



**Elsewhere:**  
**A Place For Writing About Place**

Lost Archives

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Elsewhere: A Place For Writing About Place

# **Masthead**

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# Poetry

Michelle Auerbach

## 13<sup>th</sup> Century Vishnu on Michigan Avenue

My liminal bandage dripping fuck-me red from my fingertips, acid green spooling gyrosopic slow mo droplets from the third intercostal artery. I could divine a pattern. I could lean into the professionally sharpened edge of experience. I could just put my lips together and blow. A silver screen siren a prom queen wrapped in cotton batting (crack me open - please) or Dorothy Parker could be right about the glasses. The sound, part show tune niggun hymn dirge inaudible melody variation comes through broken, transparent, for you.

Nancy Chen Long

## Dislocated

Mother and father fly past, tossed  
about, along with the sofa,  
the stove, Sophie, all requisite  
characters and habiliments of family,  
all going up, up, up the tornado.  
Mouths open, but she hears only  
the steady purr of Sophie.  
For nights, for days, she sees  
the tornado, chalk marks  
on the sidewalk, cyclone,  
bodies prone on linoleum, twisted  
episodes syncopated.

# Oblivescence

– *the process of forgetting*

Her chore of securing food now complete,  
the little girl sucks her thumb, her fingers laced green  
with a feeble harvest of seaweed. Weary, she falls  
asleep atop a granite pillow-slab on the deserted beach.  
Night comes, tide in tow, turning her granitic bed into a tiny island,  
while the forgotten gatherer dreams of tangy pe-tsai, rice, warm

• • •

breezes from a lonely fan tickle the storm of sweat  
gathering on the precipice of her brow.  
Christmas greenery lines the stage  
where she stands motionless, staring into a sea  
of expectant faces. Blood scuds to her throat.  
She scrambles to recall her rallying cry—  
precious, yet forgotten words

• • •

written large at the edge of a mist-laden sea, rock  
birthed by bubbling earth—or was it by giants?  
Shorelines of neatly-chiseled hexagons  
snuggle next to kelp walls

• • •

slathered in gravy, chicken fricassee languishes unconsumed,  
along with turnip greens steeped in bacon grease.  
Cleaning solution on a hot grill spawns an acrid cloud  
that sears the aging cleric's nostrils and lungs.  
He twists paper napkins into thread as he labors  
to recall every detail of what she looked like  
before she married God.

Joan Colby

## At the Lab

This morning in the waiting room  
At the lab, I recognize Dr. Han  
Who 13 years ago performed the surgery  
That has saved my life so far. His voice  
On the phone after the biopsy,  
“Cancer of the Womb” worse  
Than Uterus, more personal, deadlier,  
A word in prayers “the fruit”  
Mine is rotten and I can't pray  
Though it's Christmas Eve and we've a houseful  
Of guests to whom I must show hospitality  
Though what I want is to be very silent.

After the operation when there were complications  
From the radiation, Dr. Han said, “This is what  
You must endure. No help for this.” He held my hand  
Told me how as a boy in Korea, he yearned  
To be an American cowboy, sings the Bonanza tune  
To make me smile. He retired years back,  
A young woman took over his practice.  
I like her well enough.

He is thin now, his suitcoat looks handed-down  
From a larger, meatier man. His feet shuffle  
As he walks guided by what must be his son  
Who speaks kindly to him  
As one does to a child.

He doesn't know who I am—  
One of many, so many women  
He delivered or rescued. He totters slowly  
To the door a nurse holds open. The inner chamber  
Of needles and beakers. He is greeted with respect,  
Called Doctor. He looks bewildered. Goes on in.

# Country Sisters

The two old sisters  
Show up shortly after  
We move in.  
“We grew up in this house,” says Margaret.  
They live just down the road  
In a ranch house built when  
They sold off the land.

They look around. What do we plan?  
Sheep. Cows. Pigs. Or just  
Beans and corn. We tell them  
Horses. They approve.

They’re tiny, bent as willow whips,  
Bright-eyed, brimful of stories.  
“Watch Roger, he won’t pay to lease.”  
“See Kenny for the haying. Got a  
Brand-new baler.”

Examine the barn where we’ve ripped out  
Stanchions, filled in the gutters,  
Built sturdy stalls.

“Hard work,” says Helen,  
The one who never married.  
Margaret divorced. She had  
A milk run. Helen  
A trucker too for UPS.

They watch me school a horse  
Over jumps and clap their hands.  
“Higher. Higher,” shouts Helen.

Old-timers tell us  
How the sisters  
Used to sing in country bars.  
*Wild ones. Pretty tough. Good dancers.*

One fall morning, here they come  
With their chainsaws. “We always cut  
From the woodlot,” Margaret says  
Ignoring it’s no longer theirs

But who are we to argue with  
These singing, dancing, trucking sisters  
Aged 85 and 87.

Jennifer Givhan

# Dead Man's Fingers Grasp the Pacific Coast

*This fringed nuisance attaches to nearly any hard surface, settles in shellfish beds, and, as the alga floats away, carries its host shellfish away with it.*

—*Guide to Marine Invaders*

Seaweed reddens as it dies.  
Red stringy limbs spider the boardwalk of Huntington Beach

mid-November as we trudge across  
the ocean's tossed up miscarriage.

These rusty spindled sea cells  
cling to black-skinned rocks as they dry.

The stench of clinging, of drying, of dying,  
overwhelms.

We cover our noses,  
like holding our breaths past a cemetery.

You offer in passing that these bleeding weeds  
strike more vibrantly than this summer's green.

I grab your hand reflexively  
to wedge my fingers through your own.

So it is we hold on  
when readying to let go.

A rash, a flush,  
a rush of life. Then death.

But these ruddy algal gloves aren't leaves;  
they won't fall.

We'll find them, withered and crisp,  
still hugging the rocks come winter.

Alicia Hoffman

## The Chupacabra

It exists. I've seen whole corners  
of shadow swallowed – towering  
eaves of trees breathe like mares  
stunted in the murk of night –  
the force of a frightened horse –  
a still confusion of fight or flight –  
and now, the chupacabra jolts  
through the drafts and settles nowhere –  
an upset dish cracks unexpected  
on the stones of the kitchen floor,  
it enters when we open the latch  
to the cupola in the attic to empty  
the wails of the absent basinet  
and the cupboards too are bare,  
the barn doors hatched up tight,  
sealed against the storm, the animal  
smell brewing in the dew-drop heat  
that stagnates in the soft down  
of a woman's wrist. It comes  
when we are least like this: ready  
for the readings at the bottom  
of the gypsy's bowl, written in  
the dregs of tea, the runes of secret  
trajectories – the shaman cloisters  
his culture like the sprawl-legged  
clothes of the gauchos, spits twice  
and mutters in an unknown tongue  
before tossing salt over elbow  
and back down his side, kicks

his heels in the muscled haunches  
of his ebony *caballo*, like a stallion  
hail mary's the sky before he gallops  
up the rising hillside and disappears.

Sarah Leavens

## Couch

In the beginning,  
we ordered it in spite  
of the measurements, in love  
with its plush crimson, its womb  
like high arms: the possibility  
of being hugged by anything.

It wasn't supposed to fit—  
it wouldn't, you told me this,  
while my father said “use  
your awareness”  
—but I wanted it to work,  
so we hoisted it on end. Got it in.  
From it watched the trees change  
color. Fought. Fucked.

Eighteen months later  
we eased it back down and out,  
across town into a tilted  
grey house. Your father helped.  
On it we spread seed catalogues  
and planned garden, sprawled  
our dirt-feet, napped with the puppy,

took turns sleeping nights alone.

Two years and we again hefted  
its tired arms, to this new narrow  
city. Both our fathers lifted its dusty weight  
with you, bending their fragile  
backs and cracking sweaty threats; the jokes  
fell flat at this longitude, where no fresh angle  
would serve to fit our monstrosity  
here, awareness or not, anymore.

It went, finally, back into the truck,  
and you three men, outside  
an overcrowded Goodwill,  
left it alone in the rain. Alone  
in the crooked rowhouse apartment,  
I rearranged  
the remaining furniture.

Alicia Salinas

Translated by  
John Oliver Simon

## Claustrofobia

Lucha mi palabra, no engendada. Quiere  
que un niño la encuentre por la calle  
y se la coma, la cante uno que trabaja.

Asfixia la forma, el fondo: punto  
por donde el olvido pasa  
y conmueve.

## Claustrophobia

My word's a fighter, fatherless. It wants  
some kid to find it in the street  
and eat it, some worker to sing it.

Form, foundation smother it: the point  
where oblivion passes by  
and is moved to tears.

Shin Yu Pai

## Main Street

out front of  
the Conway post office  
fresh from mailing

notes to a college  
search committee, I turn over  
the last question asked

snap back  
to earth when  
sputum lands

inches from my leather  
dress shoes three teenage  
white boys

parked & the one  
in the passenger seat  
who watched me walk

back, synchronized throat  
clearing just then – spitting  
*towards* isn't any crime

this ain't China w/  
no government  
ban on discharging

in public – the veil  
between town &  
gown torn down

by the local welcome  
wagon, I climb inside  
the rental car where

my partner notices  
enough to ask if  
everything's fine

I am careful when  
I try to describe spittle

coming in my direction,

thinking of our next-door  
neighbors in an even smaller  
town, proud to wag

the stars & bars  
displays we resist &  
those which we

submit to

# Chit chat at the Super Wal-Mart

the cashier catches me  
off guard when she wonders  
aloud – I'm emptying out a cart  
full of moving supplies: polymer totes,  
packing tape, solvents to scrub  
down a greasy stove, glass cleaner  
for a bathroom mirror trying to see  
things from her view, no polish,  
I ask her the question again  
to be sure I hear her right:  
*Do you do nails?* she repeats

I look down at unmanicured hands,  
my own ragged cuticles, gnawed  
nail folds feeling how the heart  
wants to hammer down the nail  
that sticks out, put her in her place –  
this is *not* my immigration story  
yet to sense how I've already turned away –  
picturing Asian nail parlors in every town  
across America, ubiquitous even here,  
I depart in days, there's nothing left  
at stake, so I state what's obvious  
to my own mind, moving out of town –  
I sort my belongings into boxes

relieved I speak English  
she says she sees it all the time  
salon techs stocking up  
on acrylic nail forms, fake tips  
organized into plastic cases  
the tension relaxes between us  
into recognizable decorum  
*bet the weather will be good  
where you're headed – bless  
your heart, you live a good life*

# **Nonfiction**

Abriana Jetté  
**Sojourns**

*Saturday, New Jersey Turnpike, 12:33pm*

I had better tell you where I am going and why I am watching smoke sift through the hood of a 1993 green Honda Accord, spritzes of coolant spattering like small kisses onto the windshield. I am with a rap artist named *the Deafinition*, whom I will call Greg, and we are heading to the Poconos. Just a moment ago I was listening to the brashness of his voice seep through the SONY speakers that cost more than this car. Just a moment before life was working out as planned.

Since I have been near him I can't help but touch him. There is a meager patch of skin creviced between his head and neck, where his hair remains prickly, where there sits the redolence of a tender man, a place where my fingers seem to travel to trail the ends of his spine. He is soft to the touch. Wears a size thirteen. Hates tomatoes. Writes.

Except he calls it rapping. *Same difference*, I say. Within my reach I always keep a notepad or pencil, same as he when he scribbles lines at work or keeps a beat to remember with his fingers on the steering wheel. He writes in rhythms of west coast rooted torments; here is the best friend's unexpected death, there the stepfather he has been forced to accept. He prides himself on his growth. He is 6'3", has quiet green eyes.

I am trying to keep calm. He storms out of the car, swings open the hood, spouts curses while mumbling under his breath. For the first time I notice he is wearing dark blue jeans that he has rolled once, then cuffed, a pair of black Nike Zooms, a plain Hanes t-shirt (black), and a white Rocawear track jacket, with horizontal red and black stripes. His hair is shaved as if he were a soldier.

Ten minutes ago his voice sounded closer on the radio, like I could finally hear him speak. There is a distinct east coast flow in his pronunciation, a syncopated voice that manipulates verbs. A troubled soul permeates through all ten unsigned albums. He is judging, and crude, he lacks the desire to reach out and love, and yet his tone is void of rancor; it is kind, it has listened.

A month or so ago, when we were still trying to set up this meeting of sorts, he told me he most enjoyed rapping when he was able to create phrases using words that

were pronounced the same, but could mean various things. *Homonyms*, I told him. *Homonyms what?* He asked. I explained, in an uncontrollable bout sharing a long-time goal of creating poetry programs in urban areas, that anyone who respects language as much as rappers should know homonyms are words which sound the same and are spelt the same but have different meanings. Since then he has been quite supportive in conversations regarding sestinas, past participles, syllabic verse.

The problem with his car is the hose, a predicament his mechanic predicted a few weeks ago when the first hose was replaced. *He told me this would happen*, Greg says, *like a domino effect of bullshit*. He is nervous, and angry, and I am walking on eggshells, choosing my words with caution, careful to make sure they are right.

We discuss options. We could attempt to drive the car, although the gage is already pushing against the H, fueling Greg's anxiety, towards a gas station the GPS has calculated to be 0.6 miles away, a distance most definitely inaccurate, we agree, considering that we are stranded in a vacant parking lot, with nothing but abandoned warehouses in the foreseeable distance. We could call a tow company to tow us to the gas station we hope has an auto-shop, and that may or may not be 0.6 miles away. We spend a rough twenty five minutes letting the engine cool, hoping it will work itself. He speaks on the phone with multiple mechanics, writing keywords like *Elizabeth*, *\$50 surcharge*, *Cambria close 4*, in circles on a travel-sized college ruled notepad I pulled from my purse. *This is the worst day of my life*, he says. A small round bellied wren rests on the open hood, unaffected by the engine's smoky haze, staring Greg in the face.

When he talks I try hard not to interject. I also listen, of course, but every so often at the end of his sentence a bubble of my own opinion rises to my throat. *Don't say it, keep quiet*, I must tell myself. He hates to be interrupted. He says he grew up on *Wu-Tang* and *Dangerous Minds*, refers to TuPac Shakur as his first experience with loss, the first time he was bereft of all senses -- his favorite rapper dead. His rhymes reveal tiny parts of his conscience, sentiments he tries to deny. Each punch line dazzles my amazement; I become jealous of the words he marries. Except with him I am not jealous. I want to soak in his past. I flood him with questions: favorite word, strangest dream, most proud moment, can I just hold your hand while we wait. We are fairly new friends, maybe we met once or twice two or three years ago, maybe I forgot him three months later, but we met again, anyhow, and here we are on the New Jersey Turnpike, with no idea how to better the situation, still, enjoying the others company.

A few hours later we walk into Grease Gorilla, a family owned mechanic who I googled in a panic and called because I needed to know there existed hope somewhere. The woman on the phone spoke in broken English, informing me that they could fix the car, but *maybe it stay overnight*. The mechanic, Julio, just about to end his shift, eyed us as if we were lovers.

*We aren't even from around here*, Greg said.

*Pull up the car*, sighed Julio.

As it happens, this isn't where we are supposed to be--laughing in the small office of a mechanic in Elizabeth, New Jersey. And yet, somehow, it feels okay. If life went accordingly, by this time I would have moved on from artistic issues and found out about the man, if life went accordingly, I would already know that there have been plenty of worse days in Greg's life than this mixed up Saturday with an eccentric writer, a broken hose, and a case full of CDs in his car.

He doesn't understand why I want to write about him. I tell him it's not only him I'm writing about, but his talent, the talent required to succeed as a writer. I tell him it is because I realize that we both believe that words can rub up against one another, electrifying sentences into dizzying fricatives and vertiginous syntax, because we understand that nouns can be dangerous when the rhythm is sexy. You see, I have fallen in love with the mechanics of poetry. I hear iambs in the thick drip of coolant on the pavement, notice the beat in every day speech. If I had the desire to I could reformat this entire essay into a poem in blank verse on that round-bellied wren resting on Greg's hood, compose an ode to finding pleasure when you are broken down. Even each paragraph carries its own tune. I am in control here, like the drummer on his drums, or *the Deafinition* on his beats. He tells me rap allows him to move through the cadences of language, that he writes to make life right.

The receptionist tells us she is locking the door behind her, says the mechanic will let us out when he is finished replacing the hose. The sun beams hot onto my legs. We smile politely and thank her. There are small stuffed black gorillas in the display case beneath her desk. We are, the two of us, a rapper and a poet, content to be locked in this waiting room with the balance of language between us. Greg looks at me with a glare of serious suggestion, *now this*, he says, *is something to write about*.

Marin Sardy

## How To Be an East Harlem Tenement

Rise up. Rise by the hands of men, beige brick by gray stone, to your full six-story height. Discover yourself among identical tenements beside you and across the street from you, this year—1904—and the next. Your simple innards hide behind architectural ornaments on your facade and the strange rhythmic beauty of a fire escape running the length of your western wall. Find yourself attached to a number, a name, a thoroughfare—“1791 Lexington Avenue.” You are embedded in a block on the city's massive grid, one rectangle of human order on which to rest, between streets named 111th and 112th. Two intersections flank you. It is a city of intersections in space and in time.

Watch as men's hands make way for knees and elbows and backsides, banging around within your walls—your insides divided into railroad-style apartments, four to a floor, housing washtubs and stoves and hanging laundry and occasionally only one person but more likely nine. Around you and through you swarm new immigrants from Eastern Europe, rapidly replacing the Anglo-Saxons who inhabited this area, in suburban houses, before you were built. In 1892, a doctor named James Ferrier, M.D.—that's a Scottish name—stated his address as the lot you now fill. His neighbors were German and Irish, who came escaping the Lower East Side, some living in shacks made of crates and others in dark, toilet-less, pre-1901 “old law” tenements. In 1900, the Irish were attacking Jews in nearby streets, but by the time you are built, both groups form complete communities in the blocks that surround you.

Make the paper in 1906, when one Edward Frost, arrested for stealing \$150, claims you as his residence. Others inhabiting your walls disclaim him; you are spared being marked as a building linked to crime, for now. Someone opens a laundry in your ground-floor space, and on October 18, 1912, men come to register to vote. Most are tenants, some within your walls. Their wives hang laundry from your windows, strung across your courtyard like white flags—truces called from crowded rooms, acquiescence to circumstance. Housing is scarce and overcrowding rampant. In the summer, when it's hot, mothers and children have picnics on your roof.

Notice that in the 1920s, the Yiddish-language newspapers littering the streets

begin to disappear. Men bemoan the new federal immigration laws that severely limit new Jewish arrivals. As established immigrants move out of tenements for Brooklyn and the Bronx, your area's Jewish tenancy plummets. Fights break out between the neighborhood's Irish and the Southern Italians arriving in droves. By 1930, Italians outnumber Jews by a factor of eighteen—89,000 in “Italian Harlem,” which spreads east from Park Avenue to the East River. In the next decade the area becomes overwhelmingly Italian, nearly 80 percent.

Your block is now one of the most populous in the city. The only green space in the neighborhood is Thomas Jefferson Park, three blocks away. Clothing shops, hardware stores, jewelry stores mostly owned by Jews, Irish bars, Italian-owned bakeries, grocers, music stores, and shoe stores, as well as an ethnically mixed array of candy shops, print shops, restaurants, union halls, and social clubs line the streets. Puerto Ricans have begun to appear.

A brick church to your north, attached to your southern wall, hugs the corner of 111th and houses a Methodist ministry. In your downstairs commercial space, a man named Morris runs an auto repair shop and acts as the neighborhood bookie on the side. During World War II, your resident J. J. McCabe is drafted and so are the Fitzgerald brothers. After the war, one Fitzgerald becomes a priest and the other, traumatized, screams from an apartment on your fourth floor. His voice mingles in the hallway with the smells of Mrs. Giovanello's cooking, prepared for her husband, the neighborhood ice dealer. Across the hall, a small American-born Italian girl named Mimi plays with clothespin dolls. Her brother Arnold plays stickball down on the street with his buddies—Italians Dino and Tony, Puerto Ricans Nelson and Frankie, and an African-American boy named Fludy. On weekends their father goes to synagogue and their mother goes to church.

Some time in the 1950s, find yourself falling apart. Your dumb waiter doesn't work anymore, so your inhabitants throw their garbage out the windows and it collects in your courtyard. In come the roaches, and the rats, climbing the inside walls of the dumb waiter up to apartments on your highest floors. The Italians are leaving now, replaced by more Puerto Ricans, as whole blocks are razed – including Horenburger & Straub -- designed tenements exactly like you, one block north at 112th— to build new high-rise public housing projects. Now, most often, when people speak of you they say they are in “El Barrio.”

The familiar tensions build again. In 1969, look out to see the streets on fire. Young Puerto Rican residents have piled their garbage into haystacks on 110th Street and Park Avenue and set them ablaze, in protest against the Sanitation Department's neglect of El Barrio. In late December they gather before you, calling themselves the Young Lords, and break down the door of the church next door. Led by one Cha Cha Jimenez, dressed in berets bearing pins showing a map of Puerto Rico, a fist raised high, and the words "*Tengo Puerto Rico in mi corazón*," more than a hundred baby-faced revolutionaries occupy the First Spanish Methodist Church beside you for eleven days.

Despite their militant garb, the kids set up a free-breakfast program for children and demand that a day-care center be established in the church. A year later, member Mickie Agrap, a thick girl in a black military jacket, will tell a news reporter's microphone what the Young Lords were angry about. "We can't call these houses," she'll say of you. "We just call 'em dumps. Children eat the lead-poisoned paint. Roaches live wit' chyoo—they don't pay no rent, but *you* do." The stand-off ends, the Lords are arrested. Little comes of their food programs, but something has permanently shifted in the minds of residents. There is a new pride.

Nuyorican culture emerges in street life, but the physical decay is relentless. By the mid-1980s, you stand at the geographic center of a new epidemic—the invasion of crack cocaine. It creeps into the underground economy, traded for cash on the weather-cracked sidewalks and smoked in boarded-up buildings that increasingly pock the streets around you. Heroin follows, and soon a body count, a skyrocketing murder rate, is a notable feature of the community. Most residents have nothing to do with the drugs, but they have lost control over their public spaces. The subway stop just south of you, at 110th and Lexington, is an infamous junkie hangout. By the early 1990s, spent hypodermic needles and empty crack vials collecting in the gutters are common sights.

Witness, remarkably, a slow climb out of hell. It's partly a natural effect of economic growth, but also the result of lessons learned by those who have witnessed life with hard drugs. Meanwhile, mingling with the smell of deep-fried chuchifritos is the sight of a new flag: the red-white-and-green of the Mexicans, whose numbers in the neighborhood roughly quadruple in two decades, to well over 10,000. You now stand at a nexus within Spanish Harlem, with the heart of the Puerto Rican barrio five blocks south and the Mexican barrio centered five blocks north. Urban renewal programs cause migrations within the city, too, bringing African-Americans east from Central Harlem.

Meanwhile, the Puerto Ricans are leaving, replaced by South Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, and some who are utterly new on the immigrant timeline—West Africans from Ghana, Nigeria, Senegal, and Mali. They become a familiar sidewalk sight, hawking all manner of cheap and used goods from folding tables.

In 1996, in the increasingly mixed neighborhood, Dr. Mahesh Kumar Shah sets up an office for general dentistry in your southern-most street-level commercial space. It is safe enough for his business now, and keeps getting safer. Every day he commutes from New Jersey; every night he leaves East Harlem behind. This is a place, writes community organizer Russell Leigh Sharman in 2006, where “roots sink deep without the strength to hold firm.” Sharman is part of the strangest influx of tenants yet: young, well-to-do white Americans, whose immigrant pasts are generations behind them. How different the street looks than in 1904. Paved, electric, full of automobiles. Yet how similar the people—all the tenants have long since begun to blend together. The temperaments, illnesses, romances and sorrows fuzz the boundaries of ethnicity and scatter the layered years into montage.

What is memory, for a building? Yours is in your stone and mortar, in scratches, chips, layers of grime partially washed away by rain, occasionally scrubbed by human hands. Memory is what remains of experience after it has been subjected to many stages of deposition and cleaning. And memory is how you come to mean something—how you have become a microcosm of this city, which, when seen at dusk while crossing the East River, appears more as an electrified organism than an unmoving structure. Look down. One day in late 2010, there on the sidewalk across the street stands a woman. Inscribed in her profile you see traces of Italian faces long dead. Notebook in hand, scribbling words, she peers up at you in wonder.

# Fiction

Lisa Abellera

## Searching for Martians

Doris fought the urge to retch. She grimaced, pressing her fingers against her abdomen to work through the bits of meat having difficulty digesting in her stomach. She hardly touched her dinner, even though it was *dinuguan*, one of her favorites of Amy's Filipino stews. The fishy smell of the *bagoong* in the *pinakbet* did her in. Now everything made her queasy. Odors were the worst, often triggering her gag reflex at the most inopportune moments. When Amy cleared Doris' nearly untouched plate, in a look of disappointment and concern, she wrinkled her nose, scrunching the tiny silver stud on her left nostril. Its mate sat on her right eyebrow. Doris could only offer an apologetic half-smile in response. Amy was Doris' best friend since college, and the only other person who knew. If it weren't for her, Doris would've procrastinated in making her appointment at Planned Parenthood. Coming from her own unexpected surprise, she suggested Doris to just do it without letting Dante know. She often told Doris, "The first one got us into this marriage and the youngest keeps us in it."

Amy was like the Filipino sister Doris never had. In the same year she lost her father, Amy became pregnant with her and Rich's eldest child. By then, Doris, Amy, and Rich formed a makeshift family, complete with regular Sunday dinners. Dante, who Doris met through Rich, seemed to complete the set of four.

Doris craned her neck, looking out of the window to the street below. A quiet fog slowly poured into San Francisco, engulfing Upper Haight with a blanket of white gossamer mist. She could still make out the wild-eyed man in a stained and worn overcoat on the small corner parking lot that sat between a row of converted Edwardian condos and a street lined with a burrito joint, yoga studio and smoke shop. With a bible in one hand and a used paper cup in the other, he yelled his nightly sermon to anyone who dared ignore or scurry past him. She never saw him during the day, but he was there every time Amy and Rich had them over for dinner. Sometimes she'd drop a dollar or extra change into his cup if she had it. It wasn't to keep him from bothering them, which she let Dante think, nor was it out of a sense of charity or compassion. She

thought of it as a kind of small offering to the gods. As if by doing so, it might somehow keep her from a similar fate. If it weren't for Dante, she'd be half a paycheck away from a life on the street.

The spring following her father's funeral, she'd given Dante her phone number at Amy and Rich's wedding with no intention of going beyond a second date, but he kept showing up at places where the three of them hung out. She suspected Rich had something to do with that. Not that he wanted to get rid of her, but he may have thought it wasn't fair that she should watch them joyously prepare for the upcoming birth of their son, while she mourned the loss of her father.

Although it was true she preferred spending nearly every evening at their place than in her apartment, it wasn't just because it was in the grittiest and dingiest domain of the city's down and out. She could only afford a cramped studio apartment in the Tenderloin where unhinged residents were a constant presence, and after dark, drunken people collapsed on the streets, while others furtively smoked pipes in doorways. The closest park was more like a fenced-in trash heap and junkie hangout, and her brick apartment building was surrounded by cheap hotels and dive bars. Her studio sat above a Pakistani restaurant, so the stairwell and halls smelled like tandoori lamb chops that had been sitting in marinade for too long. But none of that bothered her as much as being alone, especially at night. Not alone so much in the physical sense, although there was that, but alone in that there was no one else left on your team, no one to call when you couldn't sleep, and no one to acknowledge that you not only existed but that you mattered.

Dante's baritone voice droned warmly in Doris' ear, like a bee hovering, waiting for a chance to land. She'd heard this joke before. A few times. Just like his conspiracy stories. There was a time when she thought he was witty. Not funny in the way that made her hold her stomach from laughing so hard. But witty, in a charmingly clever way, which made her think she should like him as much as he liked her. Then she was laid off and could no longer afford her rent. In less than four months after they met, she moved in with him.

Dante abruptly stopped in the middle of his punch line, clearing his throat as soon as he saw Amy and Rich's kids walk in. Like Doris, they were half-Filipino. Jack, who had his father's freckles and his mother's light cocoa skin, had changed into his bright red and blue racecar pajamas. His older brother, Parker, with his mother's

diminutive, flat-bridged nose and his father's dimpled chin, was determined to dress himself, and wore a mismatched pair of pajamas. The top had colorful planets in black space, while the bottom had green GI Joes in posing in states of battle and attention. One after the other, the six and four-year-old boys reached up to give Dante a hug goodnight. Dante bent stiffly down, embracing and thumping each on the back a little too hard. He awkwardly accepted their gestures of affection, as if they'd each given him a fruitcake for Christmas. To the boys' credit, this had no effect on them. They liked him just the same, which Doris thought was both sweet and sad.

When it was her turn, the boys handed Doris a small book they'd made for her. They bound it by hole-punching and stringing yarn through the holes. Parker had thought of it. Doris happily accepted it as if it was a priceless treasure. She'd take it home and put it in her old boot box, adding to the many finger paintings, crayon etchings, birthday cards and other artwork they'd made for her over the years. One day, she thought, they'll create something beautiful or brilliant that will change the world, but for now, she had them for herself. The boys pulled her arms to escort them to bed. Early in the relationship, Dante attempted to join in . Within minutes of being surrounded by the frenzied energy of young children, he found a reason to leave the room.

"I don't have the fatherhood gene," he told her on numerous occasions. As the only child of a father who loved his scotch too much and a mother who loved her husband too much, Dante had already decided he'd never have children by the time he was in law school,. He had nothing against them. In a way, he felt he was doing them a favor. Before Doris moved her stuff into his tiny two-bedroom apartment overlooking Washington Park, he made clear his only condition. His assumption that their relationship would ever evolve that far had amused her. She intended to be in her own place in six months and single before the year was out. She hadn't expected the six months to turn into six years.

Her own relationship with her father was much different, although no less complicated. Doris had just started kindergarten and was too young to remember when her mother, a promising pianist from the Philippines, passed away. Her American father took on short-term engineering jobs all over the country. He loved bridges. When he wasn't working on them, he was visiting them. He marveled at the perfection of their design and the enduring quality of man-made artifices. God-made objects, he said, were

too fragile and fleeting.

By the time Doris was eleven she'd become an expert map reader and navigator. Once in school, she'd taken a math test which asked her to take 66 away from 244. The first answer she thought of was Tulsa. Her father swore he'd never get lost as long as he had her for a compass. During their moves, she was responsible for mapping out a route that would take them not only over the nearest bridge, if there was one, but also near any significant landmarks and tourist sites, especially if they were a little bit odd, questionable, challenging or absurd. This was how she'd been able to touch the largest ball of twine in Minnesota (she still kept the twine ball starter kit her father bought her). It was also how she learned to cook mac and cheese in a 7-11 microwave, wash her clothes in a train station sink, and make ramen in a motel coffee pot. When she'd ask where they were heading to next, her father would say wherever the bridges took them. For as long as she could remember, this was the way life was meant to be lived, from one adventure to another, never letting life get too serious or complicated. Unlike most of her fellow freshmen, by the time she moved into a college dorm for the first time, she'd lived in over a dozen different houses and apartments, in over a dozen different cities, spanning from Montana to Missouri and Kentucky to California. Neighbors and PTA mothers in the towns they briefly lived in, clucked their tongues, saying it was no way to bring up a child. Her father would argue with a smile that he was not bringing up a child but a citizen of the world.

With the two boys on either side of her on the bed, Doris' stomach lurched in the middle of piloting a spacecraft carrying her and the boys to Mars. Three heads poked out, emerging from under the covers. Parker held the flashlight underneath the thin sheet. It glowed like a captured firefly. They were searching for Martians. She stared up at the ceiling, inhaling deep and slow, waiting for her wooziness to subside. An unfortunate turn for the young explorers. She had to cut this trip short. So far they hadn't met any Martians, and Jack was getting bored with walking around the rust-colored rocks and grooved canyons anyway.

"All systems on line, sir." said Parker in his best robotic, military voice.

"I'm firing up the rockets," Doris responded through gritted teeth, though not for effect. Another wave of nausea washed over her. Parker and Jack provided the sound of roaring engines. They dodged three asteroids and headed out to Saturn to check out the multi-colored gas rings. By the time Amy came in, they'd landed back on

Earth, and the youngest had nodded off.

Doris stood at the doorway, watching Amy climb onto the bed next to Parker to give him Eskimo kisses. Her short-cropped hair was dyed at the tips, so when her head sank onto the pillow, all Doris could see were her pinkish-purple ends. She still had on the apron they made for her last Christmas. Doris had the boys dip their hands in paint and make different colored hand prints all over the white apron.

Doris wondered how anyone could feel uncomfortable around children. But even as a child, Dante didn't play cops and robbers, cowboys and Indians, or astronauts and aliens. He preferred games, like board games, card games, or sports like baseball or basketball, where there was a beginning and an end. A winner and a loser. He didn't understand the purpose of maneuvering through imaginary realms.

On their long drives across the country, Doris would re-tell stories she recently read to her father. They'd make believe the endless Kansas wheat fields they drove past were the high seas. Her father called himself Captain Ahab, addressing her as Ishmael. Or she was Meg and he was Charles Wallace, traveling to other worlds by way of their unpredictable *tesseract*, also known as their mostly running ten-year-old car. When she grew older, she began to tell her own stories. They were usually derivative of what she'd read and certainly too fantastical and melodramatic to be taken seriously, but her father didn't mind. He was genuinely interested, asking her questions to clarify a scene or explain her character's motivation, sometimes saying, "That's a good phrase, Doris. Make sure you write that down." And she would, until she had a box of torn and dog-eared spiral notebooks filled with road stories.

From the small hallway, Doris heard Dante's voice coming from the kitchen. She heaved involuntarily and ducked into the bathroom.

As a temp, Doris purposely kept her distance and stayed under the radar, but two days earlier, her boss had called her into her office. This was it, Doris thought. The *thank-you-for-your-services* talk. She stood up, tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, and pushed away the rising anxiety with a long exhale. It was a relief, really. She could now move on to something else, something new. Walking through the maze of cubicles, she pictured herself, after a decade of working there: sickly pale, with bags under her eyes; thirty-nine and thirty pounds heavier from years of working long hours

under unnatural light and eating last night's leftovers at her desk. She'd look as miserable as everyone around her. The Vietnamese garlic noodles she had for lunch twisted in her stomach just thinking about it.

During an earlier temp assignment, she'd been in one of the bathroom stalls when she overheard her co-workers talking about her.

"That edgy, damaged-soul look might work at nineteen, but when you're closer to thirty, it's just sad."

"She says she's a writer."

"Of course she does." They laughed and made fun of the other outfits Doris had worn that week.

When she was younger, their opinions wouldn't have bothered her in the least. She'd feel a kind of twisted delight when someone was uncomfortable with her appearance. Blending in was fairly easy in grade school, but when high school and puberty came, it was nearly impossible. What was acceptable in Brooklyn wasn't always acceptable in Houston, and what was acceptable in Houston was looked down upon in Seattle. She told herself it didn't matter until it no longer did. She reasoned she'd be the outsider, no matter how hard she tried. It wasn't like she'd gone to the same Sunday school, or climbed the same trees, or explored the same creek beds or snuck into the same movie theaters. And how could she convey with justice a Vermont fall, and the exhilaration of riding a bike for blocks under a canopy of fiery leaves, to her skater friends in San Diego, or the thrill of starting a blazing beach bonfire with the damp sand squishing between her toes and the summer moonlight dancing on the Pacific Ocean, to a boyfriend in Chicago? So she dressed as if to acknowledge this, as if to announce her difference before anyone else could. She wore black army boots with lace or tulle skirts. She wore a studded dog collar with a row of pearls. Without fail, her classmates fell into two camps: those who made fun of her, and those who were inexplicably drawn to her, most likely because they themselves were outcasts, either exiled by others or self-exiled like her. Her teachers didn't know what to do with her. Other than her appearance, they had no complaints, especially since she didn't give them any trouble or lip, and did surprisingly well academically.

Why it mattered now, Doris couldn't say. She'd remained in the bathroom stall until both women were gone. After that day, it was difficult to talk or look at either of them. She gave the agency some lame excuse about needing a break until they found

something else for her. It took the temp agency over three months to place her in that something else. She tried to use the time to finish at least one of the novels she'd started, but nothing would come forth. Instead she wrote a short story that no one understood, because nothing seemed to happen and no one seemed to do anything. In the meantime, Dante paid her half of the rent.

When she began her current temp job, her mini-skirts and ripped black net stocking were left at home. She kept to blacks and neutrals and wore blouses that strategically covered the tattoos on her back and upper arms. She intended to be another indiscernible cog in an indifferent corporate wheel. But someone must have noticed, because she now found herself being offered a permanent, full time position.

Sitting across from her boss, whose desk was topped with scattered spreadsheets, piles of files and a half-eaten pastrami sandwich, Doris looked down at the two gold desk pens standing up on a carved walnut desk stand like sleek, sharp skewers. She was distracted by the garlic burning in her stomach, which now threatened to push upward.

"I'll have to think about it," Doris answered slowly. She'd prepared herself for a gracious good-bye. Not this. In the past when she'd been offered a permanent job, she immediately declined. Maybe this time, she thought, she should hold off. "I just need to figure some things out first."

Her boss' finely plucked eyebrows arched upward and her wool skirt bristled when she shifted in her chair. She cocked her head to the side. "You're in your twenties, right?"

*Closer to thirty.* Doris nodded anyway. She clamped her lips, praying she'd last without throwing up. While her boss' offer took her by surprise, she was even more surprised that she was actually considering it.

"When I was your age, I would've jumped at this opportunity." Her boss twirled and clicked her pen in her fingers several times, waiting for a response. Doris suppressed a burp, which left a bitter sting of garlic in her mouth and nostrils. When she didn't answer, her boss stood up, signaling the end to their meeting. "I'll need to know next week or we go forward with someone else."

Doris murmured she understood, aware of tiny beads of sweat forming at her hairline. She walked calmly out, but as soon as she was out of her boss' sight, she rushed to the nearest bathroom. It was the second time that day.

Doris held off telling Dante about the job offer. She wasn't in the mood for his commentary on evil, greedy insurance corporations that rob from the rich and steal from the poor. Besides, she hadn't made up her mind yet. Although her checking account desperately needed an infusion of currency, she didn't know if she was ready to be a name on a phone directory, with responsibilities and consequences that went along with it.

In Amy and Rich's bathroom, Doris swished the mouthwash to rinse out the taste of vomit. She put the bottle back in their medicine cabinet and splashed cold water on her cheeks and neck. Her crimson red lipstick had worn off. Her blunt-cut bangs were growing out unevenly. The ends of her jet-black hair revealed the remnants of Amy's electric blue and candy pink highlighting experiment. After the last temp job she decided to grow it out. She held up her t-shirt and pushed her black and red plaid mini-skirt down to get a good view of her belly. She sucked in her breath as far as she could, forcing her stomach to tuck under, then exhaled, forcing it to extend out. In and out. In and out. She didn't look any different.

And yet she was.

Whenever Doris opened her mouth to tell Dante, the words refused to form. She wasn't afraid of his response or of not having the right words. But once said, there was no taking it back. No unringing of *that* bell. She straightened her clothes. Maybe everything could still stay the same for just a little while longer. At least until she figured out what to do.

Everyone had migrated into the living room for coffee and *biko*, a sweet rice cake. Candlelight flickered from several shelves, tables and inside the defunct fireplace, so the room had a warm lemony glow. Doris took a seat on an oversized zebra cushion beside Dante. Amy and Rich sat on the other side of the large square wooden coffee table. Dante was now explaining how Goldman Sachs was behind every major market manipulation since the Great Depression. He placed his hand gently on top of Doris' leg. It weighed down on her thigh like heavy clay.

"I know. I used to work there," he said, referring to his brief internship at a small branch office, doing clerical duties such as faxing, filing and data entry. "I saw the files. I'm *not* surprised."

In the beginning, Doris had been impressed by Dante's ability to evoke the

fractious words of dead politicians and articulate his criticism of the live ones. She'd enjoyed the rise and fall of his voice, especially when he argued a salient point about some law or bill. It took time to tire of his conspiracy theories and left-wing indignation.

She watched his profile bob and animate. At thirty-two, his hair had begun to recede, so he grew it longer in the front, sweeping strands across his forehead to mask the widening gap. From a certain angle, she understood how women would find his languid blue eyes and chiseled, Nordic nose attractive. Then Doris saw how Dante's square jaw blended, instead of curved, into the top of his neck, giving the appearance of a wide double chin. His actual chin sported a newly grown soul patch, which Dante sometimes stroked and smoothed down to emphasize the depth of his thoughts before speaking. She imagined that chin thirty years from now, wrinkled and sagging.

What Doris couldn't imagine was Dante attempting the Mokee Dugway, a three-mile long rock and gravel road made up of hairpin switchbacks on a steep grade, like she and her father had when they drove through southern Utah. Dante certainly wouldn't have driven such a road twice, especially one without guardrails or shoulders, nor would he have consented to be a passenger with a fourteen-year-old behind the wheel.

The road was barely a lane and a half wide. On the way down, it'd been very unsettling to see a few abandoned trucks that had rolled off the edge of the road. Her father drove down while she drove back up, putting her turning skills to the test. Doris gripped the wheel with all her strength, holding her breath when she maneuvered past a car going down the Dugway. It was the most excruciatingly slow three miles she ever drove. And yet after, she felt exhilarated. Alive. And fully aware of her pulse pumping, blood coursing, and lungs expanding. The next time she'd get close to that feeling was later that year, when she walked onto the Rio Grande Bridge. An immense monstrosity of steel and ingenuity, it stretched across a steep rock canyon. She held tightly onto her father's arm, trying to not to look down at the gorge six hundred fifty feet below them but at the green shrubs dotting the reddish rocks around them. In the brilliant blue sky, two hawks lazily glided in circles. It was a dizzying experience, one that Dante would have found neither socially meaningful nor politically interesting.

Dante misinterpreted her scrutiny for affection and put his arm around her waist, pulling her closer toward him. Inside the snug enclosure of his arms, she felt the warmth of his breath against her face. Despite his incessant conspiracy theories and

diatribes about corrupt politicians, Dante was grateful. Grateful to be American. Grateful to be living in San Francisco. Grateful for his job as a house painter. Leaving law school (his father's life, not his) was the best thing he ever did, he often said. He was grateful for how his life turned out. He was even more grateful for Doris. She still sensed at times, when he kissed her, he was thanking her.

When her father's passing still felt like a scab she continued to pick at, Dante encouraged her to write about her father, instead of dwelling on her grief. He probably thought it more as a cathartic exercise than a literary endeavor, but nonetheless, she dug up the old box of road stories and started writing a young adult adventure novel. In truth, being with Dante helped her feel less alone in the world, so she never kicked him out of bed. Or out the door. Plus he adored her. And yet she felt they were like two pieces of a puzzle that fit but didn't truly belong together. But Dante was so sure in his love for her it was natural that she should love him too. Over the years, a gnawing notion grew inside her like a prickly weed that had been ignored too long. Now she wasn't sure if she still loved him. Or if she ever did.

Doris leaned forward, out of Dante's embrace, and ran her index finger back and forth across the flame of one of the yellow roman candles on the table, watching it affect the shadows on the walls. Admittedly, life with Dante wasn't completely without merit. He earned a decent wage and had a steady paycheck (more than she could say about herself) plus a rent-controlled apartment in North Beach. She immediately felt at home in the cozy two bedroom flat and its quirky San Franciscan neighborhood, with its used book and second hand clothing stores, its corner coffee house which not only made a perfect macchiato, but sometimes threw in an extra shot of espresso. She'd miss the aroma of freshly made napoleons, cannolis, struffolis, and other pastries, coming from the Italian bakery every morning, weekend picnics watching local bands play in the park, and early evening runs nodding hello to neighbors and dog walkers. As much as she wrote about spirited heroines braving epic journeys into unfamiliar lands, she'd become exceedingly reliant on the comforts of familiar arms and well-travelled territories.

Amy put on an old Patti Page album. *Moon River* softly filled the room. Doris closed her eyes, letting luscious violins carry her down a long, lazy river. She liked how Patti's notes sometimes strained, subtly breaking at the edge of emotion and vulnerability. She kept her eyes closed. Until her stomach settled down. Until she

heard nothing. Not even the sounds of conversation. Her head felt like she'd submerged in a bottomless ocean. Was this how it felt to be cradled by a cocoon of water? It would be the size of a lima bean right now, she supposed. She felt her heart beat and imagined another one just a step behind. If she could've stopped time, this would've been the moment. She slowly opened her eyes. Dante knelt beside her with a small gray felt box in his palm.

"Did you hear me?" Dante lifted its small lid to reveal a gold ring. "So how about it?"

The modest single diamond sparkled briefly in the light. The room was quiet, except for Patti singing softly. Doris, now aware that Amy and Rich had left the room, heard the muffled rumble of a car rushing underneath the apartment's picture window. Her stomach acids suddenly kicked upward, burning inside her throat. The ring box sat open in Dante's hand, suspended in the space two feet in front of her. She blinked, unable to move or talk. Shadows from the candles' flickering flames darted across his smile, giving him a slightly ghoulish appearance. The hazy atmosphere of the candlelight pressed around her. She smelled the wax melting.

She had to say something.

The ceiling and walls shifted at her periphery, as the words, "I'm pregnant," croaked out of her mouth.

On the way home, Dante was uncharacteristically quiet. The streetlamps gave off a halo glow in the misty night. With both his hands firmly on the steering wheel, he focused his attention on the steep hilly street of jelly bean-colored Victorian row houses. When they reached its crest, Doris caught a glimpse of lights on the city's rusty red suspension bridge through the moving fog. It was fitting her father ended up in a part of the country connected by eight bridges. The Golden Gate Bridge was the last bridge she and her father ever stood on together. The summer before the cancer finally took him, she clutched her father's frail body as if the two of them could protect each other from the cold, misty wind. She'd regretted taking him outside, especially with so many people, but it'd been one of those precious few sunny days in San Francisco. And he insisted. He didn't say it was his last wish but she suspected later that it was.

"Promise me you'll keep making up your stories. Maybe tell them to my grandkids someday." His voice scratched against his throat like gravel on cement and

broke when it pitched high. The chemo had made him so weak that even talking took effort. His once strong, rosy arms were merely skin hanging onto bones, and his full head of wiry brown hair was reduced to patches of fuzz. That day, while they watched sailboats crossing the bay like handkerchiefs over tempered glass, he held onto her tightly as if she was the only thing that kept him tethered to this world. "Promise you'll live a good and happy life, find a man who makes you laugh and treats you like his queen. Because you deserve that Doris. More than anything." Her father cupped her cold hands and faced her fully while the ocean wind whirled around them. "Promise me you'll go back to school. Promise me you won't stay out of pity."

It hurt to hear him talk like that. Pity. Was that what he saw when she sat with him during the entire slow drip of drugs which made him increasingly irritable and weak, stayed up all night in the hospital to change his sweat-drenched t-shirts, and dealt with the doctors and the insurance company? After his bone marrow transplant, he badgered her into registering for fall courses at San Francisco State. Less than two months later, she held his hand in an ambulance while it raced down Protrero in the rain to San Francisco General. She never went back to finish her classes. It was clear to her now that Dante represented everything her earlier life wasn't, something she had greatly needed when she met him: stability, security, and most of all, stillness.

Stretches of fog now reached, like giant, marshmallow fingers, over and down the hills, reminding Doris of an evening six years ago, when she and Dante had driven back through Marin after a long day of wine tasting. Dante had drunk much less, feeling the responsibility of driver and new boyfriend. But that was a much different fog back then. It was the kind of fog that enchants and makes you believe in promises that can't possibly be fulfilled.

On Monday, Doris logged off and looked at her watch. Ten minutes to go. She stood up and peered over the cubicle walls like a gopher popping out of its hole. A few executives hovered by cubicles and offices. An assistant rushed past to get to the printer. Grooved lines stretched across the woman's forehead. Her shoulders bore the weight of resentful resignation. Offices Doris temped in were filled with people like this woman. Her boss soon rounded the corner, heading toward her office. Doris quickly sat back down. Anxious flurries flared just below her solar plexus. She was purposely avoiding her boss, who'd been in meetings most of the day. Maybe she could delay one more day

to give her answer.

Doris pulled the small gray box out of her purse. Was she really going to go through with it? The diamond flashed under the florescent lights.

“Good job on the proposal.”

Doris spun around in her chair, confused. She hadn't noticed the account executive she'd helped earlier was standing behind her. Her co-worker wasn't as frayed and edgy as when Doris had last seen her. The woman smiled broadly. “We got the account.”

The woman leaned in and squealed in her ear. “Oooh, that's pretty - is that an *engagement* ring?”

Doris' throat went dry while searching, grasping for words. She shook her head, forcing a casual smile, and closed the box, tossing it back into her purse, as if it were a toy prize she'd found in a crackerjack box. Heat rushed from her collar to her cheeks. The dryness now collected into a small, dense ball stuck at the base of her throat. Swallowing failed to get rid of it. She wasn't exactly lying. After all, she hadn't officially said yes, and the last thing she wanted was for news about it to spread.

After the woman walked away, Doris quickly wove her way through the maze of cubicles, dodging the account managers she worked with. She was glad to be out of there. The fluorescent lights had been giving her headaches lately. By the time she reached her car, she was lightheaded and unsteady. The exhaust fumes from passing cars made her nauseous. She held onto the car door until the feeling passed. Her life had become like her head, spinning out of control. She had to give him back his ring. She felt like a kid who'd pulled a prank that went too far. Absent-mindedly, Doris massaged her tummy. Tonight was as good a time as any.

Doris sat down across from Dante and devoured his chicken and mushroom risotto. Lately, she was either sick to her stomach or ravenous like an adolescent boy. He'd come home early and fixed dinner. She could tell from the smell of turpentine on the jacket hanging on the coat rack by the front door. He still worked for the same painting company that had hired him after he dropped out of law school. Now he headed his own crew and set his own hours. The turpentine smell never left his clothes or hair, no matter how many times they were washed.

After their meal, Doris put the small gray box on the table and slid it toward

Dante. "I can't accept, especially when you had no idea about ...my situation."

Dante stared at the box, his hands staying where they were. "You said you didn't want kids."

"That was a long time ago."

"So you've decided to keep it?" A flash of worry betrayed him. The way he said *it* bothered her. *It* was nothing more than an inconvenience to him. *It* was a hassle; *it* was an obstacle; *it* threatened his future plans.

"That's not what I said. And that shouldn't matter." Doris fidgeted in her chair. The risotto had begun to work its way down. She wondered if she should tell him she'd already made her appointment at the clinic. "What if I don't keep it now, but wish I had later?"

He leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. "So now you *want* kids."

"I don't know. But I might." There was an irritation in her voice she hadn't intended. She wondered if he was being purposely dense. She looked down at her belly, feeling the risotto pushing through her digestive tract. Maybe she was right not to tell him about her appointment. "Like I saying, my situation changes everything – at the very least, my perspective."

"Your *situation* doesn't change a thing. I still want to marry you." Dante pushed the gray box back toward her.

Doris refused to touch it. "What's the use of going down the aisle if I change my mind about children in a few years? I'd start to resent you for it."

"If that's what you really want," Dante took her hand into his. "Then I'd man-up. I'd do what it takes."

Doris winced. This was exactly what she didn't want. She didn't want him to fight for her. She didn't want him to try to make it work. She'd given him an easy way out. Why couldn't he just take it? Her stomach gurgled; garlic and rosemary flavors still lingered on her tongue.

"Then you'd resent me."

"I'll support you in whatever you decide to do." He wasn't going to let something like a pregnancy get in the way. The bravado in his voice sounded like fingernails raking across a blackboard.

"But what if," Doris' voice shook slightly. She cleared her throat, feeling a flush of heat on her cheeks, and pulled her hand away. "What if I don't...maybe..." Why was

he making her spell it out for him? Her next words burned like bitter melon on her tongue. "Maybe I was never...in love with you?"

Her last words hung in the air like the fading note of a train conductor's whistle. The muscles between her shoulder blades relaxed, as if she let go of a breath she'd been holding for six years. Dante quietly picked up the box and opened the lid.

"I've always known I loved you more. I'm okay with that." He smiled. "I'd like to think you've loved me back in your way."

It wasn't the answer she'd expected. Doris wrinkled her brow and shook her head. "But that's not--"

"Look at us, Doris. Look around at what we have together." He swept his arm in a wide arc, as if the apartment was a palatial estate. "What we have is a good thing." Dante took her hand into his again. "We get along, don't we? That's more than what a lot of others can say." He was referring to Amy and Rich. Once madly in love, they now bickered all the time. Doris was used to the occasional late night call when she did little more than agree and offer sympathy to Amy. "What we have is based in reality, without expectations that neither of us can live up to. No disappointments when the fantasy doesn't turn out."

He had a valid point, Doris thought. What was love anyway, but a shitload of work in return for distress and disenchantment? Dante continued to make his case. No matter what she said, he had a more rational reason for staying together. He debated her logic. She hesitated. He asked her leading questions. She squirmed. He offered counterpoints. Her confidence eroded. By the time she saw the last kaleidoscope of colors disappear below the jagged city skyline through their bay window, his arguments made sense again. Dante didn't hide his relief when Doris finally told him about her appointment at Planned Parenthood.

"No expectations and no illusions." She repeated his words.

"And no highs or lows. Isn't that so much better?" Dante took the ring out and slipped it on her finger. Sized slightly too large, the weight of the stone kept shifting the ring, so that the setting faced the wrong side of her hand. His arms soon engulfed her small body. His chest so close to her face, with its faint smell of sweat and turpentine, made her queasy. He lifted her face up with his hand and kissed her with such a yearning that his body trembled slightly.

When they made love that night, Doris closed her eyes and tried to picture him

as someone else. Someone who didn't smell of paint or turpentine. Someone whose hands were not clammy, clumsy, or clueless. Someone she craved like chocolate candy to a child. It usually worked, but not tonight. In the darkness, she could hear Dante's labored breathing. His sweat had become like a sticky coating between their bodies. He went to kiss her. She turned her face so his lips landed on her cheek. They rarely fought. In fact, she couldn't remember the last time they had an argument. What else did a relationship really need? After all, generations before them had gotten married for far more practical reasons.

"I have more than enough love for the both of us," he whispered in her ear as they lay beside each other. He squeezed her hand under the sheet. She didn't answer. Instead she rolled over onto her side and gazed out of the window at the moon. It would be full soon.

Doris pressed her cheek against the top of Jack's head and kissed him lightly. Amy still washed his hair with baby shampoo. He'd scrambled onto her lap and fallen asleep while she told him one of her old road stories. His four-year-old fingers clutched her upper arm, and his head rested against her chest, while he softly snored. When Amy scooped him up to carry him to his bed, she whispered to meet her in the kitchen, where she'd prepared sandwiches. Their weekly lunches were Amy's welcomed breaks from wiping up spills, negotiating toy rights, and triaging scraped elbows. She soon joined Doris, and between bites of her sandwich, gave her latest account of her disappointment in Rich. Doris had heard all this before. Richard wasn't involved with the children as much as Amy thought he ought to be. He hadn't become the person she imagined he'd be, and sadly, neither was she.

"So do you regret it? You know, Rich, the kids?"

"The boys? Never! Rich? God, we were so young. What the hell did we know?" Amy laughed. "Every now and then, when the boys are finally asleep, and it's just us, we're back to being the kids who couldn't keep their hands off each other."

Shaking her head, she stood up and began to clear away their dishes. "I just wish he'd think about our future." Amy wanted to move to a bigger place. The boys were outgrowing the apartment. They needed a yard where they could play, but that required Rich to get a better paying job.

"Just because a job pays more, doesn't make it better."

“Are you talking about Rich or about yourself?” Amy leaned over the narrow counter. “Have you decided what you’re going to do?”

Doris checked her watch to see how much time she had left. “Not yet. But they’re expecting me to accept.” She explained how before, she was simply *the temp* and ignored like another piece of furniture. “Now, people greet me or stop by my cube to ask me how I’m doing.”

“You make it sound like a bad thing.”

“Don’t you see? I’ll be a prisoner like everyone else.”

“We all have to enter the prisons of our choosing eventually.” Amy put the bread, cheese and cold cuts back into the refrigerator. “Speaking of which, I see you’re wearing it.”

Doris extended her hand out before her, shifting it so she could see the ring in slightly different angles. She sighed. “It doesn’t fit.”

When lunch was over, Doris sat in her car for a moment, resting her hands on her stomach, feeling its small, fleshy mound. The attraction she first felt for Dante never generated a lot of heat or sparks. It was never filled with unrealistic hope and nervous anticipation. Nor was it ever hungry, breathless, achy, scary, stirring or satisfying. Not once had she experienced the feeling of free-falling into something greater than the both of them. But it never demanded of her what she didn’t already have. Or required strength or foresight or sacrifice. It was never less than she expected nor any more.

Later that afternoon, she walked into her boss’ office and accepted the permanent position. Her boss was pleased and unsurprised. The next day, several people including an executive manager, who never before looked at her or returned a smile when they passed in the hall, stopped to thank her for her work on the proposal. He puffed up proudly when telling her how their presentations were going incorporate the same kind of graphics she’d used. Then he asked, or rather stated, that she show a few others. After she managed to grunt a *yes*, he responded with a pat on the back of her shoulder. “Great. We’ll have you teach a class.”

When she returned to her desk, her chest and shoulders felt as if she’d been given a hundred pound sack to carry. As soon as the clock turned five, she hurried out of the building to take a deep breath of open, unrecycled and unfiltered air, and threw up in the bushes near her car.

On the day of her appointment at Planned Parenthood, Doris stopped Dante from grabbing his car keys. She sat him down on the sofa, before pulling off the small solitaire diamond ring and placing it in his palm. "I just can't do this."

"But why? Why now?" Dante's voice strained and cracked. "Didn't I say you could keep it if you wanted?"

"It's not about that." Doris shook her head, feeling her chest constricting and tears forming in her eyes. She was going to do this, she thought. Push through no matter what. "For the past six years I wanted to believe eventually I'd fall in love with you. That someday I'd be head over heels. But we both know that's never going to happen."

Dante drew her close to him. She could smell a faint trace of turpentine.

Doris pulled away. "Stop it. Please. Don't you see?" Her voice scratched against the sob rising in her throat. She felt flurries deep in her abdomen, but she had to keep going. "I can't go through life never knowing how it feels to be so close to someone that I can't stand being away for one day. And when I'm with him, I know I can be a better person."

"That's how I feel about you," he said hoarsely. "Why can't that be good enough?"

"I don't know. It just isn't." She was sobbing now. Dante encircled his arms around her, kissing the top of her head. He held her quietly until the doorbell rang. Amy had come to take her to the clinic.

"I need to do this by myself," Doris insisted, after Dante declared he'd go with her. She pressed her cheek against his chest. He hugged her back even tighter. When the wool of his sweater began to make her nose itch, she gently broke his embrace. She had to keep moving. She turned around quickly to avoid his eyes, which had become bloodshot and teary, and walked out into the morning fog.

While Amy drove down the city streets, Doris stared out of the passenger window. She watched a mother holding the end of a bicycle while her helmeted son wobbled down the sidewalk toward a small park. Maybe in five years, she'll look back and see this was the best decision for both of them, she thought. Maybe she'll finally finish that young adult novel she started six years ago.

After pulling into the small parking lot next to the clinic, just before she took the

key out of the ignition, Amy asked her, "Ready to do this?"

"Yes. No." Doris said. "Not completely."

Several minutes later, after confirming her appointment with the receptionist, she asked to change to a different doctor. The woman raised her eyebrows. "Are you sure?"

Doris nodded. Once her name was called, a nurse weighed her in and took her blood pressure. She sat on the edge of the narrow examining table. The white paper rustled underneath her. Amy sat quietly on a chair beside her. When the doctor came in, he asked her how she was feeling. Along with her nausea and sensitivity to smells, she described how her hips felt wider, and her breasts were bigger and tender. She spread her fingers out before him to show how she'd begun to retain water. The doctor assured her these symptoms were normal. He had her lay down before he spread a cool blue-green gel on her exposed abdomen and slid the sensor. The machine next to her whirred. "Hear that? That's the heartbeat."

Doris propped herself up on her elbows. It has a heartbeat, she thought. A shiver rippled down her spine. No, not *it*. "That's him?"

"Or her." Amy smiled, squeezing her hand. By the end of the examination, Doris carried a list of books, a stack of pamphlets and a bottle of prenatal vitamins. Her knees knocked slightly while she dressed, like when she'd stood with her father on the Royal Gorge Bridge, a rickety bridge overlooking a ten mile long canyon and suspended almost a thousand feet over the Arkansas River. When Doris opened the clinic's door, the sunlight was blinding. The morning fog had broken. She put on a pair of sunglasses. Their tinted lens gave the landscape a ruddy, alien hue.

Sheila Thorne

## Get Out If You Can

The summer of 1974 was a rough time for Sherman Way, with lay-offs and sky-rocketing gas prices.

The block-and-a-half long street of single story frame houses, part of a tract built in the thirties for workers at a nearby cannery that had long since closed down, dead-ended at a park. Cars were parked on front lawns for washing and fixing. The pollarded trees along the sidewalk offered no shade. A few blocks away, freeway traffic swished with the sound of rolling breakers, and in the distance to the east rose a line of bare California hills, brown wrinkles of land.

Torpolo Gadea had gotten laid off from a tire factory. After looking for work in the mornings, a fatiguing, humiliating occupation, he spent most afternoons in the backyard patio watching the baseball game on the television he'd rigged up outside with an extension cord, drinking beers to obliterate the heartbreak of the morning while babysitting his three boys, Joe, Billy, and Bobby, each a year apart in age and one-and-a-half inches apart in height. His wife, Teresa, had had to take a part-time job as a telephone dispatcher for a plumbing company to make ends meet, and so the afternoon shift fell on him.

—That employment office is useless, man. It's pure buzzard meat out there, he griped to his friend Willie. Willie, while visiting his in-laws, the Silvas, two houses away, had dropped over one Saturday to see how Torpolo was doing. For a long time Willie and his wife Jessica and their two little children had all lived crammed together in the Silvas' house, until Willie landed a job with the fire department and moved his family into a brand new development on the south side of town. Now he and Jessica talked about things like jazz clubs in the City and ski-mobiling at Tahoe, activities people on this street couldn't even imagine.

Willie nodded sympathetically. —I read that GM just laid off thirty-five thousand in Detroit.

—I hate to see my old lady having to work like this. I just hate it.

—You know what? I saw Frank getting into his pickup just as I pulled into Al's. He yelled out he was going to the mall for the afternoon.

—Oh oh, he must be worrying about his job too.

Frank worked at Ford and had a history of going on furniture buying sprees whenever he felt anxious.

—Care for a hit? asked Torpolo, lighting up a joint.

—No thanks, I don't touch that stuff now with my job and all.

Torpolo narrowed his eyes and sucked in. —Drink wine now, do you?

He was jealous that Willie had gotten out of this fucking neighborhood. It was degenerating every day. Young truant boys from the junior high sniffed glue behind some bushes in a corner of the park next to the tot lot. The field in the park was just that—a weedy field, bare-patched, full of gopher holes, something no one could care about. Often, on week-end nights, older boys crashed their junky cars through the chain link gates of the park and spun around the field with racing engines and shrieking brakes.

The Gadeas lived in the third house from the park. Next door to them, second house from the park, lived the widow Julia, who was seventy-five but looked more like ninety, and was the only one on the street who'd lived in the tract since it was first built. She spent her days sitting at the front window behind drawn curtains reconnoitering the street through a crack between the two panels. No one in the neighborhood knew that in the thirties, when she'd worked at the Sherman Packing Company, now closed down, she'd walked the night shift picket line for the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Union when it was fighting for representation, carrying a small twenty-two caliber pistol in her pocket for self-protection against goons.

The Silvas lived on the other side of Julia, right up against the park. They both worked at one of the few canneries remaining in town, Al as a mechanic and Dolores as a line supervisor. During the seasonal lay-off periods Dolores would become uncontrollably depressed and go on drinking binges, coming home late at night, alone, then crying and breaking dishes and flower pots against the wall; more than once not only Julia but all the neighbors nearby had peeked through their window curtains to witness the sad spectacle of Dolores being pushed, screaming, into a police car.

Willie deserved to get away from that, Torpolo conceded to himself.

In the kitchen Teresa was telling Jessica about her job. Their children were riding their banana-bar bicycles in long loopy circles between the house and the park.

—You wouldn't believe how many clogged or broken pipes there are in this city. I'm busy every minute! But you know? I kind of like it. But don't say a word to Willie, because poor Torpie...

Just then the Silvas' big black dog escaped from the garage and barked at the children's feet. Bobby, the littlest, started howling, and Jessica ran out to shoo the dog into the backyard pen. Teresa got up to make snacks for everybody.

Two teenage girls with pompadour bangs and black-rimmed eyes strutted past the house on their way to the park.

—What I say is, I don't care what he says.

—That's what I say.

—I can get anyone I want between my legs—that's all.

—Really.

—That's all.

—Uh huh.

Teresa, hearing them through the open kitchen window, smiled. She envied their easy boldness, she herself having been raised strictly, not allowed to date until she was fifteen and then chaperoned by an older cousin. If she'd had just a little more experience in the world, she often thought, how different might her life have been?

Jessica returned. —Well guess what now. There's a bunch of cholo teenagers congregating in the park, taking over the swing sets.

—Let them have their fun. They're just kids too.

—You're crazy to put up with that, Teresa. I'm so glad we got out of here.

Late in the day Frank drove home with his pickup full of iron patio furniture which he lugged through a side gate behind the garage and arranged around a cemented laundry-line area in the back of the yard, the patio area being already covered with a redwood picnic table, benches, and Adirondack chairs. His wife Verna stood at the back door with her hands on her hips.

—Say what! Where do you expect me to air the sheets now!

—No problem. You can just push the furniture to the side when you want to use the line.

—Huh! You crazy? And who the hell wants to go sit by a parking lot anyway?

Their back yard backed up against the God of Prophecy Church parking lot. Every Saturday night in the low square church building horns blew and cymbals clashed as the congregation stomped and clapped and punctuated the darkened neighborhood with ecstatic shouts.

—I do, said Frank, and plopped down on the flower-patterned plastic cushions

of the new chaise lounge. —I can get closer to the show here.

He sat a minute to prove his point then hauled himself back up. On his way into the house, glimpsing his neighbor Elvira in her back yard, he shouted —If I ever catch any cats pissing on my new furniture I'm going to shoot them with a B-B gun!

At last count Elvira had nineteen cats. She shouted back —You pull out that gun and I'll have the Humane Society out here before you know what hit you!

—Self defense! Those cats are trespassing on my property.

—Your property! Nothing of yours is your property. The bank owns it all.

—I'll get the Humane Society to arrest you with all those damn cats of yours running wild, said Frank at the brink of the door, before slamming it firmly.

He and Verna had been fighting with Elvira for twelve years, ever since his sons had built a playhouse out of derelict wood in the back yard, and her sons had climbed over the fence in the night and trashed it. Her sons were overprotected, obese, and troubled. Her husband, a truck driver, was a quiet man who hadn't been home much to discipline them, and then he had a heart attack and became quieter still. So Elvira ran the family in her own pig-headed way, probably collecting cats just to get even with him, Frank, whose sons had gone off to college and the army, while hers still hung around home working on cars and playing their boom boxes too loud.

As soon as he entered the house Verna sprang on him. —This time you've really gone too far, Frank. You know how deep in the hole we are and this time there's no way out of it. They're not going to let us just declare bankruptcy and solve it all. We're screwed.

Frank looked at her despondently. —There's something I can't get out of my mind. Last night a man on my line lost control of the rivet gun and got all sliced up by a piece of dangling metal. From his eye down to his chin the skin on his face just flapping, blood all over the place. But the belt never stopped moving and we had to keep going. The damn foreman yelled for a replacement before he went to help the poor sucker.

—Oh. Verna put her hand to her mouth. —That's awful. Then she broiled up again. —But why do you have to take on all the problems of the whole world? She stomped off, tacking in lurching, erratic bursts of stopping and starting through the maze of sofas, Lazy Boy recliners, coffee tables, and ottomans.

The summer wore on, hot and leaden, saturating the air with brown, gritty smog. Torpolo still didn't find a job. Julia, the old lady, watched the street through the crack in her curtains.

Isabel Garcia, thirteen years old, was found to be pregnant. She'd been a flat-chested gawky girl still covered with a layer of baby fat who still rode her bike around the neighborhood with Torpolo's boys. —How could this happen! Who did it? her mother screamed. —Behind St. Joseph's, Isabel whimpered. Later, her mother cried and hugged her. —We'll take care of it. I'll raise it just like my own child. Isabel started curling and spraying her hair, wearing bright red lipstick, and sticking out her newly developing breasts, feeling like a real woman now. Privately, in their houses, people shook their heads. This lousy neighborhood. These shameless teenagers.

More and more teenagers hung out at the park, day and night, playing hard metal on their boom boxes at a roar that made the street reverberate. One afternoon Torpolo caught his five-year old smoking. He wrenched the cigarette out of Bobby's hand. —Who gave this to you? Bobby pointed to a boy in the park. —He made me. He was going to hurt me, Bobby sobbed. Torpolo stormed over to the park and in his rage swatted the teenager. He called in a complaint to the cops about the situation in the park, and in the evening a cop came to his door, not in response to his complaint but with a charge of assault from the mother of the boy he had swatted. In the end the cop did not charge him, but Torpolo felt something wrenched inside him, letting loose a molten fury.

—We're going to get out of here if it's the last thing I do, he said through gritted teeth to Teresa.

And finally, at the end of the summer, he found a job. As a dog catcher. A good job, a county job with benefits and a pension plan, a much better job, in the long run, than the old tire factory job had been. He was so proud and happy that on Labor Day weekend, shortly after landing it, he threw a barbecue party for all his friends and neighbors. He set up stereo speakers in the back yard and bought a keg of beer and put up a hand-written sign on the front door that said dope was forbidden. —I've got to be careful now with a government job and everything, he went around explaining. He told Al and Dolores they should lock up their dog better.

Every day he went to work in a uniform and drove around with an old-timer learning how to lasso with a net and muzzle and set traps. Eventually he would get his

own truck. Teresa quit her job to stay at home, but missed the excitement of plumbing emergencies. On weekends the family drove around looking at new housing developments.

One Saturday morning Julia took her post at the window, as usual, and looked out at a shocking scene. A sheriff's car and a van were parked in front of Frank and Verna's house across the street and the sheriff was directing a team of men in dark blue coveralls who were hauling out the contents of the house and heaping it all at the edge of the lawn—bed frames, drawers, television sets, couches, Lazy-boys, the new iron patio furniture, like spilled guts exposed to the world. Neither Frank nor Verna was in sight.

This was too much for Julia to keep to herself. She scurried out to alarm her neighbors. First she woke the Gadeas up, then she made her way to the Silvas, but before she got to the front door the big black dog came tearing around the corner of the house barking fiercely, and terrified, she backed off. She hobbled across the street to tell Elvira the cat lady and found her and her husband already goggling from their front door. The neighbor on the other side of Frank's house, an elderly widow like Julia except unlike Julia she dressed up and went out to play bingo and go to card clubs every weekend, was also already watching, standing in her front yard dressed in a bathrobe. Julia then went to Isabel's house. —Oh no! said Isabel's mother, and came running out to the street.

Then Julia brushed past the startled sheriff to find Frank and Verna. They were seated on the kitchen table—the chairs had already been removed—gripping the sides and looking dazed. —This is all his fault, Verna wailed when she saw Julia. —I kept telling him. I kept warning him.

—You're being evicted? Is that what's going on? said Julia.

Frank stuck his jaw out and didn't say anything. —Yes, we're being evicted, and all on account of him. You scumbag! Verna turned and screamed at him.

—Oh no, this isn't right, I don't care what you say. After all these years, said Julia, shaking her head.

Something about the scene—the sheriff, the men in blue, the forlorn couple, the starkness of the rooms being emptied of all life—seemed vaguely familiar to Julia. Of course at her age almost everything seemed familiar: almost all faces were like faces she'd seen before, almost any event was comparable to something in her past. Still shaking her head, she went outside, where there was now a group of neighbors in front

of the growing pile of household goods. Murmuring together they watched distrustfully the blue men going back and forth.

—I don't care what kind of dodo he is, no one deserves to be thrown out of their home like this, said Elvira. She realized with a pang what fun it had been spitting with them all these years.

—That's right, said Teresa. Torpolo eyed the Silvas' black dog scampering excitedly to and fro between the clump of onlookers and the Silvas' yard, where it pawed the dirt and barked fiercely. —What are they going to do with all this stuff? Why are they piling it here? said Isabel's mother.

Julia began to recall more distinctly what seemed familiar, what had already happened before, many, many years ago when all these houses were brand new and smaller, owned by the cannery she worked at. Had it been in this very neighborhood, or somewhere nearby? It was still vague, but she followed her memory and stepped forward to the pile of goods, ferreted out a milk glass lamp and a set of aluminum mixing bowls, small, light things that she could easily carry in her shriveled arms, and walked with them back into Frank and Verna's house. —Hey! What d' you think you're doing, said the sheriff gruffly, but he hesitated to lay a hand on an old lady. She set the items down on the kitchen counter while Frank and Verna looked at her with surprise.

When she returned to the pile, Al Silva and another man were already lifting the double bed frame. As they staggered up the front walk, one of the moving men came outside with the lamp and bowls again. The sheriff started shouting —Everyone move back to the street! Dolores Silva ignored him and picked the lamp and bowls back up and walked into the house behind the bed frame, which acted as a ram that forced the sheriff aside. Julia picked up a couch cushion, Teresa and Elvira grabbed kitchen chairs, Isabel's mother took a small table, and walking abreast with their burdens thrust in front like shields, they steamrolled towards the front door.

Others stepped up to the pile. The sheriff went to his car to call for reinforcements, while the moving men, threatening and shoving the people away from the pile to no avail, tried to carry everything back out but were unable to keep up with the people, who far outnumbered them as more distant neighbors down the street, attracted by the hullabaloo, joined the fray. Teenagers in trickles of twos and threes began to make their way to the park for the first smoke of the day or the first hit of speed or sniff of glue, and they joined in also, not understanding exactly what was going on

but feeling their blood leap to the crackle of excitement in the air and sensing the chance to fight the cops. Soon enough a police car screeched up, siren wailing, red light flashing, and then another, but that only brought out more people from streets farther away. In the ensuing melee, Torpolo tapped Teresa and said into her ear, —Put that thing down. We've gotta get out of here.

—But why? she said, surprised.

—Listen, there's going to be a riot, and I can't afford to be involved, not with my government job.

He had not carried anything into the house, himself. For a long time he'd stood by the pile debating with himself, and finally decided not to, because a person has to get ahead in life, no? You can't get sidetracked, he had bogarted his life too long in a shitty job, smoking dope and going with the flow. Now he was going to save his wife and kids from this crummy neighborhood, like Willy had.

Teresa, though feeling ashamed, obeyed him. They went back to their living room, where they had left the boys watching cartoons, and viewed the rest of the action through a crack in the curtains at the front window.

As if it had been planned, though it hadn't been, the teenagers rampaged with bottles, cans, and bare fists, diverting the cops' attention and forcing them to fan out through the park and nearby streets in pursuit, so that the neighbors succeeded in overwhelming the blue moving men and carried all the belongings back into the house. Then as many as could fit crammed into the house with Frank and tearful Verna, locked the door, and waited. A few teenagers were arrested, handcuffed, shoved into the cop cars and driven off. The blue men got into their van and drove off too, after one of them angrily kicked an empty beer can onto the front lawn.

No one emerged from the house for at least an hour—they were busy partying—then one by one they ventured out.

—We won, said Teresa from beside the window. —Can you beat that? We won.

—They didn't win. You'll see, they'll be back tomorrow, and how long can this go on?

He knew this was so, that it was hopeless to fight against a system they were all caught up in, that he should just shut up and hold onto his job and be grateful that he, at least, was going to get out. For what else could possibly explain the emptiness that had ripped open inside him and was tunneling to his heart?

# Interview With Rachelle Cruz

For our first issue, we talked to poet Rachelle Cruz about her chapbook *Self-Portrait as Rumor and Blood*, which was published by Dancing Girl Press in 2012. Rachelle is from Hayward, California. Her work is forthcoming or has appeared in *The Collagist*, *The LitPub*, *Stone Highway*, *The Bakery*, *Bone Bouquet*, *PANK Magazine*, *Muzzle Magazine*, *Splinter Generation*, KCET's Departures Series, *Inlandia: A Literary Journey*, among others. She hosts *The Blood-Jet Writing Hour* on Blog Talk Radio. An Emerging Voices Fellow, a Kundiman Fellow and a VONA writer, she lives and writes in Southern California.

## Elsewhere

*On reading your chapbook, we felt that you're doing a lot with different voices. You have many persona poems in your chapbook, it's very polyvocal. How did you decide upon this structure?*

## Rachelle Cruz

First off, thank you, Nandini and Dena for reading my chapbook! I so appreciate this opportunity to talk about my poems.

Yes, the chapbook is haunted by many, many voices. The voices of the aswang witch, an anthropologist, a young girl living in Northern California, a chorus of gossipers.

Margaret Atwood's "Half-Hanged Mary" appears in the beginning as a preface to the poems.

When I first started writing about the aswang back in 2006-2007, I had a very difficult time accessing her life, her body, her story. I sputtered out poems in the second-person about the aswang, but they felt emotionally distant. Actually, they just plain sucked.

A poetry mentor of mine, Laurel Ann Bogen, introduced me to Atwood's POETRY (I was familiar with the English class-required *A Handmaid's Tale*). I read *Morning in the Burned House* and *The Journals of Susana Moodie*, which were sizzling with imagery and voice through the persona. Her poems blew me away. I'm sure I was also reading drafts of poems on Barbara Jane Reyes' blog that were later compiled and published in her book, *Diwata*.

I'm wild about the persona form. It sent a shock wave to my imagination. I situated the aswang at the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair; notable for its "Philippine Reservation," an exhibition of "natives" from throughout the archipelago, among many colonial projects displayed at the Fair. She interrogated the anthropologist who "discovered" her. She

fought with her mother. She became a superhero in Los Angeles. She ate endless bowls of pho. (Many of these poems never made it to the chapbook and now only exist as the shadow selves of the poems that did.)

The persona forced me to confront my own monstrosity, my darkness, my own complicity. I am the creature and the bespectacled academic who writes and studies her.

The persona form feels intuitive for me. I grew up imitating my older girl cousins, aunts and best friends, and now versions of their voices and stories end up in my poems as well.

### **Elsewhere**

*How did you come to this project? What is it about the aswang figure that captured your interest and imagination?*

### **Rachelle Cruz**

My mother told me about the aswang when I was a child living in Hayward, California near overgrown cypress and redwood trees that sometimes felt like they would swallow our house up. I felt very far yet close to Bicol, Philippines where my parents are from. My mother would terrify my sister and me when she turned her eyelids INSIDE OUT. She would cackle the entire time and tell us it was the way her and her siblings scared the pixies in the forests near her barrio.

One afternoon, I came home from school to my mother and a family friend talking about a former classmate of theirs who was hypnotized by an aswang. She sucked the youth out of her, my mother's friend said. I imagined a straw inserted into this girl's arm, like an IV, wrinkling her face, withering her body into an old woman's.

I couldn't shake the aswang when I got to college. I kept writing the above-mentioned bad poems about her, and she still sneaks into my work.

A few years ago, when I felt at a loss in the process of writing aswang poems, a friend asked: what would happen if the aswang came to the United States? Would they believe in her then?

Maybe it really started then.

### **Elsewhere**

*We were really struck by the ways in which your poems allude to the act of watching. For example, the poem "The Anthropologist Fantasizes About the Aswang." Can you talk a little bit about the way gaze (colonial gaze, male gaze, any other forms of gaze) works in your chapbook?*

## Rachelle Cruz

The gaze has so much to do with story. The “official” story. Who controls it? Who narrates it? Who changes history?

One of the early poems in *Self-Portrait as Rumor and Blood* is “Figure A,” which is my twist on Philippine historian, Maximo D. Ramos’ ethnographic work on the aswang and Philippine folklore. Besides my mother’s stories, the only other source of “official” knowledge about the aswang that I found in my research was Ramos’ book, *The Aswang Complex in Philippine Folklore* and a few other articles by him.

What happens when story is seen primarily through the lens of anthropology, a discipline fraught with a history of racism?

I’m interested in what happens when the aswang upholds the male or colonial gaze in order to understand or come to terms with her own experience. How does she perpetuate patriarchy? How does she resist it? I’m thinking of Rachel McKibbens’ poem, “Tomboy:”

“It was my own wild language, passed down  
to me by my father: words, sounds, rages,  
the darkest blue shades of misogyny  
no child’s mouth should ever dare commit.”

A girl who learns how to hate women from her father. An aswang who talks shit about her sisters and cousins behind their backs then later embraces them.

## Elsewhere

*Your chapbook is also very rooted in space. There are actual references to real physical places, then there are spaces like the home, the metaphorical spaces. How did you decide upon the sites, the spaces and places of your poems?*

## Rachelle Cruz

Grounding the work in actual landscapes made the poems come alive for me. I was happy to finally write about my hometown, Hayward, in the Bay Area, which is such a strange mix between the suburb and the hood. I struggled with writing about Hayward for a long time. To be honest, I haven’t been to the Philippines in years, so many of the poems that are situated there are mostly drawn from the imagination and/or memory fragments.

I wanted to write about home and its ghosts. My parents constantly talk about “going back home” even though they’ve lived in the Bay Area for almost 30 years. This isn’t new; this speaks to so many people who are immigrants and/or exiles. What does it mean to inherit this ghost home?

### **Elsewhere**

*How do you place your work within the histories and traditions of women of color writings in US and elsewhere?*

### **Rachelle Cruz**

I'm, of course, indebted to the work of so many women of color writers, long deceased or still writing. I claim Lucille Clifton, Gloria Anzaldua as my ancestors. The work of Maxine Hong Kingston, Lynda Barry, Barbara Jane Reyes, Kim Hyesoon, Aracelis Girmay, Harryette Mullen, Naomi Shihab Nye, Sarah Gambito, Rachel McKibbens, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Jessica Hagedorn, etc., etc., have forever shaped me.

### **Elsewhere**

*Is there anything else that you would like us and our readers to know about the chapbook?*

### **Rachelle Cruz**

Dancing Girl Press published it last April, and I'm so grateful for the tireless efforts of Kristy Bowen, who promotes the work of women poets and is unstoppable. So many amazing poets, including Jane Wong, Cati Porter, Stephanie Barbe Hammer, Kate Durbin, Angela Veronica Wong, and so many others have published with DGP. Please, please check out the website ([www.dancinggirlpress.com](http://www.dancinggirlpress.com)) and buy chapbooks and support this wonderful press. You can even purchase a "mixtape" bundle of five books for about \$25.

### **Elsewhere**

*What is your next project?*

### **Rachelle Cruz**

I've incorporated some of the poems from my chapbook into my larger manuscript, entitled *The Gossip Tree, or The Aswang's Particular Thirst* (I haven't decided yet). Another monstrous figure looms large here: Imelda Marcos, former First Lady of the Philippines and hoarder of shoes (at the expense of her starving compatriots).

I'm also writing poems inspired by Cuban artist, Ana Mendieta's *Silhueta Series*, and a new character, *BANDAIDGIRL*.

## Contributors:

**Lisa Abellera** is a Filipina-American writer living in the San Francisco Bay Area. She earned her MFA in Creative Writing from the University of San Francisco and have work appearing in *The Southeast Review*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, and *The Globetrotter's Companion* (Lion Lounge Press), an anthology of creative travel writing. She is currently working on a collection of short fiction.

**Michelle Auerbach's** work has been published in *Van Gogh's Ear*, *Bombay Gin*, *Xcp*, *Chelsea*, and *The Denver Quarterly*, *Water-Stone Review*, and anthologized in *The Veil* UC Berkley Press, *Uncontained* Baksun Books, and *You. An Anthology of Essays in the Second Person* from Welcome Table Press. She is the winner of the 2011 Northern Colorado Fiction Prize and has a book of poetry forthcoming from Durga Press.

**Joan Colby** has published widely in journals such as *Poetry*, *Atlanta Review*, *South Dakota Review*, *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *New York Quarterly*, *the new renaissance*, *Grand Street*, *Epoch*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Awards include two Illinois Arts Council Literary Awards, Rhino Poetry Award, the new renaissance Award for Poetry, and an Illinois Arts Council Fellowship in Literature. She was a finalist in the GSU Poetry Contest (2007), , Nimrod International Pablo Neruda Prize (2009, 2012), and received honorable mentions in the North American Review's James Hearst Poetry Contest (2008, 2010). She is the editor of *Illinois Racing News*, and lives on a small horse farm in Northern Illinois. She has published 10 books including *The Lonely Hearts Killers*, *The Atrocity Book* and her newest book, just out from Future Cycle Press—"Dead Horses."

**Jennifer Givhan** was a 2010 Pen Rosenthal Emerging Voices Fellow, as well as a 2011 St. Lawrence Book Award finalist and a 2012 Vernice Quebodeaux Pathways Prize finalist for her poetry collection *Red Sun Mother*. Nominated for the 2012 Best of the Net and a recipient of the 2012 National Latino Writer's Conference scholarship, Givhan has also been awarded a grant to attend the low-residency MFA program at Warren Wilson College. She recently landed an agent for her first novel and is at work on her second

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**Alicia Hoffman** was raised primarily in Pennsylvania. She now lives, writes and teaches in Rochester, New York. Recent poems have been published in *SOFTBLOW*, *Rufous City Review*, *Minor Magazine*, *Camroc Press Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, and elsewhere. She is currently pursuing her MFA in Poetry at the Rainier Writing Workshop at Pacific Lutheran University.

**Abriana Jetté** is a poet, essayist, and educator from Brooklyn, New York. Her work has appeared or is forthcoming in the *American Literary Review*, *Empirical Magazine*, *The Boiler Journal*, *Page Seventeen*, and many other journals. She has taught at Boston University, the Borough of Manhattan Community College, and currently teaches at the College of Staten Island.

**Sarah Leavens** is the 2012-13 Out of the Forge writer-in-residence in Braddock, PA. She received her MFA in Poetry and Nonfiction from Chatham University, where she served as the Margaret Whitford Fellow and organized the monthly reading series Word Circus in collaboration with Most Wanted Fine Art Gallery. Her recent work has appeared in *Fourth River*, *The Diverse Arts Press* and the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* and is forthcoming from *Weave*. She teaches writing and visual art in Pittsburgh.

**Nancy Chen Long** works at Indiana University and lives with her woodsman husband and blue-eyed dog in a small cedar cabin in the forested hills of south-central Indiana. You'll find her recent and forthcoming work in *RHINO*, *The Louisville Review*, *Roanoke Review*, and *Noctua Review*. She blogs at [nancychenlong.blogspot.com](http://nancychenlong.blogspot.com).

**Shin Yu Pai** is the author of several books, including *Adamantine* (White Pine, 2010), *Sightings* (1913 Press, 2007), and *Equivalence* (La Alameda, 2003). The poems in this issue of *Elsewhere* are from her forthcoming book *Aux Arcs*. Shin Yu is a graduate of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and studied also at Naropa. For more information, visit

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**Alicia Salinas** was born in 1976 in Rosario, Argentina, on the shores of the mighty Paraná River, where she still lives. She is a journalist, poet and teacher, with a doctorate in Social Communication; her first book, *La Sumergida*, was published in 2003. Her work also appeared in *Las 40: Poetas santafesinas 1922-1981*, *Poetas del Tercer Mundo*, *Diecinueve de fondo* and *Nueve de nueve*, a selection of Argentine poetry by the Colombian journal *Arquitrave*. She was also featured in *Pulpa* (2006), *Dodecaedro de Poetas* (2004) and *Los que siguen: Veintiun Poetas Rosarinos* (2002). This poem is from her book *Gallina Ciega* (2009).

**John Oliver Simon** is one of the legendary poets of the Berkeley Sixties who has remained true to his calling. He is a distinguished translator, who received an NEA Fellowship for his work with the great Chilean Gonzalo Rojas (1917-2011). He is Artistic Director of Poetry Inside Out, a translation-in-schools program of the Center for the Art of Translation. He is editor of *Aldebaran Review* <<http://www.aldebaranreview.com>>.

**Marin Sardy** is an essayist, memoirist, and cultural critic whose work has appeared in two photography books—*Landscape Dreams* (2012) and *Ghost Ranch and the Faraway Nearby* (2009)—as well as numerous magazines and journals, including *ARTnews*, *Outside*, *Blood & Honey Review*, and *Broken Bridge Review*. She is a regular contributor to the Forum on *TheCrookedHouse.com*, and is currently pursuing an M.F.A. in Nonfiction at Columbia University.

**Fabio Sassi** is a visual artist from Bologna, Italy.

**Sheila Thorne** lives in Berkeley, California. Before teaching in the writing program at California State University, San Jose, she worked as a union organizer on factory assembly lines in Silicon Valley. Her fiction has been published in *Nimrod*, *Stand*, *Literal Latte*, and *Louisiana Literature*, among many other journals, and most recently appeared or will appear in *Pif Magazine*, *Storyscape Literary Journal*, *Natural Bridge*, *Northville Review*, and *Prick of the Spindle* (print edition). It is anthologized in *Texas Told'em* (Ink

Brush Press 2010).