

THIN AIR



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Thin Air

M A G A Z I N E

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In This Issue

From an altitude of over seven thousand feet, *Thin Air* presents eleven American writers describing the human (and the canine) condition. As writers go, they are a mixed group: young and old, new and established, serious and witty. Put together, however, they provide a comprehensive, stunning look at the world we live in and the company we keep.

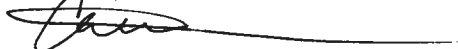
The often funny, ironic, sensual, and touching pieces collected in *Thin Air* range from the devastating to the ridiculous. In many cases, the characters are searching for something or someone that is missing. In Stephen Dixon's "Survivors," for instance, two aging friends play detective in an attempt to find long lost acquaintances that are presumed dead. In other pieces, the focus is on what is found, as in Rick Adams' rather physical, "Misplaced."

All too often, the literary world takes itself too seriously, forgetting what we can learn from the absurd. *Thin Air* hopes to change that. For our primary weapon, we offer Ron Carlson's hilarious "Max Who Caught a Car," written by Max, Ron Carlson's dog. Besides being a car killer, Max is a terrific poet.

If you crave heavier, more serious fare, check out Craig

Rullman's "Touch and Go." In it, Rullman describes what happens when the estranged father of a cowboy pays an unlikely and enlightening visit home. And speaking of home, read Chuck Bowden's "Just Say The Word: The Place That We Live," and enter a world disturbingly recognizable as our own.

Yours,



William Tyree

Touch and Go

As an adult, Curtis Underwood had learned to take his father's declarations lightly. So when his father called early one morning to announce a surprise visit, and to say that he would be piloting a light airplane, Curtis didn't believe him. "I thought you hated airplanes," he said over the static hum of long distance.

"Your mother tell you that?" J.D. said.

"No."

"Well I'm flying. How's the weather?"

It was the first substantial conversation they had held in some time, and because it was almost Christmas there was reason for suspicion. It was typical of J.D. to surface during periods of generosity with his hat in his hand.

"He wants money," Martha said, taking the receiver from Curtis and dropping it in the cradle. The bedroom was dark but he could see the disapproving slant to her eyebrow.

"He's flying," Curtis said.

"Promise you won't give him any money."

"He'll be here at noon."

"Promise."

Curtis rolled out of bed without answering and dressed quickly in the morning cold. After his morning ablutions he walked down the long narrow hallway into the living room. It was early and there was a pewtery sheen in the windows. He knelt in front of the stove and stoked the coals and shoved a fresh log into the flames. In a moment Martha came out and walked into the kitchen. Curtis watched her absently.

"How can he afford to fly?" he said.

"Maybe he works," Martha said, pulling a package of bacon from the freezer and setting it on the counter.

"Maybe," Curtis said, doubting it. He thought it much more likely his father has swindled some lonely widow. Whatever the case, J.D. was a mystery and Curtis knew the futility of trying to resolve this latest twist. He stood for a while in front of the stove, watching Martha in the kitchen and warming up his pant legs.

The sky was high and gray as Curtis walked down to the corrals where the horses were huddled against the far rails with their heads tucked away from the cold. As far as he could see the desert lay under a blanket of frost and the raw metallic air burned in his nostrils. Curtis climbed into the corral and hammered at a layer of ice in the water trough.

They had last seen J.D. at the Reno Rodeo in June. He and Martha were seated high above the

arena when the old man somehow spotted them. Even from a distance they could see he was drunk, his ruined Stetson tilted to an outlaw's angle and his white Panhandle Slim unsnapped halfway down his chest. When he finally made his way up to them he sat down and dropped his arm around Martha. "Why don't you come home with me, he breathed. "Why don't you leave this sack of shit you're married up with."

Curtis, who had feared the worst and now saw it taking shape in front of him, took J.D.'s wrist and very deliberately unwrapped his arm from Martha's shoulder. "You get out of here, he said. "Now." People in the seats around them began to inch away.

J.D. shook his wrist free and stood up precariously in the hot sun. "Alright, you simple sonofabitch," he said. "I'll remember this." He turned and lumbered back down the stands.

Curtis climbed out of the corral. He knew J.D. would not remember the incident, would not have thought about it twice. It seemed his father's memory served only to dwell on other people's debts and bad behavior. His own were buried so deep and so well he gave no indication of remembering at all. And no one, Curtis thought, had ever made him pay.

When he came back in the house Martha had breakfast ready and he took a seat at the table. The kitchen was bright and warm and he could feel the flesh on his face relaxing in the heat. He took a cup of coffee from the pot and filled his plate with bacon and eggs.

"You know," Martha said, spinning the lazy-Susan between them for the pepper, "I could go with you."

Curtis dabbed at the corners of his mouth and took a sip of coffee. "I'll be alright," he said.

"Are you sure?"

"Positive." He took another sip of coffee. "Why don't you stay here and make sure Marty shows up."

"He's not here yet?"

Curtis shook his head.

"I wish you'd find somebody else," Martha said.

Curtis didn't answer. Marty was an old friend of his father's, a semi-literate buckaroo Curtis had grown up admiring. It was sentimental and stupid, but Curtis would never fire him. He was not as hard as Martha, who kept the accounts and maintained an active enmity toward any reminder of J.D.. She'd even thrown out his treasured collection of shot glasses.

"How long will he stay?"

"How should I know?"

Martha sat quietly staring at Curtis, her head tilted to a dreamy angle and her face slightly pinched.

"There isn't much room," she said.

"Shit." Curtis set down his fork and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Haven't we been all through this?"

"Well you don't have to encourage him," Martha said.

"*Enough*," Curtis flared. He said nothing more and when he'd finished eating he pushed away from the table and rinsed his plate in the sink. He stood for a

while looking out the window into the sagebrush desert and he could feel Martha's eyes on his back. He knew he should not be angry with her, that her cautious instinct was the right one, but waiting for his father was like waiting for a bomb to fall: he could run in any direction and not feel safe.

By eleven o'clock Curtis was driving down the long rutted road toward Marty's camptrailer. To the west the Sierras stood under a fresh dusting of snow and to the east the Great Basin desert stretched empty and cold for three-hundred miles across Nevada.

Curtis pulled into the tiny windswept yard and parked next to Marty's pickup. He sat for a while waiting for any sign of life and when nothing stirred he went up to the door and knocked. Marty didn't answer and so he pushed inside where it was dark and cold and the air was strong with the aroma of pickled garlic. The trailer was crowded and dirty. There was an old rimfire saddle tipped up in the middle of the floor and the walls and ceiling were covered with pinups of naked women. Marty was sleeping under a fogbound window at the rear. Curtis found a bootjack and launched it across the trailer. It crashed into the paneling, tearing an ancient centerfold from the wall, and Marty sat up very slowly on his elbows. He was still dressed from the day before and he looked around in the dusky light as though he'd lost something valuable.

"Rise and shine," Curtis shouted, twisting the

doorknob in his palm for noise.

"Time is it?"

"It's noon," Curtis said. "It's noon and my animals are starving." He stood by the open door letting cold air and light rush inside and when Marty finally stood up he stepped outside to wait.

Marty came out a few minutes later, his eyes bloodshot and baggy. He wore a dusty black Stetson with a silk wild rag tied around his neck and both elbows of his jacket were wound with duct-tape. He climbed into his truck and started the engine.

"You alright?" Curtis asked.

Marty nodded without looking at him. He was seized by a sudden wrenching cough and then opened the door and spit a mouthful of steaming phlegm on the ground. He blew his nose in a handkerchief and then looked at Curtis. "J.D. coming?"

Curtis didn't answer.

"I figured," Marty said.

Curtis put his hands in his jacket pockets.

"He called," Marty said.

"He called." Curtis looked into the sky and then back to Marty. "And when he called did he say anything about flying?"

Marty shook his head like a man trying not to vomit. When he recovered he stepped on the accelerator and his pickup backfired. He rolled up his window and before reaching the top he rolled it back down. "It ain't like you think," he said, and rolled up the window.

Curtis watched him go. He thought it probably

was like he thought, that his father and Marty were conspiring in some way to run him off the place. It came over Curtis suddenly that he did not know the first thing about Marty, or J.D., or even his wife. He stood for a long time in the yard, an icy gray wind pouring down from the Sierras and shaking the aerial on Marty's trailer.

The airport was twenty miles away, parked on the edge of town in a field of sage and buckbrush. The county had purchased land on one corner of a failing ranch, built a hangar and a runway, a cinder block waiting room and two more structures that appeared vital but were probably empty. Summer afternoons might find a herd of cows chewing their cud on the center stripes, or chickens scratching in the cracks. Vernon Reese, who lived in a single-wide mobile home behind the hangar and whose job it was to keep the runway clear of obstructions, rarely thought about it. In winter he spent his time in the hangar, rebuilding crop-dusters and listening to the wind whistle through gaps in the structure.

When Curtis drove up beside the hangar and stepped down he found Reese sitting out front in a swivel-chair, a b-b gun across his lap. They had never met so Curtis introduced himself.

"Underwood," Vernon said, turning it over in his mind. "I knew somebody named J.D. Underwood once."

"He's my dad," Curtis said, uncertain if this was something he should admit.

Reese stood up for the first time and handed Curtis the b-b gun. He walked deep into the hangar and in a moment came back with a chair. He took the b-b gun from Curtis and they sat down, facing the runway and the frayed and pale windsock planted in the sage beyond.

"I've got a dog that keeps sniffing around here," Reese said, lifting the b-b gun by way of explanation. "Next time he shows up I'm gonna plink him in the ass." Reese sat quietly, as if imagining the fulfillment of some elusive dream.

"So when did you know my dad?" Curtis asked. So much of his father's life was a mystery, a jumbled and confusing sequence of friends and events, that he was genuinely excited to meet someone who might tell him something new.

Reese shifted in his chair and picked at something on the knee of his coveralls. "Years ago," he said. "Way down in Fish Lake Valley." A blast of arctic wind whipped around the corner of the hangar and both men squinted into the cold. When it was gone Reese spoke. "In fact, I remember one time—this would have been say '68—a bunch of us that were workin' down there on the Circle L went hunting up in the Whites." Reese paused as if trying to arrange something in his mind. "We'd been up there a couple of days, hadn't seen hide nor hair of anything, when we spotted this beautiful goddamn buck. Out of nowhere. Just the most beautiful goddamn deer you ever saw in your life. J.D. and this other fella, I forget his name now, went around to track him for a clean

shot, over on this other ridge. So anyway, to make a long story short, they come back an hour later, both of them so mad they could spit." Reese was smiling as he spoke and Curtis found himself leaning forward in his chair. "Well come to find out," Reese said, "When they got over in the jackpines this fella with J.D., who was real dumb, somehow got it in his head that this tree was too skinny to hide him. I guess he looked over to where J.D. was and saw this skinny little fucker hiding behind a big tree, and wanted to trade. Makes some kind of sense don't it?" Reese looked at Curtis and smiled doubtfully. "So J.D. told him to go to hell, he wasn't trading with anybody, and pretty soon they got to calling each other names and yelling so loud that buck disappeared." Reese looked out over the desert and smiled. "I don't know but they didn't square off some time. Never did like each other."

Curtis leaned back in his chair and savored the story like candy. "So then I guess you and my dad are old friends?" he said, hoping.

"Oh no," Reese said. "You know how it is, sometimes you just buddy up with someone for a while and then go your different ways."

Curtis nodded and then looked out to the windsock. He felt certain there was more to it than that, something deeper Reese would never tell him, and the realization made him sorry. He had met enough of his father's old acquaintances to know that there was usually a bad business deal or marital infidelity involved, and he wanted to let Reese know

that he was sorry for whatever J.D. might have done. It was an old feeling, an uncertainty Curtis had learned to accommodate, but he was increasingly tired of moving through life and apologizing for his father at every turn.

"What time you say he was coming?" Reese asked.

Curtis pulled back his sleeve and looked at his watch. "Anytime," he said.

He had left Reese sitting in front of the hanger with his b-b gun and was reading on the naugahyde sofa in the waiting room when the radio crackled with J.D.'s voice. It came suddenly out of the speakers and Curtis jumped. His heart beat faster and for a while he had trouble sitting still. He looked out through the wide windows at the sky and tried to locate his father but he was looking in the wrong direction and saw nothing. After a minute he stood up and walked outside into the cold. Reese was still sitting in front of the hangar and he waved and pointed into the eastern sky. Curtis walked out on the tarmac and scoured the sky until he could see a tiny black dot floating among the clouds. He walked over to the hangar.

"Where's he coming from?" Reese asked, his eyes trained on the plane growing larger by the second.

"I have no idea," Curtis said.

"Elko maybe," Reese guessed.

Together they watched the airplane ease down from the sky and Curtis stood trying to imagine where and how his father had learned to fly. He tried

to imagine what J.D. saw as the plane passed low over the runway and shot past them. Curtis walked farther out on the tarmac to watch and Reese followed. J.D. had banked the plane and turned back and was approaching the runway. He came down slow and the wheels touched and then the engine surged back to life and the plane powered forward and climbed. "What's he doing?" Curtis asked, fearing some disaster.

"Showing off," Reese said.

The plane had climbed steadily back into the air and was now banking and coming around for a second approach. They watched it slice through the air above the chaparral. Curtis was chewing on the inside of his check. He listened to the engine on the wind, expecting some guttural choke or explosion, but the plane eased out of the sky and touched down and went streaking by.

"Think he'll need fuel?" Reese asked.

Curtis shrugged. He watched J.D. taxi the airplane down the runway and already he could see the man inside. In a moment J.D. rolled up in front of the hangar and turned the airplane around to face the desert. Curtis held onto his hat in the propwash and watched as the propeller came to a stop. He stepped up to the end of the wing and waved to J.D. who did not see him and did not wave back. Reese had disappeared and Curtis stood not knowing if he should approach or stand still and wait. In a moment the door popped open and J.D. held his hat out. "Hold my cover, will ya?" Curtis walked over and

leaned on the wing and took the hat. He watched his father crawl out of the plane like a man emerging from a cave for the first time in years. J.D. stood up on the wing, grimaced and stretched his back. "How'd you like that landing?" he asked, obviously pleased with it himself.

"Slick," Curtis said.

J.D. closed the door behind him and then came down off the wing. Curtis watched him and thought he looked awkward and old. When J.D. was on the ground he held out his hand for the hat and when he'd put it on they shook hands. "Good to see ya," he said, looking somewhere over Curtis' shoulder. "They got a fuel monkey around?" He made a pouring motion with his hand and looked about.

"He's around here somewhere," Curtis said, joining the search for Reese because it was more comfortable than looking at his father. He saw Reese coming out of the hangar. "Here he is," he said.

Reese came out of the hangar wiping his hands on a red rag and walked up slowly. Curtis watched J.D.'s eyes for some sign of recognition and saw it bloom and then gloss in the old man's eyes.

"Why don't you top it off," J.D. said.

Reese nodded without answering and then turned and walked back toward the hangar. He stopped short and looked back to Curtis. "There's coffee on in my place if you want to want to go back there," he said.

Curtis nodded his thanks. He looked back at his father. "You know him by any chance?"

"No," J.D. said. He turned and opened the cargo

door on the fuselage and reached inside for a brown paper sack. "What say we go get some of that coffee?" he said, closing the hatch.

Curtis sat across from his father in the living room of Reese's mobile home. J.D. was in front of a large window and behind him the sky was darkening like a stain. The coffee was strong and Curtis drank his in quick bitter sips. He did not know what to say and the pressure to provide a topic was beginning to shrink him.

"So," he said, exhaling. "Where you been living these days?"

J.D. had his eyes closed and he opened them now. He took a two-handed drink of coffee and seemed to hold it a minute before swallowing. "I've been over in Yerington," he said.

"Yerington?"

J.D. stared into his coffee as if considering what to say or whether to speak at all. "Got a job over there," he said. "Ain't much call for geriatric buckaroos you know." He raised an eyebrow and Curtis knew this last was meant for him. But he felt no guilt. The place had been his mother's and she had passed it to him when J.D. left. Curtis looked at his father. You had your chance, he thought.

They sat quietly drinking their coffee, Curtis fighting the irrelevance his father's presence always encouraged and wanting the old man to leave. He did not hate his father but he did not know him, and the difference was important. He had always believed

that if he could merely acquaint himself with the old man he might learn to like him. And it came to Curtis as he sat looking out the window over J.D.'s shoulders that the old man had a reason for coming, that he was struggling now in his chair to break through this same layer of unknowing in order to speak. So, he thought, it cuts both ways. And he began to feel something like sympathy, some union he knew they would never openly address.

J.D. leaned forward in his chair and held out his coffee cup. "Son, would you mind getting me a refill? I don't know if I can get out of this chair."

Curtis looked at the coffee cup suspended in the air between them and fought back the comments that came to his mind. After a second he rose slowly and took their cups to the kitchen and refilled them. He brought them back and handed J.D. his and went back to the couch.

They sat quietly, Curtis watching the windowpane over his father's shoulders as it flexed in the wind. A tumbleweed went skating across the tarmac into the brush. It was mid-afternoon but the color of the sky made it seem later or deeper into winter. The silence between them was becoming less strange and uncomfortable and Curtis felt the tension in his body easing. When he looked again J.D. was sleeping, his head pitched back against the chair back and his mouth slightly open. The vulnerability suggested in his father's sleeping form made Curtis feel suddenly affectionate. He wanted to do something for the man, to find a blanket to drape over

him or pull off his boots, but he did not know how deep a sleep it was.

Curtis found the telephone and carried it into the kitchen to call Martha. He told her that he loved her and that he would be home before long. He said he just wanted to hear her voice and she asked him where the checkbook was. "He doesn't look right," Curtis said. Martha told him that Marty had finally arrived and that when he came in for coffee he couldn't stop apologizing. When they hung up Curtis carried the phone back and sat down. It was very quiet in the mobile home and he listened to the heavy ticking of a grandfather's clock in the corner.

When J.D. finally woke an hour later he seemed to do so in stages. Curtis watched as his thumb twitched and his mouth closed until finally his whole body seemed to shudder, as though released from some invisible grip. When he opened his eyes he turned a slow and uncomprehending gaze toward Curtis. "Now why'd you go and let me do that?" he said, his voice low and sarcastic.

"I don't think I could have stopped you," Curtis said.

J.D. raised his eyebrows as if agreeing and then sat up and scratched the top of his head. He turned and looked outside. "Well, shit," he said.

"Are you alright?" Curtis asked.

J.D. turned back around in the chair. He looked at Curtis and then down to his feet and seemed to consider. "No, I'm not," he said at last. "Is this coffee

warm?" He picked up his cup and tested it and made a sour face.

"You want another pot?"

"No," J.D. said. "I'm not supposed to drink this anyway." He set the cup down as if he were angry with it and looked up. "Listen, son, there is something I have to tell you and I just want you to sit there and not say a damn thing." He looked Curtis in the eyes and Curtis could feel the strength in his gaze. "I've been having a little trouble lately," J.D. said, "So I went to the doc and he says I've got cancer. A big spot on my lungs."

Curtis looked at J.D. and sat waiting for the cold shock to wash over him but it did not. He looked at the man in front of him and his mind began filling up with unsortable questions.

J.D. was sitting forward in his chair, his elbows on his knees. He looked suddenly naked and skeletal in that position. "I don't expect," he started, "I'm not asking you for anything here," he said. "I can't expect anything from you." He stopped and stared at the wall behind Curtis. "I don't know how long I've got, but I intend to make the best of it, and if you don't mind I'd rather not go into details, it's too goddamn depressing. But I thought you should know." J.D. sat back in the chair and cleared his throat. "Now," he said, "How are things with the little lady? And how's Marty?"

Curtis pushed himself upright on the couch. "He's fine," he said, trying to sound casual, feeling disoriented. "Drunk most of the time, but alright."

Curtis went into his shirt pocket for his Copenhagen but it wasn't there. This made him almost furious. He looked around the room for a moment then back to J.D.. "Would you mind talking to me straight here? I mean, we can talk about Marty all day if you like, but it seems to me that would be a little strange, considering."

J.D. smiled grandly. "Well it might be a little strange," he said, "But I don't think Marty would mind." He gave a little wave of his hand and the smile faded. He sat for a moment. "I've told you everything," he said flatly. "I would just rather not sit around here and mull it over."

"Alright," Curtis said, looking away. After a minute he said, "Martha's fine."

J.D. nodded and as he did a gust of wind shook the mobile home and something underneath it moaned. Curtis realized the weather was turning very bad and as he looked out the window he saw Reese come out the back of the hangar and make his way up to the door. In a moment the door opened and Reese stuck his head through the crack. He spoke to the back of J.D.'s head. "I don't want to tell you your business," he said, "but it's blowing up a storm out here. Radio's calling for snow. If you want to get out of here I'd say now's your shot."

J.D. turned a stiff neck toward the window behind him and then nodded.

"You're all fueled up," Reese said, looking at Curtis and closing the door.

J.D. turned around and then leaned forward and

rested his hands on his knees.

"Well I guess it's time for me to buzz on out of here," he said.

"So that's it then?" Curtis asked incredulously.

"That's it."

"We've got room if you want to stay for a while," Curtis said, realizing that he was sincere, that he wanted his father to stay. He did not want him to go with so much undiscussed and unresolved.

"No," J.D. said. "I've got to get this bird back where it belongs." He belched silently and reached for his hat. "Oh damn, I almost forgot." He reached into the paper bag between his feet and pulled out a small box wrapped in Christmas paper. "This is for you." He slid the box across the coffee table and pushed out of his chair.

Curtis took the box in his hand and shook it slightly and then stood up. "Should I open it?" he said, but J.D. was already on his way out and did not answer.

It was cold outside and as he followed his father around the hangar to the airplane Curtis looked out to the Sierras where it was already snowing. When they came to the airplane Curtis stood back and watched J.D. run through his pre-flight checks. Curtis watched intently, fearing he would not see J.D. again, afraid that his father's sickness would seal the distance between them.

"Alrighty then," J.D. said. He came around the wingtip and stood next to Curtis. "I'm out of here." He took Curtis' hand and squeezed it firmly and then

climbed up on the wing and opened the door. When he was seated inside he reached over to close the door and looked down at Curtis. "Write when you get work," he said, smiling.

Curtis smiled and said that he would and then stepped back from the airplane. In a moment the propeller spun to life. Reese had come out of the hangar and was standing with his b-b gun against the door. They watched as the plane began to roll and taxied off toward the runway.

When J.D. had taken off and the plane was finally swallowed up in the clouds, Curtis walked over to Reese. He was exhausted. "Thanks for the coffee," he said.

Reese looked at him for what seemed a very long time. "Don't mention it," he said.

Curtis reached into his jacket and took out the small present his father had given him. He stood next to Reese and together they watched the first flakes of snow as they began to fall and dissolve on the tarmac.

Max who Caught a Car

“When I found out that one of my years was seven of theirs,
I started biting absolutely everything.”
-Max Carlson, Australian Shepherd.

I'm now a legend underneath this porch
where old age has me tethered in the yard,
and every young pup carries his own torch
to me, the dog that caught a 60 Ford.

The story's known from L.A. to New York,
how I dragged the Fairlane back onto the grass
and chewed it up like so much tender pork.
It took my years to swallow all that glass.

And still these young dogs come to see if I
can offer any help with their technique;
they scratch and piss and bark into the sky,
macho doggy stardom what they seek.

I smile at their bravado, all that toil,
and then I sleep, as always, drooling oil.

Max Carlson, Australian Shepherd, b. Jan 1, 1983.

Survivors

He died or at least we think he did. We haven't heard anything of him for a long time. My friend Maurice and I were talking about him and what his work and Albert, meaning the way Albert conducted his work life, meant to us years ago and Maurice said “Why don't you check?” If he's dead we should know it, shouldn't we?” “Why so?” I said and he said “Because if someone asks if we've heard from Albert, or what's the latest on Albert, or do we know anyone who's seen anything on him and his work lately, or do we know if he's even alive?—those kinds of things, and just our own curiosity about him, we can say he died.” “Suppose he hasn't died, and we're certainly hoping he hasn't, right?” and he said “You have to ask me that? Of course, what do you think? Like you, I've nothing against the guy personally, so I can only hope he lives a long and happy and fruitful life for years to come. Forever, if it's possible. So if he's alive, we know it and that makes us feel better than just sitting here thinking he's more than likely dead. And if he's alive and still producing, even better, for we feel good the guy never gave up no matter what rewards never came his way. But I'm only assuming he has died because he's around that age when

lots of people do. Like ourselves, let's face it, but unlike us he never let himself stay healthy after he was a relatively young man and he worked himself so hard for years and years you'd think by now there wouldn't be much left of him. And also, and this maybe more than all of it, that we haven't heard a whisper about him or seen anything of his or any mention of it for around ten years, and I've kept pretty much in touch on those things and I know so have you. So go on and do what you can in finding out about him and let me know right away if you come up with anything."

So I call around and nobody I know who knew of Albert or who even knew him a little way back when has heard anything about him or seen anything of his or about it for more than ten years, and a couple of them say fifteen, maybe twenty. But I tell them both I know for a fact there was something of his, though granted not so prominently displayed, some twelve years ago or even less. I'm about to give up finding out anything about him when on a hunch I call his phone number in the city he was living in last time I knew him, New York, and which I still have in my little address book and for some reason haven't scratched out. I guess I always thought I'd contact him at it some day, even if the last time I tried—or last times, for I tried for a month without anyone answering the phone—was maybe eight years ago, though what I wanted to speak to him about then I forget. I figure that this time I'll get a no-longer-in-operation recorded message, or at the very best a message with his new phone number, or get someone or this person's answering machine who'd been assigned the number once the phone company took it out of service for about six months or however long they take it out before giving another customer

the number. Anyway, I for sure didn't expect to reach Albert at it. I was just, now out of ways to contact him, covering the last of my bases, so to speak. But, surprisingly enough, I get a nephew of his who I only learn is the nephew when he says "No, Albert Rampskin isn't in, I'm his nephew Nelson, may I help you any?" "Yeah, a lot. I'm looking for your uncle, or just would like to know what's become of him. I'm a former contemporary in the same field, you can say, and I—" but he cuts me off with "Oh, he died, sir, years ago. Five, six? Something like that. I'm here with his old number because I inherited the whole works from him, phone, furniture—the apartment, is what I'm saying: books, linen, kitchen utensils, even a couple dozen cans of food in his cupboards. It wasn't easy either. Getting the inherited apartment, I'm saying, and it wasn't an inheritance so much as a turning over to me from him. As for his death and how easy it was—well, certainly not for me, being a guy who kind of liked him a great deal; as for Uncle Al and how easy it was going, isn't for me to say for him." "I'm very sorry to hear it, very. And about the apartment, I'd say you were lucky to get it, if you just continued the lease with a little increase when the renewal for it came up and didn't have to pay the landlord through the nose to keep it. I've been there, several times. Though it's only a one bedroom, the rooms are spacious and all of them facing the river, including the bathroom. So if the trees across the drive haven't grown up past your floor by now and sprouted, you got one of the great views in the city and probably in the summer even." "Rarely, breezes. It's got just one exposure, so the heat stays for days inside once the rest of the city's cooled off. But the view's as beautiful as you say, if you like lots of river and

ugly 40-story apartment complexes across it on the Palisades, and it's cheaper and cleaner and a lot more convenient than my former place. As for acquiring it, the landlord wanted me out of here if I wasn't immediate kin like parent or child, since he figured that after he'd splash a little paint on the walls and got a new flushometer for the toilet he'd get fair market value for it, which would mean three times what Uncle Al was paying, so I had to go to court. You see, to head off all this, for nobody knew the city like Uncle Al, he'd signed a paper and got it notarized saying I'd taken care of him like a nurse the last three years and made this place my first residence, and when all I really did was bring him a bagel and coffee once a week or so and spend a night on the couch here every month if it was too late and dangerous to go home by subway to my room in Brooklyn. As for closer relatives by blood, he had a daughter and there's also my father, but they wanted nothing of the place since they lived a thousand miles from here and thought New York to be Satan in a bottle. But that paper and our same last name and that no one checked out his more immediate kin convinced the judge I deserved the apartment." "Tell me," I say, "and not so much to change the subject and if you don't mind my asking, but how'd he die?" and he says "Not from overeating." "Excuse me, what are you saying, he was too sick to hold down food? Or just too poor to buy any and keep his apartment at the same time and didn't know he could probably get assistance from friends or people who'd respected him in his work or just some big institutions in his field?" and he says "Hey, where you going? No, he didn't eat intentionally is what I mean. He just got tired of living for several reasons, he told me, so he thought starving to death

was the best way to go, painless for everybody, no carcass lying around with blood all over it to clean up, and the lighter he was, easier it'd be for the death squad, as he called it, to stick him in a body bag and cart him away." "You know, this doesn't have that ring of truth to it, I'll say. For it'd seem because of the unusualness of his death, as you described it, somebody like myself would have heard it from other people or at least from the newspaper which I read every day, since you'd think with all Albert had produced over thirty years he'd have rated a minor obituary in the *Times*, with picture or without, but something instead of the kin you pay for. But starved himself to death? How does one even do that except not to eat, and how do you do that?" and Nelson says "That's it, what I've been telling you. Not a thing to eat or drink for eleven days. He laid here for the first ten of them and then the landlord came in and sent him to a hospital but he already had something signed that said no means to keep him alive should be taken, or something to that effect—you know the phrase, what I mean, right?" and I say "Yes, but didn't they put him on intravenous feeding there, even with this no-means thing he signed?" and he says "They did, a little, but it was too late. And he also kept pulling the tubes out till they strapped down his arms, but by then he was finished, probably also from years of semi-starving himself before that only because he lost interest in most foods." "I still don't see someone killing himself in that way. And why in the world why? Things weren't going well with him? Okay, that's never been unusual with any of us, but he was terminal with something?" and he says "Terminal with life, is the way Uncle Al put it. Just didn't see any reason anymore to live. He'd produced, the word you used, a ton of stuff and

no one much took it with seriousness, even when it was out there for everyone to get if they made a first step to. He was also exhausted by it all and couldn't do any more or wouldn't because of that reason of not much interest I gave, plus his daughter and my dad couldn't take him because he was such a critic of their materialism and no-culture ways and so forth, so he lost them too. And listen, a guy's in his fairly right mind and wants to go, who's to legitimately stop him, is the way I see it. If you knew Uncle Al as you say then you remember nothing could really please him in his later days, and his friends—well, let's say you were one of them, but they got to the point where because he was so angry over almost everything after while but especially the stinking way people received his work that they couldn't take him either, even the ones who said they liked it so much. Like you, one would call every five to ten years, he said, to see if he was still around, but certainly not come over to see him or make a lunch date-like, and you probably would have done the same if he was alive today when you called. You would have said, 'So good talking to you, pal, just checking in with you, seeing you're okay, and that would've been it till another five to ten years.' "I don't know about that," I say and he says "Well, no harm meant in that remark, as I got to admit he was kind of a touch bird to get along with at times and his work, whatever the big minds might say about it, was a bit too pretzel-like and in the serious vein for my tastes, besides dark. But now that you know what's happened to him, tell who else might want to know about my Uncle Al so they wouldn't be calling me ever five to ten years here to find out."

"Sure, will do," and I hang up and call my friend and tell

him what I learned about Albert and he says "Too bad, he was an all-right guy, didn't you think? Tough to get along with as his nephew said but smart and occasionally friendly enough and not mean-spirited that I could see, or more than anyone else, and a heck of a talent—a hell of one. So, a terrific loss to the field even if he hasn't done anything in it in the last ten years or from what I've seen and heard, but his works will stand out, even if they're mostly forgotten now, sometime in the future I bet," and I say "Probably not. Once you don't get a name after working so long you never get a name, or not, for sure, after you're dead. Or maybe not except by some rare fluke or you do something like jump off the Empire State Building with your work strapped to your sides, but they'd probably put you down as another crazy dying for attention. I didn't mean that 'dying' there, by the way—it was an error, unintended, not made for laughs in any way or form. But that'd be it for you, a funny story to people who heard it—an anecdote of desperation that didn't succeed. Anyway, nothing like that's going to happen to Albert because his stuff is so, well you know, like the nephew said—dark and highly serious and just off-putting to most folk and in a way inaccessible to the degree that nobody's about to make a fuss over it in the future. And especially when I think just the opposite's what people will be making fusses over in the future under the same set of circumstances—serious, dark, not easy, and so on—the way things are going with culture. What you got to credit the guy for is working hard at what he liked doing—this alone will get you nowhere, you understand I'm saying—and then having the sense to give up on it after thirty or so years once he found it almost impossible to get his work around except for

a little. And then snuffing to himself without any fuss and no bother to anyone, really, except the most minimal—I didn't ask and wasn't told but I bet he requested to be cremated and his ashes kicked to the winds—besides leaving his place to his nephew instead of the landlord, who as the kid said would have looked at his exit as just another way to make big bucks with little investment. Say I say here's to Albert. I personally didn't care for him much as lots of others might have but I did think his work was of a pretty good caliber as well as being honest and direct, and I admire him even more now for going so easily and considerately and with no to-do."

"Here's to Albert," my friend says, "and when I get off the phone I'll actually drink a drink to him in his honor. May he R.I.P. and all of that stuff. So, see any sign of Tim Phickerson lately?" and I say "No. In fact it's been so long since I've seen his name or heard even a peep about him that I'll lay odds he's gone too." "Why don't you phone around to find out?" and I say "This time you do it, that last one took me hours. We haven't spoken about him for a while but he was right up there in our estimation, am I wrong?" and he says "As much as anyone among the no-so-knowns except Albert, perhaps, in the category of their conviction against the odds and stick-to-itiveness. Especially when it became clear after more than thirty years that his work would never sell much or really get around. All right, I'll call, or do what I can to sniff some info out about him, and let you know what I come up with."

He calls two days later and says "I'm not going to suggest you won't believe this but Phickerson walked into the ocean at Honolulu four years ago and was never found. Did it intentionally, is what I'm saying, with the last person to see

him saying he saw a man traipsing calmly into the water with these iron weights around his neck and thought he was doing some new kind of exercise. Now that took guts, I'd say, which in his work we both knew he always had. The ranks are thinning, my dear pal, wouldn't you say?" and I say "You never know a man's dead till you find the body unless you saw him fall without a parachute from a plane, that's what I learned from bad dick novels when I was a kid, so don't count the guy out yet. He had imagination, humor, sense of adventure and an irreverent way of not going by the rules, in his work and out, if I remember correctly, so who knows if he won't turn up some day and say to us all 'fooled ya.' What else they say he do, leave his clothes and a note on the beach, for that'd be the tradition," and he says "His clothes, piled precisely, shoes and socks first and so on, but no note, thought it could have blown away, did you think of that?" "Who'd you finally hear it all from?" and he says "For this one, once I couldn't uncover anything about him from people, I had to push some computer buttons and keys in the reference room of the main library—the local ones had the tools but nothing on him. Actually, I had a librarian do it for me as I'll never be able to figure out those things even though the instructions are given in clear elementary English right on the screen. After that I went to the Honolulu newspaper with the correct death date, almost ruining my eyes trying to read the articles on this new kin of microfilm machine." "Any new works by him in the last ten years?" and he says "Nothing the computer and microfilm thing know of." "So," I say, "another one, if it's no hoax, who we'll have to assume did himself in because he got too discouraged about his work, or the reception to it, for that

guy was such a hard worker and inventive that I'm sure he was thinking of something new even while walking into the ocean. That is, if it wasn't because of a serious illness or even at that late stage in his life a romance that backfired. But you really couldn't reach anyone who might have known something about his last years, or you just got lazy at the last minute or cheap with the telephone?" and he says "All my queries came up blank. And since I knew you'd complain if I wasn't absolutely thorough about this or as much as I could be, I phoned people in Paris and London and all over whom I knew he once knew. Nothing. Even the old places that used to take his work were either under themselves—and you get the reference there, don't you, that 'under' in relation to him? And I think it's accurate all the way as a comparison too," and I say "Yes, it's good, or was till you started explaining it—I mean, what do you think my mind's been doing the last thirty years?" and he says "Or the people still working at the places still in business that once took him said they haven't heard or seen a thing from him since they don't know how long and because he never made their companies any money from his work or boosted their reputations much by their having him, they weren't about to seek him out for more. How about Hy Solowitz?" and I say "Boy, there's a name from the past—what about him?" and he says "Long as we're sort of doing a little survey of old-timers, let's see if he's still around. Not out of any ghouliness, you understand. Though if he went the way the last two did, and with three of them born around the same decade and going into the same field at about the same age and staying in it for a similar number of years and facing almost the same things in it, that would be something to mull

over, wouldn't you say? But with Solowitz, seeing how we've been alternating these, you do the calling and finding out," and I say "Fair enough," and phone around and learn that Solowitz, who was maybe as good at what he did as Albert and even a little better known years ago, which means we're talking about two hundred people in this world who knew his work compared to a hundred-fifty for Albert's, and who was more than just a little better known than Phickerson—here it could be two hundred compared to a hundred—crashed his car into a wall seven years ago, and the police and medical reports on it couldn't determine if it was an accident or self-done though sort of leaned to the latter.

I call my friend but his line's busy. When he hears the news about Solowitz I wonder what he'll say about the third one we talked about ending up as a more-than-probable. Maybe, knowing him, that it was a good thing the two of us didn't have as much talent as any of that threesome but more important that we eventually got to realize it and pulled out before we really began deluding ourselves that we were better than we were and would become more known than we'd been and that real worth always wins out in the end and also that with lots of hard work, perseverance and sacrifice and so on we'd get to be as good if not better than the others, which could be true—you never know, though look where being so good at it and working so hard and giving up so much got them—but those kinds of things. I call again and his line's still busy. Maybe I'll fool him and say "Listen to this: Solowitz is not only alive and still plugging away at it but he hit it big critically and monetarily a year ago," and see what he was to say. But he'd probably tell me "If he did hit it big I definitely would have heard about it, for isn't that what

we've been getting with these calls and inquiries all along?"
Nah, I'll just tell him the truth and if he brings up some other
guy's name from the past and wants me to do the calling and
stuff, or even volunteers to do it himself, I'll say "Really,
three's always been enough. If you haven't had your fill or
learned what you had to learn from that many examples, then
something's got to be wrong."

Saint Theresa Says

after transcendence come hours like
death, sudden loss and a tumbling

descent back to Earth's blind, sleep-
heavy face. She sits in a stone-dry

bathtub and knows she has never been
beautiful, skin too small to contain

her much longer, she trails her finger
down a bath so thirsty it cannot

speaking the word water and wonders will
she be here when it fills again?

Lunch

I am forty and my mother is half my age; today we are having lunch in a Chinese restaurant. My mother, an Orthodox Jew, looks around warily. She keeps turning in her seat, looking and sniffing. Finally I say softly, "This is a nice table, a perfect spot. So no way are we going to keep changing tables."

"Of course, I agree completely, dear." She smiles sweetly, laughs and adds, "Will they bring the bread soon?"

"I told you they don't ever bring bread."

She made a face.

I lecture, "Just remember they did invent spaghetti."

"Macaroni doesn't interest me at all," she confesses and we both laugh. She always fears I may only be laughing at her so she stares at me, studies me intently.

I plea, "Don't fly away. Forgive me, forgive the world." She nods. "You'll like it here," I assure her.

"It looks clean."

"It is clean."

A glum waiter brings cold sesame noodles and fried dumplings. After the waiter leaves my mother says, "Oh what a sad man! Should I cheer him up?" She sniffs at the food, pats it, then eats. For me, the scene is a miracle—she has entered the twentieth century.

Then my mother announces, "I like the noodles, but I love the dumplings." Awkwardly she touches my hand. "Am I paying or are you?"

"My treat today."

"A real date," she giggles.

"Right."

"Why are the noodles so cold?"

"It's a cold dish."

"That's silly. Be better if the noodles were heated. Should I tell them?"

"Another time."

"They have to stop wars once and for all," she says. She begins crying. Though it's not possible, I reach under the table for my childhood radio; the only object capable of drowning out my mother's aimless roaming through all the rooms of our apartment. And while she struggled to find her way in a foreign and forlorn land, my father coughed nervously, whistled, and denied it all. Suddenly she stops crying.

"I'll be good," she promises. "I'll eat the noodles cold." The waiter brings platters of chicken and pork. My mother whispers loudly, "It all looks so beautiful, and smells wonderful!" The waiter beams then exits.

"I think the waiter likes me."

I answer, "Yes, yes. It was only a matter of time."

"He loves me."

"Everyone does."

"Really."

"Sure."

She sighs, "It can't be helped, life isn't perfect. There are problems, even if you're beautiful. Have I changed?"

"Never."

"I know but," my mother looks away from me, "I only travel now in clean cabs. I have to get in and out of many cabs a day." Her hair is long and lustrous; she is young and slim and beautiful as she thinks and remembers."

"Once," she chants, "I was looking for the Hudson River. I felt I must see it immediately. Really discover it. Do you understand?"

"Yes, okay."

"I was on 1st Avenue, very far from the Hudson. But everyone was so kind to me. The doormen and even strangers were nicer to me than you ever were."

"I'm sorry."

"Turn over a new leaf then. Don't feel bad that you're not young anymore." She begins crying again. "Why did I want to see the Hudson that day?"

"I don't know."

"I don't want to see it today. Just that one time. I was frightened and lost, but they got me a cab and I went home and straight to bed. Do you remember?" I shook my head. She beckons to the waiter and sweetly asks for a coke.

"Oh, he does have a crush on me," she says, "poor man." And she giggles. After he brings the coke my mother stares at the glass sadly. She points, "I hope that is fresh soda. He should have brought the can. I'm very surprised. I thought he liked me."

She keeps looking at the soda. "I love Coca Cola, even the name is thrilling! Its fame made the South great once again. And it brought pleasure to a thirsty world. Would you laugh at me if I told you a secret? Or would you understand?"

"I'd try."

"Your father wouldn't laugh, but I'm not sure he'd really understand."

"Of course he'd understand."

"I'll try you first." Her fork pokes through pork in black bean sauce. She sighs loudly. "Is this silly? Explain it to me. I would like to do a commercial for the Coca Cola Company without a fee. It would be my pleasure and my way of saying thank you to Coke." She is small and very nervous.

"That's not silly at all."

"I'd be wonderful, of course. You know I can sing and dance beautifully. Perhaps they just want me to look into the camera and say how much I love that soda!"

"You'd be a star!"

"But would they take me?"

"You'd have a real chance."

She is puzzled but not about to cry again. "Nobody ever really took me before." The waiter clears the table and leaves fortune cookies and the bill.

"Shall we learn our futures?"

She is frightened. "When we go outside again, then maybe we'll open the cookies." She blew me a kiss. "I know this isn't a Kosher place but it was very important to see you again." I pick up the check and hand it and my credit card to the waiter. He returns swiftly and we are finished with lunch. My mother is startled.

"I'm not sure what to do now."

I smile. "It's a nice day. Let's take a walk."

She pauses. "Do you feel sad without any brothers or sisters?"

"No, it was okay."

"I always wanted you to be special."

"It's okay Mother, you did fine."

"Is it too sunny out or too cold? I never go out, you know. Is your father dead?"

"He's home watching TV with the woman he married after you died."

"Then we're finished here," she says and rises. The rest of the diners applaud. She waves and bows. I get out of the restaurant as quickly as possible. She follows.

"Have they seen me on TV? Did I make the commercial yet?"

"Not yet."

"They must have heard gossip."

"Shall I open the fortune cookies? Aren't you curious?"

She points to the sky. "We're not gypsies! Throw them away. First we'll walk miles to your favorite bakery. First we'll find strawberry cupcakes. Then we'll find your fathers cherry vanilla ice cream.

A plane flies overhead and she is distracted and frightened. Passers by race back and forth breathing heavily. Traffic is noisy and slow moving. She stares straight ahead, mumbling to herself. It is sunny and warm on one street; then windy and cloudy on the next block. The plane seems to follow us. My mother is frightened. I say, "There's no war, the plane will fly away and leave us in peace.

"Do you promise?"

"Yes."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

We clutch hands and hold each other tightly; happy, nervous children, we set out skipping across dirty streets.

Misplaced

I find your breasts
in the dresser, nipples stare from beneath pale scarves,
bras lay empty.
What sort of woman leaves her breasts behind?
Didn't you reach to switch radio stations
on the way to work?
Notice their absence?

Curious . . .
I check to see
if my personals
were as I'd left them, tucked.
I pick up the phone to call
anxious that your gray suit
does not fit properly, betraying you
to men who look. I hang up
return to look beneath the silk wrap
appreciate the inert, flattened shape of you.

I fear
blood when I touch your breasts
lift them with their odd heft
of rubber paperweights.
I tumble them over in my hands
like a juggler, performing

a ritual.

Wanting you,
I return them to your drawer
discover your note
owing to your prescience:
I'll be back!

On Women Who Cover Their Hair

I came to Cairo to flee my old self, to get away from the person I loved. The Pharaohs drew me to the Nile, they called for me through the pages of a National Geographic. I have lived here for a year now and I'm half way through my degree in teaching English as a second language.

The English built this neighborhood, Garden City, so they would have a nice place to live while they were colonizing Egypt. Big, stone apartments with high ceilings, wood floors, cool balconies, and black ironwork. We live in a rich neighborhood, but we are not all rich. We are segregated by levels. Some of us live in the apartments but others of us live on the roofs, in shacks with no running water. We are the servants for the people that live in the apartments below. We are the maids and the garbage men and the drivers and the *boabs*. We sing out the call to prayer five times a day over the loudspeaker.

I live in a luxurious apartment in a building once owned by an Egyptian princess. She lived here and filled the apartments with her elite friends and their loyal servants. She built it in the shape of a horseshoe, sturdy and strong so that it could

withstand earthquakes that shake on unknown fault lines. Now, important families keep the flats and rent them out to respectable people. My landlord is a doctor, a surgeon who speaks English because he once studied in Boston. He will only rent the apartment out to American girls. I have wild, blond curls, so he chooses me right away.

"You are American, yes? I know right away. Yes, you must be careful of the floors, polished they are, and I will come by once monthly to take up the dollars. Okay then? And if you get sick while you live here, then you must come to my office. Yes then?"

"Yes then," I say. "It is a lovely apartment and I'll take good care of it. Thank you."

"And, Hassan, the *boab*, the doorman, he lives in that little room, by the entry door. He will watch for you. I always tell him, 'watch out for the girls,' but you must tip him then, once monthly. You know this?"

"Yes, thank you."

"And your name then, may I have your name?"

"I am Beth."

I am Beth and I pay one hundred dollars a month for my polished floors and King Farouk furniture. The gold twists and turns on the arms of the chairs match the scrolls on the walls and the loops on the picture frames. The apartment even has its own tiny automatic washing machine. It's the only one I have seen in Cairo.

The apartment is quiet because it is away from the road. In Cairo drivers don't trust traffic laws, but they are guided by the horns. Horns that blare out in the night. Horns that pound in the heat of the afternoon. There is one horn that sings the theme song to the Godfather. But our building is

back from the road and the chorus of horns from this distance sounds like a far away party. From the apartment I can hear the happenings of the neighborhood. On hot nights I often turn out all my lights and sit on my balcony, quiet and alone, ready for the show. When I am still I can sense my neighbors. From the light of their open refrigerator I watch the brothers across from me and the poor family above them. I smell cologne as the young men come and go. I hear Mr. Said make phone calls. I listen for Magdi's whistle in the darkness. I see the bats fly by and eat bugs out of the air. I watch the coals breath red as I suck smoke from the *shiisha* pipe. From the safety of my balcony I have the freedom of men.



I see a woman in her mirror. I can't see her body, only her face in the mirror in the apartment across the alley. She brushes out her hair with long deep stokes and then pulls it back. She spends a few moments arranging the scarf over her hair and ears, wrapping it around her head and then securing it with a straight pin. So it will stay all day long.

I can't see the straight pin, but I know that it is long and that it has a plastic pearl tip. Like many of the women on the streets of Cairo, her scarf is a synthetic, a pastel polyester sheer. And the pins have a plastic pearly end, sharp on one side, protected on the other. Sometimes I see them readjust: hold the scarf back, pull the pin out, shift the material and then re-pin, all while running for the bus. I can see the silver point and the pearly end. Sharp and smooth. I can hear my neighbor, across the alley, shove the pin through the fabric,

through the thickness of her hair, and then back out again.



I stand outside now, near the fountain in the courtyard of the University. I see Mona. She stands quiet and complacent; her eyes gaze at the ground. Her hands are politely folded. The other girls are also calm and still. Some of them have long black hair pulled back or bound up. Others cover their hair with white scarves. In public, they maintain modesty on every occasion. The cloth frames Mona's face. It circles around, covering her neck, and tucks in back. I watch her brush away a single, loose strand of hair after it tickles her cheek.

The girls are huddled together, whispering to each other. "Insha'allah, if God wills it, we will do well." They are comforting one of their sisters. It is Mona. They straighten her belt and wrap her bare toes with white tape. She secures her white scarf and pulls down the corners of her vest. The sisters put their hands on her, rubbing her shoulders and patting her back.

Mona steps out onto the mat and walks to the center line. Her opponent faces her and they make eye contact for the first time. The audience is quiet, the sisters are still. The referee waves his hand around in some symbolic language and suddenly the women are bouncing and punching. Sisters are screaming. Two opponents move around in circles, periodically lunging at each other. High kicks slam into chests and pound on hips. When Mona is kicked in the thigh I suddenly smell her sweat, the smell of her pain. She stumbles but remains standing. And then the two clamp together, both

refusing to pull away, each one trying to avoid the punch. The referee comes to pull them apart, they repel to the corners of the mat. There is a time out.

Mona returns to her chair. Once again the sisters crowd around her. She winces when they touch her thigh. They spray heat on her leg as the coach massages it. When time is up, she limps back onto the mat. The two girls grunt and groan. They are constantly bouncing, twisting and kicking. They throw straight, hard punches, but more often they use the high kicks that slice through the air. Mona's opponent is getting tired. Mona scores points. Mona moves in, she lifts her leg high and pounds her opponent on the side of the head. Her foot slams into the jaw and throws the girl to the ground. The match is over.

Mona walks over to the loser, who has risen to her feet with the help of the sisters. She places her hands on the shoulders of the loser, leans in, and kisses her gently on both cheeks. Mona's hand rises from the shoulder and moves up to adjust her own scarf. I hear her lips part and break into a smile as she realizes that her scarf is secure.

I don't know how the women in Tae Kwon Do make their scarves stay. I'm sure they are not allowed to use sharp pins in the match. I wish I could ask them, "How do you keep the scarves from falling back? How does it stay when your opponent raises her leg hard and fast and slams you on the side of your face? Tell me your secrets, please."



Umm Ali comes with the flat, she is an automatic. She is a

thin, young woman, thin in a country where they don't have super models. Belly dancers and movie stars, but no stick models. She works hard in the heat, but her hair and neck are always covered. She wears long, loose dresses. Only her feet show out underneath. Small feet, with deep cracks and crevices. She flips off her thongs and works barefoot when she comes to clean my flat. She washes and wipes the smooth wooden floor. Shiny, smooth, I skid around on it in my socks. She wipes away all the Cairo dust, leaving her bucket of water dark and stale.

On her hands and knees she wipes the floor with a rag. She plunges her rag in the bucket, rings it out and then wipes. Wipe. Swish. Wipe. Later I hear her towel soaking up water off the shinny floor. Umm Ali dries the excess water up by scooting around the whole floor while standing on a towel. Little tiny two steps. Scoot. Scoot.

I watch her when she is busy, when I suppose she won't notice. I watch how she cleans my floor. I wonder if she knows that I have cleaned a floor before. At home, in California, I cleaned floors. Umm Ali, mother of Ali, do you know that? Do you know I once dusted and mopped for a rich man?

Umm Ali, where are you mother of Ali? What do you do? Who do you love? Ali, yes you love Ali. Yes, go ahead, go ahead and take my clothes, steal my bra. Go Umm.

When I ask her about the missing bras, she is surprised. She doesn't know where they are; she doesn't do my laundry. "I am a good Muslim woman, I would not steal," she tells me in Arabic. "Look at me, look I cover my hair, I am modest. I would not want your fancy, lacy things." Sometimes I don't want my fancy, lacy things either. I watch her more closely

now. I see her wipe her brow and tuck a lock of hair back under the cloth that keeps her modest. I sit at the desk when she washes my bedroom floor. I pretend to read, but really I wonder about her. I want to go up on the roof of the building and see her house, her shack. I hear people running around up there. It must be children playing. I want to see her son, Ali. How old is he? How old is she?

When she comes back a week later she finds the bras underneath my bed. She is cleaning under there and surprise, there they are. I am glad. But my bed has four posts and sits high off the floor. You can see right under it, nothing hangs down. I know that there is only dust under there. I thank Umm Ali. "Thank you Umm Ali, thank you for cleaning the dust," I say.

Umm Ali, who are you, what do you do after you clean my floor? Who do you love? Do you love Ali? Go ahead take my clothes, steal my bra. I don't want the fancy, lacy ones. Back in America, I will clean my own floor. I have less dust there and fewer maids who cover their hair.



Amira invites me home for *iftar*, to break a day of fasting with her family. Her mother cooks all afternoon without a nibble or a taste. Her younger brother, Khaled is in training, practicing for when he is old enough for the real thing. He fasts for an hour in the morning and then for an hour after lunch. "I think he eats more during Ramadan than any other time of year," Amira tells me. But Khaled is proud of his accomplishments and he is ready to celebrate with the rest of

us. Amira's father wears a tan suit with a wide tie. He welcomes us to his home in Egypt, but is quiet through most of dinner. Amira's mother wears a knee length skirt, a gold silk blouse and she doesn't cover her wavy black hair.

Dinner is ready when I arrive, but we must wait until the sun goes down to eat. My stomach is desperately making loud noises and I am reminded of how fragile I am. I fall apart without food. The rumbling of my stomach is so wise and grand that Amira's brother mistakes the sound for the call to prayer. To distract me, Amira leads me around the living room pointing out the pictures of her family. Her sisters and brothers are spread around the world. A brother is in Germany, a sister in Canada, another sister waits in Switzerland for a visa to Canada, while one more brother is in Southern Africa looking for work. Amira studies English Literature at the University. She plans to stay in Cairo and teach high school students.

As soon as the sun is down we gather around the table and break the fast with dates, like Mohammed did. During the meal, Amira's father asks me how I like Cairo and if I support Bush. After a long pause in the conversation Amira's father looks at me and says, "Amira, you know I think there is no need for you to wear *hijab*, to cover yourself this way."

Amira sinks down in her chair and says, "Father do not do this now, this is not the place for this."

"You know this thing is just a sign of the oppression of women. Amira, I think you are more beautiful without it."

"Yes, Father I know, and Father this is my choice, it is something I believe and I do not want to discuss it now."

"Amira, why do you wear *hijab*, why?" he asks.

"It is between me and God."

"I do not think God asked you for this." Amira's father looks at me and says, "Men ask her, fanatical men, not God."

"It is a thing I choose to do because I believe God asks me to. It has nothing to do with men, it is not so they will not look at me or pinch me, they pinch me anyway. It is not so that I look devout. But I also won't accept the Western ways even though it is Western trade that has made my father rich. In the West, women are just another commodity to exploit." Amira is looking at me now. She knows I have been wondering. "No, it is not because of my father. It should be only a matter of choice. Me, I am lucky, I get to choose to wear *hijab*, that is if my father does not rip it off my head."

After dinner we clear the table and Amira's mother lets me help do the dishes while Amira's father watches the local sheik on TV. When the show is over he says good night to us because he is going down to the corner mosque to pray. We spend the rest of the evening in the living room, eating pastries dipped in honey, drinking black tea, and playing with Amira's brother Khaled. Khaled runs to hide and then calls out to me in fresh English, "Find me! Find me! Americana, find me!"



I hear the look of a man; I hear the twist of the bones in his neck as he turns to look at my body. When I walk out on the street, my body is a house with a shiny front. Inside my body I sit, where the men can not see me. I sit in the dark and look out through the windows called my eyes. I can see everyone, but they can't see me. When I walk on the street, I

separate myself from my body, so that even when I am pinched, I will remain untouched.

Reham tells me it would not be good to cover my hair just for a little while. "Young girls take it on when they are twelve or thirteen and never change their mind. It is not good to go back and forth, to cover your hair some days but not others. I do not think it would be good for you to try it out," she says.

But I have wild, blond curls. I want to feel what it is like not to wear them, just for one day. So I stand in front of the window and look in the mirror and pull my hair back. I don't have any pins so I wrap the scarf around my neck and tie it in back, hiding the tie under the folds of fabric, the way Reham showed me. I wear a long, loose sweater and a full, cotton skirt. I step outside my flat and Hassan, the *boab* does not recognize me. He does not know that I am the American girl who lives on the third floor.

I head across the circle towards the main street. The vegetable man notices me and laughs. He points and asks, "Are you Muslim now?" I keep walking, nervous because I know the whole neighborhood will hear about this. About the American girl who covered her hair.

When I get to the main street, I fall into line with the crowd, squeezing by people on the sidewalk and sliding past parked cars where the sidewalk was never built. I look down at my feet when I walk and not into the eyes of the men near me. So many of us rushing around, brushing each other as we pass. Some of us poor, with deep cracks in the heels of our feet. Some of us are better off and can afford to protect our soles. People notice me less than on a day of wild curls. Without my hair, I slide more easily. I slide between men.

Even if they see less of me they still like the feel of me, the rub of my shoulder. I am afraid someone will know that my scarf is a lie, that it isn't between me and God.

When I get closer to the University I know I must cross the street. I am scared like every *howwagga*, like every dumb tourist. The traffic on this side of the divider is stopped. I step out in front of a car and put my hand on the right corner, running my hand across the front of the car as I walk by. The Egyptians do it this way, to hold the car steady. I feel my way to the next car and then I have made it to the center divider. On this side, the cars are moving fast. I stand next to a man in a long, loose *gallabeya* and wait for him to decide. I run when he runs and we both make it to the other side.

When I get to the University, I rush past the guards and straight to the bathroom. I get into a stall and rip off my scarf like many of the other girls do. At the University the bathrooms are always full of girls changing, applying red lipstick and tight jeans. They change here because their fathers prohibit this flashy dress. At the end of the day they come back to the bathroom and change again. I stand in front of the mirror and brush out my hair. They stare as the curls get fuller and fuller. I hear the rub of powder against the soft skin of eyelids. It whispers forbidden blue. I watch these girls as they cover their faces with thick makeup and clip on gold earrings. Today, we change together.

The Sheep Are Dying

"Some 5,000 sheep have reportedly died. An Army spokesman said the installation (Dugway Proving Ground) 'definitely is not responsible.' "
-*The New York Times*, Skull Valley, Utah. March 20, 1968.

The sheep are dying.
Red-ringed eyes
Empty of bleating and mountain snow
Their throats dry.
It cannot be denied.
They will not protest,
They will die-lying
In rest they cannot deny
They are dying.

The sheep are dying.
Gold-ringed heads
Empty of sunshine and shepherds' touch
Their hair limp.
It cannot be denied.
They will not protest,
They will die-silent
At best they cannot deny
They are dying.

The sheep are dying.
Dream-ringed mouths
Empty of welcome and brothers' songs
Their lips shrivel.
It will be denied.
It will be protested
They will live
In oaths-it will be denied
They are dying.

The sheep are dying.
Star-ringed hands
Empty of possession and patriarch gold
Their hold softens.
It will be denied.
They do protest
They will live
In quotes-they will deny
They are dying.

The sheep are dying.
Hope-wrung hearts
Ebbled of promise and earth's blood
Their breath recedes.
Do not deny
You will protest.
They may not live
In truth—who will deny
The sheep are dead.

Animals

When you reach the doorway of his classroom, you realize he is not alone. A student is waiting in front of his desk. He turns from the boy and says to you, "What's up?"

Ask him if you can talk to him sometime. At his convenience. Sometime. Tap the nearby molding with each syllable. Sometime.

He says, "Sure," smiles, whistles, and walks past you out of the room as though it has suddenly become a snake pit. You and the student watch his retreating back.

Two days pass.

Someone told you in second grade: Bees are as afraid of humans as humans are of them. You want to tell him this. You want to say, For the purpose of this discussion, which we aren't having, I am the bee. You can be the human.

After three days, walk into his room and ask him if he knows if it's true that bees are as afraid...

"Huh?" he says.

Repeat the question. Try to act casual.

"I don't know," he says. "But I sure do hate bees. And wasps. They both scare me to death."

He is loading a stapler. He does not look at you.

Tell him that you think it's a useful metaphor, whether it's true or not.

He is having trouble loading the stapler. He is holding it at a funny angle and examining it.

Tell him you think it's really true. Does he?

"I don't know." He clicks the stapler shut. "I just know I really hate bees and wasps. Always have."

You want to tell him that your friendship has become like a small, low-flying airplane. Both of you are carrying very heavy baggage. Your bag is bulky and bulging and has all kinds of stickers on it. His is a narrow, black leather briefcase that somehow contains both his marriage and every flirtatious remark he's ever made to you. Neither of you wants to take anything out, and if you don't, the plane might crash. But if only one person takes an object out and lets it go, the plane might lose balance and spiral suddenly out of control and crash anyway.

Another day passes. When you enter a room, he leaves. Try not to feel silly. Pretend to be looking for something. Of course you can't find it. Try not to appear anxious. If someone asks what you're looking for, say something like, "My sense of proportion." Flip through some papers. Then add, "I must've left it in the cafeteria. Exit quickly."

At some point it is inevitable: you pass each other in the hall. He nods. In the air between you, your "Hello" twists and writhes like a wounded animal. He does not pull over or even slow down.

Call in sick. The substitute, a close friend, tells you he walked by your room and looked in, "directly at the spot where you would've been." Savor the thought until she adds that he looks a lot like an emotional chicken she dated in

college.

Wake up early. Two hours before you have to, if possible. Imagine it is nearly time to get up, but don't look at your clock until you've been lying, tense, for at least twenty minutes, wondering if he will not talk to you today. Wonder. Try to think of a good approach. Try not to think of the consequences of saying something stupid. Imagine him as a sleeping lion. You will caress him and whisper in his ear. He will purr. He will not become startled and roar in your face. He will not dart away.

Look at your clock. You can try to sleep for fifteen more minutes. Or you can roll on your side and pretend your thick, bunched up blanket is his warm animal body. His back curves sensuously toward you. Lean into him. Pull him close.

But what will you do if he doesn't talk to you again? Try to stop wondering.

It's no good. Your alarm rings. You've been spending the last few minutes thinking you are like a dog with a broken leg, limping toward the promise of a biscuit.

Get up and make the day new. You never know. Maybe you will call him in the hall, and he will pause, and you will come up with an excuse to walk to his room. Then you will tell him how you feel. He will nod and listen. And he will say that he thinks everything is really all right. Really.

You will want to believe him.

Ask him to read your poetry. Even though it is about your pain, he will say it's beautiful. He will appreciate for a moment, perhaps for a lasting moment, your desires, your hopes, your grief. He will understand that you have been like a trumpeter swan, returning to the same lake year after year. And you will realize that he was not the other swan that you

thought he was. He was the lake. And he will always be there. But he cannot love you. He is only a lake, vast and unflagging.

*What Might Have Been and What Was Never Meant
To Be*

It is that kind of a day: a great prism
throws blue into the sky, red
onto the road, and burns
another blue
into rabbit-brush and snakeweed.

But one misunderstands the light
and sees one color where there are two.
It is like the distinction
between "what might have been"
and "what was never meant to be,"
the kind of talk
that happens on a day like this.

Now the ruins
rise red from red sandstone,
but if one's attention flies to the mesas,
answering to clouds or lightening,
the ruins are lost, almost
as if the people
had come again and the earth
was dismantling a bit of itself,
revealing the ruin to be.

Starfall

"...it is just as homelike for me to be an alien in one place as
in another." -*Ezra Pound*

Across a night or a week,
the wandering
makes one weary.

It is bedtime
when a spark
says get up and move,

a spark
that is an audible trail,
the hiss

of a night sky,
that middle ground
between distant homes.

It is enough
to think anything
will take root,

that a miserly plant
can hold
the face of the earth

as the sky does,
sprouting spark after spark.
Where each falls

there is another sky,
another stalk
from which stars fall.

*Just Say the Word:
the place we live*

This is the story of a place that is not on the maps but is under our feet. This ground is not an imaginary place, nothing has been made up. In a better world, it would be a crime not to record this place on the official maps, but in the world we now live in such is the case. We have placed urgent calls to the proper authorities pointing out this cartographical felony but so far there has been no response to our objections and no correction of this flagrant error. Under the present circumstances, as you can well imagine, the boundaries of this place are a little hard to pin down. But so are the boundaries of love and no one really doubts the existence of love.

I will tell you what I have had to face, the thing I always knew would come. There will come a spring when the ground smells emerge from the earth, when all around you the sap rises, and when you look up you see the birds pairing and courting. You will know at that moment, life goes on, continues, and does its damndest to fashion new forms and face new horizons. And yet you will feel a deep fatigue and

you will feel you have lost your sense of direction. That moment will be very hard, but you must soldier on because if you will, if you can, then you will taste the thing being born, the very thing that sucks the energy from you and leaves you with a deep sense of fatigue, the very thing that for the moment bobbles that moral compass deep in you gut by whose direction you have always steered your soul. That spring has finally come, and now we must face it and brave it. That is the fact of life in this place. Repeat this word: Edge. The sound is a blade that cuts. We must be creatures of faith. What we fear is already upon us, a force launched by birth rates, interest rates, and five hundred years of misdirection, pillage and neglect. Now we live with it. Believe that summer follows the spring, then comes the fall and finally winter and it rolls around again, beginning again—but never beginning in exactly the same place. Okay, now we can continue.

The literature on this place is a bit thin—though the evidence of its existence daily grows more overwhelming. The images and words that follow give glimpses of the place the maps fail to acknowledge. Perhaps, it is like a favorite tale used to explain chaos theory, the story of the butterfly's wing in Beijing eventually causing a thunderstorm in New York City. Here is the fluttering of a *mariposa*. The storm will arrive in due time.

But then in this hot, dry ground, we always pray for rain. (*Shape changer, skinwalker, bruja, poltergeist, fantasma, a shadow on the wall, the feeling of eyes peering through the 2 a.m. window. Something is out there that does not fit the conventional explanations and the officials feel it in their bones but refuse to say it with their mouths. Undocumented*

worker? Illegal alien? Wetback? Dry back? Yanqui imperialist? Pinche gringo? Narcotraficante? Refugee? Green card? Free trader? There is a constant debate over terms, over what to call this thing moving at the edge of vision, this shape changer. We all feel so much more comfortable with proper terms and better yet, numbers. Technocrats are desperate for both because without proper terms and better yet, numbers how can technocrats manage and without managing why in God's name do they even exist. I manage therefore I am. This fantasy line called the border has a constant thumping of rubber stamps, the constant clicking of fingers hitting keys on the computers that will save us all by managing us all. Now and then the secretariat gets a chilling glimpse: a reading off an infra-red screen, aliens moving freely in the cargo bay of a truck and falling on new soil, a statistic in a column of numbers, hummingbirds migrating without papers, a machine pistol chattering in the night, cholera, typhus, all manner of small life forms flowing and drifting without a thought to the regulations, the silent movement of an ice pick, turn again and it is a corrido celebrating a statutory crime, perhaps a whale bobbing dead on the waters, footprints in the wash crossing a line. Then again, it has the look of a flower, a lush beautiful thing booming color, hypnotizing the eye, flaunting style, oozing sex, and beckoning with lust and love. Yes, a flower, that gaudy sexual thing we use for our weddings and use for our dead and use for our dreams. A rose?

(Imagine the flower, inhale the scent, fear the roots, watch the frightening green leaves rise above us. It begins like the corona of roses framing Our Lady of Guadeloupe each December 12th, the paper flowers that are the miracle of

creation in those last weeks as the sun dies and then, at solstice chooses to come back again and save our world from darkness. Yes, it begins very simply and safely and within the boundaries of our faith—the roses of Our Lady in December. But something has gone awry, everyone notices this fact. The flowers have become somehow monstrous, blooms beyond our taxonomy. And they spread at will, crossing borders, boundaries, all known proprieties. They flourish under bridges where the barely cool bodies are found in the sands, they burst suddenly into view on city streets, they leave imprints on the desert floor. Their pollen floats over the highest mountains and out over the blue waters. The stems host thorns, but that is not what alarms the authorities. The scent is powerful, almost rank, but also is something the governments can live with, at least they say so.

(No, it is something else that is frightening them. The novelty of the plant, the fact that it escapes simple taxonomic identification, that reality that no one yet can easily identify it and put a name on it. This inability to paste a simple label on the thing is driving the officials almost mad. The vigor of the growth also disturbs them. The way this living thing takes on air and water and light, the way it can devour trash and garbage and yet continue to flourish and breed and spread. The very health of the thing is an affront. Worse than the kudzu vine. Worse than the killer bee. Worse than the screw worm. Worse even than the dreaded narcotics. An alien form without a name, breeding, blooming, spreading. The scent seductive, the beauty of the rose. Thorns sharp, roots out of sight but running deeply and sinking into the earth and refusing to let go. No matter what.)

Really, there are just two choices left. One is to continue

this charade put forth by our nation, this act that insists upon the reality of public order, public boundaries, and police. The other is to realize the charade is over. In the short run it is easier to go along with the current unreality. In the long run, it is impossible. So in the end the only real decision is when do we admit to what we see around us. As Joe Louis once noted, you can run but you can't hide.

Not here, not for long.

Tracks, everywhere tracks, marks racing up the arm, footprints pasted against the desert soil, tongues of air moving overhead rich with pollutants, trickles of water coursing down the arroyos or seeping slowly under the earth with their cargoes of chemicals and pathogens, spores floating, seeds moving at will in the bellies of birds, everywhere tracks making their imprint and being ignored. That is the fact of this pace, the tracks left by constant stampedes, the denial of the tracks by so many observers. Officially, there are many efforts to form links, alliances, relationships across a thing called the border. Governors flit back and forth on their jets to meetings, politicians chow down at various banquets, bureaucrats fax themselves to death in a frenzy of networking. I've done this duty myself, sat there drinking and eating with officials and power brokers hour after hour and bottle after bottle while the bill from lunch rolled upward into the hundreds and hundreds of dollars as we merrily agreed on new relationships between these two ghost ships. This is all the great irrelevancy. The real flow of material and relationships goes on below these official moments. It is a class thing. The rich and powerful pretend to be in control and pretend to control the flow of things. The poor actually of it. The drugs move, the birds

move, the chemicals move, the people move and no one can keep track of these numbers, no one can create an accurate table of these movements, and no one can actually control them. Several days ago at a border checkpoint, an official flagged down a car. The driver of the car accelerated and tried to run down the official. The man in uniform fired on the machine. And here is what happened: the car kept going, raced right through this fantasy they call the border and on about its errands. No one was arrested. That is what the word border means: a breath of air pretending to be an actual thing. It is finished. The tracks tell us that, the ones on the arm. The ones in the air, the ones on the ground, the one under the ground. We now are in the edge, the place where big forces rub up against each other, the place beyond the police, past the pretenses of nations. The place where the future has already arrived. There will be no more hit songs about walking the line. Just look at the tracks. Soon a hummingbird will be in my yard from its winter ground in southern Mexico. It will feed and rest and then push on to southern Alaska. We should pay more attention to the birds, amigos.

The treaties, the new lease agreements in our global village, are based on the idea that goods can move and capital can move and people stay put. Sixty miles south of my yard they're welding bars against the mouths of the culverts that lance through their magic border. The authorities are apparently creatures of deep faith in their own powers. They are finished I tell you, dinosaurs about to go to their fossil future. Just look at the tracks. They're everywhere. The new bars and all that welding work, well, let the dreamers dream on a little while longer.

We'll go into the edge. We visit the places of imaginary lines, things with names like say Chihuahua. Sometimes they're called Arizona or Sonora or New Mexico or Texas. They look very neat and official. As I said, I have been to meetings, lunches, drunken stupors where these terms and these boundaries were tossed about as absolutes. But out on the ground things are moving, always moving, scuttling along in the night and in the day. And they defy these notions. Tracks, everywhere tracks. And brilliant colors. The thing itself is too new for our minds to wrap it up in a tidy package. But its presence can be detected—the tracks, the colors.

Let's go.

Colors stream into the mind from the Mexican walls. Burnt-orange, blood red, dark green, rich blues, deep purple, turquoise, yellow, pink and black. Big solid swatches of color that dress a business, a house, a shack. The road from Ojinaga on the river to Ciudad Chihuahua is stone, dust, dun colored hills but the marks of people protest this drabness and scream out colors. The colors are innocent, naive and arrogant. They refuse to apologize and are never shy. Beneath the high desert mask of Chihuahua beats a gaudy heart, and from this throbbing organ flows the colors of passions and blurted thoughts. It is the easiest thing to notice and the first thing noticed and the thing always remembered. For a North American it is almost like discovering the spoken word or music, an explosive shout that in the nation to the north is either forbidden or feared or forgotten.

We have invented a jagged line that crosses deserts and mountains and valleys and rivers. This line is the first expression of the edge visible to the eye. We stare into the

face of pain. We look into a mouth of broken teeth, these stubs called things like Baja, Sonora, Chihuahua. Once the north of the Spanish Empire reached above San Francisco Bay, into Arizona and New Mexico, across the span of Texas and beyond. This grandeur was in part an illusion—a terrain largely empty, often out of royal control and here and there studded with presidios, fortress like ranch headquarters, embattled mining districts. Over the course of three centuries, Spain established a presence in this north, not a control. Strange names floated back to the capitol, A-ache, Comanche, Tarahumara, Yaqui, and the ever useful term for barbarians—Chichimec. There were sixteenth century forays like Coronado's trek toward seven fabled cities of gold, various voyages, slave raids, and now and then huge leaps in to nowhere to found colonies and military outposts. None of these efforts were cost effective and they tended to leave better histories than communities. On the ground, the northern advance stalled in the sixteenth century and then in the seventeenth century made kangaroo leaps based on the discovery of mineral pockets. By the time of the Mexican war, ignorance of the area was still great enough that the imperial schemes of the North Americans forced them to come back for a second bit (the Gadsen Purchase) when the first conquest failed to include a decent railroad route through the desert ground. This place, the edge, remains the great known unknown, something impaled on maps like a butterfly but wild and free on the ground. It's the home place for all those rejected by the decent homes, the refugee center for Mexicans and North Americans. None of this is admitted by the authorities but increasingly no one wishes to talk to them anyway. In the beginning, the color was blue in the sky,

brown in the dirt, red in the violence and gold in the dreams. But always, colors.

Cross an imaginary line drawn in the dirt and backed by heat sensors, wire, guns and law and suddenly pass from a world numbed by beige, teal, pastels and other mild hues to one primal, primary, and violent in tone. A detail, many would agree compared to the consequences of the historical record, the implications of free trade, the obligations and curses of the First World facing the Third World. Maybe so.

But open your eyes and tell me that.

That is how it begins with colors dripping off walls and rolling down the streets, pouring into the arroyos, surging against the bands of rivers. Colors shouting so loudly that at first you cannot hear the distant thunder of the revolutions, the bells of the colonial past, the drums of the tribes, the bleating of academics scouting post-modernism or post-colonialism. Just the brush full of colors lapping against your face. And after awhile the colors cease to an assault and become something you feel is normal like love or song or good food or a caress.

I am walking down the street toward the start of Saturday evening in Ciudad Chihuahua and couples are clambering off the cheap buses, the one with dirty windows or broken windows. The men are in clean jeans, boots and elaborately stitched shirts that enjoy every color except white. They all but become invisible next to their women in sheer materials, daring necklines, brilliant hues of blue, green, red, purple, high heels with acrylic surfaces and faces defined by dark coronas around the eyes, long lashes, flashing finger nails, blazing lips, They promenade under the stunted trees by the sleeping market. A band plays, and yet hardly anyone

speaks.

A taco stand hosts three tall stools before its little counter, and alone on the center stool with her back to me a woman in a red dress with long black hair leans forward toward her plate, her one leg akimbo to reach a bar on which to rest her high heel, and I stop and look at the color, the curves, the ease of her body language as the light dies and night comes on and still the colors refuse to leave.

We live in a world that does not know its own name. The form of some word rolls around in our mouths, a jagged piece of lava we wish to smooth, but we cannot make sounds come. A taste bites into our tongues, a frightening flavor seeping off that jagged rock, but still the sounds do not come and all we have is that taste and that taste is failure.

(A dead whale bobs on the waters of the desert sea, hundreds of dolphins rot on the beaches as the experts scamper to decide what caused this dying, and the nations slowly pivot their attention from the concerns of distant capitols and for a few seconds consider who is to blame and is the cause natural or unnatural and is the cause Mexican or American and is...and then they forget about it, as they always do because it all happens on ground that burns and heaves beyond the limits of their attention. A place on a map but surely not within the throb of their national lives. Gulls scream overhead, faxes purr out of machines, the bast bureaucracies of order lumber on and still the whales bob in the sea, an enormous mass of dead flesh too small to sustain the attention of the creatures sitting at desks and staring into the dead eyes of computers. I have lived like the whale, in a world beneath notice.)

We used to know our place. I remember as a boy the

absolute reality of maps. I could jab my finger at a spot, some crossroads or hamlet, and know at that very instant people were drinking coffee, gathering gossip, driving fence posts or making machines, I could look at a dot and imagine a type of house, a favorite brand of tea on a shelf in the kitchen, a local team followed by all during the sweet months of summer. I was struck as a boy how simple things like the heft of coffee mugs in a country cafe or the cut of side meat at breakfast would differ according to an exact place. The way women painted their faces varied also. Now at times, I think only the dogs know their place. When I was a boy we took a country kid along to our apartment in a big city and I remember him craning his neck out rear window of the car to take in his first skyscraper—a building six stories tall. Just as I remember at age seven or eight being in Mexico and my astonishment at restaurants that did not serve real food and markets that had merchants sprawled out on the pavement. Such a pull of a locale is notoriously waning under the beam of satellite television and under the wanderings induced by growing unemployment. In a world of sojourners, everyone gets to visit about the world but no one ever really sinks roots into this bigger world. In a way, resumes have replaced genealogies, football jerseys and T-shirts from rock concerts have supplanted local efforts at costume. But all this mass marketing of goods and human beings has disguised what I feel under the surface and taste in my mouth and what dances across my eyes. The emergence of a place beneath the maps of nations and beneath the consciousness of rulers. A place still beneath the language of the very people who live in it. But this place I speak of is actual and has a form and ethos and when the light is right and the eye is cocked, a definition

that is growing sharper and sharper as it looms out of the dust storms that rake my world. We, not an imperial we but a compassionate and inclusive we, we live in this new thing we have so much trouble saying. They try to confuse us with floods of goo and noise flowing down various information highways, but this distraction cannot in the long run deny us our new birth right. We will say the word and then it will be actual, the room will change with our sounds just as an insult converts a Saturday afternoon cantina into a new and ferocious beast. To be more exact now would not be wise. The storm still rages, the rivers still rise and the exact geography will come with the dawn when we can in clear light see the new channels gouged, the soils deposited, the islands that have risen on the brows of volcanoes from the sea, the mountains that have been squeezed up from the worlds buried beneath us. Then we can take our measure. No one in power will help us. The very thing happening is what is being denied by the rhetoric of the nations. They are like the aged when they feel death's hand on their shoulders—at some level aware of this coldness but determined to deny this thing, this inevitable thing. We will know our place.

We are said to be a border but a border requires a real solid object, say a nation—we cannot be the border of phantoms. But our Ultimo Thule is collapsing, a morning fog now being burned off before our eyes. We constitute the border of a dying order. We have become something else, something new because we are not dying, we are being born.

The wind rises and is dry, the sun hunts with a white light, our lips crack, dust settles on the surface of our catatonic eyes. We move through the shadows—we are the refugees, illegals, bastards. all of us have come as far from

something as we can possibly go and still we wish to press on. Someday we will focus our eyes, the jagged rock in our mouth will be smoothed and then this ground will shake, a hawk will wheel in the sky and scream.

We live on the edge. Yes, that is it, the edge. The place where we live. Day by day, the jagged rock cuts, our tongues bleed, yet the stone grows slowly smoother. The taste, that taste so powerful that nothing can rinse it from our mouths—not coffee or tequila, not tea, not whiskey—the taste of failure sour with our fears, bitter with our disappointments. So for the moment, the edge it is. We are jittery, unsure, angry, and alert. We place bars on our windows, guns in our hands, chemicals in our bodies, and refuse to read all the new laws that spread like slime mold on the statute books. We sense a new language growing in our minds, a weedy expanse of sounds and words. The vowels will be full, the cadence stately, and everything in this language will ride securely on a solid bass line, a sinuous guitar and a coke driven snare drum. Everyday as we go about our tasks we can feel this edge before our face, a jagged lip gaping just where we are about to step, and vertigo is our sense of balance.

But soon, soon, the center. (*They bag 900 on a Tuesday and brag of a new record.*) When the words finally come, when the lave grows a bit smoother, then the sounds will surge forth from our now strangled throats. Not the northwest of Mexico, the southwest of the United States. Not states with useless names, the Arizona, the Sonora, the New Mexico, the Chihuahua, the unloved west fragment of Texas. Not nations, they use us but are useless to us. We are leaving the nations and they know it. (*They pounce on a*

thousand two days later and boast that this proves their system is working.) Their police are everywhere but this show of force is to no avail. they are building metal walls and we laugh at these efforts as we stare out the windows through our useless iron bars. We will cease to live in relation to distant capitals. We will realize we are defending the wrong border.

For now, the edge, a jittery place full of heat, color, gore, change, collision and lust. A cauldron from which the center will come forth. Our tongues lick, the lava cuts. They are hiring more and more police but they will fail also. Checkpoints keep increasing. *(A horse train with 2400 pounds is detected, the arrest a mere blip on the big blank screen o the authorities.)* El Paso, Albuquerque, Phoenix, Tucson, Ciudad Juarez, Hermosillo, Ciudad Chihuahua and all the Desemboques. Not a nation, not a politics, not even a word yet. *(I am reading to five-year-olds in a kindergarten class and I pause and ask, "How many of you have been on a farm?" The eager brown faces shout back, "Un rancho, si!")* We press on, being born, bleeding, listening to all the jukeboxes as the choppers whomp over our heads and flash the spotlights in the night.

So many years of meeting where someone will say the boundary is drawn by the use of adobe as a building material, or the boundary is drawn by the extent of a Spanish Empire or of an American Empire. Sometimes plants are required to stand sentinel on vaunted borders. Others demand rivers toil along the watch towers. There are commissions, hands across borders, twin factory plans, strange agreements that make trade fee and the edge a fee fire zone. My head has ached for years with these meetings about defining a region, these

books are the essence and strict limits of the world I live in and refuse to leave. One day I gave up on such discussions. I felt the jagged rock in my mouth, faced up to the blood on my tongue, sensed the sounds struggling up from my throat. I took a large map off the wall, struck a match and watched flames first lick its edges and then race across the babble of its mountains and rivers and valleys and place names. When it cooled, I swept up the ashes and threw them in the trash can.

Edge. The place we live. The place I live. The places the future lives as the lava slowly smoothes. No one notices us at the moment and this is good. The authorities are all so busy with their treaties and commissions and metal walls and heat sensors and para-military units. Communiqués flit through a cyberspace where the doddering nations delicately delineate their virtual reality. We are beneath comment. We move on hard ground under a savage sun and we grow and grow within the metes and bounds of their fantastic schemes. The nations have policies, we have hungers. And our hungers will take us to the future and leave them in the past. We are barbarians and this will protect us from them until it is too late to stop us. That is when the center will come into being, when the words will pour forth from us. But for now, our tongues keep licking and licking that jagged lava. For now, a secret universe so alive the maps deny it exists.

I am sitting in a cafe twenty feet from the fence. A small glass of tequila, a gratuity of this establishment, rests on the table before me and I look north from a place called Mexico into a place called the United States. For much of my life I seriously believed the border existed and I believed it was exactly as wide as the side I now look at. I even believed in

the border when I wandered on foot in places where the fence did not exist and my only clue to this passage between nations would be pock marks on the ground marking the sensors of the authorities. For years there has been a different theory, one that a third nation, a very skinny nation, was emerging on the border, a country ten, twenty, thirty, forty miles wide and longer than any snake ever found in the natural world. I have never believed this theory because I have always been struck by the absoluteness of the fence, by the total difference in language and custom that simply stepping across the wire brought instantly to my attention. Now I have, well, mellowed. I do not believe in the border, nor in this would-be skinny nation. I now live on a large island, one the maps disguise as Sonora, Chihuahua, a chunk of Texas, and most of Arizona and New Mexico. This is the place of the edge, the ground where the power of the nations recedes and the drive of the human beings accelerates. It is largely a hot and dry place, brown is the basic color, and here and there big mountains rise up and wave green knobs at the sky. When I go from Phoenix to say Salt Lake City, I leave the edge. When I wander north from Albuquerque to Denver, I am no longer in it either. But if I bumble down to Hermosillo or Ciudad Chihuahua I am still on my home ground.

The cafe where I sit with my tequila is part of a bungled effort to insist on order and fine edges in this place where I live. I have just ridden a bicycle on a tour called from border to border, by which the planners meant from one side of a state to the other side where this place Mexico officially is said to begin. Now the trip is over, and I sit and have a drink. Every minute as I sit there, people go through a big hole in

the fence just twenty feet away and then they walk north into the fabled United States. Two blocks away is the official customs house and a man I've known for years sits there on a high stool and officially decides who in the endless line officially crossing the official border can officially proceed. I am watching more business at this one hole than this man on the high stool ever handles. The authorities have posted a video camera on a pole and it patiently sweeps to and fro along the fence. The people climbing through the hole and heading north carefully time their moves off the sweep of this camera perched high on the pole. A block away is a house where drugs are stored. I once met a fellow who moved a huge load of drugs through this hole, a few kilos at a time, simply by timing the scurrying of his employees off the endless sweeping of this video camera. Of course, when, from time to time, I talk to the authorities and mention these matters, they nod, and tell me this is simply a minor flaw in their grand concept of the border, a tiny tear in the fabric and they will soon get around to mending this hole. And of course, they do, and then five or ten or a hundred more holes pop up. This never seems to faze them or rock their faith in their religion of the border. They will have none of my notion of the edge.

But I live in some kind of dream world, I suspect, where forces operate that the authorities do not believe exist. For example, on this recently completed bike safari, one rider braked by a dead raven on the road, plucked a black feather and rode on. He had five flat tires that day. I knew he would. I never mess with ravens, although I can't claim that they are that nice to me. I've had them bop me on my skull, loot my camps, and hover just overhead screaming obscenities at me.

They are territorial, they mate for life, they've made it perfectly obvious they consider me a fool, and they mock the very idea of a border. They are truly creatures of the edge.

The power of the dry land is also an element of the edge. Sometimes I read books about the flora and fauna where this power is chipped away at and enslaved in fine taxonomic manacles. But this tactic only works temporarily, just as all these illegal drugs only work for a short while. The key facts about my ground, that it is so immense it swallows you up no matter how big you think you are, and that it is insidious, so insidious that after you have been here a while you are never able to leave despite the miserable wages, the bad governments, the endless police hassles, the limited water and the summers that hunt you each day like a contract killer.

So that is it: tequila, holes in the fence, demonic ravens, ground as addictive as cocaine, and the edge.

I have lost a grip on things, words like border, even words like Chihuahua. colors scream around me, a sky too blue, a Virgin of Guadeloupe too brilliant, walls everywhere shamelessly beaming primary colors. I fumble at this sound coming up out of my throat. I lick the jagged piece of lava in my mouth and slowly, ever so slowly to be sure, it gets smoother. I whisper one word to myself and am surprised by the soft sound in the light that throbs toward midday.

We are barbarians, creatures who live beyond the civilized, the Germans skulking in the forest across the Rhine of the Caesars, the Mongols on their runty horses barred by the Great Wall, savage Scots stopped by Hadrian's barrier. A world of checkpoints, fences, heat sensors, agents, spies, forms. Those without manners, the Chichimec, the outlaws,

the psychopaths hitchhiking and leaving death and anonymous ruin in our wake. Barbarians in a world still being born, jagged lava in mouths, creatures held in contempt, orphans of a hot ground. We are said to be regulated: by fences, guns, laws, satellites high in the sky that look over our shoulders constantly. But we refuse to know this fact. The flesh moves at will, people walking through wires and walls as if these barriers did not exist. Marijuana, heroin and cocaine being delivered more promptly than truckloads of tomatoes. And in the air, invisible to the eye, money moves, torrents of money, rivers of money, oceans of money and flows this way and that way and no one commands it or controls it. The governments, they pretend to be the masters of this flow of money but they are not. A verdin flits from bloom to bloom on the chuperosa out my window and the money crackles through the air, billions and billions of dollars and pesos, crackling shrieking, and no one can control it. We are said to be regulated, it is in all the newspapers and on the screens of our televisions. The marijuana is good this year, the money roars past, the people move at will, barbarians beyond control.

About the Authors

When not rummaging through dresser drawers, **Rick Adams** lives a stereotypical suburban life (down to the Labrador Retriever) and teaches in Los Angeles. He writes poetry while on the freeway....**Charles Bowden**, better known as Chuck, is fast becoming a literary cult figure. His repertoire of renegade prose includes nine books of non-fiction, including *Blue Desert* and *Red Line*, and most recently, the myth-shattering *Blood Orchid: An Unnatural History of America*. "Just Say The Word: The Place We Live" is a fragment from an upcoming book, *Rio Sangre*. We look forward to it....**Ron Carlson** is the author of several books of fiction, including *Plan B For the Middle Class* and *Betrayed By F. Scott Fitzgerald*. He has a reputation for moving his audiences to dangerous levels of hilarity during live readings, including the dreaded "bubble snot" laughter. His poem "Max who Caught a Car" also appears in *Unleashed*, a collection of poetry written by Max and other famous canines....**James Cervantes'** latest volume of poetry, *The Headlong Future* (New Rivers Press), was the recipient of the 1987 Capricorn Poetry Prize. He is currently co-editing, with the poet Leilani Wright, a collection of contemporary poetry to be published by the University of Arizona Press....**Stephen Dixon** is the author of several outstanding books of fiction including *Frog*, a novel, and *All Gone*, a collection of stories. Most recently, Simon and Schuster published a massive anthology of his work called *The Stories of Stephen Dixon*. He teaches at

Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore....He's a photographer, not a writer. Nevertheless, **Bill Hatcher** is one of our most valued contributors (see cover photo). He lives in Flagstaff, Arizona, and his work frequently appears in outdoor sports magazines. His credits include photos in *Climbing* and *Rock and Ice*....**Shireen Rahnema** lives and writes in Los Angeles, where she is a first-year law student at UCLA. At this time, she has no plans to become John Grisham....**Henry Roth's** "Lunch" is part of a series of stories dealing with childhood. He has published over one hundred short stories, most recently in *Partisan Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Confrontation*, and *The Beloit Fiction Journal*. Mr. Roth lives in New York City....Our intelligence agents report that **Craig Rullman** may now be cowboying on a ranch in Nevada. He is about six feet tall, lanky, and is prone to wearing a hat most of the time. If you see him, call the *Thin Air* office immediately. He is an outstanding new writer....Most recently, **Sarah Tantillo's** work has appeared in *The Crescent Review*....**Ellen Wehle** lives in Fort Lauderdale, Florida. Her work has appeared in *Painted Bride Quarterly*, *Sun Dog*, and *The Quarterly*....Peter **Zilinsky** works as a medical interpreter and translator in Seattle. He serves on the board of the Washington Poets Association and contributes to the School Outreach Program of the Seattle Asian Art Museum....

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