



birmingham, chicago, austin, philadelphia... | new writing winter 2008-'09

Gives Birth to Monsters

by Spencer Dew

Thursday, Seoul Café has sports bloopers on the televisions above the empty karaoke stage. From my seat in our usual high-backed booth, I watch a series of skiers, snapping, snowball fractures, then some young matador getting a horn to his groin. I am waiting for you, but you do not show. Bottle caps accrue. A dirt bikes skewers its rider. The candle, in its little glass cup at the center of the table, burns down, goes dead. An hour after our scheduled time, there is a text: delayed flight, Jersey, next week maybe? You include an emoticon for sadness, regret.

That night I sleep with both my laptop, online, and my phone, with me, in bed. I don't know why anymore, meaning: I don't know if it's out of hope or fear.

Then it is the day before the Darfur Bake Sale. You are in Montreal with Nathan, who makes you feel safe, who is like a brother to you, with whom you are sharing the honeymoon suite, about which you said, in a text, "So glossy. You wouldn't believe the bathroom."

I am examining urethral sounding rods. They are universally long, universally sharp, or sharpish, sharp enough. Maybe some look blunt, actually, like narrow butter knives. I move on to the case of kidney stones, and the fiberglass reproductions of fetuses, from pea-size to cabbage patch.

One day, because it calls for it, there will be a murder here, at the Museum of Surgical Science, a corpse found splayed on the floor of the great hall, its dispatching witnessed only by the pillared busts of medical pioneers.

In the antique library, reproduction gaslights flicker. At the press of a button, the iron lung demonstrates itself, a shudder, a series of heaves.

There is a room made up like the office of a Victorian dentist, the mannequins mere clothes dummies, faceless, in hats. There is a cabinet of trepanned skulls, chronologically arranged from prehistory to the Napoleonic wars. The ceiling of the stirrup and speculum room is painted in a red-heavy mural of the first Caesarian. Another chamber's wall is an early experiment with transfusion involv-

ing what look like hollow-core knitting needles, rubber tubing, and a dog strapped upside down to a tree.

I am here because it's near some bar where I'm supposed to meet Edgerton, and he's called to say he's going to be late. He's meeting his counterfeiter.

Eventually, at a fenced-in beer garden strung with cardboard shamrocks two doors down from the make-your-own stir fry place that caught fire last week, everything smelling vaguely, still, like smoke and oil and MSG, Edgerton explains his desire for a complete set of Goyas. He's taken to buying seconds, slightly imperfect forgeries at bargain basement prices. All his spare cash is going to that these days, so I have to pay for drinks.

He is a man of shifting trends, temporary obsessions. Through the first two rounds he sighs and says things like "I miss her." Or: "She was ideal, you know. Just a few pounds over, a cup size shy, but really, nearly there."

By the third round he's critiquing the ass of our new cocktail waitress, using an eight-point system, seemingly not improvised, with categories like height, symmetry, and elliptical torque.

Me, as you can guess, or as you should know, as should be self-evident to you, I can't deal so well with all that, on several levels, not least of which is the aggression of the physical, like the Museum of Surgical Science, which, to be honest, along with every other fucking thing in this world—bar fences, taxicabs, string lights, air—reminds me, too intensely, of you.

Enter the weekend getting wasted in the worst, most melodramatic and clichéd way, moaning over lukewarm outdoor beer, talking too much, excessive in content and effusive in tone. I try and fail to offer some catalogue of your wonders, some survey of charms. I wax on about your body, for instance, the arc of it, the current that runs just above the surface of your skin, and, yes, that jagged raised boldness of a scar, bisecting your belly all the way down to your subtly stumbled tuck of pubis. I think about everything down and around there, but particularly, due to whatever associative tapestry or

When the authorities called for the demolition early in 2008 of the Parliament House hotel in Birmingham (pictured, above left), a 1960s-built monstrosity of modest monstrosity and with the long vertical and horizontal lines of the best utilitarian sixties architecture, we at THE2NDHAND southern co-HQ didn't immediately realize we'd have a clear line of sight to the destruction. When we did, armed with camera and the squirrely interiority of anticipation, we were surprised to be further struck dumb by the spectacle, bringing to mind as it did the collapse of so many things. The lack of words for the experience, most times signifying failure for a writer, we find ultimately appropriate; it's a dynamic well at work among the players in Spencer Dew's "Give Birth to Monsters," too, featured in this issue. As the story's narrator lives life meaning well, mostly, he follows a specter from his recent past through the text function on his cell—the vast connectedness of things renders his imagination hyperactive but his gut, that part he feels his world with, curiously—and comically, in vintage Dew characterization—numb. Dew is the author of the collection *Songs of Insurgency* (Vagabond, 2008), a masterwork for these troubled times. He lives and writes in Chicago.

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****WRITERS:** send press submissions (2,500 words or less Web, 5,000 print) to THE2NDHAND, c/o Todd Dills, 1827 1st Ave. N #301, Birmingham AL 35203 (todd@the2ndhand.com). THE2NDHAND is **editors** Todd Dills, C.T. Ballentine, **resident artist** Rob Funderburk, **FAQ editor** Mickey Hess, and the janitor R. Beady. Literate (and soon-to-be-literate) apes unite.

bludgeoned mood, I think about your surgery and what it removed, your ovarian teratoma, a phenomenon I learned about, slightly, in the museum's Aberration and Deformity Room.

Edgerton asks the waitress if she wants to come and see his etchings. I stare tragically into my half-empty beer and think about your demoid cyst, swollen to the size of a volleyball. I think about your tumor, your vanished twin.

We were supposed to bake something, Edgerton and I. That was the idea. I wake empty-handed, with less than a clear head. Saturdays, my upstairs neighbor gets off shift around the time I wake up, and sometimes she brings back a coffee in exchange for my coming up to her place to check the rooms for hidden rapists, a phobia of hers.

Lilly, who goes by Lillian since her promotion to assistant associate manager or assistant to the associate manager or associate assistant or some combination of such terms—there's a new pin that comes with it, a collar badge—is maybe just a lonely type. She likes to wind down before a day of sleep by hearing herself think. She likes to theorize.

"The mass of free market citizens lead lives in *denial* of desperation," she tells me. She goes on about alienation, the obfuscated. We eat discard donuts together. She packs her pipe and gets high, lecturing about what's natural and what's only assumed to be, about how we should feel—*realize*—that we're on the precipice of a void, that the situation, honestly assessed, leaves us only with our hearts and our wits and ritualized appeals to vague Afro-Cuban deities.

She's carving round holes out of the tops of some apples, into which she then wedges votive candles, setting them floating in a big plastic punch bowl half full of water. I'm in her wicker rocking chair, recovering. There are ways that even donuts remind me of you, but I will spare you them.

Lillian tells me that there are two worlds, dark mirrors of each other, simultaneous and strange. "Sometimes," she says, "the veil between these worlds is very thin." She, like everyone else, has heard everything from me, all the sordid details, repeatedly.

"In such a circumstance," she says, "there's an overlap, worlds collide. A guy meets a girl, and, whatever, she's stunning, absolutely, inspiring, a brilliant girl, and you know, she's never ridden a bus, a city bus, will never ride a bus. Not her world. She walks into any given room and owns it, plucks hearts from

inside suits, but this guy, he doesn't even have a decent suit collection, doesn't know exactly what a 401k is, or what spoon to use with which course."

I kind of want to protest, but she brought me coffee, after all, and all last night I had dreams, uneasy, which I will refuse to repeat.

Her votives don't stay lit so well. They're cheap, so cheap, in fact, that they're scented, something the dollar store didn't bother to mention, and she's worried about this, seriously, because she doesn't know if the working will work the same way with, like, mountain berry or pine grove or trout stream or whatever this very simulated, slightly carcinogenic smell is supposed to be. She interrupts herself to say a prayer and interrupts—I think—her prayer to inform me, yet again, that all names for God are just *slave names*, that we might as well pray to a random interger, *Dear X, watch over me*.

It's a recent kick, Santería. For the past few weeks she's been visiting the botanicas, requesting more and more unlikely things. She's on an earnest ritual quest. I have been present on mornings that reeked of rum and want, shrines of clay heads and cowrie shells, stacks of china draped in costume jewelry, offerings of wrapped butterscotches and cigarillos. What she's after, she claims, is a solution to the central philosophical conundrum, how to be happy in the world with others. She thinks she's cracked it: She prays for total amnesia, every moment a new life, a fresh beginning. Instant do-over.

But now she's back on the theory of two worlds. "Take you and Larissa."

"Please," I say.

"The truth is," she says, "on the level that matters, practical, in terms of life partnering, you're not her type, you're not for her, you can't be. And while I'm sure the sex was stupendous, earth-shaking, whatever, and, yeah, I'm sure you doted, were romantic, wrote picnics or packed poems or whatever, again, whatever, it doesn't matter, this is the way the world is, split, and the twain might meet from time to time but that doesn't make them any less divided."

Saturday morning is no time to be alone. Lillian, at least, is a hugger in parting. Like I say, she seems to need the human contact. And it's nice, in a doughy, platonic way. She is warm and no matter how much pot she smokes, she always smells, foremost, of donuts.

At the panderia I point to a bunch of pink fingerlings and some green-speckled squares, buy several bags that they're selling by the register, things that look both breadly and sufficiently sweet.

I am thinking more normal if unhealthy things about your body, the base edge of your ribcage mesa, rising, or the nubs of your nipples under my thumbs, tongue. I think about



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create... change

the stiff ribbon of lace encircling you on the curve, your smooth, triple-lotioned thighs, the taste of bronzing agent and salt, the firm flex of your biceps, tested between my teeth.

For Naomi, it's a big day. She's co-organizer of the Bake Sale, which is at her church.

The first thing she tells me is that the zucchini bread is ruined, soured, some kind of mathematical fuck-up in the recipe, or maybe her measuring cups are, like, metric, or maybe she's going blind because, you know, it's been *so long*, and, on top of that, she hasn't showered yet, not to mention the problem of her *hair*. Eileen is going to be late *as always* and she better not have just bought some cookies from a store, because, yes, that's what Edgerton and I will do, and Edgerton shouldn't even come, the state Eileen's in, because that man doesn't know the definition of *space* or *pacing*, *propriety* or *respect*.

"Or *consensual*?" I offer. I should start more mornings with Naomi. Lilly likes to hear herself talk; Naomi doesn't even listen.

Things were different before she gave up smoking. Now she tears around her condo in crosstrainers, a housecoat, and a butchered-looking apron that reads TRUST NO ONE. She's a force of nature, the kind that obliterates half a town and makes the other half feel guilty for years.

The second thing Naomi tells me is that the kitchen is a wreck, a *disaster zone*—which phrase she follows with a few quickly hummed bars from the theme to *Top Gun*—and that Eileen is in a tender mood and I should tell *my boy* to back off and, yes, she's had slightly more than the suggested daily dose of her Adult Onset Attention Deficit Disorder medicine, powdering the pills first and splitting them into fat rails, some of which are available to guests on the kitchen island, between the caramel ripple and the almond craisin scones.

She heads off to the shower, and I do two lines, for symmetry, then another, just because. The kitchen, in its scale of mess, looks plotted, arranged, the sheer volume of disorder—spilled flour and wadded bags, egg shells, a puddle of milk, the unwashed dishes that roil out of the sink, the baking racks covering every other available inch, including the top of the refrigerator and one of the empty shelves in an open cabinet.

I don't so much clean as excavate, soil half a roll of paper towels, load the dishwasher, water the few plants in the front room that aren't dead. I'm stacking the junk mail on the coffee table in three random, square-edged piles when the buzzer goes. Eileen shows up carrying a box of bakery cookies.

"Naomi's going to be pissed, isn't she?"

"Disappointed," I say.

She smiles with her eyes, air kisses my cheeks. I like her a lot more since she stopped seeing Edgerton, which was, itself, sort of the extreme of her post-divorce experimental masochist phase. She seems slightly healthier now, but I also at least imagine a camaraderie between us, our failures, a shared and growing lack of faith.

She's auctioning off private yoga tutorials at the bake sale, but wants me to make sure that Edgerton doesn't buy any or all of them.

"Nobody can tell *him* what to do," I say, though in this case I think it'll be fine. He's scared of her, really, as a woman, hence the whole bit gag and saddle stuff, the pony play, the bondage. *There* is a alternative world, Edgerton, his wired bedroom, his trunk of toys and TENS unit, or, for that matter, his living room stacked with something like two dozen slightly imperfect Goya etchings, the images off by a hairline split, a double-printing, like old-school 3D comic books.

"How's the drama with Larissa?" says Eileen.

"Thick," I say.

"People say it gets better." She touches my arm. "People lie."

Or maybe it's this: Eileen wears her neu-roses in ways I find soothing, with a sort of façade, a polish, cool and receded, but so obviously shell-thin, fragile in the sense that ancient, leached sticks of dynamite are fragile. She holds herself as if her body were made of rubber bands, stretched taut.

"Oh," she says, upon seeing the kitchen, "It's sort of clean."

I talk about you, or about my continuing problems dealing with you, the lack of you, making quick mention of the Korean bar and of your weekend, away, the W Montreal, a surprise trip, the honeymoon suite, VIP passes to the Procter and Gamble house band, their show, the party, the afterparty, and after.

She, being her, does not talk about Edgerton or her ex-husband or anything like that, really. There's a new show on that she likes, which involves the expectation of travel, packing and planning. Plus she's found a new tea, Amazonian, detoxifying.

I interrupt with a fragment about how you do not stand and turn, Larissa, you pirouette. And I describe, in detail—my scalp tightening from the lines of adult-onset ADHD drug—watching one night from your car, double parked, as you bought cigarettes, watching your smile through the bulletproof glass of the gas station convenience store, framed by stickers for Choco Taco, Klondike bars, watching you, on your toes, lifted, lifting, spinning somehow, that inimitable way of yours, moving as if suspended, as if held by a cord, from above.

Naomi comes out, a clatter of heels as she circles the table, packing cookies in boxes. Eileen apologizes and Naomi says something about how we're all going to be late, how there just isn't time, how this is important, how it's symptomatic of our generation, this apathy, self-centered. She lifts her hair back from her neck and fans it, rapidly, with a tin lid, which makes an eerie didgeridoo sound, drowning her out.

"What is this for again?" Eileen whispers to me

"Darfur," I say.

"Yeah, he should so totally not be on death row."

"Guys, please, come on, just this once, take this seriously," says Naomi. "Darfur is the seminal event of our age."

Eileen makes a quick coughing sound.

I drive Eileen's car, because she wants to have it there to get away but doesn't want to drive. She wants to put on her giant sunglasses and lean her head against the passen-

ger's side window, fiddle with her iPod such that the car stereo plays the first few seconds of several dozen songs.

I ask her if she's OK, and only once we're there, parked, does she respond, saying she can't remember being OK. Then she takes off her shades, smiles slightly at the very edges of her eyes, and raises a fist above the dashboard. "Free Darfur," she says.

The fellowship hall of Saint Ephrem's Episcopal looks like a refugee camp, a tent city lined with stalls and awnings over them. There is a life-size camel, part of an old Christmas display, and a series of rickety, leaning, miniature papier-mâché palm trees—"An oasis bazaar," we are informed.

There is a prayer, rambling, and a speech, distorted via the microphone with a kind of treble chirp. "Never again, again."

There are stations for the writing of postcards to senators or for signing local petitions in favor of gay marriage or opposed to big-box stores. There's a booth collecting old batteries for ecological disposal, a place to learn about screenings for breast, colon, and prostate cancer.

Edgerton, who shows up late with a grocery bag full of store-bought cupcakes, half of them birthday-themed, tells me twice that the latter isn't a service he needs, "Had it done last night, amateur. You should have stuck around"

We've been stationed by the door, as far away from Eileen as possible, doling out change for plastic wrapped flaxseed muffins and instructing parents on the directions to the nap room and changing station. Eileen is off helping set up the silent auction on the stage at the far end. Still, or because of this, it's all Edgerton wants to talk about. Even more than the waitress or his clear bill of prostate health, he wants to discuss Eileen and Eileen and Eileen. He goes on about how narrow her ankles are, what an ass her ex-husband was on *Check, Please*, her exact diameter pre and post enema, and, again, how he misses her, how no one has been quite like that: sweet, compliant.

I try to get him to talk about work. He and Naomi are editors together. All week he's been on a rush release, the history of cellophane, or so I thought, but he says, as if it's the most absurd confusion, "*Cephalopods*, not cellophane," and he's off again, how he's used the latter on Eileen but the former remains a fantasy, unrequited. "A hole as wide as their eye, that's all they need, and they can shape-shift, squeeze on through it. How fucking hot is that? Octopussy?"

It has always been too late, since that first soggy faux-Irish bar, and you, on impulse, taking my thumb inside your mouth. There was a shock at the heat of its interior, then the fence, outside, quivered, as I cupped you in my hands, like some hundred times to come, cupping and lifting to taste of you.

This is just one strand, Larissa, but it overwhelms, paralyzing—these physical memories. The smallest, sensual things, so undeniably rigid and real, seize me: the blunt angle of your hipbones, that sandpaper scour of tongue lapping the rough edge above the slick musk—these *things* and this too concrete, always embodied world, are crushing me.

You say it's the ideas themselves, our belief in them, that wreck us. You say love just doesn't hold, it's not enough.

Though who knows how anything ends, or why. We diagnose, cast back speculative narratives, but none of that helps us go on, cope.

After the Darfur Bake Sale, I find myself on a bus, in the dark, inching home. First the wheelchair ramp jams, then some bundled, passed out guy in priority seating shits his pants, a reeking torrent. The driver threatens to stop, but it's not clear who he's threatening, what response he wants.

I imagine myself surgically inserted, a stint, slathered with your cervical mucus and wedged deep, *yours*, rendered concretely, the heart, not as a Valentine sketch, but as a chambered thing, alternately empty and full.

At two a.m. you send a text, the first since Thursday, and the hasty meaning is scrambled by the word prediction function: you are ducking drunk, going to sleep east, thinking of me.

I cannot type back. Instead, I dream that there were two of you.

Your consumed twin, the sister your body in its lust for autonomy devoured—I see her born, unfurling, pale, wet from the oily tumor tissue, patches of black hair matted, framing a gorgeously formless face, errant cartilage in lieu of true bone, but with teeth, as your cyst had, and grinning, her floppy tendril arms spreading wide for an embrace.

I dream of another you, on an alternative plane, with no tensions between felt emotion and the restraints of the weighty, imposed world.

"I am in love with you," she says, in your voice, as you said, yourself, all those times, only here, through the mouth of your boneless, egg-white doppelganger, it is a statement without caveat or cadge. It is not that you love me *but*, not that love carries with it complications, contradictions.

A juvenile fantasy, uterine, pulsing, and when I wake it is nearly dawn, the sky dot-matrix grey, and someone is puking into the shrubbery as their drunk friends cheer him on, applauding.

I piss, check my phone twice, then my email.

You are out of touch, sleeping deeply in Montreal, in a glossy and expansively minimalist suite in a hotel with its own sound track and trademarked white tea room scent.

So, instead, I imagine you as your twin, suspended, fully grown, naked but fetal still, sharply fresh, the sheer idea of you, unmet, as if we could do this all again, restart.

To meet anew, in that place, equipped this time with hindsight, holding close to how it feels, damning consequence, the weary web of circumstances, taking risk.

There is an email late Sunday afternoon. The weekend was good, better than good, fantastic. Nathan is going to meet your parents next. This, you say, could be getting serious, could be for real.

END

Next up: Aaron Parrett, March 2009

I AM IN HERE

a collaborative tribute to David Foster Wallace ongoing at THE2NDHAND.com/web69/dfw.html by Pitchfork Battalion

A dry-erase board provides something of a frame for the attendees of this evening's meeting of the Regional Safety Council's court-mandated "defensive driving school," which is not so much a school as a course, and the board lends the room, its bureaucratic drop ceiling, fluorescent lighting and metal folding chairs all, an air of urgency, whimsicality, and formality all at once, headed as it is by an all-cap declaration/question of ISN'T THIS FUN! [sic], written in blue dry-erase pen and followed by three driving directives in the same color— 1) Know and drive ≤ the speed limit. 2) Wear your safety belt. 3) Hold 2-4 seconds following distance [sic]. (1000-1! 1000-2!) I am in here, like the other maybe fifteen humans, most of African descent, a fact that reflects the economic conditions of the majority-white region. I am in here, which means what it says and certainly doesn't mean that I want to be in here, necessarily, though I am game, as goes the expression, for what is to come, which I am entirely unhip to the eventuality of.

Written in a sort of lime greenish-colored dry-erase pen, left of the all-caps legend at the top of the board, is the name of the teacher, now introducing himself as Mr. Jake McDonough, former vice principal in one of the local high schools. The revelation brings forth a groan from the young man sitting next to me, who during the first break

(about midway through our sophomore year according to former vice principal McDonough's analogy temporally comparing this four-hour endeavor to the four years most of us had in high school) will tell me he remembers McDonough from school just a few years back, and he is a character, the man does say, a character. I will not be altogether sure whether this designation is intended as a good or bad designation w/r/t quality, just as I will not be sure what to make of many of former vice principal McDonough's many analogies, such as his absolutely gleeful reminiscence from his college days, when as a science lab student he and a bunch of friends found a dead mouse and dipped it into a vat of liquid helium, after which they dropped the frozen body onto the ground to shatter into "a million pieces," he said, his voice rising comically in pitch, apropos of illustrating the force placed on the human musculoskeletal system during its experience of a high-impact/velocity-type vehicular crash.

Written in the same lime greenish-colored dry-erase pen very faintly to the right of the all-caps ISN'T THIS FUN! [sic] legend at the top of the board is a website address, fairtax.org, which former vice principal McDonough, clad in a Hawaiian shirt untucked and hanging over a prodigious belly and baggy jeans, nonverbally references, after introducing himself, by raising a copy, and displaying the book's cover to the assembled, of *The Fair Tax: The Truth: Answering the Critics*, by Neal Boortz and John Linder, follow-up to the authors' *The Fair Tax Book*, which detailed said authors' plan for reforming the U.S. tax code to be based on a sales tax on new goods, requiring a repeal of the 16th Amendment to the U.S.

Constitution and encouraging the reuse economy, among other things, and which was former vice principal McDonough's topic of note for most of our sophomore and junior years in the defensive driving course, plus a fair amount of our senior and freshman years as well.

At the bottom of the dry-erase board at the head of the class, in the same blue dry-erase pen that dominates the actual driving pointers included on the board, as well as the ISN'T THIS GREAT! [sic] head, is the directive "Make your adult choices wisely," which brings to my mind the late David Foster Wallace's graduation keynote address to students at Kenyon College in Gambier, Ohio. I do not know whether McDonough has ever heard of DFW, though it will seem clear by the end of our senior year tonight that he is not entirely self-conscious about the truth of such clichés and the need to parse them and demonstrate their truth through example, by which practice he, indeed, will seem to share a common bond with DFW, who might well too have appreciated former vice principal McDonough's laying bare the structure in which we participate, today, while concurrently placing blame for our demoralizing participation in said structure solely on our very selves by invoking the indignity of the amount of time one has wasted on this "little tyn" [sic] traffic ticket, what with already three or four hours at the court, another four or five hours on the way to and in defensive driving school, yet another return court trip that might take even longer than three-four hours, which is to say nothing of \$100-plus court costs we all would pay. "Viva revolution!" shouts the early-twentysomething man at my right, his shock of thick curly red hair and wide-eyed expression

causing a definite narrowing of the pupils in former vice principal McDonough's eyes—before, of course, McDonough remembers his favorite pet cause, reaches behind himself to the desk to grab again the copy of *The Fair Tax: The Truth: Answering the Critics*, by Neal Boortz and John Linder, whereupon he raises the book to display the cover and says "If you want a revolution, read this book" to the young man to my right, who during the second break—"between your junior and senior years," says former vice principal McDonough—will engage heartily in fair-tax discussion with McDonough, which discussion will quickly turn to the age of the earth, which McDonough thinks can't be more than 10,000 years, his evidence for which is an aerial view of the Grand Canyon he got on a long flight to Los Angeles that gave him ultimate certainty that said canyon was formed by the great biblical flood described in the story of Noah, to wit: "You can see how the receding waters created the crevasses and streams in one fell swoop," former vice principal McDonough will say. "All this 'billions of years' stuff is right out the window." His right arm will propel its hand back in a quick flourish over his right shoulder, as if to say, To hell with the conventional wisdom, to hell with you, solidifying his ultimate humanity. —Todd Dills

Believe me, David, / that although I do not know, / I know. It's like pulling / Infinite Jest and feeling / its weight before you / blow the dust off / with a bang of breath. / It's like going into a room / and shutting out / to write a fight / into a fist, / just to gnaw on it. / I am in here, / and it's not quiet, / surrounded. / And I want to leave. —Doug Milam