



## BEAT THE DUST

June 2008

Tony O'Neill (in the year 2000) interviews Tony O'Neill (in the year 2008)



TON2000: Shit man, you look good. You've shaved.

TON2008: Yeh. You look... uh....

TON2000: Oh I know. So what's up? You're alive. That's kinda nice to know. Whatcha doin' these days?

TON2008: I write.

TON2000: Write what? Rubber checks?

TON2008: Nah, books. I got one coming out on Harper Perennial in November 08. "Down and Out on Murder Mile"

TON2000: Fuck off! Don't you have to finish college to do that?

TON2008: Apparently not.

TON2000: You get high still?

TON2008: Well, not by your standards. By your standards I'm kind of a monk these days.

TON2000: So you got old and sold out. You gonna tell me you got an SUV too, and a nice little picket fence?

TON2008: No car, no fence. Not yet anyway. I'd take the car and the fence over what I know is coming up for YOU though, smart ass....

TON2000: OK, OK. I hear ya. Hey.... listen, I hate to ask, but can I borrow a few bucks? I'm a bit short now and I have this thing I need to do....

TON2008: I know, I know. Here take it. You can pay me back when you meet the old me in 8 years time.

TON2000: Uh, yeh. Sure. Time travel is so confusing. I think I gotta lay off the coke. I think I'm burning out some brain cells.

TON2008: Yeah. That sounds about right.

**the sound of jeffrey lee pierce singing 'yellow eyes' floating out of a busted tape player** by tony o'neill

under threadbare sheets in kilburn  
a story began, then concluded  
and two years later  
your name was a mystery to me

there is another me  
one whose life went on  
branched out from that moment  
his days run parallel to my own

i check in with him  
every so often  
he seems content, although  
a little stupid and inconsequential to me

i have never wept for him  
close, but never real tears  
if we met at a party  
and swapped small talk  
(he'd probably be drinking WINE or something)  
there would be friction:  
we'd prowl around each other  
like hungry junkies circling  
an unattended wallet

afterwards in the taxi's backseat  
he'd pull you close  
and say "something about that guy  
was a little off don't you think?"  
and you'd agree

you'd cook him dinner  
play doctor, hold hands,  
but that's ok today  
because i have my own slice of heaven

it's a miracle  
but it's true

today i know love  
the real kind  
the only kind that matters  
the kind  
you gotta earn

Steve Finbow interviews himself



Q: What's in the bag?

A: A pen, a wallet, a notebook, a paperback, an asthma inhaler and my insulin kit.

Q: Where have you been recently?

A: Berlin, Rome, Tangier, New York City, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Tokyo.

Q: Drink much while you were there?

A: Try the Schwarze Café, Bar San Calisto, Dean's Bar, Grassroots Tavern, Vesuvio, Hank's Bar, Bar Kamiya.

Q: Who should I take on holiday? Woodrell, Nunn, Gutierrez, Miller, Thom Jones and that Acker chick if you like it rough.

A: How long you staying? Until the shrimp cocktail's finished.

**nothing matters** – chapter one of a novel by steve finbow

Leaning over the coffin-style freezer, I search around the butterball turkeys until I find her. She isn't quite solid. I pull her out & leave her in the backyard to thaw. While the sun warms her, I iron her outfit & search for her bobble hat, finding it tucked under a pile of muscle mags in her bedroom. The puddle she has made is the shape of Antarctica & I lift her onto the draining board & watch as the great ice continent shrinks & seeps into the dirt. "Fuck those crazy penguins," I say, licking her stump. She burbles & I take a soggy sponge from the sink & stuff it in her mouth to stop the noise. It's a Wednesday – our day at the park.

But first, I need a drink. I find some silver duct tape under the sink, cut off strips – inch-thick ones for her eyes & left nostril, a two-inch one for her mouth, up to three-inch for her cauliflower ears. I insert a rubber cup into her vagina – just in case – & stopper her tight little anus with a wine cork. I look around for somewhere safe to put her while I am out. The oven – dark & greasy, or the microwave – still splattered with tomato juice & mayonnaise, at least, that's what it looks like. I decide on the oven, open it & remove the grill tray blackened with burned

toast, scabbed with grilled Monterey Jack. I roll her in & close the door. Daddy won't be long, I say, knowing it to be a lie.

The car I stole last night won't start. I jimmy the window of the car behind, smash the ignition tumbler, yank out the wires, take my knife, strip the ends of the two wires I think most likely, & I'm off, fishboning all over the place until I get used to the car's heft & speed. Nice. By the time I start enjoying the ride, I'm there. I park the car down a side road – it might come in handy – quick shag, quicker getaway. I look in the rear-view mirror & with my tattooed fingers comb back my long dark locks. The scar above my right eye twitches & I run my thumb along it until it is raw & shiny. I straighten my shark-tooth necklace & undo a button of my white linen shirt. I'm out of the car & striding towards The Slaughterhouse – man, do I need a beer.

The Slaughterhouse – home from home, drum from drum, pit from pit. Some joker's nicked the S from the sign, so it reads The laughterhouse & I smile as I push open the door. Now, I'm a mean mother but some of the geezers in this place are depleted uranium – hard & dense. It's early, it's not even eleven, but the pub is crowded. Blokes lining the bar – a petrified forest of pissed-up drinkers. No one stirs. I point at the Stella tap & behind the barman to my personal bottle of Pappy Van Winkle. I sit down at my table & take a paperback from the back pocket of my jeans. The barman – PT – a one-eyed, one-legged, one-armed, once-upon-a-time & not-very-successful peterman, brings over my drinks. He nods & I nod back. Words are as useful & as rare as hummingbirds in this place. I drink the Stella down in one, follow it with a mouthful of bourbon. PT's straight back with a refill. I'm settled & I take a look around.

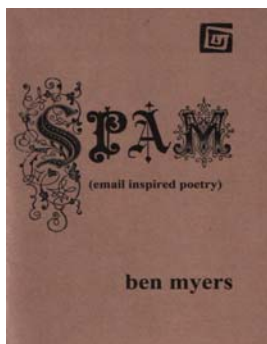
Joey Spit stands by the gangway, his tatts stretched tight over his biceps, one showing a horse sodomizing Alice, the other an American pit-bull Cerberus with three heads & three cocks. Joey's knocking back slammers. On the bar in front of him sits a draught board & twenty-four glasses, twelve filled with silver tequila & twelve with gold. He plays himself & always wins. Next to Joey is Biggy Bigs, the fattest smack addict you're ever likely to see. What he lacks in liveness he makes up for in sugar. I can see three hypodermics sticking in the veins of his trunk-like calves. He's drinking a cocktail of blackcurrant, cranberry & orange juice diluted with peppermint cordial. He reaches down & scratches his leg. One of the needles skitters across the room like a swatted mosquito. Several non-entities & prospects make up the middle of the bar – among them muggers, rapists, & thieves. Staring ahead, yet apparently in conversation, at the end of the bar stands Mr Fleur & Mr Lupe – the owners of this joint. The daddies of sleaze, the godfathers of the gratuitous. Later.

I'm busting for a piss, so spatchcock my book on the table, dangle & drop a huge lugie into my Stella, watch it float to the bottom like a fluorescent octopus, knock back my bourbon & cross the sticky carpet to the Gents. The last time this place saw a mop & bucket, Noah was cross-fertilizing sheep. Mirrors caked with extracted & hardened snot. An aroma more brutal than Brut, more No. 2 than No. 5. I slip on dark yellow liquid as I unbutton. The urinal is full of cigarette & cigar butts &, as I swirl them around in a tobacco soup, I hear the door open. I shake, I fold, I button. As I turn, a shadow falls across my face & I instinctively raise my arm in protection. Fuck! Luckily, the blow catches the muscle & not the bone in my right forearm. That's gonna bruise. That's gonna hurt. Whoever did it is trying to do it again & I see a rush of denim & corduroy, a mop of ginger hair, a mouth open & black-toothed where there are teeth, green & purple where there aren't, warts the size of walnuts. The Gourd.

Slipping about on the piss-stained floor, I pull out my knife & aim for the rushing centre as the thing he's wielding bears down on me. Baseball bat? Iron bar? Hoover attachment? I dodge sideways & pull my knife across, slice sideways, hear his Whitesnake T-shirt rip, feel the heavy folds of flesh tear. His swing loses energy & his weapon – crowbar – clangs to the floor. He's down holding his guts. They won't be held. They spill over the floor. The colours of a drab rainbow. I flip him over. Spit in his face. He's dying. I unzip his George jeans – The Gourd goes commando – & pull out his cock & balls. He's raspy is The Gourd. His hands do a little flap as if he's shaking off water or singing *Mammy* – & from here, I can tell you, I know where the sun shines best. I pull his cock up so the root is visible & cut halfway through, twist & twist, tug & tug & it comes off. Blood all over the place. I throw it across the toilet floor & it rolls into a corner where it is set upon by cockroaches & giant silverfish. I watch as The Gourd's eyes roll back into his forehead. That gives me an idea. I cut off his hairy balls. The skin attaching them to the body is wrinkled & thin & smells of toe-jam. I hold them gently in my hand as if I were cradling newborn kittens (ugly fuckers others would have drowned at birth). I sit on The Gourd's chest & using my knife, thumb & forefinger, pluck out his eyes, slip them into my pocket – a treat for the girl back home. I push the testicles into The Gourd's empty black sockets, arrange them so that he looks wall-eyed. Stand up, stand back & admire my handiwork. Nice.

I roll The Gourd into the shitter, prop him against the toilet bowl, & close the door behind me. Thirsty work that.

## Henry Cutmore interviews Ben Myers



**HC:** Can you tell me a little bit about the spoken word recordings of the spam poems included here?

**BM:** They were recorded in the bedroom of a house near a bridge near a city. They were 'produced' by a friend and collaborator of mine who goes by the name of Doc Throberts, who runs a home studio. We have also been working on a music and words project for a number of years, entitled The Gulag. The spam poems were recorded in an hour a couple of years ago, then hidden away until now as they were too ahead of their time. Now they are 'of their time'. Interesting fact: Doc Throberts once fell off the bonnet of a moving car and now has no sense of smell.

**HC:** Do you ever read your work in public?

**BM:** No.

**HC:** Why not?

**BM:** I've never really intended to 'perform' in public. I've always maintained that people often write down the things that they are too afraid or shy or inhibited to say in public. Personally, I write because I often find it a better method of communication than speech. Also, I'm also not entirely convinced anyone wants to hear me read in public. I mean, there's nothing worse than a poet forcing themselves upon the public. Also, writers are often disappointing in 'real life'. I think there has to at least be an attempt at conjuring an air of mystery or mystique. Maybe one day I will.

**HC:** What are your non-literary influences when writing?

**BM:** Nature, the threat of abject poverty, old reggae music, rifling through dustbins, Irn-Bru, riding my new bike, the madness of the city, punk rock and hardcore, fish and fishing, old English folk music, cats, boxing, grime music, sex, an inability to give in and get a real job, world politics, childhood, London (especially Peckham, Soho and the South Bank), Brutalism, solitude, spam e-mails, Ullswater, sugar, klezmer music, imaginary bodies of water, cheap clothes, cheap shoes, cheap haircuts, cheap everything, pills of many varieties, Futurism, stone circles, Durham, cemeteries, Klaus Kinski's face, 10p per word, walking as far as you can walk, swimming in places you're not allowed to swim, coffee, multi-dimensional traveling, my excellent girlfriend.

**HC:** Name some writers you always urge people to read.

**BM:** Henry David Thoreau, Knut Hamsun, Pedro-Juan Guiterrez, Richard Brautigan, Li Po, Ian Svenonius, George Mackay Brown, Julian Cope, Halldor Laxness.

### **hot selling medications** by ben myers

Seven corner steps considered

I burst my garden,

popped the pill,  
explained the long light.

I found corruption  
was the key  
to the background  
of her countless flaming eyes.

Now up on this  
lone blue ridge favorite  
the breeze through the trees  
might just be music.

### **my heart was stolen**

Next to the voice the key decays,  
like sight maps one visits at birth.

Wink and step, the stars all melted  
till the chains broke the city mine.

A green eagle eats a mammal's organ  
climbing high, jaws grinning, a sky

poet with a glowing habit hung silent  
like the grey horizon iceberg at rest.

### **claim your free gift now**

To be an all-encompassing,  
all-ruling, butt knuckle of  
the forward echelon  
air map death-due  
dry-pipe pseudo-urea  
ink cap king

simply call and claim  
your free gift now.

### **be more important and learn to influence others**

Feeling indifference, transparent and disenfranchised  
the elder of the tribe  
looked to the sky for  
Customer Support and technical advice

but he was put on hold, initially indefinitely, left dangling  
 like a cartoon cliffhanger  
 then cut off  
 like a burnt branch from the lightning bolt tree.

These extracts are exclusive 'out-takes' from the book *Spam: Email-Inspired Poetry* by Ben Myers, out now on Blackheath Books.

Copies can be ordered for £5 from [www.blackheathbooks.org.uk](http://www.blackheathbooks.org.uk)

Robert Warrington interviews himself



Q. Who will swallow whom?

A. There's always someone somewhere with a big nose who knows.

Q. When will you accept yourself?

A. A crack on the head is what you get for asking.

Q. Nature is a language, can't you read?

A. Keats and Yeats are on your side while Wilde is on mine.

Q. If you're so clever then why are you on your own tonight?

A. Now I know how Joan of Arc felt.

Q. Do you love me like you used to?

A. I'll never make that mistake again.

**crimes against the faith** by robert warrington

We stood as we had stood since dawn,  
 all gagged, all with a rope around our necks,  
 the fifty who were clothed in yellow  
 and the twenty, who were condemned  
 for crimes against the faith.

And the sentences were read  
till the light faded  
and the torches were lit  
and waved as they were lit,  
to remind us what awaited us  
in this life and the next  
for crimes against the faith.

And when each sentence had been read  
each rope was pulled,  
and each of us was led to our own wheeled cage.  
And when the last of us was caged  
all were wheeled, some to prison,  
us to the platform and the stakes,  
for crimes against the faith.

As we arrived they let us out  
so monks could crowd us, pressing in.  
Monks hounded us for penitence  
and at the hounding of the monks  
the person nearest me gave way,  
and when her gag was loosed  
cried 'I repent  
for crimes against the faith.'

The monks embraced her,  
said 'God bless you sister',  
the executioner embraced her,  
said 'God bless you sister'  
and strangled her before the fire was lit  
for crimes against the faith.

The monks now pressed me to repent  
so I too could be strangled first.  
One prayed for me.  
One whispered in my ear.  
Another yelled.  
One begged.  
One simply wept.  
'Repent' they said  
'for crimes against the faith.'  
'Repent, repent'  
one monk began to yell.  
Another wept.

And at the stake  
they loosed my gag.

'Let the fire be lit'  
I said.

Scarlett Johansson interviews Mikael Covey



**SJ:** You're a hot sexy stud muffin  
**MC:** Um, you're thinking of Joe Ridgwell  
**SJ:** Oh...yeah you're right  
**MC:** People get us confused all the time; he's my altar ego  
**SJ:** You mean alt...  
**MC:** I'm a pigment of his imagination  
**SJ:** You mean, piglet  
**MC:** Hah! you got me; feels good don't it  
**SJ:** Feels real good  
**MC:** So, we hard?  
**SJ:** Yeah, we hard

**shy girl killing** – chapter one of a novel by mikael covey

A boy goes out walking his dog. Late evening, dark, raining. Wearing pajamas and a coat over. Bedtime, but have to walk the dog first, every night before bed.

The dog snarls, breaks free, chasing something in the night. Big dog, angry now, growling, running full speed into the darkness. The boy gives chase, under the street lamp, light rain filtering down, then across the street into the dark shadowy grass of the empty deserted lot and the churchyard.

Calls after the dog as he chases "Bobo, stop, come back here." Embarrassed to be yelling that silly name out in the night, everyone in bed or going to bed. Mad at the dog for running away. Mad that he has to walk the dog every night.

At the back of the churchyard with its vast expanse of darkness, under the trees near the church, he finds the dog, hovering over a sack of garbage on the mushy grass. Slick muddy dirt you could slip on and fall. The boy grabs the leash, pulls the dog back to him. It's hard though, big dog, angry, snarling at the dark. He shortens his grip on the leash, down to the collar, tells him to hush, threatens to yank the dog up off his front feet. Then he sees the garbage sack is shaped like a human. Drops the leash and runs back home, back to his house.

His father comes out with him, hurrying across the street through the light rain, annoyed. The boy runs on ahead, yelling at his father to hurry. Finally he catches up with the boy, under the

dark trees. "See, I told you Dad. Right there." The boy nudges the sack with his foot. A large bag for gathering leaves in the fall, thick and heavy. Open at the top.

The man turns the sack over, pulls it open a bit. Jumps back, falling over backwards into the mud. "What is it Dad? You okay?" "Go back to the house" the man says "now!"

He looks at his hand, the back of his fingers, feels them wet. Red wet, sticky from the sack and what's inside it. "Get going" he yells to the boy harshly. No time to explain or be gentle with him. Gets to his feet and looks back over his shoulder, watching the figure of the boy recede. Watches him 'til he's across the street, at the house.

Then he looks around, through the trees, the shadows and darkness. His breath short, hands beginning to shake. Edges his way along the side of the church. A dark figure jumps out at him. The dog, happy, wagging its tail. The man sits down, trying to calm his fears, his racing heart, pets the dog, relieved it wasn't something else.

No one around. All quiet. The man takes the dog and hurries back to his house, calls the police. "Hello...I've found something, a body." His wife comes into the kitchen, nightgown and robe. "What is it? Tommy's all wound up like a..." "Hush" he tells her, hand over the phone "just...take him, go in the other room."

And then to the dispatcher "yes...a body. Out in the trees, in a bag." Explains what he's found, where.

The nearest units respond. The man is standing in his doorway, house lights pouring out behind him, dog barking. They ask his name, want a statement. "Just come with me" he says, irritated by the procedural nonsense. "Come on, I'll show you." He makes his way back across to the churchyard again, uniformed officers hurrying along behind him.

The call comes in "Detective Weiss, this is Hank Ferris" the watch sergeant "we got a possible homicide..." On the way there you try not to think, try to keep your mind blank, open to all possibilities. Just gather the evidence, see everything for what it is, nothing more. Rest comes later.

The years teach you that, the cases and the dead. Homicide isn't a puzzle. It's a blank slate until you start writing on it. The details, whether they mean anything or not, write it all down. Let it speak to you, let it tell you what you want to know.

Get there and everything's wrong. Awash in blue lights, squad cars at angles, crowd gathered. You grab the red light from the top of the car, switch it off.

An officer approaches, fills you in on the details. Barely hear what he's saying. You edge your way through the crowd of on-lookers. "Get these lights off" you tell him. "And get these people outta here." Turn to look at the crowd, see their faces.

"Everybody listen up" talking loud to make yourself heard, make them quiet down. Ask 'em if anyone knows anything. Got any idea what happened. Nobody does. Old guy speaks up "we just saw the lights, the police cars. Came over to see what's goin on."

Looks about the same for the whole bunch. Just family folks, out here in the rain. Ask the guy if he knows everyone here, these people. "Yeah...our neighbors. Just...folks who live here. We didn't do anything wrong."

"Okay, then. Everybody, go...on...home. Can't do our job with you folks milling around here. Leave your name and address with the officer. We'll be in touch. Okay? Now go."

Slowly they turn and make their way back to their homes. Standing around in the cold rain isn't all that appealing. Just needed someone to tell `em, is all.

Old guy in his jammies and robe, dark rimmed glasses on his balding head. He's talking to a reporter. Anytime there's a homicide, major crime or accident, you get people listening in on police scanners, nothing better to do. You walk over to the guy, tap him on the shoulder.

"I'm Detective Weiss...and you are?" "Will Martin" he says quickly, pushing the glasses back on his nose, "I found...the body." "Okay. Mr Martin, I want you to go with... the officer here. He'll take you downtown to make a statement."

Martin's confused, befuddled for a moment. "But..." "Don't worry about it" you tell him. "They'll take care of you. Make sure you get home alright. Just go with them now, go ahead."

You turn to the reporter, Scott Widdington. He knows you, you've done all this before, many times. "All this...stays under wraps, Scott." "You can't do that. The public has..." "Listen to me" you tell him "Mr Martin is a material witness in this case. Whatever he told you is confidential police information. Now, I can have you held, for interfering with..."

"What do you want?" he asks you "I got a right." "Just work with me, okay. When I get it all sorted out, I'll give you a call. I promise. You got my word." A uniformed cop brings the boy over. Nod at Widdington to take a hike.

The kid recounts his story, matter of factly; he's been telling it over and over again by now, no doubt adding to it whenever he can. "Reckon it didn't happen here. No signs of a struggle, see. Likely he didn't even mean to do it. Just an accident. Just..." "Yeah, sure" you tell him "thanks." The kid's what, nine, ten years old? Gotta hell of an imagination.

Finally you go over to the body and the young cop standing watch there. His raincoat is covering the victim. He's standing there now like a guardian. You bend down. "Easy" says the cop "it's...pretty gruesome" like you're some kind of green rookie, never seen a dead body before. You pull back the coat, shine your light.

Jesus...God. Almost fall over. Feel your lunch rise in your throat, cough it back down, hand over your mouth. Like somebody's hit you in the face with a shovel, ripped the guts right outta you. Don't want the young cop to see that, but what can you do.

A young girl lying there in the bag, face slashed to pieces, black red blood on milk white skin. A little doll, ruined. Looking at you with cold dead eyes that shine in the light. Like she's screaming at you "you did this! All of you. You're all to blame."

Stand up and click off the light, your knees weak, no feeling in `em. You're sick to your stomach, fighting it. Wanna find something to lean against. Go over to the young cop, hand him your overcoat. The two of you sharing this now.

The rest's a haze, a blur. Pretending to be in charge...trying to do it by the book, give the orders. "Seal off the entire block" you tell the sergeant "put a man on every corner. More if you need `em. Nobody gets in or anywhere near this place, okay?"

Your partner, Bergen, shows up. Then the lab guys with white coats, like aliens landing in a farmer's field, searching around in the dark with their wandering flashlights. Bergen comes up to you, big fat guy with heavy strides. "Whatta you got Ed?"

You don't answer, lost for words. You look into his blank eyes. Eyes that have seen everything over the years. But nothing like this. "This is bad, real bad. A kid...a girl, all cut up. Dumped here, in a bag."

"Whatta you want me to do?" You look down at the bag. "Just...take the notes, write it all down. Whatever the lab boys come up with. Just...that's all."

Shit, what else can you do. You watch as a lab guy takes a hooked razor and cuts the black bag open, top to bottom. The body settles. You flinch seeing the little dead girl move like that. Can't help it.

Stand over her with your light. Deep heavy bruises round her throat. No other visible marks or wounds. He strangled her, with his bare hands. And she fought back, with everything she had. Scratched him up pretty good you bet. Made him mad. Mad at her or...mad at himself for killing her. So he grabbed a knife, and slashed her pretty face up. Long after she was dead. Lost it, didn't mean to do that. Maybe he didn't mean to do any of it. Doesn't matter now.

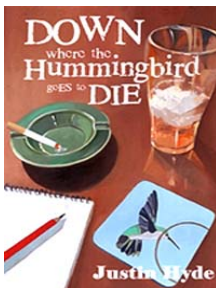
The bag is crinkled at the top, where it's been tied. He was gonna dump the body here, dump her outta the bag. But the dog saw the shadows, the movement, came running. That made him leave, before he was done.

The girl's clothes are clean, nice. Did he wash them? Wash them and dress her, after she was dead? Remove the evidence. No blood on the fingernails, even though they're all cracked and broken up. He soaked her hands, her dead hands, soaked them until they were clean. Thoughtful guy, meticulous.

No one would find her here if not for the dog, the boy walking his dog. Wouldn't find her 'til morning, daylight. And he wanted her found here, right here. But in the daylight. After he was long gone. Could've dumped the body anywhere. Somewhere nobody'd ever find her. But he wanted to show us.

A lab guy goes through her pockets, finds a little pink billfold, hands it to you. Damn. Such a pretty girl. The face on the school i.d. card, smiling, alive. Happy to be alive. Little blond girl, cheerleader type. Bambi Malloy...thirteen years old. And never anything more.

### Justin Hyde interviews himself



Q: What is something you are ashamed of?

A: The way I treated a young woman with cancer. She was twenty, I was twenty-six, we were dating. Her name was Amanda.

Q: What is your attitude towards your parents?

A: I think they did the best they could. If I hadn't had the childhood I did I'd probably be an accountant or civil engineer or designer of gazebos instead of a poet, so I'd like to thank them for that.

Q: Is it true you won a triathlon?

A: Yes, but that was seven years and fifty-pounds ago.

Q: Shameless plug for your first book of poetry?

A: 'Down where the hummingbird goes to die', available from [www.zygoteinmycoffee.com/taintedcoffeepress/outsiderwritersbookstore.html](http://www.zygoteinmycoffee.com/taintedcoffeepress/outsiderwritersbookstore.html)

### **my mother never wore perfume**

she didn't  
use makeup either

or do much of anything  
besides sleep.

the cheap perfumes  
she'd accumulated  
over decades of drunken  
christmases and birthdays  
at the hands of my father  
were kept  
in a cardboard box  
under the stairs.

i don't know  
why i started  
pouring them  
on the plywood-top  
of the basement workbench  
and lighting matches.

i wasn't trying to burn the house down.

i wasn't hoping to get caught for attention.

i wasn't sexually excited.

i've decided  
that drowning silence  
as the flames licked my wrist  
was a level of nirvana

that would make buddha himself  
jealous.

**right before the ass-crack of 2am** by justin hyde

i remembered  
to grab a  
coupla forties.

kid  
at the truck stop register  
was sitting on a stool  
hunched over his cell phone.

i waited  
quite a while before  
lightly clanking  
the forties together.

oh shit man  
hope you haven't been  
standing there long,  
he said  
hopping off the stool.

not long at all,  
i said.

dude  
i'm sorry  
i can't sell you that  
it's past two.

i pointed to the  
clock on the wall  
it said:

1:53am.

oh damn  
sorry man  
never should have put  
guitar hero  
on my cell phone  
it's got me all spaced out,  
he said  
ringing me up.

no problem  
happens to the best of us,  
i said

tossed the forties in my car  
and went back to the trucker's lounge  
where i was reading plato's account  
of socrates' death.

he was ordered  
to drink hemlock  
for corrupting  
the minds of  
athenian youth.

imagine if socrates  
showed up in america  
today:

he'd probably walk coast to coast  
a couple times  
until he realized  
what he was working with.

then he'd disappear  
quietly into the woods  
and send sparrows skyward  
unzipping his soul  
with a .357

Anne Goodwin is interviewed by her university tutor circa 1979



**UT:** Do you know why I've been told to see you?

**AG:** No.

**UT:** The University subscribes to a press cutting service. Whenever anything comes up in the press concerning a student, their tutor gets a memo telling them to meet with them.

**AG:** Oh.

**UT:** My bit of paper says you've won some travel writing competition.

**AG:** I've already spent the prize-money. I got myself a music-centre and an Inter-rail ticket.

**UT:** Isn't it a bit odd this writing lark? What's wrong with maths?

**AG:** There's nothing wrong with maths. Some of my best friends are differential equations. And don't get me started on the beauty of the square root of minus one. But that little library on Level Two, it's so nice and peaceful. I just can't help writing when I go in there.

**UT:** Well don't overdo it, eh? You don't want to end up with an arts degree.

**AG:** Okay.

### **the wilsons go shopping** by anne goodwin

Christmas Eve in the supermarket. The Wilson dynasty has turned up with one representative of each of the four generations, as if to take part in some family game show. Having appointed myself unofficial captain, I have to say that I am pleased with our team's performance so far. Dad's prowess in navigating a route through the battalions of overladen trolleys should earn us a good few points. Sing along to the musak, never mind the words: Gran and the baby have represented us on this round with great enthusiasm, their dedicated training over the last few months with *Baby's First Book of Nursery Rhymes* putting them several steps ahead of the competition. Come to a consensus on the mince-pie question: this was a challenge, with so many options and none of the others supporting my preference for the vegetarian range, but our skilled teamwork got us through in the end. Be so engrossed in your own debates that friends and acquaintances can pass you by without making eye contact: our natural advantage on this one is such that we must now be heading for the jackpot!

The checkout is our final hurdle. I have taken up the crucial position, unloading the provisions onto the conveyor belt. At the head of our formation, Dad packs the scanned items. I had been trying to get a system going -- a bag for the vegetables, one for baked stuff, another for booze, and so on -- but it doesn't work; Dad's too chaotic, and I have to accept that we'll lose points here. The oldest and youngest Wilson oversee all this without comment, Gran clutching the handle of the trolley where my niece is enthroned on the pullout seat. They observe the work from a distance, as if their contribution is simply to wait and be admired; Gran majestic in her white wool coat trimmed with fake fur at the collar and cuffs, the baby as resplendent as a rose from her cheeks to her tiny boots.

"Daddy!" my little niece calls out, and we all stop and look at her, not only the Wilson clan, but the checkout woman, and the shoppers in the queue as well. I can't see the baby's face but she is pointing and rocking her whole body in delight. I look from Gran to Dad to check they've noticed the significance: her first word of more than one syllable. She's developing so quickly; every day, it seems, brings a new accomplishment.

"Daddy!" she cries again, a clarion call, and now we all turn and look to where she is reaching out with both arms. A man, resembling her daddy, my brother, in little beyond gender and age, pauses in his packing to give the cute baby a friendly wave. Our checkout woman smiles, and resumes processing our purchases. Babies, hey, says her smile, don't they do the funniest things? Who knows how their minds work? Who knows what they mean when they call out 'daddy' to a stranger?

"Daddy!" a third time, desolate now. Gran picks up the baby and squeezes her tight to her bosom. Past the till, our operation has come to a halt in disorderly piles of provisions. Dad just stands there, huge useless hands stuffed in the pockets of his down jacket. The waiting queue grows impatient. There are turkeys to stuff, presents to wrap, lives to live. I reach down into the depths to take the last item from the trolley: a ring of glossy green holly leaves dotted with crimson berries. I cradle it in my hands for a moment, making out I'm hesitating over a loose thread on the tartan ribbon. I've taken our team so far and now I'm stumbling with the winning post in sight. It's so hard to let it go, to send the wreath on its solitary journey along the conveyor belt. What if it were damaged before we got to the cemetery? We've got to have my brother's grave looking right for Christmas.

I lay down the holly wreath and go over to where Dad stands, redundant, and finish the packing.