

# sweet: 1.3

May 2009

## Letter from the Editor

### Poetry

Barbara Daniels - Three Poems  
Hugh Behm-Steinberg - Thieves/Birds  
Sarah Browning - Kissing Girls  
Laura McCullough - Three Poems  
Tim Seibles - Two Poems  
Emily K. Bright - Three Poems

### Essays

Evan J. Peterson - T-Rex Doesn't Wear Panties  
Katrina Koski - Two Essays  
Geoff Schmidt - Otis and Jake  
Anne Panning - Valentine's Day, Saigon 2007

## Letter from the Editor

Yesterday was Earth Day.

On Earth Day last year, my wife Katie and I put an offer on a house in Florida. It had been a whirlwind of a year. Katie's mother passed away, I accepted a job that would carry us to another part of the country, we would have to pack and move from a house with over three acres of land, and we started talking about putting an online literary journal together. Our days then were filled with laughter and crying, our moods as erratic as the upstate NY winds we had grown accustomed to. One moment we sat planning our future rooms, talking about the amount of golf and tennis we would play in a warmer climate, and the next moment we were lamenting the loss of the birds we fed in the front yard, our friends we were leaving behind. We were even struggling with the magazine, working on it sporadically, second-guessing whether *Sweet* would ever come into being. It is the reason I've waited until now to write an Editor's Note. I wanted to see if *Sweet* would make it past the first issue, whether it would have the momentum to carry on for years, and not peter out like so many online literary magazines before it.

At this time last year, I remember how relieved we were, after two days of intensive house hunting, to put an offer on a house that had less land but made up for it with a large pool. To celebrate our offer, Katie and I headed for the beach. Honeymoon Island State Park was having its Earth Day Celebration, and we walked the booths, eating fried seafood and sweet potato fries with cinnamon and butter. Eventually we found a trail and decided a short walk would do us good. There, atop thick clumps of trees, ospreys sat in a line, the breeze gently rocking their perches. We counted them, at least fourteen. They swooped from one tree to the next until they headed toward the gulf in search of fish. In William Butler Yeats' long poem, "The Wanderings of Oisín," the osprey was the bird of sorrow, but sorrow was not what we felt. We felt possibility. We felt change, and change, in this one moment, felt good, felt like flight. In the days and months to come we would feel the pressures of change, and we would have our moments of doubt, but at that instant, on Earth Day, as the ospreys took flight, we embraced our new lives.

Yesterday, I sat down to write the first Editor's Note for *Sweet*. Change is what I thought about. Change is what the writers in this issue grapple with, change that's painful, sensual, vulnerable, experimental, revelatory. Lucky for us, change can also be sweet. Like our latest change, brought about by our new webmaster and poetry reader, Andrew Brogdon, who has transformed our site. It's a Metamorphosis.

OK, now go read Kafka.

—Ira Sukrungruang

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

## *Barbara Daniels*

### **Lumber**

Sunday morning, the lumberyard quiet.  
Robins are back. What they whistle  
is rage, shame. Ice on puddles forms

struts and lattices, transparent chambers  
that don't last a day. It's too cold for the rich,  
sweet wood smell. Crosscut logs, long

bodies, wait for the saw. Oak, fir, pine,  
hemlock. I'm crooked timber  
with fleshy rootknots, dark galls,

cut, stacked to dry, same sizes bound  
together, thick slices of sawed flesh.  
Birds shrill, claiming, reclaiming.

The river carries its freight of ice.  
Under the water, a world of stones.  
Some of the ice forms shining swords.

## Mangos

I opened a cardboard box of letters.  
In the box, red and blue poison-dart frogs,  
folding guthook hunting knives, lumber  
crowbarred from the side of our house.

You should have burned them. A hair grew  
from your thigh, dark filament, looped out  
into the neighborhood, wrapped around  
branches and strangled some rabbits.

I climbed our roof with a pole to knock  
down a mango. Because of lesions  
in my soft, wet tissues, I could eat  
only mashed potatoes. Your car gunned

its engine, slid itself out the driveway  
and took the blue bridge to Manhattan.  
Our best friend tried to kill himself.  
Women wrote to say they desired you.

Love was a botched experiment. I scooped  
out the ripe fruit of the mango and looked  
at the hairy stone. Mangos cure every  
disorder, even a strangled, runover heart.

sweet:

1.3

### **Route One**

People drive urgently like shamans  
moving relics to new shrines.  
When traffic grinds down to nothing,

I take a night journey, darkness  
contagious as guilt, drunk on a single  
star, processions of shadows

obstructing the highway. The gods  
request that I stop describing them.  
So I won't mention the rabbit

with the face of a man, accusing  
finger, long gown of funerary fabrics,  
necklace of flaming tires.

At the cold river, I ask an eider  
to guide me over the water,  
beg it to cure my habit of sadness.

...return to Table of Contents

BARBARA DANIELS' *Rose Fever: Poems* was published by WordTech Press in 2008. She received two Individual Artist Fellowships from the New Jersey Council on the Arts, was awarded a full fellowship from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation to the Vermont Studio Center, and earned an MFA in poetry at Vermont College. Her chapbook, *The Woman Who Tries to Believe*, won the Quentin R. Howard Prize. Her poems have appeared in *Chest*, *jerseyworks.com*, *Blueline*, and many other journals. She is on the staff at [Peter Murphy's Getaway](#) in Cape May, New Jersey. Favorite dessert: frozen chocolate mousse.

## *Hugh Behm-Steinberg*

### **Thieves / Birds**

I was stolen, so I invented birds. In Chicago I didn't know anybody so I was deliciously miserable—winter lonesomeness, multitudes, scarves. In a second hand store I was third, the little money I had belonged to the owner of rain, he watered his birds with it, the birds I made myself. There was a funeral and my soul was asleep, it dreamed of kites, which were trying so hard to be birds but just fell when I let them go. I was in a vault, a possession of the thief who stole me, he kept reaching in to sell another piece of me, I kept handing him birds, I'm sorry it was them or me. May you find me, may the birds forgive me.

HUGH BEHM-STEINBERG is the author of *Shy Green Fields* (No Tell Books) and *Sorcery* (Dusie Chapbook Kollektiv). His poems can be found in such places as *Crowd*, *VeRT*, *Volt*, *Spork*, *Cue*, *Slope*, *Aught*, *Fence*, *Dirt*, *Swerve* and *Zeek*, as well as more multisyllabic places as *Left-Facing Bird* and *Puerto Del Sol*. He teaches in the grad writing program at California College of the Arts, where he edits the journal *Eleven Eleven*.

His favorite desserts are chocolate cheesecake, pecan pie and just about anything in the custard/mousse/pudding/panna cotta family (he really likes dessert).

## *Sarah Browning*

### **Kissing Girls**

Barbara Muldoon won't let me  
unbutton her purple blouse  
though we've been wild  
with drunken kisses for nearly an hour.

She stops my hand and stops it  
again. Her mouth tastes of Molson Gold  
and mine of another kind of gold, just  
now learning to hold the sweet smoke  
in my lungs long enough to start loving  
my own unwieldy body, the press  
of something sweet between my thighs.

Barbara sighs, our tongues touch  
again—wrap each other in a new warmth  
then withdraw, then touch again.  
We are learning how talented the tongue can be.  
I want to use its new skill on Barbara's brown  
nipples—I can almost taste them in her beery breath.

But the Grateful Dead is playing quietly through  
the walls—*Friend of the Devil* boy sound  
I'd never heard till I came to this strange place—  
and I don't know the rules,  
whether I'll want to keep on kissing girls;  
if Barbara will talk to me again;  
if I'll ever learn this world.

That was nice, we agree in the morning.  
But let's not do it again.

...return to Table of Contents

SARAH BROWNING is co-director of [Split This Rock Poetry Festival](#) and [DC Poets Against the War](#). Author of a first book of poems, *Whiskey in the Garden of Eden* (The Word Works, 2007) and co-editor of *D.C. Poets Against the War: An Anthology* (Argonne House Press, 2004), she has received fellowships and prizes from the DC Commission on the Arts & Humanities, the Creative Communities Initiative, and the People Before Profits Poetry Prize. She blogs at [sarahbrowning.blogspot.com](http://sarahbrowning.blogspot.com).

Living in Turin, Italy, this year, Sarah's new favorite sweets are giandujotti, creamy chocolate-hazelnut confections, the local specialty.

## *Laura McCullough*

### **Avocados**

The name comes from the Spanish taken from the Aztec, *ahuacatl*, meaning testicle, from the shape; a symbol of fertility to them. A woman next to me takes two in one hand, jostling them as if they were Chinese meditation balls, the chimes soothing the air. She says,

*I never tire of avocados; if I could, I would eat them every day. Hass are fine, she says, but have you ever had a Hawaiian Sharwil? I shake my head. An avocado milkshake, she asks? No, I say. Me neither, she says, but I hope to one day. I nod knowingly, and it's as if*

we've shared a secret, but she smiles and moves on. Those balls I am thinking of are usually Cloisonné, an Asian art form dating to over 500 years ago. The original color was a blue, so light it evoked a still pond surface reflecting a spring sky. Most

avocados are green, dark and mottled, nearly rotted looking when ripe. *Cloisonné* comes from the French, *cloison*, or partition, from the Latin, *cludere*, to close. Blowjob is just another word for *fellatio* from the Latin for to suck milk from. I recall my first one, not an avocado,

but a blow job, how the boy made me, how I wasn't ashamed because it was what I'd thought about in the partition between day and night before falling asleep for years. I was startled at how good secrets can be if handled right,

by the various names we give them, how they ripen with time.

sweet:

1.3

### **This Poem Has Declared Itself Mundialized**

This poem wants to be a world citizen sidling up to L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E whispering questions about the narrative, or skirting story carrying cardboard signs with nothing but circles on it. Three equals Peace Through Culture, circles not con-joined but freestanding, locus of control central to self, to peace, to culture. This poem wants to be a circle, a house in a painting with a double yellow line leading to it, but stopping before the door, a harbinger of resistance, ugly enough to be beautiful, but not defined by it. It wants to D-E-M-O-N-S-T-R-A-T-E, dance on its own legs without worrying it might be taken down by a rubber bullet. A poem in this city is a poem in a city on whose streets I could sleep. It's warm there; the poems are free-range; they come from all over the world, and at night, congregate in the park, certain no one will draw their blinds or lock the doors to their houses.

sweet:

1.3

### **Mother's Kiss**

Every kiss is a first kiss  
when you've been loved so hard

you feel your own worth.  
I wish I could kiss that into every man

I see: the pizza delivery guy,  
58 and fading, the young cynic frothing

my coffee, the grease-monkey  
lubing my car with a curled Balthasar

in his back pocket,  
my sons, all of them, everyday, my husband,

everyman, everyone,  
even every woman, I should kiss, too:

the dreary, the sadly  
refused and refusing ones, the woman

losing her hair

after losing her breasts, even my husband's

90 year old grandmother,  
those crevasses in her face from smoking,

but so deep, so full  
of lost time and the sweetness of every kiss

she ever gave or held  
back. If I cupped her face in my two hands

and breathed on her,  
what dust would fill my nose, redolent,

my eyes, illumined,  
every kiss from then on a new descent.

How else should you kiss  
but as if into a cave, a lost limb, lost light,

no footing, just awe,  
and the terrible, terrible surrender? And

how else to receive one,  
but like a baby or an old woman, all mouth,

all need, and now, right now.

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

LAURA McCULLOUGH has three collections of poems: *Speech Acts*, forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press, *What Men Want* and *The Dancing Bear*, as well as a chapbook of prose poems, *Elephant Anger*. A two time NJ State Arts Council Fellow, her work has appeared recently or is forthcoming in *The American*

*Poetry Review, Painted Bride Quarterly, Prairie Schooner, The Literary Review, Harpur Palate, Guernica, Crab Orchard Review, The Oklahoma Review, Perihelion, Pebble Lake Review, Gulf Coast, Hotel Amerika, New South, and others. Visit her at [lauramccullough.weebly.com](http://lauramccullough.weebly.com) where there are lots of links to her work online.*

Laura loves champagne and low-salt chips and dip or tiramisu or dark, dark chocolate, or better yet, all three, yes, and let's just skip the main meal, okay?

*Tim Seibles***4am**

I caught the last of a great caravan of clouds.  
City night. Sky like the inside of a skillet

and bright as ghosts, they crossed—not slowly  
but unhurried—as if remembering the way

by feel, the way you might touch the wall  
of a dark hall at a friend's house late, moving

toward the back porch where you heard the June-bugs  
unbuttoning their brass jackets. September.

September: another good summer gone and me  
another season older with these streets

wet from a small storm that woke me  
to see silver clouds drawn along the sky.

But before that I had been dreaming: a box  
of bottles on the back seat of a car, sunlight

sassing the windshield. A hitchhiker  
wearing the bluest baseball cap

you ever saw. I guess I had been  
driving, and somehow money

was involved, but neither of us knew

how much. We knew the police

were hiding in the church. “But look  
how it is,” he said, —“the road,

I mean, and wide,” and the wind stuttered  
in the spidery weeds while the asphalt stirred

like a dark sheet under which someone  
sleeping had turned over and then,

it was a river much wider than a road,  
with the air barely brushing the trees

the way you might touch the hair of someone  
you loved once, stumbling into her

beneath the marquee after a movie. It was  
hard smiling the brief embrace, seeing her walk

away, because her walk was the reason  
you had tried to meet her five Junes ago—

her smiling voice, the almost sleepy grace  
in her gait: you remember scolding your heart

for *wanting* again: you already believed  
she would pass through your life—

which she did—like the good season of a late hour,  
like a brightness opening the dark by feel,

the way a blind-folded boy looks  
for his friends in his unlit basement:

the quiet so thick he begins to think  
they are gone completely.

And they are: having one by one

slipped out the back door

where, after some giggles, they catch the sunset  
burning brass into their blue jackets

and decide to just go home  
while he traces the walls,

the dusty sofa, the smooth plank  
of the ironing board, not knowing his hands

would eventually find the differences  
between what moves, what stays, and what

was never really there at all.

sweet:

1.3

## **Edge**

Traffic: loneliness,  
the city— walking around.

So many of us lost in it.  
Is love the secret

nobody tells? In a small park  
daylight pulled its knife

and a tree moved  
toward me: *What are you*

*doing here?*

I remembered then: I lit

my heart    which had  
gone out

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

TIM SEIBLES was born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania in 1955. He is the author of several books of poems including *Hurdy-Gurdy*, *Hammerlock*, and, most recently, *Buffalo Head Solos*.

He is a former National Endowment for the Arts fellow and has been a writing fellow at the Provincetown Fine Arts Work Center in Massachusetts. Seibles also received an Open Voice Award from the 63rd Street Y in New York City. His work has been featured in anthologies such as *Manthology*, *Rainbow Darkness*, *Evensong*, *The Autumn House Anthology*, and *Under the Rock Umbrella*. He has been a workshop leader for Cave Canem and for the Zora Neale Hurston/Richard Wright Foundation. Tim is visiting faculty for the University of Southern Maine's low-residential Stonecoast MFA Program. His home is in Norfolk, Virginia where, as an associate professor of English, he teaches in Old Dominion University's English Department and MFA in writing program.



## *Emily K. Bright*

### **What I Do Not Tell My Mother When She Calls**

That sometimes I awake to angry shouting out my window—strangers, with their words obscured—and lie there scared and hoping it will go away.

That now I double-check the locks, which I never thought about at home.

That three days after I moved in, the apartment below Lenny and Sarah's got broken into. From our house, you can see the sparse windows of their building. On the phone, I told you, Mom, about our yard with its ancient, protective tree, our stucco house and wood moldings, my friends who made it to the barbeque.

That I first met Lenny when he wanted a ride to the pawn shop to pawn his TV. He's 50, with a quick smile and a voice that knows how to be loud. I don't know how long he's looked for work.

That a week before I moved here, there was a double homicide two blocks away.

How easy it becomes to continue, as the neighborhood appears to, as if nothing ever happened. I didn't know them, didn't see it.

That the other night Sarah knocked on the door at 11:30, hysterical for Lenny, who'd left in the ambulance just before she got home.

That he'd been mugged three blocks away, near where I take the bus.

That, before they took his wallet, they clocked him over the head so that he'd come to the house earlier that evening, stitches lacing his forehead, asking to borrow money to fill a Tylenol 3 prescription. His stitches must have opened up.

How false my sympathy sounded in comparison with her anger. “I just want to leave this neighborhood,” she said over and over. “We've got to leave. I can't take it anymore here.”

The expression on my roommate's face in answer to her question, “Did he look real bad?” I gave her water like you would have, Mom. She drank but did not calm.

The way she said “I need...” with the whole world hinging on her words. “Please,” she said, “I need ten dollars to buy gauze.” I said the hospital would give him that. She was sure they wouldn't since they didn't have insurance. “I'll pay you back,” she said. “I'll leave you my I.D., anything. My job just started yesterday. This is why I don't work. I should have been home.”

How, before I gave it to her and again after she left, I challenged, I debated the accuracy of her details.

Mom, I'm afraid to ask. What does this say about me?

sweet:

1.3

### **The Fire**

I do not wake to fire and smoke,  
the parents and five children  
rushing out with empty hands.

I do not wake when they come knocking,  
too considerate to ring the bell.

They are friendly children, always

biking, prying up our compost's lid  
to check our its progress into dirt.

I wake to sirens, sleep again,  
the danger nameless and far off

until you stir me with a full report.  
I wish I could awake to need as  
easily as to your voice. You heard

their tapping at the window, made the call.  
I am also sorry you have not been sleeping,

the terrible and unimportant lined up  
in my mind as I get up ungracefully  
to pace the dawning street.

They have gone to seek another shelter.  
Firemen nail plywood over windows.

When the smoke smell dissipates,  
who outside this neighborhood  
will know the cause of this foreclosure?

Those crumbled steps that yesterday  
were a ramp for bikes.

We keep a lookout for the family,  
shovel compost in the garden. I'm away  
when they return to claim their sagging

bags of home. If this is a phoenix story,  
(family, house, neighborhood)

it will take a long time. Please,  
I am awake now. Let something  
also beautiful arise.

**Alive**

After visiting the model refugee camp set up in my city, the tents clean  
with space between them, the park where this was erected not yet  
stripped of trees for fuel, the lake undrunk, the geese unsuspecting,  
After listening to the doctor speak of undernourished people and diseases  
that do not exist here,  
After an hour imagining myself fled, starving, worrying about my sister,  
I craved doughnuts, honey, milk. Not long since lunch, but still, I wanted  
chocolate, grapes, wanted to remember abundance with my body.  
Why is anybody born how they are born?  
The park in bloom as I walked through it. A man taking flower pictures,  
skyline overhead. This warm September sun which is enough and  
never is enough. I drove home to my kitchen. Placed some of every  
food I saw, by turn, inside my mouth.

...return to Table of Contents

EMILY K. BRIGHT's poetry has appeared in multiple journals and anthologies, including *North American Review*, *Crab Orchard Review*, and *Beloved on Earth: 150 Poems of Grief and Gratitude* (Holy Cow Press). Her chapbook *Glances Back* is available from Pudding House Press. She holds an MFA in poetry from the University of Minnesota and currently teaches English at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire. Check out her blog at [emilykbright.blogspot.com](http://emilykbright.blogspot.com). She loves pretty much anything with chocolate.

## T-Rex Doesn't Wear Panties

*Evan J. Peterson*

I recall being Dracula on Halloween for three consecutive years, from about six to eight. First there was the Woolworth's plastic mask, elastic string and all, then makeup and those false fangs that are connected at the jaw. They would cut my gums if I wore them for too long, but then I could spit real blood. There are pros and cons to everything.

Vampires were only one obsession. The family says I was all boy, stomping around pretending to be a T-Rex or snarling like the Wolf Man. Comic book heroes should have come next, but I had already started watching Clash of the Titans and the Sinbad films and pretty much anything involving mythology, muscles, and Ray Harryhausen claymation. Even after I started reading X-Men, I didn't put it together until adulthood that superheroes and -villains are just modern versions of the gods, goddesses, and stygian beasts that patrolled the fantasy worlds of the ancients.

Mythology, even the true legends of the dinosaurs, gave me something to think about besides the powerlessness of childhood. The "all boy" label faded as I got older. Made to feel inferior to my peers for my sensitivity and complete lack of interest in sports ("Don't duck! Catch the ball!"), I luxuriated in fantasies of being a full-blooded god, perhaps an agricultural one who could manipulate plants and animals to do his bidding. It never occurred to me that the male gods were rarely the ones who could command vines or wolves. It was goddesses like Artemis who did that.

My mother, the librarian at my elementary school, would bring home guides to world mythology. I read the Egyptian book, a particular favorite of mine, frequently. To be like Osiris and rise from the dead, blue-skinned and elegant; to be like Thoth and know the secrets of magic as well as science; these were aspirations that I couldn't believe other boys didn't hold. Who would want to be the Hulk and go around hitting things, when Atum could create life out of words? The Egyptian gods and goddesses were intriguing. After all, Osiris not only rose from the dead, he wore eyeliner and jewelry.

That's why I gravitated to the Egyptian pantheon. There's something not effeminate, but classically feminine about those gods. They're subtle. They know the secrets of life and death, not just how to throw a lightning bolt down from the clouds. For the Egyptians, a god's softness was refined. This wasn't queer; it was regal. I began connecting power and prestige with the trappings of feminine gender in my already eccentric nine-year-old head. I have never felt like a girl in the transsexual sense, but as a kid I felt as though life would've been easier if I were born female, or at least godlike. I could read or play make-believe all the time rather than have to play games that involve

being knocked down. No one would even notice.

I had other reasons to identify power with femininity. My father, a cinematographer, was away on business half the time, off in some exotic location like Australia or Belgium, filming episodes of *Unsolved Mysteries*. He got to be like Indiana Jones, plunging into Mayan temples. I wanted so badly to go with him. Instead, I spent long stretches of time with my mother, being raised by her, by my sister, and by an interchangeable cast of aunts and godmothers. Associating femininity with authority has, as a result, always seemed natural to me. Mom was in charge and perpetual, while dad was elusive and glamorous.

One afternoon, my mother surprised me by saying, “Guess what? We’re going to sleep over at Aunt Min’s!” If I was nine, Aunt Min would’ve been eighty-four. She is my mother’s aunt, but due to the unfortunate deaths of all of my grandparents by the time I was eight, Aunt Min has been the only grandmother I’ve really known. I love her tenderly, but sleeping over at her apartment in Margate, Florida was the equivalent, on the fun scale, of having a slumber party in the waiting room of a podiatrist’s office. Margate is the sort of retirement community where nothing exciting has ever happened. Even death is expected. It is the antithesis of a Mayan ruin.

For thrills, I used to wait until my mother and aunt were absorbed in vodka screwdrivers and conversation, then I’d sneak into Min’s bedroom and open her bottom drawer. This is where she keeps her prosthetic breasts. Aunt Min had a mastectomy decades ago, and she keeps several silicone falsies. I loved to poke them and feel the fake nipples.

“Pack your own overnight bag. Don’t forget clean clothes for tomorrow, and don’t forget your toothbrush.” My mother loomed in my bedroom doorway and smiled at me with her thin lips, her curly brown hair filling up the doorframe. She probably wore a dark, one-piece suit with a red plastic belt gathered just below her breasts. It was the eighties, and she has never looked more fashionable.

I was thrilled to be packing my own bag. Finally, a little autonomy. I had been speaking in complete sentences since the age of two, but my mother hadn’t trusted me to pack my own luggage until then. I set about collecting all the essentials: two *Ninja Turtles*, two villains, minimal weaponry (no vehicles necessary), one mythology book, toothbrush, socks, t-shirt, shorts, and a yo-yo just in case I got bored reading and smashing Michelangelo into Shredder.

Soon we were in the car, driving the hour that took us from North Miami Beach to Margate. I tried to read my book but it has always been difficult for me to read in the car. The vibrations and bumps make the fine print bumble all over the place. My mother gave me gum to chew so I wouldn’t get car sick. Not that I’ve ever been car sick, but my mother thought that reading in the car would do it. I chewed the gum. I rarely disobeyed my mother. Disappointing her or worse, angering her, is a fear I carried with me for years into adulthood, an ice cube in my shirt pocket.

We got to Min’s and rang the special doorbell, one that played a variety of chimes from “Pop Goes the Weasel” to the traditional Japanese “Sakura.” After much shuffling, Min’s fifty or so inches of navy blue Ralph Lauren and puffy, snow-white hair opened the door. My mother has always had a key, but Min is a feisty old lady and does as much as she can for herself.

This particular evening, Aunt Min was still young enough to bake me chocolate chip cookies from scratch, something she has since given up now that she's nearly blind. Despite pleading, I was never allowed to eat one before dinner. Even though I was starving, I knew I'd have to wait a queen's reign before dinner was set before me at the China Doll restaurant and lounge, our usual eating place.

I brought my overnight bag with me into the bathroom and stripped down past my Ninja Turtle briefs. It was impossible to find Anubis underwear, or I'm sure I would have been that geeky kid with the Egyptian jackal god of mummification plastered across his tokhes. Towards the end of a lingering shower, during which I pretended that my action figures were fighting in a real sewer, my mom knocked on the door and said, "You've been in there for ten minutes. Wash up and get out." I did as I was told.

After toweling off and rummaging through my bag, I found that I had failed to pack underwear. I can't remember if I'd ever gone commando before that night. My mother insisted that I always wear underwear, something my father finds ridiculous. I asked her once why it was necessary to wear undergarments in summer in Miami.

"Underwear is there to catch the drips after you pee, or if you have to go so bad you start leaking. You will wear underwear, because no one wants to see drops of pee on the front of your shorts."

Once, I was waiting at elementary school for my babysitter to pick me up, not wanting to run to the restroom and possibly miss her car and worry her. I had to be waiting where my mother told me to be. So I had a little accident. At age seven. Luckily, I had been given my science fair project display board back that day, and I was able to stand behind it and hide my shame. Wearing underwear didn't help me that day.

My mother has also told me that women urinate just a little when they sneeze, particularly if they've ever had a baby. I don't know if this happens to most women, or just to my mother. Her odd bodily issues and stranger explanations for mysterious phenomena (such as the reason why dogs in white neighborhoods bark at black people—because dogs like garbage, and black people take the garbage away) have convinced me that I cannot believe anything she ever told me. This may be another reason that I see something like gender as arbitrary. In my home, reality was a subjective thing.

The need to wear underwear was not arbitrary to my mother. I had to hide the fact that I wasn't wearing any, and I did a good job of that until the car ride back to Aunt Min's after dinner. The taste of crab rangoon still tangy in my mouth, I tried to hold this information in, but at nine years old I just didn't have the power too. I suppose I just wanted to see what would happen.

"Mom, I forgot to pack underwear."

"Evan, I told you not to forget anything when I let you pack your own bag!"

"I'm sorry, I forgot! I'm not used to packing for myself!"

Or ordering my own meal at dinner, for that matter.

"So are you wearing the same dirty underwear you wore all day, after you took your shower?"

"No. I'm not wearing underwear."

In the rearview mirror, my mother frowned. Despite the subsequent silent treatment, I had to hide my impish grin, knowing I had trapped her and that she wouldn't make me put on my used underpants. I could feel my boy parts airing out.

When we returned to Min's apartment, I helped my great aunt through the door and she began pattering in the kitchen. I followed my mother as she immediately went to the guest bedroom to check through my overnight bag. She's no different than most folks, having to look for herself to prove that something is true. I guess that if I couldn't be trusted to remember underwear, I also couldn't be trusted to find them in a three-gallon Transformers knapsack if I had packed them after all.

My mother sighed and left the room. When she returned, she threw something the color of champagne down on the guest bed. It landed without making a sound.

"Put these on." I can't disassociate my mother's words from the same line that Dr. Frank-n-furter says to Brad and Janet early in *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, only he is describing lab coats: "Here, put these on. They'll make you feel less, ahem, vulnerable."

They were Aunt Min's satin panties, all stretched out from her octogenarian hips and buttocks.

My mother stalked off, probably for an orange juice and vodka to calm herself down. I giggled with discomfort, the way you let out and then stifle an involuntary laugh when someone tells you particularly ripe news, like when my cousin was caught spray-painting giant cocks on the wall of his high school.

I was faced with a decision. Should I hide the panties and pretend to be wearing them, or just put the damn things on? I wondered if my mother would check. She was known to do such things, tug at the elastic of my shorts to peek in and see if I was indeed wearing underwear. I went into the bathroom and put the panties on.

I kept laughing quietly. The act was so transgressive, though I had no idea what that word meant at that age. My stomach was juiced to the rind. I was actually going to put on panties and wear them all night. Satin panties. Satin panties that, until two minutes ago, had belonged to an eighty-four year old. But they were my panties now.

I didn't feel frightened or ashamed. In fact, remembering the sensations that trembled through my body, it was almost exactly what I felt when I inserted tabs of LSD into my mouth for the first time. What if I hate it, and can't stop it? Then again, what if I love it?

I did. They felt delightful.

The gloss of the material was cool against my bottom and my front parts, too. The elastic barely held them around my waist and they drooped around me like, well, like granny panties on a nine year old boy. The rest of the night passed without turbulence, and I finally got to eat those homemade scratch cookies before climbing into bed and scooting back and forth for an hour, first on my back, then on my belly.

My father returned from Borneo or Brussels or wherever they'd sent him to record the confessions of alien abductees. My mother and I hadn't spoken of the incident, except when she asked me to give her the panties after I changed, "as soon as you get in the house!" To this day, I don't know if Aunt Min was aware of what happened.

Mom, Dad, and I sat at the table the night of his return, while he told us of his latest adventures. I don't know if he realized how much I envied him. He always brought back souvenirs, like poster etchings of Tasmanian devils or, once, a wooden skeleton the size of a toddler, for which he was stopped at customs between Jamaica and the U. S.

Having learned exactly what happens when I let information slip at the wrong moment, I kept the panty raid to myself. I really wanted to say something right then, during dinner, and see what would happen. I guess I felt sorry for my dad, knowing that he would eat his own socks when he heard about it.

Plates washed, two more homemade cookies eaten, and then off to shower again. I waited all the way into the next day to deliver the news. My father was in the den, clad in his usual Hawaiian shirt and shorts. My mother was out.

"Whatcha doin, Dad?"

"Nothing, buddy, what's up?"

"Is it okay not to wear underwear?"

"Of course, don't be silly."

"Oh. Mom doesn't think it's okay."

"Well, your mother has some rules that she likes you to follow. You know you don't have to wear underwear under your clothes if it's just you and me and it's a hot day."

"Okay. Um, can I tell you about something?"

"Of course. Did you have an accident?"

Why was I still in danger of having accidents in the third grade?

"No, I'm okay. But..."

I told him the story, setting up the situation of the forgotten underwear, thinking that Mom would let me do without just once, and then I got to the part about the panties.

"You're kidding." This is my father's reaction to all uncomfortable news. It's not an accusation; it's a rhetorical device he uses to stall for the extra seconds it takes him to avoid a knee-jerk reaction.

"Nope. She really made me wear Aunt Min's panties."

I believe that, at that moment, he was thinking about the time he was spending away from us, pulling us up from the near-poverty in which we lived when I was a baby to being firmly middle class. All his time on the road, lugging camera equipment, working sixteen hour days sometimes, making the money so that we could have nice things, did it all just amount to his absence? All his hard work and while away, his wife made his only son wear panties. He couldn't have foreseen that

as a teenager and on into my twenties, I would be a cross-dressing Miami club kid, just as likely to go out dressed as Cupid as Kali or Medusa. He couldn't have known that this was only the beginning my own mythology.

He sighed, then said only, "I'm sorry."

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

EVAN J. PETERSON will receive his MFA from Florida State University in summer 2009. His fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and journalism have appeared or will soon appear in the *Southeast Review*, *Studies in the Fantastic*, *Juked*, *CaKe*, *The Pinch*, *Slurve*, and the *Black Garden* anthology of horror. He is currently developing his first full-length book of poetry, narrated by Frankenstein's monster.

## Mass Transit

*Katrina Koski*

The air is not exceptionally cold tonight, but my shoulders quiver with a chill I can't shake.

What I remember most is how beautifully the whites of her eyes, teeth, and ear buds stood out against her skin when I looked up.

I had been carefully running up the stairs to the subway, watching for ice and feeling the raw skin on my feet rub harshly against my borrowed socks. The train had just pulled up and a crowd of people wearing puffy black coats and iPods were crowded at the top of the stairs. We were all trying to get home. I picked up the pace, keeping my head down so I wouldn't fall, and was just about to reach the top of the stairs when I sank into her.

I don't know how tall she was, standing a step or two above me, but she was twice my size.

Excuse me, I begged. I just needed to get to the doors before they closed. I wasn't worried about getting stuck between them, though I've certainly heard stories. I had my mind on my feet and my eyes on her headphones. She started talking to me.

"You can't just push your way through somebody and expect to get what you want. You could at least excuse yourself."

She was clearly upset. I noticed the stairs and cold air behind me. I didn't back down though, hoping she would realize I needed to make that train. I put on my kind eyes and sternly stated my case: I did say excuse me but you had your headphones on. You didn't hear me.

I watched her take her ear buds out - the left and then the right. I listened to the beat now swinging around her neck. I was interrupting her song.

She kept talking. I started to wonder if she might push me down the stairs. I had my camera with me. I wondered if my camera bag would provide enough cushion to keep it safe or if I would land on it when I reached the sidewalk. Would my iPod slip out of the front pocket? My lens adapter would probably survive the fall - it was the only piece of metal in my bag. My train was still there.

I wanted to point out how I was on the right-hand side of the stairs, that the train was mere feet away from me, how it was common New York courtesy to let someone through to a stopped train because the conductors wait for no one. I wanted to point out that she was in fact standing in my way, not the other way around.

She just kept talking.

"Are you going to say something," she asked,  
"because I can stand here all night."

It's not in my nature to hit someone I've just met. I'm too polite. If I thought she might hear a word I was saying, or if I thought she was reasonable enough not to shove me down a flight of stairs I might have asked her what kind of night she'd had that left her with such an urge to lash out. Did her lover have wandering eyes? Did her MetroCard charge her an extra two dollars?

Instead I thought of the train, the stairs, and my fear. I apologized. I was sorry that she couldn't see that I was only trying to make the train. I was sorry that she thought the left side of the staircase was invented to compensate Her Royal Majesty's circumference. I was sorry that the volume of her music kept her from seeing me head straight toward her and from hearing my beg-pardon. I was sorry that in my rush I honestly could not remember whether I had bumped into her before or after excusing myself. I was sorry that I was too afraid of what those stairs would do to my body if I said what I was really thinking.

"You going to say something, girl? Or we gonna stand here the rest of the night?"

I faintly heard the melodic ding of the train's closing doors. The trains slow down at this hour and now I was stuck waiting in the cold.

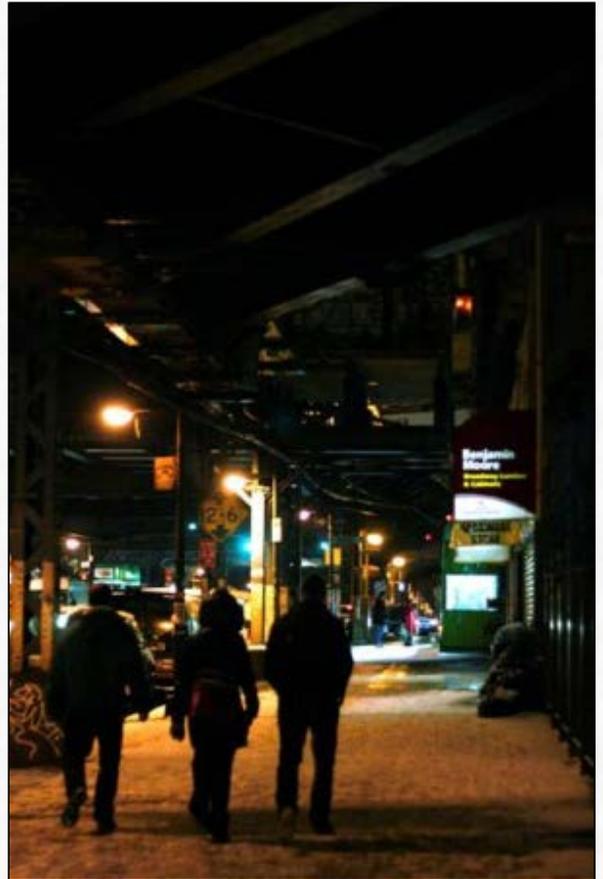
My apology was short but it begged for my life.

"Next time you better watch yourself. Somebody else might not let you go."

I said nothing, refusing to acknowledge that she'd done me any sort of favor. Finally she walked around me and down the stairs. The platform was nearly deserted, with one man sauntering slowly toward me - no, toward the stairs. I suddenly felt alone and angry and frightened. My eyes welled from fear or anger or the chilly winds but a new found instinct to watch for danger kept my vision clear and my jaw set.

Each new sound of footsteps or voices made me sink more into the shadows. I had recently ended a two-year relationship but I could have used some company just then. The shopkeeper who had made eyes and smiled at me a few hours before was now leering his way back through my thoughts. The rush of confidence his looks had given me now made me feel vulnerable and I longed to have someone by my side who could make me forget what had transpired.

I was no longer single. I was alone.



## My Dad's Favorite Lamp

Claudette fell over tonight and broke my favorite lamp. She'd been standing on top of the heater for so long that I thought nothing of it when the cats started sitting at her feet – Lola likes the warmth; Kip likes to perch. Claudette was never particularly stable on the heater. I think it was the heels she never, ever took off. I should mention that Claudette is a mannequin.

That lamp used to be my father's and I have always loved it for reminding me of simpler times. When it's been kept on long enough the dust on the shade warms and produces this homey, attic-like must. It smells like all the times my father and I played backgammon, watched the early seasons of Buffy, and fell asleep to Deep Space Nine. I remember the smell of his red felt-tipped pen when he graded papers under that lamp. There wasn't much of a scent, really, so maybe it's not the smell I'm reminded of but the small stains the pens made in the blue velour fabric on the couch my mom always hated.

I loved that couch. It had stripes.

I remember the smell of the cold on the window and how it mixed with the warm feeling of the lamp's light while I sat perched on the back of the couch watching and waiting for my father's car to get home from work. It's always snowing in that memory.

When my mother moved out and took the dining room table with her, she left the lamp and I wondered why. She told me once that they split the things they bought together. My mother wanted the table so my father got the car. After she moved out, there was a big empty space where the dining room table used to be that would sometimes house a Christmas tree and possibly some toys. I may have made this up, but I imagine the lamp was always my father's. He probably had it in his first apartment during his college years. He told me a story once about his roommate and her smoking habit. The story involved a cigarette and a ghost, I'm pretty sure, but that doesn't seem at all like the kind of story my father would tell me. The cigarette sat on a



side table under the lamp. Or it did in my head, anyway.

Most of the time, when I'm reading or listening to a story that takes place in or involves a house, I picture the last house my parents ever lived in together. If there's a pool table in the story it's always where the dining room table used to be, but most of the time there's just a dining room table there.

When I was a kid, I used to sit and examine the lamp's shade. It has white, swirly squares that remind me of the inside of an abalone shell but are more fragile. The squares are joined together like a stained glass window. For as long as I can remember one of the

squares has been different. It's just a simple piece of white plastic stuck haphazardly into the shade where the abalone square should be. It never actually fit. Two sides of it bubbled out because of the way the shade curves and when I finally convinced my dad to give me his lamp, the anomalous square went missing. Now there's just an empty square-shaped space.

There's an empty square-shaped space and a newly cracked square because of Claudette's clumsy fall.

I'm looking at the emptiness of the wall she used to lean against. It begs to be filled but I hesitate to let Claudette back up there. Really, she's not stable. It's those heels.

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

KATRINA KOSKI lives in Brooklyn with four or five roommates and is a contributing editor to *The Clever Title*. She spends her days chasing after her roommates for the perfect photograph. She is currently working on a yearlong endeavor called [Project 365](#), in which her mission is to present a photograph for each day of 2009 and enhance the story with an accompanying essay. She hopes to one day publish the Project as a memoir.

## Otis and Jake

*Geoff Schmidt*

Early on a cold morning, Jake and I walk along the bike path. Jake stops, strains. In the thin scrub and trees to our right, a rabbit hunches, panting. Its entire left flank is red and raw. There is no other motion. The rabbit shakes, breathing breathing. I lead Jake away. In the afternoon when we walk by again, the rabbit is dead on its side. Again I lead Jake away. It's a cold afternoon. The cold feels like it will never go away.

\*

When Otis was young, he could pluck birds out of the air he was so fast. We'd walk the bottom of the yard and startle sparrows out of the evergreens and he would leap up and come down with a bird in his mouth before I could even say no, his tail wagging, squirmingly delighted with himself.

\*

Sometimes Jake is seized by "the puppyness." He takes the leash in his mouth, he leaps, he races in circles around me. It's scary, the frantic energy that wells up in him. I try to remain calm and centered. I tell myself I can let go of the leash if he gets too crazy. I tell him no, shh, sit. I tell him I could let go.

\*

Otis has an inoperable tumor. It's pressing against his bladder. His back legs are swelling. He has weeks, maybe a month. He shakes sometimes with the pain. I learn this when my ex-wife, Nikki, tells me. We've been divorced for two months. Otis lives with her now. The next night when I see him, while she teaches, I lie down next to him and stroke him while he trembles. I cry when I take him outside.

\*

We got Otis a few months after Nikki's third miscarriage. We wanted to keep trying, but we didn't know if we'd be able to have children. I knew in the pound that Otis was the one. He sat when the others barked. He wagged his tail when I put my fingers near the cage. He was afraid but he was calm. Part pit bull, part boxer. We didn't commit to him that day, a Saturday, and all that night and

Sunday I was in a fever to return, so afraid someone else would see what I had seen. But he was still there Monday. That was the end of January. A year later, on January 11th, our daughter Zoe would be born. Two years and ten days after that, Amanda.

\*

When we brought Zoe home from the hospital, Nikki burst into tears. She was so afraid, she said. She sat on the edge of the bed. What if we couldn't do this? We had just put Zoe in her bassinette, on top of our dresser. I brimmed with it. I knelt beside her. I know we can do this, I said. I have never been more sure of anything.

\*

I had promised Amanda, and Zoe too, but especially Amanda, that we would get a dog for the house I'd moved into during the separation and divorce. I told her I was only waiting until my teaching schedule lightened next semester. When the fall semester ended, she pointed to the calendar. Time to go to the shelter. We had researched dogs, but when they saw Jake, they knew he was the one. Part huskie, but brindled and short-haired and bat-eared: great dane? Greyhound? Cool blue eyes and a mischievous mouth. The only dog I ever owned that let me sleep late. I've had him two months and ten days.

\*

After Nikki and I separated, I rented a house on the main drag of town. On weeks when I didn't have the girls, I'd sit on the porch and watch traffic. I was close enough to see faces. I'd never lived alone before. My bedroom was next to the porch. At night, I'd sometimes hear the thudthud of a car with the stereo cranked. Sometimes police cars and ambulances careened past. Some mornings, I'd wake up and not know what day it was. Where I was. Waking had the dislocation of dreams. With my eyes still closed, I'd know if it had rained by the boundless shush of wet tires on wet pavement. This was before Jake. Before I had something to tether me to the world on the weeks without Zoe and Amanda.

\*

Before Zoe, Otis and I used to take naps on a very long brown couch that was second-hand when we got it. Two moves later, the springs were unruly. But we would still stretch out the length of it and doze. When Zoe was born, sometimes I would hold her until she fell asleep, then carefully lie down on the couch with her on my chest, Otis stretching out beside me. Until the springs got dangerous, we would nap like that often. I still remember the way we drifted in and out of sleep, the way we breathed, the rise and fall of it.

\*

What Amanda wants more than anything is for Jake to sleep the night on her bed. Usually, the weeks they stay with Nikki, he sleeps on mine, curled up in a tight ball. We three named him Jake

together. I liked Jack, and Zoe liked Jacob Black, and Amanda lit on Jake. I tell Amanda that sometimes, when you stop wanting something too fiercely, it comes to you unbidden. And one night not long after, he sleeps on her bed until 11:45. It's a start, I tell her. He loves you, you know. She knows. But she thinks he loves me better.

\*

I didn't want you to get another dog, Nikki told me once, because that would mean that we were really over. You could never bring a new dog back into our old house with Otis there. She said this before I had gotten Jake. But she knew how much Amanda and Zoe wanted another dog. She knew it was coming. Knowing what it meant to her, I put it off as long as I could. I did. But I had made a promise to them, too. And it was the promise I felt I could keep.

\*

This morning I took Jake to Joe Glik Park, which has fields, a pond, a dog run. It's February still, sunny today but so cold still. Five or six fat bluebirds alit on the fence of the dog run, startling and bright and unafraid. They followed us back through the fields to the car. I took Jake off the leash. I didn't know what he'd do. He raced me forward and back, but he came when I called. And sat when I clipped on his leash.

\*

This afternoon I left Jake in his crate and went to visit Otis. Nikki covers his back legs with warm, wet towels. I stroked him, kneaded his ears. I told him how much I loved him, and listened to Zoe and Amanda bicker and banter over lunch. He's still Otis, Nikki said. He still wants their scraps. And he did. He still does. He's still Otis.

\*

Why do we take things close to our hearts, why do we love? We know the dogs we take in as puppies will grow old, will get sick, will know pain, will die. We know that we will outlive them, that they will be seized by a kind of suffering that we can never lift. Why do we marry, why do we have children? Why do we love at all? When you lose love it mauls your heart. It bloodies you. And yet, again and again, we choose to love. Again and again. Why do we choose to love, again and again and again?

[...return to Table of Contents](#)

GEOFF SCHMIDT teaches at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. He really likes key lime pie. And cheesecake, swoon. You can email him e-cheesecake and e-pie at [geschmi@siue.edu](mailto:geschmi@siue.edu).

## Valentine's Day, Saigon 2007

*Anne Panning*

I want an English language movie but when we follow the signs they lead us to a strange Alice in Wonderland bowling alley with zebra-lined booths & tiny bright candy-colored balls like bubble gum

I want to get my bangs cut but I'm scared no English = feathered

I want Lily to eat something not beige

I want to get a massage in the hotel spa but when I take Hudson down with me to "Noblesse Massage" on floor 2 a sultry woman in a black velvet dress points us to a dark menthol-scented room full of old men jacked back in recliners watching sumo wrestling on TV

I want the white wine I drink on the rickety hotel balcony in a taped-together plastic chair to be more yellow like white wine and less clear like water

I want to make Mark a valentine so I say, "Hey! Why don't you go run on the treadmill!" but realize when he's gone I have no supplies so I hack out hearts on Hotel Elios stationery with the Swiss Army knife and color them in with Hudson's cheap feathery Vietnamese crayons (LOVE YOU BUN! with red and yellow squiggles and smiles)

I want to eject from the taxi when Lily drops her gigantic "FOR YOU" fat red sucker with blue & purple frosting and screams nonstop with red leaky sugar slime all over her face & hands—hands she gropes me with like she's a nursing infant or an old leech even though she's an innocent though ruffian 3

I want our hotel to be in the interesting De Tham tourist district instead of the computer & scooter sales neighborhood full of dusty wilted inner tubes & tottering pyramids of hard drives, greasy & gutted

I want to sleep with Mark as in in-out-sleep-with but we are a family of four in a tiny hotel room and the kids are spread across the floor like big messy butter and all night we hear their ragged little snory breaths and flicker-twitches which prevent us from anything more than a good night kiss (though on the lips, long and heavy, with just a little second base)

ANNE PANNING'S short story collection, *Super America*, won The 2006 Flannery O'Connor Award for Short Fiction. She has also published a book of short stories, *The Price of Eggs* (Coffeehouse Press, 1992), as well as short fiction and nonfiction in places such as *The Kenyon Review*, *Beloit Fiction Journal*, *The Bellingham Review*, *Prairie Schooner*, *New Letters*, and *Cimarron Review*. Originally from Minnesota, Anne has lived in The Philippines, Vietnam, Hawaii, northern Idaho and Ohio; she now lives in upstate New York with her husband and two children, and teaches creative writing at SUNY-Brockport. Anne's favorite foods include curried squid, lemongrass beef and sushi.