

# KANSAS CITY VOICES

a periodical of writing and art



volume 11

# WHISPERING PRAIRIE PRESS

DEDICATES VOLUME 11 TO

# BOB CHRISMAN

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+Featured cover artist

# KANSAS CITY VOICES

VOLUME II

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## PROSE

Riley Welcker

AS LUCK

WOULD HAVE IT

Crossed fingers, Gorge believed, were sure to invite good luck. And luck is what Gorge had been entreating for over a month. The Y of his crossed fingers was white, the middle wrapping the index of his left hand. Although his crossed fingers were often inconvenient, he never uncrossed them. He used other fingers to push the buttons through the buttonholes of his shirt, tie his tie, zip his pants, and loop his belt. Eating with a fork in his right hand was like relearning to walk. It took an insurmountable amount of focus. And he hadn't yet mastered it. He wrote, typed, swam, and did laundry never breaking his crossed fingers, not even when he tripped down the rubber stairs of the university gymnasium and broke his nose. The swelling had receded, but the bridge was still pinched by a Band-Aid strip that nearly so well as didn't conceal the purple blotch discoloring the entire left side of his nose. The color beneath both eyes had improved considerably, however. They were no longer black but dark green, which Gorge accredited to luck. And it was luck that Gorge was counting on.

No one could ask for a better job right out of college than to work for the prestigious Regalo y Regalo. It was the closest he had come to breaking his crossed fingers when the recruiter invited him to the corner shop on Sixth and Main for an interview. It was an interview he deemed very lucky indeed. He kissed his fingers. This was it. This was real, a chance few were ever given, a real once-in-a-lifetime shot. If he got the job, he would win the admiration of his father, never hear the end of his mother's praise, folks would consider him a respectable citizen; if he got the job, Gorge would ask his girlfriend to marry him.

The small, bronze bell at the top of the door clinked as Gorge entered the corner shop. Its glass walls allowed a perfect view of the street. He glanced at his watch. Mickey Mouse's hands both pointed in the same direction. Noon light flooded the cafe. People were gathered around gray tables with cream-colored, foam cups, staring from the windows or talking. One young woman wearing a beanie was frowning at her notebook. She held a pencil to her mouth. A man rose from the corner. He stood six feet. His head was bald, his teeth white. A goatee shadowed his bottom lip. He wore a sharp,

blue suit. Gorge's white shirt was choking him, forcing him to stretch his neck at regular intervals. He adjusted his black tie and renewed his grip on the strap of his blue backpack.

"You are Gorge, I presume," said the man, extending his hand.

"That's me. You're Terence?"

"I am."

They shook hands.

"Why are your fingers crossed?" The man squinted and smiled.

"Oh, oh, it's nothing," said Gorge, his hand slipping behind his leg.

"Please, have a seat." The man pointed to the empty chairs at the small round table in the corner. "What happened to your face?"

"I fell down the gymnasium stairs."

"Oh."

Gorge's backpack clobbered the table leg. A waitress appeared. "Is there anything I can start you off with while you're looking at the menu?" She handed them each a tall plastic book cover.

Terence took it. His eyes rose and fell, following the list. "No. I will have a Water and the Chicken Salad Sandwich—number five."

Gorge's face flushed. His eyes darted across the menu. "So will I," he said.

The waitress took their menus.

"Tell me about yourself," said Terence, resting his elbows on the table, his fingers interlocked.

"What would you like to know?"

"What about you makes you the best person for the job?" Terence's fingers parted and came together again.

Gorge frowned, caressing his chin, his eyes fixed on a brown nick in the window's silver edging. "Could you rephrase the question?"

Terence's left elbow lifted from the table, his suit crinkling at the shoulder. A gold Rolex peaked from his white sleeve.

Gorge's eyes returned to the nick in the window's silver edging. The sounds of the shop were slowly muted by his ticking watch. Time passed. Gorge's lips smashed together. His mouth moved left; then right. He glanced at the painted heating ducts hanging from the ceiling, at Terence, at the faint word "ouch" scratched along the edge of the table, and back at the nick in the window's silver edging when his face brightened at a thought. "I—" But his answer was interrupted by the returning waitress.

Terence looked up at her. "Thank you," he nodded, unfolding his napkin on his lap.

Gorge's eyes shot to the table. He snatched his napkin

## *As Luck Would Have It, continued*

from beneath the descending plate and placed it on his lap. His chest rose and fell. Terence took a bite, watching Gorge.

“I believe that I am the most suited for this position as a result of my educational training,” said Gorge. He took his sandwich with his right hand. His mouth closed over the bread.

“How does that set you apart from all our other applicants?” Terence promptly inquired.

Gorge chewed, his eyes angling toward the ceiling. “I work hard.”

“And—” Terence prompted.

“And that puts me in a unique position.”

“How so?”

Gorge swallowed. “Not many people can say they work as hard as I do. I’ve gotten excellent grades in all my accounting classes. I am studious, quick thinking, attentive to detail and principle. I take the bull by the horns and slam it to the ground!” Flecks of chicken leapt from the table.

Terence’s brows slowly joined at the middle. “If you could be any candy bar, what would it be and why?”

“A Snickers bar.” Gorge looked at the ceiling and ended with a short nod.

“Why a Snickers bar?”

“Because it’s good.”

Terence’s hand moved in a circular motion.

“—It’s nutty—and sweet—and chewy,” said Gorge. “It’s pliable. It hits the spot. It’s, it’s something you can depend on.”

The man nodded, his hand gripping his chin. “Well,” he said at last, “this has been most illuminating.”

“I think so.” Gorge took a bite, glancing sideways at Terence.

Terence stood. Gorge swiftly followed. The back of his knees struck the chair. It lurched across the floor.

“Thank you for your time,” said Terence. He extended his hand.

Gorge took it. “So you have no more questions for me?”

“No. I think I’ve got a good enough idea.”

“Are you sure? Because I have plenty I could tell you.”

“I am sure you do.” The man glanced at their ongoing handshake.

“I was summa cum laude.”

“OK.”

“I was also involved with Read for Children—I helped little kids learn to read—and I was involved with HBDA, the Humanitarian Blood Donors Association—I did a lot of blood drives.”

“A lot of blood drives. Really.”

“I was also made group leader in my swimming class. I have leadership skills.”

“That’s surprising.”

“Which part?”

“Huh?”

“Which part was surprising? The part about my being made group leader or my leadership skills?”

“Oh, I was thinking of your participation in the HDBA.”

“HBDA,” Gorge corrected him.

Terence’s mouth tightened. “Tell me, Gorge, how does all this fit with your description of yourself as a Snickers bar?”

“You definitely need a Snickers bar after getting your blood taken,” Gorge nodded emphatically. “I once saw a guy—”

“OK. I do have to go.”

“You really don’t want to ask me anymore questions?”

“No, not really.”

“Well, Terence, I’ll just say that if I get this job, I won’t let you down.”

“I am sure you wouldn’t.” Terence smiled. He patted Gorge on the shoulder, tossed a twenty on the table, and stepped around him.

“What exactly are you looking for in your candidate anyway?”

“We are looking for someone with fire, someone with spirit.”

“I have fire.”

“Sure.” Terence turned the knob. The door opened.

The bell above it tinkled.

“Well, wait!” said Gorge. “I’ll come with you.” He turned, snatched a last bite of his sandwich, heaved his backpack over his shoulder, and darted after Terence. His body collided with the closing door. He made it through. “So where are you off to? Back up north?”

“Something like that.” A line of parked cars bridged the gap between the shops and the street. Terence jangled his keys. His Mustang chirped twice. He opened the door and slid onto a leather seat. Gorge closed the door behind him. He leaned into his reflection and tapped on the glass. Terence flicked the button. The window sank into the door.

“When can I expect a call?” asked Gorge, resting his forearm on the window frame.

“Definitely sometime tomorrow.”

“Really?”

Terence smiled. He slid on his sun glasses and put the car in reverse. Gorge stepped back. The Mustang backed into the street. Gorge waved. The man returned a brief wave,

and the Mustang sped away.

Gorge stared at his crossed fingers. Then he turned and walked away. The sidewalk was littered with red and yellow leaves. He whipped off his tie, shoved it in his pocket, and unbuttoned his top button. A warm autumn breeze struck his face. The sky was blue, but Gorge never noticed the sky; when Gorge walked his nose pointed at the ground beneath his feet. He never looked up except to avoid those obstacles that crept up unexpectedly. “How does all this fit with your description of yourself as a Snickers bar,” he repeated, kicking up leaves as the cars roared by, his hands buried deep in his pockets. He turned into the street at the crosswalk, looked both ways, and darted across. “I thought they were looking for Accountants, not candy bars! If he wanted a candy bar he should have gone to the grocery store. What an idiot!” He rocked his head back and forth, wondering what would come of his interview. His lower lip curled outward. “I’ve got fire enough for this company. If that’s what they’re looking for, then I’m the right man for the job.” Gorge balanced on the curb like someone pretending to be a plane. He looked at his watch. Mickey Mouse’s short hand pointed at the twelve; his long hand, at the four.

Gorge pulled his phone from his pocket, dialed, and pressed it to his ear. “Hi, Mom—Ah-huh, just barely got out—It went all right; I mean, it didn’t exactly go like I was hoping—huh?—I don’t know—Mom, I don’t know—I mean, it went all right—You can tell Dr. Barry’s wife it went okay—Yeah, Mom—Thanks—Father’s been saying what?” Gorge squinted. He rolled his eyes. “Oh great!—No, Mom—Mom, I have to wait for them to call me; they said they’d call me tomorrow—I hope so; I’ve still got my fingers crossed—OK—Love you too—Bye.”

Gorge approached Voracious Diamonds. He stopped, staring up at the sign stretching over the sidewalk. The sun struck his face. Gorge squinted. He waited as a man crossed his path on the sidewalk, then stepped up to the window, pressing his head to the glass, his hands like blinders folded around the sides of his eyes. His mouth twitched. With a bounce in his step, Gorge rounded the store window and entered the glass door. A chain of copper-colored cow bells rattled against the glass. Gorge squinted, his eyes adjusting to the dimness. The carpet was green velvet, a kind of fuzz that marked customers’ footsteps. Lights from recessed cans around the perimeter of the room lit the shop’s mahogany-paneled walls. Spotlights lit the clear, glass jewelry cases.

Gorge wandered toward the nearest case. He stared downward through the glass at the selection of rings on display. The salesman was leaning over a jewelry case, his elbows on the glass, holding up a mirror for an older woman with cotton hair wearing a braided gold chain about her neck. She turned left and right, her eyes never leaving the mirror.

She fingered the chain, squinting. The salesman glanced at Gorge. He wore a tan suit with sparkling diamond cufflinks and polished brown loafers that reflected the light. His brown hair had an unnatural thickness to it and was parted in a straight line along the right side of his head. He sported a gaudy ring on almost every finger. Gorge crouched in front of the case, his hands on the glass.

“Can I help you?” Cow bells sounded in the background. Gorge looked up. The salesman was standing over him. Gorge slowly stood. The salesman produced a toothy smile.

“I’m looking for an engagement ring,” said Gorge, tugging the bulge from his front pocket. He flipped open a brown leather wallet and unsheathed a silver credit card. “Money’s no object,” he said, showing the man his card.

Gorge left Voracious Diamonds a half hour later fingering a small diamond ring. He examined its sparkling colors. He smiled, replaced the ring in its wooden box, tucked the box and the yellow receipt in a crisp, cream-colored plastic bag, and plodded home, avoiding the cracks in the cement.

The next day Gorge found himself at swim practice, sitting on the bench in his hoody watching his swim class. He frowned at his Mickey Mouse watch. Though he couldn’t swim due to his broken nose, Gorge was forced to sit on the bench beside several of his swim-suited classmates breathing the humid air for attendance credit.

The gray cavern was filled with the deafening echo of voices and splashing water. Bright saucers overhead reflected in scattered puddles. Everyone’s face looked blanched. The green water, strung with red, white, and blue buoys, rippled endlessly. The smell of chlorine was asphyxiating. A whistle screeched. Life guards in red shorts and one-pieces with red rescue tubes patrolled the pool borders. The day had turned thick and gray outside the enormous black-framed windows.

The diamond ring wandered between Gorge’s fingers inside his hoody pocket. He stared long at his girlfriend’s wallet-sized senior photo. “Monica, I’ve been thinking,” he said at last. He slid from the bench, taking one knee on the wet tiles in front of her picture in his hand. “You are the only one. And I think that I am the only one. I love you, Ducky. I’ve always loved you, more than anything.” He rubbed her picture with his thumb. “Monica, will you—” His phone buzzed. Gorge snapped it out. “Hello?” He stood up, turning his back on the noisy pool. “Regalo y Regalo?—Oh, hi Terence—Ah, huh—Oh.” He nodded. “Ah, huh—Thank you—Ah, huh.” He hung up the phone. He stared at nothing. His chest rose and fell. A smile broke across his face. “Yes! I knew you’d come through for me!” he cried, peppering his crossed fingers with kisses.

Joe Benevento

# AFTER ZORAIDA MARTÍNEZ SAVED ME FROM DIVINE WORD SEMINARY

An annoyingly religious and self-righteous sort,  
I never cursed, unlike almost all the other boys, certain,  
at age eleven I wanted to become a religious, a brother,  
since part of my early arrogance was to proclaim  
myself unworthy of standing in for Jesus as a priest.

My mother, conspiring with the Sisters  
of Saint Joseph, rulers of Saint Teresa of Avila school,  
tried to forbid my plan for leaving to start  
a seminary life age thirteen in Pennsylvania  
with the Divine Word Order, but I was sure I felt

that Word too fully to let them block my way.  
Then the Martinezes moved in five doors down:  
three daughters ages 12-16, capturing multiple  
pretenders, none of whom saw Holy Joey a rival.  
But the youngest, Zoraida, topaz eyes, name

retrieved from the madness of *Don Quixote*,  
favored me. First she threw pebbles my way,  
which only my best friend José rightly read as a sign,  
next she confessed to my little brother who it was  
she had chosen, so that even I could not forestall

the necessary revelation, our handholding sending  
golden, electric shocks through me like nothing  
prayer had ever produced, taking me away from my Divine  
Word pretension to admitting my weakness, like a budding  
cherry blossom admits the sun, knowing all my poetry would come

from then on as a way to be always recalling that miracle.

John Biggs

# AN INCONCLUSIVE GIRL

The ultrasound technician pointed to her nametag,  
instead of introducing herself.

“Sylvia Anoli,” Mona Beaver read aloud. “Choctaw  
name.”

“Means messenger.” Mona thought the name was  
perfect for someone who did sonograms. She wanted to talk  
about it, but the tech’s expression killed the conversation.

“One sonogram’s all the Nation pays for.” Sylvia Anoli  
crossed her arms and waited for an argument. “You want  
another, you have to write a letter.” The tech’s white skin and  
blond hair didn’t match the Indian name.

Lots of white women married Choctaw men in this  
part of Oklahoma. Most of them looked happier about it than  
Sylvia. A bad marriage explained everything: the name, the  
frown, why the technician hated Indians.

“One is all I need,” Mona said. A girl didn’t feel like  
arguing when she wore a hospital gown that barely covered  
the important parts. Especially an unmarried Choctaw girl who  
was getting her one and only free sonogram. Most especially  
a lesbian Choctaw girl who’d spent her last dollar for artificial  
insemination at a Tulsa fertility clinic and didn’t want to talk  
about it.

The technician draped a paper apron over the chair  
beside Mona’s hospital bed, an amenity supplied by the  
Choctaw Nation, so girls weren’t quite so naked. Mona looked  
at the apron, but Sylvia Anoli didn’t take the hint. Maybe an  
unmarried, pregnant, lesbian, Choctaw girl who wanted  
modesty, had to write a letter.

*Dear Indian Agent:*

*May I please have a paper apron  
and a friendly technician now that the  
buffalo are gone?*

*Sincerely,  
Mona Beaver*

The technician put her gloves on with a snap that  
sounded like a slap across the face.

“Latex OK?” she asked. “Lots of girls your age seem to  
be allergic to rubber.”

“Latex is fine.”

Mona wanted to tell the tech, “I’m still a virgin, at least  
in the most important heterosexual way.” But that would take  
too much explaining.

“The daddy isn’t here?” Sylvia Anoli wanted a juicy  
story she could talk about over lunch, but the details of Mona’s  
pregnancy were practically juice free.

“Away at college.” A convenient lie that might be  
true. The sperm donor was supposed to be a healthy college  
student with a high IQ, but Mona had her doubts. The clinic  
sent them into a quiet room with dirty magazines and a check  
for twenty dollars. Mona didn’t think they took IQ tests in there,  
but lesbians can’t be choosers.

Mona could have told Sylvia about her roommate  
Chris, who looked like she could be a ‘baby daddy,’ but Sylvia  
Anoli already had a frown on her face as she walked toward  
Mona with a dollop of ice cold lubricant.

“Away at college.” It sounded more reasonable when  
Mona said it the second time; the most reasonable thing about  
her pregnancy. Just ask Chris, the nearly baby daddy. Just ask  
any anonymous college student sitting in a private room with  
a stack of dirty magazines—take your pick. Just ask Mom and  
Dad, who were happy to think the father was a private in the  
National Guard, whose name Mona couldn’t quite remember.

Sinners didn’t reform all at once, according to Mom.  
They moved up the hierarchy of bad acts from felonies to  
misdemeanors until they settled on one that wouldn’t keep  
them out of heaven. Casual sex fell somewhere between  
shoplifting and swearing. Mona would get there yet.

The sonogram wand felt softer than Sylvia Anoli’s  
hand. Mona asked about the funny noise.

## An Inconclusive Girl, continued

“Beyond the range of human hearing,” Sylvia insisted. Only dogs and pregnant unmarried Choctaw girls could hear it.

“Maybe it’s the air conditioning.” Mona waited for Sylvia to agree.

*One Mississippi, two Mississippi.* The longest river in America took exactly one second to name. Plenty of time for a friendly comment.

*Three Mississippi, four Mississippi.*

“It’s really cold in here.”

*Five Mississippi, six Mississippi.*

“I guess it keeps the flies off of the Indians.” Mona waited for a smile. It might take Sylvia a few more seconds to find one among her regular expressions.

There it was. The corners of the technician’s lips turned up. A little racial slur was all it took. But she didn’t look at Mona. Sylvia Anoli’s eyes locked onto a television screen that showed an almost believable image of Mona’s baby.

“Don’t see a penis,” Sylvia Anoli said. “Position’s not too good.”

The picture moved in and out of focus. A leg, a head, the whole body turned sideways for a moment.

“Probably a girl. Can’t be sure.” Sylvia Anoli looked at her watch. The allotted time for Mona Beaver’s free sonogram was over. Quicker than a rollercoaster ride at the McCurtain County Fair. Quicker than an anonymous male college student earns twenty dollars in a Tulsa fertility clinic.

“A girl?” Of course Mona wanted a girl. Didn’t every unmarried pregnant woman want a little girl, to dress up like a life-size doll, so everyone would say she looked “just like an angel on the top of a Christmas tree”?

Mona picked out a name already—Leah, which meant delicate according to *Five Hundred Baby Names*. She put her hand onto her belly before she thought about the slick goop slathered there by the technician who didn’t like Indians.

“Inconclusive,” Sylvia Anoli said.

*An inconclusive girl. Just like her mother.*

“You want another sonogram, you’ll have to write a letter.” Sylvia Anoli pointed to the restroom where Mona had changed into her hospital gown.

“Wash the slime off in there,” she said. “Picture’s printing. They’ll have it for you at the front desk when you check out.”

“You’re welcome,” Sylvia said before Mona had a chance to say anything.

“Thanks,” she said to Sylvia’s back as the technician

left the room. “Thanks for the inconclusive girl.”

\*\*\*

Most of the Women’s Clinic nurses were as white as Sylvia Anoli. Some had Choctaw last names, but none of them hated Indians. A different one greeted Mona each time she came for prenatal care, interchangeable middle-aged women with kind faces, and first names that ended in the letter “Y”.

“Hi, my name is—Cindy, Nancy, Tammy.” They wore green scrubs, and smiles they couldn’t hide behind surgical masks.

This nurse asked, “Anybody with you today?”

Mona supposed nurses got lots of smile-practice in a birthing center, keeping mothers’ spirits up while their contractions got closer together and their baby daddies got further and further away.

“Let me guess,” Mona said. “The Nation will only pay for one baby. If I want another one I have to write a letter.”

The nurse’s smile increased its curvature. “I’ll bet you met Sylvia Anoli.”

“How’d you guess?” Mona stayed busy trying concentrate on something besides the next contraction.

“Bless her heart.” The nurse propped up Mona’s knees, lifted her gown, and touched her in the places doctors had been touching on a regular basis since the pregnancy achieved sure-thing status.

“Six centimeters,” the nurse said. “You’re well on your way.”

The birthing room had everything a mother-to-be needed, except for a support system. Mona didn’t want her mother around during labor and delivery. She especially didn’t want her dad. She might say something she’d regret during transition. That’s what the birthing class instructor told her. Mona could say things everyone would regret for a long time.

“Will the father be coming later?”

“Bless her heart?” The contraction raised Mona’s voice an octave or two, so the nurse probably thought the *her* part was a mistake.

Mona supposed the *her* part was a mistake—at least this *her*. Chris, the sort-of baby daddy, brought Mona to the hospital, but she waved goodbye as soon as the wheel chair arrived. She wouldn’t come inside with her pretty girlfriend even though she’d made a pinky swear.

Mona knew something bad was coming when Chris pulled into the parking lot and turned off the radio because the music made her too confused to talk. Chris wanted to say something but she couldn’t. She’d probably tape a note

to the refrigerator, or send an email or leave a message on the answering machine. Chris was so much like a man in all the most the important ways.

“Later,” Chris said when she climbed into her worn out Jeep Cherokee and drove away. Maybe she waved one last time to Mona’s reflection in the rearview mirror, or maybe not.

“Objects may be closer than they appear,” Mona said.

“Ain’t it the truth,” the nurse said.

“My name is Stacy Daniels. I’ll be here for the next twelve hours.” She showed Mona how to use the call button.

“I’m all yours,” Nurse Stacy said. “Anything you need.”

Bought and paid for like a prostitute. Compliments of the Choctaw Nation.

\*\*\*

Natural childbirth didn’t seem so natural after all.

“Not a good time to start an epidural,” Nurse Stacy said.

“Seems like a pretty good time to me.” Mona had already let out a string of curses that would embarrass the ghosts of her Choctaw ancestors a thousand years back.

“A little pentazocine will take the edge off.” Nurse Stacy had the hypodermic inserted into the IV line before Mona could ask questions.

“Helps you rest between contractions,” Nurse Stacy said. “Dulls the pain. Helps you forget about the world.”

According to Mona’s mother, everyone would be forgetting about the world pretty soon, because the Last Days were finally here, as advertised in the Book of Revelations.

“It works fast,” Nurse Stacy said.

“Mom says . . .” Mona tried to tell Nurse Stacy things she never understood until this moment, but most of her useful words vaporized in the burst of pentazocine clarity.

“Wow.” The world slid into oblivion and Mona didn’t come back until the next contraction. Then she remembered everything—about Chris, about the clinic in Tulsa, about Nurse Stacy and Leah, who would be here any minute because the doctor magically appeared and told her to push.

Pain came at her from a great distance, getting closer all the time. It felt like someone else was hurting; someone Mona barely knew, having a baby girl whose name meant ‘delicate.’

“Just like Baby Leah,” Mona told the masked man who ordered her to, “Push harder please!”

So polite. The doctor’s name was Surrender Nanda. He came to Durant, Oklahoma, from India to deliver American Indian babies. Nurse Stacy told Mona all about him just before

the last contraction.

“Polite,” Nurse Stacy said. “And competent, even if he talks funny.”

*Surrender Nanda.* Good name for an Indian—East or West. But not as good as Leah. That name came from the Chosen Tribe. Leah was a Biblical name, like Rebecca, or Mary, or Caleb, or Joseph.

No one had to tell Mona to push when the last contraction came. Every part of her pushed at once, until it felt like she turned inside out. Then presto, chango, Dr. Surrender Nanda pulled a baby out of Mona, the way a magician pulls a rabbit from a hat.

“There’s a little stranger in the room.” Surrender Nanda’s voice ran up and down the scale like preparation for a music recital.

“Have you thought of a name for him yet, Mona.” They were on a first name basis now. Why not, after all they’d been through?

“His fingers are nice and pink,” Surrender Nanda said. “His pulse and respiration are good. His Apgar score is 8.”

*His?*

The doctor placed Mona’s baby on her chest so he could listen to her heart.

*My baby boy?*

Ecstatic tears dripped from Mona’s chin onto the baby whose name could not be Leah. Nurse Stacy cried, too. Even Surrender Nanda dabbed at his eyes. The only one in the birthing room who didn’t cry was baby—what’s his name?

“Joseph,” Mona told Nurse Stacy and Surrender Nanda, like she’d picked a boy’s name just in case.

“A Biblical name, because childbirth is a blessed event.” That’s what Mona’s mom had told her, and she got it absolutely right; even if Mona and Joseph were in this thing alone; even if Joseph’s father was an anonymous college student with a high IQ. Even if Mona’s baby wasn’t a delicate, inconclusive girl.

## Suzanne Carey IN THE GALLERY

I am puzzling over the best-of-show painting  
when an articulate apparition appears a few inches behind my left shoulder.  
Without greeting or preface, he begins dissecting the work on the wall.  
His manicured finger hovers over the canvas as he traces  
layers of pigment and meaning, his gravel-edged voice confident.  
Is he the man who kissed me wetly and a bit off-center last week  
in my dream? I want him to do it again, right now, here

in front of this painting and its blue ribbon. I want him to slip his arm  
around my waist and nudge me from this bright gallery to a dusky bistro,  
where we will order a carafe of house red and meatball sandwiches,  
and it will take a half-dozen napkins to wipe tomato sauce from between our fingers,  
laughing, talking like I used to talk with men in the Sixties, men who played guitar  
and knew all of Dylan and Leonard Cohen and crooned “Suzanne”  
in their candle-lit, off-campus apartments before confessing they no longer loved me.

I *hmmmm* and nod as he speaks. I sense his height, catch the scent of citrus soap,  
note his beveled wedding band. Is he young and earnest, trying to impress? Or older –  
I his naïf to educate? If this were a movie or novel, by now our eyes would have met,  
mine ribbon-blue, his God only knows what color (though I hope they are green),  
but I don’t dare look at him as he talks of tonality and texture. By now, we should,  
at least, be strolling languidly toward the wine and cheese in the next room.  
By now, if truth be told, I should be home feeding the cat, but instead I stay  
in the gallery and stare at the painting, desperately in love with all of it.

## John Biscello LIMB

The sun was strong and the wind rough, a bully with  
no motive. The old man did his best to ignore the wind’s  
antagonistic jabs and shoves as he set up his rickety easel.  
The old man’s dog, Ginger, a rust-red mutt with perforated  
ears who was getting on in years, padded away, snout to the  
ground, scavenging for something edible.

The old man screened his eyes—his brown leathery  
hand functioning as a visor—and looked up. The clouds,  
which hung like woolen skiffs in the chalk-blue sky, were shot  
through with blood-orange light. Leveling his gaze to meet  
the landscape, the old man saw grass, the color of tobacco,  
sprouted in frizzy uneven patches. When the old man had  
first come to this place, the visibly scarred complexion of the  
landscape had been devoid of color and growth. Over time  
the land had repaired itself, but as for the people, that was a  
different story, sealed in a book with no changes possible.

The old man unscrewed the cap from his canteen, a  
hollowed-out gourd, and took a swig of the lukewarm water  
tinged metallic. The second sip he gargled and spit out. The  
old man screwed the cap back on his canteen and set it on a  
small rock, near his foot. Then he reached into his canvas pack  
and produced a beige spiral notebook, which he set upon  
the easel, as you would a canvas. The old man flipped open  
the notebook, pencil pinched between his fingers, ready to  
scribble at a moment’s notice.

I am waiting for you, Esperanza, the old man  
whispered, as if Esperanza was nearby, cradled in a fragile  
sleep from which the old man did not wish to wake her.

The old man had been coming to the Disappeared  
Village (which was how the local population now referred to  
this village, as if its proper name had been vanquished with  
everything else) for almost two months. Canvas pack slung  
over his shoulder, Ginger by his side, the old man made the  
trek every day on foot from the village in which he presently  
resided, to the Disappeared Village, ten miles in all. The old  
man was not native to this country. He had come from overseas  
to visit with and care for a sick friend, and when she died the  
old man decided to remain in the city which she had called  
home. His recent relocation to the village that neighbored the  
Disappeared Village was prompted by a dream.

\*\*\*

The small, echoing voice of a young girl calls out words  
that the old man cannot understand. Yet he is keenly aware of  
the desperation pitching her voice, and begins walking, blindly,  
across a parched featureless landscape.

Where are you, the old man calls to the young girl  
belonging to the voice, which is growing smaller and smaller.  
The old man feels lost and helpless, then stumbles upon a  
gaping aperture in the earth. He stands at the slope-rounded  
edge of the aperture, and peers into it. He can follow its narrow  
cylindrical interior down about six or seven feet, before all  
visibility is bluntly cut off by darkness.

Hello, the old man casts his voice into the darkness,  
and a sudden rush of warm air comes screaming out of the  
aperture and knocks the old man backward, into his waking  
life.

\*\*\*

The old man had had this dream—or as he saw it, it  
had had him—almost a dozen times, each revisitation marked  
by subtle differences. One time he could see deeper into  
the hole, maybe ten or twelve feet. Another time he found a  
rusted hammer, stained dark with blood, lying at the edge of  
the hole. Once, he could make out his name in the young girl’s  
typically inaudible cries. The old man, who was vigilant when  
it came to observing signs and premonitions, conscientiously  
marked down every detail of every variation on the dream in  
his notebook.

\*\*\*

News about the Disappeared Village spread like slow  
poison through the other villages and hamlets. While no one  
knew the specific facts, everyone knew who was behind the  
massacre. Yet to openly implicate those responsible meant  
placing your village and loved ones and neighbors at great risk.  
And so people voiced their outrage in cautious muted tones,  
if at all.

\*\*\*

Nineteen rifles. That was how many were alleged  
to have been stolen from the soldiers by rebels. Nineteen  
rifles, sought out and never recovered, precipitating the  
disappearance of a village and the deaths of nearly two  
hundred men, women and children. Nineteen and nearly two  
hundred. Numbers, like a hard-stinging swarm of hornets,  
kept at the old man’s brain, until they were displaced by a  
single concrete image. A well. Hand-dug; pumpleless; a gaping  
aperture in the earth.

What was supposed to have been a resource for  
drinkable water was turned into a secret burial site. An  
unmarked grave for one hundred and sixty-two people,  
including a young girl named Esperanza.

\*\*\*\*

Now the words were pouring forth with

unpremeditated fury, and the old man's hand did its best to keep up. Why Esperanza had chosen him he would never know, but he understood that it was his duty to transcribe, unexpurgated, whatever her voice gave to him.

Back in his homeland, when the old man was a younger man, he had learned, as the post-script to a personal tragedy, something essential which had shaped his philosophical outlook: nothing disappears, not really. The airpockets (as the old man referred to them) catalogued and preserved volumes of the unseen and the unheard. It was simply a matter of accessing these stories and voices, these collected silences and muted sorrows, and to do so required a certain suppleness of spirit and sensitivity of perception.

*To consciously straddle the worlds between the living and the dead is to be an intermediary. The relationship between the living and the dead is not fixed in static; it is ongoing and ever-changing.* The old man could no longer remember the original source of those words, but the words themselves remained clear and vital.

\*\*\*

Silence. The old man stopped scribbling, his left hand severely cramped and sweating. He placed the pencil in his mouth, length-wise, and ground into it, tension setting his teeth on edge. The old man stared at the fixed assembly of words upon the page and tried to comprehend their meaning, as a story. Some of it was clear and resolute; some of it obscure and enigmatic. One line hit the old man hard and got splinter-embedded in his mind: *I can't find Marisol.*

The line repeated itself several times, and the last time the old man had written the name Marisol, its legibility had diminished to a cryptic blur.

The old man spit the pencil into his hand and placed it on the ledge of the easel. Exhaustion overtook his muscles, as he found a smooth-planed rock, half-swallowed in the earth, and sat on it. He took a half-eaten strip of jerky from his pocket and gnawed on it, thoughtlessly, as he stared off into the distance. The mountains, which were fringed in a tangerine haze, struck the old man as silent, impassive witnesses. This notion aroused in him mixed feelings of jealousy, resentment, pride, and awe. Even while seated the old man's tiredness clung to him, and he closed his eyes, feeling the warm, insistent press of sunlight upon his eyelids. The wind, as if sensing the old man's dozing-off, stirred a strong gust that slapped dirt and pebbles against his face and roused him. Palms braced against his knees, the old man rose to standing.

He was about to head back to his easel when he spotted, out of the corner of his eye, Ginger in the near-distance, her head mechanically moving up and down. The

old man walked over to his dog and saw that she was using her snout like a spade in cleaving the earth.

What you got there, girl, the old man asked, and nudged Ginger away from the hollow she had dug. Ginger repeatedly pawed at her dirt-caked nose, and then sneezed. The old man saw a rounded pale white object, protruding from the earth.

What is it, he wondered, and as if indulging the old man's curiosity, Ginger centered her snout in the hollow, flanking its edges with both paws, and excavated her find. The pale white object was now clenched, length-wise, in Ginger's mouth. It was a limb. A doll's limb.

The old man kneeled down and tried to dislodge the limb from Ginger's mouth, but she wouldn't let go. Eventually, after enough twisting and manipulation, the limb was torn loose. Defeated, Ginger sat on her haunches, her blubbery brown-pink tongue hanging out the side of her mouth.

The old man rotated the hard plastic limb, examining it. Its pale white color was soil-darkened in a number of places, and two of the fingers had broken off at the tips.

It's a doll's limb, the old man spoke to his dog, who stared up at him, expectantly.

That it wasn't the limb of a child, as he first imagined, came as a great relief. Yet this reassuring fact quickly splintered and the old man's line of reasoning became darkly tilted.

The limb was not the limb of a child who had been killed, but it *was* the limb of a doll belonging to a child who had been killed. A young girl, dark-haired, green-eyed, age seven.

The old man signed the cross then reburied the doll's limb. Ginger eyed the hand-dug burial site, wanting to reclaim that which the old man had stolen from her, yet was forced, by the scruff of her neck, to accompany the old man back to the easel.

The old man poured water from his canteen into a small wooden bowl and set it in front of Ginger. Her tongue ferociously plunged the water and lapped it up. The old man removed his straw hat and hung it on the apex of his easel. He combed the thick film of sweat on his forehead with his knuckles.

In the near distance, off to the left, he saw the white wooden crosses staked in the earth, signifying the location of the well. A heat-engorged gust of wind blew strong, sailing the old man's straw hat over his head and onto the ground. He paid it no mind as he picked up his pencil and turned to a blank page.

I am waiting for you, Esperanza, he whispered.

Tell me about Marisol. Tell me about your little girl.

## James Bengler THANKS

So I paced the room  
And you just lay there  
No different than any other time  
I'd like to say it was silent  
I wish it had been  
But all the scuffling and  
Murmurs and  
Laughs and  
Sobs  
From outside the door

And inside with us  
There was the sound of my footfalls as I paced  
And louder than that was your labored breathing  
You hadn't spoken for weeks  
Respiration was your language now  
And topping it all was  
That  
Fucking  
Machine  
Beeping out the staccatoed Morse Code  
Of your failing vitals

And as the orange prison bars from the  
Other side of the drawn blinds had nearly faded  
I took the mask from your face  
And yanked every cord I could find from the wall  
And I looked back to you  
You were looking at me  
And before I could reverse what I'd just done  
You said in your crocodile skin voice  
"Turn around. You don't wanna see this part."  
So I faced the closed door  
And to my unsteady back you said:  
"Thanks."

## Emily Bright LEGENDARY

Shen Nung: self-appointed explorer, Divine Healer, and beloved emperor of all China, died peacefully in his sleep, or so the messengers proclaimed. He had lived to be a great age, with many sons waiting to mourn his death and bicker over his succession. Messengers were sent out to deliver the news to the nearest villages. From there, word spread throughout the countryside like seeds on the wind.

This much was known: Shen Nung had been very great and very wise indeed, mandated by the gods to rule over the land. He was understood to have discovered many valuable healing plants, as well as to have started the current fad of placing those plants in boiled water to drink. Those who lived in the court and saw his practices more closely knew that Shen Nung had a habit of popping into his mouth any plant he did not recognize, in order to see if it had beneficial properties. In his driven pursuit of knowledge he had become dreadfully ill and almost poisoned himself on numerous occasions, but time and time again, another discovered plant had the properties to save him. He walked great distances each day, venturing throughout the countryside, his retinue trailing behind only to catch up when he paused, sometimes for hours, to examine a discovery.

In the evenings, with the lighted torches playing off the palace walls, he recounted his findings to his guests, his wives and children, and his servants, all of whom listened with practiced admiration, exclaiming where appropriate at the emperor's enlightenment.

Often on those nights, the emperor would call his Royal Memory, a small, stuttering boy named only Tu, who stayed constantly by his master's side to record or recall on command every aspect of his master's life. At the time of the emperor's death, Tu was past thirty, but he clung to the awkwardness of boyhood; he remained small and stuttering so the people of the court often forgot he had grown at all.

At the emperor's bidding, Tu would recite the day's investigations to the crowd, the emperor cutting in at the boy's falterings in order to embellish a description or add his own interpretation. Tu himself was careful never to add to the account. His words were the words he heard; his images of

strange red berries with five pointed leaves or of high tree vines that glistened golden in the sunlight, those were the artistic descriptions dictated by the emperor himself.

"Tu," the emperor would say as the evening lengthened, gesturing grandly to his palace, his spectators, himself, "you must remember all of this."

"Every word, my lord," Tu promised.

The great emperor, satisfied, would settle back into his seat to contemplate his murals of flora and fauna. It was the most intricate work commissioned in the memory of the palace, and he often sat there, admiring it, when he was not free to leave to explore his realm for new treasures. The day Shen Nung died, he spent hours in that room, retracing each shape upon the wall. He made Tu recite the story of each one as his aging body slackened toward rest.

Word of the emperor's death continued to pass from one village to another, drawing farmers in from their rice or barley fields. A young wife, rough and tired, who had never been beyond the confines of her village, added her own interpretation: he'd turned green from all those plants he ate, had been green—hair and skin—for the last several years until, no doubt, he'd eaten something poisonous that killed him. It was a good story, worth a laugh while the water, according to the emperor's edict, heated to boiling before it could be drunk.

"I don't see how it affects us either way," her husband said. "Blue, green—it won't make our crops grow any faster this year."

"Hush now," his wife said, not bothering to turn from her fire.

How could they know that, centuries later, in paintings, Shen Nung would traditionally be depicted as green? School children, studying the rows of pictures of the legendary emperors, would recognize him by his color and giggle.

No royal painting was ever commissioned of Tu. The way he looked did not matter, only the details he retained: cluttering and dry, threatening to overwhelm. In truth, though he could name every plant he'd ever touched and list its effects on the human body—how eating licorice root, for example, soothed the chest pains and shortness of breath that had plagued him since childhood—Tu was bored by plants and always had been. Disgusted, too, for he had seen their effects on his master's body. How one left a terrible rash across his face that took weeks to heal. How another turned his tongue black so that it appeared like a snake in his mouth, darting out between his teeth as he spoke.

It seemed nearly all his court-life memories were those of his master's, but this: when Tu was young, still new to the palace and unable to sleep for homesickness, he used to sneak outside at night. He would lie on his back and look and look at the sky, not counting the lights or noticing their clusters but

simply breathing in and out until he grew dizzy and his life was small and unimportant. The rumbling of his master's snoring kept time as he lay there. Once, he fell asleep to that grinding rhythm, with the whole full sky above him. Discovered in the morning, cold and wet with dew, he was soundly punished.

Tu remembered, too, the private moments when his master, unable to sleep with age, would wake him, not for his memory, but for company. Tu had not fully appreciated it at the time. They would pass through the resplendent banquet hall, past the treasure rooms, past the guards into the plant room, painted with the rich green dye of vegetation and adorned with hanging, drying specimens. Shen Nung paced the room in his nightclothes, clutching his ever present cup of tea and exclaiming to himself about the greatness of his collection and the life it had brought to all of China. Tu struggled to stay awake.

One night, he addressed the boy directly. "I have been thinking, Tu. It seems to me there is a limit to what the mind can hold. I forget the days of my youth to make way for the greater wisdom I have today. Someday, I fear, you, too, will start to forget. Perhaps after I die, when no one will remember the truth to contradict you."

Tu felt a tremor of shame run unbidden down his spine. "My lord, my lord," he began to stammer. Had he ever failed to remember for the emperor before, that now he would lose his position? True, there were so many things to know cluttering his mind that, sometimes, he needed a moment longer than in his youth to recall—but he had never failed to do so. He could not bear to return, unneeded and ashamed, to the village of his youth, to the parents and siblings—were they still alive, any of them?—whose absence was more familiar than their presence.

The emperor pressed his hand firmly into a bed of dried moss, which cracked and crumpled underneath the pressure. He dropped it, useless, to the ground. His voice was thin and hard, as if he would command death and memory. "Why could you not have had sons, Memory? Sons to continue your role, as my unschooled, disdainful lot will follow after me? In my age I see how frail I am, and all of this"—he raised a shaking hand—"I will not allow all of this to pass away. This is the only thing that has mattered in my life."

"No," Tu said, and for a moment held himself straight against the wild eyes of the great emperor. No, Tu thought, surely there is more that has mattered in your life than these lifeless pieces of the ground. No, I will not forget. I cannot.

Tu wished for a moment that he had created something. He could not build a palace to last hundreds of years, nor could he learn the skills of the painters who'd adorned these walls. And children: he had been married once, to another servant, a stranger, with long hair and small hips, who had died in childbirth and taken the baby with her.

They spoke no more on the subject, and Tu resigned himself to uncertainty. The emperor's long list of dying commands provided that his Royal Memory would remain for him only, that his sons were to find their own.

Tu was to remain, then, like a mural on the wall: a reference left to gather dust. He was to stand with the other servants at dinner in case he was summoned to correct a fact or recall an outing. But the emperor's sons wanted to impress their guests with victories and revelations, free from the dry observations of the original event. Weary, nervous, Tu stuttered and spat his words. Like their father, they would interrupt. "Ah yes!" one would claim, as if suddenly remembering. "I, too, was there."

The sons scoured the country for new Royal Memories. It was ridiculous, they railed to their dinner guests, to confine such information to one stuttering "boy" who stood to take everything with him when he died. Slow-moving, pre-pubescent, the new Memory mocked Tu's slips of speech with his eyes, then had to ask him to repeat the properties of lichen, the location of the speckled mushroom. New court storytellers arrived as well. They were smooth-tongued men who heard the stories once or twice, then added their own flourishes.

As his duties decreased through the years, he began the simple practice of not noticing and, so, having less to remember. He spoke little. He walked great distances and let the vastness of the land impress upon him. Alone on a road lined with barley fields, he wondered at the routines the peasants kept, how the same details of sleeping and eating constructed themselves into entirely different lives than his. The palace was the only life he knew, too fully, it seemed, for any one person. In his mind he kept Shen Nung and his reign perfectly preserved.

Under the shorter and less enlightened reign of the new emperor, still the peasants farmed and slept, married and raised children. They spread their gossip and their marvels; they passed word of the royal court and of the mysterious man who wandered through the fields with bags of leaves strung at his sides. Was he a palace wise man? An estranged prince? No servant could have so much freedom. The very thought of his presence infused their imaginations and generated stories that parents told their children and couples debated late at night. Some claimed he was Shen Nung in disguise, who had not died at all, just as later generations, upon hearing the stories which grow and do not die, declared that he had been a god. Pictures of his walking figure were sketched and painted to aid in the storytelling. In the drawings, Tu appeared tall and confident. "Take a good look at him," fathers told their sons, and went on to describe their own passions embodied, their own lives made new.

Suzanne Carey  
THE MODEL

He is a handsome man—mid-forties, immaculate, well-hung—  
unlike the worn, sagging characters we usually get.  
It's not supposed to be like this: I know this man. I know  
he is an attorney, a youth soccer coach, that his secretary  
books these gigs, and I wonder if she has seen him naked,  
if this is a kinky game they play. Unlike other models,

he undresses in front of us, which seems too intimate,  
despite the fact we are in a bright, second floor studio  
across from city hall, five women at easels, brushes poised.  
It is difficult to separate man from model, to see him,  
as our instructor says—grouped shapes, shades, line and form.  
I think of male artists who both slept with their models and painted

the women they married. I try to imagine a man I adore, naked,  
displayed in front of our class, all business, nothing personal.  
I concentrate on gesture, how flesh segments space. I define shoulders,  
sketch feet, shape jaw, capture the asymmetry of testicles drooping  
in their pleated bag, how late afternoon light dapples skin. I paint  
and paint until the man is lost in pigment and what emerges is the art.

