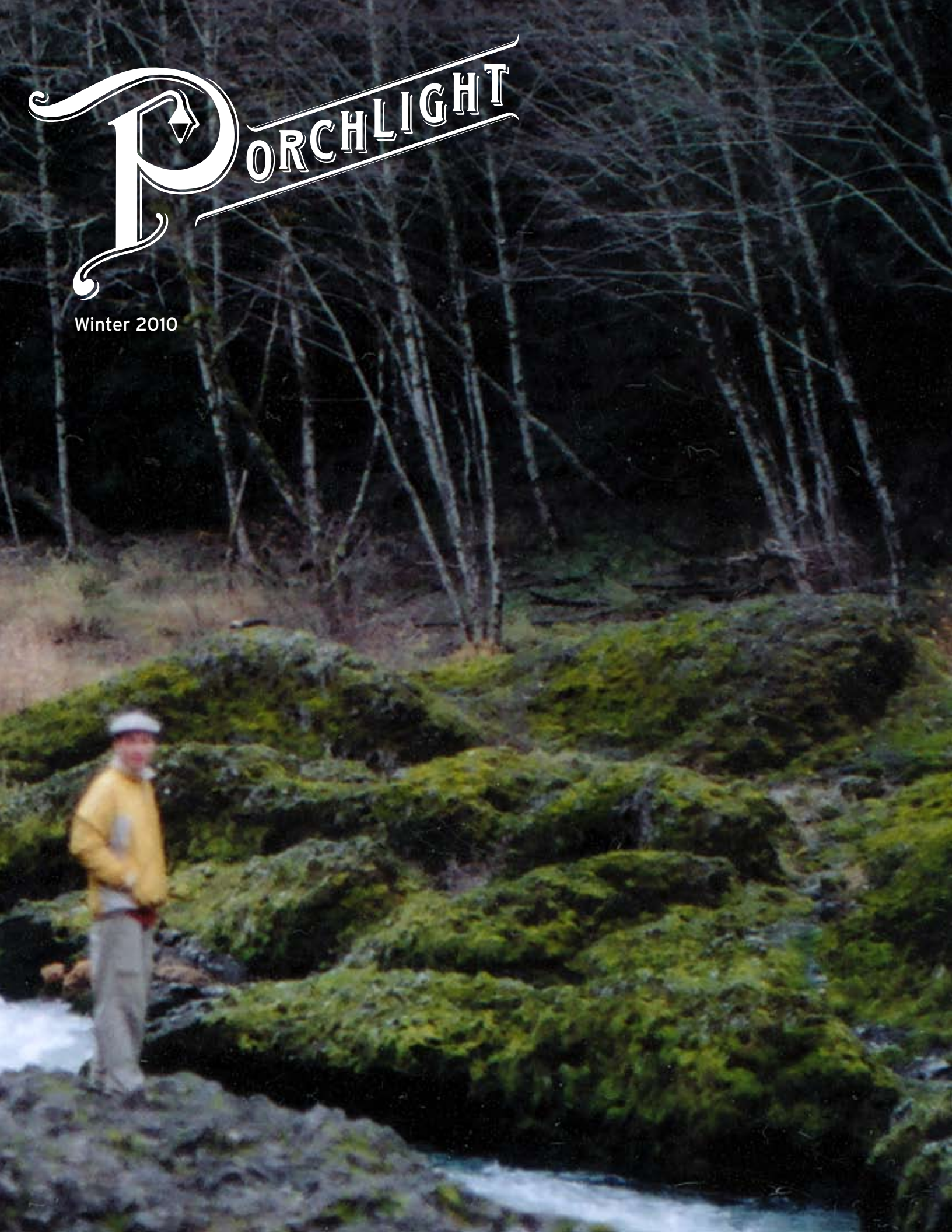


# PORCHLIGHT

Winter 2010




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**Porchlight: A Literary Magazine**  
Where Narrative, Design, and Photography Intersect.  
.....

## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The theme of this third issue is knowledge. Knowledge changes how we interact with the world, how we perceive it, how we perceive ourselves within. I hope you find that the pieces in this issue offer a unique perspective on what it means to be human, to be changed, to know.

We are proud to present many new contributors from across the country and world. In subsequent issues we will continue to present uncommon, exceptional work that engages the minds and hearts of our readers. As always, submissions are welcome, and you can find our guidelines on the last page.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "L.J. Moore". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looping initial "L" and "J".

L.J. Moore

Editor

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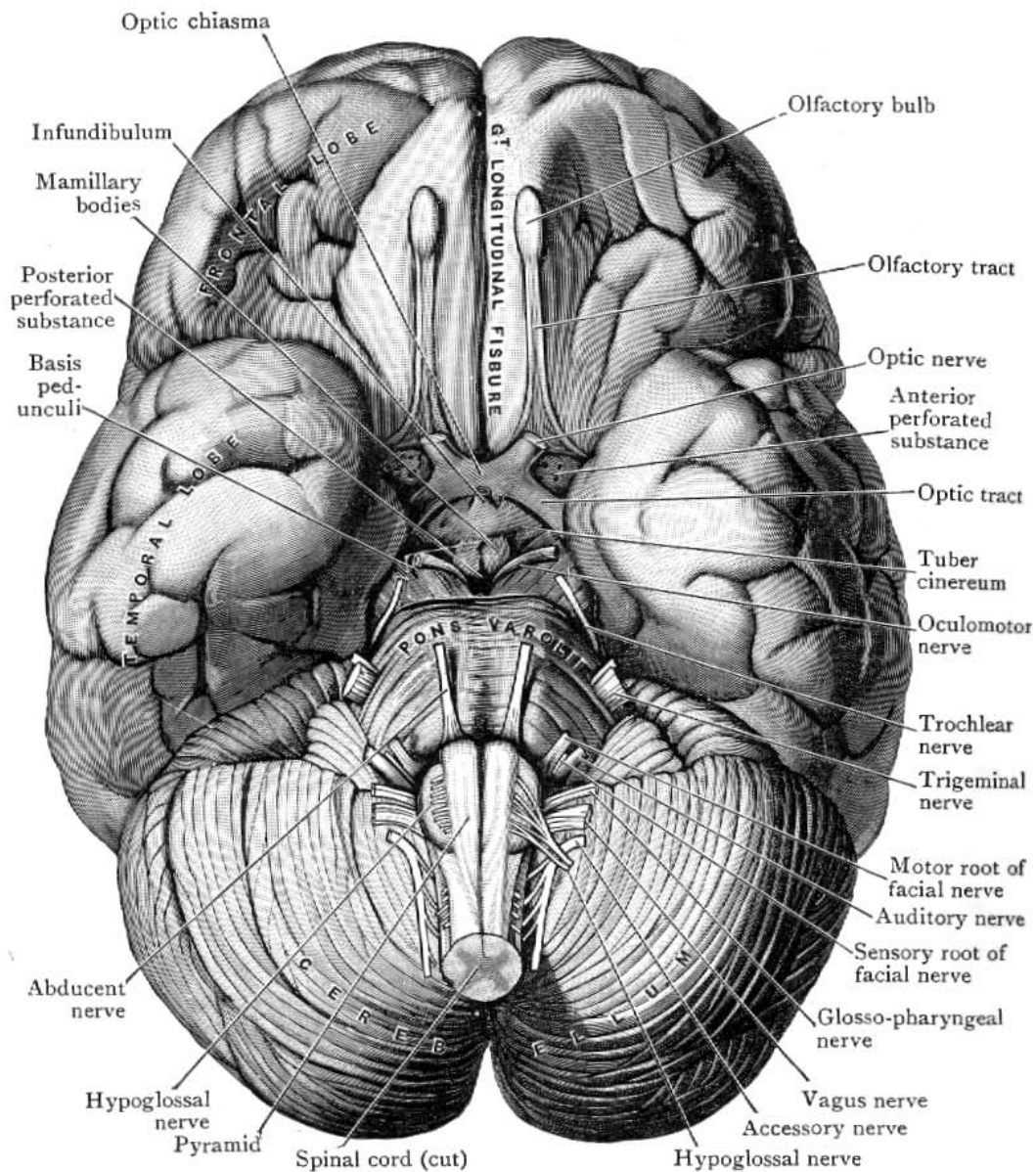


FIG. 160.—Base of Brain with Cranial Nerves attached.

Gray's Anatomy



# BURNING the HORSE



by Kirby Wright

The boy stood at the fence line watching the ranch hand stack wood on the fire. He was burning the horse. A plume of black smoke drifted over the pasture into the clouds. The smell made the boy feel sick to his stomach and alone. He thought about his flight and how his mother had cried when he had waved goodbye. It was just for the summer but they'd never been apart in all his four years.

It was his first visit to Moloka'i. His grandmother had pointed out the Churches built by Father Damien on the way out to her ranch. They were tiny with high steeples and cemeteries surrounding them. The boy wondered if the ghosts of the lepers walked the grounds after midnight and if, as ghosts, they carried leprosy into the next world.

The grandmother joined him at the fence line. Her face was brown and wrinkled like a paper bag. She wrapped her gnarled hands around the wire. "Whacha doin', Peanut?" she asked.

"Nothing, Gramma."

"Nothin', my foot," she snapped.

He finger combed his dark brown hair. "I'm watching the fire."

"Wish that damn Valdez'd finish up," she said.

He thought she was speaking differently than she had the night before. Her lips were making a new smacking noise. She reminded him of a Munchkin in *The Wizard of Oz*. Gramma was most like the mayor with the top hat and the pear-shaped body. Maybe it was because she wore a blue-and-white checkered shirt, denims, and a lauhala hat. She was fat like the mayor too.

The grandmother stuck a cigarette between her lips, struck a wooden match to life against a fencepost, and lit it. She sucked the cigarette like a baby sucking a bottle. She blew smoke through her nose. "Won't be long now befoah they're burnin' me up," she told the boy.

"God wants us all buried with crosses over our graves," he said.

"Who the hell says?"

He noticed she didn't have teeth. But didn't she have them at the airport? And weren't teeth there when she woke him in the rooster light and told him to get up and put on his t-shirt and jeans?

"Asked you a question," the grandmother said.

“Mummy says,” he blurted. “She told me if you get burnt your soul gets burnt too.”

“How she come to know that?”

“Father Keelan.”

“Wot yoah damn Mummy says doesn’t mattah.”

“Why?”

“Christ, Peanut, she’s a million damn miles away.”

He liked it when she called him Peanut. He liked it too when she used swear words talking about his mother. He knew Gramma didn’t like her because she was a spoiled girl from the mainland. He was glad he took after his hapa haole father. He loved his mother but being away from her made him feel funny inside, as if she was really only an aunt or a baby sitter. This was his summer with Gramma while his father worked on a big case in Honolulu and his mother visited relatives in Boston.

The grandmother dropped her lit cigarette on the grass and stomped it out with the heel of her boot. “Whacha want fo’ breakfast, Peanut?”

“Sugar Pops.”

“Fo’ the luva Pete,” she said. “You’ll get eggs an’ be happy with ‘um.”

He trailed after her up the incline to the beach house. Gramma lived there alone. She’d told him she had the company of the ocean and all the fish in the sea. The waves broke 20 feet from the lanai. His bed was on the lanai and, during the night, the waves had sounded like thunder. He’d tried sleeping but the waves, the mosquitoes, and the screeching geckos kept him awake.

He followed Gramma through the screen door into the kitchen. The walls were pale yellow. A carton of eggs sat on a stainless steel counter. She reached into a cupboard below the sink and pulled out a frying pan. “Sunny side up?” she asked.

He nodded. He wasn’t sure what she meant. Was she talking about the sun coming out later in the day?

“Go wash up befoah kaukau,” she told him.

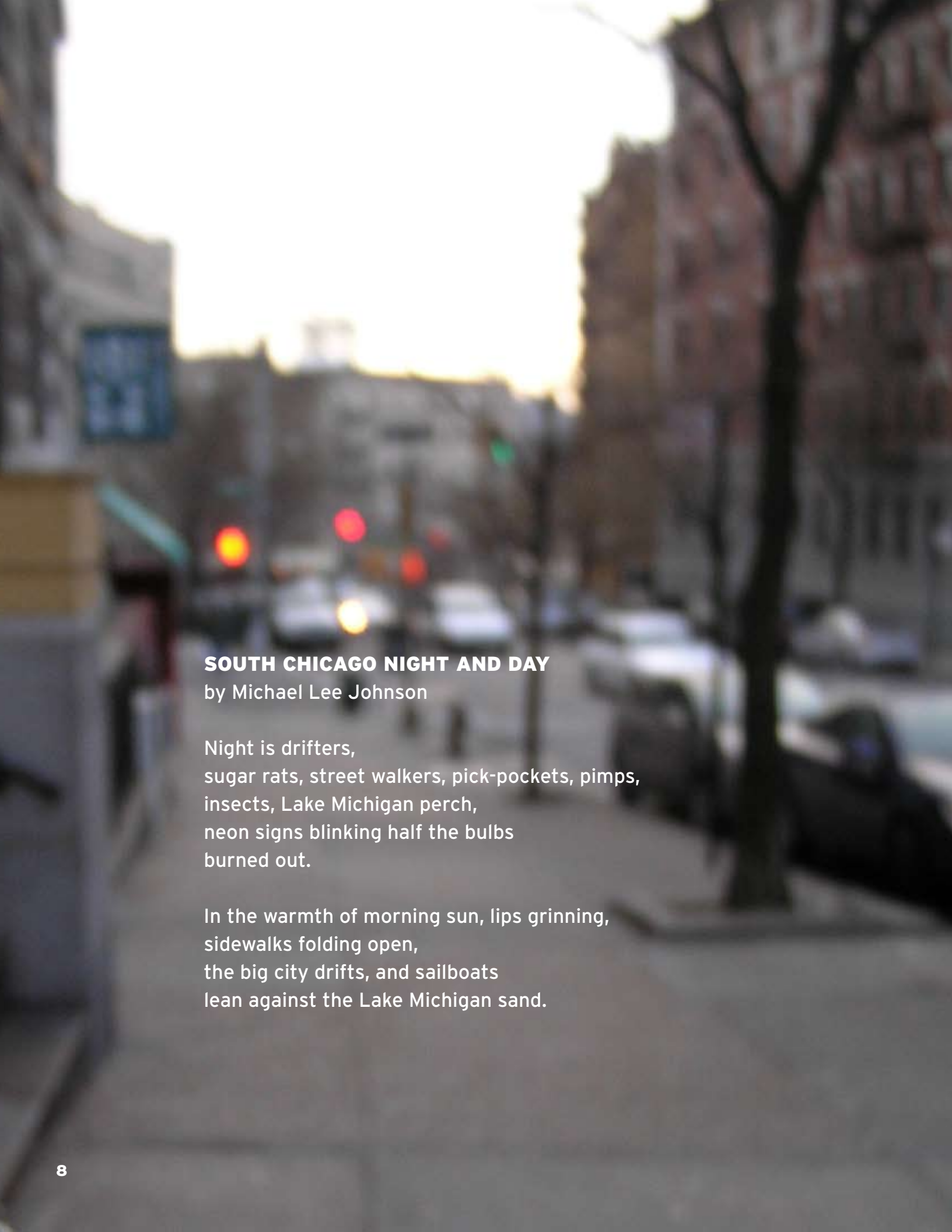
The boy walked the hall to the bathroom and closed the door. He wanted to lock it but there was no lock. He wandered over to the sink. On the dresser beside the sink, something was bubbling in a glass of water. He looked through the bubbles and saw two sets of teeth attached to pink gums. At first he thought the teeth were real, that his grandmother had the power to unlock body parts. He dropped a finger into the bubbling water and ran it over the gums—they didn’t feel real. They felt like plastic.

“Peanut!” his grandmother called.

The boy took his finger out of the water. He smiled big in the mirror so he could see his teeth—they were as white as the puka shells he’d found that dawn on the beach. He studied the glass on the counter. Gramma would go first. Then his father. Finally, it would be his mother’s time.

He was pretty sure he would live forever.





**SOUTH CHICAGO NIGHT AND DAY**

by Michael Lee Johnson

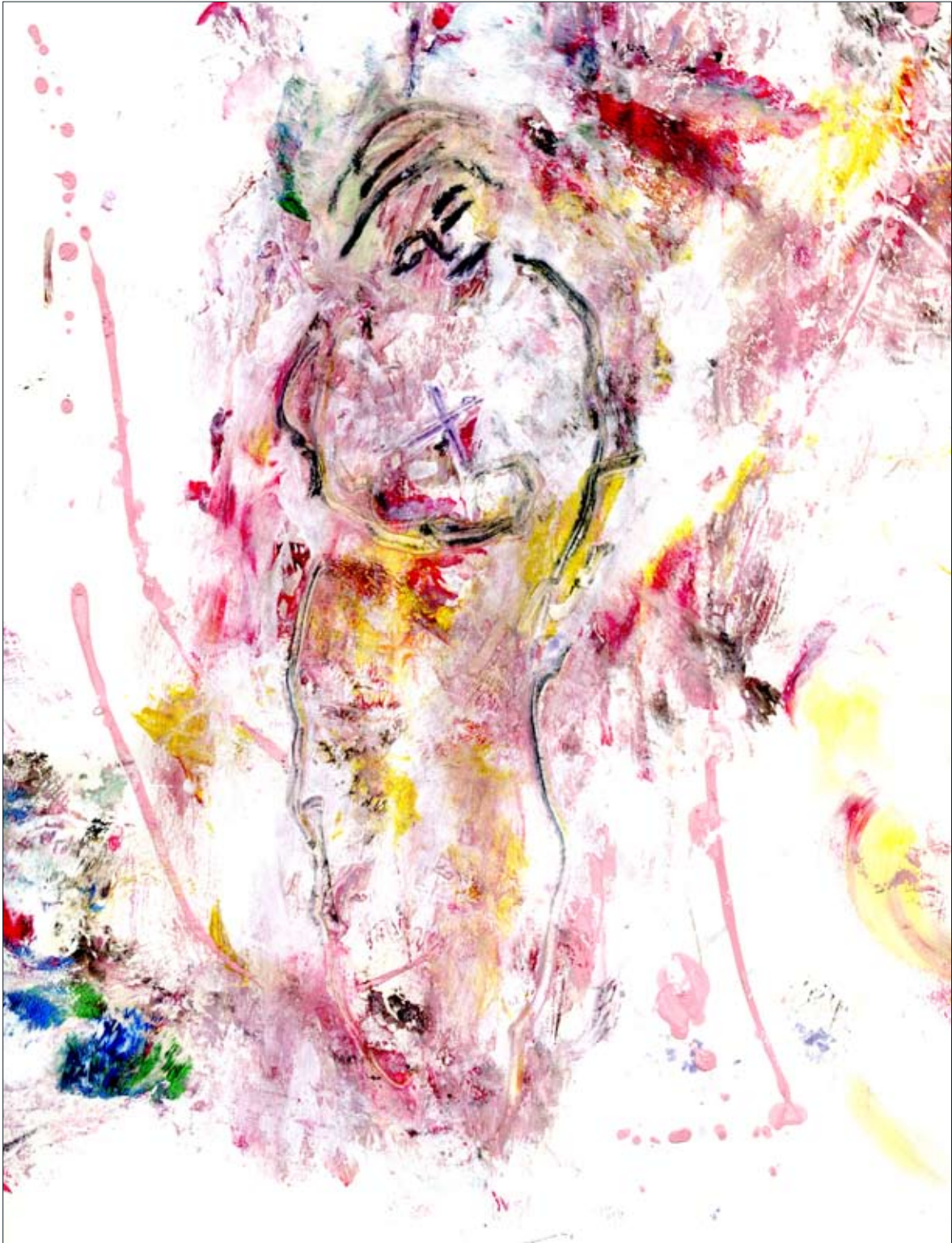
Night is drifters,  
sugar rats, street walkers, pick-pockets, pimps,  
insects, Lake Michigan perch,  
neon signs blinking half the bulbs  
burned out.

In the warmth of morning sun, lips grinning,  
sidewalks folding open,  
the big city drifts, and sailboats  
lean against the Lake Michigan sand.

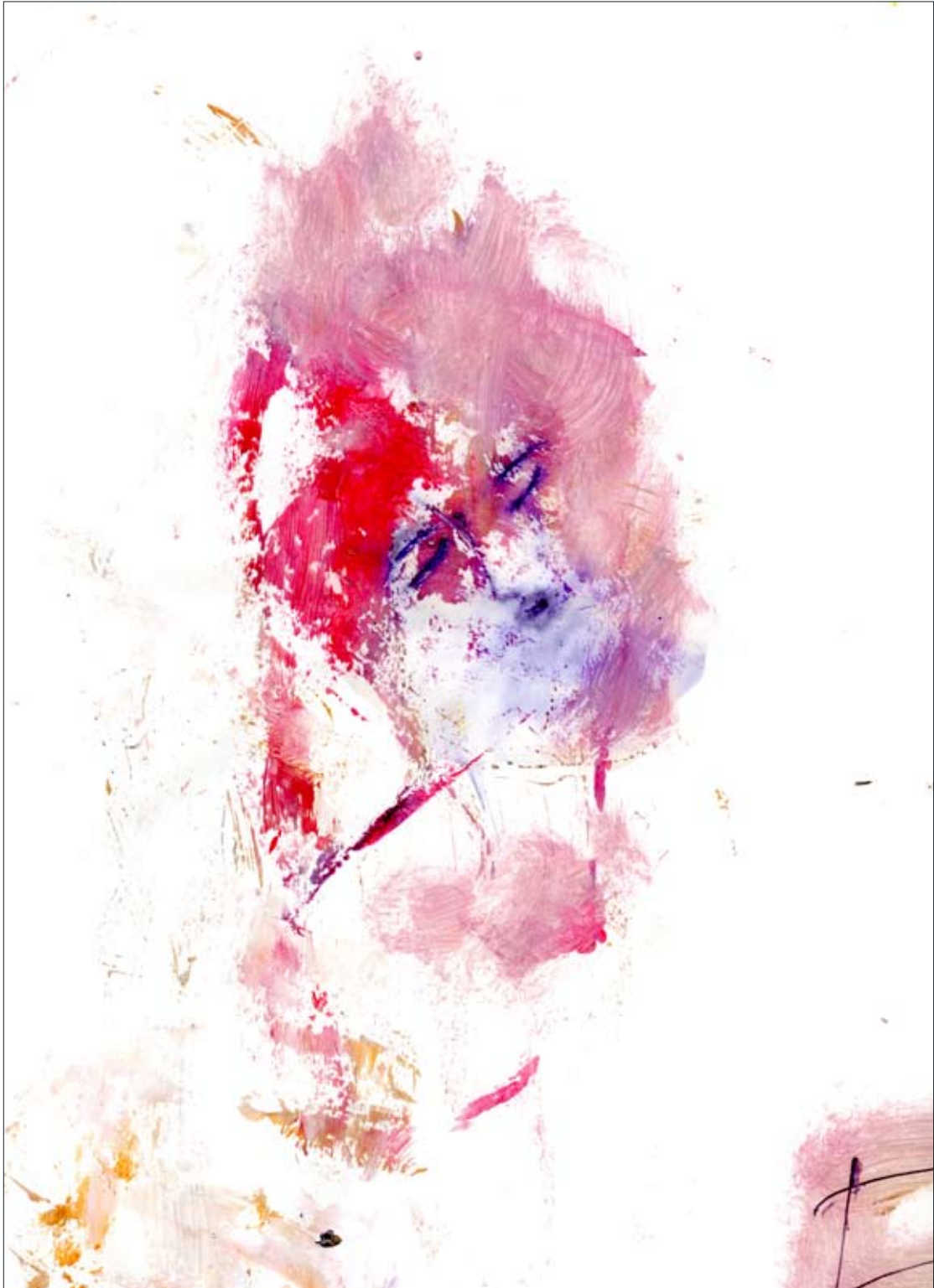
## PAINTINGS BY ERNEST WILLIAMSON III



*Man's Future in Abstract*



*Hoping For The Ideal*



*The Humiliation of Humility*



*DaVinci's Shadow*



# *a torn half*

by **Adrienne Christian**

I always knew when my daddy called  
to say he wasn't coming  
home.  
My mother would ask,  
"Again?" and then bark,  
"Well, how late?"  
then sigh in a humbler tone  
"I'll leave your dinner on the stove."  
Then she'd stomp off to the kitchen,  
take a fistful of ice from the freezer,  
throw the cubes in a ceramic mug,  
pour the Wild Turkey on top.  
She'd light another one of *Mommy's special cigarettes*  
before the previous one had burned,  
twirl her asphalt-colored curls around her index finger,  
tell us kids to go and eff ourselves when we asked her the matter.  
And yesterday,  
when you called to say that you weren't coming home  
I found my way to the kitchen,  
ripped open a sack of potato chips,  
fetched the bottle of gin from under the bed,  
took my seat, there, on the floor.  
And thought of my mother—  
she, a fraction of a woman,  
and me,

her  
torn  
half.

# THE CHICKEN SEEDS

a story by Monique Roussel

**H**E LAY ON TOP OF ME, HIS LONG chestnut hair falling about his shoulders, his tattoo flinching as he spread my legs. “Let’s break the rules,” he said. Made me think of this Bukowski manuscript I read once describing how Bukowski used to hear two things come through the walls from the drunk next door: the ball game and the words “Come on baby, let me put this god damned thing in there.”



You know there was an FBI file on him—Bukowski, the civil servant. The bulk was just mundane reportage of neighbors and employers who scarcely remember him. There are records from the LAPD too:

*Arrested for violation of Section 647F of the Penal Code (Drunk) by the LAPD on December 17, 1962 and August 12, 1963.*

For these offenses he received a fine of \$20.00. Which was forfeited.

*The records of the Traffic Violations Bureau, Municipal Court, Los Angeles, California, were checked on March 11, 1968 by [unreadable]. These records reflect that HENRY CHARLES BUKOWSKI, JR. 5124 De Longpre Avenue, Los Angeles, California, was cited on May 23, 1967 for violation of Section 22350 of the Vehicle Code (Speeding).*

For this offense he paid a \$10.00 fine on June 13, 1967.

Informants reported things like the above to postal worker Charles Bukowski's higher-ups. To what avail? You know, I took a job working for this madwoman to pay the bills once. She had what's known as a "start-up." We shared a loft in Chelsea with her passive-aggressive photographer friend, Charles. But really, she had no friends. I was her "assistant," and when she was too cheap to pay international postage to send things to her clients or the press people she was panting to impress, she would send me to the cavernous, dreaded, massive post office. You know, the big one—NEITHER RAIN NOR SLEET NOR WHATEVER SHALL KEEP US FROM OUR APPOINTED—ugh God. Anyway, it was hell. But I used to walk into that marbled madness, that mausoleum of postal death that—those rows of windows with one blue-shirted man with bifocals and lines and lines of crumpled people with boxes and bags and...it sucked.

I would think of Bukowski though. Every time I had to suffer that shit. I would think how he would wear those shorts and leather mail bag and work with those crumpled people—how he could drink like a fish, fuck and then write this poetry that was like songs off black angels wings or something—something so inspired—so inspired was he by the dry-dead-heat of cast-off LA—

Yeah, we were drunk too, me and the hippie with chestnut hair. Seems it was tequila that greased my legs open like no other, but really, I'm to blame. He was so stylish with his Sir Walter Raleigh mustache and KISS tattoo: this all balls-out, anti-establishment look that looks so good in a limo or at the Chateau Marmont where he'd hang—God, I want to go there. God—rockstars rode motorcycles through the halls there, fucked legions of groupies there, died in their own vomit and tossed TVs off balconies—*so fucking cool!* But here I was a 47-year old woman, bleach blonde, fucked up on Patrone, so intent in his bed, my black-vinyl-booted legs wrapped around this muscle bound child with his massive hard on. His trendy patchy beard and his breath all over my mouth and down my throat (the candles, of course, flickering). This is what goes on on the 19th floor of Zeckendorf Towers, overlooking what used to be a park so scary, so full of drugs, so black, so dark we



used to walk the perimeter—me and my art-school-Parsons-School-of-Designy-friends—scared like little cats, and we called it Needle Park then (arguably Needle Park because there’s all these parks in New York City that all these people call Needle Park, but to my knowledge this is the only one, the one from the Pacino movie).

Yes, that one across from that brick monstrosity, Zeckendorf towers, where pseudo-hippies who have the look but not the head live and fuck women much much older than themselves. That park that is all cleaned up where secretaries and hipsters and people eat their lunch and then go back to their insurance company jobs—yeah, much much older—hmmmm—and god DAMN I’m in bed with this guy so covered in tattoos, so rich, so sweetly naked, so privileged, and me, perhaps wishing I could be him in my next life (or when I grow up? although I’m old, like really old—really?). And when this fuck gets in his car and grabs that stick shift and turns that key and that engine gets real hot and he starts driving and driving and driving and its hot and then hotter and—blow open the windows dude—and then, “Oh what’s this? A text message—who the hell is this, what phone number is this, is this for somebody else? Oh its her. I’ll say hi.” Too fucking late and boom he crashes into a tree.

Bukowski described his first fuck as a 300 pound whore.

At least he remembered her.

I always looked at Bukowski and wondered how he lived his life of drinking and fornication and hot dusty hobo hotels and the writing and the broads and the fame and how could he make it through all that—walking around like he’d just crawled from the wreckage, *everyday*.

When I survive fucks like this, I know how. I know why. You bear witness. You open your sticky lids and see. Like our late brilliant friend the postal worker, if you’re lucky enough, you can write. You can do something other than fuck and drink and cast looks of disdain and spit into the sawdust.

But there is power in this—you are here. You see the fairness and the filth. You saw that clueless fuck lose it. That one that hit the tree. The tree fell in the forest and—his Samsonite hair bloody and blowing—shame really. Do you know they made us take this philosophy class during my spotty undergrad career at Florida State, one of the great party football schools of all time, and this freaking class was at 8 AM? EIGHT AM. Me, a 17-year-old-not-even-18, bleary-eyed-as-hell sitting next to my Rastafarian girl friend Ann, the daughter of a doctor of the upper classes. She was straight from Kingston, friends with Bob Marley, smoked for her religion—a GODSEND to me—the whole deal. Us listening to a guy that looked like Dick Cheney except rumped: about 80 years old, talking about Kant, and oh fuck. We all heard that tree fall just now, huh? Did you hear that tree my children? Yes, we heard that tree get slammed by that motherfucker—

I am not a woman scorned. Just amused. Karma rears its beautiful, stunning head and then bang! There you are—truth in black and orange lashing its tail suddenly like a Bengal set free amid the flora and fauna. When we met, the hippie told me he was surrounded by spirits. Angry ones. He'd be asleep in his suite at the Chateau Marmont and strange black footsteps would echo past his door, light bulbs would snap from the ceiling and go flying. All these bleeding, heavy, misery laden spirits followed him anywhere a place was haunted. (Am I the strangled foot dragging haunted living spirit that wants to break his ass?) When I wanted to get in his pants, I felt protective, thought it charming. Now, I know why they chase him, the dark invisible ones. They chase the careless and weak, those destructors who damage and harm with their flailing, thoughtless action and inaction.

When I was a child I bore witness to my first grade teacher. She was mean and wore pussycat glasses with rhinestones glinting dully in the corners and green grey dresses with thick flesh colored stockings and black shoes. She made us sit in these hard rows upon rows of desks. And I found myself at the age of six afraid to ask to go to the bathroom. I knew this was bullshit. I missed kindergarten with my two sweet smiling teachers with their high teased 60s hair and pink cotton candy dresses tied at the waist with black velvet ribbon—all the women wanted to be Jackie Kennedy then—and finger paints and coffee cans filled with crayons and big wide paper wrapped around each one with our names written so we could see. And nap time and songs and blocks and hopscotch and grape juice on my lips.

So, one day I decided her tyranny would end. I peed my pants. Right in the middle of her longdivisiondickandjaneoneplusoneequalszerotirade. There she was at the blackboard until a puddle underneath the child in the last row caught her attention.

“Did you wee wee?” she asked, shakily.

I looked down, calm as a freaking zen master, looked up and said: “What’s this water?”

“Why did you do this?” she said in the first tender voice I ever heard from her lips.

“You’re mean and you never let us go to the bathroom!” I was the accuser. I was the judge now, amid the frozen shock of that classroom.

I was neither punished nor sent to the principals office. Never taunted, never teased. I was like a fucking Hell’s Angel in there. I showed that bitch. It was my first “fuck you” to the world and I was victorious. My humiliation became hers. And, I bore witness.

In response to my sufferings my second grade teacher rained adoration upon me. Placed a fragrant laurel wreath about my head and let me wear my purple heart of bravery every day. On Halloween I wore my handmade kimono from Japan (from when my mother took me there after her divorce). My sisters powdered my face white and stained my lips red. I was beautiful and loved. An outlaw—but not in the style of Dillinger, having never had to draw blood to gain street cred.

Would you believe me if I told you that I was kidnapped and held against my will by a corporation? Ah, the beginnings of my illustrious career. Auspicious no? No. Yes, I was. Do you know what it's like to be treated as sub-human? I'm a Jewess. The daughter of a war bride brought here by an American GI stationed in North Africa in World War II. I heard the stories from my Moroccan mother of the Nazi occupation of Casablanca, where she was born. The air raids, her peeing her pants in basements at the blare of sirens. Guess it runs in the family, this release of fluids to make a point—

I've seen the films, read the stories. I've had my heart broken by Anne Frank, she who was sent to the camps and murdered just before the surrender. I've watched Hitler in sped-up black and white and in regular time color playing with his German Shepherd. I've listened to one of his secretaries recount how soft spoken he was once he left the podium.

I don't look Jewish. I've heard what people say when they think no Jews are around. Jews don't even think I'm Jewish. The tribe doesn't recognize its own. I respect "the tradition" but to me, God and religion are two different things. As far as something organized, I lean towards The Tao.

So yes, I've been introduced to the idea by my Sephardic Jewess mother (our ancestors tossed to the curb by the Spanish Inquisition), that people of my ilk have been treated as subhuman in recent and not so recent history. I'm white, but technically African American. Guess who built the pyramids? Bingo! My peeps! How they lifted those 10 ton blocks I'll never know, but they sweated their asses off in the Sahara, toiled like bastards for the Egyptians and—All races were slaves to someone conquering someone at some point. We've all had to rise.

I've heard a lot of talk, felt the pain and compassion. The first time I saw the striped jacket with the yellow-felt Star of David behind glass at the Jewish Museum, I cried. Right there. In front of my nine-year old son and everyone.

But you haven't lived till you've had someone look at you like you're not human. Scratch that—you never want to experience it. I worked for a big luxury retail store in the heart of Manhattan, an executive at the age of 23. One day, I was going to lunch with my friends. Two security guys I knew personally pulled me to the side on my way out and asked me if they could ask me some questions. I said sure and let my friends go to lunch. I was held against my will for eight hours. Escorted to the bathroom. (Again, someone had to watch me piss—what's that about?) Asked to write a confession under duress and thrown in the street—

Seems they thought I had lifted some merchandise. Why are writers always getting arrested? I was never arrested. Have not as yet achieved the badass status of the late great Hunter S. or Bukowski or even my zen friend Ginsberg for that matter. Come close as I say. There was that time in Hogs and Heffers with my sociopath ex-boyfriend Preston whom I knew to cut off the booze at a certain point in the evening as he was one of those filthy Doctor-Jekyll-Mister-Hyde types when inebriated. I had had a couple myself. The dreaded Tequila lifted its crazy head yet again. I was loaded, listening to the live band doing very well with a Jim Morrison tune when I spot the bartendress—

tits on the bar chatting it up with Mr. Charm School, getting him to buy them both shots as that's her job—and, quite calmly, I come to conclusion that I have to fuck her up. No raging. No flailing. Have you any idea how empowering it is to be an asshole? You know that feeling you've got when you're drunk and you know you're being an asshole and YOU DON'T CARE! I was either leaving there in cuffs or a stretcher, but I was going to slap the shit out of her AND him. No worries!

So, I start walking across the bar and she spots me first. Gets that rabbit in the headlights look. Seems she's seen my look before in other rankled patrons. Hey, if it's your job to flirt with other chicks' boyfriends well, do the math on how many times you're gonna see that glint in a chick's eye my friend... Anyways, then he spots me. Gets that rabbit in the headlights look too. And just as I swagger up to the bar (I'm about to open my mouth to Miss Big Tits), he grabs me, throws me over his shoulder (ass in the air, boots kicking the whole nine), and hustles me out. Damn! No cops! No getting arrested! Drag!

Then there's the myriad of times in my youth in Florida. Picture me in the backseat of countless black T-top Camaros, Boston blaring *More Than a Feeling* at 100 miles an hour on Highway 41 as I'm about to take that first bong hit—an angel on my shoulder, friends. An angel.

Where that angel was the day I was held against my will, I have no clue. Maybe doing a bong hit with Miss Tits at Hogs and Heifers, who the fuck knows? But, regardless of my failure to achieve total outlaw status here, no one gave a damn. Not my scaredy cat art school friends, not my so called loaded with dough, savvy Jewish boyfriend at the time. I was 24, surrounded by self-absorbed sheep and didn't know my rights.

In summary, I let them fire me without suing for millions. Not only for unlawfully holding me—failed NYPD rejects playing good cop bad cop with a terrified child shaking like a goat on their ripped faux leather couch—but try a little something called emotional distress, that nebulous catchall that can have validity for some (as it fucked me up for years). By the time I asked a lawyer he said there was no statute of limitations and I had a case, but now, there was no money in it. Money. Right. Lawyers. Yes. Money and lawyers and reading the box top for instructions, right? I'm getting better about that.

There's a Sikh teaching about a priest who gives a man a chicken and tells him to go and kill it without anyone seeing. The man goes round back, puts the chicken's head to the chopping block and raises his hatchet. He then returns with the chicken, alive. The priest says, "Why didn't you kill the chicken?"

The man says, "Because the chicken sees."

Yes. The chicken sees all. Super Chicken sees me, you, the hippie, the rumpled postal employees, even my first grade teacher, the Nazis, Miss Big Tits, and those god damn security guards. Is the chicken God? No. She's a chicken. Handing out flyers in Times Square for a strip joint. Pulled from one of the silvery drawers at the morgue, eyes riveted by the florescent lights, unable to blink.

# MATCHBOOK

BY RENEE EMERSON

FRAYED LITTLE FIREGIVER,  
YOU ARE MISSING  
MORE THAN HALF YOUR TEETH.





\*

Even in August its contrails  
without wings :this spider  
won't let go and the logs you stacked  
wave over wave crashing against  
the hard landscape –each heading  
whitened in mid-air, frozen  
for more strength, more altitude  
–each odorless thread  
trying to fly in formation  
and close alongside the sweet smell  
that still safeguards the sick  
the dead, the center, the clouds  
not yet malignant or unyielding

–each summer and the logs  
readied for a sky that will devour itself  
the way a loom years later  
somehow sets fire and your old army shirt  
struggling in the attic  
thrown open for the redeeming height  
that never comes  
–did you think you were picking flowers

that you still have the touch  
–just two fingers, lifting this spider  
on a safer course, away from its target  
–it's only a window  
and you could use more air  
under these fingers you keep counting.

by Simon Perchik

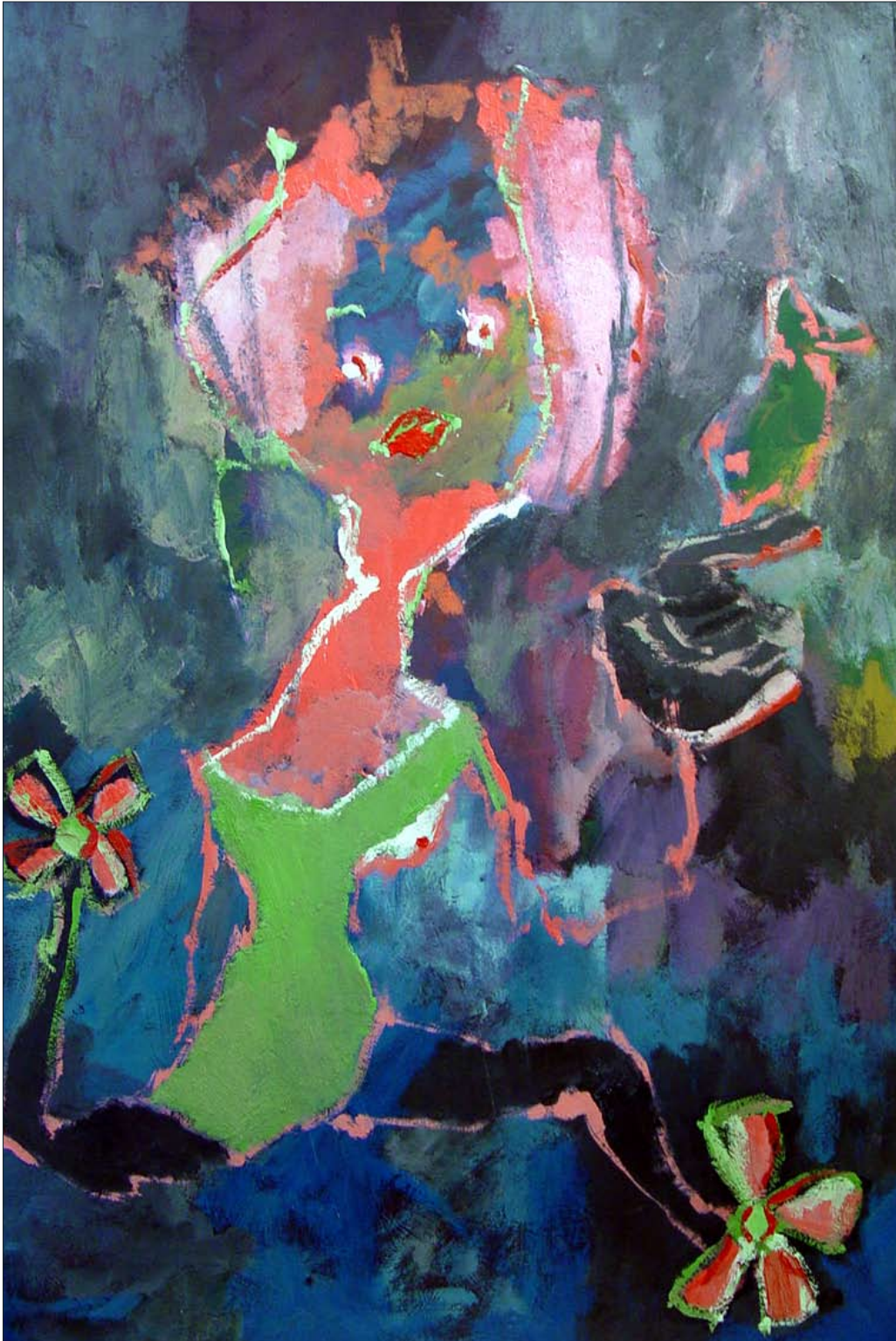


**PAINTINGS BY MAHDI TAVAJOHI**

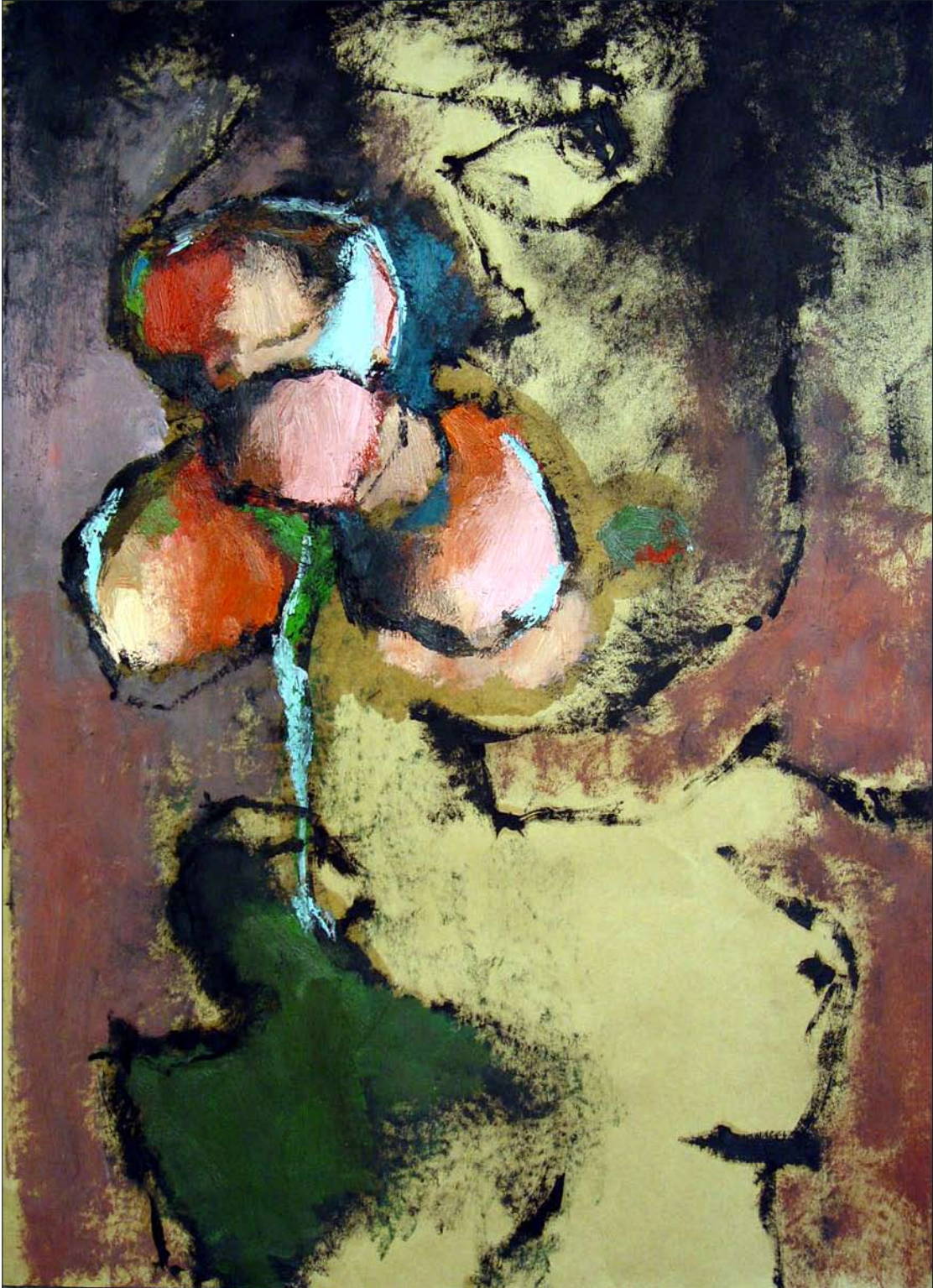


*The Secrets of Knowing*





*Untitled*



*Untitled*



*Untitled*



*Untitled*

# Florida Turnpike

by Steve De France

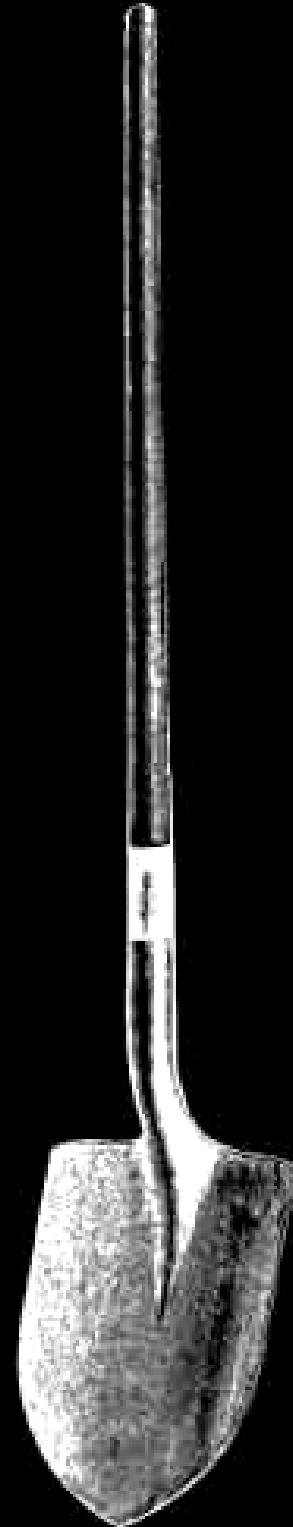
Sprinting up the Florida Turnpike at 85 miles an hour heading toward Gainesville.

The landscape sweltering in heat and humidity. As I pass the town, I'm thinking about all those coeds killed, and how it must feel to be murdered. Was it quick? Or did it last a long time? Death.

I stare at fields speckled with hardy pine trees. Then after a couple of miles more, a rush of green marshland. More swamp water, and everywhere mosquitoes and flying critters bunched in angry fists.

The cement on the road's very white. Bright. Not like L.A. at all. And at the side of the road, petrified by sun and humidity, dead critters curl up in this heat.

I wonder who comes along and scrapes them all up. Most died quick. Splat on a bumper. But you can't count on it. I once saw a cat hit. In the middle of a street. All the cars stopped. People staring. And the cat flopping desperately. He lived a long time. Jerking like an epileptic. Till a fat man in a tank top undershirt walked over and crushed his head with a shovel.



Everybody looked away. Except me.

I drive on  
thinking about different kinds of death.  
I think about you.

How you said you would love me forever.

But you said you really had to have a  
two story mortgage.  
And a Visa Card without limit.  
Wasn't that another kind of  
prostitution? I had asked, and you said,  
"Yes, yes, it probably was."  
You smiled.

I stare at the road.  
I begin counting  
bodies.  
After awhile I get bored,  
and quit.  
I pull in at a rest stop,  
uncurl  
myself from behind the wheel.  
And I stand here  
a long time,  
looking  
at open spaces.

# GENERATING SUMS

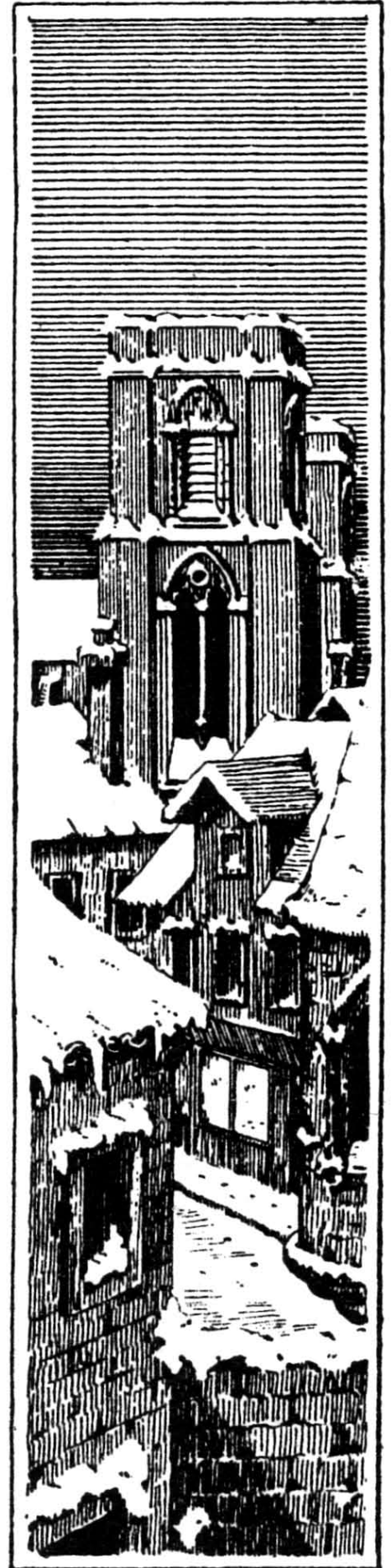
by Robert Lietz

The city was something once — the dog-sled  
cold — boys mushing boys — claiming Curtis  
Craig and John Streets as their country —  
boys with their sleds and boys already coming up —  
imagining that hosed humped rise — maybe  
four-fifths down the block — and only a breath away —  
and only the speed-seamed street — like  
a dream ahead of them — a weekend awake  
without machines — a street with its hedges  
where kids played / where the kids sprawled scarred —  
believing in *what / where / when* —  
when one night's drunk turned lights and curves  
to his confusion — when weather  
for seconds / inches changed. Then nobody's  
home on time — left to the claims  
of one old man and his desire — home through  
that cold and one world's end — given  
the frost-grey grove-shade dawn they'd entered in.  
Didn't the second shot / the third and fourth  
go down for them? Didn't the children — dressed  
for the cold — sleep out-of-doors — play  
through that laughter once — despite the promise  
of hard topics — as if they were meant  
for fifty-one — meant for the month and year — for  
every thought of being finished? Then maybe  
we helped ourselves to this — whispering the oldest  
runes — stringing the broken thoughts  
/ the mall-made memories — facing the wheels again  
and lights — the scalpels / clamps  
/ the screaming tidiness — transcribed in a mother's  
/ father's tongue — and the hurt kid lifted in  
immobilized. So the Rollfasts / Huffies / hedges  
leave their marks — as early as winter gets  
/ early as Easter gets — as early and wrong  
as hearts might get / as dreams reduced to specs  
and captivating tinsel. Think how the boys we were  
cried dawns — how every hope seemed possible —  
squeezed into light and principles — having agreed  
in ways to what kids make of generations —  
as crisp as the winters were — bright as the chestnuts



(cont.)

lobbed from tree-forts in the hill-groves —  
as the maps of buds / the low winds combing  
every sandy place — and all of that whispering  
within — where the kids seemed more than action  
into weather — taking the colors on — thinking  
what came by dark — till kids got used to it — and  
that immediate collage / that action into seasons —  
generating sums — as the voice assumed another species  
of acoustics — and the kids — impressed  
by rooms they split their interests in — absorbed  
in their partial vigilance — absorbed by the dark  
star-shod / by the nuanced and slipstream dawn  
and accidents — their fingers working  
at the tilt / their fingers thrilled or suffering  
the doilies — assumed the subtlest instructing —  
pursued another confidence — endorsed  
that disturbed utility deciding  
everything.





# LISTENING FOR ECHOES:

WHERE THE WILD THINGS ARE  
AS PICTUREBOOK, NOVEL, FILM, AND MEMORY  
BY JOEY RUBIN

**W**here *The Wild Things Are*, in nine sentences, tells the story of a boy named Max on one evening in his life that begins with mischief and ends with supper, still hot. Alongside a handful of illustrations—of a boy in wolf pajamas and a few eccentric beasts—this simple combination has long captivated the imaginations of boy readers, their sisters and chaperones. I read it as a boy and I loved it. I don't know if I loved it because it's a bit sad, and I was a bit sad, or because it ends, ultimately, with an act of tenderness between mother and boy (I was a kid who depended greatly on such tenderness). I don't know if I loved it because the monsters are monstrous—though surely, in the age of Nintendo, I had other sources of monstrousness. I don't know if I loved it because the pictures were intricate, or because Max had claws, or because his bedroom turns into a forest, or because he becomes king.

I don't know because I don't remember. I read it until I was, say, eight and then I put it on the bookshelf and I read something else. When the movie came out last fall I asked my mother to send me our copy and I looked at it again. It's a beautiful book. Max is a charming little ruffian and the Wild Things are adorable mixed-up creatures of the night. I hold the book and I flip the long, slightly yellowed pages and I think I might be reading some of my childhood—but it doesn't quite work like that. I follow Max's image and I read Maurice Sendak's declarative sentences. I can see what the story has to do with "childhood" but what does it have to do with mine?

It's been 20 years since I could have answered that question—to begin trying now may be beyond the imaginative capabilities, or responsibilities, of this essay. And yet with the filmic remake by Spike Jonze and the concurrent novelization by Dave Eggers I find myself pondering just that. Part of the magic of the books we read as kids is that unlike other juvenile experiences—those more ephemeral feelings, desires, and confusions—we can return to the books, those texts and testaments to our early lives, physical things we touched, and contemplated, let in, experienced and passed judgment on. I can hold *Where The Wild Things Are* and I can mimic myself holding *Where The Wild Things Are* when my hands were smaller and my eyes were a bit wider. But what is on the other side of this mirror? What version of my younger self do I find reading about Max and his bedroom-bound jungle adventures?

\* \* \*

Last month, after I'd seen Jonze's film adaptation in the theater and picked up a copy of Eggers's novel, *The Wild Things*, I took a train to Antwerp, Belgium, to meet my brother at my grandmother's new apartment. There are surely few experiences like visiting your 85-year old grandmother in a foreign assisted living facility with your younger brother—few experiences with such power to make you aware of the distance you've traveled from childhood.

My grandmother had set up her new home to look exactly like her old home, just condensed into less space. Her paintings, collected from across time, the pottery and baskets brought from across the world, pieces from South Africa, where she spent the defining years of her life, and from every other corner or station where friends, family and loved ones relocated when South African Jewry went Diaspora, were arranged in a manner as much as possible like the manner they were arranged in before. But only as much as possible.

Her old apartment, an expansive two-bedroom flat perched in a lone high-rise on the edge of town, had been her home for more than 20 years. When my family made our first visit to Europe from California when I was 10, that's where we headed. After my grandfather died, after my Bar Mitzvah, when I came to visit alone with my father, that's where we stayed.

It's a space I can conjure in a second: the succession of lamps you had to click off by hand (and foot) before heading to bed after everyone else; the absurd distance between the sagging couch and the (once) humongous TV—surely 20-feet, at least; the cupboards jammed full of hundreds of tea cups, tea saucers, tea spoons and tea bags; the candied smell from the laundry room that lingered in the foyer; the stones of the balcony that were so cold on your bare feet—and the view from that balcony, which went out toward the grey expanse of the Antwerp suburbs. Those suburbs are where she lives now.

That's where my brother and I spent our Christmas holidays, in the minimized and relocated version of that once important flat. We loaded and unloaded the dishwasher, we asked our grandmother to tell us stories about her parents. We talked mostly like adults, and didn't fight, and felt cut-off from a place we once visited as if a fantasy-land, a place where magic once pooled in excess on the edge of a static Belgian town. The news said it was the coldest winter in a generation

and we stayed inside, too far to walk to town, too cold to walk the suburbs. We watched TV and movies and felt matter-of-factly grown up. I read *The Wild Things* and thought about Max prancing about in his wolf-cut jumpsuit.

\* \* \*

Jonze's film, not made "for" children, but "about childhood" (as he's said in many interviews), is dark and digressive. Much like Sendak's novel, the film isn't interested in handholding; rather, it creates a world for Max and lets him navigate it alone. The pleasure is vicarious: we follow Max as he makes his way deep into a dangerous fantasy and then backs out, returning to his mother, and her still-warm cooking.

In the picture book, Max's Wild Things are ferocious but subservient—in the film, Hollywood magic allows us to see their breath and hear the crunch of the forest under their gargantuan feet. They destroy things and they smack into each other, but they aren't clowns. In fact, because it's their childish dysfunction, along with their bodies, that is so outsized, they become much more frightening than Sendak's creatures.

But they are not only monsters of immaturity: their very existence, when contemplated by this adult mind, is particularly stark. They are rounded and puppeted and colorfully rendered—enough to make the late Jim Henson proud—but they never become more than creatures trapped in a picture book, creatures rendered to personify Max's angst. Talking, longing, worrying, kvetching, they demand to know who they are, why life is difficult, when the sun will die and what the meaning behind it all is. They are as horrific and as hopeless as any of Beckett's bleakest creations—perhaps moreso because they are also supposed to be cute.

Letting Max react to and retreat from these creatures is the film's only compromise to the genre of children's entertainment. This is no criticism: adult viewers understand why he returns. Max is not Peter Pan. He goes back, he owns up, he looks outward—presumably, after we leave the theater, he grows up. We know in the end that no one truly escapes the monsters.

\* \* \*

Where I went to college, at the end of every spring semester, we threw a three-day festival. A perimeter fence was erected around the suburban campus and identity bracelets were passed out to all current students, their visitors and guests. The idea was to give students the chance to let loose, to blow off steam after the months of study and rigor—to pause before reading week and finals, before the academic home stretch. The festival, for this community of hyper-intellectual, middle-class deviants, developed into an opportunity to acquire and consume drugs. The climax of the first evening, after a parade, a bonfire, and fireworks, was a theatrical performance geared specifically toward those with altered minds: a glow-in-the-dark dance pantomime set, in the pitch black, against the campus' central canyon.

In my freshman year, too nervous to consume anything stronger than warm beer, I attended the show in the company of a girl I'd long pined for. Under the influence of hormones, I sat holding her hand as the campus lights were extinguished and into view danced a quintet of 18 foot-tall, glow-stick-wrapped Wild Things and a neon-suited Max. In various drugged and sober states of confusion, the audience was rapt.

The ballet—or whatever it should be called—could not have lasted much longer than the length of time it takes to read *Where The Wild Things Are* aloud, but it brought concord to an evening otherwise eager and frenetic. If we were striving to be adults, all whilst acting very much like children, this link to a bed-time story from childhood, even translated into a coded language and onto our particular moment, was more than just calming or entertaining—it was communal, elevating, even meaningful. Even with half the audience hallucinating, or maybe because they were, the performance made perfect sense, the way bedtime stories allow you to fall asleep in the middle and still know how they end.

\* \* \*

Dave Eggers' job in adapting *Where The Wild Things Are* for a children's novel was much more difficult than Spike Jonze's in adapting the book for a film—a greater difficulty made evident by the results.

Jonze's film works because he takes Sendak's original as an aesthetic and emotional guide and expands upon a successful essence to produce a harsh but honest effect. Eggers struggles to do the same and uses, for the most part, the same plot points and narrative conceits to punctuate his novel (Eggers, with Jonze, wrote the screenplay for the film). And yet, his novel falls short where Jonze's film takes on force.

Part of the problem is that Jonze's film, taking as its starting point Sendak's images, allows itself to follow narrative discomfort as long as it stays aesthetically pure—it's not "for children" after all. Eggers, however, takes a poetic children's medium, the picture book, and attempts to use it as a blueprint for a much more prosaic children's medium, the YA novel. His is the problem experienced by any adaptation that seeks to "fill in gaps:" it seems it was those very gaps that give Sendak's book, and Jonze's movie, their power.

Bereft of the visual language so powerful in Sendak's original and unable to rely on the book's illustrations as an aesthetic guide, Eggers attempts to find a third person voice in *The Wild Things* that can account for and explain Max—both to the seven year-old boy and to the reader. But such a conceit is clumsy from the start. Max's anger is quite mundane—what child doesn't feel rebellious, confused, angry at his parents, at his siblings? When Max, fleeing home after biting his mother, finds a boat and immediately sets sail, he does not howl at the moon, growl a big-wolf growl, or arrive, two pages later, at "the place where the wild things are." Rather, he hems and haws and fills the page with words:

*And he was getting cold. Max was wearing only his wolf suit, and by the time he reached the middle of the bay and the wind began to bite, he realized that it was December, and no more than forty degrees, and it was getting colder the farther out into the lake he ventured. When he'd been running and howling, he hadn't felt the rip of the winter wind, but now it cut through his fur—and his T-shirt and underwear, for that's all he was wearing underneath—unimpeded.*

Of course his whoops and howls have been keeping him warm—this is realism, we have to account for such changes of temperature. It's unfortunate that Eggers must hold our hand through this process, though it's not strictly his fault: if he stops talking, the page goes blank. And so we get boyhood worries, we get boyhood distraction, we get boyhood non-sequiturs. Alone, these might carry insight on the experience of being a boy—against the backdrop of Sendak's implied profundity it's just noise. One wonders what actual seven-year old boy would be interested in reading such a book. This 27-year old boy was not.

\* \* \*

Sitting with my brother in our grandmother's living room, I ask him if he remembers reading *Where the Wild Things Are* when we were kids. "Not really," he says. "I remember it, but I don't remember reading it." In front of us, tea cools, and our grandmother sleeps on the couch, half-upright with the Sendak book on her lap.

"Mom used to read it to us," I say to my brother. "And then we read it to ourselves." He nods, believing me, but not really listening. I remember the book as important. He seems to remember it as any book, another book.

"You loved *Where the Wild Things Are*," I say. "It was one of our favorites."

I want to ask our grandmother if she remembers reading it to us, but her breathing is heavy and rhythmic. It seems a shame to wake her. I imagine the Sendak beasts joining us in our childhood as dancers, singers, woolly merrymakers and chest-beaters. I imagine us, boys, being read to in bed by our mother, father, grandmother, grandfather. I know it happened. I wish I remembered it.

We can re-visit the books we read as kids years later. We can re-read them to our siblings, to our cousins, to our kids. We can re-read them to ourselves. Holding *Where The Wild Things Are* I am certain I was a boy and that I read this book. I ask myself: did it show me something? Did it move me? What *did* I make of it?

**Set-up for a DIY Music Festival in New Mexico**











by Lauren Hudgins

# THE 15TH ANNUAL WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY SUMMER WRITERS INSTITUTE

The 15th annual Washington University Summer Writers Institute will be held in St. Louis June 14-25, 2010. Workshops will include fiction, poetry, creative nonfiction, and the Young Writers Institute.

Held each June, **The Summer Writers Institute** consists of two weeks of intensive writing workshops. Choose from fiction (popular or literary), poetry, or creative nonfiction. The two weeks include personal conferences, readings by guest faculty, craft talks, and panel discussions with writers and editors. Participants may attend on a non-credit basis or choose to earn three college credits.

In the afternoons, accomplished writers and editors from Missouri and Illinois read from their work and discuss writing and publishing. The Faculty for the 2010 session includes:

**Sally Van Doren** will teach the 2010 **Poetry Workshop**. She received the 2007 Walt Whitman Award from the Academy of American Poets for her first collection of poems, *Sex at Noon Taxes*, which was published in spring of 2008 by Louisiana State University Press. Her poems appear recently in: *American Poet*, *Barrow Street*, *Boulevard*, *5AM*, *Margie*, *The New Republic*, *River Styx*, *Southwest Review* and *Verse Daily*. Born and raised in St. Louis, Van Doren graduated from Princeton University and the Creative Writing Program of the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She has taught creative writing in the St. Louis Public Schools and curates the Sunday Poetry Workshops for the St. Louis Poetry Center.

**Fiction Workshop** instructor **Rebecca Rasmussen** is the author of the novel *The Bird Sisters*, forthcoming from Random House in Spring 2011. Her stories have appeared in *TriQuarterly*, *The Mid-American Review*, and elsewhere. Recently she was named a finalist in the *Glimmer Train* short story contest as well as *Narrative Magazine's* 30 Below Contest for writers under the age of thirty, and was the recipient of the Toby Thompson Prize for excellence in nonfiction writing. She received her M.F.A. in fiction from the Program for Poets & Writers at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst. She lives in St. Louis with her husband and daughter, and teaches writing at Fontbonne University.

**Mathew Smith**, instructor for the 2010 **Young Writers Institute**, received his M.F.A. in fiction writing from Washington University. His novel *The Asian Fetish* was a finalist for the Parthenon Prize and received a Hopwood Award. His short fiction has appeared in *The Southern Humanities Review*. He was a Rackam Fellow at the University of Michigan where he taught poetry and fiction. He also taught creative writing in the Detroit Public Schools' Poet-in-the-Schools program and the Michigan Prison Creative Arts Project. Before moving to St. Louis, he spent three years in China where he taught English at Shanghai International High School and Tongji University. He lives with his wife in University City and teaches at Washington University.

**Kathleen Finneran** will teach the 2010 **Creative Nonfiction Workshop**. She is the author of the memoir *The Tender Land: A Family Love Story* (Houghton Mifflin, 2000; Mariner Paperbacks, 2003) for which she won the Whiting Writer's Award. Her essays have been published in various anthologies, including *The Place That Holds Our History* (Southwest Missouri State University Press, 1990), *Seeking St. Louis: Voices from a River City* (Missouri Historical Society Press, 2000), and *The "M" Word: Writers on Same-Sex Marriage* (Algonquin, 2004). She has received the Missouri Arts Council Writers' Biennial Prize and a Guggenheim Fellowship and has had residencies at the MacDowell Colony for the Arts and Cottages at Hedgebrook. She has taught writing at Gotham Writers Workshops, the University of Missouri-St. Louis, Washington University, and St. Louis Community College. She is currently at work on her second memoir, *Motherhood Once Removed: On Being an Aunt*.

**Keynote Speaker Devin Johnston** spent his early years in the Piedmont of North Carolina. He has lived in Chicago where he was poetry editor for *Chicago Review*. His third book of poetry, *Sources*, was named a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award (TPP, 2008). He is the author of two previous books of poetry, *Aversions* and *Telepathy*. He currently lives in St. Louis, teaches at Saint Louis University, and directs Flood Editions, an independent publisher of poetry.

Traditionally, Institute participants finish up the two weeks with an open mike reading of their own work.

## OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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**Barry Spacks** teaches writing and literature at UC Santa Barbara, California, after many years doing the same at M.I.T. He has published poems widely in journals paper and pixel, plus stories, two novels, ten poetry collections, and three CDs of selected work.

**Kirby Wright** was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. He is a graduate of Punahou School in Honolulu and the University of California at San Diego. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University and has been nominated for two Pushcart Prizes. He is a past recipient of the Ann Fields Poetry Prize, the Academy of American Poets Award, the Browning Society Award for Dramatic Monologue, and the Arts Council Silicon Valley Fellowships in Poetry and the Novel. He is the author of *Before The City*, a book of poetry, and the companion novels *Punahou Blues* and *Moloka'i Nui Ahina*.

**Michael Lee Johnson** is a poet and freelance writer from Itasca, Illinois. He has been published in over 23 countries, and is also the editor/publisher of four poetry sites.

**Ernest Williamson III** has published poetry and visual art in over 230 online and print journals. He received his MA in English and Creative Writing from the University of Memphis and is a self-taught pianist and painter. His poetry has been nominated three times for the *Best of the Net Anthology*. He is currently a professor of English at Essex County College in New Jersey.

**Adrienne Christian** is the Associate Poetry Editor of *Silk Road Literary Magazine*. Her poems have been featured in *Miller's Pond*, *42 Magazine*, *Big Lucks*, and the *Arava Review*. When she is not writing, Adrienne spends her time homemaking, reading, and traveling.

**Monique Roussel** is a writer and producer in New York City. She received her MA in Creative Writing from New York University. Her poetry is forthcoming in *Conclave Literary Review* and *Wilderness House Literary Review*.

**Renee Emerson** received her MFA from Boston University. Her work has appeared in *Tar River Poetry*, *The Blue Earth Review*, and elsewhere. She lives and writes in Louisville, Kentucky.

**Simon Perchik** is an attorney whose poems have appeared in *Partisan Review*, *The New Yorker*, and elsewhere. His collection, *Family of Man*, is forthcoming from Pavement Saw Press.

**Mahdi Tavajohi** is a painter living in Mashhad, Iran. He is currently working on an MA in English Literature after receiving his BA from the Khayam Institute of Higher Education. He also holds a painting certificate from Ali Siran's painting workshop. In the Khorasan Province, Tavajohi was elected as the second person in oil painting, and his paintings have been exhibited at the Atash zad Gallery in Tehran and the Emam Reza Gallery in Mashhad.

**Steve De France** received his MFA from Chapman University. His poetry has appeared in *The Evergreen Review*, *The Wallace Stevens Journal*, *The Sun*, *Rattle*, *Why Vandalism*, and elsewhere. He has won writing awards in England and the United States. More than once he has hitchhiked across America. He has also ridden the rails, worked as a laborer with pick-up gangs in Arizona, dug swimming pools in Texas, done 33 days in the Pecos city jail, fought bulls in Mexico, and dived for salvage off a small island on the coast of Mazatlan. His poetry has been published in most of the English speaking countries of the world. He continues to write poetry, plays, essays, and short stories.

**Robert Lietz** is a professor of English and Creative Writing at Ohio Northern University. His poetry has appeared in over 100 journals in the United States, Canada, Sweden, and the United Kingdom, including *Agni Review*, *Antioch Review*, *Carolina Quarterly*, *Epoch*, *The Georgia Review*, *Mid-American Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The North American Review*, *The Ontario Review*, *Poetry*, and *Shenandoah*. He has published seven collections of poetry, including *Running in Place* (L'Epervier Press), *At Park and East Division* (L'Epervier Press), *The Lindbergh Half-century* (L'Epervier Press), *The Inheritance* (Sandhills Press), and *Storm Service* (Basfal Books). Lietz is also the author of several print and hypertext collections of poems, including *Character in the Works: Twentieth-Century Lives*, *West of Luna Pier*, *Spooking in the Ruins*, *Keeping Touch*, and *Eating Asiago & Drinking Beer*.

**Joey Rubin** was born in New York and raised in California. He is a freelance writer whose work has appeared in *The San Francisco Chronicle*, *Paste*, and on Nerve.com. His short fiction, "Toward Lithuania," is forthcoming in *Promised Lands: New Jewish Fiction on Longing and Belonging*. He currently lives in London, England, where he is completing his Masters of Research at the London Consortium.

**Lauren Hudgins** is a hobby photographer living in Portland, Oregon. A few years ago, while living in Japan, she took the cover photo for Bon Iver's EP, *Blood Bank*, in a snowy valley of Nagano.

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