man's blue Hallelujah eyes, or his Hands a fivefold Heaven on her Hips. Instead, she Helped him circle a Heart. She also watched a House burn bright across the prairie of night with her daughter. Maybe she used some of the Hour to pray. For the inhabitants of the House, and then for her elder son's friend whose brain is angry with a Hundred wires, right eye swollen, waiting for seizures to be incised from his life, because wily electricity can be sliced off our bodies with scalpels. She also captured vomit once in a bucket, and as she waited expectantly for the second batch, she Heard from the son concerned with H's that throwing up is Hard. Yes, it is, Honey, throwing up is Hard. Later, she Hugged her Husband from behind, with Hidden tears, as he listened to the song she played him all those years ago. She remembered she loves him, touched by how he seeks to please her, letting Hair Hang long down along and around his face like a silken windy Halo. In that Hour, she inhaled his neck, still Haunted by Hallelujah. How? Can her Heart ever be circled? Hoping for her boys' sleep, she read of a fox tamed by a little prince whose Hair, the color of golden wheat, made the fox Happy, made him anticipate. Then, as she read in bed, to only herself, after setting her soothing zen alarm clock for Monday morning, thankful for the extra Hour of sleep she would be getting, she instructed her daughter to put a peeled clove of garlic in her Hurting ear, rather than rise, rather than do it for her. And she fell asleep unsure of where her extra Hour ended or began.

AUTO REPAIR AT 8 O'CLOCK

"You can have your  
boyfriend or your dad or  
whoever install it"

Well, I have neither and neither here  
and ate aside again at the Indian  
restaurant across from the theatre. Then  
I watched a film about Bettie Page and  
felt embarrassed that I had watched it  
aside also and had similar black  
hair, the way that she did not choose  
the laces and corsets and boots  
and poses but let them shoot her anyway,  
the way that I would not, bothered  
me for a while, while I was waiting for the  
engine to stop humming. Stop looking  
this way and opening your windows to make  
sure it's not yours because it's not.  
It's mine. Mine has the problem, mine  
has the noise leaking from the hole that I  
bought from the man who could not install  
it. A more willing, greasy one who had  
the necessary tools installed it instead, and  
when I asked him how much I should pay him,  
he said

"Don't worry about it"

The sweet, better words of one  
who I could not leave without exchange so  
I gave him the tool that I had bought from the  
first man.  
And after I watched the film, watched the  
way that she was acted like a child and yet  
had the robust and figure of a free  
believing woman with a spite past, I  
felt uneasy. I just wanted to  
go back home and not  
speak much about the hectic day.

She would pose and

turn and silly it like it  
did not mean much, like no  
one would mind it.

(And then I  
drove behind a man who  
was dancing, then  
changed lanes when he could  
have heard the sound coming from my  
front. Just fix this, just fix  
this please.)

SUPPOSED TO LOVE

*-sonnenizio based on a first line by Molly Peacock*

And nothing, not even that girl you love  
will follow you into that even darkening: old age.  
It's an unreachable, shadowy cupboard that girl  
you love, in her flip-flops and youthful distraction,  
cannot begin to explore. And she doesn't even try,  
just a feeble grasp at a handle, and then your love—  
your affair—doesn't seem glamorous anymore. Even  
the cabinets are bare; no riches, mystery, and nothing  
you tell her will make you appear younger, stocked with life.

And nothing, no shiny car or stock portfolio or  
even devotion, will keep that girl you love pressed  
to your frail side as you become more insubstantial,  
a stale cracker or bottle of tonic that's gone flat.  
Even your wife, the one you are supposed to love, knows that.

## #8 Fiction



*Untitled (Creep)*

6-run color lithograph with graphite, 2007

by Sean P. Morrissey

ROOMMATES

When they refused Bradley's dorm change, the office told him: "Wait one more semester and your roommate starts to grow on you. You'll see."

But he was seeing Nayla—a beautiful, serene, Hindu goddess Bradley courted since freshman year. And damn if Leon hadn't ruined that, too.

"Dot or feather?" Leon asked after Bradley invited her over the first night. Nayla coming out of the bathroom in her pajamas, eight-o'clock-morning-classes looming. Leon stops her in the hall on his way for another beer, poking his thumb to his forehead and fluttering his fingers like a headrest turkey.

"I asked Brads," Leon says, jabbing his acne-pocked brow with one thumb in the kindergarten gesture that means Cowboys and Indians. "And he says you're one of Gandhi's people." Then Leon grinned his beer-dripping, donkey smile that meant he'd said something rude and that's supposed to make it even funnier.

Nayla stormed back to the bedroom, grabbed her stuff, and told Bradley on her way out: "I know you don't get to choose your room assignment, but you can be goddamn sure I'll choose mine."

And, hearing the slamming door, Bradley finally decided to kill his roommate.

The next morning, staring at the mildew between the shower floor and drumming through the Org-Chem notes in his head, Bradley focused on the darkening tile. Leon's only responsibility in the dorm, the only thing Bradley *refused* to clean, was the twenty-square-foot bathroom they shared, which now looked closer to a closet-sized Petri dish. A mold battlefield.

Bradley staring at the live bacteria, knowing it would never get cleaned, wondering how hard it might be to break off a few pieces of bathroom-tile and ram them up Leon's pipes.

"*Honey*, I'm home." Leon back from class. Heading straight for the fridge and Bradley's last beer.

The green tile. Christ—black tile in some places. It'd take a jackhammer to clean some of this mess.

"That girl last night sure was a cutie. Even fer an immigrant."

No point mentioning Nayla's grandparents were naturalized.

*Gulp. Gulp-gulp. . . . A bellowing burp.*

Bradley drying off, dressing and sprinting through the dorm.

"What? You leavin'?" Leon desperate. "Thought we were gonna play some X-Box . . ."

The chem-lab a quarter mile away and never too close.

\* \* \*

Leon, two weeks later, jerking off in the shower.

Bradley could always hear him at it, making as much noise as possible; grunting and moaning and screaming as if in some sublime, water-board torture.

*I'm sitting right here in the next room for crissake.*

Distantly under the shower noise, after the grunting subsided, Bradley heard Leon moan: "Dude, I thought you were gonna clean the tub." Leon chuckling. "Sorry 'bout the empty bleach bottle. Dared Sean to dye his freakin hair the other day. Hilarious, man."

Bradley finally grinning from his seat on the couch.

The moldy faucet knobs squeaking as Leon turned off the shower and Bradley heard him grab the last clean towel off the rack. Bradley smiling wide enough to show teeth now, though Leon would never see it.

"—took you so long in here the other day, Brads? Bathroom still looks terrible."

Turning up the volume on the Discovery Channel.

"—need to get some more shampoo, man—"

TV loud enough you could hear it down the hall.

*"The fu—"*

Phone vibrating across the end-table and Bradley grabbed it, the display reading NAYLA. Pressing the button to answer, Brad had to talk over the roaring television.

*"—dude, there's something wrong with the floor—"*

"Hey, sweetheart."

*"Dude!"*

"Just the TV."

"Dude, it's, like, *moving* . . ."

"Yeah, I feel terrible. I shouldn't have asked you over here in the first place. I'm really sorry."

*"Oh my god, dude, it's, like, ON ME!"*

"No, it's my fault. He's a jerk and I should have said something before."

*"Jesus, Brads. This stuff is . . . Oh, GOD—"*

"Can I take you out tonight to apologize?"

*"OHMYGOD! MY FEET, MAN! MY LEGS! MY NU—"* ‘

"After, huh?"

*"CHRIST, BRADLEY! IT'S SOME KINDA—"*

"Yeah, I think I could bring over some flowers."

*"ITSGOTMEBRADOHCHRISTYOUGOTTABRADPLEASEITHURTS—"*

"Nah, just Leon being an ass. And let's stay at your place after dinner, if that's all right . . . my dorm is a mess."

314 ½ EAST RUBY

This isn't my place, having sex on red sheets, you hard on me, I flip like a pancake and you enter my vagina from the back—the way you know I like it. It hurts so badly I cough and cry and whisper, *It's all good man. Don't worry about it.*

So you go out to smoke, then come back, and your hands smell like ash and cheap tobacco, and I lie in bed and watch you pee. Posture firm, tight buttocks, both hands on your head. I reach for the wall. Flatten my palm against cold drywall; winter found its way in. I crawl to the window to see the stars, the bold navy sky. I see steam rise from a generator across the street. Puffs of smoke powder the air and I remember the road through Helper, Utah and the factory in the valley. You said it's where they made clouds. I wanted to stop and rent a trailer, drink a beer with a fat neighbor, plant daisies in the shade.

Now you're in the kitchen, drinking berry juice from the fridge, letting hot water drip so the pipes won't freeze. Negative seventeen outside and getting colder. The streetlight on Ruby Avenue reflects off our icicles.

You made an icicle sculpture. You made it in the front yard. I helped you snap them from people's gutters at night when no one was looking. I sat on your shoulders and you stood on bushes. We carried them home in our arms. Now they're planted in bundles, a natural conglomeration of stained glass. I sit on the front step in daylight and trace the colors of sunshine. We call it art. The hippy neighbor Daren fell over it, carrying a couch he found in our shed. The couch is lavender, soiled and soft. He'll put it in the jammin' room, the transcendental space of music and marijuana. We'll fix the sculpture.

There's art in our backyard too. I can see the lump of its shadow in the snow—a frozen elk hide, green from the rot of warmer days. We tried to make drums and you wanted a loincloth. But our nails turned purple, wet and frosty in a ten-degree breeze, and the knives were dull. When the smell of dying flesh attracts horse flies and disgusted humans, we'll haul the hide to Crested Butte, three hundred miles from the San Juan mountains it once roamed. For now we leave it to the foxes. They lick it.

Foxes licked Daren's chickens too, then ate them. He bought six so he could cook eggs for breakfast. He shoved them in a doghouse-sized cage and took a trip to Las Vegas. He left you in charge. The first night, one chicken was pecked to death. The second night, four were abducted, feathers and blood left as evidence. On night three, one chicken waited to die. You named him Jojo, after yourself. He lost most of his feathers in the cage, in a panic. He was missing in the morning. You said he went to Mexico with your imaginary cat Schnarls. We eat bagels for breakfast instead.

Another day we went tubing. At the bottom of the hill—you on your tube, me on mine, talking—we saw a fox. I whistled and you clicked your tongue. It came sniffing, twelve inches away. We held out hands and the people around us kept climbing the hill, sledding down, climbing, sledding—you fell in love. I watched the small-boy fascination in your eyes. I followed you; you followed the fox—down the hill, past Breckenridge apartments, into the pines. He's gone, I said. And sadly you strolled home.

We went fox hunting the next night. Your idea. It was negative twenty eight degrees. Your beard was frosted and my eyelashes were heavy with ice. We saw nothing but stars and hockey players. No word really quiets that moment when one dream dies and you need alcohol-foxes to vodka.

At our house in a yellow and pea-green kitchen, Nirvana blaring on the stereo, we danced and drank screwdrivers and you spun me fast, knocking me to the floor then grabbing my waist to toss me over your shoulder like a wet towel. I giggled, but not too loosely because you had connected eyebrows and a long nose, nicotine teeth and thick hands, and I didn't even know who you were in that fuzzy moment, your mind limp with too much drug—or if I was attracted.

One time you passed out by the door, so when I came home from work, I had to squeeze past your body to act like I was alone: moving on with my life, doing dishes, reading poems, calling Dad. Another time you hopped on your skateboard, drunk, fell over our skis and hit the door with your cheek. Then you stumbled to the bathroom while fiddling with your zipper, tumbled into the wall mirror, and cracked it into thirty separate pieces. A mosaic. Every morning I stare into a kaleidoscope and apply mascara.

I'm here, still, lying by the window. The heater kicks on, the fridge cools down, and water trickles from the faucet while you hum and move quick to the bed, sliding under the covers to hold my body against yours, my head on your chest of hair. I close my eyes tight and sweep crumbs with my toes, feeling misplaced in these sheets beside you. I move deeper into your chest and boys laugh in the night street. It's so cold I can see my breath and my mind is a constant ache of thought. My natural place is my habitual place. I have a habit of being Mormon, raised to covet temples, marriage vows, and the 'missionary position' during sex (side by side) only. You're my drinking boy, my wild-animal love affair, the tattooed atheist who slaps his knees fanatically during comedies and hugs all my friends with *hellos* and *I'm so happy to see you's*.

Now your snoring, exhaling sour breath on my cheeks, your leg intertwined with mine. Now there's a moon sliver in the sky. Habit is the most painful way to live. An apathetic existence. One day you got so angry you slammed your headlamp on the ground and shattered the light bulb. The fridge had died, our house was covered in ticks, and I had accidentally tossed your \$300 mouth guard (to keep you from grinding your teeth) into the

dumpster. I laughed, enthralled by the emotion, the lines on your forehead, the energy of living: pain, tears, giddiness, fear, beauty, lust.

A car turns the corner, its lights flashing through the window, casting tree silhouettes on the wall. I see your face, the shag of hair twisting around your ears. I stay because it's uncomfortable, Joe. I never tell you this though.

Then I fall asleep beneath stained blankets, in a shack tossed into an alley like a damp box. The alley: broken beer bottles, overturned recycling bins, bike tires, a pair of long johns in a tree, and a mailbox, 314 ½, red flag up for the utility bill.

CANNIBALS

Red finally understands God's plan for her. It is her calling to be serving drinks at this bar. It was pure divine intervention that led her here. God pushed her on the path towards this place, towards Vick and Fee. She just needed time to learn how to listen, to heed the call. Her parents don't understand yet. Don't know she has changed, that her metamorphosis has begun. They think cocktail waitresses are sad, sad people. Whores. Her younger sister went to live in the mountains in Austria. She became a nun in the Carmelite Order. This was what her parents wanted. Their daughters exist to serve God. At eighteen, her sister understood her destiny. Her sister understands how to listen. In her letters she writes that she can feel God in the mountain breezes, she can drink straight from the running streams. It is as close as you can get to the ecstasy of heaven on Earth. Not like Long Island. Ronkonkoma is riddled with negative energy. Children get cancer from playing in the snow because the inhabitants only go to church when it suits them. They don't listen when God calls for them. You have to hear God whispering to you, her sister says. Listen. If you're listening closely, you can hear Him everywhere.

Ten years ago, Red took the Long Island Railroad one way to the city. Her parents call every Saturday night at midnight right before mass to tell her she can still be forgiven. Every Saturday night Red's mother asks her if she knows, if she understands, God's plan. Red is thirty-five years old. They tell her she can still be a good person, it's not too late. She can still redeem herself—get married, have children, be a good citizen. Devote herself to God and country. There is still time. Her sister is thirty and she's had all her questions answered—she moved to a convent in the mountains, she married Jesus. When her time comes, she will go to Heaven. She will be ready. Because Red still needs to be reminded every Saturday night that God forgives, she will not.

Her parents refuse to call her by her new name. They say it adds to her deviant lifestyle and they won't contribute to her circling the drain. If she went by her God-given name, she wouldn't be waitressing in a bar. Vick has always called her Red. He lets it roll right off his tongue. Vick, the Vick Rumble, the former model and her boss, the night manager and head bartender, says she's been behaving like a true redhead lately. Moody and sullen and unpredictable. He wants her to go back to being the Red he knows, the Red he met when he hired her years ago. And if she wants to know why he hasn't approached her for sex that much lately, if she's curious at all, it's because she's been very difficult to get along with, and frankly, he just doesn't have the time or the patience for withdrawn cranky girls.

He says she'd better cheer the fuck up or he'll replace her.

The night she left for the city, her parents didn't want to let her go. Twenty-five years old then and she hadn't left her parents' house in her whole life for more than a night at a girlfriend's in high school. No college. Couldn't afford it and she didn't care anyway. Working in retail, shoes and bags, helping her parents pay the bills. Every Saturday night and Sunday morning at church, going on a date with a nice young man once in a while. All the Catholic boys in Ronkonkoma are the same. Her sister having visions, sleepwalking, crying in the night, dreaming of Austria. Her sister was leaving, going to the place where she could connect with her destiny, it was time for Red to leave too. She was going to the city no matter what they said. She'd work retail, shoes and bags, live in a bright, cramped, noisy apartment. She wanted to be far from her parents' house, far from the darkness in the Ronkonkoma split level ranch illuminated only by the flickering television set. Her mother praying all night, her mother and father fighting, crying, fighting with her, whipping her, praying for her soul. Twenty-five years was enough.

Her parents were firm believers in punishment. Severe consequences for insubordination. Discipline was very important to them. They were physically strong people, experts with the belt and the whip. They said they only did it when absolutely necessary. Her sister never suffered at their hands. She took care of it herself, cutting her arms and hands, bleeding herself. She said it made her feel better, closer to a deeper understanding. Red should appreciate punishment. Ancient rituals are comforting. Her sister's wrists and forearms were often sliced to ribbons. She had soft uncertain scabs forming and breaking, too weak from the continuous cutting. Her face slack and peaceful. Her parents were in awe of her sister's determination, her persistence, her obsessions. Red was punished often. Being sullen, withdrawn, moody, picky, cranky, crazy—all sins of the highest order. The saints understood personal sacrifice, Christina, her mother said.

Wanting to leave them wasn't in their plans. They wanted her to know that she was never too old for hard-learned lessons. But she was all packed, ticket in hand, waiting to leave until after dinner. She couldn't leave until after dinner. In their house it was always their rules, and if they weren't finished with dinner, nobody was. Nothing could happen until they were finished. The world stopped, time stood still. Her father shoved piece after piece of pumpernickel in his mouth. Her mother didn't remove the bread basket or the soup tureen knowing that her husband would spread butter on each piece before devouring the loaf with bowl after bowl of homemade soup. It was time for her parents to move into the living room, turn on a movie and settle in for the night, coffee and pie time, but they refused. They sat before their endless meal, her mother drank black coffee from a huge mug, her entire face disappeared into it each time she took a sip. Her mother sighed, her face betrayed nothing. Red always thought her mother's eyes were shut to her, she was cut off from the understanding and devotion that lay within. Now she knows she only had to let go and her mother's eyes would open wide and invite

her in. Her father's eyes were glazed and puffy. Empty. She sat for a couple of hours at the kitchen table, waiting and waiting, listening to the dripping of the broken sink, her father breathing shallowly through his nose as he ate, wheezing through his second, third, and fourth meal, missing train after train. Until finally, her hands numb, she called a cab and walked out. Her father dozed, his head thrown back, her mother's tight mouth set in place. She refused to talk to her, look at her.

Years later, late one night, she told Vick this story. She was naked and he was connecting her freckles with the tip of his finger. This was something he loved to do. He didn't want her to speak when he did it, didn't want her to tell stories, he just wanted her to lie there and let him put her together like a puzzle. He shook his head, clucked his tongue, put one hand over her mouth to shut her up, and said—how fucking pathetic.

Red knows how her parents feel about her life, she knows they talk to their church friends.

Christina is still in Manhattan, can you believe it, after all this time? We were certain it was just a phase! Christina is still tending bar, whoring, whatever she's doing. Christina doesn't understand that she can have a nice life, that it doesn't have to be this way. They say—Holy Sister Mary Margaret Catherine is doing so well in Austria.! She's learning German and Latin, visiting small rural villages to feed the poor children, comfort the lonely, tend to the infirm.

Vick Rumble was a somewhat popular fashion model. Red doesn't know how old Vick is now, doesn't know when his birthday is, she can never get a straight answer from him. He was a tabloid favorite, a party boy. He dated a lot of models, a few actresses, and, most notably, Fee Jones, for a long time—two, three years. He almost married her, bought her a hundred thousand dollar ring. Then he found her having sex with some guy, just some random guy she picked up in an uptown bar, just some guy in a suit. Maybe a computer programmer or a pharmaceutical salesman. Turned out she did it all the time. Everybody knew but Vick.

But Red didn't know who he was when she first saw him. She found out later from a regular at the bar that he was the Vick Rumble, that he was an important man to know on the party scene, that he had quite a history. On her first morning in the city, she walked downtown from the women's residence where she was staying, looking for department stores, her resume and her recommendation letters from shoes and bags in hand, and passed Vick sitting outside the bar, lounging, smoking a cigarette, enjoying the day.

Hey, he said. Hey there, Red.

He christened her.

I saw you standing there on the street, he told her years later. I thought about all the girls I interview who are looking for cocktail jobs—fucking whores—but you were so small and pale, you looked like you smelled good, I could see

your nipples through your shirt. I said to myself—I want this one. I really wanted to fuck you. You were something to look forward to.

The first time he said that to her—whispered in her ear that he wanted to eat her, really devour her whole, she didn't know what to do. She just stood there silent, stock still, not breathing or thinking or blinking. He held up her left arm right in front of her, rubbed his hands over it, licked it, nibbled it, bit it, engulfed it.

The day bartender, a tall girl with bobbed hair named Aimee who slept with Vick for a few months before Red showed up, said he was once so fucking gorgeous. What a shame, what a waste, she said. Cocaine and pills, the same old story that everybody knows. Blah, blah, blah, who cares about him anymore? He was licking it off broken mirrors like a puppy, it was seriously pathetic! His nose had to be rebuilt in the operating room—actually rebuilt! Now the only reason why anyone remembers him at all is because he almost married Fee Jones!

Aimee took her in, made room for her on the floor of her studio apartment. Red started working at the bar, learning from Aimee, from Clare Dixon, one of the cocktail girls, spending the night with Vick, then many nights back at Aimee's when he brought home other girls from the bar. A year or so later Aimee married John Willis, the Thursday, Friday, Sunday night bartender, moved into his apartment, and left her studio to Red. Now Red spends half the time there and half the time at Vick's. Fee Jones started coming in the bar a few years ago, pretending at first she didn't know Vick was the night bartender. Surprise, surprise when she saw him—they kissed passionately and caught up over drinks. Fee and Vick are friendly now. They hug, share stories, smile at each other.

Vick has big rough hands with oozy cuts all over his fingertips. Red often tapes his hands before a busy Saturday night like a boxer going into the ring. He jumps around, bouncing on his heels, while she carefully wraps the white tape around his fingers. When she asks him to keep still he tells her that he's gotta keep moving and feigns punching her over and over again square in the face. He says she cares, she's the cocktail waitress who cares, and that's a hard thing to find. He says that the other girls don't care—fucking whores—the other girls don't understand—how could they? They're fucking whores! But she does.

She's watched him sleep, knows that he doesn't just sleep, he falls into a coma. Sometimes his eyes are open, vacant, zombie-like. Bright and shiny with cocaine. She knows when he sleeps like that he's been doing it again with other girls, sleeping it off. The cocaine wakes him up periodically. He stares at her, rubs his eyes, blows his perfect, rebuilt nose into one of the soft tissues he keeps by his bedside and her bedside just in case. He looks at her with wall eyes, stares at her like he's never seen her before, then a slow smile of recognition crosses his face and he grabs her hand to kiss it. He curls his fingers around hers and goes back to his deep sleep. He ends up in her bed a

lot of nights when he's been in somebody else's. He smiles at her, pats her head, takes her chin in his hands and croons, makes up silly little songs with stupid lyrics—So blue, Red. Your beautiful blue eyes are so blue, Red. You're my beautiful blue-eyed, redheaded girl, Red. So blue, Red. Blue, Red. Blue. It's all for you, Red.

Lately, whenever she has trouble sleeping, she thinks about her wedding dress, the one that's been waiting for her all her life. She didn't even know it existed. It was waiting patiently for her to realize just how much she needs it. It revealed itself to her one sleepless night, and she has been fantasizing about it ever since. She can see herself in it so clearly. It is a demure dress, lace up to the neck, down to the wrists, past her ankles, brushing the floor. Her parents need to believe she is a thirty-five year old virgin and she doesn't want to dispel that myth before her wedding day. Perhaps the dress will transform her. She is breathtakingly beautiful walking down the aisle, the choir singing in perfect harmony. Her parents always told her that in order to be married in the church, she had to find her love for God, for Jesus and Mary. She has to own it. She didn't understand before. But now she wants to feel it, needs to feel it. She knows she can. God feels very, very close.

Everyone knows Fee Jones. Red knows this. Everyone reads the tabloids. Fee is not just the actress who was engaged to Vick Rumble, the girl with a taste for simple men, she's the actress who still shows up in the supermarket tabloids showing her angry red breast implant scars. Although lately they've shown her looking sickly, throwing up behind trees and in parking lots, walking in and out and in and out of doctors' offices. Fee has been married twice since the incident with Vick. Once to a pretty actor boy and once to a dark-haired investment banker with surprisingly bad teeth. Two divorces, both of them a surprise to Fee. She kept her extracurricular activities under wraps during both of her short-lived marriages. They were sprung on her at the last minute. The pictures of her after each of these incidents were slightly out of focus and embarrassing. Her mouth open, her hands tearing at her hair. She's done some light porn, some girl on girl action, a few bondage films, but she says she is not proud of it. Fee has a famous topless picture, her nipples just visible through her red hair that hangs down to her stomach. She is cut off at the waist, her lower body not important. She is smiling a subtle little smile. She is more than her beautiful hair, more than just a pinup girl. A framed copy hangs in the manager's office downstairs. It is signed and kissed by Fee. But lately Fee has been saying that she doesn't want to be that girl anymore. She's found religion, everything is different. She's become a Catholic, a good Catholic, a great Catholic, not a part-time one like she used to be—the kind that only goes to church on Christmas and Easter and when on the brink of suicide. Now she kneels until her knees are weak. Now she understands Jesus.

Some people insist that Fee is dying, there has been talk, whispers, about cancer. Some say they have proof. Some say they stole hair from the floor of her favorite hair salon, her red hair, her signature. They say they

gathered up the dry clumps on the floor with their own hands. Fee Jones wears a wig now that she's sick and dying. Chemotherapy makes her vomit in VIP bathrooms for hours, she's lost her hair and her will to live. Some say she has definitely been thinking about suicide. Some say the end is near for Fee Jones, she's beyond any medical help, any surgical intervention. No one knows how they know this. It is obvious that if all the rumors are true, Fee is making a fantastic effort to look happy, she is positively defiant in her happiness. She is still her stunning self. If she is still her stunning self, her hair must still be her own. A wig cannot take the place of a full luxurious head of fiery red hair like Fee's. Red doesn't think Fee looks sick. A little pale, a little tired, nothing serious. She is thin, but Fee is always thin. She's a professional. Fee is not filled with tumors, like the rumors say. It's hard, Fee says. When you're famous, you're the focus of so many, many rumors.

She's still so fucking hot, Vick says.

If it's Saturday night, Vick has an audience. Young men always gravitate towards Vick, they come for the stories, for the girls he attracts, nobody has a problem taking home his leftovers. They still want to hear about Fee Jones. I'd still fuck her, Vick says. She's always been raw meat. Don't you think, Red?

Absolutely, Red says.

Let me tell you something about Red, Vick says to his audience. Red always says yes.

This happens every week. This is tradition.

No, I don't, Red says.

Yes, you do, Vick says. You always say yes to me. You can't help yourself. Don't you think Fee is still fuckable, Red? That she's still raw meat? If you were a guy, you'd still want to fuck her too? Wouldn't you?

Vick holds her tightly, smacks her soundly on the ass.

Give her a minute, Vick says. She'll give in.

You'd still want to fuck her too, he says. Even though she's getting old. She's still fucking hot, but she's not half what she used to be. When I was fucking her? Jesus!

No, Red says.

No, you wouldn't fuck her? Cause she's old now? I'm going to tell her you said that. I'm going to tell her you said you wouldn't fuck her because she's old and not fuckable anymore. You know what, Red? I think that's really rude, cause you're not so young anymore either. Soon, no one is going to want to fuck you anymore either. Your day is coming, baby. It's coming fast. I barely want to fuck you anymore. Do you want me to tell Fee what you said about her?

No, Red says. That's not true.

So you would fuck her, so she is fuckable, Vick says.

He twists her arm, grabs her around the waist.

See? he says to his audience. This is how you keep them in line. Everything I say is right, right?

Yes, Red says finally, squirming away from him. Yes, okay.

See? Vick says. He lets her go. The audience cheers for Red—a round of drinks for everyone at the bar.

She's been thinking about Vick. About him and her and their lives and whether he'd ever consider marrying her. A big wedding in a beautiful church during the afternoon so the sunlight comes through the stained glass. The light bouncing off of Vick's shiny black hair, off of her veil and onto her face when he lifts it up to see her, like for the first time, like they've never had sex, they are virgins together again. They'll explore each other's faces. Innocent, she'll look forward to his body because she'll belong to him. His wife. He'll put one hand on her cheek, caress it with his fingers. Be dazzled and amazed by her. Be astonished by her. Say he's always loved her and this marks the beginning of a new life. Everything brand new. Vick is God's plan for her. After all, they've been having sex pretty regularly for six or seven years. She knows how often he sleeps with other girls. She knows he was having sex with Clare Dixon on and off for a few weeks down in the liquor room before Clare's live-in boyfriend found out and smashed her face in with one of his meaty solid fists. But Vick could stop anytime. Move in with her. Marry her. Clare Dixon doesn't love him. That's the truth. Red knows she doesn't.

Every Saturday night before midnight, her mother's disembodied voice comes through from the quiet halls of Our Lady of Pity. Her mother leaves messages on Red's voicemail that she listens to at work. It's become her routine. They're usually short and terse—a reminder about morning services or a Catholic retreat for singles in their late twenties. But on this message her mother's voice quivers.

Your sister has joined a long line of ecstasies, she is a stigmatic, her mother says. She's coming home, she's on the eleven-thirty out of Vienna, supposed to land here at eight. We are on our way to get her now. We're going to have to skip mass this week but...

Your sister, her mother says, pauses and sighs. Has the stigmata. She has only one of the Holy Wounds at this time, her precious hands, but it will only be a matter of time before the other wounds show themselves. It's real. It's all real now. Your sister is a special girl, Christina. We always knew in our hearts that your sister has the gift. This is very important, as you might imagine. Your father and I think you ought to consider coming home now. God loves you. Jesus loves you. You can come home, you know. If you come home, we can all be together again during this special time. I know your sister senses your absence.

Your sister, the Holy Sister Mary Margaret Catherine, has the stigmata, her mother whispers in second message left a little while later. You can really see it, she says. Oh, it was amazing! We were waiting at JFK, her plane was supposed to come in at eight, you know, but it didn't actually land until almost nine. And they wheeled her out, she's been in a trance. Such love on that child's face! Such love, Christina, you can't really understand until you see her.

She shines with it. She's really glowing, her skin is moist. We saw it. We took her home, set her up in her old bedroom, then she showed it to us. She cried, Christina. We cried. I really want you to think about it. Coming home. Christina, what makes you special? What have you done? This is an opportunity to be as close to a saint as possible. This is your own sister, your own flesh and blood! Christina, you don't think we know what you are into, what's going on with you, but we know. God knows. This is an opportunity for you. Don't let it slip away.

Vick, Red says.

What, he says.

He's pouring drinks, flirting with a tall blonde girl in a see-through shirt with no bra. Her breasts are small and plump.

I want to tell you a secret, she says. Come here.

Vick follows her to a corner of the bar.

What, he says and runs his hands through her hair.

I won't fuck her, he whispers. Promise. Just you. Be nice to me and I'll just fuck you tonight.

I'm always nice to you, Red says.

Okay, he says. We'll see. You be nice and we'll see. What's going on?

My sister has the stigmata, Red says.

Your family is fucking crazy, Red, he says. I'm busy.

No, seriously, Red says. It's the craziest thing, isn't it?

I guess, he says. Go away, I'm busy.

Vick, she says. She's got it, she's home from Austria to see Father Thomas at Our Lady of Pity who's going to confirm the stigmata and then she'll be an ecstatic.

Knock it off, Vick says, moving away from her. Or I'll fuck the blonde girl.

Only once Red asked—Do you love me? They were at the bar one busy Saturday night, Vick was pouring a whiskey sour, she was waiting for him to give her change for a twenty. Why are you fucking with me, he said. Whispered. She thought that's what she heard—why are you fucking with me—but maybe she didn't. It was hard to hear. It was loud. He smiled at her afterwards, even though he walked away from her without repeating what he said when she asked him to repeat it. She wanted to hear it again. She could have heard anything, he could have said anything. There are so many possibilities.

Come here, Fee says to Red.

She walks quickly towards her, out of breath and flushed.

Come here, she says.

Fee puts her hand on Red's left shoulder, guides her down the basement stairs towards the employee's rooms, the bathrooms, the liquor rooms, Vick's makeshift office. Places where she's had sex with Vick. Once she knocked over a couple of tequila bottles and he made her clean it up before he pulled her pants down and pushed her against the wall, she begged him to be quiet,

mortified that someone might hear, someone might investigate the situation and find them together. He loved it—say yes, Red. She'd say yes to the wall and he'd pull her back towards him—say yes, Red. Say yes to me, to my face.

Red, I want to show you something, Fee says. Go. In the bathroom. In the ladies' room, Fee locks the door, flips the light switch, starts to unbutton her blouse.

You want to feel it, Fee says. You're going to be the first one. Well, someone who isn't one of those quack doctors anyway. I heard about your sister. Please. I need you to concentrate.

Fee takes off her blouse and her bra, folds them neatly on the side of the sink. She wears a wooden cross around her neck with diamonds studs lining the sides. Fee places both of her hands on her own breasts, squeezes them a little. Then, she takes one of Red's hands and guides it to the left one.

They're fake, she says.

Yes, Red says. I know.

She pushes Red's hand into a lump just to the right of the nipple. It is spongy and warm. The breast itself is hard, almost inhuman, but the lump is very much alive. It pulses. It breathes.

It's growing, Fee says. I've been praying, but it's growing.

Can you feel it, Red asks.

Everyday it seems to get a little bigger, Fee says. Feel it.

She pushes Red's hand harder.

You have to really concentrate, Fee says. Otherwise, your hand will slip and you'll hit scar tissue.

Red closes her eyes. She pushes her palm into the breast and runs her fingers over the lump, pressing into it with her nails, watching the skin turn white and pink and purple and then white again.

I've stopped taking birth control pills, Fee says.

She pushes Red's hand away from her breast, pulls on her bra and her blouse.

I'm forty years old, Fee says. I've been taking birth control pills for twenty years. They cause cancer, you know.

I didn't know that, Red says.

Yes, Fee says. They don't tell you that, but it's true. They want us sterilized, infertile, empty. That's what the pills do. So you take them for twenty years, maybe twenty-five. Then, just when you're ready, just when you think you may be finally ready to have a kid with the only man you've ever really loved, you get cancer. It's our punishment, we're being punished for twenty years of little pink and orange pills. And I don't drink anymore. I go to mass every night. I'm trying to repent.

Okay, that's good, Red says.

Do you think I'm shedding, Fee asks, fixing her hair in the mirror. I think I'm shedding.

Shedding what, Red says.

Shedding, Fee says. Cancer cells. I'm contagious. Everywhere I go I'm shedding cancer, all over cabs and street corners and restaurants. Everywhere I go I'm infecting people.

I don't think so, Red says. I don't know, but I don't think so.

Well, I do, Fee says. I'm infectious. My cancer breath is infecting everyone.

I don't think so, Red says.

Jesus loves me, Fee says, she faces Red, her eyes wet and dark. He really, really loves me. I want to do some coke now. I don't have any on me, but I want it. But I can't. Not if I want Jesus to love me. He won't love me if I do cocaine. He won't. But you know what's great? You know what the greatest part of this is? I want it so bad and I know I can't have it and I will not let myself get it and I want it. When I can't take it another second, that's when I know I'm on the right track, I'm doing it, I'm really doing it and I will recover. If I don't, if I slip up, he'll forget me and the tumor will grow.

Her face glows in the pale orange light.

Red, I know your secret, she says. But don't worry, it is safe with me. And I'm so happy for you! Vick told me your sister has the stigmata.

He told you, Red says.

It's okay, Fee says. It's okay. He only told me after I showed him mine. He called me a crazy bitch, but I really don't care what he says anymore. See? I have it too. This is how I know I'm going to live.

She holds up her right hand for Red to see. There is a small cut in the middle of her hand, it is jagged, the skin broken, the surrounding area purple and green. There is a scab forming on it. It is soft and peeling up on the sides.

See, Fee says.

Red stares at it. She knows it is not real, cannot be real, not like her sister. She runs a finger over it and Fee shudders a little bit, trembles like she's cold. It is a nasty little cut. The blood is clotting. It is an unclean, uneven cut. Something tore at the skin.

Amazing, Red says.

I know, Fee says. I prayed for it and it came. I was feeling the pains. On my forehead, in my palms. My feet. I thought I knew what it was, but it was so much to hope for. It's what this has all been about. It's what I've been waiting for. I wanted you to touch it. You're so close to it. Your sister and I have been called by God.

Everyone wants to know what Fee was like in bed.

Pretty girls sometimes just lie there, Vick says, holding court. His audience at full attention. But Fee is different. She's on board, unconventional. There are no rules to follow. She goes someplace else. She snorts. Her eyes are different—they're darker, angrier, she grunts, grabs you, holds on for her fucking life. But after it's over she goes back to being herself. Lipstick, breath mints, pink underwear.

When Fee walks by, the men grin and guffaw.

I'm off the market now, she says. I'm fucking dying, Vick. Give it a rest.

In her third message, her mother mentioned that her sister spoke. You know what your sister said, her mother whispered into the phone. We wanted to feed her, she's so thin. I told her I'd cook her some chicken, maybe some rice too, if she wants it, your sister never really eats, you know, but she didn't hear me. She just looked at me and said—Jesus is the answer for the world! Of course, Christina! I'm asking her if she wants chicken, and she says Jesus is the answer for the world! We're keeping her in her room so she can see her visitors. People are calling from hundreds of miles away, thousands, because they want to see her, need to see her. She is so beautiful, Christina. Your heart will leap out of your chest when you see her. She's your sister, Christina. Your flesh and blood is connected to the flesh and blood of Jesus.

He's going to ask her to marry him. He's going to ask her one night when she least expects it. Just when she thinks they've hit a wall. Just when she thinks she has nothing left to say, she's empty and he's empty, no words left, no soul, just the same things over and over again between them until the end of time, he's going to ask her. He won't say—you want me to fuck you right now, you want it right now? Growling at her. She always said no. Then yes. Because she always said yes. After she gave him permission, he fucked her coldly in the back room with a cheap dry rubber for five minutes or so before pulling away, zipping up his black jeans, bounding up the stairs back to his bar.

The night before her sister left for Vienna, Red woke up, her sister sitting on her bed, her filmy blue eyes unfocused, distant. She reached out and touched Red's hand. Held it gently. Red has no memories of touching her sister before this. Her skin was waxy, flaky. She has no memories of her sister as a baby, as a child. A real child who played with toys and cried when she was hungry. He loves you, Christina, she whispered. Give up and let go. You know you want to. I know you can feel it. Let him love you.

Red cherishes the dawn. The Saturday night sky turning pink, the hybrid night-morning when it is still blackish-blue. The Saturday night ritual in Vick's office—count the money, restock the liquor, watch the light stream through the small prison window in the corner. It is Sunday morning and it won't be long before she can sink into sleep, give her whole body up to it. She longs for it. That moment when she lets go.

Along the walls in the basement are pictures, portraits, of almost everyone who works at the bar. They are paintings from one of the men in Vick's audience, a Saturday night regular, a skinny man in his late thirties—not handsome, not married. The lines on his face starting to settle in. An aging boyish face. Shell-shocked to be living with a roommate in a small two-bedroom apartment at almost forty. He is an art teacher in a high school, a sensitive jumpy man half in love with Vick. He did portraits of each of them. Vick, Red, Clare, Aimee, John, Fee, a couple of the other regulars and a

few of the cocktails girls. He is a fair painter, Red never thought the portraits looked much like them. Sort of, if she looked really close. They were more of a cartoon version of their real faces. Vick was barely polite when he accepted them, said thanks, put them behind the bar. Red was surprised when Vick actually hung them on the walls, even if he did hang them where the customers can't see them. The humidity of the basement walls makes the paintings moist, all of their faces have bumps and wavy lines like they have aged at an accelerated rate since being captured during their youth and hung on the wall. One of Red's blue eyes has since peeled off. She looked for it on the floor when she discovered it was missing, but the night porter must have swept it away.

All the men waiting upstairs for Vick are vultures. His regulars, his audience. Vultures. Her sister says that vultures are the devil's birds. They come sniffing around when they smell rotting flesh, they sense death, they understand the concept of dying, of being left for dead. They love it. They can smell Fee dying, they can smell her rotting from the inside. Necrophiliacs who want to own her body before and after her death. They want to taste her then devour her whole. Her sister told her about the dangers of cannibalism. She said—you are eating part of God, God created us, Jesus gave himself to us. His body was his gift to us. Body and soul. We should not consume the body, we should not let ourselves be consumed. She spoke about holy rituals and the consumption of the human body. An eternity with the devil. Insanity.

Down by the liquor rooms, the offices, the employee bathrooms, Vick's office, Red hears a woman's strangled voice gurgling and choking, heavy breathing from damaged lungs, the slamming of hands on the walls. She hears sounds, brief phrases— "want it" and "do you" and "tell me" and "tell me" and "crazy" and "Felicia," and she wonders and then is certain who Felicia is— Vick's voice calling Fee Jones by her proper name, Felicia Bundy. Red reads the tabloids, she knows her real name. It'd be silly to assume Vick wouldn't know Fee's real name. After all, they were going to be married so long ago and he bought her that ring and maybe he even had her real name, Felicia, engraved on it just to remind her that she'd always be her real self to him, that he could see beyond the nonsense and Fee Jones and see Felicia Bundy underneath. Maybe Fee didn't want him to see her and that's why she gave in again and again to her habit of taking home young fragile men in new expensive suits.

The door is open. Vick never closes his office door. Never has anything to be ashamed of. He thinks only guilty people shut doors. He is proud. Proud of himself. He keeps his door wide open. Red stands right in front of them. They are naked. Vick bites Fee's hand, her left arm right up to her shoulder, swallowing the whole thing. It is the bad arm connected to the bad breast. The arm is rotting underneath even though it appears healthy, pink, warm. He touches the breast with his lips, nibbles it, takes large chunks of it in his

mouth, in his teeth. They don't look up. They don't see her. She watches them. They kiss violently.

She watches Vick, her boss, her savior. She lets him fuck her in his office. This office. Her sister warned her. You can't see God's plan for you if you are being consumed by vultures. But Red can see it anyway. She knows she can. God's plan. It doesn't matter what Vick asks of her, Red has always said yes. She is obedient, faithful, loyal, true—all virtues of the highest order. She will be a good wife. Vick is God's plan for her. She can see it even if the vultures, the devil's birds, are right here in the bar where she has found salvation. This is God's plan for her. She wants God to feel close. Very, very close. Her sister, back in Ronkonkoma, holding up her stigmata trying to heal her sister who has been consumed by vultures. Red will tell her sister that it worked. Red knows, her vision is clear. Do what I tell you, Vick says. Be a good girl.

She is, finally, a good girl.

If only Vick would open his mouth wide enough for her, she'd climb right in. Not the way he's devouring Fee Jones, the way her cancer is devouring her, bit by bit. He'll swallow her whole and she'll live inside him forever.

## #8 Creative Nonfiction



*Destruction #1*

acrylic and graphite on paper, 2007

by Sean P. Morrissey

SWEET NOTHINGS

I was raised in a house where candy dishes were always full. Where artificially flavored and colored sweets were stand-ins for the *I love yous* we couldn't bring ourselves to say. This odd trio of words felt uncomfortable in all of our mouths. Tasted tainted when we tried to spit them out.

In this house Literature was King but TV was God. Everyday was a variation of: PBS, *As the World Turns*, the evening news, *Love Boat*, *Fantasy Island*, the late night news and Johnny Carson. A continuous loop of British accents, Tang commercials, sappy soap star exchanges, car bombs, *da plane*, serial killers, bloody bodies and baby kangaroos that pawed at Carson's plaid sports coat passed in front of my eyes. There were no limits. Nothing was bad for me, a child, to see.

I was raised in a house where dinners were either eaten alone at the kitchen counter or on TV trays in front of a not-to-be-missed show. There was scraping and slurping but little verbal interaction between us. My parents were quiet and shy which made me quite shy. And lonely. I had three sisters but they were all over eighteen and out on their own when I arrived—*surprise*—late to this party called Family.

In this house I had primate dreams. I longed, not for sibling companionship, but for a monkey. I wanted a chimpanzee that I could dress in green overalls and rock until it fell asleep. I wanted something to—*can't say*—I wasn't raised that way.

I was raised in a house where a Mother didn't speak her anger but let it seep out in a slam of a kitchen cupboard, in a smack of a palm on a counter, in a slip of the tongue—*hell*—sliding out of her Revlon Red mouth.

In this house I had a pink room, the color of a carnation bud. A huge inflatable heart hung on hook and string from the ceiling. I had wood floors; a goldfish I'd won at a carnival, a diary with no key and a secret door in my closet where I could hide the cheap Raspberry Champagne I stole from my parents. I would sneak this drink out under my winter coat, sipping it in movie theatre parking lots on cold December nights with a boy that loved (to fuck) me, wearing a tight cotton candy-colored dress and frosting-colored pumps. I was an adolescent confection, a whipped up pastel slice of lust and liquor. A sweet thing that left a sting.

I was raised in a house where artistic expression was encouraged. I spent one afternoon gluing shiny pink and silver hearts around the perimeter of my walls at the top where ceiling and sides collide. I finished and stepped away. The hearts were too small. Standing back in the middle of my room they lost their sweet love form and turned into distorted dots. Shining but lacking meaning.

OLIVE-SKINNED GIRL

There was no one to come with me, no one I wanted to ask. I didn't show my vulnerabilities in those days. I was a graduate student in a laboratory; what I shared with people was data. I did have a boyfriend, someone with his own commitments. Alden was a medical student in ob/gyn. When he brought me my test results from the hospital, we didn't discuss whether I should have an abortion, we discussed the logistics of how and when. In a couple days I would be flying to California to interview for a fellowship.

The next morning he dropped me off in front of a clinic in the Bronx that took my medical insurance. As I got out of my beat up Pinto station wagon, which he drove, he wished me luck. He was off to take a final exam. He would have come with me otherwise, but an exam was an exam.

*Don't worry, I reassured him. It's no big deal.*

Lying on giant white paper draped over a cushioned hospital bed, my feet secured in stirrups, wearing the cloth gown open in the back, I wanted to watch. My view was limited though, to the porous foam ceiling panels and the white sheet draped over my knees that made them look like Halloween ghosts. The nurse stared intently into my spread legs, as if she was checking to make sure the doctor performed the procedure correctly. He said *this will feel like a pinch* while injecting my cervix with anesthetic. I recognized a clear polyurethane tube, the kind I used in the laboratory for my own experiments, maybe half an inch in diameter and specially constructed with thick walls to avoid collapsing under pressure.

As a scientist, anatomy and physiology were subjects I could latch onto. I was comfortable making observations and drawing conclusions. Once the procedure was underway and the vacuum whirred and swished, I watched the red and yellow streams crisscross through the tube like a double helix, winding to a destination below the bedside. I focused on a single inch of tubing that I was sure my fetus would pass through as it made its way through the tube. Maybe it's this stream of blood, or that little speck of yellow, or that little reflection of fluorescent light hitting the arcing tube just so. These details protected me. Without them, questions might have come up. What did this procedure mean to a living being? Did being alone at this moment mean I was in the wrong relationship? Did I have friends or family, or had science replaced all of that?

When the vacuum stopped, the room was startlingly quiet. The doctor instructed that I should just lie there until I felt comfortable getting up, but not for at least thirty minutes.

*Was I really pregnant?* I asked, as if to leave open the possibility that all of this had never really happened.

*Oh yes, you were definitely pregnant,* the doctor said, his voice too cheerful.

*But I didn't see anything*, I argued, as if I was somehow right, that what the doctor yanked from my uterus was something other than a fetus, perhaps just a late period, built up layers of sterile endometrial tissue that refused to come out on their own.

*Oh yes, don't worry, you were pregnant, but you'll be fine.*

The nurse converted the examining table to a bed, and then lifted my feet from the stirrups one by one, laying them flat. She picked up the clear glass vessel and as she headed for the door I searched for any details in the red liquid, but there were none. The great wooden door shut tight into its metal frame.

A yellow cab drove me back to downtown Manhattan where I lived in a fifth floor walk-up in Greenwich Village. Zigzagging in traffic along the East River Drive we passed 68th Street, the laboratory where I worked, and I wondered if I would be well enough to go in today. I pictured myself making up a story for Howard, my co-worker, who would ask why I was late. Would he believe I'd slept in or had a 24-hour bug? We were always at the lab, even on Saturdays and Sundays. Instead I found myself climbing the stairs to my little apartment. I was too weak to go to the lab.

Alden had rented me the movie, "Lost in America," and I lay in bed watching the main character, Linda, gamble her last pennies away at a casino. Her actions affected her unknowing husband in the hotel room upstairs, but she was consumed by her obsession to win. I allowed myself to drift numbly with the story and avoided drawing any parallels with my own obsession to succeed.

I was as devoted to science as some are to religion. I was, I would say, a fanatic. If you were going to be making the discoveries, you had to be connected to them in every sense, as driven by the experiments as they were by you. I understood there were people who did not live this way. These people had "jobs." Howard and I would laugh about TGIF—Thank God It's Friday. How strange, we said, that such a slogan existed, let alone the desire to live life according to TGIF. Weekends, we reasoned, were artificially imposed structures that got in the way of true data collection, which was ongoing, around-the-clock and superior to societal delineations of time. More recently I've heard of Wednesday being called "hump-day," another artificial line in the sand marking halfway towards Friday, the week's finish. Research was never finished. When I moved from New York to California to begin my fellowship, Alden came with me. We rented a little house near the freeway and Alden bought a motorcycle. As a medical resident he worked twelve hour shifts in different hospitals, often overnight. I sometimes slept on the couch in the coffee room next to the lab.

I was the only scientist in my family. My dad's sister, Pam, had moved to California years earlier and lived nearby. Pam was the type of person who had a "job." The job did not run Pam's life. She was always trying new things that

she claimed changed her life, or her focus, and her job simply provided sustenance. Most recently Pam had been to see a Mr. Saxon, who she believed could predict the future. An office visit had cost seventy-five dollars, but Mr. Saxon was worth the expense to Pam. Worse yet, she insisted I make an appointment, and the visit would be her birthday present to me.

Mr. Saxon was bearded, burly and wore a plaid flannel shirt. His office, in a single-story decrepit building was decorated in blues. The carpet and café curtains, the flowery sofa and matching armchair, were combinations of turquoise, royal blue and slate blue. Given this cheap décor, I didn't believe for a second that Mr. Saxon could predict the future. When he began questioning me, I provided vague answers to prove, in my scientific way, there was no such thing as telepathy. On top of it, that morning I had chosen to wear a checkered, naïve-looking halter dress, and what occurred to me when Mr. Saxon started speaking was that he would never know the real me in that dress.

Despite my reservations, Mr. Saxon's voice was warm and it drew me in. He had a charming way about him, not forceful, and he asked some simple questions that there seemed no harm in answering. Then his eyes grew slit-like and he said he had a feeling that people who had once known me were gathering in the room. Their faces bore looks of recognition and warmth. One was a gray-haired man with thick eyebrows wearing a business jacket. This description would possibly fit my grandfather, I thought, who had come to this country from Greece as a child. A woman's description fit my grandmother. Of course, this could have been coincidental, but briefly I allowed my mind to drift along with the charade.

*Who else is here?* I wanted to know.

Mr. Saxon mentioned the features of a dark-haired woman carrying a bag of coins, and my mind turned to Aunt Mimi, my grandmother's sister, who would save her pennies for when I came to visit. I had loved those childhood visits to Aunt Mimi's, but then after my parents were divorced we had lost touch. By the time I was thirteen, when I heard she died of a heart attack I had no emotion. As Mr. Saxon described these people, I remembered parts of my past I'd left behind, people I'd loved and lost. I grew into the feeling, at least temporarily, that my life had meaning beyond my current fixation with the lab.

Then he said abruptly, *a little girl is here. Are there any small children in your life? Did you have a daughter?*

No. I shook my head. I had worked during the summers as an au pair for a family near Boston fifteen years earlier. These children would now be in their twenties. I didn't think they had died. Then I realized there might have been a child in my life. I might have had a daughter, if abortions counted.

Mr. Saxon had leaned forward in his armchair, and his kind eyes bulged out behind wire-rimmed glasses. *I'm getting a picture of a little girl with a*

*message that you should be more certain of what you want out of life, he continued, studying me quizzically. I have a sense that within a few years you will change your life's focus and do something more creative. Do you know what that might be?*

I didn't know what it meant to do something more creative, but I found myself holding back tears. I also felt my daughter's omniscience peering into my denial. Tearfully, I told Mr. Saxon about the abortion.

Minutes later, I emerged onto a sunny sidewalk and found Pam waiting in her Camry. I had no interest in lunch. I was angry at Pam for taking me to someone who would open my eyes. I felt as though I'd been tricked. As cars passed us on the freeway, my mind created pictures of a little girl with black-hair and olive-skin that took after Alden. At four years old, she wears a cotton sleeveless plaid dress, knee length with a ruffle. She runs barefoot on a beach near our house. Her smooth tiny limbs dangle from the dress like toothpicks.

The next day I returned to the lab as usual, analyzed the data from a recent experiment and set up a new one. But it would be some time before I could get the little girl out of my head. Especially when I was thick into part of an experiment that required immense concentration, (like counting drops from a spigot or weighing picogram quantities of fly embryos that I had painstakingly collected), the image of the little girl would return. I found myself questioning why I had aborted her. I was ashamed to admit the act had been too easy, the procedure too available. We had been students at a medical school, so there wasn't even a cost. The night Alden had come home with my results, I'd sensed his disappointment and I knew that the next morning I would go in, and that's what I had done. I hadn't thought it through because the event had been too enormous to face.

By this time, Alden and I had been together five years. I started to hint about getting married. Then one day he surprised me with a big gold and diamond ring. We planned the wedding in one day, as we hadn't wanted to take too much time off. Alden found out you could get married on a boat on Lake Tahoe, and even though it was February, a worker chipped ice with a pick so the boat could move away from the dock. With a Universal Life minister and a video photographer we recited our vows. I still remember when the cameraman asked Alden to say a few additional words. *I look forward to raising kids and having a family*, he said. So we began to try.

But timing was a problem. Due to our schedules, we weren't always in bed at the same time. I started taking my temperature to find out when I was ovulating, but this procedure was next to impossible. I would leave the glass thermometer by the bedside and as soon as my eyes opened in the morning I popped it into my mouth. Three minutes later I would read the mercury. Sometimes I noticed my temperature was 98.7 instead of 98.6. On those nights if Alden came in at 2 a.m. from the hospital, even though he was exhausted I would force myself on him. After several months there was still no pregnancy.

Desperate, I tried Clomid to stimulate my ovaries to produce eggs. It didn't seem fair that Alden would perform hundreds of deliveries and abortions in his spare time to earn extra cash, but we were unable to get pregnant.

One night we had a trivial argument, and Alden said he just couldn't take the stress. He packed his backpack and left. I tried to call him to work it out, saying maybe I had put too much pressure on him to have children, but he didn't want to talk about anything. After a couple months of living at the hospital or with other medical residents Alden brought me divorce papers to divide up our only valuables: a sofa and a stereo system. Part of my soul crumbled when I signed those divorce papers and handed them back to Alden. After he hurried out the door I went to the window. He was just a helmeted man in a leather jacket disappearing down the street on a motorcycle, but he took with him all the possibilities and opportunities not grasped.

During the weeks and months that followed I was unable to carry out experiments. I would go to the laboratory, set out ten tubes in a rack, as if beginning an experiment. Then I would sit in my desk chair and consider what to do. Hours would pass with nothing accomplished, and at an appropriate time I would leave the lab to look in shop windows, watch women push strollers, go jogging.

I remarried within two years. Mike and I were in love and we both wanted children. It seemed the timing was right to leave science and explore something more creative. It didn't occur to me I was fulfilling Mr. Saxon's prediction. *I have a sense that within a few years you will change your life's focus*, he had said.

Our first pregnancy resulted in miscarriage. Through ultrasound I learned that the heart of my fetus had stopped beating. My doctor told me to just wait for the miscarriage to happen naturally. He said spontaneously aborted fetuses had been found to have broken or malformed chromosomes. Development refused to continue in a fetus that did not have the proper programming. In that conversation I kept waiting for the doctor to tell me that women who had had abortions might have trouble getting pregnant in the future, but he didn't.

Mike was at work when I went into labor. The contractions felt like a vice clamping down on my uterus, the pain unrelieved by over-the-counter medications. As I twisted and turned on our king-sized bed I remembered my doctor telling me that twenty percent of pregnancies ended in miscarriage. Twenty percent seemed like a high number. As one contraction followed the next, I was astounded that women around the world were going through this pain without talking about it. All I'd heard about was the pain of childbirth, but what about miscarriage, alone, no one caring because it was just a fetus already dead. More importantly, why did I care now, when I hadn't at a younger age?

As the blood started pouring out, I sat on the toilet and collected the dripping material in a Tupperware container. When the pain subsided, once again I became the scientist making observations. In that mode I could cope, standing outside looking in. I brought the container to my desk, and poured the gooey mass onto a piece of aluminum foil under a Tensor lamp. Multiple hues of red, liver-like clumps drifted slowly across the reflective surface like miniature glaciers. Meticulously I poked and prodded with a toothpick and magnifying glass, searching for a miniature form similar to those from textbooks or from containers of formaldehyde in anatomy classrooms, but I found nothing.

Eventually, Mike and I conceived our first child, and we had our second right away because we still were not convinced we could. I was adamant about staying home with the children. Within ten years, however, Mike and I divorced and I needed a job. I started teaching high school science since I could be out when my children were. The job also provided health benefits for the children and was close to home so that my commute would not take time away from them.

The high school where I worked was overcrowded, and each morning caravans of buses rolled in from 110 Los Angeles zip codes. Students descended on campus like a stampede. I taught six Physiology classes, each with forty kids. It was a fact of life that teachers rarely had individual time with students.

One girl, Brooke, was unusually quiet. She was small and frail, had orange-dyed curly hair and a cherubic face. I had watched her scores slip in my computerized grade book, but repeatedly neglected to tell her to come and talk to me. Then one day after class she stood by my podium in line behind other students. When it was her turn she smiled and said she'd wait till all the others had left. One by one they headed out of the room to eat their snacks before the next class. The door remained open, but Brooke deliberately went outside to pull it tight. In that brief period of time that elapsed, I knew what she was going to tell me.

When she returned to my podium, she said, *I'm pregnant.*

I asked the usual questions, how old she was, did her parents know. She was eighteen, and I was grateful for that. It meant we could talk, and she would be an adult making her own choice. She had not told anyone else, and she had made the decision to have an abortion.

As we talked, the story written here was laid out before me in my head, the abortions, the marriages, the children, work. Ultimately, I loved my children, but here at the high school I had half a life, devoting so much of myself to others. Even though I grieved for my olive-skinned girl, if there ever had been one, choosing to be in the laboratory had been my way of creating meaning out of my existence, of filling a void that relationships and family would never fill. Somehow at a young age I had known that implicitly, and I'd

been right to act without thinking further. Yes, I had been ashamed based on Mr. Saxon's vision, but as a scientist I knew there were other interpretations. Of course, I shared none of this with Brooke, though her eyes looked to mine for answers.

*Do you think it's the right thing?* She wanted to know. Lamely, I said it was her decision, and that I would support whatever she wanted to do. I think my eyes were saying to get that abortion.

During the next two weeks Brooke's classroom seat was empty. Then she reappeared, turned in homework and ignored me. I wondered what had happened, but didn't ask. Obviously I knew. On the last day of school she passed by my podium and made eye contact. I nodded. She leaned over and whispered, *I did it.*

*Good,* I said.

She smiled, and that was the last time I saw her.

A KITE FALLING

Often, while writing at my desk, my eyes straying towards my six month old kite painting sitting there, I have begun to sense that it has been waiting to speak to me for some time. The painting itself is quite simple: a cut, stringless fuschia-bodied and yellow and turquoise ear and tailed kite flying/suspended in a monotone blue sky above a tree-top full of paper pieces of kite. I didn't paint the kite; I instead glued a miniature paper kite from a bagful that I bought from a stall in New Delhi onto the canvas. The pieces of kite in the tree too are from one half of another paper-kite that I mutilated in order to adorn my painting. I cannot recall what it is that I did with the other half: it presumably sits alongside the other intact paper kites, marooned and wingless.

I call the tree in my painting kite tree. Late last January, while visiting Jaipur : for a literature festival, I used to see these kite-studded trees wherever I went. I recognized the kite remnants as leftovers from the mid-January festival of Basant when Jaipur ritually climbed up to the flat-topped house roofs and participated in kite-flying contests. Those kite-trees still retained that spirit of festivity and celebration and seemed unwilling to relinquish this unseasonal cargo of theirs, this blossoming of mutated rainbow-hued flowers. These kite-trees figure amongst my most memorable memories of that particular January in Jaipur: translucent blue glass morning skies, melted butter sunlight, and those happy, fecund trees.

It was some time ago when I came across an article referring to the kite-eating trees in the comic strip, *Peanuts*; those trees sounded carnivorous, a pirhana-like sounding avatar of the scarlet-faced Venus flytrap. My Jaipur kite-trees and the one in my painting were not hungry: they rather accepted the kite fragments into their fold with outstretched arms, as that of a mother, affectionately feeding the kites' illusion that they were still aloft. It was akin to snowflakes starring a black coat, allowed to briefly retain their original and inherent individuality, rather than falling and congealing into the faceless floor of snow. You would not demote beauty into detritus by mistaking those snowflakes for dandruff; how could you then mutilate maternity into Medea by conflating those kite-fragments as objects of *consumption*?

I am focusing on the tree although I know that it is the kite in the painting which seeks to say something to me. Let us train our gaze towards it. My kite appears an Icarus, his feather and wax wings silhouetted against the sun, supremely confident in this moment of aerial triumph. And yet, if you peer more closely, my kite is not as much airborne as it is falling and in possession of the knowledge that it will ultimately bypass the cushioned security of the tree. My kite is falling. My painting is a photograph of a kite falling. And I am sitting here and watching it fall, unable to do anything.

When kites fall in my part of India, telephone, electricity and barbed wires often disrupt their descent to earth; it is common to see kites ensnared in knots of wires, gradually turning into shish-kebabs of fried paper and wood over time. Otherwise, they fall flat on their faces and are instantly submerged in anonymity, becoming as non-descript as the nearby discarded wastepaper. At their luckiest, the kites will glide down onto lawns of house gardens; their prospective owners, the neighborhood boys will then cluster around the main entrance gate, unguently calling out to whomever they see to fetch the kites; sometimes, people of the house oblige, sometimes, they don't. The boys immediately squabble if and when the kite comes into their possession, fiercely arguing over who is legitimately entitled to acquiring this prized trophy of a furiously fought sky-duel.

I saw a kite fall this July. I was standing outside in my uncle's garden, contemplating whether to write in my journal or finish reading *Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince*. The air was sepia-colored, the clouds melted burnished brass, and the atmosphere thrummed with the kind of anticipation akin to that before a theatre performance. I finally sat down on a three-decade old viridian green metal bench, having abandoned both the book and journal for gazing hypnotically up into the blanched pink evening sky. There were kites too in the air: black rhombuses hovering parallel to each other, their strings pencil lines across the firmament. A baby cried; the music store next to the bakery across the road was playing a popular Hindi film song from four summers ago, instantly transplanting me to a similar evening then, redolent of the familiar odor of unwatered dust, growth, and the charged, electric finale to a deadening, hot, dull day. It was as if today had never existed and yesterday was static. I found myself holding my breath, afraid that if I exhaled I would never recover what I had just so serendipitously discovered.

The dog heard it fall before I did. It started barking and bulleted from the house and onto the white marble verandah. The baby had stopped crying and I saw that a kite had fallen amid the stumps of the recently amputated lime tree. It still hurt my eyes every time to see the surgery that the lime-tree had lately undergone. It had been a childhood pleasure to see and touch the unripe, smooth-skinned lime-fruit dangling from the branches, like a pudgy child attempting to wear Hollywood glamour chandelier earrings. The fruit looked plastic enough to seem faux and I always had to pinch the peel and smell the citrus on my fingertips to convince myself of its reality. I even willingly gulped down its freshly squeezed juice despite its teeth enamel-chipping sourness because of the novelty of tasting a fruit directly picked from the parent tree. Nowadays, my uncle picked out tired limes from stacks pyramiding the fruit-carts on the road; the tree had become barren and had to be pruned. Someday, surely, it would be axed.

In the diminishing dusk light, the kite was pale-colored and sickly and I instinctively knew that no one would come to fetch and fight for it. It was destined to remain in that armless embrace until the sun and monsoon rain

bleached and sheared it away into becoming a skeleton once more, returning it into the form from which it had originally grown. It had fallen and how: an ignominious descent for it remained in the limbo of falling and yet not having actually parachuted to the ground. It was a kite ghost: never to be trampled to mutilation, never to be worshipped as a trophy, and never to glamorously electrocute itself in dramatic pyrotechnics on electric cables. I wished then I could say that it was a beautiful sight, the fallen kite and the newly-turned kite tree. I could not, though, no matter how much I tried to photoshop tragedy: the kite was now merely a flat diamond shaped piece of paper and the tree, reduced and atrophied.

I think I am beginning to understand what the kite in my painting is speaking about to me and why. It is asking me where it is falling. You are just part of a painting though, I should respond, there are no brackets to your story; the painting is the story in itself and like every other spectator, I too wonder where the kite is falling. This is the way I *should* respond. But I cannot. What is the use of starting to narrate a story that you cannot complete? Does not the story-teller have the right to know the ending of his story considering he is its very first audience? I am the story-teller in this case and I must find out where the kite falls. Unlike Dedalus, I could not warn the kite of the dangers inherent in the pleasure of flight; unlike Dedalus, though, I can surely narrate it the story of its fall.

Jaipur: the capital of north-western Indian desert state of Rajasthan

## Music Column

### SEX ISN'T A SIN: THE SOUNDTRACK

I'm not young and yet I'm getting to understand why someone would want to sleep with a singer or be a groupie with the hope of being more than one note. I'd easily choose to be either John Lennon or Yoko Ono, magnets in heat.

Levi Kreis does that magic to me and I'm not sure why. He sings in his gift LP to his fans, *Bygones*, "Handcuff My Soul" and I have a vision of myself being legal age and throwing off my leather coat while he opens the curtains to let moonlight makes us prayerful. Romantic, sure, but not as simple as a wet dream. There is something attractive to me when a singer means what he says, that somehow turns product into prophesy. The album is a gathering of older songs that Levi recorded before getting national attention and I enjoy the uncertainty of his choices that his voice nails (hello, Freud). As a poet and a teacher, I'm impressed when someone sounds like no one else despite the fact he or she may look alike, act average, or hide in plain sight. Levi, you are right to say proudly that you have "beautiful insights in my tongue."

But there are other songs, all of them honest and like a diary about how hard the music business is. Talent alone isn't enough.

He sings about blue eyes, about men younger than he is (or I'm bad at math, which I am). So none of these songs are about me, for me, but they move me because we are so used to generic psalmists. His voice is sexual (transparency: never met him and probably never will) but he makes me think of how body and soul are owed respect in this culture that is parsing us as blow-up dolls to be screwed by corporations. I'm not religious but when Levi says the word soul he reminds me of the first time I kissed a man and something in me understood the word *homecoming*. Discover him at [www.levikreis.com](http://www.levikreis.com). Levi has inspired me to write a poem and some lines are:

These images have short

shelf lives, but, for now, they are an electric poem I need  
to read aloud, that returns me to my life, to questions

*Same-Sex Séances*/ [www.newsinspress.com](http://www.newsinspress.com)

This is a great album and deserves listeners. Levi is obviously smart and determined to be his own man and how fortunate we are that he shares news from his journey with us. He makes sex and love seem conjoined, constant, and a cognizance of who we are when outside of the bed. "Bygones" is sometimes charmingly clumsy, but it is always convincing. He is someone I wish was my friend, someone I could come over to visit and tell him of last

night's mistake until we both laugh and talk turns to the mysteries of the cosmos.

Sex is interesting because it's more than mechanical dancing, a debt, or affirmation. It's about the music of the heart going faster, of straying into absolutes that embrace you, of percussion yielding to a kiss' precision.

So as I listen to Waz, in his new CD, *The Sweet Bye And Bye*, I think, sometimes (well often) that I hate handsome men who are talented and deserve acclaim. He makes me have run-on sentences (and someone else I will probably never meet).

His CD is consistent and convinces me that aching sounds like a strength. In "Maria," (my competition in some abstract way! I hope Waz has a sense of humor.), he says tenderly "I don't think this world can keep spinning without you." Vulnerability is becoming understood as a strength also. I love this CD's lack of rush to sell me shit, how Waz in "Release" sings "everyone's wondering about tomorrow" I must believe his gentle command to trust love in this age in which we are using hi-tech bombs and smart secret black budgets.

Waz has real talent, and reminds me of a poet who becomes a singer instead of publishing books (how jealous I am!). In his video song, "She's Gone," he sings "your were the one/you were the one" and he makes heterosexuality look glamorous and important. (transparency: I have his video on my own Myspace). Waz proves that a soulful singer has a great left hook! I've learned never to underestimate the earnest one. This music makes me think of the poet Jean Valentine's line (from "Once"):

When we broke up  
it was as if the last egg in the house  
got dropped on the broken floor.

His voice's stridency strikes me as honest and rare, so that we are fortunate to have his music to break paths for us. The Myspace site for him and his band is [www.wazmusic.com](http://www.wazmusic.com). He and the rest of them make sex also about how hard it is to open oneself long after the nakedness, how it hurts to be in love but worth the gamble. I hate/envy him and love his music and he seems such a good person. Organic music is also about the singer and band respecting you and your own aching and love.

I wanted to write about a gay and straight artist to show how much we all have in common, that being myopic is a dangerous thing. Even though I'm not exactly as ancient as Rome (where its new list of sins is a virtual Pompeii that is splattering the world), sex matters because there is an honesty when one yields to yes. We have so many superior singers today than when I was 18 and I'm amused that the young think the 1970s were fun. They weren't and confusion and repression still seems to exist. I always recommend safe sex because too many around me have died of AIDS and no drug yet will return the shine of them being themselves everyday.

Levi and Waz (OK, I'm pretending to know them and can call them by their know-me names) are working in a tradition that Bakhtin made clear for us: the body is an important part of all discourses, or should be. The heart, as always, provides the rhythm.

## #8 Contributor Bios

**Jackie Bernardo** is a Journalism student from California. Her work has most recently appeared in *Farmhouse Magazine*, *Flask and Pen*, and the *Gnostic Mag*.

**Jennifer Campbell** is an English professor in Buffalo, NY. Her poems have appeared in *Feile- Festa*, *Literary House*, *Hudson View Poetry Digest*, and *Skyline Magazine*. Her work also appears in two anthologies titled *Mourning Sickness* and *Letterhead*. She is co-editor of *Earth's Daughters* feminist literary journal, and in 2007 she was nominated for a Pushcart Prize by *Skyline Magazine*.

**Gretchen Clark** holds a B.A. in English Literature, co-teaches an online Lyric Essay course on Writers.com and is a weekly Creative Arts Mentor for at-risk teenagers. Her work has been published or is forthcoming in *Literary Mama*, *Hip Mama*, *Skirt*, and *Flashquake*. You can reach her at [prettylizard\\_2000@yahoo.com](mailto:prettylizard_2000@yahoo.com).

**R.D. Coleman** is a writer and photographer and lives in New York City. He has recently published poetry in *Envoi*, *poetrymonthly*, *Acumen*, *Pemmican*, *Midwestern University Quarterly*, and *Freedomways*. He has taught English at San Francisco State College and Malcolm/King College. He has been a union organizer, a welfare worker, a gang worker, and a director of homeless shelters.

**Naomi Glassman** writes from New Jersey, mainly in the company of her cat.

**Eloise Klein Healy** is the author of six books of poetry, most recently *Passing* and *The Islands Project: Poems for Sappho* (Red Hen Press). Her work has been widely anthologized, and she has received many awards, including the grants from the California Arts Council and residencies at The MacDowell Colony. She is the Founding Chair of the MFA in Creative Writing Program at Antioch University Los Angeles, where she is Distinguished Professor of Creative Writing Emerita. She is the co-founder of ECO-ARTS, an ecotourism/arts venture, and her imprint with Red Hen Press, Arktoi Books, was established in 2006 and specializes in publishing the work of lesbian authors.

**Matt Jenkins'** publishing credits include various publications and contest awards, notably the Grand Prize in the [www.oncewritten.com](http://www.oncewritten.com) Midnight Hour

Fiction contest. The \$500 award helped repair the truck with which he drives to work and school. He considers literary bios to be the highest form of artistic masturbation, and often confuses poor social skills as cool, J.D Salinger eccentricity. He lives in Colorado and Tennessee and should always be writing more.

**Rachel Kellum's** poems have appeared in *Barnwood Magazine*, *The Nieve Roja Review* and *Greyrock Review*. Two of her creative nonfiction pieces—childbirth narratives that resist and revise the technocratic language of birth—are featured in the book, *Journey into Motherhood*. An Illinois native, Kellum has lived in Colorado for fourteen years and currently teaches writing, literature, humanities, and oil painting at Morgan Community College where the plains have curiously claimed her again.

**Naomi Leimsider's** stories have appeared or are forthcoming online and in print, most recently in *Pindeldyboz*, *Slowtrains*, *Quarterly West*, and *The Summerset Review*. She teaches creative writing at Hunter College and York College in New York City.

**Sean P. Morrissey** was born and raised in eastern Ohio. He likes music, riding his bike and being organized. He does not like when coffee tastes burnt. Sometimes he's loud. Sean currently attends Bowling Green State University and is on the verge of receiving his BFA in two-dimensional studies, focusing in printmaking, drawing and installation/mixed media. Sean's current work deals with how we realize and reconfigure the contemporary landscape. He is an MFA candidate (currently undecided where, exactly) and would eventually like to get a library science degree. He would like to thank his parents for everything.

**Karen K. Perkins** is a writer and science teacher in Los Angeles. She holds a doctorate in biochemistry, spent many years in laboratories studying gene regulation in fruit flies and human cancer cells, and is a former recipient of the Damon Runyon Cancer Research Foundation Award. She is now part of the ongoing creative nonfiction workshop at Beyond Baroque Literary Arts Center in Venice, California. Her work has been published in *Mount Voices*, *The New York Times Book Review*, *The Hispanic Outlook On Higher Education* and in many scientific journals.

**Sankar Roy**, originally from India, is a poet, translator, activist and multimedia artist living near Pittsburgh, PA. He is a winner of PEN USA Emerging Voices,

author of three chapbooks of poetry—*Moon Country* (Pudding House 2006), *The House My Father Could Not Build* (Pudding House, 2007) and *Mantra of the Born-free* (Pudding House, 2007). He is an associate editor of international poetry anthology, *Only the Sea Keeps: Poetry of the Tsunami* (Rupa Publication, India and Bayeux Arts, Canada). Sankar's poems have appeared or forthcoming in over forty literary journals including *Bitter Oleander*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *Connecticut Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *Icon*, *Runes*, *Rhino* and *Poetry Magazine*. His recent project is creating a multimedia website ([www.writersalliance.net](http://www.writersalliance.net)) against the genocide in Darfur. He is a co-founder of Poets for Humanity ([www.poetsforhumanity.com](http://www.poetsforhumanity.com)).

**Priyanka Sacheti** is a freelance writer and journalist based in Muscat, Sultanate of Oman. Author of three volumes of poetry during her school-years, she takes an active interest in pursuing fiction and has developed a new passion for creative nonfiction of late.

**Glenn Sheldon** is the author of the critical monograph, *South of Our Selves* (McFarland). Originally from Salem, Massachusetts, Sheldon considers the Midwest his adoptive home. Currently, he lives in Toledo, Ohio, where he is an Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary and Special Programs at The University of Toledo. His favorite course to teach is “Food and Eating in U.S. Culture”; and, his favorite critical subject is North Dakota poet Thomas McGrath. His first full-length poetry book, *Bird Scarer*, was published by Červená Barva Press in early 2008. He is the co-founder of New Sins Press, an independent poetry press. Although he lives in the city, there is the occasional hawk who covets the many birds he feeds. Thus, it's not surprising, even in winter, to find Sheldon clapping his hands in his driveway to scare away a hungry hawk that failed to migrate south.