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Runner

You been here before? the man sitting beside me asked. He was old and gray and had on blue sweatpants. He tapped his long, black fingers on the table as we waited.

To the library, I said, not the readings.

Me either.

The library?

The readings.

Have to be on your toes at this place, I said. Lot of crazies.

And meanies.

How about the skinny one at the reference desk?

Tucked-in tie?

Beware of redheads.

The library's special events staff had set up a dozen tables for the reading with linen tablecloths, candles, vases of tulips. Posters around the library advertised it as a celebration of the 150th Anniversary of *Leaves of Grass*.

You really have to listen to this stuff to get into it, the man said. He wiped his forehead with a wristband. Then he picked up an evaluation form the staff had left on the table.

How do you mean?

I mean get up *into* it, like *you'd* written it.

You're a writer?

Reader.

Safer.

Not necessarily, said the man, pointing to the form.

“In my home,” the first poet began. He was a slight man with thin wrists and a hunched back. He bowed his head as he read. The poem searched for its legs, something about his mother, a 7-11, an arms dealer. The man scribbled on the back of his form as the poet read, a diagram of words and arrows.

In the end, the piece came together. A slight lifting, then the closer: “While the past burns out of control, in a vacant lot, on the edge of town.”

Not bad, I said.

Too much I, not enough us, said the man.

I like the burning.

People do.

Who are you? I asked, looking at the form. And what are you going to do with that?

Not sit on it if that’s what you mean.

You have to be careful with poets, you know.

They should be careful with us.

You think anyone actually reads those forms?

Irrelevant.

The crowd applauded as the next poet took the stage. He was nervous. He looked down at the podium, pursed his lips, ran a hand through his hair. Pretty eyes, nice shirt. The old man frowned.

“Is it too late to call?” the poet began. *It is*, the old man whispered. But then the verse took off. Skeet shooting, nightwinds, crashing butterflies. The poetry came from far away, the words formed well before the poet recited them. I nodded in rhythm. The man put

down his pen, raised his brows.

Quel surprise, he said.

A siren screeched by, a boombox, a bus. Then the closer: "...I have concluded that it is/the painters' utter ineptitude/that has made their very subject weep./Such is the miraculous power of art."

Now that was something, I said, clapping.

The old man shook his head, wrote on the evaluation.

Don't you think? I asked.

He shouldn't bother us with his problems.

He scratched a few lines, wiped his forehead, crossed them out, scratched a few more, sipped his coffee. I couldn't make out what he was writing. I took a few notes, looked around the room, caught the second poet glancing nervously at our table.

Are you a critic? I finally asked.

Hardly, the man said, putting his pen down.

Editor?

Close.

Law enforcement?

Inventor, the man said.

Of what?

Products.

What do they do?

If you want to be faster, I can make you faster.

In your mind?

On your feet.

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The poets sat down together. One laughed while the other read the newspaper. The old man tapped me on the shoulder and handed me a card. There was a picture of a man running on it. He was on a treadmill with a strap tied around his waist.

Running? I asked.

People say you're born with speed, you can't learn it.

I've heard that.

There's no creativity in running these days. Or writing for that matter.

They're related?

Get from A to B as fast as you can.

How?

Progressive resistance, cadence, form.

This machine does that?

Push and pull, pneumatics, the harness.

You made it?

Put on my Visi-Glasses and you could run the streets of Istanbul in your living room.

How can the poets use it?

You think this crowd is tough, try reading to a machine.

A woman took the podium next, said she was the curator of the series. She asked us to look at the schedule of Whitman events in April. The man folded his evaluation in half and stood to leave.

How about him? I asked.

Who?

Whitman.

Crybaby.

Seer of the unseen, I said.

That's not it.

"I am he that walks with the tender and growing night;/I call to
the earth and sea half-held by the night."

Seer of the seen, the man said.

He sees what we can't.

That's not it.

What then?

He sees what's right in front of him.

Is that good? I asked.

The old man bent quickly and touched his toes. The curator walked
past and he handed her his form. She scowled and turned away.
Then he turned to me and said,

I could've made a Carl Lewis out of that man.

One reviewer called **Rachel Dacus**'s recent poetry collection, *Femme au chapeau* (David Robert Books, 2005) "thrilling, one-of-a-kind poetry." It follows her first book, *Earth Lessons* (Bellingham Ark Press, 1998) and two poetry CDs, *A God You Can Dance* and *Singing in the Pandaleshwar Caves*. Her poems, essays, book reviews and stories have appeared in *Bellingham Review*, *Boulevard*, *Cranky*, *Image*, *The Pedestal*, *Prairie Schooner*, *Rattapallax*, *Swink*, and the anthologies *Ravishing DisUnities: Real Ghazals in English and Italy: A Love Story*. She serves as fundraising consultant to a wide range of nonprofit hospitals and charitable organizations and is a staff member for *The Alsop Review* (www.alsopreview.com).

Matthew Derby is the author of *Super Flat Times: Stories*. He lives in Pawtucket, RI.

John Domini has had work in *Paris Review*, *Threepenny Review*, and elsewhere, and has won awards in fiction, creative non-fiction, and poetry. His second novel, *Earthquake I.D.*, will appear on Red Hen Press in early 2007. See www.johndomini.com.

Claire Donato is a junior at the University of Pittsburgh, where she studies English Writing and Urban Studies. Her poetry has been published in several journals including *The Minetta Review*, *Three Rivers Review*, and *Collision*. She is currently an assistant editor for the online journal *The New Yinzer*.

Brian Evenson is the director of the Literary Arts Program at Brown University. He is the author of seven books, most recently *The Open Curtain* (forthcoming October 2007 from Coffee House Press).

Porter Fox lives, writes and teaches fiction in Brooklyn, New York. His fiction, essays and nonfiction have been published in *The New York Times Magazine*, *National Geographic Adventure*, *Men's Journal*, *Outside*, *Salon.com*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Word Riot*, *Words and Images*, and *Pindeldyboz*. He recently completed his first collection of short stories.

Jason Fraley works at an investment firm in West Virginia and is pursuing his M.B.A. His wife and cat see him occasionally. He has