

**Letter from the Editor****POETRY**

Jennifer K. Sweeney	Three Poems
Jeffrey Thomson	What Are You Reading?
Laura E. Davis	Eggs
W. Todd Kaneko	Two Poems
Elizabeth J. Colen	Dark Stones
Robert Lunday	A Vision
Liz Kay	Three Poems

**ESSAYS**

Jocelyn Bartkevicius	Ice
Donna Vorreyer	How You Become A Mother
Pamela Schmid	Woman Not Coming Back
Joe Bonomo	Origin Stories
Nicole Walker	Microbubbles

**GRAPHIC NONFICTION**

Leslie Salas	Picky Eater
Dustin Michael	I Blew into Grafton

**FANMAIL**

Ryan Cheng	GB Tran
Jenni Nance	Bart Edelman
Alan Shaw	Brad Land

## Letter from the Editor

As I write this, we're still in April—National Poetry Month. In the Tampa area, there will have been at least 17 readings this month, including a number sponsored by community groups and held at local coffee shops and bars—a surfeit of poetry. Social media is exploding with links to great poems. A friend hosted a party for which we were encouraged to show up in pajamas and read a favorite poem or two. (For the record, my sleepwear was an old t-shirt of Ira's and a pair of comfy shorts, but the apartment was so deeply air-conditioned that I envied those who had worn their fuzzy slippers.) What a time to be a poet, or a reader of poetry!

And yet...there are moments when even I am a little overloaded with poetry. When it comes to feel like an obligation. It's mid-month, and I've only made it to three poetry events so far.

Yes, sometimes during the events I'm doing my own necessary work. But sometimes I'm watching *Dr. Who* on Netflix and eating Cadbury chocolate eggs, letting my brain flatten out like the surface of a swimming pool when everybody's finally gotten out and grabbed their towels.

I'm distressed by my own behavior. After all, I belong to the church of poetry. Poetry is the closest I get to religion. It's what connects me to the mystery, to people, to the world.

I'm finally coming to understand it, though. It's not that there's too much poetry—there's *never* too much poetry. It's that I turned poetry into an obligation, into work. I was approaching it like a high school student who's told she has to analyze the poem to assess its symbols and deeper meaning. I had bought into the idea that my relationship with poetry was one of control, where I had to understand the poem *or else*.

But poetry is also pleasure. I don't feel I have to understand the gardenia and jasmine smells blessing our neighborhood right now, so I don't feel overwhelmed by them. The fragrance is intoxicating, and I walk through clouds of it that are thicker and thinner, more and less layered. I just inhale and enjoy, and sometimes sigh when I think that this particular blooming season will soon be over.

Poetry is not an obligation. We don't have to understand the poem on first reading, or even second. No one is judging us if we just stop at a line that carries us off and linger there, letting the rest go for now or forever. And we're lucky: poetry doesn't have a season. We get to breathe it in whenever we want to, all year long.

—Katie Riegel

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

## Jennifer K. Sweeney

### Call and Response

There are mnemonics for remembering bird calls.

*Listen to my evening sing-ing-ing-ing* croons the vesper sparrow,  
*But-I-DO-love you* pleads the Eastern meadowlark  
or the Inca dove's bleak *no-hope*.

That fall, an American goldfinch frequented our trumpet tree  
with its airy *Po-ta-to chip!* and I thought  
how our bodies exude their own churling mantras:  
in the past, *I-am-no-good*  
then, *please-just-breathe just-breathe*.

As the days wound back to darkness,  
a new chant became clear,  
red-tailed vireo that hums through Northern woods  
*Here-I-am Where-are-you?*

weaving a nest of bark strips, pine, lichen  
and never is the song more true  
than when she lays her eggs, and cowbirds prey  
leaving the mother to mourn the disappeared  
work of her body in a solo  
of call and response. Each month  
our love offered up its question to the world.

*Here-I-am Where-are-you?*  
as the ovums rose and disintegrated silently.  
We walked along scrolls of ocean,  
crows jagging the cliffs like elaborate shadows  
and felt the specific pain of *Not-yet Not-yet*.

*sweet*

4.3

## **Wolf Lake**

Seedfluff gathers in white canals along the path  
but how to locate the source:  
some bramble let-go into all possible

green. Late March and craving  
the fixity of an object.  
To hear the bullfrog and see him at once.

The blueprint of spring revealed  
itself so briefly at dawn.  
For two hours I could see,

outlining the trees,  
a presence like slipping  
between the margins of loss.

Turtle on the path now.  
Thirteen moons painted on its shell.  
And the blueprint of the boy

tucked in its own sac:  
instructions for eyes, nerves, a spine.  
Waiting for the window

to the next world to open, I say  
*there is no knowledge like this*  
*but so many minor gladnesses.*

Blackbird. Cricket. Clay.  
Tulips flouncing open at midnight.  
Lightening in the belly,

not long before the last dark gasp of sea.  
Instincts we are born with:  
suck, cry, sleep.

To stand before a body  
of water and want  
to throw the palmed stone in.

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

*sweet*

4.3

### **Setting The Table For The Deer**

Under the ponderosa pine, a family  
of deer gathered in late autumn,  
chewing on chucked corncobs from August dinners  
or our windfall of mealy tree-apples.  
Some snowy nights dark with solstice  
they'd rush the yard kicking up drifts  
under the spun sky  
as if beauty had finally sprung a lock  
on the reserve midwinter requires.  
My father wanted to fell the pine,  
its hulking shadow dwarfing the porch,  
but was persuaded to let it die  
in its own time.  
My sisters and I are all grown,

our swing-set hung with bird feeders  
and the picnic table, migrated  
to the woods' edge.  
Maybe because the neighborhood has emptied  
of children and hammers no longer  
pound in the distance,  
a new season of deer has returned  
and just before my parents dine  
at the tidy hour of 5:30,  
they carry heaped trays out back, like demigods  
lay a spread of alfalfa, oats, clover  
along the table's weathered periphery  
and the deer emerge in fives and tens,  
bend their necks to the splintered planks  
where platters of hot dogs and citronella candles  
had once been, to eat their evening meal,  
not questioning its arrival or presentation,  
each with a measured plot of molasses and grain,  
the last cinders of dusk falling into place  
while inside the house, my father draws  
the struck match to the candlewicks,  
my mother setting the table for two.

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

JENNIFER K. SWEENEY's second poetry collection, *How to Live on Bread and Music*, received the James Laughlin Award from the Academy of America Poets, the Perugia Press Prize and was later nominated for the Poets' Prize. Her first book, *Salt Memory*, won the Main Street Rag Poetry Award. She is the recipient of a Pushcart Prize, the Elinor Benedict Poetry Award from *Passages North* and two Dorothy Sargent Rosenberg awards. Her poems have been translated into Turkish and published widely in literary journals including *American Poetry Review* and *Poetry Daily*. She lives in Redlands, CA with her husband, poet Chad Sweeney and their son, Liam.

## *Jeffrey Thomson*

### **What Are You Reading?**

Because I wish to appear  
kind and because poets  
write for poets anyway,  
let's pretend I am  
reading your book,  
and I enjoy it immensely.  
It's your range that attracts  
me: you put a mirror between  
two mirrors and imagine  
the infinite and its opposite.  
You lecture the bees  
in the furious work  
of their hive. You bell  
the cat and mouse  
down into the hole  
in the wall, white as  
a blank page. The way  
you take risks, too,  
like a wingwalker hung  
from the stanchions  
of a single engine Bellanca,  
buffeted by the wind of all  
those open vowels, the electric  
froth of the clouds now  
above you now below  
and the plane dizzy  
with your pyrotechnics,  
I particularly admire. It's

all about danger, for you,  
isn't it? The way you  
stalk your poem through  
the sea grass, filled like the sea  
with all the plastic bangles  
and coconuts jetsam can  
manage, the long V  
of the grass closing on  
the heels of your poem  
as it slips back toward  
the trees and the small  
house in the clearing  
where you can still hear  
the surf roughing up the  
shore, and you, you predator  
on after it. Now you  
build beautiful contraptions  
that snap shut around me,  
now you let me free to  
wander the trumpeting  
fields of your imagination,  
black-faced lambs nuzzling  
clover while you, like the  
kindest of shepherds, start  
the slaughter—your knife  
the color of moonlight—so as  
to lay out lunch for the wolf.

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

JEFFREY THOMSON is the author of four books of poems, including *Birdwatching in Wartime*, winner of both the 2010 Maine Book Award and the 2011 ASLE Award in Environmental Creative Writing, and *Renovation*. His

translations of the Roman poet, Catullus, are forthcoming from Cambridge University Press. In 2012 he was the Fulbright Distinguished Scholar in Creative Writing at the Seamus Heaney Poetry Centre at Queen's University Belfast. Currently, an associate professor of creative writing at the University of Maine Farmington, his website is [www.jeffreythomson.com](http://www.jeffreythomson.com). His favorite sweet is *Crème brûlée*.

*Laura E. Davis***Eggs**

Our bodies take flight in search  
of blue eggs. We swallow them  
whole, grow tiny herds inside  
our stomachs. Our long fingers  
sink in slowly through the earth,  
place a root between our thighs.  
We pray that we learn to sew,  
slip silent through the ocean  
waves, crack oysters open, place  
pearls on our tongues. We wish  
we had remembered our teeth.  
Most days we follow the sweet  
violence of bees, write our names  
on the sky with blades of grass.

LAURA E. DAVIS is the author of the chapbook *Braiding the Storm*, forthcoming from Finishing Line Press (2012). Her poems are featured or forthcoming in *Crab Creek Review*, *J.T. Eckleberg Review*, *Super Arrow*, *The Splinter Generation*, and *Redactions*, among others. She is the Founding Editor of *Weave* and currently teaches kids the art of translation for Poetry Inside Out. She lives in San Francisco with her partner Sal, who shares her love of chocolate peanut butter ice cream. She blogs at [Dear Outer Space](#).

## ***W. Todd Kaneko***

### **Different Sort of Trees**

We don't sleep anymore, don't even  
lie down. Tell me about days before the war,  
before you endured Camp Minidoka, whole  
bushels of history spilling forth.

Tell me about your wedding ring, about dancing  
in orchards with my grandfather, about train tracks.

I've lived on the other side of winter, forgot how real  
weather feels—the furnace's breath, the showerhead  
my only reminder of sky.

Did he ever gulp whiskey and stumble home  
after dark? Did you ever steal fruit at dawn?

When the ice melts, our house fills with perfume  
as the skunks bloom, as pollen swarms venomous  
in our night parlor.

What color were those trees at midnight? Do they  
survive now that you are so far from the farm?  
What about the atom bomb, poison intoxicating us  
all like orange blossoms now that your husband  
rests in that tiny box of ashes at your bedside?

We can't sleep like horses, don't shed our skins  
like leaves, veined and diaphanous in the outlines  
of grief. We stand under dark canopies, arms

waving the wind away—we see one another  
like we used to, not like we used to.

Now the orchards have all been uprooted, now  
the orchards stand where they've always been.

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

*sweet*

4.3

### **We Sleep Like Horses**

When I dream, I see an open meadow  
from my father's living room  
windows, the house drained of color  
except for the sunrise,

a splash of fire like an angel's name  
spoken for the first time  
since awaking underground.

When my father dreams, he rides  
through the ocean, perhaps—  
hooves pounding the beach  
like a pair of fists, like

his father's fists against that spot  
where the moon leaves a zag of sky  
on the carpet every night.

Those things I know in the dark are just

between me and those emptied stables of night,  
between me and all those lonely houses  
I cannot remember while conscious.

When the body is quiet, the heart may roam  
where it desires—so why can't we close  
the blinds, relish the darkness? Why can't we  
open all our windows so the birds might fly inside?

...return to Table of Contents

W. TODD KANEKO lives and writes in Grand Rapids, Michigan. His stories and poems can be seen in *Crab Creek Review*, *Fairy Tale Review*, *Southeast Review*, *NANO Fiction*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Blackbird* and elsewhere. He has received fellowships from Kundiman and the Kenyon Review Writer's Workshop. His sweet tooth is insatiable and he invites every Sour Patch Kid he meets to live in his stomach. He teaches at Grand Valley State University. You can find him online at [toddkaneko.com](http://toddkaneko.com).

## *Elizabeth J. Colen*

### **Dark Stones**

Some mornings stab the breath out of our lungs. A rooster crows, sound lightning through the unkempt clutch of trees. The highway, like water, wanders off when the wind picks up. Your mother used to bake bread that looked like the dark stones we find on the beach. You fill each pocket, remembering when bread was heavier. That golden bough, that blackened char that made the mouth right, made the mouth into a turing machine. This is what success is: talking to each other with our fists up, a rotating cuff. Guilt is a function of Consequence, equals Risk times Possibility. A stab is a throb is a heart beat. We make love that sinks in shallow water, love that floats the deep. The camera is another face in the crowd, the room an engram. A way to get right with *oh my God*.

ELIZABETH J. COLEN is the author of poetry collections *Money for Sunsets* (Steel Toe Books, 2010) and *Waiting Up for the End of the World* (Jaded Ibis Press, 2012), as well as flash fiction collection *Dear Mother Monster, Dear Daughter Mistake* (Rose Metal Press, 2011). The occasional post about bookish things as well as links to more work can be found at [elizabethjcolen.blogspot.com](http://elizabethjcolen.blogspot.com).

***Robert Lunday***

**A Vision**

- of Houston

I see all the buildings downtown stripped to their elevators,  
and the elevators rise and fall before becoming transparent,  
and all the people in them traveling the sky.  
Then their clothes disappear and their nakedness  
is the colors of the sky, and I'm naked, too,  
but my flesh is the color of the streets.  
It's a dream like Jacob's but multiplied,  
sharp young professionals and corporate lions  
ascending and descending the ladders of heaven  
on streets from which the city has disappeared.

ROBERT LUNDAY is the author of *Mad Flights*, Ashland Poetry Press, 2002. Recent work has appeared in *Poet Lore*, *Drunken Boat*, *Prick of the Spindle*, *Agni Online*, *Tuesday; an Art Project*, *Pank*, and *American Book Review*. He lives with his wife, Yukiko, four horses, three dogs, and one duck near Austin, Texas, and teaches for Houston Community College. His favorite sweet is pecan pie, right after some Texas barbeque.

***Liz Kay***

**The Witch Awaits The Children**

Here is the part that we know by heart:

*who's that nibbling*

*nibbling?* And the echo of a child's  
voice carried above the wind.

You are holding your breath now.

You are willing them to silence.

I can feel you. This is where we all begin.

*sweet*

4.3

### **The Witch Introduces Herself**

Everyone wants to know  
about the children,

how they are and if they made it  
out. What does it matter

now? Can you see there is no  
*happy* here, not ever

after all? I, too, was a child once  
and wrestled my way out.

I was one who was not  
devoured. Look who I am now.

This is my victory. If there's a hero  
in this story, I tell you, it's me.

### **Firewood—The Witch Explains The Nature of Men**

Mother said I was the best at gathering because I was small and could slip into spaces the sun and rain couldn't reach, where the trees were oldest, beginning to splinter off limbs. I knew it was less about smallness than it was about ease. I'd press only with my fingers until the forest opened to take my body in. I've watched a man force his way, breaking branches in jagged snags, a window torn in the dark heart of the wood. They might have swayed to a lighter touch. Instead, their rough edges caught him at knife-point, ripped at his arms, his shirt, his face. This is how a man moves in the world, the friction of him working like a grindstone. He thinks only of what he can wear down. He is always surprised by the blades.

...return to Table of Contents

LIZ KAY holds an MFA from the University of Nebraska, where she was awarded both an Academy of American Poets' Prize and the Wendy Fort Foundation Prize. Recent poems have appeared in, or are forthcoming from, such publications as *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Nimrod*, *The New York Quarterly*, *Redactions: Poetry & Poetics*, and *Willow Springs*. Her first chapbook *Something to Help me Sleep* was published by {dancing girl press} in January of 2012. Liz lives and teaches in Omaha, where she is a founding editor of the journal *burntdistrict*. She can be found online at [lizkay.net](http://lizkay.net). Her favorite sweet is the gingerbread house, though she generally leaves the eating of it to the children.

## Ice

*Jocelyn Bartkevicius*

Dead of winter; a world frozen and confectioned with snow. The duck pond in Milford Center, just past the village green, behind city hall, white clapboard glazed with ice. I'm three years old, so bundled up, I can barely walk, and my father carries me over to the park bench, brushes off snow, sits me down, pulls out brand new baby skates, double bladed, like training wheels.

It's my first memory of him post-divorce, the first of what will become fifteen years of Sundays. Half a mile away, his immigrant parents still live in the house he fled at fourteen. Chickens in the backyard, spare the rod and spoil the child, Mass twice a week, so he took the James Dean approach, became the pistol-packing renegade on a Harley, cigarette pack rolled up in the sleeve of his t-shirt. And that is my mother's first memory of him.

Now he's left with the memory of a young wife toting a suitcase under one arm, and his eighteen-month-old daughter under the other, and a future of hollowed-out Sundays to fill for his only child, where he'll embrace the buddy approach: skating, sledding, touch football, tree climbing, doorbell ringing, horseback riding, shooting pool, shooting beer cans, shooting bats and other creatures he considers vermin at the old farm he'll buy, where he'll stable horses but never have chickens free ranging in the backyard.

But that first Sunday he is Prince Charming, kneeling before me to remove my boots, warms each foot between the palms of his hands, slips the skates on, perfect fit. He puts on hockey skates, takes my hand, and we step side-ways, crunching frozen grass, to the pond.

"Don't worry," he says, when I shiver. "You'll warm up when you start moving around."

My dull twin blades grip the dark, scratched-up surface. I toddle along, clutching his hand. Older kids glide back and forth all around us. Boys with hockey sticks race past. That's what I want to do, and I point, but say nothing. It's my way with him, and it unsettles both of us, this silence. We are getting used to each other again, months after my mother walked out.

On the ice, a girl performs graceful figure eights. I point.

“Yes,” he says. “Someday you’ll do that.” I want now, not someday, and try to glide, but the skates grip and I stumble.

He jerks my arm to steady me.

I step away from him, staring at the ice, threateningly close. Where it isn’t etched in white lines from sharpened skates, it’s clear enough to reveal mud, dead leaves, the dark cold water that will never freeze. Dark cold dizzying void beneath the surface of my listless, tentative first attempts. Already my view of life is bleak. Already I’m obsessed with the end. I take tiny steps.

“Try to slide,” my father says. He demonstrates, gliding away, turning sharply, racing straight at me, skidding to an ice-spraying stop.

I try to immitate him, but my dull blades cling to the surface.

“Keep trying,” he says. “You’re doing fine.” But it’s clear to both of us that I am not. ”I have to catch up on my reading,” he says, and skates away.

I want him to stay with me. The boys with hockey sticks seem wild and threatenng as they fly past. But I say nothing, watch him head back to the dull green wooden bench about thirty feet away. He changes back into his boots on, opens his Wall Street Journal, waves, disappears behind the pages.

My mother has told me he’s a factory worker, without bothering to mention that he’s also a self-educated investor. It’s clear he has what we don’t: a packetfull of money, a car and house. My mother and I share a room at her mother’s tiny rental, escape by foot or taxicab Grandma’s lamentations—“My husband was an alcoholic and he left me with six kids”—short trips to the A&P, long walks on the beach.

My father buys the newspaper every day at Izzie’s news stand, and on Sundays gets me Necco Wafers, maybe plays a number. Even the cop who walks the beat, who grew up with my father, who gives me a quarter, plays the numbers at Izzies. I sense that the store is alluring, with a touch of intrigue and danger, even before I know betting is illegal, run by the mob.

Alone on the ice, I fail to glide. My father glances up from his paper. Returns to reading. Looks up again. Returns to his paper.

I take longer steps, almost slide, and follow the shadowy outline of a partially submerged treelimb, and where it breaks the surface, reach for a dead leaf. As I pluck it, the thin ice gives out, and my chest smashes into hard ice. Wind knocked out of me, I’m splayed on the ice, unable to breath, one leg submerged, the other crumpled behind me. Frigid water seeps through my corduroy pants. I shiver convulsively. My breath returns, short gasps of white vapor, silent as smoke signals.

I look up at my father. He’s buried in his newspaper, only the top of his balding head visible. He

wears no hat. I lie there silently, waiting. The paper is important. That's where the money for the Oldsmobile and house and Necco wafers comes from. He'll look up when he's ready. He'll see how stupid I've been, disobedient. I was supposed to skate and be quiet, not venture out to investigate sunken trees.

My father glances up, the same neutral expression as before, returns to the paper as if not comprehending what he's seen there on the ice. In the interstitial moment of blank confusion before he looks up again, throws down the paper, and runs across the ice to my rescue, I glimpse all the confusion of a balding, divorced factory worker who is clueless about fatherhood and family, an almost palpable loneliness and isolation, more painful than the blow to my chest from the fall, and I'd rather sink below the ice than witness it.

He runs, slides, steps carefully, reaches across thin ice, raises me up out of the hole, hands under my arms, backs away from the treelimb.

"Jesus," he says. "Why didn't you *say* something?"

I have no answer.

In the car, he blasts the heat, removes my skates and wet pants, covers me with his wool coat, stares at me as if baffled by my silence, my utter lack of a survival instinct.

But as a child I see only my own silence, my stupidity, my father continually running to my rescue. He'll lift me out of a nest of yellow jackets I've stepped into, run across the lawn with me, tears in his eyes, both of us under attack by the entire hive, each sting hot as a cigarette burn. He'll raise me up out of a hillside of poison ivy, buy me Calamine lotion and a transistor radio when I'm bedridden for days, body covered in the itchy, stinging rash.

My father never demanded silence, never hinted that his leisure was worth more than my safety, my life. Built into my nature is acquiescence to fate.

A few years later, I've changed schools and neighborhoods, started first grade with strangers. My father has managed to make me a decent skater, and each year for Christmas he provides brand-new sharpened skates.

There's a small patch of ice in the driveway of the house my mother and new stepfather, Kirdy, have just bought, smooth black ice that froze after Kirdy rinsed road salt off the car.

A boy I barely know, Lonnie, a neighbor and classmate, shows up at our door, skates in hand, one late afternoon near dusk. "Want to skate?" he says. "There's ice in your driveway."

"Go ahead," my mother insists. In addition to a clingy daughter who needs to get out there and make friends, she has dinner to cook, a baby to quiet.

I'm skeptical, but I do want to skate.

I grab the single-bladed skates hanging in the cellar, sit beside Lonnie on our freezing concrete back steps, and lace up silently.

We try to skate on what amounts to a pathetically small frozen puddle. Lonnie is one of the bad boys who has to sit in the front row of our first grade class so the teacher, Miss Tartar, can keep an eye on him. His neck is always dirty, and his hair smells like wet dog fur. But he reminds me of my best friend from the old neighborhood, Anthony, another boy with scruffy blond hair, and a look of wild deperation in his blue eyes.

We're all three from similar families: single mothers with emotionally unstable, chain-smoking grandmothers presiding over the household. Only now my life has changed with my mother's recent remarriage to a nightclub owner.

Like Anthony, Lonnie doesn't have a father. Like my mother, I have a weakness for dangerous men.

We skate in a small awkward circle, then try out figure eights, nearly bumping into each other at the center. Suddenly, Lonnie pushes me down onto the ice and climbs on top of me. I lie on my side, slightly curled. He lies face down, curled precisely over me, like a jellyfish, pressing me into the ice.

I remain motionless and try to turn my head enough to see into the kitchen window above us. My mother is in there, starting supper. I hear cabinets slam shut, pans clanging. The kitchen is warm, smells like the sausage, onion, and garlic she fries for fresh pasta sauce each night. WNEW out of New York City is on the radio, the soft romantic strains of Frank Sinatra.

If she looks out the window, she'll have to step close to the glass, wipe away the steamy condensation, peer down past the steps, to see us lying there in the disappearing twilight.

Lonnie pins me against the ice. His breath against my cheek. His sour smell has an almost tactile immediacy.

I don't call out. If my mother looks out the window to check on me, Lonnie will have to release me, disappear into the night, go away forever. But I'll be exposed.

I lie beneath Lonnie, barely breathing, waiting for someone, anyone, to make the next move.

JOCELYN BARTKEVICIUS is the editor of *The Florida Review* and directs the MFA program in creative writing at the University of Central Florida. Her work has been published in anthologies, and such journals as *The Hudson Review*, *The Missouri Review*, *The Bellingham Review*, *The Iowa Review*, *Fourth Genre*, and *American Book Review*, and has received The Annie Dillard Award in the Essay, *The Missouri Review Prize*, and the *Iowa Woman Essay Award*. She is completing a memoir, *The Emerald Room*. She is still seeking that ideal sweet, which would be a combination of her mother's chocolate pudding (served almost too hot with freshly whipped cream) and grandmother's chocolate fudge, which took excruciatingly long to make and was also eaten hot. Flourless chocolate cake almost does it.

## How You Become A Mother

*Donna Vorreyer*

You are a little ashamed that one of your first thoughts is I could have been a slut in high school, all of those boys who wanted to touch you, fear of pregnancy trumping every primal urge, and you wonder what it would have been like. You sit and listen to your pregnant friends bemoan their swollen feet, their five-minute bladders. They confer about vitamins and breathing techniques. They worry about doctors and vaccines and which breast pump to buy. You listen politely, have nothing to add. They ask if they should change the subject. You say no. You sit in the social worker's office, and she asks you what sort of child you would like to adopt. The only answer you can think of is human. You have to write about your whole life, the therapist's foot tapping in time with her pen as she grills you about your parents, your childhood, your definition of family. You have to circle yes or no on checklists: would you adopt a child without a limb? With a heart condition? You are a monster whenever you circle no. You stare at a picture over and over. This will be your son. You send off your fingerprints, are rubber-stamped by two different countries. You wait for everything to be ready. You stare at a picture. This will be your son. You are delayed by the state's red tape, so you enlist the help of your senator, your congressman. Two months later, you are cleared. You stare at a picture. This will be your son. You can wait to travel, or the escort overseas can bring him now. You say get on the plane. Now your friends have had the babies, and you listen to horror stories about stitches, jaundice, and incubators. They complain about stretch marks, tender breasts, delirium from lack of sleep. They blend their own organic carrot mush, obsess over breastfeeding benefits and percentiles for length and weight. They ask for your opinion. You can only remember how you waited at the airport, how you held your breath as you lifted him from the stroller and your whole body just knew what to do.

DONNA VORREYER spends her days teaching, trying to convince teenagers that words matter. She hates coffee but would kill for a morning Diet Coke. Her poetry has been published in many journals, and her work includes the chapbooks *Womb/Seed/Fruit* (Finishing Line Press, 2010) and *Come Out, Virginia* (Naked Mannekin Press, 2011). Visit her online at [www.donnavorreyer.com](http://www.donnavorreyer.com)

## Woman Not Coming Back

*Pamela Schmid*

He's sitting in the little red wagon, legs splayed out on the cushions, gripping his mantra tighter than the wagon's peeling sides.

"*Id okay,*" my son whispers, more to himself than to me. "*Id okay.*"

Normally, this springtime walk home from preschool is filled with happy, half-intelligible chatter about Eli's friends, his teachers, the songs they sang that day. But today, his voice is quavering, and I turn around to see the familiar neon green of the recycling truck. It grumbles in our direction, stops, and there is the loud clatter-crash of glass and metal—beer and wine bottles, cat food cans, pasta sauce jars tumbling into the truck's open mouth. The noise makes Eli jump and grip the sides even tighter.

"*Id okay id okay id okay,*" he whispers like an incantation, his voice on the edge of breaking.

The truck starts up again, its air brakes emitting a half squeal, half belch, and this time Eli lets out a full-throated whimper.

Trucks identical to this one have appeared hundreds of times on these city blocks since Eli was born three years ago. But today, it's as if a neon-green monster has invaded our neighborhood of century-old homes.

"*Me cay-wee you! Me cay-wee you!*"

Before I have time to stop the wagon, he is swinging his legs over the side.

"Eli, please don't climb out."

Another clatter-clash of breakables. Another blast of air brakes. Eli flinches.

"*Me cay-wee you!*" His voice is louder now, and quavering. He's out of the wagon, his arms wrapped around my legs as if hugging me will save him. He refuses to walk on his own.

The recycling truck continues to shadow us, and I feel an irrational urge to throw something at it. Eli hugs my leg so hard it hurts. His brown eyes well up with tears. He will not go back in the wagon, so I hoist him on my hip, all thirty-two trembling pounds. I wrap one arm around his waist, pull the wagon with the other and hope my back will hold up for the next three blocks.

\*

How do you move through life with a child who fears so much?

When he was not quite two, I enrolled my son in a tiny tot art class that lasted until the day he shrieked at the sight of modeling clay. It was muddy brown, the color of springtime puddles. But while the other toddlers happily poked and prodded their clay with sticks and fingers, Eli touched it once and decided that was enough. Was it the texture? The way it stuck, cold and clammy, to his little fingers? I could only guess, because he had no words to tell me, only shrieks that drew puzzled looks and lasted until I scooped him up and fled.

A few months later, Eli came to fear plants, indoor plants mostly, plants that sprawled out of large pots and lurked in dark corners. Big, bushy plants were the worst, making him cower or even shove me in front of him as a shield. He often refused to enter a room that harbored an especially large plant. And it seemed, for a while, that potted plants lurked everywhere. Coffeehouses. Atriums. Restaurants. The den of my parents' home.

My husband, Andy, and I tried to humanize the plants, giving them easy-to-pronounce names like "Ben" or "Dan." "Hi Dan," we would say, waving, as we scurried by. "Leave us alone, Dan. Don't bother us." Eli would eye the plants warily, but usually followed our cue. Their hold over him shrank. Naming them somehow drained them of their power.

This most recent terror feels different. It feels grounded in something primal, rooted deep underground. I suspect that it's less about the noise itself than the lingering threat of it, the chance of a sudden eruption coming from anywhere at any time—familiar sounds, but out of context. They are fire trucks emitting staccato siren bursts in the Grand Old Day parade, followed by revving motorcycles, a combination that made him shake and wail. They are dogs of any size with loud, yappy barks. They are neon-green recycling trucks. What he fears most is the possibility: the barking, the crashing, the *not knowing*. It's the paranoia of tiptoeing through the haunted house at the fair, worried that any moment, a bloody ghoul could jump out of the shadows and grab you.

Eli's ghouls are inside him, too. They choke off the words poised on his lips and twist them into odd, alien forms. "Two" becomes "*koo*." "Read" becomes "*weeg*." The sounds are foreign,

untamable.

The official diagnosis is apraxia, and the problem lies somewhere in the signals zooming between the brain and mouth. Along the way, something misfires; the sounds get stuck. The boy knows the words he wants to say, but his tongue and lips can't do the intricate dance required to say them. It will take years for him to learn the right steps.

“He has so much locked inside,” his speech therapist tells us. “So much he would say if only he could.”

It's really no wonder Eli feels threatened by the objects and animals surrounding him. They, too, make sounds he can't harness or tame.

\*

When I was little, I had a similar, if not quite so wide-ranging, fear of loud noises. I hated fireworks and cap guns. I especially hated balloons. Those feather-light sound bombs struck me nearly speechless with fear, their skin stretched so taut it squeaked, as if aching to explode. It was not the balloon's destruction that bothered me, but rather its *potential* for destruction, the hollow, unstable state that made it so ripe to explode. It would take so little—one ragged fingernail, the swipe of a cat's paw, a clenching fist. I could not relax with a balloon in the room; I still can't. It makes me itchy and short of breath, as if I have ants crawling up my arms.

One of my earliest memories is of a party I attended with my little sister—we must have been around 5 and 3—whose main attraction was a game of sitting on oversized balloons and popping them. How could anyone have conceived of something so sadistic, at a child's birthday party, no less? Why not just invite us all to Superglu our mouths shut, or walk on a floor littered with thumb tacks?

That day, as my playmates gleefully began chasing down and smashing a colorful array of balloons, I ran. I fled to the far end of the house, red-faced with fear, fingers jammed in my ears, trying to put as much distance as I could between myself and the volley of explosions.

\*

One day, our son began to fear sleep itself. How was this even possible? If Eli rolled over late, crawled late, walked late, potty trained late and had trouble getting words out, at least we were

secure in the knowledge that our little boy would always sleep like a superhero. As a baby, we would place him in his bassinet, switch off the light, and turn on the monitor, knowing that we wouldn't hear another peep until he woke up hungry in the early morning. Once he stopped nursing, he could easily sleep for ten, eleven, sometimes twelve hours at a stretch. He looked forward to his daily naptimes as much as I did, perhaps more, and always woke up happy.

He loved being in bed, loved sleeping, and we loved that he loved it. Until the day he hated it.

One afternoon shortly after Eli turned three, I closed the book we were reading and stood up to leave. He climbed out of bed after me. "*No nap,*" he said. "*Nah wite now.*" Not right now.

"Time for your nap," I warbled sweetly as I closed his door. "I love you!"

The doorknob jiggled soon after that; then came his wails of protest. His crying had a different sound, urgent and fearful. But I convinced myself that he was simply over-tired and would soon cry himself to sleep.

He didn't sleep, though—that day or the days that followed. He cried until I retrieved him. This went on until I finally gave up, figuring that if he no longer slept during the day at least he would be exhausted by evening. But soon he began to fight bedtime as well.

"*Weed anudah book!*" he would cry, bolting up anxiously after I had already spent twenty minutes reading nursery rhymes to him. "*Weed a BIG one!*"

He stalled. He dragged out his bedtime routine as long as possible. Like a drug addict desperate for his next fix, he would say anything to get me to stay. He used to let me stroke his cheek through the bed rails as I sang *Doe a Deer* to him, before curling up happily and watching me go; now, as soon as I stopped singing, his eyes grew round as lanterns. "*Ing Go a Ghee AGAIN!*" he would cry. I would gently decline and close the door. Then came the wails.

Downstairs, I sat stiffly beside Andy and gritted my teeth. I punched the pillows of the couch. We knew that if one of us went upstairs, Eli would beg for another song. He would always want more.

After a minute or so of quiet, the wails started up again, as we knew they would. I swore. Then I announced that I was heading back up.

Andy grabbed my wrist. "Don't," he said. "He'll stop when he knows we're staying put."

We thought he would snap out of it. We were wrong. Night after night, Eli begged us to stay. Sometimes we left the door open. Sometimes I sat out in the hallway. He still cried. Even after he cried himself to sleep, he woke up screaming three or four times a night. Sometimes Andy or I brought a pillow and sheet in and slept beside him. Other nights, one of us sat in the rocking chair and waited for his steady breathing. Our son became so sleep-deprived he began stumbling over his

own feet. He became a constant whining machine. I was so tired I constantly fought the urge to yell.

We no longer recognized ourselves.

\*

It was bedtime again, and this night Andy was in charge. When he stood up to leave, Eli pointed to his bedroom window and whimpered slightly. "*Who-man in win-goh.*"

"Did you see a woman?" Andy asked.

"*Kae-wee who-man.*"

"Scary?"

Eli nodded.

"Did you have a bad dream?"

"*Bad dweam.*" Another nod.

When Andy later relayed the exchange to me, my initial thought was, *who?* Who did Eli see, or imagine? But then it hit me: Eli had words! He finally had the power to name his monsters, the things he feared most.

"We need to tell that woman to stay away," I said the next afternoon, sitting beside Eli in bed. I squinched up my eyes, jabbed my finger at the window, and shouted: "WOMAN STAY AWAY!"

Eli giggled. "*Who-man KAY a-WAY!!*" he parroted, thinking out each sound. Then we chanted the words together, slowly, one final time.

"Well, that took care of it," I told him. "She's not coming back now."

"*Who-man NAH coming back!*" Eli said, smiling.

Eli still woke up crying for the next few weeks, but usually calmed down after a quick song and pat on the head. And soon enough, he resumed his nap routine, putting his head down provided I left his door wide open. His desperate pleas to keep us in the room receded, as long as we kept telling the scary woman to stay away.

The woman has mostly kept her distance since then, although she does haunt Eli's thoughts occasionally. Those are the times he will declare, mostly to himself: "*Who-man NAH coming back!*"

Words as incantation, as encasement.

"*Who-man NAH coming back!*"

They spill hard from his lips. He reaches out, fingers them like pearls.

...return to Table of Contents

PAMELA SCHMID is completing her MFA in creative writing at Hamline University. In her previous life, she was a staff writer for the *Star Tribune of Minneapolis*, and her work appeared in the *Seattle Times*, *Miami Herald* and *Newark Star-Ledger*, among other places. She has served on the editorial board of *Water-Stone Review* and is a co-founder and contributor to *Grout* ([cnfgROUT.blogspot.com](http://cnfgROUT.blogspot.com)), a collaborative blog focused on literary nonfiction. Childhood pastimes have included sipping soda through Twizzlers straws. These days, she will agree to almost anything when offered baked goods containing rhubarb. You can reach her at [pbschmid1@gmail.com](mailto:pbschmid1@gmail.com).

## Origin Stories

*Joe Bonomo*

I silently begged, pleaded with Molly to talk to me. Anything, I won't tell! I'd gently hold her warm mutt head in my hands, bend her dog face to mine, lock eyes, hers brown and soulful, and implore her: say something, anything. Let me know that what I know is true. Say something. In the craziest moments, we came close. So I felt. Close to talking. What would she say? What language would she use to mend the cleavage between animals? This I must know. Say something, anything, I won't tell! What I really didn't know—beyond if she could, or would she, or what she'd say, what complaints or agreements or backyard or rec room secrets she'd whimper—was where I'd go if I heard her right, what world I'd tumble into, what world I'd leave behind, if Molly said.

In spring, the crab apple tree in the front yard grew heavy with bitter, marble-like fruits and Gothic with awful caterpillar nests, silk clouds of milky white suspended in the trees, loathsome tents bursting with a thousand caterpillars; we'd light them on fire every year. Before the nests would arrive, before my mom would sigh, I'd climb the tree, loving the time alone and the argument with gravity that kept me tethered to the house and the family that I wanted distance from, even as I was building imaginative houses in the tree, knowing and naming the crooked hallways, slim desks and windows in twists of limbs and thatches of crowded leaves, here a cramped staircase of winding limbs, there a bay window, a clearing of branches onto the lawn and the maple tree on the other side of the yard where I built another house in my head, propped against a dresser of thick, brown limbs, sitting, trying to doze—guarded against the fear of falling—in a rocking chair made of sympathetic branches, a kind of L bent enough to say chair, and hold me. This was my home's doppelganger, my tree's parallel house, a blueprint of floor and wall and roof that I drew in my head, every day up there in the trees against the fading sunlight, a dream as substantial as the structure I dreamt in.

There's no greater emblem for suburban futility than a Frisbee on the roof. You're playing with a friend, enjoying the sun and the breeze, when an errant toss and a wind gust conspire against the afternoon: Frisbee's on the roof, man. Step back to the furthest edge of the yard and crane your neck and peer at it, if you can see it, and you know that the day's possibilities have been foreshortened not only by the mishap but by your youth, your size, the fascistic insistence of parents, older people, necessary people. The sun seems to be disappearing too quickly. You have to wait for your dad to get the ladder. You're too small or scared to get it yourself. You wait. You'll have to wait. But isn't there always a cooler kid—or maybe it's your friend who's cool, suddenly—who'll get the ladder,

laughing wide-eyed as he wrestles it out of the garage or the backyard, it's impossibly heavy, and your chest tingles at the promise of anarchy; or he climbs a tree and lunges dangerously for the roof, and inside you're excited for the outcome, this nerve against adults, oh man the possibilities! Or you simply wait. Where's the memoir written by that cool kid with the nerve to step into Grownupland? I want to read that account, see how it's been tempered, or reduced, or elevated, or exaggerated by the passage of time and the scars borne of dutiful citizenship in Adultville. Where's that kid now?

...return to Table of Contents

JOE BONOMO's books include *Conversations With Greil Marcus*, *AC/DC's Highway to Hell* (33 1/3 Series), *Jerry Lee Lewis: Lost and Found*, *Installations* (National Poetry Series), and *Sweat: The Story of The Fleshtones, America's Garage Band*. His essays and prose poems appear widely. He teaches at Northern Illinois University, and appears online at *No Such Thing As Was* ([www.nosuchthingaswas.com](http://www.nosuchthingaswas.com)).

## Microbubbles

*Nicole Walker*

*Passage of micro-bubbles into the left atrium or aorta can be detected with echocardiography. With the use of colored Doppler echocardiography, right to left shunting of blood through the foramen ovale and ductus arteriosus can be directly visualized.*

Turning carbon dioxide into oxygen shouldn't have to be a thought. It is the job of the physical lungs to do hard chemistry, not the brain. In high-school, I was good at chemistry, maybe because I liked balancing equations, maybe because I liked the word stoichiometry. Two elements combining force to catapult from one side of that equal sign onto the other to become a new thing on the right—what kind of teenager thinks that is some kind of manageable magic?

When Rebecca's babies were born, a little early, I wasn't worried. They were more term than my daughter had been at thirty-three weeks. They weighed more. Had fleshier flesh. Twenty days in the NICU, I promised. I knew. I was good at chemistry. I could have been a doctor.

But doctor that I may have been, I'd never heard of Persistent Pulmonary Hypertension in Newborns. Persistent sounds longer than twenty days. Primary Children's Hospital in Salt Lake, where my daughter had been a patient, sent the jet ventilator down to Los Angeles Children's hospital where it sounds that doctors thought they may have been, they too were unprepared for Persistent Pulmonary Hypertension in Newborns.

Twenty days passed and I felt like a liar. Twenty days the baby girl's lungs were oscillated by a vent that sounded like a jet. Twenty days of no change and the doctors started talking like if the Persistent Pulmonary Hypertension in Newborns didn't stop persisting, soon they would soon be thinking thoughts no one should have to think, let alone say.

Rebecca heard the doctors burbling their little bubbles of noise. When a hole developed in the baby's lung, the doctors burbled louder. Against their own medical advice, the doctors let the baby sleep on her stomach.

On her stomach, against expectation, she began to breathe on her own. She kicked against the

paralytic. She blinked her eyes, asking what is this machine? Why are you trying to hold me down? I could fly out of here. This hole in my lung is its own kind of chemistry. I am converting back sleep to front sleep. I am converting oxygen saturations through my belly. I am making my own mixture of nitrogen oxide as a make these tiny bubbles around the tiny plastic opening of this respirator here. I will blow and blow through my lungs until I send this vent back into the sky along with the jets and birds where it belongs.

She was young enough to think that the equal sign is something you can master. She thought, I will make my own balance here of carbon on one side and oxygen on the other, lying on my stomach, eyeing my escape, blinking through the plastic walls, blowing a hole not only from my lung but from the bedding, from the plaster, from the plastic of this Los Angeles until I flip myself from this side of the equation to that side, over there.

\*

**mi•cro•nu•tri•ent *n*:** an essential nutrient, as a trace mineral or vitamin, that is required by an organism in minute amounts.

I think of little tiny cakes. Maybe petit-fours. God those were awful. Why did everything small when I was young, taste like Almond paste? My mom brought home from Germany tiny little pigs made from Marzipan. When she wasn't looking, I would stick my tongue on the pigs back, with tiny black marzipan dots for eyes and red marzipan stripes for sweaters. Sweatered pigs from Germany still tasted like amaretto—another thing I didn't like but would still sneak sips of on occasion.

I tried very hard to always put my tongue in the same place on the tiny pig, in between lines of sweater, so my mom wouldn't notice, so there wouldn't be a mark. I left tiny divots in the skin of the tiny pig. Eventually, though, wet marzipan rots. One day, I snuck into the dining room, opened the doors to the étagère, and there were no more tiny marzipan pigs. My mom must have found them sticky and clingy to the glass shelves. I moved on to wetting my finger and sticking it in the salt cellar, then moved on to the the sugar bowl. The salt never clumped but the sugar always did. My mom blamed it on the humidity even though we lived in Utah, the second most arid state in the country—next to Nevada, where not even spit-licked fingers can make the sugar clump. No one could live on marzipan. No one could live on just salt and sugar. But perhaps enough tiny licks of those three can keep you small in some way, forever.

\*

mi•cro•gas•tri•a *n*: Abnormal smallness of the stomach.

It is January and the ravens are fighting the squirrels over what I think is a peanut. I could get out there and fight them to see what exactly it is but I don't want to impinge upon their natural pugilism. Or maybe it's not natural. Why would they have a peanut, brought to Flagstaff, Arizona all the way from a peanut farm in Virginia, if someone, some artificial person, some external actor, put peanuts out in a bird house for the birds to eat? That person didn't mean squirrels or ravens—they meant pretty little birds like juncos and titmices. Titmouses? Do you make plural all things mouse in the same way? Even birds? Even tits?

A peanut isn't a word made for any other country though. It's an Americanism. Pea plus nut equals peanut although it's really neither a pea. The peanut, unlike the pea itself, claims its rightful place as the legume, possibly coming, like all good beans, from Peru, or possibly via a flying Raven stopping over in Mexico, in Arizona, then flying off toward Virginia where it will meet the name-makers and the slave-traders and the farmers that are both slaves and names and where they stay out of the way of the fights between squirrels and ravens because the natural ways of the squirrels and ravens aren't anyone's to mess with.

But it is cold out there. I sneak out at night and leave other nuts—authentic nuts, like pine nuts and walnuts which are native to these parts, and almond and pecans which can be grown just south of here—out on the snow.

In the morning, there is more fighting, but not, thank god, any closer to the house than they were yesterday.

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

NICOLE WALKER's nonfiction book, *Quench Your Thirst with Salt* won the 2011 *Zone 3* nonfiction prize and will be published next year. She is also the author of a collection of poems, *This Noisy Egg* (Barrow Street, 2010). Her work has appeared in the journals *Fence*, *the Iowa Review*, *Fourth Genre*, *Shenandoah*, *New American Writing*, *the Seneca Review*, *Ploughshares*, and elsewhere. She has been granted a National Endowment for the Arts Fellowship in Poetry. She received her PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Utah and currently teaches at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona.

## **Leslie Salas**

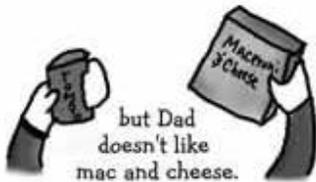
# Picky Eater

BY:  
Leslie Salas



~RUMMAGING IN THE PANTRY FOR DINNER~

There's hamburger in the fridge,  
I could make chili mac



I could make  
chicken alfredo



I could make stirfry

but the rice  
isn't a day  
old, and  
Dad won't  
eat too much  
chicken.



I could make fresh rice  
with corned beef



but I think  
Dad said he  
was sick of that meal.



Later that week



Hello?

Hi, Mom.  
I'm not interrupting,  
am I?

No, no, you're fine.



How are wedding plans?

Fine. We got the stuff  
for the capias today.  
They're pretty.



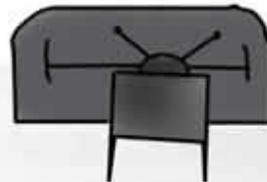
I'll have to send you  
pictures.

Oh, great. Listen, Mom,



I have a question.

When I was little and I didn't like my food, what happened?



Your dad had you sit there for hours --

-- until you finished it.

laughers

Well, yeah. I remember that. Anything else?

Well, I tried to make you something that you liked.



food for everyone      food for Leslie

but-

Mira: Ella necesita comer la misma comida que nosotros. No haga esto.



Sometimes you wouldn't eat for days. You'd drink only.



curry meatloaf      curry broccoli      curry stew

I would feed you when your dad wasn't home.



For a long time, you ate only macaroni & cheese and chicken nuggets.

We fought about it a lot.



Ella no va a comerlo.

Ella necesita comer. Recuerda los problemas que ella tenia cuando era bebe.



When you were a baby, you had gastric reflux.



I had to hold you for half an hour after eating so you would not throw up.

After that, I would put you in a carrier and bring you everywhere with me--



--even the bathroom.

I was very afraid.



¡Ella necesita aprender como comer!



Your father didn't understand what to do. He thought you just didn't want to eat, so he tried to be strict.



LESLIE SALAS is a Dean's Fellow in the Creative Writing MFA Program at the University of Central Florida, where she serves as a managing editor for *The Florida Review* among her many duties as a graduate student. Salas' work—both prose and comics—has appeared or is forthcoming in *The Southeast Review*, *Sphere*, and Burrow Press' *15 Views of Tampa Bay*; you can follow her progress by visiting [Leslie Learns Lines](#). When she isn't writing, drawing, reading, teaching, blogging, crocheting, diving, shooting, fire-dancing, or training in aikido, you can find her baking sweets-cheesecake, cookies, and cupcakes mostly. Her favorite dessert, however, is plain strawberry shortcake drowning in whipped cream.

# Dustin Michael



...return to Table of Contents

DUSTIN MICHAEL's work has appeared in or is forthcoming in *PANK*, *Palooka*, *Brevity*, *The Fourth Genre: Contemporary Writers of/on Creative Nonfiction*, and [airplanereading.org](http://airplanereading.org). He lives in South Carolina.

## Fan Letter to GB Tran for *Vietnamerica*

*A motion picture is motion.  
You gotta keep the dialogue down to a minimum.*  
-Bruce Lee

Dear GB Tran,

I loved your graphic memoir and if I could, I would write you a graphic thank you letter. I do not possess the ability to be both a skilled illustrator and writer; I wish I were and I tried to put myself in to your shoes while you were both in America and visiting Vietnam. I can imagine you sitting in white plastic chairs, cracked and stained by heat and dust or people watching from a curb sketching the congested streets of Vietnam. And at night, there you are, helping prepare dinner or eating around a table with all your relatives asking questions and listening intently to the stories your family has not yet told you.

As a writer, I try to understand the craft and the nuisances behind my own writing. Novels seem to be mainly comprised of exposition and dialogue. Some artwork has begun to incorporate text and the introduction of the motion picture was focused on movement; dialogue was kept to a minimum and was represented through text on screen and sound was non-existent. However, the graphic novel is somewhere between all of these, which must make it a difficult medium to navigate. The graphic novel requires the artist to exist in both roles of illustrator and writer. It seems that both dialogue and motion both need to be as compelling to keep the reader interested. There are the comics that use simple drawings and snappy dialogue, but somehow, GB, you manage to give each element as much attention as the other.

There are times where the panels are rigid and much like any Sunday comic in the newspaper and other times, the scenery spills over two pages and there are no borders, no defining lines. The variety of the panels gives the memoir a certain fluidity and create the smoke-like qualities of memories; some are concrete, while others remain elusive and begin to dissipate.

On the top half of two pages there is a scene captured so wonderfully of your first visit to Vietnam with the family. The images on the pages jump out and I could feel the bustle of the city, the horns from the trucks, the hot and humid air settling on my neck and the wafting smell of hot oil sizzling

with spices from the food vendors combined with the exhaust from motor bikes and trucks. And at the center I see you. Dazed, and thinking that your living in New York has prepared you for this journey. Then, on the bottom half, ordering pho from a vendor, which I'm sure is an easy task to order in New York, becomes almost impossible for you in Vietnam. As I read this, I reflected upon my first trip to China. I was anything, but ready for the culture shock of my own heritage.

Without a doubt, the desolation and desperation of fleeing refugees can be seen. These panels are primarily in black and white and are juxtaposed to idyllic village scenes to macro shots of feet in muddy puddles, trudging slowly, but surely to an unknown fate. At best, you were struggling to survive and the worst, shot or hit by shrapnel trying to flee.

Every moment was captured beautifully. The narrative was able to move from present to different pasts, both your parent's time in Vietnam and your growing up in America, and seamlessly move through these. From your father's story, who had a broken marriage, been kidnapped, and escaped the war by becoming teach French even though his art career was burgeoning to exploring the Fall of Saigon, the French and Japanese Occupation, and the whole immigration experience of both sides of the family and your struggle to understand this all through past memories and stories.

No—

Wait, maybe I don't want to start like that. I want to praise you for both the story and artwork, which you know so well already. And if I do, I would want to do it justice and appear as if I can add something new that no one has said to you before, but that is not likely. Part of my inability to articulate a fan letter with an appreciation of the nuanced approach in your graphic memoir has to do with my inexperience with graphic memoirs and the craft behind it. There seems to something else I want to tell you...

So, maybe I want to start out like this...

*I am ashamed for the black poet who says,  
"I want to be a poet, not a Negro poet."  
- Langston Hughes*

Hello GB!

I think if I could speak Vietnamese I would open with a proper greeting. At the same time that might be too kitschy. I can't help but try to relate to your own life story, and your family's journey to America. Much like you, I was a bit ambivalent to my cultural heritage. It was not that I was not proud to be Asian American, but as a teenager I had other, more pressing matters. The conversation

between you and your mother when you were in high school could have been a conversation wiretapped straight from my house. It would not be strange for me to tell her same thing you did when she encouraged you do see where the family comes from: “Mom! It’s only four months until graduation! I got a lot of studying to do.”

As you know, at that age, your family is not the number one priority. At the same time though, it can’t be our all fault. We were born in America for a reason. Your family escaped Vietnam, as your mother said, “so you would NEVER have to know what it’s like.”

Even now I know very little of my own family’s journey here. And sadly, only Po-Po, Mandarin for maternal grandmother is alive and she is one hundred years old. She came here to start an American life and escape the invading and occupying Japanese from her small farming village in Honan. She, too like your mother, had a life and a family back home. Gung-Gung, which is my grandfather was already studying in America, so Po-Po had to escape China with two of my aunts and one uncle. They were all still children. My mom, however, was born in Galesburg, Illinois. It may be too late for me to ask Po-Po questions. She can barely remember English and only speaks in Mandarin even though she spent more years in American than China. But these days, she barely remembers anything and anyone.

But somewhere along the line, I think you came upon a realization I’ve begun to discover. You say that your “family’s unwillingness to share, the most basic facts was as much to blame as [your] decades of disinterest and insensitivity.” My disinterest might have come too late, but at least I have realized this.

My own cultural identity has mattered and it also not mattered. I have a minor in Asian American Studies, which means nothing it seems. It was not so much a conscious decision, but a matter of convenience. Once my advisor, who was also Asian, told me I was only a couple of classes away from completing the minor, I told her fine. I remember disagreeing with all my teachers on the role of Asian American identity. To them it mattered, to me it didn’t. I wanted to just be a writer and if my story did not have to deal with anything remotely Asian, I would refuse to be put into an Asian American canon.

But now I can see why they, why my mom, and my family are so concerned with race and my understanding of it. Your memoir showed me how intertwined it all is; that is, your family’s history, who they were, and how you became to be matters. Your book brilliantly opens and closes with a quote from Confucius, which we find out later your father has written in a book on the Vietnam War: “A man without history is a tree without roots.”

Thank you, GB. There is still much I need to understand about my own family’s history, but you have ignited a fire within me to ask my aunts and uncles about China, to explore my identity as an Asian American even more, and know that I am, indeed an Asian American poet. I think...

With warmest regards,

Ryan Cheng

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

Dear Mr. Edelman,

When I first sat down to begin reading your poetry collection, *The Geographer's Wife*, I smiled at the title. I was once (almost) a “geographer’s wife.” I look back on that time with my geographer and I boggle at how we managed to lose each other amidst a sea of unfurled maps and GPS devices. Antique maps hung over our headboard, but at times we couldn’t find our way back to each other—unable to cross the vast plain of our down comforter much less the 25th parallel of the puckered pillow we’d wedged in between us. Hell, my geographer even wrapped our Christmas presents with maps! Inserted them into our plastic coffee travel mugs. Scribed little love notes on the backs of them, tucking them into my winter coat pockets where I would one day find them—*years* later. But to no avail. We still got lost. We eventually ran far far away from each other: He to Germany, and me to—well—I’m still catching my breath here in Florida. While reading your poetry—with all of its directionals and cracked compasses and lost souls crashing toward each other in magnetic disaster—I could only think of, at first, my own lost geographer. The man I once deeply loved: my partner in crime, my soulmate, my twin flame, and—Oh, most definitely, yes!—my downfall. Your poetry reminds me that the heart is often pulled in *every* direction, and oftentimes, simultaneously. And as I read on, the film title *Map of the Human Heart*, throbbed in my head like a heartbeat. Your book of poetry could’ve easily been titled that as well. For whether we categorize our lives lineally by directions, chronologically by timelines, or maybe even spatially by compartmentalizing them into the separate and secret chambers of our own hearts, your poetry is clearly a study of the memory of emotion *in motion*.

And I *love* the motion of your poems. As a woman who has lived her life most comfortably as a moving target—straddling motorcycles, hiking trails, backpacking through foreign countries—I appreciated how your collection could be read as an emotional road map. Your poems direct us. Like looking for the “Vous êtes ici” on a map in southern France, you tell us to “Start Here.” Then to, “Go, Prepare, Surrender.” A little further down the road, your poems even serve as cautionary tales. I too, like your uncle in “The Contiguous 48”, would love to die while RV’ing across North America, sans the heisty hookers, of course. (Well, *maybe*.) And I too, like in the poem, “Head On”, have often felt the fear of confrontation careening around the corner in the form of an old lover, or ex-husband: those inevitable car crashes of conversation.

As your poems race through time and space, sometimes at breakneck speed, you also make me feel like I’m wrapped up in a warm and fuzzy wormhole to the past: one of childhood memories and a profound longing for the people and places lost to us due to the emotional geography of “moving on” and “moving away.” In “TE7-6330”—your childhood phone number growing up in Teaneck, New Jersey—you explore your connection to your first phone number, the one that most adults

should forever remember. This poem moved me to tears as I whispered to myself, “734-9381”—and then realized, in shock and shame, that my own two children probably do not remember their very first phone number—as they were yanked from home to home through a confusing divorce.

Mr. Edelman, your poems often reminded me of what Gaston Bachelard said in *The Poetics of Space*, “[that] our house is our corner of the world ... it is our first universe.” You get this. Completely. It is palpable as I read “I Read My Mother To Sleep”—your poem about reading your mother’s favorite books: a list of books she had left for you to read upon her death. Again, tears. It made me think of my own grandmother—now 92 and dying of Parkinson’s and dementia—and her voracious reading habit long ago abandoned by blindness. Wishing to hold a conversation with a woman who is no longer mentally “there”, my memory mentally scans the phantom bookshelves of my grandmother’s old home. Authors like Frank O’Hara, Pat Conroy, Colleen McCullough, and Jane Auel all smile back at me. I think of your poem’s words: “Authors who transport me / From the end of an ocean / To small stones from a river. / Tonight, let the journey begin... / I read my mother to sleep” give me hope that I may one day, again, be able to hold a conversation with my grandmother, vicariously, through the dialogue of her favorite pages.

And you don’t just make me cry. You’re funny too. In “Takin’ Stock” you let us imaginatively rifle through your belongings. How could I not love a man who owns 29 (!) pairs of boots and 8 cowboy hats? I would like to share a bottle of wine with you, one of those 117 unopened reds, and interrogate you as to why you *only* have 84 music CDs? In “First Kiss” your narrator’s crush on his best friend’s sister is a little reminiscent of the hottie washing the car in *Cool Hand Luke*. “And she’s bending over / In these tight white shorts, / Cleaning the wheel covers— / Dark hair cascading down her back— / And it’s getting to me, big time.” I too, can remember my brother and his friend, obsessed over their project car, a Camaro Z-28. No, I wasn’t like Veronica, but I can certainly remember burning for that first kiss.

As I finish your book, I realize that I have never been a “Geographer’s Wife.” I have never been one to “stay behind.” If anything, I’m a lot like the narrator of Joni Mitchell’s song “Urge for Going”—a bit manic in my travels—and very much like a long-legged dog on a too-short run. But my geographer and I have continued to map each other over the years. I track his progress: Jacksonville, to San Antonio, to Seattle, to Heidelberg; while he tracks mine through emails and Facebook : “So, you’re single again?” Years later, on a lark, a farce, or maybe even a whim (wasn’t it always that way with him?) he emails me before moving to Germany. “Want to get married?” he says.

I reel around in my condo, like a broken compass (my “True North” unhinged ages ago) and say, “Hell, Rick! I’m still “unpacking” from our last “trip.”

Sincerely,

Jenni Nance

Dear Brad Land,

Don't take this the wrong way, Brad, but if your memoir, **Goat**, were a person, specifically a lady, I would strongly consider cheating on my girlfriend with said lady.

Seriously, I would.

Maybe that sound's weird, maybe even a little impolite, but if it makes you feel better, in all likelihood, I would never act on those feelings. Instead I would think longingly of her, pine over our never consummated love, possibly Facebook stalk her for a weekend, and then finally give up those feelings, no matter how strong, because I know it would never work out between us because, you see Brad, **Goat** is entirely mental. Your memoir is a mental story of a very mental boy at a mental time in his mental life, spent around too many aggressively mental boys in a mental fraternity, until one of them dies. Yours is a sad book, which makes it all the more sexy, if you're a twisted man like me.

In case you forgot, you tell your story in two parts. In the first you're a boy from South Carolina about to finish school and head off to university when you're first abducted by those two randos you give a ride to after a party and they later shit kicked you half to death. Conversations with cops and investigations and withering emotional distress follow.

The second part of the story tells a year in your life at Clemson, where you spend most of it being hazed to the breaking point as a rush for the Kappa Sigma fraternity. Taken on the surface of things, a reader could see this as more water from the same sad well of misery memoirs by miserable people OR they could see it as a look into the frat world, one lacquered with mystery and easy sexy cool, where stories of hazing and national fraternity reform movements dance and sing for attention. Both takes on the memoir are wrong, however.

I did a short piece of research about the book in preparation for this fangasm, and Brad, the Negative Nellys on their blogs and on GoodReads.com all had the same complaints:

"Land doesn't know grammar. Stop sucking Cormac McCarthy and Hemingway's dicks, loser."

"If you're Emo, you'll like this book. Now go cut a fucking wrist, loser."

"This book is all lies. I'm in a frat, and frats are nothing like what this pussy says they are. Dave Matthews Band rulzz! Land is a loser."

Obviously, I'm lying here. None of these are actual quotes, because the real quotes are all shit and misguided and far less eloquent than my caricatures of them. Hate for your book falls along three expectable lines: it tells a story of fraternity life university PR stooges and national fraternity directors would rather have the public forget OR it decries your fragmented and terse writing style, calling it somehow syntactically deficient or even encephalitic OR it implies that only sad sacks of sad would like this sad memoir.

As you can see, Brad, all of these reviewers are dumber than a puddle of loose shit that was given sentience and then decides to waste said life by huffing gas and listening to the Insane Clown Posse.

Sure, **Goat** is a sad story about a boy at a time in his life when alienation and isolation were the norm. Yes, **Goat** paints frats as punishment factories. And sure, the style it's written in is challenging. But none of these traits should be a turnoff, because as I opened with, these traits are all damn sexy, if you're a thinking person.

But more to the point, it is the gentle, bare, emaciated sentences that you build your story with that are easily the most arresting tool in your box. Brad, you give Hemingway strong competition for the title of "Terse Man of American Letters," and McCarthy clearly taught you a trick or three about short, declarative sentences that never muck about with spurious punctuation and modifiers. There is something deeply satisfying to this reviewer about a writer who applies as much style to the words he chooses as the words he refuses. So often memoirists seem convinced that more words, those prettier, specific-er and flowing-er words are somehow better. What you show with **Goat** is that saying less says so much more, that most people are too thick to notice this, and that I would totally get freaky bones with your writing style.

Yours very sincerely,

Alan Shaw

PS: I'm not kidding about wanting to do your book.

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