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January 2010

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Letter from the Editor

On an unseasonably sunny day this past September, my friend Beth and I spent the better part of an afternoon wandering through Glasnevin cemetery in north Dublin. Glasnevin, which is officially called Prospect Cemetery, is an endless procession of labyrinthine paths, Victorian crypts, and dramatic headstones. It offers the visitor all the Victorian splendor of ten-foot crosses, twenty-foot angels, and the carved, long-winded explanations of who lies where, who or what killed them, and what they might have accomplished in their short tenures on this earth. For tourists like Beth and I, they offer two tours—the writers tour and the revolutionaries tour. Hapless as we are, we missed both, and spent most of the afternoon getting lost.

Of the famous, Glasnevin houses the heroes of the Irish Cause—Daniel O’Connell, Charles Stewart Parnell, Michael Collins. Maude Gonne, the love of Yeats’ life, is buried there, as is bad boy playwright Brendan Behan. We were after the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, and we found him in a humble, unmarked clergy plot, his name listed with another hundred or so.

It’s no mistake, in Ireland, that writers and revolutionaries are buried side by side and in such numbers. The Irish War for Independence was sparked, after all, by a conspiracy of poets—Thomas MacDonagh, Joseph Mary Plunkett, Padraig Pearse. “You can throw a rock,” an Irish editor told me later that week, “and hit a poet in Ireland.” And some of those poets, like the ones who started the 1916 Easter Rising, have been dangerous enough to be martyred.

This forced me to consider an important, and I think, often overlooked fact: writing is a fundamentally dangerous activity. The act of creation, that is, is a revolutionary act, in the sense that the new, the novel, the progressive, is always dangerous. Maybe this is why the NEA budget is so small. The act of creation scares the hell out of those who fear change. In this respect, it’s worthwhile, I think, to remember that all poets are warrior poets, fighting the noble or ignoble fight, bringing voice to the voiceless—be them oppressed citizens or those subtleties of human experience which we cannot name.

The modern Irish buy more poetry per capita than anyone else in the world, and artists of all stripes are given handsome tax breaks. Perhaps this has something to do with what Irish culture is celebrated for—kindness, humor, passion, an impenetrable sense of hospitality. I’d offer that we’re all better people for reading good literature, verse or prose or anything in-between, and that what’s at stake in getting that work out there, from inspiration to publication, is magnificently dangerous. Here, we hope Sweet is doing it’s own small part in promoting that.

—K.C. Wolfe

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Gianna Russo

In the Kitchen of Remembrance

In the first inch of sunrise,
believing me asleep,
my husband slumps in his quarter
of some memory room,
weeps to ten confidantes, his fingers.
This is our kitchen, this
the invented grief of his future:
orphaned, as always; newly widowed.
His fear brews this over
and over he has told me,
concocting loss and its aftertaste,
forcing on him the cloud-dark cup.

The kick of forestalled bitterness
moves his hands to become solemn workers:
he shakes fragrant beans into the grinding mill,
coaxes steam into milky foam.
He hopes I'll rise to these cues.

But if I could touch him
through constructed sorrows,
I would beg him
send the future back to bed,
since it is not my silk gown,
not his leopard robe, not the sunlight
assembling itself in now.

His quiet sighs steep through the lavalier room.

Cruel or not, I lie in our bed quiet as the moon.

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GIANNA RUSSO is a Pushcart Prize nominee and the founding editor of [YellowJacket Press](#), the only Florida publisher of poetry chapbooks. Ms. Russo is a fellow of both the Surdna Foundation and the Hambidge Center for the Arts and Sciences. She is the recipient of an Arts Teacher Fellowship (which allowed her to attend the Spoleto, Italy Writers Workshop in 2006). Her poems have appeared in *Crab Orchard Review*, *Bloomsbury Review*, *The Sun*, *Poet Lore*, *The MacGuffin*, *Calyx*, *Apalachee Review*, *Florida Review* and *Tampa Review*, among others. She is also the author of a chapbook, *Blue Slumber*.

David Shumate

Solitude

Around here they call it the Devil's Workshop. This idle mind. So when they discover someone sitting alone in a room, they send a hero in to the rescue. The yellow telephones you find all over town—there's always a professional companion at the other end. And, of course, there are the loneliness parlors where volunteers wait to embrace you in their white gloves. Years ago all the old monks were rounded up from their monasteries and married off to widows. I know it's blasphemy, but I miss the trumpeter who used to climb out onto his rooftop and play his sad ballads. And all those mournful violins that replied. I heard talk yesterday...They're going to start digging up the dead. On the grounds of loneliness. Then they're going to replant them. This time two to a coffin.

Prometheus

Prometheus stole fire from the gods. Then tucked it under his coat and handed it off to us. He paid the price, of course. That dark bird you see circling the foothills? It swoops down every morning to where the poor fellow is chained to a rock and eats away at his liver. All this comes to mind on winter mornings like these. When we huddle around his fire. I'd like to thank him. On behalf of the whole human race. And hike up there. Fire a few shots to scare off that beast. Then stitch the old god up and drive him into town to show him what we've done with his gift. How we bake these little muffins. How faithfully our furnaces chug along. I'd introduce him to welders. Short order cooks. People in the profession of fire. We might even hold a parade. Set him up on the back of a convertible. Have the mayor hand him the keys to the city. The whole shebang. But if I know anything about fate, even as he waved at the crowds, even as he shook the confetti from his hair, he'd be homesick for his rock.

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DAVID SHUMATE is the author of *High Water Mark* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2004), winner of the 2003 Agnes Lynch Starrett Prize, and *The Floating Bridge* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2008.) His poetry has appeared widely in literary journals and has been anthologized in *The Writer's Almanac*, *Good Poems for Hard Times* and *The Best American Poetry 2007*. He is also the recipient of a 2009 NEA Poetry Fellowship. He teaches at Marian University in Indianapolis and lives in Zionsville, Indiana.

Sheila Black

Hurricane Day

They said we should tape the windows;
store candles and water, on no account go to
work or ride the subway. Lights out. And
the sky that morning through the tenement

windows—a greeny yellow, a dangerous glow,
but muted as sound in a snowstorm, a bandage
wrapped around the suddenly slowed city.
The poet Mary Ruefle writes that whenever it

snows she wishes for someone to make love to—
all day in a bed of rumbled white sheets, the
blinds open to flake and shower. And it was like
that—the hurricane day for the storm that

never came. Friends came and we drank bourbon
in our coffee. We kept the lights out as instructed
lit candle after candle, burning our fingers
and having to suck on them like children. When

the friends went home three floors up, we lay down in
our bed like two good children. I touched
your face, mapping it finger-length at a time. How
utterly such moments get lost. You would be officially

diagnosed schizophrenic within the year. I would be living
on the other coast, wheeling a pram up the bare
California hills, saying to myself that this is what

exile is, the world like a party full of strangers or

people you no longer wish to know. But if it all could be held as under glass—as under those touristy plastic domes, which you shake to make the synthetic flakes fall, knowing all the while it is really not cold in there,

it is really a little plastic toy filled with some chemical version of salt water, and yet doesn't it give just the tiniest dizzying thrill? If it could be held as under glass, I would pick that day. The promise of storm so freeing

so that I could admit everything that was wrong—with you, with me, with us, our apartment of cardboard boxes, unmatched dishes, empty bottles of alcohol and emptied packs of cigarettes, even the death-music turning on the turn-

table, always someone singing about how to get lost or more so, as if the expiration date was already stamped on us; admit all this and think none of it mattered, only the gloaming light over the skyscrapers and the

strange warm wind we finally walked out in toward evening finding sidewalks clotted with people like us who had waited all day for the hurricane and now were dazzled, smiling at the ordinary streets, which seemed at that moment

suddenly radiant, transfigured, the eye of everything.

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SHEILA BLACK is the author of a chapbook, *How to be a Maquiladora* (Main Street Rag Publishing, Inc., 2007) and a full-length collection, *House of Bone* (CustomWords Press, 2007). A second collection *Love/Iraq* is forthcoming from

CustomWords in November 2009. In 2000, she received the Frost-Pellicer Frontera Award, given to one U.S. and one Mexican poet living along the U.S.-Mexico border. Publication credits include *Diode*, *Willow Springs*, *Poet Lore*, *Blackbird* and others. For the past two years she has been Visting Professor of Poetry at New Mexico State University. She lives in Las Cruces, New Mexico.

*Cathy Barber***True**

The fern, its fronds'
sugary underside, ridges
of next year and the ones beyond.
They must want to sleep,
these plants, these trees,
not in their wintry way,
but in our human, foggy way,
screened from the world
by the furry veil of another world.
The trees' blue heads must seek
the forest floor in the dark,
curl up with their rooty feet,
leave behind the owls eating mice.

CATHY BARBER'S work has been published most recently in the literary journals *Haight Ashbury Literary Review*, *Tattoo Highway* and *Two Review* as well as in the anthology *Doorknobs and Bodypaint: Fantastic Flash Fiction*. She has an MA in English from California State University, Hayward, where she won awards for her poetry, fiction and non-fiction. She teaches with California Poets in the Schools, the largest writers-in-residence program in the country, and serves as president of the board. Her favorite dessert is bread pudding.

Alison Amato

Sleep Anatomy

Tonight the palms were not tarantulas, but brushed against each other to make the sound of rain. You said you could like it here, but it is too flat, you can feel the ground moving. I agree, too flat. But the ground doesn't move.

Darkness lulls a time of unrest. You trace nervous systems in repeated hush. Hair-pricks skin to skin; my arms alive with a thousand thorns. This reminds me of home. And cold. Ice over the dirty river. Dreams filled with ghosts I cannot place. You say it can never go away.

Teach me about anatomy—because your sleep smells thick and golden. I despised that smell until you and sleep and sheets. I want to know what gland that comes from so I can hold it like a silvery fish between cupped hands.

We set the clocks forward. 2:00 a.m. falls into place by the count of heartbeats. It reminds me of home. The smell of green rolling over bare shoulders; slighter than apparitions. I ask where this comes from. You hold a hand to my chest and mouth, “lungs.”

[ALISON AMATO](#) recently graduated with an M.F.A. from Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, FL. In June she moved back to her home state, Maryland. She now lives in a little red house by the water in Baltimore County where she enjoys eating any variety of biscotti while sipping coffee and watching the water ripple along. She thanks Sweet as well as all her professors at FAU for their encouragement!

Michael T. Young

Undigested

Pennies dissolve to water in the wishing wells, a kind of camouflage, the opposite of memory. What persists is shadow at the edge of things, debris in the gaps between sidewalk and street, door and doorjamb, cracks between all the comings and goings. Under the eaves, deep in the crevices, fillers mend and dispread, untranslatable thoughts fusing the planks, the inner machinations between floors. Basements, attics, crypts, storage for all that is truly ours: honey in the tombs sweet after centuries of pharaoh's decay, burs carried from the woods on sleeves, pollen on the legs of bees. Rooted in the dust and mud, the muck and manure of history, the blossom of an African daisy floats in a glass of water, a bit of sand in the oyster, a skip in the old song becoming part of the song, grit and gravel, what passes undigested and remains itself. It is the key that should not have been swallowed, only to dislodge in the later years of autumnal refrains. But by such metal a door was unlocked to returns and further disclosures, the aromas of decay that mimic and remake the spring arrivals, the bursting hyacinth, the rain and resilience.

northern lights

"A free people claim their rights as derived from the laws of nature." —Thomas Jefferson

Fire burns behind the walls of this weather: morning clouds smolder the fields, threading gray light through the gold, dry grasses of January. A confusion of warmth melts the evening rain. The shed's red siding smokes. An oak's bare branches lurch into the winter air like an insight, an epiphany of wet bark, under whose protective arms all the puddles release their smallest reflections, their briefest or dimmest impressions of passing hubcap, cat tail, late autumn leaf and every bird that gathers to drink.

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MICHAEL T. YOUNG has published two collections of poetry: *Because the Wind Has Questions* and *Transcriptions of Daylight*. He received a 2007 Fellowship from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts and a 2008 William Stafford Award. He was also twice nominated for a Pushcart Prize and received the Chaffin Poetry Award for 2005. Young's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Heliotrope*, *Iodine Poetry Journal*, *RATTLE*, *The Same*, *The Sow's Ear Poetry Review* and many other journals, as well as the anthologies *Phoenix Rising* and *Chance of a Ghost*. He sporadically blogs literary essays and thoughts on [The Inner Music](#). Young currently lives with his wife and children in Jersey City, New Jersey, and his favorite dessert is chocolate mousse pudding.

This Thing Seemed Solid

Kyle Minor

Junior kindergarten it was called then. Now it's called pre-kindergarten or four-year-old preschool. Now it's playing on jungle gyms and learning abc's, but ours had nightly homework, a drill book of homonyms and rhyming words and speed tests, a navy blue book called *Victory Drill*, the victory being in Christ through whom all things are made possible.

Nap-time, though, we had. Now they have tumbling mats, but we brought beach towels. Mine was a *Star Wars* beach towel, C-3PO and R2-D2 my sleep companions. Every day, the same instruction from Miss Doty, our teacher: "You don't have to sleep, but you can't get up. Don't rise from your towel. Don't talk to your neighbor. Don't visit my desk. Nap time is a time for rest."

This day I remember, I don't know if it was toward the beginning or the end of the school year. I don't even know much about the school year or about being four years old. This is my only memory of being four years old. What I do remember is that I needed to get up and use the bathroom, that I knew I was not allowed to get up, that logic therefore dictated that all I could do was stay on my towel and hold it as long as I could.

Number two, the teacher called it. Poop, we called it. Crap we could not call it, and now we know that the third grade teacher, Mrs. Vanderlip, was fired for using this word, crap. Shit was a word we did not yet know, and too bad, because this is the word that would be the right word for what now was coming out of me, because I could no longer hold it inside of me.

What I mean to describe is the most memorable bowel movement of my life, and the way I remember it, this thing seemed to be happening elsewhere. I was somehow an external observer of this thing that was happening. Coming out, the shit seemed quite solid. It also had a definitive texture to it. Long and firm and narrow, but with spikes protruding at regular intervals. Coming out of my bottom—not my butt, ass, or anus, for these words would likely also have resulted in the firing of Mrs. Vanderlip—this thing did seem solid. It did not worry me. When nap time was over and the lights came on, I would just go to the bathroom and dump it into the stall toilet and forget about it.

The lights came on. We were marched to the bathroom. I went into the stall and took down my pants, but when I tried to dump the log, I found it was not a solid as I had imagined. It smeared. Everything was smeared. My pants, my underwear, my legs, the toilet, somehow the walls of the stall, somehow the toilet seat, certainly my hands.

Time passed. How much I do not know. The toilet paper in my hands, I tried to clean things. Sometimes in those days I assigned colors to numbers—white to one, yellow to two, orange to three, green to four, red to five, blue to six, brown to seven and nine, black to eight and zero. I remember worrying why there was no number for purple. I remember adding numbers to see what color they might become when paired with another number.

All of this must have taken some time. The teacher knocked at the stall. The teacher eventually came into the stall. I do not remember what it looked like but I can imagine her horror at what she saw. I can imagine the defecation all over the walls. The words fail here. It is not serious to write or speak of shit or crap or poop, and the word defecation seems too elevated, yet isn't this what we each of us traffic in, and daily? Isn't this the kind of failure that bookends our lives, this failure of control, to poop we are born and to poop we shall return before we die? Even in the words there is indignity, and what does this say about life?

In this spirit of indignity, Miss Doty did not try to clean me. She did not much touch me so much as I can tell. Instead, she pulled my pants to my knees and marched me that way, legs shuffling as though ankle-shackled, legs shit-smearred, tiny penis flopping exposed with each step, past the crowd of classmates washing their hands in the bathroom sink, past the lines of pointing kindergartners and first graders in the hallway of the primary building, past the maintenance men tending the sidewalks and politely averting their eyes, past the fifth graders at the water fountain outside the nurse's station, who began to point and laugh and cheer and say words I cannot remember except their mock and the sting of it.

This evening it is twenty-nine years later, and a child in my own house has pooped his pants. In the years intervening, I have helped clean my grandfather's soiled underpants after a triple-bypass surgery, and I have changed the diapers of children, and I have crawled into the bed of a male friend dying of leukemia and come away with his shit on my own pants, and the next day after he had died, I washed the shit from the leg of my pants. I wonder did Miss Doty want me to feel the shame of that long walk that I certainly did feel and still feel and still remember twenty-nine years later, and what did that shame mean, and what does that shame mean, and if it is so shameful, aren't we all now implicated, all we who have ever shit ourselves and all we who will ever die, and why is there no number for the color purple, and why are we so frail? In the bathroom, my wife wipes my child's bottom with a wet rag and rinses the soiled clothes in the toilet water and throws them in the washing machine and draws a bath and sings softly a song, and still the house is filled with the smell of shit, and I cannot bring myself to help her, and I feel ashamed.

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Devil's Territory and co-editor, with Okla Elliott, of *The Other Chekhov*. He recommends any variety of Rhum Barbancourt, which is bottled in Haiti, the most beautiful country in the world, says he.

Cradle and All

Lisa Romeo

"In sorrow thou shalt bring forth children." — Genesis 3:16

One winter evening not long ago, my teenager stacked logs in our living room fireplace, the same fireplace into which I once fantasized about tossing him when he was a newborn. I wondered what this cheerful and sensitive young man might say if I told him. What might he think, what might anyone think, if I said that the slate patio we shoveled together a few hours before, was where I once contemplated dropping him from his second floor bedroom window, flinging him out past the curtains with the yellow and green cows?

These menacingly dangerous thoughts lived in my mind, vivid and sharp, moving across my internal movie screen in colorful detail: The baby in the microwave, his nostrils imploding. The baby rolling, bumping down the basement stairs like a pale soft log. I loved my son. I hated being his mother. I wanted to disappear. I wanted him to disappear.

I knew I would never hurt him.

Sometimes I couldn't turn the thoughts off, at two in the morning when I could not sleep, at two in the afternoon when I thought I could not bear another moment of motherhood. They lived in my head, lingering brightly and then dark, and when they did, I kept my baby in the playpen, or in the bouncing walker, or in the crib while I paced, sometimes for hours, until Frank came home. He held the baby and then held me until he convinced me, again, that I was not crazy or a bad person.

I understand now, as I did not at the time, that something else, something other was at work. I was not medically insane or showing latent criminal tendencies at age 35.

Of course, I had postpartum depression.

In 2009, this is so clear, to anyone, to everyone. But I got slammed, hard, by postpartum depression 16 years ago, when it was not popular, not socially acceptable, as it is today. It all happened to me before it happened to Marie Osmond, before Princess Diana first admitted to "postnatal melancholy," before the rain poured down on Brooke Shields, before *PPD for Dummies* landed at Barnes & Noble. I was not a pioneer, I broke no barriers. It was not me who made things better for women who were being dismissed by their doctors, told by their families to "snap out of it."

*

Frank and I first talked about having children on our third date. We were getting into his car after seeing a movie in which a couple had had a baby. "So do you want kids?" Frank asked. I knew one of the factors in his recent divorce was conflict over the kids question: He, yes; She, no.

"Sure," I said, and added brightly, "but not tonight!"

"But some day, right?" he said.

"Yeah. Someday."

We married on Mother's Day and spent the next three and one-half years trying to get pregnant. On my first real Mother's Day, Frank placed the baby's photo in a white picture frame which said "I love Mommy," in red letters. A month later, I deliberately pushed it off a shelf on a day when my monster-child was inconsolable and I was wandering the house looking for things to break, things other than my baby's skull.

The first time I can remember consciously thinking, "I can't do this," meaning *be a mother*, was when an efficient and blasé nurse demonstrated how to snugly diaper my seven pound newborn son, who was screaming. I said, "He doesn't really seem to like having his diaper so tight and being wrapped up so..."

"Nonsense, all babies like that," she said. And that was that: *What the heck did I know*, I asked myself, *about what babies want? What did I know about any of this? What did I know about being a mother?* I knew what my public relations clients wanted, I knew about running a business. I knew nothing about any of *this*. Twelve hours later, at home with my child, I approached the crib with trepidation and dread. I mentally flogged myself: *It can't be right to feel grief, to feel nothing*.

The baby was screaming, punching his veiny clamped fists in the air, circling his left leg in a jerky bicycle motion. The volume escalated with each intake of breath, and then lapsed into a terrifying open-mouthed screech, and a blotchy red-purple faced silent breath-holding scream. I picked him up, changed his diaper, rocked, turned on the tinkly mobile music. Nothing helped. It had to be me.

I told Frank, "He hates me. He doesn't even want his own mother." And silently, *his own mother doesn't want him*. I closed myself in the bathroom where I dripped tears on my stretched out pink cotton briefs and a new nursing bra. Still, the baby's cries ricocheted off the pink and grey tiled walls until I thought I'd scream too, and that's when I had the first idea about putting him outside on one of the snow banks drifted against our garage, because then maybe he would quiet down and maybe I could be normal again and maybe then I could start over the next day and be a good mother after all. Either that, or I wanted, had to get, out.

*

On our first wedding anniversary, we chucked the condoms. For the next three years what rested in our night table drawer instead were thermometers, charts, a book about fertility-friendly sex positions, and, under the bed, a wedge pillow to raise my pelvis and increase our chances of conceiving. We tried to make it fun, but after the first few months, we dreaded another yoga-like

sexual position. There was nothing fun about blood work, swabs, collection jars filled with semen or cervical mucous, or the laparoscopic hysterosalpingogram to check for uterine lesions (which weren't there) or blocked tubes (which were open). We tried to treat the trip to the nearby chapel of St. Gerard Majella, patron saint of motherhood, as a meaningless placating gesture to the elderly aunt who suggested it, but we ended up staying on our knees a little too long to be convincing. We showed up for monthly appointments with the fertility specialist, but along the way my attitude slid from cheery to dutiful, and eventually to impatient and irritable.

I spent the better part of the second act of *Miss Saigon* in the Broadway Theater ladies' room. The fake smoke and the roar of the realistic helicopter blades on stage were making me sick and I stayed there, peeing every three minutes and nervously weighing how to tell Frank: I was done. No more treatments. I would not be keeping my appointment with Dr. Scott the next morning. We were happy, weren't we? I felt queasy and lightheaded anticipating the conversation we would have over coffee after the play. Before the coffee arrived, I nearly fainted, which we blamed on the traffic-clogged Lincoln Tunnel and an overheated car. We cancelled the cheesecake and went home to bed. I was quiet and melancholy but the next morning, I was at Dr. Scott's, early as always for my usual 9:15, and I did the usual – peed, undressed, and started counting the daisies in the poster someone had taped to the ceiling in the examination room.

Suzanne, a nurse I liked, charged in, grinning. “Congratulations! You’re pregnant!” she said, holding up a strip of pink paper. I remember it was pink because months later, I recall thinking, for many other reasons, that it should have been blue.

*

Que sera, sera, my father used to sing when I was a child.

Be happy with, my older sister's hippie friend chanted in the sixties.

You have everything you need, a new-agey client advised.

I was dismissive of all of these chestnuts, but the thing is, I believed them. I believed that things always had a way of working out – apartments, men, where to go on vacation. Life would all be good, either way, any way. So when I said "yes, someday," to Frank on that third date, what I probably meant was, *yes, if it works out that way. Yes, having children would be great, and not having them would be just fine too.*

Never, during the infertile years or even during my pregnancy, did I think, even for an instant, that I *had* to be a mother, that if I didn't become a mother, I would feel robbed, or unfulfilled, or less of a woman, or that my marriage was missing something. Instead, I thought, *if it works, if not, I will be all right.* Having a family, to me, was just another way things might randomly and surreptitiously work out.

So was I being punished for my ambivalence now? Why weren't things all just working out? Surely they would, for someone more deserving – a woman for whom motherhood truly mattered, who was not worn out with unrelentingly absurd worry: Would the baby get abducted from the car while I put a quarter in the meter? Fall off the changing table even though I held him securely? Aspirate a dust

mote and develop pneumonia? Had I veered from baby blues to the black hole of insanity?

*

My son was born two days after Christmas, and so the first day that Frank returned to work and I was alone with the baby was January 2. A new year. I could do this, I told myself. "Call me if you need anything," Frank said. "I'll be in the office all day." That meant he would be just five miles away instead of on the road, sometimes 100 or miles afield.

That day was not much different than all the rest that would follow that bitterly cold, grief-streaked winter. When the baby squirmed and screamed, when his gastric reflux spewed out another four ounces of putrid smelling half-digested milk, I sorted through my options: the fireplace, the microwave, the basement stairs. I took stock: I lacked the nurture gene. I had no urge to cuddle my baby, and this distressed me not because I longed to feel motherly, but because I urgently wanted to feel something, anything. My baby was a blob to me, a blot.

Mothering was odious, a chore, one I would gladly trade back. I disliked not so much my son, as the idea of something needing me, sucking at me, wanting me. I hated myself, hated my situation. Yet I was not upset that this, that I, was abnormal, only that things were horrible and I wanted it all to go away – the baby, my husband's pleading expression, everyone else's puzzled looks. I often wondered if, on my next trip to FoodTown, I ought to keep driving until New Jersey slipped into Pennsylvania and motherhood loosened its viselike grip or until I found a big enough concrete wall at which to aim my car.

*

As winter turned to spring, I wanted to believe we just needed more time – one more day, another week, one more month -- to adjust to each other and all would be well. When the snow stops. When the rain stops. When the baby is weaned. When summer comes. But the days went on and nothing was okay and little changed. Months passed even, and they felt like years, and eventually it was years, almost two.

By then, I was so far beyond anything resembling the baby blues or simple new mother jitters, and my bottomless dark mood did not lift when my son had a few good hours or even when he and I had a few good days. I did not think I had postpartum depression because no one ever brought it up. I would not stumble upon the phrase myself until my baby was nearly a year old, which for a resourceful person like me, someone who had years of journalism training and plenty of experience digging up information seems, in retrospect, a very long time indeed. I could have figured it out sooner, I guess, if I had been searching for a reasonable psychological explanation of why some women react to postpartum hormonal shifts with severe depression.

The thing is, I wasn't looking for logical answers. I was looking for reasons why a well-balanced, intelligent, professional woman in her 30s would suddenly be wondering, a few times an hour, if infanticide, followed by suicide, were reasonable responses to motherhood.

*

My son, the one whom I did not burn or microwave or desert in the snow, the son in whom I was once not interested, couldn't care for and didn't know how to mother, the son who is now a lanky, jokey teen, is asking me something. Should he light the fire? As the flames flash up, I notice that they send an eerie light across the gorgeous curly hair and solid chin where the first stubble of hair has recently appeared, and I notice something else too: how still I am unlike most other mothers, who at a moment like this might think back to how needy and small and helpless their child once was, and wonder fondly where this manchild has come from. Instead, I am thinking about how needy and small and helpless I once felt, and wondering where this grown-up mother could have possibly come from, and if the love, flowing back and forth, mother to child, stronger than iron forged in fire, could have ever not been just exactly as it is right now.

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LISA ROMEO worked as an equestrian journalist, a public relations specialist, and a real estate "spy" before turning to creative nonfiction. Her work has appeared in the *New York Times*, *O: The Oprah Magazine*, and many other mainstream media; in literary journals such as *Barnstorm*, *Quay*, *Sport Literate*, and *Ozone Park*; and several essay collections, including *Feed Me! Writers Dish About Food, Eating, Weight, and Body Image*. She holds an MFA from Stonecoast/University of Southern Maine, and a BS in journalism from Syracuse University. Lisa teaches creative writing privately and in the Rutgers University Writing Program Extension, works as a freelance editor, and publishes a blog about writing. She went on to have a second child and lives with her husband and two sons in northern New Jersey, where there is always an ample supply of dark chocolate on hand. She can be reached via: LisaRomeoWrites@gmail.com.

Daddy Never Drove By Road Maps

Helen Ruggieri

Daddy never drove by maps. He learned to drive back before the first World War and there was usually only one way to get anywhere so you didn't need maps and during the war they took down all the sign posts so if they were invaded the invaders wouldn't know where anything was.

If we had to be somewhere, we'd set off in the general direction – west or south- west and go about fifty miles or so and then we'd stop some stranger and ask, Do you know how to get to the city from here? And the stranger'd give us lefts and rights and landmarks and we'd keep on going until we forgot and then we'd stop some guy and ask again or pull in at a gas station and fill up on air and stale cheese-peanut butter crackers and ask the guy pumping gas.

He might call over somebody else and they'd confer while we ate our crackers, maybe had a coke out of the red flip top ice cooler. They lean in to the window and point down the road or maybe sometimes, back the way we'd been but daddy didn't like to do that. He'd rather circle around as if forward motion was all that mattered, the old Chevy thumping along until we got where ever it was we were going or dead ended at the ocean waves crashing on the beach and all the sign posts gone to war.

HELEN RUGGIERI'S book of poetry, *Glimmer Girls*, was published by Mayapple Press. Chapbooks include *The Rock City Hill Exercises*, *Concrete Madonna*, and *Walking the Dog*. Ruggieri's book of short prose pieces about Japan, *The Character for Woman*, was published by Foothills Publishing.

Poems and memoirs have recently appeared in many magazines including, *Spoon River Poetry Review*, *Poetry Midwest*, *Cream City Review*, *Quarter After Eight*, *Labor*, *Minnesota Review*, *del sol review*, *Earth's Daughters*. Visit HelenRuggieri.com for reviews, etc.

Touch

Asha Baisden

I.

Uncle R folds his hands around a short red coffee mug. His dog whines behind the sliding glass door, behind his back. Snow falls around the dog, collects in little piles on top of its nose and in-between its ears. The dog stares at me, his eyes hitting my eyes; the fur across its back shivers; it opens its mouth a little and squeals through it. Uncle R pulls himself, his chair, closer to the table and across from me, presses the mug between his lips, his facial hair. He looks like Dad, a little, in the beard, in the purple eye-bags, in the shaken brown hair: dark, like mud.

Does this boy love you? he asks.

Is he asking, Does he love you the way your dead father would have wanted him to love you? Is he asking, Does he love you the way other boys have loved you before: Does he carry you to bed when you fall asleep on the floor from too much painting or cleaning or drinking ? Does he know which way to pull your legs so that you don't want to fuck anyone else, ever? Does he slap you into the plaster wall when you tell him you are too sick to drive him? Does he spit across your cheek and ear and leave you on the side of the highway because you won't give him more and more and more money? Does he clean the bloody mess around your lips after you were mugged outside of your apartment?

Is he asking, does he love you more or less than you love him?

Uncle R says, Your father told me once, If a woman doesn't worship you, then she isn't the right woman for you.

II.

Little rivers of toxins travel out of Dad's liver and down into his calves. They look like worms moving under his leg hairs, and I push them around for hours until they disappear. I imagine them curling back up into the blackened organ. I never imagine I am healing him; I am only helping us both return to a sense of normalcy defined by the stillness of the yellow skin around his legs.

III.

We've never touched but the intentions of touch struggles, shakes between our conversations.

Jonathon stands outside my front door. I watch him through the peephole. He shifts from side to side, rubbing his elbows between his fingers. He looks down at his knees, his feet, leans back on his heels. He hasn't knocked yet. I can see his breath like smoke punching the air in fast, short bursts. I flatten my hands against the door, and he presses a hand around his chin, scratching around his mouth, looks up, opens his mouth a little, pushes a finger against his lips, through them, scratches a tooth.

I press my forehead against the door, whisper, Just knock. Hit the fucking door.

I don't know why he's here, but I heard the car pull up, heard him moving up the sidewalk toward my door, heard him stop there, watched him almost knock.

I look out again: he's kneeling, squatting, rubbing his arms with his palms; I'm thinking, You are cold. Hit the fucking door. I tap the pads of my fingers against the door, once, in a line: my smallest finger to the strongest two. His head snaps up, his eyes move across the door. So he heard. He stands, lays his fingers across the door, both hands, moves slowly, presses his ear on the cold wood.

We stand there, watching and listening.

I imagine the door is warming from the touch of his face.

He moves away, walking backwards, turns, walks away. I hear the scratch-noise of his car starting, the thick, rough sound of it backing away. I slap the door with both hands and sit down on the floor. Is this what it is to care—to touch him through walls, waiting on the edge for one of us to push through?

IV.

More than ten? I ask. Rhys touches his temple, presses it, rubs the skin around in a circle.

More, he says.

Twenty girls? More than that?

He looks at me and pulls a wind of hair out from behind his ear, looks at it, twists it between his fingers. Wind lifts the rest of his hair up and throws it across his face. He spits some out of his mouth, moves it behind his ears. He moves towards me across a scatter of dry leaves.

We left Florida to meet in Colorado in the fall, to see each other and the trees that turn colors and fall apart under the wind.

He came here to tell me that he loves me too much to touch me.

I came here to tell him the same thing.

He says, Dude, just stop asking. You don't really want to know.

He tells me he does it because his mom was so abusive, that he'll only fuck girls he doesn't love. He tells me, That's why I can't have you.

I want to grab his yellow hair and press it against his cheeks and feel the spikes of his beard and push my nose against his nose and tell him, Stupid, I'm standing right here.

Instead I glare at him and say, Stupid. I'm standing right here.

A foot away, we stare at each other, quiet for a while. Then we tell each other: You're perfect, no, You're perfect. My favorite. And wouldn't we be perfect together? Or at least, correct? When I move to Europe, you could come with me and drink wine at my apartment while I'd write all day and then we'd fight and fuck and comb each others' hairs with our fingernails. There would be years of yelling: you asleep on the beach instead of in our bed too many nights in a row, your hair a mat of blond and sand; me curled against my bed sheets, wrapped up. There would be years of silence: you burying our kids in the yard-leaves, painting their faces with food; me touching their hair while they sleep, like touching your hair, only newer. Of course life slows down if we stare at each other long enough, and all the potentials and expectations circle us like carrion birds. The birds will go hungry: I took care of my dad as he slipped into death and your mom threw you against the wall again and again and blamed you for all the men she could never keep.

I'm too much like her, and you're too much like him.

V.

We drive past the Korean Market and an African mural painted across Enat Ethiopian and the the Christmas lights wrapped around Alfredo's and Carnes! Carnes! Carnes! and a drycleaner, cash only \$1.25 per item, and Subway and Tokyo and Lennox Square Marta Station; we roll behind a bike messenger who idles behind a cement truck. We park at Thomas Choi Law Firm; walk in. Maria greets us in Spanish; we shake our heads. In English then, she says, Hello. We introduce ourselves. Newlyweds! She says, Congratulations! She bites her lip and scrutinizes us, smiling, trying to hide that she's scrutinizing us. We smile, trying to hide that we know she's scrutinizing us. She leads us into her office, to go over fees.

Do you love each other? she asks.

We have had sex three times, once on the couch in San Diego, once on his loft bed, once in the car. When he kisses me, I feel like a man: my shoulders feel wider, my hands harder, my hands more prominent. When I kiss him, I try to make him feel like a man. He doesn't know that I will jump into other boys arms and wrap my legs around their chests and let them hold me and hold me because we haven't seen each other for years. I will let them pull my hair with their fingers and teeth and cup my jaws in their palms to keep my breath in.

We answer, Yes.

So you married for love?

Tatsu has been a friend for five years. If I didn't do this for him, he would have to leave everyone he

knows, a half decade of his life, to go back to Japan. It rained the day we pulled up to the courthouse; I wore the ring he gave me to avoid questions. No one noticed. We signed some documents and showed our ID's. The attendant stared at our chests when she spoke to us, only lifting her eyes to check our drivers licenses. A few weeks later, we realized we were both single—and married— so why not. Why not.

Yes.

Can you tell me each other's phone numbers?

We tell her.

Can you tell me the color of each others' toothbrushes?

We tell her.

She looks at Tatsu and asks, Have you met her parents?

He nods. She asks me the same thing.

Not yet, I say. We're going to Japan next March.

She nods, says, This is an example of the interview process.

VI.

Todd sits with his legs bent, wrapped around me, my legs, bent, wrapped around him. We didn't have sex this time, so we folded around each other and laid our heads on each others' shoulders and breathed. I can feel Todd's breath stop against the side of my neck when he says, You could move here. I tell him that if he had said that last year, two years ago, three, the piles of needles and trash and snow clogging the doorways of downtown Baltimore would sicken me, familiar, rather than existing as postcard images, coals for nostalgia.

I tell him, We've been doing this for too long. Too long.

Breath slides out of our noses and across our shoulders, disappears. I wonder if our breath will find the trees outside, will confront them, offer to them, "breathe back." I'm looking at the dark blue walls and the peeling off-white paint on the window frame, feeling the October cold seeping in through the old glass. Todd is probably looking at the tall, heavy wooden door, the nails that crack the doorframe and our coats and scarves hanging from them. He asks, Are we ending this then?

He says, I want to have children with you, someday.

Not today, I say.

He says, Not today.

VII.

A puddle of blood clots, the size of two or three quarters, rests on his pillow:

The night before, he was alive. This morning, he is dead: This sort of bare fact takes years to filter through.

Months after I bent under his weight, moved him down to the carport, step to step to step, pushed him into the car, lifted his feet, shut the door, waited until the defrost cleared the windshield, backed up, bumped into the garbage can, said, “fucking god damn trashcan,” listened to him groaning, drove across town, under the graffiti bridge, over the three-mile-bridge, into the ER parking lot, parked, pulled him out, curled under his weight again, held his toxin-swollen hand, shifted him into the possession of the nurses, delicate, like a gift, watched him forget himself, watched hours move, watched him shake as the toxins ran through him, watched him still and shine yellow and swollen, dead and gone, attached to machines and when they asked me what I thought I said, of course, just let him go—months after that I stare, soulless, at a boy I love and tell him, Just leave.

To carry my father into death is to understand that caring is giving, is blowing out all of my breath and wondering where it goes when it floats away, is throwing every meaningful possession off the side of a mountain, into the ocean, giving them to the barnacles and the urchins and the whales, telling myself, telling myself, they still mean something rotting under the salt water and half-buried in sand.

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ASHA BAISDEN is currently working on a collection of collaborations called *T[h]reat* and a short film. Her favorite sweet eat changes weekly, but the only ones she can't master herself are strawberry shortcake and coconut flan, so she loves them the most. If you'd like to reach her for recipe advice, chat, or sociopolitical discourse: asha.dore@gmail.com.