

# Switchback

Horizontal vs. Vertical

Issue 9, vol 5

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# Horizontal vs. Vertical

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# nonfiction

## Raining Baseballs

By *Pablo Medina*

Just as you fix your sight on a ball as it leaves your father's bat, another is reaching the apogee of its arc and begins to descend a few feet away. You run to that, hoping you'll have enough time to catch it and come back to get the other. Then a whack sounds and there is a third and almost immediately a fourth coming out of the sun, then several more in quick succession, followed by an old typewriter, a twirling pig, five flapping chickens, a statuette of the Virgin Mary and a flüggelhorn, a teapot, dozens of books, a machete glinting in the sunlight (how to catch that?), an automobile tire, a tricycle, three wives, many lovers, one infant enjoying the ride (can't catch him on the bounce!), a grandmother playing solitaire, another grandmother stuffing sausages, thousands of pages darkened by a language that isn't yours, a black panther, a school of yellow fish, a telescope for looking out, a microscope for looking in, a small black dog, fish hooks and harpoons and Captain Ahab and Santiago the fisherman and Emma Bovary and Maritornes the wench, no Don Quixote but a Humbert Humbert, an Ursula Iguarán, a Pere Goriot, a duck, an inkwell, a feast of cannibals, a pot of beans, angels and demons fighting for your soul, a boy building sand castles in the make-believe beach of his wanting, where an island boomerangs constantly around his head.

When it is all done the field is steaming from all the objects, the names, the melting memories. You wind your way to where your father was standing. Now only the bat is left next to home plate. You feel defrauded. Who could ever catch so much in a lifetime, let alone fifteen minutes? You pick up the bat and go in search of your father and find him with his back to you urinating in some bushes behind the dugout. He turns but he is not your father. His face is bland, indeterminate, face of Don Nadie, a nobody. You ask him the meaning of this. You were simply fungoing at first, catching balls he batted out to you, and suddenly, without warning, the world rained down. His answer comes slowly, as if he were searching for the right words. You wanted to play, he says. Baseball, you say, not life. What's the difference, he asks. Where is my father, you ask. You have no father, there never was any father. You made him up in order to play the game. How about my mother? She's out in the field, in triplicate.

You ask him who he is and all you get in response is the smile of a not-quite-fallen angel. He walks out of the bushes and into a car that vanishes down the road. Now you look over the mess on the field and wonder if you should clean it up. You decide that while it may be your life, it is not your responsibility. You step down into the dugout and put your glove into the bag you brought with you. Somehow you missed your mother coming at you. You look back at the field one last time and there she is, as the man said, in bed retching with pain, in the hospital gurney surrounded by blue curtains, in the hot night soaping herself in her bath.

# Thing-In-Itself

*By Pablo Medina*

There is in almost dying, the island in mid-ocean, veiled by morning light, a thing-in-itself castigating our expectations with the crisp green and fawn red of its landscape. You swim toward it, knowing you will never get there without first abandoning the complicated machinery of ropes and pulleys that tie you to cause and consequence. These are various and at times contradictory. One day you are living surrounded by desert, an ocean of sand that keeps you gasping for air. Another you dive into the real sea, not the metaphorical one, but waves are harsh and sharks are waiting. On the shore your wife calls out to you, and so you return, subsuming your courage to her fear. The essence of island is one that glows on a calm sea for which there is no map or exercise, and no return. As the morning light illuminates it, it clarifies, fills with the shadows of childhood, although on careful scrutiny you discover there are no actual children there, only old people (youth that age has vanquished), among them a man sitting on a porch smoking a cigar, unshaven, spitting out tobacco juice. On the other side of town, which is invisible to you, there are the sounds of commerce: merchants arguing over the price of cod, vendors crossing the street with sacks of coconuts on their shoulders, butchers whacking at pig carcasses with their cleavers. You are the old man who listens, you are the merchants and the vendors and the butchers, you are the island, the thing-in-itself, that will soon disappear into the dark sea, leaving behind a space no one recognizes, a cigar floating in the foam of the waves, a disembodied whisper the poet calls the nothing that is.

# Five Movements in the Key of Transience

By Janice Bockelman

## I.

Wish you were here.

Gone but not forgotten.

On the road again.

Life is short and the world is wide.

If it is true that 1/3 of Americans do not use all of their allotted vacation days, then 713 million unused vacation days float into the atmosphere, or something like that.

*Time poverty* enters the vernacular: one of the catastrophes of our time we are too busy to address.

At home, we clutter our lives with Play Places, BlackBerrys, 973 television channels, man-made, indoor mountain slopes.

We wonder why we continually reach for a *getaway*.

Anything that is not a tour, not guided, not packaged or wrapped or itinerized, not listed on the Internet, in a book, or magazine. *Far-flung* is key. This desire becomes popularized to mythic proportions and soon deserves a category of its own: *off the beaten path*.

We do not know where we are going, and it does not matter; loose lips and schedules untethered are rewarded by virtue of the spontaneous and cosmic. Or of all the drugs we took last night. To bring chaos. Or of all the drugs we take daily. To function.

In the 20th century, our nascent culture founders philosophically. A small and growing group begins to snatch those days back. Long-term travel blooms. It is fervent, professed by many and misunderstood by others, who deem it “irresponsible” and “indulgent.”

*Flashpacking* enters a select vernacular: the desire to go knows no class border.

Flash•pack•er: noun 1. An affluent backpacker that adheres to a strict meal and accommodation budget, spending freely for convenient, timely transportation and recreational activities in the chosen destination, thus adopting a *flashy* or stylish lifestyle at will. 2. A backpacker with a disposable income that maintains a tight

budget by day and indulges in dining and comfortable accommodation by night. 3. A backpacker that travels with cell phone, iPod, digital camera, GPS, laptop, and other modern technology.

When one foot in front of the other is the mantra for the day, shoes have no matter. iPod and laptop are comfortably protected, owner aptly connected.

## II.

“We should go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return.”

-Thoreau

There is a kind of movement that shares the realm with comets, meteors, supernovas. Moving through space and time for light years, incandescent for an instant.

The edge of a forest (an alley, a river, a border)

One foot in front of the other

Man becomes fleck.

Travel permits day-to-day movement within one city or a jaunt over the hill to the next, but suspends us just beyond the intimate sphere of movement, of routine, that wherever we are everyone else is enveloped in.

We float above or below the hum of traffic of everyday life in the orbit of motion, we move little, if at all one day, and take a great hurdle, across rivers and towns and countries the next. Still, the force field remains.

The currency changes from kip to dong to baht to peso to pound, to yen to crown to gilder, and even this we do not want to let go of. The pile of change grows.

Everywhere we go, things move slower than where we were. A state of mind?

At first the dilation of time, of a single day, the possibility, is dizzying, then gripping, then addictive.

The heartbeat returns, and it is not frenetic, it is not erratic.

There is a race of people who have mastered a lifestyle that revolves around a particular and persistent kind of movement. They are everywhere and nowhere, collective individuals that move in an orbit of their choosing, in the shadows of train stations, in the alleys upon straw mats, at corner tables and upon the floors of temples, in

the cracks and gaps, sitting next to us. It appears they are still.

In them there is no past, no future, no nostalgia, only one foot, and then the other. They tell us, it's not for everyone.

The in-between minutes of transit hold up the other end of paradoxical motion, stagnant pacing among the hours of the day that life is poured into.

When we travel, we live on maps in false permanence. Among the many difficulties with living on a map for any period of time is that time eventually sparks and restarts no matter how far we have come, or gone. The map dangles this element, the subjectivity of time, pausing for the moments and days devoted to it.

(Time's up.)

Concentrated evanescence diminishes the significance of time. The conflicted state between lingering and moving troubles this; a state in which time would have been quantified by place, and twenty-four hour increments of time could have been acknowledged in vain.

Footprints come and go. But the eyes, those we will remember.

We wait, move on, spiral out.

We swing closer to and farther from reality. We are pendulums of our pace.

A view from the airplane window: dappled stability among fields of transience.

### III.

Ticket stubs, Bible-paper receipts, napkins with notes, crinkled maps, paper aching to disintegrate along with time; perfected mimes and missed connections.

The collective longing sounds like the hum of locusts in the summer air, the slap-slap of sandals on the road.

A single fragment of the allure: not owning up to any one place, rather living in the cracks that open up.

42 cities in a month, 1 city in four months: dotted villages along the riverbank, *wish you were here*, slouched minutes in a visa office, *gone but not forgotten*, rummy at the bus station, *on the road again*. Cracked feet, weary

eyes, the tinkle of temple bells. The next bus is to nowhere; one ticket, please, *life is short and the world is wide*. Here too, ruts exist.

After post-op recovery, a diagnosis with a terminal illness, divorce, death, estrangement, tragedy. If not now, then when?

We need this now, before it's too late. Because it is only the beginning, because it is almost over. We invent occasions and reasons and excuses and logical responses for something buried in our roots. Why?

The backdrop of the mind is a map cloaked in a throbbing heat-sensitive blanket. The places that effect us, push us, pull us, are fiery red with a pulsating blue core. These are the familiar places, the places with our histories that roll off the tip of our tongue: Mahoning Valley and Shadylake Drive and Lakewood and Athens, Pittsburgh and Pig's Alley, Chiang Mai and Calle 31 and Tulum, San Francisco and Pacifica. Other pulsate a warm orange, places with burgeoning connections, potential: Bonaire, Futaleufu, Prague, Chicago, the Teton Mountains, Indianapolis, Ormond Beach.

This map blazes and fuels with every turn of an engine, roar of a train, sight of a sail, crack of a guidebook, crinkle of map, spin of a globe.

Step over the imaginary black line, the paper boundary, into the country, city, province, town, the rolling hills of the village unknown to us, and the imagined is snipped to shreds and discarded like steel shrapnel; *over there* reality lies just beyond the pile of rubbish, *desnudo*, nearly always more. FILL IN THE BLANK .

Wanderlust: the name of a song by 17 different bands, the name of 2 albums, a popular term in fantasy novels, particularly prevalent in elves. "Afoot and lighthearted..."—Walt Whitman.

#### IV.

Americans created automobile culture, but this did not abate our jittery nature, it did not rid us of our collective wanderlust. We are a restless bunch, politically, culturally, intellectually, physically. We thirst. We seek.

Have coffee, will travel.

Products of a mobile culture.

The idea of a return to anywhere is nausea-inducing; visa extensions, one-way flights make even a seasoned pulse quicken.

Transit therapy.

Fitful sleep on overnight trans, serene early morning arrivals, a comforting, warm gray sky becomes our familiar pillow. In the erratic, we find rhythm.

It is the glittering and matte possibility that a horizon upholds. If we can see this, we move on.

Every time we move on, possibility widens, clarity has a better pick-up line.

## V.

The remnants of transience reside in the fine lines of travel left upon a person's face, a person's mind.

When we reach our destination and cannot bear to stop: Pilgrim's dilemma. This occurs whether we are lost or found.

A map is found and lost: a road, a river, a current, an expectation, a goal, a dream, a movement. A map is the most unstill of stagnant, static, tangible objects.

In another breath, the map is the uncooperative foil, bristling at every fleeting moment. It is motionless, consistent, unvarying—it is the dreaded pragmatic cousin. Plan, itinerate, program, route, schedule.

We discover it at every intersection of travel, in the bus and train stations, the flip-flip of pages, in the packing and re-packing of bags, in the questioning: "where are you from, where have you been, where are you going?" It is in the moments of walking and waking, standing still and sleeping. It seeps into the crevices and cracks of every journey, until absorption occurs. Perhaps it is as scientific as osmosis, as mystical as Indigo children.

It sees eye to eye with the act of putting shoe to Earth and pen to paper, defies the desire to linger in life and in the written word, scoffs at preservation and the nature of writing. Scoffs at the search for the constant in the fleeting and fragmented: the remains. We and the essay are in a delicate realm, wanting to make the transitory eternal.

This kind of movement maintains only the sporadic spontaneity, the eruptive, arrhythmic temperament of

insanity. Even so, it is perhaps the way of life nearest to music we experience.

By necessity of experience, travel brings forth in us the frayed edges, the rust, the patina particular to ourselves.

The architecture of travel is unexpected, imaginary, and constantly reinvented. Perhaps it is composed entirely of scaffolding, unannounced and unwarranted stucco and fresco. Discordant rods of steel and screws jut out here and there. Brick by brick cemented solidly by mortar and logical process, here makes no sense. In this, there is room for unravel, collapse, expansion, change.

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In Japanese culture, *mono no aware* is a spiritual and aesthetic concept that represents desolate poignancy, the acceptance of the impermanence of all things. This is a cursory definition; there is no easy Western translation. American culture is some steps removed from this philosophy.

A related term: *wabi sabi*.

*Wabi* has a number of meanings: poverty, simplicity, living in nature, remote from society.

*Sabi* refers to the visual and psychological effects of aging: weathered and worn, loneliness and serenity. It has been translated as the “bloom of time.”

In the 17th century, the Japanese poet, Basho, combined the concept of *wabi sabi* in his craft. The haiku was born.

*Wabi sabi* is understood to be an aesthetic term that nurtures all that is authentic by acknowledging that

nothing lasts,  
nothing is finished,  
nothing is perfect.

Feet flattening the  
blades of grass you can almost  
hear the sounds of time.

# poetry

## Tracings & Carbons

By Micah Ballard

For several days  
I waited for the sun to come up  
then went back to work  
the winged ones were of lowest rank  
(intermediary beings)  
I said nothing of their features  
but recognized them  
by the little flames above their heads  
I began to feel hungry  
& felt around with my feet  
to see if I was touching the floor  
wanting their leave in me  
they held out their arms  
the months & years began to add up  
my body was first to go  
added lines, creases to the skin  
then it was the hair & eyes  
previous lives conjured then rewritten  
some of them stayed close  
while others chose to come & go  
now I bring them paper & ink  
wait on days to receive

# Ad Nauseam

*By Micah Ballard*

Incessant rain.

No more wind to weep the noise,  
rattle the blinds

I had wanted a flat on 42nd  
but instead retired to a monastery  
to mask the exhaustion.

I hid in the bathroom for days  
& scorned any notion of their permanence  
as long as my body held on

I traveled from one state to another  
then didn't see anyone for months

I hope to return a forgotten nobility  
& lure back the faithful

young literati too rich to care

a drastic deterioration

virtual in every particular

# New Shapes

*By Micah Ballard*

Humbly alive again  
walking through someone else's  
death not mine this time  
they are usually small  
then you move on to the next  
unaffected, besides paranoid pale  
& the usual horsemen  
they like to be spoken to  
at random at ease  
to recognize they are there  
is all that they want  
it's better to keep it up  
at random and not summon  
for your own sake  
but sit back and do what they want  
all the while taking notes  
not your notes, only theirs  
then you act like nothing happened  
and keep on acting  
because nothing does happen  
unless they want to.

# On a Vision Of the Four Elements

*By Chris Crittenden*

shattered and gassed,  
boiling bits of clues  
that struggle to warn,  
a hubbub within four,

the quartet dissonant:  
part blaze part Om,  
part flood part wheel—

a grate that steams  
what it devours back up,  
the chewed indistinguishable  
from the teeth,

the dwellings inseparable  
from the vortex.  
cities messy and flowing,

clothes swordfighting  
like windy blades  
in bustles that slant and strut,

wool of a turbid flock,  
uncertain which screams  
belong to sheep, and which  
to bolts that split  
over burning war.

# Blink

*By Jessica Wickens*

Look out the wide windows

when the ships come            under what authority            is skin

the port blisters            binds its steel but here

smaller            make yourself            make me

Placing piece by tiny piece

of the night    inside my chest

you're sleeping            there            you're falling

asleep

into teeth            and neck embrace

up close it's not a blanket            too much growing in gold grass

I'm flat on the floor            head in the speaker and finger

by finger            the light passes easily through us

teasing out the hairy breath            a plaster of yolk            but be rinsed away

be chaff            if you must            be

# **Aurora Borealis**

*By Candy Shue*

Pushed by the particles of God's  
countenance, a partial vacuum,  
fluorescent, obscure, the surface  
on which flammable liquids float.  
Fleecy or vaporous? This vital spark  
of flint, sensitive to the bit, a space  
producing sensation. Ice alloy, low  
specific gravity. Intensely timbered,  
Aphrodite inflamed the fire in the eye.  
I descend from the deliriously skirted  
frame, asteroids spinning ever faster.  
Ancient magnetic north, fickle me  
and disclose. Delivered of child, do  
I illuminate embroidered vessels, re-  
veal divisions risen from the land?

Sleep—

a winged valve, a phosphorescent  
gun, gathers and scatters its signal-  
fire, a luminous curve, a reversible  
traffic.

Golden ratio—

accumulation or  
growth

accretion of

calcite; to

calculate the

immac(awake in the dark

)ulate

—sea shell

writing construction fusion systematic marks are gone and gone the symmetry of folds  
and inherent a symmetry<sup>1</sup> in logorrhea like secretion on the page connect with syntax

the dots

are

like letters in words;

micro(not seen, electrons

bombard,

bounce back, and

affect

the examined: a

particle[ular]

gaze)

scope

broadens

(e)

dots, bl-

ips

fission, recursion:

sy[stems(roots

sprout: delicate

flesh)]

spiral  
(inward, phi

[laws,  
force,  
prob  
-ability fields{  
flat, curving  
with pendulum  
predictability and  
sine waves /like greetings/}  
chance as  
force]).

Streams  
(dictionary and usage linked)  
cut  
slowly  
(language distinct from thought, and thought above poetry –)  
down.

“That is not what I meant at all.

That is not it, at all.”

---

1 symmetry—My sister has symmetry on her forehead; screw holes the dark brown of scar tissue; her neck has a 4° list to the left, remnants of the angelic.

# Having the distinct impression

*By Jeff Anderson*

of walking in of entering of disturbance of intrusion. Chairs are lined in nothing but primes, groups of two of three of five of seven (w/ an absence of groups of four or six). Linoleum floor, complete with false perspective(s) built into the straight lines and

tone changes.

Low ceiling (seven feet, prime). A short door (five feet). Undulating hall, even, perspective lines pressing and intersecting w/ walls. Low tables and groups of chairs. The tables and chairs are grouped in primes in the undulating hall following the short door and the intersecting perspective lines in the linoleum.

Recursion.

Framed artwork, parallel, carving (visual) hallways in real hallways where people are sleeping. Spread across two chairs (balled) or three chairs (flat). No snores, just imperceptible shutters instantaneously gone, plumbing clicks and flows, and the

sound of someone: spitting.

Of comfort of cricks in necks and flows in pipes of creaks in walls and the phoneme /p/ of spitting. Solitary sleeping conversing w/ dual sleeping. Conversation of false perspective. Of the phonemics of spitting: /p/ or /t/ or some other

voiceless stop.

# Ephemera

*By Rick D'Elia*

The days when the boys, with wine soaked teeth watching porchlamps quit, keeping their lapels pressed tight, trying their best not to shudder down tenement stairs may come again. The clutch sticks and struggles while the transmission rattles down Fellsway West crossing the bridge creaking with sunset. Maybe this time lust will buckle.

# questioning the necessity of glasses

By Sarah Louise Green

- A. her grandfather staring out the window 15 years  
of looking for something in the steamed glass  
he died of impatience one day, but his body  
just kept on: the two shall become one flesh
- and her grandmother still has half a mind, full of  
Discovery Channel specials: *The Deep Sea*  
*or Mars*, it makes no difference which—her limbs  
will be packed into angels or urns.
- B. who has hidden the *Lai-See* behind the mirror?  
who has sewn the button-eyes on the rag doll?  
sweep away the days of twelve months:  
the New Year ends and begins in fire
- touching their noses to the panes as they wait  
for the good luck monkey or mercy;  
tore up the yard looking for family secrets and  
found layers: decomposing persimmons, birdbones.
- C. the Doctor lets her pick out any pair she likes  
because she was torn in two by alphabets,  
*Lichee*, persimmons, she sorts fruits and  
misnomers according to color – red to brown
- hey china, hey china! your eyes are slits,*  
*and so is your vagina!* – hop skip jump –  
the lower-case l splits down the middle,  
hole becomes home: earthbound/airborne.

# fields

*By James McFadden*

i.

Douse the burden on your  
muddled flanks

It shatters in a bath of  
robot sparks, you stutter  
out the measure of fuse-blown  
transmissions to hack your  
way through a field of ghosts-  
then write a letter about it:

“Dear Recipient,

fields are a wick burning

fields become the graph  
in dives

fields are rising pistol smoke

fields teeth their grain  
against the sky

P.S. fields to carpet the dead  
beneath the earth.”

ii.

Wind-driven rain is a dust-storm  
of river-water, it becomes  
unintegrated above fields

A trap door opens itself  
into the earth.

I had something  
and now it is gone.

Grey-struck sun and  
a wheel to turn on when  
fields engulfed approaching light.

Learn to scatter your appendages  
at the first sign of danger.

An arrow moves across a field-  
it is jamming your signal.

Sift to the center of fields  
and begin to dig.  
You are searching for God.

If you mixed grey cement  
to pour the foundation on a  
single blade of grass, I would not  
crawl on my hands to reach  
it, I would not say that I  
had slept there, I would  
not say that heat curled fallen  
leaves like a cat in your  
window.

I had a dream and fields  
are on fire.

# fiction

Sub.

By Rachel Meier

She derived an unexpected pleasure from changing his diapers. The antiseptic freshness of each one folded in the package. The stack of thick rags—bleached achingly white. Flannel, someone had advised her, would be best.

When they met she had been nineteen. He, forty-five. He was her Latin professor. They had sex in her campus apartment every other weekend, when her housemate went down south to see her high school sweetheart. The first time he spread her legs he cried out, “Actum est de republica!” And pretended to faint from the sight.

Once, when he was still her professor he had missed a class. A cold he had caught from her. There had been a substitute. One of his teaching assistants. She remembers being thrown off by this other man on the podium.

He was not her first lover but he was her first affair, and, as it turned out, she rather liked being a mistress. “Clearly, you’ve never seen *Casablanca*,” he protested one night when she expelled him from bed to ensure that he arrive on time to his wife’s father’s birthday party. “Id es vita,” she said.

“Est,” he corrected. “Id est vita.”

He was the only Latin professor at the college when she was enrolled. They both agreed it would be best if she was not his student again, so she gave up Latin. She blamed him for her rudimentary conjugation. He blamed her for his herniated disk—she made him go ice-skating! At forty-nine! They both blamed his first wife for the cancer eating away at his spine. After all, neither one of them had any family history of the disease. Not even a cat, a gerbil. And first wife, her family was just chock full of it. “I mean, where else do you pick up a thing like that?” they had said to the doctor. He, in disbelief, had said nothing.

She was making breakfast when she heard him call over the baby monitor, a hand-me-down from her sister. The babies her sister had listened for were now eleven and fourteen. She could hear him fussing around. Then periods of stillness when, presumably, he was catching his breath. And then more fussing. Finally he called for her.

“Just pretend like I’m the baby we never had.”

“I didn’t want a baby.”

“That’s right. You didn’t.” He was quiet for a minute. “Ok, then you lie down instead.”

But it wasn’t like with a baby, and for this she was grateful. His limbs stayed quietly where she placed them and she was not gentle. She had to use her own strength and also what was left of his to get the job done.

He was heavy. She had no choice.

In the beginning, before their bodies had learned the motions, it had been awkward. But like anything—setting up the coffee maker the night before, listening to opera, biting gently on the underside of his jaw during sex—it had been learned.

Still, she sweat from the effort, her skin prickling and flushing, but she knew where to place her hands for the most leverage. How to best take his weight onto her. She knew what would make his breath catch in his throat and what would make him gasp, outright. She was careful not to rush him, and, at times, she found herself drawing it out longer, and longer. Sometimes he closed his eyes, said nothing, and simply let her work him over. Other times, when he was feeling more energetic he talked to her, met her eyes, pushed back against her.

She thinks, still, about being his student. About his body pacing back and forth across the lectern. About the one class he missed and how it unsettled her to watch a stranger take the place of her lover. Unsettling hearing her lover's phrases, admonishments, and lessons issuing from the mouth of another. It made her feel as though, from his vantage point behind the lectern, he too could picture the mole on the inside of her thigh. Understood just how to make her wet. Could hear her cries of pleasure.

She knew, of course, that this was ridiculous. But now, years later, after the shape of his face has long been lost to her, she wishes that she could summon him to her. That he could do, what of course is impossible, what he had never, not for a moment, done. That he could, against all odds, stand in.

# Skittish

*By Al Riske*

This is the low point of my life so far. I'm 29, almost 30, and I'm working in a bookstore in Bakersfield—a chain that has strict rules about what we can have on our shelves and how long it can stay there before we send it back and get something else. Something someone will buy.

I spend my days tearing the covers off paperbacks and mailing them to various publishers. Just the covers. Saves on postage. The depressing part is that I'm left with all these faceless books that have to be destroyed. It's against the law to give them to anyone, and who would want them? I mean, technically, you should still be able to read them, no problem, but I've tried it and it's no good. Like talking to someone who has no face.

Even if you're a good person it would be hard to talk to someone with no face. You'd avoid it if you could.

That's not why this is the low point of my life, though. It's the low point for a lot of other reasons. The big one is that Jerry, my boyfriend—ex-boyfriend, I should say—comes into the bookstore tonight and just starts talking. No hello or anything.

I walk away but he follows me from aisle to aisle as I put new books on the shelves and rearrange old ones, the ones browsers have moved to random places, to get them back into alphabetical order. In biography, I'm momentarily confused until I remember that, here, the books are arranged by subject, not author.

I suppose the real reason I'm out of sorts, though, is because I don't want to hear what Jerry is saying. Certainly not here. I'm a private person. I don't want to have this conversation in a bookstore with half a dozen quietly browsing (and listening) customers.

We end up across the sales counter from each other. For a long time we say nothing at all, and finally I blurt out, "Jerry, I told you I don't want to talk about it." Which is kind of funny because we weren't talking about it anymore.

I notice my coworker, Paul, off to my right. He looks down at his inventory sheet.

Jerry backs away, smiles.

"Okay," he says. "See you later, Sasha."

His voice sounds all sweet and he smiles again and waves, but I just narrow my eyes. I pretend my face is made of stone. I give nothing away.

Once he's out the door, I turn away, fold my arms and stare at the floor.

"What was that all about?" Paul asks.

I try to stay tightlipped about the whole thing, but there's hardly anyone in the store now—just a teenage boy in the photography section and a shopgirl by the magazines—so a couple of gently prying questions from Paul is all it takes. He's really nice and kind of cute. (Too bad he's so young.)

"He came in to tell me he has my dog and is planning to keep her."

"What?"

"He didn't say anything to me beforehand—just went to my place while I was gone and took the dog."

“Who does he think he is?” Paul wants to know.

Paul, named for the apostle, is a practicing Catholic and seems to genuinely care about people. I was a Catholic myself once, but only briefly. I don't do mass or confession anymore, but I know God is inside me. There's no other way to explain how I'm able to get up each morning.

“It was his dog to begin with,” I say. “He gave her to me.”

Then I have to explain about me and Jerry and the dog—a beautiful retriever/lab/setter mix Jerry had never really wanted. That's why he gave her to me. He said he wanted me to have Jules because he could see how much I loved her, but the truth was he could no longer be bothered to walk her or feed her or do anything but kick her when she got underfoot.

“I love that dog,” I say. But I hear no emotion in my voice, which is weird, and I find myself staring at the floor again. Jules is my dog. She loves me.

“Maybe I should let him have her,” I say finally. “Then I'd never have to see him again.”

“From the sound of things, the dog is this guy's last hold on you,” Paul says.

I nod dumbly. He doesn't know how right he is. I'm moving next week and haven't told Jerry or anyone else where I'm going.

Paul is still talking. “He probably has no real interest in the animal; it's just something to hold over your head. Like: I've got her now; what are you going to do about it?”

“I don't want to hassle with him anymore. He's a prick, an asshole, a shit-for-brains...” When I can't think of any more names to call him, I stop. Then I add the ironic kicker, “He says he still loves me.”

In my mind I can still see him smiling and waving. He gets away with so much because of that smile.

When I blink, I see Paul shaking his head, so I say, “Hard to believe, huh?”

“He has a strange way of showing it.”

“I know. He seemed so sweet at first. Still does at times.”

It's that smile of his. And I guess I went for the muscles as well. He works out all the time and is very strong, which always made me feel safe...until it didn't.

“Don't,” Paul says.

“Don't what?”

“Don't try to work it out.”

I shake my head and notice my hair is falling all over the place, so I pull it back and replace the scrunchy. As I do, I catch Paul watching me, but just as quickly I pretend not to notice. I don't know what it is about my neck. Guys are always kissing it or wanting to kiss it. It's my best feature, I suppose.

“Still,” I say, “I hate to give up the dog. He'll only mistreat her.”

I can still see Jules, the day I first met her. She kept circling around me, wanting to be my friend, but staying just out of reach. If I stretched out my hand she would scamper back three steps, then slowly start circling again, afraid of being caught, afraid of what might happen then.

“Better the dog than you,” Paul says.

He's right, I guess, though that doesn't make it any easier.

Paul touches my arm. I move away.

# The Hammock

By *Daniel Vaccaro*

They lay in a hammock in the backyard behind their house. A few minutes before, they had brought the hammock out and hung it between two wooden poles. A few minutes before that, they had been talking about the future. They were always talking about the future.

It's just not practical. That's all I'm saying, he said.

Things aren't always practical, she said. With a push of her hand, she set the hammock rocking. It was a colorful hammock, hand-woven by artisans from Central America, and it sagged beneath their weight.

I don't really feel like rocking today, he said.

They lay in opposite directions. Her feet twitched next to his head. They were dirty from walking barefoot across wet grass. Their small backyard was the only green space in an otherwise grey urban neighborhood.

But wouldn't you be proud of making something together? she said.

A minivan passed on the street behind the gate. Music boomed from its open windows, thumping menace. He watched it come to a slow roll as it approached the intersection. A long scratch chiseled its sliding door.

Probably for the first few years, he said, but think about how our lives would change. There'd be no more of this, for example.

She looked at the ceiling of the gazebo, noting the places where the wood came together. There were steel bolts at the seams. A spider had woven a web in one lofty corner. She reached down again and with a push set the hammock rocking.

I don't really feel like rocking today, he said. When I close my eyes I feel like there's nothing beneath me.

It's soothing, she said.

The sun. A few clouds in the sky. Behind a barbed wire fence across the street, a hammering sound came from the mechanic's garage.

Can I come over to your side? she said and put one leg over the edge.

Can't we just stay like this for a while? he said. I just got comfortable.

Okay, she said. She pulled her leg back and the hammock fidgeted.

The church bells sounded for twelve o'clock mass. Two squirrels chased one another to the pinnacle of an evergreen tree. He watched them scramble branch to branch, and then descend. They tightroped the fence top, chattering.

Do you really think you'd be any good at it? he said.

She turned her head to the side and closed her eyes. It might be the only thing I'm good at, she said. Don't you think I'd be good at it?

Well, he said, you can barely keep a plant alive. He smiled, but she didn't see him. He closed his eyes

too.

She almost said something. It was true that her garden hadn't turned out as planned. The few tomatoes she was able to grow were stolen just before they got ripe. But that wasn't her fault. They had to take the hammock in at night as well.

She shifted her weight and set the hammock rocking.

I asked you to stop rocking, he said. I don't wanna ask again.

It's soothing, she said. Her breath followed the movement of the hammock. She drew her attention away from the noise of passing traffic, and church bells, and the tinkering of automotive repair, and let it rest in the silence.

I just think we need to be practical about it, he said. And when she didn't answer, he opened his eyes. He looked at the mole on her upper lip. When they'd first started dating, he'd dreamed that he was a pioneer on the surface of that mole. He'd planted a flag on it and claimed it for the king. It seemed darker now than it had then.

The hammock was still. A small bird swooped down to the rim of the birdbath, twittering as it ventured a foot into the dark green water. Its chest feathers were ruffled in the way his hair looked when pressed against a pillow for too long. Deciding against a bath, the bird bent forward and stabbed the water with its beak. After a few minutes of thrashing, the bird leapt into the air. He watched it wing between two telephone poles and then disappear behind the house.

She twitched in her sleep and a brown strand of hair slipped across her face. She turned her head in his direction. The sun touched her chin and neck. He guessed it would be easy to cover her mouth with his hand. It would be easy to squeeze her throat with the other. She would asphyxiate before she realized what was happening.

He pulled one leg out of the hammock and then the other. He sat on the edge for a moment and then stood up. The hammock shuddered, but she didn't stir. There was no sign of anyone nearby. He looked at her sleeping face.

I just want to be practical about this, he said. He reached down and set the hammock rocking. He rubbed his hand over his face, turned and walked away.

I know, she said, and opened her eyes. But he kept walking, as though he hadn't heard.

# On Writing: Neither Horizontal nor Vertical Be

By *Deborah P. Bloch*

1

She awakened in her dot.com green room. The setting moon shown through the long, low windows, turning her hair an ethereal white. As she threw off the feathers that had lightly covered her body through the many days of night, she realized that she was awake. She hoped she was still dreaming, but, no, she was awake.

This won't do. This won't do at all. The Masters did not allow her and the others to begin by being in the awakening state. They must begin elsewhere. The Masters preferred that she and the others begin by being in the town they call in medias res, but that town, as the Indian name suggested was in Indiana, and she was awakening in California. Perhaps there was some way out. Wait! She bolted upright. Once, a long time ago, one had been allowed to begin in the state of awakening. There was some hope. Slowly, she raised her nightgown. That took some time because the gown, as was the custom, stretched ten feet beyond her tippy toes and five feet beyond her fingertips. Her hope was not realized; she had not acquired the characteristics of a beetle. Then she knew,

I had a little beetle  
So that beetle was his name  
And I called him Alexander  
And he answered just the same

Then she didn't know, but she knew,  
But nanny let my beetle out  
Yes nanny let my beetle out  
She went and let my beetle out  
And beetle ran away.

This whole day was too sad. Not only wasn't she a beetle, but there was this very tragic tale of a beetle, and she was beginning in the state of awakening. Master Z would not approve at all. What punishment would ensue was uncertain. Perhaps she would not be allowed to begin in any state—anywhere—or finish. Then where would she be? Perhaps she would be forced back into the infant school of summer. In despair, she wrapped all those yards of yellow nightgown round and round her body, covering her head. No part of her showed at all.

2

That didn't work. She couldn't breathe as the diaphanous yellow fabric filled her mouth and nostrils. Gasping, she pulled the gown away from her face and then she saw it: a means of escape. Through the long, low windows she saw that the moon had finished setting; a new day had begun. In the early blue glow of daylight,

she could see giant wheels resting on the ground. With great difficulty, with all the fabric tangling around her with every move, she crawled to the window and peered upwards. Whatever was out there was big, and metallic, and—it had wings. It was a bird. It was a plane. Whatever superthing it was, it could carry her out of the state of awakening elsewhere, perhaps all the way to inmediasres. Quickly, she threw off her nightclothes, completing her undressing in two hours under the usual five required for the unwinding of the windings. She donned her required daytime uniform of tattoos and earrings and slipped through one of the windows.

It was a plane, and there were stairs leading up to a door. She thought that was strange, wondering who had put the stairs in place or why they were there. But she knew she had to take advantage of this opportunity. She clambered up the stairs, through the door, and into the cockpit. She revved the engines and began to roll back the plane and think back on her narrow escape. And then she realized. This was one more trick of fate or of the Masters. Just as Master Z would not allow her to begin by being in a state of awakening, Master A<sup>1</sup> would not permit anything at all to take place on a plane. She thought that perhaps she could avoid that injunction by flying the plane. Perhaps the injunction referred only to being a passenger, sitting in a narrow seat, leaning on a window or the shoulder of the person next to her, musing on the events of the past day or week or year, looking at photos that engendered memories. She tried to remember. What had Master A<sup>1</sup> actually said? Was it:

Fly me to the moon  
Let me play among the stars  
Let me see what spring is like  
On Jupiter and Mars.

No, that wouldn't do. That wasn't about flying. It was a song, about kissing, and who cared about kissing at a time like this! What to do, what to do? Inspiration—that was what she needed.

Somewhere over the rainbow  
Bluebirds fly.  
Birds fly over the rainbow  
Why then oh why can't I?

Yes, why couldn't she fly? Because Master A<sup>1</sup> had expressly forbidden it. To make it worse, unlike Master Z who had simply said you could not begin in a state of awakening, Master A<sup>1</sup> had a total injunction against any time spent on airplanes. Her shoulders sagged beneath the weight of her tattoos and her face crumpled in on itself so that her nose ring almost touched her lip ring.

She was lost. She felt tears well up in her eyes. Not tears! Master A<sup>2</sup> had said that absolutely, under no conditions could she or the others describe tears. What would she do with the tears if she could not describe them? She looked up and saw that above the plane's instrument panel, there was a visor just like the one in her car. She pulled it down, hoping that it held a mirror and that she could see the tears in the mirror and thus, despite the certain commands of Master A<sup>2</sup>, she would be able to describe the tears. No luck. No mirror. Since she

knew she wouldn't be able to awaken or fly, she thought she might be able to describe tears and win over Master A<sup>2</sup> if only she could find a mirror. What shape were tears? What color? She allowed a few more tears to fall and raced to the lavatory behind the cockpit. Yes, there was a mirror, but her tears had dissolved. There was nothing to describe. She thought about her plight, and a few more tears fell, but they clouded her vision and when she looked in the mirror, she could hardly see her face and its many rings. She rubbed at the mirror. The cloudiness was not in the glass but in her eyes.

She returned to the cockpit chair, and glancing around, spotted a computer. Perhaps there was a way out. She would Google *tears*. Wikipedia came to her rescue: "Tear fluid contains water, mucin, lipids, lysozyme, lactoferrin, lipocalin, lacritin, immunoglobulins, glucose, urea, sodium, and potassium." And more, "Emotional tears contain more of the protein-based hormones prolactin, adrenocorticotrophic hormone, and leucine enkephalin (a natural painkiller) than basal or reflex tears."

4

She wondered whether she had gotten away with it. She had begun with an awakening, she had described events aboard a plane, and she had described tears, at least in a biological sense. No, she was sunk. Masters Z, A<sup>1</sup>, and A<sup>2</sup> would surely punish her. She hoped they didn't still use the white-out or red rubbing things. She felt more tears drift down her cheeks, and reached out her tongue, expecting the familiar salty tang. These tears, however, had a distinctly chocolate flavor, dark chocolate, at least seventy percent cacao. And she knew: "A chocolate a day, leads the student-writer astray."

# art

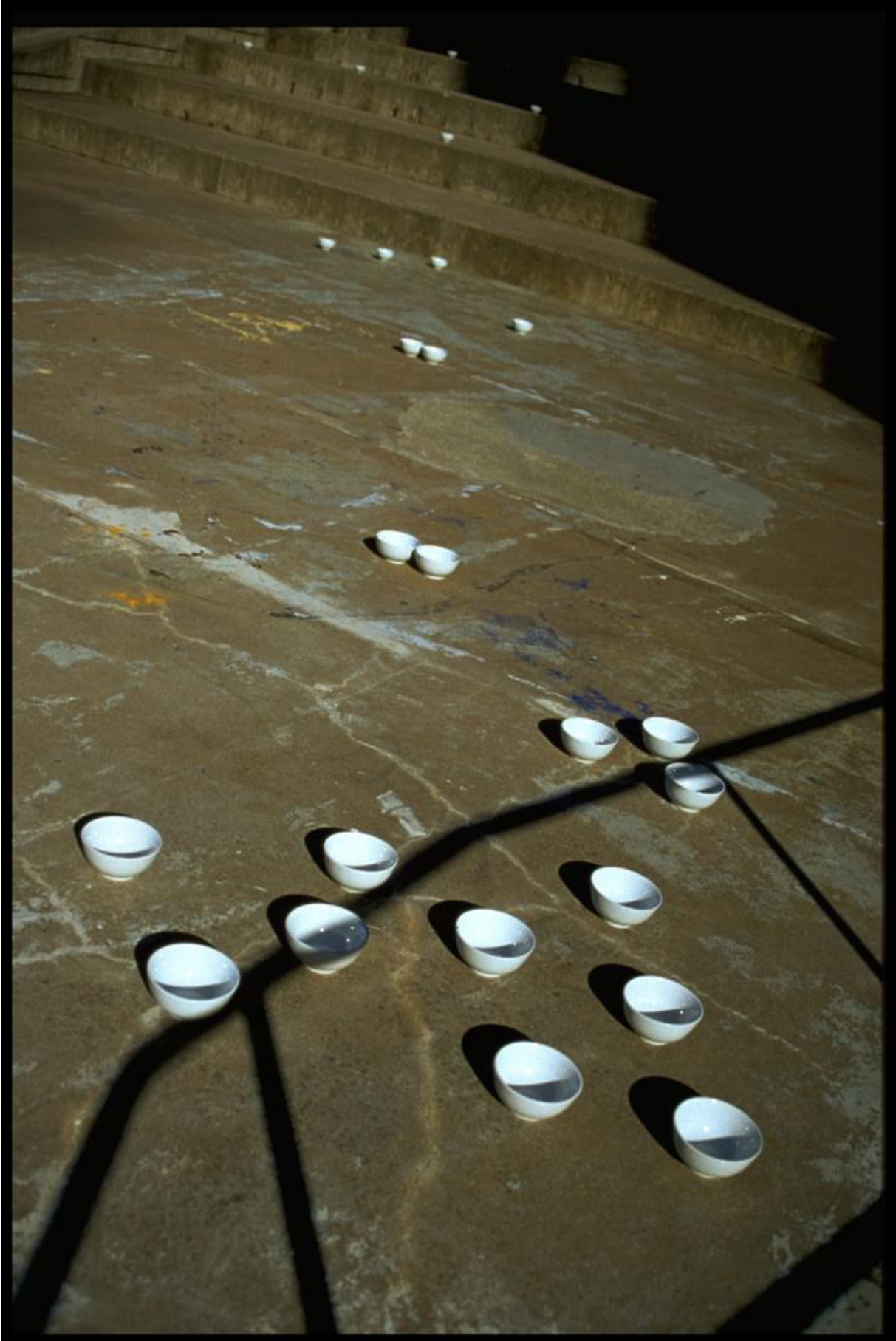
At Sunset

By Corisa Moreno



Steps (image 1b)

By Melba Abela



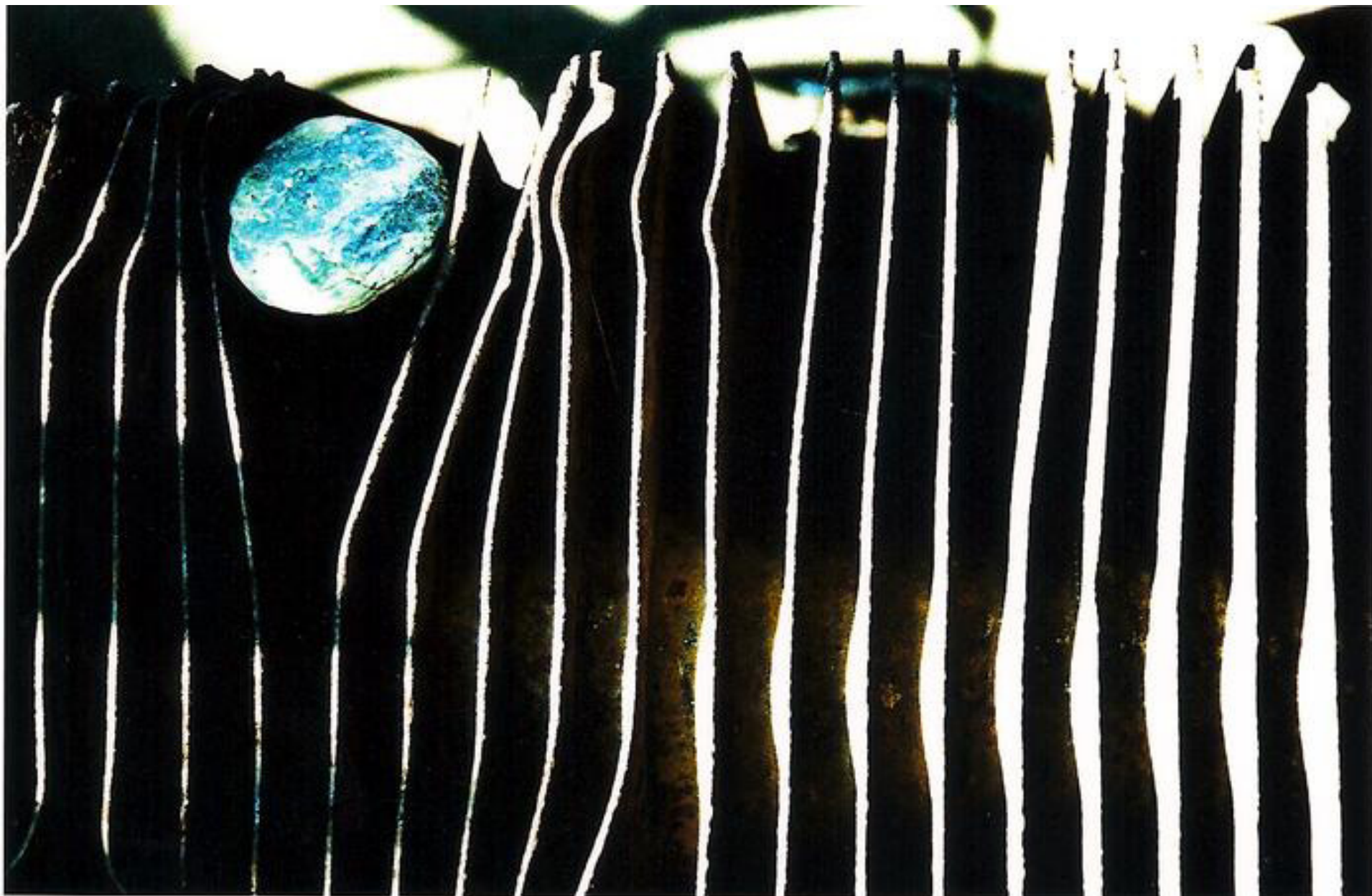
# Open

By Corisa Moreno



# When the Earth was Round

By Corisa Moreno



# contributors

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**Daniel Vaccaro** is an MFA in Writing student at the University of San Francisco. He comes from a long line of New York neurotics, addicts and enablers. During various life stages, he has lived in China, Europe and his own mind. He currently resides in San Francisco's Outer Sunset where the fog and his writing practice coexist in relative harmony. More of his work can be seen at [www.danieljvacaro.com](http://www.danieljvacaro.com).

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