



sweet
A LITERARY CONFECTION
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Letter from the Editor

Writers hate writing their own wedding vows. It's the truth. When Katie and I got married ten years ago, the pastor asked if we wanted to write our own wedding vows. We looked at each other and laughed. The pastor, this wonderful and patient woman, tilted her head in confusion.

"Nah," Katie and I said in unison.

"But you're writers."

"Exactly," we said.

The fact is writers resist everything about sentimentality, melodrama, and all that sappy stuff, and really, what are wedding vows but sentimental, melodramatic, sappy stuff. *You complete me. You captured my heart. You are the light. You understand me. You are my best friend and inspiration to me.* (Please refer to all wedding movies for cliché speeches with rice in the eyes and flying white doves or check out boganweddingvows.appspot.com, a wedding vow generator.)

I sound too cynical, I know. I'm only talking about wedding vows because this weekend, Katie and I attended the wedding of K.C. Wolfe (co-founding editor of *Sweet*) and Sarah Fleming. It was a beautiful wedding, complete with 50 mph winds, thunderstorms, and a fainting groomsman. No seriously, it was loads of fun. It was a wedding everyone will remember because it wasn't scripted, because it wasn't a cliché, because every unplanned obstacle was overcome with smiles and merriment and an attitude of *whatever*. K.C. and Sarah didn't write their vows either, but why should they? Why should they express what was so obvious to everyone, as they stood in the rustic chapel at Lourdes Camp in Skaneateles, NY? Why did they need to recite their love when the silent connection between them spoke volumes?

Because it's good to hear the words.

Because sometimes you need to open yourself up.

Because we live in a cold-hearted world.

Because, if you remember why you became a writer, if you remember those first scribbles in your notebook—perhaps it was a love poem to that cute girl in AP English describing her hair as a mystic

tangle of vines or a story about a mermaid that seduced a boy and then later ate his brain—(ahem, both things written by this editor right here) then you also know our first writing endeavors might have been sentimental, melodramatic, and sappy. You might remember what drove you to write in the first place was an extreme impulse. You might remember that what you were trying to understand in those scribbles, what you were trying to work out, were emotions that were still beyond your reach, like love, like what love feels like, like the joys of it, like the sadness of it that sits like a rock in the stomach.

I am reminded of Geoff Schmidt's essay, "[Otis and Jake](#)," that we published a few years back: "Why do we marry, why do we have children? Why do we love at all? When you lose love it mauls your heart. It bloodies you. And yet, again and again, we choose to love. Again and again. Why do we choose to love, again and again and again?"

No, the pieces in this issue of *Sweet* are not sentimental, melodramatic, or sappy. But they are poems and essays that are wrestling with the big things in our lives which we are trying to understand, and because of that, what these writers are saying comes from a place we try to sometimes forget exists: The Heart.

As K.C. and Sarah said their *I dos*, as I was getting a little misty-eyed at the union of these two special people in my life (gosh, so damn sappy), Katie texted me the beginning of the vow she would've written ten years ago: "I take you, butt head..."

A toast to this issue of *Sweet*, and to K.C. Wolfe, who is a large part of why *Sweet* happened.

—Ira Sukrungruang

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Brian Baumgart

Listen to the reading:

Rules for Loving Right

Become something you're not. That's the first rule of the game. The third rule has to do with the way

you breathe, though you'll never get to rule three if you skip rule two, which says you must

surf someone's tongue with your tongue no matter how hot the inside your mouth becomes, because

heat is the fastest way to move—even faster than light unless you listen to science. Rule number four: Never

listen to science if it gets in the way of loving right. Science is not the same as biology, chemistry, and philosophy,

though by the sound they make at sunrise along the river's curve, you would never know. The fifth rule says

remember the first rule or none of this matters. The next rule wants you to lose count because you pay far too much

attention to rules and numbers and order when all you need is to breathe in the people around you with the bottom

of your lungs. Do not use your tongue because its pink wave is already busy: See rule two. If you still follow

rules, the last rule is embarrassing in how silent it is,
how simple and elegant and utterly unforgiving.

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BRIAN BAUMGART coordinates the Creative Writing Associate of Fine Arts program and curates the Meet the Authors Reading Series at North Hennepin Community College just outside Minneapolis, Minnesota, and he holds an MFA from Minnesota State University, Mankato. His writing has appeared in or is forthcoming from various journals, including *Ruminate*, *Blood & Honey Review*, *Tipton Poetry Journal*, *Blink-Ink*, and the inaugural issue of *Sweet*. He remains voracious with candied ginger, but has a recurring fantasy about bathing in melted dark chocolate. For a limited list of publications, including those available online, check this out: brianbaumgart.efoliomn.com/Publications

Jennifer Highland

April: Sirens

*Firm to the mast with chains
thyself be bound,
nor trust thy virtue to
the enchanting sound*
—*The Odyssey*

Everywhere the push and roar of water,
the air softly urgent against my skin
and vibrant, once more, with scent:
a moist sweetness threaded with spice.

The night woos me with ferocity –
the dark trees beckon with their strange music;
the pond, alive with voices
like a thousand grasping hands,
pulls me toward its pollen-dusted verge,
its soft-floored depths.

I strain at the invisible ropes
that bind me hand and foot.
Like Ulysses, I am weeping,
I am safe, while my animal heart
is breaking.

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The Lullaby

Where are they now,
the melody,
the hand swaying the cradle?

Where is the song,
safe harbor of sound,
as the darkness thickens and shifts?
Your hands touch only strangeness
and the nightmare folds you in without a word.

Remember how fever
once rocked your spine in its juggernaut hands,
nothing but the bright hum
of your own burning blood in your ears.

Remember the nights
you woke without light
and cried yourself back into sleep:

Midnight is a path
only wide enough for one.
Even the stars cloak their eyes
as you stumble into view.
Even the wind holds its breath
while you pant against a broken wall.
You grope for familiar notes
as a sickle moon leers
through a forest of crooked fingers.

Do not cry out.
Unclench your hands.
Sleep, sleep, and do not struggle.
Child, it will always be
like this:
a voice will guide you into dream,
then leave you
in silence.

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JENNIFER HIGHLAND's poetry has appeared in *Atlanta Review*, *Conclave: A Journal of Character*, *Isotope*, and other journals and anthologies. She practices osteopathic medicine in central New Hampshire. She lives with her husband in a house they built, surrounded by a greenhouse, woods and gardens that feed them in a variety of ways through all four seasons. Her favorite sweet to eat or make is affectionately known as the Superchocolate Cake, frosted with a mocha-rum icing, which her father picked out of the *Joy of Cooking* long ago, and which became the essential family birthday cake.

Terri Witek

Sex Dream with Chain Link Fence

We planned escape
through miniature fields.

We'd breathe diamonds, we thought.
Then moon unlatched two stars

and we ignored a gate's prim swing to garden.
Admit. It seems we found

the old, cool kissarounds
more passionate. So pressed—

but who'd believe such draggletails?—
we'll keep what stands between us.

Dear elsewhere's prevailing searchlights,
flicker over then return to dark

now's fallen: two strangers
ravished by ghostly chainmail.

TERRI WITEK is the author of *Exit Island* (Orchises Press, 2012) *The Shipwreck Dress* (Orchises Press, 2008) *Carnal World* (Story Line Press, 2006), *Fools and Crows* (Orchises Press, 2003), *Courting Couples* (Winner of the 2000 Center for Book Arts Award) and *Robert Lowell and LIFE STUDIES: Revising the Self* (University of Missouri Press, 1993). Her collaborations with Brazilian visual artist Cyriaco Lopes include works on paper, video and site-specific installation. She holds the Sullivan Chair in Creative Writing at Stetson University. Her favorite sweet is black licorice.

Anne Haines

Night Language

Days since I had much to say.
But there are these windows that ask almost nothing of me
and I stare out through them as the sun
sets, through twilight, past dark
till I find myself staring at my reflection, that bitter ghost.
I draw the blinds then, slats
clanking together like coins. My own pockets
feel empty, endless. There are words
I needn't explain, so why this hunger?
Out there somewhere, birds sleep in trees.
In here I wake at odd hours,
ready to believe in the smallest of voices.

(My heart: an indoor cat that craves the hunt,
waiting in windows in the quivering
dusk. I want to devour
familiarity, to revisit the animal smell of your hair
in my vigilant dreams.)

I envy lovers their vocabulary of skin,
try to build myself a ladder out of words.
I dream of travel, wake parched. I have too many shoes.
And so these nights when I can't imagine growing old.
And all this language: small animals in my mouth.
I can live with the taste of what I'll never say,
with the stillness of stalking my own ghost
in the window. Hours later, dark birds rise
from the damp grass of every lawn.

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Erosion

I.

I've lost track of the silences.

The wind across the harbor still unfurls
every flag till it stands out straight,
shakes rhinestones out over the water.

Dogs still march up and down the street,
giddy with salt. Lovers still pause at storefronts,
negotiate a meal. My hair still

slips free of its restraints and tangles
all afternoon, impossible. The maps
are basically unchanged since last time, but

that little core of silence I slipped into
all those years, my heart at harbor
and happy, that's just gone.

I don't know if I'll come back here.

II.

For lunch, a desperation cheeseburger.

I walk past all the places it wouldn't feel right to go into
in the daylight, or without you.
It's the end of the season and some of us can't
wait, while some keep holding on
like sparrows in a stiff wind.
It's inevitable, the letdown and release.
Inevitable like bad music
on the radio, wrong shortcuts through blind alleys.
This blue sky is no mistake
and somewhere, surely, there's a place for me.

III.

Buses disgorge the same ten tourists
over and over. They walk
up and down the same street, make the same
face at every menu. Please, I pray inside
my own head, please let me never be
so unsatisfied, so alarming and slow. Let me
be a part of my landscape,
hillslope, eyebright, moon.
If it's freezing, let me freeze. If it's
over, let me let it go
with some kind of sweet regret,
some kind of peace.
Let me love what there is to love,
what's left shining in the stunning wind.

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South Shore

Days like this can find me near defenseless. Almost anything can break me open like the blocks of ice cracking on the river's surface, like the singer's voice when the melody takes that sudden turn.

Flakes of snow drifting aimless in the air may as well be drying tears on the face of a girl I might have loved, or didn't. Or a girl I failed, years ago, the way she stood in a darkening room and watched me, her suitcase open.

Even burned-out, boarded-up houses have a language I remember now, and the train that winds into the middle of town, clacking and leaning into the shadows of the wrong side. I'm traveling through towns I'll never stop in, squinting at snow-route signs, at bars that haven't opened lately. It strikes me as a mystery, how all these towns follow the same rules, how the human heart continues chugging doggedly down these iron tracks.

There's a reason why the old songs are the right ones, a secret all those crooners knew.

I loved you the most when I left you behind, when I crossed the iced-over river on my way out of town. Of course this is a cliché, all of it, and not nearly as romantic as I would have wished it, my hand stretching to touch you on your turning shoulder one more time. The snow intensifies and the sky hardens to iron, uncrackable. There's a line of people leaving, baggage in their hands, the weight of all

they carry rolling on behind them.
There's really no other way to travel,
going this direction, no reason to look
at any other schedule. The rootlessness
of birds on a telephone line, the breeze
that lifts the feathers away from their warm
bodies. I've punched the ticket, packed
the last of the bags. I believe in leaving.
I want to tell you these things. There's a bruise
on my cheek where you last kissed me.
In the distance, on the far side of a field,
a flock of starlings rises into fog.

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ANNE HAINES' chapbook, *Breach*, was published by Finishing Line Press in 2008. Individual poems have appeared in *Bluestem*, *Diode*, *Field*, *New Madrid*, *Rattle*, the anthology *And Know This Place: Poetry of Indiana*, and elsewhere. She has been the recipient of an Individual Artist Grant from the Indiana Arts Commission and of the Agha Shahid Ali Scholarship in Poetry from the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Currently she lives in Bloomington, Indiana, where she works as the Website Editor in the Indiana University Libraries. As for sweets, she's not fussy, but particularly partial to coffee ice cream and all things salted caramel.

Anne blogs (occasionally) at landmammal.blogspot.com and tweets (frequently) at twitter.com/annehaines.

Roberta Feins

Are you the same person you were 30 years ago?

For Esther

You make yourself, but others
make thumb-marks in your clay.
Malleable; but you push back.

What accidents to get to what
we are from what was meant to be.
Which necessary sorrows

shear the bonsai, hack
a long howl that echoes
into the summer night. The body

holds its own unfolding;
the gesture should be grand
but is nuance. One cell

nudges another and *voila*,
bilateral division at the apical tip.
From bud to blossom,

fruit to seed, there is a flowing out,
a falling away. Still we say apple.
Still we say Self.

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Listen to the reading:

Sometimes, the Moon is Just the Moon

I am climbing the ziggurat of the year –
January being the lowest step, December
clear down the other side. Saturday
has beautiful sculpted arms, while

the fifteenth of the month is crowded
against all the other days, with little room
to breathe. Ah, the bitter insouciance
of Tuesday. It may be August,
but I still look forward to August.

Minutes sigh from the kitchen. Father
is the slow resignation of a failed
seven pm. September is my lover
in a country far across the sea
of summer months. December, ashamed
of his vanity, always writes about himself

in the third person. For a moment,
four-oh-three hangs against a bright sky.
Below, someone absent-mindedly kicks
the brittle shards of four-oh-two.

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ROBERTA FEINS was born in New York, and has lived in North Carolina, and in Seattle since 1983. She received her MFA in poetry in 2007 from New England College. Her poems have been published in *Five AM*, *Antioch Review*, *The Cortland Review* and *The Gettysburg Review*. Her first chapbook, *Something Like a River*, will be published by Moon Path Press in 2013. She is one of the editors of the e-zine [Switched On Gutenberg](#). Her favorite sweets are the old-fashioned peanut butter taffys called Mary Janes. She always ate them when she had a loose tooth, so she associates them with riches and the tooth fairy.

Jeff Newberry

Listen to the reading:

All My Possible Selves from Alternate Universes Meet in a Bar for a Drink

The thin one is the most arrogant. Sips light beer from a fluted bottle,
full lips curved like sickle earrings.

He fears the weight pushing against him, the selves he's lost.

He won't speak to the fat Jeffs.

He glares at those who eat peanuts
from the communal bowl.

Soldier me is stiff, full of pride: he remembers toy guns,
Dollar Store AK-47s I spray painted with my best friend Vince

in the backyard the summer we watched *Red Dawn*.

Bourbon
for this man, neat, straight up.

Thrice married me parodies me
with his ill-fitting paisley suit & green suspenders.
He turns up Martinis (*really? Martinis?*) like tiny glass umbrellas.

All the Jeffs sit at the bar, though—they've seen the same movies,
know the same moves. Practice careful sneers & stiff-lip leers.

Train their eyes on the mirror behind the bar & count bottles
to make the time pass.

Only I speak doppelgänger. Only I know the loneliness of the loneliest,
the Jeff no one approaches.

This is the Jeff who died too young, who sits, askance, amazed
at the words, spicy, sweet on his tongue.

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JEFF NEWBERRY teaches composition, creative writing, and literature at Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College in Tifton, Georgia. His writing has appeared in *The Chattahoochee Review*, *Waccamaw: A Journal of Contemporary Literature*, *The Florida Review*, and *Sawpalm: Florida Literature & Art*. He is the president of the Gulf Coast Association of Creative Writing Teachers. Find him online at www.jeffnewberry.com. He Tweets as @NewberryJeff. His favorite sweet? Caramel cake, a southern delicacy.

Beautiful Fountain

Bonnie J. Rough

The legendary fountain, Schöne Brunnen, was a side note. When we went to the Christkindlesmarkt in Nuremberg on a flurrying December Saturday with our very patient German friends, “turn the wishing ring” was not on my list of things to do. Things to do included the following: *Eat grilled sausages. Drink gluhwein. Catch up with Carolin and Holger. Listen to Christmas music. Show 3-year-old Josie all the pretty things. Feed her copious sweets.*

Finding a current, we swept along with the masses through the busiest Christmas market in Europe. Above us, at the edge of the *hauptmarkt*, towered the Frauenkirche, which had been rebuilt painstakingly, stone by original stone, after World War II. A choir sang of St. Nick, hope, and climate change. Snowflakes stuck to our knit hats and scarves. Mugs of mulled cider warmed our fingers. Josie licked the frosting off a gingerbread Santa.

Caught up in the crowd, we soon found ourselves facing the Schöne Brunnen, an ornate, sixty-foot, 600-year-old golden spire rising from the ground in the main square. One after another, tourists popped from the crowd to reach an arm up the wrought iron fence around the spire. Pulling off a mitten, they would take two fingers and grasp a brass ring twined impossibly through the ironwork. Most gave the ring three turns. Someone near me said something about the ring bringing good luck. With Josie in my arms, I stepped up to get my ration.

When we returned home to Amsterdam a few days later, I felt curious about the wishing ring. Had I turned it correctly? And what would my reward be? I began reading legends, which seemed only to lead to other legends. The “fountain” had been built to top the Frauenkirche, but when the time came to move the steeple, graced with forty exquisite limestone figures, the townspeople demanded that it stay on the ground where they could admire it. It would be called a fountain. And the ring itself? One legend said that an ironwork apprentice, wishing to prove himself to his master, installed the apparently seamless ring overnight. Another story said the apprentice crafted the ring as a symbol of his love for a nobleman’s daughter. Some held that turning the ring would bring luck. Others promised I would have a wish granted. Then I read that turning the ring a full 360 degrees would bring a baby to a hopeful young wife. I gulped—later, perhaps, but not now!—then calculated that I probably hadn’t rotated the ring a full 360 degrees anyway. Still, I was glad I had placed my fingers on this ancient craftspiece...until I read it was actually just a brass ring installed a mere century ago,

shiny and easy for tourists to see. The original ring, supposedly, had blackened and now hid elsewhere in the fence lattice. And speaking of original, this was not the original fountain. The crumbled artifacts of the original are now housed in a museum, I learned. The fountain had been rebuilt in 1912, and restored again after the damage of World War II.

As I read, one corner of my mouth scrunched and curled down: darn it anyway. I had always loved Europe for its palpable history: the medieval, the ancient. I had always loved to behold an original just-about-anything, perhaps for the implication that permanence is possible. But the longer I lived in Europe, the more I had to face the fact that even “originals” weren’t original in the sense that I hoped. They had been shined up, brushed off, freshly painted, carefully epoxied, with most parts replaced.

*

After our return from Nuremberg, our American friend Jess came to visit. One afternoon, she played with Josie in the living room while I fixed coffee in the kitchen. I heard Josie ask, “What’s that?”

Jess called to me, “Should I tell her?”

“What is it?”

“The tattoo on my ankle,” she said.

“Sure,” I answered, laughing. “You can practice for whatever you want to tell your own kids someday.”

“*This is Mommy’s mistake,*” she jokingly rehearsed.

“But do you really feel that way?” I asked her as I filled our mugs.

“Well, the only thing is, sometimes I regret putting anything permanent on my body.”

That had always been my rationale for not getting a tattoo. But on the other hand, hearing Jess talk about putting something permanent on her body reminded me how very impermanent the body is. In the news, scientist had been saying that the average age of the body’s tissues was seven to ten years—and many cells lived even briefer lives. The surface of one’s skin, they said, renews every few weeks. Tastebuds, every ten days. White blood cells, overnight. Bone and brain cells seemed to have the most longevity—perhaps decades—but they would change over, too. So, even when the human body wasn’t stretching itself into an adult form—the work Josie’s body was doing every day—the original was never exactly original. When I looked at the very ends of my long hair, I didn’t have to go back very far to remember what I was doing when those hairs first sprouted: Asking Dan to take my picture next to our Christmas tree as I stood sideways, showing the small bump of our baby girl growing in my belly.

Josie and Jess had moved on to play “Where’s Bear?” over the back of the couch. But I kept thinking as I carried our steaming mugs: Physical impermanence is, of course, the reason we save a lock of baby hair, and why my mother keeps my primary teeth in her jewelry box. It is the reason the scent of my husband’s skin comforts me so: it is the same familiar pepper-and-bark, exactly right, even if little flesh remains from the day I met him.

Jess’s tattoo, I realized, could be a little anchor of something original and permanent in a sea of constant change. Maybe it didn’t matter whether the brass ring in the Schöne Brunnen was one century old or six. Maybe it didn’t matter if the fence around the fountain was the precise fence that the apprentice originally tinkered with. Perhaps it was unimportant whether the fountain was meant as a church spire, or whether water ever had anything to do with it. And possibly, it didn’t even matter if the fountain was a 600-year-old original, a replica built a century ago, or a 60-year-old restoration. The pieces held the place—in roughly the right shape—of something that would otherwise too soon have disappeared.

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BONNIE J. ROUGH is the author of the 2011 Minnesota Book Award-winning memoir *Carrier: Untangling the Danger in My DNA*. (Counterpoint 2010). Her writing has appeared in numerous periodicals including *The New York Times*, *Huffington Post*, *The Sun* magazine, *The Iowa Review*, *Defunct*, and *Brevity*, as well as anthologies including *MODERN LOVE: 50 True and Extraordinary Tales of Desire, Deceit, and Devotion*; *The Best Creative Nonfiction (Vol 1.)*; and *The Best American Science and Nature Writing* (2007). She currently teaches in the Ashland University low-residency MFA program in creative writing. She has also taught at The Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis, and at various U.S. colleges and universities as a visiting writer. Rough, who has her MFA from the University of Iowa, is a fiction editor for *Versal*, an award-winning international journal of literature and art.

What a Good Dog Knows

Laura McCullough

During our meeting with the surgeon, I asked her how going into immediate medical menopause will affect our sex life, more specifically, how it will effect my sex drive, my sexuality. She looks at us levelly, and says, “You're two working professional people who still have two small kids at home; when do you have time to have sex anyway?” When she sees my chin begin to quiver, she adds, “Have you thought about counseling?”

No one wants to talk about female sexuality.

On the way home in the car, I remember that when I was a kid, my neighbor Tommy's and my bedroom windows, the upstairs of our identical capes, faced each other over a low hedge and a pussy willow tree. His bedroom was directly across from mine. It was after he and I were kids together playing GI Joes and Barbies, after driving Match Box cars through the gravel of our driveway.

We were no longer little, in high school, I think, but since I have no real memories of Tommy during this period, it is hard to say. Perhaps this is what makes this one memory, its near anonymous aspect, all the more poignant and dear to me. For a few days one year, Tommy undressed at night before bed with his curtains open.

And stretched before the window. My own window was still curtained in pink and purple butterflies, fabric my mother had bought, curtains she'd sewn to match the comforter she'd made for my bed. Inside the comforter was my baby blanket. I sat on that bed, peering through those wonderfully perfect symbols of the curtain of innocence, and I looked. Yes. I looked, and what I saw amazed me. There was a man's body, not a little kid one.

And it didn't seem like Tommy or anyone I knew; it was something other, something kind of scary, but compelling, and I was frightened, but I also knew something deep down which I couldn't articulate, and am not sure I can now either: I knew he was doing it for me, and that somehow, it was a beautiful thing, a kind of offering. It did not feel sexual, because I was not yet sexual, but I would not quite call it presexual either, because it was more about longing and desire, and about loss, too. We'd lost the kids we were, and we were lost to each other, and in those empty spaces,

something was emerging that we didn't yet understand, but I think we knew we would never be able to connect again, not in the meaningful ways of building forts, hurtling down snowy hills, playing tag and stick ball, finding roly polly bugs together, that intimacy was gone, and now, boys and girls would have a new way to communicate and be intimate, but that would not be something Tommy, Jimmy, Patrick, nor I could ever share.

But for these few brief back lit evenings, Tommy, showed me the man he was becoming, and even now, all these years later, I feel that as a gift, seeing his wide shoulders, the expanse of his belly, yes his cock there, half hard at the joint of his thick thighs, and I know something about the birth of desire in myself, of the sacredness of desire, of its centrality to my engagement in the world. It is my ability to love this memory, to be moved by it, that I fear I am about to lose, and if I can not see the gorgeousness of that act by a boy on the verge of manhood for what it is, rather than see it as some kind of violation; if I can not see my volition in watching as also a beautiful act in its receptivity, if I suddenly see that as sickishly voyeuristic, how different will my world be? I want to still see the edges of things, the paradoxical razor's edge of the sacred and the profane, and I want always to be on the side of sanctification and celebration.

*

Michael and I have are still reeling from the meeting with the surgeon, and have locked the kids and the dog out of our bedroom. I am stunned; Michael is exhausted emotionally. He says, honey, I'm not so sure.

No worry, I say, lay back. I'll get on top of you. I know he needs this. Not just the release of sex; he needs to be kissed, cherished. I begin first with his cock, kissing, then sucking. There is such pleasure in giving pleasure. But I am thinking, too, can't help it, my mind a whirl with the stress of the impending surgery. So I think while I fellate. Multi-tasking is something I am really good at.

I hear Rudy call, and stop, Michael's hand at my neck going still. We realize it was just a cackle of laughter, not a call, and Michael pulls on my shoulder, so I come up on top of him, and sit across him, so his cock slips inside easily, and I put my hands on his face and head, and he holds a breast in one hand and my hip with the other, and we do what people everywhere have always done, we take a ride, riding fast then slow, than fast, our lips crushing against each other's, teeth clicking, tongues flicking. I love no one in the world as I love this man.

He is about to come. I can hear it in his breathing, feel it in his cock pressing against the walls of my insides, in the way he grips me, and I love these moments of your partner's arc toward this transient bliss, and there it is, he is releasing, and I hold him as tight as I can because if we can not be inside each other at least we can hold on.

The dog is now whimpering at the door. She never understands this, and always thinks someone is being harmed. The kids, however, have let us have this time, and we are grateful. Michael pushes my hip. It is a signal he wants to tip me over, go to work on me, bring me to orgasm. He has always

been what an old song used to call a lover with a slow hand, slow, but also inventive, and patient, and though we have our patterns just as any couple does, Michael often surprises me, but always, he will be sure to satisfy me, one, two, five orgasms, whatever he thinks he can get me to bear, teaching me to stand, over the years, more pleasure than I could have known I was capable of. And pleasure that deepened over time, so that sometimes, coming, in these last few years, instead of bursting into tears as I did in our early times, now I giggle and sometimes laugh, so filled with glee and delight I am with the enduring sweetness of us, so happy together we have been, how much shame we have burned off each other on the altar of our bed, how we have made ourselves into a sacrament through sex.

And this is what is endangered. And still, when Michael goes to tip me over, to take his slow time in pleasing me, it is not the fact that the children are in the other room, but the fact that my mind is again flooding with worry, that makes me say no, not now.

*

Carefully, I lift my pant leg and step over the wall of plastic red cups my kids have built. They come rushing to me, one grabbing each leg. Take her down, they yell. It is a game we play, and I will go down easy, let them swarm over me as if they have captured the giant, and we will laugh and tickle and laugh more, because there is not much more wonderful a thing than the laughter of someone you love, especially your own children.

For a moment, I feel so deliriously content, I can't help but laugh from my gut, loud whoops. The dog is snuffling our sides; she, too, is happy. She doesn't think we are hurting each other, I see; she wants in on the love. I reach out with one arm and rub the skull ridge at the top of her head between her ears, so she rolls over on her back, her legs in the air, the sweet white soft fur of her underbelly exposed, and the kids and I stroke her and say, Good dog, Oh, isn't she the best dog?

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LAURA McCULLOUGH's most recent collection of poems, *Rigger Death & Hoist Another*, is forthcoming from Black Lawrence Press in 2013. Her other books of poems include, *Panic*, *Speech Acts*, and *What Men Want*. She has edited an anthology of essays on the poet Stephen Dunn, also forthcoming in 2013, from Syracuse University Press and is editing an anthology in progress on poetry and race. She edits *Mead: the Magazine of Literature and Libations*, and is at work on a memoir about

illness, sexuality, and menopause, *The Belt of Venus*. Visit her
at
www.lauramccullough.weebly.com

Meat Ragu a la Squillante

Sheila Squillante

Serves 8-10

For Ragu

1 lb hot or sweet Italian sausage
1 lb beef short ribs (salted and peppered generously)
Six large carrots, finely chopped
2 28 oz cans tomato puree
1 28 oz can water
2 medium onions, diced
3 large cloves garlic
½ cup chopped fresh parsley
3 tbsp fresh thyme
Salt & pepper to taste
1 tbsp olive oil
1 tbsp tomato paste
½ cup dry red wine

For Meatballs

1 lb ground beef
½ cup bread crumbs
1 tbsp Dijon mustard
1 tsp tomato paste
¼ cup fresh chopped parsley
1tsp dried basil
1 tsp dried oregano
1 clove fresh garlic, minced or pressed
¼ cup parmesan cheese
1 egg
½ cup milk
Salt & pepper

Begin near tears. This is a hard project and you are an easy crier in the best of circumstances. You're making it harder on yourself, you realize, by choosing to play Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson, whose music takes you right back to your father and your grandfather, your childhood, your great-grandmother Lucia's house (her meatballs, which you will not attempt!) on Sundays in White Plains, New York. Sheila, you a nice-a girl, but you godda find a nice-a boy-a, settle down an getta married...

This music might seem incongruous to the meal you are preparing—you are not Texan, not Southern in any way, your five years in Kentucky notwithstanding—but never mind. Let's go to Luckenback, Texas, Waylon and Willie and the boys...

You are surrounded by nice boys today. Here in your home, your husband and son in and out of the back door, back and forth to the garden to gather your thyme and parsley. Waylon and Willie streaming on your laptop. Your father and your grandfather sitting poised, as if in a Country Western song, on adjacent teardrops, ready to spill. Plus two more boys you're sharing this meal with: your friend, D, and his son, B. D is the one who gave you the idea for these recipe-essays, the key, you told him to finishing the memoir about your father. You are beyond grateful and he is fun to cook for. Appreciative and enthusiastic. Affirming. That one word, in fact, pretty much describes your whole friendship with D. You will cook this ragu here in your own chaotic kitchen and then pack it into the car with your husband and kids and head over for a play/dinner date at 4pm. It's 11 am now. You'd better get this thing going as it's going to need long, slow heat.

*

"Luckenback Texas" is subtitled, "Back to the Basics of Love." It's about wanting to simplify, wanting to reconnect with someone you love. This is something your father might have been realizing, might have been working on when he died. Be thankful for that. Happy for him.

*

Chop your veggies first. Carrots from the farmer's market, their bushy green tops still attached. Onions, garlic, parsley, thyme. Your son wants to help, so put him in front of a bowl on the kitchen floor. Teach him how to thumb the thyme, stripping the tender leaves quickly and easily from their stems. He is methodical, though you catch him munching on a few. Meanwhile, brown the sausage and short ribs in batches in a large pot on the stove. See that he has finished and wants to do more. He is not usually so solicitous in the kitchen, so against your better judgment, tell him he can put some sausage into the pot.

Cringe as the oil splatters—just a drop—and burns him. Hear him scream and see him recoil from the kitchen, betrayed. Run his finger under cool water and comfort him.

Explain to him that the kitchen can be a dangerous place, that injuries happen but most of the time

we keep going. Tell him the story of your chef uncle cutting himself on that national cooking challenge show. How he kept cutting and ultimately won.

Understand that you are teaching him perseverance. Resilience. Resolve. Finish browning the meat and remove to a large bowl. Wipe his tears and tell him it's time to make the meatballs.

Pre-heat oven to 350 and lightly oil a cookie sheet. Sure, you could fry them, but this will be easier, slightly healthier, less dangerous and just as good. Wash your hands carefully and take off your wedding rings, hand them to your son who stacks them on his thumb. Remember when this gold band that sits on top of your silver one belonged to your grandmother. Remember too that she never removed it to cook. How it was caked with meat and egg and breadcrumbs. Put all ingredients into the bowl. Put your hands into the bowl and mix thoroughly. It will be freezing and your fingers will ache but you will keep going.

*

In your father's presence, you often felt small, silly, inferior, neglected.

In D's presence, you always feel capable, interesting, intelligent, appreciated.

*

Wash your hands again and get a little bowl of water, put it on the table between the bowl and the cookie sheet. Dip your hands in the water to keep the meat from sticking to them. Form small balls between your palms and place them onto the sheet. Tell your son the story of the woman you worked for who made meatballs by rolling unseasoned ground meat into balls and sticking them into the microwave. How were they, mama? They were terrible, Rudy. Meat rocks, we called them. What did you tell her, mama? I told her they were delicious, Rudy. See empathy and

understanding flash across his face. Affirmed.

Bake for 15 minutes or so, turning once or twice.

In the same pot you browned the meat in, fry the onions, garlic, carrots, parsley and thyme in olive oil over medium heat. Cook until the onion is between translucent and slightly browned. Add tomato paste and cook until everything looks rusty. Add red wine to deglaze the pan. Cook down for a minute or two. Add canned tomatoes and water, the meat and meatballs back in. Salt and pepper to taste. Bring to a boil, then turn to very low, cover and simmer for 2-3 hours, stirring regularly so the bottom doesn't burn.

Forget your son's lesson when you lift the short ribs from the pot in two hours to test for doneness, and let them fall and splash back into the sauce, scalding your right hand so badly that tears unattached to Country Western music or memory come and your stomach turns over from pain.

Suck your scream into your lungs so as to not terrify your children and stick your hand under cool running water. Keep it there. Ask your husband to stir the pot. Give yourself a few minutes—the pain will pass—and keep going.

*

D is just a year younger than your father was when he died. You are always hyper aware of this fact—at lunch at Wegmans, over beers at Zenos, at writing conferences, on play dates and here in the kitchen as you cook for him and his family. You wonder if he knows this. If he can sense it—an unspoken anxiety on the table between you.

You find yourself looking at D, who looks nothing like your father, and your brain

gets stuck. You always knew your father was young when he died—46 years old is young by anyone's standards. But here is D, your peer, your friend, a guy who grew up in the 80s like you, who writes about hair metal bands and still listens to Van Halen, loud. A guy. A word which is somehow closer to boy, you think, than man.

But he's also a parent, a husband, a homeowner, a professional, a grownup. You can't make sense of this. You realize your father, too, was just a guy.

*

Your son is back and wants to dance with you and there is no better place to dance, you think, than the kitchen while Willie sings in the twilight glow I seen her, blue eyes crying in the rain... He looks up at you as and you remember the ICU nurses, crooning over your father, his eyes they called, "Paul Newman blue." The kitchen is filled with heat and light and delicious scent, your boy's own blue eyes now nothing but bright.

I don't need my name in the marquee lights, I got my song and I got you with me tonight. Maybe it's time we got back to the basics of love...

Willie and Waylon and Rudy and you dance close and twirl and dip while the ragu simmers. You'll serve it soon, sprinkled with cheese over Ziti, with bread and red wine from bottle and box. Note that these songs are duets, "musical compositions for two performers." You remember your father; you dance with your son; you cook for your friend.

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SHEILA SQUILLANTE is a poet and essayist living in central Pennsylvania. She is the author of four chapbooks of poetry: *A Woman Traces the Shoreline* (Dancing Girl, 2011); *Women Who Pawn Their Jewelry* (Finishing Line, 2012); *Another Beginning* (Kattywompus, forthcoming, 2013) and *In This Dream of My Father* (Seven Kitchens, forthcoming, 2013). Her work has appeared in places like *Brevity*, *The Rumpus*, *Barrelhouse*, *Phoebe*, *No Tell Motel*, *MiPOesias*, *Quarterly West* and elsewhere. She has written a memoir called *Dead Dad Day: A Memoir of Food and My Father*, and is hard at work trying to find it a home. For her birthday, please arrange a hot fudge brownie sundae with coffee ice cream and extra whipped cream. Hold the cherry. Follow along at www.sheilasquillante.com.

Fertile Ground

Tami Mohamed Brown

Here is what I grew up understanding: silver barked birch and crab apple that bowed at the rocky mouth of the Deer Horn River where springtime sturgeon ran. I knew the quiet still of my backyard in the middle of the night, cows lowing in a field just past the edge of town, their muted voices calling long and low and full. A train whistle in the evening, west of town. The coffee-scented Sundays of the perfumed church narthex and the heavy black mothballed curtains of the school auditorium. I knew the damp smell of deep woods, of pine that perched and nestled atop layers of wet shale, rock that looks firm but crumbles easily, home to clutching, clinging lichens and moss, quiet plants that thrive in the shade.

I never knew my grandmother.

Fern.

Her name, I found out only when I left Deer Horn at eighteen. Like the low growing shade-loving plants found deep in the woods. Her world, what she saw and heard and smelled and believed, would have looked much like mine, interspersed only with forty years between. She would have been sixteen in 1949, pregnant with my mother during her junior year of high school, a farm girl in a house packed with younger siblings out on a dirt road, west of town.

*

I drove down those same gravel roads outside Deer Horn years later, the girl from the wrong side of the tracks looking for a place to make-out with a boyfriend, to stretch out across the back seat of someone's Malibu or Mustang, cassette player breaking the quiet, breath heavy on my neck, fingers fumbling as I made the same split second decisions that carried with them the same weight of consequence they would have forty years ago, but with the exception of methods of prevention and choice, two things that made their quietly to even the smallest of towns.

Fern.

She hadn't been talked about for years, since she left. I could only imagine, make assumptions based

on her absence, by not knowing her. She was the dust swept under the rug, the pause before the topic turned.

Because she was what we were not supposed to grow up to be, she was never mentioned.

*

My mother found birth control pills in the glove box of the tiny white Chevette I drove, our first talk about anything having to do with sex. “Are you afraid of getting pregnant?” she asked and I caught the panic spinning into her voice, like the blades of the box fan spinning wildly in the front window of the living room.

“I’m not afraid of anything,” I told her coolly.

I was dating a rich boy that summer, a boy who spent his days golfing. His family had a house on the Lake. I spent my summer working at a store called simply Fresh Meat and Produce, a place that drew in the summer people from their cabins for its wholesome fruits and vegetables, where I rang up groceries while a butcher in the back smoked meat, the spices burning my eyes and making them tear; the mother of the boy called me the Meat Queen. There was something vulgar in the way she said it, and I spent the summer feeling cheap with my aqua-net hair and huge silver hoop earrings, my tank tops and my tight jeans.

I spent the summer terrified about what it meant.

*

Unlike my grandmother, my own mother stayed in Deer Horn. She stayed there and raised a family and worked and must not have felt the oppression in the landscape, the need for change.

Unlike my mother, I longed for change, to see other things, to become something else. I wondered if Fern, like me, found the terrain to go against every part of her being, found it made her listless, those dark woods, the sad slugged farmland, the gravel roads that circled endlessly around fields of corn.

I wondered if she, too, believed she had to leave to reinvent herself.

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TAMI MOHAMED BROWN lives in Bloomington with her husband and daughter and holds an MFA in creative writing from Hamline University. She is the recipient of a Loft Mentor Series Award and a Blacklock Nature Sanctuary Emerging Artist Fellowship. Her writing appears on a regular basis in the Minnesota Women's Press and has also been published in *Minnesota Parent*, *Mizna*, *Colere*, and *Dust and Fire*.

Manchester

Eleanor Leonne Bennett















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ELEANOR LEONNE BENNETT is a 16 year old internationally award winning photographer and artist who has won first places with *National Geographic*, *The World Photography Organization*, *Nature's Best Photography*, *Papworth Trust*, *Mencap*, *The Woodland Trust*, and *Postal Heritage*. Her photography has been published in the *Telegraph*, *The Guardian*, *BBC News Website* and on the cover of books and magazines in the United states and Canada.

Melissa, broheim, the brown shower scene killed me.

Seriously, something precious and gentle, and there's not much of either in great supply in my emotional stores, it died when I read that chapter. And not because I'm easily offended by scat content, or by emotionally challenging reading.

Hell, I grew up in the nineties, when HBO was running **Real Sex** twice weekly, and **Faces of Death**, and its imitators, was still a thing people whipped out at parties in those days. Granted I knew some really gross dudes in my formative years, but the precedent holds that I'm not shy or easily shocked.

So what got me about that scene?

The writing, sure. Damn fine and strong with the descriptive bits.

But there was a logical investigation behind it, too. That's what made the scene stick, not to pun, for me. And that's what I wanted more of in your book, **Whip Smart**. But no more poop scenes. I've had enough of them.

For those of us who self-identify as readers, we read so that we may know the secrets of the world. We want to know about the lives of people we'd never meet, stories of lives too impossible to exist or simply too far down the block to observe. We read to know about ourselves by knowing more about others. It's that saw of by being more specific we can speak more generally, for we all lead the same lives, just with different costumes and postal codes. And some of us readers, if we're lucky, we get to find a book that shows us the hidden stories of the world that bring it more into focus. And when we're lucky we learn the hidden logic of the world, too.

There was one such book that shared this with me, **Sodomy and the Pirate Tradition**.

Now, Melissa, before you get any ideas, know that I was young when I read the book, I worked in an indie book store, and I had time that day and no customers bothering me.

You see, broheim, the book talked about the sexual norms and systems of a boatful of men, at sea and separated from women often for months or years, but it did so in a way that described the logic of their manly liaisons. There were rules and there were systems, and the author laid them all out, logically. I like that about the book.

Your book does the same, by explaining the logic behind some sexual deviances. Why does one

person like a golden versus a roman versus a brown shower? What kinds of people top from the bottom and what sorts of lives do they lead? How do people work in the flesh trade for years, and why do they?

Reading your book was more than peeling back the velvety curtain on illicit sex for money. I didn't care about women whose affections are negotiable by the hour, or in the case of the women in your dungeon, their disaffection. What I wanted to know was how and why people indulge in what looks like debasement and abuse. I've never understood pain play or sexual intercourse that turns weird. The most I need to get my wick hot is a smile and a handy. But I was raised Mormon.

I find it genuinely curious how people crave pain and humiliation, how they need it to get off. To pop big enough to last them for weeks. I once listened to this interview with a stand-up comic and comedy writer widely regarded by people of his craft to be a titan. A genius of late show monologues and three camera sitcoms. In the interview he talked about how he met his ex-wife. She burned his dick with candle wax so bad during their first session together that he couldn't touch it for two weeks. He saw her weekly for years, married her and fathered a child by her. That's how much he needed to be dominated. And that was how he saw it.

Not debased, like I've called it, not demeaned, hurt, abused, or ill-treated. The sex he bought was one beautiful woman dominating him for an hour a go. That fascinated me.

How people want to be infantilized so they become adult babies.

How some men who want to feel pretty so they wear drag and pitch up their voice.

How men wallow in shit, bathe in piss, and get harder enough to crack marble.

Melissa, broheim, if you could do me a solid, please write a follow up book. Write another book about the women in the trade now. About their stories, a living memoir about the trade and the people who work it. It feels like this is a story that needs to continue. Who you were in it and what your part of that world was like, we know that. But we need to know the rest.

Why?

Because left to the rest of us to share that story, it could quickly become one of isolation by pimps and handlers, forced drug abuse, trafficking, slavery, assault, coercion, and fear. The line I think the reading public has been fed for so long is that only victims work the flesh trade. The only women, and men, selling their time and access to their bodies are those who have been forced to. And not for economic gain. Forced by the uncaring hand of a domineering, violent man. I think that's a truth, for some, and for the rest a disservice.

I once watched the documentary **Thinking XXX**, which was released in conjunction with the book **XXX: 30 Porn-star Portraits**. The book is a collection of very intimate portraits of porn-stars taken

by world famous photographer Timothy Greenfield-Sanders. The man's photographed kings and world leaders, and for this collection he took gay and straight, famous and not so famous, porn-stars. The doc was filmed during the shoot. In one interview, Tera Patrick talked about collecting her earnings after her first night stripping. She had dropped out of school, had no marketable skills, but that night she'd earned hundreds of dollars. More than she could have made waiting tables at her day job. She said something to the effect of, "This is mine. I earned this, they can't take that away."

That's the trade for some people, and I think it's important that this take accompany the one so many people are selling. For some, it is a way to empowerment. For some, it's the only way to make money without going to a college they can't afford. It's just a job, nothing less.

Broheim, that's what I liked most about your book, and I thank you for that. You shared a secret of the world with me.

Yours,

Alan Shaw

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Dear Ms. Brimhall,

Before reading your book of poetry *Our Lady of the Ruins*, I had no idea a world could be crafted out of melancholy. After devouring every drop of sadness within the forty-four poems that comprise your book, I learned that you could, and had, created a world out of woes and I was enraptured by it.

Just like the priest from “Come Trembling” who “pulls a rope/ of thorns through his tongue to make his mind/ pure enough for a vision,” I too find myself driven toward flagellation, though of a less grandiose fashion. Whether I am scraping the wax off my ear drums with the screech of distorted guitars, biking until my muscles and back ache, or reading the most uncomfortable scenes from the most uncomfortable books over and over again, I too seek enlightenment at the hazard of personal comfort. Many times I feel as if, like the characters in your book, I am on a self-sacrificial hunt, and that bond made the failures and discoveries found through their journey the more profound to me.

After I read “Prelude to a Revolution,” for example, it wasn’t just the image of the burning man staring at the moths circling him that I carried out into the world, but the subtext: the wisdom that when engrossed by trauma, the things around us give us the clearest perspective on our own dilemmas.

In all your poems, your metaphors dive deeper into the tragedy than most authors are willing to go, which, in your skilled hands, amplifies the desperation of the messages your poems express. For instance, when the speaker in “To Poison the Lion” poisons himself with the intent of being eaten by the lion, he finds his target dead, being picked at by vultures. The risk taken in “To Poison the Lion” mirrors, if a touch hyperbolically, much of the risks taken in adult life: large compromises of one’s well-being for a potentially non-existent payoff.

In “A Year Without War,” the group meditates on the uneasiness of silence: “Weeks pass and the sky stays quiet. We are braver and more/ afraid.” I compared this admission of silent pain and feigned bravery to life’s daily adversities which we breach without comment: a car running a red light, an unexplained bump on the skin, or a close friend presenting a calm face in conversation despite his dad dying a few days prior.

In the final poem of the collection, “Jubilee,” the speaker has escaped her labyrinth of hardships. She has transformed, become a part of the vicious world she has traveled through, she is “red and reeking of the journey,” ready to eat the wolf.

I can't help but see the speaker's transformation as a point we all reach after tragedy: disheartened and desperate, wanting to be the one to bite first. I continued to read the poem hoping, for my sake as much as your character's sake, she finds some kind of epiphany. I refused the possibility that this speaker whom I have journeyed so far with would reach the end only to become a metaphorical stone. Then, in the very last sentence, the final six words of the volume, the speaker breaks free of the desensitization she had almost succumbed to.

"Love nails me to this world," she says. And I understand.

Each bloody step in this book has set up for this moment, where she, where I, realize that it is by the blood on our hands that we recognize the love that keeps us tethered to this world of hardship.

And after closing your book, I feel cleansed by this epiphany, and ready to go into this broken world I live in and rebuild.

For that, Ms. Brimhall, I thank you.

Sincerely yours,

Ryan Bollenbach

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