

SPRING 2010 *ORLANDO* POETRY PRIZE WINNER



TANAYA WINDER is from the Southern Ute and Duckwater Shoshone Nations and was raised on the Southern Ute Indian Reservation in Ignacio, Colorado. She was a finalist in the 2009 Joy Harjo Poetry Competition and her work is forthcoming in *Cutthroat: a journal of the arts'* 5th Anniversary Issue and the Spring 2010 issue of *Yellow Medicine Review: a journal of Indigenous Literature, Art, and Thought*. She currently lives, works, and writes in Colorado.

"The Impermanence of Human Sculptures"

Printed with permission by Tanaya Winder, copyrighted by Tanaya Winder @ 2010

The essential "arrangements"—
choose a coffin to keep her

protected from "the elements." Given sufficient time
we rust like iron, disintegrate in the presence of air

moisture and water. The palpable aging of paper.

Do we all sleep like marble
statues, fixed points in a room
with locked expressions? Interpreting the abstract

space dangling between
waking and sleeping is
an obsessive repetition. Was it Eva Hesse

who explored the medium of art
fading over
time and wasn't that part of what made it

beautiful? That's what I still called my mother
post-mastectomy. Her single breast drooping,
a perfect display of three-dimensional

impermanence. A brave faced statue.

That's how I like to think of it. No—
that thinking makes it bearable

when people ask: how
did it happen? She hanged herself, a lone

wire suspending her, delicately,
like wet paper molded into the exact shape

of emptiness. Unstable. Like a cloth-covered coffin,
left crumpling in the wind,

like paper. Or Eva. Dear Eva,
diagnosed with a brain tumor. Eva who died
in 1970. And mother who wrote a letter before

she died: keep it, safe—

as if the storage of places and names, as if
things and people, couldn't
rust indistinguishably.

SPRING 2010 *ORLANDO* POETRY FINALIST EXCERPTS:

SHELLEY PUHAK, "THE CONSOLATION OF FAIRY TALES"

1. Rye-Mother

Dream-nipples split like tongues or
blossoms, crusted tough
with ingrown hairs, thick
as black elastics,
protruding from useless tips.

Lucky thing your baby died, the nurse says,
or else how would you have fed him?

What the nurse really said, when I asked to hold
him again: Sweetie, he's already gone.

I pick at my nipples and cry.

SPRING 2010 *ORLANDO* NONFICTION PRIZE WINNER



JENNIFER RUDEN received her MFA in creative writing from University of Oregon, and volunteered for a one year term with AmeriCorps in New Mexico where she still resides with her husband and two children ten years later. When not teaching literacy skills to disadvantaged youth, you can find Jennifer holed up in some secret place writing. Her stories and essays have appeared in *Puerto del Sol*, *Literary Mama*, *Amarillo Bay*, *Mamazina*, *Word Riot*, and *The Motherhood Muse*. She is currently revising her first novel, *Leaving Utopia*, aimed at the Young Adult reader. You can reach her at jenruden@gmail.com.

A Redhead Brunette and Blonde: My Muse was a Bird

Printed with permission by Jennifer Ruden, copyrighted by Jennifer Ruden @ 2010

The first one to quit writing had fiery red hair and a penchant for dark haired men (and women) who lacked formal education. Once, while we were in graduate school, we woke up in the same bed. "Now this doesn't worry me," she had said. "But he does." She motioned to a young man crashed on the sofa: jeans around his ankles, tender white boxers dangerously close. "Do you know who that is?" I did not.

The redhead wrote poems about setting kitchen curtains aflame, stealing almonds from barrels in co-ops, and the Armenian genocide. She always said her muse was a prostitute with a drug problem. Soon after we graduated, the redhead got a job teaching composition at a private school. She married an overweight balding man who drives a Saturn. At night, she drinks herself silly in the bathtub. She tells me she puts her head underwater to stifle the giggles. "I don't miss writing at all," she says. "I never think about that whore."

I quit next. My students are the reason, but that's a lie. I moved to Albuquerque for a man, left him and found another. Now I direct literacy centers and teach people how to write a standard five-paragraph essay. "An argument," I tell them. "Everything is an argument." They want to know if it's acceptable to start an essay with the words Society today has many problems. "Of course," I reply. The GED has five sections: Reading, Writing, Math, Social Studies and Science. I tell my students that if they just learn this paragraph, this equation, this paradigm, this hypothesis, everything will fall into place. Everything gets better from this point forward. They never believe me.

The blonde held on for a while. In school she liked to say her muse was a Disney character. The cricket. Her writing was just as elusive and priggish, but damn near perfect. Before she quit she edited a collection of short stories where, "birds illuminate the human condition." I had to read several of these stories to comprehend her argument, if I ever understood it. Dead birds appear on doorsteps, in attics; some birds are forgotten, rotten, and stuck inside chimneys. Sons and fathers go bird watching (never hunting) and observe obese or wounded birds and this is somehow emblematic of human experience. She was quick to inform me that the book wasn't a field guide of sorts. It was literature. Literary birds. She sent me fifteen signed copies and softly suggested that my students might enjoy reading it. "I don't know what else to do with them," she said. Now she writes screenplays and teen pilots with her boyfriend in LA. "It is definitely," she stammered, "NOT literature." Apparently her muse in the top hat couldn't pay the bills. She evicted the green bastard.

According to one story in the book, a grouse is an exceptionally rare bird that resembles a crow. After assigning the story for homework, the students who read it beg for more of a description, a picture in the margins. The word "grouse" rhymes with "mouse" so many assume it's a rodent-looking bird. Others inquire if it is the kind of bird they can eat like a chicken.

I ask them why they think the author chose this particular bird.

"Cause that's the one flew in the house."

I nod. I remind them again that this is a story so nothing actually happened. "It's fiction, so it's what? We talked about this," I warn.

"A story?"

"Yes, a story. So it's what?"

"A lie?" one posits.

"Yes, a lie. It's not true."

I dive into the harangue about how in fiction an author maintains a reason for writing something in a particular way. I reiterate, "So, it's not a hen or a rooster. It's a grouse that flew into the lady's house. Why do you think the author picked this bird?" A slight voice from the back: "Because a hen or rooster can't fly."

This is a classroom moment when the student answers correctly, but not the way I intended. Time for a re-cap.

"So there's this old lady and it's her birthday," I begin. "She's 84." A chorus of damn, shit, and that's fucking old bubbles up. "So this grouse flies into her apartment and it keeps clattering into the window. She calls her son. He doesn't want anything to do with it and tells her to call the SPCA. He never mentions her birthday. The bird is on the floor, panting. She thinks it's dead only it gets up and flies into the window just as she is poised over it. Finally the SPCA lady comes and traps the bird in a net and leaves. Tells the woman it's a shame this happened on her birthday. The end."

This is the dumbest story they have ever heard.

"What," I ask them—sweating now. "What does this say about the human condition?"

There is a long silence. They look at me. They want so badly to know what a human condition is and if it's going to appear on the GED. For some reason, the word 'metaphor' sits on my tongue, heavy, like an egg. I am struck with just how idiotic it would sound if I were to say it, so I don't.

Finally one student, sixteen and pregnant, asks, "Why didn't that old lady just open the window?" At last, a dialogue emerges.

"We had a bat in my house once and we just opened the window and my mom chased it out with a broom."

"We get birds in Home Depot like every day; they got nests in there and everything. We leave the doors open and they fly in and out."

"All you gotta do is open a window."

"Good point," I say. "So why didn't she open the window?"

If our classroom had a window I would open it now. Jump out.

From the back row my best student has an answer. "Because clearly," he states, "she's a dumbass."

Given that the redhead teaches in private school she assumed, naturally, her students were brighter. She explains to me later, as she too had received several copies of the literary collection, her students just weren't interested in birds. I tell her that I'd never seen my students simultaneously grasp and miss the point. We both agree we were very proud of the blonde, though, for editing the book. For doing something before she quit.

"Isn't it kind of surprising?" the redhead asks. "How easy it was to give up?"

In the background I can hear the swish of water. "To just, I don't know. Stop."

I find myself agreeing. I can nearly see her in the tub, the fat dollops of water dripping from her hair. This is so like her, I recall suddenly, to prattle obliviously in the bathtub on her cell phone. I hear something plunk and sink. Soap?

"I always thought you'd be the one to hold on," she observes. "For dear life."

Before I quit writing my husband and I rented a dilapidated house. When it rained, torrents of water crashed in with such force I sometimes wondered if the roof was an illusion. We liked the house because it was funky and hip, but also because of the casita in the backyard. When we first moved in, my husband flung open the door and said, "This is where you'll write."

Only I didn't. Instead I cleaned the cobwebs from the corners and ran the space heater for three days to remove its chill. I put in a television so I could watch *The Bachelor*. Then I stocked the minifridge with cookies and wine. Every night I pushed the door open slowly, cautiously. And every night I exhaled when there was nothing behind it. Just my unpacked computer, the unwashed sheets.

Of course I stopped waiting. I left the door wide open, strutted absently inside each night and wrapped the vacuous chatter of television around me.

And it was bound to happen, I suppose. Yet when it does, I am still surprised, shocked really, to see it sitting on the metal folding chair in front of my dusty desk. It squeezes a long oily feather between in its beak. The ostrich -- that awkward massive beast—is back.

"Not you," I say.

It cocks a head on its tenuous neck, and narrows its black eyes. I move closer.

It flaps its useless wings with thunderous abandon, carousing into doors, thudding against furniture. It hurtles around the casita scratching its beak into cedar walls, rattling sharp toenails across the floors. In mid stride, I grab the bird and try to choke it. It bites my fingers until they bleed. Then I attempt to shove its downy ass through the window, but it won't fit.

After forty-five minutes of violence, of writhing shame, and shrieking compromises. After we wrestle ourselves into a corner, my mouth full of feathers, our cumbersome hearts beating madly, tongues loosed like scrolls, I relent. "Fine," I say, breathless. "You can stay."

SPRING 2010 *ORLANDO* NONFICTION FINALIST EXCERPTS:

RE'LYNN HANSEN, "THE NEIMAN MARCUS CHRISTMAS BOOK"

Watching her hands is like watching a manta ray move across the ocean floor. I think to myself that my hands, and everyone's hands, must undulate in this way—the way of Spanish dresses, and butterflies, and sheets in the wind, and surface waves. But they don't, and I watch her hands in the fading dining room light. Her hands, at first, relaxed on my dining room table and then sweeping the crumbs. Again, relaxed. Again, sweeping.

It is enough for me, and I chastise myself—why is this enough—and feel guilty—why should this not be enough? Though I confess, it is enough for me to have her here waving crumbs from my table. And the crumbs are nonexistent by the way. We have not eaten. I have only cut her a pear which she likes cold, and in the bowl, and we are only here at the table to watch the fading winter light, the birds at the feeder, the last of the day, and to go through the Christmas catalogues. It is not a ritual, but should be, for the catalogues are spread out around us, and my mother is so well-paced in the paging through catalogues, and the stacking of those that she has interest in between us, and discarding those of no interest on a chair beside her (which I will later bag and bring to my small town recycling depot), that I think to myself, the sun is fading and I must remember. And then I think, remember what? Only that she sweeps crumbs from the table while the Christmas catalogues are awash between us like a run of river rock.

PEGGY O'BOYLE, "TOTEM"

I begin to pick at the crust of sticktights that have formed around my ankles. They are thick and, not wanting to carry any new burdens, I strip away my shoes and socks, letting my bared soles explore the ground unblindfolded.

To the right, my toes find the contours of rocks. I begin searching out a perfect one, one that's been worn down by the river's force until it's smooth and gently rounded. Love of rocks runs strong through my family, from my geologist father to his rock-hound grandson. My toes touch a larger rock. It's gritty, cold surface is split in the center--a jagged fissure runs nearly its full length. I reach down and take the rock in my hand. Its hour glass shape is topped by a small knob and the rock is slightly longer than my outstretched fingers. Its almost human form reminds me of the Hopi creation stories I heard when my father worked on the reservation. How God makes people from the mud and breathes life into them. I hold the rock to my mouth and exhale. Nothing. I am no god.

Despite the crack, I choose to keep this rock as a totem and slip it into my pocket. It drags the front of my sweatshirt down as if I was pregnant.

TERESA STORES, "LATOUR"

I rise at 5, as is my custom, to be alone in the loft with my words, my writing, my stories, watching the sunrise, watching for invaders, storing away the harvest for another, colder day. I don't know all that is hidden in the heart of this structure. It has not yet been revealed to me. The tower has not yet fallen away. Change will come though. I know it. And it may be the change of a tower falling, some structure tumbling, a rug pulled from under my feet. It has happened to me before: my coming out, my brother's

death, my father's silence, even falling in love with Susan and the birth of the twins, the total demolition of my former life. I have learned that the tower falling can bring new light. We can rise to the challenges, embrace the changes, move into a new world.

Sometimes the words build the tower up. Sometimes they protect the secrets. Sometimes they reveal them and the tower crumbles. I seem to land on my feet, naked perhaps, vulnerable. But clean. Illuminated. The words are just a tower. The life within the walls is ordinary and divine in the same breath, the same light of heaven. Stones may crumble, but the light warms, a kind of magic. We must trust—not fear—the process of change. I signal the world miles away. We are safe up here together, even when the walls come down.

SPRING 2010 ORLANDO SUDDEN FICTION PRIZE WINNER



CJ HAUSER is a spinner of yarns and writer of fiction who lives in Brooklyn, New York. She has published fiction in *The Brooklyn Review* and the *L* magazine and believes New York is the best possible place to grow a story. She is currently at work on a novel about fishing towns, taxidermy, and love.

"Buoys"

Printed with permission by CJ Hauser, copyrighted by CJ Hauser © 2010

I have two lobsters in my bathtub and I'm not sure I can kill them. New England will know if I don't. Henry is from Maine, which I found charming, until we moved here post-honeymoon.

I am sitting on the rim of my bathtub. It has curled, porcelain feet with flaky rust between the toes. Everything is anthropomorphized in this house- that's my first problem. My second problem is that I pet the lobsters. I roll up a sleeve and run my pinched fingers along the length of Lobster No. One's antennae. It feels sensitive and unbreakable like coiled wire. Lobster No. One knocks his crusher claw against my hand, but there's a thick, pink rubber band binding it up so I'm in no real danger. I stroke Lobster No. Two's antennae, just so they're even. Both lobsters have dark spotted backs that remind me of Dalmatian puppies. I really should not be thinking of them as puppies.

I get a six pack from the fridge.

This is my plan: I will get blind drunk and then I will kill these lobsters. I tie my hair up in a dark knob and hike my shorts so I'm ready. I open my beer on the faucet and foam geysers up. Beer froth plops in the water. Henry says his mom gave her lobsters beer before cooking them. She also bathed them in seawater

so they'd have one last taste of home. I ask the lobsters, "Do you feel at home?" Of course not, some bearded yahoo caught them in a pot.

"I love you and I get my mail here, isn't that enough?" I'd asked Henry over dinner negotiations.

"Of course it's enough," he said. "But this is part of the culture here! I want us to participate in the local culture." When I say culture I'm saying let's go to the Moma. When Henry says culture he's saying cul-chah! in a wicked Maine accent.

I stare at my underwater feet. My toes are painted the color the lobsters will be once I boil them. Lobster No. One and Lobster No. Two conference at the other end of the tub. Do they suspect? They are currently bruise colored.

I'll find a way to do this, because love is boiling the lobsters your freckle-backed husband thinks will grow you instant roots. And because I want roots too, even though the soil here is black and full of salt. My parents raised me an only child in a nineteenth floor penthouse. No one grows roots nineteen stories long.

The lobsters jostle around my feet and I know I won't be able to kill them. I can live here and let it grow over me like a home but I cannot eat a lobster. I get a box of salt and shake it onto the water to make it briny like the sea. I devise a new plan to make Henry understand: I'm going to name them. I lie down on the bathmat and wait. I finish the beer and think that this is not such a bad spot.

"Leah?" Henry is home. "What are you doing down there? The bathroom smells like a bar."

"Welcome to the Lobstah Bah," I tell him.

"Are you okay?" he says. "Why are the lobsters in the tub?"

"Henry, this is Lavender and this is Leopold and they eat scurf and they have names and so we should not eat them." Still lying on the floor I gesture towards the tub with one hand. "Don't they look at home?"

I sit up and Henry and I kneel by the tub. He puts his big hand on my back.

"I'm as drunk as a lobster," I say. "Let's return Lavender and Leopold to the sea."

∞

That night in bed we are quiet though neither of us is sleeping. I wriggle so Henry can feel my arm against his back, but he doesn't roll over which makes my heart feel like one of those long carnival balloons let fly so it whizzes through the air.

I want to mention that I'm good at many things. To start, I'm good at writing newspaper articles, which is what I did in New York. Outside of that I'm a good cook, a fast runner, and I am excellent at loving Henry. In fact, I did such a stellar job of loving Henry that three months ago he decided to marry me, despite the fact that our two ages lumped together don't amount to half a century.

The thing is, despite my fierce balloon-heart love, Henry's worrying is putting a damper on things.

I throw off the blanket. It is too hot and I appreciate the way our blue sheets stay cool all night. I can't hear the ocean from here, but the steel bell buoys ring out a baritone song, one note for each time the waves rock them. It's a deep, echoing sound I found haunting until Henry explained the noise was meant to let ships know they're too close to shore when visibility is bad. I thought that was nice. Dong, dong, you're too close. Dong, dong, it's alright, just turn away, we're watching out. I listen and stare at Henry's back.

Henry is still but I trail my fingers between his shoulder blades that just barely protrude, like vestigial wings. I follow the vertebrae of his spine down to the small of his back where the bones disappear beneath the surface.

"Were you drawing a sailboat?" Henry asks.

I wasn't, but suddenly I wish I was.

"A sailboat would be like this," I say, and trace a boat body shaped like a lemon wedge. I add a tall mast and two triangular sails. They would be white, if they weren't invisible.

I stare a moment and then move my finger in a curved but unbroken line along his lower back.

"Those are the waves," he says, "I can feel them."

"Yes," I say, "yes, those are the waves."

SPRING 2010 *ORLANDO* SUDDEN FICTION FINALIST EXCERPTS:

NUZHAT ABBAS, "DAGH"

The woman's body, pregnant, you found later, filled to the brim with the euphoria of little white pills to bring the darkness down. The stop of her death. How everything would tumble later, but now, as you stare into the quiet at the two bodies lying on white sheets, the dark frame of their bed glistening in the half-light of this shuttered room, you too are pulled into a twisted arc of time, fiercely slowed. Your own heart pulls you down. Your own dark body slumps against the tired wall.

There is a story here, you know, and one day you might even have to tell it. But right now, all you can see, and this afternoon seems to last for years, is that white bed, that grown woman's gently swelling body, that tiny comma of a girl with dark lashes shut down and the shifting stripes of light that cross the quiet room.

CAITLIN O'SULLIVAN, "HOW TO MAKE A FIST"

Curl your fingers joint by joint, creating a row of bones like bullets lined up in a clip. Fingernails dig into your palm. Metacarpals show up like white shadows under the skin of the back of your hand. Fold your thumb over your fingers like the safety bar on a carnival ride. No air pockets in your palm, just tendon pulling bone snug against muscle. Dry skin cracks on your knuckles. Blood outlines the weak places.

The asshole looks at you and you punch him. A bone breaks in your hand. The pain feels like manhood, like brotherhood, like doing your part.

SPRING 2010 ORLANDO SHORT FICTION PRIZE WINNER



ALLISON ALSUP is a native of the San Francisco Bay Area, now living with her husband in New Orleans where they are slowly renovating a one hundred thirty year old cottage. Two years ago, she made a shift from full-time teaching to part-time work so that she could devote more time to her fiction. "Quick and Clever" is a stand alone piece from an emerging work focusing on the early generations of Chinese immigrants. Another short piece from this body of work won the New Millennium Short Short Fiction Award last spring and just recently, a related story following the protagonist's father and grandfather placed second in the H.E. Francis Short Story contest. Allison would like to express profound thanks to a Room of Her Own for this vote of confidence and much needed support.

"Quick and Clever"

Printed with permission by Allison Alsup, copyrighted by Allison Alsup @ 2010

Sing little bluebird
Fly round and round

I am eight and reading out loud to my mother, showing off the English I have learned in school. I am the third or fourth best reader. Soon I will be first. My mother pulls a needle, ties a knot and clips the thread. She is mending. Her basket is full as it is every New Year and fall, when the men return from the fields, from Castroville, Fresno, Stockton. She sews busted collars, broken frog clasps, fabric sliced by wheat stalks, the mean tips of artichokes, the frayed baskets of shrimpers and abalone fishermen. If ever there is a time when she does not work, I do not know it. The lantern on the table gathers us in its yellow circle as I follow each word with my finger.

Tell of the spring
The glad news bring
Come blow your horn.

I have said heart not horn. I repeat the right word. But my mother does notice the mistake. For her, the American words are just sounds, nothing more. Days, she washes and irons in a laundry on the edge of Chinatown, next to the bunk houses that hold the newcomers and the drifters: miners, fishermen, pickers. The laundry is owned by a Sunning County man. Like us, she says. The laundry also takes in American clothes from the big houses on Nob Hill that look down on Chinatown. When she first started working, my mother laughed at the stiff American clothes -- their tight fits in the chest and waist. She shook her head at the wealthy women who dragged the hems of their white dresses over muddy

cobblestones. Ah Bao, she said, rich American women are strange, they do not bind their feet; they bind their ribs. But now she does not find such things odd. Their owners sometimes leave coins in the pockets, pennies and nickels that are dropped into a jar and split among the workers. American forgetfulness buys salty plums and sweet bean cakes, sesame balls and once, a wooden rickshaw that clicked along the sidewalk.

Yet now there are never any coins for sweet things; any money must go to pay for our room, candles, rice and tea. It is easier to forget about wanting treats when I read. I pretend that I am one of the American boys in my book, curly haired with round eyes and a wide white face, a clean sailor suit and a toy boat, a sand pail or sometimes (I do not tell anyone this), I imagine I am one of the girls with the ribboned bonnets who carry dolls or beat toy drums. They are so perfect! Where they live, there are no laundries, no cigar factories, no butchers, no old men pushing carts or sitting on stoops or selling lottery tickets. There are no airless alleys, no muddy streets, no rotten vegetables, no piles of horse manure. There are no men at all. There are only fields and white clouds, seashores and talking squirrels. There are trees for climbing. I do not know where these places are, only that that they are not Chinatown. Sometimes, I tell myself that they are all pictures of Washington, where my father is many miles north of dai fao, that the factory where my father works is just over the forested hill, or that his factory is really just a little house, the one in the distance with the smoking chimney. I tell myself this even though I know it is not true. No Chinese live in my book, not even one.

The rain is over.

Boys and girls want to play.

Jump and run!

My father has not sent a letter or money for months. In his last letter, he wrote that he wears rubber boots and a rubber apron and guts fish with knives as long as swords. He has written that he must be quick and careful; those who are not, lose fingers. In Washington, the rivers run thick with salmon, some as tall as an eight year old boy. He says that Washington is a cold place, much colder than San Francisco. He has seen snow falling onto the river where the salmon swim, he has seen snow so heavy it stills the water. I have not seen snow except in my primer. No one in my class has touched snow and did not know that the curved stool the pretty boy was sitting on was called a sled until our teacher told us. Snow is white, I have seen pictures of it in my book, and made by beautiful women in long lace dresses whose breath is like ice. My mother does not like these pictures in my primer. She says the women look like ghosts who steal little boys and if you touch one, you will get sick and die. I ask her if she has ever seen a ghost. She says of course, they are all over dai fao, this place is full of restless spirits waiting to return to China. She says it is bad luck to read these pages and if she catches me looking at the pictures, she will slap me.

Run with me.

Little bird, fly to the tree.

"Ai-yah," my mother interrupts. "Come here, I want to show you something."

I stand next to her chair. Smelling of bitter tea, she sips from a clay cup. She lets the leaves steep for too long. When I complain, she reminds me that black tea helps keep her awake. I hope that there is black tea in Washington and that my father drinks it to keep his fingers from falling asleep.

"You are a good reader now. Read this," she says, tilting a square of red cotton towards me.

"Bao!" I say, seeing how she has stitched my name across the fabric. I imagine it is one of the few words she can spell. Already, I have told her that I can read more words than she can.

"Why don't you try to stitch your name below?" she asks.

I tell her that I need to read for school. She tells me that I am already smart enough and puts my primer on the shelf. In a few more years, I will be taller than a salmon, taller than she is and then I will be able to reach anything. When I whine about the book, she says, "To keep it safe. Come and sit on my lap. I will let you use my needles."

My mother lifts me up, her arms strong from the laundry. She wears loose cotton jackets and trousers, not so very much different from men, her jacket a few inches longer, her pants a wider leg -- clothes made for those who must bend, squat and lift. She holds out her sewing scissors. I have coveted these small blades, their carved handles, each ending in a crane's wing so that when one cuts, it is as if a bird is flying. I have been slapped for using them to snip paper, but here they are in front of me. She shows me how to thread the needle, to tie a knot. I begin to pull the needle through.

"Careful not to poke your finger," she says. "Smaller stitches, Bao. Be patient."

But I am not patient. My stitches are crooked and in my rush, I prick my finger. A drop of blood beads on my skin. I wipe it on my pants. I have not been quick and careful. If I were in Washington, I would have cut off my finger. Suddenly, I am angry.

"I don't want to sew," I tell her. I want to go back to reading, to things that I know. Things she doesn't.

"Try again," she says.

"No."

"Ai-yah, hold out your hands," she orders. When I do not, she softens her voice. "Like this."

She puts her hand next to mine. Of course, mine are smaller. There is a little, worm-shaped scar at the base of her thumb. Her skin looks like a shirt that has been washed too many times, the tips of her fingers are thick with callouses. From the irons, she says. They are heavy. But they make her arms strong. It is why she can carry me even though I have grown so tall.

"Do you see?" she asks.

At first, I see only that her hands are old, older than her face.

"Look at the shape," she says. "The fingers."

She turns her palms face up. The lines are deep like rivers.

"Put up your hands," she says. She taps my fourth finger and I notice that like her, my fourth finger is shorter than my second. Then I understand -- the long fingers, the narrow palm, the knotted knuckles. My hands are a smaller version of hers. When she pulls back, I see the faint smear of blood from my cut on her skin.

"What my hands do," she tells me, "your hands will do."

But I do not want her hands. I tell her I want to slice fish with swords.

She rips out the crooked stitches with her needle. We begin again. That night, I am glad to have a short name, just one character. My stitches are not as small or straight as my mother's, but she nods and smiles as I dip and pull the needle, copying her work above.

"Now it is sewn twice. Bao, Bao," she tells me once the thread has been knotted and clipped.

"Double treasure!" I exclaim.

"What a fool," she says to the window as if a ghost waits ready on the other side of the glass. "A useless boy." I know she does not really think this and says it only to keep away jealous spirits. Still I do not like to hear it.

"Double treasure," I whisper.

"Yes," she says quietly and pulls me close.

I dream that I am a salmon. I swim in cold waters but do not know I am cold. I am a fish! My father's hand reaches through the water. Do not kill me, I think. But I cannot speak.

In the morning, when I awake, my mother is already at the stove, drinking tea and heating jook. She points to my jacket on the table. "Look inside," she says.

I slip from my cot and open the front flap of my jacket. She has cut the red fabric into a small, neat square and attached it with black thread so that it cannot be seen from the front. I run my finger over the stitching, hers above and mine below.

"Now, it is a special jacket," she says. "It belongs to no one else."

I have a secret and a secret is like a hidden weapon. Now no one at school can say that my jacket is theirs. If they try, I can open the front and reveal them as a liar and a thief.

I point to the shelf. "My book."

"Another time, Bao," she says. "Today, you come with me. I want to show everyone at the laundry how well you can sew. We will show them the patch in your jacket and they will be impressed."

I take her hand. The morning is cool as we walk over the wooden planks, past the butchers shops with their thick, salty smells, past the walls where the men gather to read new handbills, past the vegetables stands and the pharmacy, past those who have no shops but sell from sidewalk tables, past the peddlers pushing carts over the ruts, calling out to fix umbrellas, pipes, clasps. My mother keeps the sleeve of her jacket unrolled to cover our hands. She has brushed and braided my hair, cleaned my ears, scraped my tongue. An American man with a mustache and a brown suit points to me and holds up a camera; my mother waves him away. If Americans ever ask me questions, she tells me, I am to pretend not to speak any English. When I remind her that I am American, born here, she shakes her head. Chinese in America, she says. Different.

Already, I know that some who pass us on the street think she is a servant girl -- an amah or mui tsai, maid to a merchant. I do not mind them thinking this because then they will imagine that I am the son of a rich man, that my father owns a shop and silk jackets. Even with her hair oiled and pinned into a tight knot, some will think she is not married. Married women are nei ren, indoor people, and have servants to fetch for them. But sometimes, my mother forgets to look down at her feet and stares at passerbys. She does not act like a woman ashamed that she must go to work or the market. Men say things to her. I know they speak low and soft so that I will not hear. She does not talk back to them.

As we pass the gate to the school yard, some of the children stop playing. One calls my name and asks where I am going. He is a boy more beautiful than any of the girls, a boy with a hair like feathers. Suddenly, I am proud. He has noticed me now that I have someplace more important to go than school. I turn back to wave, but my mother grips my hand tighter.

"Look where you are going," she tells me. "Not where you have been."

The laundry is hot. A long counter runs from one wall to the other. Behind the counter, irons heat on the stove. The other women stare at my mother. A man comes out from the back door and yells. He stops when he sees my mother, then yells again. My mother tells me to wait and follows the man into the back room. No one says anything in the front; they are listening. The owner sounds angry that I have come. He says there is no money to pay someone else. I do not want to be here, I want to be reading outloud for my teacher, but know that if the owner does not let me stay, then it will be worse. His wife stops her ironing to ask me if I speak English. I lie and tell her that I am the best reader in my class. The other women cluck in approval as they push the irons over white handkerchiefs, collars and cuffs, leaving the fabric stiff and shiny with heat.

L.'s son is clever.

L. is lucky to have such a son.

I know the women say these things to cover the sound of my mother's voice as it carries from the back room. If my mother were listening, she would be angry. Ghosts.

Then my mother and her boss return. My mother says to show him the red patch, the stitches I have sewn. He fingers the patch too much, then asks if I speak English. His wife calls out that I am the best reader in my class as if everyone in Chinatown knows it already. The man nods again. He holds up a stubby finger that is nothing like our fingers but like a ginger root. I am to learn how to fold first, he says. Today is a test. Then he is shouting again.

"Lan!"

A girl appears from the back. I know her and she knows me. She was in my class last year. But it is only her face that I remember. I have already forgotten her name.

My mother tells me that I must be quick and careful like my father. And I am, even though it is so hot. The stove must always be lit to warm the irons, the vats always boiling to loosen soil and sweat from sheets and clothes. I tell myself that if I am careful, my father will be safe, that if I am quick, he will return from Washington with pockets full of coins. Lan shows me how to fold shirts and pants on the counter, how to wrap them in brown paper and to tie the paper with twine. The string is rough and Lan swipes at it with a small blade. I am impressed with her speed but do not tell her so. We do not talk speak as if we know each other. We act as if we are strangers who never sat next to one another in desks.

At lunch, an old man comes by with a wagon. He brings more clothes, each bundled in a sheet. The boss calls the old man dabo, uncle, then points at me. I am to help carry the bundles in, then carry the brown paper packages out to the street, lift them over my head and into the back of the cart. The wagon is for American customers who pay extra to stay out of Chinatown. I am allowed to pet the man's horse, given two pennies, then he is gone. All day, my mother says that I can have a nickel to spend anyway I want. But the jar is kept in the back room and so I do not get to hear the sound of the coins as they fall. The boss says that if my English is good enough, he will let me talk to the customers and write tickets. I tell

myself that Lan cannot write tickets; she is a stupid girl, too stupid to write anything or she would already be at the counter. It is why she has not been sent back to school.

At the end of the day, my mother says that the boss is pleased with my work. I have passed the test. He says that I am quick and clever. He thinks it will bring luck to have such a loyal son in the laundry. I am to work six days a week and earn six dollars. I think my mother will be pleased; six dollars is more than spending money. But she waves her fingers at the boss man and says this is too little. Later, he says, when I am older, then I can earn more.

As we walk home. I ask my mother how much Lan earns. She says to stop talking crazy. Lan is the owner's daughter. She earns nothing. For a moment, I feel bad for stupid Lan. I wonder if she misses school, if she still has her primer.

"Here," my mother says and gives me my nickel.

I add it to the two pennies already in my pocket, but I am too tired to want to go to the bakery. My eyes are red from the smell of bleach and lye. It is already dark and I too tired to want to do anything but sleep.

A letter arrives from my father. My mother must pay the fortune teller outside the barbers on Fifteen Cent Street to read it. We stand on the sidewalk while the old man sits on a stool behind his table. He wears a round cap and a jacket that covers his knees. He moves his inkpot and paper to the side, wraps his spectacles around his ears. He lets his hands rest on the red, ink-stained cloth covering the table.

There are no more jobs in Washington, he reads, the factory is closing. My father has heard of a place in Eastern California, a town called Bodie where there is still gold and silver. There are Chinese there. My father says he has been to this place before, not this town, but one like it, with his own father long ago. It is a hard land, a place without trees. It is best that we are not with him. He will send money when he can.

I ask my mother if it will be cold in Bodie.

Yes, she says.

I ask her if Bodie will be as cold as Washington.

Yes. It will be the same.

The man asks if she wants him to predict a jiri, a lucky day, the day her husband will return, perhaps? I tug on her jacket. Yes, I say. Yes.

But she says such predictions are a waste of money, she knows when her husband will return. The fortune teller nods then tells me that I must be a loyal son and take care of my mother until my father comes home. She hands the man a few coins, then puts the letter in the pocket of her jacket. When we get home, I know she will add it to the others she cannot read in her trunk.

I ask when I will go back to school. I think they are now many chapters ahead in the primer. My mother says that for Sunning County boys, work is more important than school, that school will always be there, and that I can always go back when my father returns. My primer disappears from the shelf and I am given a set of needles, my own pair of crane scissors. I learn how to sew buttons and to drink black tea. Soon the boy with the feather hair does not call my name when I pass the schoolyard. I pull from my mother's

hand and shout through the fence, but he does not hear me. He has forgotten me just as I forgot Lan. The next day, we do not walk by the schoolyard. My mother says she has grown bored of walking that way.

On Sundays, my mother and I go to the park. Sometimes men smile from the benches and come to speak to my mother. They bring sesame candies, pork buns and balloons from the Jewish man. She tells me that they are lonely men, Sunday uncles with no family of their own in dai fou. There aren't enough children in Chinatown; they want nothing more than to hold my hand, to watch me play, see me laugh. If they give me money, I am to take it. She tells me how their families back in Sunning County are greedy and do not appreciate how hard these men work. Some of them work in laundries. Like us, she says. Until my father returns, I am to act like the good son these men deserve. I am to call them dabo, uncle. My mother watches us play from the bench. They are not bad men and they give me gifts. I hate them and their loneliness. I watch for my father. When he returns, it will be on a Sunday, on a bright, clear day like today, and I will be the first to see him, to pick out his black jacket and hat, his long thick braid, from all the rest. I ask my mother when my father is coming back.

At the end of the season, she says.

When is the end of the season?

Here, she says, take this nickel. Go to the bakery.

Ai-yah, you are slow today, Lan says.

We are wrapping shirts in brown paper. I am not at the counter; the boss is always there, sitting on his stool. The American customers call him Mr. Sing Lee. He does not tell them that Sing Lee is not his name, only the name of the laundry and means victorious profit.

Sometimes I think that if I go slow and move my hands like pudding, that the boss will not want me to work for him and my mother will have to send me back to school.

My mother yells.

I speed up.

Boys and girls want to play.

Jump and run!

It is Sunday, our day off. I shout out the words to my primer as I speed down the alleys. I tell myself that I will remember everything I have learned. I am a flying salmon. I am the snow! No ghost that can catch me. I will not be stupid like Lan. I will never be an old man who must borrow other people's children.

Run with me.

Little bird, fly to the tree!

When my father comes home and I return to school, I will have practiced so much that I will be the best reader. Then the others will be sorry that they have forgotten me, someone so quick and clever.

SPRING 2010 ORLANDO SHORT FICTION FINALIST EXCERPTS:

ANNE DEMARCKEN, "SIGNS AND SYMBOLS"

I have always talked in my sleep and I used to be afraid that I would say something that would hurt Gib's feelings because dreams are so personal, so selfish. But instead she reports that I sometimes wake her up telling her that I love her, kissing her, snuggling up to her even when it is so hot we have the fan running on high all night. I never remember, but am relieved to learn that unconsciously I love Gib and need her. It is like reading in my horoscope that I am a kind and generous person. Now, I don't worry that she will find out I am pregnant because of what I might say in my sleep. I have come to trust that my secrets exist separately from my dreams. It makes me wonder if a secret is located closer to the center of a person than her dreams, because on their way to the surface, my dreams don't seem to brush up against my secrets. Maybe a secret is the center of every person, the soul, the undying part of us that is bigger, more lasting than ourselves.

COURTNEY MCDERMOTT, "SHADES OF WHITE"

Q sometimes wishes that she had a camera and could take a photograph, like the photos Jan takes for the hostel brochures - of golden walls and viney gardens and a pool that's bright like the underbelly of a seashell. Then she would have a photo taken of her and the baby Clara, sitting just like this on the rag carpet, with sugar in their mouths. Clara sitting in white ruffles and Q in her maid's uniform of blue polyester, the sun through the French doors shining equally on Clara's pink skin and Q's brown skin.

She would like a photo of herself on the beach too, barefoot in the white-peaked waves. But only tourists take photos like that, and even though the ocean is just over the building tops - a seagull's flight away - Q never has time to enjoy it. She went there once with Ana and Clara. Ana bought an ice cream cone and refused to walk on the sand, because Clara would get dirty. She ate the cone and Q held the baby and they watched the waves, but didn't touch them. So Q knows only the look of waves.

HONORABLE MENTION: JAMIE AMOS, "BEFORE THE BEND"; SHANTI BANNWART, "APRIL FOOL'S DAY"; KIT SOLEIL, "CHRIST JESUS WATCHING"

SPRING 2010 EMESSAGE WINNERS:

SUSAN ANDERSON

Printed with permission by Susan Anderson, copyrighted by Susan Anderson @ 2010

You bring tools to the rocky field and dig, exhume, and plant. The garden - your story - takes root and grows, despite drought and deluge. You hoe, weed, pluck and kill bugs. The story grows hardy, its fruit sweet as sun-ripe gold tomatoes. Harvest is near.

ELISSA BASSIST

Printed with permission by Elissa Bassist, copyrighted by Elissa Bassist@ 2010

I wish you'd stop believing no one is going to read your writing; this makes your work restrained, lackluster, and full of the hollow fear of what other people think. I wish your anxiety away, but only you can move it, with your hands, with your heart, with the sheer force of your bones.

AMINA HECKSTALL

Printed with permission by Amina Heckstall, copyrighted by Amina Heckstall@ 2010

Through my words I am able to expose myself in ways deemed unacceptable by a society that has placed restrictions or standards on how I am to be. Through my words I can just Be.

CARRIE NASSIF

Printed with permission by Carrie Nassif, copyrighted by Carrie Nassif @ 2010

She dared me to look into my own eyes; to tell myself, "I love you" and really feel it. Shame rose bile-like in my throat. I can't even think it and mean it. In the mirror, she takes a startled breath, forgiving my familiar flaws...and speaks. I'd begun.