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# Alchemist Review

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2007

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While thought exists, words  
are alive and literature  
becomes an escape, not from,  
but into living.

— Cyril Connolly

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# Raising Cane

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Carol Manley

Cane wants to know everything. He's reading signs. It takes him a minute to sound out the words on the one in the flower shop window. I let him have a minute, though I can't afford to give him more than that. He gets it before I have to pull him away.

"What's a gladiola?" he asks.

"It's a female gladiator," I tell him, "C'mon." And I keep on walking without even looking at the poor kid. He's got little short legs and I know he can hardly keep up, but I'm trying to get to the damn church. The bells are ringing.

At the church steps I have to stop and catch my breath. Cane's doing good. He's right there with me. I push his hair out of his eyes and straighten his shirt, wipe a smudge off his face so people won't think I'm a lousy mother. I am a lousy mother.

We push against the heavy doors and fall into the church. Inside, there's a long red carpet that leads to the altar, enormously long. It seems to lead into a swirling vortex, but that's probably just the effects of stepping into the cool, dark church after rushing down the street in the hot sun. The handful of people who are there all sit down at the front, but we stop at the third pew from the back.

Cane scoots his little butt down the pew while I stand there looking. These folks are Catholic. I'm not. Never been in a Catholic church before. I don't want to violate anybody's spiritual peace with my ignorance, but I need a church quick and Protestants tend to keep theirs locked up during the week.

I'm expecting Cane to swing his feet while he sits, kicking the back of the seat in front of him. That's what kids do. But not Cane. He's such a good kid that it breaks my heart. I put my hand on the top of his head and the curls wrap around my fingers. I raise my hand just a little and then let the curls draw it back down as if they were tentacles. He has amazing hair. He rests his head against me and his body feels warm in the cool, dark church.

Sometimes people look at Cane when he and I are together as if he's some sort of abomination. The truth is that he's cute. Adorable. By anybody's standards. Those dark curls make his head look like a fluffy little dandelion. His brown eyes are serious. His mouth is soft and pink. His nose is as flat and round as a baby's. But if he ever misbehaves in public, nobody would think he's cute. I think he's always sensed that. They have

a word for little brown people who don't act right, a word that would makes him less than human. And because I don't want him to hear that word, he has to be very good.

A woman comes into the church, wearing sweatpants. She bends her knee and crosses herself before scooting her soft gray butt into a pew. I should have waited to find out the right way to enter the church before plopping down. I should have watched somebody else come in so I'd know what to do. But I didn't watch and I don't know what to do. I'm in a suspended state of wrongness.

But a church is a church, I figure. Any one will do, and this is the closest one, the one that rang its bell five minutes after the mailman handed me the letter that's still tucked in my purse.

"Mother died on Tuesday," it says. "I asked if she wanted to see you. She said no." My sister's writing is neat and precise. She does everything right. I don't begrudge her that. Somebody has to do things right and it can't be me. She put a P.S. on the letter. "Please," it says, "don't come." "Don't" is underlined twice. "She'll be buried by the time you get this."

I was reading the letter when the church bells began to ring. You've got to go to a church when somebody dies, don't you? I grabbed Cane, stuffed a couple of Hot Wheel cars in his pocket. I tied his shoes but quickly and not very well. "We got to go," I said. He didn't ask why.

Kids are good at knowing what not to ask. He's never asked about his father.

People always ask me, "What do you tell him?"

I don't tell him anything. He doesn't ask.

Social workers ask. "Where's the father?" they want to know. "Why did he leave you?" And they look at me real close, try to see my soul, see what I've done. How bad can a woman be to make a man leave his child?

They write things in files. They have to verify that I'm a person no one wants so that I can be eligible for food, for shelter, for whatever. I don't argue. I just sit. And Cane is always with me. I have no one to leave him with. So we sit together in those dusty offices with their cracked tile floors. While we wait to see if we pass the judgment of some social worker, I rummage in my bag for candy and slip him a Lifesaver if I can find one. If we're silent enough, if our manners are good enough, they'll give us what we need, a bus token, a measles shot, the name of a landlord that rents to people like us. We've spent too many of our days this way.

But it was different once. There was a time I was loved through long hot nights. Cane's father and I would lie in the bed with the summer breeze rustling the curtains and the

moon making a highway of light across the sheets. And he would tell me about growing up on the islands, working in the cane fields, and I could see him as a small boy with bare feet emerging from the long rows, chewing the stalks, and letting the sugar run down his face. "So sweet," he would say, as he licked the tips of my fingers one by one.

Maybe he's in the islands now. Maybe he'll come back. Maybe he's dead. I named the baby Cane.

It was only later that I thought about the other Cain, the one in the Bible. And it's just like people to think I named my child for a murderer when I named him for something sweet.

In the church, I can't make out what the priest is saying. He's talking fast. They used to speak Latin. That would have been good to have some mysterious and indecipherable words, but mumbled ones will have to do. If I don't know what they're saying, then it can be a funeral and it can all be over with. And I want it to be all over with.

At home, I have a postcard on a shelf. I dust it off sometimes. I add one and two cent stamps to the back of it when the rates changes, but I don't send it. Dear Mom, it says. That's all. I didn't know what else to say.

I have a child, I could have said. But she knew that. He's brown, I could have said, but she knew that, too. I want you to meet him, I could have said, but that would've been a lie. I never wanted him to see her. I protect him from people who never do anything wrong. I wish he could never be looked at with disapproving eyes.

Someday I'll say something about my mother, but I don't know what. Am I my mother's keeper? She never did anything wrong. I never did anything right. I wanted her to love me.

There's a place in the Bible where John baptizes Jesus and the whole sky breaks open. "This is my beloved son!" God says for everybody to hear. That's what I wanted somebody to say about me. This is my beloved child. Too late for that.

I could have put that on the postcard. Dear Mom, do you love me? I may write that on the card when I get home, though it too late to send it now, if I ever wanted to.

Cane is picking at a mosquito bite on his ankle and there's blood on the pew. I search for a tissue, but I don't have one. I only have the letter and I hold the corner of it to his leg, letting the paper draw off the blood to try to keep from defiling the church.

When I see people standing up to go, I stuff the bloody letter back in my purse. Cane and I follow them out of the sanctuary. The altar boys are girls and they run giggling out the side door in their plaid skirts and white blouses, rushing back to class.

Cane must still feel the hush of the church because he tugs on my hand rather than raise his voice. There's a table of bright-colored mission pamphlets on a stand by the door.

I bend my head down to him and he whispers, pointing at the sign, Free, take one. I nod my head and he approaches the table.

He's careful to get one of each. They have pictures on the front of children who look like him, barefoot children standing in front of grass huts at overseas missions where the church sends money. When Cane gets home, he'll want to copy words from the pamphlets onto plain paper. He'll be intent about his work. He can be such a grave little child.

When I take my eyes from him, I notice a prune-faced woman look at him without smiling. She turns to a black woman standing nearby. "Those are not for children," the prune woman announces. But nobody makes a move to stop him. The prune woman turns back to the black woman with another complaint. "His shoe needs tied," she says, and I realize then that she thinks he belongs to the black woman. The black woman looks confused.

"He's mine!" I say, grabbing him up and speaking in a voice too loud for church. "He's mine, mine, mine!" And I bury my nose in the perfume of his hair, my beloved son.

Cane pokes the brochures into my bag as we turn to leave. I push them farther down into the bag and the letter from my sister, stained with my son's blood, falls onto the brick walkway.

The prune woman doesn't miss a thing. "You dropped something," she says, but I've decided to let it go and I carry Cane out and down the steps.

"You littered," the woman accuses. There are a lot of people like that. If I give them proof that I'm wrong, then they get to be right. Their anger at me for having this child becomes justifiable if I let a scrap of paper skip down the church steps.

At the bottom I set Cane down and tie his shoe. I'm such a bad mother to this perfect little boy, dragging him down the street like a piece of luggage, lying to him about the gladiolas.

"A gladiola is not a female gladiator," I say.

"I know."

"I lied to you."

"I know," he says, but he's forgiving. "It's some boring thing in the flower shop. You just like things to be better than they are."

I look away from him and my eyes are blurred so I can hardly read the sign in the parking lot. IMMACULATE CONCEPTION ONLY. VIOLATORS WILL BE TOWED.

Suddenly, I remember seeing raw sticks of cane in the grocery store on Sixth Street. "C'mon, Baby," I tell him, slowing my pace to match his, heading for the store hoping I've got a couple of food stamps left in my purse. "I want to tell you about your name."



# **WUIS in Motion**

---

Lola Lucas

I'm sitting at a stop sign, applauding---  
Usually I'm not that keen on Handel  
But today his fireworks exploded  
On the radio and I cheered.

I imagine the courtiers who heard it first,  
The rustle of their silks, the smell  
Of the Thames when it was an open sewer.  
I rather doubt it crossed their minds  
That the music would outlive them.

"Bravo!" I yell, now in my driveway.  
Handel takes a bow, bemused  
By carriages as rolling concert halls.

# The Paleontologist

---

Lola Lucas

“Thirty years and more in the Gobi Desert,  
In time, I forgot my name  
(‘What was the face you had before  
You were born?’ That was gone, too.)  
Fieldwork is long and slow when unfunded.  
I dug and swept and brushed and gathered  
Bones. Often, heat crazed, I was lost  
Between eons; I’m surprised  
I wasn’t trampled by dinosaurs.

“One morning from my yurt I heard  
Words drifting past in the fog of half sleep,  
(For decades I’d even dreamed in Chinese)—  
Travelers from a caravan speaking English,  
Cadences of home, and I woke with a joy  
I’d forgotten could be alive in the world.”

And so it is for me each time  
I hear your voice.

# **The Shine of His Shoes**

---

Lola Lucas

I suppose under other circumstances  
I wouldn't have noticed the scuffs on his shoes  
Or the state of his manicure as he picked  
At his cuticles, fingers fidgeting through  
Memorial speeches. In his twenties,  
Black suit, narrow black tie, he was trying  
For the unctuous look of his profession  
And failing, a scaled-down G man amid  
Floral displays. He was clearly hired help,  
Not born to the business, oblivious  
To the fact that tiny details stand out  
To mourners who begrudge the warmth  
Of the spit on his chewing gum while  
Their loved one lies cold.



*Untitled* by Audra Roach

# Education

---

Teresa Holton

1

Women's studies 205

I read myself in the pages  
of the textbook that cost  
a whole weekend's worth  
of tips.

I am a pattern.  
I am a statistic.  
Or will be.

First words.  
Bitch. Slut. Whore. Cunt.  
Apology.  
Isolation.  
Escalation.  
His fist.  
Apology.  
Escalation.  
His knife, hidden always in his boot,  
suddenly at my throat.  
Roses.  
Escalation.  
His car, peeling away, over my foot.  
Apology.  
Escalation.  
The gun slanted in the corner...

...I read myself in the pages  
of the textbook that cost me...

11

Psychology 101

Could it be that he unconsciously fears me?  
That he worries that once he stuffs his thick  
cock into me that I might be able to  
bite it off?

Bite off that blunt treasure of his  
with layers of shark teeth?

What a surprise it must be each time for him  
each time as hot silk,  
sans razored dentata  
welcomes and suckles him.

What a brave boy  
performing such a brave act.  
Something to crow about!

When he struts away,  
does he cower inside  
terrified of the next time?

111

Shakespeare 375

Lovely Desdemona  
saved my life  
loving her  
jealous Othello  
teaching me  
to leave  
mine.

IV

Graduation

He was right to fear my education.  
In his fit of rage he  
tore my textbooks to shreds.  
With shaking hands,  
I spent hours taping the pages  
of Othello.

After I left him and decided to hate men,  
I kissed a girl.  
Her jaw felt fragile in my own small hand.  
My mouth on hers,  
our tongues mingling  
felt familiar.  
Together, we learned to make love to ourselves.  
To love ourselves  
And I knew then  
what he felt when he  
kissed me,  
thumb sliding across my face  
how he knew I was breakable,  
vulnerable.

His Othello loved me.  
His Iago almost destroyed me.  
And I, Desdemona, ran 300 miles away.  
That was all it took.  
That, and the play

# Saving Grace

---

Julia M. Gentile

Helen walked out of Holy Family Church and there was her landlord, standing across the street in front of her building. It was just last week she'd paid him the rent. Blood rushed inside her head and the fine blue veins in her temple began to throb. Charlie Kinkaid seldom came around unless it was rent day, or he'd lost money at the track. Well, it wasn't going to be her this time. She jammed her hand inside her pocket and gripped the spare rosary she kept there for good luck, rubbing the crucifix as best she could with stiff fingers, hoping, this time, it would work.

Helen Delaney wasn't afraid of much except getting into a fight with her landlord and having to move. Not that it was such a great place. Eighteen stairs up to the second floor of a run-down building with two dingy rooms at the end of them. Outside, May Street was the dividing line between the Mexican and black neighborhoods and the Mexicans had the alleys and the blacks, the sidewalks, and everyone else tried to keep out of the way. The kind of neighborhood where when you complained to the cops they just smiled and said maybe you should move.

But none of this mattered to Helen.

Some said the old woman with the gardenia white hair and brown plaid coat had money and could live anywhere on Lake Shore Drive. But all she wanted was to stay where she was, at 1123 South May Street, across from a church that survived the Chicago Fire.

"It's the only thing around older than I am!" Helen kidded Father Martinez, the new young priest at Holy Family. "Makes me feel good to wake up and see it still standing!"

There was a little more to it than that. Though the church was now almost all black, people called it the Irish Church. In the 1850's, Irish immigrants settled just west of Chicago's Loop and built the Gothic church with art glass windows that soared up the sides. By the 1890's, it was the largest parish in the city with five grade schools and a college that would become Loyola University. But newer immigrants arrived and, the story goes, the Irish blocked Holy Family's doors to them so the Italians and Poles built their own churches and schools. And, as things often go in big cities, the Irish eventually left the inner city and their church to the poor who followed them. Now the grade schools were gone, Loyola University sat on the city's north side, and the Irish church was decaying in



place, what with its massive doors missing whole chunks of wood and its stained glass windows criss-crossed with duct tape that wouldn't stay put. Even worse, the Irish church had no Irish left. Except for Helen.

Rumor had it she was in her 80's, maybe even 90's, but she'd never tell. "None of your goddamn business!" she'd bark at the nosy inquisitor who, as Helen was prone to say of just about everyone, "damned if I know why folks can't use the good sense God gave 'em!"

She was tall and spindly with papery thin skin so pale it set off her sapphire blue eyes and the fine blue veins in her temple. She was hard of hearing but took those 18 stairs up to her place easier than did most of the neighborhood kids who came by for their piece of candy. Helen set out a bowl of green mints at the top stair outside her door. Not that she liked kids or anything. She didn't. But it made her feel safe and she refilled the bowl around 4 o'clock, right after she had her daily shot of Bushmills Irish Whiskey.

"Just like the English and their tea," she'd say, proudly.

Then, on Wednesdays, like tonight, she headed over to Holy Family for evening novena, no matter she'd just been there for morning mass and afternoon rosary, always taking the same pew. Tenth from the altar. Close enough to see Father Martinez raise the chalice. Far enough away to think. About the days when the paint was fresh and bright and the rain stayed outside where it belonged. And the times when the Delaney's filled an entire pew, like she was telling Joanie Sims from downstairs last night as they sat on the back porch and everything was still and even the police sirens had taken a break.

"Did I ever tell you how I was baptized?"

Helen Delaney was never one to wait for an answer.

"In the main chapel! Right in front. Not like today."

She sat in a rickety armchair, her hands resting in her lap, a black rosary comfortably weaved between bony fingers.

"Now they put you on the side," she said, "like you're not even important."

She shook her head gently, then gazed down at the old wooden porch floor where blue paint peeked out from under a peeling grey. The chair creaked as she shifted in her seat to look at Joanie.

"I was almost a month old."

Joanie nodded politely, like she'd heard it before, knew what was coming.

"First Delaney to be baptized at Holy Family. Had me wearing the same gown my mother wore back in County Cork."

Helen looked out over the porch railing and smiled as though she saw something in the darkness beyond.

“Grandmother O’Donohue had it made in County Donegal by the Mahoney’s. Best place for linen, mother said. Carrickamacross lace, yet!”

Then she told Joanie about how the Delaney’s came from Glengarrill, close to County Kerry. How grandpa O’Donohue swam in the Atlantic when he was a lad. And how cancer took her only sister one summer. It was that fast. Now her sister’s boy lives in Baltimore.

“Sean’s the only one left,” Helen said, and she slumped back in the hard chair like it was soft. Joanie often heard Helen complain about her nephew who seemed intent on moving his aunt to a nursing home, far away from May Street and Holy Family.

“I still have it.”

“What?” Joanie asked.

“The gown! It’s in a white box, in my closet, top shelf, if you ever want to see it.” Helen didn’t wait for Joanie to say but looked away. “I take it out most every night.” She said this absently, as much to herself as to anyone.

A bell sounded from far away. Father Martinez chanted a prayer she could barely hear. But Helen didn’t tap the hearing aid in her left ear like she did in Fontana’s Pharmacy whenever Joey Fontana told her about the newest arthritis drug. Hearing the priest pray wasn’t all that important. The only thing that mattered was she was here, inside her church with its 100 or so saints gazing down at her and the Delaney’s all around.

After service, Father Martinez gently pulled Helen’s hands into his own and hugged them.

“Helen, how’s it goin’?”

“Well, Sean’s in town again. Y’know, my dead sister’s boy.” Father Martinez nodded.

“He tells me he came from Baltimore just to see me. Hmmph!”

The priest smiled. The last time Sean said that, Helen learned he’d come to Chicago to wrap up some real estate deal.

“Like I was stupid,” she said.

But complain as she did about Sean, Helen was careful never to complain to Father Martinez about her landlord. It might get back to him, though she herself had come close to telling Charlie what she thought. Once Helen was headed over to Holy Family when Charlie yelled out, “Hey, Helen, stop waving that purse around! Someone’s gonna grab it!” As fast as the words left his mouth, Helen shot back, “Don’t fancy everyone’s like you, Charlie Kinkaid!” She laughed hard, like she was kidding, but her burning sapphire eyes

said she wasn't. She was remembering those times when he gambled the rent and showed up on May Street empty-handed, looking for something to tide him over. A few of those times he looked to Helen.

The priest now let go of her hands, "Don't worry, Helen, God will give you strength."

"But, Father, Sean keeps saying this is a dangerous neighborhood!" Helen missed old Father O'Rourke. He'd never say God gives you strength. He'd be telling people God helps those who help themselves so they could walk out and do battle instead of trying to get along with people who didn't want to get along with them in the first place. She clenched her lips and the fine blue veins at her temple grew thick. "Here's no more dangerous than any place else!"

The priest nodded, having heard all of this before.

"Just wish it weren't him left," Helen said. Then she gave a small wave and walked out, not stopping to light a candle at St. Patrick's statue because Helen Delaney suddenly felt very tired. And, now, a sharp pinch between her fingers. She was clutching the rosary's crucifix as hard as she could.

Under the shadow of the streetlight in front of her building waited her landlord, flicking his cigarette like he couldn't knock the ashes off fast enough. Charlie Kinkaid was a squatty kind of guy with an overflowing beltline and with his dark hair flattened down you got the impression he was a lot closer to the ground than he really was.

"Helen, gotta minute?"

His voice was unusually soft.

Joe Briggs and his nosy wife were sitting on the front stoop next door and whatever Charlie's faults he did his best to hide them

Before Helen answered, he whispered, "I need a little money."

"What for?" Helen shouted, hoping Ellie Briggs was taking notes.

"Got some bills."

"Just gave you rent money last week! Where'd it go?" Helen glared at Charlie, making a point not to blink.

He lowered his eyes as though searching the sidewalk for answers. "Don't know. Things just kinda come up."

Helen's eyes flashed at him. "Yeah. Horses!"

Charlie's head shot up and under the glow of the streetlight his face burned a garish orange. "Hey! I gotta lotta bills on this building! Whadd'ya think? I don't put money back in it?" He cast a sidelong glance in the Briggs' direction but they were looking straight

ahead like they weren't about to pick sides just yet.

"The screen door's still broke," Helen yelled back. "Since last year, it's gotta be."

Charlie groaned. "Well, Corrine needed a new faucet and that Joanie downstairs from you...I don't know what the hell she does with the tub. Christ! I'm always over there fixing the damn thing and then ..."

"You're talking about pennies, Charlie, for cryin' out loud. You got a full building...four flats in all. Com'on! I'm not stupid."

"Yeah, I know," he said softly, shaking his head.

Helen figured she was ahead. The tightness in her head began to fall away. "Besides, you got a job with the city, Charlie." Helen sensed she could afford to be generous. "Streets and sanitation's a good job." Even her legs felt stronger.

"Yeah, I guess."

Maybe Sister Eleanor from the settlement house was right. This was a sickness Charlie had. He couldn't help himself. And he did have a good side, like taking in that mangy dog before the dog catcher found him. Her fingers felt better letting go of the crucifix. And that baby sparrow. It had fallen out of the only tree on May Street. Joanie's kids had carried it home, crying, so sure it would die. It was Sunday but Charlie got Joey to open up his drugstore so the kids could get a syringe. Charlie was as excited as they when the tiny bird took to it, swallowing bits of bread soaked with milk. And, later, when he and the kids watched Wingsy fly over the back porch railing and above the clothesline pulleys that littered the backyards, Helen couldn't believe how Charlie's eyes had watered up.

A door closed. She looked over. The Briggs' stoop was empty. Ellie probably thought the best was over.

"Well, goodnight, Charlie," Helen said, believing the same.

As she turned to go inside, Charlie blurted out, "The city's been after me to sell, Helen. I told you that, right?"

Helen stopped short and spun around so fast her spindly legs almost gave way.

"What?"

She couldn't be sure of what she'd heard. Her bad ear and everything. Charlie repeated it, slowly, like even he wasn't sure of what he'd just said. No, he hadn't said that before. She'd remembered if he had. Her memory was still good, sharp as a tack, everyone said.

"No...you never said that before." She frantically searched his dark eyes for some sign he was lying while her crooked fingers fumbled in her pocket to reclaim the crucifix.

Charlie turned away and looked out into the darkness.

“Yeah, think they want to turn it into a parking lot.”

Then he waited, as if she might say something, but she didn’t, so he continued.

“I don’t know what the city wants...they don’t even know what they want! Huh!”

Helen’s eyes looked jittery, like they were working hard trying to figure out whether Charlie was telling the truth. He was such a damned liar, she didn’t care what Sister Eleanor said. He’d never sell the building for a parking lot. But how could she be sure? What if she were wrong? Bad as May Street was, it was hard to find a place to live. Nobody seemed to move out unless they had to. It was like you had to wait until someone died to get a place.

Charlie was still talking about how he didn’t want to sell the building but Helen wasn’t listening. She was thinking about the Briggs and the Sharps and everyone else on the block. No one was getting ready to die anytime soon. Except her. She stared past Charlie, at the towering blackness across the street, and felt the fingers in her pocket go limp. The street lamp blazed overhead and Charlie’s shadow seemed to grow taller, straighter, right in front of her.

“Y’know, I sure don’t want that to happen anymore than you do, Helen.” He took a drag on his Lucky Strike with what looked to be an inch of smoldering ash hanging perilously from the tip with no threat of being knocked off any time soon. “But I just don’t know what else to do.”

Charlie was decent enough to call it a loan but Helen knew what it really was. Late that night, she pulled a box down from the closet shelf, lifted out a tiny christening dress trimmed in a fine lace and yellowed with age and she thought of Sean and wondered whether it was time. But after only a few Hail Mary’s Helen returned the gown to the box and put it back up on the top shelf, where it had been, where it belonged.

## **This Poem...**

---

A.D. Carson

This poem is racist.  
It's racist  
and racism goes both ways.  
Needless to say—nobody really cares.

The same few people  
stand for the same few issues.

The College Republicans plot in secret meetings  
on how they can get a rise out of the Black Student Union.  
“Wouldn’t it be cool to have an All-White Scholarship?  
Requirement for eligibility—write an essay on why you are proud  
of your White heritage. You must also submit  
a recent photo to confirm Whiteness.”

All this to prove that slave days are passed  
and they have their equality.

The Black Student Union plots in their meetings  
on how they can get the Black athletes  
to come to a meeting  
or maybe stop chasing White girls around  
long enough to notice that they  
are a needed portion of the campus population.  
“We are not about to throw another party.  
Why should we have to convince Black people  
that they need to be active in the community?  
They should already know it, and want to help out.”

All this to prove that slave days are passed  
and they are on one accord.

This poem is racist.  
It's racist  
and racism goes both ways.  
Needless to say—nobody really cares.

The same few people  
stand for the same few issues.

It's racist because I'm Black  
and I want to date who I want to without repercussions.  
It sounds ridiculous saying it,  
but it will be a real problem for me to live  
in a racist world with a White wife and children  
who will be in this same world that will pit them  
against themselves on a daily basis.

When the ultimate hate happens,  
they will have to choose sides,  
and my youngest may be responsible  
for the murder of my eldest,  
because he related to his mother a little bit  
more than he related to me.

It's racist of me to even believe that  
the woman I will love enough to marry  
will be capable of that ultimate hate  
that will make her have to choose sides  
when it actually does happen.

It's racist because I like White girls,  
and like sometimes turns into love,  
and you can't help who you love,  
or hate for that matter, and my hate makes me  
hate myself because I know that hate will keep me  
from being with who I like or love  
if she so happens to be White.

I don't like the idea of my relationships  
being dictated by so many people  
who I don't know and don't know me,  
but are so certain that I am just like the rest of them.

It's racist because a White College Republican  
joins the school's "multicultural" choir,  
that consists of all Black students and him,  
and really believes that he's doing his part for the cause.  
I guess they're all doing us such a big favor, in reality,  
by letting us exist on this big ball of dirt that we all came from,  
and all of our kids are a cause, because we were a cause.

We were a cause because  
our Black fathers were gone,  
teaching us to need a father figure.

Any male authority figure—  
even some White man who despised us—  
whose daughter we sought to make him proud  
of our transition to manhood,  
despite our boyish actions;  
neglecting the Black girl who reminded us  
so much of our lonely, crying mother.

I mean, why would we want to be with a woman  
so unhappy.  
So angry.  
Full of so much rage and tears.  
She didn't like Black men any more  
than she taught us to love Black women.  
If she did, he wouldn't have left.

You see, it's not only Black athletes  
who like White girls,  
just like it's not only College Republicans  
who think all Black folks are looking for a handout.



There are plenty of Black folks  
who think all Black folks are looking for a handout.  
People who think a Black person will never  
be a suitable candidate for the presidency of this country  
because the issue hits too close to home.

He will never be articulate enough.  
He will never be honest enough.  
He will never be White enough.  
He will never be that father figure.

But even with not believing a Black man  
is capable of doing the job  
Black folks won't vote—even for that “qualified” White man.

All this to prove slave days are passed  
and the overseer mentality no longer exists.

This poem is racist.  
It's racist  
and racism goes both ways.  
Needless to say—nobody really cares.

The same few people  
stand for the same few issues.

It's racist because no one can  
come up with an equivalent  
word to Nigger for White folks,  
and if they could and did  
it would be used so much  
that White folks would begin to believe  
that it was their name or title,  
and after 400 years or so  
White boys would be calling each other  
this name and passing it off  
as a term of endearment,  
saying that it's not the word that's offensive,  
but the way you use it.

There would be a group of  
all White rappers who would record an album  
entitled, "The Word" For Life  
and they would be called "The Word" With Attitudes,  
or something different  
like "The Word" With Parents With Large Bank Accounts  
because it's an assumption that  
"Niggaz" have "Attitudes"  
and they wanted to make it known  
that it was okay to take that assumption  
and capitalize off of it  
so why wouldn't White boys  
start owning up to  
what society assumes about them.

All this to prove that slave days are passed  
and racism is extinct.

This poem is racist.

It's racist  
and racism goes both ways.

It's racist because  
we think that it can only go two ways.  
Needless to say—nobody really cares.

The same few people  
stand for the same few issues  
and ignore each other.

I wish that this poem could be more racist.  
More racist than Willie Lynch  
More racist than the Red Summer  
More racist than Watts, Chicago, and L.A.  
More racist than O.J.'s verdict  
More racist than Emmitt Till's  
More racist than racism could even stand.

I mean, if we could just be so racist that we could  
get comfortable enough with racism  
that we could believe that this world is just destined  
to be racist, and there's nothing that could be done about it,  
maybe we could start to admit that it's racist  
and use racism as a form of endearment  
so when a White person kills a Black person  
or vice versa, we don't try to come up with a spin on the story  
we could just be reminded that the world is racist.

Then it wouldn't be a matter of the act being racist,  
it would only matter how the racism occurred.

We wouldn't have to admit to ever or never  
using any hurtful words  
or even explain why we did.

It would be expected.

This poem is racist  
and I want it to start the trend of racist poems  
that make racism chic  
or beautiful  
and artistic.

I want this poem to be that pain  
so maybe we could spend  
a little less time denying that it exists.

All this to prove that slave days are passed  
but we haven't moved forward.



*Quiet Room #7 by Dave Kube*

# the poet

---

A.D. Carson

I have often pondered upon whether I'm a  
poet or prophet  
flowing for profit  
so out of pocket  
I ask if I can get a quarter back  
to make change  
because strange the times now are  
how far have I come  
from beating the loud drum for free.

for me, shit ain't been easy  
I know this world don't need me  
& if these words ain't gon' feed me  
then why the fuck—should I keep speaking.

poet for profit  
sew in the pocket  
reap in the bank book  
seek, but you can't look  
eat, but you can't cook  
preach, but you can't put  
the money from the plate in yo' pocket.

poet, no profit.  
poet. no prophet.

flow it—don't stop it's  
knowing—no problem.  
showing—no style comes  
from thin air.

everybody ain't been there  
but then stare  
at you like you crazy as fuck once you in there.

when there  
seems to be no easier solution  
turn around & think about needing a revolution.  
make a sound & talk about speaking a revolution.  
burn it down & know about being the revolution.

evolution from poet to prophet.

poet for profit.

poet, no prophet

so it—don't stop get

more it—won't profit

to be a prophet

for no profit

& so I spit

prophecies for profit, see

I can see stories.

people, places, things.

evil racist scenes.

equal aches & pains.

needless waste of brains.

me, I'm made insane

on a daily basis:

baby faces,

fishy dreams—

may be basic.

dipped in streams—

save me, save me

I am a poet.

I am a prophet.

I am a poet, but I won't profit.

I am a poet for profit.

poet & prophet.

prophet for profit.

poet to poet,

I know it sounds crazy.

profit for prophet, I know it won't save me,

but beating that damn drum for free has made me  
see not look.  
need I should,  
should I need for free,  
& that ain't the way it's gon' be for me.

so I must be me,  
& I must be the  
bearer of bad news  
not wanting to tell you,  
but the drum is still beating  
for one who is not eating  
so I will be needing  
you to pay me for speaking.

not for the profit,  
but a prophet for no profit  
is just a poet,  
& I am no poet,  
I am no prophet.  
I'm just a nigga who wanted to cop shit  
I couldn't afford,  
got bored,  
wrote this,  
spoke this,  
tired of that broke shit  
& figured it was a way to get paid.  
*(so can we pass the plate?)*

## julia's chickens

---

Jacqueline Jackson

she craved organic eggs and  
hormone free gizzards and drumsticks  
so my friend built an elegant coop  
its little ribbed chicken ladder  
leading from the small door  
to the verdure of an ample field  
the assorted-breed chicks made a  
peeping arrival the whole post  
office staff crowded around  
while julia opened the tiny box  
they all looked alike then but now  
grown plump on tomato and zucchini and  
special feed they are like the vast variety  
you see at the state fair though  
without labels julia labels them  
pointing out the busy scratchers  
those beauties ruth and ruby are  
rhode island reds glenda and goldie  
they're buff arpingtons over there  
bertha and blanche see they're  
iridescent in the sun they're  
black astrolorps susie sussex  
is that splotched one a speckled sussex  
and winnie and reggie are silver-laced  
wyandottes reggie is the alpha rooster  
he won't let the others mount he  
runs and pecks them away but it  
doesn't matter for the hens won't let  
any of them mount they consider such  
nonsense fiddle faddle oh the other roosters  
archie's an ancona and pomeroy's a  
french partridge chanticleer  
those other hens I haven't named yet  
the brahmas with feathery feet  
or the three barred rocks or the  
dominiques with black and white stripes  
I can't tell them apart yet the eggs  
are all brown though various tones  
I get at least a dozen a day  
the meat how could I think of  
killing one in fact I can't  
eat chicken at all any more



# **Sixty-Six Ford Galaxie**

---

Carol Manley

Never date a guy with a big old piece of wood on the front of his truck for a bumper. In fact, never date a guy whose car is worse than yours. Even if you don't have a car, don't date a guy whose car is worse than yours. Listen to me, Honey, I know what I'm talking about.

I had a 1966 Ford Galaxie. That's a luxury car. Even if it was 1987 when I had it and I had to use a screwdriver to start it, it was still a luxury car. I didn't really need a screwdriver. A pencil would do.

I just popped the hood and opened up the carburetor – that thing that looks like an upside frying pan that cars don't have anymore. There's a little thing in there that you flick with your finger and sometimes flicking it with my finger was good enough, but usually I had to put a pencil down there to hold it open. Then I'd turn the key and the car would start. I'd take back my pencil, screw the lid back on, close the hood, and go.

That was the extent of my automotive expertise. I didn't want to contaminate my femininity with too much technical knowledge. I just wanted to start my car.

So there I was with my 1966 Ford Galaxie using a number two pencil to start it in the parking lot of the Piggly Wiggly when this guy came up.

"Thought you needed some help," he said.

He should've been able to tell by the sound of the engine running that I didn't need a darn thing.

He peered into the back seat of the car where I had tossed my groceries and butted into my life. "You like asparagus? I like asparagus, too." He said that like it was some deep spiritual connection between the two of us.

I looked him up and down and what I was thinking is that I didn't think he could afford asparagus. I couldn't really afford it myself, but it was payday. You might suffer for it later, but everybody gets a little wild on payday. Buying asparagus out of season at the Piggly Wiggly was about as wild as I dared to get in those days. I was at the envelope factory then, making a hundred and one dollars a week.

I wasn't about to share my asparagus with this guy, but he looked so pathetic that I gave him my number.

He just stood there grinning at me and I was feeling a bit of relief because he hadn't written it down, but then he started slapping at his pockets like he was infested with something.

Finally he gave up feeling on his pockets and asked me if I had a pencil. Well, I was holding the one I had started my car with and didn't feel like sharing it, but he plucked it out of my fingers and wrote my number on the back of his hand.

I was hoping he'd wash it off before he got around to calling me, but he didn't seem like the washing type. When he started walking away with my pencil, I also realized that he didn't know a thing about starting cars because he was taking my car-starting pencil with him. I called after him, which was when I realized I didn't know his name.

"Bill," he said. "I'm Bill." He said it like it was something original or meaningful, but it wasn't neither one. Then he came prancing back to me like those people in the movies who run at each other through a field of daisies or a snowstorm or something, like they're being reunited after some tragic separation.

"You got my pencil," I told him.

"Yeah, I do," he said, patting his pocket like it was some kind of trophy. "I'll call you," he said, like I wanted reassurance and started walking away again without giving up the pencil.

That should've been a clue to me right there. If, between the two of us, we could only afford one pencil, we should have stayed away from each other. And if one of us didn't have sense enough to know that the pencil was an automotive necessity for the other one, then that should have been a big red flag right there.

Fortunately I was very good at planning my route home and knew how to get there without stopping for stop signs. Lord only knows what I would have had to stick in it if it had stopped while I didn't have my pencil.

So you see that I had to go out with the man. I know you think I could have got another pencil, but that one was mine and I wanted it. I had a right to that pencil and if going out with Bill was what I had to do to get it back, then that's what I had to do.

He showed up at my door driving a pickup truck with a big old piece of wood strapped on the front for a bumper. "Give me my pencil," I said, snatching it out of his front pocket. He had changed the shirt, but still had the pencil. "We're going in my car."

He just had that floppy old grin on his face and I should have known then what kind of trouble I was going to be in. He was pitiful. And if you go out with pitiful guys, you always have sympathy sex with them - the sex you have because they're just too pitiful to say no to.

And then you get pregnant because you never actually plan to have sex with anybody that pitiful and you're never prepared for it.

I know that's not what you want to hear from your own mother, Honey. You want to hear some romantic story. But there ain't none. It ain't like our entire family is based on me getting pregnant from sympathy sex in the back of a Ford Galaxie, but it did start that way and you're old enough to know it. At least I spared you the indignity of getting conceived in a truck with a big old piece of wood for a bumper.

I married your dad two months later and that was the end of my freedom. I had to sell that Galaxie since we couldn't afford car repairs and baby formula at the same time.

If that car had started up quicker that day at the Piggly Wiggly, or if your dad hadn't stole my pencil, then you wouldn't be standing here today. I'm not saying I've got regrets about it, I'm just telling you that one thing can lead to another in ways you never expect.

Your dad wasn't so bad. I figure a man's got to have a lotta love in his heart to go to work every day spraying varnish on decorative hardware and never complain. But look where that got him.

I don't want to hurt your feelings. It's hard enough on you seeing your own father laid out in a box – and a box that don't even got no decorative hardware on it - but when I looked out the window and saw that boy drive up in a pickup with a big old board on the front for a bumper, Honey, that just broke my heart.

I cannot let that boy drive you to your daddy's funeral in that vehicle. You tell him to ride with us in the funeral car. But I'm warning you, Baby, if he looks too pitiful I will put that boy out by the side of the road right there at the Sandy Hills Cemetery. My sympathy is all used up.

## **Pantheistic Sanctification**

---

Kevin Howe

Discipl'd by the poet of the lake,  
I long to see in Nature what is mine,  
Avoiding that lamentable mistake  
Of letting Nature's genial powers decline.  
And yet, one bird, a chickadee, I think,  
Has given me a dreadful time, of late.  
His high-pitched piping has me on the brink  
Of changing Abel's love for filial hate.  
Is my philosophy so shallow, then,  
So vain that I thus easily dismiss  
First principles, and make, as man, of men  
Discordant players of hateful notes as this?  
Or is the song a penance for the sin  
Of disbelief that yet resides within?

## **Backwater**

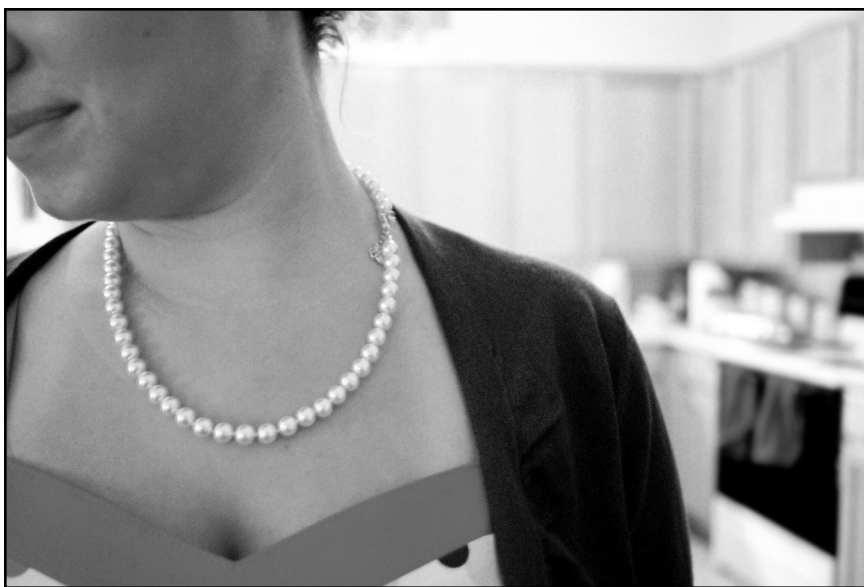
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Kevin Howe

We cleared the hill and paused before descending,  
Our tennis shoes and hiking boots encased  
In lakeshore sand, our camping gear in packs  
Upon our shoulders. On the air, a taste  
Of something rancid came. We turned our backs  
Against the slothful, nose-offending breeze,  
Took breaths, then turned again to see unending  
Piles of sun-bleached shells, and mixed with these,

The carnage of a tide gone out too quickly—  
Silver-scaled, lime-encrusted fish,  
Dissected, eyes and organs picked apart—  
A piscine Dante's literary wish.  
And here and there, we watched the seagulls dart  
Amid the bracken, demons of a sort.  
No doubt, I looked as you did, pale and sickly,  
At witnessing this fish-unfriendly port.

Like gawkers drawn to injury and blood,  
We silently descended to the shore.  
The water ebbed unhurriedly in soft  
And silty waves, caressing feathered gore—  
A headless gull, its flight no more aloft  
But destined to reflections of the sky.  
And marking our excursion through the mud,  
Our steps to one another gave reply.



*Trophy* by Audra Roach

# **Erica's Gotten Her Braces Off**

---

Vera Herst

Erica sits with me in temple.  
She is beautiful  
with perfect teeth.

“You’ll probably be wearing braces  
for two or three years,”  
the orthodontist tells them.

Judy cries, afraid  
she won’t live to see  
her daughter’s new smile.

In temple Erica is beautiful.  
Her teeth are perfect as she  
rises to say Kaddish for her mother.

## **At Sangchris Lake**

---

Patricia Martin

Early morning mist curls low over the water  
as two fisher boats skim along the burnished  
perimeter of the east bank, each leaving  
a wake gossamer as a jet's vapor trail.

The two aluminum boats glide out of the bay,  
one heading west, the other east.  
The fishermen stop, closer to me  
boats anchored. They cast their lines

in opposite directions. Reel in. Cast again  
and again. Then, sliding bone-white  
through the tranquil water, they head back  
toward the straw-colored promontory.

The two men, clothed in camouflage,  
stand in their boats and bend close enough  
to pass something from one to the other.  
Then they take their separate ways again.

But not too separate.  
Within shouting distance.



# **traffictrees**

---

Sarah Bly

Maple streets tree leaves  
affic lights fall across  
the town  
never sleep

# **pokerface**

---

Sarah Bly

low

“Aces —or—”

high?

Man on the left

Man on the right

asks

holding

No Aces

# Arturo, Who Likes to Shave His Legs in the Snow

---

Lucy Marrero-Silva

Arturo at thirty-four years old filled out his bronze body with defined muscles. Despite his strength, he still had a delicate appearance, like one too beautiful to pick strawberries in the California heat—just like his abuela. *El jefe*, his pink cheeks glowing in the excitement of finding one so beautiful, took her hand as she prepared to jump down from the bed of the truck that had brought her and her husband to the fields that first morning, their brown arms pressed against other brown arms, swaying and jerking with the rocks and potholes in the road. *El jefe*, he took his abuela's hand and led her into the office instead, gesturing for her to remove her wide-brimmed straw hat and sit, sit down, please. Her graceful fingers gripped at the brim as she held the hat over her stomach and pelvis as she stood unmoving, praying silently behind pursed lips and tightened jaw, *por favor, no me moleste. Por favor. Por favor, señor, dejame sola.*

Arturo looked up from the notebook where he'd been frantically trying to capture the images as they spilled out of his brain, fingers scrambling to keep up. He stood and passed his palm slowly across frosty glass that'd seen winters just as cold as this for more than 80 years. He saw the flakes like tiny down feathers starting to fall.

His flesh immediately puckered with a chill, but still he lingered, palm on the window, for a moment before turning away for the pink-tiled bathroom. It would have made a lovely photograph, the palm against the frosted window, the arm slightly relaxed into an aesthetically-pleasing line to the chest, shoulders pulling the body into a relaxed but regal posture, smooth slope of the nose dark against the outside light.

The thick pile of the white rug between Arturo's bare toes contrasted with the hardwood floor, and the radiator blew warm air over his goosebumps, relaxing him as he rummaged in the medicine cabinet.

The shaving cream and razor sat lined up on the sink as Arturo let the soft track pants, smoky charcoal gray, drop to the tile and pulled his white T-shirt over his head. He gazed into the mirror, squinting his eyes as if trying to spot something in his reflection. *So different without clothes*, he thought, turning away from the mirror slightly so that he could see the elegant lines of muscles crossing his back. Such a delicate balance, trying to

find the right clothes to wear. When browsing through burgundy and forest green sweaters or stark button-downs with muted ties, sometimes his mind wandered, and when he looked down, he found his fingers resting against smooth velvet or cool satin. It startled Arturo to realize he'd somehow moved from the men's section and into the women's. The textures of their clothes were so beautiful, comforting, even. His sybarite nature clashed with the standards expected of a successful business man like himself, and so he would make his way back to the men's section, sighing quietly.

Arturo grabbed a soft towel from the cabinet and inhaled the fresh scent of laundry detergent before gathering up the rest of his supplies and headed out the front door, scanning the yard for the tree stump that kept him company from his desk. It was already covered in a layer of white powder from earlier snows. By four o'clock, about two inches had accumulated, and by then Arturo could not longer resist the teasing little flakes on his skin, the dry cold air that promised to hug his body.

The hairs on his leg popped out as goosebumps covered his entire body, and Arturo shivered. He propped his left leg up on the friendly tree stump. The shaving cream felt warm in contrast to the frigid air as he covered his leg from ankle to knee.

The never-changing ritual soothed the cold from his mind as he ran the razor first from knee down to ankle all around until he'd finished the entire lower part of his left leg like a lawnmower, leaving perfect rows of almost-smooth skin. Adding more shaving cream, he then repeated the perfect rows, this time ankle to knee, razor traveling neatly all the way around his leg.

Arturo squinted as a few flakes fell onto his lashes, and more fell from his stylish hair as he switched legs. The snow was falling more insistently now, but still he took his time, savoring the cold as he worked. It was so quiet he could hear the scratch of the razor as it liberated the hair from his skin one row at a time.

The expanse of trees outside his front door cordoned him off from the rest of his world, and the neighbors and their poorly-concealed curiosity disappeared from his mind as he worked rhythmically.

The small gloved hands gripping tree trunks were worlds away, the crunch of twigs underfoot unheard.

He ran the soft towel, now damp from the falling snow, down both legs and lifted his heel to inspect the back of each leg. Satisfied, he folded the towel over once lengthwise, once sideways, and placed the shaving cream and razor inside, folding the towel over them

once again into a neat little package. Inhaling deeply, he braced again against the cruel coldness, standing tall for a moment more, lingering just a moment more before heading in, when a juvenile giggle pierced the peaceful silence surrounding him.

His head whipped around to the row of trees barren of leaves, branches bending under their heavy white burden. *There*. Small gloved hands disappeared from tree trunks and he heard the crunch of snow underfoot, whispers and small voices in hasty retreat.

Arturo gathered himself up quickly, his chin high despite the blood pounding out his heartbeat in his ears. He hadn't dropped the towel, but the package had threatened to loose its contents, and he tucked them safely back into the fluffy damp towel. Purposefully, he turned back to the front door, his stride proud despite his nakedness.

He leaned against the door after closing it, gulping deep breaths, instructing his body to settle down. The towel released its cargo and faintly Arturo heard the clatter of metal on tile. Puzzled, he ran one hand over his cotton boxers, which had somehow become quite wet and a little warm. Quickly he shed them, grabbed his dropped supplies and headed for the kitchen, where he deposited everything, including the towel, in the garbage. Eyes fuzzy and unfocused, he stood motionless for a moment, body still, mind whirring with something he couldn't quite grasp. If you had asked him, he would have been unaware of any thought at all. Just a moment of spacing out.

The steam rose in the tiny bathroom, breathing a thin sheen of moisture on the rosy tiles and the mirror on the rusted medicine cabinet. Arturo wet his hair and let the water splash down onto his face, eyes squeezed shut. As he stood that way, his mind wandered without his permission, dragging him back, back into scenes he'd long forgotten.

"Fag!" the chubby brown teenager shouted, cackling and elbowing his skinny friend, the one who hardly ever spoke. They laughed and slapped each other high-five as Arturo hurried past. *I don't want to miss warm-up time*, he told himself, carefully avoiding mention, even to himself, of the daily menace that interrupted his memorization of class routines. He walked briskly, arms moving just the slightest bit as he visualized each movement, breathed the steps of the routine in time to the rhythm of his footsteps.

*Sash-ay, sash-ay, pique-lique, side.*

*Hooold—and down, rom de jamb, contract.*

He rolled his shoulders back and walked on. He intended to convey nonchalance and confidence, but instead only emphasized his dancer's posture, drawing attention to the way he glided gracefully down the sidewalk, a stark contrast to the slouchy, hunched shoulders of the other teenage boys sitting on stoops and playfully insulting each other at street corners.

Arturo froze, one foot still in front of the other, his weight suspended, not yet committed to the next step. *Is someone following me?* He drew his right foot up to meet the left and let his backpack drop from his shoulder, eyebrows furrowing into dramatic enactment of looking for something, anything, from its depths. His heart pounded so loud in his ears he could hardly make out the muffled sound of footsteps. His follower dragged his feet, but he was coming quickly. Arturo realized quickly he needed a plan of action, but before he could think anything at all, he was hit from the side by a wall clothed in baggy jeans and quilted jacket.

They fell, and if it could be replayed in slow motion, it would have been beautiful, the collision of solid body, so compact, into Arturo's lithe and lanky frame. It would have showed the indignation on the solid form's face, sneering, personally affronted, it seemed, by the fragile body he reached out for as if to embrace. Folding his arms around Arturo as he floated to the ground, a swan's drawn out dying dance, Arturo's knees collapsed, his elbows bent like a hula dancer's, lingering in the air, until the floating, floating, slow embrace was interrupted by the sick thud of flesh hitting pavement.

The water flowed over Arturo's eyes, still clenched shut. He opened his mouth just so, taking in small gulps of air, spitting out the water that snuck in with it, then reached down to shut off the water. As he towed off, he regarded the shirts hanging in his closet.

The shimmer of peach beckoned to him from the hanger furthest to the left of the hanging rod. It always beckoned to him. This time, it was more insistent, and Arturo felt compelled to it, reaching for its soft, smooth skin, wanting it pressed against his own. He slipped into the shirt, slowly, his face showing concentration as he buttoned the iridescent pearl buttons. They glinted with the light as he worked.

He pulled on his favorite black pants, simple and well-cut, a contrast to the material above it. Arturo finished dressing, pulling on his jacket that smelled strongly of leather. He inhaled the scent of his father coming home from the third shift to sleep for two hours before disappearing into the pre-dawn morning to catch the truck to the fields. The jacket felt bulky and heavy against the delicate peach underneath.



*Past 15* by Dave Kube

# moment of incongruity

---

Isaac Moore

*this story has been modified from its original version—it has been formatted to fit the written word*

she says, “i come from a place where the landscape isn’t fragmented by splinters of glass and steel.”

6:00 am—three weeks colder than before  
sewer bottom, rat tongue, parched cough  
blows up dust, bubble gum wrappers, lottery tickets  
    hope against hope  
take a number—get in line  
your turn to feed the hungry beast will come soon enough

red  
to rare earth metals  
to electric evenings  
    a one-way ticket  
        the final show  
            this life

systematic deconstruction of theory and scripture  
the suicide hall of fame  
splatters by way of freight train and strange attractor  
the flicker that lights the gargoyle’s face from various distances not explained by prime numbers or interest rates

blind man’s sidewalk cluttered by traffic noise and straight ahead  
monday’s forced smiles  
drifting between my perceptions of the present and memories of once possible futures  
the lady at the counter frowns at me—maybe i should have shaved this morning  
at least she’s honest—no need to read between her lines  
good thing i can leave when i want—always an option to drift away into night  
    to drift away into candle lit thoughts free from the steady, uneasy, intrusive,  
prying glare of  
    technological boredom (malaise)



i stand here  
beneath the weight of emptiness  
    brick by brick her go-go boot foot steps  
    echo through the urban-decay-neon-lit-back-streets of my mind  
    not captured by messianic erotica  
    discord

u-n-i-f-i-e-d-f-i-e-l-d-t-h-e-o-r-y  
t-h-e-m-i-s-s-i-n-g-l-i-n-k

minimalist abstractions  
surrealist refractions  
nothing fits the scene quite so well

    angry-diamond-eye-haunting-my-shadow-ancient-and-wise  
    paper dragon  
“can you tell me how it comes across the night so quietly we can’t hear it?”  
“it does the marionette dance through the mind-like-child haunting us all,” she puts her  
finger to my lips, “look deep enough and you will remember—don’t talk—don’t work  
against...” her voice trails off.

against what?

                    slow loneliness  
                    dull, numbing, useless, tip-of-the-tongue knowledge  
                    the whole world darkening bit-by-bit as the sun burns my  
eye

echoes, “...can you?”

    put a finger on the switch that controls the power they have on you  
    turn your back to the world, to your savior, to your self  
    taste the touch you feel when you look into eyes burdened by all the world’s sor-  
row

turning inward to f l u c t u a t i o n s  
s o m e t r u t h s s h a t t e r  
c r u m b l i n g r e a l i t i e s

*moment of incongruity ~ Moore*

all architecture relies upon the time-it-takes-to-perceive-the-space, manifold  
    science fictions packaged neatly  
    competing  
    pleading with tendrils  
    cold, gripping, transitive fingers of life  
spermatozoa, ova  
in-store credit only  
infinite line in finite space  
the gears of the universe  
    mechanic [im]perfection  
coming into being  
wrapped our minds  
in the absurdity of time  
tragic

“i have to leave now,” she smiles.

*now back to your regularly scheduled life*

# Waist-High

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Tyler McHaley

Gold buckle, rodeo prize...  
No, my prize  
for your acceptance.  
Pat the head—  
head and shoulders above you.  
I roll over broken glass,  
just to live in your world.  
Juggling eggshells on my toes,  
I turn to look for your applause,  
your distorted laughter,  
your unwelcome nods to continue.  
I can be you  
but never me.  
Half human,  
half machine,  
can I be man?  
Rolling thunder,  
deflated dreams,  
all at your whim.  
A spasm quakes the earth  
where I live.  
Your head shakes  
in despair,  
disdain,  
disgust.  
My place in your world  
only comes to your waist.  
I reach up  
to enter.  
You reach down  
to refuse.  
And all the while,  
our eyes never meet.

# Nesting

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Gary Smothers

The nurse on the phone had told Tristan that his mother was going to die this afternoon.

Again.

This time for sure.

When he'd heard the news Tristan hung the phone up, rubbed at his temples, and slouched back to bed.

It'd serve the bitch right to finally die. She'd found the wherewithal to abandon her only son, divorce her husband, and marry some hippie tree hugger and eat granola out on nature trails. Only when dying did she try to reconnect. Only when Carol had presented herself was Tristan confronted with the truth that he had a living, breathing mother who was, in fact, dying. And alone. Alone after her husband had fallen off a cliff.

So he'd went back to bed. And later, the birds awakened him. Again, just like everyday for the last week.

Before opening his eyes to face the day, the purported impending death, he rubbed at his temples again. His filthy coal stained skin hung on him like a nasty costume--he'd been too drunk to shower and opted to clamber down his hall and into his bedroom. The hangover wouldn't leave and yet, it was time for his mother to die.

The birds beneath his windowsill had silenced since his awakening. Tristan opened his eyes. With a sense of peace and a squint at the brightness he watched the shadows of the oak tree undulate across his barren, gray wall. The shadowed branches swayed from side to side in a gentle lullaby rhythm and he thought to close his eyes again. But he knew the extra sleep wouldn't come thanks to the damned birds. The bald, wingless bastards had already squawked and pierced their way into the willowy comfort of the dream he could barely remember except for a fleeting image of the son he no longer saw and his blonde topped little head.

The birds must've been fed or fallen asleep, so he decided to test fate. He shut his stinging eyes.

The baby birds screamed. The muscles around Tristan's eyes tensed and his eyeballs felt hard in their sockets. Still refusing to accept the day and his mother's stubborn death,

he squirmed in his balled up circle of sheets trying to find some comfort. The birds screeched in unison and it seemed to Tristan as if each scream was louder, more piercing than the previous. He brought his mine-worn knees up to his belly and lay there picturing a hopeful image of the momma bird dangling worms into their upturned mouths.

He willed his eyes to relax, rolled over to keep the filtering in sunlight from his eyes; but the deadbeat mother was still out there somewhere carousing about in a birdbath--probably with a full belly.

The babies' screeches brought the finer details of his dream back and he thought of that little, blonde topped kid again. He hated to think of the boy and most days he could avoid it. The kid could throw a tantrum that rivaled the entire screaming choir outside his window. But the child was gone now, back somewhere down south with his momma and, assumedly, his new daddy.

Tristan's arms quaked as he tore the sheets from his body and went to the window. He struck at the wall feeling the crusty drywall eating into his skin with a quick burn. With a growl he moved his fist over to the windowsill and pounded down again and again and again. When he finally stopped, the birds had silenced. Satisfied, he stepped towards his bathroom for a shower.

The nurses had accommodated his mother by pushing her bed to the window so that she could see the setting sun of an Indian Summer. Tristan stopped in the doorway. His mother's frail, little body lay there in front of the window, her pale visage reflecting above her on the glass. She lay there perfectly still, facing up to the ceiling. Eyes closed. He'd seen her up here before, five times and counting; and on each death call she'd slap away the hand of death and come around to speaking to Tristan with the timber of a schmoozing insurance salesman.

Tristan took a half-step towards his mother, careful to soft-shoe the heel of his boots atop the linoleum. The peach fabric of her sleeping gown rose and fell with each shallow breath. The skin of her neck was ashen and laced with thin, blue veins that disappeared underneath her chin. Her mouth lay open, lips chapped and naked.

Finally, she opened her eyes and turned her head towards the window.

Tristan took a step back, glanced down the hall and then back to his mother.

"I can see you. Your reflection," she rasped. She cleared her throat weakly and continued on, her sales-pitch returned, "Come over here, son."

Tristan sighed and walked over to her bedside.

She rolled her head over to face the ceiling, her yellowed eyes moving to find Tristan. He'd never noticed before but, minus the ugly coloring, he had her eyes.

"Carol."

"Mother will do nicely." Her thin lips stretched into an uneven smile. "You look... upset, son. It's okay to cry."

"Carol, crying never done nobody no good. Never brought a body back. Most bodies I went to see laid out I'd just as much not reckon to see 'em come back after their run."

His mother creaked her head back towards the window joining Tristan in a distant stare.

"You won't cry when I'm gone. Will you?"

Tristan squinted and looked away. Outside the city lay in shadow as dawn approached and gathered up the buildings and the workers departing them. He wiped across his brow and gripped the bedrail searching for coolness in the metal. "What were you looking at," he stuttered. "Why'd those nurses go and move you?"

"See that long rectangle off to the right? Besides the Capitol building."

"Sure."

"That's the museum. Your father and I once took you there. You were eight I think."

"Yeah. Eight."

"Remember how taken you were by that shell? That gigantic shell that hung above everybody's heads when they walked into the gemstone area. All those pretty lit up, colored gems inside it? You loved it."

He did remember. Tristan remembered being frightened that they'd somehow be struck frozen in place and that the shell would come down silently sucking them away.

He looked from the museum, took a glance at his mother, still staring outside, and then looked to the clock.

"Your daddy, he was a good man. Bless him. A real fun day." His mother's voice faltered and she tried to clear her throat again. Her Adam's apple worked up and down, struggling, slipping underneath her thin skin. "Tristan," she wheezed.

Sweat flashed out on his forehead again, collecting at the back of his neck, his arm pits, the bends of his arms. It suddenly seemed darker outside, smaller in his mother's room.

"Tristan," she creaked again without looking from the museum. "I would like you to hold your mamma's hand. Just this once as an adult. Like in the museum that day."

He sighed and reached out towards her hands which were folded neatly across her

lap. She unwrapped her fingers and laid a bare hand face up. Tristan took it. Her bony hand was cool and moist, small, and shaky. The quaking of her fingers was too real, too needy. And so he squeezed her hand, but not too tightly.

“Yes, there. I like that. Now, could you please do me just one more favor?”

“What’s that?” Tristan shifted his feet and stood as straight as he could without letting go of her hand.

“Call me mother.”

“Carol, I--”

“Just this once let me to hear my grown up son hail his mother proper.” She craned her head back to Tristan, her yellowed eyes squinting.

Tristan released her hand and stood erect.

“C’mon. This is just another of them false calls. We can skip the closure garbage. That doctor’s about as accurate as the fucking weatherman.”

She looked away again and, with an alarming groan, edged herself away from Tristan.

Somewhere down the hall a monitor pinged. A nurses’ shoes squeaked. The pinging stopped.

“Everybody needs closure,” she whispered.

“Closure. Bullshit. I don’t even say goodbye when I hang up the phone or leave someone I’s been speaking at.”

“I want you to kill me, son,” she breathed.

Tristan flinched and took a step back. He glanced over his shoulder out into the hall as if her mere mention of a murder was a crime in itself and as if his proposed abetting was guilt by association.

“Kill me.” She spoke towards the window.

Tristan’s eyes watered.

“Kill you?”

“I’ve had my run.” Her reflected eyes shut tightly--a schoolgirl’s wishing.

Tristan’s vision jiggled and his jaw tensed. “Yeah, well I ain’t finished with mine yet. Prison ain’t no place to have your run at.”

“Place your hand over my mouth. I won’t struggle. My lungs, there won’t be that much work on your part. Please, son. Your mother’s dying wish. Please.”

He thought of the museum and the shell swallowing them all up, mountain trails and granola, hippies falling off cliffs, the darkness of the mines, the darkness of death, the baby birds and their absent mother. Growing up without his mother while she literally tiptoed

through the fucking tulips. The blonde topped boy.

He looked down and she had rolled back and raised her yellowed eyes up to him.

“Kill me,” she demanded in a whisper.

Tristan felt his balled up fist opening, his pulse racing just behind his knuckles.

“Look out the window,” he said noticing the life that suddenly danced in her eyes.

“Look out the window. Mother.”

Silently, in secret collusion she rolled away and faced the beautiful, violet streaked sky.

“Now, look at the museum over there in the shadows.” Her reflected gaze shifted.

“Now, close your eyes.” She complied, offering up a long, breathy sigh.

He turned away and walked from her room quietly as he could.

On the drive home in his father’s old truck white fumes poured over the hood. The truck bucked and sputtered. Tristan pictured the engine inside the rusted out hood. He thought of the machinery pumping around the frail, coagulated pistons. He thought of his mother and her sick, cancered-up lungs, her insides kicking, pumping with effort for a mere hated breath.

Tristan pulled into the drive as the white smoke turned to black coating the windshield in a thick oily grime. He clambered from the truck and headed around to the back of his house for his box of Pennzoil.

A motion light kicked to life illuminating his muddy, grassless backyard and the case of oil. He held a hand at his worn-out lower back and bent for the box when a sickly sounding wail grabbed his attention. He turned to the noise and at the outermost edges of the light, next to the steps, was a fat robin. She stood there guardedly amid the debris of her nest her head twitching as she chirped a sound that Tristan somehow knew as a warning or cry out for other nearby birds. He took a step closer to the tangled mess of twigs at her feet and squatted down on his haunches. He squinted and peered inside. From this vantage point he could see that the nest had toppled upside down. Through the tiny slats in the nest’s structure he could see the five bald babies, their twisted vein-lined necks and the nubs of their half-formed wings. Their eyes were shut. Tristan, feeling sickened at his knowledge of their mishap, stood and stepped back. The momma bird repositioned with a few awkward hops, squawked and lit into the air flying away. Tristan swallowed and crept back towards the nest with a morbid thought to flip the thing over and look closer at what he’d done. He reached for the nest and a tiny chirp came from inside. Tristan steadied his hand and smiled at hearing the surviving baby. Between the crooked slats of the nest the



baby bird twitched its head around weakly. He drew his hand back, thought, and reached again. Slowly, he pried the nest up. The babies naked, pink body heaved completely with each rapid breath. One eye was half shut and it's head jerked around on its pencil-thin neck as if it weighed too much.

Tristan thought to pick the nest up, shovel the frail little thing inside it and bring it into his house, nurse it back to health. Salvation of the pink little thing would make up for it all.

The baby bird, as if sensing this realization of Tristan's, cheeped. From somewhere above the momma squawked.

Yes, he could save the baby, try at least. He madly ran through the old wives' tale of babies in the wild and how you weren't supposed to touch them. If he so much as touched it and his plan didn't work, if he let it back go--the momma would probably kill it. But what if he did raise it, let it go, and watched it fly off. . . Would the momma find it and kill it still?

Tristan gritted his teeth. Beneath him, the baby in its upturned shell of a nest screeched. The momma squawked louder and landed just outside the rim of light. Tristan shook his head and raised his boot. He looked away as the momma chirped angrily and hopped into the light. With a deep breath, he raised his boot higher and stomped down at the nest. The mess of twigs crackled beneath him and he felt the sickly squish of the babies as he mashed them. He raised his boot back up and stood wide- legged.

The momma robin alit into the air with a chirp. She blitzed in mad circles about Tristan, her streaking shadow darting in and out of the light until she departed silently.

Tristan fought the urge to look back down at the birds. He wiped a sheen of sweat from his brow and moved back towards the oil when he heard the distant sound of his telephone ringing. He went to his knees crying.

*I'm Watching You ~ Wilburn*



*I'm Watching You* by Jeremy Wilburn

# Contributor's Information

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**Sarah Bly** is currently a senior at UIS majoring in English. After graduation she hopes to travel to other countries and later attend graduate school with a focus in post-modern poetry.

**A.D. Carson**, current UIS Grad Student and 2004 graduate of Millikin University, spends much of his spare time drinking overproof rum with his Mexican bunny rabbit, Poncho, who is also his best friend, and hunting unsuspecting primates at his whim. He also really really loves women and is accepting wife applications.

**Julia Gentile** was born in Chicago, and found her way to Central Illinois and into one of Jacqueline Jackson's classes at UIS. She credits Ms. Jackson with encouraging her to keep writing, no matter what. In addition to appearing previously in the *Alchemist Review*, one of her short stories received second place in the Ella Grasso Literary Award for 2006.

**Vera Herst** is an attorney with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, and credits Jackie Jackson with encouraging her to write something other than dirty limericks. She lives in Springfield with her husband, two stepdaughters, and other assorted companion animals.

**Teresa Holton** is a graduate student at UIS working on her degree through the INO. She plans to graduate in the Summer of '07 with a degree in Creative Writing: Process and Application. Ms. Holton is a teacher, a farmer's wife and mother of two children.

**Kevin Howe** lives with his wife Amy in Southern California, where he works as a contractor for the US Navy. He is currently working toward his BA in English at UIS. His favorite reading includes the works of Dante, Donne, Milton, Wordsworth, and Blake.

**Jacqueline Jackson**, a retired UIS Professor of English, is the author of thirteen books. For many years she hosted a writing show over WUIS for area classrooms. Thousands of school kids were read on the air, and visited the campus yearly during the Verbal Arts Festival, for the Reading and Writing and Radio Jamboree.

**Dave Kube** is currently a senior at UIS in the visual arts program. He also teaches graphic design at LLCC. Dave will be displaying new photos at UIS in the LRH building from April 26 – May 17. The opening reception will take place on May 3rd from 5:30 – 8:00 pm.

**Lola L. Lucas'** first book, *At Home in the Park: Loving a Neighborhood Back to Life*, has been compared to Garrison Keillor's writings (it's available at the UIS bookstore, hint, hint.) She has taught in the HDC program and is a member of the no name writers' group and PWLF.

**Carol Manley** has an M.A. in English from UIS. Her awards include the Friends of Lincoln Library Writer of the Year Award and an Illinois Arts Council Artists Fellowship. Her unpublished short story collection *Church Booty* was a finalist for the 2006 Flannery O'Connor Award from the University of Georgia Press.

**Lucy Silva Marrero** is a slowpoke senior at University of Illinois Springfield, completing her degree in English while working full-time as a technical writer, maintaining a political blog, and attempting to wrangle a rowdy preschooler. This is her first published work.

**Isaac J. Moore** studies Psychology at UIS. He commutes from Mars. Although this may seem like quite a journey, he says the educational reward of attending UIS is unparalleled in the known universe. The poem he submitted, moment of incongruity, was created during a hypnotic trance.

**Audra Roach** is from Charleston, Illinois and is a senior at UIS. She spent her four years here playing volleyball for the Women's Volleyball team. Audra became interested in photography about five years ago and is currently selling her photography at Gigi's Attic in Springfield.

**Jessika Ross** is a junior at UIS studying graphic design and visual arts. She is also a photo-journalist for the Army National Guard and spent a year deployed to Mosul, Iraq in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. She has a passion for traveling and enjoys painting, photography and forcing herself to learn new design programs.

**Gary Smothers** has had several other short stories published and is the author of the novel, *Penitence*. Having read *Penitence*, award-winning author Bentley Little referred to Smothers as a very talented writer. Smothers' works have been described as gritty and unflinching accounts of humanity. "Nesting" is an excerpt from a novel he is currently writing.

**Jeremy Wilburn** is a senior at the University of Illinois at Springfield majoring in Visual Arts with a focus in Photography and Graphic Design. He also has a minor in Communication with a focus in Mass Media and a minor in Computer Science. He will be pursuing his Masters in Arts at UIS in Communication with a focus in Advertising.

