EXILE

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"You of the finer sense,
Broken against false knowledge,
You who can know at first hand,
Hated, shut in, mistrusted:

Take thought:
I have weathered the storm,
I have beaten out my exile.

---

*Ezra Pound*
For one human to love another, that is perhaps the most difficult of all our tasks, the ultimate, the last test and proof, the work for which all other work is but preparation.

Rainer Maria Rilke

Meredith woke to the sound of a morning rain pattering on the roof above her head. Wind billowed the curtains as it came through the window. She turned her face to feel the breeze.

The sheets had been tossed about the bed during the night because of the hot, wet air that hung heavily in late summer. John lay sleeping on his side at her right. His chest, arms, and one leg were freed of the sheets, victorious in the battle for comfort that waged silently through the night.

Meredith turned, molding her body to his large form. He grunted, rolled onto his stomach, and buried his head among the pillows.

“Morning,” she said, the word cracking through a small part in her dry lips.

John mustered a grunt and Meredith watched as his shoulders rose and fell from the depths of the pillows. She tousled his hair, kissed his cheek, and then padded to the bathroom.

Steam rose from their coffee mugs as they sat in silence, each with a section of the paper. It was Sunday and they were always lazy on Sundays.

“What’s the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet?” John asked. He bent over a crossword puzzle and chewed on a pen. “Beta or Gamma? or is it Delta?”

Meredith began clearing the breakfast dishes. “Delta, it’s Delta,” she called from the sink. She stopped a moment and looked at her husband. He was bent over the table, his head supported by his left hand, long fingers appearing among the dark curls of his tousled hair. John filled in the squares with a satisfied grin.

“I don’t know why you like those things,” she said over the rushing faucet water.

John continued the puzzle in silence.

“The house could be burning to the ground,” she went on saying, “and you would not leave that table to save your life before finishing a puzzle.”

“Oh Ditty, you know that’s not true. I would take it WITH me and
finish it outside so it wouldn't burn. THEN maybe I would come in to find you."

"Oh, bestill my heart, my hero," she swooned.

John went to the sink and encircled her from behind. "Don't get me wrong. I wouldn't come to SAVE you," he said, bending to kiss her neck, "I just need your help with the tricky ones like the Greek alphabet."

"Get out!" she yelled, laughing.

"Well Meredith, I need some diversion to help me choke down your breakfasts every morning." He pecked her cheek and dodged from the kitchen as she raised a wet fist covered with soap.

"I love you!" he called from the stairs as he went up two-by-two.

Meredith's hands pruned in the warm water and she added more soap to the already filled sink. She washed, rinsed, and rewashed the dishes, not wanting to lift her hands from the white bubbles. Like a child, she lifted a handful of suds and blew them upwards, watching as they dispersed and then fell wet onto the countertop.

She could hear John upstairs, the floor boards creaking as he moved about the room. She could picture him in her mind as he first started the shower, walked to the bedroom to undress, and then returned to the bathroom to shave, standing naked before the sink and racing against the steam as it crawled onto the mirror. Meredith never understood this morning ritual, but knew it by heart and that it would never change. Later she would go upstairs and pick up his crumpled boxer shorts and pajama bottoms from the floor at the end of the bed and throw them in the bathroom hamper.

"Morning Ditty!" The familiar voice sang out over the phone and Meredith smiled at the nickname she had created for herself as a child.

"Hi Mom. Well, how was it? I want to hear everything!"

"Meredith," she gasped, "it was divine! We could not have had a more beautiful evening. The food was delicious and the guests... almost everyone attended... no, the Wexlers were out of town, but anywho, everyone stayed until at least one a.m. Your father is exhausted today. I, am too, but oh! So thrilled it was such a success!"

"Oh Mom, they always are! I am glad you had such a wonderful time. Things sound as if they went smoothly, no broken glasses or fallen desserts?"

"Not a one."

Meredith laughed as she remembered the first time John attended the "Fabulous Franklin Affair" as he now referred to the annual summer's end party thrown by her parents. It was the Fall of their last year at Gettysburg and Meredith's mother had insisted on John coming to the party before he and Meredith left for school.

John was completely overwhelmed as Meredith knew he would be. Following an entire day of preparations including florists and caterers, John realized this was not a simple cocktail party. Meredith tried to make him feel at ease but was more humored by his fascination.

That evening, Meredith's mother maneuvered John around the party, introducing him to every guest there. It was on the long drive to school that he finally expressed his shock and began to feel comfortable again after the tedious hours of small talk, smiles and handshakes.

"It was unreal!" he laughed. "How can you take those people seriously Meredith? 'Oh Ditty, dear!' He extended a bent wrist and fluffed imaginary hair under his ear. "How ARE you? Oh! And this is HIM! I've heard SO much about you, eh, Jim, is it? Oh aren't you two just IT! Ditty, he's ADOR - A - BLE! or how about, 'DITTY! You have GROWN! Harold, Harold, HAOLD! Hasn't Ditty gotten to be such a... oh never mind! Harold just never listens! But Meredith, you look great. I remember when you were THIS big!

John and Meredith laughed their way across Pennsylvania as they remembered the party.

Meredith's mother's voice interrupted her reveries. "So, how are you? I see on the news that you have rain."

"Oh, it's so ugly. John and I are having a rather lazy day, keeping in from the rain... ."

"How is John, dear? Are you two getting along all right?"

It was an odd question after four happy years of marriage, but one that Meredith's mother never failed to ask. It used to anger Meredith, but she soon tired of the ensuing arguments and learned to always respond positively, regardless of the truth at the time.

She could hear John in the basement, rummaging about like a boy in a toy chest.

"He's up to something," said Meredith. "I've got to go. I'll call you soon and say hi to Dad for me." They hung up and Meredith sat at the kitchen table a moment, tracing the line of the wood grain with her index finger.

Again she thought of her mother's party and John's imitations of the guests. From then on he had called her Ditty and they often fell into a mock conversation as if they were two snobs having a marvy time at the Fabulous Franklin Affair.

"Johnathon, Johnathon, do you EVER listen to me?!" she called from the top of the basement stair case. "I was just on the line with Mummy and heard all the details of yet another soiree that was a smashing success last night! Do come listen!"

"Ditty, my love muffin, I'm in the middle of a most fantastic project.
Come hither and do tell, for I am not to be interrupted just yet," John called.

Meredith shared the conversation with John as he worked intently on a new model airplane. John loved putting things together and had collected models of all types since he was a young boy. Meredith loved to watch him as his large hands worked on the small, delicate pieces of various trains, cars, planes and ships that he put together, sometimes in a single afternoon. She stood watching him from behind and could hear him humming as he worked.

"Well, pumpkin," she said finally, "I've got laundry to attack."

Meredith sat in the middle of the king sized bed humming quietly to herself as she folded the laundry strewn about her. T-shirts were stacked in square columns and socks rolled into florettes on the bed. Rain fell like a wet sheet outside casting a grey tint over the late afternoon. The clothes were still warm from the dryer and Meredith absorbed the heat; she felt as though it seeped into her mind, warming her body and soothing her.

Humming quietly to herself, she thought of John, for it was his habit to hum when he worked quietly. She had noticed this one day in college as he sat across from her and folded his Economics papers into oragami shapes. Meredith was distracted and looked up to see him concentrating on the folds with squinted eyes and his tongue slipping between his lips. The image caught her by surprise and she smiled and then continued reading as he went on humming. It was the same picture of John that she kept in her mind and it often struck her at odd moments, such as this, and brought the same feeling of security it had the first time.

The evening was cool and damp, the rain having finally subsided.

"Let's cook out," said John. "Burgers, corn, a salad maybe. You know Meredith, we're running out of grill time. Winter is just around the corner." He began rummaging through the refrigerator to get dinner started and Meredith set the table.

"Did you finish the model?" she asked.

"No, I'll have to save it for another rainy day. It's pretty big. Hey, is this ground chuck okay?" He stood at the freezer staring at the package with a funny smile. "Ground chuck. It sounds like dog food. Why not just call it 'hamburger meat'?"

Cars slipped down the wet streets and the night glistened against the headlights. The air smelled of the approaching season while the cooling grill gave off the familiar scent of the passing summer months. Meredith lit the candles on the table. She and John sat across from each other, their faces illuminated in gold.

"What a day," said John. "You would think we had not a care in the world. I wish we could have lazy days like this every day."

"Mmmm, me too. I love Sundays. I remember when I was little, Sunday was always my favorite day of the week. Especially during the Winter. Dad and Jeffery and I would watch the football game on T.V. and Mom would make a big dinner with apple pie for dessert."

"Your Mom made the pie?"

"Yes. Why?"

"Well, I don't know. I can't imagine your mother cooking like that I guess. She seems like the type that would even cater family dinner on Sundays."

"John!"

"No Meredith, I don't mean it like that. It's just, well, almost every time I have eaten with your family it has been on a holiday or one of their parties. Usually the food is catered, that's all."

"John, you never knew my mother when we were younger. She was a great mom. Of course she cooked for us. My parents lifestyle changed when Jeffery and I were out of the house. She didn't need to cook as much and they got used to going out."

"Meredith, I never doubted your mother like that. Don't get defensive. That is not what I meant."

"Catered family dinners. Unbelievable John." She twisted the edge of her placemat and stared into the food that was left on her plate.

"You're angry. I can't believe it. You're angry about one little comment about your mother when, in fact, you were just mocking her yourself a while ago. And I didn't even mean it like that." John threw his napkin down onto the table in frustration. Meredith panicked a moment, thinking he was going to leave the table, but he didn't. She looked into John's piercing eyes and saw him in a way that seemed to challenge her sense of security with him.

"Meredith, what is this really about?"

For the first time she could not explain it to him, for she could not explain it herself. She knew it was not so much about her mother, but rather herself and the fear of her ability to cause a strain in between them because of her selfishness. Her love for him was so intense it sometimes...
frightened her, made her believe she could destroy what seemed perfect. She loved knowing his morning ritual, she could hear him hum, taste his breath or smell his skin when he wasn't there. But it wasn't enough. She was always in search of reinforcement. A pit grew in her stomach whenever something between them faltered, no matter how trivial the situation.

John's face seemed to dim and became blurred as tears welled in Meredith's eyes. “I'm sorry John, I don't know why I'm getting so upset. This is really stupid.”

He looked at her a long moment. "Meredith, you know I love you. And I'll never stop loving you. Your mother has no part in our relationship."

She felt transparent, as though he had read her thoughts and seen her fear. She was, for a moment, controlled by the intensity of her own love for him, by the desire to have him know her as she did him.

He stood and blew out the candles and the dark room swallowed her. She was lost among its shadows. He rose in the darkness to take her hand, lift her to her feet, and hold her tightly to his chest like a child with a doll.

"Forget the dishes," he said. “You always do the dishes before I even take the last bite, but not tonight, Ditty. Tonight I want you all to myself."

She could hear his heart beat and felt his voice in her throat when he spoke.

John lay at her right. She could feel his steady breathing on her skin. When the wind blew it caught droplets of crystallized rain from tree branches that had begun to lose their leaves. Meredith touched his skin lightly a moment, and then she clutched his arm tightly to her chest as she sunk into the folds of their bed. She held onto him, absorbing the warmth and scent of his skin into her own.

"Ditty," John said sleepily, "someday I want to have a piece of your mother's apple pie."

Julie Gruen

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Like A Lady

When I was growing up surrounded by six similar sisters, mother told me to smile, to sit, to speak like a lady. She urged me to giggle, let men open my doors. I did, until Emily was raped, Mr. Gordon walked out and left his bride with three children and food stamps, Michael blackened my eye.

Now I tell her just because my hips have curves no one has the right to call me "babe," just because I shave my legs no one has the right to shave my salary, just because my shoulders aren't broad no one has the right to hit me.

She smiles at me and agrees, like a lady.

Gigi Mulvihill
The Final You

I wish I could have known
the final you I saw—
with stars and stripes laid out
above your serene face.
You never looked that peaceful
when you were passed out on the floor.
Or when, with folded brow, you tried
to make a point to a spinning room.

My friends with hands bruised
in drunken handshakes
who didn't believe — "He's got the flu,"
did not have the same
undying respect
that your fellow agents and superiors had.

Shoulders back
facing into the room
stood your peers,
hands clasped before them, protecting
their flawless manly image.
I wondered if even one tear was shed.

I know that I let many fall
on the shoulders of my friends.
But not for what I'd lost as much
as for what I'd never had.

I deeply wish that I could have known
the final you I saw.
The one of love
and peaceful strength
that you drove inside and crushed.

Eric Franzon
Ain't the 1950s Anymore

When I got ready to go to town this morning my damn hands were so stiff I could barely open the truck door. I was late anyway because it took me so long to do the latches on my overalls, and then the stove wouldn't light. I wished Sophie was here to do it. But finally I got through my usual bacon, eggs, biscuits, and coffee, and I started for Larkin's Grocery. I've known Virgil for 27 years now, and shopped at his store every one of them.

The truck wouldn't start, and it was hard to keep twisting the key and pumping the gas. I don't recall being so stiff yesterday, and not just my hands but my knees, hips, ankles, wrists, just about everywhere. Finally I got it to turn over -- the son of a bitch never fires up after it's set for a couple of days.

I was surprised to see such a haze on everything so near to noon on a fair day. I slowed down to about 40 just to be careful, and a damn bunch of silly kids passed me on the hill by the Davenport place. I saw that one of them was Jack Stephenson's boy; if his daddy sees him, that boy will catch hell -- be standing for a week! Jack's wife Myrna waved at me when I went by, like always. I thought of the years Sophie and I went down to catch hell — be standing for a week! Jack's wife Myrna waved at me when I went by, like always. I thought of the years Sophie and I went down to help them with their tobacco crop, and what good times we had.

I pulled into the parking lot at Larkin's and when I walked in, Virgil said, "Hey, you old man, how you doing?" That's our joke because he's almost 76, near my own age. He comes by the house now and again to talk a bit, catch me up on his wife's gossip. It's always good to talk to him since there's not many of us still living.

We were standing by the counter talking, Virgil watching the door like he always does. After a minute I heard the cowbell on the door, and I saw Virgil's face change. His eyes squinted up and he ducked his head a little, just glaring at whoever opened the door. He looked just like an old dog I used to have; that animal growled at anything that moved! When I turned around, I saw why Virgil was looking that way.

A colored woman had just walked in, with a little one with her. She smiled and said hello and we said hi back, then she walked down an aisle. Virgil looked at me and didn't have to say anything because I knew what he meant by the look. I remembered some years back when the county ordered him to take down the "WHITES ONLY" sign that had been there since I could remember -- since 1944, he said -- and longer than any other place I knew of. It wasn't that Virgil had nothing against coloreds; he just thought that since we never bothered them, they shouldn't bother us. "They got everything they need over there in Eubanks," he would always tell me, "They can just keep to theirselves over there. Don't need to come over here for anything." Can't say I blame him.

We could see her as she passed the first aisle and the next, and Virgil whispered to me just what I was thinking, that it was easy to tell she was a kind of smart-assed one. She had on a real pretty outfit, like the suit the phone company lady wears when I go in to pay my bill every month. And this woman walked real proud, with her nose in the air, and stretching her neck. I can't stand anybody to act like that, especially a woman . . . and a colored woman, at that!

Just as she turned up the third aisle, the cowbell rang again and we turned around to see Russell Carter's two girls. They were both nice, and the oldest one was as pretty as her mom, and taller already. Virgil said, "Hi, girls! Can I get you all something?"

"Hey, Mr. Larkin, Mr. Reppert! We came to get some Hamburger Helper and a gallon of milk."

"Well, the Hamburger Helper is in the second aisle, and you know where the milk is."

Just as they walked away, the colored woman picked up a loaf of bread and walked towards the counter where me and Virgil were standing. She said, "Excuse me, do you have any fresh bread? I'd like some but this is pretty stale." Well, Virgil didn't know what to say. I could see him biting his tongue and just looking at her. Finally he said,"That bread is just fine. Nothing wrong with it."

She turned the loaf around for him to see the end of it. "But the expiration date was for almost two weeks ago. It's going to mold soon, if it hasn't already," she said, like he was too stupid to know that or something. His face was turning red and his hands were shaking and he said to her real calm."Don't you come in here and tell me my business. If I had it my way, you wouldn't be in here at all. You people come over here and give us a hard time, and we don't never bother you. So if you want some bread, you just go on back to Eubanks and buy it there." He wasn't so calm by the end of his speech.

Well, the colored woman just looked at him, and turned her head real slow and looked at me, then back at him with a surprised look on her face like nobody had ever talked to her like that before. Her jaw went slack and her lips hung open with the bottom one all loose and shaking. She didn't look so proud now. The little girl with her stood and looked at us, too, with those great big, scared eyes like they have. The two of them looked they was going to cry or yell or maybe both. Then I saw the Carter girls out of the corner of my eye, and when I looked at them. I saw they both had that same scared, shocking look on their faces, too -- they looked like they couldn't believe Virgil had said
what he said. The box of Hamburger Helper was laying a few inches from their feet, with the corner of it all mashed in. I thought maybe Virgil had got a little too excited, but I didn't think he was wrong.

When I looked back at the woman, she was still bug-eyed but now her lips were pinched together, too. She looked ready to spit fire, but she just stood there looking Virgil right in the eye. Virgil hadn't moved at all, either. He still had that same mean-dog look on his face, still staring at the woman and not saying a thing or even blinking. It was dead quiet in the store except for the buzz of the lights and the window fan, and it stayed that way -- nobody talking or moving -- for the longest time. I thought we were all six going to be there forever, just standing and looking.

But then the Carter girls walked past us real slow, the older one looking at Virgil like she was about to get sick. She said something that sounded like, "Ain't the 1950s anymore," but she said it too quiet for me to tell. She was pulling along the younger one, who was wiping her eyes and looking at the floor. They walked right out the door without even buying what they came for. That was the first time Virgil moved; he turned his head to look at them and then wiped his top lip. He looked at me and back at the colored woman, but still never said a word. She finally slammed down the sack of bread on the counter -- it made a loud noise, so it must have really been stale -- and walked out on her high heels, letting the door slam on her way out. Her little girl looked back at us over her shoulder, with those eyes that just got bigger and bigger.

Virgil watched them get out, then turned toeward me. We just looked at each other for a minute, the he shook his head. "Dear God!" he said. "Jimmy, none of this would ever happened if the county had just let me keep things the way they always was back then." And I can't say I blamed him, cause he was right. It wasn't his fault she came in acting so proud, and that she mouthed off to him. I asked him, "Well, what can you expect? Not many of us left who know the old ways was best.

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Ellen Stader

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**Bonding Women**

Women's voices creep from under the door and into my ears, sounds of women, yet not only women but friends who "need to be alone.

I cannot imagine (as men try to do) what they could talk about that they would not want me to hear.

These women know me as well as I know myself, sometimes better: second guessing me, spoiling a joke or comic movement, bringing me mocha-chocolate chip ice cream when they see I am down....

I asked one once about the complexities of bonding, even the word itself conjures images of Mrs. Stewart's chemistry class in the past of high school.

She said, "Tits, it's all about tits."

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Shannon Salser
Ice Man (for mami 1905-1975)

On a single day, when the sun had gone walking
she ran. She ran past the crooked wooden porches and the old men on
stoops, past concrete lamp posts with their balls of milk glass and waited.
She waited on her splintery swing seat and listened for him,
for the wheels ticking, the ice man.
His whistling tune so familiar and soothing
to breathe the sweetly dusted notes.
Clothes flap in the breeze behind her
as he unveils the brown tarp—
then, on his leather padded shoulder rests the frozen block--
its blue icy smoke churns around him, a banner of white light
which then slips, like tears, into space.
She leans in the cart to slide some crystal shards
into her palms, the shimmering liquid drops ripple down her throat.
She presses her face to the block of blue crystal
longing to crawl inside and live.

Anne Mulligan

The Car Salesman

Brown leather shoes with
tiny holes punched in curls
swirl to a drain in the toe.

As he walks past a sticky
clean flat maroon Ford, headed
for a gun metal gray Buick
with a customer in a denim suit
and two boys younger than ten,
he watches the shoes brush the
blacktop and thinks to keep them
until they wear from his feet.

The two boys watch him too,
watching his shoes. He tells
them, “I’m going to show you
a car as black as Batman’s cape.”
Their faces don’t light up
when they see the car is gray.

Later, at home, he sits as his
wife asks about the lost sale.
He cannot tell her why.

In the kitchen, he eats soup.
His little girl walks up, asks
how to make a heart from paper.
His wife frowns when he tells
the girl, “I honestly don’t know.”

Asleep, he dreams of two boys
wanting to see Batman black
and a girl looking for a heart.
He walks to find them,
wearing the shoes away from his feet.

Tom Ream
Cancelling the Bunny

His is the only black house on Spruce Street. The walls, the floors, the ceilings, even the doorknobs, all black. Mothers used to push strollers down the sidewalk out in front of the house, little children from the neighborhood used to laugh and skip and run about on the little lawn just underneath the bay window, but that was before he moved in and painted the place. Now mothers walk on the other side of the street, cast worried glances at the silent, shadowed doors and quicken their pace. Children only go there on dares, usually late in the summer, when all the safer games have been exhausted, and the time has come to prove bravery so as to insure a proper degree of respect in the lunch room the coming year. All that is fine with Earl, however. For Earl likes things quiet, and he likes them simple.

Earl spends most of his waking hours in the living room at the front of the house. Light comes through the big bay window, drawing golden lines down the black wall, and the television is usually on. There is a beautiful portrait of Wayne Newton, famed Vegas lounge personality, done on the best black velvet available in the entire state of North Dakota which proudly hangs above it, and if the light coming in falls on the picture right, there are two little rhinestones, one in each eye, that shine like the light of God. It really is a beautiful portrait, and Earl finds himself staring at it during commercials or when he turns the set off and just wants to think. Delores did it for his fortieth birthday, before she ran off with Anton, the professional bowler from outside of... where was it, Detroit, or something... no, it was Des Moines, Anton had been from outside of Des Moines. Earl had never liked Des Moines that much, his second cousin had died there in 1968, killed by an insane mime, and he just couldn't shake the memory.

Delores had left a year ago, and after he realized that she really wasn't coming back, pro bowlers make a lot of money, after all, and then there's the glamour, Earl had bought a load of black paint, a case of Cuervo and a carton of Lucky's and painted the entire house black, every little part. It had taken two weeks, but now the house looks great.

Every day at three Earl watches cartoons. Or rather he watches the screen at three when the television station out in Canon broadcasts them. He can't really see the cartoons themselves, because last week he painted the screen black, just like the rest of the house. Lenny the mailman saw the paint-smeared screen this past Tuesday, and as he handed Earl a bundle of bills and the government check he asked him why he'd done it.

Earl stared at the mailman for several minutes, until the sweat glistened on Lenny's forehead and the nervous twitch he hadn't suffered since quitting morphine was causing his upper lip to dance like a puppet on a string. As Lenny was just about to turn and sprint back to the jeep, Earl finally spoke.

"Why did I paint the T.V., Lenny? Is that all you really wanna know, Lenny, Why did I paint the goddamn T.V.? Well, Lenny, the reason I painted the fucking T.V. is because after they cancelled Bugs Bunny, everything turned to shit, man."

Stewart Engesser
Richard Brautigan's Body

I thought of you Richard
on Earth Day nineteen-ninety
beneath the floorboards of
the backporch summer home
in Marin County

They didn't recognize you
as the trout fisherman
or even the guy who wrote
“The Beautiful Poem.”
They discovered no beauty

You were half dirt,
barely dental
when the neighbors
realized the air
smelled bodily
of you, and not
the outhouse

Five men used trowels
to lift the stiffened fabric
of your clothes from the dirt
without letting you crumble out the cuff and crotch
They worked like missionaries
on knees and hands
saving all of you they could

They sifted your teeth from the dirt
with panning tools, Richard
They took your moustache hairs
labeled them in a Ziplock
and rolled each ivory souvenir
into their own pockets
leaving only your hat to mark the grave
they chose for you

It was worse than anything I learned
in school --
someone having to excavate you.
You were not food for daisies --
they could not grow beneath the porch
you thickened with your dust.

Michael Payne
Dinner in Barcelona

One night, when we took our evening meal together,
We were separated
By the table and by
A single naked bulb suspended from the ceiling
Glaring fiercely and affecting our vision
So that we sat
Facelessly facing each other.

Until the subway rumbled beneath us
And the dishes shook and shattered
The silence
Vibrating me into awareness.

It must have moved you too
Because abruptly you arose
Cleared the dishes, put out the naked bulb and
Went wordlessly away
Leaving me alone to wonder
About the dishes and about
How they moved but did not change.

We let many more chances slip past
Because we have taken our evening meal together,
As we had many times before,
Many times since.

And the subway has moved forward,
As it had many times before,
Many times since.
But nothing has ever been so fiercely felt

Neither before, nor since.
And I am sure you, too,
Felt it.

If only once.

Holly Kurtz
Candles

Watching you through ghosts of incense, your profile flickering on my wall, our thunderous pondering is giving me a headache. Haven't seen your eyes in hours but this carpet stain I know intimately. If you'd only speak first, I could try to say the right thing; but our silence slaughters good intentions as they arrive. Sudden clearing of your throat offers reprieve, "Let's get some sleep."

Eric Franzon
“Someone betting? Let me in on it.” Max, the last of the foursome to wake up, jogged over from the clubhouse. Sweat beaded on his upper lip and forehead.

“All right.” Jason spoke after exchanging a glance with Dave. “Dave and I against you and Jeff. The bet is twenty-five apiece that we beat you by sixty strokes.”

“Oh c’mon Jason. That’s like taking candy from a baby.”

“No summer rules, Jeff. Balls in the water count. Out of bounds counts. No ‘two drives on each hole, I’ll take the best.’ No twenty foot gimmes.”

“Interesting. I’ve never played that way.” I looked at Max, who seemed unconcerned. He was busy looking for a ball to tee-off with. The handle of my driver was beginning to get sticky with palm sweat, switched it to my right hand.

“Max?” I asked.

“It’s a bet dudes. Let’s party away.”

“You going to drive that practice ball?” Jason said.

Max held a plastic ball. “Just kidding, dudes.” He turned and rumbled for another.

“O.K., it’s a bet,” I said. “Let’s just have fun. Remember, the greens will be fast, Max.”

“Excellent. Fast greens. We’ll be done faster. Get some brews.”

Jason took a slow back swing and his metal driver rushed forward, connected dead on with the ball.

“Sweet-spot shot,” his partner said. “Take it away, Jeff. And don’t use your putter.”

I thought the day should be fun. Max and I had to average less than eight a hole to put Jason and Dave, prominent fixtures on their respective collegiate golf teams, in their place.

I studied the flatlands of the first fairway. Thick air rose in hazy fumes, blurred trees and bushes making them look impressionistic. I heard a mower, but the air strangled the sound and tried to shove it back to its origin. I took a few graceful practice swings. The sound of the club rushing through the grass, dividing the brown, brittle turf like the Dead Sea, making that professional swooshing sound. Then the grass settling back on a Pharoah’s army of ants and summer crawley things. It was much better than straining wrist and elbow by hitting the ground too hard even to make a divot, or missing the ground entirely, which wretched the shoulders.

My drive had good altitude but only went 80-90 yards. It was relatively straight. I figured if I could just stay in the fairway I could pull fives or sixes on each hole. I related the strategy to Max, whose subsequent drive never got above six inches off the ground but went straight and also stayed in the correct fairway.

“Good start, fellas. Looks like you’re at least going to make it interesting.” Dave said before hitting a violent drive. The ball accepted the premeditated abuse and landed 80 feet from the pin.

“Let’s do it,” I said. “Can you feel your wallet growing lighter, Jason?”

“You’re funny, guy. The only thing that’s going to be left in your wallet after today is a melted condom and some dust.” Jason stripped off his t-shirt and sheathed his driver before walking after his drive. Fashionably, he had washed the grass stains into his white tennis shorts. His feet featured Nike Legend high-tops, which provided no traction and a tan line above the ankle.

We came to my ball first.

“Shit, I hate topping the ball.” I watched my ball take top-spin hops for fifteen feet. I pulled my shirt off and wiped the sweat from everywhere. The sun threatened my skin. My tan would only protect me for three, maybe four holes.

“Blow it off,” Dave said. “You’re only one stroke behind...”

I interrupted, “…at this point, I know.”

A finished hole later Max and I were nine strokes back. Dave carded a bogey 5, Jason a double bogey 6, Max a quinta-bogey. An eleven tainted the first box by my name. An inaugural septa-bogey.

“Lotta bogey’s on that hole. Excellent,” Max said. We walked to the second tee. I lifted my Cub hat and adjusted it. Jason spit and wipe his face on a ragged kitchen towel hung from a ring on his bag.

“You all go to Sarah’s party last Thursday?” I hadn’t made it.

“No,” Dave answered first. “I went out with Jacki.”

“As usual. Did you get laid?” Jason asked.

“Yea.”

“As usual. They must teach you things like that out at that country club.”

“It’s not a country club. Better than that.” Dave teed off. I noticed his laceless topsiders.

“Nice golf shoes.”

“I’m a professional. Why did you ask? Did you go to Sarah’s?”

“No. I could care maybe a little less, but not much. I just thought someone might have seen George or Alex. Maybe Laura.” My skin cracked a little on my second weak drive. I’d have to keep moving or the sun would dry me out, make me immobile.

“Still mad at her, Jeff?” Jason asked. Max was behind him, thinking about hitting.

“Like I said, it doesn’t matter. I just avoid her, and if I see her I ignore her.”
“At least you got a piece.”

“What a way with words you have. And anyway, that was two and a half years ago.”

“Hey, I’ve had her sooner.” Jason smiled and turned. I was glad; he didn’t have to read my lips. Dickhead. I really didn’t care, but Jason was vain enough to think I did, which was enough to piss me off. It was getting progressively less worthwhile to discuss anything with Jason. I watched puffs of dust lift from his feet as he walked after drive number 2.

“Hey Jeff.” He turned twenty feet ahead. “Remember at half-time during the game against Jacksonville?” he said. “Your going to need that kind of luck today.” He assumed I remembered. What was he talking about? I hit a shot from the bench at halftime. That’s it. For three bills, No metal, nothing but string. The heat, no, the time slowed my memory.

I might need more luck than that I thought after we finished the third. On the fourth hole, the day was lost. Max and I were already down 32 strokes, and since we never made par, we could never catch up. So we decided we were awful and hot, and that Dave and Jason were just hot, and decided to have some fun.

The heat came alive about 12:30. Metal buckles on the golf bags burned legs, singed the hairy ones. Dribbles of fallen sweat made indentations in the dry earth and many together indicated where one of us had teed off. Perspiration dripped into my ears, my eyes, my mouth. I sniffed a drop up my nose. I sweated wood glue. Everything stuck -- hand to the leather grip, my socks stifled my toes.

“My balls are stuck to my boxers.” Dave threw in his own complaint. Max’s supply of chocolate eggs bubbled in the ball pocket of his bag.

“How’s the pre-law going?” I asked Dave.

“Not bad. I hear I better drink now, get fucked up before I get to law school. No time then. It’s a serious bitch from there on.”

“You getting some good parties in?”

“Fuck yea. As often as possible. But I have to study once in a while. Parents are paying a shitload for school.”

Which is a good reason to study, I guessed.

“Hey Max, you gonna clean that ball off?” Too late. The chocolate covered Titalus rolled down the fifth fairway. I was playing to get it over with at this point -- I hadn’t started the day with any pride. Max wasn’t helping.

I hit my longest shot of the day on the fifth, but it rolled into the pond. Jason and Dave laid up on the near side, but I had under-estimated by ability to get lucky.

Max found his ball covered with grass clippings. He stood staring at it while I walked past Jason and Dave, down a small embankment to the edge of the pond.
going to add to Dave’s summation. I wanted to laugh and kill. The smelly mud mixture that covered me had an insulating effect, and I perspired buckets. This served to naturally wash some of it off. Deodorant was rendered an anachronism in the history of the day. I had fleas and gnats, and it was so fucking hot.

“Lighten up Jeff. Let’s get this round over with and I’ll buy you a Margarita,” Dave said. He paused, then smiled. “I’ll just put it on your tab.”

By the seventh hole the remaining mud on my skin crusted and began to flake off. I cringed at the memory of that flesh and those scales on my skin, thinking whatever it was somehow denied the reality of the pond. I hoped it wasn’t amphibious, not caring to see anything having the ability to survive in that mucus.

I hadn’t seen my partner since he threw his third shot on the fifth. I felt Dave and Jason laughing at me as I used my three-iron as a machete, taking long, arcing whacks at the prairie grass where my ball had bounded like a lost, disembodied rabbit’s tail. I flushed a family of grouse, decided not to finish the hole and wandered off in search of the fairway. Several hundred yards ahead, on the mown, smooth expanse of a fairway, I watched Jason hit the green hard and bit, then rolled back and settled within what I assumed was ten feet of the hole.

“Nice shot, dickhead,” I muttered. Dave was already on the green. He turned as I walked out from under the trees between the seventh and another fairway.

“Givin’ up, Jeff?”

“You’re a hole. Shit, I already got my money’s worth. I only paid for nine holes, but I feel like I’ve played 36.”

“You’ve taken enough shots for 36.”

“Exactly my point.”

“Where’s Max?” Jason asked.

“Lost.” I scratched the back of my neck. My fingernails came back full of dirt. “He’s lucky, though.”

“Why?”

“Cause he doesn’t know how bad he is.”

I watched Dave and Jason hole out. I put the pin back in the hole for them, and we walked to the eighth tee. A fly buzzed my control tower, but I ignored it and hoped it wouldn’t crash.

“Hey Jeff, we’ll give you honors. You have to contend with the swamplands again.” We had traveled in a semi-circle since the fifth hole, excluding unplanned detours, and once again faced hitting over the Springpatch Public Golf Course Everglades.

“Shit.” I felt like crying, but didn’t want to dehydrate completely. The opposite shore was 90 to 100 feet away, in between what I now saw to be a decayed vegetable stir-fry. Definitely not a gimme. “Forget it. I’m packin’ it...no, I’ll play it out.” I didn’t want to quit, and decided to suck it up and play the final two holes.

“You don’t have anything to lose.” Dave said.


“Your partner.” Dave added.

They were right.

“Double or nothing, Jeff. I’m feeling sympathetic. Double or nothin’. Just hit the ball over the water.” Jason smiled.

“No more bets.” I was cutting my losses. I teed up before I could change my mind.

“Don’t be stupid, Jeff.”

“I’m not. I haven’t won a thing today.”

“Oh, c’mon. Your bound to win something. It’s only a hundred feet.”

I pulled my club back. “Fuck” I said at the top of my swing. “You” I finished when the club solidly hit the ball.

“Sucker,” Jason said.

“Pretty shot.” Dave liked it too. And it was pretty. It cleared the water by 75 feet. I sat down next to the tee. I’m not going to get pissed, I thought. Not going to tell Jason I hate his stinking fucking guts. Not going to replace Dave’s spinal cord with my putter shoved up his ass.

I looked up. Dave had already hit. Jason was in the process. He topped his drive -- first time I’d ever seen him do that - and it rolled to the edge of the pond. He walked after it, swearing.

“A minor victory, Jeff,” Dave said.

“Yea, minor. And I still have another hole to play. Maybe I can work up some momentum.”

Jason picked up his ball off soggy land.

“Hey, that’s your...” I was going to say drive and something about summer rules, but a movement in the pond behind Jason distracted me. The pond was bubbling a little, allot. Despite its apparent lack of depth, small waves began washing the dried debris off the shore. They originated maybe twenty feet out. Something big was disturbing the pond. My leg involuntarily tensed at the memory of its meeting with the unknown.

Jason had stopped, had stepped into a soft spot. He sank. I could hear the suction sound as water and mud rushed over his foot, filling the void it had momentarily created. He wasn’t really stuck, though it slowed him down. But it annoyed him enough that he lost his temper and tried too hard to yank his food out. The ground said no. He lost his balance, his body met the ground.
The next seconds were lively. A huge, amphibious-like snake or serpent lunged out of the water at Jason. It clamped its jaws on his free leg and began dragging him into the pond. The creature was a slimy brown and deep green. It was difficult to tell if its skin was skin or was actually mud and weed, like the pond bottom. It had long black feelers like a catfish. It didn't have much in the way of teeth, but it was doing its best to jaw Jason into submission.

Jason screamed in a way some would call desperate. Dave and I watched hypnotically stricken into inaction. But Dave willed himself forward, drew this three-iron for battle, while I thought how the situation could somehow end up negating the bet. I organized and perused my thoughts, though the commotion made this difficult, then snapped out of reverie in time to see Dave taking wild swings at the Creature from the Springpatch Pond.

The monster had no legs but reared up by balancing itself on its submerged tail. It was coiling its scaly body, lifting Jason some twenty feet in the air and then bashing him on the ground, each time nibbling a little further up his leg. The creature had reached Jason's pelvis and was working toward his lower torso. Each time it bashed Jason on the surface of the pond, Dave would take several swings at the serpent's head. Dave was agile for a golfer, and quick enough to land several blows in his partner's defense.

It might have been Jason's choking and gurgling screams that tempted me into action. Regardless, I was by Dave's side, wielding a three-wood rapier. We beat madly at the serpent, yelling for Jason to hang on, dammit, hang on. I was excited, we fought together again, on the same side for the same goal. Like the old neighborhood weekend wars. There was happiness, briefly, fueled by adrenaline.

Jason looked like a mutated mythological creature, half serpent, half little human. His Piston's hat was lost. I saw penitence in his eyes and beat harder, without inspiration but with a primitive urgency. I put out one of the serpent's large, black eyes, but Dave lost his weapon when it became stuck in one of the aquatic murderer's gills.

He made the mistake of trying to recover his weapon. He reached for it, and fell. Briefly submersed, he came up gasping and shaking. He was under the serpent, and the predator must have felt his presence. It rose, wavered under its own weight, then dropped. Dave never knew; he was still wiping his eyes and face, legs unsteady on the pond's ill-defined bottom. While he reoriented himself to the world above the pond's surface, the serpent landed, crushed him; I heard bones crack or crunch and he disappeared.

I took a step back, the serpent began to slowly retreat to the middle of the pond. I was losing the battle. Only Jason's shoulders and limp head were left for me to see. He struggled weakly. Serpent drool and slime dripped on me as it raised up in the air and then disappeared into the middle of the pond. This created a vortex, sucking in froth and bubbles and shredded vegetation, vestiges of bottle. I watched for Dave's body, the look unsuccessful.

I stood silent in a waist deep soup, felt biblical and stunned into autism. The sun relentlessly fried me. I dropped my club into the water. I went to my bag, dragged it to the edge of the pond and opened one pocket. Tees, an old manual score-keeper similar to the ones umpires use to keep track of balls and strikes -- this one kept track of strokes. And a glove. I threw it all into the pond. Practice balls followed. They floated and bobbed away, mocking my surrender. Then I threw my clubs in, one at a time. The driver, the pitching wedge, the putter. The irons and the plastic tubes I kept them in. All into the pond.

I looked up, threw my bag in, then walked away from the swamp and its vicious tenant. I thought about Jason, by now probably half-digested in the bowels of the creature. And Dave drowned, his body smashed into the mud bottom, someday to be fossilized; Max lost in some time warp on the fifth hole. I pulled my watch out of my pocket. It read 3 bells through a muddied face; the flock had migrated again.

Jim Cox
My Boat

A lifetime spent
Trapped at sea—
A bottomless boat
Is all that holds me—
Rowing, rowing, vigorously.

Holly Kurtz

Her husband come home
dripping wet from muddy water
telling her how it was too swift
too much to swim against
their son lost
in the cleaving torrent of the spillway
the fire crew found him blue
forty-five minutes underwater

she must not have remembered when
she first heard it
his infant lips
wet and trembling
the doctor holding him up
the cord attached still
slowly going limp
and the nurse rubbing away
the blue mucous of birth
swabbing fluid from his mouth and throat
and him tumbling fetally underwater
like he must have looked in her womb

Michael Payne
Half the Birds in the City

(1)
I don't want to die yet,
my brother says one night
like the room will cave in on him.
He's seven and scared
of the half-blind gardener
who fumbles mornings amidst
the house-palms and orchids,
who sleeps afternoons
on the living room couch,
boots hung off the edge.
Galen's convinced
that when the man dies,
it will be soon and in the ivy
by the front door, through really
it is years from now
and in his own bed
with roses nearby.
Neither my brother nor I
know that he will leave behind
paintings he's done,
some of them of us.

(2)
In the park I point out pigeons
to my brother and tell him about
a building I once saw torn down
in New York, how pigeons
swarmed up and out of it,
hundreds of them,
maybe half the birds in the city.
Galen thinks it means the park
is going next and on the way home
refuses to look at the birds.
He doesn't know that one day
he will no longer care
how many birds a city has,
or mind picking his way
over scattered rakes and hoes.
one day, Galen will be able
to look at a deflated face
and body like the rest of us,
and see nothing, even the gardener's,
whose paintings my brother
will find years later,
and keep hung in his bedroom,
because the colors match the wallpaper.

Tiffany Richardson
Down Queen Anne Hill

My roommate wears holey ragg socks
as she pads to the bathroom.
Behind closed doors I hear laughter
and know she wages
a silent battle.

I nod as we stand with cold feet
on white tile,
She doesn't know, she does not think
to care of what others say.
But I hear words that clash
against smiles.

I spit toothpaste into the sink.
It tastes like bubblegum -- the flavored kind
kids are supposed to like.
The toothpaste coats the white porcelain,
then slithers with water down the drain.
I think how I hated the taste and wonder
if that means I am an adult.

My cousins were seven and ten.
They used Crest mint flavor.
Their mom probably didn't want them
to like bubblegum flavored toothpaste.

Bus route number four took us downtown
I sat between my cousins on the bus.
The leaned in when they spoke so
the woman couldn't hear.
I could smell the mint on their breath.

She pulled the string
and stumbled off the steps
with a backwards wave at the driver.
My cousins covered their mouths with tiny hands
but I saw their faces fold in a smile.
On the sidewalk the woman laughed.

I rinse the sink
and can see my roommates feet next to mine.
The woman cackles and I wonder
if the bus driver wore holey socks.

Julie Gruen
Your Music

As I hold you with my knees,
my fingers lightly caress
your neck on my shoulder.
The tickling of the bow
I draw across your body
makes you chuckle softly.
Vibrato caused by my fingers
changes your laugh to a giggle.
The bow drops but you can't stop.
I can only smile and hold you,
happily trembling, in my arms.

Tim Emrick

Zephyrs

If we have sinned, can we ever be good? If man has fallen, can he rise, rise again? — for surely he does. And somewhere in that is where the sin lays. Man is never finished. One act is never enough and yet we treat each one as the best. God's grace: Jesus died to extirpate our sins. Forgive us, Father, for we know not what we do.

Brian thought of God and lack-luster theology as he lay on his back on top of a rock in the tall grass sweeping over the rolling field under a full-blown azure sky sporting voluminous—

He turned dreamily, a languishing smile, to Elaine as she emerged from the tree line twenty yards away. Her skirt and long hair were attracted uncontrollably to the far end of the field; but she kept coming, towards him, pulling against her wayward clothes. Her blouse billowed out, sunk to wrap her body, on whim. She began to sweep both her outstretched arms from high on her left down in an arc to the right, catching the tall grass bent over in her fingertips, then letting it slip through and starting the motion from the other side. Thus she reaped, and he thought she was singing, but the wind brushed over her face and left only the smiling lips and glimmering eyes.

She mounted the rock and laid down next to him in gentle exhaustion. They both looked up at the full-blown azure sky sporting voluminous...

"Zephyrs," he said.

"What?"

"The clouds are like zephyrs."

"I think you mean zeppelins. Zephyr's a wind."

"Oh." He paused, and then, "I think they should be called zephyrs anyway: it's a much better name."

"O.K., they're zephyrs."

"Yes." And so are we, he said to himself. The sky was their's, the field, this moment. She looked so beautiful, just then, walking across the field, and she was there for him, and him only. He thought the day was as fair as her eyes.

"Where do the zephyrs come from?" he asked.

"Water, I think."

"But where do they start, and where are they going? I mean, did these come from Arkansas and are heading for Europe? They don't move vertically, you know."

"Oh." Oh where, oh where, has my little dog gone? If his dog ran away, and if it was picked up by someone else, could it not live with that other person? And would that other person, that stranger, not treat it as his own — even give it a new name? How similar are dogs and people?

He placed his hand on Elaine's thigh. Was it her thigh? He couldn't tell.
He rolled his head around and looked at her face — yes, it was Elaine, and though he could not see the thigh on which his hand rested, he had to assume it was hers and no one else’s. But was it his hand? She crinkled her eyebrows as if to say What? and he smiled to reassure her. She looked up, and he looked down at the hand — yes, it came from the arm that sprung from his shoulder; and the thigh came from those hips. Those hips. They were themselves, and he was touching her.

“I think the zephyrs form from water vapor in one spot, say Ohio, and then are carried with the wind until they evaporate somewhere else, say Maine.”

“Main, mane, sounds the same, but who’s to blame?”

“What?” she giggle-asked.

“Oh, nothing.” Hmmm, years ago, when he was about sixteen, he was driving his girlfriend to some friend’s house. Something came up about an old boyfriend, or maybe it was just someone who had had a crush on her. He said something afterwards to her which he meant, but didn’t know how he meant it. What he said was this: “You know, dating you is like buying a used car.” She did not take it well. The word 'used' does not carry agreeable connotations in respect to girls’ reputations, and it was probably that which had insulted her. But it was forgotten before the night was lost.

He had a friend, now, who dated only bitches. He didn’t think his friend was a martyr, or suffered from horrible taste in women. It was just his friend’s way of making sense of the world. If they weren’t bitches, he would still be going out with them. And the present girlfriend was always a queen, of sorts. And there could be only one at any given moment.

He thought about the used car lying next to him and knew it was impossible to turn back the mileage, but this was not something on which he wished to dwell. Actually, he did not try to turn back the mileage, but instead denied the length of the roads traveled. Was this fair?

He thought about Denise, with whom he had been involved before Elaine. Why wasn’t he going out with her anymore? Because she was stupid. And, he didn’t enjoy it when she would cuddle up next to him afterwards. Still, a year is quite a while, but Denise was definitely out of the picture.

He thought about Renee. If things did not work out with Elaine, he could date her. Or, could he? She’s pretty and smart, but so are a lot of other people. They had shared seltzers and jokes a few times while waiting for the commuter train, but that was about all. There didn’t seem to be much point in banking on Renee; besides, who knows what sorts of relationships she’s had — she’s probably seeing someone right now.

Elaine rolled over onto her side and threw a leg over Brian’s, and an arm over his chest. Her head nuzzled into his shoulder. No denying this, he thought. He was going to feel really stupid if he didn’t do something.

Brian had never touched the zephyrs gliding by, coalescing and evaporating, in and out of one huge pool. Exactly how did he feel about Elaine, he wondered? Man is infinite potential. He really had liked Denise, and he had liked she and him to do things to each other, The Hindenburg blew up mysteriously, oh the humanity. This was a full-blown azure sky and a sweeping field of tall grass which Elaine had so confidently stridden across. He had invited her on this picnic, he had unbuttoned her blouse. Was she confident because of him? Could he be responsible for such feelings? Oh God, this was really, really complicated.

One of the zephyrs passed overhead and a shadow fell across their bodies with a sudden chill. Elaine fidgeted closer into his body. Brian slid out from under her, jumped up and off the rock, and ran. Elaine sat up and laughing-yelled:

“Where are you going?” He didn’t respond, so she sat and watched her lover run through the grass in huge circles.

Brian ran, the sharp grass whipping against his legs, the wind tearing into his eyes. He ran as fast as he could, and stumbled, falling onto his hands, cut and chafed by the stubble near the earth. He groaned and was angered by Elaine’s laughter. He kept running furiously in huge circles, continuous figure-eights. He felt like a zephyr and she cheered him on. She didn’t know; it made him angry. He didn’t know. She didn’t know, know, know, no, No, “No!” he was shouting.

“No what?” she shouted back to him. He spread his arms out like wings, and ran around the rock, spiraling inwards, closer, closer, closer, and jumped back onto the rock, collapsing and gasping, beside her. She put her hands on his heaving chest, leaned over and kissed him once. His eyes jumped back onto the rock, collapsing and gasping, beside her. She put her hands on his heaving chest, leaned over and kissed him once. His eyes darted over her face: full lips, clear green eyes, arching eyebrows. They all belonged to her, but he had trouble seeing them all at once. Did that voice come through that mouth — the mouth that kissed him — did he like that face, that mouth? He did, but he couldn’t connect that face with the body he had cleaved to his within the hour.

“You cut your hands,” she said as she took up his right hand in hers and kissed it; “we ought to put something on that.”

“No,” he said and withdrew his hand from hers. Her hair dangled down, lightly brushing his face and then he wanted to have his arms around her, to have her weight on him. He encircled her with his arms and drew her down, kissing her.

“You taste like salt,” she said.

“Then we’ll just lay here basking and watch the zephyrs floating beneath Heaven’s blue smile.”

“My, aren’t we romantic.” He shrugged then held her tight, exhausted.

Steve Corinth
Mother

Dinner six
she says
chopping carrots
so fast
piling orange
eyes stare
at me
chop chop
you move
so fast.
They once
were chopped
in a red
lunchbox
under a napkin
with a
secret
message.
“turn in your
blue slip
good luck
on test
have a good
day
I miss you”
I don’t
see why
you don’t
I don’t
write messages
anymore —
Stop
chopping so
fast please
I’m afraid
for you
to cut
yourself.

Anne Mulligan

As I Look to the Sky, Maize

Second, the wind in the corn
calls me as a mother cat
to her kit, first as a man --
whispers of unexpected
whispers form
on the broad leaves,
fall onto my skin,
caress my body on a long
walk, crisscrossing paths
left by teens in jeeps,
joyriding in the field of ears,
creating noises not meant
for mounds of earth
and fish and seed planted
in spring, now taller
than a man in the
heat of late July.
Tassels of silk toss
in the breeze, smelling
of corn mush, cakes
and corn whiskey that
Grandma held in her
hands back in Ohio.
I remember the husk
doll she gave me
at five, oatmeal color
and dry enough to burst
into friendly flame
which once had heated the
blackened fields,
then furry with
green seedlings.
The corn-silk hair
of the doll fell out
as I grew older and
Grandma fed me
Succotash, mixing
her vegetables from
the garden behind the
white-sided house,
trying to recapture
the look of West Virginia.
I buried that doll with
Grandma, placed
a leaf and tassel in
her cold hands. We
planted her in the
hills of West Virginia,
waiting for spring
and the growth of Easter.

I pull a stalk
and rip. Yellow
teeth, milk-rich,
splatter my face with
sweet, cloudy liquid,
as I stand with
Matt in a cornfield
in Ohio, summer
before college. We
have been driving,
stop to breathe the rows.
We find a farmer,
blue-jeaned and working
his field, checking for
pests. He asks what
we are up to,
we explain our
love of corn and water
and the Ohio summer.
We wonder if he can
see love in our
hands as they join
together in flesh;
the other hands
gripping branches of
the abundant corn.
He must, for he
invites us to use
his field again.
The wind blows Matt’s
messed hair, the color
of the silk on that
cornhusk doll.
We use his field again,
making love under the
moon, hiding among
the corn as we lie looking
up at the moon
through the moving leaves.

As I near the
edge of the
scarred field,
I remember yet
another time —
the wind blowing down
fifteen acres of a patch,
full-grown stalks against
the storm, a circular
pattern appearing where
corn had extended
to the sky.
That was the summer
you left for school
in the East, I for a
school in Ohio. As I
leave this field now
at the horizon, I wonder
about the rain, cooling
the scorched soil,
what sort of harvest
this year will bring.

Shannon Salser
Close Book
Before Striking

My forefinger strikes
The match, and the flame
Soars, the tobacco,
Clean and fresh.
I light my cigarette.
The paper burns first
With a sizzle, such
A familiar sound.
I could tell
When my mother was
Having her fix. A
Small flame shines around
The edge, then hits
The tobacco. "How sweet
The taste," she used to
Say. "It's an acquired
One," I would reply.
I inhale, the fire
Runs quickly down the
Edges, as if it were
Running from something;
She always was, am I?
The ash grows longer
Like wasted time. It
Frustrates me, but I
Don't get rid of it,
She never did; holding
Onto it, as if
She were holding onto
Life itself. With each
Draw, the smoke stick
Becomes smaller and

Sarah Verdon
Smoked

William sags
into a plaid upholstered chair
looking at a T.V. screen
tuned to static,
he raises a hand rolled cigarette
and breath's through the tobacco.

In the shadow of the screen he sees his past.
A bar fight he lost when he was twenty,
jealously in his favorite
child at Christmas, his wife's worst
frying pan rage, scenes he thought
divided from him by the film
he kept like dark glasses over his eyes.

He searches through tobacco smoke, puts his mouth
on the cigarette, and takes another puff.

There were, when he was young, dandelions
in the yard. His wife picked
new yellow buds, whispering to them as
she fixed them in the kitchen table glass.

The weeds and his wife, with smooth
skin, come back to him as he drowns his
cigarette in her dandelion vase.
Five dead cigarettes floated, their
gray ash clouding the water.

He rests his head back on the worn plaid,
and fades into the hissing on the untuned T.V.

His wife now serves her favorite pointless
weed, feeding them from the earth, painting
them yellow with her smooth skin, whispering
to them, "Don't forget to smile at Billy."

William closes his eyes and hopes to
sleep until the hissing fades
and something good comes on.

Driving through Rain

Driving through rain
Away from shadowed rooms with broken furniture
And empty notebooks,
Brightly lit corners
Where the Snakes of Blues tried to tell me jokes,
Away from empty bottles of gin and
Overflowing ashtrays of morning,
I listened to Miles Davis be kind of blue and
Tried to forget the memory of the girl in the
Black and White Photograph
Who sleeps now in circus-light New Orleans,
With a wrestler, no friend of mine.

I was heading to Mexico again, meeting an old friend
Somewhere on the Texas borderline.

We prowled several days last summer
Through Clint Eastwood Guadalupe Desert town,
Santa Elena, Mexico,
Where wind lifted the innocent dust
From the unpaved lonely street
To make us cough,
And the Indian sun grinned down
As shadows, hunched in doorways, whispered,
Asking who the gringos were.

Santa Elena, population ninety-nine,
Where the doorless bar at the edge of town
Rattled
As the wind whipped its sides
And weary angels traded Bowie knives for cheap tequila
And diamond conversation
In the quiet darkness just inside.

I had to smile
As I gained on Memories at seventy miles an hour
Of dusty shacks waiting in the sun.

My friend and I
Would fall on Santa Elena once again,
And play kick-the-can with brown-eyed children smiling...
And Maybe I'd forget about the rain.

*Stewart Engesser*