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The alphabet in my lunchbox

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The alphabet in my lunchbox

by

Laura Jill Ebert

A Thesis Submitted to the
Graduate Faculty in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
MASTERS OF ARTS

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1995
For my parents,
who packed my lunch with words
and peanut butter and jelly sandwiches
and made me go to school.
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Exposure

Her nerves were jumping double Dutch with Nick O. Teen when she fled into Pop-A-Top Tap. Her camera noosed her neck like a tie too tight around the top button of a white Oxford shirt. Her camera was her cocaine and she shot light to get her fix. She focused on the glazed faces of each mellow drinker before she was magnetized to the lazy yellow haze that crowded around each bulb. The light particles rode piggyback on the carousel of smoke and lullabied each Pop-a-Top drinker until Q's an R's were riddles to their tongues and slipped off into the night, indistinguishably as cat burglars.

The bulbs were dipped waist deep in swimming pools of black paint to take the edge off of the brightness. They were wet with night. To her, they looked like dilated pupils hanging over each booth like a microphone trying to listen and look in on the whispered slurs and murmurs.

In a dark corner of a booth a bulb orbited slowly in the curl of smoke. The drinker was fusing with the glowing atmosphere of the planet bulb. At the vernal equinox she saw his fingernails bitten short and the scars on his hands. She wanted to hold his hands the hands he shoved in his pockets on first and second dates. She wanted to soak in his battled skin, like a warm tub of bubbles until she was wrinkled
with familiarity.

She was wrapped up
in the gauze of his corner booth.
when her cigarette extinguished into ashes.
She aimed and shot,
flashing him without permission.
He slid her a sideways look
his hand trying to catch the light
like a Band-Aid pulled sticky
to patch a poked hole in a window shade.
The light curve-balled around his palm.
She didn’t miss, it recorded him
as he called out "Jesus."

She ran out of Pop-A-Top Tap
away from him,
his hands imprinted on her film.
Needing a larger dose
of light, she ran into the street
craving beams of headlights
like a vampire of the sun.
Cracked

Like a ripe tomato left in the sun
my skin split and left a gap
to reveal my inner flesh.
With no mom or Band-Aids
to heal me,
I broke apart my head
to see what was inside.
It was riddled with chords
of long slippery wires.
I charged
and sparks flew from my Nike heels
as I jumped synapses to run lapses
around in my hemispheres.
The path was a tongue depressor
and opened up in places echoing ahhhh...
Aurally I heard the mouth
of pain licking his lips to devour me.
But I was faster and peeled off
a leftover Post-it Note sticking to my frontal lobe.
I slipped over “Go to the store:”
ripping off the colon,
speeding through “Butter”
“Milk,”
trying to squeeze the pulp of “Orange Juice,”
and fumbled to grasp the holes in “B.”
The rest was “read.”
I rafted on a malted shake
of chocolate blood
to beach on a layer of fat beside an oval window.

I swam around in the fishbowl
of my left eyeball
through the algae of nerves
to view the flap of skin waiting,
for a bandage to stop the pain
from reaching the outside.
It was a clean shear cut
from the wrist to the V-canyon
formed by the thumb and index fingers.
I was Jell-O-walking
on the trampoline fat of my eye
and grabbed the sticky blue of my iris
to hang on.
Peering through my pupil,
I saw my body walking
down the basement stairs to darkness.
The pupil was growing larger
and larger...
I pushed at the sides
prying at the tunnel for light.
My heart was beating scales of off key notes
as the pain gained on me...

As I leaned into the black hole,
I heard the click
of a switch and naked light exposed me.
Radiation rolled in
and pushed out an Ohhh.
The pupil shut into a dot of ink
and I was jolted into the beam
focused on my hand.
I slid down the ray
to skate from side to side
over the film,
a glass fabric sewn loosely over blue veins.
I coated the skin with sweat to seal the tear.
Zipping shut the opening
I disappeared into the cavern of my fist,
a lower cased "o"
walled by my palm,
and returned in time to reach
into the medicine cabinet
peel a Band-Aid
and gag the mouth of pain.
Fat

Doc said I had, correction, have anorexia nervosa. Don't go ballistic. I'm not bulimic. I don't puke. I just eat. A lot. A whole lot. Actually, the whole lot. My favorite is oranges. The membranes fill the gaps in my teeth and I can wedge a peel behind my lips to smile a laugh from unexpected passersby. I'm packed full of Vitamin C. I have a thing for fruits. I wash my plates and forks with Lemon-scented Joy and try not to suck on the tines. I'm diseased. I eat. I don't eat. I'm a zero trying to fill up the space inside. I'm a statistic trying to fall off the edge of the page to the table of Recovery. I'm starving. I cradle watermelon and kiwi, scooping out the insides to fill up mine. I crunch on the seeds and wait for a new beginning.

I scrub the kitchen linoleum with ammonia and sleep on the tiles. I swallow through my nose and inhale my cleansing. I'm wrapped up with scents. Dollars pass over counter tops for colored Christmas trees to hang from my rear view mirror. Pineapple trees drive me to full. I chew and chew the air. I feast on fruity bubblegum, cupping my hand over my nose and mouth and go under with citric gas. My stomach drowns in hot water steaming pineapple-orange shampoo and conditions me for daily rituals of facing mirrors and expectations. I immerse myself in water with oil marbles of lilac melting into my skin. I am fragranced with natural beauty. But it wears off, and I sniff around for a new identity.

I want to own a scent. I want it for myself. I'm in love with gasoline, kerosene, nicotine, all the ine's. Nicotine lights me up. I float on smoke to drinks mixed with strawberries and coconuts. Caloric hideaways suck through my straw and coat my waist with a belt of refrigerated gravy. It melts again and again when I heat up. Kerosene takes me camping in forests sapped in pine juice. The campfire aerobicizes up and down and to each side. I hunger for exercise but the flames remind me of oranges-and then I'm started. I fill up at Quick Trip, stealing the used plastic gas gloves from the trash. I suck and blow them up over my nose. The fumes resuscitate me. Inside, cellophaned apples and cartons of orange juice scream at me from behind glass doors. I free them. I'm a junkie anorexic, storing up food for a fast. I'm bloated with oranges and can't say Abracadabra to turn thin. And I want to go to the park and swing, but orange acid eats holes in my stomach and I sit on the couch trying to patch it all up.
Cesarean Child

Her toes stuck out from beneath the blanket like a turkey thermometer waiting for heat. Her skin was tanned by weekly visits to Sun Spirit Salon. Laying on the long tubes she smelled her skin cooking. She was in reverse claustrophobia.

In the afternoons she disappeared to her patio greenhouse. She slipped into the soil of plants and stretched toward the light feeling a hot tub of nutrients whirl through her. Her skin talked with the sun and feel in love with his warmth.

When the sun set the courtship stopped and she stepped out of the plants to slide under her electric blanket. She was outside, wanting inside. Her mother did not push her to get out, but sometimes took her to the grocery store. She would be gone for hours lost in the candy machines planted at the entrance of Fareway. She climbed inside the hollowness of gumballs and slept. Children would chew her. She bathed in their saliva, and resurfaced when they spit her out on to cool concrete.

On her thirtieth birthday she climbed inside an Impatient that was growing near the greenhouse door. The sun had missed her the day before, not seeing her swimming in the Hedera Ivy that hung in the west corner. He smiled, but she had her eyes closed. The sun was eager for her attention
and smiled so big the sky became white
and overheated her window.
She folded out of her sleep
into a fantastic red, and bloomed
out into the world.
A Walk to the Movies

"Quawrter. Quawrter fo' da peep show?"
Yah, right buddy.
I saw you come out of The Blood Center.
What a job. Work every two weeks.
His army issued liner was safety pinned together,
layers of brown polyester and blue based plaids
and stuck out of the holes entangled with old news.
I passed Stein's Jewelers,
cubic zirconias on display.

"Quawrter? Pretty lady gotta' quawrter,
fo' a phone call?"
Get lost.
His brown pants hung over his skeletal frame.
They melted into olive greens socks that bagged
around his ankles- dead loose skin,
spilling over onto his duct-taped, patent black shoes.
'Checks Cashed Here.' was propped
up against a barred window.

"Beautiful nice woman, quawrter fo' a good man?"

His face glowed
in the neon blue light
of the JESUS
    A
    V
    E
    S
sign.

His whole face disappeared,
buried under brown hair.
He had no age.

"Quawrter?"
I opened the glass door
to the Grand Movie Theater
"Bitch." at my back.
Trip

She was overdosing on the sidewalk crack
when I found her all cracked her up.
She was cliched, thinking about mothers
having heart attacks from frayed kids
who didn’t side step around the crooked lines
in the concrete, but let their toes drink
the mushrooms of tar squeezed soft between slabs.

She gave me the orange juice,
already juiced up from a fraction of acid
and Vitamin C intensifying
her hyper active reaction.
I pocketed her pitch to enrich
my eyesight and poured out
her bewitched orange juice,
while she whacked a Hackey Sack
with her bored, rotting
rich teenaged friends on the corner.
I cornered her to go home.
But she burst into jumping jacks
asking me about her old hula hoop
and silly putty
and called me, a “fuddy duddy,”
for not drinking the juice.

"Let's go," I said taking her hand.
"You can be the car," I tried, tired,
thinking about her love for Speedracer.
He was her cartoon high.
She placed him high on her list.
Since she was eight she ate a Fruit Looped
breakfast and braked fast with Speedracer
as her Saturday morning date.
He was speed.
He raced.
She liked his hair cemented in place.
She liked its stability.

"Wonder twins activate" she quoted.
and spun around.
I walked and she spun,
whirling in circles...
"I am a rolling muddy tire," she announced, 
and she slid to a screeching halt 
to stand paralyzed at the stop sign.

I reached for her fingers 
or palm or wrist and risked her 
smooth trip home. 
"Ah! You are an electric wire."
I charged her with my hand 
her arm muscle jerked 
and she was jumped started 
with a fidgetedity quirk 
to play a top on top of the dotted yellow street. 
"Street stitches," she delighted 
and sewed up the road. 
"Look. I'm rolling in polka dots," she said 
pointing to the air. "Let's play collect the dots."
I began to pick the air for bread crumbs to lead her home, 
playing Hansel 
for Gretel in the forest of our neighborhood.

She stopped in the middle of the street, staring at me 
drawing lines in her thoughts. 
she said with her logic, "Connect the dots."
But I couldn't connect or collect 
and just wanted to protect 
her as she stood with her arms straight out to her sides 
for balance and moved like she was Jell-O. 
I thought she was losing it 
and went to steady her 
and then she screamed 
"Nooooo." 
I thought she was my sister 
but she was a glass 
of orange juice 
and was afraid I'd spill her.
The Name Puzzle

He painted dancing computers on canvases bigger than billboards. These were not the home-made billboards along secondary highways that spring up like daffodils to welcome you to a small town. They were not like the billboards outside of Janesville that read,

Betty's Teacup, Finest peach pie this side of the Mississippi or
Bob's Bar, Where the Boys Live, and the Game is Always On or
the Blue Moon Cafe, with the simple message: Burgers and Pool tables.

These were the size of the billboards that have lights, fringe and three-dimensional half naked women with pop up breasts; the women are always drinking beers from bottles without smearing their lipstick. His canvases wallpapered his studio like water filling up a glass. They covered every inch of the red bricked walls. Ashvin Ozga was an artist. If doctors were to crack him open like an egg, they'd find paint pumping through his heart. He would lay the canvases on his concrete floor, and dance barefoot in the paint, as if he were marbleizing the tile. Sometimes, he disappeared into his studio for hours, days or weeks. He did disappear. He never locked his door to his studio. In fact, there was no door to lock. He lived on the town square above the West Grove Bank, in Janesville, the townspeople would laugh if they saw anybody with pantyhose pulled over their heads attempting to rob them. Anyone could go straight up the stairs and into Ashvin's apartment. His neighbors felt free to go into his studio at any time like wandering through a public park. Many times Ashvin, just wasn't there. They'd look around trying to decipher his keyboards and discs and leave disappointed they couldn't see the artist at work. They knew he was somewhere, because they'd return the next day and see the "in progress"
painting changed. Maybe he was hiding in a secret compartment behind one of computers with eyes that danced on the walls. Maybe he was watching his neighbors like test rats. However, that would be unlikely; Ashvin didn't really concern himself too much with people. He had two loves: painting and computers. Until he met Betty, and had three.

Ashvin Ozga created new colors as often as each new minute brings sixty virgin seconds to the commercial world. Nobody quite knew what to say to Ashvin. Although, he lived in the heart of the United States, Ashvin Ozga belonged on the edge. It didn't matter if it was Oregon or Massachusetts, Ashvin needed a coast that dropped off into a pool of liquid. It was not his style to be on the inside. He always walked on the curbs. In grade school, he always colored out of the lines. He'd spill his colors into the Great Lakes. The teachers thought he didn't know his geography, but the map couldn't contain him. Ashvin was bigger than one state. No one knew too much about him, except he was a nice enough guy, although unreliable. It was hard to put your finger on Ashvin. He was kind of slippery, like a goldfish accidentally flipped out of a bowl when the tank's being cleaned. His paints played substitute to the oceans and he dived into them, soaking up the spray with his face and hands.

It was on one sunny morning in Janesville that Ashvin loaded up a semi-size U-Haul truck with canvases and drove away. Everyone thought he must have a show on the East Coast, where people would buy stuff like that—computers whirling around lost in memory. Joey, the best (and only) insurance guy in town, said Ashvin Ozga's paintings sold faster than hotdogs at a November football game. Nobody questioned his authority. But the fact was, Ashvin was gone. He just packed up and left. The townspeople panicked. Even
though Ashvin was, "one brick short of a full wheelbarrow," they thought he'd eventually bring them tourists.

Ashvin's parents were the fame of the town. His parents authored the Organic Baby Names book. In an agricultural small town if "organic" makes it to the front porch conversation it is neatly swept under the rug. But somehow, the people of Janesville were proud of their authors. Joey said that someday the town could give tours through Ashvin's old apartment, like the Mark Twain thing in Hannibal, Missouri. They could make lots of money.

Ashvin's paintings didn't sell too well in town, but everyone seemed interested. His parents were Gary and Mary McKee. They would've liked to change their names, but the parents were still alive. And the parents couldn't understand why their kids turned into fruits. They kept telling Ashvin it must be a genetic malfunction. They never told him about Betty.

Ashvin's full name is Ashvin Ozga. Ozga is his last name, not his middle name. His brother's name is Poplar Polar and his sister's name is Oakley Waka. Oakley got along pretty well because she had the same name of a popular sunglasses company, but Poplar did not. They called him "little boy P.P." all through school. Ashvin was just Ashvin. It isn't such a bad name, except everyone is startled when they see a white Irish male come through the door. They anticipate a Middle Eastern or a someone who speaks Russian. When companies see his name, they get excited to hire him. They think he's a minority, and he'll help fill their quota. Ashvin Ozga sounded free to Ashvin. He would have preferred Oakley, but Mom and Dad McKee told him that Oakley is definitely a girl's name.

Well, one day when the sun was over watering his windows he decided to leave. His neighbors were too neighborly and always snooping around his stuff
like ants at a picnic. "Sometimes," Ashvin said to his parents, "you gotta find a bigger park." When Ashvin told his parents he was going to the city, they gave him Betty's phone number.

"Good luck," they chorused and off Ashvin went with his U-Haul of computer gadgets and paints.

Upon arriving in the city he dialed Betty's number,

"Hola?" a voice asked.

"Hello?" Ashvin asked.

"Hola." the voice said.

"Hello, Betty?" Ashvin tried.

"Si, hola." the voice answered.

Nobody told him Betty was Hispanic, but then again nobody told him anything about Betty.

"Betty this is Ashvin Ozga, I'm Mary and Gary McKee's son. My dad gave me your number?"

"Ashvin Ozga, Ash- vin Nose-ga, Ashvin Ozga," she rolled his name out on to the table as if pressing out dough for a pie crust and then spit out, "Yes, Ashvin. What can I do for you?"

"Well, I'm new in the city and I was wondering if you could help me I find a place to live."

"You can live with me. Come over," she said, and hung up.

Ashvin dialed her number again.

"Hola?"

"Betty, it's me. I don't know where you live." Ashvin replied.

"Que?" Betty said.

"Betty, this is Ashvin."
"Oh, yes Ashvin what do you need."

"Directions to your house."

"Oh, yes." Betty replied.

It was midnight before Ashvin unloaded all of his belongings into her house. Betty was not Hispanic. She was a pale-skinned, tall woman with short auburn hair. Her skin was as white as the paper that sat ready in his printer to be run over by the ink jet. In fact, she was rather attractive. Ashvin was tall like her and had pale skin from painting inside too many years. He saw a bit of family resemblance in the eyes. Their eyes were big blue holes in their faces, so big they looked as if they could see through reality.

Betty lived in a house on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan. The water was reflecting the lights from the boats and the people who worked late nights in the offices of city buildings. Ashvin wanted to dive into the water and float around in the lights. However, he thought it might be impolite on his first meeting with his relation. Instead, he arranged his canvases. With Betty's help, he hung them along the walls of the house, updating the Victorian velvet wallpaper with ballrooms of dancing computers.

"This house used to belong to a man." she said.

"Oh? "Ashvin encouraged.

"He was a nice man. A bit eccentric. He built this house after he had his first book published. He was always afraid he was going to be trapped in a room, so he made every wall have an opening. "

Ashvin looked at her waiting.

"He's dead. I guess he's dead, He disappeared one day and he wouldn't have left me. We always had many words to say to each other. Good healthy
words and wonderfully terrible words." she said with a smile. "The house is mine, and yours too," and Betty walked out the door.

Ashvin didn't know how he was related to Betty, but she was a very nice woman. Very honest, he could tell that immediately. Ashvin set up his computer and then began to arrange his paints. He painted iridescent stars on the ceiling above his waterbed, so he could float to sleep. He wanted to paint the walls, but didn't know how Betty would feel about that. He went in search of her.

He found her in the basement, snacking on cheese puffs and watching a huge color screen. "Betty?"

"Yes, Ashvin Ozga."

"What is it your watching?"

"Oh, just words."

There was a picture in the background, but it was blurry. A blue band cut the screen in half, and the words of the actors swam in the strip like the New York Stock Exchange price updates on CNN.

"You don't like sound?" Ashvin asked.

"Oh, yes. I love sound. But I'm just concerned on how the words look right now. It's my own little word gallery show."

Ashvin looked at the words. They didn't look artistic to him, but then again he could picture double S's and P's dancing with the is in the word Mississippi. For the first time, Ashvin thought about the aesthetic beauty of words. "Betty, why did you speak Spanish on the telephone?" he asked.

"Well, the man who owned this house, he liked the way Spanish sounded. He spoke many languages. He was crazy about them. He was teaching me. Are you afraid of anything, Ashvin?"
"Land." Ashvin replied. "I wish I could live in water."

"Water is nice, but land is solid. Water is like the openings in this house. They let the liquid flow through, but give it a stable foundation. Books do that for words. Words need concrete things and so do we, what do you think of that? Betty asked.

"Perhaps so." Ashvin said and thought about his computer holding all those words.

It was about three A.M. when Betty poked her head around the corner. "Race car" she said.

Ashvin looked at his painting he was doing, "Yes, I suppose it could be a race car."

"No- no, race car is a palindrome. You can turn it around, read it left to right, right to left. You can read it "Boustrephedon"- as the ox plows.

Ashvin thought about the word. "Like mom or dad."

"That's right. It's mom or dad because little kids can read either way at first. Left to right and right to left. But then they grow. And everything is written, from left to right. and then most of them forget they could read ever read right to left. I love palindromes because they are solid letters, but as flexible as liquid."

"I have seen lists of them on my computer late at night. They float across my screen like those flying toasters that fight to save your screen from burning up. "I've never thought much about them." Ashvin said.

"I want to be a palindrome," Betty said. "That way no one could look at me just one way. From left to right or right to left I would look just the same. You could look at me frontwards or backwards. Wouldn't that be great? It
would kind of be like being liquid. Could you get that list on your screen?" Betty asked.

"Let's see what's on the Internet." Ashvin clicked and typed and whirled around in his chair and then they were there.

"Look at all of them," Betty said and Ashvin got out of his chair to let her see more closely. They scrolled upon the screen.

Tarzan raised a Desi Arnaz rat.
Lisa Bonet ate no basil.
Sit on a potato pan, Otis.
Madam, I'm Adam.
Man, Oprah's sharp on A.M.
No Mel Gibson is a casino's big lemon.¹

They scrolled on...

"Some of them are perfect, some almost perfect." Betty whispered to herself. Betty was breathing heavily. Her eyes were getting closer and closer to the screen and then... Betty disappeared. Ashvin didn't know about this. Betty was gone, absorbed into her fantasy.

Ashvin typed quickly: "Hello? Betty are you there?"

"Si, Hola. I'm reversible in here."

"Do you want to come back?"

"Not right now, ask me later. Never odd or even." she blinked and was gone, leaving nothing but a flashing cursor on an empty screen. Ashvin knew about computers. Computers were sick with diseases and viruses. Computers couldn't materialize into people so sometimes just sucked them inside to see how it felt to be human. Sometimes, they were mean and hypnotized people to

¹ Part of a selected collection of palindromes as appeared on the Internet one late night at the Ross computer lab at Iowa State University, list obtained by Josh Twalt.
stare at the screen until they were blind. He knew all about computers because they were his models. He watched them closely and painted their moods. He painted them dancing in lost or sick worlds or in a memory long ago when they were the newest thing on the market. It was not a surprise that Betty was vacuumed right into the computer. He hoped Betty would be okay. His computer was tricky, she liked to play games.

With Betty gone Ashvin began to paint the walls with brushes of all sizes. Some of the brushes were borrowed from Janesville. One large brush came off the city's cleanup machine, the one that rolled the sand off the sidewalks. He had meant to give that one back. Others were old toothbrushes people abandoned in his studio while he was "out." Soon the whole wall, including the two doors, were shades of blue. Ashvin admired his work and then floated away on his waterbed.

Blunk. Blunk. Blunk. The computer woke him up. It was playing blackjack. Ashvin sat down in his whirling chair in front of the computer. The computer was beating the dealer. He clicked the mouse to return to the main screen to see if Betty was near.

"Hola. Aloh-a." the computer screen blinked.

"That is almost a palindrome" said Ashvin to the computer.

"Later Ashvin, blackjack calls. Reno 1-oner."

Ashvin worried about Betty. Sooner or later she would have to come back to the house on the lake. I hope she's careful, Ashvin thought, and then looked at his wall. Strangely enough it looked like it was all done. The blues had been mixed nicely with the yellows and greens and the sky was a shadow of Lake Michigan. But it wasn't Ashvin's work. He dipped his hand deep in the can of paint and ladled out big globs of paint. He pitched them on the wall. He leaned
against the painting and brushed the surface with his hair. His hair was highlighted blue when he saw it. The perfect glob of blue swished above the door frame. He dove into it. He was inside the painting. He spun circles into hurricanes and the strong winds began to whip up the paint and throw it all over the wall. Ashvin surfed over to the calmer blue and rode waves of blue paint to criss-cross the wall. He was headed for an island of dry wall when he saw him, swinging his feet in the blue paint, sitting in the keyhole. "It's about time you arrived. I've been stuck here forever. Boy, am I cramped."

"Who are you?" said Ashvin.

I'm the owner of this house. I was fixing the door one day and I was thinking about the inside of this keyhole, and wishing I could see inside and whoosh... there I was. I was sucked right into this keyhole and couldn't pop out. But all the oil in your paint, greased me right out. But, how do you get out there? the man asked pointing to the studio room.

Ashvin was about to answer when he heard it... blunk, blunk, blunk. He looked at the screen. HELP! filled the screen in bold black letters. "I'll be back." Ashvin said to the man and dove into the hurricane only to be quickly flipped out of the top, back into his studio. He clicked the mouse.

"Party booby trap" flashed the screen before it went red.

"Where are you, Betty?" he said to the computer.

"She's in the forest, on her way to grandmother's house..."

Ashvin searched the memory for fairy tales. When he finally got to the file of tales he opened Little Red Riding Hood. The computer broke in...

"she slept on a pea and played an ugly stepsister with her foot too big for the slipper... soon peter piper will pick her and she'll be eating her pumpkin shell walls... "
Betty's identity was lost in the fairytales. She was caught in a loop.
"She wanted to be reversible...now can you tell me who she is?" blinked the computer. "Rumplestiltskin knows. Three guesses or I'll put her in the porridge at the Three Bear's House..."

"Betty," Ashvin typed.

"I want her full name. That guess will be your freebie"

"Elizabeth," typed Ashvin.

"No. no. no. In a little more time, she'll be mine. I won't be playing this game and I won't dance around the fire saying her name..."

My computer was having fun again. "Hint. " I typed.

"She's named after the parent of all words. Give me her name and I'll throw her back."

In the background Ashvin heard her, "Little pig, little pig, let me in." Ashvin began his search...

"Bethlehem?"

The computer screen echoed a blank-blank laugh. "You poor funny artist, get inside your head or she'll be your world, dead. One more guess and she's going to play all of the characters in my fairy tales..."

Ashvin looked at the words in bold print. He walked over to his painting. It was easy enough for him to get in and out of his paintings, but how do I get someone out...of a computer." He said to himself. He went to the telephone and called his parents. "Do you know Betty's full name?"

"Isn't it Elizabeth?"

"No."
He called his grandparents, and they laughed and laughed when he said Betty's full name wasn't Elizabeth. "Maybe it's one of your parents' goofy tree names."

He hung up.

"She's about to eat the poisonous apple, my friend. You better hurry. How about the name?"

"One last hint," pleaded Ashvin.

"All I can give you is, she's not a palindrome, but kids try to sing her name backwards in kindergarten..."

"Letters...of a name" thought Ashvin, "...letters are solid."

"Draw o, c-oward," Blinked the computer.

Ashvin smiled and typed: "Alphabet."

Betty was thrown back into his studio.

"Betty, is that you?" Ashvin asked a mass of blond hair.

"My neck hurts from everyone climbing up my hair. " Betty said lifting her hair away from her face. "Thanks for getting me out of there. Why are you all blue?"

"I've been painting." Ashvin said. Just then a wave of blue paint drenched the floor and out flooded the keyholed man.

"Webster. Where have you been?" asked Betty.
A Letter

I could not be in love without you. With you there is language. You bring back black. Ideas become the ideals. Ordinary pots and pans double their uses to become plots and plans. Without you, seals would vanish into seas. Gold lions would disappear to God and ions would float silently without a roar. With you, apes blossom into lapels labeled with flowers. Eves are born out of darkness, into levels of sunbeams singing light. And mischievous elves restrain their fights and take flight into the forests. You stop the taking and replace it with talking. You make pubic public. You trim the fatter me and flatter me. You forget the y, and my body becomes bold. Write me. Write the world. For without you, it would be just a word. There would be no adverbs to modify my actions. I would just have y's. You would be over my lover. You are the constant consonant of my love. Life would not exist without you, and I would be only an aura without you, my beautiful L.
Once upon a time, there was a king of a great land. The kingdom was called Sensoria Lapseland. The king's name was King Ouiea. His name sounded like bubble gum sticking to your shoe. Never the less, King Ouiea was loved by all the people of his kingdom. After all, he was their king.

King Ouiea was short, but not too short. He had no outstanding features to which you could call him. I mean, you couldn't call him Blotchy Nose King or Floppy Ears King, Bowl-Cut Hairdo King or even King with the Frisbee Sized Eyes. He was your average run-of-the-mill guy, except he was king. But there was one tiny, teensy-weensy problem with the kingdom: everyone forgot. The townspeople couldn't remember anything. I mean, nothing. They couldn't remember their names, or who they were married to, or where they lived. They were lost in forgetfulness.

Apparently, the parents of King Ouiea had a bad spell or I guess more accurately, a bad curse. King Ouiea's dad was named Al and King Al liked to get around. He hung out on loop up town with the locals and boozed it up at the Round Table Inn. King Al was a lover of women. He was courted aggressively by a witch. (You know the type, the big, warty nose, the black, stringy hair type.) The king had a bad habit of leading her on--taking her for a ride. He was smooth with words, they coated his tongue like butter and slid off into the witch's ear. What really got her, what made her broomstick fly, were his letters. He wrote beautiful poems to her. He wrote all kinds of letters to that ugly witch. He was crazy with his alliteration and meter. His words submerged her in sugar and
sweetened her thoughts. Paper came alive with his word music. He thought she was kind of sexy in her own bony, craggy-head way.

(Storyteller needs to give each listener two pieces of paper, preferably 5" x 7" and 8" x 8". The paper can vary in color, but thin paper folds easier than a thick weight.)

However, one day he saw real beauty. (That would be Ouiea's mom.) She was normal in appearance, but had incredible elastic skin. She could inflate to any size of a person. King Al thought this was too cool for words. In his lust, unique to only him, he married her- the elasticity Queen. The witch was not happy. She was p.o.-ed (pissed off), upset, enraged. She couldn't blow enough steam, so she cursed the kingdom to forget how to save language. No one would ever be able to win another person's affection by writing poems or letters. The written word was destroyed, the alphabet was forgotten. (She got a little carried away with her spell and the kingdom was cursed to forget more all of the time. They forgot how to brush their teeth, comb their hair, and scrub their backs.)

However, a good warlock happened along. Understanding the lust of King Al, he deemed the first-born child of the royal couple, to be named Ouiea. The child would have a great skill for words and would possess the ability to reverse the spell. If the child Ouiea interacted with the right forces, he would remember how to write language.

(Storyteller pauses to begin origami fold... the following folds are done with a 4" x 4" piece of paper to conserve space. As shown in Figures 1-5.)
The following instructions should be followed during the story at the storyteller's natural pace.

Figure 1. There are two folds in this picture. First, fold the square in half to form a triangle. Then, fold the point down towards the base of the triangle.

Figure 2. Fold the top horizontal line halfway down, so only a small triangle is showing.

Figure 3. Fold the small triangle up and over the previous fold.
King Ouiea didn't know about this spell, or maybe he did and forgot it. Anyway, he was a great talker, and that is how he kept his kingdom together. He had inherited his mother's elastic skin on his face. And as the warlock had promised, he had an incredible gift for languages. The townspeople loved him (when they remembered he was there). He could remember and predict sounds. He knew what a TV sounded like when cable went out. And the way a TV sounded when falling four stories. And the way a woman sounded when underneath a TV that had just fallen four stories. He didn't know what a TV was, but he thought it might be dangerous. He could imitate a whispering walrus, a yak yawning, a blade of grass whistling through your thumbs, or a pig snort. He would bloat his face out to the size of a basketball or bigger depending
on the sound. Once, he was imitating a tornado and the skin on his face stretched and stretched, until everyone thought he was the Goodyear Blimp grounded. King Ouiea got so good at sounds, he could talk to the animals. The animals loved him best, for they could remember all of the King's good deeds, and plus they thought it was pretty neat to talk to a king.

(By now the storyteller's audience has almost completed the shape. The storyteller needs to be aware of the progress of the listeners to make sure they are completing the shape of the bird.)

One day a bird came to the King and sat on the windowsill of the paper folding room. The King sat thinking, and as he thought, he folded paper. The King was just sitting there folding away. And as he sat he thought. He whistled and tweeted a song of conversation with the visiting bird. (Storyteller needs to intermittently whistle or say a few tweets.) It was the oddest thing. The King folded and folded. He folded big colorful balls and boats and boxes and kept folding more. Since birth, he had been obsessed with paper. He was drawn to it, but he didn't know why. He suspected he was to be an artist. He always had rolls and crisp sheets of paper in the palace for him to fold. He could not imagine what else to do with the paper and his unusual desire for it. As he sat, he folded the shape of the bird. The bird was telling the King about what he had seen in the street: the forgetfulness of the people was getting out of hand. People were forgetting to go to work, go to the store, go to the toilet...it was a terrible thing. Just this morning, a man drown trying to cross the river. He forgot there was a bridge and then forgot how to swim half way across the river. He was swept away by the current. The King decided he must do something, people were dying and he was responsible for Sensoria Lapseland. The King decided he must find
an answer to the problem. "This will take some time," he thought. "I better get some more paper for my thinking."

(The storyteller begins to fold the next piece of paper. These are Figures 1-8 on the following pages. The shape is folded from a 3" x 4.75" piece of paper to conserve space. The recommended size is 5" x 7".)

Figure 1. Fold down the top corner.
The following folding instructions should be paced throughout the remainder of the story.

Figure 2. Fold down the opposite corner to form triangle at the top.

Figure 3. Unfold the paper. Fold the paper in a third.

Figure 4. This is a tricky fold. Open the paper. The middle horizontal crease is going to buckle in towards itself. You are folding on the two lower diagonals. Smooth down the creases to form a triangle.
Are you still folding? You're almost done.

Figure 5. Fold the outer two points triangle to the top point.

Figure 6. Fold each of the triangles outward away from the middle.

Figure 7. Fold the bottom vertically. A fourth of the paper on each side is folded. Then, fold the remainder of the rectangle into thirds.

Figure 8. The two folds should reverse like a fan's folds. These are the back legs. Turn over your frog.
The paper fetcher just happened to be away on a long forgotten honeymoon, so the King had to go to the paper maker's house himself. When he arrived, he noticed a woman hanging large sheets of paper to dry on a long line strung from tree to tree to tree. Her yard looked like a used car lot with paper flags waving in the breeze. She was singing *(storyteller sings and asks listeners to participate in humming)* and had a voice of memory. She was making marbleized paper and rice paper you could almost blow through, and paper so thick you could sew clothing out of it. The King stood amazed at the large array of paper and... the woman. The woman not suspecting the King was watching, continued her routine of making paper and an adding dyes. The King was astonished with her abilities and beauty. He fell in love with the paper maker right at that very instant. Just as the King was about to speak his words she turned around and screamed, surprised at his appearance in her paper garden. The King was unable to say a word to calm her. In his sudden desire for this woman, he had lost his one true gift, the gift of sound. The woman, not knowing what the king looked like, shooed him away with the broom. Well, as soon as the woman was out of sight he got his voice back. He began to sing his sorrows to the frogs that sat by the lily pond. "Woe is me. Woe is me." The frogs leapt to his side, "ribbit ribbit ribbit croak..." *(That's frog language for- if you want to win the heart of the paper maker, you must tell her, but you must find a different way than your voice, for she will always leave you speechless unless you marry her.)* Well, King Ouiea was quite dismayed, he was down with the dogs, feeling bad. First, he had a kingdom full of people who were continuing to forget more and more and more. Secondly, he had the blues over not being able to speak to his true love. He went into his paper folding room, locked the door, and folded. And as he folded he thought. "Flowers." he
thought with cartoon light bulb glowing above his head and off he went to the paper-maker's house. When he arrived, he carefully tip-toed into the yard, not wanting to scare her. Then he saw them- a whole garden full of flowers. "Fiddle-fop." he said and returned to the castle. "Food." he thought, "what a good idea, I'll bake her a pie. Women like that sort of thing. I'm a man that can cook," said the King to himself. He then made one big apple pie. Upon his arrival at her cottage he noticed she had three freshly baked pies on the windowsill. "Fiddle-fop." he said to himself and went back to the castle. "How can I give her something she needs? How can I woo her?" the King said to himself. He went into his paper folding room and sat and folded. And as he folded he thought.

As he was thinking a frog from the moat hopped under the door. (Castles were drafty back then and had big holes.)

(Storyteller instructs listeners to hop their paper frogs as many times as desired.) Almost out of breath from his long hop he said, "ribbit ribbit ribbity rib." In frog language:" Remember, you must find a different way to communicate. Use your artistic abilities." Then, the frog hopped away. The king folded and thought of his father who said to him as a child, "Ouiea, you hold the power to undo the wrong." Ouiea couldn't remember the wrong to which his father was referring, but he imagined it might have to do with the forgetting. As he folded, a bird flew into the paper-folding room. "Chirp- chirpee- chirrup," said the bird. This meant, "Forgive me for disturbing you, but in your name you hold the answer to your dilemma." The King, who was naturally good natured, but naturally was not in good nature for a riddle, shooed the bird away "Leave me alone," he said with the wave of his arm.

(Storyteller instructs the listeners to 'fly' their birds in the air.)
The King sat, and as he sat, he folded. He stared at the crisp colors of paper and thought of his name. "OOOUU-IE-a," he said out loud. As he said it, he saw each color in his hand. His father had named him after the rainbow in the sky. There were five sounds in his name, distinct as the five senses. They blended together, but were as distinct as the colors of the rainbow. First, there was the "o" sound which meant yellow, then" u" meaning blue, then" i" meaning red, " e" green and "a" orange. (To the listeners: you can figure out what color and sound you were named after by blending the vowels in your name.) The King was delighted with his memory flash. He instantly created a visual interpretation of each one of the sounds in his name. These became the vowels. He decided this is how he would communicate to the paper-maker. He was sure she would know how the colors sounded. Excited by his new art forms, he copied them over and over until he spelled his name.

However, the King knew there were many mixtures of sounds and colors, so there he sat. He didn't fold, but took a piece of charcoal from the stove beside him and drew. For twenty-one days the King created. Each day he created a new art representation of a color. At the end of the twenty one days he was exhausted, but yet he felt he was inspired by a divine power. It felt like a pleasant déjà vu. He attached them all together in a portfolio. He called the group "alpha" and bet it would win over the paper-maker. The King had recreated the written word.

He showed it to the frogs in the moat on the way out of the castle and they ribbited a "WELL DONE!" He showed it to the birds and they chirped a "BRAVO!" The creatures happily chirped and croaked away, smiling bird smiles and big froggy smiles. The King showed it to a would-be drunk, laying absented-mindedly in the street. He had a big brown bag, but had forgotten his alcohol.
Upon seeing the characters, the drunk proclaimed, "I can read." And the two proudly sounded out each character in a colorful melody.

The King hurried to the paper-maker's cottage. Before she had time to scream again, he showed her the "alpha." She rejoiced in his discovery. "Letters, for me!?" she said and asked him to marry her on the spot, for he had given her what no other could, the written word. He accepted with a nod and they were married.

The happy couple sang together a confused "I-YA-YI-I," and thus painted the town red with a tint of orange. The King, being the good king that he was, wrote down little helpful rules for his people. He wrote down where the parks were, in case they wanted to swing. And what day was Sunday, so they didn't have to work. And what day the recyclables needed to be set on the curb. The trash was recycled into paper. The paper maker could not keep up with the demand and was happy she had married a king. The King understood his craving for paper and the curse was broken. A new sign was made welcoming people to the changed Sensoria Land. The townspeople started to remember new words everyday. And as I understand it they have continued to do so ever since.
A Writing Lesson from my Late Night Neighbor

I had red eye
not pink eye from disease
or deep sea diving
or black eye from tendencies
to be contriving
just red eye,
not in a feminine fashion
the way pink winks
masquerades of mascaraed eyelashes
over and again,
not in a destructive behavior
the way black attacks
to be the key savior
hijacking fists with bone cracks,
not an inking of my eye
with pink dye
or an inkling of a shadow
bleeding a black venom glow
on my lemon skin
just red eye
from observing
a servant of language.

It was an unexpected happenchance
the chance she would happen to be
writing when I watched
her write the right words
to happen upon an understanding.
I stood with my head
under a light
light-headed from awe
as she dashed her pencil
thin fingers across the keyboard
she was the type
I had been looking for
four years in class.
Her screen was fuzzy
and I pressed against the absence
to see
but she saw
and we see sawed
through the wall until
I broke free.
I just had red eye.

Not from being awake
too late or Vodka shots
shot straight between
the gleam of my teeth
to vibrate nerves underneath,
not from poking my eye
with an ice pick
or a pointed fingernail
nailing sharpened points
into my iris.
I rise only to see
I just had red eye.

I was trying to type
or learn to write
as warm air blasted
fast from my surround sound
heat speakers,
speaking sautéed words
as I wandered around
in my underwear
unaware of windows
or type-o's
or types of those
who would peep
in my clothes
if they could seep
and compose
lyrics into my ear.
I was not a creep
of a peeper.

My red eye was not
peppered with red,
it was not red in
my eye like pink
or fusing out
of my eye like black,
just a ring around
my eye
red
from pressing,  
not from an iron pressing  
or the tip  
of a red pen pressing  
or a pressing appointment  
the point meant nothing  
until it met my eye.

"Aye!" she screamed  
as she took time  
away from her rhyme.  
She not knowing it was I  
jabbed at my eye  
trying to spear it  
and pull me like thread  
through the wall's eye.  
But I just wanted to see  
how to write like she  
But I was wrong  
to press  
to fill my page of emptiness  
and now I have a red eye  
from pressing hard  
against the peephole in the wall  
wanting to reap the whole poem  
not just a red eye.
Eight Ball

I was racked up in a Bermuda Triangle.
I tried to swim,
but the others crowded me
wedged me in their panic
as they watched the shark circle.
I was stuck in the middle.
I needed to break out
but he broke
with an amplified snap of the fingers
and I was shot into the kitchen
to supervise slop flung in dark corners.
I was tabled as the last execution.

The six pockets heckled me
they were hungry
and shrieked screams
across the green until
they got their cue.
Like a mother bird feeding
worms to her young,
the stick shoved balls
into the tables' empty holes
to fill them up.
One was lost and then Five
whizzed by like a cyclone.
Thirteen wasn't betting on the bank,
but the ball hit like a bus with no brakes
and she spun sideways like Saturn
into a black abyss.

The rest of the teens were strung out by the footstring
and whistled adolescent taunts at each other
as they were knocked closer to the edge.
Seven was marooned
when he double kissed Fifteen
and she left crying into the side pocket.
The kiss was hard
and Seven was rebounding
on guilt when he stumbled back
into a mouth opened five and a half inches wide.

The solids were fighting with the stripes again
and the gangs split
to rumble occasionally in the center.
A stripe and a solid were close
but not touching when the white guy
forced them to connect and Three slammed Nine
nine feet down the table and back again
as Six lagged behind the two to insult
the stripe.
Six was green
and didn’t see the stick
until it knocked him with a crack
and spun him dizzy into darkness.

The game was fast and Eleven and Twelve
partnered up in defense,
but the white guy and the stick
batted them into the table’s mouths.
The white guy scratched
but still sent Ten sliding into Fourteen
like a base runner catching up with the first hitter.
Ten followed Fourteen onto the plate
and was emptied into the pocket.
Four looked like he’d be hard
to sink as he stood firm against the middle of a rail
but the white guy feathered him and he died
laughing into the side mouth.
The stick was chalked
and ready to draw
shot the Two.
Two was blue
with grief for Four
before she fell stunned,
blinded by a smoke of powder
into an orifice.

I was listening to the grumbling of balls
digesting in the table’s stomach
and didn’t hear the stick
and the white guy trying to figure out my angle.
I was resting easy by the rail when
the cue spoke a little English and 
set me straight.
And the corner mouth
ate me.
Padiddle Riddle

She smashed your head
light of your car
and left a rock
in yo' window,
a short message attached
called a tension
to the end,
leaving one eye
to wink
a kiss off
to friendly
relationships.
The Knight with the Motley Crew

Fun houses housed us during Steamboat Days.
We soaked up humidity with our cool bodies
and steamed hormones from every fold of skin.
Sam let us go through free.
We folded our images in peppermint swirls
and lost our balance on moving metal steps
to step out of the house into the carnival night.
Neon Ferris-wheel lights swam in the Mississippi
as Debra McNevens and I scouted
the long-haired carnies
in their black Metallica T-shirts.

They whistled as we passed
by their stands on our nomadic
path to funnel cakes and caramel apples.
Debra told me
she was too old to live at home.
Boys and their fathers looked at Debra
as she ate her rainbow Sno-cone.
We were 14, but she was older.
Debra's father thought she was woman
not a girl.
The magnetic mirror Debra won
from Gary's dart booth contorted our faces
like spoon reflections and served words
of promise from the night's goings-on.

When the Tilt-a-World ceased
to whip screams in its three minute
imitation animation ride,
Gary and Sam offered to suspend
our imaginations.
They gave us cigarettes and beer
and we marveled in the illusions
of mirrors and spins 'til 2 a.m.
while Debra got drunk.
I got sick
promising to be home at noon
from Debra's trailer
in our overnight sleep.

At 6 a.m., I woke up
on a bleacher in the Muddy River Grandstand
covered in a tiger picture blanket
with a purple shaggy stuffed dog
as my pillow. I recognized
them from Gary's booth.
Debra mailed me a letter
8 months later
postmarked Seattle, Washington.
She married Sam
escaping her father's attraction
and her brother's backhand.
With a trace of identity,
she signed her name with a smiley-face.
Escape

We crossed the cornfields
in the black
fearing God, fearing the devil.
Uncle Harold and Aunt Mary crucified
our dirty footprints
across their white linoleum.
Eva snuck into the barn
and we loaded into Black Mercury
tearing around the corners
of our gravel roads,
the dust creeping through
the holes in the floorboards
suffocating our actions
at eighty miles per hour.
We lived and told secrets
sitting on top of the brooder house
jumping
to ride the persimmon trees to the ground
praying not to get whipped,
tempting the branches
and the supernatural.
The screen door was left open that night
as we buried ourselves under quilts.
Aunt Mary was up early the next morning
ready for confession,
seeking out our former sins.
The sugar bowl lid was not in its place,
the devil had craved sweetness.
He visited and watched us
and did not shut the door
when he left empty handed.
My rosary had been under my pillow
and had saved my soul.
"Welcome to the 44th annual Old Threshers Reunion. Where the past is the present and the present is the future, steam is king and if you’re under ten, gunfighters give you pickles on a stick." Josh mustered this speech each year with all his thespian experience and the drawl of an Iowa cowboy. Little girls in sunbonnets and boys in engineer and cowboy hats crowded around the general store named the "Pickle Jar." Josh passed out the monster-size dill pickles to little mouths who were anxious for anything free. Their faces turned into small crumbled paper bags at their first tastes of the pickles. They soon generously offered it to a mom, a dad, or an older friend. Adults could tolerate a sour taste and had developed a liking for the bitterness.

Two ice cold pickles served as Mirane’s breakfast. Her throat was cotton balled. She wondered if her skin was being slowly drawn into a secret sinkhole somewhere in her stomach. She had read about sinkholes, the lady in Florida whose entire house disappeared into a sinkhole, the earth just tucked her right into it’s pocket. Or maybe her intestines were pulling her in like a long piece of licorice methodically chomped, the mouth coming closer and closer to the end. Her face looked like a used piece of Saran Wrap unsuccessfully pulled from the roll in bunches. She felt like one of those dried apple dolls with red blush dotting her cheeks. She hated that red blush imitating life, imitating blood close to the skin. She wanted to poke at the appled cheeks, feel their hard dryness, feel they had been left on the windowsill or back porch to sun bath past ripe, not allowing to rot and die. Mirane pushed herself out and up from her lawn chair. Arizona’s August had worn her rough like the edges of a new piece of sandpaper.
She looked to the west, a farmer's rain was coming in. She could smell the wet dirt. The sky looked like a huge black hole surrounded by a yellow ocean. Smoke from the steam engines had filled the sky with soot.

His gun spun doughnuts around his finger before falling into his holster. He peered his head around the side of the building and fired at the man standing in the middle of the dusty road. He fired. The man fell back stumbling, clutching his now red soaked shirt. Dead. The man landed in a horse trough. The water spilled over the sides, his cowboy hat skimming the top of water. The crowd laughed and applauded. Josh offered his hand to Alex, the man, and pulled him out of the trough. They bowed smiling, shaking the little kids' hands and autographing the back of their Old Town entrance tickets. This would remind the kids it was still the present, not 1884 and they had no reason to be afraid. It was dress up.

On the south side of the fairgrounds thousands of campers and tents dotted the terraced campgrounds. Mirane pushed herself up and out from her lawn chair wondering why in the last couple of months she had grown so old and stiff. Maybe a walk would help. Maybe she'd take the trolley over to the Old Town. An ice cold pickle sounded good, but she had already had two this morning. Maybe lemonade. She was thirsty. The Log Village was not too far away, maybe I'll go there first she thought. She looked to the sky after smelling a farmer's rain coming in from the west. The sky looked like a huge black hole surrounded by a yellow ocean. Smoke from the steam engines had filled the sky with soot. She hoped it would rain even though Iowa had been raining all summer. She had been sick of carting boxes of records and letters up to the attic. And drying off photos on the top of her roof as if offering Mother Nature, herself and all her memories. In July, she finally gave in to her friends advice to move
to Arizona. "Humidity is bad for your old bones, gives you gout" they had said. The sun will warm you up." In Arizona, the children and adults alike, played in the rain puddles during a storm. Rain came so rarely that they disregarded Mother Nature's scolds of lightening bolts. Even though the mountains and valleys made her feel claustrophobic, there were no floods, just a steady heat. She noticed her skin was dry, her wrinkles deeper. She was uncomfortably too warm.

Mirane left her accordion lanterns that lined the awning of her camper, swinging from side to side in the breeze and started to walk. As she walked the breeze snuck down her throat and started to dry her heart. She became more thirsty. She walked past the old church where they were playing "Name that Hymn," and over the trolley tracks to the Log Village. She stopped to listen to Professor Barnswallow and the Great American Medicine Show:

"Right here in my possession I hold a miracle.
Yes, ladies and gentlemen this is 99.9% effective.
Do you want a companion who is strong?
Do you want the energy of youth to kick up your heels?
To travel? To explore this great land?
One bottle of Dr. Barnswallow's Love Potion and
You will become the age you feel.
You will be dancing in the town square on your road to success in love..."

Mirane didn't bother to hear the rest. She bought a bottle and took a drink. She was thirsty and thought about the boy she had met last year when she had felt seventeen again. The land was drier then, but the humidity had persisted and had smoothed her skin. She gulped down half the contents of the brown bottle. Unsatisfied with the results, she walked further up the hill on a dirt path that had been cleanly swept with a homemade broom.
In the Old Town, Josh was taking a break before his last performance of the day. He walked into the "A Couple More" saloon. He paused to glance at the show girl on stage. She was kicking her legs high in the air with red feathers tucked in her hair. Even with blue eye shadow she was beautiful. She looked about nineteen. She looked like the girl he had met last year, but was never able to find. The showgirl had on bright red lipstick coated with a shine to allow her lips to glide smoothly over her teeth during her twenty minute chorus line show. Her skin looked like a freshly waxed apple. She saw Josh decked out in his chaps with a red bandanna knotted at his throat. His brown hair stuck out from beneath his hat like a splintered piece of wood. She smiled her Vaseline smile.

Josh squeezed in between two tourists discussing the steam engine of the year, the Harrison 20 HP Jumbo Steam traction engine.

"Orange juice?" said the bartender.

Josh nodded. The fan behind the bar circulated a warm beer breeze. Nearby a heavyset woman sat uncomfortably, smelling of the orange talc powder old women wear on their faces. Like a loaf of bread, the woman's lower half was rising over the sides of the round bar stool. Josh thought at any moment the heat might stretch a piece of her dough and drop it on the floor to form its own roll.

She was talking loudly: "Oh, Henry, I tell you we should get on one of those ground trains, a quarter a ride. There's something freaky about those trolleys running on wires—I just don't trust them. On one of those ground trains we can ride all the way to the camper from here. Those teenagers like to get on first though. They're always making out in the back seats. Squirrelly kids. They get worse as the night goes on. Parents just drop them off at the gates. Their
hormones are boiling over, pumping out of them like steam. Must be the weather that makes them like that. You have to be quick to get a seat on those ground trains. But if you get on back side first, those skinny little girls with no hips don't stand a chance against my experience." She patted her thigh with an affirmative nod.

Josh glanced over at the woman's not so interested companion who only added a belch in response. The intense heat plus the fan lent a recycled orange pop odor to drift over to Josh.

"Here ya go," said the bartender placing a cup on the bar. Josh took his orange juice and wandered over to the wall to read the names etched into the wood. He wondered if Bread Woman and Mr. Orange Breath had ever been in love. The saloon had been made out of old bridge planks and picnic tables. Entering the bar, new comers could borrow a knife from the bartender, find a space, and carve their names within a heart. Above the bar, hung a poem commemorating the saloon:

A Couple More

I search
the walls
for imprinted love
and wonder
if any of the letters
joined by a plus
still add up
together.

Everywhere there were names, saved like old ticket stubs, to remember lost or constant love. Josh ran his hand across a heart that read "Mirane loves Josh."
His fingers traced the etched lines and curves of the letters. He wished it last year, when they had carved the heart in the wood, pledging their love to each other. He left his cup on the table, no longer thirsty. He glanced at the show girls once more if he could see the girl who reminded him of Mirane. She was reaching her arm around another show girl and waving a pretend wave to a sea of whoopees and yeehaws." The strong whiff of an entering worker with the horse barns on his boots prompted him to exit the saloon for some fresh air. He walked outside into the heat. It was strange that it was still so hot out. The slight breeze smelled of wet dirt. He looked to the sky expectantly.

"Gonna rain," said the old timer in stripped overalls waiting for the trolley. He was sitting on a bench composed of two long planks that balanced on tree stumps, and was diligently munching on a pickle.

"Think so?" Josh asked.

"Yep. Mother Nature has been sweating up a storm, growing younger all summer."

Josh looked at him with a question.

"I think She wanted to play this summer, shed some time with tears of laughter, jump in puddles big enough to get herself a little wet, maybe soak her skin."

Josh laughed. They had all laughed that summer to keep from worrying. The summer had brought people together by sandbags and swimmer's itch. "So, you think She was playing?"

"Sure, She wants to be young again too, he said finishing his pickle and tossing the stick into a trash can. "She was wrinkling up, probably from all our planting and pesticides and needed to smooth out her earth. She sure did soak us. It was a hell of a bath this summer. I tell you, my daughter she had a hard
time understanding all this rain. All she was worried about were her cats. Yah see, she figured all of her cats had crawled up into the rafters of the barn when it flooded. So we went out there on that swollen Mississippi to get all of her damn cats. Course, by that time all ya could see was the top of the barn. The rest was under the river, sunk down in the stinkin' water. But there was a window up there at the top of the barn, so we opened it up. When we looked in there, ya could just feel the darkness pouring out. Soon as we know it-there are rats, big ass rats coming everywhere, using my arm as a bridge trying to get out in the boat with us. I'll tell you we got outta' there in a might of a hurry. Shit. That was a hell of a time. Just had to leave the cats there with all that water. If I was younger I would've fought off those rats and got those cats out, but I know my body isn't in as good of shape as it was at your age. Mother Nature was probably feeling bad about all that one, the cats and all."

Josh shook his head from side to side. He was about to reply when the whistles went off, screeching through the air in different pitches. Every day at five o'clock every single one of the 158 Mt. Pleasant guest steam engines blew their whistles to signal quitting time. The coal smoke rose into the air, coating the sky until a great soot filled umbrella covered the 160 acre fairground. This is when the moms and dads went home. Tired of playing a gunfighter or saloon girl. They took the little ones home and left the big kids to play, confident that their kids would be fine due to the thousands of adopted grandparents on the campgrounds. Josh looked up and saw the black umbrella tumble across the sky as a strong wind took hold under the canopy of soot. Then the rain began. Nobody seemed to worry. It was in big heavy drops, the kind you catch with your tongue, until the drops come so fast they swallow you. The earth was so
hot that when the cold drops reached the ground, steam began to rise and the grass was growing greener and more lush.

Just as cold rain drops caught the undersides of Mirane's feet, she entered the trolley car, not noticing the layer of callused skin on her feet sliding off of her heels. The trolley was from Brazil, bought by the Old threshers Reunion Committee four years ago. The seats had been restored with bamboo coverings made in Brazil. They looked dry and brittle as if from a desert not a jungle. The advertisements on the ceiling preached cigarettes and Ivory soap. Mirane was looking at the sophisticated woman with the short bobbed hair holding a cigarette in the advertisement and did not notice the air was thickening outside of the trolley. The bamboo was steaming a forgotten dampness from its patterned weaved seats.

At this time, the fog was engulfing the old timer who before Josh's eyes seemed to shrink until he disappeared, as the steam fogged his view. Soon Josh was standing in water, warm water, up to his ankles. It was flooding out of the saloon. Josh rushed inside. Everywhere tears were dripping like candle wax, some came slowly, others fast out from the crevices of the carved hearts on the walls, some for joy, some from sadness. The bartender was scooping up water with mugs and tossing it over the counter. The tears were rolling down the boards erasing the names that no longer fit together, filling up the cracks and hardening the salty tears into wood. In the unions that time could not falter the tears were caught in the veins of the wood, like warm blood pumping through aortas, the tears deepened the carvings. The show girls were quickly scooping up sheets of music that were sailing away on tears trying to reach the outside. Josh ran over to the heart of his name and Mirane's. The names were growing deeper into the wood. The steam from outside was creeping into the saloon.
turning it into a sauna. He went outside to see if her could find the old timer. He weaved through the cattails and pond smartweed that were growing taller and taller as he walked, and climbed on top of the roof of the old jail next door. The old timer had disappeared. Josh looked towards the campgrounds. The rain had just started to move towards the make shift camps of the tourists. Already he was drenched from sweat and a cloud of moisture opening up from the ground. Iowa was returning to a swampland. A parade of steam engines, tractors and antique cars were making their way around the fairgrounds and entering the Old town clogging the air with more steam. Regardless of the weather, the townspeople would not delay the festivities. Finally, he was able to see the bench where the old timer had been sitting, but only a guy about his age was sitting there. The trolley had just arrived, only one person got off. It looked like it was a woman in a big hoop skirt. Josh couldn't be sure. Maybe it was one of the Sweet Sixteen girls who walked the grounds meeting and greeting people in hopes of being awarded the sweetest sixteen year old. But, the cloud of steam was too wise to be following a sixteen year old in pursuit of an abstract genuineness. The woman looked as if she was inhaling the air through her feet in one continuous intake. The steam sucked at her heels. She walked towards "A Couple More."

When Mirane stepped off the trolley, she was in a hurry to get a drink. In her haste to quench her thirst, she didn't see the trail of steam she was vacuuming up behind her as she traveled towards the saloon. Her skin was sifting the moisture from the air into her body in effort to cool the flames in her heart. Flakes of her dry skin joined the salt on the stairs as she stepped into "A Couple More." Her new layer of skin like quicksand, buried the steam. She was still thirsty.
"Well Mirane," the bartender said as she walked through the door. "We didn't know if you'd come visit us this year." Mirane looked at the heart on the wall that she had carved last year when she had met Josh. Last year was coming back, it was becoming the present in the steaming saloon. She looked at her feet. How had she forgotten shoes? Her feet were inhaling the water that coated the hardwood floor. Her skin was becoming smooth. She was remembering: how she had volunteered as a show girl and how she had eaten too many pickles last year and been thirsty all during the Reunion until she had met Josh.

Sweat was pouring down Josh's face when he finally reached the saloon. He had to fight through the tornado of steam that was whirling into the saloon and entering into the woman's heels. It was Mirane.

Mirane smiled and looked at Josh, the steam and sweat from his body were tunneling through the air into the soles of her feet. For in the present, Josh was no longer sweaty and Mirane was no longer thirsty.
Partners

We cradled our behinds
in the worn strips
that criss-crossed the aluminum frames
of our lawn chairs.
The L.A. Dodgers were winning
on his Motorola pocket A.M.
I folded my legs up into the chair
eating grapes from a brown Smitty's bag
salvaged from the sun tables.

Cars stopped
at Jake's Fruit Stand across the street
squished between orange groves.
I was rolling tobacco inside
the thin tissue squares of paper
when her shout,
sliced the brown sugared air
that coated grapes to raisins.

"Walter, don't be giving her tobacco,
send her in here to help."

Grandpa clasped my hand.
Around back we hid
in the cool shadows of Oleanders,
surveying the tomato plants secured
to rods by Grandma's ruined knee highs.
We plucked heavy soft tomatoes
from their sagging vines.
Warm juices filled our mouths.
On the Line

At the train station he boarded and left
my sister and I to follow the train tracks home
holding hands for balance.

Mom clothes-pinned white sheets
to wind dry the cool wrinkles smooth.

Three weeks passed before
the telephone rang
and she placed the receiver
close to her lips
waiting for an answer.
Classified

If you call
a 900 number
your night
will be *hot and wild*
by skinny
live
voices
who please
and create
your fantasies.
'Young Thighs' await
your 3.98 per minute
to breathe
a breath
along a long
thin
wire
to captivated
emptiness.
Hopping the Mississippi

When the bars closed,
the red light of Eddie's sign
beckoned us like a lighthouse
to cross the bridge
to the village of nudie bars
for three more hours.
There was no cover
for women at Eddie's.
And we always got free drinks.

Big Eddie greeted us with a smile
that dripped like pizza grease from his lips.
All smiles were lazy at 2 a.m.
Patterned after each other
in plaid flannels,
night consumers waited.
We consumed stares and
Leon waited on us at the bar.
He served
Sterzing's potato chips,
Miller Light and local gossip.

Amy and I were addressed as women
and two mustached men
saddled up to vacant bar stools nearby.
We were sucking up their air
dense with working construction and production lines.
We produced nothing, but thoughts
and construed make-believe names
for our stooled neighbors.
Our Bill and Ray asked our names
and soon left us
for not working
for taking classes seriously
and reminding them of high school.

Our common ground was beneath us,
the years of detasselling for seed corn plants,
and summer time supermarket jobs
to market our home town smiles.
We had forgotten the boys
who took us four-wheeling,  
our playmates of headlight tag on country roads.  
We had forgotten our friends  
who dropped out  
to work the farms  
and take care of brothers and sisters.  
We talked to the bartenders and men  
who wanted to talk to women.  
And we discovered we had lost ourselves  
in between summers and visits home  
to long words and perfected grammar  
until people were uncomfortable  
to talk to us,  
unless we could hang out at Eddie's  
and speak right.

When the morning reminded us  
of our beds  
we crept to the gravel parking lot,  
shading our eyes with our hands.  
We had missed the two o'clock rush  
when the bar residents looked to reside  
somewhere new for the night.  
We had missed the night  
the county fair, the Sweet Corn Festival  
Sam's annual barn dance.  
We went back across to Iowa  
to sleep off our hang-overs  
hanging like the humidity  
thick within our state  
somewhere not quite home.
Slipping into Another State

The window is frozen shut, 
tight as the Tupperware in my refrigerator. 
I wear sweats to sweet talk my body 
into sweating out the cold. 
I zero in on the outside icicles 
spiraling circles of ice puddles, 
it must be degrees above thirty-two. 
The driver with the left sided car leaves 
and I spy the mailbox waiting. 
I know the letters are crowding to the key hole 
watching for me. 

The radio man states the highs and lows 
of the "above zero" forecast. 
I suit up for a cast of sidewalks 
that are salted like the bottom of a pretzel bag. 
I don't want to live in Iowa. 
The heart of the States has winters. 
I want to go somewhere closer to Mercury, 
where they judge the air by a hundred. 
I want the radio man 
to tell me "20 below a hundred today 
with the breeze warming factor, 
it's gonna be a good one."

First, I give birth to my frosty wombed car 
to ready it for grocery store trips. 
Then, I shuffle my feet over slush and ice, 
my soles, magnets for salt and sand. 
I unlock my mailbox square. 
The letters, 
warm in my hand, 
are my candy wrappers promising treats. 
Only one letter toasts me like a red hot, 
tanning my tongue with cinnamon. 
Beside the waving flag is a date 
and "Phoenix" curves in the comfort of a circle. 
Stamped over the flag, proposing we couple up, 
is a wavy musical scale drifting 
into a cursive "Fall In Love." 
I want to fall in heat 
or forget Fall all together
and be mailed straight to Summer.

The envelope is a fantastic banana yellow.
It yells at me to slip into its peel,
and return to sender.
I wish.
And am inside.
Seal me up with saliva.
Address me as Ms.
and "mail me," I declare, to the cold air,
on to New Mexico or Arizona.
Zone me with a code
and zip me into a post office box
of someone drunk with warmth,
who won't think I'm junk,
and trash me with a quick flip.
Just don't leave me stationary.
Pencil in your words
and I'll stand posted
to deliver.
Send me to a sun spot
where my goose bumps will press out
into hot-skinned sheets of flesh.

A letter opener releases me
with a short cut in the side
of the letter pocket.
I spring up like a pop up book
and tickle the current resident's nose
with my scarf
and unfold my shivers.

I travel well in the suitcase of the letter "D"
and read on to ear
and I will whisper to you
why
the ink runs down the pale face of your page
like mascara.
And the next time,
I'll promise to travel in sock feet
to keep your letter dry.
Seam Stress

Fried bologna, milk gravy and biscuits stapled our stomachs with starch so they wouldn’t growl a hungry MORE when we turned off the lights. I was sewing bus seat covers to cover the bills and Bob welded together parts for rent every month. When the factory closed we left our two double beds and circled the neighborhood trying to figure out which way to go. With two sleepy children strapped in the backseat we drove as far as our eyes would open.

The first night we turned off the lights in our new apartment, an orchestra of long curled toenails clicked on the concrete. Cockroaches flooded the floor and walls and swam in the bowl of the overhead light fixture. We were fixed in dead end jobs. For a month we slept with the lights on and the girls were afraid of the dark by the time we got our gas bill. Bob stuffed cotton in their ears and turned off their light. 3 A.M. the girls were screaming. They had stepped down on to the crunchy backs of the roaches on their way to the bathroom. They thought the roaches were growing potato chips. They could not see in the dark. I answered them with a broom to beat off the fat brown roaches while Bob stood scarecrow. The girls clung to him like he was their life raft. He lullabied them promises of a backyard and a swingset. But after that, the girls began to wet the bed again, even when the lights were on.

The landlord told us we were dirty people. I scrubbed and bleached the walls and floor until his words were erased. I followed the roaches funneling under my stove. The next day, I went downstairs with my bucket of disinfectant. The roaches were not afraid of the Asian woman and she screamed foreign words at me when I offered to help rid her of roaches. She didn’t understand. The roaches were traveling up through her pipes to mine and living rich lives in the warm holes in the wall.

Two weeks later we moved to a trailer in a court with yards. The girls had never been barefoot on carpet and danced circles on the long shag. We went in debt and forgot pride to get food stamps to try to balance. We slept on the floor that night and for weeks after with a card table and folding chairs as our furniture.

I was sewing jean pockets and labels from 4:30 am to 6:00 pm four days a week when Bob got laid off. We went to the park and played on the swings, swinging ideas over our shoulders. No idea was safe. On the way home, we stopped at the A&W and had root beers and orange soda pop in frosty mugs. The girls had orange mustaches that painted semi-permanent smiles. We slingshot solutions and immersed in one to change the color of our fabric life. He would go first. He would start classes at the university in two weeks, and I would begin to sew up the tears in our children.
The Demeaning of the Trailer Court Girl

In the trailer court a boy nicknamed Scooter chased me on my banana seat bike, flickering a gardener snake at my neck. I screamed until Mom told me he was retarded, but I didn't care what he was—he was mean.

In the trailer court Randy sat up in a tree and threw rocks at me as I waited for the bus. He broke my glasses and I couldn't see but ran after him. I beat his face in the gravel until he was crying blood and a mother unhooked my fists from his head. Mom said I shouldn't pick on people who were smaller than me, but I didn't care—he was mean.

In the trailer court I didn't know I was a girl. My sister walked me home from the bus stop catching the blood from my nose in her hands as if it would stop it. She was a girl. Dad had been a boxer in the army and thought I was a boy, so when Mom was at night class I learned how to hook and jab. He pretended to scold me that day when the boys' moms told him I gave them black eyes on the bus when they'd tried to kiss me. I didn't care—they were mean.

In the trailer court I was best friends with Joey and he didn't know I was a girl until mom made me dress in a dress to the school program. "Why ya wearing a dress?" he asked me. "Cause I'm a girl, stupid." I said holding my hands to the side like Mom told me a girl was supposed to do. On the nights it was my turn to do the dishes he would talk to me through the kitchen window waiting for me to finish. But I was thirteen and he stopped. I thought that was mean.

When we moved from the trailer court to a house
Mom said I shouldn't beat up anybody
in our new neighborhood.
The streets were paved
and I didn't worry about rocks.
I was still trying to figure out the girl thing.

At school everyone knew I was a tomboy
and hid it from my mother who dressed me in dresses.
When Randy asked me to prom
I laughed
and laughed
and laughed thinking of the whiny kid
I beat up in the trailer court.
Mom said I shouldn't have done this
because I hurt his feelings
but I didn't care-- I was mean.

The day I signed up for karate,
Mom sighed a sigh of failure.
Dad thought he'd won a boy.
Then, I wore that dress
black like all of my T-shirts
but with a velvet V-neck.
They both stood silent
when Joey picked me up
and lead me out the door
holding
my hand.
Cereal

I was charged with serial buying
I fell for Kellogg. Wheat logs
float in my milk like little haystacks
covered with snow. I'm sugared
for the day and pop with corn.
My cabinet cages a toucan with a rainbow beak
and a frog, bear, and tiger
throughout my week roam and leap
on to my countertops.
The doughnut shapes are my favorite,
like intertubes with portholes to milk.
Each meal is surreal
in crispy and soggy spoonfuls.
Colorful rings buoy in milky waves
and rice rafts slowly sink like sponges,
fattened with milk.

I've tried the generic
but the little o's fail to squeeze
together softly
and instead, the o's open and close
like little mouths
biting chunks of flesh
assaulting the roof of my mouth
leaving nothing
but pocks mocking
the shape of each
generic o like cigarette burns
polka dotting a car seat.

I sprinkle sugar on my cereal,
but the curious grains squeal
and spring off their life preservers
to dive into the milk,
and explore the depths of my bowl.
Every time, I hope,
but the sugar hops and settles,
heavy with whole milk,
at the bottom of my cereal ocean.
I peer into the bowl
whirling eddies with my spoon
and fish for the sugar
through an aging yellow milk.
I scrape the sugar sand
from the floor of my bowl
to raise my sugar
a la mode to my cereal wheels of vitamins.

I roll and crunch my o's
into u's and the dots of i's
until the vowels slide down my throat
and splash into my stomach playground
gurgling growls and chuckles
as they are acquitted.
Tomorrow, I will talk to the tiger
and try the sugar -cemented flakes,
tired of cereal with sugar,
and wanting the pre-position of on.