

elephant  
tree

Chapman University



# Acknowledgements

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# Poetry

Always be a poet, even in prose.

*Charles Baudelaire*

# Walking Through Long Beach Trying to Seduce a Woman

*Scott Underwood*

oKAY

SO i WAS WRONG

pRINCESS (Afternoon. Rosarito, Mexico)

The horses are gentle and dying  
beautiful like mustangs running  
over the plains, mares coming into heat, willingly  
accepting every stud with enough power to broach  
the task of mounting and fucking upon the coast of a lost  
nation

i AM LEAVING NOW (4:00 am. Santa Ana, California)

We could dance with the city  
lights wavering on the edge with lips parted and  
breath hot in the ear, at the throat  
in the blood

nOT BECAUSE OF yOU (Evening. Tijuana, Mexico)

The blurry nightline of the undiscovered city screams  
of a particularly Latin nature; the whores seem  
dazzling and unconquerable and unwilling to go to bed  
without at least a little romance

i'VE JUST GOT TO GO (Night. Los Angeles, California)

This strange desert laughs at  
the uncertain nature of the boy  
who lost it all to the need for more than was ever  
possible

iF yOU ASK mE WHAT REASON i HAVE TO LEAVE (Morning. Hotel  
Rosarito, Rosarito, Mexico)

The sun is a sort of  
dying slug gnawing at the  
night steadily  
heartlessly  
(god forbid) unstopably

i AM IT (Evening. North Woods Inn, Long Beach, California)

We are lost to the  
dementia of this darkened  
metropolis where we walk across the river of  
piss flowing from the vagrant's pants  
We are like children dancing across the stones  
peeking above the surface of a snow-fed freestone creek

pLEASE NEVER BELIEVE

IN THE dEMON THAT i HAVE BECOME (Morning. Hotel  
Rosarito, Rosarito, Mexico)

Why do I believe that  
everything is lost on this  
Mexican night where the daylight is  
coming and the head is throbbing and the  
dogs are barking at the relentless progress of the  
tequila sun

iF IT CAN'T END HERE THEN WHERE CAN IT? (Childhood. South  
Gate, California. 8/24/78. Afternoon. Rosarito, Mexico)

In this barrio the dust flies like  
a swarm of black gnats  
hovering about the body of the dead American  
placed gently in the desert to rot away

i AM NOT a mAN

OF THE LOST gENERATION (4:00 am. Rosarito, Mexico)

I stood at the edge of  
the Mexican town where I  
wondered at the darkness and  
sweetness and strange nature of  
HOME

i AM NOT THE mAGICIAN

AT THE EDGE OF THE uNIVERSE (Morning. Rosarito, Mexico)

Smelling the Carnitas

of morning leaves me hoping

for the death of this fallen hero who

lives beyond the control of the dogs that

bark as a

pack and wail like coyotes at their loss of

the most basic primal

belief

i AM LOST (i AM LEAVING) (Night. Manhattan Beach, California)

Now that the death

has occurred,

we sit weeping

over the loss of

one man

and one woman

two lifetimes traded in for a more acceptable way of life

mY PITIABLE IOVE

IT'S mY GIFT TO yOU (Evening. Puerto Nuevo, Mexico)

The lobsters are beautiful like you

and reasonably priced

(unlike you) and I

am drunk and happy and slightly disturbed

by the quiet of

this day

lost to the tragic breath of

God

mY DYSFUNCTIONAL dESIRE

IT'S ALL FOR yOU (Morning. Manhattan Beach, California)

You are out of season

like an early pomegranate,

puckering and beautiful:

a vagina

soft and inviting

and always out of reach

sO WHERE TO NOW

sENORITA? (Night. Los Rocas Hotel, Mexico)

On the cliffs the wind

blows off of the calm Pacific

smelling of sex and life and of course

the ending of my family line of romanticism

and drunkenness

bEYOND THESE cIRCUMSTANCES THAT wE FIND oURSELVES IN  
(Early Morning. Santa Ana, California & Night. Jolly Roger, Anaheim,  
California)

I breathe in her ear  
and I can feel your smile  
as you tell me what it will take to  
become me  
and it will only partially involve you leaving this  
Mexican winter for me and my kind  
who dance belligerently  
asking to be killed  
and hoping without hope

wE LIVE WITHIN THE COMFORTING SLUMBER OF sIN (Morning.  
Manhattan Beach, California. Happy New Year!)

"I am leaving now," you say.  
"I've got to go," you say.  
"It's my gift to you,"

yOU SAID

# Toe Tapping

After Allison Benis' "Recycling"

*Kristen Schmidt*

Take the words black, tap, she, and shoe. The black shoe taps. She taps the black shoe. To say tap black, black she, or shoe shoe shoe would be confusing. Shoe-she might be misunderstood. It's a simple scene: a café table, a black shoe, a female foot that creates a tap. To begin with tap tap shoe, or she taps, suggests impatience, an insistence that something be done, or general nervousness. It's the tap the shoe makes.

Tap                    tap                    tap                    tap  
Tap    tap    tap    tap    tap    tap    tap    tap

That's not to say all tapping implies a negative. Rain tapping lightly against a window is quite pleasant. A tap on the shoulder may signal a surprise reunion. This particular tap, though, is that of a black shoe – which could lead to words like toe click dance. But there's no time for that now. Now is the sound she makes seated at the café table. A tap. I've narrowed it down to a specific sound – not a series of taps in a dance, not a click of her fingers on the table, not a snap.

# Enamel

*Kevin Toth*

In the red room we maintain a certain straightness of priorities: Specific softness and curvature of the shoulder, surface area and yield of the cheeks and buttocks, a square white percentage of the mind's eye in which we pay unwavering attention to the weather, tide level, length of time since last meal, length of time since last bowel movement, length of time since last lay, presence and position of limbs or their extensions – such as but not limited to wheels, matches, cutlery, staves – position of loved ones, position of facial features. We suffer the spaces between our teeth and cultivate the network of pink glowing tendrils and filaments that facilitate locomotion but are nevertheless incapable of preventing the sudden and acute awareness of empty space within the head, typically the mouth cavity, the ear canals, the nostrils, the tear ducts. During especially violent or prolonged episodes, the esophagus and the lungs may be included. We imbue each word and motion with a calculated ease and laziness. We string beads on long threads around our necks to drag in the sand behind us and rake away fresh footprints, beads which can be harvested for a small fee from underneath the pillows of the ill and obsolete whose offerings, they have been taught, are fantastical bribes from the hoods of notyet and willbe into am. Is it unfortunate that the length of this ritual's existence drags through the time behind us and rakes away the troubling morals of infant or enlightened secondguessmanship? We run across the sand leaving nothing behind us, adapt to unpredictable surfaces, stand on one foot, pick ourselves up after a fall. We take the supple and lightly freckled upper arm into our mouth and gnaw gently, remark on how pleasant a sensation, hear the gasp that results when air compressions vibrate the vocal cords, present a reaction calculated to resemble surprise, including an appropriate facial expression and awestruck verbal remark, when told that the arm consists of platinum-cured silicone secured to a central ceramic pneumatic cylinder and stuffed with the fur of a white dog, on the inside, just as false, a short series of transformations away. We respect that the body is little more than a glove wrapped around a tentacle or perhaps root system of pure air and empty space. Therefore,

we may draw up from the sand goosepimpled gray bulbs and the quills which we grind and imbibe in mixed tinctures, staining our teeth and waters to a more effective extent than blood or wine, drawing attention away from corrosion or loss, as purple, violet, maroon, or chartreuse are all considered more pleasant than gray, though graying is in all respects considered more polite than yellowing. Regardless, we rejoice when we are made privy to the creation of one whose hair is as blonde as her tongue, which slides between rows of teeth harvested from the sands or beneath pillows. Upon exiting the red room we take up places behind the observation barrier, request an address to which future correspondence may, should it be accepted, be addressed. While we are incapable of sealing the nostrils by voluntary and natural bodily means and are therefore in no danger of being wholly disrespectful, it is considered best to open the mouth as often as possible and let the empty space that exists within that cannot be denied or safely filled mingle and unify with that of the world at large, with the empty space that exists within the bodies of others. We use quills to inscribe four letter names in capitals recognizable around the world on the back of the wrist. We respect the urchin for a number of reasons, not least of which for the amount of empty space that its small size allows to flourish. Emulation is considered proper; exercises, sleeping positions, and clothing that restrict the amount of space that a body fills are encouraged. Upon dying, giving the beads in one's head and those around the neck to one's children is generally considered only right, and the least that one can do, after all.

# zoo zebras

*Ross Mann*

alphabets after bedtime add artificial borders. boredom cut, blades bent, cascading catalysts, doomed. cunning cats diving deep every day, doing exercises. evening frictions, earthy ephemerals, frayed feet gone fucking fruity. golden greasers hopping, getting geeks hopped, holding icicle hands, held interplanetary investigations jingling island instruments. jarring, jeering, keeling, jury jacking kids kneeling. learned karma kings, lame lesbians masturbating, looking lewd, moving men, never measuring. multiplying nothing, nooses of neon nights operate, observing parliaments, official oddballs, polishing patterns, quietly prosecuting perennial qualms. questions relating quintessential quirks, riding rockets saying, remember raking summer sunshine together singing sorrow treated tunes? unheard titan tempers undulating uselessly, verbosely, unilaterally uttering. viciously vile, worthwhile vermouthis vivisecting wild woes. xerotic whalebones whitened. xylopolists' xylophones yielding xus. xebecs your young zephyrs yesterday yoked. zoo zebras are zodiophilous zealots.

# Oblivion

To Siegfried Sassoon

*Julie Walker*

citizens from destiny  
feuds must climax  
dreamers think foul

ruined things mocked  
bank in gray  
drawing the jealousies

soldiers with guns  
they see in  
dreaming to picture

going of tomorrows  
in sorrows sworn  
some are clean

dugouts and balls  
hopeless and office  
land no stand

each are fatal  
when firelit gnawed  
the bats regain

holidays to soldiers  
dividend hour and  
to flaming begin

homes by trenches  
with longing spats  
train deaths times

great with action  
their soldiers of  
i lashed and

and shows the  
are of his  
win lives the

beds in rain  
did by and  
and they and

they and them  
with of the  
wives rats

# Wan

*Lori Loder*

pursuing small threads  
through tightly woven  
guarded edges  
undoing song constantly

humming softly  
a whirring kind of hum  
unquieting silenced  
rooms with dust spinning  
off the ledges

locked doors clicking  
anxious turning of  
knobs frustrating  
whatever it is  
wanting in

in the corner  
a window holding back  
everything but light within  
or the dark without

grabbing fingers  
are ones with close knuckles  
watching, irritated arches  
ache to extend  
fully

# SC

## *Ty(ler) Andrews*

*Bee boop* (2X) chimes the crosswalk siren.

Looming buildings on either side shadow the sun.

Bumped rudely (hey, excuse me, man, ease up) across the street.

Grocery bag spills onto ground – onions, crackers, olives; quickly snatch them up.

Wait! Is this crossing perilous? Stop.

In the middle of the street barely the sun glares: sneaky solar spears.

25 seconds left.

*Hruh hrüh kraching!* (money in a cup) to the right, in a dark, shaded alcove.

A cup-jingling vagabond, performing his minstrelsy for money.

Only light *kraching* – must perform poorly, or is just recently on the job...*hrüh hrüh!*

Jingle to myself. Pockets are heavy with *kraching*. Also shallow. Lose it anyway.

*Kra kra kra ching!* Another one.

A young girl punk-rocker sitting a little further down.<sup>1</sup>

Can I split between the two of them? Can't favor just one. Where's Justice?

Hand in pocket divvies, scaling the weight evenly, calculating the loss<sup>2</sup> with furtive finger-movers.

Either way, I still will sleep sound. Food is in my cupboard...or will be soon.

(Not the point.) Not about me! Have to relate.

Have to make happy elsewhere...outside world. You see?

Man on bike, girl perambulating child,<sup>3</sup> people lumbering like cattle, creamy-hot, late-summer's day.

18 seconds.

<sup>1</sup> Bother!

<sup>2</sup> \$.64

<sup>3</sup> Who happens to be sneezing

*Yes sir young man, to the left. A fine day to you sir.*

*Spare Change News for a dollar, yells the gaffer, is gettin ya the Spare Change News.*

No way around him, his snake oil.

I will get sucked in. I must look too high profile.

So? Reason it through: getting away means losing a dollar, if I'm lucky. But he'll also want to explain the mission statement, indulge me further.

*Yes sir, we're givin a voice to the voiceless. We're prin'in black and white stories from the streets to blur the boun'ries of social order.*

*We created this publication to inform anyone and everyone that no one should be sub-standard to someone.*

*It's our mission to create awareness of the streets in people such as yourself.*

Spin.

He spins his pitch, heroically. He steals glances at my hands, furtively.

They hang, unmovedly, cynically. My head swirls,<sup>4</sup>

*Yes sir, young man. But...we need your contribution. Small or great it keeps us afloat.*

*The streets must live on through you.*

*Bee boop (2X). 10 seconds.*

Suppose I give a dollar? Found one on the ground in CVS yesterday.

People fumble their mumble away all the times. I walked by the gaffer last week and not five feet from his post—a quarter<sup>5</sup> on the sidewalk. I considered pointing it out to him, but did not want to insult. Or perhaps be remembered kindly. Or at all. If I pass by him though, maybe another sweaty, crumpled dollar I could find, or any number of tarnished coins, scattered everywhere like lost companions: fortunes to the street minstrels, or the Spare Change News.

But I would have to start now. Can't stop. Dollars live shortly, settled on lost ground.

Quarters too—outside of grocery stores, drive-thru windows, phone booths, laundromats, vending machines. Rocky coastlines, all.

Sinuuous, winding straits, unnavigable, but for money's avarice.

*Bee boop, more softly now.*

<sup>4</sup> simply.

<sup>5</sup> Tails up

It calls to me. I must go now. I must brave the hidden obstacles to  
spare change,  
to find and capture and hold and rub,  
grimy gritty greasy.  
How can I stop? They get my dollar or not, but my time they steal.  
My treasure hunt.  
Their time *is* my money.

*Hruh hrüh kraching! Kra kra kra ching!* (monies in a cup).<sup>6</sup>

Oh, let up your sharp, bony rationale for a moment. These is peoples I  
sees.

Peoples sitting, curled up in dark, hidden places thrusting cups –  
chipped, two day old and coffee moistened – with gaping mouths.  
They drown but can not feel it. Chests barely rising.  
Filthy, snarled life poured onto fallow dirt. Insignificance assumed.  
All signs lost; love becomes horror. Fall from cliffs, drown in the sea.

*Excuse me sir. A fine day to you.* The Spare Change News.<sup>7</sup>

If only I thought his efforts meaningful.

Walking in shouting circles, gesticulating, waving papers in stacks,  
chasing the flow of people round and round.

The people he wants to effect are the same people who put him there.  
(A word for that?)<sup>8</sup>

I feel neither fear nor pity for either,  
but experience tells me monstrous peoples are not the answers.  
0 seconds.  
Push on. Get past this crossing. Tired. Home. Home. And what  
awaits me there.

<sup>6</sup>To the right.

<sup>7</sup>To the left.

<sup>8</sup> ...?

# A Poem Divided

After Gertrude Stein

*Tiffany Monroe*

## GLAZED GLITTER

red weakens an hour. Charming very  
charming. Clean and cleansing. Certainly is  
glittering and handsome and convincing.  
The change of color is likely. The band  
if it is white and black, the band has a  
green string. A sweet singing trimming and a  
red thing not a round thing but a white thing,  
a red thing and a white thing. A dark place  
is not a dark place, only a white and  
red are black, only a yellow and green  
are blue, a pink is scarlet, a bow is  
every color. If color is careless,  
there is no color, not any color.  
A light white, an ink spot, a rosy charm.  
A white hunter is crazy. Go red go.

## CRANBERRIES

In the inside there is sleeping, in the  
morning there is meaning, in the evening  
there is feeling any time there is a  
surface there is a surface, and every  
time there is an exception there is an  
exception and every time there is a  
division there is a dividing. The  
better and the red and the same and the  
centre and the yellow and the tender  
and the better, and altogether. There  
is no distress. Courage is everywhere  
and the best remains to stay. A sincere  
solitude all this makes a shunning so  
if there is anything left it is bone.

## CENTRE

Act so that there's no use in a centre.  
The truth has come. There is a disturbance.  
There was no mistake there, no mistake now  
And this was so charming. Harmony is  
so essential. Star-light is a little  
light that is not always mentioned with the  
sun, it is mentioned with the moon and the  
sun, it's mixed up with the rest of the time.  
A religion, almost a religion,  
there is a doubt. Clearness, a light in the  
moon. The care with in which incredible  
justice and likeness, this resolution

# The Lover

*Samantha Felix*

She sits.

    wrapped inside the skin of her feather stuffed bed.

Breathing, breath escaping slowly. Waiting.

    the air is heavy with water.

It is going to rain.

    she can feel it.

Fantasy of what may be, waiting like a stoic soldier in the barracks,

    safely bound in her wrapping paper existence

She waits.

    it begins to rain.

Slowly, gently, the smell of wet wood permeates the room.

    cold tile inhales the dampness.

The rain taps on her window, falling from the sky, gaining speed with each second,

    the band picks up and the rain's tap dance takes on a new complexity.

She listens.

    for something indescribable.

Slowing down, the rain begins to understand.

    slipping off his tap shoes, the rain stops.

Looking up, she sees a slit between the window and the pane.

    the single drop of rain sneaks through the crack, slipping down the front of the headboard,

She watches: unmoving.

    without discretion, the drop falls to the tip of her nose.

And simply,

kisses her.

# The Accident Raises the Question.

*Ruben Casas*

The accident raises the question, the answer lays down possibility that the world's most powerful military was effectively operating blind. One death resulted. Who could another survive?

The obvious and simple original message states that there is too much ground yet to cover measure: the commercial routes account for only 10 percent. The world transparent is now being developed.

For now an American flashlight (the size of a pencil) illuminates future span, world order, the array of the instantaneous. Increased formation-prediction of every country with a coastline is commercial.

The return of cancer and the treatment for it, once failing, called for hospitals and doctors and drugs—anything except surrender I was told. Anything. Knowing serious assaults, and finally a mournful defeat.

Went shopping for a cause today—store fronts, cd sales, downloads—all sold out. I texted a dollar ninety-nine to the victimized. *Par Avion*, a donation for me! Aid Relief for victims of unnatural disaster.

Language of illness, the thinness and pallor of its particular inconsistency, aestheticizes all history, personal or otherwise, with feathers and stones and emblems, icons, idols, even inconstant lovers.

The reticent relenting are candidate for popular appreciation, and in this case, you have to say that they are not human constructions but Real Things, as real as the battle for hearts and minds.

# Giant Flower

*Kendra Peavy*

B  
A  
photosynthetic  
O P E N  
catch rays  
of gold  
mechanical steel  
silver  
white to blue  
reflect  
cloudless skies  
beams beckon petals attract pistil invites  
contemplate daily  
existence  
stilled  
dusk dims  
mechanical closure  
fantastical  
lights  
say  
good  
night

# Fiction

The purpose of the artist is to draw back the veil that leaves us indifferent before the universe.

*Marcel Proust*



# Cavity

*Kevin Toth*

Again. Always the same anxiety.

You leave a restaurant and walk back to your car. Maybe you have parked several blocks away. You pat your sides. Feel the contents of your pockets through the fabric of your pants and. Or maybe you are a woman, in which case you may be carrying a purse. You feel in your pockets, or you reach into your purse, just as you come to stand before the door of your vehicle and. Something is missing. Your keys, perhaps. Your wallet. A feeling like that. Sometimes worse.

You leave a restaurant, you walk to your car, you drive home. At home, you go to put your things away and notice something is missing. Your keys, yes. Or your wallet. But maybe something smaller. The money from your wallet. A credit card. Your identification. Maybe it was stolen from you while your mind was elsewhere. You feel violated. Somehow this is worse than if you had lost the entire wallet. Or your keys, because you would have been unable to leave and could have easily retraced your steps. There are only so many places between your car and the restaurant where your keys could have wound up. But in this case, you are home now, and something that belongs to you is missing, and the restaurant, the parking lot. They are across town, miles away. A feeling like that. Anxiety. No. A panic. Something is missing, something was taken.

It was easier when I had my old position. It was not something I had to think about, because my need. And I call it that now. A need. Was being met. I clocked in, I donned the regulation gloves, mask, and respirator. Thought little of them. Though there was a joy I took from the black mouthpiece of the respirator. The stale taste. Familiar. Like tires, salts. The disinfectant, maybe. The snap and give of the rubber between my teeth. The squeak. The sound of my breathing, amplified. Air coming in from the tank. Going out, spent. A closed circuit. The tank and I.

I was promoted last year. Sales. Everyday an office. Smock, shin guards

and cleats. My old equipment. The mask, the respirator, the gloves. Those had to stay in the department downstairs.

Always the same feeling. A few minutes after I brush my teeth. A panic. Something is missing, something was taken. My mouth is empty. More than in the usual sense of my mouth being empty. Very empty. Something needs to be there. Something was there, and now it is not. Have my teeth receded? Up into my gums? No, there they are. Jutting out just as always. Maybe my tongue is smaller. Shrunken and shriveled in the cool water. Atrophied. From the lack of exercise. No. But it seems smaller. Flopping around. Naked and afraid in that greater wider open.

I went to the hardware store and bought a wooden knob. Not a door knob. Smaller. Of the sort you would mount on a cabinet or the drawer in the kitchen where you store the silverware. Small, round, smooth unpolished wood. Shaped like a tiny light bulb. A woody smell. Fit into the cup of my hand as I carried it to the cash register. The woman at the register took it from my palm. She scanned the barcode sticker on the flat end, the end that would sit flat against the cabinet or drawer. I paid for the knob and this woman put the knob into an orange plastic bag. I put this bag into my pocket. I could feel it there. As I walked home I brushed my hand against the small bulge on my hip. Made sure it was still there.

It's your head. Think about it. Fragile, yes. But at the same time so solid. Dense. It seems remarkable to me that the mouth would be the way that it is. An empty space. Right there, in your head. Always there.

In my apartment I found a stud in the wall in the entry hallway. I mounted the knob on the wall, head level. Near the coat rack. I had tried the coat rack and found it unsatisfactory.

I had tried to fill my mouth with many things. Such as chewing gum, of course. Seven or eight sticks at a time, a big heavy wad. Despite the taste there came a point when all the chewing made me nauseous.

Such as my girlfriend's tongue when she would allow it.

Such as a wine cork. Which was soft and had a fine taste, such as my

girlfriend's tongue. But the corks sloughed and disintegrated in ways I didn't care for. Requiring more wine corks. Requiring eventually that I purchase bottles of bad cheap wine simply for the cork. This was wasteful since I would not drink the wine. And less than fulfilling since the cork was of a lower quality and the taste of the cork also bad and cheap.

Such as wine bottles.

Such as a rolled up sock. Such as a small water balloon. Not sucking. Never sucking, just holding.

Such as a snorkel. Which I had assumed would be similar to the respirator my old job required.

Such as my thumb. Such as my girlfriend's thumb, during times of play when I could afford to without raising suspicions.

Such as the coat rack. But no. Hence the knob.

Almost two decades since I wore braces. Even longer since I required a retainer of any sort. My dentist tells me that I am brushing too hard. That I am wearing away the enamel on my teeth. We use expressions like by the skin of your teeth, he says. But the enamel on your teeth isn't like skin, isn't like a lot of the parts of your body, actually. It isn't going to just get better. It can't repair itself or grow back. Do you feel a pain sometimes? A sensitivity? That's the damage you're doing. When you wear away the enamel like that, there's nothing we can do for you except cap the exposed areas later in life. Brush gently, he says. Soft bristles, small circles.

Maybe I will stop brushing my teeth altogether. Spare my enamel. Allow whatever would naturally grow in there to grow in there naturally. Unimpeded.

An open mouth in the mirror. Hanging vines, loose and hairlike. Running my tongue over a grassy new pelt. Slippery and furry. Like algae on the river rocks. A steamy jungle. A rainforest. Lush new life where there was once a hot dead empty. A jungle of bacteria. Of whipping cilia. Of flatworm planaria, darting over the gums. Between the teeth. Across the

thick fuzzed surface of the tongue. Small mollusks. Tentacles creeping between my lips like long noodles, feeling their curious way around my chin and bulging cheeks. It would depend on me to feed it. A symbiotic relationship. A closed circuit. My mouth and I.

Which is what I think now as I stand in the entryway of my apartment. Near the coatrack. Staring at a darkened patch of off-white drywall. The oral cavity and I. Ask any dentist and they will tell you. Cavities need filling. A woody taste. A smooth grainy surface. A wooden knob attached to the wall, filling my mouth.

An excerpt from the novel:  
**Promised Land**

*Catherine Tharp*

Nabil walked the dusty path home, kicking pieces of rocks with the toe of his shoe. The voices of children from the school yard drifted in and out of his ears, but he focused forward on the path. By memory, he counted the number of cards he traded at school. His fingers ached to pull the new finds from his book bag. The cards would have to wait until evening when chores were done and he finished helping his mother with dinner. A daily ritual, he spent late afternoon in the kitchen with his mother preparing the meal, always waiting for his father who arrived tardy for supper.

It was springtime and small bits of green bloomed between cracks in the buildings covered with graffiti. The air held warmth until the sun sank away, and Nabil looked forward to what summer held for him. No lessons, only a summer of helping his mother keep house, the rest of the time spent in his parent's room peering at the television while his older siblings worked their jobs. Nabil knew he could not get away with being a child much longer, and the freedom it held would soon disappear.

He walked the path home occasionally glancing into the shops he passed, always the same view. Hatem leaning on his counter in his falafel store, pushing the flies away with the wave of his hands. Mona shaking her fingers at the young children entering her store to finger the candy, pressing their hot fingers into the warm chocolate. Zeinab, watching his television set, only glancing at the customers that came in to buy a newspaper, some milk, a grocery or two.

Nabil turned right, down the narrow alley of pale brown buildings leading to the door of his home. The alley always held a shadow, the sun not quite able to look down over the buildings into the walkway. Black bulging garbage bags sat in front of doors, raw smells of trash drifted up his nose each time he passed. Graffitied words decorated the stucco walls, black words crossed out by other black scribbles. His neighbors Khaled, and Raslan sat in the crook of the alley where it turned to the right. Most times the boys kept to themselves, bouncing a blue rubber ball between one another. There were times they asked

Nabil to join and he always shook his head, waving a hand at them, "my mother needs me at home."

Nabil entered the third door on the left. Pushing it open, the heat of the kitchen drifted to his skin, the smell of spices and hummus filled the small apartment.

"Nabil." His mother greeted him the same everyday, lifting her eyes from the kitchen counter, waving at him to shut the door. "Come, help me." Nabil slipped his book bag off his small shoulders, letting it slump to the corner of the floor, and walked toward his mother.

The kitchen was a small room and his mother took to stacking pots, pans, bowls, glasses, upward toward the narrow ceiling. She stacked as high as the pots would hold until they leaned to one side. Other pans sat beneath the strip of gray counter, hidden by an orange piece of fabric. It brushed Nabil's hands when reaching inside for something his mother requested, dust particles lifting from the fabric as he pulled hands back out.

"Mama." He pressed his lips to her cheek.

"I need you to push this dough," she said. Nabil ran his hands beneath the faucet, and with fingers dripping, reached for the dough. "Someday you teach your wife to cook this bread." Nabil nodded, his thoughts turned to the cards in his bag.

Trading began at school quickly after children heard of the cards. Nabil learned that Mahmoud's store sold them—candy with four trading cards of martyrs in a box that looked like an Israeli tank. Some parents allowed their children to buy the Intifada Album, a book in which the cards were pasted and displayed. If one was lucky enough to have an album, there was a chance to win prizes including a bicycle or computer. Over two hundred cards were to be found to complete a collection and Nabil had not a single one until his friend Ahmad handed him three cards in the school yard.

"I already have these," his friend held out his hand to Nabil. "I know you have none to trade."

His father refused the cards in the house.

"They teach violence," his father spoke to his mother in the bedroom one night. Nabil pressed his ear to the cool door and listened.

"They teach our children their heritage. They honor those who gave their lives in to win back Palestine," Salah argued.

"There will be no photo cards in this house and you will not speak

of it to me again," Abu said firmly. Nabil stepped back from the door.

Teachers began to punish those who would sneak one or two cards from their folder to show a friend. His teacher would not support the cards as they were distracting. There were rumors that other teachers burned the cards in front of students. The trading began to occur on the schoolyard, near the edge of the property so if a teacher appeared in the yard, they could hide the cards beneath a rock.

Nabil took his cards home the first day, pulling them from the pocket of his pants where they sat. He heard them speak to him, begging him to pull them out and see them in their glory. He stood in the alley to his house and pulled them from his pocket, the edges slightly bent.

"Which do you have?" Raslan walked up to Nabil, feet dragging in the dirt. Nabil quickly pulled the cards away from view. Raslan lifted his eyes. "If you ever want to trade," he suggested, but Nabil was already walking down the alley.

That night after his parents went to bed and the whispering ceased from their room, he sat down on the ground in the dark, cold linoleum against his bare legs. He placed each card in front of him, one next to the other. Running his fingers over the edges of the thin cards, Nabil envisioned his own image on a card. He would be in military clothes, dark green and black, a gun balanced in his hands, and the flag of Palestine behind him. He smiled at the thought of children fighting over his card, wanting to paste it in the album with the rest of the chosen warriors. With a shiver, Nabil smiled.

He began trading compulsively at school, whispering to classmates when their teacher turned her back. Instead of trading his cards away, he exchanged new cards for pieces of candy. Most children gave up on filling their albums for a new bicycle, eager for a quick reward instead. Each night Nabil sat on the floor pulling the cards from his book bag, a small army of men peered up at him in the dark. Each week he gained more cards, each week his thoughts turned more toward the martyrs.

One night in the kitchen, his father was unusually late. Nabil's words pulsed in the back of his throat. He wanted to pull the cards from the pocket of his bag and show his mother. She would be pleased at his dedication. He watched her slide the silver knife through the cucumbers, her fingers curled on top of the vegetables, holding them in place. During the silence he wondered where his mother's thoughts

drifted. As he opened his mouth, not sure what words would arrive, the doorknob twisted and his father entered the apartment.

Happiness came from the cards he carried to and from school. The evenings spent in the dark thinking about the sacrifice he would make carried him through the days. He grew eager to tell his mother of the news of his decision, but he waited and let the thought continue growing inside. The secret he carried, made each walk home a little more bearable.

# Waiting

*Jennifer Strickland*

Hunter has been a waiter for nine years. What began as an after school job has turned into a career, and he can see no end in sight. He enjoys the work, and he has met several women as a result of asking if they would be interested in a bottle of wine. The money is good, and he eats for free on breaks. He also drinks for free when he comes in with friends, and often steps behind the bar to mix his own. This impresses his friends. He used to want to go to college, but now thinks college is for assholes who take out loans to buy expensive cars and treat waiters his age like shit. His New Year's resolution is to be proud of his waiting career.

Jacob has never worked before. But he is seventeen, and this is okay. *I'm a fast learner*, he tells the manager. He is handed an apron and told he will receive seven dollars and fifty cents an hour. Starting now. Jacob puts on the apron and smiles at the manager, who points to his left. *The kitchen is that way*, he says. Jacob turns and walks, calculating how many hours he will have to work to save enough money to buy the 1994 Pontiac Grand Am he has clipped out of January's "Auto Trader."

Hunter has had his eye on the blonde at table twelve for the last half an hour. She is there with a man, but has made it clear from her lingering gazes at his forearms as he refills their water glasses that she wants to ditch the weasel and tangle her fingers in Hunter's hair as they make love in his apartment. He smiles at her and sneaks a peek down her cleavage as he delivers their bottle of wine. *Your dinners should be out any moment now*, he says, immediately chastising himself for calling them dinners instead of entrees. He knows better. *Stop acting like a rookie*, he tells himself. She's sexy, but he has been a waiter for nine years.

Jacob does not understand how a small, independent restaurant like this can have so many customers. He is scrubbing furiously, but each time he finishes a load, he finds another tall stack of dishes waiting at

his elbow. He begins to sweat, and it drips into his eyes. He drops a dish, maybe on purpose. He is not above a cry for help. But the cooks, garnishing and arranging, don't even glance his way. His arms ache. His neck aches. His feet are going numb.

Hunter is still angry about his careless vocabulary. He may not have a college education, but he is not stupid, dammit. He is experienced in his line of work. It was a sloppy mistake. The blonde motions him over. He sees the distinct desire in her smile. He imagines bending her over the table as the weasel looks on, helpless. *Yes ma'am*, he says. *Just checking on the status of our food*, she says. *Any moment now*, he says. *That's what you said many moments ago*, the weasel says. Hunter smiles politely and imagines pouring the rest of the wine over the man's head, then knocking him unconscious with the bottle. *I'll check on it right now*, he says. *That would be great*, says the weasel. Hunter bows slightly and heads for the kitchen. He decides he will spit in the man's food. Or maybe urinate on it, just to be unorthodox. He mentally runs through the list of what he has eaten in the last twenty-four hours, trying to decide whether or not his urine will be detectable in the weasel's lemon buttered salmon.

Jacob has gone deaf. He is hallucinating, and the plates of half-eaten food are faces. Meatball eyes gape at him, pasta hair tangles in his fingers, and artichoke mouths hang open in wonder. The bottom of the industrial stainless steel sink is clogged with mutilated vegetable appendages. Jacob gags.

*Hey Jake*, says one of the artichoke mouths, *have you ever seen a naked woman?*

*Stop it*, Jacob says.

*Just answer. Yes or no.*

*No. Well yes, in magazines.*

*Doesn't count*, says the artichoke. *Women don't really look like that.*

Jacob gags again.

The artichoke grins.

Walter is a cook. He prefers to be called a chef. He has worked at this particular restaurant for eight months and enjoys the creative freedom the manager allows with each night's special. On this night,

Walter must admit his mind has not been on the food at all, but rather on the argument he had earlier that day with his live-in boyfriend Gilligan. Walter does not think it is important to seek out a marriage license in a society that deems gay marriages controversial. Gilligan interprets Walter's lack of interest in a marriage license as a lack of passion for their relationship and has threatened to leave. Walter called Gilligan a raging bitch before he came to work. He now thinks it was a bit out of line, but Gilligan was in fact being a raging bitch today. Walter is seasoning a rainbow trout in the pan when he reaches for a plate and realizes there are no clean plates. Anywhere. He notices the other chefs walking towards the new dishwasher and abandons the trout to follow them.

Hunter enters the kitchen, analyzing his urine content, and finds the cooks standing in a semi-circle by the dishwasher. The skinny boy is trembling and shining with sweat. He looks like a flushed angel. Hunter expects him to swoon. He notices the sink is empty. The kitchen is empty. *Where are all of the dishes?* Hunter asks. The boy looks at him with transparent eyes. *What?* he says. *The dishes,* Hunter repeats. *Where are they?* The boy shakes his head and motions to the mop closet beside the sink. Hunter pushes past the cooks and opens the closet door. The dishes, still covered in alfredo and tomato sauce, are stacked neatly from floor to mop top, stringy noodles hanging over the edges and meatballs smashed in between layers of porcelain. *I'm a fast learner,* Jacob says, before taking off his apron and walking out the door.



# Careful Man

*Ty(ler) Andrews*

There was no bicycle locked to the rusty drainpipe as there always was at that particular time of day. It had vanished into the foggy air, set out valiantly for distant lands, towing a humble load, ridden by a careful man.

*When a man is a stranger to none in his town,  
when he can find his way home in the darkest dark,  
where is he to fit?*

*Three hours to Sunset for a careful man, a sleeping bag,  
radio and surfboard will sustain him on his journey,  
by these things, people will know him.*

*His neighbors will wonder about, will talk about,  
will conduct their day the same as ever before,  
thinking about, a careful man.*

*When they feel the fog lift, they will notice a change. at Sunset will freedom be*

—

— Oh, good god! Did ya see, did ya see? I can't believe it. We won.

Across his living room, out the door, down around the corner alongside his house and onto his back patio, rattled the winner: one Malone, his balding head tilted back and trailing in laughter.

— Scotty, did ya see the boys today. See 'em get the ball over in the end.

No broken glass bottles, nor upturned ice buckets, nor Scotty's dead-bolted door would keep Malone the conquering, Malone the indomitable, Malone the phoenix risen from his moment of reverie.

— Scotty, I see your booby traps and I'll raise ya an uppercut to the gills, you dog.

He slithered head first through Scotty's open bathroom window, uprooting potted plants and sending toothbrush and floss to the toilet bowl's briny deep.

— Did you see the boys today, Scotty? They won. We got one on him. We finally took it to his boys this time, mate.

– Goddamn subterfuge, came a hungover voice, Scotty’s voice, from inside his cave of an office. Relent! Just stop destroying my bathroom and I’ll unlock the front stinking door.

Too late. Malone, already summersaulted down from the sink and careening through the bathroom door into Scotty’s small studio living room, stood before his best mate.

– We’ve got to give it to him for this one.

Malone fell back into the recesses of Scotty’s coffin sleeper.

– He’s begging for it after all the grief he’s given our boys.

– I’d say. Moreover, oddsmakers were on his side today. Scotty looked over a tattered notebook. Christ, a lotta fellas took a bath on that game.

Scotty rose from his folding chair, whipped his hand towel off his shoulder and cleared shaving cream from around his chin.

– Let’s dig into the poor man. He’s probably locked down in his bedroom sobbing into his shirt by now.

Malone and Scotty marched out of Scotty’s back door, across the alley and to the small studio behind the garage.

– Poor bastard, he takes it all too seriously anyway.

–

His hands hung loosely over his bicycle’s handlebars, his left one rolling a half-smoked cigarette, index finger to thumb. Even the finer hairs on his knuckles collected dew. Last stop out of town: donut shop: late breakfast.

– Large coffee, Bruce, and a cinnamon twist.

– Donuts sound like hookers, you know.

– Yes. Yes they do, Bruce.

He had found a crumpled bicycle trailer, meant for toting children, in his alley. The wheels, bent at the axle, wouldn’t spin forward or backward and the frame was caved in at the roof. He tipped it back upright, placed it on the curb, and gave its owner another hour to retrieve it.

When no one came for it by noon, he took it into his garage and spent his Friday afternoon—his few hours of peace before the night shift—straightening the bent axle and dented frame. By three he had pronounced it a very fine trailer. He then connected the mended trailer to his cruiser and wheeled them both onto his driveway. He stood

across the alley and nodded his approval at the sturdy rig.

For the remainder of the day, he contentedly sat on his patio, watching the breeze rise up off the ocean and rustle through the palm trees. He sat idly, but carefully, his eyes following the horizon until the fog thickened and he lost it in the grey light. He didn't like it: a sea breeze to blow the color right out of the sky. It was a bad grey. And so his contentment faded. Melancholia came with the bad weather. The grey crippled him. He needed, needed, got to get the hell outta this mess, needed to see crisply, what's that empty noise, away from, my god, just can't see out, colorless noise, to escape it.

Meanwhile, less than a mile away, people from over the bridge, with excited horns and slamming doors, descended on his town, through the foggy glow.

—

— Where's his bike?

— I don't know, replied Malone, peering into the kitchen window. Thought he'd be on lockdown, watching the game in his house.

— To be sure. Said so last night when I came into the bar for a quick one.

Scotty looked for the hidden key atop the porch light. It was gone.

— Me too. I saw him for last call and he told me to stop by today.

Malone thumbed through his mail.

— Had a bad look on his face though. Like he'd had a rough night.

— Yeah? Maybe someone set him off last night, said Scotty considering the possibilities. Maybe he got carted up the hill.

— No shit? D'ya think he mighta...

— Hey, I'm just saying. Probably nothing though. Scotty looked up at the sky, squinting through the foggy dew. I don't know. How much money do you have, just in case we needa...?

— Not sure...

Malone trailed off as his eyes lost focus in the heavy grey.

— Probably nothing though.

—

He packed his sleeping bag, beach towel, a few other odds and ends in the trailer, strapped his surfboard onto his bike rack and set his AM radio in his bike basket. Saturday's weekend weather report predicted heavy fog along the coast as far north as Huntington. Beyond Huntington, though, mostly sunny with a strong ground swell building out of the south. To Sunset, he would go. Three hours to Sunset. And blue skies.

He stood at his kitchen counter staring over a blank piece of paper – would be instructions if anyone came looking for him. He could think of none. To hell with it. Why worry? Who would come looking? What did they really need from him? When did anyone ever need anything from him? They would have to wait until next week. This weather would make him a sour companion anyway.

But Summer's cat? Sick. She's going to be upset. Need to be there for her. Know how she gets. And if it gets worse she'll have to take it to the vet. She'll be a wreck if it's bad. Cry for sure. Runny mascara. Other things'll come up. Get real edgy. All hell break loose. Probably say something I don't mean, too. Not good for anyone. This damned weather's killing me. Have to get away.

– Hey, I'm out for a couple days. Leave me a message, I'll call you Monday. Bye.

–

The rusty chain creaked with each pedal – naked sounds in the fog – as the cruiser and trailer turned off the strand and made a right to the bridge. The dense air rippled around his chest as he rode to the top of the bridge and stopped to catch his breath. He could see the river jetty twenty feet below, but no further. The sound of breaking waves came from somewhere in front of him; the noise of passing cars and the whipping wind across his face rushed by from behind.

What lousy summer weather. Can't remember it being this bad before. Never into September. Never this gloomy. And windy. Waves are blown out by noon, dirty water, too many people. God! One more month of this mess. He looked at his watch. 1:00. Get to Sunset by four. Three more hours. Pray for surf.

Down the other side of the bridge, he coasted, S-turns for speed control, somewhat exhilarating with the low visibility. Could make for one hell of a crash: bicycle, trailer, surfboard, rider. Probably be an explosion.

He turned off the highway and onto the bike trail. The sounds of traffic were swallowed up and died away in the fog. Silence. Wide trail. No bike traffic. He slowed his pace as he reached into his basket to turn on the radio. The AM wire, perennially tuned to sports talk, came in softly below the dull static.

– ...last second score sends the Southern Cal fans home unhappy. Brilliant drive by –

Damn! What a bust. Gonna hear it from the boys when I get back.

Probably breaking bottles over each other's heads right now.

Wondering where I'm at. Looking in my kitchen window, trying to pry it open. Can't remember if Scotty knows I moved the key. Hope he doesn't need his fishing pole any time soon. Hey! I need my pole, heading out in the morning! Wakes me up in the middle of the night, wandering home drunk. It's all comedy to him. Runs out on his tab and then I don't see him for days too. Comedy.

The fog broke in patches as the temperature rose. Jane looked across the beach at groups of kids, running, throwing sand, chasing toys, rambling in and out of patches of fog. She sat on her porch and held a book close to her face, constantly wiping her spectacles with a cloth and trying to make out the words on the soggy page. She had lived at the beach for forty years and, as long as it wasn't raining, she spent her Saturdays on her patio. She looked up occasionally through the fog at the increasing traffic on the strand.

– Hey Jane, came Malone's voice from down her side walkway, did you see where he went?

– Oh, no. His bike was here when I had my coffee this morning. But I went back inside to take my medicine and when I came back a little later he was gone.

– This morning? So he was here.

– Well, yes. Of course he was.

– Thought he might've –

– But like I said, he was gone when I got back. That was a couple of hours ago.

– Alright. Thanks Janey. Malone walked back down the walkway. Have a good one.

– What's that?

– I just said, I told you to have a nice day.

– ...oh, no thank you. But have a nice day.

Jane reopened her damp book and began the arduous task of, let's see, peeling apart the pages to find, somewhere in the middle was it, where she, oh dear this'll take all day, lost her place.

—

He passed Magnolia street and the filthy row of fire pits on the edge of the parking lot. This beach never gets any cleaner. Same stone pits from when I was in high school. Can't walk barefoot on the sand from

all the tar and ash and trash and broken glass. Careful on the bike path too. Hate to get a flat here. Walk all the way to Main street to buy a new tube. Never make it to Sunset before dark then.

He swerved out wide of the sand and continued past a restroom. The stale sweet stench of the urinals, sneaking unexpected through the fog, nearly leveled him. He shook his head and lost sight of the path for a moment. A small man in bedraggled clothes and a baseball hat pulled over his eyes, leaning over a shopping cart, appeared through the fog. The front two wheels of his cart had fallen over the curb. The small man swore and spat as he tried to pull the cartful of junk back onto the sidewalk. As he got closer, the sounds of clashing metal and guttural curses clamored dully in the heavy air.

– Moondoggie, he shouted at the wanderer, what are you doing down here?

– Sonofabitch’s broken. Goddamninthingfukiwitme. Keeps crashin’s fuckin broken.

He stopped to help the old man get his cart back on the sidewalk, and when he had pushed the front two tires up onto the curb the old man let out a cry, spat at him and tried to ram him with it.

– Moondoggie, relax. You’re clear. It’s not broken.

– Aw fuck you. Always sneaking up on me. Leave me the fuck alone, and he spat at him again. I see you coming now.

– Alright, I’m going. You get home, wherever you’re going. Get out of the fog or you’ll get hit by a car. And here, take one of these. Warm ya up.

He handed the old man a cigarette which he grabbed and placed in his mouth. Moondoggie dove into the shopping cart looking for a lighter as he got back on his bike and disappeared into the fog. His bell ring ringed one last time as the yellow trailer flashed momentarily into view a few yards down the trail.

Moondoggie, no matches, stood confusedly, following the sound of the goddamned bell getting on down the damned road and sneaking up on me like that and shaking around all my shit trying to help me like I need help from him always trying to help me find my way home aw damn which way is it in all this goddamned grey?

—

Small wisps of fog, through a cracked bathroom window, wound their way into his small studio. The meandering wisps twisted around the refrigerator and swooped low over the fish tank. More fog slipped

under his front door; the tiniest traces rolled through the rusted keyhole and all met in the corners of the living room.

The phone rang and the air over the answering machine glowed red. — Hey, it's me. I just wanted to let you know that the vet said Marley's going to be okay. They gave me some stuff to put in his food and, basically, told me to do what you said. So, thanks again for coming over last night and helping me with him. That was really sweet. Okay, gotta go. Talk to you later.

Just then a knock at the door shifted the air currents and sent the fog dancing along the ceiling.

— It's your neighbor Jane. Sorry to interrupt. Sounds like you're with someone in there so I won't bother you. Just wanted to tell you not to worry too much about paying me back. You're a nice young man and I wanted to help you out. That's why I did it. Whenever you can get the money back to me, you do it. Alright, well, goodbye.

The sound of feet shuffling down his sidewalk slowly faded away. The colliding sound waves stopped, the tension in the room dissipated, the fog slowly dropped from the ceiling. Jane would remind him again and again about the money she had loaned him, Summer would call him a dozen times that week to tell him about Marley's improving health, and Malone and Scotty would hound him about life in general for years after his death. And, in the case that he wasn't home to hear it, hollering at his door, peering into his windows and leaving him phone messages would continue that same running communiqué with the town that had kept him informed for years.

With the regained silence, the fog resumed its search: twisting around itself and fluttering to the ground — the falling wisps sinuously tracing their signatures on thin skeins of vaporous parchment. Gossamer words: dusty, empty, cluttered, tucked, knotted, bottled, under, inside, stickers, magnets, whiskey, mystee, surrbwax, cawshoos, mewwow; fell from the ceiling — shaping and unshaping the words that told of their findings in the empty house of a careful man.

—

The dullest outline of the Huntington Beach pier began to appear through the grey air. He could hear the summer traffic on the highway above the bike trail. At the pier he would be halfway to Sunset. Riding for an hour. Ahead of schedule even with the two stops. Possibly, the slightest tail wind had aided him. Wind could change though. Always

does in the afternoon; damned side shore gusts. Better get on while it's good.

He passed through downtown which, even in the bad weather, was crowded. He had to be careful riding past the crowds. His board, a foot longer than his bike at both ends could easily run through an unsuspecting idler.

- Where you taking that gun, man? No waves here.
- Sunset. A strong south's coming.
- Bull shit. I was in Sunset this morning. It's a lake up there today.
- I'll take my chances.

Everyone's got it figured out, don't they? Got to yell it back to you just so they can say something. Always that guy in the crowd wants to get loud and stand out. Should've ran him through when I had the chance.

He turned back onto the highway and rode along the cliffs that overlooked the ocean. From a higher vantage point he could see a fifty yard strip of ocean and the knee high swells that calmly washed onto the beach.

He pulled off the sidewalk (a paragon!) and rode his bike to the edge of the cliff where a large overhanging boulder was covered in white lines. He sat there for a moment watching the wind rush up the side of the cliff, combing salt foam off the water and spraying it back out over the beach. The moment swelled.

- How you doing out there, Mike? I'm taking a little bike trip to Sunset and thought I'd take a break here by your rock. Hope that's alright. Fog's real heavy today and I heard Sunset might be the place to go for waves. Remember camping up there in your old bus back in high school? Must've been fifteen years ago now.

He got off his bike, pulled a can of white spray paint from his trailer and kneeled slowly before the broad stone.

- Man, with a grimace, I'm getting old Mike.

He shook the spray can and sprayed the date onto a blank spot on the rock. Dozens of other dates, sprayed on in white paint—some nearly faded out, others fresh—wound over and around the edges of the stone.

- I see everyone's been paying their respects, huh? Have they been having chats with you too, like this? They oughta.

He threw some sand over the edge.

- What do they say to you, Mikey? Do they ask if it hurt? Do they ask why you did it? I hope they don't ask why Mike. You did it for your

reasons and that's all. Your old man's still at the lumber yard, I hear. I wonder, does he ever come down here to talk? You don't have to answer that. You just enjoy the ocean like you used to when we were kids, alright? Well, back to the search, Mike.

He stood back up and lit a cigarette. Same habits as always, eh buddy? Just like when we were nineteen. He took a long drag on the cigarette and set it down on the rock. The smoke rose up on the wind and disappeared into the fog. Forever nineteen. I'm getting old Mike, but, damn, you're forever nineteen. Always. In my mind.

— I'll stop back again soon.

He rode off past the cliffs, the barking dogs, the kites, the gliders and made his way out of Huntington, out of the dense fog, into patches of blue. Down into the dunes of Small Bag Beach that cut off his view of the ocean and the sour smell of the wetlands from across the highway. Downhill he coasted, riding the footbrake, keeping the bounding trailer at bay, into a winding valley, battling the whipping winds—one hand on the handlebars, the other holding the nose of his surfboard steady. His back was to the worst of it now.

Glancing momentarily over his shoulder into the thick head of fog, he questioned whether life was really happening inside it. The images and people that he had encountered in the fog and the images and people that he was reminded of by the fog merged. With no context, just thoughts, appearing and disappearing and separated by dense masses of intuitively impenetrable air, the events of his day telescoped outwards into the fog, out over the ocean, infinitely; but they were contained, compacted—remained with him from beyond the veil. Contained in thoughts alone.

The last leg of his trip, two hours in, a couple miles to go and he was well ahead of schedule.

—

Moondoggie showed up back in town that night. His shopping cart was empty except for a red flannel jacket and a crayon box that had his cigarette in it.

— Moondoggie, shouted Scotty, drunk, who had eyed him from inside the Black Ball and rushed out to harass him a little, in good fun. What happened to all your stuff?

The small man stood on the other side of the cart from his assailant who grabbed at the flannel and dumped the cigarette out of the box

onto the ground. Moondoggie told him that he met the careful man in Huntington and that he fixed his broken cart and gave him a new flannel shirt to wear and a handful of imported cigarettes which he had already smoked except for the last one which was in the crayon box that Scotty had dropped on the floor. He refolded the threadbare flannel and continued, saying that the careful man had shaped a surfboard and was delivering it to Mark Foo and he had taken the time to show it to him when he fixed his shopping cart. And he went on about the rails and the stringer and said it was a perfect gun for Mark, the kind he liked on big days.

Scotty lost interest as he thumbed around on the ground looking for Moondoggie's cigarette which had fallen into a crack in the sidewalk and disappeared before his drunken eyes.

— Well, you just watch those sharp turns there Freddie, shouted Scotty as he ambled down the street. And observe all posted street signs and markings!

He left Moondoggie standing in front of the Black Ball, looking at the ground for his last imported cigarette.

He drug his index finger through the dirt in a small crack on the sidewalk where he dropped my only smoke, fucking slob, just tossing around my shit, jawing all at my face, fished it outta the crack where he was the only one to give me a scuffed up smoke and that drunk bastard's thinking everything's for joking, and he tells me to get home like I don't know it already and disappears in the fog leaving me the fuck alone with his last smoke so I stuck it behind an ear and moved on but he didn't give me the matches because he didn't have em and he's a damn good man and woulda give em to me if he did and so I got to get home to look for a light.

— Damnin fogs lettin up sabout fuckin time.

—

He had turned off the highway at the old wooden lighthouse. Looking out through the clear, late afternoon skies, he saw the peaks of waves rising up over the sand berm.

By four he had unpacked his trailer, waxed his surfboard and walked down to the water's edge. He had been right about the swell. It wasn't great yet, but the next morning it would be. He smiled at the man in Huntington, clearly affected by the dreary weather, who had hollered for all to hear about no waves at Sunset. As he paddled out, he

silently thanked him for the empty beach and the serenity of a solitary, late afternoon session.

After sunset, he built a small campfire, ate two hot dogs and spent the night in silence. He forgot about all the people back home, and about all the money he owed Jane, and about Summer's cat throwing up all over his truck, and the hordes of people at his bar, about his friends, about his house, about his fish tank. He stared off into the sky, trying to trace out images of all them, but he couldn't. His thoughts passed through the grey but he couldn't pull the characters through. There were no images. And so he slept.

—

The fog lifted from the small town early the next morning. Malone and Scotty had passed out drunk together on Scotty's floor — watching home videos of old fishing trips and turkey hunts — sometime after last call. The mid morning sun beat through Scotty's beach towel curtains and fried his brain a little more. Ten minutes later they were both wandering around the walkways of their houses looking for wallets, Scotty's lost sandal, the TV remote, Malone's dog, and the Sunday paper. All were lost save the paper. (The dog was not 'lost', for he knew where he was, even though Malone could not find him. He returned from Shangri-La later that afternoon.)

Scotty rummaged through the paper looking for the sports page. Malone had already removed "The Beacon," the smaller local publication, bundled in with the Sunday paper. He looked for a mention of a lost sandal, or, for that matter, any other occurrences of he and Scotty's legal persons implicated in the events of Saturday night. Again his search came up empty. But something altogether different and much more amusing caught his attention.

— Holy shit! Moondoggie died last night, he shouted at Scotty through his bathroom window. Look at this, right here. Got hit by a drunk driver in front of 7-11.

— I just saw him last night, Scotty replied, sticking his head out of the shower. I hadn't seen him in months.

Scotty, over the noise of the shower, told Malone about his run in with the little old man. He told him how Moondoggie got rid of all his stuff and *the careful man* helped him fix his shopping cart up in Huntington Beach.

— Moondoggie saw him in Huntington? Yesterday? What the hell was he doing way up there?

- Delivering a surfboard?
- A surfboard. To who?
- Mark Foo.
- Mark Foo! What?
- I know. But it's Moondoggie. He was probably in the bag. Probably never even saw him either. Besides, how's Moondoggie going to get all the way back from Huntington pushing a cart through the fog?
- Surprised he didn't get hit by a car sooner. Maybe we should go see if he's home now. Find out if he really saw him yesterday.
- Yeah. Go see if his bike's there.

—

He surfed for hours that day. The swell hit early and sets came in by the nines. A Sunday afternoon with perfect conditions and he was the only one in the lineup. Through the blue in the sky: away, his mind fled. Where were the locals? Didn't anyone else want to get out of the fog and look for waves? Didn't anyone try to get away anymore? Through the water to the bottom, feet below, miles down, clarity of vision through this crystal garden, I wait. It was sad, almost. Surfing great waves, by himself, all morning. I'm floating on out to see and then it brings me home again if I can wait long enough for the swell and it's coming. Nines are good and then it peaks early and if I get caught inside, if I don't see it clearly...No one would see. Waves or not, no one to see me. This never happened. For me? Salt rubs skin, tired arms, bubblegummy wax smells in my nose; the truth. No one to see but me. From my inside. But later, looking back, fading swell, melting blue, trails across a face bursting through the whitewash all things that happened, from sitting on the beach and looking back. Then from my outside. And I'll take that with me. Forever. Surfing it was sad great waves by himself was sad. Almost.

After toweling off, he wasn't sure that his legs had enough in them to make the trip back home. The trailer really made climbing the hills tough and there was no telling what the wind would do in the afternoon. He thought about it as he loaded up his surfboard and cleaned up his campsite. He shook out the old sleeping bag, sent sand flying everywhere and unsuccessfully tried to zip the rusted zipper. It really wasn't a decision worth belaboring. He rolled up the sleeping bag and tossed it into the yellow trailer. Then he unfastened the trailer from his cruiser and rolled it down to the street corner. He left it there on the

curb. From across the street, he nodded his head at what a find it was and would be again. He shuffle shuffle shuffled heels, twist on sandy ground, then a few moments, and then they are gone. It was a good feeling, getting on with things.

He took off for home with his surfboard and his lets see what's on the radio. Scotty's probably hollering in my kitchen window now about God knows what game with Malone trying to come in through the bathroom and at least it looks like its sunny back home. Good. Give poor old Jane a break, having to put up with it all and I probably ought to get her back that money before she up and dies. She's fine though. Not like she needs it anyway. Don't want to mention it to Summer either way. With that cat, always getting sick and feeding it more Chinese what does she expect. Vet probably laughed at her when she brought it in and gave it some syrup to throw its guts up all over again. Poor cat probably just wants to die the way it's feeling right now, but it'll be okay. Lotsa lives left for that one. Two hours probably without the trailer if I don't stop but Moondoggie. I don't think he's got many left anymore and I wish I had more smokes to give him and a light fuck I'm sure he didn't have one on his own. Poor guy, but it's too late now.

—

He watched the sunset that afternoon from the comfort of his patio. Jane looked at him through her window and Scotty and Malone peered down their walkways at his bike locked to the rusty pole. They both forgot about the lost sandal and wallets and Jane took her medicine and fell asleep early.

*Through the fog, a man, with a humble load,  
passed into blue.*

*No songs were sung, no words were spoken.*

*Along the way, he met in kind and paid in full.*

*Was he old or young and did he find his way?*

*None could tell.*

*None had known, nor none could guess*

*how far could travel, through depths of grey,*

*a careful man.*



# Driving to Lana's on Friday at 7

*Rebecca Schoenmel*

It is Friday at 7 o'clock, which means that I am driving on my way to her house, hoping that the others are there too.

It's become expected of us. Fridays at 7. Her mother cried last Christmas because we were there for her daughter. All the regulars who visited at the hospital left after she began to recognize them; when all the dramatics had disappeared, so did they. Now, at her house, it was just us, and apparently it is the thing that she looks forward to. So every Friday at 7, we come.

If we were alone, we would sit there, the two of us. She would look at me under her short, shaggy, brown, curly hair and talk about the same thing that she talked about last week, while I would try to fend off her Schnoodle, Tigger. His black, greasy, curly hair would leave a dirty feeling on my hand. She would spy him and say, "Isn't it funny? All of our other dogs were like my family. Missy like my mom, Jack like my dad, and MacGyver like my brother Cody, and now, Tigger, he's all like me."

I would nod my head, already knowing that this would transition to her speech on the cats.

If someone new was there, it would be different. Sarah and I have figured out the repertoire. A new person would launch her into her philosophy: "I think I always knew this would happen," she would say. *No you didn't*, I would want to scream at her. "I knew I couldn't keep living like that." *But you wouldn't listen to us when we told you. You listened to her tell you what to do. You finally listened only because the two cars made you.* "At first, I would think 'oh God, why did this happen to me? But now," *And here it comes.* "I'm just so much closer to my family and you guys. It's just such..." *We tried to be closer before, but you wouldn't budge.* "A blessing."

She would get teary then, and I wouldn't know what to do, only

thinking of awkward things to say. Finally, when I could think of nothing else, I'd mention how far she had come. "I mean, we used to be excited just by you blinking at first," I would say, "A low ICP score made us happy. Now you can walk, talk." "But," she'd say, "I could dance before. I looked like me." I would look into her misshapen and too wide left eye, trying to focus on the right one. That side of her face still looked like her, smooth, almond eyes with a pointed nose, and I would remain silent because there is no arguing with that.

I drive under the speed limit.

While I think about when we were at Starbucks a few weeks ago. I was embarrassed at her dancing in the aisles in line. Her hips jerked back and forth, making her look like the tin man. It was hardly the moves of a belly dancer. Her shirt read "It's five o'clock somewhere" and it went with a long, flower, floral skirt, purple of course. Before all of this, she hadn't matched in the traditional sense, but it had worked somehow and that had been part of her charm. A sheet had been a skirt one day, a tube top the next. But now, she'd lost it; the outfits just don't work.

I roll to a stop for a yellow. The cars on either side of me zoom by easily making it.

As she was making a scene, I got angrier and angrier. I could feel people watching and wondering why a girl in her early twenties was doing this. They were watching and wondering what had happened to her, while trying not to look as if they were looking. My cheeks burned.

I talked about DC.

"Washington?" she asked. (Her voice not the same but higher and more spaced.)

"Yes, that DC," I said because I knew that she wouldn't know I was being mean and because she wouldn't remember it in five minutes and because I stayed up until three in the morning in her living room since her autistic brother was on the computer next to me until then, and I couldn't fall asleep. But really, it was because it was only nine in the morning and I had to stay at her house until one before heading to work for seven hours only to come back and make her dinner. Her parents

wouldn't come back until the next day.

I pause the full three seconds at each stop sign, looking right, then left, then right again before continuing.

And I scream because it had not been good right before it either. In the months before it happened, she hadn't been Lana. In blatant disregard of the sign, she had walked into Denny's without any shoes yet still got service. She had been loud, and I knew that the family next to us was wondering why a girl in her twenties was putting ketchup and syrup together. I knew the waitress just wanted us to leave, probably expecting the change that Lana paid in. I wanted to shake her and say, "this isn't being a free spirit; it's being stoned or whatever you've had today."

But it had been okay because we never saw her that much. She was always away with her excuses, and then we would remember how it had been originally, when it was fun and she had worn shoes. When it was just the girls, hanging out, being silly, laughing until we fell over. Once, we all sat in a movie theater for Jessie's birthday and she chatted away to the elderly couple next to us about the coming attractions. They loved her.

Now, in the movies, she will laugh her laugh too late and too loud and too high.

I wait for the traffic to pass before I turn onto the track.

Her parents didn't even ask. "We need to get away," they said. "When are you free this weekend? When do we need to come home? Our numbers' are on the fridge."

We ran back and forth from work, bending under the responsibility. And what if she fell? Did she take all of her medicine? What if one of our friends came over? Would we have to kick them out at Lana's new bedtime?

Her parents didn't even call that Monday. So we sat on the couch, the last week of summer, while she showered and then forgot to put on her shirt. She ran out while dressing because we were laughing out in the living room. She got angry when I told her to put on clothes; there were men in the room.

And when they got back, her parents said, "Thank you so much. We really needed it." And I knew my script, and I wanted to throw up after forcing the worlds "no problem" out of my mouth.

I turn at the turquoise house with the overgrown pine tree covering the sign that says Mossvale Circle.

But, I can still feel my insides falling away from the phone call. I know about being hollow when someone you love becomes completely unrecognizable with tubes and machines that beep. A petite oval face becomes round, puffy and bald with a tube sticking out the top of it where long, curly hair had once been. And I know she didn't cause the accidents. It wasn't her fault. They can't even find all the cars involved. Someone clipped her from behind; someone fell asleep. Her car is just scrap metal now. And I don't want to see it again.

So, I drive to the end of the street, wanting to cry at the fact that it's a cul-de-sac, and I have to try to Parallel Park. And I don't even know how.

# Where three roads meet

*Ruben Casas*

He will attempt to unlock the classroom door after watching the substitute try each door twice. He will not be able to do it either and he will have to walk to the school office with the substitute in tow. He will return to the classroom, this time with a clerk, a new set of keys, and with their help he will push/pull one of the doors open. He will walk into the classroom, he will tell the substitute that he will set up the room up. He will be unable to answer the three questions the substitute asks him about lunch, dismissal, lesson plans.

He will gather paper trays; he will fill them with napkin/straw/spork packets, white milk pouches, cereal boxes, he will add a pastry. He will turn on four computers and run a reading program on each one. He will find a pair of scissors and a roll of Velcro. He will measure out a length—he'll snip it off—and he will notice children walking in.

Their arrival will interrupt him; he will put down the scissors and the Velcro, he will walk up to the child, in effect he has started his day.

He will turn the child around, he will tell him to take his backpack off. He will take the backpack off for him.

He will lead him to their area, he will sit the child down, tell him to be still, to be quiet, to keep his arms down by his side.

He will watch the boy watch him, but he knows it's only a gaze, a blank stare; he knows it is all but linked to attention. He might wonder where the boy's attention is precisely, if there is attention at all.

He will cut the length of Velcro into one-inch strips—six one inch strips—and he will reach out between snips to push away the boy's hand from the boy's head, from the boy's mouth, from the boy's face. He will pretend to be annoyed by the boy's intrusion into his cutting, but he probably knows that he can't really be upset at the boy. He probably ignores that he knows that each scolding is infused with pity, care, with concern.

He will align each one-inch strip of Velcro to his left, and he will produce two two-foot-long strips of orange cloth from a box lying next to his feet. He will reach over the desk and retrieve the boy's left arm.

He will have brought the strips of cloth from home, having found an appropriate sized kitchen towel, having cut it in half, lengthwise.

He will lay out one strip of orange cloth along the table; he will place the strip between him and the boy. He will roll up the boy's sleeve, he will look into the boy's face, here he might wonder if the boy feels fear, might wonder if the boy associates those actions with a nurse getting ready to draw blood. He might wonder if the boy has had blood drawn and he might conclude that of course he has had blood drawn. He will not be able to decide if they draw blood the same way for children as they do adults.

He will place the boy's exposed arm onto the orange cloth, he will inspect the flesh wound between the boy's elbow and his wrist, and he will roll up the boy's arm testing its coverage. He will pull it tightly around and then he will unroll it again. He will apply three strips of Velcro onto the piece of cloth and he will roll the boy's arm up again. He will affix the edges of the cloth to itself and he will roll down the boy's sleeve over the covered arm. He will repeat the same procedure for the boy's right arm.

He will stand up and walk up behind the boy. He will pull the boy's arms down by his side. He will tell the boy to keep them there. He will walk back around the desk and he will produce a book, he will produce a set of flash cards. He will sign Book for the boy. He will get the boy's attention. He will sign Listen to the boy. He will repeat the sign for book. He will hand the book to the boy. He will show the boy a flashcard. He will ask the boy to tell what he sees. He will say and he will sign Boy, Sit, Girl, Listen, Ball, and Talk for the boy. He will continue to move the boy's hands away from his head, his mouth, his face.

At music time he'll walk up behind the boy, he will pull out his chair, he will say Up, and he will pull the boy to his feet. He will say Sotelo push the chair in but will push it in himself. He will walk the child to the computer, he will put a set of earphones on the boy, he will load a music playback program, he will sit behind the boy. He will hold the boy's arms as the boy bobs forward and backward forward and backward, reacting to the music.

He has seen her walk in from the kitchen, seen her walk towards the phone, seen her pick it up, he has heard her say hello. He has heard her repeat his name (in the form of a question) he's heard her say Yes, he's home. He's seen her walking towards him, seen her hand him the

phone, he's seen her standing—waiting—to hear what was to be said. He's looked up at her, he's put his arm over the speaker, and he's pulled the phone close to his chest. He's looked up at her. He's probably been irritated like this before. He's seen that look on her face, and he's waited for her to leave the room. He's answered affirmatively to the question asked over the phone, Yes, that's me, he's told the person on the line. He's asked Really, they have? He's waited for an answer. He has asked when they found him. Again, he's waited for an answer. His voice has had an incredulous tone when he's asked How. He has been disappointed that no more detail could be given to him at that time.

He's booked a flight, packed a bag, boarded a plane. He has landed in Tokyo's Narita airport. He has stepped onto a limousine taxi that headed west on the Higashi Kanto Expressway. He has quickly become bored with the varying scenery that has rolled along the limousine taxi. An hour later he has stepped to the front doors of the Crowne Plaza Tokyo.

He has answered the door at the first knock; he's been startled at how young the officer at the door is, the young officer who has come in a neatly pressed shirt, in a new pair of slacks, the clasps' teeth marks still visible on the knees. He has exchanged greetings with the young officer, offered his hand, has quickly retreated it, acknowledging the young officer's bow with a medium-sized bow of his own. He has turned around, locked his door. He has asked the young officer to lead the way.

During recess/toileting he will lead the boy to the restroom and check his diaper. He will be relieved to see that the boy does not need changing. He will take the boy by the hand, take him onto the recess grounds. He will sit the boy down on the grass, he will cross his legs. He will sit himself across from him. He will toss a ball into the boy's lap and ask the boy to throw it back. He will reach forward and retrieve the ball. He will toss the ball into the boy's lap, he will say Sotelo throw the ball to me. He will reach forward and retrieve the ball.

He has been surprised to hear that they have arrived at the site, surprised even more to see that it is a demolition site and not a residence building. He has inquired about this to the officer at the wheel, and he has been annoyed at the officer's remark that he knows nothing of his business, that he was only instructed to seek him at the hotel and promptly bring him there.

He has been caught by the sudden desire to know the circumstances that brought his estranged father to an end there. He has probably wondered (and if he has, it has no doubt been a rather sudden wonderment), if it's really a desire to know about his father's end or simply a desire to know how he came to end there. He has heard the young officer tell him that the discovering officer will arrive shortly. He has waited seven minutes for said officer to arrive.

He has seen the car pull up, he has seen another officer – the discovering officer he no doubt has presumed – step out: he has seen the high-noon sun reflect off Ray Ban sunglasses, then reflect of a set of keys he's pulled off his belt; he's seen this new officer throw a key to his own chauffeur. He has seen the chauffeur run off into a cloud of dust. He has heard the young officer say You may step out now.

He will model hand washing for the boy and then he will wash the boy's hands. He will walk the child through the cafeteria line and ask the boy to point to the foods he would like to have. He will choose pizza, pineapple slices, and chocolate milk for the boy. He will cut the pizza into bite-sized pieces; he will stick a straw in the pouch of chocolate milk. He will tell the boy to take a piece of pizza to his mouth, he will tell the boy to sip from the chocolate milk. He will demonstrate for the boy, he will hold the straw between his index and thumb and he will jerk his head down like a chicken without actually touching his lips to the tip. He will sit by the boy's side, he will place food in his hand, he will lead the hand to the mouth, he will hold the boy's head as he inserts the straw in his mouth, and he will wipe the milk off his chin after every sip.

He has shaken hands with the officer. He has heard his name and has quickly forgotten it. He has heard the officer half say, half ask Follow me. He has trailed behind as the officer has told him how the demolition crew had found the remains of a body when searching the building in preparation for demolition, trailed behind how the skeletal frame had been found lying face-up on a tatami. He has heard the officer say that they will take the stairs up to the second floor.

He has heard the officer describe the mold that grew out of the refrigerator, forcing the door off its hinges, describe how it took longer for the food to decompose because the electric company didn't shut off electricity until two months after not having received payment. He has heard the officer chuckle when he said that it was sad that only today

can man's food outlive the man. He has heard the officer quiet down, he has heard him mumble My apologies.

He has seen the chauffer waiting by a door, has seen the mask around his nose and mouth. He has seen the two masks dangling from the chauffeur's finger. He has seen the officer take one mask for himself, has seen him hand one to him, has heard him go on about the mold, how it grew out of the refrigerator, how it took the refrigerator door off its hinges.

He will be called to help restrain another child in a bout of screaming and head banging. He will likely hope Sotelo will not give in and bite at his fingers or claw at his head. He will look over the other boy's head to see Sotelo, to make sure he keeps his hands away from his head, from his face. He will see the substitute walk up behind Sotelo, see the substitute move the child's hands away from his head, and he will probably feel like telling the substitute not to touch Sotelo; if he does, he will keep himself from saying anything. He will see the substitute take a seat behind Sotelo, he will see the substitute gather the boy's arms and restrain them by his side. He will have to smile and nod in approval.

He has seen the officer step into the room. He has seen the chauffer motioning him to follow. He has stepped into the room. He has recoiled at the lingering stench of matter rotted.

He will sit across the boy and he will ask him to place his arms across the desk. He will reach over and retrieve the boy's arms. He will roll up the left sleeve and pull at the Velcro-attached edge. He will unroll the cloth off the boy's arm and he will inspect the wound. He will take a red felt-tip pen and trace the edge of each Velcro strip. He will very likely use these marks to affix new strips when those fall off. He will label this cloth LEFT, fold it up, put it into the box. He will do the same for the RIGHT cloth, on the right arm. He will notice that the substitute is looking on at him.

He has told the officer to return the remains to the deceased's ex-wife. He has signed the necessary forms, and he might wonder how valid a positive ID from a man who has not seen or spoken to the deceased in over 35 years will be. He has provided the officers with his mother's Tokyo address. He has asked to be taken back to the hotel.

He will hold an arm out for the substitute to see. Bite marks he will say. He bites himself, he will tell the substitute.

He has called a cab, he has boarded a plane, he has found his car at the car park, he has merged onto a middle lane. He has walked through the front door. He has noticed a four-day pile of mail at his feet. He has noticed that the calendar still hangs in last month. He has checked his watch. He has confirmed that it is the second of the month.

He has seen the calendar on the wall, has ignored the escorting officer who has walked into the kitchen still talking about the broken refrigerator door. He has stepped over magazines, a bowl, unopened mail. He has walked up to the calendar singly hanging on the wall. He has seen its edges curling up at the corners. He has seen that it hangs open to February 1984. He has seen Thursday the 9<sup>th</sup> circled in fading red pen, he has seen Saturday the 18<sup>th</sup> also circled with the same fading red pen. He has walked closer to the tatami, he has seen the newspaper lying face up on the floor, he has seen the date printed across the front page: February 20, 1984. He will read the headline: Tokyo Welcomes Silver Medalist Yoshihiro Kitazama Home.

He has called out to her. He has checked the answering machine for messages. He has pressed Play. He has heard a message from Town Bank offering a One-time-opportunity for refinancing. He has walked up the stairs. He has called out to her again. He has stepped into the bedroom. He has set his suitcase down on the bed. He has seen the note.

He will yell No, he will sign No, and he will move over to restrain the boy from slapping his face. He will hesitate, probably not being able to decide if he should use one hand to hold him down and another to put over his mouth. He will use both hands to restrain him and none to cover the screams. He will wait until the boy has settled and he will place the pencil in the harness and the harness in his fingers. He will guide the boy's hand through the dots. He will look sternly at the boy when he screams and slaps his face.

He has received a formal letter from the Tokyo Police Department the same day he received a letter from the Town Police Department. In one letter he has read a single sentence offering the Department's condolences over his father's death. He has read on to find the Department's details on the discovery of the body, the circumstances believed to have surrounded the death (there was no sign of struggle, we believe your father died of natural causes), and what was done with the remains. He has read the name of the real estate company that had

gone out of business without having placed anyone in the apartment building, that is, except his father. He read the name of the company that had employed his father and the statement they made as to when and why he had been dismissed from his assignment (failure to report for work).

In the other letter he has read a strong reprove for the prank that was played on the Town Police Department. The feigned abduction had cost Town taxpayers an excess of 14,500 dollars—the cost of the month long investigation—an investigation that ended when they found his wife hiding out with another man across town. He has undoubtedly felt shame by the obvious suggestions made in the letter. He has undoubtedly felt shame at the openness of his wife’s affair, an affair that was then made public when she feigned a kidnapping while he was away. He has wondered if the Town Police Department has sent a letter to his wife at her current address. He has folded each letter into an envelope each. He has dropped them in the kitchen waste basket.

He will clean the boy’s face and the boy’s hands. He will hand him his backpack and he will ask him to put it on. He will take the backpack out of his hands and put it on the boy’s back. He will say Bus Sotelo and he will say Point to the bus Sotelo. He will lift the boy off the ground the two times that the he drops to the floor, refusing to move. He will get him to walk in front of him. He will see four buses parked and waiting. He will not see the boy’s bus. He will say Walk Sotelo when he sees his bus approaching. He will see the boy drop to the ground a third time. He pushes Sotelo. The papers call it a tragedy.

# Reading Guide & Discussion Questions

*Kevin Toth*

Now that you've finished the novel, use the following questions to strengthen your understanding of the text or to spark discussion amongst your class or book club.

1. Many of the events in the novel blur the distinction between virtue and immorality. Is such a distinction important? In your opinion, who are the "good" characters and who are the "bad" characters? Who are the "good" people and "bad" people in your own life?

2. Why is the time period of the novel appropriate for the narrative? How would the novel's events have played out in a different era? Can you use a bow and arrow effectively?

3. The many wants and needs of the characters fuel much of the novel's plot. Are these characters lacking in self-control, or have they coped admirably with their circumstances? Do you detect a common denominator among the needs and wants of the novel's male characters in spite of their disparate motivations? What about the female characters? The non-human characters? Do you need to be asked if you detected similarities or differences in the wants and needs of characters belonging to different races, or is that the sort of thing that you can infer from the questions already asked? Is it something you would have thought about anyway? Did any characters' wants and needs seem more realistic than others? Did any characters' wants and needs seem trivial or foolish compared to your own?

4. The novel contains a number of references to religion, including radical proposals for standards of living, debates on the origins of life, and several characters being mistaken for divine emissaries. Does religion help or hinder the characters in the novel? In which cases? Why? What would you do if someone said otherwise? What would you do if someone proved otherwise? Do you want to come back to this question later?

5. The distinction between having and not having is important to the novel, with the services and products purchased and owned practically comprising a whole separate character. Considering that a majority of the novel's minor characters often good without food, shelter, or indoor plumbing, what is the effect of these details about ownership? How much do you own? Too much? Not enough? The correct amount? What are you basing your answer on? What is your most treasured possession? How would your life be different if it were to disappear, or if you had never owned it in the first place? What about your second most treasured possession? Would your life be bearable without it? What about your third, fourth, fifth, and sixth most treasured possessions? What if you were robbed? What if your house burned down? Would you be ready? Where would you turn? Who could you trust? Wouldn't it be better to know that there was someone looking out for you? (This discussion question was sponsored by the Chubb Group of insurance companies.)

6. Does any genuine love occur in the novel? Between the characters? Between the characters and their families? Between the characters and their belongings? Between the characters and their pets? Why or why not? Of the numerous things you've lost or been denied during your life, which did you want the most? How did you feel when you realized it would never be yours? What sort of physical pain would you compare it to? Did you ever get over it? Seriously? What songs did you listen to during these periods of disappointment? Did you try to replace your foiled desire with something else? If so, with what? Did you try counseling? Did you try to tell yourself that you were better off without whatever it was you wanted, or that it just wasn't that important in the long run, or that you were a better, wiser person as a result of your frustration and heartbreak? Did you believe yourself when you said these things? Honestly? Why were you unable to obtain what you wanted? Was the situation beyond your control, or, looking back, was there something more you could have done? As a quick exercise, make a list of your shortcomings. How many of these shortcomings can you change? How many are you stuck with? Less than half? More than half? All of them? If you can change some of them, why haven't you? Is laziness one of your shortcomings? Some of the novel's characters have few problems getting what they want. How does this make you feel? Were you able to relate to these characters, or did you find yourself wishing that their lives were more like yours? What songs do you think the different characters would

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enjoy listening to? Some of the characters romantic relationships are happy, constructive, and mutually fulfilling on a number of levels. Does that strike you as unrealistic? Did some of the characters just bug the living shit out of you? Were these the “bad” characters, or were some of the “good” characters equally insufferable? Who are the people in your own life who just bug the living shit out of you? Where would you send those people if you could? Would you ever consider having them eliminated altogether? What if we told you that we knew a guy? (For more information, visit the publisher’s website or mail in the coupon found in the back of this book.)

7. The novel is populated with numerous characters that have no bearing on the plot whatsoever? Why did the author decide to include these seemingly unnecessary characters? To elevate the important characters? Or strictly for comic relief? Are you important? What is the most embarrassing thing that ever happened? Did the people around you laugh? With you, or at you? Have you considered that your embarrassing situation is now a story that those other people tell their friends at parties? Would you call them “good” people or “bad” people? Do you tell those sorts of stories at parties? Do you tell your friends about your embarrassing stories, or the embarrassing stories of others? When you cross the road at a crosswalk, do you think that the people waiting in their stopped cars are wondering how many points they would receive for running you over? Do you assign point values to the pedestrians that pass in front of your car? How many points would you be worth? How many points would your parents give you? How many points would your coworkers give you? What about your spouse? Or your children? Do you have a spouse or children? Do you think that whether or not you have a spouse or children should have any bearing on your point value? Why or why not? Throughout the novel, numerous characters are shot, stabbed, tortured, dismembered, crushed, or blown to pieces. Sometimes they take their own lives or are wiped out wholesale in political conflicts, religious conflicts, economic conflicts, or what reputable insurance companies refer to as Acts of God. Were the important characters elevated by these deaths? Did the deaths of these of these peripheral characters affect your reading of the novel, or not at all?

8. How does the author keep the reader amused throughout such a lengthy epic? Were these narrative devices effective? Should there have been a few more Acts of God? Were the special effects convincing?

9. The characters in the novel live under considerable clouds of misinformation. Would a better understanding of the world around them have kept their lives trouble-free? Would quality insurance plans have kept their lives worry-free? Do you consider yourself well educated? Do you consider yourself intelligent? What are you worried about? Do you think you're ready to answer those questions about religion yet?

10. In spite of its many realist and naturalist trappings, the novel contains a fair number of postmodern features, including a narrator who constantly reminds the reader that there is only so much of the novel than can be understood, and that all of the characters are eventually going to die. Why is the reader compelled to keep reading? Would you have preferred something more straightforward and plot-driven? How do the numerous novels within the novel affect your reading experience or understanding of the text? What about your understanding of the text of the novels within the novel? Should the novels within the novel contain reading guide and discussion questions? How many questions should be asked? Which questions? Why? Would you use this reading guide as a model? Has this reading guide been helpful? Do you feel that you've gotten your money's worth? Does postmodernism still have a few shreds of validity, or is it all pretty much played out? Why or why not?

11. What is the theme of the novel? What is the moral of the novel? What is the message of the novel? How many symbols did you find? Do you think that the author knows more about life than you do? Do you feel that the author knows more about life than you do? Did reading the novel constitute a "healing process?" What would it take for you to go on television and say that reading this novel was a "healing process" for you?

12. The novels ends with a terrific "what if" scenario. Do you consider this a satisfying conclusion? Why or why not? What if you had to read the novel over again? Is there anything that you would change or do differently? What if you were the author of the novel? Is there anything that you would change or do differently? Speculate about the futures of the various characters. Do the novel's final lines suggest anything concrete about their respective fates?