

sweet: 1.2

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Melissa Amen

Marriage: A Timeline

Melissa age 4: a car seat. thrown sitting
on the dotted white. line a mailbox
beaten. in with a baseball bat a
toaster. that has no. spring Melissa
age 9: purple flowers and baby's. breath
pinned neatly in braided. hair pink
and white. roses sprinkled. on the floor
a bride. in a long white dress made
of lace. and crystal beads Melissa age
14: padded headphones cover. ears
but only mute the noises. that cut blood.
trickles from burst eardrums Melissa age 19:
running. Melissa age 21: still running
Melissa age 23: a red baseball. bat for
protection in the new. city a ring of.
promises. made in the dark no. white
dress feet. entwined in sand pollen. spotting
the kitchen. table nothing. to show nothing.

MELISSA AMEN is originally from St. Louis, Missouri, aka The Gateway to the West. She works by day as an editor in educational publishing. By night she is a poet and novelist. In May 2009, she will complete her graduate degree in Creative Writing and Publishing at the University of Baltimore. Her poems have been seen in The Tipton Poetry Journal and Boiling River. Aside from writing, Melissa's hobbies include hiking and dancing in the rain. She believes chocolate is the answer to every question. Her favorite sweet treat is chocolate covered strawberries.

Rebecca Ellis

Prayer

Inside my cupped hands
hides the only darkness in the room.
It is resting, waiting to find me.
If I open my palms
light pours in
and the darkness disappears
into its other, mysterious life.
I don't know where it goes.

Always this soft voice
inside urging
open, open.

REBECCA ELLIS lives in southern Illinois. She has poems published or forthcoming in *RHINO*, *Quiddity*, *Natural Bridge*, *qarrtsiluni*, and on a bus as part of the Metro Arts in Transit 2008 Poetry in Motion project. She is a supporter and former board member of the St. Louis Poetry Center. She edits Cherry Pie Press, publishing a series of poetry chapbooks by Midwestern women poets. Her favorite dessert is cheesecake (any kind!) and, of course, cherry pie.

Derek Holst

The Boy With Too Big Eyes

The city at night sounds like an animal caught
in a trap. The pain of it has kept you
awake again. You get up slowly
and head for the bathroom. You stare
into your eyes while brushing your teeth.

In the early daze
of morning you see a face
from the past. The boy
with too big eyes. He had

lived in a small town,
a town with not too many houses at all,
a town with more houses than people.
He had been an average boy.
Average height, average build, average looks,
average hair, average shoes—
average, except for his eyes.

You remember old super villains, once
popular, no doubt now biding their time
in the dusty attics of America. These
villains all had one thing, besides malice
in common:
too big eyes.

When pressed any expert or aficionado will tell you
why. It represents a distorted view of the world.
Maybe that explains why he acted as he did.

The boy with too big eyes began to cry.
And not just at funerals.
He cried when his parents yelled.
He cried when he couldn't do his homework.
He cried when other boys made fun of him
and when his father tried to
show him how to hit and when he hit those
other boys. He cried, the boy with too big eyes,
and no one knew what to do, no one knew exactly why.

Maybe it was because these things
called eyes serve as floodgates of the heart.
The larger they are, the more they hold back.
The larger they are, the greater the strain
of such holding back, until one day they break
and the outpour is blinding.

Or maybe those too big eyes captured
light at the wrong angle, distorting the world,
as the aficionados would claim.

Or maybe nothing was ever wrong with his eyes.
Maybe it's the world that's
too big.

You rinse your mouth out with
water and spit into the sink. You can hear
the city breathing the rapid gasps
of an animal in pain as you head down
the stairs.

Out on the street you keep your
head down, careful not to look
too much.

DEREK RAMSEY HOLST lives in upstate New York. He holds degrees in creative writing and philosophy from the State University of New York at Oswego. In addition to being a poet-philosopher, he thinks he might be a poet-forester, a poet-outdoor recreation specialist, or a poet-millionaire. His creative nonfiction has appeared in *Prick of the Spindle*. His favorite ice cream flavor is vanilla.

Steve Langan

Bach

One

The trees like masts no sails. The flag's
an oak's dead branch. Music.
Tears at the end of the music.
Seeing you now. Missing the other...her.
I mean, she's just a friend. Bluest eyes.
Her wandering eye. I am not the owner
of the white Victorian, I'm the renter
of the earth-tone ranch house, standing
in the street in the snow, weeping.

Two

Trees encountered—are they not
black flagpoles? The day you discover
you can no longer run. The day before.
Then music's considered: there is nothing
musical in the sound of the wind
the rain the tears the lies. Din
of completed wind, and all this time
The Goldberg Variations, Glenn Gould,
ca. 1955. Like, but not, the wind
the sun the night. In his fingertips.

Three

The din of wind accompanied the "Storm
of the Century." Music, over there.
He plays every night, same time and place.
Tonight, he's playing loudly.

I'll put more than fifty cents in his cup;
I'll shake his hand slower than the words
the gambler whispers for prayer
as he scratches his last black chip
to the square on the soundless green felt.

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STEVE LANGAN is the author of a collection of poems, *Freezing*, and a chapbook, *Notes on Exile and Other Poems*. He lives in Omaha. While the lemony confection is his favorite, he has rarely regretted ordering the chocolate.

*Wendy C. Ortiz***Sweet**

I'm a mixture of autumn leaves
and nursery rhyme,
cat imitator and carnival
whim. My talismans:
juice of lime, scent of whiskey,
the nonsense of sequins.
I show you, though,
hard heart like candy,
the hot, stinging kind,
the peppermints that burn
you through but that our tongues
so desire again
and again.

WENDY C. ORTIZ lives in Los Angeles, California, where she was born and raised until she moved to Olympia, Washington, where she lived for eight years. Her poetry, fiction and creative nonfiction have been published in several literary journals, and she was awarded writing residencies at Hedgebrook in 2007 and 2009. Currently a graduate student in psychology, Wendy is co-founder and literary curator of Rhapsodomancy, a four-year-old reading series at the Good Luck Bar in Hollywood. Her website is www.wendyortiz.com.

JC Reilly

When I Awoke from a Reverie

I was an antelope.
Stripes splayed across my body;
horns twisted skyward.

I could see the plains' lopsided
baobab tree whisper equations,
offer directions to the sun.

A doe welcomed me,
her shady gaze like the rippling air,
and as I stepped towards her

a patch of grass spoke:
"I am the savannah's last green."
I bent to bite sweet shoots,

but before my lips could usher
grass inside, she kissed me.
I had not realized she moved

so close to me, could not smell
the heat of saffron fur.
I looked up when she paused,

watched as a gust resettled
the pattern of her stripes,
then stared at my hooves, shy.

And when I looked up again,
the tree had shifted, the grass lay withered,
and she was only shimmer.

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JC REILLY is a poet living and working in Atlanta, Georgia. She is a board member for the Georgia Poetry Society, and has work published or forthcoming in *Kalliope: a Journal of Women's Literature and Art*, *Xavier Review*, *The Arkansas Review*, and *Ouroboros Review*. She is also co-editor of the new online journal *Chickenpinata*, set to release its first issue in January. Her favorite dessert is tiramisu.

Lee Ann Roripaugh

“You're Going to Make Me Lonesome When You Go”

After you're gone, I dream all the dresser and cupboard drawers yank themselves open in ransacked lack.

Closet doors swing ajar and clothes slump from their hangers with a sigh. Buttons unravel from their thread and are spat out—clattering to hardwood in a noisy scatter. I creep on the floor among them, eyes closed, trying to read their shifting Braille with my fingertips.

Hidden compartments come undone, popping out like jack-in-the-boxes around light fixtures and electrical sockets. The cats use them as cat doors, stepping in and out, in and out. I can hear them swish their tails inside the drywall.

The apartment now a Japanese puzzle box like the kind I played with as a child. An entire bedroom wall slides away with a brittle warble of tambourine bells, and I find a secret room. Inside, an inventory of lost things: my American grandmother's glittery blue metal music box, *kokeishi* dolls fishing on a *geta* shoe, unpaired earrings, black-and-white photos with yellowed scalloped edges, an entire language I used to speak. There are heavy flecked rice-paper boxes that smell like green tea, wrapped in simple bands of linen ribbon, stacked floor to ceiling. They are carefully labeled:

Things Forgotten When Not Written Down

Inviolabilities Violated

Dreams Really Nightmares and Nightmares Really Dreams

Inappropriate and/or Transitional Love Objects

Things Given Away Too Carelessly

Moments Spent Too Long in Hesitation

Moments of Not Enough Hesitation

Awful Things

Time I Thought I Had But Didn't

Snakeskinned Selves

Unrealized Beauty

On the floor, in the middle of the secret room, a violin case. My violin. From before.

Mounted insects unhinge from the wall and ricochet about the apartment: blue morpho's shiny awkward flapping; stick insect a slow-motion twig laboriously creeping away from the hearth; peanut-headed lantern fly making demented rotations around the crenellations of the mantelpiece before becoming a tangled seed-pod rattle in my hair.

Kneeling, I unlatch the case, expecting to see familiar burnished deep-red wood, to stroke hourglass curves, ebony fingerboard—tracing my finger over the bridge and along the graceful arabesques of the f-holes. But when I open the lid, I discover my violin is gone. Stolen.

Someone has left a note inside the empty velvet of the case. An anxious gust of wind rises and outside, chimes jangle their deranged music, walls of the room suddenly transparent—now liquid, breathing, a molten glass. Winged things buzz and swarm like the inside of a swirling snow globe. And when I lean in closer to read the handwriting—*is it yours?*—the note erupts into honey-colored flame.

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LEE ANN RORIPAUGH'S second volume of poetry, *Year of the Snake*, was published by Southern Illinois University Press as part of the Crab Orchard Award Series in Poetry, and was subsequently named winner of the Association of Asian American Studies Book Award in Poetry/Prose for 2004. Her first book, *Beyond Heart Mountain* (Penguin Books, 1999), was a 1998 winner of the National Poetry Series. A third volume, *On the Cusp of a Dangerous Year*, is forthcoming from Southern Illinois University Press in Fall 2009. Roripaugh is currently an Associate Professor of English at the University of South

Dakota, and blogs at *Octopus' Garden*. Her favorite sweet is green tea ice cream!

Prescriptions

Sonya Huber

We fled to someone's living room in Columbus, Ohio, and sat around the glowing porthole of CNN, peering into New York's ashy hell. In a somber toast to our new lives in war-time, someone brought out the pot, rolled a joint. I drank my ice water and passed the joint without inhaling, knowing that pot would make me still more anxious and unsettled. Wondering whether another attack or nuclear retaliation were imminent, I numbly wandered into our host's bathroom.

On a low wire rack piled with bath products beneath the sink, I spotted an amber bottle of prescription-strength allergy medication. I picked up the bottle of Claritin. The ovals nestled densely like a cache of powerful larvae. In a flash of denial and prosaic problem-solving mania, I numbly multitasked, stole, and became overly involved with my boyfriend's uninsured sinuses. I opened the bottle and fished out one pill with the tip of a moistened finger. I put the pill in my pocket.

On the back porch, women's palms exuded muffled clacks as cell phones clicked shut like muted castanets. Calls to New York, where husbands and lovers worked and lived, could not be completed as dialed. Our arms twined around our torsos as if to hold in our organs. We chewed on our moisturized cuticles with the edges of our white teeth, and our eyes scanned the still and flawless sky. Someone changed the channel to Matt Lauer and Katie Couric, who sat at a round table strewn with papers and gripped bottles of spring water.

Comfort looked like those plastic bottles of water, like a plastic bottle filled with prescription medication. Comfort to my friends looked like ice cubes glinting in glasses, like the lava-red glowing tip of burning marijuana. Comfort looked like things we could put in our mouths to solve the small problems.

A strictly economist view of restitution might grant me absolution if I were to find that almost-stranger and pay her for one Claritin, which was available only by prescription back in 2001. She probably shelled out a co-pay of \$15 for 30 pills, so I might get off easy with a bill of 50 cents. Claritin can now be purchased over the counter for about \$1 a pill. Either way, the financial damage I inflicted on this woman was minimal, and I hasten to add that I didn't even take a hit off her joint, which would have cost more than 50 cents per toke. But wait: the pot was offered freely in a ritual of panic and bonding. Sadly, nobody hands out antihistamines as hors d'oeuvres. So the meaning of my action contains the crime: I took something that wasn't given in order to give something that wasn't requested.

I stole the pill for my then-boyfriend D., who sniffled daily, red-eye while holding power tools, working outside in hay fever season. D. had been up on scaffolding under the bright blue sky repairing a chimney when the towers collapsed. The house was in a rough neighborhood; when a crack addict wandered by and screamed, “Man, they’re bombing New York!” D. thought it a crack fantasy and shook his head.

Tap water and a stolen pill in the glare of smoke and ash. How dare I breathe the trivial and the catastrophic together? I reveal this petty crime because I’m interested in its existence. I want to know what it means. How is it possible, in a state of national emergency, to steal an allergy pill? How can I prove to you that it somehow matters?

Without insurance, an allergy pill cost a \$60 office visit and another \$50 or so for a prescription. A Western convenience; we were awash in material privilege, even if we couldn’t get access to all of it. Sometimes the envy of knowing we were surrounded by the well-insured, by healthcare, made my bones ache.

Living in a state of constant fear—or even low-level anxiety—is physically toxic. I worried about D.’s lack of insurance. I made myself sick worrying about sickness; I envisioned his circular saw slipping, had horribly maiming visions slippery with blood. Then I tried to offer solutions. I researched, ran the numbers, income versus outcome, flip and flip and allocate. I made calls, I ordered pamphlets and price quotes for catastrophic health insurance policies for D. to look at. Obviously, I am to blame for the direction of my thoughts and their results. My worry solved nothing, and was an invasive attempt to protect Ds. body and his health. My worry led me into irrational thinking.

I structured his existence in my image, like a fantasy in which democracy can be spread from nation to nation around the world, with a little aggressive intervention to get the ball rolling. I might claim that my intervention was motivated by love and humanitarian concern. But I could not have been more selfish. D. suffered loudly, and because I could not admit it was annoying, I tried to solve it for him so he would be quiet and act the way I wanted him to act.

In the midst of my pharmaceutical theft, I was not thinking about a full-scale cure. You might argue that in presenting my boyfriend with one stolen pill, I was actually increasing his suffering by giving him a taste of temporary relief. What was I thinking?

Although I did not articulate it to myself at the moment, one pill represented a kind of bait. I almost believed that if D. swallowed the solitary Claritin, he would be roused from the hazy, sleepy toleration of his iron-fisted, dictatorial allergies. He would remember what it felt like to have a clear head and nose. Then, I reasoned, with a “taste of freedom,” he would feel within him the stirrings of motivation and take steps on his own behalf—steps I’d conveniently laid out ahead of time. I planned to take quick and firm action, presenting my pill of freedom to pepper the totalitarian regime of mucous with high-powered weapons. The vision: After a quick surgical strike to shrink the membranes of terror, a motivated and awakened D. would take up the reins of power and start to make his own to-do lists in order to realize his destiny.

Some people cook when they feel adrift, and some clean, just to see the results of their labor. I don’t always steal for comfort. I am either an honest person who has moral lapses or a thief who practices

infrequently.

Children steal because they want to even the equation; they often can't imagine that one day in the natural course of time, they will grow into power. When I was small, I stole penny candy and plastic grapes from fruit arrangements in the upstairs arts-and-crafts section of Bruns' Drugstore. I squeezed the plastic purple and green bulbs and held the open hole, once filled by the missing plastic stem, against my skin. When I let go, suction adhered the bulb tightly to my arm or forehead like a boil or a massive wart. The small objects of my theft represented my secret will. They held mysterious significance and I wanted them in order to see myself.

Could I or should I have trusted, like a child, that one day we would grow into insurance and stability? At the time, it seemed foolish to bank on hope with so much evidence to the contrary.

As I got older, the infrequent targets of my theft became more symbolic. I took an expensive name-brand shirt from a friend during a sleepover because I lusted not so much for the shirt (unattractive, of the Coca-Cola brand strangely popular in the Midwest in the late '80s) as for the elusive status it seemed to promise. I mailed the shirt back to her later with a gift and an apology, but the damage was done and she never replied. In my twenties, I was an infrequent shoplifter, hitting the jewelry racks at the Dollar Store and Urban Outfitters when my life seemed particularly bleak and unadorned.

I applied to well-paying corporate jobs and found myself unworthy and unqualified. I worried that maybe I'd never been middle-class enough, or maybe I had squandered my chance. As a temporary receptionist, I wore a sack-like black skirt I bought for a dollar from Goodwill. I did not mind Goodwill or even taking things from the trash and the curb when they appealed and fit me; that was fun. But most of the small thefts were things I did not desperately need; my low income created a general fog of lack that made anything with a price tag into a promise of forbidden comfort.

I stole markers from my job at the photo processing store. I stole soap and shampoo from the youth home where I was a counselor. I stole stacks of Post-it Notes from office jobs, pens from doctors' offices, and a vinyl drink coaster from an expansive conference room table at a pointless job interview. I liberated things from The Man. Or else maybe I wanted to be The Man. I resented people who had disposable income. I wanted pretty things, and the world owed me these treats, which it dangled just beyond the clear barriers of department store windows.

If you frame something as a crisis waiting to happen, warning signs of a crisis abound. A sortie for reconnaissance often strangely leads to larger interventions, and when one begins to focus on a problem as a problem, it tends to escalate and provide evidence for further involvement and more complex solutions.

I lusted after safety, but I also hated those who had what I wanted, and I hated those who had structured life to be so hard. I can't tell now which of these two emotions was stronger, and even though I am safe today, I can close my eyes and feel a stripe of orange anger down the center of my belly, a nauseating desire for revenge.

Terrorism is defined by drastic, sudden, and violent action, yet its corollary—long term fear and anxiety, waiting for the next attack—is a side-effect also desired by the terrorists. If the threat of

future violence effectively leeches from a population its sense of the future, its sense of agency and security, the terrorist has won the war with a single battle.

One of the sad things about terrorism from a rhetorical perspective is that the terrorist often attempts to communicate or draw attention to the plight of a victimized group with an act of violence. The act of violence, however, overshadows any attention to the meaning for the terrorist. In effect, the terrorist's choice of medium destroys the message.

What is the message, what is the meaning, of living for years with that anxiety? An annual physical might reveal a chronic condition, the treatment of which could lead to bankruptcy. Half of the personal bankruptcies today are triggered in some way by medical debt. "Fair" in this context is drained of meaning. Life isn't fair, kids. What it is supposed to teach us? Maybe it's some hard-edged version of the American dream, some motivation to collect enough money to buy healing. But life inside a tunnel makes you frantic; any lunge toward the light can look like a solution.

The glowing maps on the television began to envision the scenarios, to make feverish plans. We ate doom for breakfast and nursed revenge. Blowback is the military term for unintended consequences of foreign intervention. The United States funded Islamic fundamentalist Afghans in the 1980s in a cold-war fight against a Soviet invasion of the country. More than \$600 million a year through a decade provided a launch pad for the growth of al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden. It takes willful effort to not connect the dots. Yet in the aftermath of 9/11, asking for reasons and meaning was akin to treason. If you wondered about the connections, you were telling widows their husbands deserved to die.

I wonder what resentment and rage we nurse here, what blowback will taste like. I know it, because I have felt it in myself. I know it is offensive to talk about health insurance and terrorism in the same breath. It is offensive to bring together two opposite systems; one is the American way and business as usual. The other is the negation of everything that country stands for. And yet both can kill you. The threat of death, the wanton harm of bodies, is the only common thread.

Insanity is fixating on any loose ends of healthcare and stealing whatever I could get my hands on. Health insurance became the beloved, the obsession. Every symbolic move toward healthcare was equated for me with a move toward safety. I was not in danger of immediate death, but every potential condition felt like a threat. I am not saying "insane" as if I am or was in the minority: Denial of symptoms, denial of disease, denial of rampant problems and festering wounds. I comforted myself with fantasies of control. I denied what was going on in my own body to focus on someone else's problems.

I swallowed a little red pill with my coffee, an over-the-counter Sudafed. I bought a box of decongestants every time I went grocery shopping. I always had extra pills rolling around in the corners of my purse. They looked like little red-hot candies. I always had a stuffy nose, but Sudafed was cheap.

Then I started grad school and got student health insurance. I visited a doctor at the campus health center and described the symptoms of obvious seasonal allergies: the runny nose, scratchy throat and ears, buzzing head. The doctor sat diagonally to my right behind a desk. He nodded, stroked his chin and flipped through my chart. "Hmmm," he said. "I don't see any history of allergies in your chart."

Correct. I've never received treatment for allergies. Because I'm lying, I might have said to the doctor, because this is not for me. Because life is not going the way I'd planned, because things feel gray-yellow, the color of a science laboratory's walls. Because the game is not going in my favor and so I'm going to cheat.

I held my purposeful little grad student shoulder bag, filled with pens and appointments and shopping lists. I sat in the sunlight streaming in the window and held out my prescription, which meant one thing: a vial of pills I could take home to D. I stepped down the stairs slowly to contain my joy. I was in like an undetected thief. I paid—a song, a nothing—and stuffed the amber bottle triple-wrapped in its white paper baggie and assorted warning labels and receipts into my tote bag, flooded with a sense of relief, wealth, and well-being. I wanted to dash home and hand the vial to D. like a prize. I possessed the ability to change and master the symptoms of illness, the illusion or reality of helping to heal.

And here is the truth another way: I stole that first Claritin from bitterness, and lied to get the bottle from joy. I stole the first because it was an easy mark, not because it would actually improve my life, our lives, in any significant way. That first theft was motivated by spite, as if I'd run a car key along the shiny surface of a Mercedes out of sheer bitterness, because it represented the other life I wanted for myself and my boyfriend, the life in which we were both insured and enfolded in that sense of physical, bodily security I craved. I took it because I was angry he didn't seem to want that life. I was frustrated and impatient and almost rageful at the world for failing to conform to my image of how things should be. I took it because I was afraid we would never get there. I took it because I was angry it was so tempting, because I felt too old to be scrounging for pills.

The whole bottle: that was joy, a victimless crime. Faking a prescription is a crime that carries a sentence of up to a \$5,000 fine and five years in jail. Most people create fake prescriptions to feed their addictions to controlled substances. People who fake ailments to get narcotics are addicts who need help, or they are criminals taking advantage of other people's addictions. I was high on my own thrifty resourcefulness, my ability to take care of a problem with the dormant power of my student health insurance card. I wanted to help D., but more than anything else I wanted the worry to stop, so much so that I was willing to easily slide from misdemeanor to felony.

Two years later, lots of death on the news, and I was safely insured. Selfish, aren't I? Mentioning death and life in the same sentence is treason, and yet I have a point.

An otolaryngologist looked up my nose and told me my sinuses were permanently inflamed. He winced and told me I had a severely deviated septum, probably the result of either a birth defect or a sharp blow to the face when I was young, leaving internal structures all awry. "I think we're going to have to do a little surgery," he said.

My face lit up. "Great," I said. "If it will help, I'm all for it." Put me under, cut away.

He pulled his lighted scope away from his eye and laughed. "I've rarely had a patient so calm about getting an operation," he said.

You don't understand, I wanted to tell him. Cut my face, use your skill, and I rejoice. The essence of fear is uncertainty. Knowing, faith, choosing action and certainty—these options lock in on a

solution, illusory or real, that shows the route to sanguine bliss.

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SONYA HUBER is an assistant professor at Georgia Southern University in the Department of Writing & Linguistics, where she teaches creative writing and composition. Her first book, *Opa Nobody* (University of Nebraska Press, 2008), presents a portrait of her anti-Nazi activist grandfather in fiction and memoir. Her second book of memoir, *Cover Me, A Health Insurance Memoir*, is forthcoming from University of Nebraska Press. Her work has appeared in *Fourth Genre*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Oxford Magazine*, *Literary Mama*, *Passages North*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and in anthologies from Seal Press, University of Arizona Press, and Prometheus Books. More information on her work is available at www.sonyahuber.com, and you can contact her at sonya@sonyahuber.com. She loves dark chocolate with almonds, black licorice, Swedish Fish, and Twizzlers (even though they have nothing to do with real licorice).

Kudzu Got Angry

Jason Tucker

There were times when I felt like kudzu was crawling up my leg—its deceptively tender runners fluttering at my ankle, cautiously tasting like the tongue of a quiet snake. After a good rain, and standing that close, it would only be a matter of seconds before I'd feel the strike and be swallowed into the green belly of broad and angry leaves. But those are the worries of a child. By the time you're numbered among the grown folks, living in some terrifying place you've always heard called "the real world," you're supposed to forget a lot of things. Or at least pretend you have.

I just moved back to my native soil in The Black Belt part of Alabama, so named for the strip of dark topsoil that for centuries has run slower than sorghum syrup down from the Appalachians. But there's just as much red dirt here as there is black, tinged with enough iron to dye clothing. When you break new ground in the red clay, its color will always get brighter over the next couple of days, especially if it rains. This place doesn't much resemble the rest of the state, just like Alabama doesn't much resemble the rest of America. This is Alabama's Alabama, where even the dirt can rust.

Here kudzu doesn't care what kind of dirt it finds. It creeps in five-foot-thick drifts, covering untended houses and abandoned cars like blizzards do in other parts of the world. Like snow, it builds truck-window-high drifts on either side of gravel roads, beaten back only by passing side mirrors. It reaches across the gray slag like twists of tire-flattened snakes. Tall loblolly pines strain their arms and backs against the swarming weight, often bending weary and sometimes dying slowly from the leaf-damp darkness that's crawled on top of them. Left neglected, kudzu flows from tree to tree. In a month or two, the space between fills with a fifty-foot wave of conquering plant. With the patience of an hour hand, it drowns meager utility poles and rips down innocent power lines. Most of us here can even quote its average speed: one foot a day.

Most people my parent's age, mid-fifties, don't know any more about it than I do. It's just something that's always been there. Live around it long enough and it fades into the wallpaper. I'm sure there was a time when I had to ask what it was. Probably from the backseat of that Chevy Nova my parents used to have, driving through the woods we had to drive through to get anywhere. "Oh," Mama or Daddy probably said, suddenly realizing how much their four year old had to catch up on. "That."

At my persistent questions, I learned that this was another thing it was useless to ask too much about. Only in coming back have I even been able to notice it again. When this place was all I'd

known, I grew tired of unanswerable questions. Kudzu was just something that had always been there, as long as anyone left alive could remember. You learned to live with it. You learned not to notice it. Or at least you learned not to take it too seriously.

We laugh at it around here. We say weeklong expeditions have to be organized to find some old coot who got buried alive while shitting in his outhouse. We say you can hear the screams as the hungry vine swallows drowsy cattle. We say it eats small foreign cars while they wait for the light to change, overtakes whole starting lines of foot races when the referees are slow on the starting pistol, grows so fast across dry ground that it sets itself on fire. Its only natural enemy is friction.

These jokes make me think of other things I've heard laughed at.

Tornadoes pick on house trailers because they're less likely to have security systems, because the tornado knows a regular house will put up a fight, because all trailers look alike and the tornado is drunkenly trying to find and kill its trashy mother for messing him up so badly.

We laugh because some guy named Wayne got so pissed off at hitting a deer and mangling the front of his truck that he jumped out in the middle of the road and emptied his .357 into what was already roadkill, screaming "You sumbitch! You sumbitch!" When he got back into the truck, his rider said, "I think you're beating a dead horse."

We laugh because being fired is supposed to be a punishment. Since when is getting to go home a punishment? So whenever I fire you, that means you have to work on Saturday.

We laugh when we tell the children you're too young to have gotten your cancer yet. You'll understand when you're older.

We suffer it all like God wants it that way.

Kudzu walks into the 28 Club and refuses to pay cover. Reaches a braided leafy arm over the bar and grabs a Natural Light we all know it has no intention of paying for. Sits on the end stool for the rest of the night, not saying anything to anybody, just pretending to listen to the other regulars bitch and laugh at how, one way or another, they're always getting fucked over. Kudzu fights with my people, usually over property lines and timber prices. But, like them, the plant knows how nothing begs to be destroyed more than a wide lawn with an expensive manicure.

How to plant kudzu: Drop a seed and run.

Mickey McMillan the farm widow says what a lot of old folks say when you ask about how farming used to be around here. Every couple of decades, a kind of person only named in her stories as "that man" would come down from somewhere and tell everybody what they needed to plant next, selling miracles on the move like snake oil or gospels that are supposed to make it rain. Sometimes he was a low-level government agriculture agent; sometimes he was a fertilizer salesman, which amounted to pretty much the same thing. That man brought Jesus crops and made the baptismal promise that all it took to save a whole region was one good crop and the faith to plant it. Glory to cotton in the highest. Hosanna to soybeans. Catfish I lift your name on high. Leaning on the everlasting kudzu vine.

We laugh at the idea of Vietnamese catfish, no matter how well they're selling. We laughed when a

minor auto parts factory held a grand opening and, by way of christening the place, its CEO announced in his speech that the choice of location was between Alabama and China. "If everybody keeps building in China," said the German entrepreneur, "There soon won't be any Americans left who can afford to buy our German cars." We all laughed with him, even though it sounded like the joke was on us.

When I knew I was moving to Ohio for graduate school, I carefully dried one of kudzu's three-leaved clusters and put it in a frame. I hung it on the wall where all my Ohio friends could see what I was talking about. "This is Alabama," I'd say, knowing even then that I was asking kudzu to do too much.

Kudzu switches to cheap bourbon: Heaven Hill. A couple of the hard older folks pat it on the shoulder as they hobble to their stools where they can watch the young folks at the pool tables. They already look workworn under the forty-watt bulbs screwed into the plywood ceiling. One of them still has his Southern Academy football jersey on. Them young'uns are too little to know that their grandfathers, in what was nearly a Southern version of the Dust Bowl, got paid eight dollars an acre to plant this new Japanese vine. Kudzu eyes the old drunks again. The looks say they all know what it feels like when young folks don't listen, when they're too busy out planting the next one thing.

Eighty years ago, a lot of land was washing away. Monotheistic farming strategies left much of the remaining topsoil as piss poor as the red clay underneath. Kudzu even put back nutrients that decades of faith in cotton had stripped away. The hope was glorious. But no one expected that kudzu would refuse to give the land back afterwards.

The Southern economy needed saving yet again in the 1930s. Low crop prices meant that the supply was too high. Rather than pay for fields to be left fallow and wash away, Roosevelt paid for kudzu to stop erosion and cut down production of real crops. He even created a lot of new jobs under the Works Project Administration, which sent the otherwise unemployed out Johnny Appleseeding kudzu along barren Southern roadsides, sowing a collective distance the full length of Japan. Kudzu and many of the jobless now had something to do.

Kudzu's roots run cactus-deep and scoff at drought. Good at stopping erosion, impossible to pull up or poison without killing every other living thing in the area and leaving the soil toxic for at least a decade. The vines die quickly in the winter, but they come back. They always come back. Absent its natural growth regulators, it's not a crop or an ornamental like it is in Japan, although it is edible, especially the root, but nobody around here ever gets too excited about digging ten feet into packed clay to find some kind of half-ass potato. The resentment grew too deep for that. Kudzu ate my family cemetery. Kudzu stunted the timber industry. Kudzu killed my grandmother.

"But did you forget about all the good I done?" it asks, unprovoked, of the whole bar. It lost its Japanese accent some time ago, and, like the immigrants all of our families once were, has done other evolving since its arrival. American kudzu doesn't put much energy into making seeds. It doesn't need to. The vines themselves spread that quickly. Should I worry that kudzu might forget how to make seeds altogether? I have long feared short-sighted adaptation.

Still, we might have thought a little harder about our adaptations to it. It's impossible to cultivate or roll into a bale like hay, even though livestock can eat the leaves, but not nearly fast enough to stop

it from spreading. People can eat it too, but I've never heard of anyone actually trying it, except the occasional Kudzu Rights Activist writing online blogs no one will read, and offering recipes I'm sure even his relatives have declined to taste.

Kudzu is only food when it's green. Once dry, it's as inedible as a woven basket. Jellies, jams, and honey come from its flowers. The Chinese use its root in the kitchen too, but mostly just to thicken soups and sauces.

Buffy Rinehart makes kudzu tea, but only uses it to stain paper, which she then turns into artsy collages that she admits most local people don't quite get. The pale tannin stains look like sun-bleached trash on canvass. Weak coffee spilled on a blank newspaper. I don't think I get it either. One of her pieces is shaped like Perry County, with a hole cut out in the shape of her daddy's place. Her word for the feeling it gives her: Desolation. The word I think when she says this: Oh. Then I think that what she calls art is a cheap shot. It brings me no closer to understanding this desolation. But then again, that's a cheap shot of my own.

Kudzu traces a regretful thumbnail through a deep crack running across its workman's knuckles. Here it doesn't even have Japanese insects and diseases to fight with anymore. It seems pissed at something it can't quite explain.

David Allan Coe's reptile rage drips like pus from the jukebox. "You ever heard his song "Nigger Fucker?" somebody asks to nobody in particular. Nobody answers. Kudzu takes another shot, sits in a line with three farm hands with craggy sun-dried faces and a younger man with the stink of the catfish plant on him—smells like he works pulling viscera, slicing and scooping, hour after hour, at the long trough they call the slime line. Like them, Kudzu stares into the bottom of the glass it rolls between its fingers, hoping to find in the amber residue something it might have done differently.

In 1970, the federal government officially labeled kudzu a bad weed. But still more miracles were developing at about the same time. Ecstasy-eyed magazines like Mother Earth News began running weepy save-the-pest articles disguised as recipes for kudzu. Young Kudzu Leaves with Sesame Dressing. Apple Pie with Kudzu Apple Juice Glaze. Ethanol.

There were also many unsubstantiated promises made about its medical benefits. Called ge-gen in Chinese medical folklore, it has treated generations for dysentery, allergies, migraines, diarrhea, fevers, cold, digestive problems, high blood pressure and has in all likelihood been applied like a poultice of magic slime to broken bones, infertile women, impotent men, women whose bodies refuse to bear sons, mangy dogs, bald uncles, and unruly children. Experiments have been done on rats and hamsters whose results suggest kudzu helped them with their drinking problems.

My grandmother's television promised that her alcoholism could be taken away. She would send Ernest Angley a thousand dollars at a time to cure and atone for her drinking. He would send her an audio tape of his greatest sermons and a form letter of God's blessing. After several years of this, she was miraculously cured by a massive stroke.

At one time, Kudzu looked like social justice. At one time, Kudzu looked like a miracle. Social justice can still look like a miracle, and miracles look like they happen all by themselves. Kudzu will tell you that it doesn't know how to fix anything. It knows it is only capable of so much. It never

compared itself to Jesus.

Kudzu never compared itself to Martin Luther King Jr., or to his wife Coretta, who was born here. On an unlined and poorly paved county road near her birthplace, a sign says “Coretta Scott King Memorial Highway,” but you can only read it in the winter. Every summer, kudzu attacks it, absorbs it. Its runners shoot out from the adjoining field like an arm ending in a fist so tightly clenched that the sign is still recognizable in silhouette. Kudzu can’t read very well, and doesn’t care whose name is written on anything. There’s no discriminating purpose to this seasonal mummification.

Kudzu surrounded the home I lived in as a child. As it went about its daily work of draping the woodline, I watched the shapes it made the way children in other places look for meaningful things in clouds: sometimes the rough skyline of a thriving green city, sometimes bent figures under a green waterfall, sometimes the pained arches of a swaybacked horse. For some reason, Kudzu is easy to dream about. When the wind all at once turned those thousands of leaves over onto their silvery sides, I always heard peaceful notes in it. The kudzu harp. But the older I got, the more that same sound began to seem like the ruthless chewing of locusts.

Now that I’ve moved back to teach English at an 170-year-old, all Baptist women’s college, trying to write about Civil Rights when so many think there are only two clear sides to the discussion, resisting the conviction from all sides that since I’m white I’ve got no choice as to which one I’m on. I listen for other frightening noises, and finding them, I can barely hear kudzu at all.

In 1965, Civil Rights marches happened in Perry County. Forty years and more into the aftermath, with nowhere much to work unless you opened or inherited a business yourself, there is black political power and white economic power and all sorts of vague resentments and preemptive defenses and hand-me-down hatreds, all of which is tied to the false cause of color.

Here, the most powerful politician is the black county commissioner. I wouldn’t mind his color, or even mention it, if he didn’t take every public opportunity, including a weekly a.m. radio address, to explain why white people are and always will be evil, and why his black opponents are always somehow “the white man’s candidate.”

Not long ago, I was working for a newspaper and waiting for local election results in the courthouse. “We worked too hard and too long for it,” I overheard a black woman say, describing her fear that the wrong black man might get elected. “We ain’t never going to let Him take it back.” I was just sitting there with a notebook. She looked at me like I was Him, trapped me there in such frustrated anger that I felt obligated to hate us both, regardless of my raceless principles. My idealism returns only when I leave this place. When I’m in it, it forces old identities upon me, holds me responsible for my skin pigment like it’s the color of a uniform. In this way, every color becomes a handicap. In this way we deserve whatever laughter and ridicule we get. You only have to look to the edge of the woods—or to certain memorial road signs—to see how we let things get out of control and stay that way.

I overhear white students after America elects a half-black president. One young woman says, “If twelve of them can’t run a McDonald’s, what makes you think one of them can run a country?”

Three students—some of my best this semester—are upset after our first post election class, and

whisper to me in a deserted stairwell. “We won’t tell anybody,” one says. “We promise. What do you think?” They don’t say it all, but they don’t have to. Please, they want to know. Tell us we’re not alone in hating this. Tell us we are not the ignorant ones. Tell us you are with us in what feels like a weak underground. “Remember I said that I don’t care about how you vote, but why,” I say. “I really respect that,” another says. “Off the record,” I say, “I’m happy.” They smile sincerely at the small camaraderie, at the unpopular politics that we all somehow, without discussion, know better than to speak of too openly.

I tell myself that it’s good for an English teacher to stay out of politics except where language is concerned. I tell myself that’s why I called my voting record a secret, but it’s really that I’m afraid. I don’t want anybody to know because I’ve been sucked into that weary argument about race so many times, and I’ve decided I can’t win it. Not here. Here my opposition doesn’t care for the logical approach, and still won’t hear what bad economics has to do with any of this. Maybe it’s time to frame my kudzu and move again. Maybe out west this time. I hear Wyoming’s nice.

Another very sweet student is acutely concerned with the preservation of a woman’s right to choose, no matter what the church says. She has a Facebook page. On it she says to all of her friends, “Don’t worry; he’ll be dead inside of two months. LOL!”

There’s something very old in all of this. The disappointment is familiar to me. It feels like when I was in high school and heard pretty girls say “nigger.” But there’s also something brand new that I can’t quite figure out. It’s something that refuses to be lived with. It’s something that refuses to fade into the wallpaper, though in larger cities like surprisingly cosmopolitan Birmingham, it comes much closer to civilization than out here in the desolation of the Black Belt. It’s 2008, and I ain’t laughing out loud. I feel a new kind of blues coming on.

Kudzu drinks. It doesn’t have much else to do these days. Been on the federal Noxious Weed List for nine years now. It wants to buy me another round. It motions me to lean in close and listen, like it has something important to say. It wants to ball me into its fist. It wants me to wear it like rusted armor. It says, somebody owes us. It says, we could have been used much more effectively. It says, nobody ever gave us a chance. It says, stop listening to them.

It wants me to join its riot. Now the contradiction. It’s still bitter at the outside agitators who’ve shown up periodically since Reconstruction to belittle, to exploit, to profit from, to be fascinated by, to lead, to photograph, to study, to seed with anything not already native to the red clay or the black mud. Yet it prays for somebody to come in and build us a factory, build us an interstate, build us new places to work and live and eat and be educated and entertained. All at once, it needs help and wants to be left alone. This is what happens when animals get wounded. It wants me to be angry too. At whom, I’m not exactly sure. Neither is it.

James Agee and Walker Evans studied this place themselves, producing the well known photographic and literary study *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* in 1941. The book did many things, but we know it best for documenting Alabama’s squalor. Last year, a French photography student showed up in my mother’s liquor store with a worn paperback copy under his arm. He probably figured that, since he couldn’t find a bar in town, this was the next best source of information.

“Where are these things?” he demanded, wanting to build on Evans’ work in documenting the place.

“Where is to see the poverty?”

“I don’t know,” Mama said. “It’s been a long time since that book came out. That was my parents’ generation. You don’t see too much of that anymore.”

I hoped he’d find something. I wonder what he noticed, since neither our poverty nor our squalor look quite like it used to. Did more than one book give him the ideas of what he would find?

Mama laughed when she told me this story of the poor, misinformed foreigner who, despite his passionate search, left only with a bottle of vodka.

I’ve been back for three months now, and I’ve spent a good deal of that time photographing plants and animals around this house my girlfriend and I are renting in a cow pasture. Giant hornets, a hand-sized mother spider carrying her writhing brood on her back, thorny or rash-raising plants, all the living things that are sharp or poisonous. I focus my camera on everything but kudzu. It just doesn’t mean as much as it once did. Instead, Something speaks to me about a wet and ragged crow feather stuck to a barbed wire fence. The feather looks almost regal in its raggedness, having already suffered several storms. One prickly strand of wire looks ancient, scaly brown with corrosion and green with algae; the other is fresh and gleaming, its steel so clean and strong that it seems to laugh at its older generation, like it thinks it’s immune to the patient work of rust.

Lately it’s the camellias that fascinate me, surprisingly dense and heavy blossoms popping bright red and white and pink at the end of election November when everything else is dying in deep browns and sickly yellows. I like to think that’s why it’s Alabama’s state flower, but there’s a thorn in this too, even if the flowers are gentle. Days can be warm in November, but freezing temperatures can come quickly. In nearly every camellia bloom I see, there lies a yellow jacket, a venomous pollinator that had been enjoying the rare feast until the moment when the promising warmth fled with the sun behind the treeline, and the insect realized, in whatever way insects realize things, that its wings wouldn’t work in the cold, that it couldn’t leave this flower and might die there except for the off chance that tomorrow or the next day, the warmth would return.

While the kudzu plant itself still creeps with all its spidery rage, three leaves and one tendril coil almost look charmingly demure on teacups, wedding invitations, or the occasional graphic on Ted Turner’s regional things-I-know-you-backwater jackasses-love-to-watch cable network (you know, The Dukes of Hazzard, In the Heat of the Night, shows about flea markets). There are countless online literary magazines, Southern arts and leisure websites, musical groups, restaurants, and damn near anything else that might be spoken of in the Lifestyles section of the newspaper, all named after kudzu.

There are kudzu festivals in damn near every Southern state. They make a little money for the small towns that hold them, but when you imagine what these towns would look like if they left their kudzu untreated for an hour or two, this does seem a little like holding a cancer festival.

But kudzu has its pride, just like all of the people who live with it, and all those who once thought they’d live better because of it. Now it waves its savagely dignified leaves from treelines and fences like flags of its own third-world nation. It’s the same dignity a person can find in the sound of a catfish being skinned, in the smell of its viscera on your hands long after you’ve gone home, in

sharing a lazy-voweled accent. It's the same dignity of chitterlings, fried neckbones, and souse meat. In slide blues played with a sawed-off wine bottle. In a banjo homemade from a used bedpan. In making whatever you can out of what little is around.

Kudzu is ours now, I suppose, even though I don't know what to do with it. I guess it has been working like a flag, giving its shape and its name and something to fight against and with. I realize that, like race, it isn't what I know myself by, but a means by which I'm expected to know myself. Maybe that's what I resist, even though I've just spent about 4,000 words using kudzu as a way to know all sorts of things, including myself.

The leaves I pressed and mounted have made the circular trip with me. They can look out the window and see the wild places from which they came. They still look like they want to be studied and admired. Preserved and spread like a toxic insect under glass, they mean something altogether different when you put them in a certain kind of frame. I don't know why I brought them back with me, or why they're up on the wall in my new living room when the picture out the window is much more realistic, though now nearly dead in November. On the wall, I see kudzu is turning yellow, slowly losing its color, and it's almost not funny anymore

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Three Lyric Essays

Stephanie Valente

In which we say, "Hello."

There are many things my lips want to say to you: oily, drowsy vowels over flowers and tepid woodbines. There are half-words I keep hidden underneath my tongue, waiting for the spring or the right amount of static on the telephone line. You and I stay quiet, as if we have transgressed some imaginary number of allotted words.

I wait for the break; it comes before the dial tone. Your voice says it in a slow and deeply perfect tone. I hear the ruffling on my end. Water beads inside my throat. My breath speaks before I do.

"Eat the pomegranate," you say.

The Empathic and the Erudite

"This is when I ask you not to fall in love with anyone else," you say. My hands do not move when your lips have closed. My voice says, "But how could I do that?"

I sit across from you: a little bee, a girl folding her hands. Such knitted slim wrists.

We are both scared, two tepid bodies whose mouths water at the first cut of sticky peaches. You are not afraid to speak, but you do not draw the first breath. This girl and I are not in the business of trading alibis. I return to the peaches and think about how my palm should be on top of her thigh. I put it there.

"Don't worry," I say. "I adore you too much."

You smile, and for a second, your nails press too hard into my skin. Your eyelashes are curled, the corners of your mouth twirling precisely. I slice the fruit and put a wanton piece up to your lips.

On A Search for Alibis

It's like leaving an ad in the classifieds, or the personals. Money and love are the thing these days, and still not a soul responds. A man with careful hands waits; so many telephones to be left ringing. This man, meticulous and rational, but easily dismayed at the turn of a wrist. He listens to the secretarial girl—pencil skirt, half written notebook, and all.

Trains will come and go, dogs will yap, and shoes will scrape against the bitter pavement. And the rest of the world will turn into night.

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STEPHANIE VALENTE lives and writes in New York. Her work has appeared in *Italics Mine* and other journals. She is currently working on a collection of short stories and as always, poetry. She enjoys candlelit smiles and diamond cut laughter. One day, she would like to become a silent film star. Her favorite desserts are crème brûlée and strawberry-rhubarb pie. She can be found at: kitschy.tumblr.com.