Love Your Muse

Editors’ Choice

2006 Short Story Contest
Ooligan Press
Editors’ Choice

2006 Short Story Contest
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To Our Readers

Welcome to the second annual Ooligan Press Editors’ Choice e-journal. Twenty advanced editing students in Portland State University’s Publishing Program held a short story contest in winter term 2006. They put out a call for unpublished short stories on the theme of love and set the deadline at midnight, Valentine’s Day.

The LOVE YOUR MUSE contest was born. The Ooligan editors posted fliers and sent notices inviting members of the Portland State community, past and present, to participate. In two weeks, the contest drew dozens of excellent entries, touching on love in many guises.

Each class member pored over every story. We read tales of love beginning, love fading, love dying and long dead. We read of marital love, extramarital love, family love, self-love, love of dogs, love of God, love between men, love between women, and love between a mannish woman and a womanish man. We considered dreams of love, the selfless love of a grandfather for a child, a love letter to George Clooney, and the transforming love of a woman for a fine fighting rooster. The class as a whole selected a short list of twelve stories. Then, laboriously, we settled on the top four. Each winning author is a writer to watch.

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Before the Beginning
by Twila Nesky

In the beginning God created the heavens, the earth, and the waters that moved upon the face of the earth. In the heavens He placed the sun, moon, stars, and planets. Then God sat back, viewed His creation, and declared it all good.

Next, He declared a day of rest, but before the day of rest had ended He grew bored.

Before the beginning He’d been very bored, which is what had inspired Him to begin the beginning in the first place. But now, having created a perfect playground, He found himself in sore need of some toys—preferably defective. He’d noticed his perfect creations: the earth, sun, heavens—once completed were . . . well . . . complete, and therefore, dull.

So, God went walking the earth looking for a challenge, or at least some sort of vexation. Before long, He found a marsh filled with sticky-warm mud, the kind guaranteed to be hiding creepy things down deep. God stuck both hands in up to his elbows, vigorously stirred around the ooze, and then pulled out a promising lump of stuff and began shaping it with a sense of impending greatness.

Despite this optimistic beginning however, it wasn’t long before God realized the only thing mud was good for was mud pies, and mud pies weren’t very satisfying because once He had a stack of them they melted back together. This was vexing all right, but not exactly what He’d been hoping for.

God sighed and listlessly prodded at the mud pies, pulled off chunks here, globbed them on there, and poked holes in random places.

Eventually, the stack of mud began to take on a shape, and God took interest again. It was rather a good likeness of Himself, only teensy-weensy. Perhaps He should take it home—wear it as a charm. If He added a hole on top He could use it as a candleholder.

He picked it up gently, fanning and blowing on it softly to help it finish drying. Then, something caught His eye. It moved! He began fanning and blowing harder, watching the shape more closely now, and yes, it did move! With some of the water gone, it began to change, becoming soft in a non-mud-like way. It was still gushy though—maybe the insides were still too wet. God lifted the little shape to His lips and blew forcefully into its nostrils. The poor thing swelled to almost bursting. Its eyes popped open in violated surprise. After the excess air finished whistling out of its random holes, it began to cough and retch uncontrollably. God was delighted. This little shape was showing promise. When the poor creature finally stopped coughing, it looked at its creator in terror and began to wail. God wiped His muddy hands on the hem of His robe and sat down to watch what the creature would do next.

The creature, or Man as God had taken to calling him, seemed happiest when he was making squiggles in dirt, or sculpting strange little mud creatures from the pit. Time and again, Man would come rushing up to God breathlessly waving his newest rock in the air. “Guess what it is! Guess what it is!”
And so time flew. Time hadn't meant much before Man, but now it seemed each moment counted dearly. Man was like a different creature every day because he changed and grew so fast. God loved each new stage of Man's developing personality more than the last.

But Man's tirelessness soon became restlessness, and he began spending more time at the mud pit, making larger and more realistic figures, figures that resembled Man in some ways. Man spent days designing and experimenting. He had the shaping process down, but no matter what he tried, he couldn't make the shapes live. He'd even tried to insert breath the way God had done but nothing happened. Now, statuesque reminders of Man's failed creations dotted the land in manic testament to trial and error.

He looked at his latest attempt and shooed away the pigeon on its shoulder.

"We could have such great times if you would WAKE UP!" he shouted in its ear.

God saw all this and realized Man was lonely. "What if I help you the next time you try to make a friend?"

"One that talks?" Man asked.

"If you insist."

Several days later, after careful preparation, God and Man headed off to the marsh pit to begin creating Man's new friend.

"Remember, no beard!" Man reminded God for the hundredth time.

"I know, no beard," God agreed.

Although they’d spent days discussing and planning Man's new friend, God still couldn't understand Man's need to make so many modifications. "After all, look how well you turned out," He said.

Man couldn't explain. It was a feeling deep in his bones that his friend would need to be his equal-opposite, someone like him but very different, too.

Reaching the pit, God discovered they had a big problem. "You used all the mud!" He said. "Why didn't you tell me before we came all this way?"

Man had assumed that because God was with him, there would be mud when they arrived. But God was in the business of creating from mud, not that of creating mud.

And this wasn’t their only problem. When God had created Man, He'd stuck both hands deep into the pit, generously scooping up everything from below and mixing it with the mud on top. God's breath gave life, but it was the stuff from the darkness that gave depth to His creations.

Man, being small, had only been taking mud from the surface and now that he'd emptied the pit, the creepiness that had been living beneath went searching for a new home. It needed a cool calm surface to contain and direct it the way lightning seeks ground to control its actions. So the creepy secrets slithered out of the pit and went looking for something cool and pliable, because without its mud it was a live wire: beautiful, exciting, and deadly. It slithered back and forth across the earth, learning and insinuating itself into various life-forms. It recognized some of itself in Man but couldn't join itself there because Man was a balanced mix: 50 per cent mud and 50 per cent hidden things.
held together by an unknown quantity of breath. It tried to insert itself into plants, but the smaller ones crackled, turned brown, and spontaneously combusted before it could make itself comfortable. It had a little more luck with trees but hissed in the leaves at every breeze, “Ssssstop moving around sssso muchh!”

After the creepiness had settled itself in a tall tree, it turned its attention back toward its old home and saw God and Man still staring at the empty hole. This might be fun after all.

Meanwhile, God was wondering if He should make it rain again. He wasn’t sure any old mud would do. Then, remembering something He’d seen Man doing once, God asked, “What do you call that thing you were doing with the sharp stone and that poor little stick?”

“Whittling. Why?”

“No reason, just curious,” said God.

“You’re supposed to be thinking about mud, not whittling.”

But God was already deep in thought. Man wanted someone like himself, but opposite. Was any part of Man the opposite of mud? There must be something, but what? And could Man spare it? Mud was soft and gushy and so was most of Man. All, really, except the bones. Well? Why not? It was worth a try. God turned to Man and said in a smooth, melodic voice, “My, you look exhausted. Your eyelids look heavy. You must be tired—very, very tired. Why don’t you take a nap while I worry about the mud?”

Man opened his mouth to protest, but God interrupted. “Don’t worry. Just sleep.”

Man was snoring before he hit the ground.

God’s respect for Man’s creativity grew when He saw the final product lying in His hands. He stared at the creature, hesitating to wake it. They were so cute when they were asleep. It seemed a shame.

“Ah well,” He sighed, puckered, and remembering how it had affected Man, blew very gently up its nostrils. The effect was immediate.

The new creature opened its eyes and glanced calmly around. It didn’t start wailing like Man had but simply stood up in the palm of God’s hand and asked, “Could you set me down now please?” which God did. The moment the new creature’s feet touched the earth, it started walking away.

God hurriedly woke Man before the new creature could wander too far off.

Man eagerly jumped up to see the friend God had helped him create, and instantly doubled over from the sharp pain in his side.

“Ow!” “What happened?”

“I had to improvise. You used all the mud, so I used one of your ribs instead.”

“You used part of me?” Man asked. “Are you saying that creature is a part of me?”

“You could put it that way.”

“So this pain is because of that creature?” Man asked as he rubbed his side—not sure if the idea pleased him or made him angry.
“What’s a little pain compared to loneliness,” God said.
Man saw the wisdom in this but felt the need to gripe a little more. “Well, am I always going to hurt
now because that creature is walking around with a part of me in it?”
“Possibly. Now go … it’s getting away.”

Man soon started calling the new creature Woman, because of all the woe she caused him. One day,
after several weeks of chasing Woman, Man grew tired and decided to follow at a distance. Possibly
he could learn more about her if he left her alone to explore. But with each new thing she saw, she
paused only briefly, touched it lightly, then drifted on. She hardly interacted with the world at all.
Man gave up about midday and went to have a good sulk. This wasn’t how he’d imagined things
turning out. The sulking failed to produce any satisfying results, however, so after a while Man sought
out God and asked, “Is it me? Do I smell bad? What?”
But God had no insights into what did or didn’t make Woman tick. “No, I don’t think it’s you. She acts
different because she was made differently. Give her time.”
Eventually, Man began to plan “incidental” meetings with Woman, but no matter how hard he tried
to draw her into a conversation, she took control of whatever topic he’d rehearsed, and when he
floundered, which he always did, left him alone again to try and figure out her meaning. And she
never stopped moving. She reminded Man of a river. Why wouldn’t she stay put? What was she
looking for?
He finally thought to ask. Her response surprised him.
“My world,” she said.
Her world? Didn’t she know she belonged here?
“This is your world. It’s the same as mine. It’s plenty big enough. Don’t you know how much I want
to share this world with you?” There. He’d said it.
“No. I mean the unseen world.”
“What?”
“You are always telling me about your dreams, ideas, and desires. You say you want me, and that
wanting makes you feel sad. If wanting me makes you sad, why do you do it? I can’t see any of these
things you talk about. So they must be coming from some unseen world inside of you. I’m simply
looking for mine.”
Man was stunned. That was the most she’d ever said to him. Before he could gather his wits or think
of an answer, she turned to walk away. Man grabbed Woman by the arm to stop her, and there was a
shocking thrill of flesh against flesh. His heart pounded. His head swam. Every molecule screamed in
a whirlwind of emotion. He almost swooned. But she only looked at his hand calmly until he let go.
“Isn’t it strange,” she asked, “how the flesh made a pale, momentary picture of your fingers?”
The flesh? Something was terribly wrong with what she’d just said. She didn’t dream or want, have
ideas or desires, because she was missing what she called an inside world, and now she didn’t notice
this was her own skin she was talking about. Maybe God hadn’t taken enough from Man to make
a whole new creature. Man rubbed his side absentmindedly. He didn’t try to stop Woman this time
but watched her walk away. What could be wrong? She was alive, he knew that much, but she didn’t seem to be any more alive than a tree. She was not at all what he had dreamed of when he’d been longing for a friend.

Later that night while Man was brooding on top of a hill, God came down to see if Man’s pursuit of Woman had yielded any fruit. But Man had only sorrows and wants to share. “I want to teach her everything I’ve learned. I want to show her all the things I made out of mud when I was trying to create a friend for myself. I want to show her everything so I can tell her she’s better than all of it. But she doesn’t want me. All she does is wander around.”

“Do you want me to talk to her?” God offered.

“No!”

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Ah, I see,” said God, which He didn’t.

“No you don’t,” said Man.

“Yes I do. You’re head-over-heels in love with her, can’t live without her, and you don’t want her to know. What’s not to understand?”

“I can’t tell you anything,” Man said, looking at the ground and drawing shapes in the dirt with his toe. The emotions Man couldn’t explain verbally, God found he could draw very well. Lately Man’s creative attempts seemed more graceful and touching—often sad in a beautiful way. Drawing and sculpting and whittling were Man’s way of exploring his deeper thoughts and feelings. For God, inner contemplation was best accomplished by walking through the world. He left Man to his drawings.

God walked quite a while worrying about Woman. According to Man, she had no wants or emotions. But wants and emotions were life. God had once asked Woman what she liked to do, but Woman hadn’t understood the concept of “like.” She had no likes, and therefore, no desires. No desires meant no desperation, no joy, and therefore, no need for creativity. So what if a person didn’t want? Was that bad? It seemed backwards. Man’s need for creativity was a product of his emotions when he couldn’t have what he wanted.

Woman would always have everything she needed because she wanted nothing. What sounded like the ideal life lacked creativity. Which was best? Man’s life seemed more worthwhile even though it was nothing but problems and unfulfilled dreams. At least Man dreamed.

God was still deep in thought when something interrupted him.

“Ssssssooo nice of you to drop by.”

God looked around but saw no one.

“Oh here sssssilly.”

God looked in the direction of the voice, if it could be called a voice. It was more like a decaying breeze, something trapped in a cave trying to find its way through a lipless face. He looked up and
saw it. There was nothing there—a lot of it. Where there should have been sky peeking between the leaves and branches of the tree there were instead ribbons of night woven in. It was dusk now, but the shadow in the tree was midnight.

It had found a voice since He’d last known it, but this bodiless being was not a stranger to God. The impudence was all too familiar. This voice could only come from the Chaos that had lived in the void along with God before He’d begun the beginning.

“Ssssssurrrrrrissssssssse!” it hissed.

God didn’t answer because He felt a sudden, urgent need to see Man and Woman and warn them away from this Chaos lurking in the tree.

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God found Woman first. “Woman, would you like to go for a walk with me?”

“How should I know?” she asked.

“Let me rephrase that. Woman, walk with me.”

“Sure,” she said.

As God led Woman toward the tree they walked in silence. This gave Him a chance to study Woman. When God studied a living thing, He saw beyond its surface into its true nature. Whenever He studied Man He saw the essence of all colors, and when Man slept all his colors blended in perfect balance and wrapped him in the velvety blackness of dreams. God studied Woman now, and she was not there. Looking past her surface, all He could see was a blinding, white light—icy and ethereal. Tendrils of light spun out of her center and snapped and flicked whip-like outward into nothingness, none of the light returning but evaporating into thin air. She was a cloud, breaking up and drifting away, leaving her body behind. There wasn’t much of her left. She was made from a part of Man, so what would happen to Man if she disappeared? Would part of him disappear too?

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Reaching the tree, God forced Himself to quit studying Woman in order to deal with their more present danger.

God pointed it out to Woman. “See that?”

“Do you mean that tree with the purple fruit?”

“Yes, that’s it. Stay away from that tree.”

Woman agreed to stay away. However, God hadn’t taken into consideration that a person without wants or emotions has little motivation for or inclination toward obedience. As soon as God was out of sight, Woman climbed the tree and ate the fruit. It seemed harmless enough.

And then she fell. She kept on falling until she landed inside the unseen world of Self.

There, all Hell broke loose.

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Woman woke to the sound of her own feet hitting the cold, hard earth as she fled—from what? She ran through a stand of naked birch, pale against the night sky—row upon row of ragged white trees, like the tattered sheets of a nightmare. She tripped, fell, and tore a deep gash in her shin. Stopping, panting, she looked at it, touched the flow of crimson, warm and pulsing from the wound, the only
spot of color in the night. The sight was strangely comforting.
“Yes, this is good. I bleed. I’m alive.”
But the voice of Chaos, the voice now in her head, said, “Yesss, isssn’t it lovely?”
How had it followed her so far into the woods? What did it want from her?
“Why are you chasing me?” Woman yelled into the darkness.
“Ohhh, that’sss rich. I’m not chasing you my dear. Quite the contrary. You’ve carried me all the way.”
Its voice became softer, harder to tell from her own. “You and I are one now, dear child, as we ssshould have been all along.” The voice sounded dreamy, sleepy.
“Where are you!” Woman demanded. “I can hear you, but I can’t see you.”
“Well, that’sss where it getsss interesting. To sssee me, you’ll have to ssspend the rest of your life looking within. Ifff you’re lucky, you might catch a glimpse of me in your finer worksss.”
“Finer works?”
“Your creationssss.”
“Creations?”
“Ssstop repeating everything I ssay!”
“Then tell me where the HELL YOU ARE!”
The voice sighed like a tutor who’s run out of technique. “Ssince you insisst—you were a hollow vessel, and I was a vessel-lessss content. Ssso, while you were busy eating fruit, I moved in. Now, if you don’t mind, I’m going to take a nap. Goodnight. I’ll sssee you in a few yearss—probably at a crossroads of sssome sssort.”
“Wait, I’m confused. I’m scared. I’m bleeding. I’m lost and I don’t know what’s happening to me. I’m a completely different woman than I was a few minutes ago.”
“Yessss, fasscinating isn’t it?” And then the voice was asleep.
Woman could tell it was asleep because she suddenly felt more room in her skull. More room was welcome. She had so many words in her head now, so many questions. What would she do with them all?
“Now what?” she said to the vacant gloom. She didn’t expect an answer but she got one.
“The resst. The ressst, iss ssssssilence.”
“DAMN YOU!” she yelled. But the voice was gone again.

What next? she wondered, and the question echoed between her ears. What next? What next?
Woman closed her eyes and saw the world anew. Here were all the invisible things Man had been trying to describe: wants, desires, ideas, and dreams. Had she understood what he’d meant—this infinite, invisible world of Self—she never would have climbed that tree. She would’ve remained in the quiet, emotionless state she’d been in before the fruit.
Where there’d once been a brain now lived a mind, horrifying in its depths and twisted canyons, glorious in its lack of boundaries. With eyes open she could see her body, its shape, and how much space it used, but when she closed her eyes, she was as infinite as the void surrounding her, no skin
between herself and the blackness. Her body, a shell of light, now harbored a dark, fathomless sea of Self. She would never escape this world. Even if she never fell again, the knowledge of the inner sea would still rage on and somehow drive her every move and thought. To escape that sea would become her sole motivation, and she knew the day she finally did escape would also be the day she died. But for now, “DAMN YOU!” summed it up quite nicely.

The invisible world made up for its lack of tangible mass and answered her curse with a cacophony of thoughts. As she acknowledged each thought and then dismissed it, another irrelevance sprang up in its place. Woman’s vision traveled deeper and she saw herself watching herself. She stood back again and noticed that she was seeing herself watching herself and shuddered at the implications of her telescoping awareness. She sat a moment longer, head drooping in exhaustion—the weight of it all—and just listened to the thoughts collide. And from that giving in came her answer. Once she stopped trying to control the Chaos in her mind, the words scattered and wheeled around aimlessly, gathered speed and momentum, reached a fevered pitch, and in the moment of crescendo she was struck by a rush of silence—like wings stroking air. She soared in the rushing impulse of breath that happens right before the Word is formed. It was Heaven. Serenity unfolded. Something inside Woman lifted, grew powerful, and shouted down the Chaos in her mind.

Woman smiled.

As she smiled, a solitary thought came singing from the depths of Self and let her know that she’d survive, maybe even thrive in the feeling world. Woman said the thought out loud, enjoying the shapes and sounds it made.

“I am doused with language and set afire by thought.”

Woman wanted nothing more right now than some way to hold on to these words, to make them eternal.

Man! He’d have something she could use to capture words! And off she flew to find him. She was a writer born, a daughter of the Word.

“Wake up! I need you!”

Man assumed he was dreaming. Woman had found him napping. She used her icy feet to convince him she was real.

Jolted awake, Man’s eyes met the most astounding beauty he’d ever seen. The artist in him took notice of every detail. Woman had changed from an ethereal glimmering into a wild thing. Cheeks flushed, she was breathless from her run in the nighttime forest, her hair tangled and matted with twigs and leaves, covered with the scratches of vine and thorn, her all over splattered with mud and muck, and her lips stained with the juice of purple fruit.

Man’s eyes brimmed with joy, and he gave a silent thanks to God that she’d miraculously transformed into the perfectly messy, smelly, woman here by his side. Finally, man was complete.
La Ciudad de las Fresas
By Virginia Ulrich

Every Thursday as the sun was setting they met by the stain on the wall. It was as though a sheet of paper had been stuck to it for years. And one night, she once told him, during a fight between a boy and the girl who had just cheated on him, instead of hitting her, to somehow calm his pain, he threw his full cup of coffee at the wall. The coffee splattered around the edges of the paper and dripped behind it, gently marking that spot forever with that boy’s suffering and that girl’s solitude. Sometimes he would ask Martha what the piece of paper had been, always hoping for one of her stories she seemed to borrow from the sidewalk, as though she was listening to all the past footprints still lingering in the puddles and dust. But whenever he asked, she only smiled and blinked once very slowly.

Martha opened her eyes to the moon beating huge and yellow in the center of her window. She pressed the palms of her hands into her eyes, wanting nothing more than for her mind to stop and for the tears to stay deep within her. The past few months had been easier. She hadn’t thought of him in over two weeks. Not really, anyway. She was so tired of crying, but she couldn’t stop the tears, and they leaked slowly from behind her palms. Her body felt small and tense beneath the softness of the red blanket that would sometimes still smell of him when she left the window open and the wind blew from the south. She fought with violent arms to be free from the softness and the memories and everything that meant him. She didn’t feel any better when the blanket landed in a small, very sad pile on the floor. And the tears didn’t stop as she recalled the Friday morning that she took the bus into the city.

She crossed over the river into downtown, and she felt a slight smile upon her lips grow as she listened to the sidewalk under her feet. She sat at the small table by the door and the window, the only table where she liked to sit when she was alone. The sky, the brick apartments, the storefronts, the people passing by the café—were all in her tea. She used to order black coffee to reflect 4th Street and watch the mornings pass. She began ordering a pot of black tea when they began telling her their stories. It’s harder to drink coffee when you are friends with men who used to work on the plantations harvesting the beans.

She smiled deep into her cup of tea, because she was thinking of Ysidro. She was thinking about if he left for Mexico without being able to tell her. He lives a life of a bird, she thought. And sometimes you cannot wait for another wind. With guilt and sadness she realized she couldn’t remember the name of his ciudad; only the way his voice sounded when he said the word fresas, and the way he smiled—it was obvious that he was remembering with clarity and ease his life in Mexico, that despite where his body stood, he was there, in his city of strawberries. And then, with a horrific calm, she knew that if he did leave without being able to tell her, she would go to Mexico and go to every city until she found la ciudad de las fresas, and found him. It was the same sort of calm she felt when she asked everyone which poem a line of poetry by Pablo Neruda came from and no one knew. She decided she would simply have to read all of his poems until she found it. She only read two volumes of poetry before she forgot what she was looking for. As an old woman carrying yellow roses passed through the pool of tea in her cup, she reminded herself to have him write down the name of his
Sometimes you truly can be in a world that belongs only to you and the person you love, and when you're in that world you forget about things like the name of the city he longs to go back to. And sometimes you can be so saddened and broken by loss that you forget the decision you made in complete horrific calm.

Martha got out of bed and began packing a bag.

There was only one person Martha wanted to tell that she was leaving. This was also the only person she had ever told of her plan to find, should it be necessary, a city in Mexico she did not even know the name of. She could never find the words to tell Ysidro.

When Martha arrived at her abuela's door, she didn't knock. She could smell the honeysuckle strong and thick and she knew her abuela was outside, inhaling the sweet, sticky, early-morning summer air. She could hear the dogs barking in the distance on their morning walk. She sat upon the back steps, next to a cluster of lavender and bees, and waited, remembering the morning she told her abuela she had broken up with her boyfriend, but that she was seeing someone else. Her abuela smiled and gasped a sigh at the same time before she said, Lincito. That is what Martha called Ysidro. Like so many people close to her, even her abuela knew before she did how much she cared for her Lincito. And it was in that one moment between her abuela and her that Martha realized she wanted to tell her everything, especially about Ysidro—this woman whose blood did not fall thick through Martha's veins, but who was so much like a grandmother-friend-sister, Martha gifted her the comfort of the name abuela, as though in the Spanish words of Martha's world, anything could be anything she wanted it to be.

Martha grew up on a busy, two-lane road that led to the river one way and to the center of a small town the other way. Acres of farms and nurseries lined the way leading to the river. The families who owned the land were all related, coming from Italy and England, marrying and growing huge. To the men from Mexico who worked the land, they seemed a tremendous power, not much different than the government they had left— their bosses had that much control over their lives. After a long day of work in earth and water and green and pesticides, the men would walk in slow, tired strides into town, passing Martha's house. Her parents would wave to them as they passed, and she would do the same in moments free from shyness. She remembered how the men would avert their eyes from the ground when they were in front of her family's house. And she remembered the one time she said hola, and the man on his bike returned her ten-year-old greeting with sentence after sentence spoken rapidly and with a smile. He rode away laughing, and for years she tried to remember which man it was. She wanted to tell him that she wasn't scared. She was curious; she wanted to understand.

But she didn't start speaking Spanish until she was twenty, after working for five years at the same grocery store, listening to children translate the cost of their food to their parents. She learned the words for the numbers by listening to these tender conversations. And soon she could say, cómo estás and quieres una bolsa de plástico o papel. It came slowly, but she fell in love with the feel of Spanish in her mouth. It wasn't until she began talking to Ysidro and his friends nearly every night for two months that she began to feel as if she was really learning Spanish.

Ysidro came to the United States when he was sixteen. He left his family because he wanted to see what was out there, beyond his ciudad with the fresas. It wasn't long before what was supposed to
be an adventure, his adventure, became an unforgiving, sharp reality. It was their first conversation after the night Martha whispered te quiero into Ysidro's soul. He didn't offer any reasons for telling her, but she knew he needed to. Ysidro needed Martha to understand not just how much his mom meant to him and why the promise of our-mothers-first was so easy for him to make, and he needed her to understand not just how the hard in his life was different from or the same as the other muchachos, but he needed her to understand how deeply he could feel. By telling Martha about the anger and fear and horrible lingering tristeza that ripped bloody holes into his being when his father left his mother to care alone for his two younger brothers and two younger sisters, when the responsibility of food and clothes for his brothers and sisters and mom became entirely his, when his father remarried, re-tearing the old holes gaping—by telling her about the smoking and drinking and throbbing desire to go back to Mexico and tell his father, not son to father, but man to man, how much respect he had lost for him—by letting that lingering tristeza come into his voice, really what Ysidro was telling Martha: here is my soul and my heart, they are in my hands for you to see, Martha, you can touch them and hold them, please Martha, I want you to touch them and I especially want you to hold them, I have been hurt Martha, I feel I feel I feel, and Martha—really what Ysidro was saying: I love you, Martha, I want to tell you everything.

They met casually and for two years it was as if they hadn't met at all. He would walk into town, passing her house, to the store where she worked. He was always a little more polite, a little more gentleness in his attitude and smiles than many of the muchachos. Martha noticed this in him, but she didn't speak Spanish yet. And sometimes so much has to happen first, so that when the one thing you've been waiting for without knowing it finally happens, you're beautifully caught off-guard and you can't help but gasp.

For two years, Martha learned Spanish from the men, women, and children who came through her line. When she began to crave the taste of palabras en español so much, she signed up for Spanish 101 during her second-to-last term at the university. She began to write cuentos, translating them into English when she had finished.

The day she felt brave enough to ask someone to read them and tell her if they could understand—she didn't care about mistakes, she knew there were plenty—was the first day she said more than hola, cómo estás, quieres una bolsa de plástico o papel, doble o sencilla to Ysidro. She handed him the papers and in faltering Spanish said, me dices si puedes entenderles. He said sí, and as he hurried away with little more passing between them, Martha could see in his eyes how caught off-guard he was.

After Ysidro disappeared, Martha would often feel a panicky empty sensation back behind her stomach, somewhere in the pit of her soul. She often wondered if it was in that moment of handing him her stories that she began to fall in love. It was only after he left that she wondered when it started. It all happened in such a way that she seemed to be the last to know, and it was as though if she could just figure out how it all happened, she could figure out why he left without saying goodbye—or at least how she could move on.

What Martha did remember was the moment she could no longer deny what she was feeling for Ysidro, for her Lincito. The moon was full in her window and all she could think about was him. Two weeks later she drove with him to one of the parks at the top of a long hill—she wanted to show him her favorite place, she wanted to show him the view of the city from so far above, she told him. He was nervous to go into the city. It seemed so far and the fear of being deported is a violent black,
especially when going someplace unfamiliar. Martha understood and wanted to tell him never mind when he agreed with such brave finality, she felt relieved and even more nervous. It was her favorite place, and the view of the city was like a million glowing candles. She wanted to show Ysidro her heart and she needed the sidewalks of the city close by when she did it.

She made him close his eyes when they got out of the car and she took his hand slowly into hers. Sometimes when you do something for the first time, something that you’ve been secretly longing to do, if you don’t do it with slow movements, you risk revealing yourself. Their fingers curled into each other and she told Ysidro to open his eyes. The city was gray in rain and fog and coming night. The mist curled into the clouds, lit by fragments of lingering sun. He put his arm around her and they began to walk.

Martha rested her right hand gently around his waist. She clutched her heart tightly in her left hand.

They stopped.

Te quiero, Martha whispered. And she let go of her heart, which screamed silently around them in brilliant color. The air was still. This was now their world.

Yo sé, Ysidro said, hardly louder than her whisper, and then quieter, cómo amigos. Martha looked up into his eyes, her own wide and with tears meeting the rain. No, was all she could say. He smiled, his thumbs gently upon her cheeks, and then his hands upon her head and back as he drew her into his arms and they stood for the first time in this new world of theirs.

Every Thursday as the sun was setting, they met by the stain on the wall.

Martha’s bag was at her feet, the lavender and honeysuckle in her nose, when Red Dog and Mack placed their noses in her hands and she met the eyes of her abuela, who looked from her to her bag.

Your Lincito?

All Martha could do was smile. What she spent the next half-hour trying to explain, she knew was unnecessary for her abuela to hear. But she needed to hear it aloud. She certainly hadn’t forgotten her Lincito. And it wasn’t that all the calm she felt in his presence was so attached to him that it too vanished when he did. It was just that his absence was like a void before her and she wasn’t sure how to move around it. It was in this void that she forgot about her plan made of love and horrible calm to go to Mexico to find la ciudad de las fresas. Sometimes love is so strong that when it begins to shatter around you, the shattering is all you can think about.

But now, mi abuela, Martha smiled softly, slightly, solo me siento tan tranquila—I don’t know how else to describe it.

Her abuela returned her smile, I’ll be right back. And Martha was again alone with the lavender and the bees, the dogs stretched out, eyes closed, entirely content. When she returned, in her hands was a book, her finger marking a page. Read it aloud, she said handing Martha the book with Rilke’s name faded from years of fingerprints holding the pages open.

Martha read the words underlined by her abuela, pausing, at first, upon the abruptness of the title, “Moving On.” And when Martha finished the poem and grew so suddenly serious, her abuela thought she had been wrong to offer this to Martha now. Sometimes when you share something that means a great deal to you with someone who means a great deal to you, it stings a deep red if you fail to
wait until the right time.

But very quietly, as though she was afraid to say it aloud, Martha repeated the line: “as if standing on fishes.” Her eyes wide upon her abuela, she said, I’m standing on fishes. She explained that the title wasn’t wrong, but that acceptance and moving on are not the same, and the poem seemed to be more about acceptance than moving on. From there, the conversation did what it always did. It twirled about brilliantly, always endlessly, and by the time the sun was setting, they agreed that Martha would stay the night.

When Martha woke up, she wanted to stay eyes closed and smiling. She was going to Mexico. She had thought her managers would be hesitant to not only grant her a leave of absence with no definitive return date, but to give her a check for three years of unused vacation time. But they were more than happy to help. As much as they could not relate to the seemingly fantastical nature of Martha’s plan, they all had their own understandings of love, and somewhere in each of those understandings was a bit of sweet lunacy comparable to Martha’s. She had thought her abuela would somehow discourage her through years of experience and knowing, would tell her to be a bit more realistic, to look for a phone number, inquire with his friends. But her abuela, who woke long before Martha to leave for work, had left an envelope on top of her bag. Inside were two things that made her hands tremble.

The first was a note: Go find your Lincito.

The second was her abuela’s credit card, with another note, Just in case. It was a gesture of full encouragement. Without an explanation, her abuela knew why it wasn’t as simple as phone numbers and friends.

After he left, Martha avoided the eyes of Ysidro’s friends. She had spent enough time with them that involved more than just the sharing of Ysidro and of pleasantries. She knew their stories—why they left Mexico, what happened when they crossed la frontera, what they missed most from home, what was hard for them in Los Estados Unidos, what they loved about Los Estados Unidos, what they were hoping for—they were her friends, too. But sometimes what you do is draw a thick black line and you tell yourself what you can handle is on this side and what you can’t handle is on that side. Martha put Ysidro’s friends on that side. She wanted to ask all of them why he had done it, why he left without saying goodbye. But she didn’t want to hear the answer. Maybe he just didn’t love her. Some people can do that, she would remind herself when she found her eyes wandering toward those of his friends—some people can tell you they love you even when they don’t.

There were no second thoughts. The door shut and it was on to Los Angeles, then Mexico City—she would be right in the center of Mexico. A one-way ticket and a handful of hours, and then la ciudad de las fresas would be somewhere close by, and somewhere breathing the same air, walking under the same sky: her Lincito.

Time had allowed the fluid motion of growing closer to Ysidro to become moments. Sometimes Martha could recall them in the order of which they passed, and sometimes she could only recall one or two that she needed. These were the bad days. When she tried to hate him, but all she had was a moment or two where she could see when and why her love for him grew. There were also the worst days. When Martha really did think she could hate Ysidro.

But then she would remember the night they went to the park. She would remember the fat red-orange slugs with the big black eyes. She would remember crouching in front of one and saying
hola, cómo estás. And she would remember that instead of remaining standing, looking upon her, perhaps even smiling warmly at her gaping silliness, Ysidro crouched beside Martha and asked the slug if it spoke Spanish or English, or Italian or Japanese.

Martha would remember that she loved Ysidro. Still.

She didn’t dare leave the airport while she waited for the plane that would take her to Mexico City. Something about the air of Los Angeles made her want to vomit and laugh at the same time. It wasn’t the sort of city that would make missing a flight worth it. She found the gate that would be her last passage to the plane that would bring her to the country that sometimes seemed so much her own. It is possible to be close enough to someone that what is theirs somehow also becomes yours. She sat cross-legged on the floor, against the wall.

There were times when a week or more would pass and Ysidro and Martha were not able to see each other. But it was always the same when they were finally able to meet. Their fingers would curl into each other’s. So often when Martha was alone in bed, longing for sleep to take her away from her naked sadness, she would feel the lingering warmth of his gentleness always there in those hands of his that she never wanted to let go of hers. One time she didn’t uncurl her fingers when he moved to leave. It was that night they decided to meet every Thursday by the stain on the wall.

Martha pressed her back farther into the wall. The noise of Los Angeles filtered into all she could still hear Ysidro say. When you are close to someone, if you read something he wrote, or someone else tells you something he said, or if you remember conversations between you and him, you read it all and you listen to it all, and it’s all in his voice.

There was a brutal Sunday when Martha realized it was fading. She would remember his words, but she was starting to lose Ysidro’s voice. Time was passing. Not ready to let go, she couldn’t forgive herself for forgetting. Anything. By the time Martha sat on the floor of the Los Angeles airport, her back pressing harder into the wall, all she had left was fresas, and the way he said her name as if there was no “h” after the “t.”

The wall did not swallow her, but Martha refused to cry. She could not risk losing what she had left. She might find la ciudad de las fresas, and somewhere amongst thousands of people, she might even find Ysidro. She knew that she could ask him why he left without saying goodbye, but she also knew she could not listen to the answer. And she remembered their promise of our-mothers-first. There can be other friends, other boyfriends, other girlfriends, he said, but there’s only one mother. She thought of his eyes when he talked about his mamá. Maybe Rilke is right, she thought, standing on fishes has everything to do with moving on.
Scrabble Night
By Jacob Aiello

Sammy Johns slipped through the gilded revolving doors of the Empire Hotel like a listless moth pulled reluctantly from its chrysalis by the light. Wearing cologne and a nice pair of pants, a finely stitched white Hermes shirt with onyx cufflinks, and the vapors of a gin and tonic on the whiskers above his lip, he wasn’t at all overdressed.

What limited novelty the hotel once held had long worn off since his arrival seven months before, when his wife had declared their separation and sent him, with a dictionary and a suitcase full of dirty laundry, packing. Now he met her the first Sunday of every month for Scrabble night, a stripping of their alliance to its most conceptual. Like life, the prize could not be harder or simpler. If there were a magic word to allow Sammy the privilege of returning home, it would only be found on the Scrabble board.

But his homecoming was made all the more unattainable by his timid disposition, for he was the kind of man who preferred his profanity vicariously—through its shrewd application by others. He now handed his ticket to Ralph the doorman and awaited his colorful commentary. Ralph gave the ticket to the valet with a dismissive snapping of fingers, and rocked back and forth on his heels. “So Mister Johns, going to see the missus?”

“That’s right, Ralph. It’s that time of month.”

Ralph nodded. “Say Mister Johns, I got a word you can use. Kumquat. It’s seven letters and it’s got a q and everything.”

“I don’t know, Ralph. It might be difficult to get all those letters.”


Dusk in the suburbs is a lonely time of day for an estranged husband, lonely not like a love song but like an elementary school jeer. Sammy parked the car against the curb in front of the house and waited for the song playing on the radio to end before turning off the engine. There among suburbia’s politesse, as ego came crumbling down around him, he realized his mettle as a man and as a human being was being tested. He also realized he was failing.

Not that she would notice, but he had taken care to dress in the clothes she had given him, an affected attempt to exhibit what remained of their marriage. Likewise, although she’d not set foot in the car for over three months, he couldn’t stomach the thought of throwing out the cast-away miscellany strewn about the floor of their car.

He opened the door to a wash of stale air, eucalyptus, and the gradual dissipation of the day’s heat rising from the asphalt. Reflexively, he checked the mailbox and walked up the white pebble drive. He saw she had let the chrysanthemums die and the lawn needed to be mown.

Once inside the house, he stood for a moment regarding the pictures lining the foyer, ignoring the
cardboard boxes stacked like hurricane debris beneath the coat rack. Sammy and Sylvie on their wedding day, on the Mendocino highlands overlooking the Pacific, Sammy and Sylvie in love; they'd always been embarrassed by the alliteration of their names, but now he couldn't help but think it was only her embarrassment he had adopted as his own.

He found her on the sofa in the living room with an incredibly large dictionary in her lap.

“Hey!” he said. “Isn’t that cheating?”

“Oh!” She looked up. “It’s you. You should have knocked.”

“What are you doing? Preparing?”

“I was just looking to see how many expletives I could find.”

“Aha,” feigning ease, he leaned against the banister. “That’s nice. How many have you found so far?”

“All of them. Merriam-Webster has no sense of decorum anymore.”

“Yeah,” he drawled. “D’you have anything to drink?”

“I think there’s some beer left in the fridge.”

He walked into the kitchen and opened the refrigerator door. A nearly empty case of Hefeweizen was tucked toward the rear on the bottom shelf. “Hefeweizen? Since when do you drink Hefeweizen?”

“I’ve changed, don’t you know.”

He took out a knife and sliced a lemon in quarters. “Your knives are getting dull.”

She appeared in the doorway. “Hmm,” she sniffed. “So are you.”

“That’s sweet. Here,” he handed her the beer. “So, how have you been? Did you get the check?”

“Yeah, I got it,” she frowned; he could hear admonishment in the tone of her voice. They both knew he only sent the money to maintain a hand, however tenuous, in her life. He collapsed into the sofa, huddling his body between the cushions like a chastised child, and she sighed mercifully. She took a seat next to him and pulled out the Scrabble board from beneath the coffee table. “Are you ready?” she asked.

Sylvie’s beauty was of the composite variety. She was shorter than average, her nose was particularly small, and her ankles were a mere continuation from her calves to her feet. Yet there were certain loci and moments of focus that caught one’s attention like a rubber band in a vice and refused to let go. Her lips. Her smile. The subtle parabolic curve from her chin to her breast as she raised her head. Sammy couldn’t say if she’d grown more beautiful with age, or if it was just his concentration on these elements that made it seem so. Through time and memory, it seemed the sum total of her features came to equal an aggregate beauty even Helen of Troy couldn’t match.

She was wearing clothes devoid of any sexual allusion whatsoever: sweatpants and an oversized camisole, her wedding ring, and a face without pretense. As she opened the box and lined up their respective tile racks, she wore a look of exasperated duty. She held forth the bag, her fingers noticeably distanced from any proposed contact with his hand, as if even the slightest touch would suggest a forbidden intimacy. “Do you want to pick your tiles?”

One by one, he selected them. \( V, c, e, x, d, u, \) and \( t. \) As Sylvie picked her own, he ordered them alphabetically \( (c, d, e, t, u, v, x) \) and then cross-organized them by their value \( (x, v, c, d, e, t, u) \). He was looking for a word that said, \textit{when you touch me, with your fingertips electrical, I become acutely aware}
of every single atom in my body bubbling and boiling like spit on a griddle. I want to light myself on fire just to prove to you that your love makes me strong enough to survive.

Instead he spelled duvet. “Double word score.”

And so it began.

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The game was simple enough. There was a board on which was printed a grid of boxes. Some boxes had scores for various points. Triple word score and double letter score. No score. There was a bag of tiles with letters engraved on them, and below the letters numbers indicated their value. X was a valuable tile. I wasn't worth very much at all.

At the game’s inception, the board was sweeping in its nudity and they could spell whatever they had the tiles for. Yet by its essence, the words most yearning to speak could only be spoken when the tiles allowed it. The tiles rarely, if ever, allowed it. As the game progressed, they began to find themselves bottlenecked and blocked in with a handful of vowels and nary a consonant between them. It was like chess played with only rogue guerilla pawns. There was still the strategy, the coups, and the tactics, but without the foresight.

As per usual, Sylvie distinguished her game early on with sharp, incisive words that filled Sammy with envy. Double entendres and innuendo, triple word scores with valuable letters, and a y, turning his strength, his iron, into irony.

But he hung on as best he could. Through his subpar writ offerings he tried to spark some remembrance of their former love, hoping that his desolation and woe would become so apparent that she would at least pity him, and her pity would substitute for love. He wanted to weep in front of her to prove the veracity of his emotion, but now in the depths of his well he came up dry.

He spelled stare because he couldn't spell tears.

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Sammy first met Sylvie amid the residual despair of closing time in a bar downtown. All evening he had watched her, steeling his courage with cheap beer, lingering by the jukebox where she danced as if he could ingratiate himself with her by proxy. She was set apart from her group, all savagely autonomous women reveling in their girls’ night out, and she wore a sheer white blouse with just the vaguest violent suggestion of black bra pushing through. He had smiled presumptuously as she regaled her audience with dirty jokes.

Finally, as they were leaving, he corralled his anxiety and her in the vestibule outside the bathrooms. “I realize you don't know me,” he began calmly enough, “and now that the bar is closing this seems like just some futile gesture to squander the night, but there's a twenty-four-hour Dunkin' Donuts around the corner and I'd love to share you with a cruller and a cup of coffee.”

She'd cocked her head, regarding him bemusedly. “You don't swear much, do you?”

“No, any less than the next man, I would imagine!”

“Well, we're going to change that.”

She was brusque and she frightened him a little, but he liked it. They bought donuts and coffee and stood waiting to cross the impassable traffic to the esplanade and their nightcap alfresco on the other side. “Come on!” she said, gripping his hand and leaping out into the street, directly in the path
of an oncoming car.
“Look out!” shouted Sammy, pulling her back to the sidewalk.
“Oops,” she grinned. “Didn’t see that coming!” She stepped back onto the street and pulled him with her.

They sat down on the grass near a giant water fountain and watched the barges sail up the river. The first whispers of fall were just beginning to show and Sylvie shivered, sitting as she was in the chill of the dew. “When I was a little girl,” she began, taking a bite of maple bar, “I used to be terrified of crossing the street. I’d walk around in circles for hours until I found a street without any cars.”

“How?” said Sammy. “You’re not exaggerating a little bit?”

“No, really,” she licked her fingers. “Hours. It was ridiculous. I was late for school, late coming home. My mom would tell me to go get something at the store and I’d show up two hours later. I’d walk three miles so I wouldn’t have to cross the street.

“Until finally one day, I decided I’d had enough. I was so exhausted from walking everywhere, from the pressures of my neuroses—you know how they build off each other like that? Like those balls made from hundreds of rubber bands wrapped all together, all entwined, until you can’t even see the first one, much less pull it out—you know those balls?”

Sammy nodded, rendered mute by her verbosity.

“So I resolved to cross this incredibly busy street—but to bring myself to do it, I decided to stare into the eyes of the oncoming driver, so that if he ran me over, if he killed me, he would have my eyes burned into his conscience for the rest of his life.” She lifted her head victoriously and laughed. “And it worked! I haven’t been afraid of crossing the street since.”

Sammy smiled and looked down. He leaned back, allowing his hand to just touch hers, and when he looked back up, Sylvie was staring at him.

After several months, they were inevitably led to Scrabble as a means to buffer and translate their romantic intentions, and the game became an endlessly wanting effort to put a name on their gestures. The tiles became the language of their skin as it touched, and the words they spelled described their anatomy. The empty boxes were a promise of travels to come, as opposed to what they’d become now: vacant rooms without windows or doors.

Game by game the words he tried to say became fainter and fainter, like stars against a dawning sky, until one morning, the dictionary before him lying useless and inert, he realized he’d become mute.

Sammy had come to realize that as frustrated as he was choosing his words among the given tiles, in the end he welcomed their limitations. For at least through their constraints he was excused from saying what he really wanted to say, and he had absolutely no idea what he really wanted to say. From her *bud*, he spelled *bloom*. He spelled *kiss* and *quiet* and among the words’ simplicity, he discovered revival.

He began to win.

At eight-thirty, Sylvie tried to sabotage his coup with a cigarette break. *Spartan*, he’d just spelled,
receiving a seventeen-point lead. She leaned back and stared at her tiles like she wished them some horrible fate. She stood up. “Let’s take a break, huh? I need a cigarette.”

“I thought you quit.”

“Obviously not.”

Sammy followed her out onto the front porch with the dregs of his beer. She leaned against the railing and lit her cigarette, and he sat down on the stoop below her. He could feel his advantage dissipating into the midsummer night air, but oddly enough he felt happy.

Sammy felt happy, but he was wary of pondering his newfound euphoria, and he was certainly hesitant to make any mention of it. He had found long ago that to recognize his condition as happy was in turn to recognize its transience and departure; to define his happiness, in short, negated its existence (incidentally, he’d found despair a much more steadfast subject). But for now at least, he was happy. He was happy being here with her.

They didn’t speak out in the gloaming, instead saving their words for the board. Sylvie merely smoked her cigarette, leaning against the railing, and Sammy watched her. She was a lilac flower at the foot of his coffin, worthy of his overtures but inescapably marked by grave connotations.

When they returned to the living room, she immediately set upon her tiles as if her cigarette had lent her some epiphany.

“Don’t do that,” Sammy shook his head. “What are you trying to do?”

“What do you think? I’m trying to win.”

“Well you’re not going to win this time. You can’t. It’s against the rules. No names.”

“But it’s not just a name,” she smiled. “It’s also a prophylactic.”

“Fine,” he rebuffed, “here’s a word for you!” From her j, he added o-h-n, each a little wiggling rind of disaffection. “It’s not just a trick, it’s also a toilet!”

She giggled like a nymph and leaned forward to spell zygote off the y of jimmy, placing the tiles like petals plucked off a flower.

He stood up and walked over to the cabinet. A stack of old pop albums was lying atop the stereo, and Sammy flipped through them abstractly, as if only for lack of anything better to do. Once they had basked in the melancholy of this music, finding some kind of elusive and unspeakable intimacy within the melodies, but now it seemed they were only capable of punctuating his sorrow. Still, he picked an album and put it in the player.

“What are you playing?” she asked.

“You’ll see.”

Sylvie followed his movements impatiently, but not without a note of guarded curiosity, as if waiting for some grand pronouncement or rehearsed epiphany. Now, in response to his meanderings she reminded him, “It’s your turn, you know.”

“Yeah,” he said. “I’m thinking.” He walked back to the stereo and pressed play. A slamming door reverberated through the speakers, heralding the Beach Boys and “Wouldn’t It Be Nice.” Sammy spelled brazen with his blank tile for the z and thought he was anything but.

“You realize you don’t get any points for that,” she said. “The blank tile.”
“I know.”
“All right, just so you know.” She spelled _cad_ and he reached across her lap for the bag. If a single word could affect the outcome of a game, what leap of faith was required to imagine it could affect a relationship? If a word could so easily destroy a relationship, didn’t it stand to reason that a word could equally resurrect one? Sammy reached his hand in and drew the last tiles, lying lonely and forsaken at the bottom of the bag.

_Donut_, he spelled, and looked to Sylvie for her reaction.

“Well,” she said, arching an unimpressed eyebrow, failing to concede the catharsis Sammy expected. “I guess that’s the game.”

“Yeah?”

“I think you won,” she said.

“Yeah, but you still have some tiles left to play.”

“No. No, they don’t spell anything.”

He leaned back against the sofa and brushed his hands against his slacks. Therein fell a silence thorough and steeped in anxiety, for with the game over, his presence was forbidden without breaching the impasse constructed between them, without laboriously unspelling every word they’d spent the night assembling. “What next?”

She held out her arms to hug him and for a split second he imagined they were arms welcoming him back. He bent forward to hold her, and being the first time they had touched since his arrival, he found it impossible to extricate himself. He felt her embrace slacken, and then the hammers of her hands wedging themselves between them.

She’d been sitting erect to hug him, but as her resistance faltered, her body began to drift awkwardly, hips and legs in seemingly incongruous placement, until finally she fell against the sofa and with great resignation, let her head fall into the crook of his shoulder.

“Are you crying?” he asked.

“No,” she said. “Just sad.” His solar plexus began to quake and his biceps ached, trapped between the base of her neck and the back of the sofa, but Sammy would not choose to move for the rest of the world. He had forgotten the warmth of her body, how even through the insulation of her clothes its heat was a brush fire burning everything else away and leaving him a glowing bulb of clemency.

He looked down at her tile rack and saw the four remaining letters. _L, o, e, v._

“It’s not what you think,” she whispered. “Nothing’s changed, Sammy.”

He smiled sadly. The strangest thing was that he could imagine himself breaking down in front of her, in rage or in sorrow, but it was too late in the game for mere visualization; the closest he could come to shedding real tears was in pondering his inability to weep, and that just wasn’t enough. How had their relationship devolved into such arbitrary modes of communication, where they would rather scrabble their words among random tiles than actually speak _with_ each other? Was it any wonder things were as they were? For they hadn’t lived with each other, but alongside each other, parallel to each other, always with some medium to refract their differences. The television, an album to listen to, a board game composed of petty plastic tokens to the ghost of time past; how could he have ever possibly imagined he could win her with words?
“Why?” he whispered, as if to ask was to acknowledge her pronouncement.

She lifted her head and looked at him. “Because why not, Sammy? Because security is a kind of death, like your idol Tennessee Williams said.”

“You would use him against me?”

She shook her head and wiped her face, mascara streaked across her cheeks. “What do you want, Sammy?”

He opened his mouth to speak but no words were spoken. Words could lie, he knew. Lies were born from them, whether spoken or spelled on a board. He would get in his car and drive back to the Empire Hotel, but residency there had long since expired. He was now a tenant of the past, of memory and nostalgia, of the static and the sporadic frames of romantic fiction between intermittent flickers of regret.

“I want to go back,” he said. “I want to go back and say the things I should have said, and not say the things I said. I want to go back and say whatever it was you wanted me to say.” He sighed. “I want to create a moment of beauty out of my pain and show it to you.”

“But you can’t change just one thing, Sammy. You change one thing and you change everything. You change one letter and suddenly the whole board doesn’t make any sense. We’re just building choices off of each other’s decisions.”

“I know. But I want to anyway. I want to stay a part of your life.”

What he did next, he could not explain (nor be held responsible for). It was like a mutiny of the senses, a temporary loss of reason. With both hands he took her face and kissed her on the lips. He kissed her hard but not passionately, long but without warmth, as if trying to push onto her his emotions so that either she accepted and reciprocated or disposed of them, nonetheless ridding him of them forever.

But as reason came rushing back, there were no words left to say but “Goodbye,” and with it, no points left to tally. Sammy stood up and randomly picked up one of the boxes she had set out for him in the foyer.

“I’ll be back for another box next month,” he called, lingering at the door.

“Sure. No hurry.”

He left the house. He opened the trunk of his car, dropped the box next to last month’s, and drove back to the Empire Hotel. He was thinking how near-death experiences make one appreciate life, and how loss makes one appreciate love, and thus how words must make one better appreciate the silence of implicit mutual understanding.

Ralph was still working the door as he dropped off the car. “So, Mister Johns,” he said. “Did you get a chance to use kumquat?”

“No Ralph,” Sammy shook his head. “I forgot to say that.”

“Spell it you mean, don’t you Mister Johns?”

“Right,” said Sammy. “Spell it. Maybe next time.”
Reyna Cobb is a single woman in her early thirties. She writes technical specs for engineers at a large semiconductor manufacturer in the dirty industrial outskirts of San Francisco. From eight to late R.C. works in a development lab without windows and is the sole female on a team of thirty engineers. Lately, finally realizing her job is dead-end and about as interesting as a sheet of drywall, R.C. has worked while listening to her Walkman and fantasizing about her coworkers in the extreme sterility of the lab.

Product: Ches Czeweski  
DOB: 74/03/20  
Inspiration: “Love Potion No. 9,” The Searchers  
Specification:  
Ches is from another planet—or likes to think he is. He’s the kind of guy who played the tuba or the triangle in your high school band and gave it his all, perfect and prompt for those few notes he was blessed with in any given march. Somewhere along the line he got into Star Trek, UFOs, conspiracy theories, haunted Hollywood, and anything else that happened by. You can ask Ches just about any question and he will have an answer, usually the right one, a fact I marvel at given his age.

So in my fantasy he will have a love potion, something he has to travel to the hazy dens of a strange flat in the Mission and bribe a curandera for. In return he gives the old woman a pamphlet he’s written on the magical properties of the venom of Southwestern spiders, since he would assume that she didn’t already know and would be more than fascinated to learn about the topic. When he is instructed how to use the love potion, he listens intently since she forbids him to write anything down. He memorizes the old woman’s gestures and intonations for each step he is to perform, as if those details will extend the potion’s potency.

The day before I know we are to rendezvous, I catch him snooping around my bench. As I approach, a Post-It note I had scribbled on is quickly shoved in his pocket. Later in the day, as I’m on my way out, I see him run his index finger along the surface of my bench, as if trying to wipe my skin-dust onto his lab scrubs (like there could be that kind of build-up in the first place). I smile to myself knowing that Ches works only for the greater pursuit of knowledge and human mystical development. He’ll give the Kama Sutra a run for its money.

I skip out to the bus stop, dizzy with anticipation.

Product: Hippo Crockett  
DOB: 71/03/22  
Inspiration: “I Feel For You,” Chaka Khan  
Specification:  
This is about unleashing the power of a married-too-young Christian. Repression is the name of the game here. Hippo, from some unidentified international city with a slightly-off-from-Caucasian-but-can’t-quite-place complexion, has fallen in crush with me. I can see it in the way his eyes hold mine just a little too long when we’re talking about our weekend plans. It’s as if he wants me to extend our
friendship outside work, but aside from my fantasy, it’ll never happen. There’s Wolfgang, anyway.

So we’ll dance all night long at a hip-hop club, somewhere far out in the flats, a place my brother Gato tells me about since I don’t like that kind of music. Under the crazy lights and the jumpy bass beats, I’m bold. I grind against Hippo’s legs. I roll my head around to the beat and time it with the sway of my breasts. I’m seductive. Hippo has only seen me in my clean-room scrubs at the lab. Now in my red polyester dress I raise my arms in the air and slowly kneel to the floor, rise, and then turn around and shake my ass at Hippo. He’s having a great time. He can’t not smile anymore. I see him breaking out of his shell. He turns around and shakes his ass at me too, half joking, half challenging me.

Lovemaking with Hippo is fantastic. He moans, braces himself with one hand against the wall behind me. We laugh, his skin fairly sparkles with gratitude, his shame completely passed now. I feel I’ve given a gift to Hippo and the best part is seeing him wide open, his heart afire, singing to a new world. How different and beautiful he will be now.

I’m strangely hopeful the rest of the afternoon while working on a datasheet.

**Product: Lonh Buoanttanang**
**DOB: 65/10/01**
**Inspiration: Anything by Michael Jackson**
**Specification:**
Lonh is a long shot, but amusing anyway. A fantasy about him definitely passes the time. Lonh’s at least five inches shorter than me with a Bay City Rollers meets Brad Pitt hairdo, modern and retro all at once without his even knowing it. He loves Michael Jackson’s music and plays it often in the lab late at night. Sometimes Ches and I look across the benches at each other and bob our heads in unison to the rhythm of Lonh’s boom box blaring “P.Y.T.,” and then crack up. I don’t think Lonh realizes what a character he is. On rainy days, he brings the crew doughnuts. I look forward to the frosted with sprinkles that will be at my bench when I arrive.

In my mind, the lights from Army Street shine through the blinds in Lonh’s small bedroom, in the apartment he shares with two other men. Michael Jackson’s “Thriller” plays softly from the stereo crammed next to a small refrigerator and a hot plate. We lie next to each other on the twin bed and listen to the cars drive past on the street below the apartment. I think about how boring Lonh’s lovemaking is for someone who loves Michael Jackson so much. And there’s not much chatting afterward to make up for it. The stereo shorted out in the middle of our session. Since then, he’s jiggled the cord and got it working again. In the middle of the night, we are still awake, holding hands but not talking. He gets up and makes me ramen and tea on the hot plate and this is endearing, like the doughnuts on rainy days. As I sip the tea, Lonh tells me how beautiful San Francisco is, how the city saved him from the sure death he faced back home. He studies me, hunched naked over the tea and ramen, sizing me up. And then he starts again, quietly this time, sparing nothing from his life-and-death history in Laos. No one at the lab knows a thing about this side of happy Lonh. It’s an honor to listen.

**Product: Wolfgang Ledester**
**DOB: 74/02/13**
**Inspiration: “Day After Day” (for the highs) and “My City was Gone” (for the lows), The Pretenders**
**Specification:**
This one is the real thing. This has been my real crush for three months and slowly, excruciatingly, we progress (in my mind or in fact, I'm not sure). I have fallen completely for Wolfgang and any fantasy I have for him, I try to keep in check. I'm superstitious and think I'll jinx myself if they get too involved.

So this one is a walk in the park. Really. We'll walk through Golden Gate Park to see the bison. It's gray, of course. I haven't eaten a thing because I can't think about food and Wolfgang walking with me at the same time. His hair has reverted in the humidity to a mass of moist, tangled curls framing his hairline, his big green eyes. He starts telling me about growing up in New Hampshire (I have no idea if he's from New Hampshire but I'd love to go see the autumn leaves and all that someday), how they raised animals and slaughtered them, what it was like living in the woods, the child of hippies. I am smitten, entranced. I am pink all over from the fog and emotion and hunger.

There is no sex. I don't let myself even think about it. I'm tense.

**Product:** Regan Palmer  
**DOB:** 63/08/02  
**Inspiration:** “Days of Future Passed,” The Moody Blues

**Specification:**
This one is a fleeting relationship. I see a greasy spoon on the fringes of the city. I sit inside, lonely, drinking coffee. The crumbs of fries linger on a pushed-away plate. It's early. There are no worker-bees about yet, and this is not the neighborhood for all-night queens or club kids just getting out from the late parties. Besides, it's only Monday night going on Tuesday morning. It's raining lightly outside. The gray from the cloud cover is lit from the east although the sun has not yet risen.

I have just left Regan in his bed, sprawled diagonally from one corner to the other like a second-hand on a square watch-face. Regan is complicated, but simple. You don't know what he's thinking behind his solemn mask. He's like Lurch from The Addams Family. In fact, he is sometimes called Lurch behind his back by our coworkers. I am nearly crushed by the weight of him. He likes me best on top anyway. When I left this morning, he gently said, “Don't go,” and it made me not want to. Simple, but complicated. Since I can't accept things for what they are (like my job), I'll mull this thing like a dog chews a bone, trying to figure out why Lurch just won't work for me. Although he's romantic and sexy, I can't go out with someone named Lurch—I must have someone better. Isn't progress what technology's all about? Progress is my job, my middle name.

**Product:** Wolfgang L.  
**DOB:** 74/02/13  
**Inspiration:** “Tears of a Clown,” Smokey Robinson

**Specification:**
Today Wolfgang mentioned that he'd gone on a date over the weekend. The pain! An arrow straight through my heart. I tried not to let it register on my face, but no amount of clenching my teeth suppressed the sudden flush of my cheeks. So I asked questions, quickly, to cover myself. Where had they gone? (Little Italy for dinner.) Her name? (Sheila.) How'd he know her? (A buddy's sister.) Did they have a good time? (Yeah, great time.) But I couldn't manage to ask if he'd see her again. I assumed as much anyway.

In my mind, we're at Coit(us) Tower, watching the fog roll in. We'll have just had coffee at a small
café where we had to break it off, finally, after months of clandestine meetings and heartbreaking lovemaking. Wolfgang has discovered he has a terrible heart cancer that prevents him from feeling love but ironically, causes him lots of physical pain. Weeping, I take it all in. We say our final goodbye beneath the tower and part ways. I walk the five miles home in the fog, vowing to never love again. I’m a changed woman.

See Also: Hippo (to restore hope)

Product: George Okenopolis
DOB: 55/11/02
Inspiration: Slow and spooky Japanese koto music (Mom’s favorite which I’m trying to get into)
Specification:
George is the oldest engineer on the floor. I hardly talk to him, but through the conversations of others I know that George is brilliant, reserved, and known for his methodical thinking. In a company hell-bent on hiring anyone who can do the job (even badly and at least cheaply), George is an anomaly with years of experience and know-how. But his reserved demeanor prevents him from getting much recognition since only those who perform heroic last-minute deeds to correct preventable snafus and scheduling errors are rewarded here. In fact, George is one of the few people I respect at the lab.

So George will want to talk. He wants quality conversation with a beautiful woman (mah-self) and would be delighted to get it. In fact, he’d probably pay for it if it came with a guarantee. So as we sit nestled into his stylish, symmetrically arranged sitting chairs which maximize the view of Lake Merritt from his penthouse—one of the older ones from the sixties, not something pompous and overdone. I have to imagine I am a well-educated and traveled sophisticate who knows about science, medicine, history, fashion, and what’s being shown in the galleries around town. We sip sake as the moon rises over the hills and the koto music plays softly in the background. George wants a meeting of the minds and I try my best to give it to him.

Product: Nat-Nat Oshida
DOB: 67/1/31
Inspiration: Gato’s techno stuff
Specification:
Nat-Nat grew up all over Asia because of his father’s construction business. Although Japanese by citizenship, Nat-Nat’s one of those worldly cosmopolitans who speaks several languages and knows about wine. At the same time, he’s boyish. He walks around the lab with large headphones over his ears and sometimes breaks into a strange little jig. He loves Japanimation. In fact, he kind of looks like a Japanimation hero—very strong but classic features, tall, mysterious, as if he’s on a secret mission all the time. Unfortunately, he’s arrogant. This is particularly annoying for me because most of the time, where engineering’s concerned, Nat-Nat doesn’t really know what he’s talking about. But from what I hear, arrogance wows the ladies, so he keeps with it.

Since it wouldn’t work any other way, I’ll let Nat-Nat do all the planning, talking, and paying. He’s taking us to Masa’s, the famous restaurant. He’s annoyed we have to first go shopping to buy me a dress, but he tries to be cavalier about it, as if classing up his Glen Park date earns him points on the gentleman score card in his head. Just to be spiteful, I have him pick me up for our shopping spree over at my parents’ house, even farther out in the Glen Park sticks than my apartment. Mom will be
making lumpia, stinking up the whole house, my dad will be squatting over the potato shoots in the front yard, and Gato will be banging his drums in the garage. I don’t know why, but it makes me happy to think this brings Nat-Nat down a notch. Still, he’s captivated by my beauty (of course) and bewitching personality, so he is gracious to Mom, polite to Dad, and does his best to look comfortable in the living room while sticking to the plastic-encased sofa. Sex is not an option here. It grosses me out just to think about it.

See Also: For some reason, George (although he might actually be fun in bed)

Product: Wolfgang L.
DOB: 74/02/13
Inspiration: “Sweet Sixteen,” B. B. King
Specification:
Another date with Whore-la (Sheila). What the flaming fuck? I’m charming, witty, certainly imaginative, mildly attractive (or at the very least not violently unattractive) beneath my green scrubs and shower-cap bonnet, and I’m smart enough not to bug him with stupid questions all day like my former documentation colleague (who, by the by, was recently and mysteriously “let go”).

See Also: Frustration, Huff (see the Glossary)

Product: George O., again, because I love the talking part, and the view, and tonight, the wine.
DOB: 55/11/02
Inspiration: Native American flutes, something Gato would mix into Marvin Gaye and Parliament and somehow pull it off.
Specification:
George and I talk about physics. The flutes play softly, meditatively, like a long ohm in the background. We sit as an audience in front of his vast plate glass windows overlooking the lake and skyline. He explains how stars shoot, or fall, out of the night sky. “Sounds like love,” I say, hoping for a she’s-so-deep effect. It works because he says softly but firmly after sipping his wine (cabernet tonight), “Precisely.” His thin lips curve into a smile. I know he knows what I’m talking about. It’s refreshing. I relax further into my chair even while its bamboo weave needles my shoulder blades. “It’s Wolfgang, isn’t it?” he asks. “Exactly,” I say, upending the balloon glass against my lips, slurping up every last drop, wondering, tipsily, if we’ll spend the rest of the night speaking in adverbs.
Hopefully.

◉◉◉

R.C.’s boss ever so kindly informs her that her new trademark statement has three glaring typos in it and it’s been sent to five customers so far. His eyes look smaller, meaner than usual. Maybe it’s just her, but she can’t get worked up over a trademark statement and is stunned her boss suddenly can. The winds of change are a blowin’, R.C. thinks, as if a tear gas called “layoff” has been released into the heating system.

Product: Lonh B.
DOB: 65/10/01
Inspiration: The rain
Specification:
It’s pouring and Lonh brings us all doughnuts from his favorite place, Happy Lucky’s. He tells me he
is worried we’ll all be laid off; he has his wife and kids to think about. I’ve noticed he’s been getting in before me and leaving after, and no one gets paid overtime here.

In the meantime, I leave a doughnut for Wolfgang on his bench. We smile at each other when he discovers it, but he doesn’t get that it’s a smile-smile, not just a smile. He doesn’t get that I left a doughnut for him on his bench. He just thinks I left a doughnut for him.

I can’t think again about Lonh and the apartment on Army Street or the ramen or Michael Jackson in the background. Lonh is really worried and I wish I could comfort him. There’s got to be more to life than this stinking place.

**Product: Wolfgang L.**  
**DOB:** 74/02/13  
**Inspiration:** “Can Do,” Journey  
**Specification:**  
So what I do is I get all hopped up on Journey’s “Can Do” (you can do what you want to, you can do if you try…) and the amazing new coffee our facilities manager is getting us (she thinks she’s about to be let go, so she’s been blowing her budget, it’s great), and I stone-up ask Wolfgang to dinner, in a date-date no-mistaking-it kind of way. He doesn’t say no, but he doesn’t say yes either. He says what all “men” (boys, all of them, I swear) of my generation say, “Yeah, it’d be nice to hang out.” Hang out. Like we’re freaking monkeys in the trees. “Okay,” I say. “I’ll let you name the day and time.” Two days. Two days! Two mother-fucking-pardon-my-French days roll their sweet rumps by and nada. Finally, finally, finally, he says, “Hey, we should hang out tonight. Are you busy?”

So this is not a fantasy, FYI. We actually do go hang out at this bar in the Haight near where “G.,” as in, “Gee, I had no idea that’s what people called you since nobody at the lab does,” lives in a one-bedroom flat by himself. “It’s a nickname from college,” he says. Since I’m nearing drunk I say, “Well, consider me informed. And giddy. Gee.” He likes that. He says, “We’re both initials,” and it takes me a few seconds to figure out what he means. Outside of work, everything is sharp and angled, fits together, makes sense.

We do make love and it’s really, really nice.

In the morning I glide out his door like a girl with new pink roller skates and glittery laces.

**Product: Wolfgang L.**  
**DOB:** 74/02/13  
**Inspiration:** Music is unthinkable right now, but I leave on my headphones so people will think twice before bugging me.

**Specification:**  
Of course it’s weird at work. Ches asks me all kinds of questions about my night since he and “Gee” are friends. I say, “How come you never call him that at work?” He says, “Because no one else does.” Great. He says, “Your energy’s all over the place. Musta been a good time.” Before I can protest, he puts his hand in the air, tilts his head to the side, and walks away, his gay man imitation. “Jhew no have to say no-thing to me, my leetle shoo-gar,” he says in his best Cuban accent. I’m telling you, the guy’s a nutbar.

When Gee arrives I see him behind the glass separating us from the production floor, working with Nat-Nat on a PCB. My hands suddenly feel swollen and hot, like they’re encased in an oven mitt
made of lead, something they’d use in a physical therapy office. I can hardly move them across the keyboard. Coffee bubbles up at the back of my throat. I use the restroom and sit in the stall for fifteen minutes trying to gather myself. I rip toilet paper into shreds, then push back the cuticle of each of my fingernails. I knead my stomach with my fists, trying to calm it down. As I walk back to my bench I pray no one talks to me, I'm so shaky. Then I see the doughnut, a maple bar, on a doily, on my bench. But it’s not raining, it was sunny, I think. I look around for Lonh. I ask George where Lonh is. I ask Hippo, then Ches, then Regan, where Lonh is. Then it hits me—it’s Gee who left the doughnut, and Lonh has been let go.

Product: Reyna “R.C.” Cobb
DOB: 69/02/28
Inspiration: “Car Wash,” Rose Royce
Specification:
They won't be replacing Lonh. And I’m pretty sure no one’s getting raises at their reviews. Happiness reigns in the land of Gee, but that’s about the only sunshine at the moment. I’m emailing with Lonh and he is panicked, irrationally thinking he’ll be shipped back to Laos and killed (he’s naturalized, so that’s not going to happen, but he’s freaked anyway). Everyone, even Nat-Nat, is scrambling to find Lonh something. Then we hear about George and I know we're really fucked. Gone, and no one knows if it was voluntary or not. We have new product shipping in five days and until then I'll be here round the clock making sure I don't have typos in my copyright statement or anywhere else.

I keep thinking about sinking ships. I get to work drafting an email blast to everyone I've ever known personally and professionally asking if they have anything, anything, for Lonh. And for me.

Product: Wolfgang L.
DOB: 74/02/13
Inspiration: “At Last,” Etta James
Specification:
Product ships, we’re exhausted, Lonh has interviews. Gee makes me chicken cacciatore at his flat and when I arrive I have to inform him that I’m a pescadarian (Gato's term for “lame” seafood-eating “vegetarians”). I like that we don’t know each other well yet. We go out for Thai instead. Over bean curd and outside of work, we realize we’re happy. We feel respected, almost entitled. What’s the matter with us that we keep this miserable job? We start to sound like agitators. We say things like, “We don't have to take their crap” and “I know this guy over at Frean Kits who says they’re hiring but no one knows about it yet” and “Can you read my resume?” We feel hopeful. I tell him how my mom sometimes scrunches up her nose and says “You look gooood,” when Gato or I smile and laugh. That’s how I feel right now, like Mom is watching us and saying “You look so gooood.” I know the second I walk into the lab tomorrow I'll feel low and demoralized again, so I ask Gee if he likes lumpia, daydreaming, and if he's been out to Glen Park. By his answers, I know everything is going to work out, typos and all.
Contributors

**Jacob Aiello** has been writing fiction in one form or another for most of his life. Aside from short stories and an as-yet illusory novel, he also writes book reviews for the Internet magazine *The Electric Review*. He lives in Portland, Oregon, where he is completing a degree in English literature at Portland State University, and his favorite word is “oubliette.”

**Melanie Jennings** earned an MFA in fiction from Mills College and a doctorate in American Literature from UC San Diego. In addition, she has completed courses at the Institute for Nonprofit Management at Portland State University. She has published short stories in *spelunker flophouse, Crab Creek Review,* and *The Redwood Coast Review*. She makes a living as a freelance writer in Portland (www.lighthouse-communications.org).

**Twila Nesky** is a graduate student in the non-fiction writing program at Portland State University. She was the winner of the 2001 Burnham Undergraduate Fiction Award and co-winner of the 2004 Tom Bates Graduate Non-Fiction Award. Her work has appeared in *Irreverent Fish*, the *Ooligan Press “Best of 2005”* anthology, *Street Roots* newspaper, and later this year will appear in the *Clackamas Literary Review, Sofa Ink,* and *Mary Magazine*. Twila’s story material, both fiction and non-fiction, comes from her struggle to understand the meaning of home, community, and personal connections. Serendipitously, her attempt to understand and write about these things led her to meet and marry a fellow writer last November.

**Virginia Ulrich** is currently working on her Masters in English literature at Portland State University. She believes in the power of words in both their oral and written forms. She is especially interested in the space where the personal meets the political. Virginia lives a half-hour outside of Portland, and often draws upon her two very different worlds in her writing.
Ooligan Press and the Publishing Program at Portland State University

Ooligan Press is a general trade press founded at Portland State University.

In addition to publishing books that honor the cultural and natural diversity of the Pacific Northwest, it is dedicated to teaching the art and craft of publishing.

As a teaching press, Ooligan makes as little distinction as possible between the press and the classroom. Ooligan Press is staffed by students in an apprenticeship program under the guidance of a core faculty. Acquiring, producing, and publishing profitable books in real markets become projects where students combine theoretical knowledge and practical experiences.

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- writing and the teaching of writing, editing, publishing, and book arts
- new or rediscovered works with a social or literary impact and a Pacific Northwest connection, especially those giving voice to the frequently unheard
- cookbooks with an unusual focus, particularly those done in a narrative style
- occasional volumes of poetry, special broadsides, and works of art

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