

sweet: 1.1

September 2008

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Brian Baumgart

What Happened on the Nine o'Clock News

In a Santa Barbara ballroom, a cell phone chirps with a digitized musical ditty, something from the eighties, a time when I believed in ghosts and love and religion.

A young girl answers the phone, red-faced and embarrassed because the master of ceremonies had just asked everyone to please turn off all cell phones and laptops.

This girl looks too young to have a phone, and it makes me wonder what happened on the nine o'clock news to make her parents need to keep such close touch.

Sixteen men were murdered in Beijing because they wore the wrong color jackets.

A scientist in New York City tells us that cell phones cause cancer in the brain, and shorten the attention span of white and black children, but Hispanics and Asians are okay.

I start to feel old when my students refer to movies less than four years old as classics, and I wonder what their children will think of me when they are my age.

Within the last few months my computer started making beeps and whirs, and the rep on the phone told me it was only trying to talk to me about its internal problems.

My psychiatrist tells me he will help the computer for a hundred an hour.

A child pornography ring was recently broken in San Diego, our sunniest city. It's nine o'clock; do you know where your children are?

Girls with and without cell phones start disappearing all over the U.S. and Japan. The police officer at the microphone looks tired and his eyes are like blank screens.

My cousin Blake assures me that the eighties were filled with chemicals and missing children, too, though I was one of those children who believed in ghosts.

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BRIAN BAUMGART lives with his wife, son, dog, and two cats in a small burg in southern Minnesota. He holds an MFA from Minnesota State University in Mankato, Minnesota, where he sometimes teaches in addition to Century College, located just beyond the borders of St. Paul. His writing has appeared in Blue Earth Review and other journals. He is currently at work on a collection of poetry and a novel, tentatively titled Fruit Songs. He enjoys candied ginger and any—emphasis on any—type of cheesecake. Some say he eats too many sweets. He disagrees. More info can be found online at brianbaumgart.efoliomn2.com.

Carol Berg

Eighth Grade Social Studies Class

Eric is mouthing off about Mr. Woods' sweaty armpit stains or his greasy hair or his fat arms winding up during his lectures about government but right now one arm shoots out and grabs Eric by the throat pushing him back so Eric's face is skyward like some painting of a saint awed by God but his feet are dangling from the tilting chair with that fist stiff around his throat and Mr. Woods' blue vein pulsing on one side of his head and the whole class gasps and we can't hear what Woods spits out to Eric or Eric whispers back his eyes down until Woods finally lets his throat go lets all our throats go

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CAROL BERG has poems forthcoming or in *The Hiss Quarterly*, *Rhino*, *Pebble Lake Review*, *Tattoo Highway* and elsewhere. Currently she is an MFA student at Stonecoast and has an MA in English Literature. She also works part-time as a Writing Tutor at Pine Manor College. Her favorite dessert is anything with chocolate and raspberries.

KJ Grimmick

Summers in Georgia: A Sestina

You complained about the impossible distance of walking the railroad tracks, but still we walked. We would breathe the dark heat, go with the soft night heat and let it cling to the bottle of moonshine between us, watery and kaleidoscopic, let it drain the color quick from our faces—lips tight to the bottle, watercolor breath. Feeling silver and large-hearted

I would watch you flip quarters flat across your knuckles, my heart skipping beats like a small white pebble, leaping over the impossible brown water of the lake you grew up on, the water you washed your face with, scrubbed clean your clothes in. I imagined the way your father walked, the way he called you inside at night, gin lighting up in his hand clear as water, offering you sips so you too could feel its slow burn, that dull heat.

I could only place your father in those hot-tempered moments of your childhood. In the dark you said he had a heart like cicadas, humming secrets, heart as the quiet bugs that skimmed the water, heart as the angry hunter. Looking up, the stars seemed impossibly mute in their geometry. I imagined Orion as your father, stepping down, walking clumsily, pieced together and pitch drunk off the blackness of the night, his face

swimming before me, his eyes large, those soft brown lakes facing North eternally, those thick inches of summer mud kept hot under our small feet, stuck between our toes forever. I could see his walk in yours, in your slight limp, in your slow hunch, your own heart slippery as the summer. Your hands shook and it was impossible to silence your own nervous habit of flipping the quarter, sky black as water

and your own brown eyes blinked, cloudy, fearing the depth of that water above us. (He did not teach you to swim.) I picked up the quarter that had fallen face up in the grass from your hands, the rail before me straight and eternal, impossible to distinguish from the moon and its cold sliced horizontal heat. The train rumbled in the distance all iron bellied, all oil hearted, thumping and guzzling coal with its smoothly grilled face,

and I placed the quarter, small and silver on those tracks. We paced and walked in circles, waiting. At twelve forty three the train barreled by - smooth as water, smooth as our own slow history, pistons grinding secrets out hard-hearted-silver whirring speaking to the whites of our bones, our pale faces eating that mechanical wind, that tar scent sticking to our clothes. The night heat, that smooth black engine heat held us tight- it was boundless and impossible.

(We walked home after the hot rumble of the train disappeared leaving only the watery moon and the smashed face of George Washington, two impossible and silver-hearted lovers.)

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KJ GRIMMICK is a full time student and part time poet. Also a sworn enemy of revealing biography. Her favorite dessert is rice pudding.

*Luisa A. Igloria***Yo Yu**

*"Have fish."
—Chinese saying*

Today, the streets flooded and ceilings leaked,
mercurial. On TV, firemen waded through apartments

with small children in their arms. The lights
went out and we swam to bed

after having made a feast of every
frozen shape in the refrigerator.

The wind looked for something
under all the eaves. The neighbor's roof

flew into the trees. All night the rain
made loops of rope outside the window.

Lawnmowers and cars floated by.
Sometimes shoes, a nightstand, a red

hot-water bottle. Tomorrow
the sky could look like a field of helium.

There's a jar of salt in the kitchen,
limes, a tin of sardines.

Why should I line up my cares in a row
like die-cast toy soldiers

along the windowsill?
Luck is bright as a soap-bubble.

Luck is a river. Luck
is the fickle and ancient carp

a child could ride, his bright
silk pantaloons improbably rippling.

sweet:

1.1

Christopher Reeve's Phillipino Nurse

*“Never turn your wife into your nurse or your mother.” —
Christopher Reeve*

1. The Premonition

Did he listen when I handed him his glass
of orange juice and vitamins
the morning of that fateful ride?
“That’s very interesting, Merlinda,
but save your grandmother’s ghost
stories for the kids at bedtime.”
I tried to tell him of my dream,
the death’s head a horse rearing up
on its hind legs. A snake
shedding its spandex, its spine
a bleached carcanet.
A handful of teeth, broken
to rattle like amulets.

2. The Fallen Hero

He calls every attendant “Nurse”.
Twenty-four hours a day we lift
and bathe, dress and feed, rotate, guide
catheters, unburden into bedpans
this man who flew across our screens,
dark cowlick never once moving
despite speeds to make time
turn upon itself, dam waters fall
back from point of breaking—
smile sweet as a charm
or an “S” emblazoned on a field
of blue and gold. And of course
the lucky girl gets the bit, emerges
from where she’s buried under
shitloads of highway runoff.
No rags to riches story, but equally
intriguing: a nothing, a brown speck
set adrift from an unfamiliar
planet or archipelago. It lands
with barely any luggage in the middle
of the night, adopts the wholesome
speech of mid-America and goes to temp
while waiting for the big time
in the Big Manzanas: Gotham,
New York, Amsterdam, Rome, Dubai—
wherever it is, we’ve all been there.
(That’s shorthand for unarchived work.)
Cosmetics are key: I’ll apply a light
foundation to the pallid, waxy skin,
pencil in the brows that are
no longer even there.
The photographs will want
even a shadow of the myth,
arranged by women’s hands.

3. The Current through Her Arms

The surgeons sliced a tendon
of the fractured neck to better
reattach head to body.

Every now and then he has
a little spasm— he says it happens
when the body tries to send
messages to the brain.

I thought of coaches on midnight trains,
of the vague destinations of refugees,
the plaintive songs harmonicas breathed
before bodies hurtled out of cars
and into the hazy, unlit margins
of sleeping towns.

One evening, he shook
as he napped in the hermetic silence
riddled only by the hum of digital
instruments. I bent to straighten
his head, wondering if he ever
again dreamed of power, the mind
shining its steady miner's light ahead
before the explosive thrust
into a core of basalt...

When I stepped away, my fingertips
glowed coral— as if, beneath the surface
of my labors, some molten self
had stirred awake, remembering
its own dreams of flying.

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LUISA A. IGLORIA (previously published as Maria Luisa Aguilar-Cariño) adores dark chocolate with orange rind or crystallized ginger, ripe mangoes and leche flan— but also steamed oysters with black bean and garlic sauce, arguably another category of "sweet." Luisa is the author of *Juan Luna's Revolver* (forthcoming, the University of Notre Dame Press; winner, 2009 Ernest Sandeen Prize for Poetry <http://undpress.nd.edu/book/P01279>), *Trill & Mordent* (WordTech Editions 2005; co-winner, 2007 Global Filipino Literary Awards in poetry), and 8 other books. Originally from Baguio City in the Philippines, Luisa is Associate Professor in the MFA Creative Writing Program, Old Dominion University. Her work has appeared or will be forthcoming in numerous anthologies and journals including *Language for a New Century* (W. W. Norton, 2008), *Poetry*, *Crab Orchard Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *Indiana Review*, *Poetry East*, *Smartish Pace*, *Rattle*, *The North American Review*, *Bellingham Review*, *Shearsman (UK)*, *PRISM International (Canada)*, *The Asian Pacific American Journal*, and *TriQuarterly*.

Stephen Kuusisto

Autobiographia Litteraria

*"Johnny Nolan has a patch on his ass
Kids chase him"
—Lawrence Ferlenghetti*

O I had that thing—

Patch on the ass,

Guaze-y S.O.S. dangling

Like a fig,

Stain on the world--

& the kids who ate dirt

Geniuses all—

They knew

The sign--

Bull's Eye;

Local flag;

Dog in the manger;

Birth mark;

Patch on the ass;

& God have mercy—

Running for your life

Hoping

Just that once

To cut out

Into stray eternity;

Morse code in your head;

Patch on the ass;

Patch on the ass;

& all about you street lights coming on.

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STEPHEN KUUSISTO is the author of *Only Bread, Only Light*, a collection of poems from Copper Canyon Press, and the memoirs *Planet of the Blind* and *Eavesdropping: A Memoir of Blindness and Listening*. He teaches creative nonfiction at the University of Iowa and serves as a public humanities scholar in the Carver Institute for Macular Degeneration. His website is www.stephenkuusisto.com and his blog is kuusisto.typepad.com.

Documents

John Chopan

- a. A written or printed paper that bears the original, official, or legal form of something and can be used to furnish decisive evidence or information.
- b. Something, such as a recording or a photograph, which can be used to furnish evidence or information.
- c. A writing that contains information.

CORONER'S REPORT

Name of Examiner: Dennis Campbell

Name of Deceased: Michael Burbank

Age Deceased: 23

Sex: Male

Race: Caucasian

Presumed Cause of Death: Drowning

Date and Time Exam Started: 9/3/05, 11:31am

Date and Time Exam Ended: 9/3/05, 2:13 pm

The average time for a human body to cool to the touch is 12 hours. 24 to cool to the core.

The body on this date, September 2nd, 2005, of Michael Burbank was pulled from the Genesee River. No signs of struggle or obvious signs of homicide.

The first evaluation provides no clarity relative to Michael's time of death. His submergence and exposure to the elements in the river (fish, currents, rock formations, etc.) have made it near impossible to determine this.

The age and race of this victim, along with the noticeable absence of traditional homicide related injuries, might suggest suicide.

The boy comes from a middle class family. He is 23. He has no last known address and has listed his 18- year-old brother as his contact in case of emergency.

The body, decomposition aside, shows clear signs of malnutrition.

The body's cells, during drowning, cease aerobic respiration, and are unable to generate the energy needed to maintain normal muscle biochemistry.

The boy's eyes are open, suggesting he was conscious at the moment he entered the water, as if he were trying to freeze this moment, capture it forever in the tissue.

The brain cells can die if deprived of oxygen for more than three minutes, thereby eradicating one's memory.

The cause of this drowning may never be determined.

A body in water does not decompose like the rest.

The boy looks content.

The body still waterlogged like my son when I pull him from the bath.

The hair frizzled and clinging to the neck and down onto the shoulders.

The boy, Michael, wearing, prior to examination, a Sesame Street T-shirt. What is that all about, I wonder?

The shirt a gift from some girl or maybe a relative, this eighteen year old brother, who is bound to come here, not so many days or weeks removed from last seeing his older sibling.

The shoes he was wearing were full of holes.

The things I found in his mouth are not an indication of crimes committed.

The boy must have parents.

This body, Michael Burbank, is not the first 23-year-old to come in from the river, dragged in like a catfish, but the first to have the tattoo of a pony on his chest.

The sudden feeling that this all means something.

The truth: I stopped, shortly after starting this exam, for lunch.

The kid on this table looks like he might have been nice. The way his eyes and mouth are shaped let me know that.

The hands look like they've been worked, make me think he was not so alone in this world.

The only answer lies herein.

The body: falls, falling, fallen.

The boy, giving himself over to the current.

LETTERS TO PONY'S MOTHER

Dear Ms. Burbank,

Forgive that I am writing to you on behalf of the Rochester Police Department to express my condolences.

Forgive that my words are of little comfort. I wanted to let you know we are doing our best to solve this and do so with you and your loss in the back of our minds. If there is anything I can do, personally, to help you during this time of mourning, please feel free to contact me.

Forgive me your loss, though I cannot take it back.

Forgive this city, which is incapable of apologizing.

Forgive the delay in regards to my letter. It was my intention to write you immediately.

Lord knows I've written too many of these letters in my tenure. Your son is the third pulled from the river this year and it's not even the end of August. I wonder often about the river, about those lost to it.

Forgive my discomfort.

Forgive my not knowing what to write.

Forgive this: my wife says I should just apologize for your loss, that there is nothing I can do to console you or set things right.

Forgive this: my wife says this sort of rambling is a sign of some deeper wound that I've yet to resolve.

Forgive our inability to effectively stop this.

Forgive all the arguments you cannot finish or the history you will not write.

Forgive the five o'clock news, which will seem like a reminder, and then daytime TV and newspapers and all other forms of mass media, which seem like an organized advertisement aimed at your grief.

Forgive those who know you and can't stop trying all sorts of things—vacations and other Hollywood remedies—none of which seem appropriate even to them.

Forgive the feeling to give yourself over to a, b, c...

Forgive the way you are coming to understand me, this unacceptable attempt to say something, to share grief.

Forgive that I mentioned my own grief.

Forgive, because it is unfair—perhaps—my overwhelming need to share something.

Forgive the forces that act on any set of circumstances, fate, for example, or luck. They cannot be held accountable.

Forgive the gods.

Forgive what has come to pass.

Forgive the way we all end up. Though finally it was too soon, perhaps. Though there is no way of

knowing or taking it back.

—Patrolman Raymond Tantillo

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JON CHOPAN is from Rochester, New York. His work has appeared and is forthcoming in *Admit2*, *The Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Monkeybicycle*, *Redivider*, *Sub-Lit*, *Swink*, and *Word Riot*. Jon is currently working on a collection of short stories set in Rochester. His favorite dessert: a cold Bud Light.

Take, Eat

Lee Martin

A few times each year, my wife and I leave our home in Columbus, Ohio, and make the five and a half hour drive to visit family in southern Illinois where we grew up on country cooking. Often, we fall into a game where we recall the foods of our childhoods, foods that for the most part we no longer eat because we've been vegetarians for twenty-five years, and I've been mostly vegan for twenty-three of them.

When we first changed our eating habits, we caused our families no end of bewilderment and in some cases downright anger because we so suddenly and certainly turned our backs on the land of beef. We spoke a foreign tongue—tofu, tempeh, bulgur— and left those who thought they knew us to shake their heads and wonder about these aliens in their midst. “How will I ever cook for you?” my mother-in-law said in despair. “I'll never be able to cook for you again.”

“Remember pan-fried chopped steak?” I might ask Deb when we tire of listening to music, and too much silence and boredom fill the car. Then we're off and running, playing this game of free association.

“And meat loaf with Velveeta cheese melted on the top,” she might say.

As the miles go by on Interstate 70—Dayton, Indy, Terre Haute—and finally down Illinois Route 130 from Greenup to Olney, we tick off the dishes we recall.

“And fried ham.”

“And pork chops.”

“And roast beef.”

And away we go, all the way home, letting our memory feast on entrees, and side dishes, and desserts.

Olney is a town of a little over 8,000 people on the flat plains of southeastern Illinois just off U.S. Route 50, thirty miles west of Vincennes, Indiana. I haven't lived in this part of the world in nearly thirty years, but I still think of it as home. I still imagine that one day, perhaps in retirement, I might come back to stay. It's an odd thought, one Deb can't quite abide, accustomed as she now is to a city of good size, but, I have this small-town boy part of me that I can't quite shake—that boy who longs for fewer people, more familiarity, a chance to walk down a small town street and enter a diner or

café, knowing that there are friends waiting for me inside, to sit over food and drink and take comfort from the kinship. “What would we do there?” Deb says when we have this conversation about living in Olney. “For one thing, how would we eat?” Then she asks the question more pointedly: “How would you eat?”

I have a number of food allergies: processed sweeteners, corn, milk products, citrus fruits, chocolate, nuts. These sensitivities developed after I gave up smoking twenty-six years ago. Suddenly, I couldn't enjoy cornbread slathered with butter, cold glasses of milk, beer, orange juice, chocolate cake, cheese. Now I'm the dinner party guest every host and hostess dreads. What in God's name can they possibly serve me?

Whenever Deb and I come back to Olney, we end up bringing food with us, knowing that there are few restaurants in town that can accommodate us; on occasion we'll pick and choose from Ty's Buffet or have pasta at the local pizza place, and now a café called Ophelia's Cup has opened for business, a café where you can get not only cappuccinos, espressos, lattes, frappachinos, but also nut burgers and vegan soups and herbal teas, and—Lord-a- mighty, I never thought I'd see the day—cucumber-infused water. For the most part, though, Deb and I do our own cooking at my mother-in-law's apartment. When we have a meal with Deb's brother and his wife, we cook something and take it with us. They don't have a clue how to cook for us.

This is farmland, land of grain and cattle and swine. The countryside, in the heart of summer, is prosperous with fields of golden wheat, straight green rows of soybeans, and cornstalks higher than a man's head. The towns, though—ah, the towns. They've dried up and gone to hell. Oil, the region's other industry, has all but petered out. The small towns are filthy with methamphetamine, the drug cooked up from anhydrous ammonia, Sudafed, brake fluid. Meth houses sometimes explode in the middle of the night because someone cooking anhydrous, a volatile chemical that often gets cantankerous, makes a mistake and the whole shebang goes sky-high with a boom and a flash. In the daylight, people can drive by these same houses, many of them with paint-stripped clapboards weathering gray, and see the warning signs: Keep Out, No Trespassing, Private. Spot someone buying Sudafed at the Wal-Mart Supercenter and you can't help but wonder whether they've really got seasonal allergies or whether they're crank addicts.

The Supercenter sits on Illinois 130 on the north edge of town, with a strip mall to its east: a Hallmark Cards, a Dollar Tree, a Fashion Bug. As is the case in so many small towns, Wal-Mart has dried up the downtown area. Main Street is, for the most part, a sad-assed lineup of empty storefronts or buildings turned into meeting places for fringe church congregations or political parties and social service organizations. Gone is the Tresslers' Five and Dime where I used to drink root beer floats. Gone is Sherman's Department Store where I worked one summer as a clerk. Gone is the Janet Shop and the Ball Rexall and Beal's Newsstand. No more Town Talk Restaurant or Gaffner's Jewelry or True Value Hardware. Even the Bradford pear trees, which were always so pretty each spring with their white blossoms, have been cut down so the blackbirds won't have places to roost. That's Olney's downtown now, a place not even the trash birds care to visit.

Lately, though, there have been attempts at renewal: in addition to Ophelia's Cup on Whittle Avenue, an Olney institution on Main Street, feared lost forever, has reopened under new ownership—Hovey's, an old-style fifties-era diner, home of Big Murt hamburgers, greasy French fries, malted

milks, fountain Cokes.

Why is it that Ophelia's Cup doesn't completely satisfy me? I had a wonderful vegan soup there one winter's day—a bean soup that was hearty and delicious, a soup I could have just as easily found at Benevolence, a vegetarian restaurant in the Short North district of Columbus. Ah, there's the rub. A soup I could have found in the city, not one I'd expect to find in Olney, not one I associate with my memories of growing up in southern Illinois. "It's like we're not really in Olney," Deb says each time we go to Ophelia's Cup, and she's right. It's like we've escaped back to the city, and though I enjoy it, it's not enough to fill the hunger I have for my memory of this place where I first knew family and community and love.

My mother-in-law lives at Brookstone Estates, an assisted living facility on East Street. Because she has moved into the intermediate stage of Alzheimer's disease, Wilma often forgets that she's eaten a meal. She can come back to her apartment after having supper in Brookstone's communal dining room, and say, "I'm hungry. What you got good to eat?"

One evening, after she'd eaten her supper, she went for a drive with Deb and me—a quick trip to Blockbuster's to return a video. When that chore was done, and I started driving back to Brookstone, Wilma piped up from the backseat. "Where we going now?"

"Back to your apartment," Deb told her.

"My apartment?" Wilma said this with dismay.

"That's right, Mother. We're going back to Brookstone Estates."

We drove a little ways in silence. Then Wilma, her voice sharp with disgust, said, "Well, cripes. I thought we was going out to eat."

My appetite has always been good, and given free range, I would, no doubt, stuff in all the foods I remember from my childhood—not only the meats, but also the cheeses and the candies and the desserts. Maybe it's lucky, then, that I have the food allergies that I do. Still, I often find myself wishing that I could eat whatever I want without having to worry about the sinus headaches and respiratory distress that usually follow anytime I mistakenly think I can eat something from my forbidden list. This is especially true when I find myself wistful for certain foods—the "Remember This?" game that Deb and I play on car trips can set off my yearnings as can glancing at the candy section at the grocery checkout line or seeing Unwrapped on the Food Network, that program about how certain products are made: Twinkies, Three Musketeer Bars, Little Debbie Snack Cakes. Just like that, I'm hungry for candy bars—Snickers and Milky Ways and Zagnuts; snack cakes—Hostess Cupcakes and Snowballs and Honey Buns; and frozen desserts—Fudgsicles and Popsicles and ice cream drumsticks.

Then there's the Christmas holidays when I remember the chocolate-chip cookies my mother baked, and the dishpan cookies, and the sugar cookies. My father bought candies at the general store near our farm and toted them home in brown paper sacks: chocolate drops, ribbon candy, peanut clusters, sugar-dusted orange slices. I can conjure up a taste right now for those candies and cookies as I can the divinity and fudge and Mexican wedding cakes and bonbons I encounter each Christmas when Deb and I visit family and friends in Olney and they haul out the goodies, and say, when I politely

refuse to sample them, “Come on. One won’t hurt. Jeezey Pete, it’s Christmas.”

Times like these, I ache for that food. I guess you’d say I get nostalgic. *Nostos*, from the Greek, meaning “return home”; *Algos*, meaning “pain, grief, distress.” That’s the etymology of the word, but I’m not sure that’s sufficient to completely explain what happens to me when I’m back in southern Illinois, unable to completely commune with the people I know there because I can’t eat their foods, can’t accept their hospitality. No roast beef for this little piggy. No pecan pie. No milk-whipped mashed potatoes. No oranges or grapefruits or tangerines. Not even those. No, it’s more complicated than a sentimental yearning for the past because my longing is countered-weighted with the thanksgiving I feel because I’ve escaped the place I now sometimes desperately want to return to and call mine, that place— oh, I know Deb is right—that would never really be a good place for us to live. Still, I can’t help but feel that I left a little boy there—the little boy I once was—and the only way I can get back to him is by making myself part of the culture there. How can I, though, when I can’t share the most essential custom of eating the native foods?

My father was a glutton. He gorged himself on anything fried, anything laden with sugar and fat. My father-in-law, too. He and Wilma’s nephew used to have contests to see who could pack away the most food at a single meal. Whole pies, he ate. At one sitting. An entire pie.

I come from a land where a man’s appetite is proof of his industry. A good worker has a good hunger. The more he shovels down, the more evidence there is that he’s work brittle, a man who can work as hard as the day is long. And the women? They keep cooking it up, Mister. Platters and platters of food. The greatest compliment you can pay a woman in this place is to eat and eat and eat until you’re loosening your belt, unfastening your pants, letting your swollen belly hang free while you groan with a delightful agony, and say, “Lord, have mercy. I’ve done died and gone to Heaven.”

If there is such a place, I bet my dad and my father-in-law are up there now, clamoring: “Enough of this angel-food cake. Bring on the cheeseburgers and some apple pie, and put some ice cream on it. Better yet, just leave the carton. Save yourself a trip.”

Understand, then, why it was my idea last year at Christmas to stop at Hovey’s one evening. We’d been out to the City Park to look at the Christmas light display—Deb and Wilma and I—and on the way back down Main Street, I suggested Hovey’s.

“Just to see what it’s like,” I said. “You know, now that it’s been redone.”

Deb gave me that look she has when she’s convinced she already knows the answer. “What do you think it’s like?” she asked.

“Right,” I said, “but what else do we have to do?” Another evening at Brookstone stretched out before us, an evening where Wilma would repeatedly tell us that someone was sneaking into her apartment and stealing her angel figurines. She’d ask us if we’d ever heard her stuffed skunk play “I Can’t Help Myself” when she pressed on its stomach. We’d listen to that skunk again and again. We’d try to watch a television program or carry on a conversation but neither would be possible because Wilma would interrupt with the questions she liked to repeat—“Did you ever know my husband?” “Is he still alive?” “Now where do you live?” Or the stories she kept circling back to—“My brother, Everett, brought me this angel.” “I’ve got nine ceramic roosters on top of that

cabinet.” “When I’m taking a nap, someone comes in here and steals things.” I pulled the car into a parking spot in front of Hovey’s. “We’re just killing time, right?” I said to Deb, and she agreed to go inside.

That wasn’t the whole truth, that part about killing time. I wasn’t aware of it then, but I am now. Somewhere inside me that evening was the ridiculous belief that I could walk into Hovey’s, order anything I wanted from the menu and make myself at home, order a Big Murt and fries and a chocolate shake, and shoot the breeze with the waitress about the holiday basketball tournament at the high school, the Christmas lights at the park, the dark days of winter we’d face together, by golly, in this small, wink-you’ll-miss-it town.

Only this town wasn’t mine, not anymore. All I had were the memories of eating at Hovey’s when I was a kid and at other diners and cafés around southern Illinois. I remembered the cheeseburgers and the hotdogs and the hamburger steak platters and the fish sandwiches and the ham and beans. The sizzle of grease on the grill. All manner of pies and cakes in the glass case, the malteds and milk shakes in their tall glasses. Banana splits, chocolate sundaes, cherry parfaits. The bell ringing on the door when it opened or closed. Customers calling out to one another. “Hot enough for you?” someone might say in summer. In the winter, a man might shiver, stomp snow from his boots, and say, “Colder than a well-digger’s ass out there.” And everyone would agree. Yes, colder than a well-digger’s ass. Women untied scarves from hairdos freshly styled, and the exciting scent of Aquanet hairspray spiced the air. High school kids played the small tabletop jukeboxes. The waitress wrote your order on a small pad. “Just a sec, hon,” she said when she cleared the dishes away from your table. “I’ll be back with your ticket in a jiff.”

Oh, what a bunch of sentimental tripe. Let me say it straight out: there was a part of me that wanted to walk into Hovey’s and travel back to the person I once was, a person who could eat anything and not give it a second thought, a person who could feel connected to this place and its people. It wasn’t the food I wanted—I can see that now—it was the feeling that I belonged to a group. I remember Sunday dinners when relatives would come to our farmhouse, and my aunts and my mother would put out a spread, and all afternoon, as we lazed under the shade trees in summer, cars would come down our lane, dust rolling out behind them, distant cousins or friends come to visit because it was Sunday and everyone, free from work and chores, had time to lollygag. On Thanksgiving and Christmas and Easter, we’d take turns gathering at a relative’s house, everyone bringing a covered dish, and we’d be this family, tainted with various tensions as all families are—a set of brothers who hadn’t spoken for years, for example—but at the same time full with the sense that we were a tribe, well-fed, fat and sassy, in a place we knew as home.

In Columbus, I can go months and months and never walk into a store or a restaurant and run into anyone I know. The servers in the chain restaurants are usually college students picking up extra money, but even after four years in this city I’ve yet to be waited on by one of my own students. The young men and women who greet us at our table are strangers. They don’t even write our orders on a pad; they punch them into a computer. These servers are interchangeable, and I’m sure to them we are, too. Just another couple of customers in a long line, none of them regulars because in a city of this size there are just so damned many places to eat, and no one really gets to be a regular at any of them. But in a town like Olney—in a restaurant like Hovey’s or any small-town diner with

customers who have their own coffee mugs hanging on pegs behind the counter, who have their regular booths and tables, for Pete's sake—you can see the same people. It can be as close to your mother's kitchen as you can get these days, and that's what I wanted, that sense that I was in the company of people who knew me and who would miss me when I was gone. I wanted to be in a place where home cooking provided communion for the tribe.

"Take, eat," Jesus said, when he broke the bread at the Last Supper. "This is my body." He lifted the cup and blessed it as well and said it represented his blood. He said that whoever should eat the bread and drink the cup should first examine themselves to make sure they were worthy of such spiritual union.

I walked into Hovey's—yes there was a bell on the door that jingled—unwilling to admit what Deb already knew; I was an imposter.

We sat at a table along the wall, and a waitress, a woman wearing a white uniform dress and a red apron tied around her waist, said she'd be with us "in a sec."

"Why'd we come in here?" Wilma asked.

"We're going to have a snack," Deb said.

The menus were on the table, leaning against the chrome napkin dispenser, and anchored by the salt and pepper shaker.

"A snack?" Wilma said.

"Aren't you hungry?" I asked her.

"Oh, maybe a little. They start serving at five o'clock. What time is it now?" The one thing she always remembers, no matter how faulty her short-term memory becomes, is the fact the Brookstone Estates serves supper at five each evening. "We're not at Brookstone now," Deb said. "It's seven-thirty, Mother. This is Hovey's. Do you remember eating at Hovey's?"

Wilma looked around the restaurant, which was brightly lit. She was facing the front so she could look out the plate glass windows to the street where cars were driving through the cold night, exhaust coming from their tailpipes. She could see the heavy front door and the screen door that slapped back against the jamb when a man and woman came inside. The man lifted his hand and waved to two women who were at a table on the other side of the restaurant. The woman with him saw the other two women and she said, "Well, look who's here." The man wore an orange stocking hat. He took it off and stuffed it into his coat pocket. The woman with him unzipped her parka. She had on a blue sweatshirt with three snowmen dancing across the front and white script that read, "Let It Snow." "Weather man says snow's coming," she said to the two women who were drinking coffee at their table. Then she and the man went over and sat down with them.

Dishes rattled in the kitchen. The grill hissed. A radio on the counter played Christmas carols. The café air was pungent with the smell of beef frying and hot grease, and it seemed to me then, on that cold night shortly before Christmas, the most wonderful place on earth.

"Hovey's," Wilma said, and she nodded. "I ate lunch here sometimes when I worked at the Weber Medical Clinic just down the street."

“That’s right,” Deb said, and she looked at me with her eyebrows raised, as is our habit now whenever we want to silently communicate to each other how amazed we are by something Wilma says. We were startled by the fact that she so clearly remembered that she had once been a clerk at the medical clinic, that it had been on Main Street, and that she had sometimes come to Hovey’s for lunch.

“They had good chili,” she said. “You think I could get some chili?”

“I imagine you could,” Deb said. “Let’s just see.”

She handed me a menu and opened one for herself. I read the list of sandwiches, soups, platters, beverages. The selection was, of course, limited. The Big Murt was there, the hamburger steak, the chili, the fries, the apple pie, the lemon meringue, the coconut cream.

I felt—well, how shall I say this? Like a fool. What had I expected? That my menu would be the “special” menu, the one that listed The Big Boca Veggie Patty, the seitan steak, the black bean chili, the baked vegetable sticks, the no-sugar apple crisp, the tofu cheesecake?

The waitress’s rubber-soled running shoes squeaked over the checkerboard tile floor as she came to our table, order pad in hand, pen at the ready.

“You folks decided?” she asked.

Deb looked at me, again, her eyebrows raised, as if to say, Okay, Mister. What are you going to do?

“Chili,” I said. “A bowl of chili.” I pointed across the table to Wilma. “That’s what you want, isn’t it? Chili?”

“A bowl of chili,” Wilma said. “A big bowl of chili.”

Deb ordered French fries, and I knew she was invoking her “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” policy when it came to the question of whether the fries were cooked in animal fat.

Which left me, and all I could say was, “A combination salad.”

I’ll tell you how that made me feel. Like I did when I was in the second grade and my school took a trip to the amusement park at Santa Claus, Indiana. It was a hot day toward the end of May, and on the two-hour bus trip home we stopped at a small-town diner, and everyone ordered pop—Coca-Colas, Pepsis, Seven-Ups, Grape Nehis in ice cold bottles. They cost a dime. “I guess I can’t have anything,” I told the waitress. “Why not, hon?” “Cause,” I told her. “I don’t have a dime.” She brought me a glass of lukewarm water, and I sat there and drank it while all my friends gulped down their pop.

When I got home, I was parched, and my mother filled an aluminum drinking glass with ice cubes and poured Pepsi Cola into it. I drank it down. I told her the story of not being able to get a pop at the diner because I didn’t have a dime. “All I had was this,” I said, and I reached into my pocket and pulled out a quarter. “Son,” she said, “I think it’s time we had a talk about money and change.” Then she went on to explain that a quarter was twenty-five cents and told me I could have used it to buy a pop and the waitress would have given me a dime and a nickel back. “You mean I could have had a pop?” My mother assured me it was so, and even today I feel so sad for that boy in the diner, sipping

that glass of free water. I still get this ache in my throat when I think of that kid, too stupid about money—too stupid for his own good—drinking a lousy glass of water like he didn't have... well... like he didn't have a dime to his name while everyone around him slugged down those pops.

“That's all you want?” the waitress in Hovey's asked. “A salad?”

I knew what she was thinking. What kind of thing was that for a man to order on a cold winter night when there was steaming chili back there, when there was the by-God Big Murt ready to do business? A salad? A combination salad? Iceberg lettuce, flimsy radish slices, a single cherry tomato?

I looked her straight in the eye. “And a glass of water,” I said.

Such an insignificant night in so many ways. A Tuesday. Pine flocking on the light poles along Main Street lifting and falling with the wind. Snowflakes just starting to flutter down. If I were to stand outside in that cold, as I do now in my imagination, I'd be able to look through the plate glass windows into Hovey's, into all that bright light, and see the woman with the snowmen on her blue sweatshirt toss up her hands and laugh, and the man with her laugh so hard he has to hold his stomach, and the two women drinking coffee, one of them lifting her mug, so the waitress will see and bring the pot.

But first she carries a tray of food to the table on the other side of the café. Well now this is all right—those people laughing and drinking coffee and the ones on the other side glad to see that their orders have come. What a place to be, out of the cold and with all the food and drink they could ever need. But what's really happening at that table with the chili and the fries and the salad is this: Wilma eats a few bites of her chili. Then she makes a face like she's just tasted the worst thing in the world.

“What's wrong?” Deb asks her.

“I don't like it,” she says. “That's not the way I remember it.” She pushes the bowl toward the center of the table. “Here,” she says. “You and Lee help me eat it.”

“We can't,” Deb says. “It has meat in it.”

“Ground-up hamburger,” Wilma says, not understanding why this might be a problem. “It's cooked up real good.”

“Mother, we don't eat meat.”

Wilma draws back her head and studies us with suspicion, trying to make sense of it all. “You don't eat meat?”

“No.”

“Well, then what are we doing in here?”

Deb turns to me. She raises her eyebrows and waits for me to respond.

I don't have the answer yet. All I can do is close my eyes and bow my head. If I were outside looking in, I'd think the man was asking grace, saying a small prayer before taking up his fork to

eat. Even now, I can imagine all the smells and the tastes and the food inside that café, the food that makes me hungry—starved to death—just to think of it.

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LEE MARTIN is the author of the novels, *The Bright Forever*, a finalist for the 2006 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction; *River of Heaven*; and *Quakertown*. He has also published two memoirs, *From Our House* and *Turning Bones*; and a short story collection, *The Least You Need To Know*. His fiction and nonfiction have appeared in such places as *Harper's*, *Ms.*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *The Georgia Review*, *Story*, *DoubleTake*, *The Kenyon Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *River Teeth*, *The Southern Review*, and *Glimmer Train*. He is the winner of the Mary McCarthy Prize in Short Fiction and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Ohio Arts Council. Since 2001, he has taught in the MFA Program at The Ohio State University where he is now Professor of English and Director of Creative Writing. His favorite childhood dessert was German chocolate cake, but now he's more partial to blackberry cobbler and apple pie.

Fruit Theory: A Lament

Aimee Nezhukumatathil

Wind made my parents nervous wrecks. Their yard crammed with fruit trees grown from seeds smuggled in a pocket or a shoe: lychee, jackfruit, chico, papaya. Each heavy fruit gently tied with pantyhose sways in the neck of hurricane. They pray for the wind to stop so their fruit will be safe.

They don't want to lose now.

They waited three years for a single mango to show, two for an orange, and one before someone actually shoveled out their pomegranate tree in the middle of the night. My mother followed the footprints to the edge of the yard: padlock busted, fire ants scattered into a frantic mess.

My mother said, No moonlight.

They must have split the wormroots blind, pulled the tree from the sandy soil, while someone else surely had to run behind—careful to pick up all the fallen bruised fruit, darkseed secret— my parents' stormy and still-beating hearts.

AIMEE NEZHUKUMATATHIL is the author of *At the Drive-In Volcano* (Tupelo, 2007), winner of the Balcones Prize, and *Miracle Fruit* (Tupelo, 2003), winner of the ForeWord Magazine Poetry Book of the Year and the Global Filipino Literary Award. New poems appear in *Antioch Review*, *FIELD*, and *American Poetry Review*. She is associate professor of English at SUNY-Fredonia where she was awarded a Chancellor's Medal of Excellence. Her favorite fruit is jackfruit.

Mark

Donna Steiner

On the small patio of my new home are dozens of slashes on the concrete. The slashes are wood residue, spots where logs hit the deck, so to speak, when flung from the driveway. Each summer thirteen cords of wood are dumped in a chaotic, daunting heap at the top of our driveway. The property slopes downward from the driveway, and my lover throws the wood – every single log, thirteen cords' worth of logs – from that pile towards the patio, where they create a new pile.

As the wood crashes onto the patio it leaves marks, which are the equivalent of knee-skin, palm-skin left on a sidewalk after a fall. The marks are hieroglyphic; they comment on her labor, which is born of necessity and care. To keep warm, we need wood. The wood requires arrangement. My lover imposes that order. These marks are a history of her work.

They will be washed away by the next rain.

My teacup is stained. Inside, washed up and down the white porcelain, are the sepia markings of the dozens of cups of tea I've savored over the last few weeks. I could scrub the stains off daily, or periodically bleach them out. But I like them. And so I perfunctorily wash the cup but allow the build-up – at least, until guests are anticipated. And then I bleach.

The painted body of my car was damaged by six years in the relentless sun of southern Arizona. The finish looks burnt. The green paint gives way to the silver underneath. If you rub a spot on the hood, residue will come off. The way moth or butterfly wings leave dusty scales on your fingertips.

Claw marks on the desktop. Where the cat got scared.

Thread-like veins on her thigh, blue river.

The inky script inside my mother's pen case.

The tattoo on the ankle. The tattoo at the wrist. The tattoo on the hip.

The torn corner of the framed print that survived the fire.

The white scars on her shoulder. My wrinkled linen shirt after we hugged.

The message left on the mirror, drawn in the steam.

The tender indentation of flesh, her finger, when they removed the wedding ring after fifty years of widowhood.

Mark

Synonyms: stain token symptom demarcation indication

Antonyms: erase expunge efface redact revise delete cancel

As I write this, the southwest city where I once lived is being marked by fire, decimated by 80-thousand acres of flame. My body is being marked by rain in my new city in the northeast, is being marked by a new love even as I covet memories of marks on other bodies, other lovers.

When I was five years old I had a silver cap on a baby tooth. I loved that sliver of silver – I didn't know it was a cap, thought I had a rare, valuable tooth – and I couldn't wait for it to fall out so I could save it forever. It seemed like a treasure, held in my mouth, a part of me.

The tooth fell out one summer and landed in the grass of a side yard adjacent to our house. Several of us searched, but we couldn't find the silver speck. It was like an erasure, like it had never existed.

Even erasures leave marks.

On my right arm, an inch-long scar. The simplest version (“All surgical procedures, no matter how common, carry the risk of poor outcomes, including death...”) of cardiac surgery: a catheter's wire snaked through a vein, up into my heart where a tiny camera scoped its walls and hollows. Inside: a hole.

We say “negative” when something is not as we wish it to be – “That was a negative experience.” It often means something has been taken away, is missing. Try to remember that it was there once.

On the news: “She turned up missing.” “We found her missing.” “The victim was discovered missing.”

The absence leaves a mark.

The absence is substantial.

The absence becomes a presence.

Thank god, because so many presences become absences.

I was a kid who tried to erase my shadow; I spun and danced in the light trying to be only me, without darkness. It didn't work.

Blood stains.

Bite marks.

Scratches.

The shadow of a slap.

Bruises.

Fingerprints. Tear drops. (Perhaps there is no spot on my body that has not been altered by one or the other).

Dark spots in the eyes after looking at the light.

From a non-reputable source: "Erasure poetry is a form of 'found poetry' created by erasing words from an existing text in prose or verse and framing the result on the page as a poem."

I found your words. I erased some. Now they're mine.

The mark X was commonly used to denote a signature for those who could not spell.

In mathematics, x represents an unknown.

An x represents a kiss.

What is it about a kiss that carries with it the unknown? What is it about a kiss that leaves its mark?

I was a kid who loved to write names in the sand. I knew exactly where to draw them: far enough away that the ocean water could not reach... for a while. I liked the anticipation, the inevitable meeting of wave and writing. I liked the annihilation. I liked the temporal nature of my marks: "Donna loves _____."

How many times has the tide washed away my love?

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DONNA STEINER'S essays and poems have been published in literary journals such as The Sun, Shenandoah, and Isotope. She's been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and won the Annie Dillard Award for nonfiction. She teaches at the State University of New York in Oswego. It freaks her out to Google her own name – who are all those other Donna Steiners? – but an essay can be found [here](#). She's quite fond of cheesecake and ice cream. (Not together. That would be wrong. Just cheesecake. Or ice cream).