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  Equations
  Spittle

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  Containers

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  Guarded

Contributors
Escher in a Courtyard, Mexico City

Deborah Caplow
Nina Bayer
Five o’Clock

I step from the kitchen to ask my husband to clean up the coffee grounds he has left scattered across the counter. Bill O’Reilly, the “No Spin” commentator of FOX news, is on the television in my living room, and George is sprawled across the floor in front of him like a prostrate idol worshiper. He’s a conservative.

There is a black ballpoint pen with a purple tip in the outside pocket of my purse.

Every afternoon at five o’clock I hear Bill’s voice in my living room: You are about to enter a No – Spin – Zone! Today, after George waits for the first commercial to begin, he becomes defensive about the coffee grounds and launches into a lengthy discourse about everything he does to help around the house – things I apparently do not notice or appreciate.

I keep the pen in my wallet in case I have to write a check or sign a receipt.

I am tired of hearing Bill’s voice in my living room and seeing George stretched across the carpet in front of him – a right-wing pet. “We are only talking about coffee grounds,” I say to him, “not your long-standing history of servitude.” I wonder if I should just clean up the mess myself.

I never write checks or sign receipts; I have no real reason to carry the pen.

The television is opposite the couch, where George has now reclined himself on pillows. He is undeterred in his defense, and, without taking his eyes from the set, continues his discourse: the lawn, the car, the trash, the cat.

If I start using my debit card, I won’t have to sign my name.

George is flipping shelled pistachio nuts into the air and catching them on his tongue. He’s talented, in a useless Republican sort of way. Between crunching noises, he stops talking and contemplates a question Bill has posed to his audience – something about illegal immigrants and the lack of adequate border patrols in California. But George’s ego has been injured and it isn’t long before he’s talking to me, at me, again.

If I use my debit card, I will only have to enter my PIN number with an un-inked wand, and the store will provide that.

Bill begins to expound on the personal attributes of Donald Rumsfeld and Condoleezza Rice. I am unsure as to the connection, and George doesn’t tell me. He draws on about my lack of appreciation, refusing to let me deduct a point for thoughtlessness until I have acknowledged the points he has thus far accumulated for kindness. In the meantime, the coffee grounds are staining my white Formica.

I should take the pen out of my purse and leave it at home.
I wonder what O’Reilly would think of all this, of George saying, “We can discuss this later, at six o’clock, when The Factor is over.” “Fine,” I say. “Fine,” he replies. I stomp back into the kitchen and use my sleeve to swipe the coffee grounds off the counter and onto the floor.

Carrying the pen has become a habit, a security blanket.

I don’t want to wait until six o’clock. I don’t want to vacuum pistachio shells or wipe up coffee grounds. I like big government. I want strong social programs. But I sweep the kitchen floor anyway and then sit on the back porch with a tall glass of Chardonnay. The sun is just beginning to set.

Tomorrow, I’m dumping the pen.
Andrew Caulfield
Aftermath

The miniature boat,
more of a dinghy really,
rocked listlessly
in the apricot twilight.

Its broken prow pointed
accusingly to the east,
a wagging finger aimed
at the electric storm
rumbling
away

in the distance.

A hole in what might
optimistically be called the hull
allowed the salty brine below
to swirl its way upward,
like a porcelain sink
stuck
in
reverse.

The seat that once straddled
the small, sturdy frame
lay split and scorched,
having bowed and crumpled
to the flames like a wooden match.
Andrew Caulfield  
SKiN + iNK  

It’s dark when we walk in, our boots covering much of the floor in the small space. The bare lightbulbs hanging overhead are fluttering their fluorescent death rhythm.

“Are you sure you want to do this, man?” Murphy asks, looking around the dingy interior.

“Sure,” I reply with more confidence than I actually feel. “Besides, I already put down a deposit.”

I try to pretend that the dirt isn’t there, and that I didn’t just piss away fifty bucks for something I’m going to chicken out of. But Murphy’s had it done, twice.

We flipped through binders of flash as we waited. We sat. I fidgeted, but tried to keep cool. Finally, a guy from 1991 appears, in full grunge attire, and leads us down a narrow hallway, the very esophagus of the structure. If it were alive, it would have choked on us.

This part of the building is much better lit, as if I’d walked from the dark side of the moon directly into a solar flare. My eyes squint as I adjust. My head is a mere inch away from being scorched by the light fixture. It’s hot suddenly, and I take off my bulky flight jacket and pass it to Murphy.

I take a scrap of paper out of my pocket and hand it to Grunge, as I’d started calling him in my head. He smiles a toothy grin at me, and silently cries out for dental insurance and periodontal care in the process. Visions of infected lesions on my arm oozing pus play across my eyelids as they slam over my eyes to fight the glare and the unhygienic man in front of me. His mouth closes and the moment passes.

He shows me the chair and tells me to get comfortable as he steps out to start working on the stencil. Murphy and I talk quietly, as if speaking above a whisper would ruin everything.

Grunge returns with the tracing paper.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

He waxes on about some bodybuilder who fainted in the chair or some other bullshit. My left boot leans against Murphy’s knee, and he grabs my ankle, absentmindedly playing with the laces as he looks around the room. I love him like a brother.

Flesh and blood. I dare not move my neck now as the incessant mosquito dances across my skin, pricking me constantly and drawing blood. Deliriously, I wonder what it will look like when the hemoglobin mixes with the black ink.
The phone rings. Grunge gets up and I tell Murphy to get me a glass of water.

“Endorphins?”

“Must be. It’s like a rush.”

“I know, but you’ll get used to it.”

He hands me the water and sits back down. I drink it greedily and hand him the cup.

“More?”

I nod my head.

Grunge returns and finishes the lines. Now the fill. It doesn’t hurt as bad, but there is pressure. Lots of pressure. And it’s so hot. Murphy still has his flight jacket on. I’m dizzy, and I close my eyes. Every time Grunge stops I try to look down at the artwork. It’s coming along nicely. The detail is good, and it’s better than I’d hoped.

Finally, he’s done. He takes the gloves off, replacing them with a clean pair. My arm looks like it’s been beat to shit. It’s bloody and bruised, and a river of ink cuts a path down toward the floor, as if my bicep were crying black tears.

He cleans me up as best he can, then comes the gauze and the bandage. He passes me a sheet with what to do the first twenty-four hours, the first forty-eight hours, the first two weeks, etc.

Murphy hands me my coat and puts his arm around me as we walk back to the front. I hand Grunge my credit card and he swipes it through. I wonder how much I’m supposed to tip for this kind of thing. I decide ten percent is plenty, and instantly feel guilty.

Murphy asks me how I feel as we head out to his car. I tell him I feel better in the fresh air, but I’m really hungry. We head to the diner we always go to.

I’m tired, and it’s a weird feeling knowing I’ll carry this with me the rest of my life. Dazed, I turn to Murphy in the driver’s seat.

“I want another one.”

“I know. We’re like that.”
The Six Fingers of Anne Boleyn

Joann Comerford
Orion rising in the morning sky
weakened; Helios destroyed
out there the light fails
drips into the black
of space and timeless night
the parable of the blind
blinking
attempting to see detail
in the murky gray abscess
clawing at the eyes of God

the sundial shows noon
in the center of a basin like pond
there should not be stars,
yet there they hang, a dream perhaps,
in the shadow of the sun

diagonally the swordsman’s belt
gleams arrow-like toward the moon
celestial motions quell
the blind man with his staff
knocking against a curb,
wonders at the silence,
does not know.
His footsteps, light,
echo in the dawn.
I've seen your face a thousand times,
    Imagined responding to a knock and opening to find you standing there.

You should have her nose, and probably my ears (I'm sorry);
    Your hair will be dark and curled.

You won't yet know you have sisters, won't yet know my heart has ached
    Because we have never met.

Standing there I will see her, and parts of myself.
    I will see my shame and pain.

In that seeing, I will also see you are distinctly you,
    Brave and curious and angry and anxious.

My tears will burst forth as you tell me who you are.
    You won't yet know I already know.

I won't be certain if I should hug you, won't know how to move for a moment
    From the door holding me up.

But soon we will be sitting on the couch, nervously smiling
    Glancing here and there.

In finding me, you must already know she died years ago
    Still, that loss must be fresh and unresolved for you.

Talking will bring that back to me, bring back regret
    Bring back my dishonor.

I will tell you she was strong and kind and forgiving
    As she faced life's end.

I will tell you she was protective of me, guarded me,
    Keeping hidden my part in making you.

I will tell you I loved her, a youthful, indiscreet,
    Heat-kindled, foolish and lonely love.

I will tell you I carry her at times in my heart now,
    Long to heal that part of me that you and she are.
You will tell me something about yourself,
    I can't know what it will be.

Oh, I have imagined it a dozen times:
    Doctor, teacher, mother, wife.

But I will not let myself believe which is true,
    Until we meet.
Salena Farris
Finely Divided Rock and Mineral Particles

Hardly recognizable by myself, I am sand.
With others, however, able to build great castles, kissed by jealous waters.
You can find me flowing deep under cities, coursing through the veins of the great sphinx.
But great figures make great targets, time and wind corroding my form.
Unwilling to concede, I wait, seeking to congregate, reunited once more with my kin
Lovers, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, and sons.
Unable to erase pain, undo what has been done.
I squish between bare toes
Of those who neglect, play, touch, then leave.
Leaving waste in their wake, taking with them a small piece of your soul.
I remain with them, paper grinding the soft skin raw, until they can no longer ignore me.
I am not soluble, dissolvable.
I have survived wars, witch hunts, weathered souls and wearied bodies.
I reflect the light
So many diamonds blinding those not ready for this illumination.
Children running to keep their soles from burning.
Looking out, never ending horizon, futures unknown.
Amazed by my might, they bury each other.
Toes sticking out, proud smiles stretching from ear to ear as they yell, “Momma, look!”
She lazily swivels her head in their direction, her hands trying to shield her eyes from the intensity.
Molded by her relaxed body, I cradle her warm bones, her down-turned book, her sun hat, and soak up her greasy tanning lotion.
In this same place, I have absorbed generations of other(ed) women’s sweat and tears.
Ravaged, Raped, and Broken, they have crossed my path, shaming me for my privileged birth.
As I peer up at their determined chins and the bobbling feet of children, riding piggyback, I feel my smallness.

How could my tiny, insignificant form

Form anything but their footprint?

Washed away by violent hurricanes who know no currency.

Angry, unrelenting winds sweep over me, inspiring awe.

Wrathful fingers hammer the ground with the finality of the judge’s gavel.

My comrades rise up as the lightning strikes, passion and fury.

Glass, reflecting the atrocities built up over time.

Glass, reflecting monstrosities performed in the name of biology, inheritance and God.

Glass, reflecting struggle, resistance and revolution.

My edges pierce calloused heels, hardened soles and industrial tires rolling towards oil, diamonds and bauxite.

You underestimate me and my kin, seeing only dirt.

You underestimate those who look like you, but do not think like you.

You underestimate those who do not look like you and do not agree with you.

This mistake you have repeated throughout history, but it will catch up with you.

I have seen hope.

I have seen those who can heal with their touch, mend broken hearts and give rest to tired souls.

They are capable of loving so hard, it hurts.

In their eyes I can see pain and compassion.

Their smiles carry the weight of small triumphs between persistent trials.

Their shoulders may sag, but they remain strong.

Crippled fingers caress grey hair, wrinkled brows.

They are why I remain.

Why I do not let the ocean wash me down to the deep, dark, quiet waters.

They need me as much as I need them.

After all, what would the world be like without sand?
Brandon Finley
Any More...Any Less

If I loved you any more I’d be obsessed.

But everything erodes.
Now I’m taken with the idea of you never coming home.
Just keep smiling, like you’re special.
Like you got away with something.
It keeps me from noticing your vacant stare.
Vacuous...insipid...inane,
striving to be meaningful.
Convinced you have a righteous cause.
And that you’re not selling out by saying so.
So hold fast your new fads, your South Atkins diet,
and cry yourself to sleep because you’re hungry
and too skinny to be pretty.
Compare yourself to the calendar
and feel bad. Not because you’re bad.
But because you’re stupid. And you don’t care.
If the lightbulb in your head was on as often
as your porch light I wouldn’t be so concerned.
We know you’re open for business;
you don’t need the neon sign in the bedroom window.
Just keep moving,
roving eyes with lack of focus.
The wall, the tv, anywhere but the mirror on the ceiling.
Bury the shame deep, because I can dig for days.
And all I’ve got is time.

If I loved you any less I’d be a murderer.
Executing a Work of Art

Joann Comerford
Skeletal Study: Homage to Van Eyck's *Man in a Red Turban*  
Anonymous
Skeletal Study: Keeping Mozart Company

Anonymous
Arnie Franke
Manslaughter

If you find yourself so inclined,
I have discovered that an excellent way to
Murder
Your Computer is to let your hand wander down to the
Start
Menu and select the words “shut down.”
If your machine complains of a “non-responsive program,”
Simply demand that it end
Now.

If you think a simpler approach is
More to your taste, you are always welcome to
Rip its plug from the wall
Or smash it with a hammer.
Arnie Franke
KILL - 9

WE HAVE FOUND
- -> HANGING
- -> ELECTRIFIED CHAIR
- -> GUNFIRE

AS WELL AS
- -> INTERVEINOUS ADMINISTRATION OF
  1. SODIUM THIOPENTAL
  2. PANCURONIUM BROMIDE
  3. POTASSIUM CHLORIDE

OR
- -> COMPELLED RESPIRATION OF
  1. HYDROGEN CYANIDE

TO BE ACCEPTABLE MEANS OF TERMINATING HUMAN LIFE
Arnie Franke
New York

I didn't sleep last night
I tried       But…
I didn't

Sleep

I tried…
But I don't

I can't                                        I won't

As the nights and days
And nights and dazed nights
Pile upon one another
    One another
    One another
I let my mind flood
With the watery refuse wrung from
The brains of my contemporaries,
Refused on account of its twisted
Passion.
Vanessa French
Desert Rose

planted in the dry
and broken ground
forsaken by the rain
ridiculed by the sun
although
unseen
never forgotten
through the farmers design
still finds a way
to survive
the unforgiving desert
and when it blooms
it is the most beautiful
but growing from such
despair
knows not of its own beauty
to anyone
other than the farmer
but is
a desired rose
All the flowers
couldn’t replace
the wishes I make
with a sigh
a hopeful
breath
they wisp away
carrying a dream
landing only
to seed
sprouting weeds
that linger
yellow
deception of flowers
calling out
in reminder
for all
my wishes
turn to weeds
cast
upon the wrong
seed
Melissa Grimmer  
Chashaku

press, release, slide,  
press, release, slide, turn, slide  
press, release, slide, turn, slide  
press, release, slide,  
press, release, slide,  
press, release, slide, remove.
Harajuku Man

Rusty Gerard
Melissa Grimmer
Natsume

black lacquer chipped and scraped from endless use
a clumsy hand grasps your side
red silk gilds across your once perfect unblemished body
opened to what may come within you lies the promise of fine bitter drink
set down again to wait until your use becomes apparent
lid removed, for all to see your true beauty hidden under your
black lacquer chipped and scraped from endless use
Michael Johnsen

Eight Ball

I'm probably seven, maybe eight years-old, on my father's shoulder. It's late, something like eleven at night, and we're moving through the bowl. This is where I will spend thirteen years of my life. There are only two lanes running this time of night. Long before the machine age, a human pinsetter lays down ten pins each. We pass the bar on the way in; it won't interest me for several more years. Seconds pass, I guess, and without warning—a vision that will never leave me: Twelve five-by-nine tables. Slate in 24-ounce cloth the color of lawn-bowlers grass. Rails of beveled oak. Cushions with reverse 45-degree angles that could have been cut with a knife. Faux-Tiffany lamps hang low over each table. Large balls of wood numbered and colored carom off of each other. I hear each click. The intense faces of men leaning into their shots. Dropping ball after ball. The air is juiced, wired. And I'm plugged in. Only a kid but the hair on my arms is literally charged. Any older I'd have a hard-on. It's so fucking spiritual I should be on my knees. Hallelujah. Soon, nineteen years old, a Marlboro hanging from his mouth. His hair curls at the collar. Eyes as hard as cue wood. His hands powdered and stained as he twists blue chalk nonstop around the tip of his stick. This is me. Eleven years later. I'm standing there as Jerry Benz leans into the six ball. Drops it in the side pocket. I drop twenty bucks on the table. This is getting old. The kid is wiping our asses with our own money. Half-hour Frank looks on. The next game is racked before he digs out a bill. Maybe he's thinking: fucking ring game. Or how bad he wants to kick Jerry's ass. Or maybe he's just thinking about what he had for breakfast. Frank was a short smart-mouthed punk. I hassled the shit out of him. Three years pass and he's six-three. Comes looking for me. Pops me. Hard. Up against a wall. Wants to know if I want to be his best friend. I do. That day on, anytime I'm with him? No one fucks with me. He not only shoots lights-out, he puts guys in comas. Me? I'm along for the ride. He calls me bait. We make all the stops: Gus's in Brisbane. The Palace on Market. In the city. Tad's Place in Sausalito. I set the hook. He reels. There's no dick-head eight ball played in our hall. Use a crutch, you'll get your ass kicked. Only nine-ball or six-ball. Call-shot. Occasional game of three-ball, but there's not that much money around this.
place. Once in a great while a couple of guys play three-cushion. For fun. On the only real billiards table in the house. We watch less than thirty seconds. It’s all we can take. No action, no game. Brad Haskin’s back in the corner, just knocking balls around. I ask him if he wants a game of nine-ball. He wants to know if I’ve got money. Yeah I got money, I lie. We dance this little dance with each other a couple of times a month. If I win he loses. He wins he loses. He knows this going in but never turns down a game. He’s gotten pissed once or twice but Frank’s always at another table. But I’m tired of this game. The rooms filled with losers. Big fish eating little fish. Me. A little fish. My empty pockets. I’m tending bar down the street. At The Shack. A job with benefits. Yeah. Twenty six and I’ve travelled a half a block. I’ll be sober in four years but the road between here and there is paved with nothing but riddle. It’s a strip joint, and the babes that dance here are fine but hard. I still haven’t figured out why women will pull their clothes off, dance and shake their teats, do deep knee bends back side out. Later you walk up to one, ask her if she wants to fuck, and she cold cocks you. It’s not one of the benefits. Towards the back door there’s this little four-by-six table. The cloth’s stained where guys have knocked over their drinks. The rails laid with cigarette burns. Tonight it’s home to a couple of dirt bag drunks. Jerry’s back there hustling his last game of pool. Mike Laski is waiting up the street for the winner. With a baseball bat. Jerry’s the winner. Three weeks later Laski’s dead. His old lady Sandra does him a speedball with something extra in it. She and Jerry’s money disappear. Last time I saw Frank, he’s on the nod. I hear he tries to kick every once in a while, but he’s always liked slow. A year ago Art Venosa took up boxing. Pulls Frank out of the bar, does him bad. Frank’s never the same after that. It’s like watching Jesus hang on the cross. All those guys are probably dead. It’s just me now. Looking at social security in a couple of years. I’m in this college joint. An upscale bar it’s called. These two professors from the local college are shooting eight ball. For a buck a game. I ask in. What the hell, who’s to know. I run the rack, win the next two before they hang up their cues. There’s this sweet looking thing watching. Long red hair. Forty maybe. She’s as tall as me. Thin. Legs go all the way up. She’s wearing this short little shift and I’d like to run my hand up under the back of it. She tells me I should quit my day job. Says I’m that good. How about a little action?, I ask her. You know how to play eight ball? And just like that, I’m standing there. Thirty-five years ago. Waiting for her to get to an answer.
I wander the halls of the interred, search the names etched in marble or granite of those I might have known, while their lives walk me vault to vault. I’ve come seeking a last visit with you.

Save the Mexican caretaker, only I and the dead have arrived for the ceremony that will honor you, bring each of us a false peace. I fear I will not find you; it is easy for the dead to hide from the living. We are near certain they have just stepped away, out of sight for a brief moment.

But at last I see you, in the rose garden. Sixty ounces in an ornate urn wrapped in a tasseled felt bag. Atop a wooden dais, where you can survey old and new friends alike. Just you and I now, as we share a moment before your procession of mourners comes to lean upon each other, and commend your soul to their separate heavens.

Your daughter and her sons are the first to join us; your sister and her god take their front-row seats. My brother would not come when you were alive, why now? Your first husband sits sobbing, at home. The second waits in the ground. Faces taut, each mouth a rictus, as if it is they whom we bury. A tired minister, rented from the local classifieds, takes his place before we gathered.

I do not fear the dead. For me they differ little from the living, except they do not chatter incessantly to keep terror at bay. Nonetheless I am unsettled; you and I have changed in some way I do not understand. I feel the disconnect while holding my sister as she sobs. Pours your ashes into a hole, her tears nourishing the soil to which you return. I set a sapling maple in your hands; the migrant porter sweeps dirt around its burlap edges. I want to ask him who it is we place in this earth.

Where is the coifed blond hair, even into your eighties; the perfect makeup? Your nightly cocktail untouched. Your kitchen’s air suddenly smoke-free. Why have you stopped laughing? No longer seek the lights?

The old grave tender shakes our hands as we file out, whispers his regrets. I tell him a week has passed, and still you do not answer your phone.
Wade Arthur Johnson
Wilderness

It begins with the question
A simple wandering
The reciprocation of actuality
The driving force
The peak of the descent
To get thyself a vice, meanwhile
Taking the lonesome road south

When being is nothingness
We each of us need a hand
To give reason
To sacrifice a kiss
From blood red lips
The same as betrayal
And after, a smeared bloody mess
Of thy one true redemption
Such the nails through hands
The contradictions of love
As love’s flowers
Grow from the dirt of the dead

Forcing to choose between
The Hamlet of indecision
Vendetta, sorrow, or madness
And choose a card
Of fifty two spaded jokers
And feed thy selfserving inmate
As the tiny tin drum beats

Junkies and whores
Thieves and liars are we
Slaves of an emotional irrationality
As mothers breed apocalypse soldiers
War at the push of a button
The fathers of absence
The teachings of a one sided history
The child is left behind, abandoned
Replaced by a mothers fears
Injected into the bloodstream of youth
Fitting predetermined molds;
In the search for simple contentment
The complexity of modernity is unleashed
Like an intersecting highway of insects
A great malevolent jungle
Rabid, foaming to feed
Of lack filling materials
A finite dimension of size
A plain where the rain can be
Like falling daggers
Corrosive, rusting even diamonds
A reality of mysterious architecture
And the question that envelopes it
To keep its inhabitants searching
In the dark, for answers

The truth lies beyond
The limitations of flesh
Somewhere under thine own shifting lies
To choose a Science or a God
A Dream or a Real
A Machine or a Flesh
A Soul or a Space
To choose one in justified faith
Of theory or hollow idol
Presuming a knowledge of wisdom
Wrapped in bureaucratic nightmare
An evil that gives way to madness
For the hope of some method

And above, the baby blue eye watches
The black birds loom
Reapers of the after
The spirits of the old world
Dancing over the macabre ground
Like a graveyard on Halloween
Their trumpets whispering
Unnoticed in the wind
A corpse once had a beating heart
Now saturates the ground
Within a caterpillar’s cocoon
So real is the unreal
So unreal is the real

As it all shifts in fragments
Individual letters like ants
Insects, that from a bird
The story is formed, given context
Always paying the syntax
For the surging headache of anxiety
And a kaleidoscope of pills for remedy
Yet, just another veil
Another satin curtain
Knowing what it is to be blind
And the pain of unfeeling
As the mirror tells a certain truth
The sands of time come whipping by
Defacing the anatomic statue
As it stands, still in the ever present
But the mind
That great time machine
That universe of synapse
Able to transgress anyplace
Yet, can only see as far
As the numbers are named
As far as experience has wavered
As far along the tracks
As the train headlamps reveal
Or as vivid as memory can conjure
From some unattainable infinity

Now what randomness is given
An amalgam of sorts
An epoch of themeless juxtapositions
Where anything is a metaphor for something
To suffer the poet’s stark ravings
His love letters
To the one thing denied us all
That dispels knowledge
‘For knowledge is sorrow’
Said, the escapist mistress
Now to play the record backwards

So here we are, stuck in flesh
All strangers on the same train
Heading towards the same horizon
All together at a table
Confusing one another
Because it loves company
Jumping from one fleeting moment
To the next
A world deliberate in its aim
A darkness to define light

All in such beautiful chaos
Such wilderness
Amy Jones
Rust

orange rust rust melting into pools
I’ve seen it before I know
    that orange marker and shirt print
with the red behind my closed eyelid
    is something I’ve seen at home
that first home

the dissolved rust from the many metaled
surfaces of this industrial broke-down [castle]
broken glass windows
    the shop
        full of nails and rust and metal
            sharp points to weave around
            to get through
            to the places I love
    the green places
the leaves and the limbs and boughs

but the rust too
I love the rust
    the iron the red
    elemental
    bloody iron
    in meat [which I don’t eat anymore]
    that place where meat ends
from animal to table – cut

cut through the bone, stitched
    and bolted into place
5 hours of waiting
    that I completely missed
reassembled after 8+ years of
    waiting and wanting
metal bolts and plates now hold in place
Red-Orange  Orange  Red Rust
bloody iron red  that darkens as it dries
      harsh metal
            barbed wire fence
      cut on a hot hand on a hot day
            stings with the sweat
was searching for a kinder orange
            of salmon berries

use the underside of a ferns leaf
      for nettles  the brown bumps
which I now know are spores

      my split lip
      cutting metal
      bloody mouth
      bloody throat
      the iron taste of blood

it’s the iron that makes it red
      oxygenated iron
      oxidation

      a head drained of blood  sinking to the floor
            low blood pressure + low blood sugar
            = fainty fainty
      a face pale with the absence of blood
      a controlled spillage of blood

benevolent blood
      life carrying
            life sustaining blood
Amy Jones
My Splints

“Oh, those are cool rings,”
“I like your rings,”

“thanks....

-- well actually they are ring splints.”

“I have Juvenile Rheumatoid Arthritis.”

“-- A splint, like for a broken bone”

because that’s essentially what I’ve got,
permanently broken fingers

“Oh.”

“And maybe surgery, someday.”
First Doctor said.

Already have had one.

it was - Definitely surgery! today!
please today!
(7+ yr wait)

My silver ring splints.

Metal, metal, everywhere.

Braces, braces – twice.
(A barbed wire fence in my mouth!)

Six metal plates with screws in my face.

“The Bionic Woman!” my surgeon said.

“Hey Amy, do your hands make robot noises when you move them?” -Brother,
the first time he saw my splints.

My sister nicknamed me “Rheumy” when I first got diagnosed.
(“It sounds like you’re saying: ‘Roomy.’”
My surgery,

Before
A relative: “Oh, I knew a girl in high school that had to have that jaw surgery too. It made a big difference, in the way she looked, you know?”

“Yes I know, how could I not know?

“I think you’re going to be very pleased afterwards.”

During
The anesthesiologist: “Right after it they moved your jaw, we were all like, wow. I think your going to be happy with it.”

I still remember his name.

A nurse, to him, teasingly: “What are you doing down here?”
Him: “I’m just checking in on her.”

After
A relative: “Oh I like your look now.”

I knew that was coming.

The affirmation that I looked better.
(Which implied I had looked worse)

Actually they are ring splints.

Oh.

Sometimes that’s a slightly uncomfortable “Oh.”, and nothing follows

sometimes knowledgeable, “Oh”

sometimes mildly interested, “Oh”

sometimes questions follow, “Oh...”

I want questions.
I want to dispel misconceptions.

Try not to blurt: “Disability is a social construction!”

But sometimes I’m tired,
or my jaw is tight
and I don’t feel like talking

and it just ends
with

oh
the road wends its way... ebb and flow
quiet steps reticence without asceticism
swinging bough sensory gate through the
steal steal
don't wait steal
take every opportunity adrift

pain issho kenme give all of yourself
derives from desire

desire
state of heightened awareness

senses

mu
the world of mu
the state of mu
be mu
emptiness,
in which there is
“inexhaustible potentiality”

the void
careful quiet hands

because of ichigo ichie one
unprecedented moment

it's very difficult to be like this: -
[she gestured up and down
and to the sides, meaning
scattered, all over the place]
- that's a very painful way to live

a way
Blumenstrauß

Melissa Grimmer
Collective Freudian Slip

Arnie Franke
Allyson Kelley
Splice

Comma splice/fragment
a pause between
a mark separating
unfinished thoughts
fractional in progress
missing
conjunction
collapsing structure
distorted gist
fragmented
piece from
the whole
incomplete
disentanglement
split, splinter, shatter
splice
cut center
linking two ends
interweaving
emerging bits
fusing
congruence
Jessica Lee
Expectations

I was waiting for rain
The days were chilly with fog
That crept silent and still along the ground
For days it lingered, waiting quietly
Weaving downward through winter-bare trees
Through dark streets, through high, wind-raped grasses

A coaxing lover who leaves as quickly as arrived
Then, the rain fell diagonally, a tease of wet drops
Trickling through a window left open
A parable of the blind, feeling it’s way incessantly
It did not hold back (my world a basin)
So empty and waiting
It fell at once, softly, a gentle rain
Dripping feverishly into gutters
And damp mossy porches and slimy embankments
My breath became the once lingering fog
And the air hung like a blanket
Thick with words and silently falling drops
That glinted like milky stars
In the glow of street lights and window lamps
My thoughts, ever extraneous, fell quietly among them
When I say the nights were chilly...full...expecting
I meant that the days were anxious as well
Like a child who cannot sit still
And I...
I waited for rain
Ben McGinnis
the baby carriage

today I watched a woman
cross the street with a baby
carriage. she was headed toward
a definite destination: her face
her gait, her whole body
suggested so. her hair practically
flew behind, trying to catch up.
as she neared the other side
a bottle flew out of the carriage
onto the street and started
rolling down the hill. I saw
her lips form terrible words
as she chased the object,
dragging the culprit along
in hot pursuit.
the most effective form of protest
is often silent;
actions speak louder than words.
Ben McGinnis

a bicycle

sometimes
a bicycle
ridden in summer
can obliterate
the illusion
that motion
connects
with destination
Ben McGinnis
street scene

A street side café a table full of empty glasses a couple empty chairs an open window with curtains blowing in the wind a man inside the doorway standing, looking out across the street a couple walking on the sidewalk holding hands a cat stalking the back alley a bin full of garbage a man a boy tossing a bright red apple in the air catches it and takes a very loud bite a blind man taps his cane as he meanders off to somewhere a woman with very large breasts runs to catch a bus, she stops to reach around to straighten a stocking and tries to calmly board the bus the boy tosses his apple once more takes another bite and boards the bus eyeing the woman obnoxiously the man still stands in the doorway the cat meows the couple walk into the café a blonde waitress comes out and clears the table the blind man has disappeared into a barber shop the cat meows again the man greets the customers and walks inside the bus disappears the sun has started setting a writer exits a bookstore with a bundle of books under one arm and takes a cigarette from his pocket and musingly ambles off to write his next depressing novel glasses clink inside the café and laughter rings as the sun decides to keep setting until it is night and the shops turn off their charming lights and the keepers amble off like the writer and the blind man too and the couple comes out and hold hands again and kiss and the man grumbles under his breath because the check was too big and the café man smiles again and says to himself, “Ah, lovers,” and the blonde waitress pushes past him and puts on her coat and runs after a bus and stops to fix a stocking and calmly boards and the café man smiles again puts on his hat and locks the door and says goodnight to the cat, who meows once more.
To Robert E. Howard, creator of *Conan the Barbarian*

Sing to me, O deathless bard, of tales not my own.
Of the gloomy land and its somber hills;
Where dark pines rattle in misty winds,
And the soft tread of the hunter’s step
Whispers to hearts made deaf.

Tell me, of a time not my own.
When a young sun warmed the flesh of infant men,
Whose lives were free of civilization’s fetters.
Elemental men, of great melancholy and great mirth,
Whose destinies they clove from the hand’s of fate.

Sing to me songs not my own.
Of the crimson sword and iron nerve.
Of deeds unnumbered upon a youthful earth,
When azure sky was scraped only by white ramparts;
Of the freedom that once was.

Give to me a strength not my own.
Of the one who sundered the chains of gods and kings;
That man from the land of darkness and night,
Who tread the jeweled thrones of the earth under his sandaled foot.
That man who might have been me—in another time.

Sing to me his song of death, love and life,
For they are refuge against these
Empty days and empty dreams.
Your voice alone has the power to shatter them,
To set me free—if only for a while.

So sing to me, O deathless bard.
Sing to me of tales not my own.
Jeff Morgenroth
For a Sweet-Heart

Woman’s ample curves
Rise softly beneath blankets
A fart splits the silence

Glamour’s painted form
Yet only maskless is she
An image lovely

When does love arrive?
When does beauty become real?
When it wears P.J.s
Jeff Morgenroth
The Troll

Something strides purposeful,
through mist and mere,
Out of legends, out of folklore
into the very heart of
me

Supernatural? Hardly!
Elemental? Naturally...
Although insubstantial as breath
this walk is matter in
its most basic form

You may think it nasty,
this towering force,
since it surely cares little for you.
Socrates knew it, and was killed,
for people like you knew that he knew.

Is life so drab that we must
look up
instead of in?
Since when did Living
Become a sin?
Night

Wade Arthur Johnson
Ghost Snow Tree

Amy Jones
Patty Northman
Yellow Bowl

Sturdy, stable, open, round
Mom filled, on winter holidays, sploppy Libby’s pumpkin puree
sugar eggs evaporated milk nutmeg cloves
and cinnamon all mixed together

I loved the pie dough most,
which was mostly butter with
a little flour and salt

I watched her crimp the edges of the pie dough
between her thumb and forefinger
pushing against the index finger of her opposite hand
forming a ruffled crust

Mom passed on
the darker than lemon mixing bowl
slightly ribbed and very solid.

Yellow was one of her favorite
colors. Butter yellow.
Butter was probably what killed
her – congestive heart failure.
Patty Northman
Dog Walking Langus Waterfront Trail

Pick up some green plastic poop bags under the freeway overpass
Sun playing behind the clouds
Lily, the beagle, bays
Orange and black BNF train car headlight on
    Santa Fe yellow and black
green car grey smoke out the back
    Rumbling on the track across the river
Lily runs ahead on the wide black path
Wild rose and blackberry briars on one side
Metal domed sewage treatment plant through chain link fence
    River is calm
    swirling eddies in the current
How’s Dana?    Depressed and has an ulcer.
Here comes a roller blader with a pitbull -- leash up all five dogs
Horsetail, wild hemlock, and lacy yarrow

Sun comes out from behind a cloud
Wrap the jackets around the waist
Trilling sounds of red-winged blackbirds
Grass and skunk cabbage on the muddy banks
Mallards startle from the stream
Melissa makes the loud sound
    Blowing a blade of grass between her thumbs
Nettles and pink salmon berry blossoms
Two periwinkle butterflies flitter by sporadically
Red-headed woodpecker pecks on the sun-bleached tree

Down to the T-shirts stifling hot
Father and son pedal by with the tandem bike
Cinnamon duck takes off from the stream
    exposing white under wings
Lucy, the bulldog, cuts her tongue on something
Long-necked blue heron walks slowly along the muddy bank
Red-winged blackbird sitting on a cattail
Marsh trickles out with the ebbing tide
White-headed bald eagle roosts on a snag
End of the trail, turn around, and wish for drinking water
Doug makes the annoying grass trumpet noise
Two geese glide and honk above our heads
Overpowering stench of the sewage treatment plant
Rudy cools down in swampy pond
Thick white hair clinging to wet body, wags tail, and picks up the pace
Relief of cedar smell from the chipping plant wafts this way
Beagle and Boston, Lily and Roxy, sprint bouncing through the grass
Practically dragging Max the Bassett for the last half mile
Under the freeway overpass, load the dogs back into the cars.
Abe Olsen
Fish--Phish

i wish fish drown in their stupid water

i wish red and green can melgsh into some other color than brown
i wish for eggnog year round—but just in Mexico... and one must sneak back in here illegally
i wish for a warm fuzzy fuzzy to cushion this vice pinching my sense of conformity
i wish i had a cape to wear when i am regal and sometimes when i am asleep too
i wish i could stop caring what people think
i wish people would care more what i think
i wish icecream came in flavors like lasagna or peas

i wish for the courage to abandon a perfectly good car to “save the planet”
i wish “the planet” would “save” me for once so i don’t have to rely on Jesus and his minions
i wish i could grow a third foot to wear this lonely sock which has forever lost its mate
i wish i had twenty of the same outfit so i would never again be bothered by fashion choices

(the outfit shall include a cape)
i wish for a zombie outbreak—my gf lists it as her “dream date”

i wish for inspiration at a time when i don’t have more urgent things to do
i wish for a thousand more hats to add variety to the outfits
i wish those smugass fish would stop gloating with their blub blub blub silent whining
i wish i met a celebrity—any one—as I’d know them; and I’d fuck tentatively with their head

i wish cows were put out of their misery
i wish fish were put out of my misery
i wish cemeteries didn’t have all those ugly hard anonymous cement blocks to make them ugly
i wish to be healthy all my life and die at a very old age in an avalanche of naked supermodels
i wish my body be fed to my enemies—as a joke
i wish my inedible parts be cremated—those ashes fed to my same enemies—as an even funnier joke
i wish on second thought to outlive everybody else and then restart humanity again—but improved
i wish global warming dries the seas to dust so all the fish flip flop and die of suffocatian in pain and death
(for Allyson Kelley)

she changed the sunny grew it up alone
weeded faithfully, told no lies in winter

wolves bayed but found no springing songs
in rhythmic cries of packing pleasure

dawning labor at summer’s well
sipping solace from tin in full, cold measure

hoe packed ground: small prints; nail marks;
    fur; the odd, forlorn feather

these she would fold in loaming deep
    fire it to field her favored flower

she changed the sunny, at the end
sundering fleets of greater power, possessed

    by lucid instinct, after
raised us in squared lines of earth recessed

    each grown up in rows, alone
faithful weeding by rod and hoe

raked the innocence right off us

she changed the sunny in fits of isolated pleasure

made strangeling fruits bloom in reticence
to season’s measure
mis took

this blackbirding of memories
mine, once unspoken
now caught upon the sticky

page

once, indecipherable
i wrote a full month in code

mistaken, i hid myself
from myself

back going no is there ←

what did i know
beak scratched ink?

there is a blackbird at my window, with a yellow beak
he is calling me

i swear to you that i was kidnapped
and brought here, to this unfamiliar place
from an unfamiliar place

the birds are in the room now

feathers of memory
float black dots
behind my eyes
Sandra Penney
nittany girl

of the balconies of my
colorado of my
all were rotted

forbidden
to walk there
the aching masonry

no support for the
weight
of so many heritaged
and binding

expectations

the seeding took all
our summers together
harvestless, the carpenter

ants feasted
the supporting remains

we press wood chips
in memory
of fruiting

and curse those foreign parts
so hostile
to our family
name
Crystal Sackman
Truth

Truth,
the unspoken
  the unseen
  the unacknowledged

With which I want
To slap you in the face
Crystal Sackman
Infectiousness of Hate

Sound of hate rasping
tap   tap   tapping

Tension teasing talon
draaaag  tap  tapping

Drawing, dripping blood

Oily vapor choke

Churning fear into hope

Steadfastness remote

Tempting taste of irony

Leaves mouth full of smoke
William Seaburg
Past Present 1917-1919

I

It's a photo postcard
Trimmed to fit a metal oval frame
Colored brown, a faux wood design
Glass cover with cardboard backing.

Bright-eyed, round-faced, ears protruding--
She is her father's daughter,
She is a Higgins.
Left hand in motion as the shutter
Clicks, right not to be seen--
As hidden as her thoughts
The briefest trace of a smile.
Big feet--so large for a one-year old
Or so, sitting upright in a white,
White dress on the dark studio chair
Somewhere in Billings.
She is my Auntie Lucile, though
Nobody called her Auntie Lucile
No time, no time.
Perhaps we’d have called her
Auntie Lucy or
Lucile Jane Higgins, full names reserved
For anger or rebuke, for calling cards,
Diplomas.

II

“Don’t take Lucile,” my mother said
Her father said. My grandpa Higgins. “Higgins”
Grandma called him, just Higgins, not Barney--
As she would call her second husband Polley,
Not Rufus, just Polley.
“Leave her with me. If she gets sick,
I’ll take care of her.
Influenza’s everywhere--
What are you thinking about, woman?”
Grandpa, my mother said, was a good hand
To nursing the sick.

But grandma won the day
And they boarded a December train
To Washington, Thurson Co., Rainier,
Twenty acres, great-grandma Wise,
Grandma Higgins’ mother--a paper widow.
Auntie Bert, Louise--Bert called her Wese--
Lucile, and Grandma Higgins, on their way
To Christmas with great-grandma Wise.
What an excitement for four-year-old Louise,
probably her first train trip--
I never thought to ask.

I don’t know where Aunt Lucile shook hands with
Influenza--Billings, on the train, in Rainier.
The sickness began just before Christmas, lasting
Eighteen days, burning itself out within a week
After New Years, 1919.
They were no strangers to illness,
But great-grandma and her daughter had never met
The likes of Influenza. Nobody had.
Their home remedies failed.
A Doctor from Tacoma, when finally called in,
Could do no more than note the time of death:
4 a.m. on a cold January morning.

Lucile Jane Higgins is buried
In an unmarked plot in a
Private cemetery in Rainier:
1 year, 6 months, eighteen days.
My grandpa, my mother said, never forgave his wife
For taking Lucile from him.
It was, I imagine,
The beginning
Of the end
Of a marriage
Already in trouble.

And on the cardboard back of that picture frame
In a young girl’s scrawling hand is written
My Beloved Sister
She is an Angel now
In Heaven.
God Bless her.
And I am left to wonder
What were you thinking, grandma,
What were you thinking.

--February, 2008
Dustin Sewell
Forward March

Left
Right
Left
Boots beating syncopated rhythms. Rhyme is the reason. Soldiers of mis-fortune for sale to the lowest bidder, to the riches go the spoiled. Army of royal loyal drones do the bidding. Never jaded, never faded

Left
Right
Left
What is thy bidding my master; kill or be killed. Soldier bee’s worth worthless without multiple multitudes -masses of those lacking identity; is the fool more foolish or the fool who follows? Never fail to follow.

Left
Right
Wrong
Change the rhythm; feed the beat. Let rhyme be reason but find your words; Speak! Act! But think firstly; thinking man stands lastly. If first things are indeed first, then lead with compassion, follow not blindly
Trajectory (Connection)  Sandra Penney
Jesse Sonderland
Haze

looking,
yet not
exactly sure
for what.
I have
no window
to steal
my attention.
electronic screens
in every
single room
though.
writers block?
likely just
laziness.
a keystroke
here
and there
fills the paper.
if I
don’t bother
with
meaning,
you
get to
fill
that void.
Jesse Sonderland
Equations

Is it narcissistic to focus solely on the self for long stretches of time?

Is it somehow OK to do so if for some sort of spiritual enlightenment?

Self deprecating humor helps.

It lightens the load consciously.

It relaxes all parties.

He, it, I, it makes no difference, the subject matter seemingly always the same.

Write about what you know, at least that is the ever present excuse.

Head held at a tilt = pondering

Head nodding twice up and down = yes

Head shaking twice left and once right = no

No movement whatsoever + a squint = can you just shut up already

Happiness is > tact
Filtering in the information here and there. Accepting some of it as actual truth, but generally hunting for ammunition to attack with. The spittle is visible flying from your mouth this evening. You may almost mean what you say this time, or at least half. Resentment frothing in your undertone, you could say thank you and make it feel dirty. On and on and on and on, you repeat yourself heavily as though this brings new points to the discussion. The louder you say something does not sadly in your case make your point more acceptable or correct. If you realized that, instead of speaking at an individual, rather that to one, half of your bile could remain burrowed away, laid dormant, in the recesses of your being. Not like the song, but one thing remains repeating in your head, “Should I stay or should I go now?” Fighting the urge to run becomes ever so difficult, not so much away from the situation or problems, more so just to make it stop. Please stop it, just shut up, let me think for myself for a moment rather then having my brain so heavily intruded upon. Regrettably, you have no more joy remaining. Do I regret this? Sometimes I don’t dwell on this at all, would rather you suffer things out along with me, at least then we are on an even playing field. Please. Please. Yes! That is exactly what I wanted. Tell me one more time what it was that I was thinking. If it wasn’t for you, I would have no way of ever determining how it was that I felt at a particular moment.
Marcia Woodard
Containers

During my recent closet and dresser-drawer cleaning frenzy, I did not go through my bra drawer in the lingerie chest. Perhaps I determined a thinning out wasn’t necessary because I could stuff all my bras into one big drawer, shut the drawer completely, and end up with no straps poking out around the edges. In order to accomplish this bit of magic, however, I had to hold down the bras and withdraw my hand at the last second, risking injury. This exterior appearance of control passed as organized in my storage universe, even if my undergarments popped out like they’d been deprived of oxygen when I opened the drawer.

I write in the same room that houses my lingerie chest. While working on an essay that linked compulsive shopping with compulsive eating, I began to wonder if bras qualified for the obsessive acquisition category as did most of my other clothes, shoes, and food. Time to do some research.

I lowered myself to the floor and dumped out the bra drawer after a brief struggle with a particularly heavy duty underwire that had lodged itself in a crossways position. I am conflicted about underwires because of the punishment aspect of the garment, and I’m no longer sure the discomfort justifies the cosmetic improvement. Even though underwires give a nice silhouette, it’s a painful separation and lift, a policy of “one breast shall not touch the other,” or any other flesh, in their design. When I take off an underwire bra, my breasts pop out like they’ve been deprived of oxygen.

My 68-year-old friend, who is wise in the way of undergarments, refuses to wear underwires. She does not exercise, but she wears soft sports bras because, she says, “I am not a construction site and I don’t need a derrick to get my breasts into place.” I looked up “derrick” in The New Shorter Oxford English Dictionary. Turns out Derrick was the surname of a noted London hangman around 1600. The first definition of the word, then, is “a hangman; hanging; the gallows.” The second definition is “a contrivance for hoisting or moving heavy weights.” So: underwire bra as a gallows for heavy weights. Appropriate.

I counted out 46 bras, folded them, and placed them in pillar-like stacks on the floor. Forty-six bras ranging in size from 34D to 40DD, which is technically eight sizes because I had both D and DD in 34, 36, 38, and 40. Forty of those bras hadn’t touched my breasts in a minimum of five years. But I still think I might wear them because, with hormone therapy or birth control pills, weight gains and losses, and PMS or not, you can never be sure which bra will fit on any given day. And apparently I prefer to hang onto a wide size range rather than buy a single bra as the need arises. (Buy one bra? Who am I kidding? I have always viewed clothes purchases as something you acquire in pairs or groups.)

I consulted my 68-year-old friend of the derrick metaphor, and whom I also knew to have a panty problem—hence her anonymity—and she said the dilemma with bras was the engineering: “They attempt to combine comfort and function but it can’t be done. Nature will not be contained.”

I asked her how many bra drawers she had.

“Just one, but it’s a big one. And the reason I have so many bras is because I can’t bear to try them on at the store. I get them home and they don’t quite fit, but I still wear them.”
I could relate: the push-up bra I had was a little too pushy, so I wore it for gardening. Except that every time I knelt down to pull weeds, both breasts would pop right out the middle. Or the new bra my mother wore on a recent trip she took with her sister and me. The bra crept up Mom’s back and sagged so low in front that we suggested she tie a piece of twine to the strap across her back and anchor it down to a belt loop on her pants. Or the bras you try on in the store, and you swear they fit, that they have a little extra room in fact, and the first day you wear them you notice a pouchy protrusion in the middle of your two existing breasts that resembles a third and fourth breast, or, depending on the cut of the bra, the protrusions come together like a thick “V”—a jiggling fat silhouette of a bird. I have tried to get rid of this disfigurement by rearranging my breasts in the bra and pushing them over to my armpits so nothing will squeeze out the middle. This works temporarily, but if you are wearing a tight t-shirt and you catch a chill, others may notice that your nipples are pointing left and right.

Professor X in the English department at the University of Washington recently gifted me with a new term that she and her sisters invented to alert each other of nipple projection: “t.h.o.” Tittie hard on. “Tho,” they’d warn each other, and up went their arms to cover their breasts until the symptom faded.

I find my personal thos both embarrassing and liberating. I don’t like my nipples calling attention to themselves, but what are you going to do? I’ve grown to appreciate that they have their own agenda. Apparently, public concern about thos has grown. I say this because I’ve seen new bras advertised as t-shirt bras that eradicate any evidence of nipples. The cups are made of a quarter-inch-thick molded microfiber and stand up on their own—no breasts required.

Professor X, a PhD who is held in high esteem by her peers, grew up in the South and also introduced me to the phrase “tittie baby,” as in “She’s just a tittie baby, ain’t she?” A rough translation of this phrase: She is a crybaby who wants to hold onto mother’s apron strings, or, literally, wants to keep sucking on mama’s nipple.

Professor X first used the phrase when talking about her dog, Kafka, that was afraid of the other dogs in the dog park one day and came running back to hide behind X’s legs. Professor X’s friend, who is also from the South, was at the park and opined, “Kafka, you’re just a little tittie baby.”

Professor X spent some of her pre-teen years in Texas and had a girlfriend, Louise, whose father knew how to use this phrase when it would hurt the most. If Louise was visibly upset about a situation, her father would yell to her mother (who was usually still in the kitchen): “Mama, we’ve got a tittie baby on our hands: bring that tit in here so Louise can suck on it.”

After I counted my bras, I went through the pile again to make the “keep” or “toss” decision. I held every bra between thumb and forefinger and tested the texture; I thought about each one’s history. My favorite was the Frederick’s of Hollywood bra and thong set my husband gave me for Christmas a while back. I’m fairly sure that thong was the beginning of the end for my rear end. I’ve never made it through a day with a thong again. My 68-year-old friend says I’m buying them too small: “They are supposed to make you feel sexy, not in pain.”

My friend can sit on a bench at a mall and determine which women are wearing thongs by the manner in which they walk: “See that woman in the red pants? She how she glides? She’s wearing one.” She makes
these pronouncements with authoritarian body language that lets you know disagreement would be futile. She says she learned this skill in Prague, where, according to her vision, most of the women flow when they walk because they wear thongs and shelf-like bras that lift but don’t cover.

The Frederick’s of Hollywood set is pretty—black velour with shiny purple sequins glued all over, new and sparkly—so even though I was reminded of pain, I kept it. I haven’t worn Frederick’s in eight years and I may never again. But what if I could? An oft-quoted rule says if you haven’t worn an item of clothing in the past two years, throw it out. On some of the new style shows hosted by gay men, they’ve shortened the time period to one year. I can’t weed this way—so arbitrary and no consideration for emotional attachment—and I feel anxious thinking about those types of decisions.

The bottom of the drawer held a collection of early jogbras, or monotit bras. These sports bras had stretch straps and made two large breasts into one huge flattened breast. I remember jogging down the road and becoming aware that my monotit bounced around like a flattened ball on sing-along songs. I would try to tense my chest muscles to slow down the beat, but the monotit had a rhythm of its own. The scene must have been hypnotizing for passersby.

I realize that all women don’t have to deal with the same breast issues. Let me put that another way: mine are big, some are not. My bra straps carve out red river channels in my shoulders and a map of welts appear under the strap that goes across my back. You know what I’m talking about, no matter what your breast size, if you’ve ever gained twenty pounds or become pregnant.

I’m conflicted about my big breasts, and they can embarrass me. Sometimes, though, I feel a certain breast power: as if all I had to do is point them at someone to take them down—like Xena the warrior princess with her conical leather and metal sculpted bra, from which the current underwire has descended. But mostly I wish I were more proud of my body, like some women I know (especially those who are younger than I) who accentuate the curb appeal of their breasts with tight, low-cut tops.

I worked for a rich, dysfunctional couple in my early 30’s. They were into anything that purported to improve the self, and they were into using me as a pawn between the two of them. My bad posture—shoulders slumped forward to create my own clam shell—drove them batty, and for my birthday one year they gave me ten rolfing sessions (an intense manipulation and realignment of the muscles) to straighten me up and get my breasts up and out where they should be. Once and only once, my mother came to visit me at this job. My boss, Mrs. Dysfunctional, rather than engage in a normal greeting, said to my mother: “Has Marcia always been ashamed of her breasts?”

In the last few years I’ve grown more comfortable going braless at home—but never in public. If I don’t have to go to work, I leave on my pajama top and pull on some sweats and work around the house all day. I feel loose without a bra, and I like that suggestion of rebellion. But I run and hide if I’m braless and the mailman or a neighbor knocks on the door. And if I have to go to the store, I may leave my pajama top on and zip a jacket over it, but I’ll never go out without first strapping myself into a bra.

In her essay, “Autobiography as War Machine (or Wild Titties I have known),” Annette Murrell writes about venturing out sans her 44 DD bra for the first time:
I’m only now realizing that I’ve grown and changed in ways I’ve barely noticed. Didn’t the other week I do the unthinkable: go out in public braless? Okay, so it was midnight and I only went to the grocery store, and I wore a thick baggy sweater. Still that sweater couldn’t completely hide the fact that my breasts were swinging like pendulums, and even when that priggish woman in the cake mix aisle chastised me with her furrowed brow, I kept on walking with my head held high. (2001, 152)

Unlike Murrell I’m not there yet, and I may never arrive. But I am taking small, swinging steps. In the meantime, until society and I become more acceptable of a variety of women’s bodies, I think breasts should be interchangeable, say like with Velcro. I should be able to remove my double Ds and put on some Bs and look perky in a tank top with nipples that looked people in the eye instead of down and away. And I’d like to wear those camisoles with the built-in shelf bras without my breasts looking and feeling like an overloaded shelf that’s about to fall off the wall. I suppose you could think my complaints about large breasts are my way of boasting. Could be.

By the time I finished sorting through my bra inventory, I was down to 18 keepers: 10 bras that fit, two that were a little big, and one bra in each of the smaller sizes that didn’t fit. I kept the smaller ones so that, in case of emergency, when I woke up one morning and realized my breasts had shrunk and I didn’t have time to go to the store, I’d have a bra to wear.

My mission when I sat down to count my bras was to determine whether or not my purchases of this undergarment qualified as compulsive. You might be thinking the answer is “yes” based on my initial count of 46 bras. But in my closet landscape, that’s nothing, especially since I was able to whittle the collection down to 18, and, a few months later, I’m still maintaining at 21.

Maintenance is important in measuring clothing compulsions. In a true compulsion, within a week of the cleaning process, you end up with as many articles of clothing, or more, than you started with because you see any available space as something to be filled—as quickly as possible. This perspective of available space can be compared to going on a diet in order to enjoy gaining back the weight.

Since I gained only three bras in six months, I don’t consider them a compulsion. I don’t buy them in large quantities (and hide them on the floor in the back seat of the car until it’s safe to smuggle them into the house) like I do my other clothing, shoe, and food obsessions. Why? Because bras aren’t easy. They take work, and they aren’t reliable. Oh sure, they can be soft and sexy—even promise to be your best friend—but they can also turn on you and be a derrick you simply don’t want to face. Like a gallows, they can ruin your day.

References


Guarded

Claire Scarbeary
Contributors

Nina Bayer holds a BA in Interdisciplinary Studies (Culture, Literature and The Arts) from University of Washington Bothell, and an MFA in Creative Writing (Fiction) from the Whidbey Writers Workshop. She enjoys writing fiction, nonfiction and poetry, and her work has appeared in numerous chapbooks and literary publications. Nina resides in Bothell with her partner, George, and an apricot tabby named Jameson. She works as the Editor of Lunch Hour Stories short fiction magazine, and teaches writing at Edmonds Community College.

Deborah Caplow specializes in Mexican art and culture, as well as the history of art in general. She has recently published a book about Leopoldo Mendez, a Mexican political printmaker, and took many of the photographs of the prints that appear in the book. She teaches a variety of art history courses at University of Washington, Seattle and University of Washington, Bothell. She also loves to travel and spends as much time as possible in Mexico and Portugal.

Andrew Caulfield is moving up in the world. He still lives in an ivory tower in Bellevue, but he enjoys the view from a higher floor now, where he can see for miles. As motorists no longer pass by on the street below, he has taken to yelling at pedestrians instead.

Joann Comerford: As an artist, I’ve had a life long interest in history and portraiture, often adapting or redrawing familiar imagery into new contexts. My predilection for rendering has been well suited for the graphic medium and I spent many years studying lithographic techniques, including reduction methods such as acid tinting. Prior to moving to Washington State, I earned a Master of Fine Arts degree from Arizona State University, and taught foundation art courses at Mesa Community College in Mesa, Arizona.

Brennan Emerson is a human being.

The father of seven daughters, Gary W. Farris is an eclectic writer, having been published as a film critic, essayist, short story author, poet and playwright. He has worked as an educator at various institutions since 1974, teaching such diverse subjects as artillery fire control trigonometrics, ancient religions, criminal justice heuristics, human-centered computing and the history of women in film. His main interests are literature, religion, history and cinema.

Salena Farris

Brandon Finley is currently a post-doctoral researcher at UW Bothell. He enjoys writing poems, lyrics, and the occasional short story. He received his Ph.D. in atmospheric chemistry last year and uses that to pay the bills since he’s far too lazy to be a professional writer. He plans to continue pursuing writing as a hobby, science as a career, and secretly hopes to one day sneak behind a book publisher’s editing desk and be a constructive critic of other people’s work.

Arnie Franke is a student at UWB and plans to graduate at the end of fall quarter 2008 under the SEB focus. He spends most of his time pursuing the dark arts of necromancy and doodling.

Vanessa French
Rusty Gerard is a recent graduate of Computing & Software Systems BS program from University of Washington Bothell.

Melissa Grimmer

Mike Johnsen began writing 40 years ago, and began focusing on poetry in 2003. He has published one collection of poems, titled *Garage Sale*. Three of his poems appear in the 2007 edition of *Between the Lines*. In August, he begins his second residency at the Rainier Writing Workshop’s MFA program, at Pacific Lutheran University. His website focuses on unpublished authors and literary resources. His website can be found at http://www.theseatlemuse.com. His work is generally somber. His poems expose often unseen ironies of life. They are powerful, and intensely personal. And he has this thing about redheads.

Wade Arthur Johnson will soon be a fluttering butterfly in the real world, and would like to thank all of the IAS professors for a rewarding learning experience while still in his cocoon.

Before last year, Amy Jones was not too keen to share her work with others, but after a positive experience with last year’s journal and some creative writing classes, she found out that sharing is not so bad! She has enjoyed and appreciated the unique opportunities to learn about and sometimes create or be inspired by many different art forms while at UWB.

My name is Allyson Kelley; WOW I am so excited that my poem, “Splice” was chosen for Clamor! I am an IAS major with a Community Psychology focus. I plan to attend graduate school for counseling psychology, which will enable me to help others work their Splice. I want to thank Jeanne Heuving for being a Transducer to my growing capabilities as a fledgling writer. I want to thank Diane Gillespie for helping me understand what a comma splice means to me on a deeper psychological level. I thank God and my children for living the Splice with me every day.

Jessica Lee

Ben McGinnis writes a little bit every day and hopes to do so for the rest of his life. In his spare time, Ben enjoys biking, fishing, baseball, music, and any activity that demands a leisurely pace.

The loathsome mass scrapes itself through shadowed halls, leaving behind an oily smear of abhorrence. Ghastly beyond words, it pulls its noxious form with elemental resoluteness; yet, the only sign of intelligence is the purposeful extension and hideous flexing of dripping tentacles which coil like rotted rope around the creature's bloated girth. A fetid plume of orange exhalation gusts silently, shivering the floor and walls to rotted planks. It pulls itself to a desk, which blackens with mold, where it then—delicately, dexterously—wraps a moist tentacle around an unfortunate pen and scribbles something, signing it Jeff Morgenroth.

Patty Northman sees the light, beauty, and humor in life and tries to capture that in photography and poetry. Constantly seeking balance between home, work, and school. Have pen, paper, and camera – will travel.

Abe Olsen
Sandra Penney lives in a moss draped forest with a husband and a dog and two thousand books. She only ventures out to attend university and stock up on wine, coffee and kibble, and has yet to fully grasp that she is graduating this summer despite constant assurances from very patient IAS academic advisors.

William Pickert: I am a first-year graduate student in the Master of Arts in Policy Studies program at UW Bothell, and an amateur photographer (in the sense that I do not get paid) who attempts to capture the essence of my subjects. I have been taking photographs since age 15 and use both film and digital cameras. There is an authenticity inherent in photography—yes, even digital photography—that I think is lacking in other art forms, although media necessarily corrupt to some extent. I appreciate the inclusion of my work in this edition of Clamor.

I am Crystal Leia Sackman; a Culture, Literature, & the Arts major who will be graduating in June 2008. I enjoy eating food, making food, and even looking at recipes for food on the internet. My favorite color is blue, I am right-handed, and I strongly dislike snowboarding. In high school, I attended the WA state championships for weight lifting where I dead-lifted 245 lbs. My grandmother was shocked.

Selena Salihovic aspires to live a simple life, one filled with many books.

Claire Scarbeary: The first 27 years I searched for meaning. My next 27 years, meaning will be searching for me.

William R. Seaburg, Professor of Interdisciplinary Arts and Sciences, continues his nostalgic searching for the unknown—the tracking of fragments, traces, echoes, the fading voices of a past present, of palpable absences. The form is new, the desire is old.

While Dustin Sewell may never fully know himself, he can offer that the sum of his parts thus far have been shaped and molded from his life and times spent in North Carolina, New England, Alaska, California, Honduras, Mexico, Korea, and Seattle. From these distinct geographic locations, Dustin has “done hard time” in 12 different schools (K-16) and served 8 years in the U.S. Marine Corps. He currently sells his soul one paycheck at a time to the American corporate machine, but has delusions and aspirations for more. One small step for Dustin, one giant leap for optimism!

Jesse Sonderland

Barbara A. Thomas loves women yet admits to a slight crush on Congressman Dennis Kucinich. She writes poetry in her spare time, which translates to pretty much never, explaining the absence of work from this publication. You can see her academic work in the spring 2008 edition of UWB’s Policy Journal. She lives in Everett, WA, with her son Nicholas, sister Dusty, girlfriend Cate, and her 2 goldendoodles Hugo and Vita.

Marcia Woodard has an MFA from the University of Washington and was the nonfiction editor at the Seattle Review from 2002-2006. She is a columnist for the American Kennel Club Gazette magazine and teaches writing at Edmonds and Everett Community Colleges. She has taught nonfiction workshops at the University of Washington Women’s Center and the Edmonds Write on the Sound conference. Recent publications include Kalliope, Crosscurrents, www.womenwriters.net, the Seattle Review, 13th Moon, and an essay in the forthcoming anthology My Life at the Gym. Marcia loves her three barkless basenjis, purple, and candy corn.