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# strawberry press magazine

New Fiction by Brian Seabolt, Ashley Shelby, Whit Frazier, Carol Gavin and Ijosé Benin

**STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE**
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**VOLUME ONE ISSUE NINE**

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Check out the new look of www.strawberrypress.net online. We publish print and online fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction. We are also accepting submissions for upcoming issues of strawberry press magazine.

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## Volume One Issue Nine

Volume One Issue Nine issues in warmer weather, and hopefully the approach of spring. This issue is entirely fiction; there is no Perspectives piece for this month. This is just because I didn't get around to writing one myself, and as there were no submissions for Perspectives, I figured why not have an all fiction issue? There is a strong variety of fiction writers from a number of authors in this issue; I am very happy with the outcome.

March features work by Ashley Shelby, a very talented writer who is new to Strawberry Press. It also features work by Carol Gavin and Ijosé Benin, two talented writers new to the press, and fiction by Brian Seabolt, who has worked with Strawberry Press many times before. Finally, there are two short pieces that I wrote myself.

I wish us all warm weather and a great month.

Cheers,

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**Ashley Shelby's** work has been published or is forthcoming in The Nation, Sonora Review, Post Road, 3am Magazine, Carve, collectedstories.com, Transit (U.K.), Full Circle Journal, Identity Theory, The Portland Review, Gastronomica, and Mr. Beller's Neighborhood, among others. She recently won the William Faulkner Award for Short Fiction.

**Brian Seabolt** lives and writes in Ann Arbor, Michigan

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# The Vegas Solution

Ashley Shelby

There was only one hand to play now, and that was Vegas. We'd meet at McCarran International Airport, flying in from the pins on a map, speeding towards Vegas like vectors to a coordinate. Mom coming from Minneapolis. Carly taking an early flight from New York. Me flying in from Indianapolis. Mom had scheduled the whole thing very carefully. Our arrival times coincided—no easy feat, a task three months in the making. This was a trip of tasks, actually, secret and otherwise. Mom said she needed me to perform certain odd jobs, like being a weight to balance the scales. She needed me to balance things out. Things could get top-heavy if I wasn't there to balance things out. Besides, she implied, sisters need sisters—intermittently but intensely.

"Now, when they ask you if you'd like the window or the aisle seat, make sure you ask if there are any exit rows available," Mom said the day before we were due in Vegas. "Be really sweet to the airline counter people. They'll be pleasantly surprised by it. It's a good tack. Ask about the exit row sort of flippantly, like real off-hand. Act as if it doesn't matter."

"Does it matter?"

"Are you serious, Delilah?" I didn't answer and heard her sigh. "I thought by now you'd know the perks of asking. More leg room and if you get an aisle seat, you don't have to temporarily sit on anyone's lap in order to get to the bathroom."

"Are you telling Carly to do this, too?" I asked. There was a brief silence on the other end of the line.

"Carly doesn't like to ask things of people."

"All right," I said. "I'll ask about the exit row."

"Viva Las Vegas?"

"I guess," I said.

This was the point, and it had been well-established, if not explicitly stated, long before we arrived in Vegas: Mom had faith in the lights. She thought something about them would cure Carly. In Vegas, lights stayed on all night and they twinkled and the guys at the power grid made sure no corner in the city was left dark between the hours of seven p.m. and six a.m. Mom believed there was something salutary in this state of affairs. And who knew, maybe she was right.

As the plane flew low over the city, I imagined the 727 hovering over the tip of the Luxor Hotel's pyramid and lowering itself on to it. *Coitus altitudinus*, I thought, and laughed. That was not something Carly would have found amusing. She found sex obnoxious, and suspected all endorsements of it spoken in her presence were calculated attempts to undermine her.

When I got off the plane, I saw a bank of slot machines in the waiting area. I wandered towards the whirrs and whistles and looked for a fluffy-haired head with sunglasses resting atop a slightly crooked nose and hooked around two long-lobed ears, a pair of black stretch pants, a long black shirt, and a rhinestone-studded vest. Mom wasn't typically a participant of Midwest glam, but this was Vegas and she now felt she had an obligation to become an aging Solid Gold dancer. I spotted her at a slot machine near a window and she waved me over with her quarter cup. Success! She was even wearing dangly earrings made from tiny dice. She got up and I embraced her ferociously. I treasure this ability to honestly hug my mother. Sometimes only one or two people in a family have the gift.

"I'm already winning," Mom said and jangled the five quarters in her cup.

"Where's your suitcase?" I asked. She picked up a black bag bulging with clothes.

"This is it," she said. "I'm travelin' light." She lowered her voice. "I took the liberty of picking out some clothes for Carly during the spring clearance sales at the mall." I cringed. When my mother took the liberty of picking out outfits for Carly, my sister usually ended up with a collection of cruise-wear with elastic waistbands and dresses that looked like oversized tea cozies. It was as if my mother had made a blood pact with a Talbot's saleswoman, swearing to pick only the most ill fitting, highest-waisted outfits in the shop. I, being the younger sister and aware of the delicacy with which someone else's "style" had to be handled by the person who thought it substandard, did not allow my mother this kind of license. I knew where to draw the line. For Carly, style was not so high on the list of priorities. No one in the family actually knew what was on the list. That was part of the problem.

"Where is Carly?" I asked. Before my mother could answer, I spotted her myself. She was sitting in some other airline's waiting area down three gates. I dropped my bags at Mom's feet and ran down the hall. As I was running towards my older sister, I thought about how I wanted to appear as I approached. I wanted to look excited to see her—so excited that I could not bear to walk slowly. I wanted her to think she was a person worth running for. And I wanted to come off very casual and oblivious to any external sign of her old, inexhaustible grief. But she'd see through it and resent me for the performance. Like a trisected angle, Carly is impossible; like a scalar, she has a magnitude but no direction; like a proof, she is fixed.

"Carly is traveling tonight on a plane," I sang. "I can see her red asslights, heading for Spay-a-a-ane. I can see Carly mooning goodbye…" Carly had turned to look at me only when I said asslights instead of tail lights. She cannot ignore verbal inaccuracies.

"Hi Deebo," she said. No one in my family had used my nickname since I was five. "What's new?"

"Oh will you get off your asslights and give me a hug?" Carly carefully took off her messenger bag,

which she'd slung across her chest. She placed it on the seat next to her and smoothed the top of it with her open palm, making sure all the zippers were laying flat. I heard her left knee crack as she stood up.

"Good to see you, Deebo," she said as she slapped my back like a grateful quarterback to his receiver. "Truly. You look great." I held on to Carly very tight, pulling her so close to me that my breasts hurt from the pressure.

"Mom's waiting," I said. "She's already winning."

"So I hear," Carly said as she put her messenger bag over her shoulder. I noticed she'd also brought along Dad's old leather satchel.

"What's in Dad's purse?" I asked as we walked back towards the Delta gate where Mom was playing slots.

"Comfort," Carly said, making an uncharacteristically unconvincing attempt at sarcasm. "How're classes?"

"Good."

"Taming the numbers?" she asked. She was being good-natured so I didn't want to argue with her, but I'd told her before that the idea of taming numbers was heretical. Numbers could not be broken like a wild horse; if you found them and then halfway understood them, you were never left unawed again.

"Yup," I said. "Me and numeros are getting on real well."

Carly was terrified of math, even though we all agreed long ago—on dubious evidence—that she was the smartest one in the family. Her intelligence always struck me, though, because for a long time I was fooled into believing she did not need structure or the promise of logic. That wasn't true, of course. She needed tangibles desperately. She needed to feel the texture of life, like a threadbare blanket between her fingers. She thought she had it. Carly sped through school, graduating from high school two years early, finishing college by the age of 19, receiving her Master's degree in Art History by the time she was 22. In her eyes, you saw where every fact she'd learned had ended up and how they coexisted there with a few carefully selected premises that she allowed to float. But it was as if she had a miniature set of scales where she weighed proofs against hypotheses. Back then, if you knew Carly, you thought she preferred to have things unsettled—open, possible, malleable. But the day her scales tipped in favor of all the unknowable things in life was the day that her life fell apart. I couldn't understand it; weren't all of our scales tipped towards chaos from the start? Wasn't life just an endless attempt to ignore the scales? Otherwise you spent your whole miserable life trying to balance them out again, and any fool knew you never would.

Being the frugal old bird she is, Mom insisted upon the shuttle service from the airport. Our hotel was the last on the strip—or was at the time—and it took an hour and a half to get to The Venetian. The Venetian was an extravagant, expensive resort, but Mom had been comp'ed for some reason. She liked to put our father's—ex-father—annual income on her credit card applications, and as a result, often made platinum status immediately.

"We need to hit T.I.," I said as we passed Treasure Island with its playground full of pyrotechnics, ships sinking and rising from a green lagoon while underpaid pirates shivered their timbers.

"Fodor's says that Treasure Island is a little on the shabby side these days" Mom said. "Too much Orange Fanta and not enough Sinatra." Mom was often making these inscrutable comments, which she usually claimed to have lifted whole from reliable printed sources. From the window of the bus, the Vegas strip looked as if it were underwater, blinking behind the waves of heat rising from the street.

"It's like these hotels aren't built but were unearthed instead," Carly said. "It's like a whole city of hotels was buried in some sandstorm a long time ago and are being discovered and excavated on a daily basis." I turned and looked at Carly. Her eyes were closed. She seemed to see worlds on the inside of her eyelids and every once in a while, if she felt so moved, she would narrate them for you as if she were Richard Attenborough.

Mom dug through her bag nervously and I noticed that her cheeks had grown quite pink. When I hissed to get her attention, she turned to look at me and I saw myself reflected in her giant sunglasses. She gestured towards her vast, yawning purse and I peered inside. Clenched between her index and middle finger was a tiny bottle of vodka she'd scored on the airplane, and between her middle finger and her ring finger was another one. She looked to see how I'd react and I saw in her sunglasses that I hadn't managed to smile.

When we finally arrived at The Venetian, Mom assessed it with the impassive eye of a federal highway surveyor.

'They can build anything," she said. The Venetian was a colossal replica of an Italian palace. It was exquisite, as many of the new Las Vegas hotels were. I felt wary of what I realized was burgeoning admiration. If it had just been Mom and me, I would have blurted out that Vegas was spectacularly beautiful. But it wasn't just Mom and me. Carly was here, too. She always said something withering to the most innocent of my notions, and even though I responded with a smart remark that I hoped was just as withering, I always lost. I braved it anyway.

"I think it's really pretty," I said. "It looks exactly like an Italian palazzo." I waited for the sigh, and it arrived promptly.

"On first glance, a lot of things seem authentic, Deebo," Carly said. "I bet it will take about fourteen seconds before you realize that everything in Vegas is hollow." She looked at me and her eyes mapped every inch of my face in an instant. "Maybe it'll take you a full minute. You're idealistic like that."

We all walked into The Venetian in silence. I hated that Mom never stuck up for me. Carly terrified her, it was true, but her cowardice could be as damaging as Carly's belligerence. What was Carly suggesting? That I'd idealized Las Vegas, a giant, steel and plaster ideal disguised as a city? She was wrong. I don't idealize. I ascertain.

"Don't call me Deebo," I said to Carly as Mom was checking in across the lobby.

"Fine," Carly said.

"I'm serious, Carly."

"Fine."

I knew Mom had told me to be nice to Carly, but there were a few things that I knew I didn't have to stand for. Deebo was one of them. It didn't seem like much to ask. For years, I'd had to tiptoe around Carly. They said she couldn't help it, that she was born without her "emotional skin". Everything burned. There could be no perspective. Everything hurt, and if it didn't, she made it hurt. I guess I was lucky. I had only to observe, not feel. But in the ultra-sensitized environment of our home during those early years, I was the dumping ground for everything they tried to keep out of Carly's life. Couldn't I be unreasonable, too?

I looked at The Venetian's vaulted ceilings. There was a fresco stretched from one end of the lobby to the other. I listened to the tip tap of heels walking across the marble floor. I touched one of the pillars. Felt like real stone. I began believing in it. It seemed imperative that I believe in it.

"It's real," a voice said while I was craning to look at the fresco on the ceiling. "They had guys in here for three weeks. There were, like, thirty of them on scaffolding. They ate their lunches up there, too." The bellboy laughed. "Once a slimy-ass tomato slice fell on top of my fucking hat." He turned and looked at me quickly, then looked around us to see if anyone had overheard. "Oops, sorry."

"That's interesting information," I said. "Thank you."

"Whatever. Just thought you'd like to know. It's not some kind of press-on fresco up there."

"See?" I said to Carly when the bellboy had left. She shrugged.

"Don't you think it's just about the most depressing thing in the world to think of millions of dollars being spent and thirty guys spending their lunch hours on a scaffold in order to replicate a great work of art? They're not even creating; they're just copying. Congrats guys." Now I shrugged. "That's what their families are gonna say when they finally croak, Deebo: 'What a guy, he worked on the replica Michelangelo fresco at The Venetian in Vegas.' And probably by that time this place will have gone under like the house in Poltergeist."

"I think it's pretty," I said, hoping to sound defiant and to look pokerfaced.

"If that was my greatest claim to fame, I'd kill myself," Carly said.

"What's your claim to fame, Carly?" I said sweetly.

"I have no aspirations to greatness."

"Just delusions of grandeur."

"Girls?" Mom said as she walked over with the room cards. She was wearing her purse and her carry-on bag strapped across her chest so that she looked like a commando wearing rounds of ammunition. "Are we having fun yet?" She handed Carly a room card. "One for you," she said. "And one for me."

"What about me?" I asked.

"Two peas in a pod don't need separate room cards."

Carly turned around and began walking towards the elevators. Mom turned towards me, her face marred by worry and a deep frown.

"Oops," she said.

Carly didn't want to join Mom and me on our reconnaissance trip to the Strip. I started to protest, but Mom put her thumb in my back and I stopped.

"Why don't you just lie down here in the room," she said to Carly. "I'll get a cool cloth and you can put it over your eyes. We'll be back in a couple hours." Carly nodded and disappeared into the bathroom. When she came back out, she was wearing only a ratty old t-shirt and underwear which had three holes on the left buttock, evenly spaced apart, as if three people had calmly extinguished their cigarettes on her ass. Carly crawled into bed and Mom took an impossibly white washcloth from the ice bucket where she'd placed it for a few minutes, and laid it slowly over Carly's eyes. Carly sucked in her breath quickly, shocked by the cold. I saw her body tense and then relax.

It was two minutes before twelve and outside the sun was burning. With the lights off, I was able to see the sad details of old casinos—details that are obscured at night by the gaudy glare of neon. Sparkling lights at midnight are yellow bulbs at dawn. Vegas at night seems wet, somehow; but in the daytime, the city looks like what it is—a desert. It transforms into something dry and cracked.

"Impressed, no?" Mom asked, now that we were safe from Carly.

"Much," I said. "But I have to say, I think I'm going to like Vegas better at night and, uh, inside."

Mom didn't say anything. We walked towards the Aladdin hotel complex.

"She just needs some time to get acclimated," Mom said suddenly. "I think she'll perk up later tonight."

"I think so," I said. We walked a little ways. Heat did not make the air heavy here the way it did in Indiana. It was dry and the inside of my nostrils had begun shedding flakes of dried mucus. Mom seemed lighter, somehow brighter. She'd even pushed her sunglasses on top of her head, despite the fact that it was so bright outside that even I, with my black-brown eyes, was squinting. She wanted to see things as they were, it seemed, and she wasn't afraid now to show her face.

"Mom?"

"What?"

"How come you still act so scared around Carly?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Mom."

"I like you, Delilah," Mom said, and that was the end of the conversation. As we passed casino after casino, I could see my mother peering into each door thrown open, with placards promising buffets and $1.99 steaks and loose slots.

"Why don't we slip into one of 'em?" I said.

It was as if Mom had been waiting for me to offer. She had been jonesing for the slots for a couple hours now, ever since we left the airport. I'd seen how casinos affect my mother. Back home, she hit Mystic Lake casino at least once a month. Barely won anything, of course, but once she won a thousand bucks on a Wheel of Fortune slot and ever since has offered it as justification for further slot exploration.

Carly accompanied Mom to Mystic Lake once. This was back when Carly had eyes that seemed as clear as glass and when she did not walk with the invisible cross strapped to her back. When they came back, Carly told me that immediately upon their arrival at the Indian casino, Mom had begun practicing casino metaphysics and had dragged Carly into that tunnel of space and time that turns a minute into a decade, a quarter into your child's college tuition and back again. Carly's verdict on Mom those days was that she was amusing. I even remember seeing Carly accept a hug from Mom during that time.

Mom and I stopped in front of a non-descript street-side casino and I ran down the list of games.

"What's your pleasure, Mom? They got video poker, double-deck blackjack, single zero Roulette, Pai Gow Poker, Keno, Caribbean Stud, and the old standby: slots."

"Slots," Mom said. "I like it simple." Mom won five bucks and the quarters came clattering into the aluminum tray.

"Mom?"

"Hmm?"

"What's the plan, exactly?"

"Have fun, relax, do the Vegas thing. Be with my girls."

"Seriously."

"I am being serious."

In my family, your affection could not be split across the equation. Since Mom liked me, it seemed she couldn't like Carly. Carly made it easy for her not to.

Carly can pollute a room within minutes. Maybe that's not true. Maybe she just pollutes me. I love her so much. This is something I do not say out loud very often because we have a long history of hating each other, a history that was recently interrupted by distance. We must keep up appearances. I can't do battle with Carly because she can easily ruin me. Sometimes I think of my life as one long reconstruction, with Carly my own personal General Sherman. Maybe it's not fair of me to say this of her; she doesn't do it on purpose. The long shadow cast by a talented person is a myth; when you've lived your whole life standing hip to hip with someone who used to shine as brightly as Carly once did, you are left with no shadow in which to hide. But the difference is that while she was illuminated, I was revealed. Carly is a vessel of continuous and shocking talent. A painter. A dancer. A photographer. A pianist. An athlete. I've told her before how lucky she is to be so gifted and most of the time she didn't respond to what she imagined was a meaningless, calculated compliment but once she did by saying: "I'm desperate."

"The term 'loose slots' is really disgusting, if you think about it," I offered as I watched Carly slowly swing her legs off the bed and scoot to the edge. She held her head in her hands for a few moments.

"It's a disgusting term even if you don't think about it," she said. I pulled the curtains open. "Loose is rarely a positive adjective. It conjures up all sorts of horrible images."

I walked over to the window. In Las Vegas, you know night has come when the McDonald's signs come to life, glittering and blinking. The shadows cast by giant hotels shrink back into the corners. Nighttime here is a battle of electrical power and slot payouts.

Mom came out of the bathroom with the happy face lacquered on for Carly's benefit.

"Let the festivities begin," she said, her voice pinched and scared. I noticed these things about Mom, because I'm a good friend of hers. I don't know if Carly can tell when Mom's voice is pinched and scared. Carly picked some sleep out of her eyes.

"Would you like to peruse the selections I made for you?" Mom asked. "All of these are clearance items, which you will find hard to believe once you see them." Carly stood up and stretched. I could see her black pubic hair through her undies, and some stray ones on the wrinkle where her thigh met her privates. I looked away. The old Carly would never have let me see that.

"Alright," she said. "Let's see 'em." Mom pulled out a neatly folded brown dress that, when held up to Carly's shoulders, fell heavily across the rest of Carly's body like a potato sack.

"That one strikes me as a little on the 'former nun turned schoolteacher' side," I said. Mom frowned at me.

"It's very flattering."

"I guess for a buck ninety-seven it has to look flattering," Carly said, and showed me the price tag, which had several red slashes through several marked-down prices.

"It was originally twenty-five dollars," my mother said, with a little hurt in her voice.

"She loves it, Ma," I said. Carly flashed Mom an exaggerated smile and disappeared into the bathroom with the potato sack folded across her forearm. When she came out, she was wearing the potato sack and had no makeup on. I grabbed her chin and she flinched at the physical contact and drew her lips into a tight, perfect line. I dabbed some of my lipstick on her parched lips and flakes of her lip skin stuck to the lipstick. I took my pot of rouge and rubbed a little into her cheeks. "Your eyes really should be played up," I said. "You've got really nice eyes, Carly."

"I've always said, if she pulls her hair away from her face, Grace Kelly appears," Mom said, regurgitating the same mixed compliment she's been paying Carly for years.

"Grace Kelly in drag, maybe," Carly said, and Mom threw her hands up.

"You try for twenty-six years to convince a daughter of her beauty—"

"And all you get back is the same stale comeback," I said.

"Well maybe if it wasn't the same insincere compliment every time," Carly said. Mom and I exchanged a meaningful look, something I knew Carly hated. It was a reminder that not that much had changed.

"Normally you should not leave the house without at least a little mascara," I said. "But we're late and you don't give a shit, so let's go." Carly actually smiled at me when I said that, and for just that instant, I believed that her smile was the algorithm for some formerly unsolvable problem.

When Carly was around nine or ten, Mom told her that she was so difficult that no one enjoyed being around her. Her exact words were: "No wonder nobody likes you, Carly. Even your own father wouldn't take you with him, and you're the only one who wanted to join him." I remember how Carly had fallen silent when Mom said that. Through the years, Carly would offer this exchange as justification for her depression and her hatred of our mother, but no one ever believed the story. A mother would never have said such a thing, people told Carly. Maybe that's just how it sounded to Carly—or maybe the voice that spoke such cruel words was the one inside her own head. But I knew Carly was telling the truth.

It was no secret in our family that Mom had begged Dad to take custody of Carly after the divorce. Carly had always been a serious, unusually pensive child. She adored our father, to the point where she sprayed her pillowcase with Old Spice every night and wore his underwear as part of her bedtime getup. Dad had other things to do, though, and then later, another woman's children to raise.

When Dad left, both Carly and I had to make a decision. I chose to stay sane by surrounding myself with solutions. Mathematics is a comfort. Once I broke through the membrane that separated math homework from the vast landscape I've been exploring ever since, I was fine. For me—for all of us who take solace in numbers—mathematical objects are living things that we chase like children running after fireflies.

Carly needed room to hope. The answer to the question she asked me every night—when do you think Dad is coming back for me?—was simple. Never. Ambiguity was, back then, her way of coping. That was the difference between us. I fell asleep thinking of the way different sorts of numbers were a lot like the people in my family: irrational, perfect, surreal, and complex. Carly murmured Psalm 23 over and over again until she fell asleep. She didn't believe in the shepherd or the valley, but there were crevices in those words in which to hide even if you couldn't quite believe the words themselves were real.

We got off the bus at Fremont Street with the rest of the tourists. Lurking on the corner of Fremont and the Boulevard was architorture and $10 million dollar holes. Fremont was canopied by millions of bulbs. The old cowboy waved mechanically, sadly. Mom was immediately drawn to the window of a Wal-Mart by showgirl Barbies displayed in the window. Once inside, she ordered me to take a picture. On further inspiration she arranged two of the dolls, their feathers and sequins meshing, and asked for another picture.

"Delilah and Carly: the sister Rockettes!" she exclaimed. Mom placed one of the dolls in Carly's hand.

"Do you want one, Carly? I'll buy one for you. She looks just like you." The old Carly might have made a joke here or she might have thrown the

Barbie across the room or at Mom's chest, but now she just stood there, transfixed by the doll. She smiled slightly, but I could see the two apostrophe-shaped wrinkles just above each of her eyebrows had appeared. I took the Barbie from her hands and placed it back in its display.

"I think it's time to donate some money to the good people of Vegas," I said. "Mom?"

"Let the festivities begin," she said.

"They *have* begun," I murmured. Mom watched Carly peruse the souvenir shot glasses. Suddenly, she yanked me behind the shelves of plastic snowglobes featuring each of the Strip's hotels in a tiny, contained blizzard. Mom reached into her purse and pulled out her bottle of Xanax. She took one pill out and placed it in the palm of her hand. She placed her thumbnail in the vertical indentation of the tiny pill and cut it in half. She picked one half up and pulled her bottle of water out of her purse. She grabbed my hand and placed the half-pill in it. I watched her pop the other half in her mouth and take a swig of water.

"Hold that for me," she said.

"Why?"

"I'm trying to cut back."

"Why do you even need it?"

"It takes the edge off," she said as she put her sunglasses back on.

"I like my edge," I said. Mom frowned at me, and looked towards Carly.

"We've got too many edges as it is."

"How can you cut a cake into eight pieces with three movements?" I asked Carly as the cab spirited us towards Caesar's Palace.

"Is this a question or a riddle?" Carly asked.

"I don't know," I said.

"Well, do you know the answer or don't you?"

"I do know the answer."

"Then it's a riddle, and I don't traffic in riddles."

"It's not a riddle. It's a problem. Has a solution."

"Whatever," Carly said.

"Girls," Mom said. "Let's make this a pleasant trip. Just relax and enjoy yourself and each other. Mom's picking up the tab. Mom's taking care of everything. All you have to do sit back and look pretty."

At the Palace, women in mini togas and beehived ponytails were serving sidecars to old women who sat transfixed at quarter slots, their palms tarnished black from stacks of half-clad silver. We walked toward the Forum Shops, passing Cleopatra's Barge, artificial mist rising off the inch of water that surrounded the vessel.

I could tell Carly was polluting, because suddenly the landscape of the casino, with its pillars and pits, its dull-faced gamblers and its duller-faced dealers, seemed to me to exude despondency. I began trying to pinpoint causes and in that effort, everything that I'd seen in the last few hours became a reason: The short Mexican men who stood in front of the casinos, handing out pornographic fliers for escort services—handing them to me, to my mother, but never to Carly. The silence of a Keno room, like a graveyard in the middle of an amusement park. Beaten men and women waiting for numbers to be revealed in a painfully sluggish version of Bingo and all around their Keno space are dead cigarettes. The intricate and wasteful water battles between the grand hotels—the theater of war.

Just as I was falling into the pit, Carly was being raised from the dead by a friendly slot machine. Mom and Carly had found two open Wheel of Fortune slots next to each other and were feeding twenties into the machines.

"Wheel. Of. Fortune," the machine chanted, giving the impression that a very large studio audience was cheering them on.

"Yes!' Mom shouted. "I got a free spin!" She placed her hand above an illuminated button on the machine and waited for the sound of a timer ticking down. Once it did, she waited about three seconds, then slammed her hand down on the button. The tiny wheel of fortune to begin spinning in the console above her. Carly and I leaned forward, holding our breath. The wheel slowed and for a moment we thought it was going to stop on 1000, then 250, then 5000, then 100. It stopped on 50.

"Score!" Carly said. "Still in the black." Mom patted Carly's forearm and Carly allowed her. "I love the spin."

"We love the spin," Mom said to me. "That's the only reason to play this game. The spin."

"You never know what you're going to get," Carly said. She tugged on her watch, squinting at it, and then taking it off and holding it out towards me. "Hold on to that, will you?" she said to me. "It pinches." As I took the watch from my sister, I saw, briefly, the scar it covered. I put the watch on my wrist.

"A watch never shows the time absolutely accurately," I once said to Carly. "So what's the point of wearing one?"

"You get caught up in the details, Delilah," Carly said.

Let me ask you this," I said. "Do you think a watch that never shows the right time is better than wearing a broken watch?"

"What?"

"Well, a watch that's stopped will at least show the correct time twice a day. One that's off by a few minutes will never show the right time. Which would you prefer?"

"Is the kind of question in which someone wins and someone loses?"

"It's just a question, dude. I'm asking out of curiosity," I said.

"I think everyone in the world would prefer to have a watch that's off by just a few minutes,

because how in the hell are you supposed to know when those two times a day are when the watch is showing the right time. At least with a watch that's just a little off, you can estimate."

"A ha," I said.

"A ha, what?" Carly said.

"You're willing to leave it at a guess."

"Point?" she asked.

"I just like to be reminded that we make do."

Ancient Japanese mathematicians inscribed their discoveries on tablets. They'd hang the tablets in the temples to honor their gods. The solutions were holy. Maybe heaven is furnished with answers and solutions and theorems and maybe they don't hang from rafters and trees and maybe they're not even inscribed on tablets but instead are written on the inside of our minds. In order to believe in God—the sublime, amused mathematician—I have to believe that we will be given all answers to all the questions that torture us. I'm tormented by what I don't know and what I can never know, but I know I'm not the only one who walks around pretending that I'm unaware there are a trillion unproven theorems. Each one is a needle stuck in my body and I can neither pull them out nor push them all the way in so they are buried in my flesh. I've made my life livable by believing that life is compact, as if the whole of existence could fit inside the space of a simple equilateral triangle. Carly can't do that. That's why she's not right. It's not a matter of trivial questions, like why Dad left, and why she feels like shit all the time. It's just one question for Carly, a question I've never asked myself because I was born with the answer, forever unspoken. But Carly is one of those desperate people now who have posed the question to themselves, who have presented themselves with the problem, and she is too terrified to know the answer to the question: Why has she allowed herself to continue living? Some of us never have to ask, but some never stop asking.

The next morning, Mom pulled me aside as Carly was showering and said that she thought getting out of Vegas for the day might be good. The lights weren't helping. Mom had gone downstairs that morning and had the concierge rent us a car. Hoover Dam was about forty-five minutes away. I told Mom I remembered our 1985 trip to the dust of non-Vegas Nevada when Dad helped me climb a butte and Carly and I applauded wildly when a pack of wild horses crossed the highway in a flash of horseflesh, horsepower. Mom said she didn't recall.

Carly looked very small under the hotel blanket she'd taken along. Slowly the steel and glass fell behind and the road stretched out before us like a comet. It carried us out of the Basin and into the red hills of clay and cacti. Hoover Dam was buttes and wind-whipped valleys and peaks, criss-crossed by electrical poles.

"Herbert, how could you?" I said to Mom as we filed into the gift shop with the rest of the tourists.

"No rugged individualism here, right?" Carly said.

"Huh?" I said.

"Rugged individualism?"

"Point?"

"That was sort of Hoover's motto."

"Oh."

Mom waited semi-patiently for us to get our fill of the Dam for ten minutes. She could only take so much natural beauty; she liked seeing Vegas light up casino by casino at evenfall.

"I'll wait for you girls in the car," she said.

Carly walked over to an empty corner of the viewing platform. I followed her. We stood there, looking into the cement pit.

"What's the answer?" Carly asked.

"To what?"

"The cake thing. It's impossible. It's not possible."

"Yes it is," I said. Carly lifted her jacket above her butt and pulled a piece of folded paper out of the right back pocket of her jeans. I watched as she unfolded it. It was full of circles and rectangles with slashes through them. All of them were flat, one-dimensional geometric shapes, and her attempts to solve the problem became increasingly messy, the pen strokes darker and fiercer the further down the page she'd gone. I took the paper from her and we walked over to one of the plaques set up near the fence that described the construction of Hoover Dam.

"Look," I said, as I drew a square. I made it three dimensional, then made an X across the top of the cake. "Now look, watch what I do." I drew a thick line through the middle of the square, as if I were slicing off the top of the cake. "The first two cuts sliced through the entire cake. Then I slice through the middle of the cake, horizontally like this, and now there are four piece on the top of the cake and four pieces from the bottom." I paused. "Get it?"

"Who cuts a cake like that?"

"That's not the point," I said, handing the sheet of paper back to Carly. She crumpled it up and pushed it through a chink in the fence. I watched it drop into the dam.

"Do you do that on purpose?" she asked.

"Do I do what?"

"Ask me inane questions like that? To be a complete ass?" She hooked her fingers through the chain link fence that had been erected to keep people from falling into the dam.

"It's just for fun," I said. Carly didn't respond. To me these questions counted for something. I asked them of her because I thought they might help. These questions had answers.

Carly walked over towards the other side of the viewing platform, then turned around and walked

back towards me, stopping just an inch away from my face.

"Now I've got one for you, baby genius. There is something the dead eat, but if the living eat it, they die," she said. The beauty of her eyes startled me. I had always seen them when they were a stormy deep blue, but now they were light gray, two dismal, misty seas. I hesitated for a moment.

"Something equals nothing," I said, very evenly. Immediately, Carly's eyes filled with tears and she turned away from me. I put my arm around her and led her to the car, where Mom was sitting with her sunglasses on. She honked the horn twice and waved, thinking we couldn't spot her. And it was true; in the wavy heat hovering over the Hoover Dam parking lot, she might have been a mirage.

# Two Painters

Whit Frazier

Magus first discovered the work of Claude Monet when he was seven years old. His mother and father took him to New York City for the weekend, and they went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Magus was not the type of child who liked museums. He liked daydreaming, and reading books and running around the playground by himself. The whole time they were there he complained and complained. Art was boring, he said. Or, why can't I touch anything, or why is everyone so quiet, or can we go get something to eat now, or when do we go to the Broadway Show? This all changed when they got to the top floor of the museum. There was a special exhibition on Monet. Magus couldn't take his eyes off of the paintings. When his parents told him come on, it was time to go, he hollered, and the security guards had to ask them to leave.

Magus grew up in Cleveland, Ohio. In his early teens he was a quiet young man who liked to draw and paint with a little oil set his father bought him for his thirteenth birthday. He had a stack of art books he liked to collect. Some were presents, some he'd shoplifted, some he'd taken from the library. He'd go through them and try to recreate the works of famous artists. It was a hobby, but it was also something more. Magus dreamed of one day being able to recreate the entire work of Claude Monet to such a degree that it would be impossible to tell the difference between an original Monet and a Magus. He didn't start with Monet. Monet was too complicated. He decided he would work his way up from the artists in his books, and then he would start all over again with the real works, by traveling all over the world and visiting museums. When he was fifteen he decided that this was to be his life's work.

Life in Cleveland was quiet for Magus. There were all the punk rock kids that hung out at his school, and then all the punk rock kids that hung out downtown, and then all the other kids his own age, but he never related to any of them, and whenever he talked to girls, he never knew what to say. Kids made fun of him, but Magus didn't mind. He didn't even pay it any attention. He would look at girls and wonder how Vermeer would have painted them. He would look at the guys and think of how awkward and underdeveloped and immature they looked in comparison to those portraits painted by the greats. But mostly, he didn't pay them any attention at all. And painting was only his passion insomuch that Monet happened to be a painter.

When Magus graduated from high school he was a socially underdeveloped young man, with no friends and few interests outside of painting reproductions. His parents had been worried about him for a long time, but he didn't care. The summer before he went to MassArt, a smallish art school in Boston, they sent him once a week to a therapist. The therapist decided he was just another ordinary young man, like anyone else, just a little shy. It didn't reassure his parents, but Magus said why keep spending money to hear the same verdict over and over? He was anxious to get away from home.

Most of the students at MassArt weren't able to relate to Magus. He would talk to a few students now and then before, during and after class, but then he would retreat to his dormitory and spend all evening reproducing paintings. He spent a lot of time at the Museum of Fine Arts. He spent a lot of time sketching and looking and going home to paint. He learned to appreciate detail in a way he never had before. There were details in the way the paint wrinkled on the canvas, and the texture of the paint and the heaviness or lightness of the brushstroke, and to pull off a perfect representation, Magus had to remember every detail, go home and recreate those details. To Magus it was the most challenging and wonderful time of his life. His abilities as a painter increased. The other students were often jealous and in awe of what Magus could do, but they'd also make fun of him. *Magus can only paint things other people have painted already,* they'd say. *That's not art, and Magus, you're no artist.*

This kind of talk never bothered Magus, because he'd never considered himself to be anything, let alone an artist. He simply had a goal in life, and he was determined to reach it. By his second year in art school he was able to paint Monet reproductions that could startle even the most advanced Impressionist Painting teachers at his school. They urged him to branch out and paint his own material. *Magus, you can't let a talent as large as yours go to waste on reproductions.* Magus had no idea what they were talking about. After all, he painted what he wanted to paint, and they painted what they wanted to paint, and he never gave them a hard time about what they wanted to paint. Magus told them, *I have never cared about painting. Just Monet.*

Magus was asked to leave MassArt during his junior year. It was a miracle he even made it that far, because he rarely did any of the assigned

projects. It was a sad day for everyone who knew about Magus and how well he painted. Several of the teachers petitioned against it, and said the school was making a big mistake turning away such a large talent. This kid would be The Next Big Thing one day, and how would MassArt explain expelling him over one little eccentricity of his? The administration said it wasn't fair to the other students. Magus went back home to his mother and father in Cleveland.

His mother and father were very unhappy with him. They hadn't liked the idea of him going to Art School to begin with, but now that he'd gotten himself expelled from Art School they were furious. They knew he was a talented and dedicated painter. He couldn't just follow directions every once and a while for his parents' sake, who had put down so much money for his education? Being back at home, and harassed by his parents and away from all the culture he'd been exposed to got Magus depressed. He started skipping meals, sitting in his room painting painting after painting of paintings in the series of Monet's Rouen Cathedral. He rarely spoke with anyone. All he could think about was moving out again to a city full of museums where he could live in a little room and reproduce Monet. One day he got up and left home and kept walking.

Magus hitchhiked and walked all the way to New York City. He didn't have any money and he didn't have anywhere to stay. It was just turning spring, so things weren't so bad. He slept outside on church steps, and spent his days at the museum. The only problem was that he didn't have any money or a private room, so it was impossible for him to paint. He sketched all day long. He'd sit at the quiet little benches in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and sketch painting after painting until they kicked him out. But sketching wasn't enough for Magus. He needed to be working.

He found a decent job at an art supplies store downtown. He'd been looking to work in an art supplies store so that he could get a discount on items he needed to buy later on, once he was making money. This allowed him to get a small room out in Brooklyn, and Magus was the happiest he'd been since his Art School days. He still rarely talked to anyone, even the people he worked with, but they liked him all the same because he did his job well and never caused any kind of trouble. A lot of the other employees were artists and would come in drunk or high or both sometimes, but that was never an issue with Magus.

Years passed, and Magus kept on at the same job. He'd work all day, then go home and paint. On the weekends he'd spend the day at the museum. Then he'd go home and paint. The more he saw of the museums the better his powers of memorization became. He'd stare at a painting for hours on end, and then go home and be able to recreate it flawlessly. After a while, he became assistant manager at his job, and he set up a little space in the back of the store where he could work on his reproductions during his lunch hour. An art critic for the New York Times who moonlighted as an amateur painter happened to see one of them one day, and was impressed. He asked Magus if he could do a write-up on him, and Magus agreed because he needed the money, and he thought maybe he could sell a less than perfect reproduction or two for an extra dollar here and there if people had heard of his name.

The response was enormous. Before long newspapers and television stations and radio personalities were contacting him about his unique gift. In the end Magus decided it was more trouble than it was worth. But there was no turning back for him. By the age of thirty-three Magus was famous in the art world. His reproductions were going for enormous sums of money, and art critics were hailing the Reproduction as the next step in postmodern art theory. Articles called Magus the most important painter since Warhol and Basquiat, and everyone seemed to be clamoring to interview him, meet him, or invite him to some exclusive Soho engagement.

Magus continued with his reproductions. He was making enough money to enjoy all the luxury and time he needed to paint. A benefactor put him up in a posh Soho loft. He cut back on his hours at the art supplies shop. Women were always propositioning him. Magus had no interest in relationships. Something was starting to happen. He was making the breakthrough – he could feel it. He had a collection of Monet reproductions lined up carefully on his walls – painting after painting – and whatever he couldn't fit on the wall he'd put away somewhere. Each reproduction was an exact replica of the original. The Rouen Cathedral series – that was the problem. He'd mastered the water lilies, and he mastered the floating ice and he'd mastered – well, everything. Everything except for the cathedrals. There was

something in the color and texture of the paint that had eluded him for his entire life. How did Monet manage to make it look *just* that way? And then one morning, over a cup of coffee, staring out the window of his loft at an old cathedral down the street, it came to him.

The next year almost no one saw Magus, though he was more talked about than ever. Rumor was that he was working on his greatest achievement yet. The art community was in a frenetic buzz over what he was working on. Magus declined all interviews and made no public appearances for the whole year. Some people said he was dead. Most folks just thought he was the quintessential eccentric reclusive painter. MassArt dedicated a wing of their school to his name. Old professors fumed about how they never wanted to expel him from their fine establishment, but what could they do in the face of the powers that be? The anticipation surrounding Magus' newest work was overwhelming.

In the end Magus did finish his life's work. The night he completed it he slept like a dead man. In the morning when he looked at it, it surprised even him. He went straight to the Met and looked at the originals for comparison. There wasn't the slightest difference in texture, shape or color between what Monet had produced and what Magus had reproduced. On his way out of the museum reporters mobbed him. Had he finished his latest Masterpiece? Magus said, *they are just reproductions.* The crowd cheered, and the world felt like an illusion. Where were they? Were they back at his loft? Magus said: t*hey are hanging on the wall in the Metropolitan.* Then he went home and hanged himself.

# Mother
# By Carol Gavin

My mother flew past my window shortly after lunch. I was in a hurry to change my spaghetti splotched blouse. I didn't lower the blinds. Everyone in the neighborhood was out at McDonald's or stuffed behind desks eating out of paper bags. High school gym class trained me in flash changing. Leaving one article of clothing to pull on and adjust another was a transformation, not a process, a sparkle of skin, a fluttering of fabric, and that was it.

My mother flew past my window shortly after lunch while I was changing. Her arms were flapping, swimming through the air that swept her whiting hair up into a halo. I heard a whisper brush the windowpane but I didn't move to look. My mother flew past my window shortly after lunch when my back was turned. I know my mother flew past my window because when I went downstairs to check on her she was making tea. Her cheeks were red and she was beaming and buzzing around in the cupboards looking for sugar and teacups. She smelled like the wind and had a twig stuck in her hair. I told her she had a twig stuck in her hair and plucked it out for her. She said she wished shoulder blade tattoos of Monarch butterflies were as simply removed.

I left her in the kitchen and went back upstairs to grab my purse in case the light bulb above my license plate had burnt out and a cop stopped me. I didn't want to be nose to nose with a police officer without my license when my mother was in the car, taking notes of the scene to relate to her friends with the successful children.

My room smelled like spaghetti sauce. I worked the window open. My hand brushed the outside of the window and pieces of white yarn fell into my palm. Back downstairs, my mother was sitting at the table bathing her face in the steam rising from her tea. She was wearing the white sweater I had attempted to knit for her last birthday. She told me then that she was glad I wasn't perfect. That meant her work wasn't over and she'd have at least another fifteen years left, at least. I gave her a hug and before she could ask what the hell I was doing, and couldn't we just go to the goddamned funeral and get it over with, I noticed the shoulder of her sweater was torn. I told her that the shoulder of her sweater was torn and that she should go change it, because if Dad's ghost was hanging around the funeral watching people cry to make sure they were crying enough, he would be hurt that his wife couldn't even be bothered to wear clothes that weren't all torn up. She asked why I was so picky all of a sudden, he wouldn't care at all, he was used to her, but she'd find another better knitted sweater to wear anyway, just to make me happy.

As she pushed herself up from her tea, I asked her why she had flown past my window after lunch. She told me not to be silly, that apparently my psychiatrist was doing more harm than good, old ladies can't fly, and that if I've kept a tattoo from her all these years, I could be keeping anything and she just needed to make sure I was o.k.

# Exclusion

Brian Seabolt

Outside an enormous hotel feathers and bright white blossoms were falling and blowing against the windows and along the rugs which lay at the entrance. The security guard, usually posted there to hold the door and make conversation, was on this occasion absent. The few cars that passed moved slowly, as though the drivers wished to overhear as much as possible of a discussion between two female students who stood near the edge of the curb, no doubt unaware that just below their feet there was a drain into which debris spun and disappeared. An aging actor stood against the bricks, now close to tears because he believed that everything the students were saying—and, really, only one of them was speaking, though the other made it clear that she was waiting for her turn—was meant for him.

"You draw courage," the student said, "from the fact of your own presence, because you find yourself here now. But I was here yesterday and the day before, and you were nowhere around, and now no matter how assuredly you impose yourself it will be your absence that will win out. Your presence is counterfeit."

Worst of all, he had been here yesterday—he had been here every day, for however long he'd been coming, out of anticipation of just this kind of accusation. Two weeks ago he'd stayed for so long that the security guard had finally instructed him to leave. He didn't know what difference it made—in all the time he'd been coming he was certain no one had so much as glanced in his direction. But he had obeyed and gone away.

The student continued: "Every time you speak my obligation to repeat myself is doubled. I'm more susceptible to what prolongs these discussions than you are. Years ago, I admit, you had me fooled—your mistakes were charming to me, and your indecision resembled a faith which I envied. But as soon as I came to recognize that you were, in fact, imitating me I executed the about-face against which all of your complaints have hurled themselves ever since, like mice which have grown so fat during their excursions that they can no longer pass into their own crevices. Now they'll pose as rats, or as dogs, but no one will be fooled and they'll be destroyed or banished by morning."

These things would never make reliable memories, and this was what he wished to convey to the students, neither of whom seemed to find the conversation interesting. He longed to go home and stand at the window, listening for the whistle of the tea kettle, laying out the pages of the newspaper and allowing the day to roll to its conclusion. Even if he tore himself away now he would bring these unseemly circumstances with him, from which all the privacy in the world would refuse him insulation.

And by the same token if the students had been speaking to him there would have been little to say except that they resented their depiction—that none of the hostility embedded there was attributable to anything except his anguish, and they disbelieved in that. "Those are not my words," they would have said, "or if they are my words it's only because your stance, as dejected eaves-dropper, has confined me to filling a prescription. Even now I can't offer comfort—you couldn't accept comfort from me. Do you consider how long it will take to recover myself? Even if I ignore you I do so with the involuntary implication that I mean you harm, and I mean you no harm. I mean harm neither to you nor to myself. I too would prefer to be at home, eating and drinking and tailoring an existence which has—harmlessly—nothing to do with you. But I discover that I don't have a home to go to, unless you invent one for me."

So he emerged from the place where he had for so long been standing and the students became quiet and watched him as he approached. One of them took an abrupt step backwards as though he had reached out to caress her face. But his hands were, as always, at his sides.

He said, "Why won't you come back with me?—why do you pretend to be strangers? Every day I return to this hotel hoping that you won't be here, though in every case I know that if I wait long enough you'll come—both of you—and another layer will be added to a drama which none of us finds useful. Or, anyway, I don't. I can't use it; it's something that I'm committed to undergo—a penalty, I imagine, but I no longer know what my misdemeanor could have been. If you'll come back with me now we can discuss it—or else we can sit in a room together without discussing it, without discussing anything, and whatever needs to be revealed will reveal itself. It's something you could do out of kindness. I know that you're tired of revisiting the same crises—you must long ago have stopped believing your own words, and so have I, although neither of us has done very much toward learning how to put an end to them. If you like, you can look through my diaries and see yourselves depicted

there. It might be amusing to you, and it might be a valuable release to me."

By now the traffic had become heavy. At the intersection the lights were going red, yellow, and green, and there was the sound of horns. Until now the students had said nothing to the actor, but when one of them began to speak it was as though she may have been speaking, secretly, all the time he had been making his appeal.

"To me you sound like someone who has an appointment every morning at one hospital, where he's cured, and then every evening goes to a second hospital to be reinfected. Until this moment I only half knew you existed. I still don't know your name, and I don't want to know it. It's bad enough that you believe you know mine. No one ever says: 'I've given this person a name.' It's something, rather, which gets repeated so many times that it's finally believed."

In that instant the actor believed that the student's face had changed; wrinkles had formed beside her eyes and at the corners of her mouth. Suddenly she was not a girl but a woman, her eyes milder and the lids not so heavily distended. Even her hair had changed. It might be behind such a transformation that he would escape. He pretended to cough and turned, moving toward the traffic.

Late that night he warmed himself in front of a small fire which he'd made just outside of a construction site ensconced by a bright-orange rubber fence. He had thought for nearly an hour of making a fire and sitting, postponing the return to his apartment, and when he had, finally, begun to gather sticks, it had been with nearly crippling uncertainty. Now that the sticks were burning and he watched the shadows changing against the back of his hand he forgot that uncertainty and tried (because he was aware of the forgetting) to forget with it the hours he had spent outside the hotel. And, really, none of it had occurred as he remembered it, and he knew, and he was relieved. Had those students spoken to him—had they been there at all—he may have been condemned to create some part of himself that would remain there forever. As it was, he couldn't estimate how many nights he'd taken a room in the hotel, standing at the window until the earliest hours of the morning, gazing down as though he might catch a glimpse of himself on the sidewalk, or searching for complicity in the faces of those he was able to see, passing back and forth near the entrance. Sometimes a figure would move close enough to the building that he could no longer keep it in view, and there was some element of this which he wanted to keep. He had no intention of sleeping here—something would allow him to go home—but he would stay for a while and wait for the fire to begin to go out. When that time came he would scatter the wood with his foot and tiny orange lights would emerge from the ashes. They would shuttle toward the sky and vanish.

# Hotdog Double: A Confession of Small Encounters

Ijosé Benin

It is one of these sub-zero evenings. It is yet another lonely visit to the local repertoire cinema, and I walk alone, preoccupied with questions of moving ahead. Problems of inadequate subsistence, jobs and the plight of hot dog vendors are signs of 'things to come'. This I know. Each sign, as unforgiving as a grand aunt finger wagged sternly at my situation, unravel before me, that bleak picture of an unenviable future. For sometime now, and with perverse satisfaction, I have watch myself fall deeper still, into that deep throated vortex of dame Poverty and sire Neglect -as I grapple with abortive attempts to articulate, in one single work of fiction, the pointlessness of being. Existentialist, romantic or a mere fool, I often swing that (inept) swagger of the unpublished writer. Chronically running low on cash and spirit -and I mean at once both literal and transcendental notion of the word-- I am reminded, by an experience as banal as hunger, that I am no more than a chronically underemployed statistic; nor is the futility of such hackneyed position the least eased by claims of ‘writing a book’; claims I throw casually at any inquiring sort even as I cringe behind that shield of disdain and self-assurance. I am no Hercules and this shield is as perforated as that hero's lionskin is impenetrable. The warning signs of ‘things to come’, announced right from the start when I took that first step to complete a work of fiction -an odyssey of sorts, if you may-, have since evolved as a series of restless meanderings, which nightly sends me, dissatisfied and frantic, to portentous French noir in deserted repertory film houses. MARC BARBÉ est tré KILLER BON HOMME digging the belly buttons of vampiric French men with violent tempers.

My face braced doggedly against the wind, bleary eyes searching La Vie Nouvelle –that New Life promised at age so and so when a hugely agreeable uncle had swung me up and flung me happy giddy and said, as proud as a pappy, DESTINED FOR GREAT THINGS!

GREAT
THINGS soon come is the universal matter of grub and how to get it quick and cheap. What I need right now is some kinda speedy to speedy up the excruciating time between starved and actual fulfillment.

Turning instinctively away from a particularly bitter wind, I step right foot forward into the bitter wind, all set to understand hot dog vending. How does one become a hotdog vendor? How do I become a hotdog vendor? From this view and in this context of walking home on a severe evening, hotdog vending in winter seems just as deplorable as windy assaults on my frostbitten face. The question itself implies the circumstantially vulnerable, the tragic, the johnnyjustcome refugee. I know these indicators. I myself have used it to mark situations embarrassingly similar to mine. Year after year, bulbous human forms, recognizable as hot dog vendors, stand resolutely beside mute machines; each, human and machine, unwittingly expressed as unhurried registers of ongoing immigration. Draw closer, and that peculiar look of contempt with proud claims to a better life once lived in some recently ravaged land flashes at you from underneath the droned offer of service. Like an unexpected moment of shocking realism in comic horror--or that moment when a robed monsieur BARBÉ gnarls bloody murder and spits tooth--one is momentarily blinded by the sheer impotence of its message of loss. Or, for the actively indifferent, irritated at such unsolicited exposure to someone else's pain.

But the question remains: how does one-- how do I-- get a job like that? Ponder after ridiculous ponder. How does one find oneself a hot dog vending job? That is the question. A question as crucial to me in my disposition to dread the dreariness of jobs as my current inability to meet up with the coming month's rent, a whopping 80% of earnings on full time shifts. Shifts neither available nor expected of me. An employer's lack of interest in my services fills me with little wonder. Where do they get hooked up, these thickly insulated vendors? What is the point of their insulated status ... do they have any ... does it ensure safety from, to put it the way that rally poster did, the on-going criminality of existence charged against citizens by an increasingly corporate government? Do they answer ultimately to some supervisor? Can I get hooked up? These are strategic questions and one would think that I want nothing more than a vending job. However, underneath it all, and like the shameful knowledge of private secretions, I'm aware that, in some sort of reverse-subversion of chronically undermining one's self, I want nothing more than to find that this too, this glorious life as a hot dog vendor, like everything else attempted, is unavailable to me. Failing, once dreadful, has become a sort of pride. It is easier to secretly mean to fail than to go boldly at, only to fail all the same. Hotdog vendors however, never fail. To start with, they got hooked up. Like familiar homeless people, the hotdog vendor braves yet another winter in the big open. Human and vending apparatus abominably bundled with the solemnity of those quite prepared to fence off indecisive bleat of New York's winter or, a more recent phenomenon, global riot police. More familiar with a sweltering West African climate, I am still baffled at how readily I grew accustomed to degrees much lower than those of the freezing compartment of a refrigerator -at least, until I too acquiesced to the pressure to dish out the obligatory complaints against winter's equally tedious bleat. Degrees much

lower than a freezer, regardless, are unlikely temperatures in which one jobs outdoors. Door to door canvassing in frenzied (if not frost bitten) efforts at fundraising in those mean February days years ago to help the cause of clean air now appear as fictional past. I have ridden bikes on bitingly cold winter days as if in bold defiance, stooped and freezing out of sheer necessity, swearing through clamped teeth as the sound of approaching cars screech down every shred of will. The hot dog vendor, however, as an entrepreneur, must sell hot dogs. Rain or shine, humidity or wind chills. Hot-dogging is a job. Jobbing it is. Jobbing: that peculiar mental sprain that robs each jobber of energy. Does a secretary work or is (s)he jobbing? Is my part time minimum wage job real work or is it merely killing time? Aren't most jobs about killing time? Is hot dog vending an enterprising venture or the only alternative for the unemployed recent immigrant? At what point in life does one decide to become a hot dog vendor? As any can guess, by now, I am mindlessly juggling thought after thought, ponder after ponderous; from the needless realism of movie just seen, the possibility of quick death for all jobs and jobbing, to the hope that a hot hog vendor would appear soon, and, like some masochistic auto-voyeur, I watch sly as my mind plunge plummet like Tuesday's exchange, weighed down slow with inane options.

Having somehow connected failure and weighty meanings in French cinema to the drab reality of jobs passing for work and the perennial nature of hot-dogging, I walk on. Man cannot live on macaroni and cheese: thou needeth meat; real meat will finish that manuscript and make a masterpiece of it.... meat alone will do.

Famished, I see ghosts of rising smoke, as visible and as stylized as in cartoons. They float upwards, towards me. I trace source of swirls to the hazy form of a hefty hotdog machine crowned with a bright red grill. The redness is almost translucent: the colour of pure throbbing heat. Rows of glistering skin-tight tubs hang over the grill like a levitating brotherhood of yum. I recognize the small party as succulent, well-stuffed sausages. It happens that I am being exposed to the precise moment when sausages swell, and grateful, I watch sly bursts of fresh juicy grease ooze through perfectly lined slits. A hundred sausages all in a row, slanted and quite contrary. Balls of fatted juicy roll down flaming red coals and a splatter of smothering sweet-smelling fat burns eagerly; in the background, crowds of people who appear to have been there all along, applaud the marvel as well as my unwritten book. Together, we all watch pungent swirls of mustard and roast meat rise and rise, joined happily by the burning sounds of slabs of moist fats on burning coals. Blurred though distinguishable, the corporeal form of the high priest, the hot dog vendor, watches the ritual proceedings even as he makes slow movements of turning over roast meats; his teeth bared in jealous protection. Partially hidden from full view, he protects the mystery of his revered status enveloped in a miasma of taste and abundance. burst slice slice burst. I dig my bare hands deep into torn pockets; cold fingers strokes numb hair shafts on my thighs; I am wavering between gratifying urban mirage and futile musings on forms, wind-chills and livelihood. MUST shake self to reality. Make it real people say to me, MAKE IT REAL. In relation to WHAT? is what I say. I cannot help thinking that right at this moment, someplace somewhere, the best tasting sausage in the entire world is furiously grilling away without my much needed participation. All over the world, sausages are being grilled, hot dog vending or not; cash or not; manuscript or not.....For the here and now, however, a hog dog vendor is the easiest means to one.

As if in material response to my wishes, one of the venerable entrepreneurs suddenly pops out -it seems- from underneath the pavement. Right at the northeast comer of 122 and Malcolm Haile XX. I hailed his timely appearance as one would a fully armed warrior bursting forth out of the head of a god at a critical moment of creation. He glares at my approach, hooded closely against an especially disagreeable building on the run; lips pressed pencil thin. Either from having to look up at the building - though why he should have to do this baffles me-- or because this is the vendor's habitual way of speeding up time, his facial muscles move in a steady back and forth rhythm, which in turn, gives the effect of a thoroughly ill-disposed attitude to the way things are. It's this; or he is simply bored. His eyes continue to survey my approach without the least interest. All armed and fully loaded for a mere solitary consumer; decked and no cheering crowd; trained and no work to flex it all on. And so on.

Not at all discouraged, I walk rapidly forward as one expected: I am here to ease the problem of dismal lack of traffic. Within seconds, my insignificant frame stands well angled before vendor and machine, equipped with the right facial expression that I believe transmits the message, "zippy fast food, please". Just at that moment of establishing critical contact, a young man springs out of nowhere, shoves into me without seeming to care, his eyes searching as if he's lost something. Hands in pockets, elbows jutted out to form a small radius for full space and attention, he pressed urgently against the mobile grill. I edge off slightly, taken back by the agitated tension of his appearance.

The expression on his worn desperate profile is of confounded seriousness. The hot dog vendor too, is held back as I am. For a good five seconds, there is nothing but the sound of our patience. In situations such as this, attempts to assert my rights do more to wear me out than correct aggression. So I wait. And I'm thinking to myself: in this cold, could he not simply decide?

“I come here a lot!” he suddenly exclaims with the defensiveness of someone who is often taken for a liar.

“What?” In an instant, the hot dog vendor sets an already stolid face into that of complete indifference.

“I come here a lot!” our boy repeats, apparently expecting shouts of denial.

Now, what does he want? A discount? An extra bun plastered with mustard? Extra mustard? All you can load pickles? Well, to think of it, ‘Buy ten get one free’ ain’t such a bad idea nor is a 10% regular customers’ discount. For hot dogs that are a colossal three bucks each, is that too much to ask? The verbal shuffle wanes and continues in tandem with the varying gusts of wind.

Here we are, three adults, waiting and instigating both the concluding and hopeful results of a hot dog harangue. With a booming economy flaunted daily by flourishing condos honed with expensive blinds, surely times are not quite so hard that the hot dog vendor would refuse to acknowledge his customer's loyalty? Would he now say, ‘no you don’t! And for that, I hold back that extra pickle!” Or would he welcome this self-proclaimed loyal customer as a sign of the success of a recent promotional and marketing strategy and promptly begin to interrogate the young man with survey questions:

‘Where did you hear of my hot dog?’

‘Do you live/work nearby?’

‘How many times per week would you rather have hot dogs for lunch?’

‘Are you interested in a work/home hot dog delivery?’

Ill-tempered and cold -despite being bundled up to his cheeks under the weight of five or so jackets as would cause the restricted movements of even the most agile- our hot dog vendor offers the slightest nod of acknowledgement, and at this, he turns pointedly to a middle-aged woman revealed at my right as newcomer number three. I watch her uplifted face as she speaks to him of that ‘zippy fast food’ desire feelings that I had earlier on expressed with a similar smile and had been rudely cut off before I could utter a word. nearly knocked over. Ignored, the young man turns with sudden jolting gait, shoulders set to move faster than legs, and again, nearly knocks me over. As I grabbed his arm in reflex, and perhaps this time, in anger, and as we are of equal height and size, our faces come quite close. His eyes meet mine, if only for a brief hostile moment. I look into his eyes and see him: he is my double. We recognized each other instantly and at once, our eyes glazed over. He saw his past and now he snickers. I saw the bleak future and I flinch. He is my exact double though a stage ahead: instead of wasting time fumbling with furtive halfhearted plans of a future as an enterprising hot dog vendor, he actively solicits the real stuff that hot-dogging is about -getting the belly full. I am still flinching.

And this is where I turn, monsieur BARBÉ bottoms long forgotten, hotdogless and famished, wondering, at what point in life does one get to this point? At what point in life does one befriend/bully hot dog vendors for a bit of charity?

Is it really the next stage?

www.strawberrypress.net

*Two Writers*

*Whit Frazier*

Mr. Miles Standish
February 19, 2004

Dear Ladies and Gentleman of the Strawberry Academy of Letters:

I have come to the conclusion that each and every one of you, along with the writers whose works you support, are nothing more than a loutish lot of hacks. I have followed the careers of you and your protégés for many years now, and I can only say that what began as a small distaste for the work your academy promotes as literature, has grown into a full seated hatred for every member of your board and every writer associated with your cliquish clan. I have given the matter much thought. I write this letter with an air of complete objectivity.

What I find most appalling is how readily the citizens of our fair town, Strawberry, buy into your deceit. There is nothing that qualifies any of these writers to be published other than a thinly veiled cronyism even the most naïve child would be able to see right through. I have read the works of many of your authors, and the fact that their prose even managed to see light of day is a crime to the history of letters. It stands as an insult to the least talented hack writer ever to put pen to page. I am both outraged and ashamed.

I should mention that I myself am a writer. Your immediate response, I know, will be to suppose that I am writing this letter out of some kind of professional jealousy. That my anger stems from my inability to get my own work published. Let the record state (as William Kellwigger well knows) that I am a published novelist. West Strawberry Publishing Company published my novel, "The Origin of the Mutilated ManMonkey" last fall, and while it has not turned into a bestseller, I feel reasonably confident that I have developed a loyal, if small cult following from my work. The authors whose works you promote could never develop the type of loyalty that I have developed, although they may sell more books overall to the illiterate masses.

When I began as a writer, I began with the youthful hope and naiveté that the industry would be populated with editors, agents and academicians who were genuinely interested in furthering our great city's legacy of literature. As you know, Strawberry has a rich history of literary fiction and literary nonfiction as well. Our city has known some of the greatest visionaries in our language, and we should feel nothing but pride for what the past has provided us with. However, lately things have changed. The industry's changed to the way things were before the contamination. Money and cronyism drives the entire thing, and literature has turned into a bunch of fat cats sitting around patting each other on the back.

As a young man in my twenties I worked for a small publishing company out in Southport. It wasn't a bad job for a young man just out of college looking to be a writer, and I was making contacts fast. It was there that I first met William Kelwigger. Kelwigger, as you know, is the "hottest" new literary author out today, and they say he is the best young writer under the age of forty. As Kelwigger and I are the exact same age, I personally feel this is one of the most laughable, not to mention insulting, claims I've ever heard, but I'll let that pass for now. What you may not know is that Kelwigger and I used to be good friends. I admit that at first I admired his work, but the better I got to know him, the more I realized there was one essential difference between a man like Kelwigger and a man like myself. The difference is that Kelwigger is an opportunist; I am a writer.

I know that it may sound strange for an opportunist to choose to be a writer, (of all the ways to make money!) but for Kelwigger it made sense. I will not say he is without any talent at all. He certainly has the snake's talent for manipulating language around people to get them to hear only what they want to hear. It is the lowest form of sophistry, and the grossest abuse of language for literary purposes. This snakespeak of his is the same language he uses to write his fiction. It can be seductive, and I myself as a foolish young man was swayed by its siren call. I took the man to be a talented and serious writer. But *The Lie* showed through around the edges, and Kelwigger's books, which are consistently the same treacle drenched in a syrupy message of spiritual redemption, reveal below the surface a man who is very much a misanthrope; more disturbing than that, a man who hates the very foundations upon which basic humanity rests. I can prove this in a few short paragraphs reviewing his book, while his puerile review of my own novel, (the only review my novel received from anyone) was insulting, dismissive, cowardly, and refused to face up to the fact that he was in the presence of a far greater talent.

Kellwigger's book, "The Infamy of Madness," does no more than give us a display of the infamy that sickens Kellwigger's soul. The book is nothing more than a thinly disguised autobiography of his life before he was well known; in short, of the time when Kellwigger and I were still friends. The character James Lackluster is clearly a nasty below the belt attack on my own character, and the other characters in the book can all be traced back to real people, whom Kellwigger chooses to either abuse or aggrandize for his own petty purposes. Kellwigger distorts the story so much that he makes his own character (Clark Cornerlion) out to be some kind of

magnanimous man and visionary young writer, when nothing could be further from the truth.

Take for example the hackneyed plot Kellwigger uses as his context, and you can see this man is no visionary. He writes a novel about the relationship between Clark Cornerlion and Marianne Lalady, a doomed and star-crossed couple. This in and of itself is such an old and cheap idea, that to have the balls (or just talent) to use it, you need to be able to use it in a fresh, exciting way. Kellwigger doesn't even come close. I felt like I'd read this book three hundred times before, only better versions of it.

Secondly, Kellwigger hackneys the idea up some more when he introduces James Lackluster as the ineffectual jealous young writer who lacks the talent Kellwigger, er… Cornerlion himself so effortlessly possesses. It's that same old you play Salieri to my Mozart bullshit. Kellwigger writes it in his typically trite fashion, and it's sad that so many readers out there buy into this garbage. A thousand different writers have done the exact same thing a thousand times better. What the hell is the point of reading Kellwigger other than for his pathetic self-aggrandizement? I've said it before, and I will say it again. Kellwigger is no writer. He's just another cheap opportunist.

I have had firsthand experience from knowing Kellwigger, that he is a petty, lowdown, insecure man who will turn to tearing down others before facing his own shortcomings as a human being and as a writer. The lady Marianne Lalady (I will not do her the indiscretion of mentioning her name here) portrayed in Kellwigger's book was, in fact, engaged to me for several months. When Kellwigger writes it in such a way as to suggest that James Lackluster was somehow delusional – well, that in and of itself is a downright lie. Let the record state that only by lying about my character, and orchestrating cheap manipulative situations designed to assassinate my reputation did Kellwigger manage to take Marianne away from me. The way he writes it in his book is so preposterous, I wonder that anyone could take it as even reasonably believable. For example - to say that at the same time that I was engaged to Marianne I was also having erotic fantasies about other women in the office – that I would approach them in an improper manner – to go so far as to write my character as a deeply troubled sexually abusive pervert! – Kellwigger certainly took the slander too far with that step, and really I should sue him for defamation of character. In the end it was his own flawed character that lost him Marianne, and not my twisted machinations, as his book would have you believe.

As my name is unknown to the public at large, and as Kellwigger insists on putting this piece of trash out as his latest "visionary novel," I have let the whole thing go. Not to mention bringing the whole thing into the public arena would be doing a great disservice to Marianne. (Only compassionate, thoughtful writers and human beings take such things into consideration before they act. Kellwigger has never been this type of man or writer.)

Let it be stated for the record that Kellwigger has never been much of anything other than a snake, and the fact that your academy supports him nominally and financially damns your entire literary industry for a genuine writer such as myself. If the industry has decided to ignore the edgier, more authentic, truly visionary writers out here, then we have no choice but to turn around and ignore the industry. You can consider this letter an official declaration of war against Kellwigger in particular, and the Academy Itself, at large.

Yours truly,
Miles Standish

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November 18, 2003
Strawberry Academy of Letters Book Review

**Monkey Business**
A Review of Miles Standish's "The Origin of the Mutilated ManMonkey"
By William Kellwigger

I knew this guy way back. Fancy seeing his name in print! I have to commend him, though, for finally getting up the nerve to tell the world of his strange and horrible birthright.

Leave this one on the shelf, folks.