

The English Department presents
the 2015 Annual

Poets & Writers Anthology

A collection of original composition by students, staff, faculty, and community members at College of the Redwoods. We are pleased to present these original compositions for your enjoyment.

All of this would have been impossible without the hard work and dedication of the following people:

Spring 2013 Student Editors

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Spring 2015

Bob Davis	Slap Pants Dance
Therese FitzMaurice	Great Skies
Su Harrington	Inroads
Pam Holten	The Surfer
E. B. Kirwan	Prayer Beads
	Mary's Blackbirds
Amy Peterson	Confessions of a Fool
Vanessa Pike-Vrtiak	Homecoming (Hobson Award Winner)
Hannah Pontoni	Skinny Boy
Natalie Rose Ray	The Bone Tree (Prose Prize Award Winner)
Stephanie Silvia	This Is Where We Went Wrong
	The Plastic Tiara (Poetry Prize Award Winner)
Neil Tarpey	Not in the Stars
Terry Trager	The Happiest Place on Earth
Joy Boehm Worrell	Sonnet: I Am Blazing Fire

Poetry prize is generously sponsored by Northtown Books
Prose prize is generously sponsored by Booklegger Books

Honorable Mentions:

Aline Faben	How to Eat a Poem
Amy Fontaine	The Wind
Ron Halvorson	Nature Takes No Prisoners
E. B. Kirwan	Milk Men
Vinnie Peloso	Mid-morning, Mid-week, Mid-semester
Hannah Pontoni	Your Warmth Was a By-product of Your Light
Peter Robert Presnell	C-Buck's Sign Off
Patricia Raleigh	What about Dinner?
Penelope Anne Schwartz	The Ice Storm
Joe Shermis	The Woods of the Mind
Stephen Sottong	Orbital Decay

Bob Davis

SLAP PANTS DANCE

Right hand slaps right front pocket
Left hand slaps left front pocket
Right hand slaps right back pocket
Left hand slaps left back pocket

It's the do I have all my gear dance
Every time I leave the house dance
Before I shut the door dance
I do the slap pants dance

Right hand slaps right front pocket
Left hand slaps left front pocket
Right hand slaps right back pocket
Left hand slaps left back pocket

It's a check of what I have dance
Wallet keys and medicine dance,
Medicine I hate to need dance
It used to be so simple dance

Right hand slaps right front pocket
Left hand slaps left front pocket
Right hand slaps right back pocket
Left hand slaps left back pocket

It's the things I carry dance
It's the my mind is slipping away dance
It's the hold on desperation dance
It's the hold fast slap pants dance

Therese FitzMaurice
GREAT SKIES

(inspired by Pat Schneider's poem "About, Among Other Things, God")

the archetypal housewife
clad in apron, home surrounded
by sycamores, pantry filled
with homemade jam—

she calls to her children
come. come home
and those words pressed
into the pulped fibers of our
Grandmother's lungs, rise
rise within me

like the dust of a Midwestern mentality
suspended in the expansiveness
of great skies, where dreams
float like cumulus clouds
toward a heaven
 imagined elsewhere.

there are no sycamores
on our corner lot
or even in our West Coast
neighborhood, perched above
the pacific ocean

but the intimacy within
the vast grandeur of
that archetypal poem

crawls onto my lap in the form
of a three-year-old girl
with delicate skin & golden strands
of divinity, soft & silky against my face.

how can heaven possibly be
anywhere but here
in her mother's arms?

Su Harrington
INROADS

“Make sure it is the real Strider. There are many strange men on the roads.”

--J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Fellowship of the Ring*

The phone rings and I stop
knowing it's you
bottomed out on Canadian Club
looking for an ear.

When I pick up
you'll gnaw on mine
'cause I married a Strider
who is no king
with his ragged dog
and new guitar.

You're mad 'cause we're happy
or believe that we are
with our ancient Maverick
chipped mugs
and morning prayers.

And I traded your
glittering country club dreams
for an old-time Jesus
and a wood-burning stove.

So you call long distance
at least once a day
your Irish wit
a bottled bee that beats
and beats against the glass

While snow buries the roads
in leveling whiteness
blurring distinctions.

Pam Holten
THE SURFER

He asked if he could hang with me.
I laughed at his cockiness.
That kid had 'cojones' at 15 years old.
I knew he was one of us.

Living legends like Laird Hamilton and Dave Kalama,
Death by wipeout for Mark Foo and Kirk Pasmore,
Myths we've become, epics we populate.
We are few. We are large.

What drives our destiny?
Do we smell it and follow its scent?
Do its tentacles embrace us softly?
Favored or cursed, we'll never know.

The chase for that 80 footer
may look like Ahab's hunt for Moby
but no hatred courses through our veins.
Life grips our heart and we love.

You reporters follow us, watch us, listen to us.
Can you understand that the waves rule our lives,
their frothy exhale lures us,
their saltwater avalanche embraces us?

Sting rays, Man o' Wars, jellyfish
stirred into the danger soup with sea and sand,
bones, sinews, flesh, our offering,
pain fashions no leash to choke our pursuit.

Mavericks, Teahuppo, Jaws, Pipeline, Cyclops:
where razor sharp coral lie in wait;
where Great Whites stealthily roam;
where the board delivers primal union.

Ah, the waves — pounding, churning, roaring.
I paddle the face, rise up over the crest,
catch the lip, drop into the maw,
50 miles an hour through the monster barrel.

Does the joy at childbirth, the euphoria of heroin,
the bliss of nirvana match the rush of the wave?
Is the steep price we pay worth it?
Can there be a cost too high for heaven?

You will laugh at me like I laughed at the kid
when I claim we are a band of brothers.
Our conflict takes place within ourselves;
blood spilled from our veins an anointing.

The kid's eyes expose a hunger not satisfied,
a restless yearning to uncover his truth.
The ocean ministers his baptism;
an innocent courage powers his crusade.

My ride ended some years ago;
I should have bailed out,
but I thought I was ripping the wave.
Hospital ceiling proved me wrong.

My muscles still now, no tracking big swells,
no taming the wild beast, no testing my luck,
yet the ribosomes, nucleus, cytoplasm of my cells
host the waves. The kid knows.

E. B. Kirwan
PRAYER BEADS

It was September & you were gone,
so I made a necklace
 of all the things
I could never forgive you for –
each bead round & hot.

First I strung the other woman,
the twisted ingénue
 whom you wanted more,
the legs & breasts, the eyes –
she burned me like ice.

Next the addictions & instabilities,
the irresponsibilities
 that made me work,
the ignorance that made me cringe –
disappointment glowed red.

Last came the anger, the love, the lies,
the need that drove it all,
 the times I reached
'til you slapped my sobbing hands –
you, a rosary of pain.

Then, alone, the kids' cartoons
loud in the front room,
 I fed the beads
into my flesh, bore the undulating slither –
the twinge across the veins.

I pulled & pulled, & watched,
saw you moving, warm death
 under my skin,
absurdly & eternally cross-strung –
a rictus of prayer.

Finally, each bead safely encased
in blood & touch & meat,
 each rippled limb
flooded & creased with memory –
this necklace, everything.

Then, & only then,
with you gone
& your sins inside me,
could I love you again.

E. B. Kirwan

MARY'S BLACKBIRDS

Mary called the blackbirds down. This is what the children told us, afterwards. But you know children, always making things up, always playing pretend. You can't believe children.

And these children, of course, were worse than most. Children of the system. Wards of the State. Foster kids. Who knows what sorts of families they came from, what sorts of environments the State saved them from?

Children like that, well...you can't exactly expect children like that to know the difference between right and wrong, truth and lies.

.....

Mary called the blackbirds down. We tried to tell the social worker lady, the big grumpy lady that came to see us afterwards and asked us all those big questions. Sometimes she asked us the same questions over and over. She looked at us like we were stupid.

But we're not stupid. We were there. We saw what happened when Mary went away. We saw the blackbirds come down from the sky like a big, dark cloud, like something out of a video game.

We were scared at first, but then we saw that Mary was calling them, that she was singing to them to come save her. We saw them land all around Mary, all over her. We saw them pick her up and float her away, away, away in the air, until she was gone.

.....

There is a camera outside the youth center dormitory. The footage from the camera is in black and white, and is not continuous. Rather, it snaps a still frame every ten seconds. There is no sound.

It points down at a cement yard with a basketball hoop, a tetherball pole, a swing set, and two slides. There is chain-link fence surrounding the yard. Outside the fence are the facility parking lot, a heavily trafficked road, and a residential street. There are two gates in the fence, both hung with white aluminum signs stating, "This gate is to remain locked at all times."

On the day Mary disappears, this is what the footage shows: a dozen children are playing in the yard. Some play on the equipment, while others engage in a frequently contentious game of tag or take turns shooting baskets at the basketball hoop. In one corner of the yard, several little girls play a game with Barbie dolls.

There is a man at the far right gate. He watches the children. He fumbles with the lock on the gate for several frames before entering the yard. He approaches the girls playing Barbie.

In the next frame, one of the little girls is standing up. She appears to recognize the man. She looks frightened.

The man grabs the little girl and begins to carry her back toward the gate. The girl is crying. Her mouth is open wide. The other children stop playing and gather to watch. They appear upset.

One of the larger children moves forward and pulls on the man's arm. He drops the girl. She runs toward the youth center building. Her eyes, as she passes in front of the camera, are striking. The man struggles with the child holding on to him.

The next four frames are dark.

When the images return, the man is running across the yard toward the gate. He appears to be alone, but his jacket is bulky and could possibly hide a small child given the angle of footage. Oddly, the children are no longer looking at him. They are looking up at the sky.

The little girl is gone.

.....

Mary called the blackbirds down. We all know the truth, even though the social worker lady doesn't believe us. That's okay. We're used to grown-ups not believing us.

The best part was seeing her face all bright in that cloud of black feathers, her eyes all shiny but not crying anymore. Her mouth was a big smile that made us smile back until we couldn't see her anymore.

The social worker lady thinks we're stupid, thinks we're bad because we're not sad about Mary being gone. But she doesn't understand. We aren't sad because we're too full of happy. We're happy for Mary.

She got away.

.....

Mary called the blackbirds down. Such nonsense. But what else can you expect from children like that? They simply don't know any better. Not like adults. Not like proper people, who were raised with a sense of decency, of propriety. Not like you or me.

It is no wonder the children made up such a lie when questioned. Really, I doubt they could even understand what they were being asked.

You really can't expect any better from children like that.

Amy Peterson
CONFESSIONS OF A FOOL

When they ask me
how I want my eggs
I say, "Cooked, please"
hoping someone will laugh.
When I see a puddle
I run into it and slip
and fall
and laugh, even though it hurts
because I'd rather fall
than watch someone else do the same
When a friend is over
and I want to order a pizza
I call Les Schwab and ask
for a large pepperoni
and when they say, "Wrong number"
I say, "Oh!" blush bright red
hang up and tell my friend
what I did and she bursts out laughing
but I don't tell my friend
I called Les Schwab on purpose
just to make her laugh

When I'm walking through town
I approach every curb
with intention to trip
even when I'm alone
because I'd rather be the one
on the ground
than the one standing up
looking down
I stand in line in the grocery store
holding a bouquet of flowers
and tell the old man standing
next to me
about the time
I didn't stop
at a stop sign
and hit a 7-year-old boy
whom I never met
and never will
and he is quiet
and I'm crying

because I'd rather be
the one crying
than the one watching
And I buy my flowers
and I walk out of the store
and hand them to a beautiful woman
with light brown eyes
with a little boy walking beside her
holding her hand
and she asks me why
and I say, "Because they're beautiful"
and she takes them
hurriedly, fear in her eyes
and walks into the store--
I guess my eyes are still red
and my cheeks are still puffy.
I step off the curb
onto the asphalt
and walk a few paces
wiping my tears
and turn back around
run full out
not looking
and my foot
catches
the curb
and I go flying
to the cold ground
laughing

Vanessa Pike-Vrtiak
HOMECOMING

I have returned to a place where the beaches make love to the redwoods
the sun and the moon are not always on speaking terms
they are too jealous
of one another's luminescence

I have returned to a place
where night life exits in between the crevices of fog
street lamps shine with the purpose to protect righteous 8ths of Trainwreck
and back alley home brew

I have returned to McKinleyville
where the one black child has been shamed for decades
his beautiful lips are split and sour by white supremacist knuckles
they now resemble rotting banana peels

I have returned to so much beauty
nature knocks the wind out of you
egrets dance as if they have never been given a name
their freedom is felt in the earnest stampede
somewhere south of Highway 101

I have returned to McKinley's piss stained poppies
and vivacious vomit that lines his feet
there was once a petition to remove his metallic image
and replace him with men more just and wholesome
like Gandhi.
Perhaps he will be the new face of Arcata

I have returned to a homeless population that continues to rise
a new privileged landlord skin tight like a stretched out drum
I beat my childhood of Cadillac hopping
campground hideouts onto her face
my song is one she will not forget to sing

I have returned to more meth and heroin
children who have lost their daisy yellow-colored middles too soon
school systems broken in loss of opportunity
missing, missing, more people complaining about what is missing
they can't tell you how long it's been gone
but they know without it they are empty without it

I have returned to concerned citizens gathering too many petitions

they are unable to listen
because they have stopped driving at night
even if that means sleepwalking
because of the Eureka Police Department
they know that these officers are trained on a budget
and that means shoot to kill
because we are giving away guns at flea markets
shoot to kill
to men who want to be remembered
shoot to kill
and a legacy of sunshine and doing the right thing
shoot to kill
isn't enough to retire on
shoot to kill

I have returned all mouth and eucalyptus leaves to speak of the violence
that exists within and beyond the Redwood Curtain.
there are communities in vibrant valleys with desert landscapes
prairies that whisper in the wind
they dream of the milk and honey that drains from the soft folds of mountains
that undress themselves only for us

because it is just us
who saunter in a village filled with artist, music that clamors streets
where blackberry festivals somersault down sun dresses
swimmer's delight chants the rhythms of:
heaven. Heaven is a place where nothing happens
happens now
because here we run on our own time
arrive when it feels right

we know in all our imperfections that we are incredibly lucky
to live in one of the few cities left to really see the stars.
they still speak to us here.
when you look them in the eyes they waltz on our freckles
kiss our skin like they remember we were once one of them

Hannah Pontoni
SKINNY BOY

He eats Xanax for breakfast and lunch but skips dinner, too high to remember.
It's back and forth. He takes Xanax to forget. And then forgets that he's high.
See it's sort of like a palindrome.
And what you couldn't remember in the evening, you can't forget in the morning.
Skinny boy, getting thinner.
Cheek bones sharper than the last time I saw you.
It's hard to watch your friends shed versions of themselves in front of you.
Addiction is a weed whose roots grow into your body.
And it looks pretty for a while, it really does. Delicate and innocent.
And you look at it and think, no, no, it's fine. Harmless fun is all.
The thorns don't come out until the roots have sunk in.
Skinny boy, getting weaker.
Tell me doesn't this new addiction suck the life out of you like your ex-lover did?
He is so self-destructive, he holds lit matches to his skin and watches the light,
feels the endorphins rushing.
He likes that, he told me once that he used to cut his skin with metal blades
just to make sure that he was still alive.
What a contradiction, to risk something just to make sure you still have it.
He is alive now, but who knows how long that will last.
He is like the flame burning on a wick that is nearly spent.
Just last week I saw him flicker as he burned in the night,
liquor pouring from every cup and smoke filling the room.
I thought for a moment that it might be his last.
Graveyards and abandoned houses become his best friends.
The only places his secrets can be kept safe.
He's got legs that just keep on running, even when what he wants is sleep.
He's got legs that run like a good wine has legs when you shake the glass.
Addiction is a strong word but his demons are stronger.
He's out at the water again today, staring off into the wake,
waiting to be swallowed whole before his memories eat him alive.
Skinny boy, becoming frail.
Getting duller but somehow with more jagged edges.
Pieces breaking off and fragments falling into my heart.
I promised him that I would catch every part of him that fell away,
but now more of him has fallen away than is still there.
Lately I haven't had the strength to hold his whole soul in my hands.

I still stay beside him though; he's burrowed his way into that spot in my heart
that wants to hold onto every lost boy that I come in contact with.
I will hold him until there is nothing left to hold.
Skinny boy, disappearing.

Natalie Rose Ray
THE BONE TREE

My grandma's house was the reason that I can say I had a good childhood. My grandma was born in Mexico, so I imagine she built it in that style, with white adobe walls and a red-shingled roof to remind her of that time in her life. It stood out from the other cookie cutter ranch style suburban homes that scattered the tops of those rolling hills that slowly turned into the backdrop of mountains that formed the Sequoia National Parks and then to the more north, Yosemite. Her house stood on the very precipice of that hill at the outermost edge of that small farming town before the mountains. It looked out onto the entirety of the Central Valley of California. I used to imagine tourists being driven and then dropped off at the top of that hill and knowing precisely that it was California without any prior knowledge of their location. Quite simply the view looks like the standard image on any number of orange juice cartons or bottles of wine. It just needed a slogan across the skyline saying something like "California Grown" or "From the Valley" in gold cursive writing. The groves and vineyards divvied up the land into a neat patchwork system made up of deep green, amber, and brown swatches under the horizon to the west, until it turned to a muddled gray where it blended with the city and home. The name of the road that formed a loop at the top was Hillcrest for obvious reason.

The house was paradise to my sisters and me. There was a massive backyard with gargantuan Jurassic Park trees that blotted out the sun to give us constant shade from the summer heat. With her own two hands, my grandmother built us a tree house in one of these giant trees so that we could look out towards the mountains. This was where I learned about constellations, planets, and the vastness of the universe through my grandma's telescope. She knew about them all. She seemed to know almost everything. She filled an aviary with bright and noisy birds. I learned kindness and patience from putting the babies back in their nests after falling when their mothers were not attentive. Lovebirds never were good parents.

Past the fenced-in back yard, there was the even more backyard. Outside the fence was one giant garden. It was wonderland. There were acres of groves, filled with almond, walnut, and a couple different variations of orange trees, and also lemons, apricots, plums and avocados. And woven throughout the groves of trees there was one constant rock path that lead to the smaller

gardens where my grandma grew grapes, tomatoes, strawberries, jalapenos, blackberries, dates, apples, and a great many other things that I can no longer remember.

I do, however, remember one tree that never bore any fruit. I think it had at one time been a birch tree, but even in the furthest stretches of my memories I cannot recall a time when that tree was alive. We called it ‘the bone tree.’ The white-washed calloused branches of the tree reached towards the sky with a semblance to long skeleton fingers. It loomed over the path to the black gate that led from the back yard to the back backyard. It had grown on a piece of dried jutted-out earth that extruded from the side of the hill. Maybe that is why it died. Jessica and Katherine wouldn’t even touch it, but I was never afraid of it.

The garden was pristine, the land untouched by any trouble or worry. It was truly a sanctuary to my sisters and me in our youth.

My sisters and I were pro hide and seekers because of the diversity and openness of the land. On this particular summer day, I had taken the rock path from the front yard around the cacti and succulents so that Jessica, my middle sister, wouldn’t see me from where she had ran to behind the rose bushes. I made my way undetected around the house and hoisted myself up to climb the white-washed branches. I knew this was a good spot; it couldn’t be seen from the front or back yard because the house obscured the view of it both ways. It couldn’t even be seen from the road going all the way around the top of the hill that we used to walk every night with the dogs. It was like a cloak rested on the trees skeleton branches that veiled it from the world, but I could still see out. I could see everything. I felt at ease until I heard Katherine’s crying coming from the backyard.

“Where did they go?” My grandma had found Katherine alone in the backyard. She was too little to leave the backyard, but Jessica and I liked to use the good hiding spots outside the fence. We didn’t want to not include her, but we couldn’t help not venture out.

“Jessica, come out now!” My grandma knew that Jessica would come out. She knew that I wouldn’t. I thought about this and felt bad.

“I’m coming!” Jessica called out from the front yard. I then heard the rocks shift on the path, until she reached the steps, and I saw her make her way towards the gate. I watched from my perch as she opened the latch and went in. I heard her run up the stairs to the upper part of

the house balcony saying, “I don’t know...I thought she would be right here...” And then it trailed off into nothing.

I sat in the tree for a few hours, delighted that I could. I wondered what my grandma and my sisters were doing, but I felt grown up being up there. I decided to stay in the tree and that was grown up.

The sun began to set, and I felt content. There were magpies flittering between the orange and blood orange trees even though my grandma had just tied bright reflective strips to all the trees to try to frighten the birds away and save the fruit. I yelled to try to scare them, but they just withdrew into the branches and pretended to be gone again. I would tell my grandma about that later I thought. I reached down with my right hand while gripping the branch I was straddling with my left to pick at a mosquito bite on my ankle. I began to feel uneasy as the sun sank lower, and it grew darker. I didn’t understand why exactly, so I stayed.

The view of the road at the bottom of the hill was so sharp that I could see into the windows of the houses that lined it. But that’s not what I looked at.

Just as the sun sank into the horizon I saw a snake slither across the road. I could practically count the blurred colored rings as it crossed. I was so startled I remember bolting upright and nearly losing my grip. My mind raced. How did that saying go that my mom said? *Red touches yellow, it could kill a fellow. Red touches black...something about a man named Jack? What color and order were the ones I just saw in?!* I started to panic, even though the snake was a good fifty yards away from the tree and down the hill.

My young mind started to picture every terrifying thing that I could imagine. I immediately pictured the wild dogs my grandma had warned me about materializing under the tree, pawing the bark, snarling and jumping trying to eat me.

The thought was interrupted. Something on the road caught the corner of my eye, and I turned my head toward the mountains. A dog. A stray sniffing in the middle of the road. It was harder to see as it was getting darker, but I could still see its white sock like feet, as it trotted, sniffing where the snake had been. In the next moment, a pick-up came roaring around the bend of the hill and with complete indifference, hit the dog.

I had never imagined something so horrific. The dog went from happy and sniffing to a mangled heap of fur and bone on the side of the road in no more than two seconds.

I cannot remember how long I clung to that branch, like an anchor to keep me from falling away. I can't remember how long it took me to stop crying. I felt stupid for all the times I had cried before over stupid kid things that I thought had mattered. I was petrified, unable to move. I had never seen death so blatantly. I no longer wanted to face the world. I wasn't prepared. Something changed inside of me. My world was shifted, and I felt betrayed. I was no longer safe.

I knew I would inevitably have to climb down; it was getting very dark. I felt like I had been ripped away from the happy place I was so sure of a few hours ago, and had been dumped, changed, into a different tree in a new colder and darker world. But, of course, it was the same world and the same tree. And what else could I do but climb down go inside? There was nothing to do. I never told anyone about what I saw up in the tree. I was pretty sure they knew all along.

Stephanie Silvia

THIS IS WHERE WE WENT WRONG

We all needed our own houses
(we're alone at night)
we watched *MTV* we read *Cosmo*
we criticized each other
we thought weddings would keep us safe
we did it to please our parents
we cut our hair
we got highlights
we got cable
we sent our children to daycare
we made our children learn to add in Kindergarten
we dressed our daughters in tutus and gave our sons guns
we shopped at Target and Macy's
we watched TV again we let our children watch TV (we're alone in our houses at night)
we crossed the line and we got too much stuff
we thought too much about getting stuff
we let our stuff get the best of us
we wore Nikes
we wore Gap we secretly coveted shoes, shoes with high heels
we watched *Sex and the City*
we didn't dance in the streets
we gave up our futons
we fenced in our backyards
we made reservations at Chez Panisse
we became employers and
we didn't pay our workers enough
we went back to drinking alcohol
we smoked too much weed
we didn't stay together
we needed our own houses we became landlords
we started saying things like market value
we forgot to go dancing
we cheated on our wives
we didn't build intentional communities
we needed our own houses
we forgot about yurts and teepees and domes
we had nasty divorces
we didn't honor the earth
we didn't honor the moon we didn't honor the tides
we started driving everywhere
we didn't build mass transit
we didn't bicycle roller skate pogo stick enough

we won an Oscar
we dated fascists and let them buy us dinner
we forgot the plan the dream the gift
we raised our children alone
we forgot how to live in small spaces
we forgot how to live together
we didn't learn to grow food
we didn't learn to weave
we stopped painting
we stopped playing guitar
we gave up on Sanskrit and kayaking
we lost our hair

our waistline our nerve
we lost each other
we needed our own houses

Stephanie Silvia
THE PLASTIC TIARA

The Plastic Tiara
I wish you would just forget (finally after 30 years)
freakin' forget already
I wanted the crown
 (Iwanteditbad)
(Yeah, we know this story
 We know our own history)

Mama was with Daddy
Daddy was drinking
Mama was trying to keep Daddy's eye to herself
away from Tanya—
or MayBelle or any of the young back-up singers
with great asses
The tour bus had stopped
No one paid attention to us
except for Sarah Jean
who brought out the party dresses
and you were younger and you had golden hair
and we were having a tea party

The men were taking out their guitars
(at the rest stop)
and Sarah Jean laid a cloth over the picnic table there
She gave us the party dresses and poured strawberry Kool-Aid
into shot glasses to make it fancy special
you had golden hair she braided
Sarah Jean put the crown on your head
and I ran to ask Mama if I could put one of her
Mother of Pearl combs in my hair
(if she'd comb my hair)
but she was in the back of the bus with Dad and
she told me to go away
and Daddy was drunk
and Skinny Bob brought out a shot glass and a bottle of whiskey
and he was matching us shot for shot of whiskey for our Kool-Aid
and he tried to get me to sit on his lap (again)
and I didn't (again) I wanted to run away but I stayed
and I called for Mom and Dad
but they couldn't hear me and I couldn't leave

Okay so here's the new story

I had to let Skinny Bob put his hand up my party dress
because you were the youngest and your hair was golden
I couldn't leave you with Skinny Bob all alone on the picnic bench
I couldn't go fetch Mom or Dad
yes — so I wanted to wear that crown
later on the bus I wanted to wear it real bad
and, yes, we all know our history
Yes, I broke your arm to get it.

Neil Tarpey

NOT IN THE STARS

They met at an astrology seminar. They shared the same birthday.

Afterwards, at a nearby café, Zahar sipped her decaf.

“My name means ‘morning light,’ which is way true because I’m always up by six.”

Hesperus gulped multiple shots of espresso.

“My Greek name means ‘evening star,” he said. “I’m rarely in bed before 2 a.m.”

Zahar noticed the yin yang symbol inked on Hesperus’s forearm. She disliked tattoos.

When their waiter arrived, Zahar ordered the tofu salad. Hesperus requested a bacon cheeseburger.

“Have any animals, Hesperus? I’ve got a persnickety Persian cat named Baryshnikov.”

“My bulldog’s called Sparky.”

Terry Trager
THE HAPPIEST PLACE ON EARTH

Orlando, Florida was nothing to write home about. There was an overwhelming number of people. The heat was indisputably oppressive. However, I suppose something could be said for growing up at Disney World. Which, I can assure you, I actually did. My grandmother had a free pass, awarded to her upon retiring after ten years of service as a line cook. With this pass, she could get herself and three other people into any of their many theme parks for free for the entire day, additionally receiving discounts for parking, meals, and merchandise. Some of my best childhood memories are of going with her to the parks. It was she who raised me. Thus, any time someone in our family wanted to go to Disney World, she had to bring me along. I can't even begin to count how many times we went.

Disney World is not without its urban legends. Indeed, some people had actually died on the rides there. On the Haunted Mansion ride, someone died by trying to cross from one car to another while it was in motion. That person's ghost is said to haunt the attraction. Another of the legends was about Space Mountain. The ride was built inside a building. As such, you rode the entire thing in near complete darkness. It was rickety and *loud* as the cars zoomed across the ancient tracks. A rider had been lifting his arms in the thrill of the moment, and his hands had been sliced off by the tracks above because they were so close together.

Perhaps if I'd made known the fact that I could, by proxy, get people into Disney World for free, I may have had more friends. Then again, maybe not. I was the weirdo, you see. The kid who didn't quite fit in. Looking back, I'm now aware that this was a good thing. None of my peers were exactly the kind of company anyone would choose to keep. Social circles were rife with jealousy, backstabbing, and manipulation, so I kept to myself. I drew pictures and wrote

stories and plays. And, of course, I read lots and lots of books. Usually horror stories. My, but I loved horror.

There were two girls in particular who apparently just could not stand me: Rebecca and Julie. They went out of their way to make my school life completely miserable. They would shove me into my locker, put dirt in my food at lunchtime, pull my hair, trip me, call me names, and spread rumors saying that I had said and done ridiculous things. Things like, “She made out with her cousin once and liked it.” Or, “I went over to her house once, and there was a dead rat floating in the toilet!” Things that, even if they were true, Rebecca and Julie would have never known because I had never even spoken to them.

They had made it their mission in eighth grade to make absolutely sure that I was completely ostracized. By everyone. And it had worked.

They had to pay.

It took me some time to concoct my plan. Every day when I got home from school, I would lock myself away in my room, plotting. It needed to be evil. It needed to be painful. I wanted them to hurt as much as they'd hurt me.

One day, out of the blue, my plan became clear to me. This scheme would surely provide the catharsis I so richly craved and the retribution I deserved.

As a peace offering, I invited Rebecca and Julie to go Disney World with me. They were skeptical at first, but when the day arrived, we were all rhapsodic. Rebecca's mother dropped us off, and my grandmother, who was quite spry at the time, chaperoned and escorted us around the parks.

We visited many attractions, and I was convincingly amiable towards the two girls. Dare I say, we may well have even had fun together. In reality, however, I was biding my time until we finally made it to Space Mountain in the Magic Kingdom.

The wait time for the line into the attraction was posted for guests to see in advance: one hour, twenty minutes. Not unusual for Disney World. We took our place in the line. Grandma waited for us outside.

During the interval, Rebecca turned to me and said, “You know, thanks for bringing us today. I've been having a lot of fun. I was wrong about you.” She offered a diffident smile.

I smiled at her sheepishly. “Do you really think so? Maybe I was wrong about you, too.” I looked at Julie with curiosity to see if she had anything to say.

“Yeah, I'm sorry, too. Now that I've gotten to know you, I'd really like if we could all be friends.”

“I'd like that, too,” I replied, feigning kindness. In actuality, I was thinking to myself, *Nice try, bitches*. It took a trip to Disney World for them to realize I was a human being? My vengeance was so close, there was no way I would back out now.

We finally made it to the front of the line, and we took our seats. The cars are such that you must sit single file, two to a car. I sat in the very front, with Rebecca behind me and Julie behind her. It was perfect. In the darkness, I was able to dig out from my pockets two paper mache hands full of that fake “vampire blood” that you get from Kmart around Halloween. I tucked them both into my sleeves and pulled my sleeves down, so it looked like they were my hands. In the darkness, no one could tell they were fake.

We ascended the first climb. The lights were strobing and flashing, and my delight was rising with the roller coaster. A brief pique, a swift descent, then a sharp turn. Climb again, a

shorter hill this time, then a sudden drop and another sharp turn. Another climb. Rebecca and Julie were squealing with glee.

Now was the moment. I raised my “hands” as we dropped. I knew there would be no way I could actually reach the tracks above us because they, in truth, do provide enough clearance, however just barely. That wasn't a problem, for me. In the near pitch blackness, I broke open each paper mache hand with my fingers and flung them both behind me as I began to shriek hysterically.

“Oh my God! My hands! *My Hands!*” I cried.

Rebecca and Julie were both covered in “blood.” They were both screaming, “Oh my God! Oh my God!” No one else was around, nor would they have even noticed, since screaming was par for the course on roller coasters. When the ride slowed down, and we joined the queue to exit our cars, I turned around to beam at them. This was my moment of triumph.

They both stared back at me with vacant eyes, sobbing uncontrollably. Any person with a soul would have immediately been filled with regret and despair. *What have I done?* They would ask themselves.

“Gotcha,” I sneered, displaying my jazz-fingers. Rebecca had transcended pale. She had a perfect bloody hand-print across her cheek from where she'd been hit in the face with one of my “hands.” She was hyperventilating. Julie was sobbing and holding herself.

When we exited the ride, the authorities were called because the two girls were inconsolable and appeared to be covered in blood. Rebecca ended up developing PTSD from the whole event, and Julie would never get on another roller coaster.

Neither of them ever tormented another soul again.

Joy Boehm Worrell

SONNET: I AM A BLAZING FIRE

I stayed to watch bright Fall come brilliant in
She brought the vivid palette of her art
Her blazing brush of fever rode the wind
But could not burn its way into my heart.

Why did I wait to meet this cunning Fall
To linger here where contrast she could make
Between true Summer's warmth and Autumn's call
Of false display? She paints, but to forsake.

Courting winds charm maiden leaves then go
Leaving naked branches that were green
So you have taken more than you could know
And I have given more than can be seen.

Love, if you love, play not her careless game
For I outlast her flame with constant flame.

1963

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Aline Fabin

HOW TO EAT A POEM
(with apologies to the crab)

Leave your poet's heart in your briefcase, your ragged backpack.

Flip the cooked poem over onto its back so the belly plate is exposed:
words of sorrow and of love, roses, snails,
devastation, or astral objects.

Wrench off each jointed leg:
lines, enjambed or stopped,
long and supple,
short and pointed,
being careful of the serrated and vicious claws,
the astute analogies,
the piercing aperçus.

Use the tools available,
mallet or pliers and a pick:
logic, hard reason,
history and biography,
practical criticism.

But remember, once the poem is disemboweled, dismembered
and devoured to the last damp morsel,
it cannot be reassembled.
It may not live again
except as part of you.

Amy Fontaine
THE WIND

Wind shows you another side of things:
trembling leaves, discarded newspapers,
flocks of sandpipers that turn
as one and flash their silver undersides.

I like walking on windy days.
When the wind stirs,
it makes everything move and speak,
and the world doesn't seem so lonely.
Even if it's only leaves murmuring,
and I'm all alone,
the wind gives me the illusion that I'm not,
an overpowering feeling that something,
someone,
is out there.

The wind howls and then fades into a whisper,
like a half-remembered dream.

Ron Halvorson

NATURE TAKES NO PRISONERS

Hunting serpent clamped to the frog's leg,
The prey stretched, screaming piteously,
Snake engorging the rubbery tissue.

Macabre struggle,
Today one snake lives, and one frog dies,
What sylvan deity decides their fate?

Tomorrow the reptile shall perish,
Raised up in a death dance,
Coiling and uncoiling.

A whirling dervish,
Fighting for life,
And then, poor snake,
It will lay down and die.

Lifeless on my shovel,
I grieve for both viper and frog,
No mercy for prey or predator,
In the wild Green Idyll.

E. B. Kirwan
MILK MEN

They come at night and steal her milk. She is unsure when this thought first enters her brain, but once it does, a fully coalesced and roiling thing as heavy and true as a raincloud, she knows it with a certainty with which she has known few other things: the taste of apples, the texture of suede, lyrics to several songs, and the sound of her own name in her head. She smells it and tastes it in the air around her. The knowledge fills her and rides the back of her neck at all times.

Nobody believes her. At first, they chuckle condescendingly and brush her words away with a metaphorical pat on the head. She is a new mother after all, hormonally-charged. It isn't too unusual for a post-partum imagination to run a little wild, and besides, such a pretty girl, she can be easily forgiven for acting a trifle odd. More rest, perhaps, and she will be right as rain.

But the raincloud remains, building darker and darker at the back of her neck, a wet and drenching thing that fills her first with frustration and then with dread. She tries to explain, and the responses from family and friends grow increasingly tense. Nonsense, they tell her, don't think such things. Don't speak of it, they order, and make worried eye contact with each other over her head.

Her mother, packed to spend the first two weeks helping out, stays longer. Her husband whispers to his sister in the kitchen when he thinks she and the baby are napping out on the couch. Around her, schedules are rearranged so as not to leave her alone during the day while the husband is at work. She watches it all in annoyance and growing panic, bemused at their determination to ignore the real problem and focus on her as if she were some wild fey thing, some danger to herself and others.

She forces herself to stay awake at night, sitting still in the rocking chair by the crib, watching the window as nocturnal stillness turns surreal, wobbles and flows, leaving her unsure of whether or not she has dozed. Her eyes become dark and haunted. The raincloud presses down, and her breasts weigh heavy, but never, she feels, as heavy as they should be. Baby nurses, sucking deep throughout the day, but always seems hungry.

They come at night and steal her milk. She knows this, but nobody will listen. Her voice, once listened to, doted on, is a useless and empty thing. When they take her to the doctor for her six-week post-partum, he examines her, asks her questions, and then sends her out to the waiting room while they discuss her behind the closed exam room door. She sits in a brown chair, waiting, watching out the window for the cloud she knows follows her.

The raincloud, she begins to know — with that same cold certainty that pierces her thoughts so frequently of late — is somehow connected to the milk men. For that is what they are. This she also knows, as well as apples, suede, her own name.

She remembers her grandmother's house, remembers the milk man who delivered cool clinking bottles to the door. She was curious, and an early riser then, one of those precocious children always up with the dawn if not before it, and she would peer out beneath the curtains when she heard the low grumble of the milk truck out front. White pants, cuffed, the clip-clop of brown shoes like a horse's hooves, and the off-key clank of the glass bottles as empty were exchanged for full. And then gone, like magic, before the grownups were up, leaving only cold milk in his wake.

She never wondered where the milk came from, always accepted it as part of the cool white magic of cuffed pants and horse-hoof shoes. Now, as her mind swirls around the pinpoint clarity of her certainty, she sees the sinister truth that her childish eyes were too innocent to

register. She knows the truth about the milk man, the what if not the why, and wonders – staring out the window at the raincloud nobody else will acknowledge – how many other mothers have felt the loss that she is experiencing.

The doctor and the husband appear, pat her shoulder, and help her up. Later that evening, at home, there are pills. She swallows them at first, dutiful as well as beautiful, but they draw a curtain over her mind that she cannot peer out from under. They make her sleep, when she must stay awake. She begins to hide them, a growing collection in her underwear drawer as colorful as a floral bouquet.

She drinks coffee, rarely eats. Dozes throughout the day and stays up all night. The baby, cooing and gurgling, seems barely real compared to the darkness taking over her life. She begins to notice the raincloud creeping in the corners of ceilings, hiding its gray and billowing dampness incompletely behind armchairs and dressers, televisions and bookcases. It creeps at the edges of her eyes and trails its wet tendrils along the back of her neck.

With it come the milk men, flashes of white cuffs and the clanking of bottles startling her awake from the fitful doze that sometimes creeps over her in the dim early morning. She hears the clip-clop of their shoes inside the walls and underneath the stairs. But nobody will listen, nobody will understand. She rages and whispers, trying to make them see, but only gets more doctor's visits, more pills to spit out and hide.

They come at night and steal her milk. This is real, this is truth. She knows it like apples, more than apples, because apples are no longer real. Her knowledge is a dark raincloud, and at the same time is also the lighthouse that shines its clear hot beam like a knife through the swirling onyx of her mind. The milk men are real, and are stealing her all.

One morning, she is gone. Her family – the husband, the mother, all of them who wouldn't listen – can find no trace, no trail, no footprint. She is gone like apples, like suede, like forgotten lyrics. She has disappeared like cool white magic.

The baby, in its crib under the window, coos softly, blue eyes watching the raincloud slowly dissipate into soft drifting tendrils in the warm blue sky.

Vinnie Peloso

MID-MORNING, MID-WEEK, MID-SEMESTER

Both her knees and thighs are locked and set
against the bumps and swerves of this crowded bus
with no available seats.

Her feet splay for purchase,
arches flex while calves relax,
so most of her weight

rests on her haunches
pressed into the railing
she strains to lean against.

At the next stop, two more sidle up
to form a chorus line of student commuters,
rural Rockettes going to class,

Degas' young dancers in hoodies and jeans.
One palms a smart phone. Her thumb
twitching like a small rodent's nose.

Hannah Pontoni

YOUR WARMTH WAS A BY-PRODUCT OF YOUR LIGHT

I was drawn in by your intensity, and though I knew better than to love something so fierce, I still wanted to try holding on. I should have known I would never be strong enough. For I could never hold something in orbit whose rightful place is so far away from me, with so much more luminosity than I could ever have.

The sun and the moon were once lovers, but the moon grew weary of the sun's intensity, and she watched the sun grow dimmer until it was just warmth on her pock-marked skin. I draw lines across your face with the shadows you keep me in. I watched you that night with cigarette smoke so thick it hung around you like a galaxy in the air. We played four square in a basement, and later firecrackers burned as we broke glass to busy our hands. I finally got the courage to tear up our one-way tickets to Belize that we were going to use this Spring. I regret the things we did so that we didn't have to talk to each other.

I wear the ring you gave me around my neck now instead of my left hand. You know that before medical science discovered how the circulatory system worked, it was believed that the vein in the fourth finger of the left hand ran directly to the heart. I would cut that vein out of each hand if I thought it would help me not love you anymore.

Last week I painted your shadow in the hall in grey to remind myself that you're nothing but a silhouette in the house that used to be ours. Later I saw you at the grocery store; you held a bouquet of calla lilies and larkspur in one hand and a basket filled with a bottle of your favorite wine and enough pasta for two. I turned the other way, and I don't think you saw me.

You left me with moths in the walls where you said you would keep me near the light and bathtubs in the basement where you said you would always surround me. Now there are lions in the attic where you swore to me I was free. And I feel more trapped than ever.

The galaxies are inside of Polaroids now, and the skies are no longer singing our melody.

I asked C-Buck if he thought it had been worth it, flying airplanes all his life. Most of C-Buck's body language was stored in his hands. They were big boned and articulate with extraordinarily long fingers. At the controls of an airplane, it looked as though he was playing a concert grand. He stared at me for a long moment, and I wondered if he'd thought my question had been flip. His hands came to rest one atop the other, then his eyes crinkled into a grin, and I read in that look that he felt sorry for everyone else, everyone who wasn't a flyer.

He had something over 40,000 hours logged in everything from 'Jennies' to jets. C-Buck thought there was a here-and-now beauty that pilots know when first the dream, and then the plans and thinking and skill of a lot of people all come together in one leap of faith, like a man taking off an airplane. He didn't care for pilots who couldn't see that. He'd told me once there was a kind of social consciousness that made your mind up for you on the ground. But a flyer could somehow get reformed by vastness and solitude and the very wonder of flying through the windows of cloud castles, and following a sun which doesn't just shine upon your town, or even your country, but upon a whole hemisphere of the world. He said it was difficult to bring this kind of knowing back down to the ground. He never thought of flying as anything short of a privilege, you could tell.

When C-Buck died, it felt as if a piece of the sky had been torn away. I thought about the way he saw. The way he flew. About walking across the wet pavement away from the airplane after a day in the sky, feeling the weight of the canvas flight kit, familiar like the squash of your feet against the solid assurance of earth. Like the limitations that come with that assurance, as step by step the earth takes you back, brings you home, fills you with the gravity of her reality.

Today I rolled back the horizon by more than a thousand nautical miles. I carried freight in a 70-year-old piece of history-with-wings from Eureka to Seattle to South Lake Tahoe, and back again. I ran across the tops of a billowy white sea and chased the "glory," a running bull's

eye of concentric prismatic circles with the silhouette of my flying machine at dead center. It raced, pacing me across the deck of cloud shapes below, and I thought of C-Buck. It wasn't *Seabuck*, like the ocean, or *Seebuck*, like looking, it was C-Buck with a 'C' like the hundred dollar bill, and I knew he was out there flying that silhouette, pacing me. I stared across the cowl into the green and orange sun and saw where I would be two hours later, three hundred miles from there. I noticed the perfect design left in textures on the earth's cloth from the carvings of relentless glaciation and volcanic anger, and the sprawling signature of tectonics. The spangled glitter of the sea beneath the sun offered to hypnotize my senses. I declined warily, but played at the edges while that part of my brain bent on survival monitored and calibrated such information as oil pressure, cylinder head temperatures, and the rate at which fuel is consumed. From there, even the unraveling smoke plumes from the pulp mills fit the grand design.

C-Buck's here-and-now had become my own: this place where I could no longer bend and fit the world around me into my certain groundbound reality of how it should be, or of how I would have it. The sky is sublimely disinterested in how I would have it, as well the trappings which I carry around to protect and sometimes to disguise myself. I realized that I was here by special request, and this condition of being airborne alone in this magnificent relic depended upon my promise to keep this reality uncluttered with groundbound illusions.

C-Buck said it was the passion for freedom and for control which overcame the primal fear of the high places, and the delirium of an out-of-control plunge to ground. He was liable to say something like that, something uncharacteristic of a pilot. Something philosophical, poetical even. I won't deny it. I laughed to myself when I thought of it because in the very next breath he'd said: "...And never order '*Catch O' The Day*' when you're laying over more than 150-miles from the coast." It was on account of the way he'd looked, like a gaunt old cowboy, like some kind of ghost rider in the sky, that some of those things he'd say would echo around your soul forever, like: "*Don't forget your sky manners.*"

It was the last thing he'd said to me after my check ride. I'd brought the Gooney-Bird to a stop behind the terminal where we wouldn't be bothered, and I shut down the engines. The "Training and Ops Manual," thick as a telephone book, lay unopened on the floor between us. For the next three hours C-Buck asked me questions about the DC-3 and all her systems and gear and her great radial engines. He never referred to her as the Gooney-Bird; it was "The DC-3" and once in a while, "The Dakota." And during this session neither one of us picked up the Ops Manual. I didn't have to because I'd studied it to the point where I could have reproduced it from memory. He didn't have to because he'd written it in the first place.

When he was satisfied, he nodded and signed off in my log book. He took a long time doing it, giving equal care to each letter of each word, until the paragraph was complete, and then he signed with a flourish and the run of numbers that spoke his authority. Now I was a freshly minted DC-3 driver. The honor lay in the bird's history. The honor lay in the fact that he seemed to consider more than just competency at the controls. He seemed to count who you were and how you presented your airplane to the sky.

Then he pulled his long grasshopper legs up over the edge of the seat and walked down hill, down the aisle to the exit at the rear of the cabin. He opened the door and let down the air stairs. Then he turned and called back, "*Don't forget your sky manners!*"

He battened the door from the outside and left me alone in there. Then he slapped the fuselage twice, so I'd know he was clear.

HONORABLE MENTIONS

Patricia Raleigh

WHAT ABOUT DINNER?

"Starters: Walnut Mascarpone, Onion Fingers, Shrimp-Cucumber Spread, Italian Artichokes.

Wines, Barbera D' Alba 2007 Sangiovese Aulente 2003."

What about dinner?

Mom, I haven't had time to plan anything. I don't have any time off. And now there's two and a half feet of snow.

Must be pretty all those brick row houses...

It's a city, Mom. It's dirty and gray. In one day, it gets dirty. I can't get my car out; everything is covered with snow, the metros shut down. There aren't enough snow plows to clear all the streets. It's just stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

Did you get to work, ok?

I just told you.

You know you don't have to cook dinner if you don't want to.

I want to cook. I only just said I hadn't had any time to figure out a menu.

I could just make a big pot of chili, toss green salad, and you could, if you had time, on the twenty-fourth, maybe make some bread.

I don't want that for our Christmas dinner! I said I would cook dinner. It's my present to the family. It's my gift.

I'm just trying to plan alternatives, to make it easier for you. Chili can be made ahead. I could make a big pot, put it in the refridge...

Mom, I am a better cook than you are.

No, you are not.

Yes, Mom, I am. It's not about lighting a fire with one match, Mom. I'm not talking about lighting a fire in the wood stove and putting a pot of soup on.

Chili.

Whatever.

I can light a fire with one match. I can do it every time.

Not every time, Mom.

Yes, I can. Every time. Screw Julia Child.

Mom, I can call you back.

No, why should you? I'm still here.

"Main Course: Caramelized Rutabaga, Almond Bisque with warm winter green salad, Smoked Crab Lemon Supreme, Curried Red Onion in Hollandaise Sauce."

He didn't plan to get sick, Mom. No one plans that. He didn't plan to get sick.

I never said he did.

He's still my dad, you know.

I never said he wasn't.

Mom, look, I'll email you a menu and a list. I'll email you a list later today, and you can go to the store and get the shopping done. Okay? Is that okay?

Whatever makes it easier.

I asked you if it's okay. Will you go to the store if I email you the list?

What time does your plane get in?

I told you, 3:55. Remember?

You said you weren't sure. You said you thought it was 3:55. You said you would call and let me know. Remember?

Well, I'm calling you now.

"Main Course Continued: Braised Brandy Beef Short Ribs with Cream Endive Cellerac Ragout, Pan Roasted Brussels Sprouts, Beat Bordelaise Sauce."

So do you have to go through O'Hare?

I have to go through Reagan, O'Hare, Denver, and San Francisco.

That's a lot of stops.

I didn't have much choice. I told you that it's the cheapest ticket I could find.

And I told you not to worry about the money. I sent you a check.

You sent a check for \$350, the ticket cost \$700.

Aren't you getting money from your dad?

I don't know, Mom. He's in the hospital.

You know he could have waited. The doctor told him he could wait. He didn't need to do this at Christmas.

Well, he didn't wait Mom. So here what's going to happen, I am getting on a plane that's flying all the fuck over everywhere – DC, Chicago, SFO, and home. And that is that. How many people are coming to dinner?

There will be ten people at the table.

Ten, you said ten?

Yes, ten, and remember that several of them have allergies. No bell peppers and no oranges. They get migraines.

Mom, why are you telling me this? It's historic. And no one gets migraines from eating bell peppers. That's stupid.

Just so you're aware.

Right, Mom. I got it. You told me there were ten people, and that doesn't count my dad.

I'll cook for ten at the table and take a meal to the hospital.

I'm not sure he'll be able to eat it.

How would you know what he can eat? Have you talked to him?

No.

"Desert: Kewi Lemon Grass Ginger Sorbet, Champagne Gelle."

I have a question for you.

Yes?

Do you want to use my car? When you get here, you'll need a car to go to the hospital.

To go back and forth to the hospital you'll need a car.

Should I rent one?

You don't need to rent one.

I could rent one at the airport. I may need to go right away. Mom, what if I need to go right away?

You don't need to rent one.

Mom?

Yes.

I'm so tired.

You should get some sleep.

But what if, what if?

Oh sweet one, oh my sweet one, you should get some sleep. Sleep.

Momma?

Yes?

I love you.

I never said you didn't.

"After Dinner: Black Coffee."

Penelope Anne Schwartz
THE ICE STORM

The ice storm of January 1998 began on the Maine coast as a light mist and drizzle, and then intensified, rain falling steadily for more than twelve hours. At first it seemed a typical January thaw. But inland, even as little as five miles from the ocean, the temperature hovered around freezing, and the clinging droplets began to build, jacketing tree limbs, walkways, and power lines. Within twenty-four hours, more than 400,000 households, sixty-seven percent, were without electricity, and the governor had declared a state of emergency.

The ice storm of 1998, the worst since 1929 and what came to be called the “Great Ice-In of ’98,” was a perfect Maine storm. There were millions of dollars of destruction and property damage. Yet the ice storm was also a significant occasion of frontier hardship, a test of Maine independence and, ultimately, an incredible instance of deep-woods neighborliness. Nearly everyone touched by the storm was enriched by having been reminded of what each would call “the real meaning of life.”

Peter and I were the exception. Sometimes, the survival of a relationship depends on a delicate balance of commitment and opportunity. Sometimes, commitment cannot take root and flower. Sometimes opportunity just does not present itself at the right moment. If at all. And sometimes, there is simply a failure of will and imagination. For us, the ice storm of January 1998 was a dramatic and real *coup de grace*. The giant trees silvered up, cracked, and thudded down upon the fragile framework of our life. Every road leading away from the house, except the driveway, was blocked. I could no longer run off into the woods. The only way open was out.

I was working in Portland when the ice storm began. On the second day, Peter called and told me not to try to come home, as the roads were too bad. Then, for another day, I couldn't go

because ice-laden trees had toppled, falling across roadways. Finally, on the third day after the storm, I began my drive. Generally, this was a trip that took me forty-five minutes. On that morning, it took me nearly four hours. All the electricity along the road was out. Volunteers manned the intersections, giving priority to a convoy of electrical company trucks and rescue vehicles. A light mist fell, slicking over again the cracked and creaking trees and utility poles. All along the sides of the road, enormous jagged stumps of trees and poles stood as silent testimony to the thunderous collapses that had come before. Traffic moved slowly, as stunned as the landscape. The yellow beams from our vehicles cut like weird beacons through the gray light. Convenience stores were dark. Gas stations couldn't pump without power. The sound of chain saws, somewhere in the distance cutting up branches and clearing roadways, filled the air.

I stopped and started, idled and crept along, always watching just ahead and above me for more branches to fall. Along an open, straight stretch, I saw a huge oak split in half and thunder down, mere feet off the roadway. Now crashing, then not. Iced over, frozen ground prevented even a puff of powder to accompany that giant fall: a jagged finger pointed at the leaden sky, its hot, released sap steaming in the air above it.

I encountered less traffic as I left the suburbs behind me and even fewer rescue vehicles. They were concentrating their effort in more populated areas. The mist had thickened, and I could see from the ice crystals forming around the edges of my wipers that the temperature was falling. When I turned into Peter's long downhill drive, the car slid sideways before catching traction on the sand he had spread. I coasted just barely under control into a cleared space next to the barn. The driver's side door was frozen shut, and I had to kick it open by lying back onto the passenger seat in order to get out.

I picked my way across the frozen lawn to the house. The autumn olive along the driveway was bowed over, laden with ice, and all the tree branches were coated and rattling in the wind. Some small branches littered the lawn in front of the house, next to the pond, but most of the trees near to the house were balsam firs, and they had fared well. Still, it was a different place from the one I had left only a few days earlier.

An infectious self-righteous purposefulness informs weather-related crises. Having no heat, no electricity, no running water is merely inconvenient. Having no schedule because businesses and

schools are closed is somewhat freeing. No one was in danger. There was some mess, some hazard, but ultimately, the ice storm was a manageable crisis where one could heroically rise to the occasion and quite easily live to tell the tale. Because we maintained a somewhat rustic existence, we were better prepared than most to weather this storm. The gravity-fed artesian well supplied our water. We didn't have a pump, and we didn't need electricity to keep the water going. We had a wood stove, ran the kitchen range and hot water by propane gas, and all of Peter's Aladdin lamps finally proved to be useful. Unlike many, especially those in town, we were not at the mercy of Central Maine Power. Instead of having the rhythm of our lives interrupted by the ice storm, we had a natural rhythm restored. It brought us to a place where we could be consumed by the business of life, the housekeeping tasks of keeping warm, of lugging in wood and water, of confining ourselves to small rooms to conserve light, and of talking to each other, which we hadn't done much for some time.

When I arrived that afternoon of the third day of the ice storm, Peter was more energized than I had seen him in months. This was something he could do. This was something he was good at. Suddenly, on that afternoon of the third day, the sun came out, and brightened by the sparkling, fairy world all around, ice tinkling as it fell off trees in the sudden sunshine, we were laughing and hauling in wood, searching around for the delicate woven mantels to put in the Aladdin lamps. Suddenly we both knew what to do. It was like the first fall we had spent together, those first few months when I was so excited to be back in the country again, back on the land, and he was so thrilled to have someone to share it with. Before I realized that living in the country meant I was far away from the people and life I needed to nourish me in the city; before he realized that sharing his life meant he had to live with another person. For Peter and me, the ice storm proved to be the capsule that took us back in time, in space, in place. I should have realized that trip was time travel. I should have seen that living in a natural disaster is not the optimum. And never the norm.

The enormous amount of damage the storm had done to Peter's land was apparent as soon as we ventured away from our insular life in the house. Not one of the woods' roads was passable by four-wheeler or snow machine. The conifers swept the ground, their branches weighed down

with ice. Downed trees filled the pathways. We could not walk without climbing over jagged branches.

I took the first look alone on my second day back, the fourth day after the storm had finally moved away. The sky was lightening, and by mid-afternoon, the sun had broken through. In the woods, a shiny, hard crust of ice covered the snow, littered with small twigs and branches. The snapping and cracking of limbs falling, like arboreal gunfire, constantly startled and unnerved me. Trees split as they were freed from their icy bonds. Sap flowed yellow over the crusted snow from the downed pine trees, twisted and ragged. Everywhere, the scent of pitch was sharp and piercing as peppermint. It took my breath away.

The going was hard along the slippery, cluttered byways. There seemed to be no wildlife anywhere, no birds, no squirrels. At first, I picked up brush and moved it aside. But the branches were so heavy and numerous, so embedded in the ice and snow that I was soon exhausted and simply began stepping over and through them or walking around. It took me over an hour to reach the fork on the ridge, usually a twenty-minute hike.

I stopped and listened for Nat Leach Brook, which should have been flowing through the big culvert under the wider logging road at this juncture. No sound. The brook was frozen solid and clogged with big chunks of ice and branches. Dispirited, I leaned against a granite outcropping shining like obsidian under its coat of ice.

Suddenly, behind me I heard a scrabbling, crunching sound. I turned and saw two does trying to cross the clearing at the intersection where the roads met. They had slid splay-legged down the slope and were trying to regain their footing at the bottom of the hill. Their slender legs broke through the crust, buried more than half way. Bright red blood flowed across the shiny ice where the edges cut their legs. They pulled them out and started over. Broke through again. Cut their legs again. Over and over, until they reached the place where the roads converged twenty yards below me. They stood, heads bowed, sides heaving, scarlet running down their legs.

Their blood slid across the ice behind them, mingling with the yellow sap to form a garish river. In May—only four months away—I would leave this place before red buckeye and buttercups recreated this palette, springing up out of the blood and melted snow to paint a more normal scene than the one I saw before me now. The flowers would cover, too, the tangle of

broken limbs and debris that would not be cleared from these woods' roads, so I would hear, for several years to come. That January afternoon, maybe only hours before I began listening to the coyotes' nightly run that would encourage my escape, the deer moved off along the logging road. Within minutes, their blood had soaked, like the sap, into the crust. An exotic pink and yellow bloom spread across the ice field to mark where they had passed.

Joe Shermis

THE WOODS OF THE MIND

Once there was a dark wood
that I wandered as I searched,
I couldn't see a pathway
but I spoke to birds that perched
on boughs of trees I noticed
had a way of pointing west,
and like the birds
explained to me
it was treated as a test...

I wandered as the sun fell
and the dark wood
seemed as black
as things a body's soul sees
but without light or lack;
we gather what enlightens,
things that often glow,
giving what we thought we had
from what the woods will show...

The woods turned into oceans,
seas that flowed inland,
and as the rivers backed up
we came to understand
that darkness is the shadow,
the casting down of light;
as we fill with what is real
we gather back our sight...

Stephen Sottong
ORBITAL DECAY

Jack found that if he moved his arms just so, he could control his spin. A gentle toss of his left hand, and he rotated clockwise. Stars came into view — Ursa Major and Minor, Perseus, Andromeda. A flick of his right hand, and he paused with the near full moon covering the field of view of his helmet. Crescent darkness framed the brilliance of the remainder of its surface. He wondered if the glint he saw in a crater was reflected off remnants of one of the moon missions.

Flicking his left hand again, the sun caught the scratch in his visor forming a rainbow on his face. He had to stop himself from again touching the scratch with his gloved hands. It hadn't widened since the wrench hit him during the explosion. The faceplate would hold. That wouldn't be his fate, but it was starting to fog over.

Sarah's voice roused him. "Jack ... Jack. Come on, Jack."

"I'm here."

"How's your oxygen supply?"

The indicator was edging into the red. "Running out."

"We're working on something. Hang on."

He couldn't imagine what. "Roger. How's the station?"

"Hanging together. Rest. Conserve your oxygen."

Earth swung into view. Jack stopped his rotation. Only the sound of his breathing, now labored, disturbed the silence. Below, the Atlantic beckoned, blue and warm near the coast of Brazil. Or was it Uruguay? — boundaries had no meaning here. The horizon was open, limitless, empty. His son would have loved this sight. Before launch the boy had asked for a photo of the entire world. Here it was, at a glance, and Jack without his camera.

Jungle turned to mountains, turned to coastal desert. Clouds floated above the azure Pacific. The terminator approached with New Zealand. Night welcomed him, peaceful, beckoning. He floated into darkness.

#

It should have been a simple repair — pull a battery on the solar panel boom, replace it, stow it for return to Earth with the coming supply module. He'd done a couple of similar space walks with Sherm since his arrival at the International Space Station.

One of them must have shorted out the bank of batteries. A brilliant flash, and the railing Jack was secured to disintegrated. Parts of Sherm tumbled earthward. A now untethered wrench ricocheted off Jack's faceplate, and the battery cover propelled Jack into a decaying orbit that would, eventually, return him to Earth, burning like a shooting star on reentry. He would be out of air long before that. There were worse ways to die.

#

Day dawned over Africa. The light roused him. Somewhere below, elephants browsed the savanna. Hours had passed. How many, Jack didn't know; the chronometer in his EVA suit had been damaged by the explosion. The suits provided six to eight hours of oxygen, though, and it was becoming difficult to draw a deep breath.

"Jack."

Was it Sarah's voice again or some echo in his mind?

"Jack. Do you see the bright spot below you?"

He roused himself, saw the point of light, and found it hard to speak. "Yeah."

"That the supply module. They managed an early launch. It's going to do a braking maneuver before it gets to you, but it will still be going a little faster than you are. You have to

grab the ring on the outer hatch. Do you understand? You have to grab the ring, and you'll only have one chance."

It took a few seconds for the concept to penetrate his brain. "I understand."

"How much oxygen do you have left?"

He checked the gauge, now deeply in the red. "Just what's in the suit."

"Is the fastener still on the end of your retaining line?"

Jack reeled the line in. "Yes."

"Hook it to the ring on the hatch. The capsule will have to do an acceleration burn after you've grabbed hold. You probably won't be able to maintain your grip. Try hyperventilating just before you have to grab the ring."

"Roger."

The bright spot hurtled toward him, growing, threatening to smash him to pieces. Seconds before impact, thrusters slowed the vehicle. It soared gracefully toward him. He reached for it, bounced, twirled, saw the hatch out of reach, kicked out, catching the docking ring with his boot. There was a jolt as his velocity equalized with the capsule; his toe slipped, held. He breathed hard and fast, bending, grabbing his leg, scrambling to get hold of the ring. Fingers of one hand grasped it as the other swung the clip on his tether into place.

"Secured," he gasped and felt the jolt as the capsule accelerated. His grip broke, and he floated free until the tug of the tether anchored him to the side of the capsule.

It was so very hard to breathe.

#

"Come on, Jack. Wake up."

Hands massaged his arms and legs. Something covered his mouth and nose. The air was cold and refreshing. He opened his eyes.

"Welcome back." It was Sarah.

Jack's throat was dry, sore. "How?"

"Once Mission Control figured out which piece of debris was you, they innovated. There was just enough fuel in the supply module to nudge its flight path. They launched early and diverted it to pick you up. After the module docked, we did a spacewalk to retrieve you."

He felt life, warmth returning to his limbs. "Sherm?"

Sarah's face came into sharper focus, her head shaking. "He's gone."

"The station?"

"We're on half power, but we'll survive. Rest now. We're going to need your help with the repairs." The lights went out.

Jack drew a deep breath, let it slowly escape. He slept and dreamed of floating on the sea.