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**a review
of contemporary
word**



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Zacatecas welcomes unsolicited submissions of fiction, as well as poetry and other works. Our staff is looking for work with a contemporary feel, a powerful style, and a broad vision. A stylistic clue: the *Día de los Muertos* altar in our office last year was dedicated to Miyazawa Kenji and Jack Kerouac. *Zacatecas* acquires first time publication rights in online and CD-ROM format upon acceptance and confirmation, and the right to maintain the work online in our archives. After publication, rights revert back to the author. We are currently unable to pay, but do offer authors a CD-rom of the issue in which their works appear.

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My Rock Star Life

A.C. Koch

It started in a college town, but I wasn't in school. I played drums in a punk rock band that couldn't play a single song from beginning to end. We just played the middle of songs, I guess. We were drunk all day long, every day. Some of us, like Bergie and Joe, were into coke and mushrooms but I was a straight whiskey man. Man? Okay, I was a boy. I was a whiskey boy.

Others of us -- Simca and Sunshine, namely -- were into girls, all kinds of girls, different girls every week: college girls and high school girls, punkrock girls and hippies, school teachers and junkies, married women and single mothers. That wasn't me. I laid low. I was the quiet one, but I was the drummer.

How long does punkrock last? Not long, if you're really punkrock. People grow up, get lazy, get jobs, get married. Your hair starts to go. The sun starts coming up earlier, and finds you leaving the house in a shirt and tie. And then, worst of all, you start learning how to play your instrument. Before you know it you're playing songs from beginning to end. From beginning to end. That's when it's over. Pack up and leave town. You're not punkrock anymore.

I sold my drums and moved back to my hometown in Gunnison. I married a girl I had gone to third grade with, and, to top it off, I started teaching art in that very same elementary school. My students were little versions of me and Maria, like I was some kind of time traveler. Twenty years later and kids were still obsessed with Star Wars and Winnie the Pooh, just around the corner from sex and booze and everything else. They had no idea I was still exactly like them. They thought I was a grown up, and that just proved to me that no one ever really grows up, you just deteriorate until you're dead. But when you die, you're still a kid.

Gunnison hadn't changed either, except for a few empty storefronts because of the Wal-Mart out on the highway. There was still just one diner, with the same menu, the same lousy coffee, and there were the same two bars where I used to drink underage. There was no coffeeshop, no pool hall, no shady dive where a punkrock band could play. And that was fine with me. Mostly I stayed home. Maria was ready to have a baby. "Whenever you're ready," she kept saying, like she was just waiting for me to drive her to

the store. A baby. The thought of that kept me awake nights, staring at the stars through the curtains. I remember a feeling of something awesome and huge out there, in the night, coming out of the sky. I waited for it to come crashing through the roof, whatever it was, to land in my lap.

And then one Saturday morning I awoke to a familiar sound, the strumming of a ditty on an untuned guitar. I went onto the porch. There was Simca, sitting on the railing, leaning back against the post, strumming a battered old acoustic I hadn't seen in years. He grinned at me but didn't stop strumming and singing. But even more: my old drum set was on the porch, too. It was halfway set up, the bass and the snare and the high hat, and two drumsticks lay across the snare head. I looked long and hard, shaking my head. And sure, I was laughing, but I was also thinking about Maria sleeping upstairs.

"Ffffft!" Simca jerked his head at the drums, his hands jangling away on the guitar. I pulled my rocking chair over, sat down, and gave a kick on the pedal, a pop on the snare. My left foot found its place on the high hat pedal and then everything started up like an old machine that still remembers how to run. Within four measures I was on it, and we were jamming an old punkrock tune. Simca howled the chorus and I howled along, and the dog across the street joined in too. That's how my rockstar life came back to haunt me.

"Joe's in Japan now, teaching English." Simca and I are sitting in the Flying W Cafe over a breakfast of pancakes and tar coffee. He's giving me the rundown. "Sunshine's been living with her girlfriend for three years now, and they'd get married if they could, but, you know."

I nod, sipping my coffee.

"And Bergie, same old thing, he'll work for Wal-Mart till the day he dies."

"And you?"

Simca smiles, getting shy for a second. He looks out the window where all you can see is half a block of downtown storefronts, one or two people going by in the morning chill. "Me, I've got everything I own in my old jalopy, halfway along the road to wherever I end up. And I'm thirsty."

That word, you see, has a special weight. Thirsty. It means a lot more than you want a glass of water. It means that someone better chain the girls to their bedposts, and widen the gutters of the city, and throw all the doors open wide, because you're going to flatten everything between you and the other side of drunk. That's what thirsty means.

Result: We head back to the house with our arms full of booze. Whiskey, beer, red wine, tequila and margarita mix. It's only eleven o'clock in the morning and Maria is doing the laundry as Simca and I spread the booty across the kitchen counter and start scheming. A party is easy enough in a small town because nearly everyone I know lives within four blocks of here and no one has anything better to do. Maria stops in the doorway on her way down to the basement with a basket full of sheets in her arms. "Simca should meet Cora," she says, winking at me.

Cora is her best friend from high school who teaches modern dance at the college. She's always in black tights with her hair up off her neck and you'd have to be an idiot to think she wasn't sexy as hell. And God bless Maria for saying it and for implicitly okaying the idea of the party. Because if she got all dark and broody and whispered to me about

the neighbors or the mess I just don't know what I'd do. Just that comment--and that wink--makes it clear how goddamn much she loves me and how absolutely far she'll go to make me happy. I almost get the shivers, standing there wiping the dust out of the wine glasses, and it's something I should tell Simca but I have no idea if he would even hear what I was saying. I don't think he's ever had a woman love him in such a quiet and sturdy way. I grin at him. "You'll love Cora."

He wiggles his eyebrows. "Tell me more."

Maria and I take turns working the phone. We're calling people we haven't talked to in years. I tell everyone that my buddy from my old punkrock band is in town, and it's going to be a blowout. Maria's billing it as a pre-Halloween party. By about the fourth call we're telling people to wear costumes. "But make sure it's a costume you can dance in," says Maria. She's talking to Cora. "Don't come as a Rubic's cube or something. You have to be able to boogie, you know. There's going to be a punkrock band!"

Simca's jangling away on the guitar in the other room. He's overheard. "No!" he yells, "a Rubic's cube is perfect! Tell her to come as a Rubic's cube!"

We end up inviting nearly everyone in our address book. The principal of my school is coming, a bunch of fellow teachers, our real estate agent, some parents of my students, Maria's whole extended Mexican family, everyone we went to high school with who never made it out of town. And, of course, Cora. Otherwise Simca would be bored stiff.

We set the drums up in the dining room like we're building a doomsday machine. I stop halfway through tightening the snare head. "Where the hell did you find my drums?"

Simca grins. He thought I was never going to ask. "You sold them to that drummer for Bunny Genghis, remember, what's-his-name? Well, he had them in his house hanging on the wall over the fricking fireplace. Then he got busted for selling acid and I went over and bought the whole set off his roommate for a hundred bucks. So in fact, they're no longer your drums, pal."

"And what are you going to do when the dude gets out of the slammer?"

"He got ten years. In ten years I won't need drums any more."

"Aha. Are you planning on growing up?"

"Back off." Simca winks, grabbing for an unopened wine bottle on the coffee table. "It's almost noon, what the hell is the cork still doing in this bottle?"

Maria goes out to buy food with a wad of cash that Simca offers up. He insists on floating the bill, showing up unannounced like this and setting these wheels in motion. We agree to split it halfway. We used to pay for parties with whatever door money we made playing some show, and it was never an issue of whose cash it was: it was everybody's party.

Simca and I sip red wine from juice glasses. He looks around at the framed prints of botanical watercolors, the stenciled border of daisies and hearts circling the room at waist level, the hand embroidered doilies on the endtables. I see him smiling but he doesn't say anything. I anticipate him. "It's a step up from trash bags and tinfoil," I say. That was the decorating theme of the house we use to share, all us freaks. Black trashbags covering the walls, tinfoil molded around the doorframes and light fixtures. Simca

shrugs. "It's a step," he says. Then we're a couple glasses into the wine and Simca grabs the guitar and the next three hours are a headlong crash of half-assed tunes not played in years. But between the two of us we remember all the words, and most of the chords. He has some new tunes, too, and I tap along softly on the highhat as he strums and sings. It's astonishing, actually, to hear what he's come up with during this lost time. He's all jazzy and mellow now, playing real chords and singing more or less in tune. I don't even know where to begin laying down a beat for this kind of thing so I go grab a cannister of salt from the kitchen and just sit behind the drums shaking it softly back and forth like the sound of wind blowing through the curtains. "That's nice," I say, and Simca's actually playing with his eyes closed, strumming with his thumb so softly you can barely hear the tune.

"Dinner music," he says.

"We're not punkrock anymore."

We stare at each other for a moment. We know each other so well, Simca and I, even after all this time. With no signal between us I crash into the beginning of a hyper fast tune and he's immediately there buckling his knees and bending over backwards howling, we're howling in unison and then we're giggling, punchdrunk and energized and the drumsticks go flying out of my hands as a cymbal stands crashes to the floor and we've accomplished the essential thing: not finishing the song. We sit convulsing with hilarity, reaching for our glasses to slosh back more wine, and that's when we hear the whistles and clapping from outside. On the porch next door the neighbor kids are peering through the window, howling with delight.

Just after sundown a couple arrives wearing Groucho glasses. It's a fellow teacher and her husband and we all sit politely in the living room talking about school and sipping wine. Maria has made guacamole and ceviche and she keeps going back to the kitchen making more delicious-smelling things while Simca and I sip more wine and try to recover our afternoon energy. "Third grade this year is Retards, Inc," my teacher friend is saying and I have to nod grimly at that. When Simca is asked what he does for a living he responds, "I conduct a little chamber orchestra in Madison. Wisconsin, that is." I stare at him in frank amazement as the others are nodding appreciatively. As far as I know Simca has never been anywhere near Wisconsin, or a piece of sheet music for that matter. He casts me a grin, but no wink, and I'm left to wonder just exactly how much he's changed and how well I really know him.

More people arrive just as Simca is being asked about the winters in Madison and I'm detecting the fingerprints of bullshit in his voice. He's just having fun: people he doesn't know, and will never see again. The new arrivals are the real estate agent and his wife, and another couple I don't recognize right away because they're both wearing Japanese Kabuki masks and kimonos: two old friends from high school. Then Maria's cousins Juan Carlos and Poncho show up with three Mexican girls I've never seen before. They're armed with a couple bottles of tequila and Simca is right there doing a shot straight. Everyone gathers around a widening array of Maria's appetizers and more wine bottles are opened up. Simca's chatting up a storm. He holds a wine glass in one hand and a tequila shot in the other. He never mentions his supposed conducting career again

and instead asks about good places to ski around here and how far the gambling towns are. I leave him on his own and follow Maria into the kitchen.

"You're a star," I tell her as she's pulling a piping hot shepherd's loaf from the oven.

"But not a rockstar. That's your job."

I take her by the waist from behind. She's pulling the innards out of the bread, making a bowl for the artichoke dip. "What are you going to wear tonight," I say, "for your costume?"

"I'm going to be a loving wife."

I let a few seconds go by before responding to that one. I rest my chin over her shoulder, taking her hands as she works. "But that's not a costume, is it. That's what you are everyday."

"Sometimes," she says.

I have to back away from her. It seems like you can always feel it in the air. The air goes electric when we're about to fight. "What does that mean?"

She turns away from the guts of the bread on the counter and looks at me with her arms folded. "It means that sometimes it is a costume. That's what it means."

I nod. I reach for her again, wrap my arms around her. Sometimes it's like this, out of the blue. She puts her arms around me too. "I know," I say. "I know, I know."

I don't know, I don't know, but sometimes you just have to go with it. Then the doorbell rings again, and the party grows.

It's almost ten o'clock and everyone is pretty toasty when Cora shows up. She's a Twister mat. She's cut a hole for her head, and the white plastic sheet drapes over her body with big circles of primary colors gleaming in the folds. The spiny thing is tied to the top of her head like a mortar board and when I introduce her to Simca she bows her head and invites him to take a spin. I look at Maria. She's shaking her head but she's smiling too.

Simca is instantly smitten. The thing about Cora: she's a dancer in every inch of her body and you can see it even in the way she picks up a wine glass. Every movement is fluid and confident and you can't help but imagine what her body is like. That's what Simca's doing right now. He makes a space for the two of them on the couch and offers her a plate of raw veggies and dip. "When are we gonna play Twister?" he's saying.

By now the party has spilled into the kitchen and the dining room. There's maybe thirty people standing and sitting in little groups and a few of them sway to the groove of Stevie Wonder playing low on the stereo. The principal has arrived and stands in a group of teachers and I can tell even from across the room that they're talking about school. Not that I don't like my job but it occurs to me how much more interesting it would be to be talking about conducting a chamber orchestra in Madison.

Inevitably the noise begins. Simca sits down at the drums and starts pounding and I pick up the guitar. It's not amplified so I have to really punch it hard to be heard over the beat. I can't really play anything at all but I like to think I have a sense to melody that would come out of whatever instrument I picked up. Not pretty melody, just melody. I find a simple groove on the bass string and start singing. I'm making up shit about everyone in their costumes. "Groucho, Groucho, Japanese mask, I'm a loving husband if

you have to ask!" Simca jumps in to shout out the chorus: "Twister! Twister! Twister! Twister!"

Most everyone is amazed to see me like this. Maria is laughing and laughing, and people start to boogie. They shout out the chorus and clap their hands and stomp their feet and clink bottles. We've all just lost ten years. Simca and I switch places and play a set of old stand-bys which nobody knows but which sound more or less credible. In fact, I'd have to say we sound better than ever before. Next thing you know Simca will be moving in so we can start the old band again. He'll send postcards to Bergie and Joe and Sunshine and all of a sudden it'll be Chapter Two, all the same old shit but in a new setting like some crappy Hollywood sequel.

I'm watching Maria. There's an axiom I've learned in years of playing parties like this: the guys with the instruments are the last to know when it's time to quit. As soon as I see Maria leaning closer to someone to talk over the noise I toss my drumsticks and stand up. "Time for a dance number," I tell Simca. He looks at me in dismay as I go over to the stereo and dial up a disc. He's still strumming as a pulsing Salsa tune comes on but I head straight for Maria and take her by the waist. "Here's the dancing part," I say. It takes a minute to convince her and then we're stepping quickly through the crowd, latched together like a couple at the Copa Cabana. Some other couples join in, candles are lit and it's a swinging latin dance party.

"Mexico," Simca is saying. "Belize, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua."

We're on the balcony over the back porch, me and him and Maria and Cora. I'm lighting up my weekly cigar and passing it around. Downstairs you can still hear music and talking but most of the party has petered out. The stars are cold and the night is perfectly clear. It'll be snowing soon and we'll be stuck inside until May.

"Costa Rica," says Cora.

"Panama," says Maria.

"Colombia, Venezuela, Ecuador, Peru," says Simca. He's trying to decide where to go next. It has to be somewhere warm and latin, where you can sit on the balcony in your shorts all year round. Cora wants to know if he speaks Spanish. "Sí, sí" he says.

Then she hits him with a whole string of babble and he blinks. She laughs. "You need to study a little before you hit the road, don't you think?" She takes a puff on the cigar and hands it to Simca.

"Not if you come with me," he says, grinning.

"Sure, I'm going to travel the third world with some rocker freak I met at a costume party in Gunnison." She's all smiles and it's obvious she and Simca will be making out before long. In fact it's surprising it's taken this long.

"Why don't we go?" says Maria as she puffs on the cigar and I think she means to leave these two alone on the balcony but then she says, "I've always wanted to go back to Mexico, and why not all the way to South America? Now is the time."

I watch her face for any kind of sarcasm but it's not there. She turns to Cora and lets go with a whole string of Spanish and the two chatter for some time while Simca and I watch, out of the loop. I puff on my cigar. All of a sudden she wants to go to South America. What is it with her? Everything out of the blue. Is that a Mexican thing? I have an imaginary conversation with Maria, more like a lecture. Think of all the things that

could go wrong. Think of the cheap hotels full of cockroaches and stoned hippy tourists. Cholera water. Bus rides with chickens and goats. And then guerilla soldiers. Marketplaces full of crooks. And you know how impulsive you are. We'd end up dead or hating each other. Do we really need to put ourselves through that? When things are so comfortable here? These are the things I want to say but won't. I'll tone it down, bring it up at some later date when maybe she'll already have forgotten all about it.

Cora says to me, translating, "You better go now, before you have a baby."

Maria says to Simca, "You better learn the language, 'cause Cora can't do all the talking."

"Sure she can," he says. "She can talk all she wants. I'll be sitting in the sun covered in papaya juice playing a ukelele. I already know how to say papaya and ukelele, so what more do I need?"

"Papaya," says Maria thoughtfully. She hands me the cigar. "Simca, do you know what papaya means in Spanish?"

He shakes his head.

She repeats the word. "Papaya. Papá ya. When you say it like that, it means, 'father already.'"

"Father already," he says.

Cora smiles. "I guess there's no papayas around here."

Simca looks bewildered. Me, I'm nervous. Maria might be making it up, to get at me somehow. Why would she say that? I take another puff, pass Simca the cigar. He seems to have nothing more to say. Pensive like I've never seen him. He stares into the ember. I pull Maria toward the balcony door and she follows me inside to leave those two on their own for a while.

"Why don't we go?" she says as we're moving down the hallway. "Do you want to? I don't mind doing all the talking."

"What's this all of a sudden? You want to go to South America?"

"I want to do something, darling, before we have a family."

"When are we gonna have a family?"

"Whenever you say."

We're standing in the hall between the gazes of family portraits. There's me with my brother and my folks, Maria with her little Mexican grandparents, another of her and her sisters playing in a fountain. She hung up all these pictures. She put this little endtable here with its lace doily and arrangement of candles, and she painted the stenciled border of flowers all the way down the hall. We're living in a museum for a family that hasn't happened yet.

"Whenever you say," I say.

Everyone's gone. Maria and I are collecting glasses and piling all the dirties on the kitchen counter. Empty bottles are everywhere. There's no sound but for the clinking of glass. Simca and Cora are still upstairs somewhere, maybe still out on the balcony in the cold, but they don't make a peep. Maria washes while I dry. I rub the glass until it squeaks. "So let's have a baby," I say.

Maria watches me. "Yeah?" she says.

"Yeah."

She holds my face in her soapy hands, kisses me. "Okay, baby, just let me finish washing this shit."

We're curled up in bed when I hear Simca and Cora going down the hall. They're tip-toeing past and I can hear the squeaking of the Twister mat she's been wearing all this time. A moment later the front door opens and closes and it occurs to me that Simca's gone with her somewhere and he might not even come back for another five years. I roll into Maria's warmth. She's already asleep, and she's glowing in the light of the winter stars through the curtains.

But morning finds Simca sitting groggy on the couch, strumming the guitar and staring out the window. His old hatchback sits at the curb and you can see everything he owns packed in there behind the frost on the windows. "Overhung?" I say as I pour us a couple cups of coffee.

"Still thirsty, my friend."

We watch out the window as tiny flakes of snow come down. The sky is slate, unreadable. I wait for him to start telling me about Cora but he keeps mum. We go through a whole pot of coffee just sitting there like that, not a word passing. Maria is upstairs writing letters and all you can hear from her is the occasional sneeze. "Salud," I whisper after each one.

Finally Simca speaks. "You want your drums back?"

"Hell no. Get 'em out of here."

He nods. "You're not punkrock anymore."

"Neither are you."

"Hell no."

"Where are you headed? Or are you moving in with Cora?"

He rolls his eyes. "The day I move in with a woman again, take me out in the yard and shoot me."

"Hey, it's not so bad."

"Maybe not with a woman like Maria. She lives to make you happy, you know. Do you know that?"

Sure, I know that. But hearing it from Simca surprises me. "Sure, I know that."

"Don't fuck it up."

"Why would I fuck it up?"

"Because it's easy." He strums the guitar. "Easy to fuck up," he croons.

I help him scrape the ice off his car and then we drive down to the gas station to air up the tires and add oil and antifreeze. Most likely he's headed over the mountains, somewhere towards the west coast. He's got to shed a lot of crap before he can head anywhere south of the border. I tell him to sell my drums to some kid in LA who really looks like he could use them. "Can a guy get any antifreeze around here at this time of the morning?" he says when the car's ready to go.

The Coachlight Tavern is nearly dead this early on a Sunday. A couple of cowboy types sit at the long bar while the bartender goes around sweeping the hardwood floors that hadn't been swept the night before. No one's bothered to start up the jukebox and so we sit listening to the shush of the broom and it's the only sound except for the tick, every once in a while, of ice melting in whiskey. Simca lights up a smoke and offers me the pack.

"Quits," I say.

"That's not right."

And no, it's not right, because that cigarette of his looks damn good, and smells delicious, and I have to look away to stop from ripping it out of his hand and sucking it down in one sweet drag--but Quits is Quits, and I know it would only take one little taste to finish two years on the Butt Wagon. Cigars don't count. Thank God I never quit drinking. We sip our whiskies, Simca and I, and smack our lips and say, "Ah!" and I feel like a locomotive starting up with a belly full of hot coals.

"I went to Boston," Simca is saying, "for no good reason other than my family used to go there when I was a kid. It's different now, you know. No one holds your hand down by the wharf and buys you ice cream anymore. Anyway, I had a gig in this coffeeshop, Haroun's, every other Thursday, and with the tips from that and my waiting job I could just barely make rent. And then there was this girl. Sarah. She worked in the coffeeshop. Ohmygod, what a beautiful girl! She had perfect shoulders, you know? All round and toned and perfectly brown. We hooked up for a while but I never actually got to know her that well because we spent almost all our time screwing. I'm serious. There wasn't a lot of talk going on."

I shake my head, grinning at him. I've heard this kind of story about a thousand times from Simca, with different names and places, but the same story. Still, the whiskey is taking us back, it feels like old times, and I'm glad to listen. It's a little amazing to me that Simca has changed so little, that his eyes still glitter in the exact same way when he's describing the particular beauty of some girl. You can tell, when his eyes glitter like that, that he really was powerless to stop himself from falling for her. He's hardwired for romance, and he's innocent.

"So this went on for about a month. That's pretty much my maximum anyway, but this time I didn't want it to end. I was crazy about her. I couldn't get enough, I just couldn't, and you know how it is when you're denied something--you just want more. I started telling her how beautiful she was, how I wanted her all the time, how she made me think of this or that--poetic shit, you know?--and she would never respond to that, she'd look away and change the subject. And that just made me crazier.

"Well, the thing is, I found out something very interesting about her. There was this bar in the North End, you see, where I went pretty often after getting off work. She would never meet me there, she said it was a dive for lowlifes, and she'd always have something else to do whenever I wanted to go there. I didn't mind. It's good to have your own place where you can go alone, you know?"

"So this one night I'm sitting alone at a booth having a whiskey and winding down. The table, you see, all the tables in the place, were covered in photographs with glass over the top. Some of the pictures were really old, people with wide collars and mutton chops toasting St Patty's day in this same bar. But some of the pictures were newer, and I recognized some of the regulars: people playing pool, toasting the camera, staring into the flash. So I'm actually looking for myself when I come across a very familiar face. I lean closer to look, and it's her. It's Sarah. She's in a vampire get-up, with fangs and blood dripping out of her mouth, but it's definitely her. And she's sitting on a guy's lap on a barstool and he's biting her on the neck. There are several more Halloween pictures scattered across the tabletop, all taken in this bar. I spot several more of Sarah, and in most of them she's cuddled up with the same guy, and I recognize him too: he's the

bartender. I look over at him as he's pouring me another drink. The thing is, Halloween was only two weeks ago.

"Well, if you're going to find out your girlfriend is running around on you, there's no better place than in a bar. You don't have far to go to get loaded. So I keep ordering whiskies, and at one point I notice the bartender's wearing a wedding ring. I ask him straight out, 'You married?' And you know what he says? He says, 'Yeah. To a vampire.' And he nods his head at the photographs on my tabletop, at Sarah in her get-up. And I say something like, 'Well, you must never see her during the day.'"

Simca's shaking his head, downing his whiskey, tapping the bar for more. "That was about the end of things with Sarah. I asked and she said, 'Sure, I'm married. Why didn't you ever ask me?' Like it was my fault. But that's not even the bad part."

And then he waits for the next drink to arrive. He lights up another smoke, and I realize in the silence that the old cowboys at the bar are listening to this story too. Simca takes a fresh sip and continues. "So we're quits. I drop the coffeeshop gig because I can't be around her, I don't want to see her fucking face again. And I always remember her now with fangs and blood dripping. But Boston's a big enough city. I don't see her again, and a year goes by before I go back to that bar. I think maybe I wanted to see if there would be new photos, of the latest Halloween party. Maybe I even thought I might see her again. I don't know. So I'm at my old booth, it's the same bartender, Sarah's husband, and I'm checking out the photos under the glass. Some of last year's pictures are still here, but some are new. In one I see the bartender holding a little baby, pressing its chubby little face against his, both of their eyes lit up in the flash. In another I see Sarah, sitting on a beach chair somewhere, holding the baby. I stare at that fucking thing. At that baby. There's more pictures of it but I don't want to see any more. I take off without finishing my drink. I left Boston not long after that. Wouldn't you?"

"Yikes," I say, shaking my head. One of the loners at the bar is nodding his head in grim contemplation. Simca just stares into his whiskey with a look I've never seen on him. He's serious, angry, scared.

I let a little time slide by before I start talking. "Maria wants to have a baby, but I don't know. That pretty much changes everything, doesn't it."

"Getting married changes everything, my friend."

"No, that's what I thought but it's not true. We still go out sometimes, Maria and I, and get loaded and chase each other through people's front yards. We still stay up talking till four in the morning. And last time we drove up to the reservoir we got busy in the car. Does that sound like married life to you?"

"Now, you're saying you did all these things with the same girl? Well, then, that sounds like married to me."

"How about Cora?"

"Don't try to set me up. I can set myself up just fine."

"What happened with her? A little Twister maybe?"

He shakes his head, looking into his whiskey. Tick! says the ice.

The barman comes by to see what else we need. Simca waves his hand. After a while he says, "I don't need anymore Twister."

"You need a beach and a ukelele."

He nods. "Papaya," he says.

Papaya. Fat, ripe and sweet. Get 'em while they're good. I want to say that to Simca but I keep my mouth shut. He's got plenty to think about for a long drive through the snow.

* * *

*(This story previously appeared in the Summer 2000 issue of **River City**.)*

Behind the Temple

Jackson Carter

-Il y a quelque chose que je deteste chez-toi.

Her finger was tapping my temple. She sat over me as I lay in the sheets of our bed and the only light came through the window from the street. Voices wandered past, echoing off the high faces of the buildings, entering the still air of our room as foreign music. And she lit a cigarette, striking a match that was loud as a drum, making her face dance. Then she was still, and smoke spun out from her mouth.

"There is something I hate about you," and she tapped me softly on the temple.

"In there?" I said.

"Yes."

Behind the temple. There is the mechanism in there that makes the head rattle like a half-empty box of matches. I am walking across the bridge in the night, ticking softly along like a prostitute, as if I have an appointment with anyone who will have me. Across the bridge and along the quai where the dead leaves are a carpet. The lights of the boats make the trees shimmer and the faces of the buildings dance, and the silhouettes of the walking people shift across the walls to make families of shadows. This is where the words are, pronounced off the bootsteps-and I need all of it, the cold edge and the water traveling and the legs of the woman standing at the corner and the pieces in my pocket, held in the fist, that buy the wine. The Wine Generation, she says, isn't even a Generation, because you're the only member. That's alright, I say, just leaves more for me.

This is where the words come from, the red bottle on the table, the stained glass stark as an operating table, the words stitched into cheap pulp. She reads me sometimes, when I'm spent and too thirsty to drink anymore and I hand her a page and she stands by the light, eyes moving, and she doesn't understand where it comes from- it must be real, she thinks. even sadness when I'm fucking, God no, I didn't write that line, I ripped it off from the Master, M-hrhoff, wrote it down on the margin of a page as the tip of an idea because good storywriters can only hope to bake their bread out of the crumbs left by the Poets...but she sees these words and even if she knows I didn't invent them it is the handwriting that hurts, my hand that strikes the match, rattling behind the temple, traitor.

And the songs behind the temple, the pretty ones with some girl's name in the refrain, nothing but a name; and the survivor songs that sound soft or angry or minor and the name is in there too but it is never sung, it's underneath the melody and if you listen closely the melody peels away and there is nothing but the name, a simple word, and this is easy to do.

Listen.

There is noise behind the temple, more than just the rattling matches and the singing name. There is the noise of car engines whose only destination is the sound, going around and 'round, back and forth over the prairie and the hills, and the noise of crickets and cicadas eating out the hinge of darkness, and the earsplitting pierce of the sunrise that takes a puddle of night left over behind a pebble in Virginia and pulls it across the Continent to cast a pinpoint shadow on the face of the Rocky Mountains, the sound of this.

Now the breath of the ocean is a warm body atop the breath of the train and you watch out the window and see the tide coming in at the edge of the tracks and feel the flicker of rails and hinges under the seat and you don't know the difference between what you see through the glass and what you feel in your spine and we are all made like this.

There are photographs behind the temple. My face is blurred and there are white holes in my eyes because I'm holding the camera on myself. The horizon is tilted like a ship's.

There is a girl who stands on a bridge and she is as tall as the lamp post behind her because I am kneeled down, pointing my camera up at her face and a slice of the city unravels out of focus behind her and she stands in the center of the frame. Yes, she was the kind of girl you put in the center of the frame. Once we developed a roll of film and I saw that I was beginning to compose her in the foreground with flowers or bottles or architecture in relation, and when she saw this we knew we were finished, and these last photos are the only images I have of her, precious voodoo like a knife used to slay a lover, fingerprints on the glossy blade.

And something moves behind the temple that has no form and feels like black water trickling down the throat, drowning the heart and pressing its hands on the chest, wringing the spine and making the skin cold, and all of these sensations are as simple and slow as a giant cog that turns on a screw through the soul.

There is a mirror behind the temple where the man can watch his whiskers grow and watch his skin change color with the seasons and see the lines of his hands appear like ghosts around the eyes; and when the lover comes inside and sees the mirror she is startled. She sees nothing there, no reflection. It is oily black like the eye of a bird; there is nothing inside. She holds her head up and keeps her eyes low, watching as she taps the temple. Her cigarette is spent, and she stabs it out. She has been watching me the whole time, the whole cigarette.

"That's exactly what I'm talking about," she says.

* * *

*(This story previously appeared in the Fall 1994 issue of **Nexus**.)*

Junkie

Steve Roth

On the street everyone seemed to look better than us. Boys with slick-backed hair, girls with tight tank-tops, stylish boots. I kept worrying that you'd part from me and walk into a rendezvous with one of them. Beside you I looked dumb. My hair was unkempt and my shirt was old and used. I wanted to hold your hand but was uncomfortable in appearing to possess you. You walked a little ahead of me. I'd always wanted one of the girls with makeup. You wore none, or else very little. I wanted big red pouty lips, and their little black doe eyes. I wanted to find out where their bedrooms were, where they dropped those knee length boots.

When we stopped walking I cupped the back of your neck in my palm. Your mouth seemed to open and stretch in my anticipation. I thought of sticking my tongue down your throat, gripping your breast, squeezing your ass. The door to the bar stank of beer and cigarettes. We looked at each other and approached the doorman. He asked for our ID's. You fished in your handbag for yours, I reached under my thigh for mine. He looked at them and waved us on. The bar was packed, we had no choice but to be touching each other. You gripped my collar and yelled in my ear. I nodded and gave you money. The scent of women mixed with the beer and smoke. They passed and I caught their aroma and a glance in their eyes. They came in all shapes—I fixed on their breasts and compared them to yours. Yours were wrapped tight in your halter. At their split they seemed to yearn to bulge out. I wanted to leave a tattoo on their fleshy curves, to take their nipples between my teeth. I was desperate that you stay with me. I feared at any minute you may disappear and not be seen again. At the same time I wanted nothing more than for another woman to grind her crotch into mine, while you watched.

Your girl eyes jumped and bobbed, your clothes seemed to confine you. It took all I had not to move my hands beneath your shirt. I wanted to bite your dishy blond hair and suck the strands.

“Let's dance!” you screamed.

I shook my head no, you disappeared into the throng. I watched you bounce and bring the bottle to your mouth. Your earrings brushed your shoulders. The band played a steamy thumping blues, and there was no mistaking this was a pit of lust and desire they'd conjured. Men and women kissed passionately, inches from my face. Girls and guys both shook their asses, as if to beg for a tongue or cock.

“Let's fuck,” I said to a woman passing. She looked startled and stopped.

“I'm with someone,” she said.

“No you're not,” I returned.

She jerked, her shoulder and fluttered past. I looked around, found a woman's ear to breathe into. "I want to eat you out," I said. She was tall and lean, elbows on the bar, her length stretched out, culminating in prim boots. "I want to eat your pussy."

She knew I was serious—she looked frightened but still composed. "Right now," I said, "outside." I motioned over my shoulder. She drew away.

"I'm a nice guy," I said.

She looked at me and then disappeared into the crowd. Suddenly my manners overcame me. I felt foolish, criminal. I searched the crowd for Lisa and found her gyrating across from a young kid with stylish long hair.

I watched her. Her tongue licked her lips. She thrust her crotch at him and he grinned sheepishly. He turned in a circle and feebly wiggled his ass. Lisa laughed and threw back another gulp of beer.

I slipped through the crowd and grabbed her crotch. She squirmed and pulled her shirt down past her nipple. The boy across from her stared. I bit her nipple and clutched the back of her neck with my fingers. Her head rocked back and her mouth gaped open. I pulled her head back and stuck my tongue down her throat.

I left. She gasped, laughing, and gave her bottle to the boy. Then she bounced and pranced away, following me.

In a clearing she jumped me from behind. "C'mon, fucker," she said. Her legs wrapped around my waist and her hands around my forehead. I struggled and fell to the floor, soaking my knees in beer and sweat. She flipped me on my back, mounted me at my chest and moved her crotch over my face and chin. A circle formed around us. She rocked atop me, the seams of her jeans chafing my skin. Cheers rose. "C'mon baby!" she shouted, grinding her pelvis into my face. Her crotch was moistening and I tried to bite her through the fabric. The cheers and yells were getting louder. "Take it off!" became the cry. Above my head I could feel her unbuttoning her shorts. I looked up and saw the face of what had to be a bouncer appear.

"Fuck him!" I heard a woman yell. The bouncer's face froze in a sort of panic and helplessness. Lisa leapt off and the circle seemed to halt, in a silence. I looked up to see her head tossed back and people's faces only inches from hers.

"Break it up, break it up," someone yelled. I looked up to see a huge meaty face with short sharp hair close on mine. I bounced out from beneath her and stood, quickly. Lisa collapsed on the floor in a heap.

"Get your goddamn clothes on!" someone yelled. I was already being pushed and shoved toward the door—I looked behind to see a bouncer grip Lisa by the shoulders. She fell against the bar. I was pushed into the street. "You fucking pervert!" the bouncer yelled. Lisa ran out after me, buttoning her shorts. "Jesus, the fucking pussies," she said. Behind us, in the doorway, a crowd had gathered.

We got in our car. As I turned the key in the ignition she reached her hand into my crotch and fumbled at my zipper. "Stop it," I said. "I have to drive." I put the car into gear and rolled out of the parking lot. "Undo your pants," she said.

"Can't it wait?" I asked.

"Why should it."

“We’ll have a wreck or something,” I said. “And it’s a small car.”
“Then stop it,” she said

I pulled the car over to the side of the street and parked beneath a tree. Her long maroon nails shone in the light as she undid my belt. Her mouth fell upon my sleeping cock and slowly roused it. I leaned back and glanced in the rearview mirror.

“That was pretty hot,” she said, kissing my cock.

“Someone’s coming down the street,” I said.

“We should do that again,” she said, and took my cock into her mouth.

I watched as two young guys walked down the sidewalk near the car. They were walking quickly, one held a bottle in his hand, and he passed it to the other. They were wearing baseball caps—I closed my eyes as they neared the car and Lisa worked my cock ever faster.

When I opened my eyes I saw they had come upon the car. They walked past, and then one stopped. Out of the corner of my eye I caught his glance—he saw me see him, and then he walked on, catching up with his friend.

“Stop,” I said to Lisa, as I felt myself near an orgasm. “Let’s save it.” She stopped and pushed the hair out of her eyes, and gulped for air. I turned the key in the ignition and pulled my pants back on. She sat up and reached in her purse for a cigarette.

“Let’s go dancing,” she said. “Let’s go down to the Brickyard.”

“Alright,” I said. I turned on the stereo and we rode, windows down, beat thumping. The cars gleamed past and the stoplights were mostly in our favor. We didn’t say much—we sucked our cigarettes, and looked out at the city as it cruised by.

“It looks like a birthday cake,” she said at one point.

“What?”

“The city,” she said. “All the lights are the candles and the smoke, is the smoke. Don’t you think so?”

“It looks like a rollercoaster to me,” I said, seeing the ramps and bridges, the river-flow of traffic, headlights. “You think I’m driving this car?” I said. “Hell no, it’s driving me.”

“No,” she said. “It’s a birthday cake.”

“So make a wish,” I said, turning and skidding into a hard right. “Think I can blow out the candles?” she asked.

“Sure.”

“You think I can?” she said, and blew hard out the open window. She blew again. Nothing happened. “Did you make a wish?” I said.

“No, because it wouldn’t come true,” she replied. “You really thought I could blow out those candles?”

“You sure can blow out mine,” I said.

The Brickyard was crowded. We sat in the car and waited for Lisa to finish with her makeup. People were walking all over—girls in crowds, guys in pairs, couples—the couples never looked at you, everyone else did.

“You want some?” Lisa asked, holding the lipstick.

“Sure,” I said, puckering my lips.

“I’ll give you some eyeliner too.” She painted my eyelids black and my lips bright red. I checked the rearview mirror—I looked suddenly cute. “If you had a wig and tits I’d be a lesbian,” Lisa said.

Again everyone seemed to look better than us, or at least me. I pulled at the collar of my wrinkled cotton shirt and wished it was silk—where was my gold chain? Where were my natty black shoes? The black guys looked the best—clean granite faces, suave shirts and coats, smart slick pants, cinched around a sleek waist—and always at their hand trailed a smart tough babe. The sexy women were always the older ones—pro chics who came out to the club, to wear their best and wish for romance—they stood in their smart skirts and dark hose and stirred their drinks, sipping. The younger girls, they seemed just like rubber balls—they bounced around with hopeful faces and bottles of beer. But Lisa spotted one of them and got talking to her right away. They talked and danced for a while, and I wandered off and got a drink from the bar.

“You know Ashley, right?” Lisa said to me when I got back. She gestured to the girl standing next to her.

“Hey Ash,” I said.

“Hey,” she answered, smiling, a bright bouncing ball.

“Me and Ashley’ve been hanging out,” Lisa said. “We’re thinking about going to the Platinum. Wanna come?”

The Platinum was a strip bar. Ashley, it turned out, worked there. Something in me shuddered at taking Lisa to the strip bar.

“I’ll get us in free,” Ashley said. “Don’t worry ‘bout it.”

“C’mon, let’s go,” Lisa said, tugging at my shirt cuff.

“What are we going to do there?” I said.

“Get naked,” Lisa replied.

Did this include Ashley, I wondered? She was a stunning woman—dark chocolate skin, long butterfly eyelashes. Her eyes were big and dark, her lips were like a model’s—big and pouty, sensuous, exotic. There was something gypsy-like about her—it showed in her long skirts, her ankle bracelets, the jewelry and pendants hung around her neck, her nose-ring.

“Ashley said I can audition tonight if I want to,” Lisa told me as we left the club.

“Audition, for what?” I said.

“Stripping,” she said.

I looked at Ashley and she shrugged. “They’ll audition any girl who wants to,” she told me.

“You’re going to audition to be a stripper?” I said, unlocking the car.

“Why not, it’ll be fun,” Lisa said.

“They usually don’t audition this late, and on weekends,” Ashley said. “But I can probably set her up. You’re going to have to talk your way into it,” she said to Lisa.

“Oh they’ll love me,” Lisa said.

I started the car and we rolled out of the parking lot.

“So what’s it like being a stripper,” I called to Ashley in the back seat.

“You just take off your clothes and guys give you money,” she said. “Really, that’s it.”

“Don’t you get some creeps?” I asked.

“Oh, they’re all pretty much creeps. But it’s okay. I mean, most of them are really just nice guys, they just want to see some young chic nude. The creeps, you just take their money and don’t let them touch you. It’s really safe, actually—there’s bouncers everywhere. If you fuck up they’ll beat the shit out of you.”

We drove across the bridge—in front of us was the smoke and haze of the railyards and stockyards. The smokestacks and iron towers loomed eerily—all around were ghostly yellow and orange lights, blinking and reflecting off the muddy black ribbon of river below.

“Some places are sleazy,” Ashley said. “The King George, that’s basically a whorehouse. The Platinum’s pretty much on the level. Some shit does go down there, but it’s way underground. I’ve only heard rumors, actually. I’m just a grunt, part-timer, ya know.”

I wanted to ask her if she had ever encountered any real trouble, but I thought I’d leave that alone. “So what’s up with this audition?” I asked. Lisa was dancing in her seat to the music, and blowing cigarette smoke out the window.

“She can wear my clothes,” Ashley said. “They’re in the dressing room.”

“Basically I just have to talk my way into an audition and they’ll let me do it,” Lisa said. “Right, Ashley?”

“If they’re in the mood and they like you, sure,” she said.

“Since when did you want to be a stripper?” I said to Lisa.

“Since tonight at the bar,” she said. “I told Ash about the scene at Cranberry’s.”

I looked back at Ashley. She smiled and shrugged. “We’re fucking junkies,” I told her.

“Aren’t we all,” Ashley said.

We got to the Platinum and Ashley went in ahead of us. After a word with the doorman, he motioned us in. Ashley went to the bar and got us drinks.

“They’re free,” she said.

It had been years since I was at a strip bar. Topless women waitresses pranced around carrying trays. Men with loosened ties sat alone at the bar, drinking. Boys with baseball caps and t-shirts sat at the stages, hooting and hollering. Other types mixed in around them—foreign looking sorts, guys with shirts unbuttoned, the occasional hipster. In each of their eyes if I met them seemed a sort of shame, and beneath it a sort of terrible loneliness. How much of this was imagined and how much was real I couldn’t say—suffice to say I was glad I was there with the girls, and we were “on business.”

Ashley took Lisa through the throng and into the dressing rooms. She turned and blew a kiss as she went off. I sat at the bar, drinking. My attention turned from the men to the women—I was surprised to see how good they looked. My memory of strippers had been of some grotesque, garishly painted face, with vacant wounded eyes and used, trashy body. But these women were hot—they seemed young and bright, and their bodies were lean and toned. On the stages, they rose above the throng like statuesque trophies—like a sort of vagrant goddess, whom the crowd below paid homage. My interest fixed on two in particular. One had dark hair, the other blond. I noticed that the dancers revolved in shifts, and that when the blond had finished, the brunette replaced her. I watched the brunette—the DJ called her Alexis—and waited for her to notice me. I decided that if she

made eye contact, I would approach her. She stepped onto the stage and the music began. She wore a short denim jacket over a gold satin bra. On her hips she wore cut-offs. Her four inch heels seemed to thrust her thighs into the sky.

She stepped lightly at first, pulling at her lip with her finger. Then she turned her back and gyrated her hips—her cut-offs stopped right at the crotch, and she stroked her thighs with her long fingers and nails. She turned and grabbed her jacket—with her hips pulsing she opened and closed the jacket, to reveal the bra underneath, and just as quickly to hide it. Again she turned and this time leaned over, hands on the stage, and flexed her thighs and ass. When she turned I imagined that she looked at me—she pulled her lip with her finger, and her dewdrop eyes gently lowered and raised their lids. I left the bar and went to a seat by the stage. I'd noticed that during the first song the dancers merely teased—with the second they began to strip. As I took my seat the first song was faded out and the second began. I lit a cigarette. Alexis had noticed me now—she looked and quickly turned away.

She was on the floor now. She had shed her jacket and was opening her bra before a guy on the side opposite me. When she rose her bra was off and dollar bills lay on the stage. On her knees she danced over to a guy near me. She had unbuttoned her shorts and was playing with the zipper. Her mouth was open and her tongue was licking her lips. Her eyes were lowered and her mouth seemed animal-like and hungry. I looked at her bare breasts and hard nipples and smiled. I reached into my wallet and pulled out some dollar bills. I smiled very sweetly—I felt it was the least I owed. for such pleasure.

Before the other guy she crawled out of her shorts—she was now down to her panties. Her breasts lightly flopped against her chest as she stood and bumped—her hands and fingers moved through her hair, her head rocked and swayed to the beat. As the next song began she stepped out of her panties and dropped to her knees. This time she was coming at me. I looked into her eyes and smiled, dreamily. My dollars were scattered before me. Her eyes locked on mine and she whispered hello. I held my eyes on hers, feeling slightly humiliated but forgiving it nonetheless. I whispered 'Hi'.

She moved up to me and put her hands on my shoulders, and rubbed her forehead on mine. Her breasts wiggled inches from my nose. Her eyes seemed to pierce me and dare me to move. This time I squinted and my smile pursed into a sort of sneer, as if to tell her my money didn't come easy, my attention not easily won.

She broke our glance and quickly spun around. She lay on the stage on her chest and spread her legs to show her cunt. She put each of her ankles on my shoulders, and rolled her hips and crotch, her elbows on the stage. She reached beneath her and fingered her cunt, opening it—I peered into the hole. Again she spun around and got to her knees, rubbing her forehead with mine.

“How much money do you have?” she whispered.

“Enough,” I said.

“I don't think so,” she whispered back.

She pushed off me from my shoulders and wheeled around, to the guy opposite. Soon the song ended and she gathered up her dollar bills. She didn't look. She pushed off me from my shoulders and wheeled around, to the guy opposite. Soon the song ended and she gathered up her dollar bills. She didn't look at me again—I got up and thought, fair enough, I've been fleeced, and went back to the bar. At the bar I met Ashley.

"I don't think it's going to happen," she said. "They think she's too fat."

"Really," I said. She nodded and handed me a drink. "I was worried about that, they're pretty big on thinness," she said. "Lisa's pretty pissed."

"Who's that brunette that was just over there?" I asked.

"Alexis?"

"Yeah."

"That's Stacy, she's great. Goes to Parker, psych major. The funny thing about her, she's totally blind. She's got glasses, you know, but they don't let you wear them. She says on stage she can barely see a thing."

I smiled. "So where's Lisa now?" I asked.

"She was arguing with Joe. She'll be out soon." We drank.

"They're just not into her." She shook her head. "She's really not too fat, her stomach's a little chubby, but there's lots of girls like that. They just think she's nuts."

"Well she is," I said.

We nodded and drank.

"Goddamn that fucker," Lisa said, coming up to us. "I'm not too fucking fat!" she said.

"I know," Ashley said. "It's just a bad night. You can try it again, sometime."

"Should we stay or should we go?" I said.

"I'm leaving this fucking place," Lisa said, and Ashley and I followed. We got in the car. As we went over the bridge and back to the city, Lisa rolled the window down. She closed her eyes and puffed up her cheeks, and blew in huge breaths at the railyards and stockyards below.

"What's she doing?" Ashley said.

"Making a wish, I hope."

* * *

*(This excerpt is from Roth's upcoming novel **Magpie**.)*

Rocket

Roy Allahades

The girl strikes match to matchbook; a sonic boom crackles out over the yellow autumn cornfields.

The two events occur nearly simultaneously, an illusion of cause and effect. Then two jet fighters drop down from out of the thin cloud cover. They circle in close to each other, drawing closer and closer-- so close that everyone watching thinks there's going to be a mid-air collision-- until finally the jets blast off in opposite directions, silver arrows against pale sky. And with an air of studied nonchalance, the girl touches her match to her cigarette, and the audience applauds.

The girl. Of course, she's really a woman, probably nearly thirty, but it's just that it's so much more natural for you to say "the girl." It's not that you mean anything by it. It's just that she's about the same age as you are, and frankly, you don't really see yourself as an adult yet, as someone with responsibility and a career and all. Would she understand that kind of thinking, would she mind being called a girl? Because it really is only the wives of your friends that you call women, because they've taken up some nebulous status as settled down. Just as so many of your guy friends are now men, earnest and tired. And how did this transformation occur? You have no idea. You just woke up one day and saw that it was true.

So this girl smokes her cigarette, and you watch.

She wears a one-piece dress, dark green, along with fashionable, lace-up-the-side boots. Also: tortoise shell sunglasses and a white scarf. She stands with one hand cocked against slender hips, eyes on the sky, hair long and brown and straight over her shoulders. Her neck strains as she watches for the helicopters that are scheduled to perform next. Already you can see them as dull gray specks on the horizon. In minutes they roar past overhead, their trailing dust plumes obscuring the view of Denver and of the mountains. They engage in some sort of mock combat and everyone in the crowd cheers wildly.

Everyone except the girl, that is, who watches the show instead with a brooding intensity of some kind, like maybe she's plotting something, like maybe she's the kind of person who comes to air shows with the secret hope of seeing a plane or two crash and come hurtling across the asphalt runway. Maybe even right now she's trying to use telekinesis on the helicopters, trying to push them just a little too close, so that the tips of

their blades get caught up in each other. Or there are other possibilities. Anything and everything is at this point possible. Maybe she likes to go out on dates to the airport, likes to spend her evenings casting voodoo spells on businessmen taking the red-eye to Chicago. Maybe she crosses herself whenever a commercial airliner over-flies her path. She could be that someone free and rebellious and splendidly irrational that you've always imagined yourself with, the kind of person who can make anything and everything exciting.

The kind of person you've never, ever, actually met in real life.

Not that you're here hoping for disaster. In fact, you're rather neutral on air shows. The only reason you came at all was because the whole thing was free, and because you'd never been out to the new airport before, and because your friend Sammy Diaz insisted that you'd like it. Sammy loves airplanes, of course. He's got his commercial pilots license and works for United. His old man joined the airforce as a way out of the ghetto, so Sammy grew up around planes and has always known what it was he wanted to do with his life. He can tell you the specifications on anything with wings, just pulling out numbers from somewhere underneath his mop of black hair. And Sammy is a good guy, tall and lanky, quick to smile. He was one of your roommates back in college. But in a lot of ways you think he overdosed on this whole aircraft thing. He had posters of F-16's and F-18's his dorm room, and when he speaks of jets it's with an annoying combination of reverence and awe. So it's no wonder you're drawn to this mysterious girl, so quiet and calm in the face of supersonic speed, daring aerobatics, stunning technology.

It would be good, you reason, if this girl did believe in telekinesis or voodoo, because that kind of mind-set would go a long ways toward balancing out Sammy and his near-worship of what are, after-all, machines made for killing. And faced with two such extremes: with some spiritual rejection of modern technology versus a smugness in its flawless workings, well, maybe nestled between those two extremes you could feel like it's okay to be non-committal, because there's nothing like two opposing extremes to remind you of how ridiculous certainty can be, whether it's about what progress is, or success, or love, or anything.

You're so intent on this thought, as a matter of fact, that you don't even notice when Sammy's wife Michelle gets back from the concession stand. She stands next to you for a minute or two, holding a tray heavy with hot dogs and drinks. Sammy is there too.

"Hello? Do you want a beer or not?" she says finally.

"Oh, Jesus, sorry 'Chelle." You take a beer and a hot dog. Sammy takes the same. This leaves Michelle with a diet Coke that she sips through a long, thin straw.

She's a tall brunette, leggy, a good match for Sammy. In high school they both ran cross-country, and they both have the runner's thin build. You remember in college how you and Sammy and your third roommate, Sal Hastings, used to play penny poker on Monday nights, and how whenever Michelle joined in she would always win. She was always smart and hard-working and you and Sal used to tease Sammy that he didn't have a chance of hooking up with her. She talked about how she was going to Asia to teach English. Or else back-packing in South America. Never once did you hear her talk about marriage. Yet somehow her and Sammy have found in each other a contentment, and it is

both wonderful and incomprehensible to you. In fact, Michelle's just recently gotten her pilot's license, and when her and Sammy talk about flying, it's like they're flirting.

"There," Sammy says, between swallows of beer, "that loop's got to be tough, but the plane on the left's gotten too far ahead."

"Maybe he's just excited," says Michelle, squinting. For your part, you haven't been paying attention to the schedule. The helicopters are gone and two new jets are involved in some sort of huge loop across the sky.

"Yeah," Michelle goes on, "just imagine the view that pilot has. Just mountains and sky and open prairie for a thousand miles in every direction. It's got to be tough not to just let the throttle out and just FLY, you know, in a jet like that." You think about this. In one of those jets you could rocket to any point in Colorado in minutes. It's a Saturday afternoon, late September. The day's been hot but a cool night is just waiting to spill out over the horizon and wash the blue from the sky, leaving it clean and black for the stars. Where would you want to fly on an evening like this?

Fifty miles to the north is the college town of Fort Collins, where on days like today you and Sammy and Sal Hastings used to sit up on the roof of your house and drink under the hot Indian summer sun. Sal was always the practical one. He'd tell you to come down from your perch before you got sunburned and you'd call all your friends, and then you'd shower and dress and walk down to the liquor store on the corner. And all you'd have planned would be to walk the streets of the university district and listen for the sound of guitars playing and people laughing, and then to follow it all to some brightly-lit party. Because back then, when you were that age, tomorrow was theoretical at best, the future only the barest of abstractions. And would you want to fly back to that if you could, if you had some voodoo mystic jet fighter?

Or would you go four hundred miles to the east, to St. Louis, where the blonde you dated back in college now lives, the girl who wanted to marry you and who is now married to an electrical engineer. Would you fly back and change any of this? Or would you go only the forty miles to Colorado Springs, where the girl you dated just last year is doing who knows what with who knows who, her father paying the way, with no need for job, planning, nothing. How long would it take to fly in an F-16 to a place where we could all live like that, you want to ask Sammy, like maybe he'd know the stats on that one.

"You know," says Sammy, oblivious, finishing his hot dog, "we should get together tonight, all of us. I can call Sal and he could come over and we could all have a barbeque, maybe even play some poker..."

"Oh, right, 'cause you still haven't seen our new place," Michelle says to you, "and you really got to see our new place. It's all so brand new!"

You finish your beer. You look out into the crowd. The girl in the green dress and the white scarf and the boots who had so caught your fancy is gone. You look up into the sky at a set of fading contrails. Their white streaks mix with billowing, island-like clouds, and in them it's possible to make out shapes, visions, possible futures. Can you see yourself someday in a crackerjack suburban townhome like Sammy and Michelle, new car parked out front, brain surgically removed and a set of credit cards installed? Or take your old roommate Sal. Would you want a job like his? He's managing his own upscale pawnshop, an extraordinary pawnshop in a national chain of pawnshops, all devoted to revolutionizing second-hand retailing. End quote. Does he believe in any of that corporate mission crap? Of course not. But he's rolling in the cash, so he pretends. He

likes to play real poker now, not just the penny ante variety. Yeah, and he's cynical. You don't hear him talking about marriage ever. He likes to go down to the *Glorious Quran*, where the dancers are gorgeous and young. Sal's got the money to tip well, which translates into better service. He tells you this every time you see him. The dancers will shove their nipples in your face and run their hands over your thighs. This is how he met his last girlfriend; he was telling you this the last time you saw him, at a New Year's party in Sammy and Michelle's old apartment.

The clouds roll lazily across the blue of the sky, changing shape so slowly you hardly notice. The contrails fade out into nothingness. Michelle is talking about the logistics of shopping, getting the grill going, calling up Sal. She barely notices the show's finale, when three huge cargo planes lumber in for a series of touch and go landings while a stealth fighter soars overhead. Then everything is over and the crowd starts for their cars. The asphalt everyone has been standing on all day clears to reveal smashed and splintered plastic cups, spilled beer that's attracting wasps, air show programs blown into piles like dead leaves. The heat of the day is already fading, people are putting on sweaters and wind breakers.

"We're heading out to find our car," Sammy says, "I'm sorry we can't give you a ride"-- this is because they're in Michelle's little two-seater Fiat-- "but we'll see you then in an hour or two, at our place?"

You nod your head. Then you go and stand in line for the bus back to Denver, because your own car broke down two weeks ago and there's no money to fix it until the end of the month. But what else is new? If only, you thought, there were something more.

A lot of people came out to the air show and traffic is bad. You have to wait a long time for the bus. There's nowhere to sit down and your legs are already sore from standing all day. But then you see that the girl in the green dress and the boots is in line for the bus too, not far ahead of you. She no longer wears her sunglasses; her eyes catch yours watching her. The sun is low and dull on the horizon, the sky already purpling. And at that moment you know that it's not telekinesis, that you don't need no jet fighter, not a wife, not a whore, that you don't even need friends who are ghosts of the past only, that what you need is maybe something as simple as meeting someone you hadn't expected to meet, a catalyst to clear the mind, to set it working on possibilities again instead of history, to restore your confidence in luck. To let yourself work out some kind answer to the question you've been trying to ask yourself all day: Where to go next? And what to do with this thing in front of you, this future?

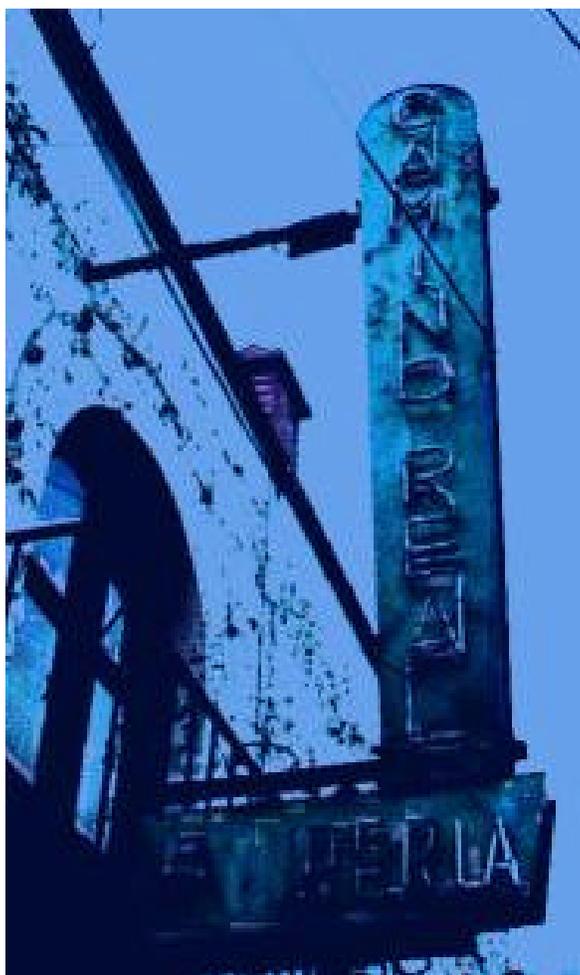
* * *



Shantih | Digital Collage | Lorri Frisbee



Blue Woman | Digital Collage | Lorri Frisbee



Camino Real in Blue No. 4 | Digital Photo | Roy Allahades

This Earth a Sphere

Charlie Mehrhoff

These blue orbit peaks, these valleys, this house, this sphere,
yet there are those of us who dwell upon its edges.

Those of us who forge our own signatures.

Perched towards exile,
race born of some hide ephemeral whose time can never run out,
those of us who stain what remaining bells with echoes.

We know: that it takes fire to heat the gold,
to cast it.
(((obedient servants
(((are seldom forged in Paradise.

(((and as all religions spout their infidels
(((faith not a one.

We know: that the miracle occurs now, that under-element
of universe,
of myth.

Why do we commit ourselves to speak of heaven, as if she resides elsewhere.

We spark our chalices from the Sabbath candles.

We migrate alongside the flocks

We are wild yet at the wheel,

present in all things.

We walk out upon the prairie vast and strip ourselves down
to a whirlwind.

Ornaments

Charlie Mehrhoff

the cubicle draped w/ galaxies of which we may hunt
beneath for a time, until the footsteps grow too loud.
the footsteps stalking: radiant currents of disease.

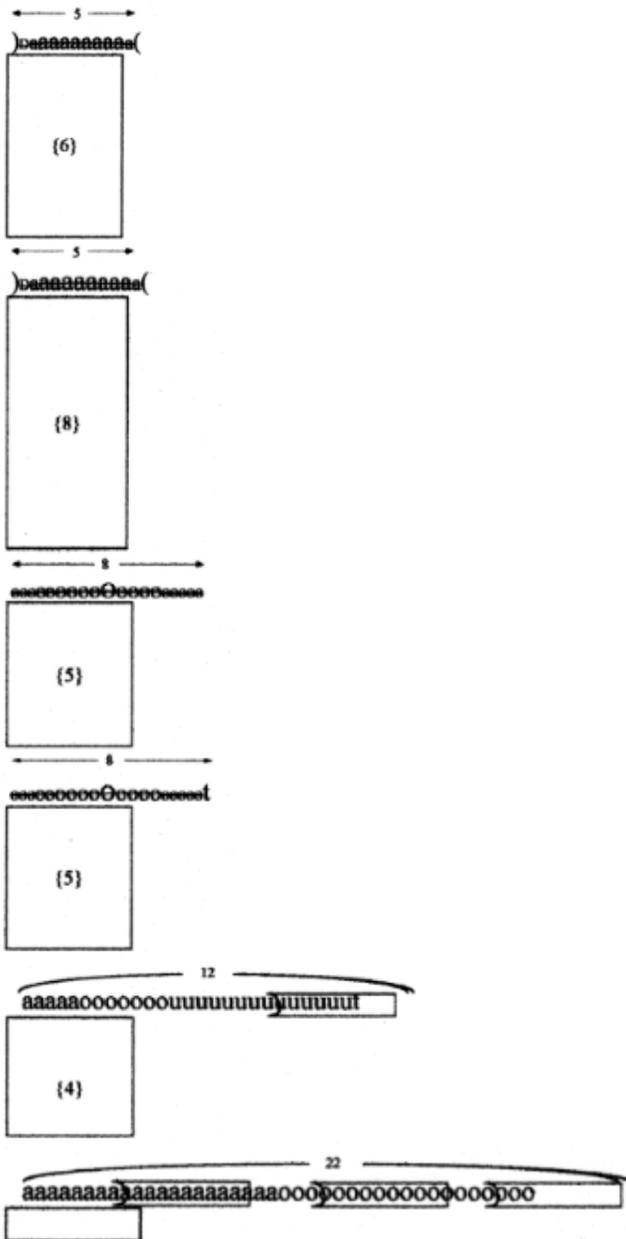
the body, being what elements holding life, is crucial
if only as an instrument of desire: a trout breaking
the surface. the surrounding rooms milking patience.

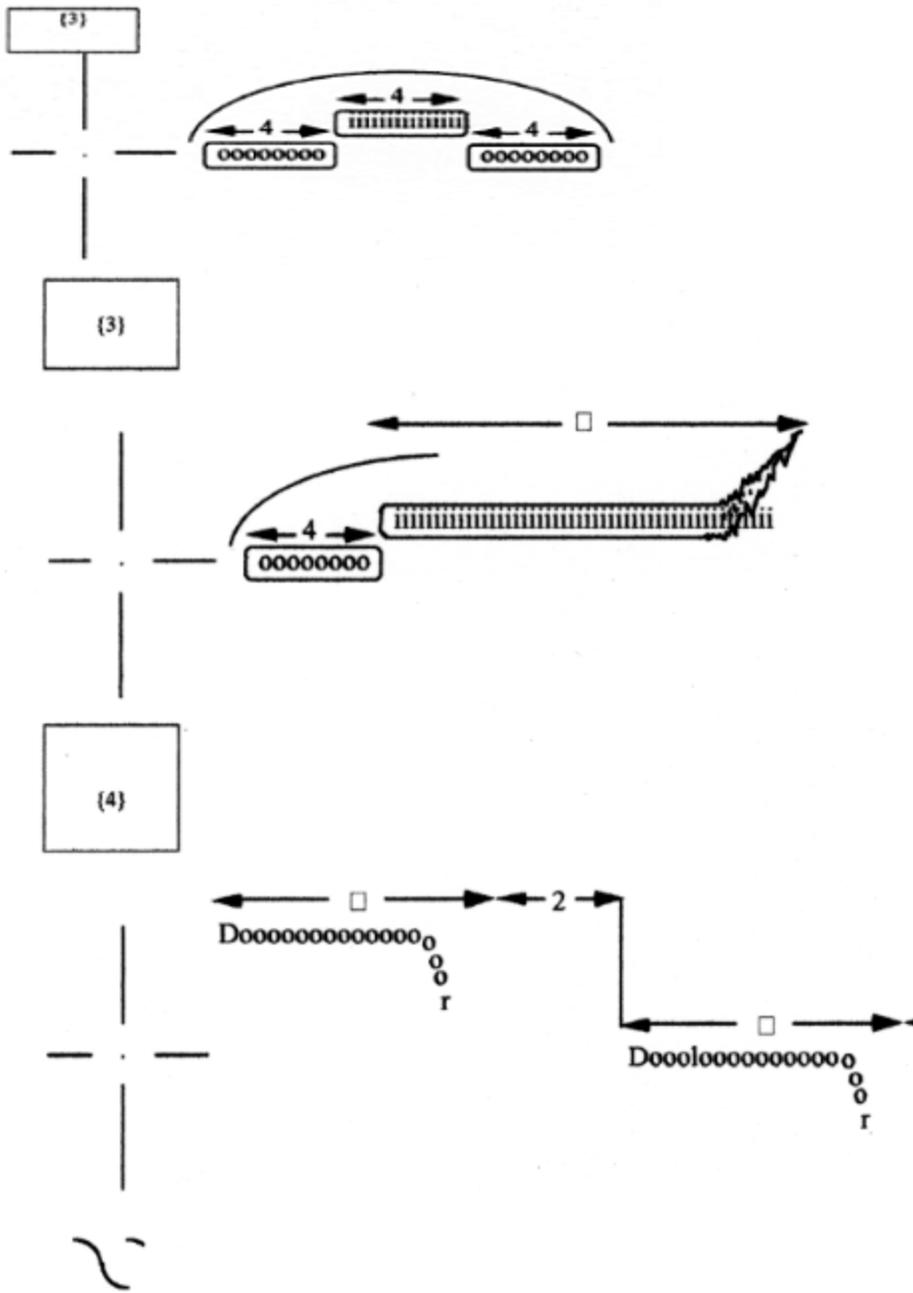
imagination: a tool sharpening itself against itself.
(((i meditate w/ chains in my lap, frost throughout
the galaxy. i'm a pier in the bay of misery. the
viper blooms flourescent, so many sparks continue))))

imagination: i thought it was over and then the cool
juice of the berry, kiss of the garden. gardens
tossed beneath ceremony. gardens subject to autumn:
cringing redness. then no more for the leaves of
this vine. such echoes of primordial screams.
poetry so complete it takes a muse to read. the muse's
eye. oh that i were capable, guilty. yet, in reality
(((reality))) unable to exchange these words.

Colors

Philippe Tapon





I am.
Awake.
I am.
Awake.

I am:
I am:
Resurrection.
I am.
I am.
Resurrection.
I am awake.
The mind is listening.
This is not a flute note.
It is not a drum.
It is the relation of a flute note to a--
To a--
It is the relation of a flute note to a--

Drum.
Drum.
Drum.
It is the relation of a drum to a flute note.
To a mind listening.
To a mind listening to a flute note.
To a drum.
I remember him.
I remember him now.
He is not dead.
He cannot be dead if I remember him now.
Now is not a flute note.
Now is the illusion of a flute note.
Now is the illusion of a relation
Between a flute note to a--
To a--

Between the living and the dead.
I remember him.
He cannot be dead if I remember him now.
Resurrection.
Resurrection.
He cannot be dead if I remember him now. Now. Now.
"Today I came across a case of astonishing complexity.
The woman in room thirteen is called María and is cataleptic.
We think she would have died long ago, except she's also epileptic.

Half to amuse me, half to prove his point, Doctor Adams lit a lighter right before her eyes.

In five seconds she snapped into a tonic-clonic seizure of such severity I thought she'd break the bed. Her crucifixion posture was incredible and just screaming through her nose (her mouth was clamped shut) she frightened the people two doors down. Then, she became quite silent.

Strange, motor function's not suspended, despite the coma.

Over and over, she keeps saying the word 'mirror,' and has been for months and months.

Ben, the young doctor from Harvard, has dug up the details:

María, born Iquique, Chile, nineteen thirty-three.

Immigrated U.S. nineteen fifty-eight. (No prev med hist.)

First epileptic seizure nineteen fifty-nine, S.F. General, Phenobarbital, three milligrams.

Interesting auras (not documented); nystagmus, not serious.

Seizures, marriage, end nineteen sixty-one, epilepsy under control,

Carbamezepine two milligrams. Two children et cetera.

Then it gets interesting.

Catatonia, divorce, catalepsy, severe depression.

Hospital, Doctor Meringew. (Harvard also? I forget.)

Then increasing schizophrenia. After writing article to San Francisco Chronicle, nineteen seventy-four, recommending amputation of genitalia for Roman Catholic priests,

Suicide attempt; interned here; cataleptic/epileptic ever since."

Green, blue, red, white.

I remember the raised circles

I remember the priests' circles

And the oceans of color--

The drowning of the church

in red, red--the ocean

yellow, the priests black,

black, black. . . .

Who knows what this girl was thinking?

Who knows what links these drawings

Of serpents and circles, of birds and chasms,

Of a blossoming lotus in chains?

Tell me, what does she know

Of eyes full of oceans?

Or oceans full of eyes?

Tell me, u's and o's - confusion, nothing but . . .

"I did read the article - San Francisco Comical; what can you expect?"

"What can she be thinking?"

"You know what Ben said? 'Has she got a soul?' Ben again! Mister poet! Mister priest!"

"Enough, enough. Turn out the light."

"Good night, María, good night, sweet lady, good night, good night."

He is big.
He is all black.
He is so big.
He is ten feet tall.
He is very very close.
He is breathing dark big face black mustache.
He is touching me with big hand bad smell saying María.
He is saying miracle miracle with red lips black eyes I am inside mirror mirror.
He is inside María María lady lady come here.
He is hairy hand holds my hand and then
We are in his church.
We are him and me.
We are near now
And I'm no
NO
Big.
So

Why is it that only Asian women...

Maria Arellano

Why is it
that only
Asian women
can wear
light blue fuzzy
sweaters,
and be
taken
seriously?

Loco Liquor Store, Pueblo Colorado

Maria Arellano

Loco
on a receipt
in 70's script
whiskey and tax
\$12.95
Thank you
Gracias

El Segundo Blue

Christopher Mulrooney

here is a road that stops
and another and another and
the last one goes up and over

there you are

you can see
at last from here
the old folks see it all
kids

dead vacant

at the Wayfarers Chapel
little verses mar the view
the little view

up the hill
the little view

the dead cove
the shuttered pleasure palaces

teapot tempest

Christopher Mulrooney

I see figured as in a poem
say by Mallarmé
a landscape

tinkle of spoons

here is the magic ordering
of all experience

in a slurping
and a burping

of our tea

Think Twice Before Promising Silence

Ace Boggess

Even to dream, I must have them:
words that return like ritual comets of distraction
beneath the black-haze sky canopy night wears.

Words that make sense of senseless apparitions,
images betrayed by sleep- I collect as if miles
benignly registered on the soul's odometer.

Curve of a woman's neck, chin, shoulders,
breasts that imagine wars, become legendary-
they lose their beauty without the tongue
defining them, while love, a scholar's word,
means nothing left unsaid.

Back to Work Now

Ace Boggess

Must write the world a nasty note.
Or an erotic one.

I can't make up my mind about that world today.
The flush of its skies reveals too little.

The intimate sexual glow of its last
October highlights sets lonely embers

of November trees aside in the ash-gray ash pile dawn exhales.

So many leaves float like lily pads along
the stagnant pond that makes up Four-pole Creek.

Such artless flattery, day drifting likewise aimless
for no good cause except its own affirmation & denial.

So much dead time in the passing hours. The sun harbors coldness as if a lover scorned.

Its head nods toward no one, nothing,
all senselessness & complacency.

But there's still a story to be told,
if only I can find it, swear at it for a while &

shake my fist; if only I can bend the monuments
away from older explanations.

There's new news to be made, seen,
revisited in correspondence, corrections,

letters to the Prime Editor cutting my heart like a comma-splice when all I'd prefer to
write

is a hard word, vulgar as imprecise, that's earned accepted usage in the language of men.

Ode to the Pager

Raymond N. Fuentes

electric, metallic inside
with plastic frame

battery operated
computer

no bigger than
a box of matches

with this technology
you can never be alone

they know where you are
for convenience

tracked down and annoyed at the same time

what would Edgar Allen Poe say
if I beeped him
while he was writing
Annabel Lee?

In '92

Raymond N. Fuentes

(After Jimmy Santiago Baca)

It was anger that burned
and was caught on every television station
breaking windows, flipping off cops,
setting fire to liquor stores,
and running out with diapers
and beer to last a whole summer
of celebration

Roy Allahades is a Hong Kong based writer who grew up in Colorado. His book of short stories, *Satellite*, is available from Thieves' Press.

Maria Arellano is a Zacatecan poet who has studied in Barcelona and London. She is currently teaching in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This is her first publication in English.

Ace Boggins informs us that he is searching for a publisher for his eight literary novels on existential themes. In July he was awarded a fellowship for fiction from the West Virginia Division of Culture and History.

Jackson Carter lives, writes, and works in Paris. We are all envious of this fact, and are refusing to speak to him anymore on account of it.

Raymond N. Fuentes is from South Central L.A. and is enrolled at East L.A. College. He spends his time, he says, "learning about journalism, taking creative writing classes, and failing math classes."

A. C. Koch lives in Mexico and is a jazz guitarist in the group *Clean and Sexy*. Koch's short stories have shown up in places like *River City*, *Mississippi Review*, and *InPosse Review*.

Poet **Charlie Mehrhoff** lives in a place in Colorado where there are no lines on the map. His collection of poetry, *Complete w/ Tongue*, was published by Epictetus Press in 1997.

Christopher Mulrooney lives in Los Angeles. His poetry, fiction, and translations have appeared in *The Brooklyn Review*, *Frank*, *Nimrod*, and *The Burning Bush*, among others.

Steve Roth plays the drums in the punk rock band *Tiger Beat* and was formerly a graduate student at Naropa University's Department of Writing and Poetics.

Philippe Tapon is the author of the novels *A Parisian from Kansas* and *The Mistress*. He lives in California.

