

river city

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t h e r (inside us)



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Contents

<i>Diane Ackerman</i> Romancing the Bay Mare	1	<i>Gregory Jerozal</i> Orphée	69
<i>Arthur Winfield Knight</i> Polly Hamilton: 1968	2	<i>Tina Y. Lee</i> Cherish	70
<i>Lucia Perillo</i> A Ghost Story	3	<i>Cleopatra Mathis</i> Two Girls	87
<i>Mary Keller</i> Here Is the Line	13	<i>Mark Daley</i> Homecoming	88
<i>Brian Rotman</i> Aura	14	<i>Philip Dacey</i> The Student of Surprise	89
<i>Alberta Turner</i> Childish Things	15	<i>A. C. Koch</i> My Rockstar Life	90
<i>Micah Perks</i> Younger Men	16	<i>Jarret Keene</i> Mardi Gras, 1999	105
<i>James Applewhite</i> The Lost Boy	25	<i>Melisa Cahnmann</i> What You Are	106
<i>Steve Amick</i> Consumed	27	<i>Samuel Jason Ezell</i> entering another man, passing himself, a tulku knocks	107
<i>Christopher Janke</i> The Mouth You Find in Your Head	30	<i>Gordon T. Osing</i> from A Dream of Inertias	108
<i>Pamela Ditchoff</i> Tuesday's Child	31	<i>William Trowbridge</i> Director Hoover Welcomes Kong into the Bureau	110
<i>Raymond Thibodeaux</i> Amputees	38	<i>David Warfield</i> Please Deposit Twenty-Five Cents	111
<i>John Taylor Moses</i> A Little Time	40	<i>Vern Rutsala</i> Identities	124
<i>Kevin Prufer</i> My Other Self	51	<i>Lawrence Raab</i> Desire	127
<i>James Roderick</i> Construction	52	<i>Matt Yurdana</i> Death in the Petting Zoo	128
<i>James Roderick</i> Gathering Blueberries: In Brian's Voice	54	Photography	
<i>Jim Dameron</i> Self-Portraits	57	<i>Sunny Montgomery & Amy Benson</i> Self-Portraits	56
<i>Charlotte Mandel</i>		Contributors	129

Melisa Cahnmann

What You Are

Between Halloween and Martin Luther King Day,
little Ramona forgot her language, started to leave it at home
the day her classmates laughed. The day she picked up
a dirty piece of paper when the teacher really told her
she'd dropped a glove.

That's how it starts, the *señoras* say.
When a piece of you drops off, and you pick up something else instead.
But nobody gives you that other piece back.

You have to fight for it. Like Ramona's cousin Gloria
who went back to the island when she was nineteen
because she was all-English, and the family said
she wasn't Puerto Rican anymore, like she always thought she was.
She was *cool* and *what the fuck man*. She even thought
you made *sancocho* from a can.

No way, Gloria says to Ramona.
Ain't nobody gonna give you back your culture
once you leave it lying there like a wrinkled
piece of paper. You have to put your name on it.
Purple with plantain stains on your fingers.
Puerto Rican. *Puerto Riqueño*. If they ask you,
that's what you are.