

A selection from

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**From *Traffic*, by Jack Anderson (Volume No. 1, 1998)**

**The Party Train**

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To bring joy and friendliness to the New York subway system, which is all too often bleak and indifferent, I propose that a special train be instituted to be known as The Party Train. Each day, this train would follow one or another of the city's existing routes, sometimes on the local, sometimes on the express tracks. No extra fare would be charged, the cars would be painted exactly the same as those of any other train, but inside there would be a perpetual party. The poles and straps would be festooned with streamers, and Japanese lanterns would hang from the ceiling. Food and drink would always be available, ranging from corned beef to caviar, from beer to champagne. Strolling musicians would roam from car to car. And the last car would be transformed into a gigantic bed where anyone could take a date, no questions asked.

The Party Train would not only be fun to ride, the very knowledge of its existence would be a source of cheer. For the route it would follow on any given day would never be announced in advance, but would always come as a fresh surprise. Thus any citizen waiting in any station could hope that the next train to pull in—accompanied by a shower of confetti and a whiff of pot smoke—would be The Party Train, so he could step aboard and glut himself on cashew nuts and kisses from the Battery to the Bronx. Or if he were in a local station and The Party Train happened to be an express that day, he could watch it rumble by, glimpsing paper hats and saxophones bouncing in the front cars and naked bodies flickering among the pillows at the back. Then he would chuckle to himself, glad that there was something interesting to look at while waiting for the subway, and wishing that tomorrow The Party Train might finally stop for him.

### Driving Lessons

Before our Town Dump became first a landfill then a waste transfer station, I'd back up to the edge of a smoldering mountain of garbage, let down the tailgate, climb into the bed, and fling trash bags, sheetrock scraps, dead appliances, broken rakes, used tar paper, tangled chicken wire, and anything else left over from our week's labor onto the pile. Smoke of a particular, unmistakable scent drifted in the air and beer bottles exploded like muffled firecrackers.'

Neighbors lingered, exchanging gossip, keeping an eye out for anything that had no business being thrown away. Not infrequently, items brought to be discarded never hit the ground. Even I was not immune. I acquired a boy's bike this way—lacking only a pedal—a pair of waders in need of duct tape and a dusty pink bathroom scale.

Ray the dump keeper knew just about everyone in town, by sight if not by name. *Good morning, Mrs. Rockefeller*, he'd shout as I eased our rusting truck to a stop.

It was our only means of transportation in those days, the 1965 International pickup Charter had driven twice across the country and twice rebuilt the engine. I liked driving it despite having to double clutch on the downshift and haul on the steering wheel for all but the gentlest turns.

Charter loved that truck. He kept its oil changed and its innards lubed. He washed it regularly and in winter took care to spray water up under the wheel wells to remove road salt. One Christmas I had the bench seat reupholstered for him.

In the summer of his sixteenth year, Bill took the wheel. Charter sat to the right of the floor-mounted gearshift and they set off down the driveway. Within minutes the truck reappeared with a fresh dent in the left front fender. Bill took a slow turn at the mailboxes and kept on turning. Into the phone pole.

*Anybody hurt?*

*Anybody hurt?* was what my Dad used to say as each of his ten children in turn sent moving vehicles off embankments, into drifts, caroming into other cars and skidding into ditches.

On a snowy Good Friday, Sebastian passed his driving test in my old blue Pinto. The following summer he was rear-ended at a red light by a licenseless, uninsured teenaged girl.

We both tried to teach Manny, but each lesson ended with him slumped over the steering wheel, defeated. Mr. Towle of Towle's Driving School had better success, though he did suggest that Manny take his course a second time. Mr. Towle wore a dark suit with a red tie. He drove a spiffy black Pontiac. Manny drove his spiffy black Pontiac. Down dirt roads and side roads and main roads and highways. For six weeks. (Mr. Towle is uncomfortable with failure. In his quiet way.) And on the roads for another six weeks. Manny passed the driving test. Mr. Towle is authorized to administer the written part of the test orally should he deem that necessary. He did. Manny's license arrived in the mail.

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The wet snow that fell last night is melting in patches. Manny drives slowly down the dirt road in the Chevy longbed we'd bought for him from a guy who owned a flooring business. He accelerates a little on the paved part. No weight in the back. Used tires. The truck begins to plane just as we reach the blind curve. When he swerves and hits the pine tree, my glasses fly off my face and Manny utters the one word he's never said in front of me.

From *Northern Latitudes*, by Lawrence Millman (Volume No. 3, 2000)

### Moon/Snail/Sonata

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*Newfoundland*

I hoisted my anchor and raised the canvas and sailed off to a broken-down North Atlantic town. There I fasted on the precision of solitude. For hours or years, hard to say which, I'd sit and gaze at barnacles, trying to find one that was legendary. Occasionally I'd stick a finger into an anemone's soft ciliated slit—a destitute mating.

When I landed, I was all flotsam. Maybe a little jetsam, too. Then one moonlit night I went down to the sea. The sand had been exposed by the tide, and I could hear a low crustaceal breathing above the tumult of the waves. I found myself walking among the barrows and sand collars of moon snails. I bent down and picked up one of the globular shells. The furrowed foot, sequined with sand, was twice the size of its thick ashen shell. In its slow writhing, it seemed like an archaic brain. Its scent was briny and seductive, like certain flesh.

The moon snail possesses a monolithic energy for shutting itself off. It will not leave home even to die. You can't see its secret parts, see all of it whole, while it's still alive. And so when I touched the snail's outstretched foot, it withdrew into its whorled sanctuary with a flush of hostile water. The operculum, a great brown eye, now stared me in the face: cheeky bastard, it seemed to say.

Here I was, a late Pleistocene trespasser in the demesne of a Triassic survivor. There was nothing for me to do but give back my moon snail to the cadence of the tides. So I put it softly down in the sand-edged foam, and it became a polished gem, a sapphire, the moment a wave rolled over its shell. See how nice I look (it seemed to say) without the benefit of your touch.

At daystart and under a sudden scudding of rip-toothed clouds, I raised my weather-lashed canvas again and set off to find another landfall. I was still flotsam, probably jetsam, too. But it did not matter. Nothing mattered now except the wind in my sails.

From *Whatever Shines*, by Kathleen McGookey (Volume No. 4, 2001)

### Simple Arithmetic

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I am still imagining the men lined up, the ones I imagine who want me. I'll tell you everything I know: there was a boy, a girl, and a boat. And palm trees, but the mosquitos on the island chased them back to the boat. There was a boy, a girl, and a dog: I still can't get the story straight—magic fruit? straw into gold?—and night's black velvet has arrived. I am glad for my life and the high clear voices of four-year-olds in the Allegan Public Library. I am not the girl in the story—I am the girl whose mouth is mainly shut but who imagines it open. But where are the other boy and girl? Holding hands and walking into the library while a baby falls out of a pile of money with astonishing grace. She's afraid to go beyond the normal bounds of conversation, the simple arithmetic of the heart. An electric blue butterfly darts in front of the car, just beyond reach and the camera's focus. The clocks tick, their greedy faces shine. The money will always fall out of our hands. We will always be slightly out of place, standing behind ourselves, not getting anywhere—no island, no boat, and no one to save us.

**From *Moments Without Names*, by Morton Marcus (Volume No. 5, 2002)**

### **THE MOMENT FOR WHICH THERE IS NO NAME**

On the sixteenth floor of one of the tall old buildings in the north end of the city, the windows of an apartment look out over the bay. The apartment is empty, the floors and walls bare. There is only a chalked circle on the living room floor. The circle traces the spot where an armchair once stood, an armchair in which an old man regularly sat watching the smokestacks come and go in the harbor in the same way he had watched the swaying forests of masts when he was a boy.

The circle was drawn by the old man's grandson while the child's parents were supervising the movers.

Tomorrow the new tenants will arrive, and before they move in, they will clean the apartment. In the course of their cleaning, they will erase the chalk.

That is the moment for which there is no name.

From *The Blue Dress*, by Alison Townsend (Volume No. 6, 2003)

*A Child's Book of Death*

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I don't know who watched over your body, Mother, after you'd left it, or how my father got you from Cleveland to Dobbs Ferry. I only know that you arrived, motionless and as chill to the touch as the flesh of certain poisonous mushrooms. I was afraid of you then—though it seemed disloyal—and thought maybe I'd killed you, praying for you to die when you did not return as you'd promised.

Night after night, kneeling beside the spool bed, my pink flannel nightie with lambs tucked around my ankles, the floor breathing snaky drafts, the sisal carpet pricking my knees, I begged the great and implacable dark to make you better and bring you home, offering up Babar or Barbie the way I'd offered Raggedy Ann, on whom I operated, slitting her kapok-filled chest with nail scissors and digging my fingers in deep for her heart.

Which was supposed to be real, the way you were but then were not, as you lay before us, your body stuffed with darkness I smelled but couldn't see, the distance you'd travelled as enormous as all the states that slept between us while you lay dying in your high, white hospital bed, and Jenny and Steve and I prayed for you—*Our Father who art in heaven . . . . Now I lay me down to sleep*—every prayer we knew, our words a useless gabble we wanted to be true, falling from the small, mint-scented churches of our mouths.

## **CARPE DIEM**

This morning he knows exactly what he has to do—it is all very clear and so simple it surprises him—and he packs his gear with great care. He wears his freshly washed and starched fatigues and feels as sharp as he had in the army, boots spit-shined, belt buckle glistening. Moving briskly as he works he likes the ozone flavor of the autumn air and the pure blue sky which seems as clear as his plan. He thinks again of leaving a note on the fridge but knows his plan is far too complex to spell out in words however clear it seems to him. Later, his wife and kids will understand. The plan simmers just above his heart and he is dead certain that it is right. Today will be a great day.

In spite of having drunk malt liquor all night he feels sober, reflexes in perfect order, eyes and fingers in ideal harmony. He drives along his usual route, not speeding, enjoying the light traffic and the purring gurgle of his pickup at stop lights. He thinks of his job, remembering those abstract motions, that lifting, bending and rising, the dance that danced its mania into him is gone now, invisible. He feels no anger about it. *They'll understand.* He takes it as a good omen when he finds a parking slot easily and at the time clock he loads a clip and slips the safety off and decides to hell with the foreman and just opens fire.

**From *Light From An Eclipse*, by Nancy Lagomarsino (Volume No. 8, 2005)**

Worries about Mother and Dad pursue me through a crowd of goldenrod and into pinewoods, where the sound of the brook relaxes my eyes, allowing me to gaze outward. I come here often, seeking the silence water imposes when it takes on a voice. Across the ravine, lichen-covered boulders hold themselves still, as though departing glaciers told them to wait. It feels strange to be so involved with my parents again, after decades of comfortable distance.

When I woke from the dream that is childhood and went into the world, I carried the dream with me—you might say I've treated my childhood like a favorite shirt worn every day. How could I leave my childhood in a drawer? For so long, it was my only garment. Photographs show me gliding along with my family, but inwardly I was reliving one of those vivid dreams we remember more easily than the day and night that surround it. Today, I balance on a stone that rises above the brook, close to my parents, yet removed. Caught in the current, a small branch hurtles past like a child on a bicycle.

From *The Angel of Duluth*, by Madelon Sprengnether (Volume No. 9, 2006)

*Necrophilia*

In this movie a woman is in love with the body of death. She wants to smell, touch, taste it. She wants to puncture it, caressing the internal organs, watching the exchange of chemicals with blood. If she sings, dances, has sex with it, she will feel its whole history of hurt or joy. For such a thrill, she is willing to do anything. But this is fiction. Tonight, in Sally's kitchen, I hear a woman describe how she entered her mother's bedroom moments after her death. How the air in there was like mica, thin and flashing. Yet how warm and supple her mother's flesh. How she washed her, changed her nightgown, combed her hair. How she inhaled then, deeply and slowly. Taking into her lungs all the cutting edges of her life.

From *Magdalena*, by Maureen Gibbon (Volume No. 10, 2007)

*Blue Dress*

I look like my mother when I wear the dress. I don't know why I say that—there aren't any pictures of her in a cornflower blue dress with white dots, and it isn't the kind of dress she wore. Just saying *polka dots* makes me feel silly, but I feel beautiful and somehow womanly in the dress.

Maybe that's what it is: the dress makes me a woman I never thought I'd be, older and flirtatious, someone who wears stockings and rouge, who sits a long time at a kitchen table, drinking coffee and remembering. The dress bares so much of me—the shy skin at my shoulders, the light hair of my forearms, all the veins rising and crossing under the skin of my wrist. When I wear the dress, I can imagine my arms wrapped around a man's shoulders, my hands at the nape of his neck, my own waist tightly held. I think about the words *in my arms* and can almost feel it, as if the words themselves were touch, the way imagining brings feeling.

It's hard to explain what it means to see my own arms and hands change after so many years of being young. I remember touching the backs of my mother's hands when I was little. I thought they were cool beneath my fingers, smoother than my sticky girl's hands. "No," my mother said. "Your hands are softer. I used to nibble you when you were a baby, just to have your skin in my mouth."

My hands are beginning to look like hers. The veins show easily and my knuckles are starting to look bony. The skin doesn't give as much and seems thin. I know it means I'm aging, but it comforts me. It's like wearing my mother's old turquoise and pearl bracelet, or her engagement ring, reset with a blue stone for my birthday. Sometimes when I think of my mother I wonder how long she will live. My hands seem so small when I think of that.

From *The House of Your Dream: An International Collection of Prose Poetry*  
Edited by Robert Alexander & Dennis Maloney  
(Volume No. 11, 2008)

KIM ADDONIZIO

**Last Gifts**

They were gathered in the room next to the kitchen, where he had his hospital bed cranked up. A writer he had published brought him a long red boa and draped it around his neck; he looked like someone drowning, a small head floating on feathery waves. Someone else brought a pillow stitched with a picture of Elvis, with the words “King of Rock and Roll” across the top. There were red splotches on his arms, and his hand shook slightly when he poured water into the glass on his tray. A poet took a book off the crowded shelves, sat on the edge of the bed and read to him for a while. Someone accidentally stood on the oxygen hose; no one noticed until he began to cough, and there was some consternation, and then relieved laughter and joking. The party grew more animated; people refilled their drinks, and everyone started talking at once. His wife went to the kitchen and brought back a big silver bowl of buttered popcorn and passed it around. For a few moments it seemed as though they had forgotten him. Then someone finished a story, someone else paused to think of the right word, and a silence opened and spread through the brightly lit room. The guests looked at each other; some had tears in their eyes. They turned to the bed, where the sick man sat smiling at them in his red boa, and he knew this was what it would be like when he was gone. And then he was.

—*for Al*

## AGHA SHAHID ALI

**Dear Shahid,**

I am writing to you from your faroff country. Far even from us who live here. Where you no longer are. Everyone carries his address in his pocket so that at least his body will reach home.

Rumors break on their way to us in the city. But word still reaches us from border towns: Men are forced to stand barefoot in snow waters all night. The women are alone inside. Soldiers smash radios and televisions. With bare hands they tear our houses to pieces.

You must have heard Rizwan was killed. Rizwan: Guardian of the Gates of Paradise. Only eighteen years old. Yesterday at Hideout Cafe (everyone there asks about you), a doctor—who had just that morning treated a 16-year-old boy released from an interrogation center—said: *I want to ask the fortune tellers: Did anything in his line of Fate reveal that the webs of his hands would be cut with a knife?*

This letter, *insh'Allah*, will reach you, for my brother goes south tomorrow where he shall post it. Here one can't even manage postage stamps. Today I went to the post office. Across the river. Bags and bags—hundreds of canvas bags—all of undelivered mail. By chance I looked down and there on the floor I saw this letter addressed to you. So I am enclosing it. I hope it's from someone you are longing for news of.

Things here are as usual, though we always talk about you. Will you come soon? Waiting for you is like waiting for spring. We are waiting for the almond blossoms. And, if God wills, O! those days of peace when we all were in love and the rain was in our hands wherever we met.

## NIN ANDREWS

### **The Obsession**

Occasionally the sailor suspects a woman swims nude beneath his ship, though when he dives into the water, he sees only white jellyfish opening and closing like umbrellas. He is reminded of the time when he was a boy and imagined ordinary stones were gems, lovely enough to win the heart of the girl next door. But he never reached to pick one up. Instead he decided the girl would never like him. The more he thought about her not liking him, the more he grew to despise her and her adolescent beauty. The more he despised her, the more he wanted to see her, to follow her, to sit just behind her, and never let her out of his sight. That was the beginning of the obsession. Evenings he stayed up late, peeking through his Venetian blinds, hoping to catch a glimpse of her in her pink striped pajamas. Every weeknight she stretched out on the lime green carpet in her living room and did her homework in front of the flickering TV. The boy began to believe that if he did not watch her, she might not do her homework. Then she might do poorly in school and be mocked, and he would have to protect her. What if he didn't know how? Better to be sure she did her work. But the more he stared at her, the more beautiful she became, the more her skin softened, and the silk of her hair awakened him from his dreams. He grew convinced his eyes gave off a kind of glow that polished the girl, like an apple, that she could never have been as lovely if he had not looked at her so intensely. He even thought his staring might have been making her breasts grow, just as the sun's heat caused fruit to ripen. That's when he realized her beauty was a kind of death wish. Like a mirage, he thought. A mirage of an oasis in the Sahara, something that could never satisfy his thirst. No wonder years later he still saw her breasts in the middle of the sea. No wonder he hated her.

## RUSSELL EDSON

### Sleep

There was a man who didn't know how to sleep; nodding off every night into a drab, unprofessional sleep. Sleep that he'd grown so tired of sleeping.

He tried reading *The Manual of Sleep*, but it just put him to sleep. That same old sleep that he had grown so tired of sleeping . . .

He needed a sleeping master, who with a whip and a chair would discipline the night, and make him jump through hoops of gasolined fire. Someone who could make a tiger sit on a tiny pedestal and yawn . . .

## RAY GONAZLEZ

### Busy

I am busy living in the new millennium. It fits well with the depression I left back in the twentieth century. I am happier now because I am older and fewer birds fly after me. If I could grow a beard, I would. If I could take my time in deciding what I think of my country, it would be easier to live here without thinking I have to have an opinion, cast a vote, or drink distilled water. I am not sure where I am going with this, but it is a fine season for confessing how we made it past the zero hour. Even the tiny spider crossing the white rug in the living room is going to make it into the first decade of the new awareness. I don't step on it or call my cat's attention to it. The little spider passes the leg of the sofa and disappears. I read in the newspaper about the 20,000 fish that were found dead in the Guadalupe River near San Antonio. It turns out it was fire ant mating season. After male fire ants mate with the females in midair, they die. When wildlife people cut open the dead fish to see what killed them, they found thousands of fire ants in their bellies. The toxic poison of the male fire ants killed the fish after they gorged on the falling insects. I am busy thinking about this because I used to live in the area and was attacked by fire ants several times. This thought fits with what I was going to say. I have two large windows in my office and a large desk. When I open any book in my office, I always use both hands.

## JIM HARRISON

### Very Small Wars

There's no flash here among the troops. We just want to protect our freedom, well being and safety. It occurred to me that if I were a vehicle I wouldn't be a Maserati but a John Deere or Farmall tractor, nothing that special. Way out here in the country Linda runs a trap line and I patrol daily for rattlers though I can't find the one she saw in the garage behind her gardening tools. She kills a half-dozen mice a day but is now thinking of a device called "Mice Cube" which merely traps them so I could release them on a Republican's lawn when I drive to town for a drink. I'm squeamish about killing mice once having tried to save one with a broken neck in the trap who looked up at me imploringly. I was drunk and actually sobbed, putting the little critter on a cotton bed in a matchbox. In the morning she was gone but was probably eaten by our retarded cat Elie who sits under the bird feeder all day waiting for lunch to fall from the heavens. Also there's a sentimentality about murder as I intend to shoot Hungarian partridge, grouse, woodcock, maybe an antelope for the table this fall. Linda is rather matter-of-fact about killing mice but women are natural hunters. Rattlesnakes aren't innocent. One killed my dog Rose. Our little grandson Silas walks in the flowerbeds which we pre-check for vipers. The mind tires of this war but my peace plan is faulty: let rattlers in the house to kill and eat the mice. The last rattler I shot was within a foot of the front door and struck at our old, deaf cat Warren. I blew the snake's head into oatmeal with my pistola in a surge of anger. I am a man of peace. Send suggestions. It's not known in Washington D.C. but death is death.

**LARRY LEVIS**

**The Leopard's Mouth Is Dry and Cold Inside**

Now I am drying my body, but carefully, as if it doesn't really belong to me, and won't last. And now that I see it, alone like this in the mirror, I think I'm right; it won't last. After all, does a stray dog feel permanent when you touch it? Does something as singular as this ant on my sill? Or if I admit that stray dogs and ants might have a certain anonymous permanence, why doesn't my white, bruised skin? It doesn't look as durable as my wife's reading glasses. It doesn't even look as if it will outlast some clouds I once saw. They were cramped into the sky of a child's painting, and looked as if the child forgot to include them, and then suddenly remembered and put in too many of them, as if to make sure of something.

## NAOMI SHIHAB NYE

### Hammer and Nail

“Would you like to see where our little girl is buried?” my friend asks as we walk between stucco shrines and wreaths of brilliant flowers. Even a plane’s propeller is attached to a pilot’s grave as if the whole thing might spin off into the wind. One man’s relatives built a castle over his remains, with turrets and towers, to match the castle he built for his body in life. If you stand at a certain angle you can see both castles at once, the bigger one he lived in off on the horizon. An archway says in Spanish, “Life is an illusion. Death is the reality. Respect the dead whom you are visiting now.” We hike down the hill toward the acres of “free graves.” Here people can claim any space they want without paying, but also risk having someone buried on top of them. In the fields beyond the cemetery, women walk slowly with buckets slung over their shoulders on poles. Black cows graze on kneehigh grass. The crossbar from the marker to my friend’s child’s grave has come loose and lies off to one side. My friend kneels, pressing the simple blue crossbar back into the upright piece, wishing for a hammer and nail. The cross has delicate scalloped edges and says nothing. No words, no dates. It reminds me of the simplicity of folded hands, though I know there were years of despair. My friend says, “Sometimes I am still very sad. But I no longer ask, ‘What if . . .?’ It was the tiniest casket you ever saw.” On the small plots in either direction, families have stuck tall pine branches into dirt. The needles droop, completely dried by now, but they must have looked lovely as miniature forests for the first few days.

**From *Reaching Out to the World*, by Robert Bly (Volume No. 12, 2009)**

### **FINDING THE FATHER**

Someone knocks on the door; we do not have time to dress. He wants us to come with him through the blowing and rainy streets, to the dark house. We will go there, the body says, and there find the father whom we have never met, who wandered in a snowstorm the night we were born, who then lost his memory, and has lived since longing for his child, whom we saw only once . . . while he worked as a shoemaker, as a cattle herder in Australia, as a restaurant cook who painted at night. When you light the lamp you will see him. He sits there behind the door . . . the eyebrows so heavy, the forehead so light . . . lonely in his whole body, waiting for you.

**From *Pretty*, by Kim Chinquee (Volume No. 13, 2010)**

***No One Was With Him***

He had his own business and let himself off at five, like a regular employee, and every day afterwards he called her, and today when she asked him how his day was he said fine except for the accident. She said what accident. He'd rolled his truck a few times. She said are you okay and he was fine, so he said he was perfectly fine. His truck was probably totaled, so he said that, and he wouldn't find out for sure until the weekend. She asked if he was scared and he didn't have time to be scared, so he told her that, and she said, but weren't you? Like, didn't you have a moment of freakiness and he said no. He'd slipped his truck on ice, whirling and spinning, rolling one, two, he wasn't sure how many times, so he told her that. She said was your brother with you? Maybe your new puppy? No, Hun. No one was with him. Someone called 911, and she kept asking him more questions, like what now? and what if? and he felt fine, so he told her he was fine, he said he was perfectly fine, and she asked more questions and he heard something like some ripping, and he said are you okay? He pictured her bedraggled, her hair a mess, her naked, asking him again will you ever touch me, will you again ever, and will you, will you, will you? ever, do you love me? She said please and are you sure that you're okay and he said he was fine, Hun, he was perfectly fine, Hun, he was perfectly fine with everything.

**From *Angles of Approach*, by Holly Iglesias (Volume No. 14, 2010)**

### **PERISHABLES**

In the final days of the war, a boy eats cake, a cake from the saddest mother, a woman unaware that her own son has bled into history, a history with jaws that are soft and tropical, the greenest green, not gray like Lake Erie in winter.

The cake sealed first in waxed paper, then gift wrap, then a grocery bag dismantled with pinking shears, the bundle tied with cotton string, her fingers recalling the tiny buttons of his school shirts, the comb dipped in water before parting his hair.

Mercy rains at every latitude, at each contested parallel, rains anywhere that grunts line up for salt pills, clean socks, for unclaimed parcels that go to those who never get mail.

Cake sweetens the mouth of a boy the woman will never meet, a boy who tastes in the kindness of strangers the complications of survival, a boy who in manhood will crumble each time he tells the tale.

From *All of Us*, by Elisabeth Frost (Volume No. 15, 2011)

**Grace Court**

*You may swallow your parents too soon . . . .*

—Julia Kristeva

It's never too soon to think of the world without them, and now you've done it. The quiet has set in after the last mouthful. The house is yours. No safety rail at the cellar stairs, the icebox packed with a week's worth of food—popsicles, bologna, Hi-C. The TV on its cart. You finish your meal at the Formica table in a stillness so complete you hear the house start to talk in a low-pitched language you hadn't noticed before. You move to the dining room, its wood paneling and the Schrank. At the head of the table, where you scribbled your name in crayon, you hear the sounds of settling from the black-tiled bathroom where they washed their big bodies in the spray. There's nothing to do now but listen—not to the piano, certainly not to the doorbell, not even to the maidenhair fern on the windowsill that might not have figured it out, but to the hardwood floor, the painted stucco, the green shutters with slices of half moons, none of them accusing, just knowing it all, waiting for you now, for something to happen. At this quiet instant, in the stare of the dust left to itself in corners of the kitchen, as you think about a taxi taking you all the way to Great Adventure, they appear in your vision, shadowy in the vestibule, sprinkling their fine layer of knowledge over the furniture. And in their sight—which you thought you were out of for good—you begin to add the sums of what you've lost.