



# Changing the Subject

by James Cervantes and Halvard Johnson

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Halvard Johnson's poem "Entering the House" has  
appeared in *CrossConnect*. James Cervantes'  
poem "Navigating an Intersection" is forthcoming  
in *Luna*, and his "Directions to Oblivion" in  
*North American Review*.

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## Introductions by the Authors

### *Halvard Johnson:*

A little over a year after Jim Cervantes and I started bouncing off each other's poems in the series we've called *Changing the Subject*, I find myself pleased by the result. The sequence (trimmed somewhat and neaten up for Gossamer Books) still has that feel of sparks jumping synapses, from one mind to another. Alex Keegan, inadvertently, set it off: One of his sentences in a posting to the Cafe Blue mailing list led me to respond with a poem, to which Jim responded . . . and we were off.

I loved (and still love) the fact that the exchange developed its own daily and weekly rhythms without planning or discussion on our parts. Once or twice, there were days when three or four poems went out and were responded to. Sometimes there were lapses, never longer than four or five days, as I recall. And only once, I think, did either of us have to be nudged to continue.

Ultimately, we both seemed to know when it was over. Fatigue? A sense of completeness? Whatever. This summer's task has been to revisit it, and that's been a pleasure too—each of us sending each the other his versions of the **Gossamer Books** version.

Finally, I think the online nature of our exchange contributed much to the series' final character. There's an energy and spontaneity that wouldn't have been there had we done this by snailmail. Jim lives in Arizona and I was living in Baltimore when these poems were written, and, since I've met him f2f only twice, and then only for brief minutes, I'm sure that if we'd actually sat down at a table together, we'd never have gotten much writing done. -HJ

### *James Cervantes:*

**Hal has hit** on all the major rewards of this spontaneous collaboration and I concur with every one, so I'd like to elaborate instead on the role of other rhythms in the writing of *Changing the Subject*. One of those rhythms is the one dictated by the academic calendar. Both Hal and I teach, and so time is scarce for nine months out of the year. I think it's no coincidence that this exchange took place during the summer, when I could awake in the morning, get some coffee and fire up the computer to see what poem Hal had e-mailed the night before, or even that morning from his east coast time zone to my mountain standard time zone. Since there was no class to prepare for, I could easily begin my poem-response on the spot and follow through with it. Hal's writing situation was probably similar.

Another rhythm was the one dictated by the medium: the internet and, more specifically, the Cafe Blue listserv, which functioned almost as a reading venue where people could "listen" to the exchange at any time of day, leave the "hall," or change out of their pajamas without any damage to the spontaneity of the exchange. The almost instantaneous exchange in a relaxed atmosphere—for the listserv is a hall full of friends—also provided the flavor of an exchange of jazz riffs; Hal, as it turned out, is as much a jazz fan as me. The medium made it easy to respond quickly by picking up on a word or phrase or sound, improvising on it and tossing it back to Hal.

As Carol King notes in her Afterword, there were 71 poems total, and so this selection may be thought of as "cuts" from the longer "concert," which contained many lighter moments, the trying on of different voices, and even a "guest artist" or two, such as Hal's use of notes from a lecture by John Cage and lyrics from W.C. Handy. Perhaps best of all, it was just plain fun to do.

-JC

### *Editor's Note:*

To preserve the feeling of collaboration, poems have been placed side by side and should be read alternating vertically between the left and right columns.

## Changing the Subject

“ . . . put enough questions together and the psychologist can tease out answers about attitudes which otherwise remain hidden”

-Alex Keegan

### Teasing Out the Attitudes

to be or not to be is that the question authority isn't everything  
is it do you like walking better than riding or isn't there more  
to life than all this should you keep the baby or throw it out  
along with the bathwater or should you drink the bathwater and send  
the baby parcel post to your mother who would say what now  
what's this got to do with me or do you prefer to watch TV or sit  
in a darkened theater with people you've never met would you  
kill Hitler (or Saddam or Slobodan) to save their lives do you  
have change for a dollar would it make any difference to me if  
you did is it pleasant enough for a walk where's my hat

HJ

### **Easing out the Platitudes**

killing is not all bad what's that between the buns  
in your salad seed of a tree you've leached to latte  
would you walk a mile for a camel to ride to Saddam  
be all you can be on the screen the street the loo  
melt guns into butter watch *Last Tango in Paris*  
put your mouth where your money is and relish inflation  
smell the roses seize the day do unto others  
take care of yourself first put yourself  
in someone else's sneakers smell the roses  
living is not all bad save nine stitch time

JC

### **Living at Ground Level**

Deserves a pat on the back for the accurate count  
of cracks in the walk and surviving olfactory soup  
an award for picking up pennies a commendation  
for collecting used needles donning latex gloves  
for latex sheaths gathered unto themselves again  
like sweaty nylons and of course a plaque  
for a palmful of loose skin on a skeletal elbow  
and a gold-plated trophy for the curbside daisy.

JC

### **Breathing at High Altitudes**

Taking one breath at a time is the first step toward eventual  
annihilation whether or not we consider alternative measures  
such as fixing the goddamn plumbing before that leak begins  
to keep us awake all night dreaming of high mountain trails  
where nothing hangs on the trees but low-flying clouds  
that keep us from seeing whatever's up ahead just where  
our path curves around that heap of rocks that someone  
must have left there just for our sudden pleasure.

HJ

### **Grinding Away at Ground Zero**

Picking up Penny's books that day when she dropped them  
oh so deliberately at my feet was the one thing that might have  
deflected my life from its present course, sending me into  
paroxysms of fury at the injustice of it all, casting everything  
in a new light, a new perspective that rendered all attempts at  
safe sex both redundant and superfluous. Curbside daisies  
notwithstanding, the impulse to self-destruct was strong in me  
that day, and Penny's books just lay there, pages torn and  
twisted, as I stood by and watched as she looked once at me and then  
knelt down to gather them up, giving me, as she did so, one  
glimpse at knees I would never quite see in that light again.

HJ

### **Eroticism in the Ionosphere**

“What’s up?” is a joke you’ll not hear, nor anything about “the gravity of the situation,” for the hand is weightless (almost) and the moist forest of hair dries out. Up and down are willed, Hal and Penny’s body-echoes like short-lived cirrus clouds.

Love freeze-dries, the shuddering orgasm a homeless radio wave, brief static in “Fly Me To The Moon.”

JC

### **First Amphibian**

Scaly relic, spewing water, gulping air into lungs that surprise a tiny brain

a new surplus of oxygen, maybe a thought that comes of sharpened vision, but does

the horizon waver, does clumsy walker undulate and what does it mount in fear of too much air

in love with what does not resist so much drowning doubly in its awakening?

JC

### **Learning to Live with the Bends**

Bony poet on the rocky shore, having come up too quickly to undo such damage as was done,

watching his lines break in the gray of early mourning light, steadfast as ever in his contempt for earthly

treasures in the form of profits and stock options and early retirement packages, residue

of some big bang or other taking human form, rising from the deep, saltwater dripping all over his cordovans.

HJ

### **Not a Bus Stop**

Coyote says, “Hillary Rodham Clinton is not a bus stop on the road to Flagstaff.” Signposts at the intersections say, “Click on this. Click on that.” Tomorrow is another day.

Trickster works every corner on this route, nudging us this way or that. White ponies of Helios run from right to left as long as we are traveling north.

Here’s a dancing girl. Do us a favor, we’ll respect you in the morning, hon. Hi, there, you cutie. If you were to die, you’d sing almost as beautifully as those three turtles over there.

HJ

### **Navigating An Intersection**

Good advice in this morning's *Mesa Tribune*:  
to watch for the driver who flirts with the red  
when making a left-hand turn. In other words,  
don't be first off the mark when the light turns green.

So how do you get through life like that,  
always alert for someone's erratic answer  
to their compelling destination? What about you  
and your more straightforward, magnetic pull?

There will always be that moment of yellow indecision  
when Coyote handles the relays, puts a dancing girl  
by the curb and turns everything green. June in January,  
a curbside strip, two full moons of ecstasy!

JC

### **Taking Four on the Fifth**

Because sky rings like lead on the fifth,  
because front porches leap across town  
and neighbors, just for a change, grill police  
over mesquite and backyard charcoal, and

parabolic angels spring blazing from barrels  
of shotguns, and our lawns reach up to embrace us  
—just for a change, let's take four medevac 'copters  
at bedtime and give 'em a call when dawn cracks.

HJ

### **Monsoon Morning**

If you speed it up, a high pressure ridge  
dashes to the four corners, moisture  
whirls up from the Gulf of California  
to take its place, but runs head-on  
into mountains, veers upward and is smacked  
in the face by a wall of hot air.

Which is why you wake in a sweat  
this morning, make small movements:  
place a pencil next to the notebook,  
keep the phone nearby, rake only  
what is next to the walk. In a moment,  
chairs are in the pool, a green branch

on a yellow lawn, all you did not notice  
up in the air. Look at the cloud of your life.

JC

### **Sabbath Breaker**

“The awful daring of a moment’s surrender,  
which an age of prudence can never retract.”  
—T. S. Eliot

In the early morning darkness  
love arrives in the neighborhoods of Bloomington, Indiana,  
tossing little plastic bags of pamphlets into yards.  
The message is that no name is too Jewish anymore,  
that blacks and mud people are really quite okay and should  
be taken out to lunch. Love fires kisses at them  
on the streets of Skokie, of Springfield, of Salem.

And then love turns on its radio and takes a nap. It runs  
away to sea, where white birds fly, and where strange pieces  
of wood are found along the water’s edge—not carved but natural.  
Expecting to see men and women sunning on the sand, love looks  
far and wide for them, finds only black water pigs that had come  
out of the water and were running in and out of black volcanic rocks.  
Love resolves to have another look at the cloud of its life.

HJ

## **The Simple Life**

Neighbors enter via the creaky porch  
without a knock and empty handed.  
We recognize their footsteps  
and upper-halves, which bow at a door  
they've opened themselves, eager to partake  
of a tired and satisfying routine.

After coffee at the formica table  
we retire to the room of knick-knacks  
for inventory: little Dutch boy and girl  
salt and pepper shakers from Pennsylvania,  
ceramic chili peppers from New Mexico . . .  
Oops! We broke one, but Rosemary

finds a small cardboard box in the pantry  
and pulls out a duplicate, as well as packing  
of curly confetti that litters the floor. The sweeper  
makes a peaceful sound, back and forth, back  
and forth, scritch-scratch, and we almost  
fall asleep in cleanliness. But hey!

Bacon and eggs at the formica table,  
the story of breaking a chili in the store  
but that was why we bought a spare—  
in case it got broken again—and how the sweeper  
was a handy thing with all this breaking  
in the early mornings of our lives.

JC

## **Not a Bus Stop (2)**

No, this poem isn't a bus stop, but then  
neither are you. Come to think of it, though,  
the very beginning of this poem is something  
like a bus stop, you standing there (or sitting,  
if you're lucky) waiting for something or other  
to come along and sweep you into it, to take  
you where you are going, or maybe somewhere  
else you'd rather be. We trust that the bus will stick  
to its accustomed route, but cannot always be  
sure. Some element of risk attaches to our  
travels, and buses we think are heading downtown,  
taking us to work, might in fact be headed for parts  
unknown, sad neighborhoods we never knew existed,  
where life is cheap and danger abounds, or happy  
suburbs, safer but duller, where all the men are off  
at work and all the kids are at school. No one  
at all on the tree-lined streets, emptied garbage cans  
lying around, down at the end of the drive. You  
look at your watch and say, "Hey, I've got to get  
to work," and the driver stops the bus and says,  
"Fine, here's where you get off." She opens the door  
and forces you off at gunpoint, leaves you standing there.

HJ

### **No Nonsense Here**

Crooked rays ran from her head to the top of the frame,  
soft features were out of the question, rumors  
blunt about her head. All came to her ears  
indirectly, as if all had been transmitted  
round and vaguely enunciated, leaving her  
utterly unconvinced, without a goal, without horizons.  
No wonder affect and voice were flat.  
No wonder her routes were always direct,  
her answers to passengers loud and sharp.  
Between horizons, her life was convincingly straight.

JC

### **Rumors Blunt as Monkeys**

“Why play the game if there is no ambivalence  
about the rules it toys with?”

—Lewis Hyde

Ray’s crooked smile lit up her face from head to toe.  
Respect yo’ mamma and don’t let nobody in without you don’t  
know whom it is.

He said, “As long as these weeds and green  
grass grow, I’m going to be around to signify some more.”

The shapes that climb into the monkey’s tree don’t want  
to get caught at either pole, says Ray, who is always  
looking for the door, hungry as history.

They take great care of their peach gardens, climb into bed  
and tell each other jokes until they fall to sleep.

HJ

### **Memory for Hunger**

A shadow of my former self, a husk, dry leaves  
moistened at New Year's for tamales,  
the corn cob nibbled clean of kernels, as if  
small, sharp teeth hungered for information.

I won't belabor this; I give it to you. I empty  
the era of Aristarchus upon your desk, with latex gloves  
I deposit Shih Huang-ti next to your journal, and free of charge  
include a photo of his simulacra. You must imagine the wall,

but with a quick whir I can give you the number of stones,  
perhaps even the dead of millennia. Your desire  
is my fondest wish. Do you want family? The trees  
have all grown together, but I can deftly prune

a thicket of family, put it in that vase before you.  
Because, you see, I want to be emptier than I am  
and that's where you come in. See how the sky clears  
as you ask for more, how the stars adjust for emptiness.

JC

### **Autistic License**

When I have nothing to say, I say it—  
few words for the late lamented Ostrogoths  
or the boorish behavior of Clovis, even  
fewer for Frederick's beard, which one day  
will come 'round for the third time,  
and he will rise to fight again—  
no words at all to say how I feel about Greenland,  
Gregorian chant, or even about tiny Liechtenstein,  
its fate sealed now . . . and stamped . . . and mailed.

HJ

### **Father to the Child**

In my walk through the forest  
I came across a placid baby  
hung from a tree with plain  
cotton cord. It matured  
as I realized it was not dead,  
but neither was it comfortable.  
It was, however, able to climb  
into a sling I made for it,  
then mature enough  
for an elaborate swing  
in which it was not only comfortable  
but happy. How it loved  
the woven branches, artful reeds,  
and its crown of ferns!  
And, out of those  
suddenly assembled there,  
not one asked me for details!

JC

### **In the Details**

“He had a horse named Nelly Nelly is your name.  
He had a house named Ella and Allen Ellen is  
your name. He had a hand named Bannie and  
Bannie is your name.”

—Gertrude Stein, “Allen Tanner”

The tree’s name was Wooden, and the cord’s name  
was Roper. My left hand’s name is Horace, and my right  
hand’s name is Pope. The true name of war  
is Mercy, and love’s true name is Kill.

Useful knowledge—pass it on, until someone  
stops to question you, and then you say right out,

The tree’s name was Wooden, and the cord’s name  
was Roper. My left hand’s name is Horace, and my right  
hand’s name is Pope. The true name of war  
is Mercy, and love’s true name is Kill.

HJ

### **Directions to Oblivion**

Chunk of limestone with shell embedded,  
egg of lava honeycombed with air: one sits, one floats.

Heights and depths are a walk-between:  
Five miles from white pine to downtown signage,

take a right at Aspen and Leroux, fifteen paces  
to the bar, ten paces to the corner stool

where Jack Christy set his moustache on fire  
four years back, forgetting his oxygen tubes,

as he lit his cigarette. Buy Jack a drink  
and drink it. Face right and his photo's there.

JC

### **The Most You Can Hope For**

1. To help the city dry out from the spring floods
2. Frozen egg whites, always on hand when you need them
3. Slightly less meaningless meanings
4. Girls' versions of classic stories
5. To become less white as you grow older
6. A somewhat clearer sense of what we've come here  
to talk about
7. Less money-related fear
8. Hanging up your hang-ups at the door
9. Free parking
10. Or meters that still take pennies
11. Intermittent terrorist activities
12. Blissful excess
13. Intermittent snow, sleet, rain, etc.
14. A gradual Europeanization of America
15. Something better than reality
16. Time travel at affordable rates

HJ

### **Walking Down and Backwards in Walnut Canyon**

After the switchbacks, early in the easy slope  
to the bottom, you can risk jumping  
onto the terrace below, then backtrack  
through transition growth, a mix of juniper,  
pine, cactus and agave. The scent of wet limestone  
wraps you in the great, shaded funnel  
where you find yourself, under a shelf,  
squatting next to the groove  
cut by fast, tumbling water. Empty pools  
are within hand's reach, and fish bones  
if you scratch into the waterless shore.  
Simply look across the canyon, at eye level,  
and there's a dark shelter, with the wall  
of uniform stones and its doorway: neighbors  
across the water that isn't there. Now  
you'll want to straighten up, move that branch  
from the way you came. But don't, because  
then it will be a path, and the wrong one  
because it was all different then,  
and that is all I'm going to tell you.

JC

### **Atrocity's Garden**

The highway to Flagstaff may be rerouted  
but the landscape remains the same—  
neither more nor less than it was.  
Salt River isn't for the thirsty.

One lowers one's mouth to the water,  
and the water retreats to the edge  
of a desert plateau. The rope breaks, the jug  
cracks, the canteen rusts and falls apart.

The mayor and the sheriff exchange  
names, but still wear the same uniforms.  
Sky is always sky. Water water—what  
we all must drink.

No one drinks the mud of the well.  
No animals come. Those who wander off  
into the desert find themselves  
alone. No one will follow.

No one sends out search parties  
after those who stray into those arid  
stretches, those who are happy  
to stay there.

If we come to a well, we shoot  
fish there. The waterbag breaks, leaks.  
A well, a mind, is a terrible thing  
to waste. The well no one uses

becomes home to its own thoughts only,  
attracts only those whose own wells  
are stagnant and putrid, guarded only

### **Misdirections Are Not a Mistake**

Imagine a map with the iris effect,  
where only dead-center  
is in focus and factually correct.

You are meant to stay on the hazy fringe,  
or “halo,” if you lean in that direction,  
and just be grateful for the sharp edge

of crossroads—even that incomplete contour  
of a possibly symmetrical hill  
which you are free to search and scour,

even dig if you wish, until you hear a clink  
and know the reason for these directions,  
for that’s when this map will wink.

JC

by the wrong dog—

some decrepit black Labrador, hip broken,  
coat dull and scruffy, unrecognized  
by its owner after all these years,  
panting and drooling in the heat,

the name of some motel down near Phoenix  
painted on its side.

HJ

### **Run Gerbil, Run!**

“Reification won’t get you out of the parking lot.”  
—Bob Perelman

Clocks slow as heavy metal,  
paddling in the wave,  
folding their wings.  
A nation with lots of fish  
to eat coming to terms  
with itself.  
Beautiful dancers—  
and pure, fresh river water—  
wanting to have gone to sea  
just for the glamour of the thing.  
Drive west on Apache Boulevard,  
turn north on Van Buren Street.  
Pass the strafed farms on your left  
and turn northwest to Thomas Road.  
This very flatness is what we yearn  
to be pinned to. Don’t cry, Ma,  
it’s only rhetoric.

HJ

## **An Imperfect Place**

You would not walk barefoot  
on this grass dried to stubble.  
Snowmelt has not been enough  
to keep it green, nor the summer monsoons,  
but water enough to waste topsoil  
and let the cinders rise.

You would not have chosen that shade  
of barn-red, the mud color mixed by a child  
with too many tints, which is daubed  
onto the trailer and its add-ons. The porch  
is saved by not having walls, a roofed  
bit of space that extends miles to the west.

The roof is corrugated tin  
that has easily borne winter snows  
and tuned the rain. Windows are boarded  
with warped plywood, sprinkles of glass  
below them, fresh splinters of wood  
beneath a bent hasp and a scarred lock.

You might think you'd been shaking  
this thing called a "house,"  
trying to get in.

JC

## **Entering the House**

“if we slowly approach a surface of water  
with our finger we often deceive ourselves  
about when we are wet a patient may feel  
the surgeon's scalpel while it is still a  
slight distance away”

—David Antin, “Meditation 12”

When we come home, we often deceive ourselves about  
when we actually get there. The door to the house

presents itself as an actual fact. Our key retracts  
first the dead bolt and then the latch bolt and our

entrance becomes suddenly possible. We feel we are home  
even before grasping the doorknob and leaning

our shoulder against the shutting stile, knowing full  
well the door's slight reluctance to open

in hot, humid weather. We dimly see a hallway through  
the opaque glass. We know that on the bookcase

there by the door, the cat is waiting.

HJ

### **The Most Familiar Home**

The son sends five months' notice  
that he will be there for the turn of the year—  
a subtropical city, perhaps a little cooler,  
a bit wetter, with broad-leaved calendula,  
banana tree, and plump Kalanchoe  
next to wrought-iron railings  
for the four steps up, the raised house  
above a nightmare crawl-space.

Which aunt or uncle, mother or father,  
will he stay with? Whose night sounds  
will he sleep with, those of which cousin,  
which brother or sister? Whose cooking  
will waft familiar through wallpapered rooms,  
the same mismatch of knives and forks  
clinking on the same chipped china  
over the diminutive of his name?

An exclamation with every greeting,  
for they will have forgotten. And after  
the pause: "I heard you were coming!"  
Because that is how it would be  
if he had been there yesterday,  
without a ticket or a plan.

JC

## Afterword

“Put enough questions together and the psychologist can  
tease out answers about attitudes which otherwise remain hidden”

—Alex Keegan

*Changing the Subject* is one of those watershed manuscripts. It incarnated the social power and principles of invention both when the poems appeared online, one after another, day by day and week by week, and now, collected in a somewhat abbreviated form for this online presentation, and in chapbook form. Written by two poets who, while having met, knew each other primarily online, these poems highlight the rhetorical power of the written word and the synergy of electronic words. As the exchange unfolded, it became obvious that the texts and subtexts in the poems were woven together by adopting, extending, or rhyming words, by echoing or reversing ideas, and by carrying into frontier corners a creation of meaning in a variety of poetic forms. The first poem began not only the conversation in poems in Cafe Blue, but also the call-and-response format—so much a part of worship in black churches—that the next poem echoed, initiating the remarkable collaboration between the two writers.

Johnson, responding to Keegan’s statement, posts the first poem, “Teasing Out the Attitudes.” He echoes the “to be or not to be?” dilemma in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* in contemporary terms:

“should you keep the baby or throw it out  
along with the bathwater or should you drink the bathwater and send  
the baby parcel post to your mother?”

Pure irony. The serious dilemma invoked, and the possibilities of addressing it, speak to contemporary people. But the absurdity of that last proposal teases some readers with its pointed attitude of ennui. Likewise, the whole poem functions to raise issues and to represent a variety of attitudes toward sticky problems. It reads, in part, “. . . would you / kill Hitler (or Saddam or Slobodan) to save their lives do you / have change for a dollar”—without

the usual punctuation. The form, the spelling, and the syntax all revolt, on the surface against the established authority in language and poetics on the surface. In the poem, the ordinary, the unthinkable, the silly and the absurd are set side by side, the lines mocking decorum and chiding those with stock attitudes toward life.

Cervantes, in the second poem, replies, but his reply is not the “Amen, brother” of the call-and-response format. Rather, it is a bit of cheek itself, defeating expectations and warning the reader of provocative reversals to come. His “Easing Out the Platitudes” is an appeal, stringing together platitudes, and challenging readers to imagine the horrendous alongside the ordinary: “killing is not all bad what’s that between the buns.” This is not intentional shock. Instead, the line sets killing—of a sort—beside eating to tighten the tension and raise questions about various meanings of words: a classic move. In this poem—one long, unpunctuated sentence—Cervantes leads the reader through several reversals of common platitudes, and, twisting the screw once more:

“put your mouth where your money is and relish  
inflation smell the roses seize the day do unto others  
but take care of yourself. . . first”

until the reader can feel the contradiction between what mother says and what is. In one grand summarizing gesture, Cervantes returns to his theme: “living is not all bad.” Obviously not. Cervantes has constructed a free-wheeling serendipitous adventure for the hardy.

This sassy collection of poems raises any number of artistic and intellectual issues for those who are discerning, and mixes close-to-traditional poetic forms with border-crossings of all sorts. The thirty playful and spontaneous poems presented here offer many layers of meaning, and many opposing viewpoints on values. It nests texts within texts with a painstaking literary regard for making meaning through the careful selection of its subject matter, its multi-tonality of voices, and its changing graphical appearances.

In short, *Changing the Subject* dances within the possibilities of ordinary free verse, rhymed verse, familiar literary allusions, contemporary references, and startling imagery while whirling across great distances to challenge the usual means of production by drawing attention to the Web itself, like which it throws out its gossamer lines, seeking to find a resting

spot on some promontory, seeking to find a reader (or readers) to whom it can connect. Tirelessly, it spins out its threads, backtracks on itself, and launches forward into oceans of virtual space—in search of an anchor, a place, a home.

-Carol King

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