Exile

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

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For Katherine

One hundred miles north, my grandmother's bones are collapsing. Chemotherapy (she calls it "evil medicine") unmerciful as a truck on ice, slams her. She phones Sunday mornings to ask about exams, Christine at OU, college football scores. With a nasty headache and hangover, I lie to her, "three finals, I must cram."

Christmas is near. The soft red candlelight hangs shadows across the creaky loft. Last night a couple specks of snow, polite as a theatre crowd, swirled around the quad and dropped like dust. If Grandma had the strength, she'd rise from her bed and wondrously applaud.
they say that.
the author is part sociologist.
[steinbeck defines our squatting.]
and part shaman.
[coupland defines our rhythm.]
true.
but i want the beyond.
i say that.
the poet is part paranoid.
    —schizophrenic—
and part painter.
for s/he/it dances
    with words
around an empty set
easel
striving always
struggling to make spectrums
    out of b/w
streams of consciousness
    squirt out through
the fingertips and onto the
8.5 X 11 canvas
canvassing the subjective state
of things
    & thinghood
unhooded into a dementia
of abstract expressionism
do not lie with me on my desk
    in my studio
rather model for me your not so very
universal veracity of pigment
so I may impart a fraction
of the dimensions
to my viewers
implode to me queasy reactions
to the prescribed staccato formula
that life without painting
    controls
we too are chipped
    and
excrete fanciful metallic
in dreams and in reality
we must suppress our need to conform
He stumbled through the knee-high grass. Anything could happen in the wilds of southern Indiana, and he figured he’d seen most of it in his forty-two years. He could negotiate just about any kind of landscape: woods, bog, sand. How to get himself home from the lake in front of him, that was the problem at hand. Could he get himself sufficiently dry by the time he got home to avoid a tongue-lashing from that shrew he’d married? Shit, he thought. I’m a grown man. I don’t have to answer to anyone.

Think again, he could hear her say.

Okay, so time for plan B. How about this: he’d jump in for a quickie swim. Wash off the smoke of the bar, dry himself in the grass and go home as if nothing unusual had happened. It sounded like a plan.

Unfortunately, the grass wasn’t cooperative that particular evening. While the moon strayed behind clouds, he rolled over the carpeted ground, oblivious to the mud that bubbled nearby. He nearly wept to feel the softness of the grass on his rough hide, so he didn’t much notice when his rolling missed its path and headed into stickier territory.

The moon emerged just in time for him to catch a glimpse of the mud spread over his skin: he was iced like a church-bazaar cake. He cursed his wife, the moon, the lake. Trampling toward his clothes, he tweezed them up with his fingers, then slid on the slippery ground and landed — shit! — right on his ass again. The clothes, well, they were goneons. He marched into the water one last time. He dove under, slime and all, and dunked his clothes with him. If he was going home wet, he was damn well going to be clean about it.

He squeaked back into the soggy shirt and trousers, giving up on shoes and socks. A man had to know his limits. He dragged his waterlogged body homeward, sprouting goose pimples as the night air hit his body. His naked feet collected loose grass and weeds as he stamped a trail through the fields. All the time he was hoping against hope that he wouldn’t see lights in the windows. He crossed the fingers on each hand.

But it wasn’t going to be his lucky night, he saw as soon as he came in. One thing about the woman, she made you realize where the expression “beauty sleep” had started. She sure looked like hell. His only hope was a play for sympathy: he’d tripped on the steps and plunged into a puddle, rowdy youngsters from roundabouts had taken him for a ride, he’d been pushed by a... well, he’d come right out and say it, a drunk who’d had some rotten luck at cards that night.

He went with the third version. Three’s a charm, he figured. She looked skeptical but didn’t say a thing either way. He went on his way to clean up for bed. Didn’t look like he was going to have to sleep on the floor again tonight, thank the maker. He stripped back down, flinging wet clothes wherever, caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he hummed. The lipstick was still stuck to his cheek. His heart stopped. He was a goner. He scrubbed it fiercely, leaving his skin ruddy and raw. Sure enough, he peeked down the hall, and there were his blanket and pillow, heaped on the floor.

Leftover Roses

He stepped on the second version. Three’s a charm, he figured. She looked skeptical but didn’t say a thing either way. He went on his way to clean up for bed. Didn’t look like he was going to have to sleep on the floor again tonight, thank the maker. He stripped back down, flinging wet clothes wherever, caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror as he hummed. The lipstick was still stuck to his cheek. His heart stopped. He was a goner. He scrubbed it fiercely, leaving his skin ruddy and raw. Sure enough, he peeked down the hall, and there were his blanket and pillow, heaped on the floor.
His tires crunched over the gravel in the parking lot and his belly squirmed with anticipation. He didn’t really have a plan yet, he was just going where the moment took him. His knees were weak as he stepped out of the pickup, and he had to keep wiping his sweaty palms over his worn-through Wranglers. He gulped down the dryness in his throat and strode toward the front door.

Dime-store bells tinkled as he stomped on in. Her face emerged from behind a People magazine, and her cheeks turned pink as posies when she saw his face. His voice was husky as he asked if he could have a word with her outside. A glance around for the boss, one last phone call to answer, and he had her and her reading material out the door. He led her to the lone tree near the lot, sat her down on his jacket, and raised his eyes to meet hers.

“Laury, there’s something I need to tell you. Now just you wait until I’m through, then you can talk. There’s some history between you and me, we go back, what, eight, nine months. Those months have been the best of my existence. You know my wife and me don’t love each other anymore. Hell, I don’t know if we ever did.” His eyes wandered downward. “I don’t know but I’ve ever loved anyone like I love you.” His eyes hunted for a smile, and he halted. “I hope you feel the same way. Laury, I’m going to divorce her. Now. I’m not saying we gotta do this right away or nothing, but I want to marry you someday, and I want you to know that right now, up front.” Her eyes were staring blankly at him, and he looked back toward the ground. He gingerly picked up the glisten of silver by his left foot and lovingly brushed off the dust, then held it to her left hand. “Will you — would you — marry me? Not tomorrow, but someday, would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

At this tender request she burst out giggling. He was still holding the washer, and she took it from his hand and slid it over her knuckles. “It’s too big, sugar plum.” She’d stopped laughing but her eyes were still sparkling. “What do you think that means?”

The heat in his cheeks forced his hands to his face. She’d taken this token of love and laughed? This wasn’t how the morning had told him it’d be.

“Y’know, honey, there’s a lot you and I don’t know about each other. Eight, nine months of a couple beers and a roll in the hay don’t mean we’re ready to tie the knot. It’s not that I don’t like you, it’s just that I’m not ready to go breaking the law for you. Last time I checked, it’s illegal, marrying two people at once. I don’t think my wife and me don’t love each other anymore. Hell, I don’t know if we ever did.” His eyes wandered downward. “I don’t know but I’ve ever loved anyone like I love you.” His eyes hunted for a smile, and he halted. “I hope you feel the same way. Laury, I’m going to divorce her. Now. I’m not saying we gotta do this right away or nothing, but I want to marry you someday, and I want you to know that right now, up front.” Her eyes were staring blankly at him, and he looked back toward the ground. He gingerly picked up the glisten of silver by his left foot and lovingly brushed off the dust, then held it to her left hand. “Will you — would you — marry me? Not tomorrow, but someday, would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

Her husband? His back stooped. His mouth hung open. She could’ve punched him in the stomach and it wouldn’t have felt this bad. “Your husband.” He tried to toss the words casually, to throw them off like he said them everyday. But they clumped, they stuck, they refused to come out smooth and clean. He tried again. “Your husband.” This wasn’t getting any better.

His fingers ripped the washer from her hand, scraping skin as it went, and he discarded it like a used cigarette, stamping it into the gravel. His feet took him back to the truck and his hands found the ignition key. He roared into reverse and gunned on out of there, streaming dust marking his departure. The truck picked up speed as it thundered into town. He wrenched the steering wheel left at Miller’s and squealed to a stop. He’d barely put on the emergency brake before his boots were headed inside.

A blonde with a decent face and a tired body guarded the only empty stool in sight. He plopped down, got himself a three-dollar beer, and downed it in one swig. A replacement was in his hand a second later and he closed his eyes as he gulped again. A pair of crossed legs down the bar caught his attention when he opened his eyes again. His feet reached for a hold on the floor but missed, and he lunged onto his neighbor. His hands grabbed her body for support and before he could right himself she was already turned around.

“You got plans for tonight?” Her voice was sweet as apple pie. His ears perked up and he got himself upright. He didn’t let go.

“Good. My place is just down the way. You drive here?” He didn’t have a chance to nod before they were out the door.

She was looking up from Better Homes and Gardens as he lurched through the front door. One glance, though, and she was right back in that magazine. What was she doing out in the living room at a time like this? The thought occurred to him momentarily. But he didn’t care. Tonight he didn’t have to worry about how he looked, how he walked, what he said. Tonight he was a free man. He’d made his declaration of independence.

Speaking of declarations, look whose lips screamed with red lipstick. He had to stop and look again just to make sure he’d seen right. Yup, she sure as hell had that goofy plastered across her face, thick enough to choke a dog. Well, not quite that bad. In fact, he had to admit to himself after a moment of wide-eyed watching, she still cleaned up pretty good.

“So, what’s the occasion? Hot bridge date tonight with the girls from church or what? Jesus, I haven’t seen you wearing that Avon shit since...well, when’d I get it for you? Last Christmas? The one before? Damn, can’t even recall that far back.” He shook his head to himself, which didn’t help his sloshing brain a bunch. He groaned inwardly as she finally looked back up at him.

“Yes?”

“You heard me, woman. What’d you do tonight? Paint the town red or what?”

“I stayed home and watched television. There was a good miniseries on, one of those Danielle Steele things. Then I read for a while. Now you’re home.”

“So why on earth’ve you got that stuff on your face? Hell,” he realized with a start, “your hair’s even been curled! You been up to something! Come on, you can’t lie to me. What’s going on?”

She just shook her head and tried to contain a sly smile. Normally, he wouldn’t have noticed a thing, but tonight, for some reason, he couldn’t stop watching her. Just ignore her, he told himself. She’s messing with your head. You’re falling into that trap like a big dumb bear, lumbering along just waiting to get caught. You get yourself to bed, she’ll give it up, everything gets back to normal. End of discussion.

He headed toward the bathroom with one last glance toward her. She refused to look up, to meet his eyes, and he growled to himself as he stripped down for bed. He clumped around, searching for some clean pajamas. They weren’t under the pillow, under the bed, and those sure as hell weren’t clean ones stuffed into the hamper. In fact, it seemed to him, the hamper was fuller than usual, and full of only his clothes. He
flung clothes from the top, looking for a bra or a pair of underpants, but no luck. Not even a stray sock, missing its mate. The pile splayed over the carpet of the bedroom by the time he hit bottom, and he yelped with frustration.

“What in the hell is going on here? Can’t a man get some clean pajamas anymore?”

He’d expected a coarse yell, but all he got was a calm “I just haven’t had time recently. I’ll get around to it.”

The woman had sure taken some notions into her head lately. “And just what am I supposed to do in the meantime? Sleep in the buff?”

“Washer’s empty now if you want it.”

He’d heard stories of this sort of thing happening to other men. It was those damn women’s magazines putting ideas in her head. Women’s lib and all that bologna. Well, it’d be a cold day in Hades before he’d be caught dead doing the wash. He adjusted his boxers and sauntered into the bathroom.

That mirror sure wasn’t flattering this time of night. He made a mental note to get that thing fixed. Made it look like he’d got some sort of beer belly, which of course he didn’t, not with the fifty sit-ups he did every morning. Maybe he just needed some glasses. He peered closer and saw the hair on his chest had sprouted gray in a place. Gray? Already? He changed angles, watching himself spin slowly in reflection. No, it wasn’t the light; the color was the same no matter which way he turned. It was only a sudden wave of will that let him grasp his wife’s pliers — no, tweezers, that’s what she called them — and yank it away. It floated into the sink and down the drain like a potato bug, swimming down slowly. He let the water run a while. He heard his wife yelp inside.

“Bowers anymore. And roses, to boot... It was beyond him this afternoon. A

The smile on his face stretched into a grimace as the alarm sounded. He crawled out toward the shower, almost feeling his tail dragging behind him. Another day, another dollar, that’s what his daddy’d said every morning of every day of his life. Except his daddy died at fifty, still faithful to his wife and making little more money than he had when he’d started out. That thought heavy on his mind, he climbed headfirst into the day.

He had to twist the steering wheel toward home that night, veering away from the Nite Lite Motel. That truck had a mind of its own, but he couldn’t afford too many more expeditions. He’d have a hard time explaining where all his paycheck’d gone when mortgage time came around next week. Besides, he was tired.

The radio was blasting away, some band with a name like Metallicdeath or Megametal, he forgot. The younger guys around work had told him that’s what they listened to, and not to be left in their dust, he’d changed his radio presets. Didn’t want to be caught being old. So he tried to follow the words and the chords and ended up half-deaf by the time the clouds on the driveway announced his return.

The slam of the screen door didn’t cause the usual shout, so he figured she was out. He headed for the fridge for a beer and turned the tube to CNN. It wasn’t until he got up for a second that he noticed the flowers on the table. Roses, and red ones at that. Well, he sure as hell hadn’t been the one to send them. His heart clamped: today wasn’t some particular day, was it? Her birthday, or worse, their anniversary? He forced his mind to pump through the adrenaline but came up empty. No, that wasn’t it. Then his eye landed on the card. “For My Love” was the caption. From her mother? He didn’t think so. His mother-in-law was a little on the queer side, sure, but even she wouldn’t have sent a card like this. He slid it out of the holder, loosening a few petals in his hurry. They floated onto the doily protecting the table and waited while he read. “Yours Always, P.”

This didn’t look like the kind of thing one of the girls would send. It wasn’t the usual casserole recipe, that was for sure. The furrows in his forehead appeared as he stared at it, his mouth working. He’d have a hard time explaining to himself that she was just pleased with his cooking, that was for sure. Then it occurred to him that she didn’t even send his wife flowers anymore. And roses, to boot... It was beyond him this afternoon. A headache thumped, threatening, and he returned to his Lazy Boy.

He’d been asleep for quite a while by the time she tiptoed in. He hardly had time to run his arm along his chin, checking for drool, before she was back
in the bedroom. His face wore the indents of the corduroy chair, which didn’t do much to make him feel less foolish as he straggled down the hall.

Somehow she’d slipped past him, into the bathroom, so that the room was empty by the time his feet crossed the line from green carpet into blue. But this was a good thing, he told himself. He would pull himself up, the man of the house, rooster of the roost, and he would not ask questions. He had no need. Was this not his wife, the woman who had vowed to love him for better or for worse? Certainly she had been busy with some charity work, some service to the community, which had kept her out so late. He had no reason to doubt his wife. She was faithful as a dog, he told himself. No reason to fear.

And so it was that his eyes were closed and his feet buried under covers when she slipped in beside him. He felt her toes probe the sheets and find his shins, then draw back. He sent his own foot toward the coolness of her side, exploring. But her breathing was even, normal. She was still awake, and he pulled away. His ears sharpened in the darkness as his eyes adjusted and he waited. He held his own breath, listening for hers, counting the rhythm to himself: one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi, breathe, one mississippi, two mississippi, three mississippi, breathe. When he heard her gulping air, he knew it was safe.

He stole into the kitchen. The purse was hunched on a corner of the counter, half-zipped. His toes nudged the carpet, careful of furniture, and dragged forward. The light was too dangerous, he’d decided; it could escape into the hall while he wasn’t looking and creep under the crack that separated the bedroom door from the floor. He circled once, looking, staring until his eyes hardened, dry with air. No one. He cradled the purse and whispered to it. No noise, he said. The hinges heard and obeyed, letting him pass into the garage.

The door securely fastened, lights were safe. The cold leaked through the stoop and into his boxers, but only his skin took notice. His eyes were busy following his fingers. They caressed, smoothed, fondled the kleenex, credit card receipts, business cards, smudged lipstick cases. He would not allow them to rearrange, not yet. He needed a feel of locations, placement, to help him later.

Once ready, his fingers found the receipts again. He scanned them: nothing suspicious. KMart, the grocery, some prescriptions. No restaurant, mail-order toy, motel. A compact, some chapstick, a dried-up pen — everything was innocent. He huffed with frustration until he felt the pocket. The zipper stuck, giving him a moment’s panic, but it gave way. Here was what he would need, a note, a picture. His fingers worked faster than his mind, but there was nothing. Even when he tested the space between the lining and the leather, nothing. He let his head fall into his knees, and it was only then that his feet alerted him to the cold. They were a purplish color, reddening when he stood. He fitted everything back into the purse as carefully as stuffing the Thanksgiving bird and went inside. Feet still icy, he clambered into bed. She moaned once, then returned to sleep. His eyes stayed open.

His boss had asked him to work overtime tonight, first opportunity in three weeks. He guessed that it wasn’t so much that business was slowing down as it was him that was slowing down. It’d been in the back of his head for a while, so he was relieved when he finally got asked again. As usual, he headed for the pay phone by the cafeteria.

when the end of the day came, just for a quick break. But his fingers dialed home this time. He tapped his fingers against the metal casing of the phone while he counted the rings. Two, three, four, five...she wasn’t home? At 5 o’clock, she wasn’t home. He couldn’t think what she could be doing, but he left it at that. He waited for her voice to finish the message and after the beep he decided to speak.

“Gotta work some overtime tonight. Be home around 10, 10:30.” His voice cracked as it came up, dry and hard in his throat. “Hope that doesn’t ruin dinner.”

When he hung up the receiver his palms were sweaty and his cheeks were pink with heat. Must be a touch of the flu, he thought to himself, and went on back. Except the next five hours, he could hardly think of anything but home. There was some call of urgency from his gut, some push to get done and get out. It was, he puzzled to himself, a feeling of protectiveness he might have had for a child, if he’d had a child. A sense that something wasn’t right, and that he was the only one who could fix things back again.

At 10:15 he was done, and at 10:22 his hands and face were washed, his hair was slicked back and his shirt buttoned up. The truck reared out of the parking lot, smearing gravel, and growled toward home. The fingers of his right hand fiddled with the radio as the left steered and somehow settled on the classical station. Maybe he’d just tired of searching. At any rate, it was some piano music, which he knew that much. Also because of the announcer, but he wasn’t totally without culture. It was romantic music, the announcer had added, and he figured it was called that for a good reason, but he wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t hot and heavy or anything like that, it didn’t have any words to make you think it was romantic. He sort of counted on knowing what was romantic at this stage of the game.

He burst into the house, then slowed himself as he saw no signs of her. He called her name but it only echoed. The refrigerator held a casserole and a pitcher of iced tea, but after a long day he was ready for a beer. He headed out to the garage. Sure enough, he was running low, and he made a mental note to refill the outside fridge. As he opened the screen door with a creak, he noticed that her car was parked. Well, where the hell was she, without her car? Was the woman home and just not answering his call? Why the hell would she do something like that? There was only one reason he could think of, and it was back in his bedroom.

He considered this for a minute. The way he saw things, there were two options. One, he could turn on the television and wait it out. Whoever it was, he had to come out sooner or later, and that’s when the two of them would meet, face to face. And a minute later, he intended, one of them would be laid out on the floor. But, he told himself, there was the possibility that they would know he’d come home and sneak the fellow out the window. He’d never have any way of knowing that. The only thing to do to be sure was to see for himself.

He clenched his toes to keep his boots from making noise as he felt his way down the hall. He could feel the pulse racing in his neck, his chest, his wrists. The door was closed, and he hesitated for a moment, listening. There was no sound except for a faint whisper, which he so soon discovered was his own breathing. He slowly grasped the handle and waited for a squeak. Nothing. He turned it at what seemed a degree at a time. Still no noise. He pulled the door open a slit, then a crack, then full force, his
eyes closed.

On the count of three, he opened them. Sure enough, there she was, in the bed. Except there was no one with her, not a sign of a man, and she was snoring softly. The covers weren’t even pulled back; she’d just burrowed her way beneath their chenille bedspread. He saw dark lumps toward the end of the bed and checked them, confirming his suspicion. He took off the shoes and laid them on the floor, then tucked the spread around her feet. She hadn’t even unbuttoned her blouse, and her neck was pinkening in a ring where the collar choked the skin. He moved close to her face, testing with a wave to see if she would waken, then gently undid the buttons. A sigh was his reward. The blinds whirred as he let them down and blocked out the evening’s remaining light. She stirred for a second, then settled back into position. He leaned over her cool face and brushed his lips against her forehead.

Back in the hall, he checked his watch. Just enough time to hit Kroger. He was careful not to let the front door slam behind him. He hopped into the truck and within ten minutes he’d arrived at his destination; by twelve, he was back in the floral department. No one appeared from the back, so he took to checking out the selection in the glass-doored refrigerators. Carnations, daisies, ferns, and then roses. His eyes fell on pink ones first, but he thought for a moment and decided on red.

Somebody appeared at the desk without his noticing and offered assistance. The woman smiled at the single rose and suggested an array of cards. An anniversary? she wondered aloud. A birthday, perhaps? He just smiled, a boy’s smile, suddenly embarrassed. He busied himself with the cards and found the plainest one of the bunch, a white one with a single rose in the corner. He noticed the woman was watching him as he struggled for words, so he distracted her. He needed some twine, he said, to attach the card to the flower. She proposed the plastic card stand, but he insisted that it wouldn’t suit his purposes, so she headed into the aromatic back of the department.

He checked the pen with a hesitant letter, then wrote the message fast, as if it might escape him at a slower rate. He looked at the words and felt his heart race. It was ridiculous, really; it was like he was back in school again, asking a girl out on a date. Before he had any more time to reflect, though, the woman returned with a hole punch and some twine. She tied a neat knot through the card and onto the flower without disturbing the leaves. He reached into his wallet for cash, paid, and left, the bell tinkling again behind him.

When he got home, he watched her sleep for a few minutes. He could still smell the rose on his hands. Back in the kitchen, he checked the water in the vase and refilled it. The older flowers were beginning to die, their petals withering like a grandmother’s skin. Now there were more than a few petals lying on the doily. He tried not to knock any more out as he inserted his rose, checking the card’s message one last time. Satisfied, he left it standing in the middle of the bunch, just budding.

Melissa Bostrom ’96
Light in her eyes
steel, white crisp
masked men
Plastic hands on her
thighs
to life out pull out the
thing — she had waited
the pain turning
inside to pop through her skin
the Alien was here
coming out ripping
their eyes on her she is crying
screaming. Peggy is saying something
and Sage is outside
"I hate you both!"
sweat.
her hair in her eyes
"you're doing good, honey"
the Doctor's wire glasses
bifocals she wants to spit on him
his plastic hands
a horrible mirror — her splitting
stomach
hemorrhoids
the thing's hair bloody
Peggy is smiling and weeping
beautiful?
slime and too many drugs she can't feel
ripping
screaming thing
purple tail and a pan
full of sludge from her insides
tiny girl-thing
repetition
the plastic hands
holding her little butt
and her head on
unmuscled neck sliding to one side
twist scream
"It hates me." cannot look
they scrub it down and
Janice is wheeled away
Hills

You remember where you come from, my mama tells me when I visit.
Toothless, she rocks,
her slippered feet shuffle
in the worn spot on the porch.
I know things. All she’d say
for a while, but I knew her.
I knew this story.
Livin’ in the hills, I never knew
how big the sky was. But I went west,
seen it surround me.
And I was scared.
She paused for a moment,
I didn’t want you think
I ain’t never been nowhere,
’cause I have.
She fell silent again, the only noise
the small scuffle of her vinyl slippers
against the worn floorboards of the porch.
I knew what scared her about the sky.
The sky, touching the unbroken horizon on all sides,
didn’t touch her. I swallowed her up.
She sought her refuge in the bounded enormity
of these forested worn hills.

Liz Bolyard '96

A Serious Discussion with Ed Shim

Ripping into a turkey-bacon club,
he launched into an exchange
about how he met his future wife
behind a rose bush in a public park
in the southeast part of Seoul, Korea:

“It was crazy August sunshine blistering
the smog. Bob kept asking me about the bars
when all I wanted was an American cigarette.
Working in the wakjan, trying to teach
those unruly little Asian bastards English
nearly destroyed me. But it wasn’t the job
that killed me, it was education.”

“What do you mean, ‘education?’ By the way,
you gonna eat the rest of those fries?”

“Take the fuckin’ fries. Anyway I’m no
educator. I’d rather provoke — sympathy,
rage, resentment, hate, whatever their parents
won’t agree with. No money anyhow.”

“So that’s why you kicked in that metal desk?”
And what about that pickle, you want it?”

“Hey, the desk wasn’t my fault. I slipped
tryin’ to slap that little kid, and my knee
slammed into the desk. Damn thing’s still
swollen up. Anyway, if that administrator
hadn’t told me to take a walk, I never
would’ve taken a walk. Never would’ve met her.”

Carl Boon '96
I was born of a rhythm. Since the moment of my conception, the climactic crescendo of a passionate dance, it has surrounded me, bringing me comfort in times of good and times of bad. It mirrored my development, dividing time as I divided, from two into four to eight, and yet always one, just as it was always one with time. It lived in my mother’s heart, and taught me to sleep, and taught me to dream. Then, it had measured out enough time, and moved through her body, contracting, moving me rhythmically into my next world.

My rhythm knew only time, and not of place, and not of hunger. The place it brought me to was one in which the people’s existence had become dissonant with the song of nature. They tried to take only what nature provided, but soon took more than she could give, and the food did not replenish itself. When the women went to gather, they had to travel further away, and still found less each day. When the men went to hunt, they traveled for days, and still found less game. The people would gather around, for the distribution of the meat, and the share would be small, and there would be no celebration that night.

We moved from place to place, my aunt carrying me on her strong back, for my mother was still too weak, with only the strength to hold and feed me when I cried. We looked for lost harmony — opportunity for synchronization. They called out with their hearts, through their voices and their drums, but nature would not answer, and their calls echoed into silence.

The people knew they should meet then. The time had come for long migration, to leave this place far behind for many years — allow for rightful revitalization before our return. And all could not make the long journey. The next water hole could be distant — uncertainty haunted the elders — they knew that the strongest among them would lead us, and behind the rest would stay.

My mother, from my birth, had not recovered. She had brought me into the world with weakness in my bones. For a time we both were ill, And my father cried out: “take one or the other, (if you must), but for the sake of love, not both.” So the energy flowed between us, and gradually my life grew stronger, and they knew I would survive. Her rhythm sustaining me, making me healthy and this made my way. And she had taken my sickness, drawn it into her so I might live, and carry her rhythm through time, for she knew through wisdom or simple instinct that such was the way of the world.

My father swore never to leave her. So there they remained in that barren place, hoping that even the ill and the oldest might find a way to reach nature and call her back. But they never found us again, many years passed, and we saw no trace and now only their story remains. It often moves the spirits inside me, and I begin to sing, and to play.

My teacher first gave me a drum, and it frightened me as it shone in the sun. I was too young to help with the food, so he told me to play and he told me to learn. And the Music moved through my hands, and I knew not how and I knew not why, but I began to feel my purpose, and to feel my power for the first time.

But the drummers with me would not play, I’m the child of darkness and caused the famine and killed my parents, they say. They told the teacher to take my drum, and not to show me the way. And aunt says “ it is not for a woman to do these things — you must learn to find food and cook it well, and earn your respect in this way, so that you may have a husband someday.”

But this path was not for me. And the elder saw this and took me away and instructed me secretly. A drummer, hearing the rhythm and melding with time is what I am here to be. Playing the drum is when a human can touch universe with palm of her hand. And teacher told me there in that place, of the rhythms of the other planets, how each one moves in never ending circles, playing its own rhythm in the same circular patterns that we play here on earth. And the time that we touch is a force that flows between all these planets, and all other stars, and all the universe — Time! a creation of the gods that governs all the planets and all stars, not just the ones we see in the sky, but the ones even further away, in huge rhythmic that all weave in and out of one another, meshing together to form the great dance of the existence of all around us. And then he told me that I had an ability, and to touch a force of nature, need only discover it’s rhythm.

So I sat in that cave and I played, not stopping to eat, not stopping to sleep, trying only to recapture that one rhythm — that I had heard so long ago before I was born. The visions soon came to me, the shapes of the planets, swirling about in a dance that had gone on for longer than I dared imagine, and I began to feel it — slowly — moving into me — so that I was nothing but a vessel — this feeling, this force moving through me, moving my hands on the skin of the drum as I stared on laughing in rapturous disbelief — and I knew that I could touch mother nature — call to her, and she would answer, for I could begin speak her language now. And a beautiful language it was and will be, one that is far too great for any human to ever understand — but we must content ourselves and rejoice in the opportunity to try.  

David Kendall ’96
Brave River

A singular rock face glances upward, rising alone from red earth.
The sun warms its stone folds in early morning.
Scarlet wind blows in the eyes of the blanketed brave.
The dust swirls about him shards of sand, lifted in the air, bite his lips, pressed together, forming a silent question.
The canyon ends in a dead riverbed, 200 feet below him
desert dry and cracked.
The only moisture the blood of the thick song
that soaks through the lungs of the brave, and into the ghost river he remembers.

Pure and solemn, his song sung as finely
As the woven thread about his shoulders, the patterns of both coloring his life and the death he mourns.
He remembers the cool water, sweat and dust washed away by current.
His brothers and he dove deep Breath tight, they broke the surface, chasing some shiny metal his father threw to them.
A game, as the warm water pulled against their naked bodies reaching for the gold.
He remembers his father, his broad mouth full of teeth, laughing a great belly laugh at the boys.

Wind whirls, and fire clay cakes his smooth cheek, clings to the horsetail that whips about his head, like a frenzied dancer, bleeding with every move. His eyes are set far back years ago. They are of horses, round, large, soft and understanding, Yet full of flame like the tongue of the Wasichu, The white man Who wrote words like a bushfire, promising to save their river, Only to destroy it when the wind changed direction.

The Brave relaxes his knees, bends near the edge of the rock to feel the hot earth in his hands. Holds the dirt, tracing circles with it through the lines in his palm, and then shakes it to the ground. His fingers deep now, full of his pocket, Searching for cigarette paper. The tobacco catches in the wind, Then strong and bitter-sweet on his lips. He breathes deep the life of the canyon, Sucking hard on the fire poison that numbs and blackens and destroys, hoping to stop the drowning and choking in the dusty riverbed below.

Nikole Hobbs '99
a wavy wail

i hear myself
say, see, speak
in quotes of camp
soundly i am going to
perform for me
for me
form is the thing
keeps flowing, flowing
spawning downriver
and i am hick
and you are jim
and twain was trained to be superstitious
by the modern standards
muddying of the foundation
dries with its
without
her
their
your
our
mine
mind print is the ontology of art
circles in the sand
on the beach
waves are eroding the castle
moat rises beyond the circle
of confusion denies the existence
of squares and triangles
only geometricians can construct
castles from précis
are deductible abstractions
grounded in the earth
or in the mind
i have a good
book
about how to screw in a light bulb
breaks
after so many illuminations
i attempt to reveal my knowledge
is penned by the pen
at play
words have dissentent
dichotomous meanings
are constructed by humans
of which i am one
among many
build castles
among many
in the earth
is composed of sand

on a shore
stretches huck
alone
on my raft
alex e blazer '97
“I believe,” said the man at the cash register
“that we’re all reincarnated from ball point pens.
What else could explain our tendency to get lost,
especially in the deepest cracks of old couches?”

Rupert handed him a ten dollar bill and two pennies
grabbed his sack full of groceries and left,
wondering about things like
employment policy and the weather.

The woman who neatly planted
the grill of her ’58 Ford into his car door
said she mistook the gas for the brake
which the police told Rupert she does quite often.

A nurse at the emergency room
putting a bandage on his shattered shoulder
asked, “Do you like your job? I like mine.”
Rupert told her he didn’t know. He just worked there.

A doctor with a deep voice and a firm handshake
said the word “surgery” and handed Rupert
a ball point pen to fill out the insurance forms:
“Reimbursement for Services Rendered.”

It was then, laying in a hospital room
with a throbbing shoulder, spinning head
and 2 quarts of ice cream melting in his wounded car
that Rupert missed most his Laz-E-Boy and remote control.

God how my sister hated those mosquitoes. Imogene slapped her thigh, the
muscle shuddering beneath her skin. I watched her thigh redden from her hand, the
outline of her longest finger and the thumb rising.

She said, “Have you ever tried to live inside a hurricane for five years? Jack
was like a hurricane. He took his time to enter my life. He had time to form, and I stood
watching, knowing where he was headed, and then he swept me into his life. In the past
five years, I’ve stood at the very center, the calmest part of the hurricane and watched
him twirl around me. You know though, even hurricanes lose their momentum.”

My sister Imogene hated the smell of the river more than the mosquito
piercing into her flesh. The smell of the fish stuck to her clothes, like a perfume, and she
could smell it on her hair late at night when she was about to fall asleep. She would turn
over in her bed to avoid the smell but it would follow her, never leaving her; bass.
Soaked moss hardened on her boots. Her wet socks, brown from the riverbank, slung
over the windowsill.

She said, “Jack needed me too much. I can’t be needed so much. I was gone
one day, to work for Christ’s sake. That’s all. When I came home, he kissed me before I
even walked down the hall stairs. He said he missed me. My God, it was only a day.
One day. I didn’t need him. Not like that. Not like he needed me. My God.”

She would sit in my deck chair, slapping the mosquitoes that crawled on her
skin, testing for thin flesh, searching for warm blood. She would move slowly, crossing
her legs at the ankle. The crickets played on the riverbank, calling to one another, while
we sat with another rum and coke, another cigarette. She would shake her hair in the
night air in hopes of cleansing it of the smell of the river, and then she would tell me
more about Jack.

She couldn’t fish, but she needed to go to the river—to watch it slip between
rocks, to watch it drown everything it touched and then slide past itself. She cast and she
reeled too quickly, her patience gone to wherever Jack was then. She would stand on the
riverbank, the rod forgotten at her side, watching the river carve through the land with
slender fish cutting through the silver water like lightning.

She said, “Isn’t she gorgeous? The fish. Look at her. Look at the way she
shines when you hold her up to the sun. Look at the glitter of the water. Feel her flop
beneath your hand. Watch this muscle beneath her fin. Smell her. Put your finger here.
No here. Feel her gasp.”

I have lived in this cabin for six years. I have stood on this riverbank and
fished everyday, without fail. Jack has never been to the cabin. Only my sister Imogene
comes when she wants to see the river again.

She smoothed the scales of the fish, her finger reddening. The fish was cold,
very, dead for hours. Her hands were glazed with dried river water. Her hands smelled.
She watched a shape in the water. The furry shadow waving on the rock below
it. My Imogene, how I adored her always, the way she could watch the fish levitate,
suspended in cold water, and never really see it.
She said, “Jack is not the problem. I am. I don’t know how I feel about him, I just know that I do.”

She left that Sunday night, after Jack called asking her to come back. The tires of her car flung mud. I watched the tail lights until she turned the bend, and then I pivoted on my toe, walked up the front porch steps, my pack of cigarettes in one hand, her abandoned fishing rod in the other. I stayed inside the cabin for the rest of the night. When Monday’s sunrise finally came, I wrote to her about the colors of the river, the smell of the mud, the sound of the morning crickets, and then I fell asleep.

Why I can’t sleep at night

Because I had my fourth birthday under the Eiffel Tower
Because even the same scenery grows dull after a while
Because I miss my brothers
Because I dream of ragged rocky meadows, purple heather, Spain and Scotland
Because I want to fly to Mars or was that Venus?
Because somewhere on this earth, perhaps in Maine or New Hampshire, there is a place I won’t want to flee fifteen minutes after I arrive
Because in Mexico and not America every town, pueblo, is different
Because there are more than ten thousand languages in the world and I want to learn them all
Because instead of breast milk my mother fed me tales of the Philippines, Nepal, Italy and Turkey
Because once I ate too much acid and lost my head among the clouds
Because I want to find it
Because my father’s father’s father was a Jewish Communist from Russia
Because even though I believe in both virtue and fairies I have yet to see either
Because the nightly news, with Ted Koppel, is nothing more than glorified gossip
Because I love sunflowers
Because I am searching for the Paris Commune
Because I like to dance so hard my skin breaks open and I have visions
Because someday I may find myself, not in a strange Buddhist meditation Om chant, but among other people
Because I have a friend who walks on fire
Because I am nothing more than a name, someone else gave me.

Colin Bossen ’98
A Lovesong Never Realized

Even with Andy’s skull and Presley’s cock
you never had much luck.
Your sense of the ridiculous,
a piece of the Fabrik
scratching out lyrics
there’s little to do
and even less to say.

We broke glass
and got blow jobs in the park
drank too much
and argued the significance of Marx
and Queers and Punks.
I was wrong and you were right
and road trips to the dark.

I helped you steal your children back
Just two weeks ago
You said you hated the little bastards
I thought you were being funny again.
Going to town in your long gray car
I never thought you’d let go.

In the beginning they say was the word
but the sentence I don’t know.

Plastic Bottle sand Plastic Mind
I’m having a reaction every time
Melted Plastic Excited Mind
My erections going every time.

We were drunk on passion
   Drunk on wine
Drunk on the Blood.
Pissed myself on the way to
the city.
We ruined out clothes in the mud.

In the beginning was the word
and after that who knows what
and after that who knows what.

Contributors’ Notes

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Liz Bolyard is a senior from McConnelsville, Ohio double majoring in English (writing) and theater. She is the poetry editor of Exile and was awarded an honorable mention in this year’s Annie MacNeil Poetry Prize contest.

Carl Boon is a senior from Baberton, Ohio majoring in English (writing). He was awarded first place in this year’s Annie MacNeil Poetry Prize contest.

Colin Bossen is a sophomore from East Lansing, Michigan double majoring in English (writing) and physics. He is a co-editor-in-chief for Exile and is active in DURP.

Melissa Bostrom is a senior from Cincinnati, Ohio double majoring in English (writing) and psychology. She is interested in publication, the piano and procrastination. She is the fiction editor of Exile and was awarded first place in this year’s Danner Lee Mahood Award for Fiction contest.

Adrienne Fair is a senior from Columbia, Missouri majoring in English (writing) and French. She spent last year in Paris, France and the summers before and after waitressing in Brussels, Belgium. She earned an honorable mention in this year’s Danner Lee Mahood Award for Fiction contest.

Cathy Gray is a senior English (writing) and psychology double major from Elyria, Ohio. She is a resident assistant in Shepardson and enjoys working on the Bullsheet and Articulate staffs as well as being co-editor-in-chief of Exile. When Cathy is not writing or panicking about what she’ll end up doing next year she can be found playing trombone with the Denison Jazz Ensemble or the Pep Band. Cathy drinks excessive amounts of coffee which causes her to be occasionally agitated although generally alert. She hopes someday to hold down a job.

Todd Gys is a freshman from Ellisville, Missouri.
Nikole Hobbs is a freshman from Canfield, Ohio double majoring in English (writing) and German. She is on both the equestrian and soccer teams and is involved in DCGA. Nikole is a member of the Delta Gamma sorority.

David Kenadall is a senior from Brooklyn Park, Minnesota majoring in English (literature). He is interested in opossums, bocce ball and underwater basket-weaving.

Erin Lott is a senior from Galesburg, Illinois majoring in English (writing). In her free time Erin enjoys spelunking and euthanasia. She was awarded second place in this year’s Danner Lee Mahood Award for Fiction contest.

Matthew Rump is a sophomore from Tiffin, Ohio double majoring in English (literature) and sociology/anthropology. His interests center on that strange nexus of language, culture and narrative, and also include making obscene noises with electric guitars.