the red wheelbarrow

October, nineteen eighty-eight
Reflections From the Window of a Low-Flying Plane

It is September; the river flashes silver through the trees, darting wild like game that has given up trying to hide.

I want to call down; there is no reason to run. I want to apologize for the shadow.

--Lisa Sperry
him that made those holes, pitching rocks or trying with a hammer to see what the inside of a plaster wall looked like.

The fact that I refused to believe seemed to bother him, and so he came up with the idea of sneaking out and spending the night in his grandparents' attic. I was game, and we risked our lives on a trellis that left splinters in my feet and creaked all the way up to the second story window. We stayed up longer than we thought nights lasted, telling ghost stories and dirty jokes and covering our mouths to silence the giggles.

But sure enough, at who knows what hour, we heard squeaking and a patter-patter, and then a rumble (“...god damn blasted mutter mutter all hell...”) and then BOOM. The floor shuddered, tiny white flakes of plaster rained from the ceiling... then silence. Jeremy looked at me and didn't say a word. Maybe he knew I'd believe anything he ever told me from that night on... maybe he didn't. Either way, he had been right, and I had doubted him, and I expected him to rub my nose in it for months, possibly years afterwards. He never mentioned it again.

Suddenly, I wanted more than anything to thank him for that... but he wouldn't understand. I rolled onto my stomach, stretched, and then held very still... just breathing, drinking in the smell of warm wood and straw, watching particles of dust float down from the roof in the filtered beams of sunlight.

---Lisa Sperry
I suppose that another person, a person who does not study science, might simply shrug his shoulders, smile a little and walk away from the whole Twinkie issue. But not me, because I study science. Science doesn't allow one to let issues like this pass without considerable deliberation. Certain troubling questions raise their ugly heads, such as:

1. How old was the Twinkie I just ate?
2. What does a stale Twinkie look and taste like?
3. What is the oldest known Twinkie, where is it, and may I see it up close?

I can no longer look a Twinkie in the eye without wondering if it is something that a hippie tossed together in 1968. So I'm conducting my own experiment. I have a Twinkie on a special shelf at home. On October 3, 2008, I will take a bite of it. This is science in its purest, most eclectic form.

While touring an animal study lab at Michigan State University, I was told about obese mice and refrigerated beagles. It seems that there is a genetically altered strain of mice that fatten up extremely quickly on a normal diet of whatever lab mice are fed. Within days these rodents become bulbasous, fleshy creatures not unlike some of our relatives back home. Which is precisely the point, my tour guide explained. These obese mice are studied, in a gory, clinical sense (too bad that the mice can't just fill out questionnaires instead of being hacked up) in an effort to determine why some people tend toward obesity. Well, all right. But it seems to me that quite a few mice are getting a raw deal because a few hundred thousand humans can't resist that twelfth piece of chocolate fudge cake. On to the beagles.

The beagles were refrigerated as part of a metabolism study. If you've had Biology, you understand the term metabolism. If you haven't had Biology, then forget I ever said the word metabolism. A team of inquisitive researchers would not be satisfied in their quest for scientific knowledge until they understood the metabolism of chilled dogs. That sounds reasonable. Imagine yourself doing research, experimenting away with your beagles and gathering all sorts of interesting data, when a member of your group says, "Hey, let's pop these pups in the fidge and see what happens". I can see intelligent, rational people thinking of it as a fun thing to do - and, oh, what a snappy article it will make for Scientific American magazine.
Twinkies, Cheetos, Refrigerated Beagles and Obese Mice: Why I Study Science

Sometimes I wonder about things. Some of those things, like why the Detroit Tigers didn't win the American League East Championship, aren't earth-shatteringly important. Other things, like the shelf life of Twinkies, can lead one to consider vital issues, such as the role of science in our society.

I was approached one day a couple of weeks ago by a student who had a scientific question. She asked me because she presumed that either I was a scientist or I could find a real one and pass the question along. She asked, "Is it true that Twinkies have a shelf life of twenty years?"

OK, now it is my opinion that all great cultures can be measured by the quality of their snack foods. And by that standard most free-minded people must admit that the United States is home to one pretty swell culture. We have Fritos and Doritos and Tostitos and Pork Rinds and 400 varieties of potato chips (including new cajun-spiced) along with innumerable multi-colored gelatinous globs of processed food-like substances called, generically, Dip, to slop on them. We boast of Little Debbie Snack Cakes, Ho-Hos, Oreos, Pink Snowballs, Ding Dongs, Chips Ahoy, Chips Deluxe, Chiparoos, Soft Batch cookies - if this ain't great culture, then let's round up the world's philosophers and sit down with a nice tureen of Swiss Miss hot cocoa and a fancy sterling silver dish piled high with Cheetos and Twinkies and figure this culture business out once and for all.

So, when posed with this question about Twinkies, I was prepared to supply a quality response. "I'm not sure," I replied. It didn't actually answer the question, but it seemed quite a bit better than, "Leave me alone, you stupid kid".

Since the time of that opening inquiry, Twinkies have become a hot issue at IAA. I've heard many interesting items that one could categorize as Twinkie Science. The shelf life of a Twinkie is somewhere between 1 and 47 years (a 47-year-old Twinkie puts a chill down my spine, I don't know about you). Twinkies aren't baked, they're a sordid blend of chemicals that react and just sort of puff up. No one seems to know how the filling gets in place, but it most likely has something to do with toxic waste or the Greenhouse Effect or those three whales that are trapped near the Arctic Circle.

It had been his grandfather's birthday party—everyone (or almost everyone) even remotely connected to the family had been there to celebrate the seventy-fifth year of his maternal grandparent, and they had all been drinking (except for Aunt Helen's newborn) very heavily. He had been brought up in a world of liquor, something not unusual in Irish-Catholic families. He began to look forward to these family gatherings as a cheap way to get drunk. It was a stubborn and persistent habit, one that even the emphysema-and-cancer riddled grandfather could not break. In fact, the first thing that he had seen upon entering the house was the birthday boy standing in the front hall under one of the swinging paper Japanese lanterns, a bottle of Seagram's in the left hand, a glass in the right. As they had passed through the door, the man had slipped them a blurred, simple smile, the sheepish grin of someone who is doing something that they know will win only disapproval, but enjoy doing it anyway.

His parent's disapproval had quickly faded as they, too, began to disappear into the haze that alcohol afforded. He had picked up a bottle of Absolut and taken it out to the patio to drink in the cool shade of the willow in the corner.

One of his friends from his grandparent's neighborhood, Alison, walked across the lawn to him. He noticed the way she kept tossing her red hair in the sunlight. Sitting down next to him, Alison said, "Viki needs a favor".

He was surprised and a little hurt at the lack of a friendly greeting, but decided not to make a big deal about it. He said, "What?"

Alison removed a pen from her alligator handbag. "Write down this number." She rattled off a phone number that he wrote on his hand for lack of paper.

"Whose number is this?", he asked. "Viki's boyfriend. She wants you to call him and tell him that she's pregnant and her parents won't let her call him."

He sought Viki out with his eyes, catching a glimpse of her through the blur of the rising heat. She had red hair, too. "And remember, she is trusting you to do this and to not tell anyone else. If she were to find out that you told someone, it would probably kill her." She stood, turned on her heel, and walked off.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He took another long swallow. There was laughter from the barbecue grill near the back of the house. It was his parents. He listened hard, but all he caught was: "Tired of dealing with it...Should have seen his face...Was gone for a week that time." He winced. He had become their favorite topic for their loud, drunken party conversation. He drank some more.
As dinner was being served, he rose from his position in the shade and walked across the lawn into the house. In the kitchen, he picked up the phone. Someone appeared in the doorway. Startled, he dropped the phone to the floor. It landed with a rattle. His grandfather asked, "What are you doing?"

"Um...Just taking care of business."

The old man staggered past, clapping him on the shoulder as he went. "Good. Good. That's what I like to hear. Taking care of business. We could all use some taking care of business..." The old man's words drifted off as he headed out the door and onto the lawn.

He picked up the phone again. Sweat had washed most of the number off of his palm, and the blur of alcohol dimmed the little that was left. He punched the numbers into the phone, heard a click, then faint warbles as the phone rang on the other end.

"Hello?" A man had picked it up.

"Hi. Uh...is Viki's boyfriend there?"

"What?"

"Is Viki's boyfriend there. I don't know his name, I...She asked me to call him."

"Well, I know Viki. What do you want?"

"She says to tell you she's pregnant."

"Look, buddy, is this a joke?"

"No. I've had a little too much to drink, but I'm telling the truth. She said she can't call you herself because her parents won't let her."

"Jesus Christ. Look, man. If you want to find out who the real father is, if this is on the level, why don't you try calling one of the other half-dozen guys she's been screwing."

"Huh?"

"Look. It's like this. We get her drunk and take turns on different nights. All she needs is a little booze in her and she's ready to go. So try calling Bill or Pete or Jim...but stop bugging me." He rang off.

He hung up the phone slowly. He stood for a moment, not sure of what to do. The grandfather wandered back through.

"You still taking care of business?"

"Viki's pregnant, Pop."

His grandfather stopped, looked straight into his eyes. He noticed how pink the eyes were. They were watery, like the man might cry. "She might be. She just might be. Who knows?" The man wandered out and down the hall in search of something.

He stood at the back door. Viki looked up at him from the picnic table, waiting for a response. He wasn't sure of himself, he wasn't sure he could walk out and face her. He turned, walked through the house and out the front door. The sun hit him full in the face as he walked down the front stairs, down the sidewalk, and around the

Notes on Following the Departure
Do this:
Ride looking through the rear window, backwards in a car
between two points
we are the bearers of the road
that passes under us
we are drawing the dots and lines
dividing the darkness into lanes.

You cannot believe there is contact between the black of the asphalt and the dark steel radial tires. Try to imagine a point on the wheel always touching the ground in an unfamiliar place.

At 65 passing cars do more than move. Like bullets their figures recede and assume a constant shrinking. They are part of the past before you can say their name.

You must fear crossing your eyes, they stick and no slap will unknot vision. We are still alive enough to separate the sounds of wind from moments of breakneck speed.

--John Rosenberg
Because I was Born on the 21st floor

I dig a hole
for myself
distance enough
for an echo
the span of my body wide
done with the shovel
I push against it
and fall straight back
for the first time
The sky is no ceiling to be walked on -

On my back
in the ground
I watch each memory
evaporate into mist
Long Sunday afternoons
struggle free from within bone
Walks in the woods keep
the same pace as they rise
Everything I have ever seen
is the inside of a prism
All that I have eaten
the bite that breaks a fast
I recognize the movement
of clouds
The disappearance of a pillow
from beneath my head
Once within shadow
you are without one
I stop blinking
and as if it were
a shirt or a warm woolen sweater
I button up the earth from inside

--John Rosenberg

corner. He kept telling himself that he just needed time to sort things out, to think of how to tell Viki. The alcohol and the heat made him giggle as he thought about the phone call, "The bastard", he said aloud. And he laughed again.

He had walked a long ways now, into a different neighborhood. Someone was coming down the street towards him, and as they moved closer, he could see that it was his friends Sean and Mason. Mason had cut his hair again. It made him laugh.

"Hey, man," called Sean, "whatcha doing?"


Mason and Sean exchanged looks.

A car passed. He had an idea. "Hey, guys, remember when we were little and we'd throw stuff in front of cars?" It was becoming hard to talk, hard to focus himself on the situation at hand.

"Yeah, so?"

"Let's do it! Come on!" He began to gather sticks, and threw them into the oncoming traffic. Angry motorists honked as they passed. He was becoming very excited. "Come on, guys, come on!" Sean and Mason picked up a couple of twigs and threw them halfheartedly into the street. He did not see them leave, and when he again looked up from what he was doing, he could not understand why he was so alone. Where had his friends gone?

He stood dazed for a moment, and then decided to sit down. He walked to a house that seemed vaguely familiar, somehow, and sat on the front steps. There didn’t appear to be anyone home.

Looking down, he noticed that there was a dead squirrel on the curb, probably thrown there by a car. He poked it with a stick for a moment, looked at its delicate pink muscles, and put the stick down again. He waited for someone to find him.

--Rick Todhunter
Meeting For Our First Time

I was so nervous,
You couldn't tell.
I loved you so much
and there you were.
The bus drove off and
We started home.
Red Hots, I offered,
(a slight indication).
That's your knee and not
the clutch?
nervous kidding
you look... pretty, he said.

In my room that night
I tucked you in,
you looked strangely
at me, was I all that you
expected?
He looked so out of place
in a room like that so
full of pink and art and
Oriental.
I stood over him in a kimono
red light from the lantern
shining on his face I
hadn't seen him it seemed forever.
I sat down, he brushed my hair
such little fingernails he thought.
Kissing his eyelids made me wish,
that tomorrow were not so far away.

The next day came with no sleeping
not waking up for fearing
that when I woke it would all be a
dream, and faking... when he came to
wake me up, his breath against my neck,
Wake Up...
Today is the day, it's finally here, we said.

and he is to take me out today.
To make his son feel proud!
"Let's go hunting, son."
O.K. dad, and nuzzle the gun tight to your cheek
and shoot your brain through
green leaves, brown buildings
you left your family on impulse.
gut - gutless - interchangeable.
That rifle is pointed at us.

---Mark I. Simmons
Father

I.

From the kitchen door
I could see his feet
and part of his hands holding the paper.
At the livingroom window, an unobstructed view
told stories that no young child
could hide.

The porch light collected the sticky, bloody insects
crushing their pelted bodies to it
and from which my father read.
His cigar played odd dances with the light,
with the creatures of nervous life.
A long, thin, round, and tapered -
slightly feminine -
cigar to make him a man.

He was interested in world affairs
and perhaps he could find himself somewhere
in that heavy black ink
that rubbed with smoke
to make dust hands.
Maybe find himself there, lost -
and he could read about what might happen soon.
The insects would freeze soon and drop in hard, smooth
spits at his feet.
In order for him to notice,
they had better be located under the nature section,
just past sports, to the left of the comics.

II.

He has let his facial hair grow ragged
perhaps,
to resemble some beast?
That he demands of himself a new man character
and his outside is laughable.

The car pulls up,
no,
it is a jeep now.

Day into afternoon, noon into night,
the day went so fast, the
room and its floating curtains are all
I remember

blue sheets were never seen.

Old clawfoot tub with gilded feet, that's all
I ever wanted;
Stepping in it was the first time I had ever
seen
your eyes that way.
They were dancing and they were blue
Remember the ocean when we met he said
I only remember you.
The night before the day he left
at a park, and I
couldn't see, but sliding down
the slide you caught me, anyway.
And sharing swings we laughed
and fell.
Please no;
We pouted our pouting faces our
teardrops meshed
Just don't forget me I won't forget you
he said.

--Rebecca Kavanaugh
The Letter to Mona

The tall man sat in a chair at his window writing a letter. Even sitting down he was tall and everything about him seemed stretched; even his expressions. He himself could feel his own length in his spindly arms, in his rope-like legs. The sign outside the 7-11 across the alley flashed "open 24 hours" on and off in the darkness. To him, its pulsing light seemed omniscient or like a pair of eyes looking over his shoulder. He pulled down the blind but still the light projected itself rhythmically onto it like a fist beating at a door.

He put a cigarette to his lips and let it linger there for a sliver of a moment before lighting it. It occurred to him that he could not remember when he had last spoken. He could not remember his mouth feeling anything but numb. He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. He looked around his room. There were balls of crumpled paper littering the floor at his feet.

His feet were something to marvel at. They were a size thirteen and they were presently submerged in a pair of massive unlaced combat boots which made them appear all the more colossal. When he walked, he liked to hunker down into his steps, picking his feet up and then setting them down in order to exaggerate their heaviness. It gave him a sense of presence.

He looked down at the paper. It stared back at him like a blank face. "Dear Mona,"

He started again, "I have hardly gone out in weeks. But yesterday, I had to get groceries so I went to the store and it felt like I had travelled a great distance although it was only across the street. Routinely, I picked out the items I needed and then stood in line. In front of me were several other people, which was not unusual since whenever I go out I see other people. But usually no one notices I am there. Nobody speaks to me. Nobody even looks at me. "What was unusual was that there was this rather lovely looking young girl in line in front of me, (she had eyes like yours) and when she felt me looking at her she turned to me and said, 'Hello'. My heart nearly stopped. That sudden communication startled me, Mona, and I did not know what to do. What I did do was swallow and look down at the ground in confusion. You see, I had started to doubt my existence. Because she said 'hello' to me, I had to take it as a definition of being and it shook me up realizing that it was harder to know that I existed than not to be quite sure. But it is imperative to know, no matter how unpleasant. Can you understand that, Mona?"

"For years I kept them. They gave me a name, a number, a reality of myself, which I could try to believe in, around my neck. But now I am coming to terms with existence and the fact is the confirmation of it can only be momentary and invisible. I know now dirt as I set up on the ground.

Around noon a woman with a basket of fruit buys the glove. I can't guess why, 'cause she is clean and don't look like the knick-knick type. After she walks away I realize she left her basket. I run after her yelling, but she doesn't hear and disappears. When I get back my stuff is gone and the fruit is spilled across the ground. One banana has been stepped on, but the rest is okay. I clean up the mess and take the basket behind the store where I left Jake. He isn't there. I look all day, but no one has seen him.

At dark I build a fire near the tracks. I eat alone.

--Julie Case
Spilled Fruit

Jake and me walk along the tracks. We've been living like this for about three years now, since I was fourteen and Jake was seventeen and momma left. Jake's got her blood and her eyes. It's cold and my hands are red, but I pick up whatever I find. Not trash, but stuff like broken bottles, string, coal. Jake is walking ahead and points sometimes.

"Jake," I say, "Jake, how about this?" I'm holding a plastic flower.

"Good enough, Daren." He ain't even looking. He never looks when he answers.

"Jake, how much further?"

"Just about five miles."

"I think we'll need flashlights soon, don't you?" I'm hoping he'll want to stop.

"In a while."

We won't make it to town tonight. It's getting late and Jake doesn't say, but he hates walking in the dark.

"Jake we haven't eaten since noon, I got the fish in my pocket. Do you want to stop?" I am trying to lure him off the tracks and into the woods now.

"We can wait awhile, Daren."

"It's looking like rain, Jake." He doesn't answer.

"It's too cold for bathing in the creek, I hope we can take showers tomorrow."

"I suppose that depends on what you do with the stuff we've picked up, how well it sells, and whether the civic center is open."

At dark we build a fire and eat sardines. We don't talk, but Jake builds a pile of leaves to sleep on. His blanket is full of holes and barely covers him.

At dawn the fog is still thick. Jake and I break camp fast. I hope town isn't far. After an hour we cross the border. I think how this is the last I'll see of New York for awhile. I wonder how Canada is. Jake knows it's the border because there is a sign between the tracks and the road. I find a glove by the sign and put it on. My hands burn.

"Just about another mile, Daren."

"Jake, do you always know what I'm thinking?"

"Only because you're my brother."

For once Jake was right. Town wasn't far. The town square was filthy, full of dust and dirt. I like the look of the old men I walk past. Behind a store we stop to put together our finds. I cut the little finger off the glove and put the flower in. I like it 'cause the flower is yellow and the glove is red. Next I glue together rocks and coal. One I glue like a ball, one like a cube without a top. These usually sell the best.

He sat back, finally satisfied, and then gently folded the letter. He put it inside the envelope and then paused before gingerly picking up the chain which lay shining, almost luminous, in front of him on the table. He then put the dog tags inside, along with the letter, and sealed the envelope.

--Zap Ryter
A new day has begun
for the weasels and groundhogs
as they lift the thin
mucus from their burrow.

Stiff mountain; men with suits on,
flexing their favorite muscle,
wrinkling the fabric.
Traffic; coffee stains
on the dashboard, drips
on hand, gearshift. Wake-up.

It's times like this
weasels wish they had
a 'frigarater, sleep late. He
promises to hunt in five minutes.
Roll-over.

Red strobe lights on highway,
Pink, blue, orange morning above
the bank building.
Roll-stop, roll-stop
only ten minutes from the city
GO-G0000-G0000, STOP.
Sweating in the morning
is a bad sign.

—Troy Kinser

A table in the public library.
A sign reading
"Puzzle Exchange-
Take a puzzle - leave a puzzle."
Jigsaw puzzles in boxes, in bags.
I open each box, each bag,
And take exactly one piece.

I steal a piece of night sky,
A section of the moon.
I pocket some chest hair from John Travolta.
The Mona Lisa's smile is mine.

Jigsaws are not enough for me.
I need more.

I omit one word from each sentence.
Language sounds like this:
'Have a - day.'
'I - you.'

I am the one who steals
One sock from a pair, never both.

I am a thief.
I rob my father of one year, 1963.
He is not married.
I am someone else's child.

I take a part of the puzzle,
I leave a larger one behind.

—Robin C. Zimpel
Fishing

A man watches a tropical fish through an aquarium.
He admires the fluorescent reds and blues of the fish, wishes he had colors like them. "Fish," he calls, "Fish, I love you."
But the fish cannot hear him through the glass.
The man presses his fingers against the side of the aquarium as if he expected them to pass through it.
He is afraid to dip his fingers in the water, to lift the fish into the air and cradle it in his palms.
Instead, he slides his hand down the glass, smiles, sings a lullaby for the fish. It flicks its tail once, and the man sings louder, wondering if it can hear him, leading the fish in a waltz without a partner.

--Marc Olender

October Vacation

A spelling book is the brightest thing in this morning.
Three children are out in jackets. The sister writes the words by the water with her feet. Such crazy dancing: one foot for balance and a digging toe scraped raw by shell edges.
The boys have alphabets beginning with O, deep ragged circles in the sand. The easiest letter, it is an empty face. The sister draws eyes, bores holes down to where water seeps up, gray quivering irises, blind.
She rubs words with her heel, massages them back into the sand. Some she cups hands around, throws out far. The smack in the water is the word, saying itself for the first time.

--Robyn Harbert
The local florist's deliveryman has a distinct knock. It is loud and expensive. It is gaudy. It is flowers dyed blue and wrapped in tacky green foil with a yellow ribbon.

Recently, I have learned to recognize this knock, and I ignore it. My little brother Robbie, on the other hand, loves to answer doors. He flings aside his GI Joe doll and begins to drag a dining chair across the room. Yesterday I taught him to check for visitors by standing on a chair and looking out the peekhole. I know it's only the florist, but he loves to pretend the peekhole is a telescope, so I say nothing. Robbie doesn't like the flowers, he simply likes to rip open the envelopes of the sympathy cards and present them to me to be read. I don't read them, but I don't throw them away, either. I have a system. I look at the name on the outside, and file them alphabetically. I throw the flowers in the trashcan.

"Tell me about China again," Robbie pleads. "the part where Dad is taller than everyone else." I try to remember yesterday's story while thoughtfully chewing on the corner of a sympathy card.

"China is a beautiful country, and this makes Dad very happy, because he loves taking photographs so other people can share the beauty. All the people ride on bicycles, and have hats that look like... I'm not sure how to describe them, exactly." I grab the straw fruit basket from the table, dumping the grapes, oranges and bananas on the table.

"They look like this," I say as I place the basket upside down on my head. Robbie giggles and a fine spray of graham cracker dust hits the table.

"Are there dragons there?" he asks.

"Hundreds," I say.

"Does Dad have to battle them?"

"Oh yes, one or two dragons a day."

His eyes are getting rounder and I wonder if I've taken all this too far.

"When is Dad coming home? Do you think he'll bring us funny hats?"

A grape falls on the floor, rolls a few feet. Stops.

"Pick up your toys, Robbie. It's time for your nap."

It is too bright in this room. I close my eyes, but the light still burns.

"Maybe he'll bring us a dragon foot?"

I shift and accidentally squash a grape between my toes. I tell myself to relax. Stop shaking. Try to breathe slowly.

I open my eyes. There is a purple stain on my shoe. "Pick up your toys," I repeat, more quietly this time.

Later that night, doing the laundry, I come across something heavy in the pocket of his Toughskins jeans. I figure it is probably a new rock collection, and turn the pockets upside down over the trashcan. To my surprise, out comes a gardening spade, and a pocketful of fresh soil.

--Mark Rosenberg

The Atlantic Ocean,
swirls of life and energy
lies beneath her feet.

She has been walking with no sense
of time or place.

But now she feels her toes
submerged in water, and slowly her ankles will follow.

Empty, but for the moon.

The air is pure like ice
and as she pulls it within,
her thighs slip down into the waters covering.

She is always moving forward until
her head is under the waves.

Her nose, her eyes, her ears,
they melt into one being.

There are fish swimming in circles around her
and together they form a spiral with no end.

--Mark Rosenberg
Homecoming

I.

I have a friend who has told me of her desire to walk on water.

She is leaving now—taking off her shoes, her socks, she gently places her left foot on shallow water. It is a sensation she has never known—each droplet of water, feeling for her feet, prickling lightly.

She turns her head, smiles to the land and moves on.

She walks to the Au Sable river. Thinking of the water below her: Fifty fathoms deep—spawning life cycles of coral, crustacean and smooth skinned fish.

Nights come and pass slowly, with beauty and gentleness. She is naked now and not afraid of this cloak around her. She remembers the waters touch, the birth and decay of life below her and continues walking.

Lake Ontario flows into the Georgian Bay and now she moves, with rhythm, to the mouth of the St. Laurence.

The waters have lost their prickliness. Now they are smooth and gentle and A voice inside her body, never before spoken, communicates to the life below.

She is more beautiful now, humming in a deep, blue voice song without words. There is always a smile on her lips as the waters deepen.

I get angry because I spent two months telling him not to go digging up the daffodils while searching for earthworms. The next morning, though, the daffodils are still in place. I crawl around the little garden plot, looking for seven year old damage. There is a hole in the center of the garden, about a foot deep, and wide enough for a little person to stand in. I run from the garden. I don't look back. I try to convince myself it was because the pancakes were burning on the stove. It is the third day of flower deliveries.

I have decided to organize cards alphabetically by first name, now. This requires a lot of reshuffling and reorganization. It's more fun now. The cards Robbie brings from the door are postcards from China, I tell him, Dad rented his own red bicycle. Dad is in a rice paddy. Dad writes: "How are things at home, kids? Miss you lots. Love and Kisses, Dad." I spend the rest of the afternoon organizing cards. I change the categories every hour. Relationship to the deceased. Alphabetical by occupation. Amount of money deceased owed the card sender. I lose track of Robbie. It is very important that these cards are filed for future reference. These things can be very important, years from now.

It's getting dark. I walk out to the yard in my bare feet. I search the sandbox, the swings. Nothing. I call his name. No answer. He is digging furiously. "What's in the bag?" I ask. "Chef Boyardee, for the journey," he says. "Are you going there tonight?" "Maybe, if I dig all night." "It won't work," I say, but he ignores me. Keeps digging. "It will never work." He throws dirt at my face. I yank him out of the hole, my arms under his armpits. He screams. I drag him back to the house, Chef Boyardee cans falling out, leaving a trail behind us.

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Once inside the house, I grab his knapsack. I dump the popcorn and hershey bars on the floor, and start to fill it with letters. Every card, alphabetized. Personalized. I put them all in the bag and go to the garden. I tear each one, putting the pieces into the hole. Then, I cover them with dirt and try to fill the hole.

—Alisa Ball
What a Boy Did

In the garden is a petrified creature that a boy hoped would last. It was muddy one day out there with his rna, and he made the insect sink. The boy is dead. The fossil is thriving. That home and garage are bustling in warm sun like Roman ruins. Flowers are towers in the place formerly his backyard, and the old caterpillar is the foundation.

--Jonathan Beery

Where the Mountains are Blue

Somewhere the mountains are blue
And the leaves are green and dance and speckled.
A place where children can be children
Even though they are not and can
Twitch bewildered asking questions,
being taught by nature's song.
Where children can run free and touch
The soil of fathers of fathers,
Squishing their toes through everything simple and feel close,
Shivering not even when the wind chases and catches.
Children cannot be caught.
They run upon roads of reflection,
Roads of running glass that can never shatter under their feet.
Where the taste of flying is in everything touched,
Worlds upon worlds,
Secrets in stone; where love is and the only known.
Rushing with the sea:
Take me, take mine to where the mountains are blue.

--Michael Mintz
Deer Hunting

The morning had the odor of fall, traces of a restless summer still drifted in the air, but now the ageless north wind began to scream, bringing the icy gale of Canada's barren tundra to the southlands. The wind sliced any armor of wool, reminding us of our mortality. The summer of the young was over, extinguishing the candles of the reckless.

Green cedar boughs created my deer blind, my feet sunk in a fashioned fitfall sitting level to the frozen ground. I am here to hunt for the first time; often before I had accompanied my father on his yearly hunt, but this season the test was solo, to face the woods alone and make a pact of life. A pact of resect and honor held by the proud and few who become at one with the woods.

My father was a master of hunting; since I was a child he taught me the way of the woods. How to build a fire in a gale wind, to recognize animals by step, to taste the blood to tell the wound, to read the sky for an oncoming storm.

I wore the colors of the trees, olive-drab trousers and a suede hunting jacket, the jacket worn by my father, and his father before, with respect for the wild and untamed. A tight stretch cap pulled over my ears, ornamented with the feather of a drake mallard, the first duck I ever shot. That day I had a double; on the edge of a small inland pond my father and I jumped five mallards.

Frost still lined the ferns around my blind, reminding me of the cold night before. My dazed hand lay on the wrinkled face of my rifle's stock. Lines of age spoke in the red oak. The rifle was a bearded old man sitting around a fire, telling tales of high adventure, and waiting for his final hunt.

I heard two soft rustles in the underbrush before I saw the doe. Her skin was the color of bronze, strong and beautiful. I wondered how long it would be until the doe heard my heart, pounding rhythm on a cool fall morning. I slowly shouldered my rifle as I had been taught seasons before. The shot was glass clear from my blind. I pulled the safety to red, putting the bead and groove on the doe's left shoulder. With my forefinger embracing the trigger I heard the call of the old hunters, those long past who had made the pact. It was the dream of the woods, the dream of the wild, and pulling the trigger I felt no pain, just the wind in my ears.

--Zachary S. Dean

Early Morning Nightmare, Segment I:

Green elephants dance around my cup of coffee. Outside my window, they pirouette in random circles waiting for the sun to rise.

Empire of the Elephants, Segment II:

Green elephants haunt my room, dancing on the window sill Some are flying UFO's zigzag down the hallway. They plan to paint the house purple with blue-green stripes, and they will only drink Sanka brand coffee.

--Michele Wright
Frederico Fellini (1920– ) is one of the world’s most famous motion picture directors. He formulates his own ideas for his movies, usually developing the story as the film is being made. His films blend realism and social satire with fantasy, creating surreal, dream-like effects heavy with symbolism.

Stage Left

1

Last night I dreamt
that you were Fellini,
and Fellini was everywhere.

2

When you let go
of my hand,
the world saw me alone
for the first time
in my life.
Cameras
found me
in a room
that did not
belong to me.
I was with a man
I did not know,
a man smiling especially for you.
Every eye behind each lens
belonged to you;
every writer’s notebook
a young girl’s journal
that you took from
my dresser drawer.
Now you know everything, Fellini.

3

You told me
I reminded you of
your wife,
vacant-minded,
an empty touch
like your mother’s.
I think about her often,
alone in the sheltered
life you promised.
Without a scriptbook
I sit below
the constant flame
of a stagelight,
burning for the chance
to dirty my hands,
digging my way underground,
hoping that I will never
be the clean daughter
you always wanted,
drying the water and oil
from my forehead forever.

I never needed
a father;
you should have known that,
shouldn’t you?

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Rushing with the sea:
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--Michael Mintz
Homecoming

I have a friend who has told me of her desire to walk on water.

She is leaving now—taking off her shoes, her socks, she gently places her left foot on shallow water. It is a sensation she has never known—each droplet of water, feeling for her feet, prickling lightly.

She turns her head, smiles to the land and moves on.

She walks to the au Sable river. Thinking of the water below her: Fifty fathoms deep—spawning life cycles of coral, crustacean and smooth skinned fish.

Nights come and pass slowly, with beauty and gentleness. She is naked now and not afraid of this cloak around her. She remembers the water's touch, the birth and decay of life below her and continues walking.

Lake Ontario flows into the Georgian Bay and now she moves, with rhythm, to the mouth of the St. Laurence.

The waters have lost their prickliness. Now they are smooth and gentle and A voice inside her body, never before spoken, communicates to the life below.

She is more beautiful now, humming in a deep, blue voice song without words. There is always a smile on her lips as the waters deepen.

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--Alisa Ball
The local florist's deliveryman has a distinct knock. It is loud and expensive. It is gaudy. It is flowers dyed blue and wrapped in tacky green foil with a yellow ribbon.

Recently, I have learned to recognize this knock, and I ignore it. My little brother Robbie, on the other hand, loves to answer doors. He flings aside his GI Joe doll and begins to drag a dining chair across the room. Yesterday I taught him to check for visitors by standing on a chair and looking out the peekhole. I know it's only the florist, but he loves to pretend the peekhole is a telescope, so I say nothing. Robbie doesn't like the flowers, he simply likes to rip open the envelopes of the sympathy cards and present them to me to be read. I don't read them, but I don't throw them away, either. I have a system. I look at the name on the outside, and file them alphabetically. I throw the flowers in the trash can.

"Tell me about China again," Robbie pleads, "the part where Dad is taller than everyone else." I try to remember yesterday's story while thoughtfully chewing on the corner of a sympathy card.

"China is a beautiful country, and this makes Dad very happy, because he loves taking photographs so other people can share the beauty. All the people ride on bicycles, and have hats that look like...I'm not sure how to describe them, exactly." I grab the straw fruit basket from the table, dumping the grapes, oranges and bananas on the table.

"They look like this," I say as I place the basket upside down on my head.

Robbie giggles and a fine spray of graham cracker dust hits the table.

"Are there dragons there?" he asks.

"Hundreds," I say.

"Does Dad have to battle them?"

"Oh yes, one or two dragons a day."

His eyes are getting rounder and I wonder if I've taken this too far.

"When is Dad coming home? Do you think he'll bring us funny hats?"

A grape falls on the floor, rolls a few feet. Stops.

"Pick up your toys, Robbie. It's time for your nap."

It is too bright in this room. I close my eyes, but the light still burns.

"Maybe he'll bring us a dragon foot?"

I shift and accidentally squash a grape between my toes. I tell myself to relax. Stop shaking. Try to breathe slowly. I open my eyes. There is a purple stain on my shoe. "Pick up your toys," I repeat, more quietly this time.

Later that night, doing the laundry, I come across something heavy in the pocket of his Toughskins jeans. I figure it is probably a new rock collection, and turn the pockets upside down over the trash can. To my surprise, out comes a gardening spade, and a pocketful of fresh soil.

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II.

The Atlantic Ocean, swirls of life and energy lies beneath her feet.

She has been walking with no sense of time or place.

But now she feels her toes submerged in water, and slowly her ankles will follow.

Night is forming in the sky. Empty, but for the moon.

The air is pure like ice and as she pulls it within, her thighs slip down into the waters covering. She is always moving forward until her head is under the waves.

Her nose, her eyes, her ears, they melt into one being.

There are fish swimming in circles around her and together they form a spiral with no end.

--Mark Rosenberg
Fishing

A man watches a tropical fish
through an aquarium.
He admires the fluorescent
reds and blues of the fish,
wishes he had colors like them.
"Fish," he calls,
"Fish, I love you."
But the fish cannot hear him
through the glass.
The man presses his fingers against
the side of the aquarium
as if he expected them
to pass through it.
He is afraid to dip his fingers
in the water,
to lift the fish
into the air
and cradle it in his palms.
Instead,
he slides his hand down
the glass,
smiles,
sings a lullaby for the fish.
It flicks its tail once,
and the man sings louder,
wondering if it can hear him,
leading the fish
in a waltz
without a partner.

--Marc Olender

October Vacation

A spelling book is the brightest
thing in this morning.
Three children are out
in jackets. The sister writes the words
by the water with her feet.
Such crazy dancing: one foot
for balance and a digging toe
scrapped raw by shell edges.
The boys have alphabets
beginning with O, deep ragged
circles in the sand. The easiest letter,
it is an empty face. The sister draws eyes,
bores holes down to where water
seeps up, gray
quivering irises, blind.
She rubs words with her heel,
massages them back
into the sand. Some
she cups hands around, throws
out far. The smack
in the water is the word,
saying itself
for the first time.

--Robyn Harbert
Morning Provider

A new day has begun
for the weasels and groundhogs
as they lift the thin
mucus from their burrow.

Stiff mountain; men with suits on,
flexing their favorite muscle,
wrinkling the fabric.
Traffic; coffee stains
on the dashboard, drips
on hand, gearshift. Wake-up.

It's times like this
weasels wish they had
a 'frigarater, sleep late. He
promises to hunt in five minutes.
Roll-over.

Red strobe lights on highway,
Pink, blue, orange morning above
the bank building.
Roll-stop, roll-stop
only ten minutes from the city
GO-GO000-GO000, STOP.
Sweating in the morning
is a bad sign.

--Troy Kinser

Puzzle Exchange

A table in the public library.
A sign reading
"Puzzle Exchange-
Take a puzzle - leave a puzzle."
Jigsaw puzzles in boxes, in bags.
I open each box, each bag.
And take exactly one piece.

I steal a piece of night sky,
A section of the moon.
I pocket some chest hair from John Travolta.
The Mona Lisa's smile is mine.

Jigsaws are not enough for me.
I need more.

I omit one word from each sentence.
Language sounds like this:
'Have a - day.'
'I - you.'

I am the one who steals
One sock from a pair, never both.

I am a thief.
I rob my father of one year, 1963.
He is not married.
I am someone else's child.

I take a part of the puzzle,
I leave a larger one behind.

--Robin C. Zimpel
Spilled Fruit

Jake and me walk along the tracks. We've been living like this for about three years now, since I was fourteen and Jake was seventeen and momma left. Jake’s got her blood and her eyes. It’s cold and my hands are red, but I pick up whatever I find. Not trash, but stuff like broken bottles, string, coal. Jake is walking ahead and points sometimes.

"Jake," I say, "Jake, how about this?" I’m holding a plastic flower.

"Good enough, Daren." He ain’t even looking. He never looks when he answers.

"Jake, how much further?"

"Just about five miles."

"I think we’ll need flashlights soon, don’t you?" I’m hoping he’ll want to stop.

"In a while."

We won’t make it to town tonight. It’s getting late and Jake doesn’t say, but he hates walking in the dark.

"Jake we haven’t eaten since noon, I got the fish in my pocket. Do you want to stop?" I am trying to lure him off the tracks and into the woods now.

"We can wait awhile, Daren."

"It’s looking like rain, Jake." He doesn’t answer.

"It’s too cold for bathing in the creek, I hope we can take showers tomorrow."

"I suppose that depends on what you do with the stuff we’ve picked up, how well it sells, and whether the civic center is open."

At dark we build a fire and eat sardines. We don’t talk, but Jake builds a pile of leaves to sleep on. His blanket is full of holes and barely covers him.

At dawn the fog is still thick. Jake and I break camp fast. I hope town isn’t far. After an hour we cross the border. I think how this is the last I’ll see of New York for awhile. I wonder how Canada is. Jake knows it’s the border because there is a sign between the tracks and the road. I find a glove by the sign and put it on. My hands burn.

"Just about another mile, Daren."

"Jake, do you always know what I’m thinking?"

"Only because you’re my brother."

For once Jake was right. Town wasn’t far. The town square was filthy, full of dust and dirt. I like the look of the old men I walk past. Behind a store we stop to put together our finds. I cut the little finger off the glove and put the flower in. I like it ’cause the flower is yellow and the glove is red. Next I glue together rocks and coal. One I glue like a ball, one like a cube without a top. These usually sell the best.
The Letter to Mona

The tall man sat in a chair at his window writing a letter. Even sitting down he was tall and everything about him seemed stretched; even his expressions. He himself could feel his own length in his spindly arms, in his rope-like legs. The sign outside the 7-11 across the alley flashed "open 24 hours" on and off in the darkness. To him, its pulsing light seemed omniscient or like a pair of eyes looking over his shoulder. He pulled down the blind but still the light projected itself rhythmically onto it like a fist beating at a door.

He put a cigarette to his lips and let it linger there for a sliver of a moment before lighting it. It occurred to him that he could not remember when he had last spoken. He could not remember his mouth feeling anything but numb. He lit the cigarette and inhaled deeply. He looked around his room. There were balls of crumpled paper littering the floor at his feet.

His feet were something to marvel at. They were a size thirteen and they were presently submerged in a pair of massive unlaced combat boots which made them appear all the more colossal. When he walked, he liked to hunker down into his steps, picking his feet up and then setting them down in order to exaggerate their heavity. It gave him a sense of presence.

He looked down at the paper. It stared back at him like a blank face. "Dear Mona,"

"Dear Mona," he started again, "I have hardly gone out in weeks. But yesterday, I had to get groceries so I went to the store and it felt like I had travelled a great distance although it was only across the street. Routinely, I picked out the items I needed and then stood in line. In front of me were several other people, which was not unusual since whenever I go out I see other people. But usually no one notices I am there. Nobody speaks to me. Nobody even looks at me.

"What was unusual was that there was this rather lovely looking young girl in line in front of me, (she had eyes like yours) and when she felt me looking at her she turned to me and said, 'Hello'. My heart nearly stopped. That sudden communication startled me, Mona, and I did not know what to do. What I did do was swallow and look down at the ground in confusion. You see, I had started to doubt my existence. Because she said 'hello' to me, I had to take it as a definition of being and it shook me up realizing that it was harder to know that I existed than not to be quite sure. But it is imperative to know, no matter how unpleasant. Can you understand that, Mona?

"For years I kept them. They gave me a name, a number, a reality of myself, which I could try to believe in, around my neck. But now I am coming to terms with existence and the fact is the confirmation of it can only be momentary and invisible. I know now dirt as I set up on the ground.

Around noon a woman with a basket of fruit buys the glove. I can't guess why, 'cause she is clean and don't look like the knick-knick type. After she walks away I realize she left her basket. I run after her yelling, but she doesn't hear and disappears. When I get back my stuff is gone and the fruit is spilled across the ground. One banana has been stepped on, but the rest is okay. I clean up the mess and take the basket behind the store where I left Jake. He isn't there. I look all day, but no one has seen him.

At dark I build a fire near the tracks. I eat alone.

--Julie Case
Father

I.

From the kitchen door
I could see his feet
and part of his hands holding the paper.
At the livingroom window, an unobstructed view
told stories that no young child
could hide.

The porch light collected the sticky, bloody insects
crushing their pelted bodies to it
and from which my father read.
His cigar played odd dances with the light,
with the creatures of nervous life.
A long, thin, round, and tapered -
slightly feminine -
cigar to make him a man.

He was interested in world affairs
and perhaps he could find himself somewhere
in that heavy black ink
that rubbed with smoke
to make dust hands.
Maybe find himself there, lost -
and he could read about what might happen soon.
The insects would freeze soon and drop in hard, smooth
spits at his feet.
In order for him to notice,
they had better be located under the nature section,
just past sports, to the left of the comics.

II.

He has let his facial hair grow ragged
perhaps,
to resemble some beast?
That he demands of himself a new man character
and his outside is laughable.

The car pulls up,
no,
it is a jeep now.

Day into afternoon, noon into night,
the day went so fast, the
room and its floating curtains are all
I remember
blue sheets were never seen.
Old clawfoot tub with gilded feet, that's all
I ever wanted;
Stepping in it was the first time I had ever
seen
your eyes that way.
They were dancing and they were blue
Remember the ocean when we met he said
I only remember you.
The night before the day he left
at a park, and I
couldn't see, but sliding down
the slide you caught me, anyway.
And sharing swings we laughed
and fell.
Please no;
We pouted our pouting faces our
teardrops meshed
Just don't forget me I won't forget you
he said.

--Rebecca Kavanaugh
Meeting For Our First Time

I was so nervous,
You couldn't tell.
I loved you so much
and there you were.
The bus drove off and
We started home.
Red Hots, I offered,
(a slight indication).
That's your knee and not
the clutch?
nervous kidding
you look...
pretty, he said.

In my room that night
I tucked you in;
you looked strangely
at me, was I all that you
expected?
He looked so out of place
in a room like that so
full of pink and art and
Oriental,
I stood over him in a kimono
red light from the lantern
shining on his face I
hadn't seen him it seemed forever.
I sat down, he brushed my hair
such little fingernails he thought.
Kissing his eyelids made me wish,
that tomorrow were not so far away.

The next day came with no sleeping
not waking up for fearing
that when I woke it would all be a
dream, and faking... when he came to
wake me up, his breath against my neck,
Wake Up...
Today is the day, it's finally here, we said.

and he is to take me out today.
To make his son feel proud!
"Lets go hunting, son."
o.k. dad, and nuzzle the gun tight to your cheek
and shoot your brain through
green leaves, brown buildings
you left your family on impulse,
gut - gutless - interchangeable.
That rifle is pointed at us.

--Mark I. Simmons
Because I was Born on the 21st floor
I dig a hole
for myself
distance enough
for an echo
the span of my body wide
done with the shovel
I push against it
and fall straight back
for the first time
The sky is no ceiling to be walked on .-

On my back
in the ground
I watch each memory
evaporate into mist

Long Sunday afternoons
struggle free from within bone
Walks in the woods keep
the same pace as they rise

Everything I have ever seen
is the inside of a prism
All that I have eaten
the bite that breaks a fast

I recognize the movement
of clouds
The disappearance of a pillow
from beneath my head

Once within shadow
you are without one

I stop blinking
and as if it were
a shirt or a warm woolen sweater
I button up the earth from inside

corner. He kept telling himself that he just needed time to sort things out, to think of how to tell Viki. The alcohol and the heat made him giggle as he thought about the phone call. "The bastard", he said aloud. And he laughed again.

Someone was coming down the street towards him, and as they moved closer, he could see that it was his friends Sean and Mason. Mason had cut his hair again. It made him laugh.

"Hey, man," called Sean, "whatcha doing?"

Mason and Sean exchanged looks.
A car passed. He had an idea. "Hey, guys, remember when we were little and we'd throw stuff in front of cars?" It was becoming hard to talk, hard to focus himself on the situation at hand.

"Yeah, so?"
"Let's do it! Come on!" He began to gather sticks, and threw them into the oncoming traffic. Angry motorists honked as they passed. He was becoming very excited. "Come on, guys, come on!" Sean and Mason picked up a couple of twigs and threw them halfheartedly into the street. He did not see them leave, and when he again looked up from what he was doing, he could not understand why he was so alone. Where had his friends gone?

He stood dazed for a moment, and then decided to sit down. He walked to a house that seemed vaguely familiar, somehow, and sat on the front steps. There didn't appear to be anyone home.

Looking down, he noticed that there was a dead squirrel on the curb, probably thrown there by a car. He poked it with a stick for a moment, looked at its delicate pink muscles, and put the stick down again. He waited for someone to find him.

--Rick Todhunter

--John Rosenberg
As dinner was being served, he rose from his position in the shade and walked across the lawn into the house. In the kitchen, he picked up the phone. Someone appeared in the doorway. Startled, he dropped the phone to the floor. It landed with a rattle. His grandfather asked, "What are you doing?"

"Um...Just taking care of business."

The old man staggered past, clapping him on the shoulder as he went. "Good. Good. That's what I like to hear. Taking care of business. We could all use some taking care of business..." The old man's words drifted off as he headed out the door and onto the lawn.

He picked up the phone again. Sweat had washed most of the number off of his palm, and the blur of alcohol dimmed the little that was left. He punched the numbers into the phone, heard a click, then faint warbles as the phone rang on the other end.

"Hello?" A man had picked it up.

"Hi. Uh...is Viki's boyfriend there?"

"What?"

"Is Viki's boyfriend there. I don't know his name, I...She asked me to call him."

"Well, I know Viki. What do you want?"

"She says to tell you she's pregnant."

"Look, buddy, is this a joke?"

"No. I've had a little too much to drink, but I'm telling the truth. She said she can't call you herself because her parents won't let her."

"Jesus Christ. Look, man. If you want to find out who the real father is, if this is on the level, why don't you try calling one of the other half-dozen guys she's been screwing."

"Huh?"

"Look. It's like this. We get her drunk and take turns on different nights. All she needs is a little booze in her and she's ready to go. So try calling Bill or Pete or Jim...but stop bugging me." He rang off.

He hung up the phone slowly. He stood for a moment, not sure of what to do. The grandfather wandered back through.

"You still taking care of business?"

"Viki's pregnant, Pop."

His grandfather stopped, looked straight into his eyes. He noticed how pink the eyes were. They were watery, like the man might cry. "She might be. She just might be. Who knows?" The man wandered out and down the hall in search of something.

He stood at the back door. Viki looked up at him from the picnic table, waiting for a response. He wasn't sure of himself, he wasn't sure he could walk out and face her. He turned, walked through the house and out the front door. The sun hit him full in the face as he walked down the front stairs, down the sidewalk, and around the house.

Notes on Following the Departure

Do this:
Ride looking through the rear window, backwards in a car
between two points
we are the bearers of the road
that passes under us
we are drawing the dots and lines
dividing the darkness into lanes.

You cannot believe there
is contact between the
black of the asphalt and the
dark steel radial tires.
Try to imagine a point
on the wheel always touching
the ground in an unfamiliar place.

At 65
passing cars
do more than move.
Like bullets their figures recede
and assume a constant shrinking.
They are part of the past
before you can
say their name.

You must fear crossing
your eyes,
they stick and no
slap will unknot vision.
We are still alive enough
to separate the sounds of wind
from moments of breakneck speed.

--John Rosenberg
Twinkies, Cheetos, Refrigerated Beagles and Obese Mice: Why I Study Science

Sometimes I wonder about things. Some of those things, like why the Detroit Tigers didn’t win the American League East Championship, aren’t earth-shatteringly important. Other things, like the shelf life of Twinkies, can lead one to consider vital issues, such as the role of science in our society.

I was approached one day a couple of weeks ago by a student who had a scientific question. She asked me because she presumed that either I was a scientist or I could find a real one and pass the question along. She asked, "Is it true that Twinkies have a shelf life of twenty years?"

OK, now it is my opinion that all great cultures can be measured by the quality of their snack foods. And by that standard most free-minded people must admit that the United States is home to one pretty swell culture. We have Fritos and Doritos and Tostitos and Pork Rinds and 400 varieties of potato chips (including new cajun-spiced) along with innumerable multi-colored gelatinous globs of processed food-like substances called, generically, Dip, to slop on them. We boast of Little Debbie Snack Cakes, Ho-Hos, Oreos, Pink Snowballs, Ding Dongs, Chips Ahoy, Chips Deluxe, Cheetos, Soft Batch cookies - if this ain’t great culture, then let’s round up the world’s philosophers and sit down with a nice tureen of Swiss Miss hot cocoa and a fancy sterling silver dish piled high with Cheetos and Twinkies and figure this culture business out once and for all.

So, when posed with this question about Twinkies, I was prepared to supply a quality response. "I’m not sure," I replied. It didn't actually answer the question, but it seemed quite a bit better than, "Leave me alone, you stupid kid".

Since the time of that opening inquiry, Twinkies have become a hot issue at IAA. I've heard many interesting items that one could categorize as Twinkie Science. The shelf life of a Twinkie is somewhere between 1 and 47 years (a 47-year-old Twinkie puts a chill down my spine, I don’t know about you). Twinkies aren't baked, they’re a sordid blend of chemicals that react and just sort of puff up. No one seems to know how the filling gets in place, but it most likely has something to do with toxic waste or the Greenhouse Effect or those three whales that are trapped near the Arctic Circle.

It had been his grandfather's birthday party—everyone (or almost everyone) even remotely connected to the family had been there to celebrate the seventy-fifth year of his maternal grandparent, and they had all been drinking (except for Aunt Helen’s newborn) very heavily. He had been brought up in a world of liquor, something not unusual in Irish-Catholic families. He began to look forward to these family gatherings as a cheap way to get drunk. It was a stubborn and persistent habit, one that even the emphysema-and-cancer riddled grandfather could not break. In fact, the first thing that he had seen upon entering the house was the birthday boy standing in the front hall under one of the swinging paper Japanese lanterns, a bottle of Seagram’s in the left hand, a glass in the right. As they had passed through the door, the man had slipped them a blurred, simple smile, the sheepish grin of someone who is doing something that they know will win only disapproval, but enjoy doing it anyway.

His parent’s disapproval had quickly faded as they, too, began to disappear into the haze that alcohol afforded. He had picked up a bottle of Absolut and taken it out to the patio to drink in the cool shade of the willow in the corner.

One of his friends from his grandparent’s neighborhood, Alison, walked across the lawn to him. He noticed the way she kept tossing her red hair in the sunlight. Sitting down next to him, Alison said, "Viki needs a favor".

He was surprised and a little hurt at the lack of a friendly greeting, but decided not to make a big deal about it. He said, "What?"

Alison removed a pen from her alligator handbag. "Write down this number." She rattled off a phone number that he wrote on his hand for lack of paper.

"Whose number is this?," he asked.

"Viki's boyfriend. She wants you to call him and tell him that she’s pregnant and her parents won’t let her call him."

He sought Viki out with his eyes, catching a glimpse of her through the blur of the rising heat. She had red hair too...

And remember, she is trusting you to do this and to not tell anyone else. If she were to find out that you told someone it would probably kill her." She stood, turned on her heel, and walked off.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah." He took another long swallow. There was laughter from the barbecue grill near the back of the house. It was his parents. He listened hard, but all he caught was: "Tired of dealing with it...Should have seen his face...Was gone for a week that time."

He winced. He had become their favorite topic for their loud, drunken party conversation. He drank some more.
I suppose that another person, a person who does not study science, might simply shrug his shoulders, smile a little and walk away from the whole Twinkie issue. But not me, because I study science. Science doesn't allow one to let issues like this pass without considerable deliberation. Certain troubling questions raise their ugly heads, such as:

1. How old was the Twinkie I just ate?
2. What does a stale Twinkie look and taste like?
3. What is the oldest known Twinkie, where is it, and may I see it up close?

I can no longer look a Twinkie in the eye without wondering if it is something that a hippie tossed together in 1968. So I'm conducting my own experiment. I have a Twinkie on a special shelf at home. On October 3, 2008, I will take a bite of it. This is science in its purest, most eclectic form.

While touring an animal study lab at Michigan State University, I was told about obese mice and refrigerated beagles. It seems that there is a genetically altered strain of mice that fatten up extremely quickly on a normal diet of whatever lab mice are fed. Within days these rodents become bulbous, fleshy creatures not unlike some of our relatives back home. Which is precisely the point, my tour guide explained. These obese mice are studied, in a gory, clinical sense (too bad that the mice can't just fill out questionnaires instead of being hacked up) in an effort to determine why some people tend toward obesity. Well, all right. But it seems to me that quite a few mice are getting a raw deal because a few hundred thousand humans can't resist that twelfth piece of chocolate fudge cake. On to the beagles.

The beagles were refrigerated as part of a metabolism study. If you've had Biology, you understand the term metabolism. If you haven't had Biology, then forget I ever said the word metabolism. A team of inquisitive researchers would not be satisfied in their quest for scientific knowledge until they understood the metabolism of chilled dogs. That sounds reasonable. Imagine yourself doing research, experimenting away with your beagles and gathering all sorts of interesting data, when a member of your group says, "Hey, let's pop these pups in the fridge and see what happens". I can see intelligent, rational people thinking of it as a fun thing to do - and, oh, what a snappy article it will make for Scientific American magazine.
My tour guide mentioned that it was one of the funniest things she had ever seen when she walked into the cooler and saw forty caged beagles running and jumping and yelping, trying to keep warm. I wondered about her and her animal study lab for a few days afterwards.

Cheetos are my favorite food (all of these topics interrelate, and the wise reader will easily note the connections, so I won't insult your intelligence by explaining it). Even the orange mess all over your fingers has its advantages in certain social situations. One of my chem students suggested that Cheetos occupy a class of matter all by themselves, and I could think no solid evidence to refute her hypothesis. Obviously, further research is necessary. This is why I study science. Science gets answers. Science generates data. Science gives us ultrafat rats and supercooled dogs. Science makes us think. Science makes us wonder.

The Twinkie Project is underway. The Cheetos Study looks promising if I can keep my hands off the samples. I'll get back to you with the results.

--Jack Randall
The Capwell farm was about half a mile down the dirt road that separated our houses... a quarter mile if we were wearing shoes and took the shortcuts. Jeremy Capwell and I had been best friends longer than either of us could remember, and I knew that farm so well I could have guided tours with my eyes shut.

My favorite spot was the hayloft... I could stretch out and relax, loved the old cracked beams, the scratchy feeling of the straw against my skin. The air today was thick and warm and smelled of straw and freshly cut green grass, and I could hear the Capwell dogs, Husker and Reg, barking from what seemed like very far away. They were both Great Danes, knew how to open the screen doors of the house using only their tails, and could be counted on to awaken the entire Capwell household at six-thirty sharp every morning by banging their dog dishes around the kitchen until someone came down to feed them. Somewhere in the back of my mind were vague memories of being small enough to put rugs on their backs and ride them like horses.

I could hear Jer's grandfather out there too, hollering at a cow, something about moving her lazy cotton-picking rear end. I was sure the man had a name, but know one in town had ever called him anything but "Crazy Cap." He lived with Jeremy's grandma Callie in a smaller house on the farm over next to the vegetable garden.

"Jer?"

"Mmm hmm." Obviously on an afternoon like this, that was as close to a response as I was going to get, so I continued.

"Do you remember spending that night in your grandfather's attic?"

"Sure."

"I didn't believe you were telling the truth."

"I know you didn't."

The first time Jeremy had ever taken me to see his grandparents' house, I had been mystified when I noticed eight or ten holes in the plaster in their bedroom walls, looking like someone had been casually tossing around a bowling ball. No, Jer had said, it was the mice that lived inside the walls. At night, he explained, they did a lot of running around and squeaking and chewing and all that, and Cap, who was a light sleeper (and also, the family suspected, terrified of mice) had grown so infuriated that he kept a shotgun next to the bed, and in fact was able to pick "them danged critters" right out of the wall with one shot.

Now, if Jeremy Capwell ever had a sucker for his stories, it was me, but that one I wasn't going to buy. He was just spinning wild tales again, I told him, and I wouldn't be surprised if it had been
him that made those holes, pitching rocks or trying with a hammer to see what the inside of a plaster wall looked like.

The fact that I refused to believe seemed to bother him, and so he came up with the idea of sneaking out and spending the night in his grandparents' attic. I was game, and we risking our lives on a trellis that left splinters in my feet and creaked all the way up to the second story window. We stayed up longer than we thought nights lasted, telling ghost stories and dirty jokes and covering our mouths to silence the giggles.

But sure enough, at who knows what hour, we heard squeaking and a patter-patter, and then a rumble ("...god damn blasted mutter mutter all hell...") and then BOOM. The floor shuddered, tiny white flakes of plaster rained from the ceiling... then silence. Jeremy looked at me and didn't say a word. Maybe he knew I'd believe anything he ever told me from that night on... maybe he didn't. Either way, he had been right, and I had doubted him, and I expected him to rub my nose in it for months, possibly years afterwards. He never mentioned it again.

Suddenly, I wanted more than anything to thank him for that... but he wouldn't understand. I rolled onto my stomach, stretched, and then held very still... just breathing, drinking in the smell of warm wood and straw, watching particles of dust float down from the roof in the filtered beams of sunlight.

--Lisa Sperry
Reflections From the Window
of a Low-Flying Plane

It is September;
the river flashes silver
through the trees,
darting wild like game
that has given up trying to hide.

I want to call down;
There is no reason to run.
I want to apologize
for the shadow.

--Lisa Sperry