

ginosko literary journal

19



Ginosko Literary Journal #19
Summer 2017
www.GinoskoLiteraryJournal.com
PO Box 246
Fairfax, CA 94978

Robert Paul Cesaretti, Editor

Member CLMP
Est. 2002

Writers retain all copyrights

Cover Photo
Shayne Skower

www.skower.com

ginosko
(ghin-océ-koe)

A Greek word meaning
to perceive, understand, realize, come to know;
knowledge that has an inception, a progress, an attainment.
The recognition of truth from experience.

γινώσκω

Heaven fills my lamp with oil
and I place it at my window
to direct the stranger through the dark.
I do all these things because I live in them;
and if destiny should tie my hands
and prevent me from so doing,
then death would be my only desire.
For I am a poet, and if I cannot give,
I shall refuse to receive.

Kahlil Gibran

CONTENTS

PRAYER FOR SMOKE	14
Jason Del Guidice	
Flawed	17
M.M. Collins	
RECOMPENSE	19
Katherine Forbes Riley	
Dementia Nights	21
Hospital Visit	22
Connection	23
Sneaking Back	24
Austin Alexis	
Relic Making, #2: Smoke	25
Relic Making, #4: Wheel of Life	26
Relic Making, #5: Splinters of the Cross	27
A Junk Drawer	28
Gone	30
Larry D Thacker	
OUTSIDE, INSIDE	31
EVENTS	32
COLORS AND HEADGEAR	33
UNTITLED	35
William C. Blome	
Two Tons of Pig Manure	36
Mitchell Waldman	
Mornings	47
Courtney McMahon	
Transients	53
Inheritance	55
Olivia Kate Cerrone	

FACE RECOGNITION	56	
IRRIGATION MASSACRE		57
SLIDING DOOR	58	
LUCK	59	
CONNECTIONS	60	
Wendy Hoffman		
Catacomb	61	
Four Trees	62	
Inking the Plate	63	
Lepidoptera	64	
Rainy Ridge	65	
Douglas G Campbell		
CONEY ISLAND, Memorial Day, 1957		67
Sheila Martin		
FRANKLIN AVE	71	
Rachel Veroff		
The Tin Cup	73	
Jana Harris		
Red, White and Blues	75	
Janice Hastert		
Black Bear Lake	76	
Ken Wetherington		
CRIPPLED RAIN	83	
CYCLES	84	
ORPHANED MICROPHONES		85
PRELUDE TO WEBINAR	86	
ELECTION SEASON		87
Larry Narron		
THE INTERVENTION	88	
BODY PARTS	91	
CONSORTING WITH LUNACY		93
Bill Yarrow		
OCEAN	95	
Michael Chin		

Resurrection	97
Elements of Enchantment	97
Bridget Clawson	
Come to Me	98
Joseph Krauter	
Blue Ribbon Babies	102
Rattled	103
My Own	105
Steve's Mom Gets Out of Prison	106
At 7,000 Feet	108
Labecca Jones	
Eviction Day	109
Bill Cook	
THIS VILLAGE CALLED A RIVER	112
Diane Glancy	
The Gypsy House	117
Nana	118
Orhan	119
For Natasha	120
Adrian Slonaker	
Below the Poverty Line	121
Baby	121
Made in China	122
Rachel Holbrook	
Bruadar	123
Love Letter	124
Adoration	125
Genesis: Bone	126
Genesis: Eat	127
Angela Doll Carlson	

four-storied	128	
<i>Man to the hills, woman to the shore</i>		129
Recidivism	130	
Kelly McNerney		
Boots	131	
DC Diamondopolous		
BLANK SPACE		139
READING THROUGH AN OLD JOURNAL		140
NOVEMBER, 2014	141	
EYES (PLANES)	142	
STORAGE SPACE	143	
James Croal Jackson		
1348	144	
Russell Hemmell		
Strains of weird music	146	
Even Disasters Shed No Light		147
After	148	
California Mountains	149	
Dreaming without	150	
Figure observed in seismic activity		151
When night will glow	152	
Out Hiking or was it a Dream?	153	
Andrea Moorhead		
The Artificial Lantern	154	
The Mushroom Ghosts of Finland		155
The Ochre Hotel of Stockholm	156	
Gordon the Turtle	157	
Kirby Wright		
Coming Up Roses	158	
Allan Douglass Coleman		
Seventeen Years	166	
Clearing the Air	167	
What I Could Have Been		168
Where the Bells Went	169	
Ian C Williams		

Desert Light	170	
Three Sisters	171	
Night Alley	168	
The Day My Brother Cried	173	
Taken	170	
Loretta Diane Walker		
Fair People	174	
Laura Dzubay		
I'm Quick Becoming Stone	185	
Forest Arthur Ormes		
Impermanence	195	
"Our Father"	196	
James Claffey		
Braille	198	
Breakfast at Tim Horton's	199	
Diagnosis	200	
<i>Nevus flammeus</i>	201	
Remembering	202	
E Laura Golberg		
LOOKING THROUGH THE FAMILY ALBUM	203	
AN OCCUPIED HOUSE	205	
SUDDEN HURRICANE	208	
John Grey		
Follow the Snow	209	
Robert Ciesla		
Among trees	213	
A feather cairn	214	
Sibelius' lullaby	215	
Once friends	216	
Euan Tait		
<i>Symphony of the Sierra</i>	217	
Justin Fenech		
Candle	223	
Neil Citrin		

Square Musing	235
Distance	237
Hope	239
Soar	
Finger	241
Pageant	243
Richard K. Weems	
Fast Food	244
Karen K Ford	
VOICES	246
Thomas Elson	
“Life haunted by its more beautiful sister life”	253
“I left parts of myself-everywhere The way absent-minded people leave Gloves and umbrellas.”	254
“Everything you didn’t understand Made you who you are.”	255
“The sun doesn’t care for ambiguities, But I do. I open the door and let them in.”	256
Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk	257
Alan Catlin	
big sir	258
devin wayne davis	
BENEATH SALVATION MOUNTAIN	259
Andrew J. Hogan	
AT A CLASSIC FILM REVIVAL	272
BEREFT	273
AN AMERICAN POET ON TOUR	274
THE ISLANDS OF LANGERHANS	275
HAYDN’S HEAD: A PASTICHE	278
E M Schorb	
Moving Day	296
Penn Stewart	
HSI-WEI AND THE LIUQIN PLAYER	300
Robert Wexelblatt	
The Dead	307
Keijo Kangur	

LOVE THEME BY MOONLIGHT	310
LISTS	311
COFFEE CUPS	311
Anjana Basu	
Tired Cantilena for Barstow, Can't Sleep	312
Unheard Music	314
May Day	315
South from Alicante	316
The Man Buys Himself a Guitar to Play the Blues	317
Tobi Alfier	
THE YOUNG MAN	318
THE HOUSE WHERE WE USED TO LIVE	319
FIRST LOVE	320
PRE-VALENTINE'S DAY POEM	321
MODERN ROMANCE	322
Douglas Nordfors	
After Sleep	323
The Lovers	324
By the Light of Dawn	325
Daylight	326
Remains	327
Angels	328
Willows	328
Tulips	329
Deer	329
Natalie Crick	
HIGH DROUGHT	330
STREET TRUMPETS	331
BLOOMING	332
ASPARAGUS HUNT	333
Diane Webster	

PEELING THE BARK	334	
AFTER HEARING THE YOUNG BLACK POET	335	
A WOULD-BE MIX	337	
DEMOCRACY AT THE MALL	338	
WHAT THE GARGOYLE SEES	339	
Gene Twaronite		
8/ETERNITY	340	
Lisa Harris		
“Hope is the thing with feathers...”	341	
Jennie Robertson		
12	344	
Raving: A Tribute to Buddy Holly	348	
Walking Hypotheses between an Aristocrat & a Bohemian	350	
Blinking Innocence of the Cinnamon Woman	353	
Z M Wise		
DOGS	355	
FINISHING POEMS	356	
ISLAND PROPERTY	357	
LIWA	357	
THE ARK	358	
THE POORHOUSE	359	
J. TARWOOD		
20 February 2017	360	
22 February 2017	360	
25 February 2017	360	
26 February 2017	360	
5 March 2017	360	
Margarita Serafimova		
The Attitudes of Language	361	
Metaphysics of Cloud	360	
Cloud Formations Over Mason County	363	
A Clouded Sulphur Wing	367	
In the Autumn Evening When Two Thousand Pages Burnt	368	
The Poet and Society	369	
John Timothy Robinson		

Intro to Philosophy	378	
Ed Higgins		
Interview with Ron Silliman by Lepota Cosmo	379	
Interview of Travis Mulhauser by Carol Smallwood		386
Kierkegaard or Nietzsche	390	
Theodore Sabo		
The Hallelujah Song	394	
Richard Meade		

Writer Services

Contributors

PRAYER FOR SMOKE

Jason Del Guidice

Ruben died on a cold night. I mean, not regular cold, but cold cold.

We'd had us a session that night. Smoked our junk supper on the tracks.

Sufficiently fixed, Ruben sat there looking like *the Thinker*, elbows on his knees, his body rocking fluidly, head dropping lower and lower until he fell off the crate he'd been sitting on.

I crawled over to him and found a face like a rubber mask, and whispered his name into his ear. I dragged him to his spot and worked at covering him, and then Magda knelt down beside him and felt his head for fever. "It's going to be a long night," she said.

Ruben had been sick. Had been going around for weeks, coughing hard. But he never complained, never said shit except for when that cough came from deep within. I remember him making a desperate face, saying, "It's like a hot knife," and then knocking on his bony chest to show where it was hurting.

It was so dark that night. The street lamp on the bridge was out. No neon blue glow from the go-go bar sign, either. A police raid shut that down. All of Mr. Larry's girls locked up for selling it.

I heard Ruben's breathing, shallow and quick, reedy and whistling in his throat. I moved my bed beside his. I laid down and pulled my cover over me—an assortment of sheet-foam, old blankets and plastics that smelled fishy like the dead air from inside an old tire. The only parts of us exposed to the cold were our crying eyes, dripping noses, and our split, bleeding lips. I fell into a half-sleep, an opiate dream, trembling, watching the shifting forms in my foggy breath rise to a night sky the last shade of blue before black, and violet clouds like strips of torn paper, moving across a white moon encircled by signaling planets. Everything pulsating with the beating of my heart and the coo of a hidden dove.

In the morning, some force pulled me away from the sleep world. Something jabbing at me. A voice. I opened my eyes and saw two cops wearing knit hats, leather jackets with thick, wooly collars. One of them was standing, backlit by the sun. The other was leaning over me, poking me in the chest with his baton.

“Get the fuck up.”

Magda was crying. She was being escorted away by a lady cop. I stood up and called to her, but my legs cramped and then buckled and I began to shake. The cop with the baton grabbed a fistful of my coat and said, “Let’s go.”

Ruben was where I had left him. He laid there uncovered, his hands curled into claws near his face, fingers that looked like they could be laced through a chain link fence, and I thought of that Star Wars movie when bad guys froze, what's his name? Indiana Jones.

Ruben’s face shimmered with frost. His eyes were wide open, a frozen froth ran from the corner of his mouth. His expression was a paused look of surprise, or like the face of a child in a classroom who knows the answer and is excited to tell it.

Cops were everywhere. A lot of folks from the neighborhood asking questions, talking shit. “A bum...a junkie...homeless filth.” a man in a heavy green parka was pointing a ridiculously large camera at the river bank, the no trespassing sign, our camp. “Don’t take any pictures of the body,” one cop told the photographer.

I spoke with a detective. Told him my name was Jimbo and I was twenty years old and he said that was bullshit. I didn't argue. I told him Ruben had been sick.

“Sick with what?” he asked.

“I look like a doctor to you?”

An ambulance was idling nearby, its red lights hypnotically turning. The paramedics casually lowered Ruben onto a stretcher and wheeled him over to the rig.

“What are they doing? They gonna try and save him?” I asked.

The detective was blowing steam over hot coffee. He laughed abruptly and said, “He’s fucking dead, you lunatic.”

“Then why they putting him in an ambulance, man?”

Magda broke away from the police. She limped to the ambulance and fell to her knees. She reached out for Ruben and cried, because Magda was everybody's mother. We came to her and she accepted us unconditionally. We needed her love and she gave it to us in its entirety.

She clawed at the frozen ground, her body shuddered. I tried to go to her but the detective stopped me.

Magda invented prayers, she did it all the time. This one was her most beautiful. She prayed aloud for everyone to hear.

Flawed

M.M. Collins

In these increasingly familiar moments, when the sun is but a sliver hidden behind apocalyptic clouds and gray windshields speckled with the sky's sustenance, I am reminded that home is a foreign feeling. In these moments I could surely sell my soul for a script. Addiction. Understood.

I understand yet it only sets me further apart in thoughts which have become empty echoes down hollow halls while my voice falls flat upon stubborn stones of psyche. I reach for my lighter and hunker down between seat and dashboard to take a much needed drag off my weed pipe without being spotted by the cameras attached to the shelter, an oppressive eye bolted into place, held there within the guise of safety.

I feel like a hypocrite out here, getting stoned before curfew, annoyed with the junkie women inside and the silent paranoid frenzies I allow them to provoke. Insomnia. I say I understand addiction and I surely do. Nicotine would have me by the balls, had I a pair; instead it is King-Kong riding my back, suffocating me slowly. Hell, half my twenties have gone dark due to those little bars of ignorance-is-bliss-anxiety aides, merely cleverly disguised crutches, but I learned to stand on my own, or did I? I exhale slowly, savoring the decompression despite the divide.

I sit up and light a cigarette, solidifying this ritual. Medicine before poison. It's a crooked game I play, justifying, judging, comparing, contrasting, but I am more asshole than alien. Human. Flawed. I look through my rain spattered window on into the large kitchen beyond another. The women are still milling around, smiling, seemingly stress-free, grateful to be out of the elements though most take it for granted as sink-full of dishes and trails of crumbs are left on carpet and counter each day, only adding to the squalid mess which the house rat will fee upon by night, but they are thankful, see it in their smiles?

Swallowing another sigh I exit my car, the only real asset I've managed to acquire throughout the years, though I'm sure duct-tape has driven down the value. Everything I own is stuffed inside that car and I worry quite constantly that I'll wake to find shattered glass littering the ground around an empty steel shell waiting for me. I think that if I just keep to myself I may make it out of here, stuff intact, but I don't really believe it. The others, inside, sniffed me out already and they smelled hope rather than dope and they've no use for such things.

I punch my key-code into the censor on the door and wait as it springs to life, noisily lighting up as it buzzes me back inside. It's a welcome relief to step in and away from another typically damp west coast night, but here solace is small, a burden like anything else. I've crossed over into the Twilight Zone where I willingly walk amongst the zombies, in their soiled clothes and dispirited smiles, recruiting for their army of lost souls. Like them, I once thought I needed a circle, that was until I stuck myself in

the middle and was able to see the downward spiral of deceit and denial, the hole disguised as a whole.

At times I feel a great deal of empathy for these nameless faces with their expressionless eyes, but the longer I'm surrounded by such lackluster spirits the harder my heart becomes. I am more asshole than alien. Human. Flawed. Life is meant to be lived after all and if one chooses to walk with death, then why bother wasting energy in mourning their choice? The resistance is exhausting enough.

I make my way to the rooms, past the women cluttering up the kitchen, past the clinking of silverware on glass in the dining rooms, past the autistic woman-child, whose name I actually know, who spends her time awake hidden beneath a blanket on the dirty carpet in a corner, and then up the stairs, making sure to avoid that ankle-twisting soft spot right in the middle of the second to last step. They creak and groan beneath me, their age masking my own.

I lay down upon the bottom bunk I've been assigned in the middle of a room I call mine without worry of delusion for silence doesn't stay here. Tomorrow will only be the same. I will rise and work, carrying my belongings around with me everywhere, driving to and from these apocalyptic places alone, while life waits for me to catch up, packed neatly away in my four-door world on wheels. Tomorrow will be the same and so will I; more asshole than alien. Human. Flawed.

RECOMPENSE

Katherine Forbes Riley

Main Street. Drizzling. Night. Warm. No, no, no, she said. In my bed, she said. Holding her body like it would break. He looked at her unchanged. Still who he was. Who he'd always be. She turned around. Cast about. A broken line, whipping wildly.

A man approached her from the dark. Longish hair. Bony nose. Pretty eyes. Drink? he said. I-I-I, she said. If you want me, that's where I'll be, he said, and pointed to a bar. Then he pulled a dress from his bag.

Golden. Beautiful. It spilled through her hands, a life rope. She slipped it over her head. Turned around. The strap, her husband said. It was falling. He fixed it. His fingers were gentle on her skin. Do you want to come? she said. He shook his head and said, Do you have to go? She nodded. But I won't be long.

A woman entered a bar in a golden dress. The place was crowded, full of eyes. He'd see her, she knew, for how could he miss her in that dress? She sat on a bar stool and ordered a drink. We don't get many requests for that in here, the bartender said and smiled. She drank. Felt the eyes. Felt her own heat rising.

A boy sat down next to her. Early twenties—a boy to her—a scout. He's a she to me, he said. A little jealously. Either way, she said. Is fine with me. Just tell him—or her—to hurry. Because I don't have all night.

by Austin Alexis

Dementia Nights

Boxed into a realm of confusion,
she must have felt so desolate.
Strands of memories wiggled away from her.
Lines blurred.
Life's bric-a-brac jumbled itself
into a labyrinth her eyes
couldn't clarify,
could find no path out of,
couldn't penetrate with anger, will power
or even calm discipline.

Wires hanging in the dark
in a cityscape of litter and winds
knew how to entangle her.
Street lights dimmed.
There was no moon.

Hospital Visit

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” I asked.

“Yes,” she answered.

Presently, she offered a smile that mocked
or ignored or refuted

my unsolicited concern--

more a grin or a smirk as opposed to a smile,
an expression that perfected her ambiguity.

Then, positioned only a foot from her bed,

I gazed at her out-of-reach presence

as she twisted

away from the ungainly chair in which I sat,

toward the more comforting company

of death.

Connection

A faint pulse
like a refrigerator you sense
existing in another room.
Similarly, your mother:
medics couldn't rally her heart
to do more than a delicate thump,
a faint pulse,
frail as a sparrow's breath
as, just maybe, a sparrow stood
balanced on a weathervane or a birdbath rim
outside her nursing home window
and peered inside,
drawn mysteriously to the scene
as she lay dying.

And you, back home in another state,
one-hundred-and-sixty-five miles from her--
a galaxy from her.
Not knowing she was passing away
you felt a surge of vitality deep in you
continuous for forty minutes,
her last forty minutes.
Somehow, during that particular time, you experienced
this prolonged lightning-rush sustaining you,
giving you the charge you would need
to survive the coming months--and years.
You saw the connection between her dying and this experience
the day after her death,
when your brother told you, by phone,
with hesitant exactness
the timeframe of your mom's last interval on Earth.

Sometimes, the dying--as sickness seeps away their life--
transport their wattage to another person:
a beloved daughter, a son, a close friend,
or just an acquaintance they feel warmth towards.
In secret generosity, by way of hidden channels,
they donate their energy
to the living.

Sneaking Back

Though you can no longer feel her hands,
her presence can be felt.
When you gaze at her funeral card
her eyes stare back at you.
Her features are frozen,
her expression set
as only the faces of the dead can be.

You prop her card on your bookcase--
her name printed below her image.
How odd existence is
that a portrait of the dead,
that the person in the photo
breathes more air than the snake plant
stationed on the same shelf.

by Larry D Thacker

Relic Making, #2: Smoke

A tall and thin bottle recovered from a burn pit of an abandoned house, revealed a light blue once cleaned up, the hardened, scorched mud scraped away from only the outside, the mud kept intact on the inside, dark and dry. That hardened dirt a perfect place to press the stick end of your Indian Temple incense. What is down, down in the bottle is never revealed to you. You don't allow that. The bottle is a vessel, sending its mysterious contents to flight by the heavenly smoke you release.

Relic Making, #4: Wheel of Life

Take the beat-up wagon wheel that leaned on the wall of your great-grandparent's cabin for so many years. Take all the stuffed animals, antique baby dolls, and toys from the storage room of your grandparent's home, the room you were afraid to explore when little because there were no windows and so many eyes. Borrow the tools you need from your father's shed. Yarns and glues from your mother's basket. Take it all to your fourth-floor uptown loft. Knock out all the spokes of the wheel until you have only six realms. Cut away all the arms, legs, and heads. Use the still pristine porcelain doll faces for Gods and Heavenly Beings, the head of a ceramic piggy bank for the Titans, six long-necked, empty-eyed Barbie heads for the Hungry Ghosts, as many reaching disembodied arms as you can fit for the slice of Hell, the head of a fuzzy one-eyed teddy bear for the Animals. Place a toy mirror from the first makeup set your mother allowed you to buy in the Human Realm so no one ever forgets how Karma appears.

Relic Making, #5: Splinters of the Cross

Word gets around you want to preserve as many splinters as possible, long and short, broken, intact. To qualify, a portion of their length must have been shoved into skin to some depth, then removed, blood re-born. You've done this yourself for a few years already, thus the fascination: the splinter pulled from your palm when you wiped leaves from the picnic table too quickly and without thinking (2014), the ones from the coffee table building project (2015), from your legs as you slid down the tree in your shorts at the lake showing off to that girl that never called you back (2016), the toothpick you accidentally shoved into your gum last week when you ran elbow first into the door facing (2017). The emergency room calls. The staff wants to help and has been collecting up donations. They want to know if the 157 spines removed from the body of the escaped convict who had jumped a fence and fallen into the award winning cacti portion of the city garden club's park might qualify for donation. They regretted that the extricated two-by-four that impaled the man and woman together in the car accident was no longer available.

A Junk Drawer

Three table knives.
Extension cord (six feet).
Warranty manual for deep freeze.
Empty book of matches from *Holiday Inn*.
Used cat flea collar.
Unopened pack of index cards.
Ceramic blue bird.
One silver fork.

Why do we keep dulled, non-matching knives,
as if they're aren't others all over the house,
even better knives, matching and sharp?

The cord is frayed just around the plug.
Was this noticed and tossed in the drawer
as if the drawer was a holding point,
a purgatory for healing, before the bin?

There is a hum in the cellar. A never-ending hum,
vibrating the house sometimes. No one
knows what's inside the hum.

A book is only a book when something exists
between the covers, she said,
striking the last match for a last shared smoke.
After the man left, she kicked
off the covers, stood naked in the mirror,
trying to remember every detail of the night.

A small mound in the backyard. Very small.
We know, at least, they belonged to Marjorie K,
but no one in the house ever had a last name
with a K, nor was anyone a Marjorie,
so it might have been a school friend,
visiting, leaving some book report materials,
forgetting where she'd put them, but
swearing they were in her backpack.

Fits in the palm of your hand. The glazing
reflects the day's cloudlessness, turning
the creature all the more impossibly azure.
This goes home with you.

With makers marks. A crown and indistinguishable letters. A scent that doesn't leave your fingers until you get home and wash them before having supper in your own home.

Gone

When I go, I go filled
with a burden
only the undisturbed pulp
of deep forest trees understand.

Covered, but thinly,
with a skin of bark,
a layering of proof, booked
over a life, aching up the mind
of groundwater,

rising it with earth pulses
to find leaves, and teeth,
nails that will gently,
but impossibly, seem
to keep growing.

Still sending messages.

OUTSIDE, INSIDE

William C. Blome

My first wife stormed on our honeymoon that since I was the one who had booked us on an ocean liner with portholes everywhere, I was therefore the one who had enabled her “stinking ex-husband to press his fucking face against the glass and spy on me throughout this ship wherever you and I are suckling one another’s toes.” I guess I kind of knew at that moment, what with her paranoid sentiments and the repugnant language, the two of us were as good as kaput, and I believe I can be forgiven for slipping away from her at our big boat’s very first port of call.

Oh, I had to work some manual labor for several months in Puerto Rico before I accumulated enough money to fly back to Baltimore, but I hung in there, and finally was able to get on with my life by jetting out of San Juan, buckled securely in a window seat. I’d say I’d been airborne a tad less than half an hour when I noticed my window had misted over on the inside. I used my palm to smear it clean, and then I took my time about peering out and looking down into the night, though of course when I did, try as I might, I couldn’t make out a single thing in the darkness. But I was happy about returning home, so I sat back and closed my eyes. Sure, I reasoned, I wasn’t too pleased that my marriage hadn’t made it, but I nonetheless relaxed, and when I next glanced at the fogged-over window, I knew how I was going to proceed, I knew how I was going to handle everything. I started with the ceremony of prepping my right index finger: I bent it and flexed it over and over again, and next, I painstakingly wrote “TOES” in big capital letters on the airplane’s small square pane of glass.

EVENTS

William C. Blome

You have to wonder how widespread an area of the ship heard and/or paid any attention to the five-bell prelude to our vessel's sudden stoppage in the Baltic Sea. I know I heard the bells, but I'm not the bedrock-certain kind of witness you'd like to have at your side when attempting to prove something of either casual or crucial concern, and especially if that something is a nautical matter, for I won't deny that my many-a-year dream of having been an Imperial German admiral in the Great War absolutely has the capacity to rule my observations and judgments at sea, and that's whether I'm drifting on my lonesome in a skiff; fishing for white perch near the bow of any boat; or slouching about a roulette wheel on some behemoth of a cruise ship, listening to the ball spin 'round its wooden channel and then go bumpedy-bump-bump-bump before ending its life in a slot. Anyway, I only know that for a period of better than thirty-odd minutes, we were all doing whatever we were doing on this vessel atop the late-night surface of the Baltic without the slightest assist or impedance from our ship's great engines.

You should also know that I had a similar occurrence in the eleventh year following the experience above. I was in a winter garden with Zina, and we were admiring the violet berry clusters on a pair of holly trees. I had also become fascinated with a metallic green light that bathed the trees from a brace of small floodlights mounted overhead. When several of those lights went out at once, damned if the hollies didn't release all their berries at the same time. Now Zina had been busy adding realism to the winter garden by carefully placing several pewter rats around the bottom of the trees, and her concentration had been so great, she hardly paid attention to the shower of berries. Oh to be sure, the moment she finished adjusting the configuration of the attending rodents and crawled out from under the trees, she became aware of the darkened setting, but let's be honest: she was never able to tie like, or precipitating, or simultaneous events together neatly and completely the way I have, though I have to admit, such events, considered all by themselves, would be unlikely to hand their mystery over to just anyone.

COLORS AND HEADGEAR

William C. Blome

My seat was decent for such an expensive circus, though I might have wished the popcorn odor wasn't so strong and pervasive, and I might have wished there weren't so many women here in the audience all dressed up in sickening yellow fur hats; I mean, what in the world kind of mammal has such bright, dandelion-yellow fur? And okay, I know, I know: you would likely be whispering in my ear that some cheap white fur had been dyed yellow and stitched together into toques and hats, but that knowledge would really have changed nothing as concerns my irritation with looking out at all that yellow hair around me. And sadly, worse consternation was heading my way, for during intermission, I was leaving the men's room when I collided with a young man carrying an outsized sketch pad under his arm. The pad got knocked to the floor and flipped open to a detailed, pastel sketch of some of the folks here in the stands watching the circus. And, correct—I know you've guessed it—there I was, a can't-miss likeness, kind of rapt in enchantment as I beheld a dancing rabbit; oh there I was, and rather prominent in this guy's artwork with some crazy headgear on. Because the big thing was, damned if he hadn't replaced the nice red batting helmet I actually wore in here with a tall, canary dunce cap! I mean, I don't think they even use dunce caps in schools anywhere anymore, much less his deciding to put me in one (and a yellow one at that!).

Well, you know me, I wasn't about to take this sitting down, so I immediately pursued the bastard back into the john, and I caught him just as he was about to enter a stall. I asked him pointblank why in hell he had drawn such a distortion, and he lamely answered that by the time he'd come to sketching and coloring me, he didn't have any dark red pastel pencil left. Putting aside his obvious urge to get on with hopping on the throne, he opened the sketch pad between his outstretched arms and gestured to approximately where in the composition he'd had to abandon using the depleted stub of his dark red stick and had switched to using yellow instead. In sum, he pointed out (but without any explanation) how he had had to alter reality when it came to creating me.

No, I wasn't very satisfied, but I did start to feel somewhat understanding, and though nothing could totally erase my disgust over his having put me in a dunce cap, I had to concede that after all, this was his art work and his conception, so I let him have his privacy and relief. But as I turned away from the stall and was about to go back up to my seat, guess what I heard and saw fall out of his pants pocket and then come rolling out of the stall after he had dropped his trousers? I know you've guessed it: a long and sharpened red pastel pencil!

I went immediately-and-big-time furious, and I whirled around and started banging as hard as I could on the outer wall and door of his locked stall. I must have made such a commotion that two circus security men quickly came in and escorted me out of the

entire circus. One of the officers told me I was lucky in a couple of ways: the circus probably wouldn't press any charges as long as I now got in my Lincoln and drove off post haste. Then he gazed at me admiringly and added (as he kept balling and unballing his fist), how intelligent it was that I had on a batting helmet to protect me from various mishaps to my skull, "the kind of impossible-to-guess shit that can come out of nowhere at any time and be quite injurious".

I ran my hands across what were obviously freshly-trimmed bushes before I asked my neighbor, Bolton, if the hedge didn't look like it had been very recently clipped so low. It hadn't looked that way yesterday morning, and I sure knew I hadn't cut it. He told me he didn't cut it, but he said Vera, the woman he was currently shackled up with, might have done: "She's still a little new to me, so I can't surmise for certain, but I wouldn't put it past her to go lease a pair of clippers and then have a whack at sprucing up the privet."

I didn't mention anything to Bolton about how I hadn't seen any cuttings whatsoever along the ground on either side of the hedge when I just-now paced the entire length up and down. That's right, I patrolled in a sort of strict due diligence, because it seemed amazing to me that the cutter would accomplish such a fine and even job of trimming and then also be willing to perform an out-of-this-world cleanup. Furthermore, I know Bolton can hardly even tell what a lawn rake looks like, he certainly doesn't own one, and just try and find some place here in Levittown that will lease you one. I'll further murmur on the QT that moments ago I padded over to where Bolton keeps his trash cans, and I lifted the lids and peered inside, and there wasn't so much as a leaf or a sprig anywhere in sight.

Oh I don't want to make it sound like I'm sleuthing some great, great mystery here—I'm not trying to erect any kind of fucking edifice—but if I do decide to broach the matter again to Bolton and/or his woman, I'll very likely square off on three things: the trimming itself, the cleanup afterward, and all this anonymity.

Two Tons of Pig Manure

Mitchell Waldman

Dick Steinmueller was growing more and more uneasy every day. He didn't believe what was happening all around him, the lines that were being crossed that shouldn't have, wouldn't have, been crossed when he was a kid. Something had seriously changed since then. Now there was a mass creeping of undesirables into what had once been sacred territory, what had been theirs, the heartland of America. The people who were moving in across the street, right next door. Niggers and spics. No longer could he walk out of his house in the morning feeling safe and proud. The nigger'd be working on his car. The spic would be watering his grass. Still he'd been able to handle it, he could shut his mind to it all, start up his car, turn on his stereo, listen to a nice soothing Wagner libretto, and drive off in his air-conditioned haven as if the world around him were not deteriorating before his very eyes.

But that was before the Friedmans moved in across the street, with their Jew clothes, their Jew door hangings and foods and candlesticks, and general Jew ways. Those little beanie caps they wore sometimes and the strange ceremonies and holidays they celebrated. The Christ killers lived right across the street now. It was more than he could take. It was the last straw.

He couldn't eat, he couldn't sleep. It was always on his mind, the pebble in his shoe.

Down at the factory they talked about it over coffee. He and Rudolph. They were two of the old-timers, both line supervisors at Kreisman Appliances. Over coffee and donuts. Though they would have preferred beers. The workers were half-breeds of all kinds now. Blacks, Mexicans, Puerto Ricans, Cubans, Asians, Vietnamese, Jews, Arabs, you name it, they got 'em. Chicanos, Hispanics, Negroes, blacks, African-Americans -- who even knew what you could call them anymore? Hell, they didn't even know. The black guys would say to each other nigger this and nigger that, but just let a white man try to get away with that! Used to be when it was just white boys on the lines. White boys who worked hard drank even harder. He remembered those days well. He'd been one of them back in the day. And there were women were on the lines now, too.

Dick told Rudolph about his current problem. He sighed and set his cup down, then hunched over the table toward the other man, and whispered, "It's bad, Rudy, my goddamned neighborhood...it's going to hell."

Rudolph smiled weakly at Dick, and shook his head, then took a bite of his donut. "Tell me about it. And I thought it was just me."

"What is it, Rudolph? Why don't they stay with their own kind? Why do they insist on coming where they're not wanted?"

"Who are we talking about?"

"A Jew. A goddamned Jew family. Right across the street."

"Lord."

"Yeah," he said, staring right at his old friend. A Hitler did his best, God bless him, but these types never quit, they spread like vermin. Now they're living right across the street."

"Shit, man, what are you gonna do? Move?"

With his blue eyes opened wide, Dick stared at Rudolph with a look of incredulity. "Move? Jesus, Rudy, what're ya', getting fuckin' soft? No kikes are gonna make a Steinmuller move!"

"Then what? You got any ideas?"

Dick stared ahead through the door of the break room to the wide expanse of the factory floor. "Ideas," he said. "Yeah, I've got a few."

He was standing at the back of his pickup truck with Albert Neumann and Donald Parker.

There were the days back in high school when the three of them would raise hell. Standing in the doorway to the high school cafeteria, in their black leather jackets, shaking down the general school population for dollars, sandwiches, whatever they felt like grabbing that particular day. Watching the way the girls watched them, their shy smiles, the admiring glances. The glory days.

Now they were smoking their cigarettes, waiting for the dump truck to arrive. It was two o'clock in the morning. The sky was black -- the clouds were heavy and not a single star could be seen in the sky.

Dick took a slug from the bottle and felt the soothing warm wave of liquid move down his throat, into his gullet. Jim Beam. Good stuff. He passed the bottle to Hoyt without a word.

"Thanks, bud," Hoyt said, smiling. Then he lifted the bottle to his lips, tilted his head back and guzzled the stuff, the Adam's apple bobbing in his neck as he drank. And the thought came to Dick Steinmueller then: he could snap that neck in a second if he wanted. He smiled, felt comfort in the knowledge of his power. But he knew it was just a passing thought. He would never do such a thing, no. Because Hoyt, weak as he was, knew, in his feeble way, what was going on. He was one of the soldiers, one of the good ones. Despite his half-breed mother. His father was pure, and his grandfather had bravely served for the Fatherland. It had not been shameful back then to be proud and know the natural order of the world. Before all this equality bullshit. He knew the truth -- all men were *not* created equal. It was a myth created to mollify the masses. You could write whatever you wanted on a piece of goddamned paper -- it just wasn't true. Just look around you, the evidence was everywhere from science, engineering, the arts, to the finest automobiles -- it was always German culture, logic, ingenuity, and quality that set the standards of the world.

The guttural sound of the dump truck and the sudden glare of the lights brought Dick out of his thoughts. Mason -- John Jefferson Mason -- had arrived and Dick smiled as wide as a man could. His new neighbors would love this, wouldn't they?

Dick guided Mason, helped him back the truck up onto the lawn -- it had to be a quick maneuver. The other two men watched as Dick, hand over his nose to cover the ungodly, sickly smell, directed Mason right over the curb, up the slight incline to the beginning of the lawn. Then Dick and the other two men stood back, passing the bottle, holding their breaths as Mason pulled the lever, the truck groaning as the bed tilted back, moving to a forty-five degree angle, the back gate of the truck opened, and two tons of pig manure started to slide in a heap onto the Jews' lawn. In less than three minutes the whole load was out and Mason was easing the truck back down on the street, setting the truck bed down, and speeding away.

And, for a moment, Dick, with one arm around his friend and one hand on the bottle, stood there, just stood there, admiring their work -- this massive pile of pig shit on his neighbor's lawn, his face breaking into a wide, open-mouthed grin.

At that moment a light went on in the Jews' house and Dick, in a low rumbling voice, said, "All right, let's get out of here." But he didn't run as the other two scrambled. He walked at a steady, calm, pace, back straight, head held high, back to his house, as the other two ran to their cars, hopped in -- Donald, the idiot, honking his horn and hooting -- and sped off into the dim eerie darkness of the night.

The next morning, at seven a.m., Dick peeked out from behind his dead grandmother's white lace curtains and watched the Hebe across the street shouting and jumping up and down, his arms flapping like a big flightless bird, while his wife stood beside him, arms crossed, silent and staring at the brown pile on her previously green patch of lawn. And, with a smile, Dick whispered from behind the curtains: "Two tons of pig shit ain't exactly Kosher now Jew boy, is it?"

He showered, shaved, and brushed his teeth, the white towel still around his waist as he stared at his features in the steamy mirror. At 49 still not a bad looking guy. He thought of all the women down at the factory who would like to get him alone. He knew from their looks at him as he walked by, inspecting their work. He knew that if he wanted one of them all he had to do was say the word. Their shy smiles, their fluttering eyelashes. The day of his divorce had been a golden opportunity for all these women. But Dick was selective. He wouldn't take just anyone. He couldn't make the same mistake again. He would pick a woman with pure blood coarsing through her veins. It was the way. It was the only way.

He zipped up his pants, whipped his tie skillfully over and under, tightening the knot firmly, expertly, as he smiled at himself in the mirror and put a dab of Brylcream on his head, then combed his hair -- still mostly jet black but now with a trace of gray at the ends -- straight back.

He walked downstairs, poured himself a cup of coffee, sat at the kitchen table for a moment, and skimmed over the headlines, sipping the hot brew. Then, he looked at his

watch, and, seeing the time, took one more quick sip. The hot liquid burned his tongue. In one smooth move, he picked up his briefcase and tucked the paper under his arm and headed for the door. Outside there was a putrid smell in the air, a smell of manure. Head down, he strolled down the driveway to his Volvo, ignoring the squawking Jew and the hideous pile on the lawn across the street. He started his engine, admiring the gentle hum, turned on the classical music station -- a rousing Beethoven symphony playing something to get the Aryan juices flowing -- and drove off to work, the chaotic, comical scene of the hopping Jew and his stony-faced wife left behind. Smiling and humming he drove, thinking, *Another night's work done, but there was still so much more to do.*

He didn't say a word to Rudolph that day. He hardly said a word to anyone, just went about his business, smiling at the female workers he knew wanted him, ignoring some of the less desirable employees -- the ones he'd had to hire to fill in the holes, to keep the machinery operating. There was nothing he admired more than a well-oiled machine and nothing he hated more than those who wanted to mess with the efficient operation of the machine, whose roots and backgrounds, in great enough numbers could virtually bring the machine to a standstill.

He went out for lunch on his own that day, away from the factory, away from everything. He got a burger at a fast food restaurant and drove out to the field where his father's chicken coops used to be. He didn't know what it was that brought him out here now. He got out of the car and walked toward the barbed wire fence, a warm breeze whipping up and flipping his tie in his face. Leaning against the post, closing his eyes, he remembered how it was back then, padding after Papa in his overalls as he did his chores. And that time, that first time he'd taken an old hen out back to kill, how he had sat in horror watching as his father had taken the axe, laid the hen's neck against the board and with one swift, cruel swing, carried out his task. Dick, only three or four at the time, had sat motionless for a moment and then, after taking a breath, had started bawling. His father, two days growth of stubble on his face, his white hair tossed in all directions from the wind, had smiled at him then, the torso of the chicken in one hand, axe in the other and said, "Don't cry, Richard. It's only a chicken. Sometimes it helps to think of it other ways. Just think of it as just another dirty Jew." And then walking back to the house, wiping his eyes, his mother gathering him up in her arms, wiping away his tears as he said, "Daddy said--." But she shushed him before he could say more. "It's all right, little Dickie, it's all right," she said, patting him on the head, and for an instant, one single instant in time -- the only one he could remember -- of his mother's piercing glimpse at his father as he turned and walked out of the room.

It was what he'd remembered, what he'd grown up with. He remembered, too, the

lectures his father'd given him on the purity of Aryan blood -- it became like secondhand religion to him after a while. And there were the brawls he'd gotten into on school playgrounds with various members of other races -- most of all Jews.

He'd been Dick's father. A well-liked, well-respected man in his community. How could you not believe the words of your own father?

It wasn't until he'd married Liz that his views had been brought into question. They'd be out and he would say something about the niggers down at work, or that Jew lawyer running for mayor and she'd stop talking and stare at him like he was from another planet or something. "Dick, you know I detest that word. And what does they're being black or him being Jewish have to do with anything? There are lazy whites, there are lazy blacks, there are lazy Christians. But you choose to categorize people by color or religion. Some people might call that pure ignorance."

"Jesus, Liz, you just don't get it!" he'd said during one of their increasing number of fights, after she'd called him "ignorant," "a fascist," "a fucking Nazi!" And he'd gone on to explain just what all these people had done to the fabric of America, but she wasn't listening, she didn't hear his words. Instead, she just got worse, saying that she was disgusted, disgusted, she said, that she'd married someone without a clue of knowing who he really was. She'd thought that all those words he was always spouting about other people was just his way, his insecurity. But now she saw. Her eyes were wide open now, she said. He was a man possessed with demons, filled with hate and ignorance. Filled to the core. A hateful man. "Ignorance?" he'd said, and stood with his arms crossed in the kitchen as she gave him a look of horror. He tried to grab her but she was too quick, yanking her car keys off the hook by the kitchen door, and storming out, the screen door slamming behind her.

Six months later she'd filed for divorce. Good riddance, Dick had thought at the time, thinking that had his father still been alive he would have smiled and said "That's what you get for marrying a Pollock instead of a strong, healthy, German girl." But why then when he had thought he was better off then, had he remembered, again, that look of his mother, burning holes through the back of his father's skull that day so long ago?

When he drove home that evening, feeling parched and gritty from work, he glanced out of the corner of his eye at the yard of the Jews across the street. Their lawn was now clear and clean, as if it weren't just the night before, that moonless, starless night, that he'd had two tons of pig manure dumped there. He clenched the steering wheel tight and took deep breaths to keep his calm. All that work to no avail. Like cockroaches they just kept going on, no matter what obstacles were put in their way.

That night he went to his bedroom and pulled the black box out of his bottom drawer. It had been a long time since he'd looked at it, this box that had passed to him after his father's death. He remembered the lawyer, in his office, placing the box in his

hands in an almost secretive manner, looking around the room, although there was no one else there, and breathily whispering, "Your father wanted you to have this."

And opening the box now as he sat at the edge of his bed. Pulling the black velvet cloth from around the Luger, slowly feeling its cold smoothness with the tips of his fingers. Pulling out the neatly folded flag, and opening it up in front of him at arm's length. Staring at the black swastika on the red background, just staring at it and closing his eyes for a moment, a deep longing from an unknown source swelling up inside of him all of the sudden, and a breath of minty cold wind soaring, swirling inside in his head, making him feel dizzy and giddy, almost outside of his own body, for an instance, before he opened his eyes up again, and, after a moment, folded up the flag, and gently wrapped the gun in the black cloth. Then carefully placing both objects back into the box like sacred religious items. Closing the lid and secreting the box back into its dark silent spot in the back of his bottom dresser drawer. Closing the drawer, but still feeling the power of that box; like black magic it remained, unaffected by the passing of time or the weight of words that had passed since those days of glory, all just words in the wind that could not wear away the extraordinary ideas and principles those times stood for, and those items had been a part of. Still undiminished they remained in the silence of his bottom drawer, just waiting for a chance to come out from hiding again, waiting for that moment of reawakening, to come back out in the light.

The next morning his mother was coming in from Florida for her annual visit. Three years before, at seventy-five, a year after Papa had died, she'd taken off for Miami, just like that. Her parting words had been, "You're a big boy, Dick, you've got a life of your own and now so do I." She'd smiled, grabbed her carry on bag, and hopped on the plane, leaving him standing there, wondering what had just happened. She'd never mourned his father like he'd thought she should have. Since Papa had died she'd actually lightened up, become more playful. Rarely, when he was growing up had he ever seen her smile. She was always cowering, and cowing to his father's demands. So, his death had lifted this weight of servitude and silence off of her it seemed. She could talk for days on end now if you let her. It seemed totally out of character to the mother he'd known, who'd always been so subservient, the woman who had hardly said a word, at least not when his father was around.

His stomach was churning as he drove to the airport. Why was she still coming to see him, anyway? It's not like he was on the closest of terms with her anymore, especially after Liz had left.

She'd held her feelings about that to herself for a long time, until the month before she'd told him, over the phone, exactly how she felt: "She was the best thing that ever happened to you, Dick. She loved you. You should never have let her get away." Then, after a brief pause, she'd said. But maybe it was your father. You're too much like your father."

He hadn't known what she'd meant or what to say to that. He couldn't believe this

was the same woman who'd spent long evenings slaving over his father, catering to his every whim, cooking second dinners after Papa had upturned the table once, saying "I'm not going to eat this crap. I want a real meal." The woman who had risen from the table slowly then, calmly cleaned up the broken glass with her broom and dust pan, then gone into the kitchen, without a word, to make him what he wanted -- a steak smothered with onions and a baked potato.

No, this was a new mother, a new woman, and he was afraid of her, afraid for not knowing what to expect from her.

And there was something else. It was something she'd said in their last phone conversation: "I've got something I need to tell you."

What? What was so important that she couldn't tell him over the phone?

"I'll tell you in due time. When I feel the time is right."

So what the hell was that all about? And who was this woman now who had once been his mother? At least that was how it felt. He didn't know who she was anymore.

He spotted her at the baggage claim area, though she hadn't seen him yet. She was wearing a purple pant suit and a cream-colored hat with her arms folded in front of her, staring at the bags circling in front of her on the conveyer belt.

"Mother," he said tentatively, stopping a step or two behind her.

She turned around to face him. "Dickie," she said, turning around to face him, smiling, her arms open. He hugged her awkwardly, stiffly. "It's so good to see you, my son," she said, squeezing him tightly.

The ride back from the airport was a quiet one. He tried to make small talk, asked her how she had been, what she'd been doing with herself, how her blood pressure was -- it had always been high. "Not much, what old people do." "My blood pressure's fine, Dickie. Nothing to worry about. I'm in great shape for an old lady." She turned to him then with her eyebrows knitted, as if she saw right through him. But that was ridiculous. What was there to see through? He was the same Dick he'd always been. Little Dickie playing Cowboys and Indians with the other boys, like in the days of old, the same Dick chasing the cows, and riling up the pigs back at the farm when he was small. He hadn't changed all that much. He was a simple man, he liked to tell people. Simple, but strong in his beliefs. He knew who he was and the way things were. He was no fool. He knew how the world turned.

They spent the rest of the ride home in an uncomfortable silence, until he pulled the car up the driveway, turned off the engine, sighed and said, "Well, we're home." She smiled and lightly patted his shoulder.

At breakfast the next morning he tried to fry her up some bacon and eggs. No, she had said to the first, much too high in fat, and no, too, to the second, she said. The cholesterol's no good, either.

"But for thirty years you fed Papa this stuff everyday."

"It's what he wanted. That doesn't mean it was good for him, or that it was what I

wanted to eat. It was never up to me, these things. You know that, Dick?"

"Yes, I guess I do." But, he wanted to add, isn't that the way it's supposed to be? The man running the household, the man the king of his house? But there was something in his mother's eye, a sharp glint of something he didn't recognize that made him wary of saying anything more.

During breakfast -- she settled for some old oatmeal he'd had laying around for a century or two--she told him about her new "digs", as she called them. It was a sort of condominium complex for senior citizens. She casually mentioned the fact that she lived next door to this wonderful woman named Tequila.

"What kind of name is that?" Dick asked.

"What do you mean what kind of name is that? It's a woman's name. And a perfectly beautiful one at that, I would say."

"I just meant...."

She looked at him across the table, a prim smile on her face. Then she spread her napkin across her lap. "Oh, I know what you meant, Richard. Thirty years of living with a man who judged every nearly other person on earth but a select few gives me more than a little insight, I think, into what you're asking me."

He didn't say a word, just turned his eyes away from her.

She dug into her oatmeal, the spoon scraping against the sides of the bowl.

"Yes," she said, Ain answer to the question you didn't ask, Tequila is a Black....an African-American woman. And one of the dearest friends I've ever had."

"I didn't mean anything..."

"And here's something else that will shock you," she said, still smiling at him. "I've got Asian friends, and Hispanic friends and Puerto Rican friends and, yes, even....Jewish friends where I live. They're all wonderful people, wonderful friends."

He felt his heartbeat quickening, the vein on his forehead beating in an annoying pulsating manner. "So....is this the something you had to tell me? The something you couldn't tell me over the phone?"

"No," she said, smiling at him still. "No, Richard, that will just have to wait."

There was noise outside suddenly, the honking of horns, and the clamor of suddenly arriving voices. Dick moved to the front door and stared out from behind the curtains. It was the Jew, some kind of affair going on at the Jew's house. Another aggravation.

"Richard."

He turned around, for a moment having almost forgotten that she was there.

"Yes, Mother?"

"Do you think you could fix your poor old mother a cup of coffee? It seems like such a nice morning. The cool breeze was blowing through that bedroom window and it felt so so nice. If you could make me a cup of coffee, with just a little cream, no sugar, that would be so good of you, Richard. I think I'll sit out on your porch if you don't mind."

You could bring the coffee out to me and we can sit and we can talk a while. How would that be?"

"Sure, Mother, fine. Why don't you go out there and I'll bring the coffee out to you."

"That would be wonderful, dear. Thank you." Then she stood up and walked out the door, as Dick got busy, getting the coffee maker set up for his mother.

When it was done he brought the coffee out to her. She was rocking in her chair, watching the cars pulling up to the house across the street.

"What's going on over there?" he muttered in his agitated state, more to himself than to his mother.

"They must be having a party," his mother answered. "Maybe a bar mitzvah party. It is Saturday, after all."

"Saturday? So?"

"That's what the Jewish people do on Saturday. They have their bar mitzvahs."

"Hocus pocus. It's a bunch of ignorance and black magic."

"Ha!" his mother yelled, and stared at him with narrowing eyebrows. "Hocus pocus. Black magic. Is that what you think faith is all about?"

"Faith? Jesus, Mother, listen to yourself! They're Jews, goddammit? Didn't Papa teach you anything?"

"What he taught me was what *not* to be, how *not* to think."

"Oh, really? Is that so?"

"Yes, my dear son, that is so. He taught me what ignorance can do to people, how it can tear one's soul in two."

Now it was Dick's turn to laugh. His mother had finally turned the corner, gone off her nut for good. He laughed hard, he laughed long. She stared at him as if he were the mad one.

And across the street the cars kept arriving, letting out nicely dressed families with gifts in hand. "Mazel tov!" he heard people cry, and there was a boy in some sort of shawl with fringes greeting the people at the door.

"You're like your father in many ways," his mother said after he stopped laughing. She was staring right at him. "But," she said, a small smile on her lips now, "in some ways you are in no way like Frederic. You are like someone totally different than him."

He stared at his mother for a moment, dumbfounded. "What is that supposed to mean?"

Her smile widened. She picked up her coffee and sipped it slowly staring at him over the rim, the smile still supplanted on her face.

A panic was building in his mind. "What the hell is that supposed to mean, Mother? I'm asking you a question."

She continued to smile at him, then said, "Why look at your face, your hair, your complexion, your hands. Not even a close physical resemblance to him. Don't you think that's odd?"

His face had turned beet red, and he could feel his pulse quickening.

"You are more like someone who used to live in our neighborhood. A Mister Steinberg. You remember him? He used to be our butcher."

"Our butcher? The Jew butcher? What in God's name are you talking about? How am I like a Jew butcher?"

"I'm sorry, Dick. I never told you. Your father was incapable of making me pregnant. He was a hollow, bitter man and he couldn't even make his wife pregnant. I never loved him, never. And I wouldn't go near him, anyway, after a while. Not in that way, anyway. The truth is...I loved someone else."

"Who? What? What are you trying tell me? You loved the Jew butcher?"

She said nothing, just continued smiling at him.

"Oh, no. It can't be," he said.

She nodded her head. "Oh, it can be, all right."

"No, no, this is a joke, right? Okay, Mother, what did I do to make you mad at me this time?" He smiled at her to try to weasel the truth out of her. But she didn't react, didn't bat a lash.

"So," he said, trying to let this sink in, "You're trying to tell me you had an affair with a Jew and I'm a Jew's son? And Papa knew all along?" She still didn't respond to him, just lifted her coffee cup and stared straight forward out across the street, that strange faraway smile still painted on her face. "Mother, look at me, goddammit!" She still didn't move. "You were in love with a goddamned Jew butcher and I'm his child, I'm tainted with his Jew blood?" Then he started to laugh, laugh so hard he couldn't stop. Laughing until he fell to the floor, crumbling, crying, a strange broad tightness in his chest. Rolling himself fetally on the floor, looking up at her. She was no longer smiling. Hearing himself whisper to her, "I'm a goddamned Jew, my father is a Jew? No, no, no. It isn't, it can't be true."

"Yes," she said. "Yes." It was the last thing he remembered her saying, as the pain in his chest grew and broadened, overwhelmed him so he could barely breathe. And then there was nothing. A long period of black nothingness.

When he awoke there was a sea of dark-haired Jews staring down at him, muttering among themselves. "Come on, Buddy, come on," one of them said. And, in the middle of the group, the Jew from across the street, with his frizzy black hair, was looking down at him through his black-framed glasses, staring down at him through the cloud of pain. Beside him, looking down at him was his mother. "Dick, Dickie, are you all right, baby?" There was pain in her expression, as if the pain he felt was reflected in her. And beside her, closer, too close, the yid was touching him, breathing in his face. "What the hell," he thought. "What..." he wanted to say, but nothing came out. Hell, he thought. Could it be?

Then another face -- that of a beefy blond-haired paramedic, a Swede probably -- came into focus and, behind him, the flashing red lights.

"It was a good thing Doctor Friedman was here today or you'd have been history."

Dick looked at the man blankly and blinked his eyes as the Swede and a Puerto

Rican guy lifted him onto the stretcher.

"He saved your life," the Swede said, smiling at Friedman and lifting Dick into the ambulance. "For now, anyway. I think you owe him a 'thank you' to say the least," and Dick's heart started racing again -- he could feel the blood pulsing through him as they lifted him into the dark colon inside the ambulance's shiny white shell.

Mornings

Courtney McMahon

9:22am_

The house is emptier than before. The little dog is gone. It was a dumb little dog – that is how the girl likes to describe it in her head. It sat on her bed for hours and barked at minute noises on the street, only stopping when she went to it and placed her hand on its shivering body. It was a pathetic little thing. It wandered the house looking confused. Lena had taken a pair of scissors to it and trimmed all its hair and the hair looked all choppy and more mangled than before. One day it was unusually warm and the girl felt bad for leaving the dog in the house, so she took it outside with her for a walk. It stopped every twenty seconds to sniff at brick walls and halted, mute and anxious, when other dogs passed nearby.

Still, it was not so bad, to tow the little creature with her down the long hot street. Strangers seemed less strange with the little dog around. Concrete footpath and brick walls moving by in a blur, water over glass, less imposing, less abrasive. She found herself talking aloud to the dog. Talking emptily, but talking nonetheless. It was comforting, to have the little being following behind as she crossed the vast green empty ocean of the park.

But the dog is gone now. The girl sits on the deck eating peanut butter on toast. Lena sits there too, rubbing her eyes in the sun. Dried washing hangs stiff from the clothesline nearby.

Jamal, Lena says.

Ah, Jamal, the girl says. They laugh.

Jamal is not coming back. The girl has said this. Lena knows it too, but she

cannot help but wait. The two housemates make a good joke out of it. They spend nights giggling about it on the floor until neither of them wants to talk about it anymore. They talk about ants instead. How can creatures so tiny exist?

Lena goes inside to shower. The girl sips coffee and watches the sunlight refract off the tiny hairs of her arm. It is a hot day. The heat came suddenly a few days ago, jarring against the backbone of a long, pale winter. It laid the streets of Brunswick bare and has not receded since.

The caffeine races through her veins like quicksilver. Peanut butter an abrasive aftertaste in her mouth. Sunlight setting the hairs of her arms alight. She is an apparition, a ghost hovering in the sunlight, phantom-limbed. Her fingertips fade and fade into infinity. She reaches out to touch the decking. Wood slams against the pads of her fingers. Finite, she is inarguably finite.

She finishes her coffee, and wonders where the dumb little dog is now.

3:35pm_

A series of wide paths crosses the expanse of lawn at the university. People bare their limbs bravely to the potent sun, walking languidly across the paths on their way to late lunch or afternoon classes. Fat-leaved trees fringe the lawn. The shade there is cool and swollen; the sun cannot reach its burning fingers beneath the branches. In the coolness, the girl laughs, resting her finger at a point on the page.

So that's where Milo comes from, she says.

Ben looks up from his textbook and looks at the girl for a second with a half-smile. She has learned that half-smile already, in the short months that they have known each other. His closed lips stretch, his neck juts forwards like a bird, his

eyebrows peel back towards his scalp.

What? he says.

Milo was *A prodigiously strong wrestler from Croton, in Italy*. So I guess that's why it's called Milo. The drink, I mean. Because it makes you strong, or something.

He laughs. Oh, sorry. I had no clue what you meant.

She laughs, and apologises too. They apologise to each other a lot. He apologises when she misinterprets the point of a story he recounts. She apologises for following aloud whatever abstract train of thought comes to her head. It is a game of sorts: to assert and backtrack, then pick apart the meaning of each other's sentences as if they could be dissected like the small prone bodies of rats. It is the game that comes before the sex; but what, pray tell, will come after that? Attempts to express something deeper, something – but he will misinterpret, and the game will go on.

Silence eases back in. A breeze rustles the pages beneath her fingers and throws shadows spinning across their backs. The sun disappears behind a cloud.

The dog is gone, the girl says after a while.

Which dog?

Lena's dog, the one that was at our house.

Oh, that one.

It's weird. The house feels so vacant without it.

Wasn't it only there for a few days?

Yeah, but I got used to it being there. He was so dumb, but I got used to him being there...

Oh.

A group of students come and sit on the benches nearby. A girl's voice loudly asserts that she is giving up carbs. She is going on an all-protein diet. She is good at regulating her portion sizes. You don't burn fat if you eat carbs.

Today Ben has brought the girl iced coffee in a plastic cup. She likes the coolness against her fingers, but the caffeine, at three in the afternoon, is making

everything spiky. The student's voice nearby pierces her ears. The blood pushes thinly into her temples. Ben's body is too close to her on the grass. She cannot concentrate on the words before her.

The sun reappears. She looks out at across the lawn at the pale faces passing by, one after another. Inside the margins of her book, she has written down in secret the words of the girl on the bench nearby.

6:07pm_

The tram is stuffy and crowded. The air smells of boot feet and salami. People hang from overhead handles and cling to green vertical poles like clumps of seaweed, swaying in the current. Backpack nestled in the rubber-mesh nook connecting the two tram cabins, the girl turns her head to face the yellow evening light coming through the window. Her body feels slim and shapeless in the large t-shirt and boy's shorts, small enough to fold like paper against the edge of the rubber without any of the bodies pressed around her noticing.

The tram slithers to a stop and the doors peel open. People shuffle slowly inwards as more press in from the openings, the newcomers blinking slowly as if adjusting to darkness, arranging themselves in various positions to fit the human jigsaw-puzzle. The tram crawls through the congested traffic into Brunswick.

Her gaze flicks from face to face assembled in the cabin. The takeaway coffee in her hand ebbs warmth into her skin like a small living animal. She remembers the winter – that darkened night when she travelled the crowded tram alone, wearing Abhi's jacket. His smell hung inside it, that smoky-haze smell of lentils, incense and cigarettes. His warm body: a familiar trace on a strange landscape. The earth impaled on a pole, no longer spinning quite so uncontrollably.

She sips the coffee and scans the faces. Locks of hair, angles of jaws, hollows of eyes – one, pale-skinned with a dark oily fringe, gazes out the window on the other

side of the tram. He is skinny in jeans and thin coat, skin perfect and unblemished, brow angled and dented like a rat. Could she come to love him – the perfect skin a blank canvas to start from, the stick-body and rat-brow arriving later as they came to know each other? Piling words together, attempting to convey something – negotiating their bodies through poetry, through conversation, through the silence that comes only with comfortableness –

The doors slide open. The girl steps off the tram and into the yellow light. The caffeine has retaken her body. The morning is beginning again.

10:46pm_

Eating. Spoonful after spoonful of milk and cereal, leaning against the wooden benchtop. The rhythm of crunch between teeth, reverberating through jaw and skull. Finish one bowlful, pour another. Spoon dipping into mouth, into milk, hovering in between.

When the box runs dry she screws up the dusty plastic packet and puts it in the bin. The whiff of the week's coffee grounds and orange peel. She squishes the cardboard box, pushing the corners down towards the centre.

2:59am_

The garbage truck is back. It isn't Monday yet but the garbage truck is back, grinding against the pavement outside, only a handful of meters from her bedroom window. She lies in the half-space between consciousness and sleep and wishes away the coffee she had at 6 PM. The squealing and banging comes in through the doona pulled around her ears and bounces around inside her skull. She is counting rabbits, brown rabbits that hop past one after another out of nowhere, counting the hours left until 10 AM when she can have her next coffee, counting to 100 to lull herself to sleep and

beginning over again when she still isn't. *Bang* – the rabbits scatter. She jogs after one, reaches down to touch it, finds choppy and mangled hair. The dumb little dog is following behind her as she walks the length of a long dusty road. The stars swing in an enormous arc overhead. She wonders what to have for breakfast in the morning now that there's no cereal. Why has the garbage truck come when it isn't Monday? 99, 104. She backtracks and begins again at 0. The squeal of the truck fades into the night. The little dog's quiet trotting behind her. Overhead, a clear half-moon giggles as it creeps across the sky, winking knowingly at the slowly-spinning earth below.

Waiting for morning.

Transients

Olivia Kate Cerrone

I found a stranger asleep in my tub that morning. The backdoor never locked right in our apartment. My roommates had long shrugged off the vagrants who trespassed through the yard at night, taking refuge in our shed after the last Boston shelter closed for good. I drew back the shower curtain, plastic twisted in my grip. Blood rimmed his nostrils, caked in beard bristle and swollen lips. I'd seen him before in subway tunnels or on park benches, with a cardboard sign between his hands: *Homeless. Anything Helps.* Now again his red-rimmed eyes held mine in question. I shrank beneath his gaze, felt the fear hot and sticky through my guts. He pushed himself upright from the tub's ceramic lips, shampoo bottles and soap tumbling, and muttered something about finding his coat, despite the canvas jacket he wore, streaked in filth. Lumbering past, he returned outside, his gait unsteady. I found my phone and called the police.

Later, a cop dropped by to ask questions. Each attempt I made to describe the man left me hollow and small. I imagined him collapsed somewhere, unconscious nearby. The policeman smiled, said I'd be notified if there were any further questions or an arrest made. Later, I kept watch from my bedroom window, with no good view of anything except the crowded reach of tree limbs and a frozen square of snow-topped land that I planned to revitalize in spring. A wilted row of evergreen shrubs divided us from sidewalks edged in sleet. Long shadows faded between neighboring houses, heralding the cold and early sunset. Another wave of flurries drifted overhead. Inside the narrow room, my space remained warm and dry, sparse of possessions. I lived in bags and boxes, kept a suitcase open at my feet. I gave no thought to photographs and keepsakes, my husband's laughter or the wedding dress still locked away in storage—all that neat packaged chiffon and lace hidden from sight. His death unhinged me still. I feigned sanity through constant motion, fleeing from one destination to the next before the old grief could settle in, filling me with want. The wounded man's face circled my thoughts, pricking me with shame.

Headlights emerged along the street. White satellite trucks expelled new faces, their voices eager and tense. Cameramen advanced along the walkway. Later, I'd discover how the press monitored police scanners for leads. Mine was just another in a series of local incidents exposing the homeless as threat. Better to have made for him a bed from the tub, lining the basin with pillows, fresh linens and quilts. My roommates sat on the sofa, playing Xbox, oblivious.

"Stay inside. Don't say anything," I said. Who knew how they'd twist our words around?

The roommates popped open beers, watched the live broadcast and laughed. All night the newscasters rang at our door. The reporters waited outside until the early morning hours, turning home invasion into house arrest. My hands trembled without

pause. After the news vans left, I slipped on my coat and stood alone on the front steps, breathing in faint smoky traces of burnt leaves and cigarettes, warm against the twilight chill.

The next night the transients returned to our yard for the shed. Low voices emerged with the crunch of footsteps over snow and twigs. I gazed through black sightless windows, unable to decipher faces, before gathering my thickest blanket to leave outside on the stairs. My fingertips pressed against fleece, folding it together with familiar ease. I squeezed the bundle to my chest, returning outside, my feet taking me past the steps, the safe comfort of a home built with sturdy bones and warm light. In the dark, the voices continued to murmur as I approached, realizing then what more I could offer.

Inheritance

Olivia Kate Cerrone

A petrol taste lingers in Elliot's mouth. Inside the Algiers Café of Harvard Square, he washes soot from his hands and face in the restroom before taking his usual spot at the bar, facing the door, where it's possible to watch those who enter from Brattle Street. Younger patrons move past, clutching their phones, and soon disappear from view. Elliot keeps a glass of scotch at his lips, ice chips meeting tongue. He swallows away something charred and bitter, clearing his throat again and again. His phone buzzes for attention. Already his sister Elizabeth is driving through the night, anxious to claim the spoils. He imagines her in those white tennis shorts, her voice snaking across memory. *A house like that belongs to a family.* Perhaps she's even taken those young nephews of his along for the ride. Now the will is settled—his fight dissolved on account of his dementia, early onset and irreversible, along with the fickle sway of the courts. He stands on the wrong side of inheritance. Usurped.

How he cared alone for their mother in the years before her death. The disease ate through her mind, rendering her a child to be fed and washed. In the evenings, he'd take her upstairs to bed and turn on the radio to a station that played Mendelssohn and Bach. The music anchored her to something still beloved. Some nights she'd awake, startled and confused. Often, he waited through the storm of her cries, his limbs too heavy with fatigue. In the end, she no longer remembered his name, confusing him instead with his long-deceased father.

"Jeffrey," she'd say, her hand in Elliot's lap.

It's a night for vices, the touch of a lover he's not heard from in years but still remembers the tug of her long hair between his teeth. He orders another scotch and thumbs through a list of contacts in his phone but cannot remember her name. His mother's shadow fits his own. Elliot drinks. A woman hurries through the door, her leather skirt pulled tight across her thighs. The phone hums again and he pushes it to his ear. Elizabeth's high, intrusive voice appears, asking if he left the spare key under the geranium pot on the front step, where they always kept it as kids. Elliot breathes in the smoke and gasoline woven through the fibers of his coat. He grips his whiskey glass, remembering the hard twist of the gas valve, and wonders then what it might mean to sit among the flames.

"Yes," he says. "It's there waiting for you."

by Wendy Hoffman

FACE RECOGNITION

I was pulling bills from the post office box when a voice called my name. "I recognized you from your back," she said. Her face glowed but looked like she put too much cream on at night. I knew the image. My mind rolled and rolled looking for the right notch. Yellows turned into orange, pinks became purple. Finally it jumped into place and I volleyed back her name. We both fell into joy. "Wendy." "Gerry." We have memory. We can match faces with words. We know.

IRRIGATION MASSACRE

Branches lean down and lick our cheeks.
Trees appear plump with sharp spirits.

I can't imagine how old this forest is.
I wouldn't want to walk here alone

and don't feel that way in other majestic sites.
The air's creases sting.

My companion stops talking about her tumultuous daughter
and tells me about the Chinese workers at the Dungeness irrigation plant

two undulating centuries ago.
We walk by the enormous cement pipe

covered in bursts of moss,
an Asian feel.

When the smuggled immigrants finished the
breaking labor, she says, the bosses placed them at the foot

of the pipeline and turned on torrents of water.
They drowned. They weren't paid.

Maybe some fled. Maybe that's how we know the story.
Or one of the crew spilled.

They don't talk about this funereal ground
during the Irrigation festival.

This river made into a weapon
rolls over mounds of tossed rock

washing away, whispering forever.

SLIDING DOOR

A tiny fly caught between the screen and glass doors could not escape. I moved the screen back and forth trying to get the right position. I made the opening perfect but the miniature fly didn't buzz and fell to the floor. It must have had a heart attack. Sailors probably feel caught like that when hurricanes from all sides press them into the center of storming oceans. Or when you're trying to figure out what life is but everyone around you is an enemy. I murdered the silent fly. I did that.

Later, I showered. A spider with a crinkly orange and brown body clung to the tile wall. Of course, I was not happy to share my shower with the languorous spider and still felt heavy with despair because of my accidental slaughter. The spider elongated some legs to move and shortened others to balance. It leapt behind the bottle of Argan Oil shampoo. We stared at each other. It leapt back. I feared any splashes would drown it or him or her. Two creatures, one human.

When I went to bury the baby fly, it wasn't there.

LUCK

The pastor finally landed
a fitting job and she
delivered a live baby.
They invited the congregation
to their modest home to celebrate.
Pastors and wives have many duties.
I don't know the first one

who threw a coat on the bed.
Without thinking, automatically,
others followed. Coats
and denim jackets, fur lined
and plain, wool and corduroy, waterproof
and regular formed a mound
as high as their fresh Christmas tree

decorated in discreet splendor
in praise of their lord.
After refreshments, the search
for the infant began
and the mother's scream
pierced the other cozy homes on the
well-cared for immaculate block.

CONNECTIONS

I put some old clothes on the sidewalk. That's the way New Yorkers do it. Some apartments are furnished completely with street-finds. The next day while walking on Houston Street toward the Bowery, I saw my discarded clothes walking toward me, on men and women younger than I, and thought of brides with their something borrowed, something blue.

"You're wearing my shirt," I said to the man who scurried away. "That's my hat," I said pointing. The woman put her hand to her head and crossed the trafficked street.

Now that I'm older, I can't stay away from thrift stores. I want to carry on my back other people's sorrows and joys, their torn seams, as I sew on buttons that came off in my dryer.

by Douglas G Campbell

Catacomb

Wanderers within darkness
are not the lost, but the found,
come again as visitors seeking

the cubicula where they chanted
prayed, placed bread upon their tongues
and sipped wine. These spaces

bounded by the bones of martyrs,
disentangled from their flesh
through some kind of torture, hold

fast the tasting, sensing world they
inhabited, but now no longer wear.
For in knowing again that they are

tied to their creator they are freer
now than ever they were before death
smothered them and set them free

to journey and reverence and celebrate
all that was and is and is forever
in new bodies more perfectly and

individually crafted for eternity.

Four Trees

Came down on that windy night
(I'm not sure which one), winds
pushed and pulled at those tall
cedars that stretched upwards from

the steep-sided gully. First a cedar
snapped and fell towards the north.
Its weighty solo shoved against its
leafless neighbor, a maple rooted

in the soft soil of a narrow creek's
bed; it gave way. This duet of trees
leaned into another cedar until
it tilted, tugged on its roots until

they loosed their grasp on rain sodden
soil. All three forming a trio within
the grip of gravitational urgency
came to rest against a fourth and

more obdurate cedar which resisted
the urge to lie prone upon the earth.
So it did not fall. Instead it embraced
a massive Douglas Fir which was

more firmly rooted. For weeks this
quartet remained suspended until
the men with chain saws came. It
did not take them long in that din

of gasoline engines to bring them
all down to recline in death.

Inking the Plate

An etcher is a curious kind of artist,
first covering shiny copper
with a brown recipe of goo, then
allowing acid to eat away at places
where the goo or ground has been scraped
away. Eventually oily ink is forced into
the crevasses resulting from this
nitric appetite before the surface of
the coppery plate is then made
clean again with tarlatan and newsprint.

This dialogue between purity of
surface and tenebristic infusions bespeaks
a tension that is often present
when transferring ideas to paper.
How can, ink and acid not destroy
or ruin everything they intrude upon?

Rembrandt and Goya may have lived
besmirched and somber lives, but
their intaglio works on paper—though
sometimes strange or disturbing—posed
useful questions while directing us
towards places where answers can be
found, if the search is persistent and
the eyes remain unfettered.

Lepidoptera

Sacrificial flesh dividing
serrations of a blade slicing
through a peach
molars pulping fruit
separating fiber
from fiber

Sacramental feathers
framed by pristine snow
colors balancing austerity
incisors shredding warm down
separating fiber
from fiber

Mulberry leaves consecrated
punctured
to satiate voracious worms
coiling silken shrouds
unto transformation
emerging
to flutter within
translucent currents

Verity on canvas
fiber intertwined
with fiber
Caravaggio making incarnate
our past
our present
our future
before fleeing incarceration

Rembrandt bickering
with neighbors
transfixing paint
into dark shadows
souls unpeeled
into bright illuminations
fortuitous emancipations
epiphanies from muck

Rainy Ridge

It was one more cloudy morning,
another in a series of overcast beginnings.
Our trail took us uphill through
columns of evergreens a-drip with
remnant clouds tangled around

their uppermost branches. As we
climbed we glimpsed Wahtum Lake
from open places above boulder fields.
We passed Turks Cap Lilies, Lupines,
Penstemons, Indian Paint Brushes

blooming brightly beneath the clouds
along the Rainy Ridge Trail. We could
see the snowy base of Mount Hood
from the bare and rocky spine between
infillings of clouds. We lost track of

time as we walked further into this
new day and new place. At some point,
it is difficult in retrospect to determine
when, the trail began to slope downward;
instead of firs and hemlocks,

Monkey Puzzle trees rose around us,
enveloping us within a symphony of
strange sounding birdcalls and languid
aromas. When we reached an open meadow,
with small huts scattered about near

a lakeshore, we knew we were lost and
clueless. There were no inhabitants about.
We found a dugout canoe-like craft, along
with two paddles. It beckoned to us,
invited us to set out across this unknown

water. After what seemed hours we saw
a small island with scattered trees and smoke
rose lazily from behind a gentle slope of land.
The island seemed to call to us, so we
altered course from aimlessness to purpose

and soon reached a graveled shore. There

was another canoe pulled up away from the gentle lap of wavelets, so we pulled our borrowed dugout further in and stowed the paddles within the craft. It was then

that an unexpected weariness settled upon us. We could go no further; what energy we had possessed departed and left us lethargic—unable to move. We must have lain down, spread ourselves out atop the grass along

the shore and slept. But when we awoke, it was to gathering darkness. Mount Hood rose confident in its strength, bathed in evening light, but it was now to the north, and we were not beside Wahtum Lake.

CONEY ISLAND, Memorial Day, 1957

Excerpt from “The Coney Island Book of the Dead, An Illustrated Novel,”

Sheila Martin

The kind of night when neon signs dust the boardwalk with light like powdered jewels, when foghorns and roller-coaster screams drown out the brush-beat of the surf, when the ocean’s salt breeze smells of vast windy skies, great clouds of mist roll in on the waves, and the lighthouse at Norton’s Point shines a beacon for ships lost at sea.

It was that kind of night—a night like every night in the City of Fire.

An old man lurched out of the shadows.

“Give me two dollars for this gold doubloon!” he shouted. His face was smeared with dirt, his white beard matted, his eyes smoldering. “No, three dollars! No, one dollar! You, sir.” He poked his finger at a heavy-set man. “You buy it. I built the Half Moon Hotel, now look at me.”

The heavy-set man kept walking.

The beggar made a grab for a woman’s arm, but she dodged out of reach.

“You, lady, buy it or I’ll suck your brains out with a straw!” She walked faster.

“Hey, don’t run away like I’m a leper or something.” He turned and looked at me like he would suck *my* brains out with a straw. “How about you, girlie?” It’s a real pirates’ doubloon. Fifty cents.”

I grabbed Mom’s arm, so skinny it felt like it might break. She jerked it back.

“Don’t cling,” she said.

She'd been like this for a while now, ever since Dad's mama, my bubbie... Just skirting the memory crushed my chest.

Mom was wearing a lace-trimmed blouse too dressy for the boardwalk, even I knew that. It kept slipping off her shoulder, exposing her bra strap. She didn't notice.

She was still taller than me, but I was growing fast, would probably overtake her. I was skinny too, but normal skinny, kid skinny. I had her green eyes and rich dark hair, but mine was a little more red and I had a smattering of freckles like my dad.

"Mom?" I tugged at her arm again, got a whiff of her Arpège perfume, rose and jasmine. "Mom!" I shouted.

"What now!"

"When are the fireworks going to start?"

"Stop it, Sarah!" She pried my fingers off. "How should I know?"

She started scanning the boardwalk for Dad, trying to spot his red hair in the crowd, his sweet-natured face. He was out there somewhere, making the gears turn, but not for us.

"Sinners!" shrieked a preacher. He waved his hand at the crowd. "Filthy degenerates!" He pointed a tremulous finger at the saloon, brazenly open to the boardwalk, its crimson neon sign glowing: Max's Place. Dark and smoky, wallpapered in a flocked pattern of blood-red fleurs-de-lis, it had a horseshoe-shaped bar at its center, wrapped around a raised stage now in shadow. Max's reeked of whiskey, beer, and cheap perfume, the whole place pulsing with drunken laughter. I could just make out my gangster uncle Max, tapping his cigar into an ashtray at a table near the back. Of course he owned the joint.

Mom sighed. The saloon used to be her hangout, was where she met Dad, the beginning of everything as far as my existence goes.

“Blasphemers!” the preacher ranted. “Drunkards! Fornicators!” His eyes scanned the boozers inside the saloon. “You!” He pointed at a platinum blonde on a barstool. She was leaning forward, reaching for her drink, her low-cut dress barely able to contain her heaving white breasts. “Filthy whore!” he shouted. “Jesus died for your sins, yet you entice men to defile you!”

The lady took a sip of her highball with one hand, patted her stiff tower of bleached hair with the other.

A ceiling spotlight sliced a cone out of the curling smoke to reveal the singer on stage, seated at a baby grand. Lenny was a dreamboat in his black tuxedo and bow tie, his shiny dark hair casually tossed back.

“I used to date him, you know,” Mom whispered, as though everyone didn’t know that. He was in love with her before Dad stole her away.

Lenny glanced my way for the briefest of moments, his teeth flashing white against his tanned skin, eyelids half-closed. He tapped the microphone. Boom! Boom! Boom! The drunken laughter dropped away.

“Evening, ladies and gents.” He took a slurp of martini. “I can’t tell you how ring-a-ding-ding it is to be back here in crazy old Funville, U.S.A. Got my start here, you know, right here in Max’s Place, where the broads are stacked and the gasoline’s high octane. Hey, you.” He pointed at a bald man slouched against the bar. “Don’t stop guzzling on my account. You know what I always say, don’t you?”

“What, Lenny?” the platinum blonde called out.

“You’re not drunk...” He winked at her. “If you can lie on the floor without holding

on.” He raised his martini glass with a flourish. “This song’s for you, baby. With a pair of charlies like you have? Va va va voom! You’ll never be lonely.

“And now...” Lenny’s fingers tickled the keys. He crooned, “One For my Baby.”

His voice mesmerized me, pulled me into the broke-down world of grownup love. I wished it was me up there, emptying my heart out, but I was just a kid, I wasn’t even *allowed* in there.

As he sang he inserted new lyrics:

It’s not time to go

I got a story, Sarah, that comes from below...

WHAT! *That’s my name!* He was singing to *me!*

We’ll drink little girl

To the end of someone you know...

FRANKLIN AVE

Rachel Veroff

The girl who works in the wine shop on Fridays is reading poems by Paul Verlaine.

You can see her through the storefront window, perched on a stool and wrapped in a

wool sweater. She is the kind of girl who imagines trading lives with her most vibrant

customers: the smiling wife of the professor, in the slinky dress, the lawyer or the semi famous

painter. Girls who work in wine shops have good taste in poetry, though, somehow, this thought

makes you sad, like being fond of poetry might be a sign of darker inclinations. She wraps

your bottles in crepe paper and admires your aliveness. You are a flaming pyre

of embittered thoughts and old regrets — she has intuition for such things, just like you. She knows

your name because of your receipts but you do not know her name, only that the polish on her fingertips reflects

the glow of the genie light, coming from inside your usual Bordeaux. *I like*

your bracelet, she says, and you startle at the compliment. If only she knew the truth; that

the cold metal bite of jewelry against your skin is nothing to covet, and tonight, in fact, you

would give anything to trade places with *her*, the girl who works in a simple wine store

on Fridays, who does not know (yet), perhaps, that her wares are ships, vessels inside of bottles, dreams

tossed on the black of waves and empty
Brooklyn nights. She cannot know sobriety
would be this hard for you to keep. You are standing alone
beneath the streetlamp, knowing that you can't go *in* . You are
a hysterical, gasping fish caught
on the wrong side of the glass. You are two
weeks out of rehab and never before has your
life been so obviously in shambles. Sobriety
is a nightmare. *Je suis l'Empire à la fin de la décadence*,
you think as you walk willfully into the shop and the pretty
door chime tinkles. This girl might have read these
verses in her book, but she will never know
how foolish she is to envy you.

The Tin Cup

Jana Harris

I was six and always had to be good because Mother had heart trouble. It was a cloudless summer day, so I was allowed to wear my favorite dress; the robin's egg blue one with a print ruffle that my married sister had ironed the day before. After breakfast, when Mother began scrubbing the floor, she suddenly felt unwell. "Dot," she said—that's what she called me, short for daughter—"Could you bring me a cup of water?"

I grabbed the tin drinking cup from the drain-board in the kitchen and ran outside to the well pump. When I stood on my toes, my fingertips just touched the long iron handle, which had a curlicue on the tip of it. I ran back to the house for a chair to stand on, but couldn't get it through the doorway, so I used a split log from the woodpile instead. Standing on a log I could reach the pump handle, but couldn't pull it down; the hinge was too stiff. When I sprang up hoping to use all my weight to depress the handle, the log jumped out from under me and I fell, scraping my knee and tearing my dress. I wanted to cry, but there was no time for that and, with mother unwell, no one to comfort me or come pick me up out of the dirt.

I thought of the milking stool, which I stood on whenever Mother let me mill coffee in the old grinder that Father had fastened to a post in the kitchen. It took all of my might to move the gear handle just an inch. "Try harder, Dot," Mother always coaxed as she stirred a pot of laundry boiling on the stove. The milking stool was nowhere to be found.

A quick search of the barn revealed only the old white mule that Father said I would ride to school when I started the first grade in the fall. Nothing that I could stand on to reach the pump handle, nothing that would make me tall enough to bend over the lever and push it down with my stomach after lifting my feet off the ground.

Other than our well, the nearest water was at the Jensen farm. The mule bent his neck so that I could slide a halter over his muzzle and then buckle it behind his long woolly ears. Leading him from his stall, I mounted bareback by climbing the corral fence. Pointing his nose in the direction of the neighbor's, he read my mind and began plodding in the direction of the windbreak of poplars that crested the wheat field like the spine of our old cow whose bones had been left in the pasture to bleach.

By now the sun was hot and I'd forgotten my bonnet. I wasn't wearing shoes. Kicking the mule did not make him move faster. Flailing my arms had no effect. A mule cannot be hurried, especially a mule as old and set in his ways as that one. When Mr. Jensen saw me ride up holding the reins in one hand the tin cup in the other, he gave me a flask of water to carry around my neck. After I turned the mule in the direction of home,

he plodded a good deal faster, but would not trot. Somewhere along the way the tin cup fell from my hand; later I went back to look for it.

I've always wondered: If I had found another chair to stand on, one that fit through the doorway; if I had stacked more logs from the woodpile under the pump handle; if I had been able to locate the milking stool. When I reached the line of poplars on the way to the Jensens, if I had stopped to break off a branch to use as a quirt; if I had hollered at the top of my voice as I flailed my legs against the mule's ribby hide; if I had remembered the shortcut through Corliss Gold Gulch.

Mother was 36; the day before had been her birthday. Though I went back many times to look for the cup, I never found it. When my father remarried, my stepmother made me a beautiful red dress. Everyone said that I was such a lucky girl, but no one saw her shred the dress with a scissors in front of me. I married at sixteen to escape my brother-in-law who was always trying to get me to himself. I raised five children and outlived two husbands. Next year I celebrate my 100th birthday, if I live that long--I have heart trouble just like my mother. Every day I re-think it: If only I had found a way to hurry that mule.

Red, White and Blues

Janice Hastert

I grew up blue-collar. Mom and Dad sat every night in front of our black and white TV, their filtered cigarette tips burning red-hot, laughing at Groucho and Lucy. We never went anywhere but church and the supermarket. We spoke in code. Homework. Dishes. Bedtime. Why. This was nowhere. I wanted to be somewhere.

I married a redneck right out of high school. Wore a white dress and high hopes. He took me places I'd never been. Mostly redneck bars, but the people were friendly. I felt so happy, I thought I couldn't live without him.

After the wedding, we lived a white trash life in a rundown ranch house in the middle of that same nowhere. Had some kids we raised on a threadbare shoestring. My chain-smoking beer-guzzler couldn't hold a job. He spoke in four-letter words and sat in front of the TV every night laughing at the "Beverly Hillbillies" and "Dukes of Hazzard." Our conversations consisted of "Get me a beer," and "Get it yourself."

I wound up nowhere I wanted to be, and he wasn't taking me anywhere I wanted to go. Came down with a permanent case of the blues. Turned out I couldn't live with him.

After the last kid left home to seek his own happy-ever-after, I started wishing one of this partnership would just lay down and die, preferably him. Of course, if I waited for fate to take up the matter, it might be another twenty years. If I took the matter into my own hands, I'd be a lifer. Probably not much of an improvement.

When I saw a commercial for a divorce lawyer, I threw in my dishtowel and made an appointment. Time to move on. The day I moved out, the redneck stood in the bedroom doorway, watching me empty my closet and throw my clothes in a box. He wanted to know, what with me and the kids deserting him. who was going to get his beer and cook his dinner and mow the grass.

"Guess what. I don't give a damn," I said from across the room.

Then he shouted, "You ain't going nowhere."

"This is nowhere. I'm going somewhere."

He started towards me, his hands clenched. I turned to the dresser and grabbed his gun from the sock drawer. Then I turned around, pointing straight at him.

When he said, "Aw, shoot, Rhonda," I thought he meant it.

Black Bear Lake

Ken Wetherington

The cops say Danny drowned in Black Bear Lake, but they never found his body. The lake lies secluded in the backwoods of the North Carolina mountains. Its deep, murky waters are shrouded in legend. The locals recite countless tales of supernatural happenings, suicidal lovers, and the like. To get there you had to drive for miles down a narrow, dirt track. You couldn't really call it a road. We went there to drink beer and smoke pot.

I remember the last trip with Danny—July 1, 1970. Ted and George came with us, and Danny brought his girlfriend, Ellen. That summer we drove up from our various home towns and gathered at the small college in western North Carolina we attended. An excursion to Black Bear Lake offered an antidote to the summer doldrums after our sophomore year and a way to blot out the uncertainty of what was to come.

On previous trips, we limited our activity to hiking, but this time Ted prodded us to get out on the water. His father loaned us two canoes, which we strapped to the top of my car. For a couple of hours we jolted along over uneven terrain and splashed through shallow streams, sometimes barely squeezing through the encroaching undergrowth. On one occasion the thicket hung so low we had to remove the canoes and drag them for a hundred feet or so before securing them once again.

Finally, the lake came into view. Its serene water, surrounded by the graceful blueness of the mountains, never failed to fill me with a sense of peacefulness I have seldom found elsewhere. We unloaded our gear, piled into the canoes, and set out with an abundance of enthusiasm. Paddling, we quickly discovered, is considerably more difficult than it appears in the movies. We were just a bunch of overindulged college kids who had never put in a day of manual labor in our lives, but we goaded each other on and eventually reached our destination—a small island in the middle of the lake.

Danny immediately produced a Frisbee and sent it sailing down the small, sandy strip, which served as a miniature beach. Ellen chased it down and flung it back. Ted, George, and I unloaded tents, backpacks, and the all-important cooler. George wasted no time in cracking open a beer. He looked over at me.

“Want one?”

I shook my head. “We’ve got lots of time. Let’s explore first.”

Ted gave a nod. “I’ll come.”

We left George to his beer and struck out. Low, scrubby bushes populated the small island, and a few, gnarly trees grew here and there. We quickly reached the opposite shore.

“Not much here,” I said.

Ted picked up a stick and swung it aimlessly. “It’s just fine,”

“Yeah. I guess you’re right. Enough room for the five of us, for sure.”

By the time we got back, George had joined the Frisbee game. Next to Danny's lean, graceful motions and Ellen's quickness, he looked like a stumbling giant launching his big, awkward body across the sand in an earnest, but futile, effort to make a catch. When he went sprawling, Ted approached and offered his hand.

"Thanks," George mumbled. "I guess I need another beer."

Ted held up a joint. "Why don't we have a smoke instead?"

The afternoon passed in a blur of pot and beer. George fell asleep, but the rest of us rose dutifully to our feet and began gathering wood for a fire. Danny and Ellen took charge of cooking the burgers while Ted and I stretched out on the sand.

"They say a Cherokee brave drowned his unfaithful squaw in the lake..." Ted began.

"I heard," Ellen interrupted as she flipped the burgers, "that he drowned her because she caught him cheating on her."

"He said, she said," I replied. "There are many versions of that old story. Some say they were newlyweds out for a swim when she caught a cramp, and they both drowned when he tried to save her."

Ted waved off my remark. "Well, an old Indian told me it was the squaw that was cheating."

Ellen gave him a skeptical glance. "Yeah, but I'll bet that old Indian's wife put the blame on the man."

Danny struck a chord on the guitar he had brought. "I think I'll write a song about it."

"You're too late," I said. "All these old legends have been set to music many times."

"None as good as the tune I'll compose."

"We'll see," I said, with a laugh.

Danny strummed another chord and hummed softly.

Ted grinned. "Off to a great start."

"Just keeping my mind busy." Danny stuck a dissonant chord. "Tomorrow will..."

"Hush." Ellen's voice was a whisper. "Let's not think about tomorrow."

It was too late. Danny's remark had shattered the mood. An uneasy quiet fell upon us, broken only by the sizzling of the burgers. Though we tried to avoid it, the randomness that would determine our futures weighed heavily on our minds. Finally, Ellen took up the last of the burgers.

"Shall we wake George for dinner?" I asked.

Ted grinned mischievously. "Let him sleep,"

Ellen smiled. "You're bad boys." She bent over George and gave him a kiss on his forehead. He awoke startled and looked around in wide-eyed bewilderment.

"You just died and went to heaven," Ted joked. Everyone laughed.

Afterwards, Danny picked up his guitar and played, while we listened drowsily. Ellen sung softly to some of the popular songs. The fire popped and crackled in accompaniment. How could life be any better?

Darkness comes quickly when there's no electricity. The dying fire and our single lantern provided enough light to set up the tents and roll out our sleeping bags.

Danny surveyed the moonless night. "How about a swim before bedtime?" Without waiting for a response, he stripped off his clothes, and plunged naked into the cold, dark water. I didn't feel the urge to jump in. Even in the summer those mountain lakes were frigid, especially after sundown, but a moment later Ellen rose, slipped out of her clothes, and followed him.

"All right!" exclaimed George, rising to his feet in lusty excitement.

"Hold on, George." Ted reached up and grabbed his elbow. "Let them have some fun."

George looked down at Ted and me. I nodded my agreement. "Aww...", he complained and dropped down on the sand with a grunt.

Ten minutes later, Danny's lanky form and Ellen's petite body emerged, shivering in the cool, night air. They wrapped themselves in a couple of towels and sat close to the fire. We passed around another joint. After the last toke, Danny and Ellen retreated to their tent. The rest of us turned in, too. The ground was hard, but we were tired and sleep came easily despite the nightly insect chorus.

We drove back to campus the next morning to face what we all dreaded. For any trip, returning is less fun than going. In the summer of 1970, it proved to be especially true. The journey passed largely in silence—five teens crammed tightly together in a small space, each alone with his or her own thoughts.

On campus, we bought a newspaper at the newsstand next to the post office and anxiously scanned the draft lottery numbers. I breathed a sigh of relief when I read 272 by my birthdate—plenty high enough to avoid induction. Ted, after checking his number, looked up and gave a grin, the tension dropping from his face.

George frowned. "110," he murmured. "What do you think?"

I paused before answering. "Could go either way. What's your birthday, Danny?"

He glanced over my shoulder. "Shit. May 29th."

A heavy silence descended over our little band. Ellen began to cry. Danny put his arm around her. Together they walked away as if they were one instead of two.

George glanced at his watch. "I gotta go and meet Walt," he said and hurried off.

Ted and I shuffled over to the student union and plopped down on a bench out front. Ted spoke first.

"He'll get a student deferment."

"Maybe. His grades aren't so hot. If he flunks out..."

"Yeah, I know what you mean. This should motivate him to work harder, but I could see it having the opposite effect on Danny."

"You might be right, Ted. After all, a deferment would only delay the inevitable."

"Yeah, I guess. Deferments run out eventually, don't they? I feel guilty. We were lucky and Danny wasn't. How do you feel?"

"Me? Suddenly, I feel old."

We drifted back to our separate summer lives. Danny didn't return for fall semester though his induction wasn't scheduled until February. He sent a letter saying he intended to enlist. "The sooner I go in, the sooner I'll get out," he wrote. Ellen returned to school, but we didn't see her much. Ted and I roomed together that semester in an off-campus apartment. On a cool, crisp morning in late October a knock on my door awakened me. I thought Ted had forgotten his key again, but in the doorway stood a deputy sheriff.

He confirmed my identity and asked, "Do you know a Daniel Forsyth?"

"Yes," I responded, with trepidation. At first I feared Danny had been caught with a bag of pot. The sweat began to bead on my forehead and collect under my armpits. I tried not to think about the stash in my dresser.

"I have some bad news for you. Your friend is missing. We found his car up at Black Bear Lake."

"He may be hiking in the area," I felt relief that I wasn't the object of his visit. "He's probably with friends up there. I'm surprised he didn't call me. He usually does when he's coming up."

"The thing is," the officer continued. "We found the canoe he rented. Was he a good swimmer?"

A knot of dread formed in the pit of my stomach. I tried to deny it. "Yeah, real good. You think he drowned?"

"It's looking that way. He should have returned the canoe a two days ago and his girlfriend hasn't heard from him."

Numbness washed over my body. "He wouldn't drown," I stated with certainty, for the officer's benefit and my own.

"Do you know if he was depressed?" The officer's voice was flat and routine.

"Suicide? Not Danny." My words sounded too loud. "He's not the type."

"His girlfriend, uh..." The Deputy checked his notepad. "Ellen Barker, she says he's been moody."

"Well, yeah. He's got his worries as we all do." I decided to not mention his draft status, perhaps due to a generational distrust of authority. Besides, this deputy appeared intent on telling me things I knew were not true. Why should I give him any information? Anyway, I didn't see how it would help find Danny.

"When did you see him last?"

"July."

After a couple more questions, the officer concluded the interview. He jotted down a few notes and started to leave, but turned back.

"Give us a call if you hear from him, okay?" He handed his card to me.

For several minutes, I stood there, too stunned to move. I stared at his card and tried to come to terms with what he had said. It seemed unreal. My phone rang, stirring me from my thoughts. I guessed before answering, Ted or George was calling to tell me what I already knew.

The weeks passed without news. Slowly we began to acknowledge our worst fears. George, Ted, and I mulled over a variety of speculations. Did he drown by accident or by intent? In a burst of unsupported optimism, we concocted the idea that he faked it and went into hiding or possibly fled to Canada. We had no evidence for any of our theories. In time, we came to accept the official narrative of a “probable drowning,” though we often wondered if the local authorities lacked the incentive to fully investigate the disappearance of a long-haired college kid.

We did our best to console Ellen, but before Thanksgiving she withdrew from school and returned home. George quit at the end of the semester and enlisted. To “take Danny’s place,” he said. I tried to talk him out of it, but George had a stubborn streak once he made up his mind. He never came back from Vietnam.

The following summer, Ted and I made the trek to Black Bear Lake. In vain, we sought to relive the pleasures of summers past, but joy eluded us. We missed the camaraderie of our friends. Without the joking and singing that sustained us the previous summer, paddling to the island took an eternity. We quickly tired of chasing the Frisbee, which seemed to consciously drift just beyond our reach. The ritual of making a fire and cooking burgers became a quotidian task. Afterwards, we settled down with a joint and a couple of beers to watch the sunset. Ted broke the silence

“It’s only been a year, but it seems like a lifetime,”

“Yeah, I feel so much older.”

Ted inhaled a long toke. “Danny’s out there somewhere.”

I nodded. “I suppose he’ll become one more chapter in the legend of Black Bear Lake.”

“Yeah, I think he’d like that.” Ted’s grin was barely visible in the fading light. “Don’t you?”

I felt Ted was wrong. Being a live person is better than a being a dead legend, but I didn’t contradict his romantic notion. We talked a while longer, our conversation meandering through a cannabis haze. Eventually sleep came, interrupted only by the need to urinate.

Ted and I pursued our studies, and both graduated a semester late. They say you can do college in four years, but a lot of my friends took longer. A few never finished. After graduation Ted got a bank job in Charlotte, and I went to work for a university in Raleigh. Only a few hours of interstate highway separated us, but as time passed, we saw each other less. Neither of us fully embraced the social media revolution that has helped succeeding generations stay in touch with virtually everyone they ever knew. However, we managed to attend each other’s wedding. Then came parenthood, kids, and their soccer games and gymnastics. I knew we were micromanaging our kids’ lives, but you fall into the pattern of your times.

It’s astounding how having children makes the decades fly. Memories dim with the passing years. Faces are remembered, but names forgotten. Details get fuzzy, and

the chronology of life becomes scrambled. Often, I fail to recall who was with me at certain times, but that day at Black Bear Lake in the summer of 1970 remains crystal clear in my mind.

My retirement, which had seemed so distant for so long, suddenly loomed close. Freedom from my working life finally lay before me with its fickle promises of copious spare time. I planned to spend my days leisurely reading all the books I had never found the time for, doing a little writing myself, and taking a couple of special vacations with my wife.

One day out of the blue, Ted called. It had been more than a year since we last spoke. We had grown apart in tastes and politics. Our common ground remained rooted in the past.

“What’s up?” I asked.

“You remember Ellen, Danny’s girl?”

“Sure.”

“I just heard from Walt. You remember him, right? He says Ellen is living in the backwoods of Canada—way out west, north of Vancouver. She’s got a cabin in the middle of nowhere and she hooked up with some musician.”

“Good for her. She always had a thing for musicians. I worried about her after Danny died.”

“Let’s go see her.” Ted’s tone took on an enthusiastic edge.

“Whoa. I can’t drop everything and fly to Vancouver. We haven’t seen Ellen in... forty years. I wouldn’t have anything to say to her.”

“What if he turned out to be Danny?”

“Who? Who do you mean?”

“That musician she’s shackled up with... could be Danny.”

“You’re crazy, Ted.”

“They never found his body.”

“But we would have heard from him. When President Carter granted that universal amnesty in the mid-seventies, he would have come home.”

“Maybe not, if Ellen was with him, or... if he felt guilty about George. You know, enlisting in his place.”

“You’re crazy,” I repeated. “You’re getting old and feeble-minded like me.”

“Maybe that’s so, but I want to go back in time and make everything come out right.”

“Sure, Ted, we all feel that way. Hey, next summer after I retire, let’s take a trip to Black Bear Lake, for old times’ sake.”

“Okay, old man. I’ll see you then.”

I picked up Ted in Charlotte the following summer and drove to our old stomping grounds. The trip began with small talk but soon turned to the “good ole days” and then to Danny.

“Maybe he skipped off to Canada.” Ted’s words smacked of self-delusion rather than conviction.

“Yeah, maybe, but Black Bear Lake is deep and muddy. He might be there.”

“They didn’t find him. He could have faked his suicide.”

“You sound like a conspiracy nut. He wouldn’t have done that,” I countered. “I don’t think the cops did a great job of investigating his death. He meant nothing to them. But even if they made the effort, they may not have found him. In those days they didn’t have the technology they do today.”

“But we know Ellen is in Canada. Walt made it sound like she’s living off the grid. Why would she be there if not to be with Danny?”

“I don’t know, Ted. Who can say why some folks end up in the places they do?”

Ted shook his head. “If I was Danny, I’d feel guilty about George. I don’t know if I could face everyone.”

“Guilt’s a funny thing. Sometimes I feel like it’s my fault for failing to talk George out of joining up even though I tried. But it’s crazy to think about changing the past. You have to live with it.”

In a small town near campus we rented a canoe, strapped it to the roof of my car, and headed for the lake. To our surprise, a newly graveled road took the adventure out of the journey. At the lake shore a parking lot and canoe rental stand greeted us. A party of boy scouts occupied several picnic tables. On the surface of the water, a dozen or so paddlers worked their crafts back and forth.

“Damn,” I said. “I guess we didn’t need to haul a canoe up here.”

We stood for a few moments, not knowing what to do next.

“It’s changed a lot.” Ted didn’t try to hide his disappointment. “It’s too goddamn wholesome. They’ve practically ruined it. The worst thing is that damned road. Getting here used to be half the fun.”

We strolled around the site and discovered a few cabins had been constructed beyond the picnic tables. Meanwhile, the scouts had broken into teams and the scoutmasters were laying down rules for some sort of game.

“That’s really roughing it.” I nodded toward the cabins. “They probably have electricity and running water.”

“Next thing you know they’ll put in an RV parking lot,” Ted grunted.

We leaned against my car and surveyed the scene. I couldn’t deny everyone there was having fun, except us—two grumpy old farts disenchanted with the unexpected changes to the paradise they had hoped to reclaim.

Ted broke the spell. “Is Danny out there, or in Canada? What do you really think?”

“I don’t know, but either way, he didn’t want to be found.”

“I suppose you’re right,” Ted conceded with a sigh.

After a few minutes of indecision, we got back in my car and drove away. Memories of times past and songs sung long ago surged up within us. We laughed at our youthful follies and sang the old songs all the way home.

by Larry Narron

CRIPPLED RAIN

Downpour,
a useless color.

Down here
under the atmosphere,
crippled rain can't decide
whether it wants
to be hail.

Would-be
pebbles
dissolve.

Thirst of feet quenched
through soles worn thin
from walking past
ghost town bus stops.

Calluses kiss

gravel until
it hurts.

The pang shudders.

CYCLES

What is she washing?
written sideways on the page.
Fade in to Laundromat:
junkies in arms. Suds spinning
until they're bubbleless. . . .
Teenage girl in middle age
skin—so pregnant. I feel
her pulse under her
black *Playboy* bunny neck tat.
Her baby belly, a selfish hope.

ORPHANED MICROPHONES

In the echo chamber of my only
skeleton (in which I sought to sound-
proof the interior of my bones

with discarded egg cartons),
I fastened myself with marrow,
the memory of coils: a recording

booth sweating reverb, the ecto-
plasm of weeping syllables,
a piano's death rattle of chords.

PRELUDE TO WEBINAR

By the time I finally find the hotel
where the bullshit conference is scheduled,
I realize I've left my Obamaphone

in my other pants at my colleague/
girlfriend's apartment in Michigan. These ones
are wrinkled from the six-hour-with-lay-

over-red-eye-return from Detroit,
where she'd asked me to babysit her thirty-
something son (whom I suspect

is older than I am). We got drunk on
her living room couch & he showed me
the ropes about betting on fantasy

football. Now I'm hung over with jet lag.
I've locked the keys in the rental,
left the windshield wipers waving.

Violence squeaks back & forth,
mocking my uneven dirty-
blond unibrow. Through their blades,

at least I can fancy my tinted
reflection relates, its clip-on
tie crooked & obvious, its dress shirt

from the dollar store only half tucked,
its fly left unzipped. The laptop
I desperately need for the icebreaker

webinar is tragically locked in the trunk—
overheating, I'm sure, whirring with
unopened emails I should've read months ago.

ELECTION SEASON

Making a last-
minute left at a light,
bald tires screech

through the intersection.
In the shade of a squealing
electrical tower, shadows of power

lines tangle my hands to the wheel.
Over the airwaves,
the jingle of an invisible

cartoon bird strangled
by static. Sweaty conservative talk
radio uncorks my ear-

drum. Uncertain as snow
in November, I'm one
third rebellion,

two thirds apathy
as a Mexican love song drowns
out a rant on investing

in silver.

THE INTERVENTION Bill Yarrow

for Joani

Part One

A horde of well-intentioned poets I had met online descended upon Lake Forest where I had gone to attend a lecture entitled "Jung Love." They accosted me outside the hall and dragged me to a craft brewery where, in a back room decorated with stainless knives, they surrounded me and then drew their circle tighter. "Bill," they said solemnly, "you're publishing too much too quickly. We think that's unhealthy. We want you to slow down. You're becoming a fame whore."

A fame whore!? I shouted. *I have as much integrity as any poet here!* and then I paused as the absurdity of my words dripped, like dark irony, down my legs.

I look around the room at the sharp noses and bulbous heads of the assembled poets come to save me—from myself—but when had that ever worked? Hadn't Kafka taught us there's no rescue especially from indenture to a muse? What were they going to do anyway—get me banned from Submittable?

I brandished my new manuscript. *You'll never stop me! Never! Never!* Wriggling free from the grip of their overdeveloped index fingers, I ran out into the octave of streets and signs, hissing, *You dare tell me what not to do? ME? Hear me, recreants! I'm unfriending the whole rotten lot of you!*

Part Two

- Have the nightmares subsided any? the lady in white queried.
- Do you mean have they lessened in frequency? Yes.
But not in intensity. I still feel pursued by harpies.
They tear at the buttons of my Beethoven pajamas!
They threaten to boil my brains within my skull!
Yesterday, they threatened to laminate my writing hand!
- Now, now. Take it easy. No one's going to do any tearing
or boiling or laminating around here. You can rest easy.
- Where's my manuscript? What have you done with my
manuscript?
- It's quite safe. We've locked it in the vault as you requested.
- Bring it to me! Bring it to me! I need to see it. There's something
I need to fix.
- Why don't you try to get some sleep? You can fix it later.
- [*Shouting*] I don't have time for later! Later is just the foul excrescence of now!
- [*Screaming*] I'm being tortured by the muddy suddenness of sudden
muddiness!!! [*Begins beating at his head, violent thrashing from side to side*]
- Ssshhh. Go to sleep, my little poet. [*Administers sedative*] Go to sleep, you
benign trollop.

Part Three

—We'd like to ask you a few questions. Is that OK with you?

—[*Silence*]

—What is your name?

—Hame. Jaime. Houdi. Houdini.

—How old are you?

—All tolled? All toilet? Lancet. Recess.

—Do you know where you are?

—I know. I know. I know those are pearls that were his eyes. I know let's go down to the sea in ships. I know he went to sea in a sieve. I know the water it soon came in. It did. And then he capsized on the sea. Capsized. On the sea. Poor sea. Mercì. Mercy. DMZ. DMZists.

—Do you know who I am?

—Yes, Popeye. I'm Olive. Olive Oil. Oil for love. Oil's well that ends oil. Oil you need is love. Love is oil you need.

[*Begins to dance*]

—Sit down. Please sit down. It'll be OK. It'll be OK if you just sit down. OK? I promise you it will be OK. You have my word.

—Word. Bird. Curd. Merde. Word inferred! Word deterred! Word absurd!

Word is turd! My word. Your word. Your word. My word. My word. My word.

My word.

BODY PARTS **Bill Yarrow**

They were playing chess with body parts of children they had sacrificed to God.

The battalions of pawns were tiny teeth. The darting rooks were eyes. The frosty knights were hollow cheeks. The blushing bishops were ears. The Queen was a nose. The King was a tongue, upright but unsteady, like a vertical snake.

Antoine was red, his soldiers bristling and bloody. Emily had black, her men dark with decay.

Antoine went first and moved the tooth in front of his tongue one space forward. Emily moved her same tooth forward two squares.

Antoine took out his nose's cheek. Emily nudged her tooth further forward.

Antoine matched her by moving out his other cheek. Emily considered his move and put her hand on her ear.

Antoine attempted the moves leading to Blake's Fool's Mate, but as he went through those tired motions, Emily had moved out all of her black teeth, forming a moat of absence between her front and rear lines, her nose proudly exposed.

Then Antoine played the Irresistible Tongue. Emily countered with the Insatiable Eye.

It was as if they were playing two different games or playing two different kinds of chess, one landed, one lunar.

I gave up my space in the front row and pushed out through the thronging crowd which howled or moaned at each succeeding move.

The hall was air conditioned and, as I was cold, this spurred the urge to empty my bladder.

"Who's ahead in points?" I asked the bearded man in the urinal next to mine. "No pieces have yet been exchanged," he said, zombielike, staring straight in front of him.

I zipped up and washed my hands.

I would have liked to have stayed, but having given up my seat and realizing there was no viable way back into the hall, I left, regretful but resigned.

I read in the next day's paper that patriarchy, though threatened, had prevailed. Antoine had won, but, so shaken had he been when playing Emily, he ceded the championship title to her.

Emily thanked him but declined the offer. She refused to win the crown by forfeit and was applauded in the press for her integrity.

"Self righteous!!!" cried her fans.

"Self righteous!" cried her foes.

I was undecided. I could see both sides of the equation as I could see both sides of the game, its divergent opponents and contradictory styles.

Ultimately though, it made no difference.

The government stepped in and, citing sanitation and health concerns, banned all games played with body parts.

CONSORTING WITH LUNACY

Bill Yarrow

What interests me most about insane people is how reasoned they can be. Like drunks who walk the perfect straight line, they take pains to sound intelligent, citing ill-vetted evidence, putative news reports, or soi-disant statistics. They build their irrational edifice brick by faulty brick, and I watch with amused horror as it teeters above me like Mount Sinai looming over Christian in *Pilgrim's Progress*.

Sooner or later, however, they are betrayed by their madness. Sooner or later, they reveal to me, often in hushed tones, that Queen Elizabeth is the great granddaughter of Jack the Ripper or they confide to me that they last had a bowel movement in 1990.

The sane are betrayed not by madness per se but by their passion, which, as manifested in zealotry, resembles insanity. When passion enters, it disfigures a person, and the person, so disfigured, cannot be easily distinguished from a madman. Blake's was right to distinguish between "being" in a passion and "having" a passion in one.

But who would want entirely to exclude passion from living? What kind of existence would that tightly guarded a life be? My heart breaks at John Barrymore's portrayal of Hilary Fairchild, the innately-enthusiastic but mentally-tenuous father in *A Bill of Divorcement* who tries but fails to contain his surging emotion.

I'm renting a room in an old stone house. The man in the bedroom below me is a seventy-seven-year-old madman, washed but ill-kempt, whose paranoia unspools in conspiracy theories that put him in the center of every story he tells.

When I get in one evening, he's sitting in the dining room watching TV. He offers to share his dessert with me. Would I like half of a frozen brownie?

I would! I'm hungry tonight. I could do with something sweet. I take the proffered sweet.

What am I doing? Am I crazy? What if the brownie has been laced with drugs? What if it has been poisoned or contains something vile?

My thinking begins to race in strange directions, imagining lurid scenarios in which I defend myself with household objects against a multiplicity of unprovoked attacks as he talks to me about the government, big-box stores, corporations, the military, low-level bureaucrats, information requests, espionage, cover ups, shadowy plots.

I listen in silence. Dare I interrupt him? What kind of umbrage might he take if I

question his facts or logic?

Might he, in the middle of his tortured rant, leap upon me, go for my throat, embed his bony fingers in my neck?

Might I then grab the rotary phone on the desk and smash it against his greying head?

Who is more paranoid than whom?

Where will this end? Where will this end!

How did I become a character in a Poe story?

His crazy talk continues. He will not pause even to take a breath. There's no stopping him, no stopping his mouth.

I begin to yawn—authentically at first, then theatrically.

"I'm sorry, but I'm *very* tired. It's been *such* a long day. Thanks so much for the brownie. I *really* enjoyed it. I'm going to turn in now."

"OK," he says. "I'll be here in the morning when you wake up."

There's a bit of frozen brownie still in my mouth. I swallow the wrong way and begin to gag.

OCEAN

Michael Chin

The girl's name was Ocean. I chatted her up at the Tiki bar, this beachfront, would-be vacation spot turned dirt-cheap as autumn set in. She wore a black sweater and her hair was dyed a shade of electric blue. She told me her parents had named her Lake, but said we all grow vaster. She'd grown up—besides which, she had an ex-lover it was better couldn't find her by name. I asked what he did.

"She didn't know when to quit," Ocean said. "Busted my window and stole my beta fish."

I might've read the reference to an old girlfriend as a hint, but the bartender delivered her California Roll and Ocean said I ought to help her finish it. I was skeptical of sushi in the south, let alone in a bar, but asked her how it was. She drizzled soy sauce over one piece, bypassed the chopsticks, and picked it up between her thumb and middle finger. "See for yourself."

It crunched in a way a California Roll shouldn't have, but wasn't so bad otherwise.

Ben was supposed to walk by casually and I'd give him a look to say he ought to extricate me, or leave us be. Maybe he took the shared sushi as a sign to stay scarce, I thought, except then I spotted him chatting up a pretty girl with curly red hair and realized that as far as he was concerned, I didn't exist anymore.

I finished my beer. We finished the sushi. I asked what the red-orange concoction she was sipping off was supposed to be and she told me I ought to try that, too, and it was too sweet to be good.

But when it was gone, she asked if I wanted to get out of there.

It was easy to get out of a bar like that without doors, just a few short steps from down the wooden stairs back to the sand. I tried to catch Ben's eye on my way out but he didn't notice me, or at least didn't offer any recognition, and I figured we'd each might as well have our fun, and left him to the redhead—he had a hand on her leg by that point, and she hadn't reciprocated but wasn't exactly chasing him away either.

Ocean kicked off her flip flops and led me to the water, so I paused and took off my shoes and socks, too, and followed after her. The sun was going down when Ben and I got to the bar—a romantic sunset, and we figured that might give us a better shot at finding girls hungry for affection. By the time Ocean and I were walking the shore line, by the time the cold water rushed over our feet, it was dark out. I was always paranoid about walking into water, and kept my eyes down, wary of jellyfish or squid or piranha attacks. I kept my eyes down, even when Ocean took hold of my hand.

I didn't realize we were walking to any place until we took a turn back to solid land, and up to a house she seemed to know, where she took a garden hose hanging from the picket fence and hosed off our feet with icy cold water, the kind of water that might have been imported from the Pacific, much colder than the Atlantic.

I dried my feet by hand, a disgusting practice that I always imagined everyone did

in a beach town, so I was always shaking hands with someone's dirty feet.

I got my socks on and started to pull on my shoes when she said to keep them off and led the way down a little cement walkway to the house.

It was unclear if the room we entered through were merely a room, or her entire place, but it might have been, a California king-sized bed, a sink and two-burner stove, a convenience fridge, a suitcase overflowing with untidily packed clothes. A person might live like this.

All of this and the camera on a tripod just inside the door, pointed at the bed. She turned it on. I asked her what was going on.

She pulled off her sweater—a practiced move. She was very thin, skin pale enough to see the veins in arms, blue and pulsing, beneath. “Isn't this what you wanted?”

Ben and I had had this conversation on the drive down about how sex wasn't the same as pornography, how it was a different animal altogether. *Funny isn't it?* He said. *I'm not saying there's any substitute for skin on skin—it just isn't possible in real life. Either I can't hold out long enough or it gets weird.* He gave me specific scenarios, each stranger than the one before it, from sex in a shower to eating out a girl from behind, to sucking her toes. *Good in fantasy, bad in practice. The great paradox of our times.*

I was never much for porn, always clicking off the video or the pictures before they loaded all the way, lest they fry my computer. I tried to add a different kind of nuance to the conversation, about pornography messing with a person's perspective until you looked at everyone some kind of player in some kind of fantasy.

Isn't that what everyone is?

There Ocean was, revealed, there for the taking, every blemish in full relief. She slid her thumb over my belt buckle, arm fully extended. I imagined her in center frame for the camera, that I may fall just outside the lens's view. Or maybe I was already in. Too far to go back.

Ocean unzipped my fly, pulled me out, the teeth of the zipper all around me, all risk, all the possibility of cutting.

She looked up at me, eyes big, blue-green, and staring.

What choice did I have but to dive in?

Resurrection

Nothing buried is ever far. I dreamed of a faraway marriage to someone I never knew. Unearthed green French calico wrapping paper fragments survived.

Unopened gifts of pale green porcelain squirrels, chasing one another in a line, meant for hanging on a wall.

The world wants me to tell it what I have here, but perhaps I have unearthed my original heart –

can't I just keep it for myself?

As I say, I don't know what dreams are murmuring to me –

I need the chance to course through the excavation site and run some tests.

I need to find my label maker.

Elements of Enchantment

Crow's gift of a stomach or gizzard, soaking in my birdbath with the agates and jaspers, to be traded for some pretzels cast into the yard.

Skeletonized squirrel or mountain beaver found among decaying leaves of my garden, taken apart, painted, glittered and etched, drilled and beaded onto silk.

My bones, my innards, beaded or traded.

Come to Me

Joseph Krauter

I am so loud that you will not hear anything.

I touch everything so you will feel nothing.

I am so vast, so that you won 't see anything.

Come to me.

Come to me.

Come to me.

I will not hurt you.

What I consume, I give back.

Do not be afraid.

He sat legs splayed out in front of him almost touching the opposite side of the hallway; tv eggshell walls etched with rust-brown claw marks—desperate finger holds ranging in size from child to man. Cracked, chunked Saltillo tiled floor led down the dimly lit hallway.

Old, battered cardboard boxes mile-stone marked how far he could go before he got to the door. An antique metronome marked the end of safety before the door.

He looked in the other direction, squinting at the train tunnel brightness trampling endlessly through a massive windshield, light that promised pain, like burning sand in his eyes, on his skin. That drowned him in indiscernible sound as it got brighter.

Cool air traced fingertips over his scarred arms, legs, and face, stirred through his hair, eagerly tugging his clothes, like a hungry lover pulling him into bed; smelling of rain and moist earth.

Come to me.

The door banged open and closed, echoing up the hallway to him. The slams counter pointed rhythm to the anchor of the metronome's tick tock.

He rolled slowly into a crouch, hands splayed on the abused tiles. Like an animal: wolf, tiger, scared dog trying to be brave.

Come to me.

They weren't words. Never were nor thought not even sound. Just felt, in the deep down, where things are just known without why or how.

Today he wouldn't run away. Today was not another day to leave his desperate journal entry in blood and fingernails on the walls and floor.

He stood. One hand on the wall, walking to the tick tock of his metronome, heart beating to the creak and crash of the door.

Come to me.

The hallway inhaled, the air stirring stronger with each step. Metronome. Not

even one hundred paces away. Ten paces after

Come to me.

A door. Metal, no knob, handle or lock, banging from what lived behind it.

He swallowed blind fear mixed with desire—to just go. To go away inside, to stop fighting to be present outside. His hand pressed flat against the door, cool, calm. And shoved it open.

Wind roared into the hallway; cold moist air dug into his clothes and hair, pulling him forward through the doorway.

Come

To

Me

A field of demolished earth and destroyed buildings stretched out before him. Pieces of farm tractors, trucks, cars stand stabbed into the wet churned dirt—headstones of God knew what memory. Eight paces ahead was a steel pipe frame sunk into concrete, making a hitching post. A chain with a padlock dangled, swinging in the wind. A last point before no return.

The hand of God, wrathbound to destroy all before it, rose before him dominating the sky, feeling like it was reaching for him and him alone. Lightning slashed: purple after imaging terror.

How could he fight the hand of God?

The tornado was stationary, ripping debris into itself and hurling out freshly

mangled headstones for its claimed land.

His courage curled in his toes and balled up into his fists: soaked in sweat and panting, ht began to walk toward it. He touched the hitching post gaining strength from the memories of being here before, against his will; to be strong, to resist the pull and not break. His steps echoing the anchor in the hallway.

Come to me.

Tick, lock.

"I'm com—"

The door smashed closed behind him....

by Labecca Jones

Blue Ribbon Babies

The Southern Baptist nursery
taught proper care
of foster babies
to girls who wanted
out of Sunday School
or choir practice.

We rocked, swayed, pointed
out windows at birds and bushes
listened to one-inch speakers muffling
a chorus in C flat, then sharp,
with too many verses.

Blue ribbon babies never
cried unless we held them
too long, rocked too hard
or if they had the hiccoughs.

We laid them down
in a crib, on the floor,
waiting for the screams
to die while we sat, silenced,
before moving the blanket,
pacifier, pillows, the way
foster mommies said
before onesies revealed
a straight-line bruise
from a wooden staircase,
the rounded swelling
from a fist, a belt or boot.

We hummed *Jesus Loves Me*
yes I know to bruised babies,
blue ribbons wrapped
around their waists,
reminders not to pick them up,
to burp them from the diaper up
and always set them down
on stacked pillows.

Rattled

The wind outside
my bedroom window echoes
the force of Mother.
It shrieks
screams
freezing breezes
into bedrooms
where I don't sleep,
a kitchen
where no one eats.

Glass rattles
between broken words
and closed pains.

Cold lingers,
clings to curtains,
keeps frozen
what needs warmth:
quilts, curtains,
untouchable vents
remain worthless
to gusts
such as these;
dragging my appetite
to crumbs
hidden in table cracks.

Outside warms
lilacs open to bees,
buds separate
dead leaves.
The sun is back
but indoor winter
never ends.
Mother's words whip
through cloth,
rip at hair strands,
tangle thoughts

of me being:
spoiled, someday
too-thick for love.

The cupboards stick
closed, empty,
trapped-shut by wind
ever-whipping
this house around
and won't stop
telling, reminding
me of the cold
inside out.

My Own

Nathan and Steve taught me
to hold my own Kershaw,
.45, JD, since I was *primed*
light weight, polite,
for the taking,
every predator's wet dream

with my downward eyes,
hip twists and great tits
asking for it
until I learned screams,
sharpening and magazines,
every Thursday I didn't work,
but handled sprung blades,
diaphragm-command and loaded boys
with loaded pistols.

It's all in the wrist Steve said
smoothing a dot into his pinkie
with a red thumb.
I practiced putting on lids,
moving the safety button,
closing a blade

with my right hand,
left hand,
faster with two,
tried all three
bottle, pistol, blade
in each.

Steve's Mom Gets Out of Prison

I

Newspapers expanded the labels:
mommy slayer, they called her
baby killer- 98 in a 75,
swerving, running happy-little-family
off the interstate. Steve couldn't
remember a night he didn't cover
her body, limp over the couch.
He barely made it to middle school
before she was locked-up
for involuntary man-slaughter.
He stayed with his dad,
cigarette butts piled up around bottles.

II

Two years into my BA Steve called
almost every night. On-time for deadlines,
red-ink-ready, I'm nothing like his mother,
who lived behind bars
because she lived at them
and he counted down to the day
she got out *all planned*,
according to her best friend and parents:
Welcome Home banner,
cake ordered and she'd been clean
for a decade. Even Steve sobered up,
excited for the event and wanted to call
soon as he saw her.

III

I took to Kafka's *Metamorphosis*,
answered Normandy beach questions,
discovered inertia,
before a ring at three-something.
Steve was silent until,
"Mom just got here;
they went to the bar first. Didn't
recognize me, wanted me
in bed with her, actually.
Guess I'm the good-looking man
she always wanted."

At 7,000 Feet

Rawlins,
Wyoming
is smothered
by mountain peaks
and here
our grief
petrifies
to stone.
We weep
granite-still
layers of brown,
burgundy,
black, stacked
and run together,
sheets of rock,
one buried by another
winter after winter
of frozen stone
raised, woven,
motionless,
granite peaks,
pillars, whispering
to shadow clouds.

Eviction Day

Bill Cook

Juni and I skip our last class and bike over to the dried-up wash. One day a month the cops corral up the homeless, re-evict them and their ratty pound dogs. They call it Bum Rousting Tuesday.

Juni laughs as we descend under the concrete bridge. She laughs like a mannequin just like her father. She's never ever serious—except when we come here, and even then. Emotions too, are tough, she never says. Only I do.

Overhead, hammering rush hour traffic, their tire's incessant drone: Click click-click, click, clack.

Juni turns, eyes me. Smoke this, she says.

What is it? I say.

Don't know. She flicks her father's AC/DC lighter. But it feels great!

She confesses with a sick raspberry smile that she took the drugs from his black Raiders daypack.

The same pack he totes his life around in?

Big deal, she snarls.

Isn't that, like trespassing, I say. C'mon, Juni says—just take a fucking hit.

Juni bemoans hardcore—I'm sorry, that I've been such a bitch. She touches my arm.

I say, He'll know we took his dope. I feel uncomfortable. But why should I?

We'll wait here, for him, Juni says, deflecting, but just a little.

She exhales a column of lazy smoke at the rumbling bridge.

You're like my best friend, she purrs.

Dove-blue light hovers over the Santa Clara wash. I imagine *us* angels floating over it.

It so beautiful, I say, staring back at her. Like we're inside a cocoon!

Juni chuckles. Yah, it is, I guess.

Cars bong their livid horns above us. Like fam, we jump up, shout shut the fuck up, and laugh hysterically.

We should focus on our homework, I half yell at Juni through the traffic.

Midterms are coming and neither of us is prepared. Instead here we are, two homeless trainees getting stoned.

I rub my itchy face. Smack Juni to come on. Let's go!

Chill, she says, lit.

I go and sit on a mound of Juni's father's rumbled clothes, spill my Chem books onto the dirt. I stare at them freaked. However, I'm not here for this. I'm here for Juni. I love her.

Later with the studying, Juni says, squeezing beside me. She kicks at the pile of schoolbooks.

Alright, I say, because I'm high anyways. But not high enough for a head change. All I want is to please Juni. Afraid what she'll do if I don't.

Juni gets up and walks over to the sloped hill with the stolen bicycle rims. They hang from bent willow branches he gathers from the wash. At the far end of the encampment is his lean-to of Home Depot tarps. Mountains of trash bag recyclables. A photo of Juni from her middle school graduation pinned to the front of his frayed tarp door.

Juni's picks out two tires, one for me and one for her, and rolls them towards me. I reach out to take one and she slips sideways and kisses my cheek, laughs and thrusts the tire into my hand.

Not ours to take, I stutter.

Not yours to not receive, she shouts back.

Nearby men in Sherriff-green commando pants weave under bent branches, hunting out bums like Juni's father. We duck behind his home—hut Juni calls it, laughing always, like it's all cool. Like she's the only one with a dad who lives free and wild—in a hut!

She picks at the ground.

He's probably at the other homeless site, Juni hisses. Doesn't offer anymore. She fades before me. Like I am not really here, crouching beside her. I play along. Then she's back. She grinds the half-smoked joint into the gravel.

Fuck-it, Juni spits. Enough of—

Then her father slinks from behind some boulders. He's clutching more wagging bike parts, shaking his head at us to skedaddle, scam, vamoose!

I tug Juni's shirt. C'mon, they're getting close.

A Deputy hollers for Juni's father to stop.

He grins all Mad Scientist at us. His silver astronaut jacket flaps happy-to-see-you-but. His eyes are gigantic and bright as newborn stars. He's all anxious. He lugs the goods into a tangle of sagebrush, and starts running. They Tase him and he collapses. Juni drops the rims and stares at him. After a while, she turns towards me, pockets his baggy of weed.

Let's bounce, she says, hard.

We crank back up the trail. Juni's a sudden beast, lit. At the ersatz trailhead, we stop. It's like we've entered an alien world. Juni's face is flush with sweat and dust, a crazed grin.

C'mon, she says, with an air kiss.

Don't tease. Shiver with the thought.

Showing-off, Juni swerves to-close to some waiting bus riders, skids out on some sand. Passengers gather around. They don't gawk like she's a freak show. One of them helps Juni up. Someone dusts off her daypack, hands it back to her. No one cowers, clutches, or scowls.

Look at them, Juni says, breathless.

Afraid of little old me.

Shit, I say.

Juni's lips glisten like she's won a race or gotten away with something bad.

Right, I say—cancel that. I feel like I'm living.

Then Juni spots two girls she knows. Together, we pedal towards them, faster than normal, light as air. Juni races out in front of me.

She shows them her dad's pot.

I hang back. Don't talk. They smile like I'm broken, sad, poor me. Juni nods my way. Says we're old friends or study partners. I can't tell which. We never make eye contact.

I smile as if I'm shy and not feeling betrayed, like an extra.

THIS VILLAGE CALLED A RIVER

Diane Glancy

I was born a long time ago in the plainness of the earth. Dust clouds had passed. Topsoil had blown away. The Depression was over. Another war would begin. I was born a long ago in the middle of the country in a harsh time. God spoke in the heavy weather. There were labor union disputes and roughness. A boy fell off his bicycle and was injured in front of my house. I dreamed of grade school plays in which children were killed. We traveled to my mother's parent's farm 69 miles south of Kansas City on Highway 69. A seriousness was there. My grandparents were remote. I was in the way. They were people to be feared.

The old farm house in Kansas is gone now. The barn and outbuildings. Even the drive into the farmyard over the drainage ditch. The bending weeds in the field still wave good-bye. In an old photograph, c. 1948, I stood by the hollyhocks on my grandparent's farm in a plaid pinafore. My shoes were too big, probably to last longer on my plain, long feet.

In Kansas City, my mother grew zinnias instead of hollyhocks.

If I was to go anywhere, it would be with what I could think. Somewhere the sun baked a brain into my head. Where it came from is still in doubt.

I was plain as the words I heard and spoke. I had been marked *plain* on the assembly line of those slant-ways where the souls of infants are dropped into their bodies before birth.

In Bible school we learned there were a thousand hills where cattle lived that God owned. My father worked in the stockyards. I thought of God as the yard master. Jesus was his son the way my brother was the son of my father.

I was reading a Mary Ruefle poem, "Sawdust,"— *I was trying to take / a nail out of the wall / and it wouldn't stop coming / so I screamed / how much more of you can there be?* Jesus then enters the poem as he plays with nails also. Christianity came into my life that way— from the beginning it was a story that didn't stop. Christianity put its finger on the nail— and the point of the knife. Blood always was a part. There is something wrong with humanity and it was Jesus' job to take care of it. I loved the story of Abraham and Isaac, waiting for Isaac to die, and always was unbelieving when God provided a ram caught in the thickets with its horns. No. No— I wanted Isaac to die.

Whenever I saw the cattle chutes in the stockyards where my father worked, I

thought of Calvary. Not Catholicism but Protestantism. The protest of the ornateness of faith. Nothing added but a church and a steeple. We were separated from God. Jesus was the long and dusty farm-road back to God. Everyone at Bible school accepted Christ as their Savior. We were scoured. Wiped of anything interesting. Thumbprints. Footprints. Pawprints.

My life began in travel— a wayfarer not on foot, but in a car. In another photograph, where I was three-months old, *First trip to the farm* was written underneath. We went often. I'm not sure why. None them are living now. I have no one to ask. I have outlived those who held the memories, though once, on a trip to the farm with two aged aunts, they couldn't agree on what road left Hume, Missouri to the house where they were born.

In those days, we were always moving. My father was transferred from plant to plant. The old wooden buildings were rotting. Whether raised or repaired or allowed to hobble along for a little while longer was his job.

I am starting late into my life. Haunted by a herd of nightmares. My salvation has been travel. Travel and the Lord Jesus Christ punctured on the cross. I am strengthened by the history of my driving. I would leave the past behind, but it catches in my trailer hitch.

The former rain has fallen. The latter rain is still dripping from the eaves.

Gathering Water, 1903, Edward Curtis Photograph

On the wall above my writing table is an Edward Curtis print of an Apache woman filling a round clay vessel at the river bank. Behind her, two ponies, a brown one and a white. They are wearing blankets over their backs, and basket panniers or pack-saddles, in which the water vessel would ride back to the encampment.

On the table is the actual artifact a friend gave me years ago— a clay vessel smaller than the one in the photograph, but a clay water jug nonetheless. It is an early form of the canteen, flattened on one side to ride against the hip. It would have been heavy. It looks like a small head. There are two handles on the sides like ears, and a spout that looks like a mouth saying, *oh*.

One evening, the vessel began to speak. It began with the thought of how the idea for the early water carriers could have come from the full moon in the sky. Did not the moon come from the ocean?— Did not a comet once hit the earth and send a piece of it into the air— gauging out a place for the ocean to reside?

The Origin of Horse

A long time ago people began to arrive on earth. They wandered from a great distance.

When the people first came to earth, they lived near a river. They built a lodge because the nights were cold. They built a fire.

The Maker made buffalo for the people to eat. But the buffalo would not stay in one place. The people argued with them, but the buffalo would not listen. They called the buffalo a name that is hard to translate, but meant something like, balloon on its back.

When the people traveled away from the river to hunt buffalo, they cried for water.

But how to carry the water from the river.

Many people died of thirst until a woman had a dream of how to form mud into a ball— a round, hollow ball with an opening like a mouth. She dipped the ball into the river and carried away some water.

At first the water ball was hard to carry and slipped from the woman's hands. She made handles on its sides so she could carry it. What is the name of that?— the people asked. The woman said— A-ball-full-of-water-so-we-can-follow-the-buffalo. The women helped her make more balls to carry water.

But how to carry the water balls when they were full of water. It took many people, and the buffalo were far ahead. The people tried to drag the water balls on the ground, but the water spilled. They tried to roll the water balls, but the handles caught in the ground and the water balls broke.

One night, the woman who made the water jug had another dream. In the dream, she saw an animal who said its name was horse. She told the others what it looked like. Four legs and a head something like the buffalo, but smaller. They took clay along the river bank for a brown horse, and the clay they found among some rocks that was almost white. In a sacred ceremony they breathed into their nostrils and the horses snorted. They always are snorting to get rid of the breath so they can return to the river clay from which they came.

The women wove blankets from sheep's wool dyed with rabbit bush and the trader's vermilion for the backs of the horses, and baskets for panniers to hold the water balls for the people as they traveled.

They painted the horses in a sacred manner. They named them, carriers-of-the-burdens-given-us-in-a-dream. They called them, carriers-of-water-in-vessels-from-this-village-called-a-river.

The Spigot of the Quarter Moon

What shall I equal you to that I might comfort you?— Lamentations 2:13

I've always had a depression of sorts— a disturbance I've had all my life. It's not anything I take medication for. It's more of a disruption of *settledness*— a general feeling of being made of parts that didn't fit with one another. I was born between two cultures, neither of which went together, yet my parents stayed married all their lives. It was an in-between place between disruptions I orbited as a child. I continued the orbit during my own marriage, and in the thirty years of singleness after that marriage.

At my writing table, I thought of the moon after it was torn from earth. It could not have been round in the beginning. Its jaggedness must have been shaped by travel— by the friction of rotation. Is it not the same with my writing projects that begin with tearing? Aren't those projects a moon that keeps the earth from tilting too far one way or the other in its orbit? Has the moon ever had it easy? Isn't it scarred by craters from the comets that hit it? Yet it holds its own in the sky.

I am rocked by the inconsistencies of different thoughts— it must be something like crossing the lunar surface as I try to write. Does not the moon change the shape of its stories? Isn't it only visible where the light of the sun hits it? The earth often is in its way. Maybe the moon is angry. What does it know of itself?— a satellite in the sky. No more than a clay vessel with a mouth. But thirst and a need for water is our source of life. What is the source of death? I think of the gorges in my thoughts. The effort it takes to bring thoughts together. I think of these thoughts because their shapes do not fit, and in them is the shape of my own being. This is not what I wanted to think. Maybe a cruelty of aging is that nothing has to do with anything anymore. Yet I am trying to make a unit of these indecisive pieces.

The Origin of Water

I have used similitudes— Hosea 12:10

It was the single church I went to as a child. The giving of the river. He came as a fisherman with the hook of the gospel. How can I carry his words?— awkward as a clay vessel full of water. The two handles on each side too small for my fingers. Maybe not for someone with smaller hands who came before me.

Christ was a wayfarer and transgressor who came to tear up the world and the believers' ideas of themselves in the world.¹ The gospel was full of water. It kept us afloat. My ears like handles when I heard.

¹ Luke 12:51

There were swift disruptions. A clan of disparities. A moving herd of buffalo. A fragile hope less fragile each year. Or at least not as frightful in the channels of the river. I am torn between my will and the will of Christ. I follow both. I camp beside one then another on this long and bobbing journey. Sometimes I see how far away I can go to see if I get back.

Don't you remember when you could see what you were thinking? A horse-song, which is a similitude of truth buried in a story. Last trip to the farm. A cemetery in Hume, Missouri on the Kansas border where we went to spread the ashes. The land stark as gravel.

by Adrian Slonaker

•The Gypsy House •

We were too old to be plagued by puerile purity. Frantically fidgeting inside polyester pockets, I need to bail on that birthday party, since imagined sex trumps real cookie dough ice cream cake.

My pal came through with the gift of all gifts. Through a dizzying network of contacts and chance, he'd scored us an hour of hedonistic thrills, of needed discovery at the gypsy house, that lilac-bordered, chocolate-mint-colored Victorian manse downtown that oozed off-limits seduction and delightful degradation.

We finally fled the confines of cheesy childhood through the coppery dimness of dusk. Powder kegs of curiosity, we strode across the threshold. Languid bodies and a farce of respectability took turns at the till, with fake opulence and even falser smiles flashing throughout the gypsy house.

We waited and watched in a foyer dripping with desire for gratification, for stimulation, for companionship, for money.

Suddenly I knew I'd be just the latest in a long line-up of cold transactions. Not love, but lucre, ruled here. I buckled under my unexpected bout of sensitivity- or nerves- and bolted into the somber night.

•Nana •

My grandmother wanted to save the world not by building bridges, but by teaching bridge, that cozy card game of Crimean War vets and Midwestern gossips. Kennedy had crafted the Peace Corps to fight the Commies, so Nana jettisoned her job, investing in visions of Kenya, and proudly proffered her plan to bureaucrats unable to fathom the merits of fiftyish *bonnes vivantes* with smokers' laughs and trick-taking altruism.

•Orhan •

I should have paid more attention in that fiercely driving rain, yet my scattered thoughts jostled in time with the rhythms, more infectious than typhoid, of the cheerful boy-girl duo on the staticky radio. I sank into the navy upholstery inside that powder blue '68 Ford Fairlane, already bored by the stark red glow of the traffic light, which, in South Africa, would be called a robot.

You were the last thing on my mind, but you swung open my stupidly unlocked door and hurled yourself onto the seat next to me- two hundred pounds of thoroughly soaked wolf, sheepishly apologizing for your rudeness in that half-silvery, half-husky Bosnian-accented voice.

Oh, it's just you. You could've been a damn carjacker! •was my dulcet greeting to you on that strange evening. The light blinked green, and cars honked like a concert of rhinovirus-plagued noses behind us. Crushing the accelerator like a stinkbug (minus its signature fragrance) under my loafer, I maneuvered on, juggling the herculean tasks of trying to identify anything past the opaque curtain of water and trying not to laugh at the ridiculously guilty, ridiculously endearing picture you formed while wiping your glasses dry with a crinkled tissue.

The innocuous ditty crackling into oblivion on the radio, I switched it off, preferring the harmony of the windshield wipers. We said nothing until you asked if I'd ever seen a falling star. I raised the ante by asking if you'd ever seen a double rainbow. The rain by now reaching monsoon-like proportions, I felt it best to stop, if only out of a powerful, maybe instinctive desire to protect you. I suggested the cheap Szechuan diner on the next block. You agreed. I taught you how to use chopsticks. Later that night, you taught me how to growl.

•For Natasha •

In a haze of wonder and patchouli incense,
with twelve shades of time-seasoned carnival glass,
haunting and haunted concerns melt away
like Pineapple Whip in the scorching blaze of St. John's Day.
Grip my hand with the force of a galloping troop of Cossacks,
and I shall caress yours with the coolness of a Frigidaire on Svalbard.
Lock your eyes in mid-stare with mine,
and know how much I want to abscond to Waffle House with you.

by Rachel Holbrook

Below the Poverty Line

When my kids' dad disappeared and the bills piled up, I sold his guitars. Then I sold his tools, his baseball card collection, and his clothes. When he didn't come home and child support was a distant memory, I sold my jewelry. After six months had passed and they shut off the water, I sold the kids' bikes and their trampoline to turn it back on. After a year went by and he was still gone, there was nothing left to sell, so I sold myself.

Baby

When I was little, Mama would take me to my room and say, "Hush, Baby." She would rub my tears away with her thumb, and pull the door shut. I could hear her let him in. The deep-voiced, faceless him was never the same him twice. I pressed my ear against the wall and heard the mattress creak.

When the noises stopped, my tears were dry. His footsteps to the door were always so much faster than on the way in. "How about a walk, Baby?" Mama held my hand and I smiled on the way to the grocery store.

first published in *Ink in Thirds*.

Made in China

I'm a girl made of donated parts. My biological parents gave a sperm and an egg, but that's all they could contribute. My adopted dad shared his intense work ethic; my mom, her low self-esteem. My sister, her kidney. I guess you could say she's invested.

Recycled. I'm recycled. Someone made from what's left over. Maybe that's why I sell myself so cheap. It would be unethical to charge full price.

by Angela Doll Carlson

Bruadar

(fr. Scottish: to dream)

I dreamt again of the white stag.
His steady gaze kept me
frozen
as we eyed one another.
He did not seem dangerous
intimidating, yes,
perhaps curious.

The fact that we were in the housewares department at the Sears store on Kimball was notable.
I had, just moments earlier, been looking at blenders.
I am a sucker for small appliances.

He shows up often in my dreams,
sometimes the grocery store, sometimes the house I grew up in,
never in the woods,
never by a stream or in a glistening field of snow.

I am told he represents virility, passion, purity
a change to come
in location, in love, in life.

The low level braying of my clock radio alarm breaks through, echoing over the
loudspeaker in the housewares aisle in Sears. I turn
my attention from the stag to a row of microwaves to my left—
the green glowing display matching the rhythm of the alarm while flashing the words,
end
end
End

I lay there for a long time, staring at the ceiling. I always wake up depressed when I
dream about that damned deer.

Love Letter

Lover, I saw how the sun rose on your face
this morning
as you slept.

The taste of the words we made together
the night before were
still sweet on my tongue,
not dampened at all
by the child wedged between us.

His stealthy midnight visit,
his arms and legs branched
across our backs,
his warm limbs
a familiar tree—

Roots deep
in the kicked-off sheets
allowed the breeze
which must be
what woke me.

Adoration

From somewhere deep inside under flesh
under bone
under water
there was a humming

a smooth vibration of form and word
a whispering of shadow
of shade
of substance

and then with only a breath between us came the connection.
“We made this,” I’d said,
“we cannot be unmade.”

Genesis: Bone

That it would take
injury
in the making of woman
is worth noting.

Not merely forming
the clay
using sacred language but
the ghost white hands stained by mud
becoming red with blood
from the bone
as the flesh folded over.

The breath was the same, though
this is important.

Genesis: Eat

I know the other voice
in the garden
near the tree
silky, sibilant
each sentence end
dropping suddenly
sotto voce-

Sketching stunning spectacle,
words fill me
with false flattery
a meal I can touch
but not take in.

It leaves me
lacking,
hungry for excess,
spent without cause.

The promise becomes
this fruit, hanging ripe and red
held up as antiphon
to my newly minted need.

And calls out to me
saying simply
"Take and eat."

by Kelly McNerney

four-storied

his father dying quietly downstairs
everyone discreet about it

my own, digging his heels in,
carrying me through the snow

mother putting us in matching dresses to go to the city
brushing our hair 100 strokes and counting

the worst is over now in the big house
all of our things stored in boxes

(the dreams, long and vivid,
both my mother and father in the house, with both a basement and attic)

the barrel-chested man saying we won't be comfortable here
and other reoccurring hunches

or, memory breakdown? The day of his funeral,
I've only just now remembered, and I'm

trying to make it up to you

Man to the hills, woman to the shore
(Gaelic Proverb)

What pile of tangled jewelry.
Remorse is not the word. It is:
pictures of my parents in their twenties.
A backhanded slap to the face.
A slight, endearing lisp.

I hear you
ashing your cigarette somewhere.

A woman,
like a wave, is energy and water.

I'd like to see you
coming through the waves towards me
laughing and strong—
finally a man.

recidivism

i.

I have mug shots
to remind me
of nights spent on jail floors—
a crowded cell with one open toilet in the corner

trying to fix
hair in this one-way mirror
vanity and self

(something like) aversion

my reflection only smudged eyeliner

ii.

Insomniac
you came to where I was stubbornly
not sleeping

sure that I've fumbled this thing

power, power, power
and the running of my mouth

I screamed myself hoarse
let me out of this boat

the word *regret*
how it sounds

my own reflection
every time

let me become smaller
and less of myself

Boots

DC Diamondopolous

The same sun scorched downtown Los Angeles that had seared the Iraq desert. Army Private First Class Samantha Cummings stood at attention holding a stack of boxes, her unwashed black hair slicked back in a ponytail and knotted military style. She stared out from Roberts Shoe Store onto Broadway, transfixed by a homeless man with hair and scraggly beard the color of ripe tomatoes. She'd only seen that hair color once before, on Staff Sergeant Daniel O'Conner.

The man pushed his life in a shopping cart crammed with rags and stuffed trash bags. He glanced at Sam through the storefront window, his bloated face layered with dirt. His eyes had the meander of drink in them.

Sam hoped hers didn't. Since her return from Bagdad a year ago, her craving for alcohol sneaked up on her like an insurgent. Bathing took effort. She ate to exist. Friends disappeared. Her life started to look like the crusted bottom of her shot glass.

The morning hangover began its retreat to the back of her head.

The homeless man disappeared down Broadway. She carried the boxes to the storeroom.

In 2012, Sam passed as an everywoman: white, black, brown, Asian. She was a coffee colored Frappuccino. Frap. That's what the soldiers nicknamed her. Her mother conceived her while on Ecstasy during the days of big hair and shoulder pads. On Sam's eighteenth birthday, she enlisted in the Army. She wanted a job and an education. But most of all she wanted to be part of a family.

"Let me help you," Hector said coming up beside her.

"It's okay. I got it." Sam flipped the string of beads aside. Rows of shoe boxes lined both walls with ladders every ten feet. She crammed the boxes into their cubbyholes.

"Can I take you to lunch?" Hector asked standing inside the curtain.

"I told you before. I'm not interested."

"We could be friends." He shrugged. "You could tell me about Iraq."

Sam thrust the last box into its space. The beads jangled. Hector left.

She glanced at the clock, fifteen minutes until her lunch break. The slow workday gave her too much time to think. She needed a drink. It would keep away the flashbacks.

"C'mon, Sam," Hector said outside the curtain.

"No."

Hector knew she was a vet. He didn't need to know any more about her.

On her way to the front of the store, Sam passed the imported Spanish sandals. Mr. Goldberg carried high-quality shoes. He showcased them on polished wood displays. She loved the smell of new leather, and how Mr. Goldberg played soft rock music in the background, with track lighting, and thick padded chairs for the customers.

The best part of being a salesperson was taking off the customer's old shoes and

putting on the new. The physical contact was honest. And she liked to watch people consider the new shoes—the trial walk, the mirror assessment—and if they made the purchase, everyone was happy.

Sam headed toward the door. Maria and Bob stood at the counter looking at the computer screen.

“Wait up,” Maria said. The heavy Mexican woman hurried over. “You’re leaving early again.”

“No one’s here,” Sam said towering over her. “I’ll make it up, stay later. Or something.”

“You better.”

“Totally.”

“Or you’ll end up like that homeless man you were staring at.”

“You think you’re funny?”

“No, Sam. That’s the point.”

“He reminded me of someone.”

“In Iraq?”

Sam turned away.

“Try the VA.”

Sam looked back at Maria. “I have.”

“Try again. You need to talk to someone. My cousin—”

“The VA doesn’t do jack shit.”

“Rafael sees a counselor. It helps.”

“Lucky him.”

“So do the meds.”

“I don’t take pills.”

“Oh, Sam.”

“I’m okay.” She liked Maria and especially Mr. Goldberg, a Vietnam vet who not only hired her but rented her a room above the shoe store. “It’s just a few minutes early.”

Maria glared at her. “Mr. Goldberg has a soft spot for you, but this is a business. Doesn’t mean you won’t get fired.”

“I’ll make it up.” Sam shoved the door open into a blast of heat.

“Another thing,” Maria said. “Change your top. It has stains on it.”

Oh fuck, Sam thought. But it gave her a good reason to go upstairs.

She walked next door, up the narrow stairway and into her studio, the size of an iPhone. Curry reeked through the hundred-year-old walls from the Indian neighbors next door.

Sam took off her blouse and unstuck the dog tags between her breasts. The Army had no use for her. “*Take your meds, get counseling, then you can re-enlist.*” But she wasn’t going to end up like her drug-addicted mother.

The unmade Murphy bed screeched and dipped as she sat down in her bra and pants, the tousled sheets still damp from her night sweats.

The Bacardi bottle sat on the kitchenette counter. She glanced sideways at it and looked away.

The United States flag tacked over the peeling wallpaper dominated the room, but it was the image of herself and Marley on the wobbly dresser she carried with her.

Sam had taken the seventeen-year-old private under her wing. She'd been driving the humvee in Tikrit with Marley beside her when an IED exploded, killing him while she escaped with a gash in her leg. Thoughts of mortar attacks, road side bombs, and Marley looped over and over again. Her mind became a greater terrorist weapon than anything the enemy had.

Her combat boots sat next to the door, the tongues reversed, laces loose, prepared to slip into, ready for action. Sometimes she slept in them, would wear them to work if she could. Of all her souvenirs, the boots reminded her most of being a soldier. She never cleaned them, wanted to keep the Iraqi sand caked in the wedge between the midsoles and shanks.

The springs shrieked as Sam dug her fists into the mattress and stood. She walked to the counter, unscrewed the top of the Bacardi, poured herself a shot and knocked it back. Liquid guilt ran down her throat.

Sam picked up a blouse off the chair, smelled it and looked for stains. It would do. She dressed, grabbed a Snickers bar, took three strides and dashed out her room.

Heading south on Broadway, Sam longed to be part of the city. Paved sidewalks, gutters, frying tortillas, old movie palaces, jewelry stores, flower stands, square patches of green where trees grew—all of it wondrous—not like the fucking sandbox of Iraq.

The rum kicked in, made her thirsty as she continued down the historic center of town. The sun's heat radiated from her soles to her scalp. A canopy of light siphoned the city of color.

She watched a tourist slowly fold her map and use it as a fan. Businessmen slouched along, looking clammy in shirtsleeves. Women, their dresses moist with sweat, form fitted to their skin. Even the cars seemed to droop.

Waves of heat shimmered off the pavement. They ambushed Sam, planting her back

in Tikrit. She heard the rat-a-tat-tat of a Tabuk sniper rifle. Ducked. Dogged bullets. Scrambled behind a trash bin. Searched around for casualties. She looked at the top of buildings wondering where in the hell the insurgents fired from.

“Hey, honey, whatsa matter?” An elderly black woman stooped over her.

“Get down, ma'am!”

“What for?”

Sam grabbed at the woman, but she moved away. “Get down, ma'am! You'll get killed!”

“Honey, it's just street drillin'. Those men over there, they're makin' holes in the cement.”

Covered in sweat, Sam swerved to her left. A Buick and Chevrolet stopped at a red light. She saw the 4th street sign below the one-way arrow. Her legs felt numb as she held onto the trash bin and lifted herself up.

“You a soldier?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Sam said looking into the face of the concerned woman.

“I can tell. You fella’s always say ma’am and sir, so polite like. Take it easy child, you’re home now.” The woman limped away.

Sam reeled, felt for the flask in her back pocket but it wasn’t there. Construction workers whistled and made wolf calls at her. “Douche bags,” she moaned. Alcohol had always numbed the flashbacks. Her counselor in Bagdad told her they would fade. Why can’t I get better, she asked herself? Shaking, she blinked several times forcing her eyes to focus as she continued south past McDonald’s.

At 6th, she saw the man with tomato color hair on the other side of the street jostling his shopping cart. “It’s Los Angeles, not Los Angeleses!” he shouted. His voice rasped like the sick, but Sam heard something familiar in the tone. He pushed his cart around the corner.

The light turned green. Sam sprinted in front of the waiting cars to the other side of the road. She had grown up across the 6th Street Bridge that linked Boyle Heights to downtown. From the bedroom window of the apartment she shared with her mother, unless her mother had a boyfriend, Sam would gaze at the Los Angeles skyline.

She followed the man into skid row.

The smell hit her like a body-slam. The stink of piss and shit, odors that mashed together like something died, made her eyes water. A block away, it was another world.

She trailed the man with hair color people had an opinion about. The Towering Inferno. That’s what they called Staff Sergeant Daniel O’Conner, but not to his face. He knew, though, and took the jibe well. After all, he had a sense of humor, was confident, tall and powerfully built, the last man to end up broken, not the hunched and defeated man she was following. No, Sam thought. It couldn’t be him. It couldn’t be her hero.

He shoved his gear into the guts of the city with Sam behind him. The last time she’d been to skid row was as a teenager, driving through with friends who taunted the homeless. The smell was one thing, but what she saw rocked her. City blocks of homeless lived under layers of tarp held up by shopping carts. Young and old, most black, and male, gathered on corners, sat on sidewalks, slouched against buildings, drug exchanges going down. Women too stoned or sick to worry about their bodies slumped over, their breasts falling out of their tops. It was hard for Sam to look into their faces, to see their despair. The whole damn place reeked of hopelessness. Refugees in the Middle East and Africa, at least, had tents and medicine.

Sam put on her ass-kicking face, the one that said, “Leave me the fuck alone, or I’ll mess you up.” She walked as if she had on her combat boots, spine straight, eyes in the back of her head.

Skid row mushroomed down side-streets. Men staggered north toward 5th and the

Mission. She stayed close behind the red-headed man. He turned left at San Pedro. And so did Sam.

It was worse than 6th Street. Not even in Iraq had she seen deprivation like this: cardboard tents, overflowing trash bins used as crude borders, men sleeping on the ground. She watched a man pull up his pant leg and stick a needle in his ankle. Another man, his face distorted by alcohol, drank freely from a bottle. The men looked older than on 6th. Some had cardboard signs. One read, Veteran, please help me. Several wore fatigues. One dressed in a field jacket was missing his lower leg. Most, Sam thought, were Vietnam or Desert Storm vets. She felt her throat tighten, the familiar invasion of anger afraid to express itself. She'd been told by the Army never to show emotion in a war zone. But Sam brought the war home with her. So did the men slumped against the wall like human garbage.

The red-headed man passed a large metal dumpster heaped with trash bags. It stank of rotten fruit. He disappeared behind the metal container with his cart. Sam looked at the angle of the sun. She had about ten minutes before thirteen hundred hours.

There was a doorway across the street. She went over and stood in it.

He sat against the brick wall emptying his bag of liquor bottles and beer cans. He shook one after another dry into his mouth. She understood his thirst, one that never reached an end until he passed out. He took a sack off the cart and emptied it: leftover Frito bags, Oreo cookies, pretzels. He tore the bags apart and ran his tongue over the insides. He ate apple cores, chewed the strings off banana peels.

“What are you—” he growled. “You. Lookin’ at?” His eyes roamed Sam’s face.

Shards of sadness struck her heart. It was like seeing Marley’s strewn body all over again. Staff Sergeant O’Conner’s voice, even when drunk, was deep and rich. It identified him like his hair. How could the man who saved her from being raped by two fellow soldiers and who refused to join in the witch-hunts of Don’t Ask Don’t Tell, a leader, who had a future of promotions and medals, end up on skid row?

“You remind me of someone,” she said. How could a once strapping man who led with courage and integrity eat scraps like a dog next to a dumpster? What happened that the Army would leave behind one of their own? Like a militia, disillusionment and bitterness trampled over Sam’s love of country.

She woke up to another hot morning. Her head throbbed from the shots of Bacardi she tossed back until midnight as she surfed the internet, including the VA for a Daniel O’Conner. She found nothing.

For breakfast, she ate a donut and washed it down with rum. She pulled on a soiled khaki T-shirt and a pair of old jeans and slipped into her combat boots, the dog tags tucked between her breasts.

Sam knotted her ponytail, grabbed a canvas bag, stuffed it into her backpack and left. She had to be at work at twelve hundred hours.

If O’Conner slept off the booze, he might be lucid and recognize her.

At the liquor store, she filled the canvas bag with candy bars, cookies, trail mix, wrapped sandwiches and soda pop then headed down Broadway.

The morning sun streaked the sky orange and pink. Yellow rays sliced skyscrapers and turned windows into furnaces. Sam hurried south.

When she crossed Broadway at 6th, the same sun exposed skid row into a stunning morning of neglect. Lines of men pissed against walls, women squatted. She heard weeping.

Sweat ran down her armpits, her head pounded. Sam felt shaky, chewed sand, and looked around. Where was Marley? She stumbled backwards into a gate.

“Baby, whatchu doin’? You one fine piece of ass.” The man reached over and yanked at her backpack.

“No!” Sam yelled. She didn’t want to collect Marley’s severed arms and legs to send home to his parents. “No,” she whimpered, grabbing the sides of her head with her hands. “I can’t do it,” she said sliding to the ground.

“Shit, you crazy. This is my spot, bitch. Outa here!” he said and kicked her.

Sam moaned and gripped her side. She saw a plastic water bottle lying on the sidewalk, crawled over and drank from it. A sign with arrows pointing to Little Tokyo and the Fashion District cut through the vapor of her flashback. Iraqi women wore abayas, not shorts and tank tops. Sitting in the middle of the sidewalk, Sam hit her fist against her forehead until it hurt.

She saw the American flag hoisted on a pulley from a cherry picker over the 6th Street Bridge, heard the click clack of a shopping cart, and the music of Lil Wayne. The sounds pulled her away from the memory, away from a place that had no walls to hang onto.

Sam held the bottle as she crawled to the edge of the sidewalk. She took deep breaths, focused and glanced around. What the fuck was she doing sitting on a curb in skid row with a dirty water bottle? *“Or you’ll end up like that homeless man you were staring at.”* “Oh Jesus.” Sam dropped the bottle in the gutter and trudged toward San Pedro Street.

She had thought that when she came home, she’d get better, but living with her mother almost destroyed her. It began slowly, little agitations about housework, arguments that escalated into slammed doors. Then, one day, her mother called George Bush and Dick Cheney monsters who should be in prison. She accused Sam of murder for killing people who did nothing to the United States. Sam lunged at her, when she stumbled over a chair and fell. Her mother ran screaming into the bathroom and locked the door. “Get outa my house and don’t ever come back!” “Don’t worry! You’re a piece of shit for a mother, anyway!” She left and stayed with her friend Jenny until she told her to stop drinking and get her act together.

In her combat boots, Sam scuffled along, hoping to catch O’Conner awake and coherent.

She turned left. The shopping cart poked out from the trash bin. Sam walked to the dumpster and peered around it. O’Conner wasn’t there, but his bags and blankets were. She stepped into his corner and was using the toe of her boot to kick away mouse droppings when someone grabbed her hair and yanked back her head, forcing her to her knees. Terrified, she caught a glimpse of orange.

“Private First Class Samantha Cummings, United States Army, Infantry Unit 23. Sergeant!” She raised her arms. Sweat streamed down her face.

His grip remained firm.

“Staff Sergeant O’Conner, I’ve brought provisions. They’re in my backpack. Sandwiches, candy bars, pretzels!”

He let go of her hair. The ponytail fell between her shoulders.

“I’m going to take off my backpack, stand, and face you, Sergeant.” Her fingers trembled, searched for the Velcro straps and ripped it aside. The bag slid to the ground.

She rose with her back to him and turned around.

She saw the war in his eyes. “It’s me. Frap.” His skin, filthy and sun-burnt couldn’t hide the yellow hue of infection. He smelled of feces and urine. His jaw was slack, his gaze unsteady. “You want something to eat? I got all kinds of stuff,” Sam said. Her emotions buried in sand, began to tunnel, pushing aside lies and deceit.

O’Conner tore open the backpack and emptied out the canvas bag. “Booze.”

She knelt beside him and unwrapped a ham and cheese sandwich. “No booze. Here, have this,” she said handing him the food. “Go on.” Her arm touched his as she encouraged him to eat.

O’Conner sat back on his heels. “It’s all—”

Sam leaned forward. “Go on.”

“It’s all. Stuck!”

“What’s stuck?”

He shook his head. “It’s all, stuck!” he cried. He grabbed the sandwich and scarfed it down in three bites. Mayonnaise dripped on his scruffy beard. He kept his sights on Sam as he tore open the Frito bag and took a mouthful. He ripped apart the sack of Oreo cookies and ate those too. “Go away,” he said as black-and-white crumbs fell from his mouth.

Sam shook her head.

“Leave. Me. Alone!”

“I don’t want to.”

He drew his knees up to his chest, shut his eyes and leaned his head against the metal dumpster.

Here was her comrade-in-arms, in an invisible war, where no one knew of his bravery, where ground zero happened to be wherever you stood.

“You saved me from Jackson and Canali when they tried to rape me in the bathroom. I should have been able to protect myself. And when they tried to discharge me. For doing nothing. You stood up for me. Remember?” O’Conner didn’t move. “I never, thanked you. Cause it showed weakness.”

O’Conner struggled to his knees. “I don’t know you!” His breath smelled rancid.

“Yeah, you do.”

“I don’t know you!” he cried.

“You know me. You saved me twice, dude!”

O’Conner stumbled to his feet and gripped the rail of his shopping cart, his spirit as razed as the smoking remains of a humvee. He shoved off on his morning trek. For how long, Sam wondered.

She gathered the bags of food and put them in the canvas bag. She kicked his rags to the side, took his blankets, flung them out, folded them and rearranged the cardboard floor. She put the blankets on top and hid the bag of food under his rags.

Emotions overcame her. Loyalty, compassion, anger, love—feelings so strong tears fell like a long-awaited rain.

Sam couldn’t save O’Conner, but she could save herself.

She ripped off her dog tags and threw them in the dumpster. Once home, she’d take down the flag, fold it twelve times and tuck the picture of Marley and herself inside it. She’d throw out her military clothes and combat boots. Pour the rum down the sink. She’d go to the VA, badger them until she got an appointment. Join AA. She’d arrive and leave work on time.

The morning began to cook. It was the same sun, but a new day. Sam walked in the opposite direction of O’Conner.

by James Croal Jackson

BLANK SPACE

After Taylor Swift

Cherry lips, crystal
skies, cocaine
off a key in a dive bar
bathroom where you lost
me. I would have shown you
magic, madness, heaven,
sin. Thin lines– faith,
pleasure, riches. I touch
myself with new money,
fresh currency of the next
body– there, drunk on jealousy
I'll write your name.

READING THROUGH AN OLD JOURNAL

Work. Sex. Tacos. My everyday experiences recorded in detail. Life now is a notebook in which I don't write anything down.

The callus on my middle finger used to be stained with 2 A.M. ink after my days fluttered vividly into pages before sleep. In one entry,

I recount a dream with my friend Alyse where we're in a forest digging morning soil shouting, *save the earth! save ourselves!*

Today I sit with laptop at the mantle of my past, sipping hot coffee to thaw the winter-frozen ground of yesterday.

NOVEMBER, 2014

Over the weekend
we ingested paranoia,
the green hue of the room
obscured by smoke.

The fragile wings
of dreams left our lips
chapped, kisses more static
than electric.

EYES (PLANES)

eyes overhead
the sun the luckiest
alive or dead
in your eyes soar
skies eyes glaze
straight vision on
arrival compartments
of eyes gaze
suitcases intent
brown leather real
animal realize
something new
something alive

STORAGE SPACE

If time isn't infinite,
why do memories
linger?

Fifth-grade science
with greased black hair,
and this whiny voice
like pipe hitting gravel,
tectonic shifting
to leave
a gaping core,
longing
for earth.

The shovel
won't go away.
It works
to bury you alive.

You can't dig
beyond the dirt
beneath your fingernails.

1348

Russell Hemmell

He arrived on Sunday, after a winter of sleep and snow. A jester with clear blue eyes, pale lithe hands and white flowers in them. He smiled and said, I come in peace. I ply my trade with buffooneries and riddles, and the joking tambourine accompanies my laughter. Enjoy my gifts, you beautiful city, and the good time I bring. He bowed in reverence, with the beauty of an angel. And it was Sunday.

On Monday Florence woke up at the song of hundred birds, colourful plumes of fast-winged spirits. Sun bathed the city roofs and its rays made the Cathedral's spires shine and glow. Here it comes an unforgettable season, people rejoiced. For the jester had promised.

On Tuesday boys chased girls in the streets, calling them funny names like the jester had told them. Naked shoulders in the sunshine heat, naked feet on the humid lawn, great expectations and longing hearts. They laughed and laughed, they played and played again. And they were happy.

On Wednesday the artist began his most amazing painting, of a pale young man with white flowers in his hands. He gave him the beauty of an angel, blue starlight in his eyes. Which flowers are they, jester - but the model stood up and walked. Wait, the artist said, I haven't finished yet. You won't, replied the jester.

On Thursday the lords in their high palaces wanted to declare the war to end all wars, for a never-ending peace. Money to buy armies to buy weapons to buy yet more power. To earn yet more money for the richest city of Christianity. But the smiling jester told them to wait, for a war was no longer needed. And so they waited.

On Friday he invited the people of Florence to celebrate and party. He went down to the streets, taking their hands and dancing around, drinking red wine and eating warm bread. They made rhymes and ballades together, singing the praise of loving souls, of kindred spirits, believing in eternity, sizing the fleeting day. Like yesterday never was, like tomorrow would never come.

In peace I came, he said, and kissed people of all ages, sex and races, rich and poor, beautiful and ugly, filthy and elegant, nobles and peasants. He caressed Lady Beatrice's soft cheek, and brushed children's head with his delicate fingers.

It was late at night when his Lady came to him. So scared she had been, the week spent burning in secret, yet hesitant on her steps. Are you wise enough to befriend a fool? Are you foolish enough to believe what he says? But not that night – that night she believed, and her feet followed him under an immaculate moonlight. His skin was whiter than the moon itself, and his touch as gentle as butterfly's wings, bestowing pleasure and divine wisdom. What's your name, my Lord, she whispered in awe. One you don't want to hear.

When Florence rose from slumber on Saturday afternoon there were no songs, no

flowers, and all birds were gone. A hot sticky rain was dripping on their faces and insects crawled on their wet skin. Sunlight had disappeared under a blanket of fog and clouds masked the Cathedral's spires. In thousands they were dying, without mourning of the living, abandoned in fear, desperate beyond despair.

As a ghost in the darkness, a cart with its sinister bell sound came over, slowly parading in the streets. The jester strolled along, clear blue eyes shining in compassion, and face covered by a beak-like mask, white as his hands. Soothing sick people, whispering words to their moribund ears, caressing their gaping buboes.

He visited taverns, churches and houses, a silent shadow of doom. And on the red linens of their beds he threw the asphodels of the Black Death, his voice crystalline and sweet, the touch suave of an Angel of Plague.

first published in Strangelet 1.4

by **Andrea Moorhead**

Strains of weird music

Burn the fires out of your eyes
salt from your lips
the cataclysm has passed and
this is the time for moving around
free and black-sooted lungs
cannot seize this air
super-cooled to minus a million degrees
you haven't even seen the sun blink yet
the blue floating above our sphere
bands of atmospheric distortion
the gold brass on your ears rings around the clock
it disturbs sleep and pulls out thorns from the wind
can't you see the garden has left
pulled up root and stone
followed the quick path out
the wandering abandoned
snow accumulates slowly behind the shed
and the whispering down by the brook
denies any complicity.

Even Disasters Shed No Light

She discarded the first set
the rings torn out of the sun
beach ice crackling on her hands
persistent glowing under the frozen sand
it can't happen again
the rust-proof bands around the Earth
another conjecture turned on end
and she had to discard the first set
the swollen blue-green lights
still bleeding, flickering, pulsating
under the brine the rock the sand
but she forgot the murmuring on the east wind
the fragrance still clinging to the molten core

After

words burn out the snow

turn over soil when the wind dies

and the fragrance of molten leaves

streaming above the trees

where a rare hawk prepares his nest of fire.

California Mountains

His hair had tangled sparklers
curls floating above the clouds
a streaking of rainbow
and mist rose quickly
seeding the stone invisible
and protected
mention of something else
too distant to perceive
shimmering on the land
like the mirrored bottom of
prehistoric lake
a shallow reach of frozen sun
melting slowly as the planet
spun the soft silk
a phantom cradle
above the rising blaze.

Dreaming without

for JGD

This incandescence
that troubles you
shivering under the rain
despite the fires in your head
the flaunted capitulation of
ember and lava
traced on the concrete
on the deep soil under foot
trees bent over to protect
and your eyes still glow
thousands of miles away.

Figure observed in seismic activity

The person wore iron shoes

flashing sparking burning

on the cracked concrete

blocking his path

but the storm ripped over

the night

glazed his shoes

settled the concrete

restored an enigma

not ever solved.

When night will glow

in defiance

where the brown burning line

the bloodied song singed

in the throat of a child

who dares cross into death

her arms at her side, her face radiant

sun and moon around her heart

to hold the bleeding sacred

the singular melody

without end.

Out Hiking or was it a Dream?

Someone found the sun
immense particles spread over several miles
dazzling and quaking whenever
and sudden ellipsis at the sound
and voices rumbling have never fully understood
someone found the sun
immense spectacle spread across the body
striking a quick bell at the crest of the hill
where the rain runs
and the rivulets find another path to the sea.

by Kirby Wright

The Artificial Lantern

The apple-red lantern on the table fakes a flame. Its hood is cold. Open the swing panel on the bottom—it reveals a clutch of fat batteries. This unreal light is missing a tickle flicker. Still, it serves as a centerpiece for the artist's dinner. Tonight, he eats pork-and broccoli stir-fry with his wife. Their silver anniversary approaches. The artist's spouse knows tonight's the night because he gets hot whenever he cooks. She hates how he chews. She will fake it again when their lantern glows cold, smiling knowing he knows nothing about her.

The Mushroom Ghosts of Finland

I have a strange confession—ghosts are nibbling on purple mushroom caps. It's easy to see because the purple skins are gone and the white insides are visible. Look! See teeth marks? The strangest thing is that it happens in the bright of day, sometime around noon. I don't see it on my mid-morning stroll past the 400 BC burial ground. But, on my way home, I've seen mushroom after mushroom missing pieces. How they get that low I'll never know, but they are ghosts. They must be extremely flexible without bones or spines. I've heard these purple ones are poisonous but, if you're already dead, does it really matter?

This nibbling is spreading. It extends down to the neighboring campground, where children play soccer and ride bicycles over a wide green lawn. I'll bet the ghosts watch them while biting mushrooms. Maybe it helps them keep calm and recall the past, their brief time spent in the human world.

The Ochre Hotel of Stockholm

Spray us yellow. It will stand out from the red hotels claiming Gamla Stan. We were only the second boarding house to hang a vacancy sign, the first kaput before the war. Flanking us is a canal filled with lily pads and Storkyrkan, the brick Church built during the Dark Ages. Tourists use Monk's Bridge to reach the Church, where cars race on a freeway below it.

Past residents? Victims of the plague, a garrison of soldiers, and that bald hooker with the gold-studded tongue. There was also the defrocked priest chanting psalms during Holy Week. I am pleased those gay men still rent our garret, going on eleven years.

We will sniff defeat if rival hotels copy. Imagine Old Town flooding with hues of piss? Nobody will know where to go. Tourists lost. We might consider pink. Nobody dares. But guests would remember pink, even the Americans. Being remembered is everything.

Gordon the Turtle

I feed Gordon a scrap of barbecued steak and he morphs into a turtle. Not a fancy turtle or anything, just a rather ordinary red ear slider. The type you see in ponds. Gordon was shy and reticent as a boy so I figure this is why he wants a shell. He camps on the carpet like a stone. "Okay, Gordie," I call, "time to get moving." He doesn't budge. Instead, he buries his head deep in his shell, folding his neck over his eyes.

Coming Up Roses

Allan Douglass Coleman

My first memory of television has me sitting among a crowd of adults who were crying and cheering as we watched the Army-McCarthy hearings in June of 1954.

A table model whose brand I don't recall, with a big black & white screen in a dark wood enclosure, that TV sat atop a high chest of drawers in my parents' bedroom, actually a large space off the living room in our expansive railroad flat on the north side of 14th St. in Manhattan, west of Eighth Avenue, just outside Greenwich Village -- the southern edge of Chelsea, half a block from the meat-packing district. Undoubtedly purchased secondhand (Duke and Frankie could rarely afford anything new in those days), it was nonetheless one of the few TV sets owned by anyone in their crowd, whose leftie persuasions typically included disdain for this low-brow medium. Its large screen, plus its elevated placement, enabled viewing from a distance, so a dozen or more of their friends had pulled up chairs or found space to sit on their double bed that afternoon.

Broadcast live from Washington, DC, televised gavel to gavel for three months, the hearings riveted this audience, whose individual members came and went over those weeks according to the demands of their professional and personal lives. I knew all of them, at least in passing, mostly members of the poker crowd that gathered several evenings each week around our big dining table or participants in the writers' workshops that my father ran for the Communist Party, or both. Sometimes my parents would be at work in the front room of the apartment, which they used as an office, sometimes not there at all. Many a weekday my younger brother Ennis and I would come home from grade school -- P.S. 41, just a ten-minute walk away down Greenwich Avenue -- to find some new configuration of vaguely familiar faces with their eyes glued to the screen. People brought sandwiches, macaroni salad, and pound cake. The coffee percolator worked overtime.

At the age of ten and a half I didn't have any clear understanding of what these hearings signified, needless to say. I took their importance for granted from the weight that my parents and their circle gave to them. So when, on the grainy screen below the rabbit ears, this elfin old guy said to the ugly man with the ugly voice and the five-o'clock shadow, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last? Have you left no sense of decency?" and the gallery in the hearing room burst into applause as the camera panned across it, and our home rang with the sounds of weeping and huzzahs, I understood only that this nasty bastard had finally got his comeuppance, so I yelled and clapped gleefully along with them.

I may have been only half past ten, with a limited grasp of politics, but I knew something about nasty bastards. One of them, Leon Manx, sat near me in that small crowd that day. I didn't realize it at the time, only gathered it later and had it confirmed by Duke not long before his passing, but Leon served the CPUSA as, among other

things, my parents' handler. He was almost certainly a genius; he spoke fifteen languages fluently, wrote effectively in another dozen, read yet more (including Sanskrit), had doctorates in several sciences. He and his wife Nena had accompanied us to France and then to England when my parents went into exile in 1951 to dodge the House Un-American Activities Committee, had returned when the British refused to renew all of our visas, lived a few blocks away from us, nominally worked freelance for my parents as the main translator in their publishing business.

I had no way to put those pieces together, but I already knew Leon as a bully, and a threat. Prematurely balding, of medium height, he had a barrel chest and bulging muscles -- a physique inherited from his ironworker father who (Duke confided in me some years later) used to punish Leon and his brother Hank by drunkenly holding them by one ankle, upside down, outside the window of their fifth-floor walk-up tenement apartment, vowing to drop them if they didn't shut up.

Leon liked to pass the abuse along, by intimidating women and dominating men. Women he scared by radiating the potential for some berserk eruptive capacity -- nothing I can imagine anyone finding virile and thus sexually provocative, just a continuous seething. For men he added verbal aggression and active physical provocation, not only unconsciously puffing out his chest but crushing any male hand proffered in greeting or departure, forcing the victim to acknowledge the painfulness of his grip and plead to be released from it. He practiced this on all members of his own gender, regardless of age, so I came to dread their occasional visits, after which my right hand would ache for a day. My father, who knew of this because I spoke to him about it, and because Leon did the same to him, never did anything to stop him.

Leon's barely controlled violence took psychological forms too, a variety of domineering patterns. Here's a story that Duke told again and again (as he did with all his stories):

After we sailed to France, on the run from the witch-hunters, we ended up on the Côte d'Azur, a sleepy little town called Golfe-Juan. My parents rented a white elephant of a hillside villa for a song, and, until they found a rental of their own, Leon and Nena stayed with us for a month. Breakfast every morning consisted of croissants, *pain au chocolat*, fruit, coffee for the adults, café au lait for me, hot chocolate for my brother Ennis.

When you slice a *pain au chocolat* in two, so as to toast it and get the chocolate melted and tasty, the chocolate almost inevitably ends up on one half or the other, not evenly divided. Leon made a point of getting to the breakfast table before any of the rest of us, and the chocolate sides of those pastries were always all gone. Always. All. Even after I complained and my mother reprimanded him for that.

My father never showed the slightest interest in spending time with infants. Children only began to interest Duke when they could serve as captive audiences for his narratives of his life, or as proto-contestants to whom he could teach competitive games, at which he was by definition superior. Or when he could read out loud to

them, though books of their own choosing usually bored him, so he generally picked the titles. (I first encountered *Moby-Dick* that way, including the chapter on the whiteness of the whale, when I was nine.)

The only ways I knew of to get Duke to spend time with me, then, were games, his stories, or getting read to. One evening in Golfe-Juan he and I were playing casino, a simple card game. I didn't much like games, then or since, but at age seven I could understand the rules of casino and sometimes won a hand. Duke wouldn't generally throw a game, but with something as elementary as casino he didn't press too hard, so I had a slim but fighting chance, one on one.

Suddenly Leon came into the room -- either they were still living with us or had arrived for dinner -- and sat down at the table. After watching my father and me for a minute he huffed "What are you doing? That's the wrong move!" and began helping my father to play more aggressively against me. After a few minutes and a few lost hands, with two adults arrayed against me, I burst into tears, threw down my cards, and ran out.

"Poor Arlen!" Duke would always say in retelling this incident. "That was so sad. Leon was so mean." I heard that tale dozens of times over the course of my life. (I have no personal recollection of that moment, which I surely wiped from my memory as soon as I could.) Not till Duke was in his eighties, recounting this yet again, did I awaken to the realization that Leon was peripheral to the plight of "poor Arlen," who lived with a father unable or unwilling to defend him against bullying even in the supposed safety of his own home.

Fortunately, we didn't see Leon and Nena often once we returned to the States. Now and then Leon would show up at our 14th Street apartment during business hours, to confer with one or both of my parents, in which event I either stayed in my room or went out to play, waving goodbye from a safe distance as I left. Neither Leon or Nena played poker or wrote poetry or fiction, nor were they particularly social, so they didn't take part in my parents' scheduled recreations or occasional parties. From time to time they came over for dinner.

I recall Leon vividly from that period, Nena much less so. She was small, perhaps half his bulk, and spoke little. Usually I excused myself after the meal, so I don't know how those evenings evolved, but when I had occasion to pass through the living room en route to the kitchen she and my mother were mostly silent, the talk conducted by the two men, each of them monologists by nature. I do remember that Nena always wore skirts and blouses with full-length sleeves, a trademark silk scarf around her neck, a swept-forward hairstyle that covered half her face, and an unusual amount of pancake makeup for a woman her age in that era in those lefty-boho circles.

Around 1957 my parents' little bootstrap publishing business had succeeded to the

point where it had solidified and grown. Their company went public on the New York Stock Exchange. For the first time in either of their lives they had some money, and bought a brownstone on West 70th Street, where we lived on the first two floors (plus the basement), with rental units above. They sprang for a living-room ensemble -- a brand-new couch, coffee table, and rug, all Danish modern, plus a stereo console in teak to match -- all store-bought, as we used to say, not second-hand or found cheap at auction. That's the point where Ennis became aware of Duke and Frankie's financial situation. I've often told him that we grew up in two different families, me with two churchmouse-poor old lefties always looking over their shoulders for the thought police, him with two solid-citizen successful entrepreneurs running a publicly traded corporation.

The brownstone had a little garden out back on the ground floor, mostly flagstones with a few strips of earth along the fences for plantings. Surrounded as it was by other similar buildings, all five stories tall or more, it got no more than an hour's sunlight a day, around high noon. From sunrise on, the rest was shadow, until darkness fell. Still, it was an outdoor space about twenty feet wide by thirty deep, which few New Yorkers have. My parents bought a wooden garden table with accompanying benches, left the rest as they found it, and in the summer we'd eat lunch and even dinner out there. In warm weather their parties (and, eventually, mine) would spill out of the living room into that space.

By 1959 we'd settled into our new life as landed gentry. Tickets to Broadway shows had become one of Duke and Frankie's indulgences. Whenever we saw a show that Duke liked, he'd buy the original-cast album. That was the year the musical *Gypsy* premiered, so of course that LP often spun on the turntable in the evenings and on weekends. Duke fancied himself as a singer (Frankie was tone-deaf, or claimed to be); he'd taken voice lessons in his teens, so he'd sing along -- especially the theme song, "Everything's Coming Up Roses."

When the business took off, before the IPO, they'd moved all their professional activities to an office on West 17th Street, so Leon never showed up at the house thereafter during business hours. He'd become marginal to Duke and Frankie's business -- they worked with dozens of translators at that time -- and whatever power he'd held over them as their handler had somehow waned. (By then I knew a lot more about my parents' political past, knew also that Leon was much higher up the Party ladder than they had ever been, was thus more at risk than they, with the Cold War still raging.)

Still, at least on a personal level, he had them cowed. He and Nena came over for dinner every few months, and my last memory of Leon grinning viciously as he crushed my hand and stared into my eyes to relish my pain has us standing in the foyer of that apartment, my parents watching this torment wordlessly. I would have been close to sixteen, but nowhere near his match, the classic 97-pound weakling of the Charles Atlas ads.

One morning a few months later, spring of my junior year, I was explaining to my mother that I had to go to some fictitious high-school function that night, when I knew they'd planned another dinner with Leon and Nena. Frankie cut me short, announcing that they'd cancelled the dinner; Nena wasn't feeling well, not the first time that had happened. A week later I came in to find my parents and Nena huddled in the living room. Nena turned her face away. Duke jerked his head quickly, and I beat it.

The semester ended. Ennis and I left for the summer place our folks had purchased on Martha's Vineyard. Duke and Frankie came up for weekends, sometimes whole weeks. We hitched rides and went to the beach while they were gone, played golf and did some deep-sea fishing when they showed up. Somewhere along the line Frankie mentioned that she'd started redoing the garden, fixing up their bathroom (Ennis and I had our own), and redecorating the living room.

Sure enough, when we got home she'd changed things around considerably. Their second-floor bathroom had all-new fixtures and tiles, while the staircase leading up to it and the ground-floor living room sported new coats of paint. In the garden, a high cinderblock wall had replaced the much lower, decrepit wooden back fence that had come with the place. "They had to dig a deep trench to pour the footing for that," Frankie said. Though still straggly, newly planted climbing roses had begun to spread along guidewires attached to bolts in the cinderblock. "Eventually those will cover the whole wall," our mother told us. "It'll look beautiful."

She'd set privet hedges along the side walls, where previously only some English ivy had grown. "These are all heavy feeders," she informed us. "We'll need to fertilize and water on a regular basis. That'll be one of your chores, Arlen. We're going to increase your allowance." Needless to say, I was pleased.

A few weeks later, I came out of my room for dinner to find Nena and Duke at the garden table, with Frankie passing the meal out to Ennis through the small kitchen window that opened onto our little backyard refuge. Looking around quickly, I saw no Leon. Duke caught my eye, put his finger to his lips, and led me back into the living room. Before I could ask, he said, sotto voce, "Leon has gone underground. It wasn't safe for him to stay around. He had to leave. You understand?"

I nodded. I did understand, or thought I did. People on the left went underground sometimes, I knew that, they hid, they went on the run or into exile, people hunted for them, Trotsky, Mao, Arthur Miller, it got dangerous, and Leon had been in the thick of it, my parents more like useful idiots, smaller game. "You can't mention this to anyone," Duke continued, his finger again to his lips. I nodded. "Even among ourselves, even with Nena. It's too painful for her to talk about it." "Okay," I agreed. "I get it."

I figured the dinner would be strained, what with Leon on the lam somewhere, fleeing right-wing hounds, and Nena and my parents worried sick for him, but in fact it went fine. The women conducted most of the conversation, in a cheerful mood, Duke remaining uncharacteristically quiet. Nena looked good, better than I remembered ever seeing her. She'd changed her hair style, off the face, so you could see her bone

structure and her hazel eyes, which shone. Aside from a light shade of lipstick, she wore no noticeable makeup. Perhaps because of the heat of Indian summer she'd donned a sleeveless blouse without accessorizing it with a scarf, first time I'd seen that. It seemed a weight had been lifted from her shoulders, which I chalked up to the fact that it must have been a relief to have Leon with all his intensity gone for awhile, her concern for his well-being notwithstanding.

I found the company so enjoyable that I stayed with them after dinner. When Nena left that evening she hugged each of us, myself included -- another first. "Don't worry," Frankie told her. "It'll all be okay." "Yeah," Duke added. "Everything's coming up roses." Nena laughed at that, but I thought I saw tears in her eyes. "Coming up roses," she echoed, before stepping out into the hall.

That got to be a catchphrase with them -- not surprising, since you couldn't get away from the song that year. We saw Nena often from then on, at our house in Manhattan and even as a summer visitor at the place on the Vineyard. Whenever the weather permitted they'd sit outside in the cool of the evening. "How are things?" someone would ask, and another of them, Heineken or gin and tonic or wineglass in hand, would answer, "Coming up roses." I even took to saying it myself, seeing as how I'd become the de facto gardener for our back forty, and that tickled them especially, though I couldn't say why. As for Leon, at least in my presence, none of them ever mentioned him again, save for some of my father's stories about the past, which he never told when Nena was visiting. I figured he'd found some safe house or bolt hole in the States, or had slipped across the border into Canada or Mexico, and the less said the better before things cooled down and he made his return.

I left home for graduate school shortly before I turned 21. Duke and Frankie finally divorced while I was on the west coast, to the great relief of Ennis and myself. She got the house as part of the settlement and kept it, much longer than she should have (too much space and work for her), and she tended to that garden in my absence. Eventually she sold the brownstone, with that wall of roses one of its attractions, I was sure. But new buyers sometimes like to start from scratch, so I had no idea if it had survived.

In the mid-'90s I took a girlfriend on a tour of the exteriors of the places I'd lived in Manhattan. They were all still standing then, remarkable for a city that's always in flux. The house on 70th Street was the one furthest north, the last for us to view. When we got there, I saw that they'd remodeled the front, moving the steps, running the entranceway through what had been my bedroom, and turning the former hallway into private space for the owner's unit.

I was explaining all this to my gal pal when the front door opened and out stepped a man in a jogging outfit. He looked suspiciously at these strangers studying his building. "I used to live here," I called. "You just stepped out of what was my bedroom." His face lit up. "You must be one of the Corman boys," he said. "I bought the building

from your mother Frankie. Would you like to come inside and take a look?"

Delighted by the offer, we followed him in. It was strange, the mind accommodating a space so clearly defined in memory to the physical actuality of it. I've had that experience a few times before, watching two perceptual overlays meld into one, not without a struggle. It's visually disorienting, even a bit vertiginous, until they merge, as they finally did.

The new owners hadn't changed the place much on the ground floor, but they'd completely finished the previously raw basement, and had revised the second floor, keeping the back half for themselves, converting the front half, which had been Ennis's room, into a separate studio apartment. A shock, yet also a treat, to step back into a space where your life once centered after an absence of forty years.

It was summer; the door to the garden was open. "May we?" I asked. "Be my guest," he said, guiding us into it. They hadn't altered that at all, just replaced the furniture, added a high-end barbecue grill, and repainted the fences. The back wall was a riot of small, deep red roses, all the way up that cinderblock. "Frankie planted that, you know," I told him, "summer of '59. I tended it for years."

"Believe it or not," Sumner told us -- his name was George Sumner -- "that's what sold us on the place. My wife Lilian couldn't get it out of her mind. She said if those roses could flourish here, then we could. Frankie loved that response; I think she even reduced her asking price because of it, and she took our personal note in lieu of a mortgage. She gave Lilian very explicit directions on how to feed and water the rosebush to keep it healthy; we still have those, on the kitchen wall. She said she'd been waiting for someone who would take good care of those roses."

"Could I get a few cuttings?" I asked. "I'd love to have some for my own garden." He stepped inside and we followed. He pointed to a yellowed card pinned to a corkboard on the kitchen wall. I recognized Frankie's handwriting, then scanned the card, seeing fertilizer and bone meal brand names, feeding schedule, watering frequency in different weathers, instructions on how to wrap the base and mulch the ground for winter.

Suddenly I realized what those roses had meant to Frankie and Duke, but most of all to Nena. And again I had that unnerving sensation, two realities trying to exist in the same mental space, more dizzying because this involved perceptions not of spaces but of people -- who they are at their core, what they're capable of, how much of them you can fail to see, especially when you live with them every day. For a minute I couldn't breathe; my whole chest locked up, I thought I might faint.

Fortunately, I was up close to the corkboard, my face turned away from them, my hands gripping the countertop. I stayed there as if studying Frankie's notes, while Sumner rummaged in several drawers, finally fishing out a pair of pruning shears and a small paper bag. "Help yourself."

I did. "This means a lot to me," I told him. "Seeing the place and the roses so well cared for, Frankie's notes, these cuttings. Thank you, and thank Lilian for us. Frankie

will be glad to hear all this is in good hands." "How is Frankie?" Sumner asked as we took our leave. He didn't need to know about her slow slide into Alzheimer's, so I just told him she was fine; he said to send their best wishes, and we waved goodbye. I've never gone back, though Sumner gave me his number and said to call anytime.

Those cuttings rooted easily in some potting soil, then began to branch. One of them, now a full-grown bush, thrives in my back garden on Staten Island. The next time I saw Duke and Harriet, his second wife, I gave them another, telling Duke where it had come from. "Everything's still coming up roses," I said, looking him straight in the eye. "Coming up roses," he replied, nodding. "Good to know."

I flew out to see Frankie, at her place in Mendocino, some months later. Nena had spent time with her there shortly after she'd moved in; they'd stayed friends till Nena died of cancer, and Nena had stayed in touch with Duke too, though mostly by mail after the divorce. I'd brought another of the rooted cuttings with me on the plane.

Frankie moved slowly into the garden on the arm of her caregiver, who sat her down on a bench in the shade. I'd taken what I needed from her potting shed, a shovel, some compost, and a cup of bone meal. I told her about the cutting's source while planting it in a suitable spot, where she could see it every day, then watered it to set it.

Brushing the dirt off my hands, I sat down next to her, took up a manila envelope, and pulled from it prints of several pictures I'd made that afternoon with Sumner: one of the new front of the brownstone, one of the rosebush in full bloom, and another of her care instructions pinned to their kitchen wall. "Oh dear oh dear," she said, looking from one to another of the pictures, "Oh dear oh dear," which was pretty much all she said about anything at that stage, good, bad, or indifferent. When I asked her if she knew where I'd made those photos and what they represented, she said nothing. Then she turned her weathered old face to me.

"Everything's coming up roses," I told her. She returned my gaze and, after a long minute, replied, with a faint smile, "Coming up roses." I wanted to think she knew what she was saying, but by that point in her decline I couldn't be certain she even recognized me.

by Ian C Williams

Seventeen Years

You always kept a jar
full of cicada shells on the edge of your bookcase.

You called it a conversation
starter, but it was just an excuse for you to elaborate

your entomological interests
and I was never one to mind—I still wouldn't.

Yesterday, I drove through
your neighborhood and wondered if you still lived

on the corner. If your parents
still visited without calling ahead. If the shed scrimps

of leftover cicadas escaped
their enclosure and carried you off as one of them.

Clearing the Air

She slides between floral bed sheets before drying off—
damp tracks from here to the bathtub, still gurgling past the hair in the drain.

I poured her a cup of tea, but she did not drink. I poured
another, but she left it on the ledge with the bar of lavender soap—

the teabag's string stuck to the side like flower petals after a storm. I poured another,
another, another cup of empty steam to steep in heavy rooms, thick

with the aromas of too many teabags. But before the bathwater drains,
before the footprints lift from the carpet she turns her face.

Her breathing evens. She flinches in her sleep
and the tea is already lukewarm.

What I Could Have Been

Violence never belonged to me—
it slipped my fists as if sifting

through a sandbox sieve. It signaled disaster
like the blown bicycle spoke before

the sudden collapse.
But it belonged to K.

He clutched it like a cudgel when he bludgeoned
my kid brother. It pulsed past his knuckles

when punching the back of my neck,
and yet if it fragmented after the impact,

I didn't pick up the splinters, only watched them
dissolve by the summer's oleander, standing

open-handed and stunned, blood running past
my upper lip. And here, separated by years

and state-lines, I wish I'd scooped up those impetuous stones
and hurtled one back.

Where the Bells Went

When you ran through the orchard, arms outstretched
as if reaching for the low fruit—

as if the low fruit didn't surround your ankles
this late in the year—

you kept crying, crying
 where have the girls gone?
 The girls who rang the bells
 Sunday after service—
 where have the girls gone?

You kept crying, crying
 had I been more aware
 had I been listening when their songs
 slipped out of earshot, had I not
 looked away, their mothers might sleep tonight.

Off in the forest,
in the high branches where the jarflies stay,

You swear you hear the bells, you swear
you hear the girls singing.

by Loretta Diane Walker

Desert Light

*"... suddenly, there: a gate into such
distances as perhaps only birds know..."*
~ Rainer Maria Rilke

A wren chirps a cappella on a gate
stretched between night and dawn.
A small chorale of clouds sings a hymn
morning is here with her long burning candles.
How beautiful the soft music of light
pulsing in the voice of this desert sky.

The last remnants of darkness disappear.
On my block, houses wake and brush
their windows in daylight.
The air tastes like new beginnings.
A fly, that symbol of unwanted things,
beats hard against the pane.

Is this not true of the desert sun
when it beats against the pane of our bodies?
Heat a pumice against the skin.
Flesh and glass both fragile.
Vulnerability is our light.

Curious how the harp of dusk strums
a pink cadenza just as we desire
shadows smaller than ourselves.

Night in its wisdom shuts its ears.
Stars, those tiny crumbs,
leave a trail of silence.

Three Sisters

I Dawn

“The quieter you become the more you are able to hear.”— Rumi

An exiled windmill stares,
refuses to turn its head
as dawn, light’s chaste sister,
streaks sky’s soft upper lip with orange.

Dew falls on the red *Radio-Flyer*
that waits for children who will not return.
The air sweetens its breath with honeysuckle.
There is goodness in this break of day.

II Blaze of Day

There is goodness in this blaze of day.
The way a pigeon perches on a nest of stones.
The way light draws a silhouette of its eye.
The way a stray tom ignores instinct,

retreats to a hammock of shade
stretched across a wooden fence.
The way the wind walks quietly
through the fruitless mulberry’s branches.

III Storms and Starlight

The wind walks quietly
through the fruitless mulberry’s branches.
Orange-fingered flames press against windows.
Black petals of smoke drift towards the sky.

A dog barks; his throat clots with sorrow.
A parade of ashes march across the parking lot.
Who can hear the cadences of their apologies?
Overhead, tears of light fill a long corridor of stars.

Night Alley

Night is a wide dark fence
posted around the city.
I ride around its boundaries
with the car window cracked
listening to the radio harmonize
with the wind, dogs and my engine.

At the stop sign near home,
I decide against the shortcut
and stretch the drive a few more feet.
Though I am shielded by tons of steel,
fear is the rusty latch that locks
me out of a dirty alley.

When I get ready to turn,
a wiry silver-haired woman shepherding
a Target shopping cart
trundles into view.

Her metal buggy burdened
with bags of clothes,
dented cans and mystery items
only she and the stars know.

Raising the window and fencing out her courage,
I watch her from the review mirror unlock
the rusty latch and walk into that place I feared.
I drive on with her back whispering in the distance,
Feel the blood rise in my face
as the sound of her cartwheels pulsate in my bones.

The Day My Brother Cried

The frame of our mutt's door is a black hole,
half-full water bowl a cistern of absence.

I come home after my brother searches,
find her white stiff body near the back gate

with untenanted eyes, mouth open,
tongue drooping a final benediction.

Silence weeps on cream carpet,
sobs muffled by shabby fibers.

He gives the quiet his tears,
jumps the hurdle of manliness

to honor the joy she places at his feet.
He stares into the day's soft neck,

voice rough with anger.
I hear a crack in the cup of his throat,

sadness breaks him.

I know that sorry excuse of a man poisoned her.

He makes a vow, threatens tomato vines, clothesline poles,
bars on the windows, but never the *neighbor*

who growls at life and foreigners on his lawn.
My mother's wisdom tempers him.

You can't prove it. She knows, I know
revenge crawls through his body.

Night hides from her shadow,
my brother walks up and down the street

with our mutt's innocence leaning
on the broad shoulders of his promises.

Taken

Then the Lord God made a woman from the rib he had taken out of the man... Genesis 2:21-22 (NIV)

Songbirds sing through the cage of my ribs
a melody of the beginning.
This is the origin of beauty— bone and dust
taken from the hard side of clay.
He sleeps, cannot deny my birth.
He wakes, feels his sutured side,
learns the meaning of want
in the early morning of a seasonless day.

Grazing wild beast and flying fowl watch as I am taken
from and to the husband of earth.
He laughs, names me wo-man, born of his wound.
And this is what comes from birth— woe, joy,
tears from the pain of tearing, joining
flesh, bone, breath in the steady hands of God.

Fair People

Laura Dzubay

We went to the demo derby because we wanted to see some cars get destroyed. Lucie and I had spent a lot of the summer building up a general ill-concealed hatred for one another, and although neither one of us would say it, there was the sense that witnessing a good all-around smashing would go a long way. We got to the county fair at dusk and waited in the back of the line, counting out crumpled ones and fives in a sea of hefty tractor drivers and prepubescent football kids.

"It's ten dollars," said Lucie. "I can spot you if you need it."

I had seen the sign. "I've got it."

"Are you sure? You said you forgot cash."

"I found an ATM. I've got it."

The derby crowd was denser than usual, this being a Friday night near the end of the summer after a lot of the more sensational fair attractions had come and gone. There had been the rodeo the week before, and the highlight of the summer, a traveling carnival from across the state line in Illinois, a week before that. The demo derby was the county's last hurrah, where men in orange shirts dragged junk cars out onto the dirt in the middle of the stadium and the cars slammed each other into the dust for all to see.

We shuffled closer to the ticket man and handed him ten dollars each for pink wristbands. Walking up in between the bleachers, we passed a folding table with a poster in front of it that read in glittery block letters, IN MEMORY OF SHARON CHRISTLER. Beneath the letters was a large grainy photo of a woman smiling behind the cleared-out windshield of a clunker, her gloved hands gripping the steering wheel and her face looking like she was home.

"I wonder what happened to her," I said without really thinking as we passed it. Lucie was leading the way as always, scanning the rapidly filling bleachers for seats.

"Who?"

"Never mind."

"Here," said Lucie, stopping in front of the bleachers. She started up the rows, taking wide, slow steps over the seats as people bent out of the way to let us through.

We sat down next to a skinny woman in a sequined purple jacket and a couple of overweight men. There were two young boys sitting with them as well, probably twelve or thirteen, wearing tee shirts and ripped jeans. The boys each had their phones out and were playing Angry Birds side by side. The men were talking and the woman was watching the field of dirt, watching nothing.

"Maybe she died at one of these," said Lucie.

My head jerked around and I stared at her. "What?"

"Shirley Christler. That's who you were talking about, right?"

"Sharon, I think," I said absently. "Yeah."

“I don’t know why they’d go around publicizing it, though,” she mused. Her eyes were on the field, where the men in the orange tee shirts were evening the dirt out with brooms. “They didn’t seem like they were protesting the derby itself or anything. Probably they just wanted money.”

She spoke definitively, as though she were knowledgeable about things like this. Lucie had been doing this a lot recently, assuming expertise all over Martinsville. Complaining about the traffic coming into town – she drove the half hour to Bloomington, our preppier counterpart to the south, quite often, for tennis matches and the occasional Habitat build – and giving people directions around town even when they didn’t ask. She’d go out of her way to compliment the school guidance counselor’s new cardigan, to ask after her dentist’s kids whenever she went in for an appointment. Wriggling her way in with the adults. Driving past the guy who stood at the end of Main Street with a plastic cup and a weathered cardboard sign that warned us all about a coming apocalypse, she would groan and say, “Isn’t Old Pete going to get a job one of these days?”

Martinsville gets humid during the summer months, and everyone comes out of their houses, for better or for worse. One of our sources of pride is that we’re a small town, a simple town, and we don’t need a bunch of fancy stores and attractions to make us something worthwhile – in other words, there isn’t a whole lot to do here. All through July and August, kids line up outside the Jiffy Treet, squinting under the partial shade of their baseball caps, waiting for the cool release of ice cream that’ll already be half melted by the time it’s handed to them across the counter. Farmers like my dad and Lucie’s dad spend their days out in the fields, lost up to their sunburnt necks in gold as the wheat soaks up light all around them.

In the fall, Lucie and I would begin our last year at Martinsville High School. We’d go to the homecoming game and then the dance afterward – Lucie would go with Rob and a group of her friends from the tennis team, and I’d tag along, pretending I was friends with them, too. In October, we’d help our families bring in the harvest and later drive to Harrodsburg one Friday night for the scariest haunted house in southern Indiana, in keeping with tradition. Neither of us had done any talking about college yet – at first because we were too close to want to comprehend the thought of losing each other, but now because, as the time drew nearer, there seemed to be nothing to say. I’d go to school almost definitely in Bloomington – it was in-state, and I knew I could get at least one or two good scholarships there. Lucie’s family was better off than mine and could send her if she wanted to go, but she’d made a few jokes recently about skipping out on college if Rob asked her to marry him first, and it was hard to tell how much she meant them. Rob wasn’t the first boy Lucie had dated, but he was the first boy she’d dated from the football team.

Sitting in the bleachers at the demo derby, I caught the eye of the first boy I’d ever dated - Eddie Cresswell. He was sitting toward the front with a few other guys, wearing

a red Cardinals tank top that had giant holes cut out of the sides in place of sleeves, so that you could see all of his tanned skin and muscles more easily. It had been a big fad back in eighth or ninth grade. We accidentally made eye contact, and then both looked quickly away.

Lucie noticed. "Is that Eddie?"

I didn't need to answer.

She nudged me. "It's never too late!" she said, grinning, and even though it sounded like a joke, it wasn't. Eddie was on the wrestling team, and Lucie had been supremely jealous when I'd started dating him the year before. I'd broken up with him toward the end of the year, after he and some other guys got in trouble for writing jokes on the bathroom walls about Dave Massey, the only kid out of the closet at our school. I could still picture the rueful look on Lucie's face, the tone in her voice as she reassured me that Eddie and them probably hadn't meant it *that way* – that she liked Dave, everyone liked Dave, and maybe if he'd had more of a sense of humor about everything...

"I get it," I'd snapped, fed up, "so there's a time and a place for being principled." She went red in the face immediately, and I felt guilty and apologized.

Now, at the derby, I muttered, "Never too late."

A minute later a click sounded from the loudspeakers, and a man began to speak. He thanked us all for coming out, reminding us that demo derbies were dying out all over the country and that it meant so much to have our support. Everyone stood up as a girl came out onto the dirt with a microphone to sing the national anthem. Our hands over our hearts, our eyes on the flag.

The girl was Eve Bowman, an ex-cheerleader from our high school who had graduated the year before and would be going on to college at Purdue in the fall. She was in the choir at her church, First Presbyterian, and had been singing anthems at town functions since she was around eleven. Soon she would be at college, living far away from here, doing internships and studying abroad, and we would have to find a new choir girl to sing our anthems for us, but the day hadn't come quite yet.

"I think she was a little sharp," Lucie whispered to me as Eve gave a gracious little bow and made for the bleachers.

"You're so critical," I said.

"Well, I just mean compared to last week. She sang at the rodeo, too. I came and watched with Rob." Lucie peered down at Eve, assessing her fine blonde hair, her sheer sky-blue blouse. "She looks really pretty, though."

"You sound like your dad."

Lucie's dad was always talking about the way girls looked. It was like a compulsion. He couldn't tell a simple story about a trip to the bank without rating the breasts of the female teller, or mentioning the weight of the woman standing next to him in line. Lucie made fun of him for it a lot and sometimes he even made fun of himself, which was strange to me. I still can't decide if him being aware of it made things better or worse.

Down on the dirt field, eight cars had been positioned in what was more or less a circle. None of them had windows, probably so that the glass wouldn't shatter in and hurt the drivers when they crashed, and they were all spray-painted with different colors and words. There was a completely white car with "008" hand-painted on the side in black, a blue and yellow one that said "POKEMON GO" in big block letters, a red and blue truck with a Confederate flag fluttering in the back gap where the window should have been. Another "IN MEMORY OF," although I couldn't quite make out the name.

Some had even added extra features, like twin pipes on the hood that I knew from previous demo derbies could shoot small flames into the air. Nothing harmful. Just for show, just enough fire to remind people of hell, but in a cool way. As soon as the two young boys sitting near us saw it, they started bouncing up and down a little, nudging one another and pointing.

"D'you think the flames are gonna be big?"

"Not too big." The second kid was wearing a camo shirt and was a little bit taller than the other, maybe an older brother. "I saw last year and they were pretty small. Not enough to actually do anything."

The first kid, a skinny boy wearing a red baseball cap, frowned down at the cars. The drivers were coming out now in their jackets and gloves and grinning up at their audience, waving at their wives and girlfriends and children, strapping on helmets and finding their cars. "Maybe," he tried to negotiate, "if another car smashed up on its hood, and then the flames shot up into the car and it exploded—"

"Well, we don't want that." The mother had overheard and was smiling a little, but the smile was hardened into her face. She was very young but looked old. The skin on her face was etched with lines and tan in a patchy sort of way, and her hair was stringy, pulled back into a ponytail. In fact she looked a little like some of the girls from my high school, only aged five or ten years.

"Why not?"

"The men driving the cars, Michael. They'd get hurt."

The boy shrugged and pretended not to hear. I glanced over at Lucie to see if she'd heard the whole exchange, but she was bent over her phone, texting Rob.

Once the drivers were all in their cars and ready to go, the men in orange did one last walk around and then signaled their okay to the commentator, who was standing in front of the bleachers at the edge of the battleground. The commentator counted down from three, the crowd cheered, and they were off.

A minute or so went by before the first real crash, but as soon as it happened, there was no going back. A gold-painted Ford truck managed to send a checkered Camry up practically sideways against the barrier, and everyone in the crowd who hadn't already been standing leapt to their feet, including me and Lucie. Whole families pumped their fists, shouting out advice for the drivers and calls of approval. Couples grinned down at the cars and at each other, groups of kids I vaguely

recognized from the local schools clustered together to watch. It all blended together into one crowd of unhinged people, smiling, shouting, gaping, cheering. For a moment I felt joined with all of them and with Lucie – looking at us as a stranger here in this mob of people, grinning our open grins and yelling side-by-side at the cars below, you wouldn't have known about the invisible bricks that had been building up between us, the exhaustion with each other, the bitterness with no name. If anything at all, you would have thought we were just two friends from the high school at the end of our summer, going wild over the demo derby with the rest of them.

And looking at the derby, it wasn't hard to understand. Lucie and I had been coming to this together every year since middle school. Even after all those years, we still couldn't predict which cars would eventually emerge with undue power over the others, who would end up on top in a collision, or how many beatings one driver would take before he caved. That was the thing about the derby – it was like watching an epic unfold. There was the valiance of collaboration, whenever two cars would team up to smash a third between them. But more often the appeal was in the individual drivers themselves. They stepped into boxes of junk knowing that they were going to be slammed across the dirt, into other cars, against barriers, that the metal would bend in sharp all around them. Engines revving, wheels whipping across the dust. There was no stopping them – a driver was forced to back out only when his car had been through so much that even if he repeatedly tried, the engine would not start. He could be pummeled to splinters and still somehow choose to keep going, as long as the engine would permit.

To watch this, to watch people keep going and going and going even when nobody is helping them, when people are actively hurting them, it gives you strength. They were persistent and strong, they were admirable, they were heroes.

A few minutes in, a thirty-second break was called. The orange shirts jogged out again to check on the drivers and to re-apply spray paint, although again the purpose of this was questionable. I wondered if it smelled like spray paint down there, and car hood fumes and gas and sweat. In the bleachers, teens working at the fair for the summer were walking around the rows, selling sodas and Pure Leaf iced tea.

"Wow," I said to Lucie, knowing it sounded stupid but figuring that a return to the silence between us would sound even worse.

"Yeah," she said.

"Mom!" The boy in the red cap was tugging at his mother's sleeve. "Mom, can I do the demo derby when I'm older?"

"Of course not." She sounded tired. "It's not safe."

"What are you talking about?" one of the two men broke in, speaking over the boys' heads. He was on his second or third Miller Lite by now. "Didn't you see all those guys? That'll be Mikey, someday."

"Dan," said the woman, helpless.

He waved her off. "Aw, c'mon," he said, "it's a while away." He turned back to his

friend then before she could say anything, pointing down at the dirt, where the cars had just started going again.

The round went on for another half hour or so, and one by one the competition was chipped away. The winners ended up being the “008” car, the Confederate flag truck (whose driver had gotten out briefly to fix the flag during one of the thirty-second breaks), and an old taxi painted a bright lime green. Once the round had ended, the fair workers brought out tractors and bulldozers to heave the fallen one by one off the field while the people in the bleachers milled around, buying refreshments, reliving the wildest moments. The workers took the cars off who knows where, back to the junkyards they’d come from, smoke streaming from their hoods, their dangling bumpers tracing thin lines in the dirt behind them. Once they were all gone, the orange shirts moved out again with hoses to spray the dirt, packing it down so that the cars wouldn’t get lost in dust the next time around.

Lucie and I became friends as easily as somebody falling in love for the first time, as easily as you love your hometown. Our families grew soybeans off the same stretch of road, our farms were right next to each other. We were both rooted deep here and knew each other’s grandparents and cousins, all of whom were spread out around a few immediate counties and towns nearby – Ellettsville, Spencer, Hope, a few up in Marion. Many of them had lived here since before Prohibition.

Lucie was a kid with a businesslike mind, and summer days when we were bored, she’d organize lemonade stands on our road and we’d yell at the cars that sped by about four or five times an hour. Sometimes she recruited other kids who lived nearby – it was a peculiar thing, with Lucie, that there were some kids she would have given her right arm to sell lemonade with, while there were others she always politely refused when they offered. I got the sense that those were the kids her parents told her not to hang out with - I’d hear them mentioned sometimes over at Lucie’s house, gentle words from her mother, loud jokes from her father, followed always by a rising tide of laughter, as though everyone was on the same page.

One summer day, we must’ve been around eleven or twelve, and we were out there with Eddie Cresswell and Al Frasier. All of our ice had melted and the lemonade in our plastic pitcher was getting sticky and syrupy, so Eddie, the strongest of the two boys, had run back down the dirt driveway to Lucie’s house to fill up a cooler with more ice. The three of us stood by the empty road with a rickety wooden table for the lemonade, miles of green soybean leaves fluttering in the breeze behind us and before us.

“We can teach you how to play Concentration,” Lucie offered Al, grinning.

“No,” said Al. “That’s a girls’ game.”

“You sure?” She held out her hands toward him, one palm facing up, one facing down. “Let’s play” – she clapped three times in his face – “Concentration–”

“Stop it!” He shooed her away, scowling. Lucie giggled, giving up, and turned to

play with me instead.

As we were playing, a red Camry sped toward us, sending up clouds of dust from the road. As it neared us, Lucie and I broke apart, getting ready to call out our advertisements for lemonade, but before we got the chance, we heard somebody in the car whistle. It wasn't like the whistles we knew from home, sharp or quick, *come-inside-for dinner* or *I'm-over-here-where-are-you* whistles. This one was high and long and somehow implicitly unfriendly. I could hear it rolling around in somebody's mouth. I stepped back from the road.

"Damn, girls!"

"Sell me some of that lemonade!"

Whoever was in the car was laughing, and then they were gone.

Lucie and I stared after them, and Al just about fell over himself laughing.

"Damn, girls!" he kept saying, trying to imitate the man's voice. "*Hooo-eeee-*"

"Shut up!" said Lucie.

"Sell me some of that—"

Lucie shoved him, but he only kept laughing. "Asshole!" she said, and that made him stop and raise his eyebrows at her, clearly impressed.

That was the first time I ever heard Lucie cuss, and to my knowledge, it's the first time she ever cussed at all. I was also there the first time she got a nosebleed, the first time she wrote her full name in cursive, the first time she got a boy's number. I don't remember the sound of the whistle nearly as well as I remember the white fury in Lucie's face. *Asshole!* It made me so proud of her that I actually felt stronger, in my chest, in my heart. This was what it was always like with Lucie. Like finally lighting a match and starting up a bonfire out of newspapers and old trash, like sliding into cool Lake Monroe on a hot day.

We decided to take a break from the derby and walk around the fair for a bit. The sun was lower now and the rides were all lit up, the pendulum tilting sickly back and forth, the Ferris wheel tracing neon circles in the sky. A little bluegrass band near the barbeque stand was playing a rendition of "Spirit in the Sky," and a throng of listeners had gathered, some taking videos, some closing their eyes, swaying and singing along. We bought lemon shake-ups and walked around the food-stands and ticket games – the Whac-a-Mole booth, the Guess Your Weight scale, the game that's like beer pong only with little glass goldfish bowls. We passed the livestock barns, where a lot of the farm families were sitting in unfolded lawn chairs near their animals, drinking beers while their kids explored the hay-strewn rows. They had been here for weeks now, in the grass outside the barns with their RVs, where a lot of them would retreat later tonight. No sense in going home when your animals are here and you're at the fairgrounds all day anyway. Within a few days they would sell off most of the animals to be killed and they would pack up and go home, taking their RVs with them.

In the time that we were outside, the sun disappeared altogether. The sky was a deep black, the moon and stars were absent, but it didn't matter. We had our own stars in the lights from the rides and food-stands, and our stars were multicolored and closer to Earth, closer to us, our stars spun like pinwheels.

When we finally got back to the derby, it was the final round. The crowd in the bleachers had shifted a little, and sitting in our old spot was Eve Bowman, the church singer, so we joined her. The commentator hyped up the eight finalists – 008 was gone, but the green cab and the Confederate flag were still in, although they did look a lot worse for wear. Their doors were smashed in, their hoods caved and dented. Down in the bleachers in front of us, another wrestling guy was joining Eddie Cresswell and the others, and they clapped him on the back as he sat down next to them. They started whistling and hollering for the cars to start.

I hadn't stayed as late as the final round in many years, since I was a kid coming here with my dad. I had forgotten what happened, how it went, but now I remembered. As Lucie leaned forward, clutching her cell phone in her hands and watching the cars, I sat back in my seat, a rough emptiness filling my chest and a rushing in my ears.

The bullet sounded, and the cars could barely drag themselves across the dirt. It was impressive when they could gather enough momentum to bump into one another, let alone to cause any real damage. The heroes of the previous hour were now fumbling, their metal cages weakened.

"Mom," the kid, Michael, was saying, "can we go to Chik-fil-A after this?"

"No." She had given up and was smoking a cigarette, her fists closed around the ends of her purple sleeves. "I made dinner, remember?"

"But Chik-fil-A has milkshakes," the kid in the camo shirt pushed, joining in. "And waffle fries."

"We'll go to Chik-fil-A some other time. I made spaghetti, it's waiting for us."

"You made spaghetti again?" It was the dad. He started laughing. "Is that all you know how to make?"

"Don't be mean," she said sullenly.

"You make spaghetti all the time. We can go to Chik-fil-A."

The woman looked starved in her eyes. "Dan."

"We'll eat your spaghetti for lunch tomorrow."

"Okay," said the woman, swallowed up by her own family. "Okay."

I tried making conversation with Lucie a few more times, but she was busy with Rob on her phone, and I soon gave up and went back to stirring the ice around at the bottom of my lemon shake-up. The cars bumbled around one another, pushing into fenders, accidentally trapping themselves against the barriers. After about twenty minutes it was clear that no one had the force for it anymore, and the beating around which had seemed so valiant earlier now came off as only pointless and strained. One could almost feel bad for them. The Confederate guy in particular wouldn't stop trying, his wheels churning up dirt, his engine snarling and spitting, but there was nothing else

for it. They could go on like this forever. I felt a sudden urge to drag Lucie away from all of this, to beg her to break up with Rob and come to college in Bloomington with me, so that she never had to watch one of these pathetic derbies again in her life. But she wouldn't go – my throat was thickening, I was looking not at the cars but at her and she wasn't even noticing – she wouldn't go, wouldn't listen, she already hated me too much. I tried tugging a couple of times at her sleeve, saying, "Let's go, let's go," but she wouldn't budge, so I slipped out of the stands by myself and left early.

Earlier in the summer we'd had the Fourth of July picnic, and I think that was the last night I was really friends with Lucie. The Fourth of July picnic is the one thing all year that everyone in town goes to. People spend most of the afternoon running into friends and family, aunts and grandparents and neighbors, cooking up burgers and hot dogs over a few metal grills, unfolding lawn chairs and spreading out blankets in the prickly grass that spanned across Martinsville City Park. Up on the scarcely-used stage at the front of the park, musicians appear and disappear, hauling out equipment. Kids chase each other around the playground, toss Frisbees and baseballs back and forth in the fields. No one ever gets lost.

Slowly crickets begin to thrum and the sun filters down through the trees at the edge of the park, and it takes a while to notice that it's getting harder to make out the words on the labels of your chip bags and beer bottles, the faces of the people sitting far away from you. Eve Bowman leads everybody in "The Star-Spangled Banner," and then the symphony on the stage takes over, launching into renditions of "Hail to the Chief" and "You're a Grand Old Flag." Kids light up sparklers and write their names in the air, watching the ghostly glow fade away moments later. After a few songs, the first real fireworks start going off, lighting up the sky and pounding loud in our eardrums, like gunshots in the woods.

By the time this summer's picnic came around, I hadn't felt at home in Martinsville in a long time. And it was because of the people I had grown up with and the people I loved – Eddie Cresswell, my first boyfriend, who had taken me out for Steak'n'Shake so many late nights in his car, and Al Frasier, and Dave Massey and Eve Bowman, beautiful Eve Bowman with her fair hair and high voice. Lucie's parents – her father, who'd made me feel so welcome in his house and on his property, who'd told me jokes over so many of Lucie's mom's homemade meals. I loved them all so much, and yet there was also something there, something unspoken, that made me afraid to risk thinking about any one of them for too long.

I went to the picnic like I did every year, helping my family set up blankets and food right next to Lucie's. This time next year I would be getting ready for college, packing, planning out my classes. The year after that, I'd be gone. This, the goneness, was on my mind all the way to the park.

"Come and play Frisbee with us," Lucie said, tugging me along after the sun went down. She led me toward a group of people from our high school – Eddie and Al and

some other guys, Lucie's boyfriend Rob, a bunch of girls from the tennis team.

They stood in a wide circle in the grass near the stage, where the sounds of "America the Beautiful" filled my ears and drowned out anything else I might have heard. It was okay, though, I realized, because I didn't need to hear anything – I knew, already, everything that was going on. I was still full of good food from the cookout, my mom's almond cookies, the hamburgers my dad and Lucie's dad had grilled together. I felt the memory of the graffiti slipping momentarily away from me, along with Eddie and Al and the lemonade stand, and the hatred for Lucie that had only just begun spooling at that point, dark and clean inside my chest like black silk. I kicked off my shoes and stepped with bare feet into the cool grass. The crickets were back for the summer and the symphony was reeling with the sounds of our great country, our great town, and under the exploding sky of fireworks I shoved the old sickness back down my throat and tossed the plastic disc back across the circle to Lucie, thinking, *This would have been such a nice place to grow up.*

I'm Quick Becoming Stone

Forest Arthur Ormes

It has been an unpredictable disease; it has taken its time with me. And since it was time which was my need, I have since arrived at a deep gratitude for the unexpected years Providence has granted. Now I'm quick becoming stone. Because it's finally started to spread.

An older doctor named Gladstone was doing the talking. He had a thick mop of white hair with a short, stocky physique.

"If the surgery removes all the cancer cells in the colon and in the lymph nodes nearby...."

"How long?" I asked.

Doctor Kolisetty, the young, tall blond-haired doc, now gave his input: "For a fifty year old man in stage 3 colon cancer with your specific indicators, we would expect a survival probability with chemotherapy of forty two per cent in five years."

"Listen. I have two kids to raise on my own. They are just entering high school. I'm not ready for dying because they need me now most of all."

"During my thirty years as a surgeon, the human body has never ceased to surprise and humble me," Doctor Gladstone said.

"Research indicates..." Doctor Kolisetty said, "...that giving chemo early after surgery is associated with significant improved five-year survival times. We have treated hundreds of patients with your diagnosis."

"This case... it would be my first," I said.

"I treat each surgery individually, Mr. Stewart," Doctor Gladstone responded.

"Forty two per cent, five years," I repeated the numbers. "With chemotherapy."

Doctor Gladstone left the room. Doctor Kolisetty followed him.

I left the VA, and began walking home along Birch Road. Perhaps as a solace to the loneliness taking hold, I recalled that afternoon on the beach, one month before the kids' mother was killed. A storm was approaching. Rita had closed her eyes and turned her face up toward the thunder and the lightning and the rain. As her hair got soaking wet, I felt as if I was staring at a beautiful woman who was not my wife, but a stranger who I had met, briefly, a long time ago.

All she had wanted to do that evening on August 11th was to sit and relax. After waitressing Sullivan's all day, that wasn't asking too much. The man who shot her told the police he was drunk and angry and had just wanted to scare the man who was arguing with him. Now he was doing twelve years for his so-called mistake.

After his mother's death, in spite of a deformed left leg from birth which gave him a significant limp, Brad started walking down to the railroad tracks and picking wild flowers. Afterwards, I would drive him to the cemetery and then stand behind him, wiping away my tears as he placed the flowers over his mama's grave.

At times I blamed myself. If I hadn't been out of work in the first place, Rita wouldn't of had to take the job and so needed the rest which killed her.

In Joshua Cove you took whatever work you could get. I had been out of work four months when Rita got the waitressing job. She kept it when Hansen Cement put me back on payroll because she knew that I could be out of work anytime. The honchos at Hansen weren't promising anything except that if the orders stopped so would the work. I would of picked up and moved to another part of the country except that I could not forget how difficult it had been for me when my mama and daddy moved me up north. I was six years old. It seemed practically another country for the difference in the way the kids talked and how those same kids made fun of me when words came out my mouth.

In response to the extra spending for the war with the North Vietnamese, small factories and gas stations followed by brick houses began to appear around Joshua Cove. And then the same war which had brought us up north and given him a job took my Daddy away. Instead of answering my inquiries as to why my daddy didn't come back, my mama drove me to Joshua Cove Cemetery where I was ordered to place a bouquet of plastic flowers beneath a military monument listing half a dozen gold-lettered names. The last letters of the monument spelled my daddy's name.

Two months after I turned eighteen, I joined up just like my daddy, but unlike my daddy I never left stateside. I served a year and eight months in a supply warehouse out in Colorado. Upon returning from leave for my mama's funeral, I was transferred to Fort Riley, Kansas.

After I got out from the army, I got a job at Hansen Cement. I'd shoot pool and drink beer at JT's on week-ends. JT's was situated along Birch Road a mile from the trailer park where I had moved. Two miles north of the trailer park was Joshua Cove Cemetery where I would visit my mama's gravesite regularly. Since my daddy was MIA, I had only a stone slab for a spot to focus my respect.

I met Rita at JT's. Hansen had laid me off during their slow down. Rita put her quarters on the table and beat me the next pool game. We waited until I was back on payroll at Hansen before getting married. Rita and I had to wait five years for Cheryl to get born. We were surprised when Brad followed a year later. Too bad my mama wasn't alive to hold her grand-children in her arms.

As I continued walking, putting the two VA physicians further behind me, I started worrying more and more about Brad and Cheryl. The economy of Joshua Cove was slumping. Beside the dole I got from the state, my only source of income came from whatever I could pick up scrounging for aluminum cans. Store windows downtown had become dark and empty. Franchises had stopped going up on the outskirts of town. My kids faced the same work prospects which killed Rita and put me on the dole. And something else that practically scared the breath out of me. The kids' mama was dead. I had no relatives fit and willing to raise them if I didn't make it. Cheryl and Brad faced becoming wards of the state.

Suddenly, a muffler coughed loudly and the screech of a horn pushed me off the shoulder of the highway. A two tone, '98 Chevy sped past, and disappeared down Birch Road. That '98 Chevy had been a hazard about town for years. I chuckled at the timing of my brush with it.

Three weeks later, I entered the VA for surgery.

I was put to sleep that same morning. My side was sliced open, Doctor Gladstone cut out a section of my bowels, and then sewed me up. I awoke pinioned to my hospital bed by half a dozen needles and tubes. About the time the pain started, an angel in a nurse's uniform appeared, bringing relief. On the morning of the fourth day, I was placed beneath a scanning machine. The following morning Doctor Gladstone and Doctor Kolisetty visited my bed spewing out medical language between them.

On the seventh day I was discharged.

Upon my return from the hospital, I found the household in better than usual condition. Plastic bags filled with flattened aluminum cans had been neatly placed in the corners of the trailer. Brad was in the kitchen taking his turn at dish washing. A week passed, and I realized he was taking Cheryl's turn as well. When I spoke to her about it, Cheryl responded that I had given her – Cheryl Anne Stewart – the responsibility and therefore the authority for keeping the household during my absence. She had fulfilled that responsibility.

I knew I had to pull Cheryl up and dress her down quick, but I didn't have the strength. It was Rita who had done the disciplining in our family. I had tried to get Rita to go easier on Brad, but she refused to grant him any exceptions. If you allow for his leg to become an excuse, she told me, that leg would become an excuse for everything.

Brad's sister had long ago begun spending all the time she could in the school gym practicing basketball. Even back then, everyone knew she was good. When Cheryl would sneak out to the school gym without taking her turn at dishes, the next night she would be directed to a sink full of dishes with an enjoinder against going out until they were washed, dried and put away. Eventually, Cheryl gave up trying to sneak out.

That first week back from the VA, as I sat propped up on the couch, I began reviewing the chances Doctor Kolistetty had given me for survival: forty two per cent, five years. Then I reversed it, calculating the chances he had given me for death -- fifty eight per cent, five years. That how-can-I-do-it-alone feeling which had been talking at me since that night on August 11th settled over me now. Rita's rules, came the answer. They were the only thing keeping our family in one piece.

My weekly chemo began after Doctor Kolisetty's "four-week post-surgery mark," followed by weeks and weeks of sitting on the toilet with diarrhea, vomiting all through the day and feeling so weak that I lay invalid upon our couch. I told myself that it would soon be all over and that I would be good as new. I found my own words about as reassuring as the names of the chemo medicine the docs and nurses put into my

veins The acronym for the meds was, FOLFOX . I called the medicine FOUL-FOX.

In the third month following chemo, instead of being escorted to the examining room by the short, red-haired nurse, I got marched into the exam room by a tall, thin nurse dressed in gray.

I took a seat on the exam table.

“The doctor will see you in a few minutes,” she said, and closed the door.

Twenty minutes later, Doctor Kolisetty appeared.

“Excuse me Doctor Kolisetty, but I’ve been seeing Doctor Gladstone for my regular check-ups,” I said.

“It was at Doctor Gladstone’s request that I begin seeing you,” he answered.

“When?” I asked.

“He made the request when we received the results of your latest test.”

I braced myself.

The cancer had spread to my liver.

Doctor Kolisetty told me that, with chemotherapy, I could increase to 32% my chance of survival in five years.”

“Without chemo?” I asked.

After hesitating, he answered: “I can’t give you percentages at this moment, but I can tell you that your survival probability would decrease significantly.”

I told Doctor Kolisetty that I had no intention of repeating three months of diarrhea, nausea, vomiting and feeling so weak all I could do was lie on the couch.

“Mr. Stewart,” he answered. “I recommend that you go home, think about it and then reconsider.”

“Thank you for your time, Doctor,” I answered. “I’m not submitting myself to another round of chemotherapy. I don’t care how it affects... my survival.”

I returned home to resume a life I could no longer call normal. I decided not to tell the kids. If it was going to happen, they’d see it soon enough. Part of me was holding out for a miracle, and as long as I was breathing I figured I had a chance for one.

My life didn’t change much at the start. I tried getting disability, but the caseworker told me that there was no official classification for someone with my kind and stage of cancer. I remained on the dole.

I was visiting Doctor Kolisetty every three weeks now. He reported a continued enlargement of my liver, as predicted. Toward Thanksgiving, I started getting diarrhea. It’s arrival was earlier than predicted. Doctor Kolisetty prescribed medicine to help relieve it. Some of the time it helped.

It was our fourth Thanksgiving without Rita. Cheryl and Brad helped with the turkey.

Thanksgiving Day closed with Brad doing the dishes and Cheryl sneaking off to play basketball with friends while I slept. When I caught her trying to sneak back beneath the same nose under which she had snuck out, I reminded her that she had an obligation to stay put on family holidays. Cheryl immediately reminded me that it

was her second year on the basketball team. The coach had told her that, if she continued to practice and practice hard, she was on her way to a full basketball scholarship. She said I had no right to interfere.

Staring straight at her, I asked what and who handed her the right to place sport over family. Brad and I were her people by blood, I said. Some day when she was older and – I surely hoped – wiser, she might need whoever of her people time had left to her. She threw me an angry glare, and marched off. I stood alone in the living room. The sound of an occasional passing car along Birch Road made me aware of the night silence. I could hear Cheryl closing the dresser drawer, then climb into bed in the room she shared with Brad. I looked at my watch. It was late. Whatever it was that came over me remained, and I went to bed with it.

By the middle of January my liver was four inches larger and Cheryl was high scorer for her team. She was also coming home late six days a week, grabbing only a snack for dinner and shirking her turn at dishes.

“Brad and I swapped,” she told me when I garnered the strength to confront her. “He does the dishes. I do the groceries.”

“Swapped doesn’t seem like the right word for it.”

“He doesn’t mind,” she answered.

“It’s not your role to make those decisions.”

“Yours either!” she snapped. “It was Mama who made them!”

“She made them. I’ll keep them.”

“You’re wrong to hold onto to them! If Mama were here today, she’d tell you: ‘Cheryl’s grown up. She’s got a chance at something. Don’t stand in her way.’”

“Goddammit, Cheryl Anne! Your mama’s dead. I’m doing the best I can. The only help I’m getting from you is... you shirk family responsibility every chance you get!”

Cheryl made a quick, double-time exit from the kitchen to the corner of the living room, almost tripping over the coffee table as she did. She came back pushing an empty aluminum can in my face.

“Look here! These things all over. Brad keeps them in our room under his bed. You got them in your and Mama’s room. You got them in the living room behind the t.v. Here in the kitchen, a stack in the corner. And look out there.”

She turned to the kitchen window, and gestured outside.

As I turned my head, I could see Brad bent down beneath a solitary road light, coming up with an aluminum can. I watched him brush the snow from it, and then place it inside one of the heavy-duty plastic bags I used for scrounging cans.

I looked back at Cheryl.

“Is that how you want me to end up? I can quit basketball tomorrow. I can come home early every night. I can take my turn at dishes and take Brad’s turn, too. I can go out every night and collect cans until late. On Fridays I can buy groceries and carry them home without help from you or Brad. Next year I can quit school and get a job at Sullivan’s and, if I’m lucky, get shot just like Mama!”

“Don’t bring your mama into it! And yes, I do know how important basketball is to you.”

“No you don’t know! You and Brad,” she said. “You’re going no where quick. And you want me to follow. I go to school all day. I go to gym to practice. I get home late. I hit the books. I got no time for you throwing Mama’s rules in my face. Mama’s dead. Stop trying to get me to help you get over her.”

She left the room, double-time again. She returned wearing her winter coat, unbuttoned in the front, and the trailer door slamming behind her. When I looked out the window, I saw her standing next to Brad under the road light, brushing the snow from a shiny aluminum can wearing a pair of gloves two times too big. She dropped the can in the bag, and then stared straight at me as she lifted the bag over her shoulder and began heading down Birch Road toward JT’s where aluminum cans and plenty of them could be found. A short time later, when Brad struggled through the door with a full bag of aluminum cans, I peered through the window. I could see Cheryl heading toward school where she would shoot that basketball over and over until the lights in the gym got turned out. I knew – I could feel it – I did not have the strength to enforce Rita’s rules.

Brad was doing the dishes every night now. When I asked him why he was being so generous when any other kid his age would be screaming just at the suggestion of accepting his sister’s duties, Brad answered that he may be handicapped, but he wasn’t stupid. Doing Cheryl’s dishes was no more than helping to carry the extra load in the family.

“And that extra load, Daddy, is me,” he said.

“Who says you’re an extra load, son? Who says that to you?”

“It’s the way they look at me. How they stare. And then... there’s her. With my own eyes I’ve seen her shoot a basketball through the net from further out than any kid – boy or girl. And it’s not just that she’s a girl and can do that and I’m a boy and can’t do near that – besides being her brother. It’s not just that. It’s.... the other kids at school. You’re worth something ... you’re somebody ... if you can shoot a basketball like Cheryl can. Cheryl’s somebody. I can’t do anything, Daddy. Nothing.”

“There are more things in life than sports,” I answered.

Because he was born with it, Rita and I had figured Brad would accept his condition free of self-pity. I hadn’t figured a strong dose of fatalism would water down the toughness Rita had tried to provide. I knew that, whatever stubbornness and resistance his sister was giving me, Cheryl was going to make it. She would get older and self-sufficient if she wasn’t self-sufficient already and eventually succeed if she hadn’t already done that, too. But Brad. After what he said to me that night, a fear for Brad’s future sprang up within me – a fear which competed equally with my fear of the cancer and the death it promised.

It was as if that ’98 Chevy came off some divine assembly line for the express

purpose of being put under the direct control of a certain Siegfried Wolfe who took the Chevy around the curve on Birch Road with Brad deciding too late to get out of his way. Life added its own little joke to Providence by making Mr. Siegfried Wolfe the grandson of a Kraut who had undoubtedly fought against my granddaddy in the war against Hitler. To his credit, Mr. Siegfried Wolfe got on his cell and called for an ambulance immediately.

When I got to the hospital where they had taken Brad, I was told it was a head injury. Cheryl sat beside me in the waiting room, but she kept getting up and going to the bathroom. When she finally got up and said she was going to take the bus to the gym to shoot baskets, I told her once and only once that a head injury was the most dangerous injury you could suffer and that her brother might die from it so she had better shut up and stay put.

After sitting down, Cheryl turned and said she had meant no disrespect to me or her brother. She was scared. All she had intended in wanting to go to the gym was to work off that scare. Whenever she started getting scared of me getting sick again, whenever that scare escalated to low-key terror that I might die and the state would take ownership of her and Brad, she – Cheryl Anne Stewart – would go to the gym or a friend's house and shoot hoops. It always worked, she said. Basketball was her lifeline. Her hope.

I thought Cheryl was so wrapped up in herself that she couldn't get scared, let alone terrified. It hurt and shamed me that my baby daughter was taking it as hard, if not harder than her daddy. At that moment, I felt like jumping up and shouting down the hospital corridors that I had had enough. Providence had been coming down against me since age six at Joshua Cove Cemetery. Couldn't it at least leave my family alone!

I got up and entered the bathroom to wash my face and calm down. When I returned, a doctor was standing there. The swelling had stopped, he told us. Brad was out of danger. He would be walking out of the hospital intact. But he would need rest. Brain rest. Two weeks off school. No physical activity. No mental exertion. Peace and quiet at home.

Brad stayed in the hospital another three days for observation. It was during that first day that a nurse's aide – not bothering to inquire whether it constituted mental exertion or not – placed a drawing pad and set of colored pencils on Brad's bed. He started drawing and found out along with the rest of us that he had a talent for depicting things and people on paper in a way that caused the observer to keep staring at his depiction. When he returned home for his rest, Brad began sketching people and places in Joshua Cove which, by the time he had accumulated a whole box of sketches six years later, added up to a complete story in itself.

Take that oval, cut-from-oak coffee table. The one Cheryl almost tripped over. The way Brad drew it.... He gave it a life so unique that when I stared at it, I got the feeling

that anyone who took the time to look would know the same thing about that table I did. That table had been presented as a gift from a proud father to his adult daughter when that daughter was pregnant with her first child. That same table now sat in the living room of a mobile home trailer, reminding the widower to that mother of their years together.

One day Brad came home to show me a sketch he had drawn of wild flowers growing along the railroad tracks. He had drawn a yellow caboose attached to the end of a passing freight. In a meadow on the other side of the tracks, he had sketched a three-legged buck deer. The buck ran effortlessly beside the train. Brad stared at the paper as if someone else had done the drawing, then held it up and said:

“Here, Daddy. This is for you.”

Carrying his pad and drawing pens, Brad marched through the door and settled on the trailer steps. As I stared through the window, watching him begin to sketch whatever people or object he had chosen, I could have begun crying right there. The meaning of his drawing was not lost upon me. Brad would never condemn himself as an “extra load” again. Providence, I realized, had ceased taking sides against me.

Six weeks later, after being escorted into the examining room for my check-up with Doctor Kolisetty, Doctor Gladstone greeted me instead.

“Modern medicine has no explanation for it, Mr. Stewart,” he said, “but at this time you are in remission.”

“You mean the cancer isn’t killing me anymore?”

“Not exactly. It means the cancer is dormant. It could recur anytime.”

“How long if...”

“Or, “ he continued, “it could remain dormant another thirty years. It might never recur. Although, after five years, we term an individual a survivor.”

“Survivor?” I muttered.

“We’ll arrange regular check-ups for you.”

“Will I be seeing you?” I asked. “Or Doctor Kolisetty?”

“”You will be seeing me.”

“Even if the cancer starts up again?”

“Yes, Jeb, ” he answered. “You’ll be seeing me.”

Modern medicine had told me that the percentages were against me. Then, suddenly, it reversed itself and pleaded ignorance about its own reversal. Life, as long as thirty years.

Time passed with me still living in it. Brad was finishing his third year high school. His sister had accepted a four year basketball scholarship at the state university which was known for its fine girls and boys basketball teams. Three new suitcases sat in the corner of the living room of our trailer, compliments to Cheryl Anne Stewart from her daddy. Cheryl Anne couldn’t wait to get out of Joshua Cove.

I must have passed the place two dozen times since it was set up downtown. I went inside and immediately was given some forms to fill out by the black man who had introduced himself as the director of the program. After I finished the forms and returned them to him, the director told me to come back in a week and bring my son with me.

A week later, I sat on one of the wooden chairs with Brad beside me. The office was empty except for its director. I listened dumbfounded as the director informed me that, because Brad had a disability, plus a box full of excellent drawings he termed portfolio, the state was able to allot Brad a grant which would cover tuition plus costs for two years of commercial art school. If the teachers at the school thought that Brad was motivated and talented enough, they would likely find a way to finance him for another two years enabling him to come out of the school with a four-year degree in commercial art.

The director informed me of the time-consuming forms waiting for Brad and I to complete. Then he sat back in his chair, looked at Brad and asked:

“Well, young man, what do you think of all this?”

“Sir,” Brad responded, “my favorite things to draw are freight trains because they move slow, wild flowers cause they remind me of my mama and old men cause they stay in one place. I don’t want to draw in any school.”

The director gave me a what-in-hell stare.

“Sir, will you excuse us for a minute,” I said to him.

I grabbed Brad by the arm, took him out in the hallway. I told him in my once-only tone of voice that he could draw all the trains and wild flowers and old men he wanted – after he finished school. But for four years of his young life, he was going to study what the teachers at this art school told him to study. And after graduating, he was going to earn a living eight hours a day, five days a week, as a commercial artist. Providence was offering him a whole lot better chance at a living than the hand-to-mouth living which was waiting for him in Joshua Cove. Now, we were going back inside and Brad was going to tell the director of the program that he, Bradley Jeb Stewart, had not fully understood the complexity of state financial assistance. He was to apologize to the gentleman for his impertinent remark.

We returned and sat in front of his desk. The director glanced at me, then gave Brad a scrutinizing stare.

After Brad followed my instructions, the director asked: “Do you understand that not everyone gets this assistance?”

“Yes sir, I do,” Brad answered.

“Do you understand that we expect you to complete your training?”

“Does that mean the two years your agency is paying for?”

“Yes, son, that is what it means.”

“I promise I’ll finish the two years your agency is paying for,” he answered. To my surprise, Brad added: “Sir, I intend to work hard and finish those next two years and

graduate.”

The director smiled, looked at me and nodded.

Two plus years have passed. Now Brad is finishing his second year at the art school. He is working part-time, and waiting for the results of his scholarship application. Brad says that, if he doesn't get it, he will go on with the four year program even if he has to work a full-time job to do it. Cheryl is graduating and already has a job lined up as an assistant coach with a girls' basketball team at a neighboring state college.

But my celebration has been tempered. I had been visiting Doctor Gladstone every three months when, in the spring of the fifth year of my remission, the cancer woke up.

The disease is spreading faster than Doctor Gladstone anticipated, as if Providence is aware that its gift of time has been adequate and now the merciful thing is to let the disease work quick. To his credit, Doctor Gladstone has stuck with me. I caught him staring at me one morning through the open door of the examining room. Then he closed it. I think I remind him of someone, a patient, perhaps. Who knows.

I sit on the steps of my trailer, watching the cars go by on Birch Road. Once a day a lady paid by the state comes to clean and cook for me. I hate depending on anyone. I refuse to perpetrate one minute of my incapacity upon my children. If I tell them, I'm afraid Brad will withdraw from school and Cheryl will take leave from her assistant coach's job and both will come back to take care of me. I can't permit that. My kids future is more important than anything. I'm not going to telephone Cheryl and Brad until close to the end. As far as they know, their daddy is a cancer survivor. Good as new.

I'll be going back inside the VA any day now and then, when its time, into hospice. Through legal aide I arranged a will to be administered by an executor – selling the trailer and what's inside. The only stipulation was for Brad to get the oak coffee table and Cheryl the set of dishes.

Before I got too weak, I had gone back to visiting Joshua Cove Cemetery where I stared at my daddy's name on the stone slab, visited my mama's grave, then spent time with Rita. I think about those wild flowers Brad used to pick for her grave. I loved Rita more than life. I like to think she's with me now, helping me through this last difficulty.

Impermanence

James Claffey

Your bed appears as a vast floating island in a candlelit sea. Did I get here with the aid of a map, or was it divine instruction that steered me in the right direction? In a dark hallway lined with closed doors a lost owl flies silent as if in some dismal wind tunnel, or caught in an ancient road closed in by curved tree canopies. Courage, the child of whiskey, brings our lips together. I clamber out of the dream and run the back of my hand across your face; flawless skin, a polished chestnut hue, your eyes cast upward, your mouth slightly open. Make a space and inhabit it by placing two lamps at either end of the sofa, populating the coffee table with Taschen's *Book of Symbols* and Ron Hensen's *Mariette in Ecstasy*. Tiredness overcomes me and the tinkling bell of the monk coming from the zendo nears then fades. "Zazen in fifteen," is the waning message. Your toes crack, and before you slip away I find your lips again and let you escape. Quiet again, I lean against the wall and wait for the running monk to journey back from the brink of the world.

“Our Father”

James Claffey

The day of my mother’s funeral our father drove us to the Hellfire Club in his old brown Austin Cambridge. He knew the Devil had appeared there in the last century, and none of us knew what was going on in his head when he told us we were off to the haunted ruins.

We played x and o’s on the steamed back windows as my oldest brother picked at the scab on his knee. Sitka spruce lined the road on the one side, and on the other the mountain fell away towards the city. Our father turned his Rosary ring around his thumb one last time, praying Sorrowful Mystery after Sorrowful Mystery as he tried to fathom how to raise four boys on his own.

“Enough of Jesus, Mary and Joseph,” he said. “I’ll be better off praying to the Devil, himself. God did nothing to save your poor mother.”

As we crested Montpelier Hill, he wound down the window and jettisoned the Rosary into the air, cursing God and all the angels and saints. The radio remained silent as we ascended towards the blue heather around the summit. He ground through the gears and prayers as the engine strained, more profane litanies mumbling through closed lips.

“Can we turn on the radio,” my oldest brother asked. “The Top 30 Countdown is on Radio One.”

Silence. The squeak of fingers on glass. Our father raised one eyebrow, the owl-like tufted hairs, and silenced us with that simplest gesture. “Your mother is warm in the grave and you want to listen to that hurdy-gurdy music?” We three in the back seat looked at one another and huddled closer. “Is it heathens she raised?” he asked. No answer needed. We closed our mouths and turned our eyes downward in an attempt to appease him.

At the Hellfire Club, we got out of the car and walked the perimeter of the ruins as our father raged. In the upper window a cat licked its paws and took note of our movements. "Come inside, lads." He ushered us in the door-less entryway. Grass and nettles covered the inside of the house and the roof was open in places to the sky. Crows and rooks had built nests of sticks where the chimneys rose to the clouds.

He knelt in the fireplace and beckoned us to join him. He drew an upside-down cross on the floor and laid her Mass card in ashes left by some vagrants, or hitchhikers. "Come here, boys. Let's say a prayer for your mother and ask the Devil himself to take care of her." Our father wet his thumb and anointed each of our foreheads with the sign of the cross. I couldn't understand why he did this and also prayed to the Devil, given his ultra-religious ways.

As we went out into the bright sunlit afternoon and made our way to the graveled patch where the car waited I looked over my shoulder at the Hellfire Club and the burnt-out remains of what once had been an impressive home. The cat sat in the window licking its paws, our father worried the space around his thumb where the Rosary ring used to rest, and our mother lay in her coffin dead of a stroke at fifty-six.

by E Laura Golberg

Braille

I close my eyes and touch your chest,
reading the reassuring hair
that has greyed now.

How many times I've nestled my questing
fingers in that small cluster
erupting from your skin.

It's always there, crouching behind your shirt
transmitting through my fingertips,

some hairs curly, others straight,
some leaning toward me, others away.

Breakfast at Tim Horton's

Voice like a woodpecker, drilling through
the conversation, shouting out the orders.
She's fifty-five, paper hat showing dyed hair.
No room for the line that pushes against the door,
keeps it open. "Close the door," Marlee says
using her forearm to push back her paper hat.
"Damn thing sets off an alarm that rings
and rings," but we can't hear it, only words
trumpeting, instructing the new help
on how she can staunch the line's Niagara
of demands. The girl heats oatmeal,
stirs in brown sugar. Marlee reaches round her
for the yoghurt in the cooler, "We're out
of muffins." More people come in, the line
bulges like a stomach wanting more.
"Close the door." She's asking for orders,
repeating, "Jalapeño bagel, cream cheese."
Correcting the new girl, "We've no muffins."
Stout lady eyes the donuts, "Got any muffins?"
Tall, blond woman with daisies on her bag
wants coffee, "Regular or decaf?" Insistent.
"Cream or sugar?" A man asks, "How are you?"
Pushing back the paper hat, "Been much better."

Diagnosis

We had a brass plaque nailed to the fence
at 4 Styal Road in Wilmslow.
My father had mounted it on wood,
neatly beveled, better to present in black letters:
Dr. B. Fried, Consultations by Appointment.

Our house was in the tree-lined suburbs.
My mother worked in Reddish
for the National Health Service
amid long rows of workers' houses
each with its few steps to the pavement

in what she called her "little room."
There she could diagnose and treat
the housewives, children, working men.
That's what she loved, to be in her practice,
fingers on a pulse, eye to the otoscope.

Only once in Wilmslow did anyone need her.
It was the postman, frantic, his daughter
sitting in the van outside, in great pain.
My mother made a quick diagnosis,
"Take her to the hospital at once."

His daughter had a baby boy.

Nevus flammeus

Every time she saw Gorbachev on television,
my mother diagnosed the port wine stain
on his bald spot:
she wanted him to hide it.

We'd open Andrews' Diseases of the Skin,
look at scabrous patches,
scaly penises, skin suppurating.
"Revolting," we said and closed up the book.
She saw the real patients, scraped
and prodded till she found the diagnosis.

She talked of Covermark,
he talked of *glasnost*,
she talked of laser treatment.
He talked of *perestroika*.

Remembering

For Michael

Those weeks of eating and drinking--
yellow wassail, sweetness and heat
on the tongue, held like the breath
that savors the lilac; textures
of mincemeat, raisins and dried fruit;
potatoes and cheese, creamy and crispy;
peanut brittle sweet, crunchy--
I remember their pleasure. I hope
when I'm dying, I recall Thai green curry,
rich in its sharpness, potatoes in sauce
floating like icebergs. And our walk
in Raleigh, tiny red mushrooms clustering
near the path, sun slanting on them;
you, laughing, basking in words with me.

by John Grey

LOOKING THROUGH THE FAMILY ALBUM

I speak a different language,
all in glossy color,
all who are old beware -
and to think,
these are dead people,
right in my face -
but you're a dancer- I'm jealous -
crazy shoes,
dear ancient photograph,
every moment just
engaging me in some way –
I'm supposed to be a gust of fresh air
with all these years of me,
but you're the one who's
flashing smiles like neon –
you can steal the heat
from my body
as I thumb through this album -
yes, there's a resemblance,
I would still be you -
I'd kiss you
on the cheek
if not for the years between,
and this boy –
we could play games –
and woman
if you were here,
there's be guys lined up
at the front door –
it's like looking inside of me –
life constantly mutates
maybe once a generation,
this is more fun than intelligence,
the past attacking my flanks,
an only fashioned fight
in which the winner gets to be
the survivor –

okay. I get it –
this dates back to the turn of the twentieth century -
it's as if I have always been here,
time is a reward
for making sure
my ancestors are not me.

AN OCCUPIED HOUSE

An army of the dead occupy these barracks.
One man watches snow shift the world
and yet, preserve it like a dream.
An aftershock, the heirlooms on the mantle rattle and fall.
Now all of them asleep, pieces everywhere, a silent weight,
a farcical resemblance to time and space,
as I wipe my glasses, certain this house talks
like a parrot that stares at the great one for a sign,
as now, at the top of the winding stairs, I am
praying the family sleep through another night.
crying, how is this done, when the frozen
bodies in earth are jostled, cracked,
moving in, their words warm as coals in my ears.

Even if it's only this floating and clinging ether,
it's a truth that leaves me trembling like fumbled prayer.
I can do people no better justice than to love them.
But look – my hand glows white on a moon-slicked railing,
my solitude is softened by tender night,
clock on the wall tick-tocks timelessly.
dim photographs of ancestors line the walls,
the dog keeps a wary eye on the one man he loves.
He can taste the flesh of the black air
is drunk with all the scattered pieces surrounding him.

Even in stillness, the house needs to thump,
the colors go slowly white. How many gone before
have come again? Is that a laugh or the boiler of darkness?
The bookshelves are flesh gray. The countertops are frames.
The house is painted with grinning faces.
No use sleeping. My first ever dog will claw me awake.
I can sit for a while with love's flickering darkness,
hear the house-heave of sleepers, and go jittery,
look out through window glass buffeted by rapping knuckles,
see footsteps circling the snow Are those the tracks of a dream world?
Footprints are unassailable when nothing living makes them.

I see the face of some brother in jail betrayed,
bright, ubiquitous malice,
that in later years became a monster,
a punch-drunk threat – and now he pleads
to the winter-shadowed house where I live on.
Were we not inseparable from the start?

Is it up to me to keep him alive,
to fill the house with the best of him,
cut his malicious heart out? I believe I can do this.
Parents do not squander the opportunity.
They glow where cracks fan drafts.
An older sister is that walker in the snow.
An old friend is doing all the whistling.
Night after night, they make their stand.
Door after door leads to them.

People crave flesh like boys gather toys.
The clock is in denial.
A dog is locked out on gleaming icy steps.
Hope is stamped on the brows of the young.
A good chance, so they said. Impassive is my response.
Overhead, giddy stars do cartwheels.
Pipes clank and gargle like an ogre's stomach.
Light plays tricks with my eyes and my head likewise.
I plead. I accuse. The moon is far off and dim,
rising with an idiot's blank yellow face,
shaped by the years when it was a lover's chunk of rock.

Come morning, I hustle downstairs to halt the jackhammers.
And every day I wipe my glasses but still they tear up the street.
Digging into shadows, and the shrieks of old women.
in sub-zero temperatures, as now, morning fire finds an opening,
spreads freely through dark houses. Those enigmatic fissures
eat their young, who could make it given a chance, just
as there is only truth and law. I have learned that law.
I have lived my life tethered to it.

To believe is to extol dust,
to hear breathing in the house of the dead,
to go forward without question or answer,
to allow those who are gone to continue in my head.
Even in an empty house, I can come to know them.
On the magic stairs. In the fairyland beds.
There is no ascending alone to the second floor.
I take a knife blade to the raw facts
when they try to take over my living quarters.
Where I live, the wind howls within reason.
There is no fear I can name that is not a loss to myself.

SUDDEN HURRICANE

The horizon's black and swirling,
an old woman's desperately masking tape her windows
and even there the sudden crescendos boom
and see -the woman shudders, grabs her hair crazily
eyes blinking like neon, trembling, limbs flapping –
it's begun: cars with their wind-shattered glass,
the sidewalk clotted now with trash-bags, roof-tiles, bodies,
canines hovering in the sky, waiting for signals unheard.
Just one hurricane holds all the power we'll never need,
keeps emphasizing, as if it means to address
the flying cows, the overturned buses,
the cries of scattered chicken coops -
no one knows how to harness the power for good,
a roar beyond even the brains that broke the atom's back,
not the woman with a flowered dress for wings,
nor the boy whose hand reaches, reaches,
but is never gripped in turn,
not the trailers in the park, one after another,
flung against a stand of oaks like missiles –
everything visceral, raw, no graceful moves,
lives once separate, now one atop the other,
spewing the swamp or the backyard swimming pool,
playing a piano in the sky,
unjoining two people betrothed for life,
then suddenly fooling them with the eye.
that quiet time that stalls enough
so death can almost be forgotten
before the noise takes up again
and deafens even the pledges of love,
with a pulse ten earthquakes deep,
a sting so strong it whips eyes from sockets,
folds and refolds vision until the world is upside down,
squeezes a month of movement into one blinding second,
runs the territory like the bloodiest dictator,
even enters a church where many huddle and pray,
plays the role of devil as it tosses every last believer
out onto the street.
It's just weather, they tell themselves.
It has nothing to do with Sunday's sermon.

Follow the Snow

Robert Ciesla

I don't wear the collar. Most days I can't even find it. Today I was forced to stick it on me. Right this way, Father Vincenzi, the warden says taking a quick glance at the clerical. He must be thinking: this is no way to spend your Christmas Eve. As far as I can tell, he is the only custodian inside the secure wing of Howard this time of year. The strapped-in guys are deemed too weak to cause any disturbances. Some are too frozen to even tell if they've passed on or not. It's also Uncle Christopher's time to go. At the tender age of forty the time is finally right for my prison hospice debut.

In November of 1966 I had pneumonia. I still had it the following year when the nuns finally decided to get me proper treatment. Back then bacteria was bacteria. It was like shards of glass tearing up my lungs with each inhale. The disease seemed to go on forever; a kind of meditative coma took over my existence. Pain became perpetual. I still feel it at times, this searing stillness in my brain. As an orphan I had no relatives to look after me. I was beat up, of course, just like the other kids. I was starved. I had to pray in order to pay for my sins. Sins, which I had no idea I had managed to commit at that age, during my sickness. There were plenty of wrongs around me, but they were mostly being committed by other servants of God. To them we were just little bastards.

Christopher is in many ways an expert on death. His life work was mostly in his killing with the occasional extended torture thrown in. Growing up, he and I had some things in common. Uncle Chris was saturated with violence from the day he was born. His were the worst parents imaginable, launching into countless senseless attacks against him and his brothers. School for Christopher was a boot camp for his later prison stretches. Up to the eighth grade he would be on the receiving end of the daily fights and jeers. Then one day in sixty-one something happened. It was all very unexpected. Christopher delivered severe punishment to anything between two and six young men, one of whom never returned to school. According to the numerous and cheap TV biographies, eventually the body surfaced without teeth and fingers outside the state line. From sixty-two, Christopher would kill for pay.

In the seventies the mutilated and burnt human remains started popping up all over America. Christopher used to shove his contracts into barrels of acid, sometimes welding them shut before discarding them in nowhere, USA. There were no chance of finding fingerprints, dental remains, or specific tattoos on these guys. Uncle Chris was all over syndicated television at one point. I saw him on the news many times over the

years, pretty much commandeering the courtroom proceedings. Everybody was petrified around him. The judge discarded eye-contact with Christopher altogether as he sentenced him for life without parole.

The doctor in Howard had told me the big man had been losing weight for a few weeks. Now this guy is down to ninety-seven pounds from well over three-hundred and his electrocardiogram is all over the place. He won't see next year; his seventy-third birthday will be his last. Look father, I'm busy, you wanna come see this guy or what, the doctor interrupted me over the phone as I recounted my past experiences with the dying. Yeah, set me up, I replied, spilling some of my coffee.

The Lord would not cage parts of himself in eternal damnation. Hell is a crock. A surprising amount of students agreed with me on this in the seminary days, but it was all very hush-hush. The vestments would've expelled me in no time had they known I was blossoming into a loose cannon catholic. But I never gave it up. I was authorized in my beliefs by the Lord and no-one else. During years of prayer my mind was purified and some very clear answers were given. You don't learn any of that in the seminary. It was the serenity I felt after my daily personal prayers that assured me it was coming from the main man. No crises of faith ever for Father Vincenzi. I even had a few women over the years. If anything, they made me praise God, not abandon him. I'm a priest. I can't cheat.

Not even Uncle Chris is going to hell. No, but I would have a hard time telling him there's a similar, although temporary placement in his near future. A joint called purgatory. For every bullet he fired into a man, he gets one. Every cut of a knife, same thing. For all the grief and terror he inflicted on his victims and their loved ones, uncle Chris will be made to suffer. There's no other way to come back to mankind. I will take as long as it took him. There's no other way to learn about love and this world was given to us by an act of love. Once Christopher becomes a better man, he gets to move on. Prayers will help him on his journey, I'd tell his family this had they come to see me. I don't expect them to. Christopher is a "do not resuscitate". And it was this man who gave me a hope and reason to go on. Try telling that to the wife of the guy who got chopped in almost forty pieces during a period of four hours. Or the family of the guy who got his spine cut in half with a screwdriver, paralyzing him from the neck down before getting ripped into with scissors. You got all this and more at the hands of Uncle Chris, the worst serial killer America has ever seen. He killed in the hundreds. Anything for a price. Preferably in the upper range of fifty K.

"Christopher, you turned the worst Christmas I had into the best one, back in sixty-seven. You know that?" The man gazes past me and through the hospice ceiling. Like

most of the dying he's seeing things. Whether its just his regrets come to life, it's all before him now. "You were visiting someone in the hospital I was in. I was really sick. At age eleven I was on my way out", I tell Christopher. I was lucky to get eventually snatched and brought up by Manny and Rose. Sickly orphans are not in demand. "We talked for a while and the next day you showed up and gave me a color TV. Out of the blue. Why'd you do that?"

Christopher re-focuses his gaze and this time he doesn't let go. It's an exchange between predator and prey, only neither of us doesn't know who is who. He may be suffering from dementia and general organ failure, but his instincts are as sharp as ever. He figures something out about me, summoning a mild expression of levity to his big menacing face. I hope it means Christopher remembers me. He fails to make the other connection. Hand-picked volunteers from the general prison population bathe the dying around us. There's very little small talk around Christopher, I'm told by one. Pockets of snow gather outside. Eager footsteps are made, gifts are received. Rhode Island is filled with a subtle warmth shared by all except those in Christopher's room in the secure wing at Howard. I have him now.

Uncle Chris has half an hour on Earth, tops. I'll suffocate him with a pillow, I'll take care of it quick. The camera gets taped and I gotta be quick. I thought of cords at first, but they'd leave deep lesions around his neck. Ditto for my bare hands, as much as I'd love to use them. The Lord forgave me for this in advance, I know it. I'm only helping in doing his work. For thirty years I've known this is the way it'll go. He and I both. I'm purifying his world, one sack of crap at a time. This is for Manny.

It's safe to assume even at his most fragile Christopher is still dangerous. He could be holding a shank beneath his back, just waiting for the right moment to jam it into someone's throat. His weathered physique could still throw you around.

I'm having a hard time leaning closer to him, but I follow his signal. "Order", he whispers again and again. "Order!" After a few seconds it dawns on me. Christopher needs to know whether his family is willing to resuscitate him if his heart goes flat. I shake my head. Whatever is left of Christopher's ticker sinks. Time becomes a scarcity and words mere clutter. Something makes me speak.

"I just wanted to thank you, Christopher. You made me believe."

Christopher looks puzzled for about a second, like he heard something the first time. He then closes his eyes in acceptance. Go now, he signals me. I give him his last

rites like I'm supposed to, fully knowing Christopher doesn't hear me or care in the slightest. I choose not to share the other thing in common we have with Christopher. We both had business with Uncle Manny. I had the best four years of my life with him until Christopher put him in that flaming barrel. Manny disappeared in September of 1984. The dates match Christopher's confessions. I never knew what Manny did wrong. I later heard he was into gambling. He sank in debt until somebody made the call. But why the open flaming barrel, Christopher? Why would you do something stupid like that? It was a signal. In the end Christopher just got bored of his way of life.

In the bluest moment of the evening the dying man enters a state of peace, overlooked by a middle-aged priest at his weakest so far. An old Little Richard performance is reflected off a small TV through the reinforced ward windows as snow spirals downward outside. Christopher is unable and unwilling to apologize to those he hurt. He feels no fear or remorse, but by a kind of grace he too is pushed out of this world and into the next one. He is allowed to change. Judgment means nothing to him and changes nothing. At the core of Christopher there's an open stab-wound. We all have it in us. Its from where we connect to others.

Just a few minutes later I'm in the maze. I see no-one, but I feel a ton of presence following me. I turn around twice on my way out. It's the energy of a sturdy man in aviator glasses who forgot what it was to be a part of a civilization. He got everything through the use violence, even his family. After some swell first dates Christopher turned to death threats to keep his girlfriend around. He broke his wife's nose repeatedly during their marriage. They had a bunch of kids, all better people than he ever could become. Christopher caved under hatred. To many, he was the perfect example how not to live your life.

A weight grabs onto my being like after some serious time in the confession box with nervous young couples. I feel like stopping on my tracks, just to make sure. After a few more steps I do just that. Behind me, there's nothing but the maze of ancient Howard buildings getting gently snowed on. So I tell him, just in case: follow the snow. Just follow the snow, Uncle Chris.

by Euan Tait

Among trees

I walk into the breathy gatherings of trees,
their games with light, their unease with sound;
unsettled instruments, they are voices perhaps,

unseen or missing, and in their tensed flesh
is their restlessness, shaped into strained sinews
over loud, troubled bones.

They are apt summer dancers, or cold and still
like choked waiting: imagine being as silent, lonely,
or perpetually voiced as this.

Always, they make emotion an energy
more than itself, each season intensifies
touching them, mere heat and light

is future violence, sound an angry power
in this ironic orchestra, except, this quiet night,
the warning is so intimate.

A natural place for deep fear, or deep joy.
I have never danced so much as I have in woods,
though I am constantly disturbed

by soil agitated and uneasy underfoot,
by strange company. Imagining them
and what the hell they're after,

I want to chase that impatient presence
who waved, moving among the trees,
wanting, destructive, or calling.

A feather cairn

Men and women left feathers
almost as large as themselves
on fire in the cliffedge grasses;
the aftershocks of a life,

a son who died, rattling
in the heart, who liked,
quite simply, to dance
like a fool, chancing rhythm

because he erupted laughter.
No other reason, no other.
She drives the same road
to this spot down the coast

where he turned too sharp,
lost himself, membrane,
spark. She stops, and hungry,
stares. A tear in the bark.

A bird feather, outsize,
whips into the winds,
falls onto a deck plunging
through salted, tongued air.

Sibelius' lullaby

(for the rest of his life, he sang at the piano at night to his daughter Kirsti Maria, 14.11.1898 – 13.2.1900)

The window is open, my daughter: hear
the breeze, the sound you learnt
to sing swiftly as a quarter hour,
the stillness you understood
more deeply than any words
I read to you, or song I played
like mist forming in our rooms.

The window is open, my daughter: you
are the breath, the ten second guest
I feared would come among us
and trigger an unanswerable love,
then become the lone girl, loss-pilgrim
out of sight but for the distant sounds
as you pulse your way through a land
we cannot form the words to name.

Your window is open, my daughter:
you rest for a moment on the sill,
exhausted by your hours, but then,
twittering, joyful child, you stay
for one more moment only, then turn,
and disperse, present to nightfall,
hidden by the thickening air.

Once friends

(a new photograph)

I think maybe, for me,
love is the best suggestion of home
anyone has ever made (unlikely,

since water is home,
and no boat has ever been made
that crosses the cracked glass):

the inescapable uniqueness
of your look, guarded, but full
of a laughter already protected,

in a face layered by many years
of attempts at love,
and the physical so still

and beautiful in that street
which even you, perhaps,
cannot or will not name.

Perhaps touch takes us,
those men, home, its burn
memories in the flesh,

but the fact we *didn't* love
our deepest physical selves,
but loved as friends,

that draws me back:
a mutter of your name
suddenly, in the voice

of my life, sings the breaking
of a quarter century, to
I loved you, I loved you.

Symphony of the Sierra

Justin Fenech

The sunset over Granada cast a lazy hue upon the faces of the crazy ivory buildings. The roads were as bustling and diverse as a *paella*. Side streets slithered in your peripheral vision and dominating the violet skyline were the sharp white peaks of the distant Sierra Nevada.

The lazy mantel that had befallen Granada that dusk was broken by the booming curses of a language the city couldn't understand. They were *oles* no one could mimic. *F'ghoxx ommok. Qahba dinja. Il-liba, liba. Aw gisem!*

This was Maltese, this was the Arabic dialect isolation had made a barely European language, this was the harsh poetry of endemic swearing... this was Richard's family.

The family – Richard's two brothers, his parents, wife and daughter – were on their way to have post-siesta drinks. They went into the Albaicin and in the winding, ballet-like streets they found an old tavern that sold Alhambra beer. Richard and his brothers sat in the corner of a long, I-shaped table, discussing the pork belly roast they had eaten the night before. "If we were to be stranded somewhere, on a desert island or in the mountains, I would want you to eat me, my brothers; my crackling would be my last gift to you." Stuart, Richard's middle brother, eulogised as they discussed Muslim's aversion to pork, reasoning, as they always reasoned, that it must be due to an intimate secret Muslims discovered long ago: that pig flesh tasted remarkably similar to human flesh!

"The screams of a pig dying gently in the open echoes in much the same way as the screams of an orgasming man." Andrew, the eldest brother opined. The conversation was ended when Stuart, for a fucking change, spilt his beer on the table and the elegant waitress interrupted their talk by cleaning up.

Richard's parents, Tony and Jean, were on the other end of the table, talking with Richard's wife, Catherine. Richard listened in to them and he caught them mulling over the vices of Spanish bullfighting. "All bullrings are equipped with abattoirs, you know. When a bull is killed he is hung and quartered, like Mussolini on a rope, then the meat is blown to the four winds of Spain's culinary corners." Tony reluctantly defended the spectacle he found naturally gory but in principle necessary and a matter of pride. "In comparison to bullfighting, boxing is an art form!" Catherine shook her head solemnly. "The Spanish are the only people who are, and always have been, crazier than their kings." Jean laughed in that manner she had which made you think something worse than a smile would soon follow.

Richard then left his parent's and wife's talk and turned his eyes to Alexandra, his daughter. She wasn't saying a word and her eyes were bowed.

Why can't I listen to her thoughts like I can anyone else's, Richard thought. Or at least, her nightmares.

He was disgustingly worried about her.

When they all went back to the hotel so everyone could rest and get ready for the night-time crawl, which started in Granada near 10pm, Richard got ready early and told his wife he fancied a solitary walk. He went for a walk into the old quarters. He skirted round the cathedral of Granada. He turned round 180 degrees at the tourist office, pretending to have received a message on his phone. He injected himself into a narrow vein of a side street. He recognised the Placeta de Castillejos. He turned round and he dived into Calle Baratillos. He saw it was narrow, dark and rundown. And he knew it was good.

For there was the massage parlour. Tantric sex, that vague, yet mind-numbingly kinky term, was on offer. The door was broad and secure, he rang an intercom and was buzzed in. He wondered what ring of Dante's *Inferno* this place must inhabit – though that thought paled in comparison with his curiosity about the angels within.

“Hola,” the angel as brown as a tree trunk against the spring greeted him. He walked in, fumbling over the threshold, apologising for his clumsiness, and donning the habits of a clown.

She lead him inside, past corridor after bleak corridor, and finally into a dim room with scented candles and a music that urinated softly all over the massage bed. He recognised the piano as Debussy's – *The Girl With The Flaxen Hair*. He smiled inside himself and the piano tinkled away as he negotiated terms, prices and then watched her undress as he noticed the soft, meticulous lyrical warmth of the music which was so uncharacteristic of Debussy in that time.

The massage was soft like a flood and was full of anticipation. At the edge of the precipice of promise came the sex, a waterfall of blind delights. This part of the symphony is usually titled the ‘happy ending’ – but for Richard, the ending was followed by a bouquet of self-loathing no other patrons could know.

He could allow himself to succumb back home, back in Malta, where family life cast a niqab of mundanity over his youthful wanderlusts... but in Spain, in Granada, on the holiday that was meant as relief for his daughter's nightmares?... he wanted to cry, cry like a swan splashing in the shallows. But somehow, the music, having switched now to Handel's *Largo* from *Xerxes*, kept him from crying. Kept him from the avalanche of post-coital tristesse. Instead, Richard opened up to Reina, the cherub in the grass: “I love your music, it was almost as good as the massage.” “It is *that* good, *amor?*” “I'm a composer, so, yes.” She laughed like dying fish smacking the dead sand. “What you compose, *chico?*”

“Right now I'm working on a symphony inspired by mountains. It's for my daughter. She loves mountains.”

When Richard walked out of that numinous dive he had decided to begin composing his mountain symphony. To give truth to the lie he had told that dethroned Reina.

He hadn't composed anything new since he was eighteen. His work as a bars

manager took up his restricted time; since his promotion he felt himself outside time, that time neither passed nor looked back on itself. But now, now he needed to compose again.

On his way back to the hotel he walked into the cathedral. He went inside this time, hoping the ancient, mystical serenity would make him feel clean enough to return to his family. Inside he felt as if inside a fossilised honeycomb with the last vestiges of honey glistening in the faint light. He looked at the ceiling the way an ant looked up at a boot. He didn't feel splendour, rather he felt like a pygmy creature made in the parody of god. People didn't build such places for god, they built them so they could be his equal. He remembered a conversation he had had with his brother in the Vatican on a holiday some time ago. His brother, Stuart, told him, blasphemously, but whispering so devoutly: "this entire place was paid for by the sale of indulgences. Every brick, every stroke of art, rests upon man's wish to wipe his slate clean and enter into heaven."

Richard smiled to himself then; my symphony shall be *my* indulgence. I can't ever defeat my addiction – such things are written in the crass handbook of our genes. But at least I can cleanse my legacy with my high art. He rubbed his hands and entwined his fingers around his chin. All men are dirty, he thought in front of the gold-cruled altar, but some are immortal because of art. Men are forgiven their filth if they can atone for it by greatness. Maybe Alexandra will forgive me too, one day. If I write the symphony just for her.

The next day Richard and Alexandra set off on the long-expected day-trip into the Sierra Nevada mountains. It's what they had come here for. But Richard went with his daughter alone. He insisted on it.

Their bus stopped them at the foothills of Mulhacen, the tallest peak in the mountain range, and they then began walking, walking and walking as if it were man's only panacea. The walk wasn't easy. They climbed steep, furry hills, descended into slippery valleys and bore the ignobility of hardcore sweat. But as they walked they talked, and father and daughter bled out their souls.

"Alexandra, can you please tell me about your nightmares. I, I want to know."

"Alright, but they don't leave the mountains!"

"Promise."

Alexandra spoke not of nightmares, but flashbacks. Flashbacks of her early childhood odyssey that had taken her from her native Kenya, across all of Africa, Sahara and all, into the vile Mediterranean, all the way to Malta. She narrated the story just like a child, with an eye for detail and an indifference to the general picture. And these mosquito-sharp details haunted even Richard. The "women throwing up over their babies," "my father coughing blood into my unwashed hair," "men farting as they died", and "I can't understand, how could my mother's eyes be so open when she was dead?"

Richard didn't know what to say. And he didn't have to say anything. Alexandra's

mood rose with their elevation. The mountains – why the mountains? – seemed to exorcise her, she watched them obsessively, always asking, are we at the top yet? Why this drive to ascend, to climb, to walk? What was she walking away from? My own daughter, Richard thought, and I can't even know what Fate her past has set up for her!

“What are you thinking?”

“I'm not. I'm listening.”

“To what – it's like dead quiet here!”

“It isn't. Listen. You hear the wind whispering... doesn't it sound cold? It's a shrill note. And if you listen carefully birds-of-prey are calling from above. They remind me of Lark Ascending – my god!”

Alexandra laughed. And her laughter had the open-mouthed gusto of a cymbal striking at the end of a crescendo. It was the most natural thing in all nature. And the highlight of his symphony would be Alexandra's Laughter – that was Richard's first title in the piece; now, it felt alive, real, hardbound. And he was happy.

They came across another small village right at the foot of Mulhacen. It was a white-washed, ghostly place, right in the armpits of Spain. They walked through, stopped for a snack in a service station, and Richard saw an odd blonde stride into the nearby bathroom. She was tall, her skin youthful, her eyes childlike and her legs... Richard was wondering; could she be one of those escorts that make a living off tired, exhausted men trekking by this wayward town? He imagined the kind of motel escorts that you saw in American movies. I wonder, Richard thought.

She came back out of the bathroom and sat down next to the bar drinking a long coffee. She was alone. Richard thought, profoundly thought, of going up to her and asking her the magical question: “do you do massages?” And then he would wait for her body language to answer him.

But what if she did do ‘massages’ – what about Alexandra?

Fuck, Richard felt his stomach burning like a thundering river. He turned his face away from the girl and from Alexandra and sighed into his hand. (Even here, even here!) He felt hopeless, as if he were the dead yearning for life. But it didn't matter. He had tried several times to go cold turkey – but inevitably the fog descended upon him once again, first in stages then all of a sudden, and he'd return, like a faithful mongrel seeking out its master. The act of paying for sex can never be endowed with pride. And thus it can never pupate into fulfilment. But it is also never lacking in happiness. And depravity and pleasure are not mutually exclusive.

Unfortunately, the two can also work together, like two semi-circles joining one ring, one perfect, divine form. That's how Richard felt throughout the rest of his trek with Alexandra.

“Dad, look up there, it's a kestrel!” She said tugging at his arm, pointing to a segment of denuded sky and a faint, broad-winged shadow. “I see it, but how do you know it's a kestrel?” “It's colour, chest-nut, see?” “My god, you know your birds!” “Ma

taught me!”

Richard then promised Alexandra: “when we get home, I’m going to buy you a pair of binoculars and we’ll go birdwatching, deal?” Full of shy humility, Alexandra wrapped her arms around her father’s waist, saying thank you into his clothes.

Pride. Happiness. Together they create a flood of emotions that leave permanent marks wherever they touch. Richard knew then that, even when Alexandra grew up, and she would no longer hug him, no longer be his, the feeling he felt then would still accompany him to his deathbed!

But wouldn’t his disgust at himself at always preying on masseuses and escorts also chase him down until maggots crawled over his lips?

No, not if I finish this symphony!

“I’m tired.” Alexandra sighed after four hours walking. She sat down on a rock, within sight of the craning peak. Richard sat beside her and she leaned her head on his shoulder. “Why don’t you take a nap, a siesta as they call it here?” He could feel her shaking her head. “Why not?”

“I’m scared.”

“Of the nightmares?” She nodded her head.

“Dad, why are you shaking?”

“I’m cold,” he lied.

Like a river that breaks its dam a realisation burned itself into Richard’s consciousness; what difference will it make if she is proud of me? If I compose my symphony and Alexandra, the world, everyone loves it enough to assure my gilded legacy – how will any of that halt her nightmares?

The symphony is my indulgence, not hers! It’s balancing the books of *my* soul. But what of Alexandra’s memories?

He said to her then, after nearly half an hour’s near-perfect silence between father and daughter, something akin to a crest, a peak of clarity: “nightmares aren’t real, you know, Alexandra. They’re just ghosts that replay the same film over and over again in your head, trying to terrify you. But that’s all they are, ghosts, and - ”

“ – Ghosts aren’t real.”

“Exactly.”

“But what happened to me was real, wasn’t it?”

“Alexandra, you were hardly three-years-old then, do you remember anything that happened to you when you were three?”

“No, but, those things were scary.”

“So was being born – but do you remember *that*?”

“No!” She laughed, lifting up her head, her eyes open wide and full of the flames of realisation. Her laugh snowballed until Richard was laughing too. Her nightmares wouldn’t stop, but she could now – he hoped – stop believing in them, disrobe them of their fake credence.

This is my indulgence, Richard thought to himself, as they began the long trek down to the bus station. To free Alexandra from the shackles of her past, to overthrow the Fate that had been written for her at birth, to rid her of her need to remember and care for all the horrors of Africa, the poverty of Kenya, the towering evil of human trafficking, the cruelty of nature, the engulfing Sahara and quaking Mediterranean – she no longer needed to know any of that!

When they returned back to the hotel in Granada, a small B and B with a Latin courtyard embellished by Moorish tiles and flora, Alexandra kissed her mother and went straight to bed. “How did it go?” Catherine asked Richard, her eyes bowed, her shoulders kneeling on the ethereal carpets of maternal fatigue. “I had to lie to her. I had to. I think it’s worked, but, now, what about me?” “All’s fair in love and war, right?” She kissed him in a way that almost declared him a hero. Then she slipped away from him. She slipped away, but the question remained: “what about me?” What kind of indulgence is it that casts you into an even greater web of unprincipled lies?

“But whatever, this isn’t about me. Nothing is, not even the pleasure I’m addicted to.” In that moment he felt the exuberance of pride and happiness sway within him, a twinned exuberance that numbs everything else, that numbs the very currents of lilted life.

Candle

Neil Citrin

John Saunders took a deep breath. He walked from his desk to the window that overlooked his back yard. After another breath he pulled open the light blue drapes and watched as the three men from Lindsey's Pool Cleaners worked. The daily activity calmed him, and he needed that now. John took another deep breath. The flicker of pain in his chest, which had begun a few weeks ago, stopped; after several seconds he closed the drapes and walked back to his desk.

On the desk sat that day's *Wall Street Journal*. Several articles discussed the effect of the new Reagan Administration on the business community. I'll read that later, John thought. He turned his attention to the letters and other pieces of paper next to *The Journal*. Most were notices about several of his buildings that either needed maintenance or had to be brought up to code. John scowled as he drummed the fingers of his right hand on the desk's smooth surface. He decided to let those wait and focus on the Gordon Street building in Hollywood. Long overdue for attention, it now demanded his time.

At that moment, however, his wife entered the room.

"Found your heart yet?" Debbie asked, her eyes more gray than blue now, a sure sign of anger.

"What?"

"Your heart, like the gypsy said."

John shook his head and wondered how much longer he could take her off the wall comments. One and a half years of her mourning for her parents, dead in a car crash, was enough. When his own parents died of illness, six months apart, it took him less than a week each before he moved on with his life.

"What are you talking about?"

Debbie sighed and shook her head. Normally John found the bounce of her

blonde ponytail appealing. Not now, and not lately.

“The gypsy was right. No heart and no mind for anything but ‘matters of business’.”

“Which provides us this house and a comfortable lifestyle. Really, I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“You don’t remember the weekend we took Sam and his wife to Olvera Street?”

John recalled it now. A year ago, on one of the most boring days of his life, his then-partner Sam Collins, Sam’s wife Suzie and Debbie had dragged him through a relic of old Los Angeles that deserved no more than a decent demolition. They had misty notions of connecting the shop keepers with their roots and the larger world in order to create something both profitable and culturally informative. Sam’s heart attack a month later put an end to what John always thought of as “a silly pipe dream.”

“Well?”

Debbie stood with hands on hips, a stance normally directed at someone else in anger.

“I remember,” John said. “A waste of time, visiting Olvera. Someone needs to raze it and building something new, not cling to the old.”

“Where would the shop keepers and residents go if you did that?”

“Not my problem they didn’t learn modern skills and followed outdated things, like that living fossil, the gypsy.”

Debbie stared at him a moment, then turned and walked out of his office.

John had always refused to look outside himself for support, even during college and the first year after graduation as he struggled with a entry-level job at that low-end real estate company. Two jobs and five years later he met Debbie. She shared his self reliant attitude and they married a year later. After her parents died, however, she changed. At first John rejoiced as her search for “truth,” or at least some spiritual comfort, kept Debbie’s focus off the tragedy. The obsession grew, however, and now threatened their marriage. Once John attended a séance with her, to show support,

but he'd laughed so hard at the obvious fakery that the medium had fled in tears. That amused him even now. I'll talk with her tonight, once I resolve the Hollywood problem.

For the time being, however, John wanted to take a personal look at the Gordon apartments.

He accepted responsibility for the code violations and slow rent payments, knowing he hadn't devoted enough personal time to making things right after he purchased the building six months ago. That changed now, he decided.

John rose, grabbed his briefcase and headed out to the car.

As he drove toward Hollywood John wondered why Debbie brought up that outing to Olvera Street with Sam and Suzie. They had maintained contact with the couple for a time after Sam's heart attack. Once his former partner and college friend had signed over the papers ending his participation in the planned joint project, John moved on to other things. For all he knew Sam had died, or perhaps moved away.

It took John half an hour to reach Gordon Street and his apartment property there. Only the recording studios on nearby Sunset brightened this down-market area. He pulled his silver Volvo into a spot a building down from the aging brick structure he owned. He saw his manager, Slim Friedman, tossing around a football with another man. John recognized the other man as a hang around who lived, according to Slim, out of his van.

Perhaps this blue Econoline? he thought as he got out of his car, glancing at the grease and dust splattered van in front of him. He shook hands with Slim and nodded at the other man.

"Nice to see you again Mr. Saunders," Slim said, a slight quaver in his voice. "You remember Gary Selby?"

John nodded again. Once.

"We need to discuss building business, Slim. Let's go inside."

Selby followed as they walked up the steps and through the doors. At the

entrance to Slim's apartment they stopped. John glanced at Selby.

"Alone. With my manager."

"Gary has some suggestions about the building," Slim began.

"Does he live here and pay rent?"

John noted the flicker of annoyance on Slim's face.

"No."

"Then he has no say."

John ignored Selby's stare as Slim opened his apartment door. Closing the door behind him John decided to write down the license of that van when he finished his business here. At the moment the tangled mess of his manager's apartment, all around him, occupied his attention. Does he treat the rest of the building like this? John wondered.

"In the process of reorganizing," Slim said, with no trace of apology in his tone.

John shrugged.

"Selby a friend of yours?"

"We've taken a few art classes together at L.A. City College. Why?"

"I don't want non-residents hanging around my buildings, thinking they can have input."

"Gary's handy. He helps with repairs."

"Not any more. That's your job, along with cleanup."

"All right."

And to enforce that, John decided, I'll need to make more frequent and unannounced inspection tours.

They settled down to work. The deeper they explored the books the thinner Slim's explanations became. Fully half the residents owed at least one month's rent and almost a third were more than two months behind. Despite this John saw no record of notices, or warnings.

"Slim," John said when they'd finished, "I cannot accept this. "Everyone who

owes money gets a three day notice -- tonight. I want copies of those notices for my records by tomorrow morning.”

“I don’t have the gas to drive out to your place.”

“I’ll come by for them at ten. No excuses. I also want the hallways vacuumed and the front area swept.”

“I have another job, too.

“That’s not my problem.”

“With only rent reduction as payment here it’s not like I have a choice about working elsewhere too.”

“You understood that when I took over. Do what you must, but make sure you fulfill your responsibilities here.”

As he walked out of Slim’s apartment John vowed he would pink slip his manager if he didn’t do as asked by tomorrow. He reached for the knob to the front door of the building.

“Hey, you!”

John turned and found himself staring at a bald woman over six feet tall. Normally that would be enough to catch his attention, but her huge breasts, and the two husky pups on leashes by her side, made the woman impossible to ignore.

“Are you addressing me?”

The woman glanced up and down the hall in an exaggerated manner.

“Don’t see no one else. You the owner?”

John nodded.

“Good. Maybe you can do something about my place. Two-oh-five.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“My boyfriend kicked down the door the other day.”

He was probably trying to get out, John guessed. As he thought about what to say, the door to Slim’s apartment opened and the manager peeked out. He looked both fearful and annoyed.

“Sally, I said I would see to that. No need to bother Mr. Saunders.”

“We’ll see to it,” John said, with a withering stare at Slim. He glanced at the woman. “You need to get those dogs out by tomorrow. They don’t belong here. They’re a violation of your rental agreement.”

Without waiting to hear any protests John opened the door and walked out. As he approached his car he spotted Selby entering the van. After a check of his car’s tires he wrote down the van’s license. Mel Gates, the private detective he used for gathering information on business competitors of all types, would have little trouble providing background on Mr. Selby.

As he drove John reviewed the events of the past hour and shuddered. What other terrors lay hidden in that building? Regardless of what Slim did tomorrow he would terminate the man if he couldn’t provide a good reason for the presence of those dogs in that woman’s apartment.

To clear the affair from his mind, John decided to stop at the Polo Lounge for a quick lunch. At the hotel he turned the car over to the valet and strode into the building. On his way into the Lounge he stopped at a pay phone. Within minutes he reached Mel and, with a brief explanation, read off Selby’s license plate. John took his seat feeling better than he had all morning. When his drink arrived John sipped slowly and wondered what Mel would find.

“John. John Saunders.”

John turned to stare at the sound of his name, and then blinked in surprise at the person waving at him from two tables away. After a moment he recovered his composure and, a little curious, walked over to the table.

“You’re looking well, Sam,” he said, masking his emotions.

“For a heart patient, you mean,” Sam said, laughing. “Join me for a bit.”

John decided he had nothing pressing and instructed the waiter to move his utensils and drink.

“Strange as it sounds,” he said, “I’ve been thinking about you lately.”

“Wondering if I was alive, no doubt.”

John smiled.

“You’re not alone,” Sam continued. “I thought my active life was over. It took a lot of convincing from Suzie and a strong discipline to convince me otherwise.”

Suzie. The girl they both dated in college. A woman whose dewy-eyed politics and pacifism suited Sam more than himself. She still looked great the last time saw her.

“How is Suzie?”

“She’s doing well,” Sam said. “She’s at home now, doing the month end figures for our business.”

John couldn’t hide his surprise.

“You’re back in business?”

Sam smiled and nodded. He paused as the waiter set down John’s salad.

“A whole different thing,” he said. “Mail order.” Sam leaned forward. “It was a great experience working with you, but in the long run I’m glad it worked out this way.”

“Mail order?” John asked. “What kind of money is in that?”

“We started nine months ago, three months after I left the hospital,” Sam answered, “and we’re at fifty thousand gross.”

John nodded and nibbled at his salad.

“What type of product?”

“Art. Prints, mostly, but we’re getting more originals. I go to a number of science fiction conventions as well, to sell our merchandise.”

John nodded. It made sense. Sam always liked weird art.

“That sounds like your area,” he said.

Sam nodded.

“In the past only as a hobby,” he said. “I already had the contacts, so I decided to use them for business.”

The more John thought about it the less Sam’s success surprised him. People

would buy anything, with the right marketing behind it. What did surprise him were Sam's robust good health and his ability to plunge into business so soon after the heart attack. Before his tact could catch up with his curiosity, John asked bluntly about it. His friend smiled.

"I'm glad you noticed that. It's a system of meditation and visualization called Candle and Sun. Professor Paul Krieger of Stanford created it, from a blend of western and eastern practices."

Professor of what? John wondered. Mumbo jumbo?

"That sounds familiar," John said.

"I'm sure Debbie mentioned it to you. She joined our group recently."

That explained why Sam's name entered his conversation with Debbie this morning, he thought.

As they ate his former associate described the meditation practice he and Suzie had gotten involved in. Despite himself, John listened.

Perhaps I need to pay more attention to what Debbie does -- to preserve our marriage.

At the end of lunch he and Sam exchanged cards and promises to touch base soon.

On the way home John thought about Sam's explanation of Krieger's system. If he heard right, the sun stood for one's life in connection with the universe, and the candle for everyday reality. Sam had said the trick lay in not confusing the two. The heart held some significance in Krieger's system, too, but John couldn't recall what. He decided Sam, like Debbie, needed to believe in some reality beyond this world.

Whistling softly, he pulled off the freeway. He thought about Selby and wondered if Mel had come up with anything of importance. He would call him as soon as he talked with Debbie.

As John got out of the car he spotted Debbie by the door, arms crossed. By her

expression John knew something had ticked her off again. He hoped hearing that he had met Sam would calm her down.

“Hello, dear,” he said with a grin. “Guess who I met today?”

“I don’t care right now. I want to know what the hell got into you.”

John moved past her into the house.

“What do you mean?”

“Taking away that man’s home.”

“Whose home?”

“Someone named Selby. He said you had his van towed.”

Debbie followed after John as he walked to the den.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” John said, wondering again what Mel found.

“Perhaps a listen to the message will clear up your memory.”

She pressed the “on” switch of the answering machine. John heard Selby’s voice, the voice of a man who believed himself blameless.

“You may think you are all-powerful,” Selby concluded, but you aren’t. “I’ll get back at you and all you love.”

“Damned idiot,” John said. “No one threatens my family and me like that and gets away with it.”

He shut off the machine, picked up the phone and dialed “What are you doing?”

John held up his hand for quiet as the professional voice of the desk sergeant answered.

“Captain Lovelace, please,” he said.

Once he got Jim Lovelace on the phone he explained the situation. He listened to the man for a moment.

“Thanks. I’m mostly concerned for my wife, of course.”

John hung up the phone and turned around. Debbie glared at him.

“You liar. You don’t care about me. This poor man did something you didn’t like

and you punished him. I don't blame him at all."

"Of course you don't," John said, his tone of voice sharp. "You don't blame anyone for anything -- except me. You have no idea what's been happening at that apartment building."

"Perhaps if you involved me more in what you do things like this wouldn't happen."

John said no more. He didn't like talking with her about business, and he certainly didn't want her involved in this. After a moment he picked up the phone again and dialed Slim's number.

"Slim? You give Selby my home number?"

"No!"

Slim's voice sounded tinny as he proclaimed his innocence.

"How else did he get it? He left a threatening message on my machine that scared my wife. Tell him to leave town before the police find him."

"How can he leave? That van held everything he owned, including all his money."

"He should have thought of that before he called and left that message. I'm doing him a favor by warning him. See you tomorrow morning with that material."

John hung up the phone and smiled at Debbie.

"You bastard! Her shout echoed through the room. "I don't know what I saw in you."

John grinned wolfishly.

"Security," he said, "and a good life away from the whole hustling Hollywood crowd," he said.

She glared at him.

"Maybe it's time to reenter that crowd."

"Now don't you start that..."

John couldn't continue. He clenched and unclenched his hands in response to the fist squeezing his chest. He collapsed.

“John!”

He dimly heard his wife screaming. As she turned him on his back he barely felt her efforts through the pain. After a pause he heard her voice, calmer now.

“Emergency. My husband’s having a heart attack.”

Hope that’s the paramedics, John thought. Debbie gave the person she was talking to their phone and address. She sounded too calm, now. After a pause John heard her talking again.

“Suzie? Debbie Saunders. John’s having a heart attack and I need you guys. Thanks.”

Unable to think clearly through the pain, John wondered who she was talking to. She leaned over to unbutton his shirt, then jumped back as he convulsed from the sudden pain in his chest. He vomited, blacked out for what seemed only a moment, and then regained consciousness. His parents stood in front of him, then changed into two people he only vaguely recognized.

“John,” the woman said. “Concentrate.”

On what?

The man with this woman struck a match and lit a candle, then held the candle toward him.

“This is your life. Your heart.”

Drifting in and out of consciousness, John saw the candle flicker. Others entered the room, dressed in uniforms he thought he should recognize. Somewhere a beeping sound began.

“Now see the sun,” the woman said. “Superimpose it over the candle.”

The candle started to fade. John tried to follow the instructions. The beeping tones slowly blended together.

“Don’t give up,” the man said. “Make the sun your center and focus.”

The tones became distinct for a moment, then faded and blended into one low sound. John didn’t understand, but something in him responded to the sincerity and

compassion in the man's voice. He summoned his remaining strength to recreate the candle in his mind's eye.

Got to find the sun, he thought. While it's still day.

Square musing by Soar

He told me to write together with him, sitting next to me at an inviting distance, where I could feel his gestures without looking, while he peeped at my screen from time to time with curious smiles, his utmost charm unknown to him. My confusion was mixed with desires and prayers to the muse to take me away from his senses and from that music in the background, alluring me towards greater depths where I would relinquish symbols, as music always won over my artistry. Then, there was that place with faces, where no one stole looks or offered gallantries because socializing in cafes meant being immersed in individual activities, while pretending to belong to the same gathering, cheering drinks and on-screen messages, within the same room, a pastime trend through decades.

We shared air, nothing else, and cosiness seemed like a stray dog, from time to time in need of a caress at the table where a lavish candle arm, waxed by too much burning time, reminded us of warmth. Habit seemed to be the pleasure of the moment to grasp in seemingly creative tasks or just relaxing online chats.

I joined the cafe “club” as well, even though I gave up on that black sugared illusion long before, replacing it with a healthier sin: the good mannered, placid tea, yet coloured by my whims in flavours, straws, and sometimes honey. He, on the other hand, was going big, maybe just to impress me: Baileys on the rocks, despite the unpleasant degrees beyond our window outside. Expensive drinks always suited him and I loved to have a taste or more of each of his alcohol imbued determined wishes, left upon my taste buds like reminiscences of exotic cocktails I would never refuse no matter the place or time. Our table was special, almost surreal, if only for my poetry which procrastinated silently, overwhelmed by an intense metamorphosis at the border of his traits, I tried to memorize with my eyes closed, mesmerized by the openness we seemed to communicate in stares or shares each time circumstances had us unravel the same intent.

He was ferociously energetic, with no boundaries as to exercising curiosities and living dangers at their utmost brinks. So different, yet so similar to me, that only my deepest intuition discovered him within: he was practising, sometimes to extremes, my own wilderness. And every look and word and touch of his opened another seal from the unaddressed and unsent letter I tried so hard to conceal from the eyes of addresses. Not because of pride, or vanity, but because I knew the depths I would have fallen into for the one reaching my veiled surges, intrigued by a desert hiding too well its own oasis.

Instead of the fall, I was learning and practising with diligence the walk, on that day too, while falling was the sweetest peril I wanted to try with his excelling madness.

He was still writing, with the corner of his eyes watching my breath as though he were putting it down in words, letter by letter, space by space and pace by pace, while my reverie was floating in his hands beyond cascades of truths we bore there, where desires escaped from their own definitions into the embrace of a moment, eternal to both. In that scenario words rose above us in perfect shapes to cut through the air like congregating swallows running for warmer lands, senses indulged the drives of bodies craving to dissolve into each other's forms and souls matched like twins lost in the enchantment of a complementing destiny, set off by itself in the pursuit of an unremitting unity. Colours and sounds blended like melting caramels, while black and white tainted each other in hues wherefrom new nuances were born, like in a painting of peafowls in courtship rituals eager to display their array. The world itself dissipated in the swirl of our sways and murmurs.

A distant rumour called me back to the real scenery where the swaggering peafowls were just the coloured drinks, music had already melted in fainting notes of jaded harmonies, whereas our unity was only completing the air with stealthy smiles from sight to sight, alternating timidity and assertiveness, both pretending to be deeply immersed in writing.

My muse was still late. But he was there with me, closer than ever to my being. My prosaic poetry. And I was praying.

Distance by Soar

“Let yourself go,” he said.

“What if I fall?”

“I’ll catch you,” his unscripted determination answered in the swirl of her fear, holding tighter her fragile body, just before the inconspicuous chains he was tied up with by his mind’s labyrinth cut deeper into his craving flesh, a pain he acquiesced with familiarity, as pain and pleasure were equally akin to his reality in an unpredictable, explored destiny.

His present was everything he could offer her as his past was marked by conditioned sentiments and never-ending drafts, pretty daring in his secret black-skinned journal, whereas deterring and convoluted in life. His future bore no better sign: a combination of unsure plans and certain doubts, which often guided the path he tried so hard to keep straight, amid perilous addictions and sweet distractions he allowed himself from time to time, out of rebellion or out of fun he needed so much, more to forget, rather than to laugh. He had let himself chain by the promise of love, yet he would strive each time at the border of freedom to look outside for marvels to savour, like honey accents in culinary arts, and hopefully have his ego indulged.

She was one of a kind in this world of craze, where sex was conveniently filling the space between “hellos” and “goodbyes”, with little time in between for other ponderings or values, forgotten by urban minds like antiquated books in old flair bookshops against the present malls of blandishment and readiness in all shapes, colours and tastes, a feature of the new decade. She slipped accidentally into his life with her great walls but deeper love and, as she got closer to his truth, which he protected with grand performances of erudite phrases, occasional lies and deep kisses, she gambled her utmost trust to patiently unravel in the darkest nights his raw thoughts and fragile smiles. There she discovered the greatest of hearts, with her own untamed beats pulsing for its beauty. Occurrences allured her more and more towards that setting and she was ready to relinquish her awe to the gate of their chastity, if only for his perdurance in their most romantic reality.

She would come closer and closer to his chains to feed him care and quench him with her sweetness that he badly needed, like fresh breaths above the standard oxygenated cast in which he was supposed to fit. Chance became habit, habit turned into ritual and ritual was dangerously encouraging innocence to fall for temptation every time his eyes gazed into her soul, deeply. She felt too strongly the danger of losing herself in that arcane deepness, yet he promised he would be there for her, should the path itself lose its own end; a scenario she almost wished for, among other reveries, just to cling onto fate's excuse to remain close to him. A drug she couldn't resist despite her throbbing heart reminding her constantly of her symbolic place in his

mind's dwellings, for, as much as he loved dreams, the setback of reality haunted him daily, despite the pond of ink and wine in which he drowned it, recurrently.

She was "amazing" to him, a word he used every time he discovered her unconditioned care he couldn't quite explain, as there was nothing in it for her victory, while his flaws revealed themselves slowly in her palms, like posies upon the gift she still considered beautiful if only for the contents within. She felt at home in his arms in inexplicable forms and his clumsy gestures were the undaunted charm she also possessed and loved to discover in him, as though they rooted their traits from the same tree of genes or just from an unfeigned honesty.

Yet, there was a third party present between their unity, *distance*. Not the one coined by classical dictionaries, but the one between their intents and possibilities, reveries and given sceneries, thoughts and facts, untethered wishes and moral restraints, all coalesced in too much thinking, from their most innocent kiss upon a cheek to the well-being of all humanity. Humanity who wouldn't lose sleep over her happiness or his, yet she wouldn't have it any other way, for love had to stay pure in its demeanour, untarnished by any dying beetle, should they be consumed by unity.

Distance was there with them every time they met, like a ghost reminding the living of the underworld, like an alarm cutting off wings to dreams and counting seconds at the brim of their fulfilment, like those chains that kept him still in a cage he tried to deny each time he could feel that desired freedom and wild sweetness she was giving him gracefully.

They both rebelled against that uninvited foe with respectful sighs and unabashed whispers, bending rules without breaking them, leaving affection safe in their shelter just to find it back again at the next encounter, holding hands supine while showering together with lust in their minds, smiling into each other's eyes lost in the same gaze of the outcome: more care, more trust. So easy and hard for both as every time was like the last time and the next to come: the brink of the unknown abyss encouraged their fight for more while his chains already reached her skin bruising her soul at night when she had to let him go, taking with her only his dreams to bed, while he dreamed about her reality constantly.

In such unpredictability, only their intensity was palpable, keeping their certainty spinning around its origin, just like an unbreakable spell he cast once upon them with a fragile expression of feelings. "You are here and I already miss you", he said in the most genuine of ways, just before leaving to meet her again, the next day. On a spiral of life, time was losing ground and moments were gained, slowly, unremittingly, to transmute distance into crystals of memories, solid and precious, to be hung on the string of destiny.

Hope by Soar

Trust is a precious gift from the soul and it's greater than love. Who earns it has won two lives' worth.

It's been hours now deepening the night with the air wafting its scents around. She was still staring at his face, lost in his sight like a child in a store of sweet delights: she admired and adored every detail about those eyes she hardly met, yet they felt as though they had never parted from her light in all their glowing life. Something she couldn't quite grasp about those traits, curves and hair, too rebellious, like arrogance over innocence, yet she was sure that he must have come from some forever-land and was to stay - a cast simply and already set by some prequel of life, when they might have met and shared trust. The world's logic would contradict such unity, but there was too much familiarity to feel about him, too many riddles were answered by genuine occurrences, and too much destiny rippling backwards targeted a future of essence. There was a déjà vu of togetherness in those untethered sensations, which she set free, relishing him dearly with all the definitions one could find, from soul to body and back.

"Try to rest", he uttered without moving an eyebrow, as though he were already in her mind, soothing thoughts down, while arousing feelings to exuberant degrees, where reality was passionately in love with dreams. She was not just some stardust, rather a sun to him, something he always felt it should be his, but he lost faith somehow, along the tortuous course of life; and now, she was lying beside him, so pure and fragile, as if the entire light of the universe would depend only on him to keep it bright from that day onward. Yet, this great gift came with a same weight of responsibility: the rediscovery of hope, almost a ghost to him, which he had to protect if only for her eyes, like gods would defend their mighty temples with unleashed meraki.

As it is known that the human mind is the comfort zone where emotions are free to play contradictory scenes, fear already settled in, ensnaring his tenacity to win a battle without its real existence. So, he gave in, hibernating in the den of expectancies and waiting for the time to hone up eclectic turbulences. While time played its card upon a heavy mind, for soon enough he almost predicted a future deplete of meaning, with people of no true actions and a world of mere distractions; it was an abyss his heart was sinking into, while she was pushed afar by his bleak scars, like a diaphanous sun left to die out without its eruptive sparks.

In this swift perilous test of humans by their universe, only the latter knew the mystical rule which always applied, regardless of space or time: what destiny ties, people can't untie. It was not long before one dawn sent him a flicker of orange, tangled in his hair like a divine sign to wear, and awoke him from a forgotten dream murmuring "you will be ok, in the morning". A morning with no special meaning except that she was

standing there, before him, summoned anew to life by a message he must have sent in the night, although he couldn't remember the fact; all he could feel was joy and her warmth wrapping the room like raw details over swaying mirages.

Further away on a shelf, her phone was still flashing in blue his unopened message as if it were winking "ok"; she hadn't had time to read it, while rushing in the night in a yellow car to find the only orange light she cared about.

Like a song running for a poem's metaphors just to be infused with fresh breaths of meanings, his silent repentance was already saving the world with a desired strength he never knew he possessed. "I lost my faith, but, ... I can't give up on you", he whispered. "It simply means that hope itself has fallen for you", she answered with a caring smile and the certainty of a child, genuinely solving mature puzzles.

On a whatever day, a dove was dashing off his feathers in the middle of a yard where only sunrays and calmness dominated an ineffable beauty, like in the sacred dwellings of the world above, where happiness was supposed to be adorned. It was the view that their window pointed towards.

Finger

Richard K. Weems

It may have looked more like a plump vanilla bean, but Davi smiled the moment he found it in the trash heap. Before any other kids in the alley could get a look, Davi tucked the finger into his fist and ran home. *A finger, a finger this time*, he sang as he burst into the kitchen. The digit extended like a pistol barrel from his sun-baked hand and took a bead on his mother's forehead. She lifted the hem of her skirt and made a pocket the boy dropped the body part into. As she stood, she glowered at Davi and pointed her chin towards the back door.

Scrub your hands, she commanded. *Out in the dirt, and scrub them good*. Filthy boy. He'd snatch up marmot or rabbit from the street with his bare hands, even if it had already collected flies. Amazing he ever waited for her to cook it first. He and the other children sometimes found worse things in that alley. Mrs. Souza claimed her Ana Luiza caught crabs from picking up what turned out to be a shriveled testicle. Davi's mother walked the digit to the counter and dumped it in a paper bag under the sink.

Out in the street, a squad of gangsters rolled by with a body in plastic tied to the roof. Kidnapping was their latest scheme—nab someone, hit up the family for some quick cash, maybe return the victim. If they didn't, they cut up the body and scattered the pieces. They had started local but soon branched into areas with money. Before the car could cruise out of sight, one of the gangsters, a teenager with silver teeth he liked to glint in the sunlight, turned to Davi's mother and nodded. She looked down at her skirt and flapped it to loosen any essence of the finger she had carried. Police, she knew, would only make matters worse—if they came at all, they usually demanded food or money for their trouble and left as soon as they were paid off.

When Davi bounded back in, *Mama, mama*, pointing through the window at the car, she pushed him back outside. *Rub those hands raw! I want to see blood before I let you in to eat!* Her mission was to keep that boy as clean as Holy Mother allowed her to.

She didn't need that other son, the one with silver teeth and a car that smelled of death. She didn't want any part of money dropped into trash cans or left at bus stops. *Little Davi eats roadkill*, that other boy argued last time, when he tried to push on her a wad that would have paid her rent for a year. Her gut always clenched in his presence, the revulsion that she could have produced such a creature. *We take only from the wealthy families now, the snobs and the perua*. To prove his claim, he held up a page from a magazine, a pretty blond girl in lingerie. *See this? We found her down the corner from here. We don't exist unless we have smack to shoot between her toes. We cut off an ear when her papi didn't believe us, and we made him pay five times more*. Davi's mother didn't budge, and his eyes clouded over with darkness. *Yo, we cut her lips too, madre, took them right off. They look like chilis when they dry, you know? I should have made you a pendant*.

Other mothers wept and paid good *real* for their boys while Davi's mother had one son too many. She asked Holy Mother every night why this had to be so. The only reason she could fathom had to do with balance—Davi couldn't hate his brother. Even now, he ran after the car and waved. His mother let him play in the alley because he had found twelve pieces of his father so far. She kept them in a paper bag under the sink so mother and son could bury him as a whole one day.

Pageant

Richard K. Weems

Dolls straight from the package! Fixed smiles, sparkling outfits, glitter on their unblemished cheeks and foreheads to boot! But you know better than to rush the stage. You know such conquests take patience.

This one marching by now, that's a ridge of buttock eking from under her panties when she high-steps. Wardrobe malfunction? More likely that her mother hopes to entice a judge to knock her daughter up a couple points. It has quite an effect on you.

This one has the kind of teeth you've only ever seen on a corpse after they've been knocked out, washed in lye and glued back in. Such perfection! This one has a parabola of hair impossible to maintain in any normal-gravity environment. You don't even have to be up close to see slight coagulations of tanning spray on her face and arms. High maintenance. Your regard for her ends there.

This next one captures your fancy, her dark skin smooth as polished granite, her arms muscleless cable. What's that under her chin, hidden unsuccessfully under foundation? A scar? From the procedure to heighten the cheekbones of her still developing face? She is willing to suffer for beauty. You note her for later.

This one with the baton, her eyes glisten with echoes of her mother-coach telling her how ugly she is and how fat and how no one will love her if she ever eats another cheeseburger. How happy she will be with someone who adores her, even if you still don't give her any cheeseburgers.

This one, however, who takes a moment to twirl in front of the judges' table, stinks of ambition. What has she done with a judge, man or woman, to give herself an edge? What hasn't she done? You can smell her taint from here.

But here she comes, the one you know you will go to great lengths to have for yourself. Skin so smooth it could be PVC, her smile immobile, even while she curtsies. Already on display for your pleasure. She's beautiful, and as long as she obeys you she will stay that way.

Fast Food

Karen K Ford

RIGHT FROM THE START I KNEW SHE'D GIVE US THE MONEY. She looked right at us through the glass doors of the fast food restaurant, making eye contact with Jerry as she dug in her purse for keys. Well-dressed, well-off, maybe a little guilty about it. That's a good combination. I had her pegged before she even got through the door.

When she came out into the open patio where we sat I sniffed the air. Expensive perfume. To get to her car she'd have to walk right past where Jerry and I were resting at one of the concrete tables. She slowed down some as she went by, like if she brushed past too fast it would be obvious that she was trying to avoid contact.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Jerry said. "Can you spare some change?"

She stopped, smiling a strained smile down at us. "Sure," she said, and reached into the purse again. While she searched for her wallet, Jerry said, "Anything you can spare would be appreciated. We haven't eaten today."

Jerry's speaks well, like the educated man he is. He doesn't glance away or duck his head, the way some guys do; he looks people straight in the eye. I admire him for that, but sometimes I have to admit it backfires. Some people get insulted if you're not licking their hand in gratitude. The idea of a rational, sober homeless man rocks their little world and they can react badly. I've seen it.

The woman brought the wallet into view – Pucci, Gucci, some designer thing—and flicked a glance over her shoulder at the crowd inside the restaurant. For reassurance. That was enough to tell me she was carrying a bundle.

I have to say, she was more generous than most. She gave Jerry a five. As she handed him the bill she said, "I hope that will help."

"Thank you," Jerry said.

I think it was the manicure that set me off. Forget about the huge rock on her finger;

we could have eaten for a week on what it cost to have her nails done. She bent down to me, where I was lying in the cool shade under the table. "Hello, sweetheart," she cooed in that cutesy voice they use. "How's a baby?" She reached down, I saw that manicure, and I snapped.

Okay, first I barked, then I snapped.

Her mouth dropped open and her eyes popped out. She yanked her hand back and hugged it to her chest, like I might come after it again. I could see the hairs on her arm standing up and I could smell fear.

"Chester," Jerry said to me mildly, but he kept his eyes on the lady, his expression bland.

The woman glared at Jerry, drawing herself up a few indignant inches. "He tried to bite me!" she said.

Jerry shook his head. "No ma'am," he said. "If he was serious you'd be pulling back a bloody stump."

I lay down again and settled my head on my paws with a snort. Damn straight.

The woman stared at him openmouthed for a second, then, cradling the offended hand, she spun and stalked away, high heels clicking on the pavement.

Jerry looked down at me and shook his head, a guilty chuckle escaping.

Don't say it, I thought. But he did.

"Jeez, Chester," he said. "Talk about biting the hand that feeds you."

VOICES

Thomas Elson

I

Seán Tyler knew what had happened. He had been inside waiting for Joe Kilmer, surrounded by the odors from men allowed to shower twice a week. Those smells merged with adrenaline and suppressed testosterone that found nowhere to vent until the guards opened the metal doors.

The men rushed past the open door, down metal steps toward the Mess Hall – food plentiful, repetitious, bland; the drinking water speckled with floating rust; and whatever you do, don't eat the bread. They treaded over cement walkways threaded between spans of asphalt - a world of grays, blacks, browns lacquered with splotches of industrial white. In an atmosphere of perpetual dusk, they were surrounded by nineteenth century limestone walls seven feet thick and twenty feet high.

As if reflected in a mirror, Seán glimpsed a man in a bloodied white T-shirt lean against the Mess Hall door. Head down, he clutched a stained, brown paper bag. His eyes watered. "Why? Why do they keep talking? The voices." Paper bag in hand, right shoulder pressed against the wall, he paced. He reached the next door and turned, pressed his left shoulder to the wall, switched the bag to his right hand and continued to the next door, then turned, switched hands, repeated. Within minutes, three uniformed men hauled him away. When the sun caught the man's face, Seán thought he saw himself. For years, he was haunted by that memory, and for years kept seeing the bruises from the guards.

"He's on an anti-psychotic, but this damn place won't approve it," someone said. Referring to the prescription formulary for approved medication. "Be careful of him, he hears voices and has imaginary friends. He'll be buried in the hole."

The hole - an octagonal two-story limestone structure segregated from the other buildings. Inside, the tiled floors glistened under fluorescent lights. Monitors that transmitted the movements of men adjudged to be an immediate threat to themselves surrounded a circular stainless steel desk positioned in the center of the first floor.

Repeated screams, "Why? Why?"

"Help me."

"Look at this blood. It's been here for days," echoed from men inside cells with drainage holes near their doors. Clanging, reverberations, perseverations – never ending, deafening. And always, the smells prevailed – sweat, adrenaline, testosterone, feces and urine – sanitation not a top priority. Lights never dimmed. No visitors allowed. Men on the second floor allowed out only to eat and one hour in the yard. Men on the first floor – never saw the sun. Only five armed guards per shift. No psychiatric services available.

A jet stream swept into the yard, ricocheted from limestone wall to limestone wall; then repeated itself and clawed his face. It was two degrees hotter than hell, and Seán Tyler knew he was in the middle of it.

Seán, lean and agile with a view of the future rare in this setting, saw shapes break through the whirling dust - young men strutting with heads raised, eyes alert – temporarily above the rules; rail-thin, mustached men in tight shirts and tighter jeans, prancing behind rough-cut, burly men with scowls, heads lowered like bulls; older men, hope absent; and the oldest men, bent and limp like effigies expecting another body blow – nothing to see, nothing to say.

Seán heard his wife's voice in that jet stream. He could describe her words verbatim if he felt safe. Which he didn't. He could describe her face, the lilt of her voice, her clothes, her touch. He could describe how he, as a young man, had risen from seasonal carpenter to master carpenter with dreams of building entire houses, large communities. He could describe how his wife had followed him in that dream. But he didn't. He could describe what she advised him to do, if he trusted anyone enough. Which he didn't. He knew, but chose to forget, even to deny, his wife's infidelities.

He had spoken with her often since her death twenty-six years ago. On the day of her funeral, she said, in a rushed, almost staccato voice, "Seán, after our Sunday dinner. Shot in the head in his car. You weren't even in town when he killed me." Her words conveyed a feeling in him he had long felt but could not name. He took comfort in what she said, "Seán, you don't belong in there. Work to get out. Help find him." Unsure whether it was a dream or a vision, he settled on vision and stuck with it.

Then, as quickly as it happened, she disappeared, and Seán was on the edge of his bed stunned as if he had been administered some drug without his permission. "Hell, for years, everything's been without my permission," he said to no one.

Seán never spoke of his wife's visits, not even Joe Kilmer, his cellmate in the Ninnescan County jail when they were young men. Together, they had secreted rare reading materials through bars and around thick walls, learned how to convert the water faucet into a drinking fountain, and memorized the rhythms of incarceration. Shackled one the other, and transported to Lecompton State Prison, then assigned to the same cell.

In Seán's mind, it was just last year he was a newly married man with a clear view of his future. Then his wife's death and he was the defendant in her murder trial with no money and a court-appointed lawyer. As the husband, he was the first suspect, and when he refused to take a lie detector test, became the only suspect. After the jury verdict and life sentence, his family, money, visits, and friends disappeared. No money meant that he researched and wrote his own appeals. He relied on Kilmer, to help him decipher tortuous legal opinions.

Each evening, after his laundry job and dinner, Seán walked up three flights of stairs to the library, a compact room with no windows, a few tables and chairs, metal bookcases containing a lean selection of relevant books, scattered Fed. 2nd volumes,

the 1963-1971 volumes of U.S. Supreme Court case law, and an incomplete set of the U.S. Code.

II

After they left the Mess Hall, Seán walked with Kilmer toward the exercise yard over tightly packed dirt, choked patches of weeds, and hurried past men clustered near the metal bleachers. Movement, motion, almost a blur of men - large and wide, tall and thin, short and broad, some with teardrops under their left eyes, a few with missing fingers, others limping and shaking. Seán heard bursts of harsh laughter with hand slapping interspersed between practiced glances of derision.

“Hey, you. Killer,” said a skinhead with a 5:1 tattoo to tooth ratio, his voice a third rate imitation of Tony Soprano.

No response.

“You, Killer, I asked you your name.” Seán slowed down.

The voice again, “You. Speak up.”

Silence, then Seán turned and said, “Seán Tyler.”

“Well, Seán Tyler, when you gonna align yourself? Join up?” “Align,” pronounced like “a lion.” Join, pronounced “jo-ween”. The man laughed.

“What?”

“You heard him. When you gonna join? You needa be with us. You high status,” said a voice with a regional rasp that spoke of few hopeful days. Then as if challenged, the man stepped forward.

Seán knew the common law of the institution, the rules - *Decisions. Make ‘em quick. Know where you are. Know how to act. Know the routine. Don’t screw up, don’t look up, don’t bend over. Incur no debts. Watch your back, watch your ass, don’t watch other people – learn to live like that on a daily basis, and you may survive.*

He heard his wife’s voice, looked directly at the man, took one step forward, and irrespective of the rules, without a smile or rise in pitch, said, “Buddy, I don’t need to,” stopped, inhaled an exasperated breath, then exhaled that exasperation, “jo-ween anything. Leave me the hell alone.” He walked off without another word. At that moment, Seán was singled out as a special project.

“Watch out. They’re not asking you to pledge a fraternity,” he heard Kilmer say.

Seán slowed his pace, turned his head, looked straight at Kilmer, “Can you imagine me standing around – using ‘fuck’ as an interjection or adverb, hell, maybe even an adjective?” He took a breath, “Not me.”

A few minutes later, Seán’s eyes jerked to the right, quickly shot away. His words came out deliberately, “Look at those old men on that rusted bench near the barbells. Scares the hell out of me.”

“How?”

“Faces tight as drawstrings. Resentful eyes. Roll-your-own cigarettes hanging out

of their mouths.” He flashed to a large round table in the day room with the omnipresent cigarette-rolling machine, the yellow and blue cans of Tops tobacco – rumored to come from floor sweepings, the Zig-Zag wrappers in shirt pockets. Seán’s face flushed. “I don’t want to end up like them.”

“How’s that?” Kilmer asked.

“Full of regret. More than that. Full of revenge.”

“Well, hell, who isn’t? Sounds biblical.”

“Is biblical. I’ll end up insane or interred – or both,” said Seán.

“You’re too smart to end up like that,” said Kilmer.

“I hope you’re right,” said Seán, “but I ended up like this.”

On yet another day, in yet another line of men waiting to be told what to do, told where to go, to be barked at about something – lined up to go somewhere or lined up to come back from somewhere else; it didn’t matter. It was a line, and Seán was in it.

It happened quickly. One second he was in a line; the next, surrounded, and sprawled across the ground. He had felt pressure against his ribs, but no pain.

He saw Kilmer stand over him. “Not him,” Seán attempted to point toward Kilmer, saw blood on the ground, then on himself, felt pain for the first time.

“What happened? Can ya get up?” A guard bent over, “Ya know who did it?”

Seán felt his side, attempted to speak. His throat gurgled. He coughed, tasted copper, watched a bubble of blood escape from his mouth. An uncontrollable urge to stand came over him, he failed, then, in slow motion, crawled toward the bleachers, gently pulled himself up, and perched on the front row.

“Did you see who did it?”

Seán lied himself ignorant. Even in his battered state, he knew the guards didn’t believe him. He didn’t care, and, what he learned was, they didn’t either.

The next morning, drugged and painless, he awoke in the county hospital with a dark red swelling the size of a golf ball under his rib cage. He received ephemeral kindness from an English-as-a-sometimes-language nurse. A nameless doctor, who never looked directly at Seán, said, “They stabbed you just below the left side of your rib cage. Just missed having your bowels sliced open.” Walked away without another word.

He was sent to the three-bed infirmary inside the walls two days later. The next morning, he was escorted back to his cell with a pass to the nurse’s office for a dressing change.

That evening, Seán told a guard his toothbrush was missing. Three days, three reminders, and one cell search later, he received a new toothbrush and placed it in full view.

After the lights dimmed, Seán pulled his old toothbrush from a hollowed-out section of a book, scraped the bottom of it against the wall until it had a sharp point, placed it back inside the book. He thought for a moment, then decided. *Not now. Now I need to*

focus. Concentrate on my appeal. No diversions. No revenge.

The next evening after supper, Seán stuffed his bag with three number two pencils (the maximum allowed), handwritten pages of case law (photocopying not available), and trudged up the iron fire escape to the library. His right hand held protectively below his ribs, Seán opened the door; saw movement in the shadows. His wife. He leaned close, heard her say, “Focus. Don’t get angry.” Then she was gone.

He adjusted his aviator frame bifocals (standard issue), pulled out a chair, sat next to Kilmer, and listened, “Seán, you gotta do something. You need to avenge this, or they’re gonna kill you.”

“I can’t.”

“But, you’ve been attacked. You have to.”

“I know,” said Seán, but I’m not gonna screw up my court appeals. That’s all I got left.”

Seán watched as Kilmer set his book on the table, “Is this your last appeal?”

“Nope, I’ve still got the federal courts. Who knows?” Seán watched as Kilmer’s eyes focused on him, “But I can’t risk it. I’ve bet everything on the courts. So I can’t retaliate against anyone.”

III

Years passed. Large swaths of Seán’s life were lost or rendered incomplete, his memories beaten and smudged by time. Names forgotten, men discharged or died, cells reassigned, cellblocks changed, guards left. Seán, now sixty-seven years old, hair thin and gray, body periodically painful, always sore somewhere, walked with a stoop to lessen his pain. He listened to his wife more often.

During a mail call, a guard shouted, “Tyyyyy-lerrrrr.” Elongated words reverted quickly to the clipped form, “Tyler, somebody love ya.” As if dumping trash, the guard discarded a nine-by-twelve manila envelope on the pile of opened mail strewn across the floor. Seán hustled down the iron steps. The right corner of his mouth tilted upward. He was smiling again.

Back inside his forty-eight sq. ft. room, Seán sat rocking back and forth. Head lowered, he read amid shadows cast by a single light embedded nine feet above the floor. It all culminated in this - after years of research into out-of-date books and the struggle to find relevant case law, rarely able to secure a current Supreme Court opinion, and if he could, spending hours hand copying it – he received a manila envelope thrown on a pile.

His mouth moved as he read his final appeal. The Federal Court’s obligatory recitation of the history of his case: His jury trial – lost. Direct state appeal – denied. Motion for a Federal jury trial – denied. Appellate Court affirmed the denial. Petition for Writ of Habeas Corpus in federal district court – lost. Appeals court affirmed the denial.

The court referenced a fifty-nine page order issued by a court years ago – the

higher court agreed with the federal district court. Seán had failed to show that he had been denied any important federal rights. The court outlined Seán's issues – all denied. DENIED AND DISMISSED. *Christ, they actually capitalized the words.*

Jury trials lost. State court appeals lost. Verdicts affirmed. Federal appeals lost; legal issues rejected, dismissed. His final appeal - denied.

Nothing outside his cell and certainly nothing outside the walls existed for Seán. Whether it was sunny or dark, summer or winter, held no personal relevance. He lifted his battered five foot eight inch frame and walked to the bars, looked each way, neither saw nor heard anyone.

He examined the walkway again, saw no one. No trustees. No guards. He placed his right hand over the cover of a book – the dug-out interior of which held the sharpened toothbrush, and secreted it in the lining of his jacket.

What's the point? Dismissed, ignored, the remainder of his life sealed inside limestone walls and vertical bars. *Every day a repetition of yesterday. Hour after minute. Why?* He knew he was a lifer. No parole. No release. *They'll bury me in the prison cemetery in a few years.* A grim smile formed when he added his number, *Grave stone number 3817-9.*

He heard his wife speak to him slowly and patiently. He trusted her. When she stopped, he saw her smile, then glanced around his crude enclosure. *Why not? What do I have to lose?* Seán put on his jacket, tapped the lining and smiled.

Once outside the metal door, he walked past the Mess Hall over pathways that snaked between three and four story buildings. Spotlights swept the yard and bisected the stadium lights above the towers. It was almost windless with only small, scattered patches of snow.

Seán's face now pale, almost bleached-out, his shoulders once broad now rounded, hand held over his scarred stomach, he neared the limestone towers, looked up, adjusted the collar of his jacket, quickened his pace, and moved purposefully near the walls. From guardhouse to towers, through walkways, Seán saw trailing shadows. His breathing grew shallow and quick.

He looked into the eyes of every man he passed. He saw the face. Knew it was the man. He made his decision. Seán reached inside his jacket, and began to laugh.

Within ten minutes, Seán was escorted from the cement grounds. The men walked slowly. His head down, a stained, brown paper bag in hand, Seán's eyes watered. Palm out as in supplication, he reached for assistance. Preoccupied, no one made eye contact.

"He's on an anti-psychotic, but this damn place won't approve it," someone said. "Be careful of him, he hears voices and has imaginary friends. He'll be buried in the hole." The sun caught Seán's face as three uniformed men hauled him away with his life's possessions in a brown paper bag.

Within minutes, he stood stunned inside a first-floor cell. Seán looked at his

bloodied his white T-shirt; then bag in hand, he watched the shadows weave through the walls. His eyes watered. "Why? Why do they keep talking? The voices." His right shoulder pressed against the wall, he paced and waited for Kilmer.

by Alan Catlin

**“Life haunted by its more beautiful sister life-“
C Simic.**

The life exhumed from a graveyard gone to swamp and enshrined in a museum of dead objects, a place the looks more like a bowling alley of the gods than a gallery with neon arrow hints on how to make a spare rather than works of contemporary Art. This could be the place Alice discovered after falling down the rabbit hole after she stepped through her looking glass. Even the advice given for making spares is wrong. Still, the flashing arrows on the otherwise plain walls were beautiful to behold.

**“I left parts of myself-everywhere
The way absent-minded people leave
Gloves and umbrellas.”**

C. Simic

The way they used to make
confetti from ticker tapes
of stock market updates
and scatter them out sky
scraper windows on special
occasion parade days.

Or the colored paper kind
thrown at New Year's Eve
celebrations in banquet halls,
open bars and supper club
lounges where all the middle
aged married women, and
the single mother divorced
ones, used the occasion to
lean over the bar to kiss the
young man behind it, home
numbers and times to call
scrawled on napkins furtively
passed as they kiss, as her
unexpected tongue tickles
his teeth, their eyes saying,
“I've waited all year to do
this. Let's do it again.”

**“Everything you didn’t understand
Made you who you are.”**

C. Simic

Like the wrong turn in the supermarket
that brought you down the aisle of
lost objects: miniature Easter Island heads,
carved images of chiefs of lost tribes
of the Amazon, all the psychedelic roots
Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg about
in Yage Letters and all the dreams they
induced. The dreams you enter into
now, clear-eyed but confused;
there are no sale items here,
no markdowns, no way out.

**“The sun doesn’t care for ambiguities,
But I do. I open the door and let them in.”**

C. Simic

“Let’s party!” They say,
a gaggle of them the size
of geese rushing in.
All of them ecstatic as clowns
released from their car, waving
tiny pennants, blowing whistles,
kazoos, party hats askew as if
my place was not the first stop
on an extended tour of our
neighborhood. Once inside,
they raid the refrigerator,
the liquor cabinet, head to
the bathroom for the drugs.
Nothing I say deters them.
It’s almost as if I do not belong
here, that I am an intruder
in my own home.
“Here, hold this.” One of them
says to me, handing me a large
firecracker, the quarter stick of
dynamite kind. He lights the fuse
and laughs. I wait for it to go off.

Return to a Place Lit by a Glass of Milk

In a Russian winter dream
where the sleeping are more
real than the waking, the images
easier to hold on to. Where a rude
wooden table shakes but the glass
of milk remains unaffected, when
the transports go by, the warships
and cargo planes fly low over
the Forbidden Zones, the Interzones,
where the law's of physic have
been altered to accommodate
the dreamers, awake. Here
the milk shines in all kinds of weather,
radioactive as radium, as eternity
watches, their faces as hollow as cheeks
of the dead still standing in percussive
shock long after the bombs have dropped,
long after the alien intercession.
Only a child with special gifts, the habit
of levitation and the power to move minds
and objects can touch the milk, can partake
of its gifts, can see where the path it is
illuminating ,leads.

big sir

devin wayne davis

one night ...
when sunspots turned out
to be the spectacle of a "woodfaery,"
caught in smoky quartz ...

at dusk, fluttering -
a cascadeful of its liquid
wings before a weak right eye.

and so, now,
like a monk,
i've settled on
old-fashioned bi-focals

- to better read,
or follow a path ...

the shoreline, the caves,
set low in a cove ... made

once enough from breaking glass -
but plastic, today.

the tortoise-held
saviors of my choked sea life -

they appear
as tears pooling in a bay,
upon these blue-green islands.

BENEATH SALVATION MOUNTAIN

Andrew J. Hogan

“Dad, what’s that motor home doing in the driveway?” my daughter said, as the frigid late-December air rushed in the open door.

“That’s my research-mobile. I’m leaving for Slab City on Friday,” I said.

“Dad, we already talked about this,” Arlene said. “You’ve never driven a motor home before.”

“The guy at the RV lot said it drives like a car, just bigger. It’s only twenty-seven feet, a camper really. Not one of those monster motor homes,” I said.

Arlene put my mail on the hall table. “This is twice the size the car you’ve been driving for the last twenty years. You’re seventy-two; your reflexes aren’t what they used to be.”

“Look, I need to get away. I’ve been tied down here for seven years with your mother’s Alzheimer’s. Now she’s gone. I’ve been thinking about this trip ever since I read that article in The New York Globe & Observer last year.”

“Dad, you’re not making sense. You’re a political scientist; you analyze election returns. All of a sudden you’re going to Slab City to study an egalitarian society unregulated by government. You’re not an anthropologist. What do you know about participant observation?”

“Well, I’m not too old to learn. I was stationed there during the War. I’ve wanted to go back for a long time, and now I am free to do it.”

“But it’s not safe at your age,” Arlene said.

“Being alive isn’t safe at my age,” I said. “Look, I have a cell phone with nationwide coverage I can hook up to my laptop for e-mails. I have a backup cell phone in case the first one dies. We can talk every day. I’ll be okay.” I used the old-man’s failsafe maneuver to end the conversation: I held up my finger, pointed to the bathroom, and left the room in a hurry.

New York Globe & Observer

Saturday June 11, 1994

“Land of the Free” by Rakmon Dupree

Your directions to purgatory: from Los Angeles drive east past Palm Springs into the bowels of the Mojave Desert. Turn south at the stench of the Salton Sea. Proceed down Highway 111 to the town of Niland, a broken-down place of limited possibilities. Turn left on Main Street and head down the road to the railroad tracks where the law sometimes waits, as though the

tracks were an international boundary.

You are in the heart of the southern California desert among the ruins of an old Marine-training base, and you find a makeshift camp called Slab City. You are sharing the last free campsite in America with disenchanting war veterans, society dropouts, and Scrabble-playing pensioners proud to call this litter of strewn trailers and Winnebagos in the wilderness of the Mojave Desert their home. For the last 40 years, up to 5,000 campers at a time have lived here without electricity, water, trash or sewage facilities. Some come out of poverty, trying to eke a life out on a dwindling pension, others to flee their tragic pasts or hide from the authorities. But like many, you have come for a characterful pitstop between the plush campsites of San Diego and Palm Springs.

Arlene had been right about driving the camper. Outside of Kansas City, a gust of wind blew me off I-70 right into a snow bank. The camper wasn't damaged, fortunately, just stuck. In a couple of hours, the wrecker had me back on the road.

I decided to pull off the interstate almost immediately at Lawrence. I had some acquaintances in the political science department at the University of Kansas, and this would give me an excuse for sticking around a couple of days until the weather cleared without having to admit to Arlene the doubts I had in my driving abilities.

After four days of confidence building and innumerable checks on Weather.Com, I was back on I-70, free of snow, ice and heavy winds all the way to Limon, Colorado, over 500 miles in one day. Exhausted, I rested all the next day in Limon, checking on the road conditions along US24 to I-25 at Colorado Springs. The next eighty miles went smoothly, and I decided to continue through Pueblo all the way to the New Mexico border. By the next day my driving confidence was back, and I drove through to Gallup on I-40.

I avoided the Phoenix traffic in the camper, detouring through Kingman. I stopped for a few days before taking the slower route along US95 to Blythe, where I left US95 for CA78 and traveled south around the Chocolate Mountain Gunnery Range to Brawley and then north up CA111 to Niland on the east coast of the Salton Sea. Approaching Niland, I smelled the Salton Sea again for the first time since I'd been stationed there in 1945. The smell had degenerated from an unpleasant musty scent to the stench of rotting fish being killed by the increasing salinity of the evaporating lake.

I turned right onto Main Street, crossing both branches of the Southern Pacific railroad line, and the Highline Canal. Three miles further down the road I passed the guard bunker where Arnie and I had celebrated the bombing of Hiroshima. The bunker had been converted into a billboard, 'Welcome to Slab City.' Just to the south of the guard bunker sits Salvation Mountain.

The Navy Department condemned a square-mile of featureless desert scrub on 6 February 1942 and constructed Camp Dunlap later the same year. Improvements included 30 buildings,

a water treatment and distribution system, sewage collection and treatment system, over 8 miles of paved streets, recreational areas, including a 76 x 165 foot swimming pool, and concrete fuel tanks. The Marine Corps trained more than 185,000 troops for special artillery over a 3-year wartime period. After the war, a dwindling contingent remained until the base was dismantled in 1956. By 1961, all that remained were a few potholed mud tracks and the concrete foundations. Squatters soon trickled in. Itinerant fruit-pickers from the north, hippies and many a war veteran - of the Second World War, Korea, later Vietnam - all of whom were attracted by the free parking and the clement winters. By the early 70s, a community of mobile homebodies had sprouted from the desert, 5,000 strong at its peak. Today, the population is just under a thousand.

“Ah-TEN-shun,” the Master Sergeant barked. Lt. Carlswell marched into the barracks. Arnie and I waited at attention beside the bunk bed we shared.

“Gafoskaptonakis, Vedettina, I’ve got an assignment for you. Come with me.”

We followed the lieutenant out of the barracks. A short Mexican teenager was standing in the shade of the mesquite tree. It was 9 o’clock in the morning and the temperature was already 90°.

“This here spic is Lázaro Moreno from Mexicali,” Carlswell said. Arnie and I both looked confused. “Mexicali, it’s just across the border, south of El Centro. Didn’t you ever go there to get laid?” We’d just begun basic training; we hadn’t gotten laid anywhere yet.

“Never mind,” Carlswell said. “Lázaro here don’t speaka the Inglis, and nobody around here speaks Spanish.” More blank stares from me and Arnie; we didn’t speak Spanish either.

“Lázaro,” Carlswell said, “has decided to join the US Army, now that we’ve beat the Krauts and the Japs are on their knees, because once he finishes basic training he’ll get an early discharge at the end of the war and qualify for US citizenship.”

Lázaro was smiling broadly now, clearly not understanding a word that was said. “Some asshole in recruiting let this guy in. I tried to get him unrecruited, but everything is so fucked up now with the war winding down they just told me to put up with him for a couple of months,” Carlswell said.

“Yes, sir,” Arnie and I shouted in unison.

“Assholes,” Carlswell said. “That’s not why I called you out here.” He opened a brown folder with my name on it. “Gafoskaptonakis, says here you’re Greek, spoke some Greek at home?”

“Yes, sir,” I said.

“Vedettina, says here you’re Italian, spoke some Italian at home?”

“Yes, sir,” Arnie said.

“Good,” Carlswell said. “Greek and Italian are romance languages just like Spanish. Take the spic, get him settled in, show him the ropes. I don’t want him fucking up our routine. Understand?” Carlswell said.

“Yes, sir,” I said, “but Spanish is a whole different language than Greek or Italian. Anyway, he speaks Mexican Spanish; it’s probably completely different.”

“I don’t care, Private,” Carlswell said. “Figure it out. That’s an order. Dismissed.”

Carlswell turned and walked away, leaving the smiling Lázaro in our incapable hands.

Slabbers are proud of their tenacity, resourcefulness and simplicity. The example they often give, their mascot almost, is Leon Squire, the 77-year-old artist eccentric who lives in his work at the entrance to Slab City proper. No one else so embodies the bursting of life from its junk and dust. Squire's Salvation Mountain is a monument of American folk art, hailed by State Senator Barbara Pugilia - who led the petition to have Salvation Mountain enshrined as such - as 'a unique and visionary sculpture encompassing five acres, an iridescent fusion of doves, clouds, flags, flowers, hearts, streams and Biblical messages.' Childishly rendered in loud primary colors from gallons of donated paint, Salvation Mountain proclaims to the heavens, 'Jesus, I'm A Sinner, Please Come Into My Heart.' Every day, pretty much, visitors from as far as Japan stop by to marvel at the 18-year labor.

I drove the camper between the old guard house and Salvation Mountain on the other and turned left onto Low Road. Since this was the ‘high season’ in Slab City, there were dozens of campers, fifth-wheels and full-size motor homes parked next to the old building slabs along Low Road. Traveling two blocks south to Tank Road, I found the Slab City Singles trailer now occupied the corner where my old barracks had been. I circled around the block and found an empty campsite at what would have been the south end of barracks where Arnie and I had had to move our bunk bed to be next to Lázaro Moreno in the non-white section.

After calling Arlene, telling her I’d arrived safely, I took a nap. It was dark when I awoke. Through the windshield I could see a campfire flickering. I found several men sitting on folding chairs around the campfire outside of the Slab City Christian Center. A man with a book in his hand was citing what sounded like biblical verses. He closed the book and walked back into a nearby trailer. The rest of the group remained seated in their folding chairs.

“Hi, I’m Nick Gafoskptonakis,” I said. “I just arrived here today.”

There was a round of welcomes, inquiries about where I had come from, how was the weather on the road.

“That’s Pastor Bill who was just talking. He’ll be back in a second. You’ll probably like to talk to him,” said an old man in a hunting jacket.

“Why’s that?” I said.

“He just lost his wife too. That’s why he needs to take a break every once in a while.”

“How’d you know I just lost my wife?” I said.

“This is the widowers’ club. Besides, you got the look.”

Pastor Bill came back a few minutes later. He brought me a cup of coffee and a Fig Newton. I introduced myself.

“Why’d you come here, Nick?” Pastor Bill said.

“I saw the light in the darkness.”

“I meant to Slab City.”

I told him about being a retired social scientist and my interest in studying the Slab City social hierarchy.

Pastor Bill patted me on the shoulder. “We’ll talk again when you’re ready. I need to finish up tonight’s service.” He stood up, facing the group, opened his bible again and read,

“Jesus said to Martha: I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, although he be dead, shall live. Jesus went to the cave where Martha’s brother was buried and said: Take away the stone. They took away the stone. Jesus, lifting up his eyes, said: come forth. And presently he who had been dead came forth.”

I slipped away just as the group was breaking up. An evangelically decorated pickup loaded down with junk drove through the entrance of Slab City toward a similarly decorated Airstreams trailer. The lights of the pickup panned across Salvation Mountain, briefly illuminating a figure standing on the top behind the O in GOD.

I waited for the figure to turn on a flashlight. There was no moon and, of course, no electricity in Slab City. Whoever was up there was either staying put or waiting for me to leave. I pointed my flashlight but it was too weak to illuminate the top of the mountain. I went back to my camper.

The singles scene in Slab City is orderly to a fault - the RVs are huddled together into a kind of prim Singles District, an island of swept tidiness at stark odds to the chaos beyond. This gulf is a point of pride to many club members. ‘I expect you’ve seen the upturned cars and tires, right?’ asked Nolan, a retired journalist, looking up from his Scrabble letters. ‘Don’t get me wrong, they’re interesting characters, but this is uptown Slab City, you’re on snob hill right now, oh yes...’

My research started the next day, doing lunch at the Slab City Singles club. As the fresh meat on the menu, I got a good looking over by Hilda, Jenny, Mable and Sarah, the current batch of eligible elderly bachelorettes. Almost everyone there had the same story as I had: a middle or working class life with a job, a spouse, some kids, then the emptying of the nest and the death of the spouse, followed by a longing to do something and/or to go somewhere different before it was too late.

“I met Pastor Bill last night at the campfire over by the Christian Center,” I told the four ladies, two of whom were a decade older than me.

“Yes, he’s such a sad fellow these days. After all the years he and Angela spent helping people here, he could really use some help himself,” Jenny said.

What happened?" I said.

"His wife died last August. Massive stroke," Hilda said. "Wouldn't have done any good had she been living in El Centro."

"El Centro is the closest hospital?" I said. "That's a long way."

"Well, if you're a guest at one of the chi-chi spas around here, they'll call for a helicopter. You'll be in El Centro lickety-split. Slabbers, they send an ambulance. They think we're better off dead, I guess," Mable said.

"Pastor Bill doesn't come to your club? Seems like he would be an eligible bachelor?" I said.

"Still too broke up. He can't hardly get through a service without running back to his trailer for a good cry," Hilda said. "Breaks your heart."

"Right. Pastor Bill's become almost antisocial, except for hanging out with Dusty," Mable said.

Jenny and Sarah made faces of disgust. "Oh, god, the smell. Pastor Bill must be doing penance for something if he's hanging around with Dusty," Sarah said. They all nodded.

"Who's Dusty?" I said.

"Nobody knows for sure," Hilda said. "Seems like he has been here forever, maybe since back when they closed the Marine camp. And he hasn't bathed the whole time."

"Oh, Hilda, that's not true," Sarah said. "I've seen Dusty in the cistern bathing..."

"You watched him bathe in the nude," Mable said. "Sarah, you slut."

"I did not." Sarah was blushing. "I just saw him go down the ladder, and I had to wait for him to come out before I could go down."

Turning to me, Hilda said, "Dusty is awfully hard up for companionship. He's not allowed in here because of his personal hygiene problems. His visits to the cistern are welcome but infrequent events."

"You say Dusty's an old-timer?" He might be a good informant about early Slab City social structure, I thought.

"I heard he was here during the war. Came back after they closed the base," Mable said.

"Dusty's paranoid. He won't even give the Sheriff's deputy his right name," Sarah said. "You should ask Pastor Bill. They spend a lot of time together now that Angela's gone."

After the ladies worked me over pretty good for information, I got to talk with some of the guys at the singles club. They were a little put off by the extra attention I'd received, but they agreed they'd all been through the same meat inspection. I asked if new club members might bring beers to the social hour; they all agreed that it would be a considerate gesture for a newcomer to make.

Several thousand campers, many of them retired, use the site during the winter months. These

'snowbirds' stay only for the winter, before migrating north in the spring to cooler climes. The temperatures during the summer are forbidding. Many Snowbirds leave something behind at the Slabs before making their trek up north. In a way it is like the three coins in the fountain. Superstition has it that you will come back to the place where you have left a token.

Next day I looked for Pastor Bill. I decided to act a bit more like a congregant in the hope of getting more information about Dusty.

"Pastor Bill, I was sorry to hear about your wife's passing. I lost my wife about six months ago," I said. "I miss her every day, but not the way she was the last few years. Alzheimer's. She's in a better place now."

"I lost my Angela suddenly. A stroke." He looked down at the ground so intently I thought he'd seen a scorpion or a snake, but all I could see was dust. "We were doing so much good work here, I couldn't understand why the Lord took her away. I've been carrying on, but it's been hard."

"I took a walk over by Poverty Flats today. Those folks can surely use all the help they can get. It reminds me a little of Calcutta," I said.

"Did you happen to meet Mother Theresa there?" Pastor Bill said.

"No, I went to Calcutta for a professional meeting on the analysis of election results. I only saw the slums on the limo ride in from the airport."

"Well, what can I do for you, my son?" Pastor Bill said, even though he was at least a decade younger than me.

"I wonder if you know who the old-timers are around here? I would like to get some idea about the history of the place."

"Well, far as I know, Dusty is the oldest of the real old-timers. I mean, maybe back to the sixties when the military pulled out. Only problem is he's plenty suspicious. You being a left-wing intellectual and all, he's not likely to trust you."

Pastor Bill was getting ready to leave. "Why do you think I'm a left-wing intellectual?" I said.

"You got a fancy education. You say you're here doing research." His face turned hard. "We're just a bug collection to you, something for you to write about in some highfalutin magazine somewhere." He turned again to leave.

"Well, actually, I was a soldier here back in World War II. I was just coming back to visit some old ghosts," I said.

"What was all this crap about research then?"

"Some of the memories weren't all that pleasant," I said.

"So, you've come back looking for your token. You want to talk about it."

"No, not right now," I said. "I just thought Dusty might have been here after the camp was closed. He might know some of the history around here right after the war."

"Go ahead and talk with him. Tell him I said it's okay. You might get something useful," Pastor Bill said. He put a hand on my shoulder. "When you're ready to talk, let me know."

Outside of the gentrification of the Scrabble set, Slab City begins to resemble the post-apocalypse for which it is known - ramshackle RVs, heaped tires, gutted cars and the yaps and howls of skinny dogs. This is the world of the full-time Slabber, the yearlong resident. Most full timers are dirt poor, with more fingers than teeth; they are frequently alcoholic, emphysemic and their raddled skin is cracked deep and dark. When the Snowbirds flee the heat in April, only 150 or so Slabbers remain to endure the punishing summers during which temperatures frequently rise to 130° in the shade. For the full-timers, Slab City is about survival, not Scrabble.

In the pet cemetery at the very end of Tank Road, a man about my age with a mottled gray and black mutt was looking at one of the graves. He had a full, scraggly gray beard and mustache and long, greasy gray hair down to his shirt collar. He wore those sunglasses the ophthalmologists hand out after cataract surgery; the temple was secured to the frame by a paper clip. His shirt and vest were worn and his pants soiled. I said hello and asked him about the cemetery.

“Me and Jake were paying our respects to Charley. He was a standard poodle, died here last year on Steamboat Chilly,” he said. “Steamboat was too broke up to get another dog. I expected Steamboat to be back at the Slabs by now. Maybe he’s joined Charley in boondocker heaven.”

“Boondocker?” I said.

“There’s three kinds of people here. Slabbers, like me, what live here year round. Snowbirds, like you, in their fancy campers who come here to vacation for a month or two to rub elbows with those of us who really believe in freedom. And the boondockers, they’re the ones that live full-time on the road and off the road.”

“I don’t understand, off-the-road,” I said.

“I mean, they still live free, just not stationary. They never pay to stay in a campsite. When they camp, they just pull off the road somewhere and camp until the police come to run them off. Steamboat and Charlie were boondockers, that’s why we got along.”

I knew where I fit into this hierarchy of merit. I changed the subject, “What’s your dog’s name?”

“This here’s Jake.”

“How’s he like snowbirds?” I said.

“Jake likes everybody what’s got food.”

Before I could pet Jake, the man turned and walked away, heading north along the Coachella Canal. The Slab City Singles told me Dusty had a dog named Jake. If I was ever going to get to talk to Dusty it would probably be through Jake’s stomach. When the supply wagon from Niland made its afternoon run, I bought a box of dog biscuits. Dusty’s shack was just a little northeast of my camper, an outpost of Poverty Flats among the relatively well-to-do snowbirds. I would keep an eye out for their next

trip to the pet cemetery.

In the distance you hear the muffled booms of warplanes bombing the nearby Chocolate Mountains. The noise causes a murmur to ripple through the assembled old folk at the Slab City Singles afternoon dance – ‘Hear that?’ Tim says. ‘They're bombing again. Second time this week.’ The music starts up once more. ‘That's nothing, you should have been here before the war in 1991,’ Jim tells you, while giving Mina a twirl on the concrete slab dance floor. ‘We didn't want for entertainment back then, you just stepped outside your RV and enjoyed the light show. But that's Slab City - there's no electricity, but, hey, the fireworks are free!’ During the Second World War, Camp Dunlop Marine Training was sufficiently isolated for General Patton to practice desert maneuvers and for the Enola Gay bombers to rehearse their nuclear mission.

It was getting dark when Lt. Carlswell staggered out to the guard bunker where Arnie and I were only an hour into night watch. He carried two bottles by their necks in his right hand and was waving a newspaper his left hand.

“Ah-TEN-shun,” Arnie said, and we both saluted.

“At ease, Privates,” Carlswell said. “You dickheads remember those secret bombing runs the Air Force was conducting over in the Chocolate Mountains back in May?”

Arnie and I both nodded, even though we had just started basic training in May and couldn't have distinguish a secret bombing run from a hole in the ground.

“Well, this is what it was all about.” Carlswell held up a copy of Stars and Stripes. The headline in 60 point read, **New Devastating Atomic Bomb Wipes Out Jap City Of Hiroshima**. Carlswell began reading, “On August 6 a superfortress flew deliberately over Hiroshima, a Japanese army base city of 318,000. A bomb dropped from its belly and floated slowly earthward on a parachute. A minute or so later, Hiroshima was lighted by all of the colors of the solar spectrum. There was a sanity-rending crash, but not many of Hiroshima's inhabitants heard it. The revolutionary missile equaled the load of 2000 B-29s. Buildings and people were vaporized.” Carlswell handed Arnie the paper and took a long swig from one of the bottles. “We blew those fucking Japs back to hell where they belong.”

Arnie and I looked at the newspaper, but neither of us understood what an atomic bomb was.

“They blew up a whole city with just one bomb?” Arnie said.

“That's right,” Carlswell said. “And we've got more of them. We'll keep blowing up one city after another until the Hirohito kisses our ass.” He took another long pull from the bottle he had in his right hand. “The war's over. You chumps won't be getting your heads blown off invading Japan.” Carlswell handed me the other bottle of tequila. “Celebrate, that's an order.” He looked around. “Where's the spic?”

“Sir, he went into Niland to get some real spic food,” Arnie said. “Our food was

too bland.”

“Who gave him permission to leave the base?” Carlswell said.

“You did, sir. You told him this morning to get out of your sight,” I said.

“Ah, fuck it. Maybe the little greaser won’t come back.” He saluted and staggered back toward the barracks.

Arnie and I drank from the bottle of tequila Carlswell left for us. We’d never drunk tequila before, and at first we had a hard time swallowing what seemed like liquid fire. By midnight, we’d finished most of the bottle and were getting pretty drunk. The master sergeant came by the guard post. He was pretty loaded himself.

“How you assholes doing out here? See any Japs trying to break into the camp?”

“No, surgent,” Arnie slurred. I started giggling.

“We’re still at war, you little pricks. There’re reports some Japs escaped from the internment camp over in Poston. They’ll be looking for revenge for the family members we blew to smithereens in Hiroshima. Gimme that bottle and pull yourselves together.” The master sergeant walked back toward the barracks. He took a long pull from the tequila bottle, and I thought I heard him laugh.

“Was he for real about the Japs breaking out of the internment camp?” I said to Arnie, “or was he just after our bottle?”

“We don’t have any choice but to sober up now,” Arnie said. “I need a nap. You take the first shift, and I’ll relieve you in an hour.” Arnie slid down along the side of the guard bunker and was passed out a minute later.

Even at midnight the temperature in August was over eighty degrees. The Salton Sea stank, and my belly was full of really cheap tequila. Dizzy and sick to my stomach, I went behind the guard bunker toward some creosote bushes and puked up what I had been drinking. Crawling back in the direction of the guard bunker, I stopped to rest my head on the sand, waiting for the dizziness to subside.

I’d passed out for a while, when I heard Arnie shouting. There was a small, dark man standing over him; in the dim light of the lantern, I saw this person swing a shiny object at Arnie’s head. I pointed my rifle in the direction of the person and yelled, “Stop.” The man turned in my direction and began screaming gibberish, lurching in my direction. I yelled “stop” again, but he kept coming, holding the shiny object out in front of him. I fired. The attacker fell.

Arnie, who seemed to have gone back to sleep, jumped up at the sound of the rifle fire. We both stumbled toward the body of the stranger.

“What the fuck did you do?” Arnie said. I turned over the attacker. It was Lázaro. I’d shot him through the heart. A half drunken bottle of mescal was in his hand. He must have heard the news about Hiroshima in Niland and was celebrating on his walk back to the camp just like we were.

“Oh, shit. What are we going to do?” I said.

“Wait five minutes,” Arnie said. “If nobody’s heard the shot, we can bury him over by the wash. The lieutenant thinks he’s run away. They’ll never miss him.”

We waited.

Dusty, a hobbling veteran of the World War II who turns 73 this year, lives down the road from the Slab City Singles camp with a whining dog in a shack that might have been blown in from the hills. 'Every year someone dies in the heat of the summer,' he says, between hacking coughs. For all its hardship, Slab City is Dusty's piece of the American dream, the Land of the Free. He regards his harsh but simple existence as a tribute to the pioneers who built America and defined its freedoms. "This is about as free as you're going to get," he says. 'It used to be more free, before the government took away our guns. If you ask me, they're betraying the people that made this country great. I ain't saying I'm a hero, I'm not. All the heroes are dead.' Dusty used to operate a nine-man militia here on the Slabs. 'I had a militia for 15 years and we used to train here. But everyone got so bent out of shape when they heard the guns go off. I figured out a scenario where the Mexicans might invade from the south or the FBI from the east and take over this whole camp by tomorrow. Who's going to stop them?'

Next morning, I saw Dusty and Jake headed toward the pet cemetery. I pocketed a handful of dog treats.

"Hi, how's Jake today?" I said.

Jake wagged his tail. "He's fine," Dusty said, turning to head Jake up along the irrigation canal path. When I offered Jake a treat, he dragged Dusty back toward me.

"He'll be your friend for life now," Dusty said.

I had to get Dusty talking about the Slabs. "What's this place they call the Looney Bin?" I said.

"That's where the Canadian snowbirds park off yonder," he said, pointing south. "It's named after their two-dollar coin called the loonie. They're pretty much all socialists."

"I thought it might have been an old brig back when Camp Dunlap was here?"

"Nope, we didn't have a brig as such back then," Dusty said. "We just used one of the barracks for the drunk recruits the MPs brought back down in Mexicali."

"Pastor Bill told me you were here during the war."

"Yep, lots of guys came through here, specially when the Marines were in combat training for the invasion of Japan."

"Believe it or not, I was stationed here, just before the end of the war."

"The Sea didn't stink so bad back then," Dusty said.

"I was only here during the summer. Man, was it hot. Even in September of '45 when I was discharged, it never cooled off."

"The Sea smells okay in the winter."

"Were you here when Leon Squire started work on Salvation Mountain?" I said.

"Yep. I told Leon to start working on the mountain over there by the guard bunker, so people could see it easy. Back in the sixties, there were mostly hippies and dopers here. A lot of folks didn't want to go into the main part of Slab City."

“I read about it in The New York Globe & Observer. The article had a lot of nice pictures of Salvation Mountain. It brought back memories for me.”

“How’d you have a memory of something that didn’t exist when you were here?” Dusty said.

“Oh, you know, being next to the guard bunker. I had guard duty here.”

“Most guys did,” Dusty said.

“Yeah, well I was in the guard bunker when they dropped the first atomic bomb.”

“So was I,” Dusty said.

I stared at him, trying to see under the beard and mustache. “Arnie?”

Given the impending emergency of uninsured elderly and demographics alone, Slab City ought to be growing, but the opposite is true. There are no Mexican Slabbers to prop up the numbers. Despite its proximity to the border, Slab City is a strictly Caucasian camp, and each year its older residents die off.

“Dad, are you okay?” It was Arlene. She’d come from Indiana to bail me out of jail. She was almost crying.

“I’m okay. Can we leave?” I said. The door to my holding cell clanked open. I was a little wobbly on my feet; I’d had more than twenty-four hours to sober up, but I hadn’t eaten or slept much.

“Yes, I posted bail for you,” Arlene said. “The Imperial County prosecutor says you have to make restitution to Mr. Squire and pay a fine for vandalism, and you’ll be free to go back home.”

“I murdered somebody, Arlene. I deserve to be punished,” I said.

“You didn’t commit murder, Dad. You got drunk and vandalized Salvation Mountain.”

“I was looking for the body that Arnie and I buried there back in ‘45.”

“But, Dad, you didn’t find anything,” Arlene said.

“Maybe the coyotes got to the body. We didn’t bury him very deep,” I said. “I was too afraid to go back and look.”

“The prosecutor checked with the military,” Arlene said. “They say they have no record of Lázaro Moreno being enlisted in the Marines, and there was no record of his having gone missing. Lt. Carlswell is dead. The Master Sergeant is dead. There is no one to corroborate your story. And that revolting guy, Dusty, the one you call Arnie, says nobody was shot back in 1945.”

“He’s lying,” I said.

“Well,” Arlene said, “more than a quarter of a century passed between the time you say you shot the Mexican kid and when Mr. Squire started building Salvation Mountain. No human remains were ever found in the vicinity of the guard bunker or Salvation Mountain. Anyway, you were a soldier. If you shot someone coming onto the base while on duty, even if you were drunk, the most it would be is negligent

homicide.”

“They still ought to punish me for that.”

“The prosecutor said that was a matter for the military. It’s out of his jurisdiction. Everything happened inside of a military training camp during a time of war,” Arlene said. “As far as the military is concerned, the guy never existed.” Arlene sat next to me on my bunk. “The county prosecutor said no way were they going to dig up Salvation Mountain looking for a body that is almost certainly not there now, if it ever was there. The Mountain is all Niland’s got for an actual tourist attraction.”

“The Sheriff thinks I’m senile.”

“Well, Dad, you were drunk when the Sheriff’s deputies caught you digging up Salvation Mountain,” Arlene said. “Apparently they see a lot of religious nuts around here. When you told them you were trying to set Lazarus free, I think they put you in that category.”

“What now?”

“Let’s go home, Dad. I rented you a nice apartment in the Holy Sepulcher Retirement Village. Just until you get back on your feet.”

Calling the police runs counter to the spirit of anarchy, and of justice, that prevails in Slab City. The Slab motto - 'If you don't like your neighbor, just move!' - is gloriously idealistic. Often, when one Slabber takes offense at another, he will burn down his trailer or rob him. “There ain't no rules,” Dusty said. As the sun sets to a shimmering eyelid slice, and the vast jet-scored sky swirls with the finest shades of mauve, fires are lit all over Slab City. Old men sit around rubbing their hands and swapping tales of their distant adventures. Salvation Mountain waits for another dawn to proclaim its message, ‘God is Love.’

Originally published in the Marathon Review, June 30, 2015

by E M Schorb

AT A CLASSIC FILM REVIVAL

Walking down the darkened aisle, he stops,
shadows leaping about him. Behind the
credits
rolling down the screen, the detective
hero strides a shabby street of cheap hotels.
I know that neighborhood. I know that boy.
Old Technicolor flashes in a static blizzard.
Still, he sees, or thinks he sees, *himself*
up there, behind the striding hero,
innocently tailing him, his own trench coat
collar up against the wet wind that was
blowing that day—for now he remembers
that day, but does not recall a camera
or a striding movie star ahead of him.
Someone shouts,

Sit down! Sit down!

He gropes the dark for a seat, dislodging
others,
who spill popcorn and sticky drinks down on
his tissue pants and rundown shabby loafers
but keeps on looking up—at the image of himself!
—Oh so beautiful, that blooming boy!
He wants to be in Fred's Bar, to tell the flies
that he is in a film, or, at least, in the credits.
It doesn't matter that he got no credit, nor got
paid.

BEREFT

By artificial time, full of dates,
the pygmy time of people, not
the giant genuine time of stars,
she is late, the alarm rings out desire.
Artificial time is murdering his lust.
And the all-night lover of years ago
(his sleepy-eyed but vivacious wife
hurriedly hitching stockings to
garterbelt, slipping into heels)
looks on, bereft.

A hard life
has left him exhausted by night,
but a dream's sensual levitation
engages his tumescent morning lust.
Faithfully, this indiscipline of oversleep
by one who understands his plight,
he tries to see as healthy nerves;
although old men of the gold watch,
being doubtful of prowess, suspect
always a planned escape, yet
feign indifference.

The clock's
silent now, the old man blows smoke,
the coffee in his cup cold as his heart.
The choice was made between himself
and sleep. His wife had lust for sleep
and not himself. She has escaped
when she might have wakened early,
like a morning-glory, for his tested love.

AN AMERICAN POET ON TOUR

I suppose it was somewhat
like this in the Hellenistic
age, when you could go in every direction
from Athens and still be a Greek
and I suppose it was somewhat
like this in the Roman
when all roads led away
and back to Rome and
I suppose it was somewhat
like this when the sun never set
on the old British Empire,
so this is what we Americans get
for being the so-called superpower.

I have been thinking these thoughts
on a plane for an hour—
how every place I land
seems like the place I just left—
and now I think I understand
just what Gertrude Stein meant
when she said what she said
in her odd and idiosyncratic bent
about the place she had come from
where there was no there there.
Anyway this morning wherever I am
the weather seems fair
and I'm sure to like it there.

THE ISLANDS OF LANGERHANS

*Islands of Langerhans--
scattered cell groups in the
pancreas which produce insulin*

*Stream of consciousness, WWII Veteran,
hospitalized, diabetic, dying . . .*

in memory of an uncle

Woke once to
white-smocked aliens
their poetic rap
the crystalline
active principle of
the Islands of Langerhans
insulin
palm trees swaying
ukulele music
sarongs
Hollywood presents the
Islands of Langerhans
with Boris Karloff
as Langerhans
the mad scientist who invites
the alien pod people to land
and institutional footsteps
down the hollow hall
hollow footsteps down
hollow footsteps
in an echo chamber
Silver Hollows near the sea
ukulele music
on the crystalline
Islands of Langerhans
emerald islands
in a crystalline sea
in Oceanside in
Golden Land

Silver Hollows
in Golden Land
near the sea
where you can see
the Islands of Langerhans
in an echo
of crystalline footsteps
down a hollow hall
where white-smocked aliens
rap poetically
where you forgot to take
your insulin
you know you can go
into sugar shock or
insulin shock
if you don't take care of
your only friend
and you like a kid
have to spend all day
at Disneyland
eating cake and candy
and swilling beer
unbalanced
Disneyland in Golden Land
Hollywood
sarongs
ukulele music
palm trees swaying
the Islands of Langerhans
their crystalline
active principle
poetic rap of the
white-smocked aliens
who took samples
of your blood
on a raised white table

The beach at Langerhans
is heavily fortified
and there's a rough surf
many died

before they hit the beach
awarded the Purple Elvis
and the Flying Saucer
for the bullet came in
at the neck
at the neck
and drove down
and out through the ribs
under the right arm
rapping he'll be out of it
in a day or two
rebalance of sugar-insulin
treat as shock
then nothing but
the white-smocked aliens
who landed at Langerhans
I was afraid
when I saw them
they echo'd and echo'd
down the long hallways
a Silver Hollows sound
but they will transfer me
to a VA hospital
heard their crystalline
poetic rap
footsteps
echoing down
wasn't afraid of God's
musical castle
wasn't afraid at all
because old was young
when we hit the beach
at Langerhans at
not Langerhans
at Normandy

HAYDN'S HEAD: A PASTICHE

E M Schorb

*for Jack O'Brian, columnist, New York Journal-American,
who tipped me off*

We are aboard the Orange Blossom Special, returning to New York from Florida, and I am hopeful that Tweedledum and Tweedledee, as Johnny calls them, a couple of bad eggs in plaid suits, are not.

"Odds are we've left them shaking their fists on the station platform, Pug," Johnny says, mopping his brown brow with a white silk handkerchief. He gears his seat back, loosens his tie, tips his Panama over his eyes, and acts like he hasn't got a worry in the world. I act like I am watching the midnight Miami lights recede, but what I am really doing is watching the window for reflections. I expect to see Sam the Elephant's bonebreakers appear at any second.

Most gamblers have a specialty—cards, craps, horses—but Johnny Belmont will bet on anything. I have first heard of him a year ago, when he places a spectacular bet on the presidential election and loses to all concerned. He is in deep trouble until his rich family steps in. But they are very much put out, because he has bet on Stevenson and they are an Eisenhower family. So they warn Johnny that they will not rescue him again. At least this is the version I have heard outside of Lindy's restaurant, in that vague area of the environment around Broadway and Fiftieth Street which Damon Runyon has dubbed Jacobs' Beach in honor of his ticket speculating pal, Mike Jacobs. On Jacobs' Beach you meet the sporting crowd—scalpers, bookies, touts, mobsters, and journalists such as Walter Winchell and, until he passes on in '46, Runyon himself.

But it is at Hialeah that Johnny and I have become pals. The Florida sharks do not know that Johnny is a black sheep without a red cent; so, with his good looks, his classy manners, and his family name, he has been able to borrow large amounts of hay from Sam the Elephant, who is called such because he does not forget so easy. But Johnny has been having the world's worst losing streak, and has tried to get on the good side of Lady Luck by placing some bets for me. Unfortunately, Sam the Elephant has heard of said bets; and, because he does not care from which individual he collects, has decided to hold me partners with Johnny when he calls in the bets.

We are tap city when we step off the Special at Penn Station—unless you count Johnny's lucky two-bit piece, which he never spends. But Johnny thinks we can get a stake at the Hotel Bon Chance, a gamblers' haven in the West Forties. I figure he means to check us in and flip his quarter into wealth. But I am worried that some of Sam the Elephant's boys might be keeping their eyes out for us there. Johnny laughs kind of grimly and says that we will have to gamble on that because the Bon Chance is the only place he can think of where he can raise a stake.

It looks like we are going to have to hoof it through a cold November rain, which is pouring out of buckets. It does not matter much to me, because I am not a dude, but it matters to Johnny, who is a clotheshorse. We have had to leave all our clothes in Florida, and he only has this one tropical suit left, which is on his back. So he shakes his head, and says: "Pug, I'm not going to let this suit get soaked."

I follow him through the crowd and up to the Lost and Found, which is open all night in those days, and it is now about midnight, as our trip takes us about twenty-four hours, and he tells the busy clerk behind the counter that he has lost his black umbrella. The clerk hustles off and is back in no time with three such. "That's it," cries Johnny, and takes the one that happens to be the best of the lot.

As we are walking away, Johnny says, "You know, Pug, one could get anything that way." He stops and looks at me with his green eyes bright like two Go signs. "Think of something, I'll bet you a belated C-note that they have it—that the clerk will hand it across to you."

There is nothing like a wager to cheer me up, and I need cheering. "You're on," I say. "We'll make it for the first C-note one of us gets."

"O.K.," says Johnny. "But I choose the item. It can't be anything with an I.D., and it can't be anything too unusual—like a zither. Fair enough?"

"Fair enough," I say, wondering what a zither is.

"Say a plain square box—a cardboard carton or package wrapped in plain brown paper and tied with twine—O.K.?"

"You're on."

"You ask for it. I got the umbrella. The clerk might remember me." On the 5-yard line from the Lost and Found desk, Johnny says: "I'll wait here." In two minutes I am back, carton in hand.

"I owe you a C-note," I say, dangling the package from a finger by the twine. "The bet's good," I add, and say that I will now return the package.

"Wait a minute, Pug," says Johnny. "How about another C-note on what's in it? Let's say on whether it's animal, vegetable, or mineral."

I say, "It's bigger than a breadbox, that's for sure."

"Takers?" says Johnny.

I shrug. "Takers," I say. "So where do we open it?"

"Not here," says Johnny. "I'll tell you what, Pug. We'll take it with us to the Bon Chance, and open it there. Then I'll have a boy re-wrap it and bring it back here to the Lost and Found. What do you say?"

"I suppose you want I should carry it?"

"And I'll keep us dry with the umbrella. Come on."

The Bon Chance is a few blocks uptown from Penn Station. Cats and Dogs of rain are bouncing knee-high as we turn off the avenue. On the next corner is a Yellow Cab stand, or used to be in those days. I duck to look into the first cab in the line and there as usual is Sleeping Bill, who could make a claim to being the worst hack in New York,

as he never takes a fare. Actually, it is his own car, done up to look like a Yellow Cab, and he is no hack at all, but a bookie. I tap his windshield but he is asleep at the wheel. I think he has been so since I left for Florida. Anyway, he's in the same position he was in when I left.

In a block or two on this numbered cross-street the pedestrian traffic has thinned down to Johnny and me. Ahead, through the watery dark I see *BON CHANCE* come and go in nervous green neon winks. I am looking at this sign, and thinking about a hot bath, when a dark, shiny limo sprays up beside us. The back window on our side is rolled down and there is the head of a white-faced, dark-hatted woman in it. She has thin red lips and big white teeth through which she hisses something at us, which I cannot make out due to the fact that the rain is doing drum rolls. A big boy in a chauffeur's uniform comes around from the other side. He is waving a revolver which has a silencer on it like a rolled-up racing form. He believes that action speaks louder than words, because instead of explaining himself he hooks a couple of thick fingers into the twine on the box I am conveying and tugs. I tug back. He then swings at me and misses, but corrects himself by bashing the big silencer down on my knuckles. Only now does he decide to make himself clear.

"Let go, you fat swine!" he cries, adding insult to injury. But before I can be offended, Johnny has collapsed the umbrella and batted it down on the pistol, which splashes into a jumping lake at the rear end of the limo.

"En garde!" cries Johnny, stabbing the guy several short ones. The big guy lets go of the twine, and slips in the rain just as I step in with a right cross. He falls against the limo and keeps on going down toward where the pistol has submerged, slapping at street water, grabs up the pistol, aims, and pulls the trigger.

Because of the silencer and the noise of the rain, I don't know if I have been shot or not, but then I realize by the look on the big guy's face that the pistola is waterlogged.

Johnny and I have jumped away when he has had the pistola pointed at us, so he has a head start when he ducks around the limo. The door slams and the limo speeds off, making a wake like the Titanic.

"What the hell . . ." says Johnny, looking after the limo.

"It is this dumb package," I say.

"Did you see the plates?" says Johnny. "They were diplomatic. Let's get to a room and see what we've got here."

There is a new night clerk at the Bon Chance, a straw-haired, freckled kid with a Southern accent. This is a break, as the old clerk would have sold out his mother to Sam the Elephant or any other shark for the price of a warm beer. It won't help much if Sam the Elephant's boys are looking hard for us, but it is anyway worth the ink to register under a couple of phony names, so we do. A kid who looks like the younger brother of the yokel behind the desk shows us up, carrying the package by the twine, like a suitcase.

In our room, Johnny offers to flip the kid double or nothing for the tip, neglecting to state the amount involved, and the kid eagerly takes the bet. Johnny then offers to let the kid owe him “the ten spot.” But before the kid has about-faced, Johnny has flipped him into serious debt, which he immediately cancels, on the condition that we get top service, to which the kid gratefully agrees.

Johnny orders sandwiches, coffee, cigarettes, cigars, razors, etc. He also needs a bottle of good Scotch. He sends the kid away with our wet clothes. In those days, you can get a good steam press all night, even in a cheap hotel.

“Well, now, Pug,” says Johnny, ripping open the package, “let’s have a look at this.”

I go over to the table on which the kid has placed the box and look into it. Johnny is pulling out a lot of excelsior. There is something round and gray down in the middle of the box. Johnny pulls more excelsior out, reaches in, and jerks back like he’s been stung. I see it now and let out a whistle. It is a human skull.

As soon as it sinks in what we have here, we do a thorough search of the box for identification of some kind—“Provenance,” Johnny calls it—even checking inside the skull, but discover zero. We pack the bony head away; and then, while we bathe and shave, we discuss the nature of things as they stand.

We ask ourselves: Who are the foreign couple in the limo? Why do they want this old skull? Should we call the police?

Johnny says, combing his dark hair down over his forehead and cutting a part in it, “Do the chauffeur and his lady know that the package contains a skull, rather than something else more valuable? Surely an ordinary human skull can’t be worth much. Surely not enough to induce armed robbery.”

Comes a rapping at our chamber door.

“Who is it?” Johnny calls.

“Bellboy. I got your clothes and a wagon full of food and drinks.”

When the bellboy goes, Johnny says, “Get dressed, Pub,” and pulls on his pants.

I am tying my tie in the cloudy mirror over the dresser when there is a second knock at the door.

“What now?” Johnny calls over the transom. He thinks it is the bellboy again.

“Please,” comes a reply. “I am Professor-Doctor Albrecht Schmitt with my daughter, Agnes. We have rooms down the hall. I must speak with you.”

“It don’t sound like anybody Sam the Elephant would know,” I say.

“Nor like the chauffeur from the limo,” says Johnny. He opens the door a crack and peers out. Then he steps back and opens it wide.

This gent has a couple of inches on me and I have a couple of pounds on him, making us two barrels, but his weight is then as old as mine is now, and he has never been a lightweight boxer as I have before I lose my last match in the late 40’s and begin consoling myself with pumpkin pies.

He has a gray, yellow-streaked walrus mustache, and thick, silver-rimmed specs. His daughter is taller and a hundred pounds lighter, a honey-blonde in powder blue

who looks like a wicked witch has chased her out of a fairy tale. She eyes Johnny like he is Prince Charming.

The gent extends a thin manicured hand. "I'm Professor-Doctor Schmitt," he repeats. Gray moths flutter behind his specs. "I see you have opened our package. We were on our way up from Washington with that skull when we suspected we were being followed. You see, it is a valuable specimen, and there are those who would stop at nothing to possess it. Research is highly competitive. You Americans have a phrase—*it's a jungle*." He gives out with a nervous cackle.

Johnny lights a Fatima. He says, "It hasn't got a name or a number on it. How do we know it's yours?"

The Doc looks stumped. The gray moths look like they are trying to break out from behind their glass cages.

Johnny purses his lips, lifting his little black mustache, and blows out some Turkish smoke, giving Agnes the once-over twice. She looks at him with big sad blue eyes. He cracks a smile. "Maybe if you can tell me how you lost it—?"

"Oh, no," the Doc almost stutters, "it wasn't lost. Just as we were leaving the train, we became *certain* that we were being followed. But we hoped we had lost our pursuers in the crowd when we came upon a row of lockers. Unfortunately, neither of us had an appropriate coin—"

"We had to work fast," Agnes breaks in. "In a moment's inspiration, my father saw the Lost and Found, and we deposited it there."

"Then," the Doc picks up, "we waited nearby to make certain that our pursuers had not seen us turn in the package."

"You can imagine," says Agnes, "our surprise when we saw—you, Mr.—"

"Morris," I say. "Pug Morris."

"—Mr. Morris, pick up the package."

"You were not at all what we were looking for in our pursuers," says the Doc.

"Sorry," I say, as I am pulling the ring from a Prince Albert.

"No, no," says the Doc, kind of flustered. "I did not mean—"

"Frankly," pipes Agnes, "we thought you might be some sort of confidence tricksters who preyed on Lost and Found patrons."

"If that should prove to be the case," says the Doc, kind of shrugging, "I'm certain that we can come to terms—"

This time I break in. "We picked up the package on a lark," I say, around my stogie, which I am busy lighting.

"We're gamblers," Johnny says. He explains the bet.

"I see," says the Doc, when Johnny has finished. "We followed when you left the station, and saw the assault on you. We should certainly have helped, for those who attempted to steal the package from you were assuredly those who pursued us from Washington, but I'm getting old, and the rain was beating down, and we had fallen too far behind to be of any assistance."

“They must have found us,” says Agnes, “and then seen you ahead of us with the package, passed us by, and attacked—”

“We saw you turn in here,” says the Doc.

“We told the clerk we were friends of yours and wanted rooms on your floor,” says Agnes. “We’ve been drying off and making ourselves presentable.”

“Now,” says the Doc, “if you’d please be so kind as to give us our package . . .”

Johnny grins, and says: “We still don’t know that the package is yours. Maybe it belongs to the pair who jumped us.”

“Yeah,” I say, “and maybe everything you’ve told us is a load of—”

“Pug!” says Johnny.

“—baloney,” I say.

Schmitt’s face falls. He thinks for a moment, and says, in a much more businesslike manner, “We haven’t much time, gentlemen,” reaches into a breast pocket, pulls out a fat wallet, and takes a couple of bills from it. “Will a hundred—er, two hundred—one each—be satisfactory?”

“Mister,” I say, “we lose more than that before breakfast.”

But Johnny takes the two bills, stuffs one in his pocket, and, handing me the other, says, “Here, Pug, cash this and call the cops.”

I start for the phone, but the Doc cries, “Stop!” When I turn back, he is holding a .30 Mauser, with its little black eye looking right at me. “Put your hands up and hand me that box,” he orders.

“Which is it, Professor?” says Johnny in his usual cheerful way, his hands half up, talking through the smoke from his dangling Fatima.

“Agnes,” says Schmitt, “get the head.”

Now we are all startled. Someone is at our door again.

“We are very popular tonight, Johnny,” I say.

“Infamously, Pug,” says Johnny.

Neck on neck, Johnny knocks the Mauser to the floor and I catch the Doc on the chin with a light fast uppercut.

Schmitt has gone down across the coffee wagon, taking a few items with him. In short, he has made a good deal of noise. Plus which, Agnes has screamed.

“It could be the Elephant’s boys,” I say.

Johnny grabs up the Doc’s Mauser, looks sharp at Agnes, finger to lips, and steps to the wall by the door so he will be behind it when it opens. He nods at me.

I stay put and call, “Come in!”

It is the chauffeur and the pale-faced lady from the limo. The chauffeur is holding the revolver with the big silencer on it. The gat looks dry and newly oiled.

I back up some toward the table with the package on it, drawing them in. They bite, and step in, eyeing Agnes and the Doc’s unconscious bulk.

“Where’s the other—?”

But the chauffeur has got curious too late. Johnny jams the Doc’s Mauser into his

back.

“Well,” says Johnny, “if it isn’t my fencing partner! Drop it.”

The chauffeur drops the big revolver with a thud. Johnny kicks the door shut behind him, steps around in front, and kicks the gat to the side.

“Who are you two?” he asks, pleasantly.

The chauffeur clicks his heels. “Colonel Ivan Lensky,” he says, “Soviet State Security. This is my associate, Frau Yeva Von Heller of Austria.”

“KGB,” says Johnny. “How interesting. My uncle is Wild Bill Belmont.”

“OSS,” says Lensky. “I have met him. A double-dyed conservative McCarthyite reactionary.”

“That’s Uncle Bill,” says Johnny, smiling.

“Who are you talking about?” I say.

“Spies!” says Johnny.

“We already know Doctor Schmitt and his daughter,” says Lensky. “Who are you?”

“Not-so-innocent bystanders,” says Johnny. “Gamblers who made a bet on a live lark and wound up with a dead head.”

“That head is important to Frau Von Heller and myself—to the governments we represent. We are prepared to offer you two thousand dollars. I have on my person an instrument for that amount. Payment cannot be stopped.”

“Two *grand*,” I say. “That might keep the Elephant from our door, Johnny.”

“Elephant?” The Colonel looks intrigued.

“An Americanism,” says Johnny. He looks at Agnes, who frowns, and at the Doc, who groans, and at me, who shrugs. “Make it five thousand,” he says.

“Ah,” sighs Lensky. “It so happens—”

“That you have another instrument for five thousand,” says Johnny.

Frau Von Heller says: “We represent the rightful owners.”

The Colonel waves a hammy hand at Agnes and the Doc. “These two are frauds.”

“No,” cries the Doc, looking up from the floor, “don’t give it to them! You would be betraying your country. It doesn’t belong to them and you cannot put a money value on it. It’s priceless!”

Now come more knocks. It is like a convention.

“House detective,” comes a voice. “Open up!”

“No deal,” says Johnny to Lensky and Von Heller, who have closed ranks. Lensky whispers something in Von Heller’s ear.

“Shut up, you two,” I say. “And behave.”

“Open up!” says the dick outside the door.

“Get your father up,” Johnny says to Agnes.

A key is inserted in the lock.

“He’s got a key, Johnny,” I say. “It’s the house dick, all right.”

Johnny shoves the Mauser in his belt at the small of his back and drops his coat tail over it. He pulls open the door, a ring of keys jangling on the other side of the lock.

“What the hell—” says the house dick. He is long and thin in a worn blue suit and looks at us from a long thin yellow face, sour as kraut. “Why didn’t you open up?” he asks, scowling.

“There’s been an accident,” says Johnny. “We were busy.”

“What’s going on in here?” says the dick. “Folks down the hall say they heard noise and screaming. You realize it’s two in the morning?” He gives me a hard look. “Hey, wait a minute. Ain’t you Pug Morris?”

“You got me,” I say.

“You ain’t registered, Morris. Who’s he?” he asks, spotting the Doc.

“He’s my father,” says Agnes, rising from the floor where she’s been trying to get the Doc up. “He fainted and knocked over the tray and the lamp and I cried out. He’s been suffering this condition for some time, but I’m still terribly upset and was caught off guard when it happened. I’m sorry we disturbed the other patrons.”

I notice now that Frau Von Heller has her big black hat off. The house dick has stepped in close to get a good look at the Doc, and Von Heller and Lensky are edging toward the door.

“You’re not leaving?” says Johnny, like a disappointed host.

“Duty calls,” says Lensky. “I hope you and Mr. Morris will reconsider our offer.”

“Ah!” cries Von Heller. She has dropped her hat. It is pretty obvious to everybody but the house dick, who has his back to her, that she has scooped up the big revolver with the hat.

“Keep your powder dry,” I say.

She touches her pale cheek with a red nail, says, “Yes, it’s still raining,” turns on Lensky’s arm, and the pair step out of the room; and, I hope, out of my life, but I doubt it.

“Everything here all right then?” asks the dick. “Want me to get a doctor for your father, miss?”

“No,” says Agnes. “It isn’t serious. And my father’s a doctor.”

Schmitt sits up and shakes his head. “I’m getting too old for this work,” he says.

“I’d better help Father to his room,” says Agnes.

“I’ll help you with him,” says Johnny.

“Wait a minute,” says the dick. “Don’t I know you, too? Ain’t you Johnny Belmont?”

“Clarence Feathergale,” says Johnny. “It’s on the register.”

“Feathergale! Well, Feathergale, I’ll help the young lady and her father. The Bon Chance don’t want no lawsuit on its hands.”

“I’ll be back when Father is comfortable,” says Agnes, “to explain.”

Johnny pushes the door after them, leaving it ajar.

“That dick has us pegged,” I say. “He’ll tip the Elephant’s boys for sure.”

“Maybe not,” says Johnny. “Maybe he doesn’t want any trouble here on his carpeted beat. In any case, we’ll have to gamble that he doesn’t. We can’t walk out on a situation like this, Pug. That young lady needs help, and maybe our country

needs help—and maybe there's enough money somewhere in this situation to pay off Sam the Elephant and to get us a new stake.”

“So what makes an old skull so valuable?” I say.

Johnny snaps his fingers. “Pug,” he says, “maybe it's not *what*, but *who*.”

This gives us something to think about while we straighten up the room. We set the wagon up, put what is unbroken back on top, and I fix us a couple of drinks. I call down for the boy to clean up the mess on the rug and bring us some fresh sandwiches. When he has gone we finally put some food aboard. I am several meals behind.

As I'm swallowing the last corner of the last sandwich, Agnes taps and steps in.

“How's your father?” says Johnny.

“All right,” she says. “He's resting. But he really shouldn't be doing this.”

“Doing what, exactly?” says Johnny.

“This kind of work—for the government.”

“It's on the level, then?” I say. “Listen, Miss Schmitt, I am really sorry that I have to deck him, see, but I want to make sure that he comes loose from that Mauser.”

“He understands,” she says. “He shouldn't have drawn the gun. It was an act of desperation. Oh, why on earth did you pick up that package! How did you *know* about it?”

“We didn't know,” I say. “It was just a wild bet.”

“Then, you really *are* gamblers?”

“You do not know the half of it, lady,” I say. “We are even now being chased by loan sharks who will bite off our legs if we do not paddle.”

“You're not criminals?”

“My name, Miss Schmitt,” says Johnny, “is Belmont. I come from a long line of generals and statesmen. A good third of my family is in government—the other two-thirds are in money.”

“Then you're patriots?”

“Black sheep, but true blue,” says Johnny, with plenty of pride, “and with wounds to prove it.”

“Johnny made a hero of himself fighting Hitler,” I say. “That's how come he ain't in Korea. War wounds. And he has the medals to prove it.”

“Well,” says Agnes, impressed. “Perhaps you'll fix me a drink. I'm a little unsteady.”

I fix the three of us some Scotch and soda and we settle down to hear what she has to say.

“Do you know anything about Austria?” she begins.

“Nope,” I say.

Johnny just sips his Scotch.

“It's divided,” she says, “into American, British, French, and Russian zones. Vienna is in the Russian zone, but the Inner City is administered by each power in turn

for a month, and patrolled day and night by groups of four soldiers drawn from the Four Powers.”

“Sounds complicated,” I say.

“It is,” she says. “There are hopes for reunification, even plans ongoing. But things *can* go wrong.”

“Well, what has this got to do with the head?” I say.

“My father and I are agents for the forces in and out of Austria who oppose Communism. That skull may become important—even more important—if reunification fails. You see, it is the skull of one of the greatest composers who ever lived—an Austrian named Franz Josef Haydn.”

“What did I tell you, Pug,” chirps Johnny, beaming. “It’s *who*.” He leaps up and digs the skull out, palms it, and says, like an actor: “Alas, poor Haydn! I love his music!”

He sits down with the skull in his lap.

“Then you may know,” Agnes goes on, “that Haydn died in Eighteen-nine. Austria was at war with France then. A battle was advancing into Vienna. Haydn was buried in the middle of that battle. The local prison chief, a man named Peter, was an amateur phrenologist—”

“What is that?” I say.

“One who studies the conformation of the skull to divine mental faculties,” says Johnny.

I guess he can see that I have missed him.

“They study the bumps on your head to see what you’re like,” he explains.

“They would think that I am pretty complicated,” I say, “what with all my bumps.”

“Extremely complicated,” says Johnny.

“And so,” Agnes picks up, “in the middle of all the confusion of the battle, the prison chief, Peter, had the body exhumed, and the head cut off. He stripped the head of all flesh, studied the skull, and finally pronounced that Haydn had the bumps of music fully developed.”

“And what if he hadn’t?” asks Johnny, smiling. “Would this Peter have cancelled his season ticket?”

“I don’t know,” says Agnes, laughing. “Anyway, he had planned to return the skull, but had taken too long in his study of it, and now felt that returning it was too dangerous. Instead, he had an ebony, glass-windowed box made, which he had decorated with a golden lyre. The skull was placed in this box, on a white silk cushion trimmed with black.

“But Peter lived in fear of being caught with it, and later passed it on to a man named Rosenbaum, who was secretary to Haydn’s patron, Prince Esterhazy. Prince Esterhazy was, of course, unaware of all this, until he decided to give Haydn a more dignified burial than the one he had during the war; and, in course, had the coffin brought to him at Eisenstadt, the capital of Burgenland, in East Austria, where Haydn

had lived under his patronage, and opened. The Prince was horrified to discover that there was only a wig where the head should have been. He investigated, and traced the decapitation to the prison chief, Peter. He was furious, and sent the police to Peter, who confessed his deed, and that Rosenbaum now had the skull. The Prince demanded that the head be returned. Rosenbaum returned a skull. The Prince had it examined and identified as the skull of a twenty year old man. Haydn died at Seventy-seven. Now the Prince had a search made of Rosenbaum's house, but it did not yield any result, as Rosenbaum's wife, the singer Therese Gassmann, had hidden the skull in her straw mattress and lay on her bed during the search.

"It was Frau Rosenbaum who was behind Rosenbaum's refusal to return the skull. The glass and ebony display case containing that gruesome relic you're holding had become the highlight of her famous musical evenings.

"Then the Prince tried bribery. His emissaries promised Rosenbaum a huge sum if he would deliver the skull. Whereupon the besieged Rosenbaum bought the skull of an old man from a Vienna mortuary. This skull was much closer in phrenological detail to Haydn's, and was accepted as the original and interred with Haydn's body.

"On his deathbed, Rosenbaum bequeathed the real skull back to prison chief Peter, who in turn bequeathed it to the Society of Friends of Music in Vienna, who owned a great number of Haydn relics. But Peter's wife gave it to her doctor instead, who presented it to the Austrian Institute of Pathology and Anatomy in Eighteen-Thirty-Two. They supposedly passed it on to the Society of Friends of Music, to whom it was originally willed by Peter.

"In Nineteen Thirty-Two, Prince Paul Esterhazy—direct descendant of Haydn's patron—promised to build a magnificent tomb for Haydn, if the head were restored to the body. But, while the authorities were still discussing the matter, the Second World War erupted. As a result of new political divisions after the war, Haydn's skeleton lay in the Soviet Zone while his skull rested in the International Zone. All of this is public knowledge; but of how the skull was stolen and taken to the Soviet Zone, then retrieved by agents of the Western democracies, nothing has been made public. The world in general still believes the real skull to be in the possession of the Society of Friends of Music, in Vienna. Both the democracies and the forces of Communism would like to claim the genius for their own, but neither can, until skull and skeleton are reunited. No price can be put upon the propaganda value of such a coup."

"And this is the real head?" I say.

"Yes," says Agnes, "and the Communists know it. If they get it, they will have Haydn."

"How did it get to the States?" says Johnny.

"That remains a classified secret," says Agnes. "But it's my father's job to get it back to Vienna."

"Why didn't they send it on a battleship?" I say.

"Classified," says Agnes. "But let me say this much. It's not generally realized that

the skull in Vienna is a fake, as I've said. So everything has to be done—unobtrusively.” She studies us for a moment, then says: “The head is priceless because you can't put a price on propaganda value, but there *is* financial value attached to it. The authorities are offering twenty-five thousand dollars to anyone who is of assistance in recovering the head. So, if you'll help us, you wouldn't be doing it for nothing.”

I look at Johnny. His green eyes are very bright.

“I can explain a little further,” says Agnes. “There are two other skulls being pursued right now—bogus skulls—one in Europe and one in Asia. They are meant to confuse the Communists.”

“Two phonies,” I say, “and we have the real one. Just like three card monte, eh, Johnny?”

“What do you want us to do?” says Johnny.

“There's a freighter leaving at four this morning from Pier Ten. We want to be on it and at sea before Von Heller and Lensky or anyone else knows. If you and Mr. Morris could get us safely to it . . .”

“Why not a plane?” I say.

“The Captain is our associate. The few other passengers will have been closely screened and will present us with no problems. It's all been arranged, you see. We were supposed to go directly to the ship from Penn Station. Your intervention—”

“Threw your plans off,” says Johnny. “Of course we'll help. Pug, would you wrap up Maestro Haydn's head, please. Here, let's have one more drink for the road, then we'll go down the hall and collect your father and see how we can get safely to Pier Ten.”

In a few minutes we are standing in front of Doc Schmitt's door. Agnes raps on it lightly, calling:

“Father! Father!”

When no answer comes, Agnes opens the door.

The Doc is stretched out on the carpet. He faces the ceiling, open-eyed.

Agnes runs over and shakes him. “Father! Father!” she cries. She looks back at Johnny, her face twisting with grief. Johnny goes to her, bends down, feels the Doc's pulse, listens for his heart, but it's all automatic, as the old man's eyes keep staring up, like he's looking through the ceiling at the stars. Johnny takes a shoulder and turns him over.

“He's been stabbed,” he says.

“Not shot?” I say.

“There's a slit in the back of his coat, not a hole.”

“Stabbed in the back,” I say. “The dirty cowards.”

“But why not shot?” says Johnny, like he's talking to himself.

“Noise,” I say.

Johnny gives me an impatient look.

Agnes falls across the Doc's body in a dead faint. It must be delayed reaction. Johnny carries her to an easy chair, gets a damp towel from the bathroom, and pats her cheeks and forehead. Pretty soon she opens her eyes, which look bigger and bluer and sadder than ever. Johnny perches on the arm of her chair and puts an arm around her shoulders, which are shaking. She buries her face in his chest and in ten seconds his suit is wetter than it got in the rain. Finally she pulls back and says: "I shouldn't have left him alone . . ."

"Shouldn't we call the cops?" I say.

"No," says Johnny. "They'll tie us up and we've got to make that ship." He thinks for a minute, then says: "We've got to leave things as they are—for the time being. It's what your father would have wanted, Agnes."

"Yes," says Agnes, wiping her eyes. "He would want me to carry on with the mission. I must pull myself together—for him. What time is it?"

"Nearly three," I tell her.

She says: "And the ship weighs anchor at four o'clock this morning."

"Won't it wait for you?" I say.

"No," she says, shaking her head. "It's to leave without us. The Captain is to assume that we've failed."

"And if you fail," I say, "it will be our fault. Maybe this will cure you of making these wild bets, Johnny," I add, feeling pretty bad about the whole thing. "Now maybe we have even hurt Uncle Sam."

Johnny says: "This must have happened a few minutes ago, when Agnes was in our room. That means that Lensky and Von Heller aren't very far away. Pug," he says, "take Agnes back to our room. Give her a drink. I'll be right along."

"What are you going to do?" I say.

"Place a bet," says he.

"A bet!" I am disgusted—almost.

"Go along now," he says, and I can see that he means business. "But leave the head here."

I have almost forgotten that all this time I am holding the box. I shrug, put the box on the bed, help Agnes to her feet, and take her out. She is pretty shaky, poor kid.

In the hall, she says: "I can trust Johnny, can't I?"

"You can trust us both," I tell her. But I cannot figure out what Johnny is up to.

In our room, I fix two drinks and hand one to Agnes.

"I guess he's right," she says. "The main thing is to get the head to the ship." She threw down her drink like she needed it. "We can call the authorities about—about my father once that's done."

"Sure," I say, pouring her another drink. She is beginning to get back some color. I jaw with her for nearly twenty minutes, and I am beginning to worry about Johnny, when in he comes, carrying the box.

"Now, listen, Pug," he says, "we've got to be careful—"

I interrupt him with: "What have you been up to?"

"Calling us a cab," he says. "I got the cab stand to tap Sleeping Bill. He'll be waiting out front."

"All that time!" I say. "And why didn't you call from here?"

"I didn't want that house dick—or anyone else—to know that anyone from this room was going any place. Now stop asking questions," he says, "and keep sharp." He looks at his watch. "We better get a move on, if we plan to make that ship."

What makes me edgy as we step out of the elevator is that the lobby is deserted. The yokel night clerk and his kid brother are nowhere in sight. But, as we are halfway to the front door, the house dick appears from a room behind the desk.

"Checking out?" he says. "Trying to skip on your bill?"

"We'll be coming back," says Johnny.

"Then," says the dick, "let's have your keys."

Johnny checks his watch. "We haven't much time," he says. "We better pay him."

We go back to the desk. I, for one, feeling kind of sheepish.

"What's the tab?" says Johnny, pulling Doc Schmitt's hundred dollar bill from his pocket.

"Ten G-s," says the dick. "You boys owe Sam the Elephant ten G's."

"Can't stop now," says Johnny, turning us about.

"Oh, yes you can," says the dick, pulling a gat. "Now, if you two and your lady friend will just step back into the office for a minute . . ."

Behind the desk, the dick does a quick frisk on me and Johnny. I guess he thinks he is too much of a gent to touch Agnes. He puts his own pistola away and holds Doc Schmitt's Mauser, taken from Johnny, pointed at us.

He orders us into the office with a jerk of his gun hand.

Who should be waiting for us there but Tweedledum and Tweedledee, our bonebreaking friends from Miami, the bad eggs in plaid suits.

The night clerk and his kid brother are sitting on a small couch, looking meek and mild.

The dick is behind us, blocking the door.

Tweedledum says: "We was just on our way up to see youse. Tanks for coming down."

Tweedledee says: "Mr. Elefanti wants his ten G's, Belmont. I hope for your sake that you have scored well during your brief stay here at the Bon Chance."

Johnny says: "I have, indeed, boys. As a matter of fact, we were off just now to collect a large sum. How about giving me an hour?"

"You must be nuts," says Tweedledum.

"Let's break his arms," says Tweedledee.

"Let's break his knees," says Tweedledum. "Then he can still deal from up his sleeves and make Mr. Elefanti's money back, but he can't run, see?"

"Pug," says Johnny, "we haven't got time for this right now" and I know what he

means.

I grab Agnes by the arm and slam back with the box, knocking the Mauser from the dick's hand, as Johnny is making two stabs with his umbrella to the soft round bellies in plaid.

We jam through the door, I lose my grip on Agnes, and she falls. I pull her up, and we beat it out of the hotel to Sleeping Bill's phony Yellow Cab. But Sleeping Bill is not ready for our getaway. He is—sleeping.

Johnny pulls him out of the driver's seat, stuffs the C-note into his pocket, and we leave him standing there. I think he is still asleep as Johnny steers us out through the flood like we are in a motor launch. We head for the river, downtown.

At corners we are making huge wakes of water, which blur the night lights outside so they seem to run crazily down the windshield and windows. But through the back windows I can see headlights that are staying with us.

It is just like this when a shot smacks through the back window between Agnes and me and goes out the front by Johnny's ear, and Sleeping Bill's old car kind of faces one of these steel pylons, that are holding up the West Side Highway. Johnny is a smooth driver and pumps coolly on the brake, coaxing it, but Sleeping Bill's car has made up its mind. At the last second Johnny finds some traction and pulls the wheel sharp. The car leaps, avoiding a head-on, and slams into the pylon sidewise, on my side, back by the gas tank. Then we hear a puff.

"We're on fire!" cries Johnny. "Get out! Out!"

Now the three of us are running in deep water over slippery cobblestones.

I hear Sleeping Bill's phony old cab blow apart. Well, Johnny gave him a C-note, and the car was worth maybe only fifty bucks.

Up ahead of us is coming a police car, siren squawking. The cops in the car don't see us in the rain and the dark. They pass right by us.

I look over my shoulder and see that the Elephant's boys have negotiated a U-turn and are now heading off from whence they came.

Agnes says: "There's the ship! Follow me!"

Aboard, Agnes takes charge. "This way," she says, leading us through passageways. "Cabin A," she says. When we are at Cabin A, she opens the door and walks in ahead of us. We follow her into a good-sized stateroom, I guess you call it.

She crosses the room and turns around to us. Now she is not like Agnes at all. She is like some altogether different person. It is all in the look on her face. I get a cold chill up my back.

"Good morning, gentlemen," comes a voice from behind us.

I turn around and there are Von Heller and Lensky. He is holding his pistola with the silencer.

I am certainly confused. I look at Agnes. She is holding her daddy's Mauser.

"I'll take the package," says Agnes.

"What is going on here?" I say. I must admit I am by now feeling pretty stupid. I

look at Johnny, and I am amazed to see that he is smiling. He sees that I am mentally in a bind and is good enough to answer my questions before I ask.

“We are rounding up secret agents, Pug,” he says. “Uncle Wild Bill would be proud of us.”

“What does he mean?” says Lensky to Agnes.

“I don’t have the slightest idea,” says Agnes.

“How did she come by the Mauser, Johnny?” I say.

“That falling act she did at the hotel. These two women—not to call them ladies—are aces at scooping up guns.”

“But Agnes,” I say, sadly depressed, “your father—”

“Doctor Schmitt wasn’t her father,” says Johnny.

The hatch now opens behind Von Heller and Lensky.

Two men with pistols in their mitts step in.

“F.B.I.,” says one.

“C.I.A.” says the other.

“You might as well hand over your weapons,” says Johnny. “There’s a Coast Guard cutter blocking your way out to sea.”

The feds go around the room collecting from Von Heller, who has a nice little pearl-handled automatic of her own, and Lensky, and Agnes. When the F.B.I. agent is taking the Mauser from Agnes, Johnny says:

“Agnes, I’ve been meaning to tell you all night that you have beautiful legs. Would you mind lifting up your skirt so that I can get one good look at them before you go?”

Agnes gives Johnny a grim little smile, shrugs, and lifts her skirt. On her right thigh is a scabbard with a long knife in it.

“That’s what killed Schmitt,” says Johnny. “Oh,” he adds, “thank you, Agnes. I shall never forget them.”

* * *

It is a week later and we are sitting in a couple of beach chairs by the pool of Sam the Elephant’s Miami Beach hotel. It is a glorious day and there are beautiful ladies stepping all around us and the noise of the diving board and splashing and palm fronds waving over our heads.

Sam the Elephant is in his gold bathing trunks and has a gold towel over one hairy shoulder and is wearing dark shades over his eyes and smoking a huge Havana cigar and sipping occasionally on a straw which draws up something green inside it. Johnny has been telling him the story, as follows, which clears things up for me too:

It seems that Agnes planned to slip away from Schmitt, with the head, at Penn Station, and catch the limo in which are waiting Von Heller and Lensky. The three were then going to drive to the freighter. The freighter was a Communist ship. Agnes, however, has been suspected of being a double agent. In Washington, she has been ordered to pose as Schmitt’s daughter, but Schmitt has been warned not to trust her. Agnes, of course, does not know that Schmitt suspects her. Then Schmitt’s inspiration

about the Lost and Found, plus Johnny's bet with me, messes up her plans.

Later, she dumps Schmitt the hard way, with a knife, when the house dick leaves her alone with him, calls some contact with the freighter, and explains what has happened. She leaves word for Von Heller and Lensky to meet her at the freighter, and that she has a couple of suckers who will help her make the pier without interference.

Then she comes back to our room to tell us the story of Haydn's head, to make enough time elapse before we discover the body so that we will think Von Heller and Lensky have killed Schmitt. Also because the story will help convince us that she is in danger and needs help.

We go and find Schmitt, with me, at least, thinking what she wants us to think, that Von Heller and Lensky have paid Schmitt a visit. But Johnny doesn't think so. What troubles him is that Schmitt is stabbed in the back. Why should Lensky need to use a knife when he keeps waving around a revolver with a silencer on it? And why in the back?

That's when he thinks of Agnes. He sends me off with her to our room, but he keeps the head with him. He's afraid she will use the shiv on me, take the head, and scam.

(When I asked him how come he knows for sure that she has a knife, he says: "It was a logical deduction, Pug, from the circumstances—besides, I felt it on her thigh when I put her in the chair." He guffaws. "What about me?" I say. "She wouldn't tackle you, Johnny, because you had the Mauser. But suppose she used that pig-sticker on me?" Johnny says: "Why would she? She wanted to keep us with her. Besides, I had the head." Then he laughs and says: "I just had to gamble that she wouldn't knife you, Pug old boy." I say: "Thanks a lot!")

Then Johnny puts in a call to uncle Wild Bill Belmont, in Washington (He says: "I took great pleasure in waking him up at three in the morning"), gets the dope on the situation, and sets the trap at the pier.

Sam the Elephant is delighted with the whole story. He is also delighted that he will get his ten G's when we get the reward, which is to be within a month, from what we are told. But it is our nerve, says Sam the Elephant, which delights him most, the way we have come down to Miami and walked right in on him with our tale. Also, he is a great patriot, he tells us, and appreciates what we have done for our country. He is going to stake us until our money comes, and we will have the best.

He is laughing as he heaves himself up and waddles off, laughing and shaking his head.

A waiter comes out and passes him, bringing a telephone. It is Wild Bill in Washington has something to say.

Johnny is all smiles at first, but then he frowns.

"Wait a minute," he says, "are you sure?"

But I have already heard a click.

Johnny hangs up, looks at me, and says:

“Pug, we’ve got a problem.”

“What’s that?” I say.

“The head was a fake. The real skull has been with the Society of Friends of Music in Vienna since Eighteen-Ninety-Five. The authenticity of the skull in their possession has been proven beyond doubt.”

“A fake,” I say. “Does that mean we do not get any reward?”

“I’m afraid not,” he says. “It seems that Schmitt knew he was carrying a fake. He was under orders to do everything he could to convince Agnes that it was the real thing, and she believed it. And so did we.”

“But, Johnny,” I say, “now we owe Sam the Elephant the ten G’s again—”

“Plus,” says Johnny, “five hundred expense money.”

“Not to mention,” I add to the list of our woes, “our hotel bill.”

“We better get packing, Pug,” says Johnny.

“So it looks like we are on the run again,” I say with a sigh.

I am not overly interested in history, as I have a tendency to think that it is all in the past; but, for what I guess are obvious reasons, I stay interested in the subject of Haydn and his head. I follow it in the newspapers.

They finally get his head and the rest of him together in Nineteen-Fifty-four in Burgenland. In Nineteen Fifty-five there is such a thing as an Austrian State Treaty, which is signed by the Four Powers. So it seems that nobody takes over Haydn’s country, which joins the U.N. in the same year. All this is very interesting to me, because I feel like, in a little way, I am a part of it. Also, when I think of it now, it brings back the days when Johnny and me were always on the run. Being on the run was a lot of fun if you ran with Johnny Belmont.

Moving Day

Penn Stewart

I look through the window and see the piano movers waiting, leaning against the hydraulic lift on the back of the truck with cigarettes dangling from their mouths, and then I turn away. My grandmother's hands dance a ragtime rhythm and she nods punctuation at the end of each musical phrase. Her fingers, bent with age and arthritis, jump octaves with ease. She knuckles some high notes and rides a glissando down the keyboard. The music stops and reverberates off the bare walls and through the empty house. She sits for a moment, looking at the keys. Her shoulders rise a bit as she inhales, and it seems like she's about to say something but doesn't. She reaches up and drops the fall and runs her hand across the polished wood like she's soothing a thoroughbred.

"I'm ready, Jack," she says.

It's my grandfather's name she uses to address me, but I don't correct her. Now's not the time to explain. I place my hand under her elbow and help her up from the bench and we make our way to the door. Her steps are short but steady. I open the door and help her through. We stand on the porch a moment as she looks out across the yard. The piano movers straighten up and ditch their cigarettes.

I give them a nod.

As we descend the steps she pats my hand and says, "You're a good grandson, Peter."

I open the passenger door and she sits and places her purse square in her lap. I pull the seatbelt down so she doesn't have to reach around. She takes the buckle and looks at me. "At this point, I don't think it really matters." Her finger releases it and a hidden spring reels in the slack. I start to say something, but I know everything I could possibly think to say she's already heard at some point in her eighty years. So I close the door and walk around to the other side of the car.

"Your grandfather would've never owned a Japanese car. He built planes during the war to shoot those peckers down."

I nod. The Grumman Wildcat FM2 was built by General Motors, and my grandfather oversaw their production as a line manager at the Turnstedt Division in New Jersey. Mitsubishi built the A6M Zero, the planes with blood red circles on their wings and fuselage that strafed seamen at Pearl Harbor and other islands in the South Pacific during WWII. I drive a Honda, built by a company that wasn't founded until 1948.

I put the car in reverse and as we pull away I see the piano movers in my rearview mirror buckle their back support belts and make their way toward the house. My grandmother looks out the passenger window of the car and watches the homes of her neighbors drift by for the last time. Her knuckles turn white as the grip on her purse tightens.

"Mom wanted to know if she could bring you anything."

She doesn't say anything, and then she shakes her head. "Isn't that sweet of her."

At the end of the street I turn onto White Horse Avenue and pass Blackstone's Dinner, the restaurant my grandfather took me for breakfast when I came to visit as a child. We drive a bit farther and I see a sign for Dunham's, the department store my grandmother worked at for three decades. I recognize the name from the gift boxes filled with dress shirts and slacks sent every Christmas.

"She knows this isn't easy for you," I say.

My grandmother nods. And then she looks at me with eyes like a sharpshooter.

"Seems to me she's making it easy on herself sending you along to fetch me."

Several things run through my mind and as each tries to escape through my mouth I clench my teeth and keep them captive. We take the entrance to the Turnpike and I accelerate into the flow of traffic. Cars cluster at 80 mph. The man driving the Cadillac next to me is holding a folded newspaper on the steering wheel with his thumb and a cell phone in the other hand. A light rain begins to fall and I turn on the windshield wipers.

"Forest Manor sounds more like a cemetery than a nursing home."

"Mom says it's an assisted living facility. The best in the state."

"It's a place people only leave when they're dead. Call it what you will."

I change lanes and keep the distracted Cadillac driver in front of me, careful to watch for brake lights in front of him. "Mom says they have a piano."

She rubs her knuckles and looks out the window. "Your grandfather bought me my piano in 1946 with a bonus check from GM. I haven't touched the ivories on another one since then."

My instructions were simple. My mother said, "Take your grandmother by her house after the movers have boxed and removed all her belongings. Make sure the piano movers are scheduled for 1:00, arrive ten minutes late, tip them twenty dollars each and ask them to wait for another fifteen minutes while she plays a few tunes. Bring her to Forest Manor afterward to meet us so we can show her the apartment. Do you think you can handle that?"

We come up on the Gordon Road exit and my grandmother says, "Get off here."

"That's not—"

"You're going to miss it."

I change lanes and a car honks. I exit and see a sign for Princeton Memorial Park, the cemetery where my grandfather is buried.

"Turn left."

I nod and follow her directions.

I try to help her as she walks through the grass to her husband's grave, but she shakes off my hand. I slow and let her walk ahead alone. When she reaches the gravesite she places her hand on the tombstone and looks skyward. Her mouth moves

but I'm too far away to hear what she says. I check my watch and can imagine my mother's impatient foot tapping as she waits for us at Forest Manor. But I don't rush.

My grandfather passed away over twenty years ago. He suffered a stroke in a library and landed on a pile of books about space travel and continental drift. Unseen by anyone for far too long, the ischemic cascade robbed him of his essence. After a week in the hospital he succumbed quietly amidst the beeping and whir of an automated heart and blood pressure monitor. My grandmother was there when he passed. A week later, she was in the same hospital with a broken hip and a concussion after falling down the stairs to the basement. She was found by a neighbor who she often suspected of spying and eavesdropping. In the hospital she pointed to her rescue as proof that her accusations were well-founded and that she was indeed not paranoid.

My grandmother drops to her knees and I move toward her, but I realize she's praying and stay back. The wind gusts and rustles the leaves on the trees and floats strands of gray hair from her head. After a few minutes I move in and rest my hand on her shoulder. She crosses herself and I help her up. We walk back to the car in silence, arm in arm.

Back on the Turnpike, we are only a few exits away from Forest Manor. She looks at me and I know something is on her mind. "What is it?"

"Take me to the shore."

"Mom and Dad are waiting for us."

"Your grandfather would be so proud of you. He was a company man, too."

I turn and she's looking straight ahead with her hands on her purse. She's not focused on anything, just looking out onto the road as if it were a blank slate waiting to be filled. She pulls a tissue from the cuff of her jacket sleeve and dabs her eyes and then replaces it. She does not sniffle or plead.

We pass the Jamesburg exit and she reaches over and pats my shoulder.

"Keansburg," she says.

Moments later, as if she had sight of my car and watched me pass the exit for Forest Manor, my mother rings my phone. I look at the picture that accompanies her number. She's in a business suit, sitting on the corner of her office desk with a rolled document in her hand. The photo came from her business' website. I hit ignore and put the phone back in my pocket and accelerate into the passing lane. The phone rings six more times in the next thirty minutes. I don't answer any of the calls.

We pull into the public beach at Keansburg and my grandmother gets out of the car before I have a chance to put it in park.

"Wait here," she says as she closes the door.

I sit for a moment and watch her disappear behind a dune. My phone rings again and I look to see who it is, though I already know. I think about hitting the ignore button, but then let the phone ring until it goes to voicemail. There'll be hell to pay, but I know these are the last moments of freedom my grandmother will ever experience.

From here on there will be orderlies and nurses and doctors and activity directors and fellow residents encroaching on her world. These moments on the shore have to last her until the end.

My phone rings again. "Christ." I struggle with the seatbelt and get out of the car. The sky is gray and the wind and the tide are coming in. The sea air pelts my face with bits of sand and salt as I make my way over the barrier dunes. I see my grandmother's sensible shoes abandoned in the sand and foot prints left by her bare feet. Ahead, she is walking into the surf. Flotsam swirls and her dark dress ripples in the wind until a wave crashes and pastes the fabric to her body and legs. She staggers under the weight of the water but remains upright. I slog through the sand to reach her. The water cedes the beach and she drops her purse into the retreating water. It tumbles across the sand and floats into the wash, vanishing under the break of the next wave.

I decide to run and push off. The ground melts away under my feet and I take another step before I've gotten anywhere with the first one. My arms pump the air and my legs churn the sand in a frenzy, all with no affect. Expectations—my mother's, my grandmother's, and my own—trip me and I fall face first into the sand, grit, and salt.

She turns back to me and raises a hand. I see her smile in a way she does only when she has let go of herself. Those times when she is lost in the world of a book, when she tells stories about before she was married, or when she becomes the music of a song and the rhythm moves her body and her hands dance across the keys of a piano. And then another wave crashes.

HSI-WEI AND THE LIUQIN PLAYER

Robert Wexelblatt

Note: After receiving an education as a reward for his service to the Emperor, the Sui period peasant/poet Chen Hsi-wei took to the road, selling straw sandals and making verses. His poems were copied and circulated. To his surprise, Hsi-wei sometimes found that he had become famous. The following is an account of the origin of his poem popularly known as "The Liuqin Player".

The marketplace was nearly as still as a painting of itself. The villagers drooped, just like the leaves on the medlar tree under which Hsi-wei had set up his sign. Anyone who stirred moved as if resenting the necessity. Two sweating workers shuffled lethargically up to the dumpling seller. A boy almost tottered from a dry goods shop to the well to get a drink. A woman holding a little girl by the hand approached Hsi-wei with small steps. What would new sandals for her daughter cost? Though Hsi-wei's price was low, when he saw the look on the woman's face, he made it still lower.

The summer had turned oppressively hot and dry. Up north there was drought, rumors of famine. This region, watered by the Yangtze, was better off, but still sweltering and dusty. Hsi-wei was making his way south to Chiangling. An invitation from an old friend had reached him. Zhu-li had been appointed to a high post in the city and promised Hsi-wei a gracious welcome if he would visit. When they were students together in the capital, Zhu-li had defended Hsi-wei against those who insulted the upstart peasant. In return, Hsi-wei helped Zhu-li prepare for his examination. Hsi-wei was making his way south from Daxing. He had stayed in the capital only long enough to pay his respects to the widow of his old teacher, Master Shen. It was she who handed him Zhu-li's letter.

At mid-afternoon a wagon with a faded green awning pulled into the marketplace. Hsi-wei could see the horses were suffering from the heat. The man at the reins jumped down quickly, unhitched the poor animals, and led them to a stone trough on the east side of the square.

Three people emerged from the big wagon: a young girl, then, more slowly, a fat man and a thin one. The men stretched and looked around them drowsily, while the girl wrestled a carpet from the wagon, rolled it out over the hot ground and called sharply to the two others. The men rubbed their eyes and ignored her. The girl struck Hsi-wei as unusually self-contained. Her narrow face was closed, giving her the squinting, severe look of an over-studious child.

The fat man waddled to the well, drew water, and gulped it down straight from the bucket. The thin one was right behind him and did the same. The girl shook her head at them, then jumped back on the wagon. Hsi-wei wondered why she hadn't drunk as well. She emerged carrying two musical instruments by their necks, like dead fowl. In her right hand she held a *pipa* almost as long as herself, in the left a small *liuqin*—goose and duckling. Across the marketplace, the fat man flopped down in the shade of the well, feet splayed out. The thin man wiped his mouth, grunted at his companion, then made his way back to the wagon and climbed inside. A moment later he emerged carrying the kind of flute known as a *chi*, also an *erhu* and its bow. These he laid on the carpet.

The fellow who had seen to the horses left them at the trough, strode over to the well to get a drink for himself, then went into a shop. Hsi-wei guessed it was to inquire about stabling the horses. Meanwhile, children gathered to look at the instruments laid on the rug. The thin man pointed and named each instrument for them but kept the curious from touching them. "You'll hear them soon," he said, then bellowed the same again, turning his head, broadcasting an invitation to the whole town.

Hsi-wei liked the look of the fellow who had driven the cart and seen to the horses. He was energetic, well built, around thirty-five, with a kind face. None of the musicians could be called finely dressed but he wore a leather jerkin over his shirt, a garment common in the northern village where Hsi-wei was born. When the man came back into the marketplace Hsi-wei accosted him.

"Pardon me, sir. You'll be performing?"

The man stopped and sized up Hsi-wei, with provisional approval. He inclined his head in a manner that conveyed both humility and dignity. "My name is Ping," he said. "And yes, we'll be playing around sunset. That's the best time. It will be cooler and people will be at leisure."

"So you're itinerant musicians?"

Ping laughed. "Well, at present, I suppose that's just what we are."

"At present?"

Ping glanced across the marketplace. "Excuse me. I can't let the horses drink too much."

"Of course."

Ping started toward the horses then turned back.

"You'll come listen to us, I hope. There's no charge. We ask people to give what they want. It's more for practice than money."

Hsi-wei pointed to his sign. "My own prices are low—but fixed."

"Fair enough. Sandals last longer than air."

"Not always. Straw wears away more quickly than a song whose melody's good and words are true. Even the best sandal won't last two years."

This thoughtful reply pleased Ping so much that he invited Hsi-wei to join his

troupe for their evening meal. "After we play. Then perhaps we'll talk some more. I have a notion there's more to you than sandal-making."

Hsi-wei took three orders, bought some straw from a peasant, and negotiated with the tavern owner for a corner in which to sleep. The rest of the afternoon he spent making sandals but kept an eye on the musicians. Toward sunset they took stools from the cart and set them up by the well. Word of the performance had spread. About twenty people gathered and Hsi-wei joined them.

Ping, obviously the troupe's leader, announced each piece, folk dances and popular tunes, just the sort of music to please a rural audience. But there was nothing rustic about the playing. Ping was a master on the *pipa* and the two other men, thin and fat, played their instruments more than competently. But it was the girl Hsi-wei watched most closely. Her playing was unlike the others'. It wasn't that she played better or worse but that she played in a different spirit. It seemed to Hsi-wei that the men were performing for their listeners while she played for herself or for some higher, imagined audience. The men smiled, nodded to the people, and encouraged them to clap; the girl looked inward with an earnestness that was almost comic. She was not a pretty child; her face was too thin, her ears stuck out, and her hair was crudely cropped; yet Hsi-wei found it a pleasure to watch her. He felt she was sympathetic; he thought he understood her. He liked the intensity of her playing. He liked her bright eyes.

The crowd was pleased; there was much applause at the end. The musicians bowed and clapped for the audience. Ping collected some coins.

After the recital came the meal. During the afternoon Ping had bought a load of vegetables and some fresh pork. Now the girl brought a bag of rice out of the wagon while the fat man saw to the brazier. They even had a little table which the thin man and the girl set up, placing the four stools around it. The fat man was the cook. While the rice simmered, he chopped the vegetables and sliced the pork. Ping fetched a fifth stool from the wagon, then walked over to where Hsi-wei was working, made a formal bow, and courteously asked him if he would be pleased to join them.

Hsi-wei put away his work and gathered up his things. Ping introduced him as a traveling sandal-maker with whom he'd struck up a conversation earlier. That the others were not surprised and that there was a fifth stool suggested to Hsi-wei that Ping often invited guests and the others had to put up with it.

Ping himself was eager to talk. He sat himself beside Hsi-wei and began by explaining that they weren't really itinerant musicians. "We are—or were—retainers of the Duke of Shun. Our Master is a good man but young. I'm afraid he can be a little headstrong. Some months ago he sent a letter to the Emperor's First Minister complaining that too many of his people were being conscripted to work on the Grand Canal and too few were coming back. On top of that, he added some impolitic words about the wisdom of invading Goguryeo and doing it over and

over again. The Emperor banned the Duke from the Court. We're part of the Duke's apology. Everybody knows Emperor Wen's fondness for music. It's said he keeps seven orchestras!"

"I've heard there are now nine," said Hsi-wei.

"You've been to Daxing?"

Hsi-wei nodded. "I'm coming from there."

Ping had dozens of questions about the capital and Hsi-wei answered all those he could. He described the famous rotating pavilion, the broad avenues, the new Buddhist temple, the palace and its grounds, the capital's full store houses. All the while he kept glancing across the table at the girl, who ate slowly. She had no questions. She did not appear to be listening and said nothing at all.

After they'd eaten everything down to the last grain of rice, Ping invited Hsi-wei to join him for a stroll around the marketplace. "Old people say a walk's good for the digestion."

As they headed toward the well, Ping looked over at Hsi-wei with a sly smile. "I've heard that a certain Chen Hsi-wei, the peasant/poet as people call him, walks the roads as a vagabond. I've also heard that he makes straw sandals."

"Is that so? And do people say which are better, his poems or his sandals?"

Ping laughed. "I've heard his poems last longer."

"Ah," said Hsi-wei.

"Am I plagiarizing?"

Hsi-wei came to a halt at the well and bowed to Ping. "The Duke is sending a treasure to Daxing. You're a gifted artist. Your whole troupe is excellent."

"So then I'm not mistaken, am I? You're the poet Chen Hsi-wei?"

"The way I see it I'm only a poet when I'm writing a poem. A flute-player who never blows the flute is no flute-player."

"I have to disagree, Master. He may still be a flute-player because he *has* played the flute and may do so again. And you may write a new poem, maybe even one about us."

"If I do, *then* I'll be a poet."

They laughed at their own silliness, laughed like colleagues in different fields who like and respect each other and never have to compete.

"Look," said Ping, "I can see the girl intrigues you. Now, that one's a musician *all* the time."

"Is she your daughter?"

"My daughter? No, not that. Are you curious about her story?"

"I am."

"Very well, then. Yin's parents were well off, almost gentry. Her father and I grew up together. While I was studying music, Lu was learning the cloth trade and establishing a good business. He and his wife had two children. Yin came first and two years later her brother Gao-tzu who, of course, became the hope of the

family. Lu's ambition was not for his son to go into trade but to become an official. So he hired a tutor for the boy. I often saw this young man when I visited, a lively fellow who loved the arts and cracking jokes. This tutor did not object to Yin sitting in on his lessons with her brother whenever she was free from chores. Yin learned to read and write so quickly that it was obvious she was far more gifted than her brother. She particularly loved the old poems her brother was assigned to copy; in fact, she confessed to me that she did far more copying than her brother. Everything that was a burden or a stumbling-block to him was a joy to her. The tutor and Yin got on well. It was a pleasure to watch them tease each other. The tutor was also an amateur. He had a *pipa* that Yin was always begging him to play."

"All this couldn't have pleased the parents."

"Well, no. But they didn't discourage her. They thought it wiser to urge the boy to be more like his sister, to outdo her."

"I see."

Ping paused and then sighed. "We're all dancing over an abyss that can swallow us up at any time. Everybody knows this but we seldom think about it because, if we did, how could we live?"

"That's true. A catastrophe, then?"

"My friend Lu often traveled on business. On one of these journeys he was set on by bandits. He had two guards with him but they fled. Lu was robbed and killed. His wife's health had always been delicate. The news destroyed it. She died a month later. The only relatives were the wife's brother and his wife who had always been jealous of Lu. They grudgingly agreed to take in Gao-tzu but not Yin."

"So that's how it was."

Ping pitched his voice high. "*What use is she? She's so small. Besides, she'll marry and leave us, but the boy is strong. He can work now and when he marries his wife will serve us.*" That's what the aunt said. I know because she said it to me at the funeral. So I took the girl myself. I know, it was madness but what else could I do?"

"Then Yin's your ward?"

"Ward? Yes, I suppose that's the word. My ward, but also my pupil, my apprentice. The *pipa* was too large for her, so I got her a *liuqin*. You've heard the result."

Hsi-wei noted that the good man was more proud of the girl than of his own charity. But all he said was, "Yes, she's very good." He could tell that Ping had more to say.

"Yin was a favorite of the Duke. '*Such a big sound from such a little instrument, from such tiny fingers.*' That's what he said when we first played for him. I've always believed it was because of Yin that he took us on."

They were still standing by the well. The arid sky was as crammed with stars

as the capital's storehouses were with rice. A half-moon silvered the tiles.

"She's different, isn't she?"

Ping shrugged. "We make music the way tailors make clothes. Excellent tailors, mind you, and silk gowns, but yes, with Yin it's something else, something more."

"Higher?"

"A child whose life falls apart in a month, rejected, taken in but not by a family. For Yin, it's as though music is the path to enlightenment and she's condemned to be always marching down it. Can you imagine? The old tunes aren't enough for her. She makes new ones to sing her favorite poems. I'm always on the lookout for poems for Yin. She keeps a little library of them."

"So she likes poems as much as music?"

Again Ping smiled slyly. "Let's get back."

Two lanterns sat on the table, attracting moths. The fat man and the thin one were playing a game of *Xiangi*. Yin busied herself inside the wagon. "Wait," said Ping and went in after her. Hsi-wei couldn't help overhearing.

"You were rude to our guest at dinner. Now, come out and offer the man a proper greeting."

"Too late for greeting sandal-makers. Anyway, you can see I'm busy cleaning up."

"If you don't come out you'll be sorry. And if you do—"

"If I do?"

"Just come, Yin. Now."

The girl jumped down and stepped up to Hsi-wei. She looked up at him and in a flat voice said, "I hope you enjoyed your meal, Mr. Sandal-maker. Good night." Then she picked up some chopsticks that were still on the table and began to turn back to the wagon. But Ping, standing behind her, put his hands on her shoulders and held her still. Hsi-wei could see the man was almost bursting with anticipation, with mirth.

"Yin, our guest makes more than sandals. In fact, I believe you may have heard of him."

The girl swiveled her head, confused.

"His name, my dear, the name for which you neglected to ask, is Chen Hsi-wei."

Yin dropped the chopsticks. Her bright, black eyes widened. "Is it really?"

Then, knocking over a stool, she fell to her knees and bowed to the ground. Hsi-wei was horrified. He hurriedly helped her to her feet.

Some say he and the young liuqin player stayed up all that summer night talking about the making of poems and music, Yin overflowing with passion, Hsi-wei more measured but equally absorbed. It is to be regretted that there is no record of this conversation, if indeed it took place.

What we do have, however, is Hsi-wei's poem.

*Tallow leaves hang low; grass is brittle underfoot.
Birds spiral lazily then flutter down in the shade.
Prickly lettuce and withered jasmine
lie flat, like bing cakes baking on the dirt.
Paving tiles burn right through straw sandals.*

*Her eyes are so alert, it's as if she just found them.
The heat barely touches her, this devotee of song.
She's not the sort to compromise, not yet.
She asks me about music, what I've heard and whom.
Did I hear the great Zhang Chu in the capital?*

*Her reverence for her art exalts them both. She's
sure a celestial melody floats just above her head;
if only she could tug it down and play it then
the world would certainly change for the good.
The sun wouldn't scorch, perhaps taxes would drop.*

*She is small, delicate, nearly a child, though
if you look closely, you'll see that's half true,
that she's a soft soul in a hard cocoon.
Her faith is as unspoiled as her smooth skin.
Who would dare to scoff? Not me.*

*When she's told my name, she leaps to her feet,
then kneels and calls me Master, says she
can scarcely believe it, tells me how much she
loves my old poem about Lake Weishan.
Her face is fervent as a praying monk's.*

*Taking up her liuqin, she begins to sing
and it's like running water by a dusty road.
I feel my old poem surfacing from
Lake Weishan transformed, summoned
by the sudden beauty of this butterfly.*

The Dead

Keijo Kangur

The battleground was strewn with the bodies of dead ashigaru and samurai, some of whom were missing limbs and some even their heads. The sky above the blood-soaked meadow was drab and gray and drizzled rain. The unmistakable odor of death pervaded the air. In the foggy distance, camphor trees loomed ominously, their branches stretched out and twisted like the legs of spiders.

Amid this dreary scenery, two scrawny looking figures were scrounging about, looking for valuables among the recently deceased. They took neither sword nor armour, however, for the former were branded and the latter too heavy to carry; instead, they searched for anything small and glittering.

Eventually, after having rummaged through the dead for a while and discovering little else than but a few meagre baubles each, the two thieves came upon a body which was covered in armour considerably more extravagant than the rest—on closer examination, it turned out to be the body of a shogun.

Like vultures, the thieves immediately swooped upon it. Fumbling rapaciously, they swiftly removed the grotesque black lacquered faceplate and throat guard from the shogun's head. Around his neck they discovered an exquisite golden pendant with a large blood-red gemstone in the shape of a tear. For a brief period, the two of them just stared at it in awe like drooling dogs.

They then began hungrily tugging at it, but the jewelry was firmly fastened around the shogun's neck and could not be lifted over his head due to the large horned kabuto helmet on it. When one of the thieves reached out his hand in order to remove the helmet, the shogun suddenly opened his eyes. The thief shrieked, quickly pulling back his hand.

"Is he alive?" the other thief said with some concern.

The shogun wheezed and coughed blood.

Having calmed down, the first thief now looked at the shogun with a sinister glare. "I don't think so," he said.

In between the sunken faces of the thieves, the shogun glimpsed a raven flying by overhead; it was carrying the severed middle finger of a samurai between its beak.

“Shouldn’t we help him?”

“Hmm . . . I suppose,” the first thief said hesitantly. He briefly examined his surroundings. “Hand me that,” he said, pointing towards a wakizashi sword on the belt of a nearby samurai.

The other thief complied. “What are you going to do, Katsushiro?”

“I’m going to help him cross over to the other side.”

The shogun looked on in frantic disbelief as the thief brought the blade to his neck. He then pushed it down with all his might, as blood came gushing out of the wound. He pushed and pushed, struggling quite a bit, but eventually the head came clean off, an expression of horror permanently transfixed upon its face.

Exhausted after his labour, the thief enthusiastically took the pendant, which by now was covered in blood, into his hands and began examining it.

“What have you done?!” the other thief said, as if only now realizing what had transpired. “He was alive!”

“Nonsense,” Katsushiro said, still examining the jewelry. “The dead don’t just come back to life, Takebayashi. He, uh . . . just got a little lost on his way to the land of the dead. Besides,” he added dismissively, “no one will know anyway; they’ll think he died in battle.”

“But I know!” Takebayashi declared, feeling excluded. “Of course . . .” he said in a hushed tone, “I’m not going to tell anyone if you share it with me.”

Katsushiro laughed. “How can I share it if there’s only *one*?”

“Well, you can give me half the coins after you sell it.”

“I could . . .” Katsushiro pretended as if he was considering it. He then looked up towards his companion and said: “But I think I’ll just keep it all to myself.”

Anger sparked in Takebayashi’s face. “Then I’ll tell the authorities what you’ve done!” he threatened.

“Go ahead,” Katsushiro said nonchalantly. “Who will believe you anyway, you lousy thief?”

“Alright, Katsushiro, if that’s the way you want to play it.” Takebayashi pretended as if he was going to move away, but then suddenly made an attempt at snatching the pendant from Katsushiro’s hand; his adversary, however, had expected the ruse and quickly pulled it away, making the unlucky thief trip and fall, as fate would have it, right onto the barbed end of a gut-gouger arrow sticking out from one of the corpses. He let out a piercing scream.

Katsushiro looked at the pitiful sight of the miserable thief writhing in pain before him and said: “I think I’ll take my leave now, Takebayashi. After all, there’s sake to be drunk and brothels to be visited!” Eyeing the blood seeping out from the thief’s wound, he added sardonically: “But you go on and look around some more.” He then started walking away.

However, after he had turned his back towards the wounded thief and taken but a few short steps, the wakizashi sword—still covered with the shogun’s blood—entered through his back and exited out of his stomach. Katsushiro could only briefly look at the bloody blade protruding from his abdomen with astonishment before falling to the ground, blood pouring from the wound.

Having detached himself from the arrow, Takebayashi was now bleeding profusely. With some effort, he stumbled over to Katsushiro’s lifeless body and took the blood-covered pendant from his hand. One hand clutching the costly treasure to his chest, with the other one pressing down upon his wound, he cast a scornful final glance towards his fallen companion. “You fucking thief!” he said, before passing out.

by Anjana Basu

LOVE THEME BY MOONLIGHT

1

Black sky the summer moon rises perfectly round against that griddle perfectly pocked
singled by heat here and there come moon fill the beggar's bowl with your burnt flat
breadness the world has no poetry left.

2

Her long hair strangled the wind with its dark length filling the known world with
perfume a cascade of braids that drew his eyes to them from the first glance so he
could not would not look back until the knot was tied and then no shears just the man
cuffed in silk trailing backward glances of regret and I the only fool left crying for the
moon.

3

My eyes open to another day and take in the light of the sun or grey and then the
thought fills my mind opening the void that empty space of absence they say the year
has worn you down that you wear unhappiness like those checked shirts I knew I lock
the void with a secret key having released our mutual gloom for the day so much for
those words now – if only they had been true

4

The orange moon lower on the horizon Ovid's angel or was it Sappho's holding firmly
to the round while time's shadow creeps in nibbling at its rim invisibly time is a hunter
in a bad poem where moonshine spills over the orange wanes in the street the prices
rise bitter for sweet no moon madness that or taint of lovers held in bondage by
fugitive time or moonbeams

LISTS

comma, comma, comma, list, list. list a frail of dates cargo of poppy smoke chest of someone's memories piled heavy with bhojpuri patois and old wars medals swords paraphernalia where are those dates to sweeten this paragraph the endless piling of lists to kill space and details of a war no one remembers and a corruption that persists in the running they call it globalization and in the chests are noodles, vegetables quick frozen to ensure starvation in some backwater land where the women walk ghunghat deep red in a sea of poppies hunting for lost children rummaging in trunks washed up by the sea on the horizon smoke billowing though whether cyclone or fire makes no difference to the world list list, list, list, comma, comma, comma, stop, stop, stop

COFFEE CUPS

Over the coffee cups they talked about days gone by the fish that got away taking his hat and line her widowed cat that finally drowned itself from loneliness in the wash tub under the long night shadows life they agreed was not what it used to be in the end it was all old clichés scraps of black and white scented with that bitter brew of the long ago - the coffee made poetry of it before their lives forked again and the cat's cradle on the terrace unraveled in the spring wind

by Tobi Alfier

Tired Cantilena for Barstow, Can't Sleep

Two dead crows on the lawn today, an old apple core
untouched, the buzzing sound of anyone's small plane and
no one knows why anything happens.

[I'm never sure why I come to these deserts.
Last night in another floundering bar, one
more man called one more woman
a soulless bitch, sparking a backslap
of flying alcohol that made men look away.]

That sadness of the spirit— the clock marches a soldierly
horror show and brown is desert wrapped with low. Chaingang
of weariness and blues, everyone gets this way
sometimes.

[Today a white butterfly fell into my coffee
while a radio voice sang there'd be lightning
in her fists for a man fool enough to show
at her door. I was sufficiently blue inside
to believe it meant the end of grace.]

Mostly just an ordinary summer, but music is missing and
clouds keep the sun from burning a hole in the sky.

[The motel room I took tonight was so quiet
I heard a young couple through walls thin
as the lace she wore for him, while all I have
is the musk of faded wildflowers ghosting
a cracked vase, Venice painted badly on the wall.]

The kindness of touch, burn of a shot of gold, eyes that
stare into the night. Too hot to sleep, too lonely to make
love, how long...

[The couple's whispers turn to passion. Radio Zion
flutters in static on my nightstand. Spanish
praises God for numbering all the hairs on all
our heads. We creatures strayed from Heaven,
who, at mindless hours, waken and shut our eyes.]

...how long.

Previously published in "The Color of Forgiveness" by Jeffrey Alfier and Tobi Cogswell Alfier

Unheard Music

Neglected piano in the neighbor's yard
in back of their Oxnard barn, the old brown
Upright keys dappled like aging teeth,
dotted with leaves so dry, they cracked
of their own accord ages ago.

No bench, no music, not even
a wobbly old bar stool
doing double duty—
forgotten—out of tune—
a landing pad for cats and crows,

never to play at weddings again.
Like the piano sitting front and center
of an empty ballroom in a Detroit hotel.
The door red-tagged, only light
shushing in through dirty diamond panes

onto the black and white floor.
A lace handkerchief dropped, lies in silence.
Grace for the spirits that play both
instruments on moon-shadowed nights,
melodies climbing, meeting among the stars.

May Day

Brim of near August, the monsoons wait—
harbingers like John the Baptist,
eating locusts and wild honey
under the desert's summer lightning.

Raven wings grate the sheer edges of light,
the sleet quickens, gets lost on the road—
mysteries/ lies could sink this place,
a fact I know in my bones.

A streetlight tangles with my shadow,
sweat stains a map on my shirt,
cold don't get much meaner than it does
in this town.

In the full pitch of darkness
she takes foot down an unlit road.
She swore to put me on the hook
with the law but she was a wrong number,

a letdown artist, quick to turn her eyes from mine
and she walks. The air shot through with woodsmoke/
dank foliage/ raucous madness—I *feel*
the smirk melt off her face.

The night dense with silence.

South from Alicante

Mornings I stand at the bar,
a glass of café con leche warming
hands frozen into another country.
A language I don't know swirling
rhythm around me, these fishermen,
hard-working class welcome me
to their lives, as they start their day

with song, their version of prayer,
their version of the world loved right.
Their wives in church as the sun rises,
They pray for a net full of fish, pray
the lace of the lines hold tough,
pray their men return without loss.
They pray as the window-light

glides across the feet of the Madonna,
then they turn home to their work, difficult
as their men's. Wives get to speak though,
while their now-silent men watch the sky,
the water, the bait ball summoning
birds and summoning boat after boat—
skiff, trawler, each man, hands

roughened raw by rope and time, they teach
sons to be men, all song left back
at the bar, left back with me. I am
the honored curator of their lives, all talk
edded out, replaced with rusted iron
railings wound with fishing line
for them, trumpet vine for me.

The Man Buys Himself a Guitar to Play the Blues

He's more of an acoustic guy,
more under the breath,
as if he were humming gently,
his fingers quietly pick the strings
to keep him company.

His voice is good, soft,
doesn't need an audience
of more than one, as he sadly praises
the open road, his travels lonesome
and long, the women he left behind,
the ones he's yet to meet.

Sorrow etched on his face,
he entertains himself with near-silence.
Wind through the junipers louder
than his downhearted words. His luck lost quickly,
his farewells a simple nod of the hat
and a start of the truck, his dad's old pick-up,
it knows the story without even being shifted
into reverse. Such is the light from the window
left behind, such is the love, turning to frost
even as the tires turn the miles to the next
run-down motel, the next song to sing.

by Douglas Nordfors

THE YOUNG MAN

Once, as we stood in the airy space
between our houses, my neighbor
said, "I call this house the graveyard,"
meaning her house, and meaning
she had lived in it through the deaths
of her husband and all of her friends—
I knew this from less desperate, less poetic

things she had said at other times.
I must have wondered, as we stood
in the airy space, if a metaphor
made up of many little houses
marked with headstones was too little
or too much, and I wonder now
if the young man, inside me still,

had a heart, meaning did I, before
I moved away, in a waking dream
walk onto her front yard, and on
her doorstep lay a few flowers,
so that, opening, not expecting
them, she would throw them out
or stumble over them, and begin again?

THE HOUSE WHERE WE USED TO LIVE

On bare paper I write:

As if birth could not help
but not change me
into someone, as if I am
the world and me without
me, I am a wide eye
shutting as it closes

on another eye that
sees merely a candle
on a nightstand, all I
remember of one room,
not to mention a bare
floor and four walls as bare as

paper. Merely? A candle
that, burning or not, as each
successive night slowed,
lit up the noncircular
lines, the circumference, both
more than visible, of her

body and mine, of her
body and the world, as,
standing on a night,
kneeling, first light
slowed and stopped.

FIRST LOVE

The loneliness I felt, yes,
was the loneliness she felt.

We spent our youths,
before we came to be,

looking out a window
containing no reflection,

only the city outside:
old sidewalks like unfinished

cathedrals, streets paved
dark, yellow lines, telephone poles

like trees, branches and leaves
taken away to a safe place—

we knew not where.

Once, just after we met,
she averted her eyes,

and the yellow, separating
lines remained, and

the sidewalks stopped cracking
open—there was nothing

to reveal. The window
was dark. And then her eyes

turned back to me, and then
beneath me I wasn't.

Over cathedral sidewalks
was the answer

to where the sun shone.

PRE-VALENTINE'S DAY POEM

Our seasoned, not yet cold heart
is, to my naked eyes, as
viable as peeled-off bark standing apart
from its tree, is as yet

not real, and works the way
a wild, evolving metaphor or simile
works, and works its way, like
love, with such unbelievable patience, into

a biological soul, while a mouth
from a practiced, imminent kiss stands
apart, the exposed skin on such
sure lips as yet not even

tasting the air, and I try
to breathe in while telling you
all this all the time, even
with my eyes closed.

MODERN ROMANCE

Leaning on no one
prepares me
for actuality. Actuality
doesn't take
permanently. Eventually,
the voice of no one calls me,
and I go.

I need her, and I need her
to be free of me.
Before I return,
the voice of no one is
Earth with nothing
in it, save a plant, maybe
a foxglove, maybe
a cyclamen, plants
I've heard of, plants I believe
I've never seen.

Before I return,
with her hands
in a bed with nothing
in it, save a flower,
she just wants
to hear the sound of
her own voice, the beat of
her own mind.
I need him, I need him. Three words
forming the sort of thought
only ones
who are bereft
entertain.

by Natalie Crick

After Sleep

After sleep
Your eyelids open and close
Like sunrise and sundown.

In this long curved room
Walls start to shimmer,
Breathe in rhyme.

Rose and charcoal dissolve to dove,
Reaching into the dark
For their colour,

Trees blackly jade,
Dripping with cones like
Jet suns.

This milky summer night
Dazed, smiling,
Lilies move into both of us.

The Lovers

Old woman stands
At the window

Watching the moon slipping loose
Of it's skin,

Leaves dappled with light,
Breath like heat lightening.

Now the stars
Barely blink in the dark

And the beggarly moon
Treasures it's myopia of desire.

After dark, lovers
Carry blankets down

To the water's edge
Beneath a clemency of cloud.

She grew lonely as a
Sheep ghosting the field
As they emerged each night
From the darkness,

The way the Earth
Dreams a coming fluency of snow.

By the Light of Dawn

Rains arrive.
Rivulet, replete with rusted dust,
Loose suitcases of storms.

The thin grey skim of sky
Breaks with a howl.
I am lost, without

The slow simmer of dawn, when
The sun rises red
And the crop comes in,

Deep and golden.
We wade into the burning lake
And we wait.

Daylight

Dawn gave us only grey,
Then threadbare craggs of cloud
That fell apart to rain.

Mist-crowned and veiled,
The gaunt forms of buildings
Throng about us, hulking

In a quiet parade across the beaches,
Drowned to their ashen foundations.
The moon waits to be released,

Safe beneath the black lid of night
That rests upon
The evening's jaded hinge.

Remains

When snow has filled the lungs
It takes time to cover the body.

If God were a season,
He would surely be Winter.

Waiting by the black trees,
Thin as ribs,

I offered God my mind,
But he only wanted your body.

I look for your soul,
Pale and baroque,

But I don't find it.
Only your mouth like a black hole,
Open and vacant.

Angels

They choose
Stark room with
Wooden floors.

Bald rooms
Marked by time,
Stained by death.

They appear
Out of darkness,
Nebulous and blanched,

Summoned by moans,
Wordless prayers.
They smell of milk.

Willows

Willows spill their
Golden plumes
Like a girl brushing her
Silken braids,
Almost stirring the
Glass black surface of the lake,
Which glitters in promise
Before the touch.

Tulips

The Tulips have wilted.
Petals fall and light
Bends, grotesque,
Like a secret splayed open
At the seams of a wide
Black mouth.
The crowns remain lush,
A bouquet of teeth
Gleaming bright in a smile
As if to say:
“I am not dead yet.”

Deer

Come morning dew,
Like softened scars
Their tracks across the sunlit land.

Here, they only speak to me.
In the dark, voices fill
This empty house.

They are back,
The ones that bled from me
Last Winter.

by Diane Webster

HIGH DROUGHT

High drought at Bully Creek Reservoir
where carp swim abandoned in a pool
where two days of 100-degree weather
siphon the pool into mud
where hundreds of years from now
carp fossils appear in sedimentary rock
split by archeologists digging
in Bully Creek Great Sand Dunes.

STREET TRUMPETS

Streetlights flood the neighborhood
with halos of safety hugs,
and the trumpet vine spirals
night and day up the pole
until a tendril touches the light.

A flower blooms at night
like a stained-glass window
lit from within, and all the trumpets
herald the miracle...
in silence.

BLOOMING

Enter the world of the flowering
crabapple tree where blooming aroma
soothes day's dilemmas while bees
buzz/purr rhythm.

Hummingbird trills overhead
as sunshine bakes my back
so I close my eyes and surrender.

ASPARAGUS HUNT

With empty bread sack
and knife we crawl through
the fence into Tommy's pasture
and admire the ditch like a small
Snake River tributary too wide
to jump by the locust tree
but farther down near the first
clump of asparagus it narrows
and flat running room beaches
against the ditch wall
where leaping successfully
to the other side where asparagus
grows sparsely but Monarch
butterflies flutter milkweed pods
still green with sticky milk
and later in summer when pods rattle
we crack seeds loose to fly in the wind.
But today we cut asparagus
and bag the spears like arrows
in the quiver bread bag,
and none of us ever fell in the ditch.

by Gene Twaronite

PEELING THE BARK

As I drove past
the shirtless man,
his head wrapped
in cloth against
the desert sun,
he peeled the last
bit of bark
from a young
palo verde
as if to strip
away all
trace of green
from a world
he once knew.
How dare it grow
when acid hate
falls from the sky
and the ground
bears only fear
and despair,
when the buds
wither and die,
and the rot
goes all the way
to the roots.

AFTER HEARING THE YOUNG BLACK POET

 speak, my first reactions were
 sadness, rage, then wonder
 at our different worlds—
 he writes of the bullet
 he knows has his name on it
 while I write—again—of my
 imminent decrepitude,
 he writes of all the times
 he was stopped and frisked
 while I write of indignities
 suffered at airport security,
 he writes of how his
 great-great-great grandfather
 was sold and branded like cattle
 while I write of how my
 Lithuanian grandfather's name
 got butchered at Ellis Island,
 he writes of how it felt
 to watch the first black president
 compared to a monkey
 while I write of how
 my big ears always turned red
 whenever kids laughed at them,
 he writes of the pain
 that won't go away after
 seeing his son killed because
 a policeman felt threatened
 while I write of the day
 a policeman's wife shot her husband
 dead in the bedroom above us
 and I felt sad for my poor dad
 cleaning bits of brain off the walls,
 he writes knowing that for some
 he will always be less of a man
 while I write whole and secure.
 We explore the separate
 flows of our lives, holding
 them back against time,

diving for words
in quiet pools of reflection,
but it's a wonder
his dam doesn't burst.

A WOULD-BE MIX

is what I am,
wishing my skin
were some other shade
than Baltic white.
Would that my identity
were forged in strife
rather than immunity.
Would that my genes
could express all
the colors I lack.
Would that my heart
could know what it
feels like to be
ignored, beaten, raped,
jailed or excluded
because I'm not
one of them.
Would that the bittersweet
mysteries of my
brothers and sisters
were mine and I could
check off the box marked
all of the above.

DEMOCRACY AT THE MALL

Seems strange to talk of government by the people
in this corporate domain, where every move
is manipulated by apps and advertised needs
and the inescapable aroma of Cinnabon®.

Yet, if you look past the dazzle and contrivance,
you will discover democracy alive and well
in this climate-controlled space,
where young families with their children
play in plastic playgrounds open to all,
where citizens in blue sequined outfits and coiffed hairdos
line up at the model and talent search for a shot at fame,
where dazed teens stare into their phones
seeking new parameters and connections,
where the huddled masses exercise
their inalienable right to shop
and promote the general welfare,
where a candy store promises *a piece of happy*
and another promises to *get your life in order*,
where you'll find Justice® and domestic tranquility
and still Payless®,
where there's *fashion for the people*
and you can vote for your favorite pants
(as long as it's *our* brand of pants),
where mall walkers can breathe the free air
finding sanctuary from weather's oppression,
where the people ordain this place each day
to secure the blessings of liberty
to themselves and their posterity.

WHAT THE GARGOYLE SEES

You think it easy
leering down all day
with bestial gape
on the war below
as a widow cries
for a third son lost,
a one-eyed child
with half a face
stares up and smiles
at me before he dies.

8 ETERNITY

Lisa Harris

Lay an 8 on its side and eternity looks back at you.

Envision an 8 on your body's trunk and breathe through the roadway you travel.

You are on a Mobius strip that loops and loops, a one-sided surface with one boundary; travel it fully and never cross over the edge.

Welcome to the conveyor belt of life! Balance and motion are gifts in and across time. You are provided for. You have all that you need. You belong to infinity, larger than any number. You balance between worlds.

Join. Divide. Participate. Prosper. Focus: Verbs you carry in a basket as reminders.

You are an 8-cylinder engine and you propel yourself, part spider part octopus, during the night to the 8th realm where gods dwell—making webs to collect dew and flies, dancing across the ocean floor and resting in the coral reefs. During the day, you transform into an 8-spotted forester moth: your black wings glisten; your white spots shimmer and glow.

You are forced to choose who you will be, and so you pick, with some hope and some regret, the order of cephalopod; you abandon any desire for a skeleton because your greater wish is to fit in and squeeze through tight places. Like a writer, you

disguise yourself by expelling ink so you can jet away from danger.

You remember both now and long ago. You know shapes and patterns, and you refuse entanglement.

You build your house from discarded coconut shells and mostly live alone.

Each breath is a new beginning and a continuation.

You quaver and hover with strength and power and refuse to tie yourself in knots over loss and anger, over anticipation and fear.

You turn inward and become attentive.

“Hope is the thing with feathers...”

Jennie Robertson

(... apologies to Emily Dickinson)

Jacksonville, NC, has the skeleton of a quaint downtown, but it exists largely because of war and to meet the needs and desires of Marines, the “combat-ready units” who sit awaiting “expeditionary deployment”, or recovering from it. So explained my husband, Cpl. Bryant, who also said that Camp Lejeune, like several USMC bases, sits on a swamp because that’s what the Marines usually buy—cheap land that nobody else wants. That’s not to say it doesn’t suit their purpose: preparing men and women to exist—or stop existing--in the most unpleasant situations.

This particular unpleasant situation, this former swamp, was our new home. Our first home. I met a woman while shopping for my wedding dress that was enthusiastically planning to move there and “loved the area.” She must have meant some other area. Nobody loves Jacksonville.

After our honeymoon in New Hampshire’s White Mountains, we began the long drive south. We borrowed my parent’s van and filled it with things you can live without for 8 short months. That’s how long I would end up having before Daniel deployed again. At the time, I thought I was moving for three years. I didn’t yet understand “combat-ready units” and “expeditionary deployment.”

We got lost in New York City--misplaced the George Washington Bridge or something--and I ate the last of our wedding cake while Daniel studied our map in a disreputable looking parking lot.

It had been raining in New England when we left, on the green hills, the stony fields, the picturesque farms. It was still raining when we arrived in Jacksonville on a Tuesday afternoon, on the dingy pawn shops and tattoo parlors. The bridal shops and the tawdry lingerie shops looked alike. The little markets and the tobacco shops looked alike. One cheap cinder-block building begged you to sell your plasma and save a life; another identical building, a souvenir shop, was decorated with a poster, “Kill ‘Em All and Let God Sort ‘Em Out”. Save a life, as long as it’s the right life. One strip club had emblazoned its windows with “God bless America!” This was the place where we would plant our fragile hopes for the future, our seedling family, and pray for it to flourish; we had to plant it here. My brand-new husband was a Marine, and this was where Uncle Sam had sent us.

It rained a lot in Jacksonville. I guess that’s how it became a swamp. Some weeks it rained nearly every day. Everyone at home worried about the threat of hurricanes and tornadoes, but I found the violent, windy rains exciting. I’d sit and watch as the wind peeled the siding off the building across the way. I preferred it to the more usual dreary drizzle or steady grey assault. I thought it would be a fertile place for growing

things, all that warm, moist air, but the little flowers I planted died, despite the numerous hopeful green stems that had shot up initially. Drowned? Poisoned by acid rain? Rotten from damp?

There had been thunder and lightning and hail throughout the week. In the night, we heard the gutter by our bedroom window gushing water constantly, like a large and powerful faucet. It emptied onto the cement patio in back, which flooded, becoming a pond outside our back door.

In the morning, when it had drained, I was able to go out to check on my flowers, hoping for their revival. There was a little pile of something on the cement, a little bit of rubbish or something. I bent over it.

The little bird, the dead little bird was twisted, here its beak, here its one twiggy foot, here the other bent behind it. Its down was all soaked or torn out, so that it was partly bald, and its pitiful thin neck stretched out, making it look emaciated. In reality, it was quite a plump little thing for a baby, and it was a baby, though, like a starving child, it had an eerie look of age in its grim mortality.

I summoned Daniel; he buried it. He pointed to the gutter above, and to the big black bird peering out at us. "There's where your bird came from", he said, "Papa bird built their home in a bad place, Papa and Mama did."

That night, we swam in the community swimming pool that was the focal point of our backyard. In Maine, I knew veterans, of course, and had even heard of local men who had died in OIF; but in Jacksonville, I saw personally the gruesome work of IED's and gunfire. That night was the first time. The man was swimming with his wife and baby, burns on his face and back, lip distended from his injury. He looked to be in fairly good health otherwise; he was well enough to lift his baby high in the air until she giggled. He laughed and smiled with his wife. In fact, it was a happy scene.

"I wonder if it happened over there", my husband said, speculating about the man's injuries from the other side of the pool.

"Of course it did," I said darkly.

"She's a good wife to stay with him, after that. Which is more than can be said for a lot of them..." He didn't see any of his buddies get hurt "over there"; but plenty of them got hurt when they came back to find the lover they had longed for had been unfaithful, to walk in on her with another man. They'd have traded burned flesh for fidelity. Semper Fi indeed. "I'm glad I have a wife I can trust", he said, then and often in days to come.

We went on to laugh and splash, happy newlyweds, excited to have a pool in our own backyard to use anytime we wanted. Daniel, as usual, checked the drains for frogs and other fun amphibian friends. None in the right drain. In the left...

"Is it alive?" I heard him say to himself, "Oh...no..."

"What?" I said, still caught up in our play, our laughter, thinking some interesting curiosity had fallen into the pool. He tried to keep me from seeing it, but I craned my neck to see past him. A second baby bird was in the drain, floating dead and swollen.

I grimaced and we moved away. He knew how much I hated the sight of it. We tried to play again. We smiled at the antics of some kids trying to make a big splash. Daniel, big Marine, jumped in and splashed them. I laughed. The pool was about to close. The man with the burns got out and wrapped his baby in a towel, and he and his wife played Frisbee on the lawn. He was okay. Even if catastrophe occurred, it could be okay. But God forbid! I put my arms around Daniel's neck suddenly and said, "Don't go away! Don't go away again..."

He couldn't promise, only pray. "I hope not, love."

Monday morning brought down the rest of the baby birds. I saw them with revulsion when I looked out that morning, in a soggy heap under the gutter. It was beginning to make me sick. There seemed to be horror around every corner, and nothing I could do to escape it. I called Daniel and chokingly told him what happened. I rarely called him at work, but mortality on my door step was getting to be more than I could handle.

"Shhh, love, its all right. I'll take care of it when I come home." He buried them in the backyard so I couldn't see them, and by a mercy of God no creature dug them up.

This was my welcome to Jacksonville; Camp Lejeune, Camp "the young" I had thought poignantly at first, knowing only the French and not the Marine it was named for. I wanted to hope for our future, our family, for happiness, security, and that Daniel would not have to return to Iraq. I worried he had used his luck up the first time, though I didn't really believe in luck. We were surrounded by healthy Marines who had survived unscathed; but the maimed and dead spoke louder, the young grotesquely thwarted from their promising lives.

"Hope is the thing with feathers..."

12

Elderly fisherman,
swimming in the arroyo and
warming his ideas in the shanty
during the frost and ice season.
Elevator door man,
driven insane by the mundane
vertical up and down playlist.

Twenty two year old jester,
chuckling at city misfits,
socialite drama,
urbanite capitalism,
cranes flying overhead,
where order to the world
serves as one concentric circle of laughs.

Omega poet in the corner,
observing a word as a face,
a sound as a color,
and paper as shielding parchment.
The other eleven might as well
have their brains quarantined.

Shamanic medicine woman,
viewing every flash forward as
scenes inside a West Virginia mind.
Her peyote ramblings exit her
lips as villanelles, pantouns, and ghazals.
Oh, will her unbiased mastery
be inherent in her child's psychotropic genes?

Previously used bookseller,
tiptoeing on her expiration date.
Of all the documents that
weaved their way through her ruby curls,
the photocopied report,
crumpled by edgy fingers,
gave her judgment free insight beyond clairvoyance.

Middle-aged astrophysicist
has lost her inner conscience.
Freedom of choice lies beyond
the outer reaches of this
radar blip of a galaxy.
Flight in the tabernacle arms!

Paranoid, trigger-happy fighter,
suffering from delusions of
preventive victories by an
authoritarian nation with a
stiff bottom lip.
Egalitarian beliefs:
open mind with success of a chameleon.

Old codger of the sea of anger,
regurgitating him back to the
sands of limited time only.
He is a modern day Jonah,
being deprived of the guilty pleasures
that rare breezes want to feel.
Pluck yourself because it feels amazing.

Teenage-minded animal rights activist,
hands on experience,
paws on protection,
yet all reliability drifts
to the accomplices in the West.
People...humanity...past existent hobbies.

Fury-fighting feminist heroine,
well dressed for each court date,
eyes on the common folk
who can sniff out the lying
water dogs in the quick of
gun-drawing suspenseful seconds.
She who shoots last is a semi-pacifist.

Materialistic queen of the shops!
All hail those who win the suit
and spend half at the Vancouver mall
and half on a hall of alcohol.
Money-grasping marsupials,
feeding off of the
concept of hovering over green paper air.

Single mother in mid twenties,
only wants the best for the
son of the abandoning cretin.
Put the guilty in their place.
Put on the shackles and
imprison those who do not desire freedom.

Twelve irate souls
converse their combined
ways of combat.

Weed out the naysayers.
'Tis a guilty group of felons,
nothing more than
housebroken rats, voluntarily soiling cages.

If the facts would appear and
present themselves, then
every cold case would
ice the nearest informer
for squealing out of turn.

Opening statements are
first legal impressions.

The gamblers take their chance.
Jurors now swim in two
entirely different seas.
Curse the storm of spontaneity
and the mullah mindset!

Separation of Church and State?
Highly illogical when holy literature
binds one's verbal contract to
speak of the truth and its entirety.

And as the rabbit runs,
dogs are out for the hunt.
Without a witness, this
case shall take a nosedive
into gentle obstruction.

Release the river from
which the dam held captive
after fifty years of nature restriction.

All it takes is eight for the
final verdict,
to tell the tale for a
high and mighty six dollars a day.

Civic duty put the righteous
three weeks behind the rent.
The decision has been reached.
Hold the final number for ransom.
Keep the two cents.

Raving: A Tribute to Buddy Holly

Oh, boy!
You made a
clear spectacle(s) of yourself!

Two in the eyes,
one full head of Crisco hair.
He must rave.
He must roll down the
glorious line, down the
victorious finish line.

She will be waiting for him.
Knock off the ape business.
Goodbye to so many cares.
You and the mate of your soul
are one and connected in a
plethora of commoner ways.

Such ways of true love
will not fade away.
Compare it to a
luxurious automobile,
cruising down the alleyway.

Rollerskating to the
'57 expectations!

We sent the demo, Charles.
Happy accident,
playing the latest,
playing the greatest.
Back up the vocals.

I can see clearly now
that the bifocals are on.
Pieces are appearing closer
everyday...every way.
Catch the Hank Snowflakes
on that wild-eyed tongue of yours.

Ah, Maria...
sweetest Maria.
What a lucky man he was
to have and hold a bird like her.

He gave to her what
we, the screaming fans,
only saw in memories.

Oh, boy!
That'll be the day!

Walking Hypotheses between an Aristocrat & a Bohemian

Oh, wealth is the
basis of all personal game.
Security and stability
come in as income,
swimming in a stock pile
from the one that raised
salaries and questions.
And through the pane of pain,
it wanes on in the never ending monopoly game.
Money: the finest hour of power.

This hand...
by this hand, the
bountiful land we live off of,
the hand fits on the land as an
organic glove wearer and cloth bearer.
This community...
by this community,
the workers are dedicated in daylight
and dance around the moon's white.
Heat in composition: tonight.

While the strains of the rain
remain in plain sight,
towers on the rise,
with structured organization,
harvesting the Bossperson's organ
to the glossy bossa nova beat.
Glam wears the outside in.
Play that mediocre music average,
Beige Boy on thin ice.
Your eyes are on the teenage crushed diamond.

Suppose the crops rot like
abuse violence victims in
driftwood caskets, affording
to only be buried three feet under.
The eulogizing will carry on,
stoned heads with inscriptions.
So sick of the nicotine-stained
plastic clubbed-out femme fatales.
They have strayed from the lifestyle of giving birth to a
breath more important than they are.

Swim under thousands of leagues
of reassurance in print.
Bank with the super ball,
eating away and bouncing back.
Tireless efforts and
effortless tires,
reruns of promotional moments
out to represent royalty,
earned through humanistic tenacity.
Not inherited through Father's phallus.

We, the Modernists, say nothing.
We, the workhorses, light
bottom fires under pressure,
not from peers, but you.
There is no fourth wall to break.
You are already processing
looks of deception.
Break away from possessions.
There is only one self.
There is indecisive progression.

Heard the news today, junior citizen?
Seen the newsprint?
Hell's frozen icicles have
penetrated warm bodies and
dropped the stocks off of
jagged rock bottom cliffs.
Feel the innuendo of hollering dollars,
the censored image carries
roaring twenties, stacks in her undergarments.
The iced earth took a volcanic turn.

Every wave that crashes
upon this shore adds one
more reason to wear this
well-dressed laurel,
for we will keep following the
footsteps of the dead.
They write in symbolic hieroglyphs.
Metered verse, free-flowing
from the spoken tongue, spooned and not forked,
cryptic in society, but mastered by orators on the page.

Blinking Innocence of the Cinnamon Woman

Blossom of fire,
who on this relatively colossal
planet would have thought
that I needed to meet you
on this day of independence?

You, who raise the bar
to its inexplicable height,
you, whose blood type is
O Negative, covered with a
six foot seven inch wall of steel.

Oh, you joker of impracticality.
We read dystopian fiction
in a utopian dream.
We reminisce about the
takers of lives and
givers of solidity.

I see you and I forget what tension means.
In your future's eye,
you examine the bones and
I will write the poems.

How elated I feel
when the elevation of
temperature increases
by the evening hour.

One feverish glance and
we turn to putty.
One of your selected laughs and
even the cynics must chuckle in reply.

And let us restart our archaic memories.
Under that spell,
under that trance,
the heart's padlocks loosen,
but the vulnerability does not subside.

Only your strawberry strands
could unlock universal commonalities.
By day, you shall profile crime,
but the only one committed is
not being beside the bearded bard.

The scent of cinnamon
brushes past him,
waiting to share a
fingernail moon on a
cloudless summer eve.

by J. TARWOOD

DOGS

(For Alonso)

Dogs, big, dark,
full of teeth, full of hunger.
Chains slacken, chains tighten,
but they don't frighten.
I am hectare after docile hectare
for contagious foam.

Sometimes I reverberate. Mariachi dogs
bark in profile at the moon
in m uterus. Shout *SIT!*
and they bark worse, perhaps fearing
they'll die where they began.

On the other side of pain,
the moon cures. But no, barking's
better, they think, so look
with rabid walled up eyes

at me, wanting, warning:
Love us or die.

FINISHING POEMS

(For Sanchez)

Those gaps? Hands
miming bells, spiritless
birds already night muffled.

Rain sleeps on doorsteps,
sleeps on the skin of the sea,
sleeps on feverish trees

until the hand opens,
rising like a sunken boat,
a swallow escaping chimneys
weighing a choice of sky.

Ear to the door, I hear
the sea flashing between
fingers of the beach.

At last a girl dances,
each ankle a rose.

Getting late. Traffic's mussed.
Slow hands build a fire
with leftover winter wood

ISLAND PROPERTY

Freedom's the feeling of a clock striking twelve,
and so they seek to sell that white house
in hot hills and return to cold,
cold being home and a comfort too,
honest as icicles, unlike our sun
blinding a stampede to shade.
They hope swindling's done,
a kind buyer freeing foreigners
from our sea around which
we spawn and plot like frogs.
Shaking his hand, kissing
her cheek, we'll nick
and kick drinking
adieu our splendid suckers.

LIWA

Away from cities
and their made up light,
couldn't this starry sky
be a look
at the mind of God,
cold rules and mysteries
the smart name and explain?

Dumb, I stare till midnight.

Dunes delaying dawn,
I sneeze awake
and bundle fast.
Among tents and trash,
humans materialize.
Sun aims to clarify.
Like a fly, I'll find myself
some windy shade.

THE ARK

I would die in a motel
after roads iced me in.
Pills, probably. Last book,
last kiss. I didn't
expect to be missed.

The slog thickens. I clock
in wishing I was
clocking out. Evenings
I bend and lift. TV
between commercials promises
news, windows wind, and sleep
sometimes a whim of girls.

Every day there's less of me.
I'm not following tracks
of border mud. I'm not
cross-legged on cold pavement,
hand out, eyes shaming for cash.
World's drowning. I'm in the ark.
I still don't expect to be missed.

20 February 2017

I can barely withstand the beauty of your eyes.
They are the first day of the world
after which there is no history.

*

22 February 2017

You do not sigh but your gaze on me is dark
and dense as an almighty hyacinth,
and I gasp in my mind.
My mind expands, semen of a star.

*

25 February 2017

Dread beauty.
Your eyes directed at the sun
on an equal footing.

*

26 February 2017

In your dark, your tenderness is a rise of a white hyacinth,
its exquisiteness and fullness – more consummate
than the ancient world's idea of elevated matter.
That which rises, sets.

*

March 5 2017

Eons, breaths pass,
the lions of Delos stand.
The sun that burns
is the sun that fills.

by John Timothy Robinson

The Attitudes of Language

Partisan and non, many in divided meaning,
lost arcana, a ruin of imprisoned words
imply the attitudes of language.

Defining, re-defining, clarifying context,
or clumsily impeded, fawn-fettered steps,
meanings in their plurality of forms—

dreamlike phrases like moxen or mycosa,
knived as shreol carson proper,
imply the attitudes of language.

Great utterance of the burdened mind,
like merging words in soft-spoken prayer,
or forms in multiplicity of meaning,

bound within a locket-hasp of gold,
flared like variant flames
imply the attitudes of language.

Conveyed through pages from conclusion,
removed passages from the text of lost imagination
settle like something sanctified and languid
elusively implying the attitudes of language.

Metaphysics of Cloud

Biblical; color in a painting of Prud' Hon²,
or Blakelock's³ blue furnace tufts and all
the scattered nimbus fan
before receding, beveled sun-fall.
On the ground, within fire, a drop of water seres
in cinder and flames dissolved,
each of each, displaced as veils that mirror
the other in an absence of resolve.
Evening settles, thoughts evade,
not as if they had a will or mind considered,
as intuition guided, informed a form remade,
these different forms of being, ominous and tiered,
continuous in change above earth's renewal,
a mind carousing in thought's perusal.

² Pierre-Paul Prud'hon (1758-1823) was a French Romantic painter and draughtsman best known for his allegorical paintings and portraits.

³ Ralph Albert Blakelock (1847-1919) was an American, Romantic landscape painter remembered for his imaginative, dreamlike works.

Cloud Formations Over Mason County

1.

From morning sleep
I wake and walk the hollow field
where from a half-hung, drowsy head
scent of Milkweed blooms fill the air.
And far from the house
I see clustered Cirrus doubled in the sky.

From Kanawha river-bottoms
a flock of birds descend and wheel
precision arcs that seem so calculated,
sudden turns unified in oval shapes,
forms that sheer the wind in fluttered rush.
Here, under the green canopy
across logging roads
bronze *Verrucosa Arenata*
and *Micrathena* sprawl their sightless webs.
All this seems reversed—
this walk and day and place,
someone else's life, an older life, too soon.

2.

Down in the Kanawha Valley
a dark band extends over clusters of trees.
In distance, chalk-shaded ridges
arc in a mellow maze of green,
rise and fall over Leon into Eleanor,
Beech Hill, Arbuckle, Pleasant View, Redmond Ridge.

Spores drift hundreds in the breeze,
scattered over pasture grass.
I once believed words could change anything.
for the better.

Scribbled words in process, writ on leaves almost,
not promised anything.

Freud's talking cure without neurosis,
one that all people share,
real as any living thing.

Dangerous. Potent.

All along, mostly for the writer;
words, meanings,
images that draw the mind to thought.

Clouds are fledged, abstract tufts on the horizon.

Across Hard Scratch Hollow

Holstein graze in shade and sun.

Hunched in a tree-stand

the hunted word works an indifference out.

I stalk the wind's ghost, nothing more.

Axes of words couldn't cut themselves.

Dull days lingering

pasture of McCullough Farm and the bone-yard woods,
old roads in between.

From my coat pocket, four folded pages

hold scattered notes, ideas,

Isabel's rain.⁴

Obsessing over patterns,

days in walk of Long Branch, Sines Hollow,

Poling Place, Freda Wood and Priestly.⁵

On the ridge above Big Hollow,

I found an old whiskey bottle

prostrate in a bed of leaves under the line fence.

I thought about the day they found Uncle Grey passed out in snow,

his frost-bit feet,

his April promise

never to drink again from a sick-bed that spring.

The pasture hills resemble

⁴ Hurricane Isabel reached West Virginia September 19, 2003 and brought rain to this geographic area.

⁵ Local place-names given to geographic areas of rural properties from the earlier generations.

something from Winslow Homer or Thomas Hart Benton.⁶
Brush hog tracks cut lanes
in rough-lined traces over locust slopes.

And in the mirror that stubborn face
refuses to lie down;
Black Honey-Locust thorns in sunlight,
deep gold of wild violet petals,
deer at graze in August grass.
A mound of rock pulls me to the ground
and only there I think,
one day, I will find the new-fallen leaves,
their golden-yellow bodies
will be the place
where I lie down and sleep forever.

3.

I saw them once on a blustery day
hunched around a combine.
Two hundred yards from Route Thirty-five
in a corn-field,
one worked on a broken part
inside this huge machine that would not move.
When I walked across the brittle stubs,
winds almost knocked me down.
A boisterous voice boomed in laughter.
My father exchanged words with the man
as we stood and watched them.
Tools changed hands
as the one inside cussed every other word.

I remembered my reason then
as I rode home in the truck with my father,
more alike than he knew.
So often these familiar faces

⁶ Winslow Homer (1836-1910) American Landscape painter and Thomas Hart Benton (1889-1975) American Regionalist painter created works with subjects that resemble the local landscape of Mason County, West Virginia.

seemed like strangers
and that they were really no reflection of me.
They *are* strangers. I will *never* know them.
I have lived here though, for a hundred thousand years.

A Clouded Sulphur Wing

I found this torn and broken form
in the grass
like a leaf,
pale yellow near the tear,
charcoal into deepened yellow,
an orange dot above one crease, off-center, raised.
The edge of an upper corner
has been stained a darkened grey
like litho-tine diluting black ink
abruptly, where smaller, golden arcs
border a velvety texture,
thinner than Bible pages,
veined as fine as angel's hair.
How many days had it lain there?
What carnivore's vengeance severed?
Held up like stained glass
illuminated fibrous lines.
The bottom tapered like feathers
around the trim, pale underside,
though mostly resembles
a meticulously careful architecture.
What name has this wing fallen from?

In the Autumn Evening When Two Thousand Pages Burnt

“I will never burn my words.”

- Theodore Roethke

In the Autumn evening when two thousand pages burnt,
I did not care for saving words.
I wanted a clean break, a separation
from high school verse.
All badly written, imitative form,
writ-less words consumed in smoke—
a new beginning from ashen glories.
To know this ink was honest,
sheaved inside a few plastic shopping bags.
Time between was not useless work
inspired of objective fact.
Instead, I began again, each word re-thought,
torn in fury with a self-made tongue.
This mind had never known one frustrate word,
I had only emptied water from a jar—
that words descend like angels on light wind.
The once thought universe was only page and pen,
minded matter separate
from all things beyond white space and lines.

The Poet and Society

John Timothy Robinson

A poet must be conscious of his methods. Education compels reflection upon intuition and artistic goals. I was educated in high school and college primarily to utilize the methods of the New Critics in research and explication of poetry. College life, socially as well as professionally, exposes one to multiple ways of life and approaches to reading literature. I enjoy reading and learning about new ideas. I have attempted here to express my views without any implied politics or extremism. Having been born in a different time and with strong, cultural pluralist, union values, it is from part of that sense and spirit that I came to write. I previously refer to this as 'traditional, liberal conservative, democrat,' though all politically loaded language begs oxymoronic interpretations of meaning. I was raised in a working-class, moderately pluralistic community in Mason County, West Virginia. Also, unfortunately, this community was and still is endemically racist. I do not share the old, Southern Agrarian vision of the Fugitive poets. I realize that literary works do not exist in a vacuum. We are all influenced by cultural and political events or ideas, though I distrust literary theories and thoughts that become infused with ideological agendas—political or social propaganda. Poetry is an art and a document of human experience.

I have no political agenda as a poet, scholar or educator. I don't even really claim to be an Appalachian poet, though I admire the work of Fred Chappel, Robert Morgan, Irene McKinney, James Dickey and other poets. I am a white, single, heterosexual, middle-class, middle-of-the-road, liberal, democrat. I believe I am a cultural pluralist in terms of general, social orientation and have managed as an educator to promote all that is good in the humanistic tradition of the highest and most noble of human thought. I tried to survey my poetry up to this point in life and have only found a few poems which would constitute direct, political address. "Life Outside the Whale," "A Prayer" and "Thanksgiving Day" illustrate works that express my own views on common issues such as racism, public corruption, bigotry, domestic violence and fascism. I also see in my survey of poetry numerous poems that have what you may call an implicit political aspect; poems about art, mediums or artists, intellectual concepts such as metaphysics, L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poetry, formalist poetry, family history and aspects of the local. Each of these types, in their own way, offer descriptive features and facets of my psyche which may not find evidence in many other areas of my living unless you asked. This section is not an attempt at expounding any political agenda, however I have found that in reading selected essays by different writers that there exist political aspects of writing poetry they have brought to my awareness which I find interesting. This interest is all that is necessary for discussion.

Regardless of whether you're a teaching poet or someone writing on your own, eventually the practice of writing will enter the public arena. This entering is inevitably

political because of the varied nature and background of the reading and writing population. More-so, the American university is in and of itself a political machine with its own norms, culture and hierarchical structure and influences. For the poet, the university remains the primary influence because of its educational role of preserving past intellectual achievements and the mission of forging innovative knowledge through technology and debate. The study of literature is not immune to such changes even today. The location of the forums for the publication of research and informed opinions may have shifted with the implementation of the internet, though issues remain just as politically volatile as they were fifty to one hundred years ago in our nation's past.

Every college English major knows the primary location of research and debate in literary studies exists in the library "stacks," otherwise known as periodical publications. Examples from the recent historical past are as follows; *Poetry*, *Glyph*, *The Dial*, *Field* or *The American Scholar*. Because of the invention of internet technology, print journals have either ceased publishing or adapted to the nature of this cultural condition and have begun printing electronically or publish both electronically and in print. Add to this fact that most university English departments have their own websites, each teaching professional has the capability of establishing and maintaining their own. This has changed the paradigm of publication since the invention of the internet. Because of this paradigm shift in the norm of academic publishing, the norm of expectations has also shifted along with the scholar's odds at getting in print or electronic publication format. The slogan, "Publish or perish," no longer hails as the lofty standard of achievement in higher education. Since more quality mediums exist for writers and researchers, one's odds at getting published increase, and especially at this point in history, they increase dramatically. This technological shift creates also an emphasis for some in other areas, such as teaching, mentoring or publishing as editors. There is certainly nothing wrong with that. Everything you do as an academic is eventually utilized as material for other people so that they may understand the writer's thought or so that the writer may in fact become better at writing or research. For myself, I believe my path a rather tame one compared to most and envision my work and this writing as an offering in the spirit of theoretical knowledge to like-minded people. As Rita Dove writes in *The Language of Life*, writing "for me means putting a name to a face, to memories. It means calling up emotions that I don't quite have a handle on, and beginning to understand them a little better by writing about them. But it also means reaching out and connecting with someone else" (124). While a certain degree of argument remains inevitable for every publication of this type, my intentions remain similar compared with Mrs. Dove's quote. My purpose in writing a creative dissertation was for the clarification of my own thought and to seek the reflections of other people who think about similar literary issues in similar or different ways.

Three poems come to mind from *Horizon-Level*; "A Prayer" and "Life Outside the

Whale,” which illustrate strong political themes. “A Prayer” attempts to address my spirituality, though from a solipsistic and detached stance. In writing the poem, I drew on *Psalms* and a book of Taoist poetry, though the sensibility expressed in these types of writings have been in my thoughts for many years. Originally published in 1997, “A Prayer” has been revised several times since. I wanted to keep a sense of compression and eventually formed three stanzas of eight to twelve lines each. The poem also contains a reference to the Dylan Thomas sonnet-sequence “Altar-wise by Owl-light.” “Life Outside the Whale,” addresses the issue of racism, of growing into seeing through this tendency, looking back from the present into one’s past. I have torturously revised, extended, compressed and struggled finding the appropriate words and structure for such a work. In his essay, “Leaping into Political Poetry,” (1971) Robert Bly says:

“When a poet succeeds in driving partway inward, he often develops new energy that carries him through the polished husk of the inner psyche that deflects most citizens and poets. Once inside the psyche he can speak of inward and political things with the same assurance. We can make a statement then that would not have been accepted” (*Talking All Morning* 98).

This has been true in the remote past as well as the recent. I have approached the problem with the awareness that this inwardness, the process of self-reflection is what produces good poetry about human emotion and the social life of communities. The idea remains no easy task. The sensitive issue for the poet concerns resisting didacticism as I believe a poet should attempt to find the right words for his time. If we take Wilbur seriously when he says in “Poetry and Happiness,” that the poet’s task is not to let anything be excluded by one’s sensibility, then everything is valid and meaningful. This reanimates in a sense much of what a poet may consider unimportant or inappropriate material. However, political poetry must not be forced. The work should develop just as naturally as any other subject or theme.

“Thanksgiving Day” addresses the issue spouse abuse. While this seems the most didactic of subjects, the problem still exists in society. I found the more suggestive, “Life Outside the Whale” easier, though in a sense, has a cryptic or obscure quality because of its subject matter. Thomas McGrath has written a wonderful essay about poetry and the role of language called, “Language, Power and Dream.” In that essay, he says a poet can risk too much reform of language and formal qualities. When this happens, poetry becomes a project for a single mode or way of writing. This narrows perception in numerous, negative ways. All the poet has to do is ‘find his or her real relationship to things’ (289). Making another person’s mode or language dependent on another’s can have a reductive effect. Appropriating the language possesses the potential for the obstruction of the inward path toward authentic expression. People naturally seek models, though the most effective means lies within them. This is how

the political poem facilitates a way toward a poet's own authentic voice and language. As McGrath says, "*Do Not Bandage These Wounds!*" (*Claims* 292). They become, metaphorically, the true means of seeing the self in the other person, of connecting with society after being driven in, perhaps alienated and isolated, though only in expression will their true worth be known.

Robert Bly discusses a technique in poetry called 'association.' This technique need not take the nature of intertextuality. He aligns this with an ancient method more closely focused on the inward qualities of human existence. Long ago, the deeper romanticism and spiritual movements encouraged cultural pluralism, an openness to the differences among theological and philosophical ideas of all cultures which also influenced freeing up of form in poetry. In association as a poetic device, ideas and things are likened or contrasted, sometimes juxtaposed or even listed in a series to clarify or complicate a central issue of the given work, even to further illustrate ideas. In "Looking for Dragon Smoke," he says this method has been used to identify or resolve ideas and emotions with those of a most resolute orientation in making a spiritual leap from objective catalog and subjectivity toward a humanly felt inwardness. "Association" in poetry has something in common with drawing on all poet's knowledge; history, math, science, politics, spirituality or economics of greater human experience so as to sort through the content of the individual, human consciousness and the unconscious and to form one's own expression.

Association exists not as mere listing or juxtaposition. Bly calls this technique the accumulation of leaps of consciousness, of association so that they open the inward poem toward commonality rather than implode toward utter subjectivity ("Looking for Dragon Smoke"). "Life Outside the Whale," and "A Prayer" poems of association which attempt to make sense of emotional and intellectual experience. These poems, as well as others in the collections, have that scope and concern, though whether they succeed is another matter. Part of the problem of intertextuality always concerns accessibility. Will the allusions present be read as allusions by the intended audience of the work? Probably not. The intertext of each of these blend the general allusion with a more personally involved, close reading, which may not find accessibility without the use of foot-notes. One's poetry risks becoming postmodern, philological gadgets.

Perhaps one of the most ambivalent concepts in the art of poetry also founded on the idea of associative technique remains T.S. Eliot's description of the "objective correlative." I say 'ambivalent' because this theory was for Eliot not merely a theory but a method for creating poetry. Eliot defines his idea in his essay from 1920 titled, "Hamlet and His Problems." He says:

"The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an "objective correlative"; in other words, a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of that *particular* emotion; such that when the external facts, which must terminate in sensory experience, are given, the emotion is

immediately evoked” (*Sacred Wood* 58).

Bly claims that Eliot’s concept of association was no different than that of which he was writing about in “Looking for Dragon Smoke,” though he claims that Eliot and Pound were no great innovators of the idea. The intuitive approach utilized in Bly’s poetics as well as many of the *Claims for Poetry* poets, was also something advocated in the later work of Eliot. In “The Music of Poetry,” he makes an almost passing remark that the “poem comes before the form, in the sense that a form grows out of the attempt of somebody to say something...” (*Major British Writers* 858). Poetry being a purely expressive medium, Eliot even expands his idea to include *all* art. For poetry to achieve its final cause of gestalt or the evocation of a sense of catharsis in the reader, or even some basic response, the material of poetry must find a sense of some inherent correlation between objects, experience or a situation. This deliberate formula is successful, says the practitioner, when the work ‘terminates in sensory experience,’ and rather than stating the emotion, it is merely “evoked.” In Levertov’s thought or those writing an intrinsic form, it is ‘discovered’ in a sense, in nature, and thus, organic.

Despite this difference in approaches to poetic process, Eliot’s deliberately conscious or formulaic, and the *Claims for Poetry* poet’s more intuitive throughout, there must be something said of the sheer fact of poetic experience, which I believe is a deeper and more profound experience than is often believed. Something must also be said of why such associations exist when they are found because at some point, even in the intuitive modes, human consciousness will enter and execute a judgment—possibly multiple times. Eliot writes in “Hamlet and His Problems” that

“The intense feeling, ecstatic or terrible, without an object or exceeding its object, is something which every person of sensibility has known...the ordinary person puts these feelings to sleep, or trims down his feelings to fit the business world; the artist keeps it alive by his ability to intensify the world to his emotions.”
(*Sacred Wood* 59)

This intensity of human experience is what the poet attempts to capture and form into a work of art through poetic process. The emotions and associations however, remain shaped, consciously shaped after the intuitive aspect expels its energy in producing the bulk of material being formed. This judicious process after the fact is mostly a conscious, though poetic act. Still, we are also aware that the poet can ‘re-enter,’ so-to-speak, the state of mind through which they used to create the beginning of the work, the rough draft. It is in this condition that the poet returns to the work multiple times and makes new decisions about any aspect of the work in question: the poet revises. Regardless of how mechanical this entire process seems, that initial

experience and state of mind are forever connected and a part of each other. Being able to perceive that initial experience is what makes the poet a poet. There is always the essence of aesthetic experience at the core of what the poet feels, it is the thrall of life, of mystery and genuine wonder of the universe that drives the creative spirit. The quest for knowledge was a primary trait of Romantic and then Post-Romantic poetry. When the spirit of the work or ideas fueling the work change, when the material or other aspects change, we must look for different ways to describe or talk about the work because the nature of the work changes.

“Life Outside the Whale” illustrates an attempt at associative technique. The title designates through allusion, the condition of living life in honesty of political expression. Since racism, fascism and narcotics abuse were so common, I chose a title that I felt represented standing against these things, even if for a while, the only place this expression existed was in my notebook. Most academics recall the fatwa that was issued against Salman Rushdie for his authoring the book, *The Satanic Verses*. This book was interpreted by Islamic extremists as blasphemy against the sacred Koran and the Islamic religion. Because of the similarity between his situation of living in hiding and mine of more-or-less speaking out, I chose a beginning point which was more a sketch of the basic idea of the mind searching in terms of natural images, which gradually moves inner, toward the expression of the counter-attitude. Rushdie’s essay, “Outside the Whale” is the actual origin of that title. That writing was his response to a George Orwell essay titled, “Inside the Whale,” published in 1940. The main reason for doing this though is that the political voice issuing a statement of counter-thought opposed to such common norms is equivalent to the allegorical life of Jonah, who resisted his sacred calling and was swallowed by the great fish, usually interpreted as a symbol of indecision and inner turmoil—literally being enveloped by your problems. The immediate address of the overt sexual assault implications and the political association implied through the underlying fascism. The memory associations give way to natural images and then to remembered things that people said to me; “What you don’t know won’t hurt you,” was especially one of those statements I would often hear. The poem moves on in a self-meditative mode to address this experience. The rest of the poem contains the literary allusions which contrast how other life decisions made by influential poets and express my own different stance against such negative, political influences. I had wanted to write a poem like this for years, though I never decided as to how my poem should take shape or specifically what I would write about since this idea could be approached in a very didactic and arbitrary way. I decided to establish drafts based on memory from personal experience and develop the poem into the larger context. Even where I come from, some people like to play both sides of the issue. I think it’s important for a poet to remain truthful in their expressions and that the work should fairly conform to the life as it is lived.

The middle of the poem shifts back toward a shared, cultural reality and the things

that a person learns when they study their regional history or genealogy. The fifth through tenth stanzas resume the idea of political realities. I linked the previous ideas with the natural cycles and larger human truths. I wanted to express the truth of my experience without pathos or self-absorption, without 'subject-seeking' (Sadoff). This kind of self-definition is not easy. I think it's meaningful to point out that in thinking historically that even in 1979, there existed in all that supposed, cultural openness the same type of Klan networks as there existed in the South in the 1950s and 1960s.

The latter stanzas directly try an extension of association through intertext which doesn't necessarily implicate an allusion to the politics of those writers or the judgments of poems. I have made the attempt at focusing upon the idea of the absurdity of political extremes. All the poems I have alluded to in the end, the novel and the essay, concern this idea of how pathos can create alienation and contribute to other social problems. I think the poem is successful, though in a somewhat unpoetic way. Since there exists only the undeveloped context of the speaker and no literally denotated situation, time or place, this one attempts the more outward from the inward with the great, sweeping arm, like Bly mentions in his essay, "What the Image Can Do" (38). In my opinion, poems that draw strongly from a poet's autobiography possess the quality of becoming more meaningful or unique if one becomes familiar with the body of a poet's thought and work.

All the allusions within the poem serve as judgments on the issue of racism and self-expression. One of the burdens of Enlightenment thought concerns the idea that science has improved humanity's quality of life, though destroyed the old symbolic constructs utilized in understanding or expressing other types of human experience; religion, art and political life, for example. How important is that questioning if human social and political relationships are not healthy? Dylan Thomas's, "Windmills Turning Wrong Directions Underground" expresses those destructive aspects of Modernism. I coupled this with an allusion to the Elizabeth Bishop poem, "The Man-Moth," as my intention was to use these works as symbolic rejections of the underworld, or what many would call the unseen influence of movers and shakers behind the political forces which attempt to corrupt American life and society. The line I allude to from Sylvia Plath remains very important—another judgment concerning the use of knowledge, the power of knowledge. I conclude with an allusion to T.S. Eliot's idea that first works are usually bitter—in disagreement with the previous generation or they challenge some social or political issue in a very aggressive way. I realize that in drawing so many literary allusions that I risk the very subjectivism Bly and other *Claims for Poetry* poets warn so strongly against in poetry.

"A Prayer" exists as one of the spiritual statements of the first collection, although was not written as a judgment or summation of belief. This three-stanza poem remains one of the most textually 'loaded' in the collection. At the time, I was reading Psalms and wanted to create a poem that illustrated two things; the idea of place, as I have been influenced by a certain aspect of my remembered, geographical past and

my attitude toward knowledge. I felt a need in this work to convey my attitude toward the power of place. Specific settings remain a constant image in several of the poems; “Leaf and Tree,” “Loam Bearing” and “Wind on the Water.” I wanted to express this importance in a way that was faithful to my own time and experience. Second, I wanted to combine my interest in a certain attitude which can never be fully communicated. This attitude or feeling, although I associate it with a Taoist mindset or mood, knowledge and implications of inward sensibility became the real issue. How does that knowledge have meaning in my life? Only I can answer the question. This poem characterizes a response in the form of prayer. The poem is not the product of syncretistic faith.

Denise Levertov’s essay, “On the Edge of Darkness: What is Political Poetry?” sets forth six traits of this theme in the writing of poetry. The political poem is ‘timeless and natural’ because she links its evolution to the epic poem, which in any culture is a major statement of identity and purpose. The skepticism which many project upon political or social material in poetry is a fallacious attitude, a modern one, and because of this, a poem should not always find its limitation as a private expression of emotion. Political poetry in the United States is most often written by those most affected by such issues. Sometimes political poetry suffers in quality because poets rely too often on the emotive element of the issue alone, a pathos of the message, the heinous nature of incident or rely on the work’s message to justify the work. This can add to the quality of “concreteness,” only when each element achieves equally good quality. Poetry can affect the course of political understanding, reaching people who may otherwise never read about a given issue or another way of thinking about something. To be political, a poem must express a poetic emotion—the same qualities as any other poem.

The only political stance I take, aside from personal, democratic, cultural pluralism, would characterize an openness towards intellectuality. A poetics should inspire one to set forth thoughts which illustrate quality of consciousness and clarify artistic goals. A poet’s realizations, however different, should involve reflection through some meaningful mode of self-conscious discourse. Seamus Heaney writes in “Feeling Into Words,” that poetry is an act of discovery and recovery, a

“revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds, where the buried shard has an importance that is not diminished by the importance of the buried city; poetry as a dig, a dig for finds that end up being plants” (Norton 2844).

Critical writing and research that refuses the amorphous political machinery of certain forms of Postmodernism is a beginning toward a rejection of such destructive forces of power and influence. Poetry and discourse should exist as modes which deepen and

develop human understanding. This does not necessarily mean that art should serve a moral purpose, even though a certain morality remains inevitable within works which illustrate expressions against social injustice or like attitudes. A poet's intelligence in the act of forming discourse in today's environment is the very resistance of meaninglessness and relativistic apathy. Regardless of the political indifferences of our age, the existence of a given work should not be 'art for art's sake,' even though it is quite easy to reduce poetry to this neutral condition. Emotion and thought inspire one to write, therefore motive should involve an equal amount of thought and reason.

Works Cited

- Dove, Rita. *The Language of Life*. Anchor, 1996. pp.
- Bly, Robert. *Talking All Morning*. The University of Michigan Press, 1990.
- . "Leaping Up into Political Poetry: An Essay." *Talking*, pp. 95-105.
- . "What the Image Can Do." Hall, *Claims*, pp. 38-49.
- . "Looking for Dragon Smoke." *Seventies*, no.1, spring 1972, pp. 3-8.
- Eliot, T. S. *The Sacred Wood and Major Early Essays*. Dover, 1998.
- . "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Sacred*, pp. 27-33.
- . "Hamlet and His Problems." *Sacred*, pp. 55-59.
- . "The Music of Poetry." *Great British Writers*. Enlarged ed., edited by Elizabeth Drew, Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1959, pp. 851-859.
- Hall, Donald, editor. *Claims for Poetry*. University of Michigan Press, 1995.
- Heaney, Seamus. "Feeling into Words." *The Longman Anthology of British Literature volume 2c: The Twentieth Century*, edited by David Damrosch, Kevin Dettmar and Jennifer Wicke. Addison-Wesley, 1999. pp. 2844-2857.
- McGrath, Thomas. "Language, Power and Dream." Hall, *Claims*, pp. 286-295.
- . "Poetry and Happiness." Hall, *Claims*, pp. 469-489.
- "Psalms." *Harper-Collins Study Bible*.
- Sadoff, Ira. "Neo-Formalism: A Dangerous Nostalgia." *The American Poetry Review*, January/February. 1990.
- Thomas, Dylan. "Altar-wise by Owl-light" and "Windmills Turning Wrong Directions Underground." Jones, *Poems*, pp. 116-121 and pp. 36-37.

Intro to Philosophy

Ed Higgins

We now live in post-Postmodern Absurdist fear of course, says our smiling Prof. That's the price we pay he tells us: because of all those existence-precedes-essence philosophers in our text who may have put you to sleep while reading this week's assignment. He's often jokey like this. Most of us laugh politely, those who aren't dosing through late afternoon Intro to Philosophy 127B from our balding, bearded forty-something Ph.D. philosopher professor—with the shadow of middle-age mortality shuddering his ennui loins. Half the students in our class suspected Dr. Contingency, as I like to call him, is banging the smiley, brainy, svelte blonde who always sits in the front row. And often lingers after class for clarification on some dense arcane point or other. But then half the males in our class have their hormonal phenomenological essence squirming every time Jennifer walks up to her regular front row seat. Meanwhile, I'm my usually brain-blinked self with my afternoon eyes clicking like dual metronomes overdosed on caffeine. My pendulum swinging eyes nonetheless alight on the perfect complement to my own raging phenomenological hormones. Two rows over from where I sit is Susan. She, too, seems equally bored with Heidegger-et-Kierkegaard-et-Dr. Contingency; she yawns but not too obviously. We exchange smiles. So now I'm ontologically hoping she's wondering if I might be her existential quantification for the coming weekend. Lust's expression of ultimacy, as I smile over at her again, anticipating some deep theoretical chat when class lets out.

Interview with Ron Silliman by Lepota Cosmo

You attended San Francisco State University. What are your experiences with San Francisco Renaissance?

I should note, to start with, that I don't believe a San Francisco Renaissance truly existed. A Berkeley Renaissance did exist in the very late 1940s and early 1950s, centered around Robert Duncan, Robin Blaser and Jack Spicer, but also including Mary Fabilli, Landis Everson, Philip K Dick, Rod McKuen and some others. But the term got imported and translated into San Francisco Renaissance as something of a joke, I think, as well as a means of distinguishing those poets who predated the Beat scene of 1956-7. Jack Gilbert used to joke that the Beat revolution could never have occurred if Robert Duncan had not gone to Majorca during that exact moment, because he would not have allowed it, and Duncan himself certainly concurred. So for several years it meant "pre-Beat" and also to some degree anti-Beat as well. And yet Lawrence Ferlinghetti ends up fitting that pre-Beat definition quite well. But there had been a continuous poetry community dating back to the days of George Sterling and Ina Coolbrith in the 1920s. Kenneth Rexroth, who really was the poet who first made the important connection of San Francisco literary culture with Asian writing, arrived in San Francisco the same week that Sterling died, and the scene that was to become the so-called renaissance really were the writers who were his friends and peers. Kenneth Patchen, William Everson (Brother Antoninus), Madeline Gleason, Ruth Weiss, Tom Parkinson, and finally this wave of poets from Berkeley drawn by the presence of a scene, as well as by gay bars that had existed since the end of prohibition. By the time I first attended San Francisco State in 1966, the renaissance term had been loosened and broadened to include any non- or anti-academic poet in the San Francisco Area, so someone like Michael McClure -- clearly a Beat poet -- was always being called that.

Spicer died the year before that happened, and I never met him, although there is a description of a party at the Berkeley Poetry Conference in Spicer's biography that indicates that he and I must have been in the same room once, although I did not know it at the time. I first learned of him at a memorial reading given the week of his birthday in 1966 at the Shakespeare and Company Bookstore in Berkeley (it may still have been called the Rambam at the time). Blaser read *Book of Magazine Verse*, which is still one of the ur-texts of my imagination, but he was already getting ready to move to Vancouver, which he did along with George Stanley and Stan Persky, other key members of the Spicer circle. Before Stanley moved up there I got to know him slightly through Gilbert (who had been a member of Spicer's Magick Workshop at the San Francisco Public Library, as well as a protege both of Stephen Spender and Gerald Stern.

Duncan and I always had a complicated, somewhat difficult relationship. I am certain

that he thought I was presumptuous, and I always felt that he distrusted straight men (albeit with some good reason), but we often had deep conversations, especially during the times when we would ride the old F bus from Berkeley to San Francisco. He was the person who insisted to Richard Baker-roshi that I should run a reading series at the Tassajara Bakery in the Haight, but he also wrote a letter that he read at several public occasions blasting me for suggesting that the arrest and potential trial of Lenore Kandel's *The Love Book* represented an important moment for civil libertarians because here was a text that fully deserved the protections of the US Constitution, but which could not be defended as good or great writing, which was the hedge that had always been played in other literature-as-pornography cases, from *Ulysses* to *Howl*.

On the other hand, there were lots of those writers with whom I had very little interaction. My only conversation with Lawrence Ferlinghetti in my entire life was in Buffalo one day when I was palling around with Robert Creeley and Ferlinghetti also happened to be in town.

Let me also note that while I was at SF State, Spicer's death was the tragedy that hung over everybody, and that George Stanley's writing of that period was seen by a lot of those poets as on a par with -- maybe even better than -- Duncan's. But folks like Philip Whalen and Gary Snyder were mostly not around (I saw Whalen read a few times but only met him once at McClure's when we were performing a gagaku music session along with Michael Palmer and the composer Chris Gaynor (whose name I might have misspelled). Snyder and I corresponded a little when I was the editor of the *Socialist Review*, but the one time we talked in person was at Josephine Miles' house near the Berkeley conference.

The only one I actually studied with was William Everson, a course on "creativity" that he team-taught with the dancer Anna Halprin and composer Charles Amirkhanian. I still use some of the things Everson said in his class whenever I am teaching.

Form is of interest only to the extent that it empowers liberation.

"Wild form" uses Jack Kerouac. What are your favorite predecessors among SF?

Kerouac was a brilliant, but brief flame and burned himself out very quickly with alcohol. As did Spicer, although Jack's writing got stronger as it got worse, quite the opposite of Kerouac. *Visions of Cody* is the key to Kerouac's work, a systematic reinvention of the novel (not unlike what Kathy Acker would do in the 1970s with her early novels). Spicer's work from *Heads of the Town Up to the Aether* to the end of his life is utterly amazing.

Robert Duncan, from *The Opening of the Field* to *Roots & Branches* to *Bending the Bow* was the unquestioned master of poetry in San Francisco, and the other utterly

essential figure for me was George Oppen, the Objectivist poet who lived the last decades of his life in the city he had been raised in. And, in this context, I should note also that Michael McClure was a fearless poet, and someone who can be read with great value for both how he uses science in his writing, and also his pacing of detail. Michael Palmer is the only poet I know of who comes anywhere close to that sense of pacing.

You worked as engaged lobbyist do you prefer to see poetry as active form?

The poets who have been important to me, from Pound, Williams, Zukofsky and Oppen to Duncan and many other of the New Americans all have always presumed poetry to be essentially political, in the most literal sense of being addressed to the Polis, the city, by which they mean readers-as-citizens. In this sense, William's *Spring and All* and Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* are completely agreed.

Could you say something on The Age of Huts [knowing it is produced in swivel years of Language poetry]

In Rousseau's original model, *The Age of Huts* is the one that occurs between The Age of Innocence and the Age of Experience. The quartet of poems that begin the lifelong writing that is *Ketjak* occupy precisely that space in my own life, after the early poems, but before I had arrived at any sense of true maturity as a poet.

Who came up with name of language poets?

It was jointly created by Steve Abbott, an editor of *Poetry Flash*, and Alan Soldofsky, an academic poet who had been an undergraduate at Iowa City back when Robert Grenier, Bob Perelman, Ray DiPalma and Barrett Watten were all grad students there. Steve wanted to put together a special issue of his tabloid on our writing and Alan needed a name that he could use so that he dismiss us as decadent narcissists. Ironically, we share this feature of having been named from the outside by people with no particular sympathy for our work with such movements as the Beats and the Fauvist painters.

Why exactly language, is it [for] theoretical, or lingual value of poetry. is it break up with lyrical or light poetry. was the language something new in that moment. (Have you thought that language could replace poetry, by putting language poetry to lyrical poetry for instance.)

Language is to poetry what sound is to music or paint and light to painting. The original

impulse was a materialist one born, I would argue, by our experience collectively coming of age during the Vietnam War. We felt that the illusions that made the American Exceptionalism that could "destroy villages in order to save them" during that conflict was no different, really, from the un-self-critical gush that accommodated far too much of the New American Poetry.

I never felt that even short, self-contained poems by so-called language poets were lyrical in that sense. I do not think of Rae Armantrout as a lyric poet and think it's a fundamental misreading to take her work that way. It has so many layers of thought and analysis going into it.

I think that your fragments, inner structures, created poetry within the phrase, making lingual poetry possible, and [simply or just] creating lyrics in prose.

Is Universe extension of Alphabet?

The large frame of my project I call *Ketjak*, of which the first poem in *The Age of Huts* is just one part. But I think of each section -- *The Age of Huts*, *Tjanting*, *the Alphabet* and *Universe* -- as functioning rather like nested Russian dolls. Rather than going from beginning to end, for example as Pound's numbered *Cantos* do, it proceeds from inside to outside, toward an ever-expanding arc. *Universe* in this sense is a verb, not a noun.

With which poets of Language you find most associated

There are too many to really spell this out. Rae Armantrout, Barrett Watten, Kit Robinson, Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian and David Bromige are all poets without whom my own poetry could not exist.

Have you best friend in Language? What particular work have you co-authored worth highlighting?

I used to say that Rae Armantrout was the sister I never had until, at age 50, I suddenly discovered my sister Nancy Bryant. But she is the one with whom I communicate almost every single day. Not long ago, I had an assistant who spent the better part of a summer doing nothing but printing out and organizing some 5,000 emails we had traded over the past 15 or so years.

Engines, in *The Alphabet*, co-written with Rae, is the one work in my main project that is a collaboration with another.

In the American Tree you use in title : Language, Realism, Thought, why realism? Do

you believe in realism in poetry?

Yes, I do. I very much am about reportage and documentation, in the sense, say, of a Charles Reznikoff, But also in the sense of Italian cinema after the Second World War.

Is that realism proactive?

Obviously.

And what is relation of thought to labels and super active society..?

Labels are boxes that can be useful for sorting, but they are only that. The specificity of the material world is not to be denied.

I would like to emphasize The New Sentence, Legend, What, Lit, Sunset Debris you wrote...

You have come up with the concept of new sentence.

Could you explain concept of sentence in poetry?

Historically, the defining feature of poetry has been the line, a unit that originally was predicated upon sound, specifically the recurrence of sound or rhyme. Stanzas did not really exist until poetry had a primary existence as a print phenomenon, but print rendered the use of rhyme literally unnecessary, suggesting an obsolescence of the line, which has been increasingly a nostalgic presence in the poem unless organized otherwise. Which is why the line in free verse shortened greatly during the 20th century, and why certain poets -- Olson, Duncan, early Dorn, Blackburn -- took it upon themselves to create a new, speech-based more complex line. Olson's longest lines -- which almost always take place at the beginning of his poems -- are marvels of architecture. But even this is still predicated upon sound, which linguists from Saussure forward have insisted upon as arbitrary from one language to the next. Look at all the variants of a dog's bark from language to language. But since Baudelaire first had his creative misreading of Arsene Houssaye, the sentence and all the other units of writing (as distinct from speech) have been available to writers. The prose poem is one of the three great poetic innovations of the 19th century -- the others being dramatic monologue and free verse. It was my generation's fortune to note that in English the uses of the prose poem had barely been explored by earlier US poets who had incorporated only one thread of what already was a rich tradition in France. It was as if the whole of French poetry extended from Max Jacob to Max Jacob, with no recognition that the likes of Perse, Ponge, Segalen, Butor or Roubaud ever existed.

Who has right to define verse. Verse is not the purpose, if not the concept, poetry

*is purpose. Seeing predefined verse is just as seeing predefined poetry.
Poetry is not technically, or theoretically predefined. Poetry is not prejudice.
Poetry is manner of everything.*

You are right, basically. Every community has the obligation -- not only the right -- to define what poetry can be for them. A poet who keeps her texts to herself in a notebook is every bit as legitimate as somebody who publishes in the *New Yorker* every year. Once a tradition sinks in roots, it seldom goes away. There are oral poetries specific to the US African-American community, but also to the fishing industry of Oregon and to the last remaining cowboys across the American west. It is much more interesting to examine what the functional terms and conditions of such poetry might be. Is identity an aesthetic, or can it be one? You bet!

Could you define yourself as poet of everything.

That is so global as to sound meaningless to me. More precisely, I try to find those things less often commented upon, the forgotten and unseen. I've joked that I'm the poet laureate of lint, of accumulations of dust behind the couch, but in fact I take that joke very seriously. We have just seen what can happen in an election when a large portion of the electorate has become invisible to the elites of the two coasts. I straddle those worlds, which gives me some advantages.

I believe that you created new lingual verse [or logical verse] in poetry and by that created new kind of poetry, wide and non-formal poetry of real lingual poem, lingual reality that is liable to poetry.

Reality [that] is not potent to poetry?

I am not sure what you are asking here. In an important sense, I have created nothing other than a number of lines (and paragraphs) of verse. I was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time, so as to be part of something that could only have occurred at the community level. Nobody can take credit for language poetry, so-called, not even Robert Grenier. It was something that occurred in our midst, but it was the collectivity that proved defining.

Poetry is aesthetic style, aesthetic obligation, you agree?

I often think of poetry as philosophy in action, and as something that demands intense training in listening and reading the world.

"American Tree", is one of the most important contemporary American anthologies, on what idea and criteria you assorted?

I tried very much to focus on the community aspect of it all. The anthology focused upon three physical communities, in New York, the Bay Area (San Francisco and Berkeley, with a smidgen of Silicon Valley and Santa Cruz), and Washington, DC. I insisted that everybody needed to have appeared in three key publications of the community and not be previously associated with an established school of poetics. And I asked everyone who should be in it as well. There were poets -- Larry Eigner, Robert Creeley, Bill Berkson to name three -- who would have qualified had they not been identified thoroughly with different schools of poetry. And there three poets who did qualify whom I omitted for various reasons -- Curtis Faville and David Gitin had both, at that time, stopped publishing altogether -- and I mistook Abigail Child as a filmmaker who wrote, which was an obvious (and no doubt sexist) mistake on my part. And I included one poet, Tom Beckett, who really did not fit the criteria because he was not in any of the three geographical communities and had no opportunity to partake of the important face-to-face interactions that most of the other poets took as vital. In a sense, Tom is there really to represent a broader possibility for that writing than could be contained in just three metropolises (already Michael Davidson and Rae Armantrout had moved to San Diego, for example). I have sometimes thought about poets who in those days took themselves very much to be critics of language poetry -- Leslie Scalapino, Beverly Dahlen, Jerry Estrin, Joan Rettalack, for example -- but who over the decades now seem quite thoroughly within a broader arc of it that would not have been plausible without their own contributions, critical as they were. But I can imagine Jerry Estrin howling at seeing himself characterized as a language poet in his own obituary in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. So in that sense Tom Beckett serves as an important reminder or marking post in that collection -- one that I caught a lot of heat for, but which I've never regretted.

Michigan Quarterly Review May 2, 2017

<http://www.michiganquarterlyreview.com/2017/05/on-writing-michigan-an-interview-with-travis-mulhauser/>

<https://www.facebook.com/MichiganQuarterlyReview/>

I also posted the interview to Twitter and tagged Travis.

Interview of Travis Mulhauser by Carol Smallwood

My admiration of Travis Mulhauser's writing began almost 20 years ago when we were creative writing students at Central Michigan University: he was young, I was auditing classes as a senior citizen after editing the 3rd. edition of *Michigan Authors* (Michigan Association for Media in Education, 1993) as a librarian). He already had an enviable style and I was happy when I heard he had gone on to the University of North Carolina-Greensborough.

Just a short time ago I ran across him in the 2017 list of Michigan Notable Books from the Library of Michigan for his first novel, *Sweetgirl* (Ecco/Harper Collins, 2016); finding many rave reviews, I got in contact with his agent about doing an interview. After reading his work I saw that his writing had taken more of a flavor of another writer associated with Michigan—a writer also familiar with the setting for *Sweetgirl*, Ernest Hemingway. Living not far away, I had taken the first of the annual Fall Hemingway tours of his Walloon Lake family summer home, the Horton Bay General Store, and relevant Petoskey places.

It was a great pleasure to get in touch with Travis again through an interview. *Greetings from Cutler County: A Novella and Stories* (The University of Michigan, 2005) also uses the setting of northern Michigan.

Smallwood:

You are a graduate of North Central Michigan College and Central Michigan University. In “Eddie Bauer Girls” (in *Greetings from Cutler County: A Novella & Stories*. University of Michigan Press, 2005) appears: “On Mitchell Street alone there was the public library, JC Penney’s....” Ernest Hemingway knew the library well and stayed in Petoskey a while after returning from World War I. Has he had an influence on your fiction? Your uncompromising bent reminds me of his Nick Adams stories. If he hasn’t what are two or three writers that have?

I love Hemingway and read everything he wrote as I was deciding to become a writer myself. He influenced me on every level—particularly the ability to use clean, simple sentences to address complex ideas.

Hemingway, I think, would have done even better as a writer now. I’m nearly certain the character limit and self-promotional elements of Twitter, particularly, would have been ripe ground for Papa. Which is probably sacrilege to say, but as much as he moved writing from the Victorian to the Modern I think we have to acknowledge some of his influence in our current obsession with quick hit social media.

And his biggest influence on me is probably that issue of time. People don’t have much of it and I don’t want to waste it—just as I don’t want others to waste mine. My

first priority is to tell the story well and completely, followed shortly by the aim of getting there quickly.

In all honestly, part of that probably comes from my mom as well, who drove everybody nuts with her constant frenzied work—both in her professional and home life. I remember her telling me it was most important to do a good job, but once the job was done well, could you also find a way to get to that end result more quickly?

Smallwood:

NPR wrote about your novel: *“Sweetgirl works on so many levels, it’s difficult to know how to classify it... hilarious, heartbreaking and true, a major accomplishment from an author who looks certain to have an impressive career ahead of him.”* That is great praise and well deserved! Please share what you are now writing (I know many writers prefer not to)—or give us some idea of what your daily writing schedule involves.

Well, I’m writing about Northern Michigan as usual and one thing I am comfortable disclosing right now is that it will be set primarily in the summer and that the natural world will once again play a significant role.

I think that good writers can create a fully-developed, lived-in physical space for any location and time and I consider myself lucky that I grew up in, and am able now to write about a place as physically interesting and beautiful as northern Michigan. As a writer, it’s a great place to hang out in and explore and as much as anything that continues to drive my interest in the landscape. I simply like being there.

Smallwood:

“The perfect balance of humor and heartache... a masterful debut... as wise as it is suspenseful, as funny as it is tragic... written with guts, grit, and grace, Sweetgirl is the book you want to keep you company on a cold winter’s night.” (Ploughshares, *Best Books of the New Year*). How did you achieve the very difficult balance that a good novelist achieves? You published novella and stories before and how did you manage a novel?

My process is very non-linear and frustrating and I wouldn’t recommend it to anybody, but since you asked here it is:

I usually start with an image and work backwards or forwards from that spot to determine the importance of the image and/or the story that surrounds it. In *Sweetgirl* it was the image of a teenage girl in a hooded sweatshirt discovering an abandoned baby—and with that image was the sense that the girl was actually in more danger than the baby and the story was essentially trying to figure out if they could help each other find safety, and possibly, if they were lucky, eventually a better life.

The frustrating part for me is that I take a lot of wrong turns working out or in from that image. As an example—when I started writing *Sweetgirl* I became too swept up with the baby's parents. How the baby had become abandoned in the first place. I created entire narratives that ended up being completely unnecessary and that never appeared in the finished version of the book because I was trying to explain to myself how somebody could abandon an infant and on some level I think I was trying to soften the story for myself. I didn't want to write about an addict that passed out and left their baby to freeze by an open window, but in truth that was what I needed to be writing about because it was what felt true once I finally hit on it. So my process becomes exploring an image and trying to train myself to hear what rings true and false as I write and attempt to fill the narrative out.

Smallwood:

The Midwest is often regarded the place between California and New York as far as writing goes but D. H. Lawrence gave words to a vital concept: "Every people is polarized in some locality, which is home, the homeland. Different places on the face of the earth have different vital influence, different vibration, different chemical exhalation, different polarity with different stars: call it what you like. But the spirit of place is a great reality." What are you finding even if you were only born in 1976 about the importance of place for a writer?

Wow, that's a great quote...I don't know what to add to that except to say that my favorite praise comes from Michigan and/or Midwest readers and writers...when I do events in Michigan and people tell me I hit some thread of truth or resonance for them that really, really matters to me and I've been fortunate to get a lot of that feedback from those readers and it basically makes my day every time.

Smallwood:

You had a collection of stories published while still a college undergrad with a Bruce Springsteen quote about dreams and am very fortunate to have kept the 1999 autographed copy. Please tell readers about *Corvallis Road*.

My friend KJ Stevens and I put out a chapbook of stories between our junior and senior years of college...we did everything ourselves...including the actual binding and it was really, really fun. It basically kept us occupied for an entire summer and likely helped us avoid a good deal of trouble. We did it, in part, to send to other writers because we were stupid and thought they would be impressed and write us back and introduce us to their agents—you have to understand how little two kids from northern Michigan know about how the publishing world works—and while nobody ever wrote us back it was fun to put those in the mail and have some hope that they would!

Smallwood:

What advice could you give to writers thinking of giving up, not finding their way?

I would say that everybody thinks about giving up at some point or another, and that you shouldn't. But more to the point, after you don't give up enough times you stop even taking the thoughts about giving up seriously—you sort of realize that you're trapped, which is ironically a very freeing realization to have.

Smallwood:

How did you select a girl as your main character? Wasn't it difficult as a male writer?

It wasn't that difficult, honestly. I think part of that was not really thinking of Percy as a girl. She was just Percy. I felt like I knew her and so I was very comfortable writing her. I taught community college for years in Johnston County, North Carolina, and I think reading all those essays really helped me understand how Percy might view certain situations—it wasn't anything specific as much as it was a sense of familiarity with girls around that age that gave me the confidence to write in her voice.

If I was conscious of anything with Percy it was to present her selflessness and strength. As a teacher I had so many great students who dealt with such difficult, complicated issues with remarkable grace and I wanted to capture some of that in her character. I think so much of our media right now is dismissive of young people. We think they're all about selfie-sticks and developing personal brands, but the vast majority of kids I worked with were really remarkable human beings.

More about Percy is available on:

<http://www.travismulhauser.com/about-percy-james.html>

Travis Mulhauser was born and raised in northern Michigan. His novel, *Sweetgirl*, (Ecco/Harper Collins, 2016) [https://www.amazon.com/Sweetgirl-Novel-Travis-](https://www.amazon.com/Sweetgirl-Novel-Travis-Mulhauser/dp/0062400827/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

[Mulhauser/dp/0062400827/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0? encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=](https://www.amazon.com/Sweetgirl-Novel-Travis-Mulhauser/dp/0062400827/ref=tmm_hrd_swatch_0?encoding=UTF8&qid=&sr=)

has been listed for The Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize, was an Indie Next Pick, and named one of Ploughshares Best Books of the New Year. Travis is one of the 2017 Michigan Notable Book

Authors: http://www.michigan.gov/libraryofmichigan/0,2351,7-160-54574_39583-402086--,00.html

Kierkegaard or Nietzsche

Theodore Sabo

1

It is said that Søren Kierkegaard is portrayed in the young drunken principal character of Hans Christian Andersen's novel *Shoes of Fortune*; but one cannot blame Andersen who was often the butt of Kierkegaard's wit in the circle they frequented for a time. Walter Lowrie notes that while Andersen was engaged in his short fictional autobiography "The Ugly Duckling" Kierkegaard, whose work always intimates the faery tale, was writing his in the parable of the wild goose who becomes a tame goose in order to teach tame geese to fly. In 1843, the year the second edition of Andersen's faery tales came out, Kierkegaard published his first major work, *Either/Or*. In it one mourns, as with Coleridge and Arnold, the death of a poet and the birth of a philosopher or, as Kierkegaard himself would have said, the passing from the aesthetic to the ethical and from the ethical to the religious. Each of these succeeding stages he thought of, like Hegel, as a synthesis of the preceding: the aesthetic is indifferent to good and evil; the ethical chooses good; the religious transcends the ethical, a point strikingly illustrated for Kierkegaard in Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. The stages that concerned him most were the aesthetic and the religious. The distinction Nietzsche made between Dionysus and Christ, Kierkegaard made between the aesthetic and the religious. The religious stage is characterized by misery and self-torment, by bearing one's cross, by resigning the joys of earthly existence. The aesthetic stage is characterized by a joy in the temporal world and the cherishing of earthly things; here one is on the same ground as Zarathustra who beseeched his followers to remain faithful to the earth and resist those who spoke of the otherworldly hopes which for him reflected a fundamental hatred of life.

Whatever Kierkegaard's reasons, and notwithstanding his scattered late aesthetic writings, in general he passed from the aesthetic to the religious, choosing

Christ over Dionysus. It is possible that a religious education, such as he underwent for ten years, inhibits the ability to appreciate art; perhaps all theological and polemical writers are failed artists. Nietzsche, another failed artist, shared Kierkegaard's preoccupation with religion, but while Kierkegaard was attracted to its morbidity, its Cowperesque terror and psychological unhealthiness, Nietzsche was repelled by them; and yet, paradoxically, it was Nietzsche and not Kierkegaard who lost his sanity. Kierkegaard's words about genius apply more to Nietzsche than to himself: "Genius is like the thunderstorm which comes up against the wind, like a conflagration which the wind blows into a fiercer flame."

It is often helpful to contrast Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, and not only because both were powerful minds trapped in the bodies of ascetics. Nietzsche had the courage to say what other men can only dream of saying; his chief enemies were the old who, by holding out the certainty of eternity, wreck the lives of the young in time. Yet one recalls his restraint in waiting until his final creative year for his most outspoken utterances and remembers his liking of the Old Testament which would have been almost impossible had he spent more of his youth in a religious environment; his occasional commendation of Jesus, whom he viewed as sublime, sickly, and childlike, was solely a reaction against his own violent polemics.

There are times when Nietzsche comes less as a thunderstorm than as a cool morning breeze and he is prepared to accept all of him because, for all Nietzsche's praise of cruelty, he attacked what was cruel in religion. On reflection his disciple may find the worship of the unadulterated life that he constantly approved too poignantly naive, and his only recourse will be to follow Wagner into the dimly lit land of pagan myths and knightly legends, the land of faery tales that shows us more fully than anything else the wonder of mortality.

I used to think that Nietzsche and Wagner represented two kinds of paganism, the one youthful and exuberant, the other older and wiser, and that the fact Wagner was born before Nietzsche meant nothing: each would have followed his chosen path

regardless of his age. Now I am reluctant to place Nietzsche in the circle of the pagans. I have narrowed my definition of paganism to embrace only a nostalgia for old mythologies and polytheisms, a definition which makes it possible to include even Tolkien under the category, and view Nietzsche's as little more than a hopeful humanistic philosophy, one best reflected in the early episodes of Delius's *Village Romeo and Juliet*. I once thought also that the symphonies of Carl Nielsen were a synthesis of what I fancied as the two kinds of paganisms. It is true that Nielsen's is a more life-clinging art than that of Wagner or Sibelius, but it has the same pagan yearning. When I heard the last movement of the Third Symphony I could not doubt that Nielsen was, in a happy phrase, a worshipper of Nietzsche, but the second movement, with its wordless dialogue between baritone and soprano, can convey only a pagan mystery or at the most Adam and Eve on the day of their creation, without guile or sin, sending forth the birds that perch at the ends of their extended and upraised arms, birds whom Adam has named with his own lips, into the newly fashioned universe.

2

In Nietzsche one has life-affirming summer; in Kierkegaard he glimpses Easter and its holier preoccupations. Kierkegaard was perhaps more cowardly than Nietzsche, perhaps wiser. His father ruled the family with a melancholy severity that was the offspring of his youthful hedonism. He was one of those because of whom God's name is blasphemed among the Gentiles; so at least he became to his youngest son, and yet he exercised greater moral courage in revealing his own childhood blasphemy than he could have in refusing to let go of his patriarchal rule.

Kierkegaard always wanted to be a clergyman and because he never became one he attacked the clergy with an unremitting hatred in his last days. His greatest folly was his desire to be a clergyman. Some would point to other follies and say that

Kierkegaard, with his acceptance of Kant's absolute dichotomy between the phenomenal and the noumenal, with his leap across Lessing's big ditch that separated the accidental truths of history from the truths of reason, with his belief that one must accept the Incarnation even though it is impossible, rejected not only Christian hypocrisy but orthodox Christianity, exchanging the true Easter for a spring substitute. Kierkegaard once said there was nothing lonelier than a girl walking alone to her confirmation, not realizing that there is nothing more Christian, more springlike. Neoorthodoxy appropriated Christianity's use of spring; there is a neoorthodox yearning in Kierkegaard, in *Parsifal*, in Mahler, even in the lethargic symphonies of Brahms.

The Hallelujah Song

Richard Meade

HALLELUJAH

I've heard there was a secret chord
that David played to please the Lord,
but you don't really care for music, do you?
It goes like this: the fourth, the fifth
the minor fall, the major lift;
the baffled king composing Hallelujah!

Your faith was strong but you needed proof.
You saw her bathing on the roof;
her beauty and the moonlight overthrew you.
She tied you to a kitchen chair
she broke your throne, she cut your hair,
and from your lips she drew the Hallelujah!

You say I took the Name in vain;
I don't even know the name.
But if I did, well, really, what's it to you?
There's a blaze of light in every word;
it doesn't matter which you heard,
the holy, or the broken Hallelujah!

I did my best; it wasn't much.
I couldn't feel, so I learned to touch.
I've told the truth, I didn't come to fool you.
And even though it all went wrong,
I'll stand before the Lord of Song
with nothing on my lips but Hallelujah!

— Lyrics of Leonard Cohen song

The Hallelujah Song by Leonard Cohen is one of the most profound and popular songs in recent American music. Its mysterious lyrics and haunting melody have gripped millions ever since it was first released on an album entitled "Various Positions" in 1984. Cohen has said it took him five years to write. Unlike many great songs, it appears in dozens of versions, often with the inclusion of one or more of the three additional verses which give it distinctly different endings, one of joy and one of suffering.

For this essay, I am using the version first recorded by Cohen in 1984 and published in both *Stranger Music* (1993) and the Everyman's Library edition, *Leonard Cohen* (2011). They are all three virtually the same, containing four stanzas of six lines each and interspersed with the Hallelujah chorus in the recorded version. There has never been an adequate explanation of the additional verses, of their chronology or how they came about. It has been reported that at least one "broken" stanza was assembled by John Cale, the Welsh singer and co-founder of the Velvet Underground, after Cohen sent him a cache of unused lines.

Each verse adds another layer of depth to the song and has been recorded by many performers. Cohen has never explained their relation to the definitive text and has vigorously resisted in aiding any literary analysis of his work. As David Remnick quotes in his recent profile "How the Light Gets In," (2016) "As I approach the end of my life, I have even less and less interest in examining what have got to be very superficial evaluations or opinions about the significance of one's life or one's work." I am writing this piece in the belief that Hallelujah demands and can receive more than a superficial examination.

That there are so many variations of the song makes it very different from its most significant counterpart in the world of popular religious songs, "Amazing Grace," which has a clearly fixed text. "Hallelujah" has also been recorded in plaintive solo and choral gospel. Yet for all its justified fame, it has never been deeply analyzed. I realized this last year when I read an entire book devoted to it, *A Broken Hallelujah* by Leil Leibovitz, but found only the most cursory attention paid to its meaning. The book is mostly an account of how it was written, a history of its reception and its relation to the music business. *I'm Your Man*, the excellent biography by Sylvie Simmons, has many brief references to it, but nothing that might be called a detailed interpretation.

The first thing that must be said of "Hallelujah" is something generally acknowledged but not often enough stressed. It is a deeply religious song, described by some as a hymn and others as an anthem. Because an anthem is often associated with patriotism, I prefer to think of it as a hymn. But both carry the denotation of sacred vocal music. This reverence is often little recognized. Bob Dylan's comments that Cohen's songs are "like prayers" and "celestial" accurately captures the essence of "Hallelujah." But when people laugh at Jeff Buckley's description of it as the "hallelujah

of the orgasm" or point out that it appears on an album with a title that has sexual connotations, they miss the point.

The song certainly has an important sexual dimension, but that is integral to its unusual sacred meaning—sex as a human pleasure that God gave us to enjoy. Many have suggested other secular interpretations, but "Hallelujah" is not, as Bryan Applegard has asserted in the *Sunday Times* either a "wishful, intimately feel-good song" or a "bitter commentary on the futility of human relations."

To place the song in its religious context we need to explain some aspects of its musicality before we turn to the lyrics. Cohen has said he "wanted it to be like the voice of God." He wanted it sung in a "big gospel way" with a choir for the chorus, as if it were being sung in a cathedral. In 30 years, it has become, as *Maclean's* magazine has put it, "The closest thing pop music has to a sacred text." This is something "Hallelujah" is almost universally understood as—a song in praise of God. But what does the song have to say?

The musicality is as significant as the words. And the musicality is the main subject of the first verse. The haunting quality of the melody, of course, binds the entire song together into a stirring prayer. And the accompanying chorus of "Hallelujah" between each verse becomes more powerful until it reaches its final crescendo. But the language tells us that "Hallelujah" is also a song about composing a song. Each line of the first verse contains a reference to music, such as "chord," "played," "music," "the fourth, the fifth," "the minor fall, the major lift" and "composing."

David, the greatest of Hebrew national heroes, is celebrated not only as a ruler but also as a musician. He is also the best-known ancestor of Jesus. It is his "secret chord" which opens the song and he who is the "baffled king composing Hallelujah." Many have observed that "the fourth and fifth" refer to the movement of the chords of the melody, as do the "minor fall and major lift." But little has been said about what else these words mean and how they begin to develop the literary and symbolic artistry of the text.

To say first the most important thing about the argument of the song—it is primarily a one-sided conversation with God in his human form as Jesus. Why is the King "baffled?" Because this song of praise is not at all the conventional one that the King of the Jews would have expected to create. It erupts without any obvious aspect of his control, carries no hint of royal pageantry and includes allusions to a future he as a man would know nothing about. "The fourth and fifth" are also references to Stations of the Cross as Jesus carried the crossbeam toward Calvary and the crucifixion, where the "minor fall" is the stumble Jesus takes on the way and the "major lift" is his raising on the cross and then to the Resurrection.

Essential to our understanding of the rest of the song is the recognition that the "I"

and "you" of the remaining stanzas are Cohen and Christ. Christ is the one who "doesn't really care for music," because it is traditionally royal or glorious and would depict him as kingly, resplendent. But as he is portrayed throughout "Hallelujah," Jesus is sensual, vulnerable, wounded and human, not the sort of perfect being usually described in Christianity. Cohen challenges our conception of his purity, his sexuality, even his certainty of his own divinity. He is so completely different from traditional depictions as to be almost a different being than the one worshipped in most churches. What Cohen has done in the song is to refocus our attention on his own and Jesus's humanity. In the recording I have mentioned, Cohen accentuates Jesus's human nature even more profoundly, by changing the "you" of the written version to "ya," a much more personal reference that makes Jesus seem even more human, a friend Cohen could even speak to with brash informality.

In the second verse, Cohen continues to describe Jesus as a doubter, like Thomas, unable to sustain his faith without proof. He sees and is attracted to a beautiful, probably naked, woman on a roof whose pure sexual power is a manifestation of God's power. She is an earthy angel and her stunning beauty has broken through both his and our defenses—portraying him as a sexual being, one of the most fundamental human qualities disparaged by the conventional Church. By tying him to the kitchen chair and breaking his throne, she has overturned two of his most often assumed stereotypes—his dominance over human kind and his lineage in the royal line, beginning with David. By cutting his hair, she has shorn him of the most traditional trappings of his divinity. Can any of us imagine a painting of Jesus with short hair? She has, in fact, conducted a kind of mock crucifixion. She has liberated him from pure spirit and made him also flesh and it is this transformation which compels him to call out "Hallelujah."

The third verse now shifts the focus to the "I," the Cohen persona. He responds to an accusation by Jesus that he took the Lord's name in vain. By stating that he doesn't "even know the name," he is saying that he is a Jew, not raised in the Christian church. How can a Jew, he presumes, be faulted for failing to understand the divinity of Jesus and his dual nature as both human and divine? But he goes even further in challenging Jesus in one of the most shocking lines of the song. "But if I did, well, really what's it to ya?" In other words, I'm my own man, and so what if I don't recognize your divinity?

No man could come from such defiance to such powerful adoration as does Cohen in the final words of the song. And Cohen goes on to say that it is impossible to take the Lord's name in vain. His glory sustains his name no matter how we use it, in our human profanity or our human adulation. What most men intend when they praise God is the "holy Hallelujah." But the "broken Hallelujah" is just as valid and just as powerful as the holy one, and probably more like the one Jesus would prefer—damaged, hurt, angry. In the end, it doesn't really matter too much which type of "Hallelujah" one sings

because ultimately God hears them both.

In the final verse, Cohen speaks openly and movingly about his own flawed attempts at faith. Like all of us he "did his best and it wasn't much." His words are dismissive, but the tone is utterly serious. He "couldn't feel" the trust of God through words only, so he had to "learn to touch." His version of God comes through sensual things and sexual pleasure like a beautiful naked woman bathed in moonlight. But Cohen sees Jesus as able to accept this and affirm it. Cohen's Jesus loves both spirit and flesh. Both the seeming irreverence of a pop song and the traditional piety of Mozart's "Requiem." Cohen did not write "Hallelujah" to mock Jesus but to praise him. He "told the truth." He didn't come to fool us. Even though it all went wrong, both because of sinfulness, as well as Cohen's personal failings, everything comes together under heaven. The Lord hears both the sinner and the righteous. And the "Hallelujah" rises spontaneously from Cohen's lips, a unified praise to both the sacred and profane.

I hope this examination has shed some light on this icon of American pop culture. "Hallelujah" has been the subject of more than 300 covers and has been used in the scores of dozens of movies. It has even been transformed into a Catholic hymn, with the original mesmerizing melody, but with words that tell the traditional Christian story of Jesus' path to the cross. I know that many people, Cohen included, prefer that its meaning remain a mystery. That satisfies one's feelings, but I think the song is richer if we let it satisfy the intellect as well. And it is striking to me that in his recent profile of Cohen in the *New Yorker*, only weeks before his death, Remnick discusses Cohen's Jewish heritage, his interest in the Kabbalah and his lengthy Buddhist study but the subject of Jesus does not appear in the essay.

And yet this song, like so many others in his repertoire, can not begin to be understood without calling attention to a central element of Cohen's work: his almost tortured relationship with Jesus. In the final analysis, "Hallelujah" is as much a Christian hymn, in its own way, as is "Amazing Grace."

I let characters and symbols emerge from me, as if I were dreaming.
I always use what remains of my dreams of the night before.
Dreams are reality at its most profound, and what you invent is truth
because invention, by its nature, can't be a lie.
Writers who try to prove something are unattractive to me,
because there is nothing to prove and everything to imagine.
So I let words emerge from within.

Eugene Ionesco

Writer Services

EDITOR FROM concept to copyediting for novels, memoirs, stories, and essays. Published, award-winning fiction writer (MFA, Indiana U.; Ph.D., U. of Utah) has 20 years' college teaching experience and proven success in helping writers at all levels working in a range of genres. E-mail: cdiacono@gmail.com. Website: [http:// caradiaconoff.com](http://caradiaconoff.com).

4REVISIONS. Your book: As good as you can make it? Before submitting to an agent or publishing as an e-book, make sure you've put your best work, your best words forward. A second pair of eyes is always helpful. No flattery, but constructive criticism, useful suggestions, editing, and proofing. Website: www.4revisions.com.

200+ GHOSTWRITTEN titles, 11 award winners. Ghostwriting, rewriting, development, editing results in awards, contracts, film options, readers. Forty-seven adult, YA, and juvenile titles currently under contract. Queries, proposals, book-to-blog, script-to-novel, crowdfunding, grants. Supercharge your results with 20 years of experience. Laine Cunningham of Writer's Resource. E-mail: consultant@writersresource.us. Telephone: (919) 928-224;. Website: writersresource.us.

ACCLAIMED author helping writers for more than 20 years: I have published 5 highly acclaimed books and offer services in developmental, content and copy editing of fiction and nonfiction (including academic, legal and medical texts). I can also provide contacts to agents, publishers and publishing consultants. Reasonable rates. Contact me at christopherwb@msn

POETRY EDITOR former Executive Director of Alice James Books, 20 years of editing experience. Provides professional manuscript evaluation, comprehensive editing. Edits to suit various budgets. Workshops, tutorials, Publishing, publicity advice. Author of *Event Boundaries* and *Anxious Music* (Four Way Books). CWMFA faculty editor at SNC. Details: www.aprilossmann.com. E-mail: aprilossmann@hotmail.com.

ACCOMPLISHED editor Wyn Cooper seeks poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and memoir. I help writers revise and perfect their manuscripts, and offer publishing advice. Thirty books I edited have been published in the last 3 years; 7 have won awards. Free consultation. Sliding scale fees. See website for testimonials: www.wyncooper.com. E-mail: wyncooper@gmail.com.

AUTHORS NEED instant gratification? We'll print, bindj and ship your books in 2 days. High-quality, perfect-bound books, full-color covers, easy ordering, helpful staff. Casebound and coil-bound also available. Our authors just love us! For details, visit www.48hrbooks.com or call (800) 231-0521.

AUTHORS, WE ARE here to support you with results-driven professional editorial services. Our hand-selected editors have passed tests proving their skills in everything from reorganizing

text to creating flow to fixing grammar, all while keeping your voice. We have expertise in all genres. For rates and camaraderie, visit www.inkblotediting.com.

AWARD-WINNING fiction writer, graduate of Iowa Writers' Workshop, creative writing teacher of 3 5 years, provides personalized manuscript editing. I offer detailed editing, honest evaluation, and sensitive critique. I work with new and experienced writers, fiction and nonfiction. Contact Hugh Cook. E-mail: hughcook2i2@gmail.com. Website: Hugh-cook.ca.

AFFORDABLE, powerful, and comprehensive editorial services give your manuscript an edge. Unlock the potential of your manuscript with in-depth evaluation, plot/character development, line editing, revisions. Benefit from years of editorial experience at Big 5 publishers. Want to write a good book? Let me help! Helga Schier, PhD, Helga@withpenandpaper.com. Website: www.withpenandpaper.com. Telephone: (310)828-8421.

AWARD-WINNING poet teaching writers for 25 years (92nd Street Y, Poets House) helps poets springboard their work to new heights. Small group workshops, 1-on-1 tutorials for poems, chapbooks, and book-length manuscripts. Visit sharondolin.com or contact sdolin@earthlink.net.

ADRIFT NO MORE! Experienced writing teacher, editor, memoirist, and published poet (Bluestem Award, Milkweed Editions) will help you begin or complete your personal/family/ literary memoir, poetry, nonfiction, or academic writing. Specialties: overcoming writing blocks, in-depth critiques, and reasonable rates. MFA in creative writing; masters, counseling psychology- Call Jill Breckenridge at (612) 371-9010. E-mail: jbreckenridge@visi.com. Website: www.jillbreckenridge.com.

AUTHOR, AUTHOR! Professional editor, literary midwife, award-winning author (Bantam, Avon, Scholastic, Berkley/Ace, others) offers extensive critiques, tutorials, revisions, support. Upgrade your writing skills; solve problems with plot, character development, pacing. Specialties include literary and mainstream fiction, mystery/thriller, juvenile/YA, general nonfiction, psychology, spirituality. Carol Gaskin. Phone: (941) 377-7640. E-mail: carol@editorialalchemy.com. Website: www.editorialalchemy.com.

ADEPT EDITOR, experienced in multiple genres, prizewinning author of poetry and literary fiction, is looking to assist you. Respectful. Thorough. Together, we can raise your novel, poetry manuscript, short story, memoir, query, or application letter to the next level. Free initial consultation. E-mail: dmgordon@comcast.net. Website: www.dmgordoneditorial.com.

BOOK EDITOR Former publishing house senior editor. Award-winning/ agented clients. Story solutions to elevate your novel. Critiques, coaching, editing, queries. Specializing in YA, thriller, Christian, historical and literary fiction, women's lit. Jessi Rita Hoffman. Website: www.jessiritahoffman.com. phone: (360) 264-5460, e-mail: jessihoffman8@gmail.com.

CALL AN EDITOR offers developmental, substantive, copy editing, and proofreading services for authors. Contact us at www.callaneditor.com for more information. Call an editor today! (317) 504-5418.

CONSULT AN EXPERT! Beaufort Writing Group Developmental Editor. Prizewinning novelist/ poet/essayist, retired English professor/ journalist/policy analyst, small-press publisher edits all genres: academic, science, novels, memoirs. I critique clarity, flow, structure, grammar, voice. Same mindfulness pruning apple trees. See directory: www.the-efa.org. Susan Schmidt, PhD, (252) 269-0032. E-mail: susu@susan-schmidt.net; susankiwii5@gmail.com. Website: www.susanscbmidt.net.

DON'T HAVE TIME to submit your creative writing? We can help. Submission leads and cover/query letter guidelines. Join 50,000+ writers who subscribe to Submit Write Now! In our 2 3rd year! Writer's Relief, Inc., 207 Hackensack St., Wood-Ridge, NJ 07075. Phone: (866) 405-3003. Website: www.writersrelief.com.

EDITOR. Acclaimed author Marcy Dermansky (The Red Car, Bad Marie) will help you improve your novel, short story, or memoir. I provide a detailed rewriting plan, including big-picture structural suggestions and line edits on the manuscript. E-mail: mdermansky@gmail.com. Website: <http://marcydermansky.com/editing-services>.

EDITORIAL SERVICES from a nurturing but whip-cracking, well-connected author (Bang the Keys, The Great Bravura) who will help you unleash the true fabulosity in your projects and bring them to fruition in the real world before depression or drink destroy your nerve! Fiction, nonfiction, scripts, poetry, theses. Ten percent discount if you mention PW ad. E-mail: Jilldearman@gmail.com. Website: www.Jilldearman.com.

EXPERIENCED EDITOR for private work-shopping experience. One-on-one treatment for your novel or short stories. Visit skurnickeditorial.com.

MAKE EVERY WORD COUNT. Give your book a final polish before hitting send. Proofreading, general editing, and honest feedback. Quick turnaround and reasonable rates. alex@scribbler.solutions.com.

MALONE-EDITED books sell to traditional publishers. Turning manuscripts into traditionally published books, and developing writers into successful authors. Malone Editorial Services, www.maloneeditorial.com. E-mail: maloneeditorial@hotmail.com. Website: www.susanmarymalone.com.

NEED AN MFA OR A Mentor? If you're not sure an MFA is right for you, consider a writing mentor. For a much lower cost, I'll provide personal, focused feedback that will help you learn

to write powerful, compelling fiction or creative nonfiction. And isn't great writing your goal? garyleestories@icloud.com.

POETRY HELP IS on the way. Widely published, award-winning poet and experienced educator will give critiques and detailed line editing of your MS with big-picture feedback and book publication as the goal. Inquiries and rates at susansonde@msn.com.

POETRY, Poetry manuscript. Expand your range, syntax, facility with language. Close editing and attention to big picture. Phone or Skype conferences — US or international. Experienced poet/teacher, award-winning author of 11 collections, 5 with Godine and Knopf. I founded and taught in the MFA and postgraduate conference at Vermont College. E-mail: rogw!2@comcast.net.

PROFESSIONAL Writing Coaching: Blocked? Struggling? I'll help you finish that project! Break through blocks with published author, skilled editor, experienced teacher, compassionate mentor. Plays, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, memoir, dissertations, children's books — I can help you get it done right! Carol Burbank, MA, PhD. Free 30-minute consultation. E-mail: cburbank@carolburbank.com. Website: www.carolburbank.com.

WRITING COACHING, manuscript evaluation, and editing. Widely published (*Glimmer Train*, *Missouri Review*, *Notre Dame Magazine*), Pushcart Prize winner in nonfiction, anthologized and award-winner in fiction, and New York City-produced playwright. Works with established fiction and nonfiction writers as well as beginners. Specializes in process and structure, www.stevedadamswriting.com.

CONTRIBUTORS

Jason Del Guidice was a musician before he became a writer. In creating music he found that he was always drawn to the wrong notes. All those unintentional noises, odd time signatures and angular structures were what came naturally to him, though. They were the components that amounted to his voice. Eventually he learned to accept this, to allow himself to be surprised with what that voice had to say to him, to let it flow. He follows those same instincts as a fiction writer. His stories, *the Shotgun* and *Canned Ham and Werewolves*, both were quarterfinalists in the 2015 & 2016 ScreenCraft Short Story contest, which seeks short fiction with strong potential for adaptation to film. Jason lives in northern New Jersey with his wife and three children. *Prayer for Smoke* is his first story published.

M.M. Collins From everywhere and nowhere, now resides in the Pacific Northwest where she spends a vast majority of her time behind a screen, merging reality with imagination to weave tales of a life lived within the dream and everywhere in between.

Katherine Forbes Riley is a computational linguist and writer in Vermont. She is currently a visiting writer at The American Academy in Rome. A Dartmouth graduate with a PhD from UPennsylvania, her creative writing appears in *Gone Lawn*, *Paper Nautilus*, *Blue Monday Review*, *decomp*, *Fiction Southeast*, *Noö*, *Spartan*, *Jellyfish Review*, *Conium*, *James Franco Review*, *Mulberry Fork*, *Halfway Down The Stairs*, *Crack the Spine*, *Storyscape*, *Whiskey Island*, *Lunch Ticket*, *Eunoia*, *Literary Orphans*, *Eclectica*, *BlazeVOX*, *McNeese Review*, *Akashic Books*, and *Buffalo Almanack*, from whom she received the Inkslinger's Award.

Austin Alexis is the author of the full-length poetry collection *Privacy Issues* (2014) and two previously published chapbooks. His poetry has been published in *Barrow Street* and *Ginosko* and more recently in *Chiron Review*, *Home Planet News* (fiction and poetry), *J Journal* and the anthology Rabbit Ears: TV Poems.

austinalexis@hotmail.com

Larry D. Thacker's poetry can be found or is forthcoming in more than ninety publications including *The Still Journal*, *Poetry South*, *Tower Poetry Society*, *Mad River Review*, *Spillway*, *The Southern Poetry Anthology*, *Mojave River Review*, *Mannequin Haus*, *Ghost City Press*, *Jazz Cigarette*, and *Appalachian Heritage*. His books include Mountain Mysteries: The Mystic Traditions of Appalachia and the poetry books, Voice Hunting and Memory Train, as well as the forthcoming, Drifting in Awe. He's presently working on his MFA in both poetry and fiction. Visit his website at:

www.larrydthacker.com

William C. Blome writes short fiction and poetry. He lives wedged between Baltimore and Washington, DC, and he is a master's degree graduate of the Johns Hopkins University Writing Seminars. His work has previously seen the light of day in such fine little mags as *Ginosko Literary Journal*, *PRISM International*, *Fiction Southeast*, and *Roanoke Review*. yandropov@hotmail.com

Mitchell Waldman My fiction, poetry, and essays have appeared in numerous other publications, including *The Waterhouse Review*, *Crack the Spine*, *The Houston Literary Review*, *Fiction Collective*, *The Faircloth Review*, *Epiphany*, *Wilderness House Literary Magazine*, *The Battered Suitcase*, and many other magazines and anthologies. I am also the author of the novel, [A Face in the Moon](#), and the story collection, [Petty Offenses and Crimes of the Heart](#) (Wind Publications), and have served as Fiction Editor for *Blue Lake Review*. (For more info, see my website at <http://mitchwaldman.homestead.com>).

Courtney McMahon has been writing "for real" for nearly two years. They discovered they had a body at age three as they leapt from the cormorant poo-stained jetty into the muddy dam at their house in the country and their head went underwater and their toes scrunched up at the thought of the muddy bottom with yabbies waiting half-hidden in the murk. Seventeen years later in a university classroom in the midst of a Melbourne winter they found that writing was, indeed, a part of that body. Courtney is currently wading through the mire of an Honours year in philosophy and creative writing at Melbourne University, with a philosophy thesis on the limits of phenomenology. They are currently working on a novella, and enjoy experimental writing in fictocriticism. Their short story will be published in the upcoming edition of *Farrago* magazine. *Ginosko* will be the first literary journal to publish their work.

Olivia Kate Cerrone's Pushcart Prize-nominated fiction won the Crab Orchard Review's 2016 Jack Dyer Fiction Prize. Her work has appeared in various publications including *The Rumpus*, *The Paterson Literary Review*, and *New South*. She is the recipient of fellowships from the Ragdale Foundation, the VCCA, the Vermont Studio Center, and the Hambidge Center for the Creative Arts and Sciences, where she was awarded a "Distinguished Fellowship" from the National Endowment for the Arts. [The Hunger Saint](#), a historical novella about the child miners of rural Sicily, was published by Bordighera Press in 2017.

Wendy Hoffman's first memoir, [The Enslaved Queen](#), was published by Karnac Books in 2014, and a second volume, [White Witch in a Black Robe](#), followed in 2015. Her book of poetry, [Forceps](#), was published in 2016, also by Karnac Books. Her poems and prose pieces have been published in various journals. She lives on the Olympic Peninsula.

Douglas G. Campbell lives in Portland, Oregon. He is Professor Emeritus of art at George Fox University where he taught painting, printmaking, drawing and art history courses. He is also the author of Turning Radius (Oblique Voices Press 2017), Seeing: When Art and Faith Intersect, (University Press of America, 2002), Parktails, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2012), and Facing the Light: The Art of Douglas Campbell, (Oblique Voices Press, 2012). His poetry and artworks have been published in a number of periodicals and his artwork is represented in collections such as The Portland Art Museum, Oregon State University, Ashforth Pacific, Inc. and George Fox University.

Sheila Martin was born in 1946 and grew up in Brooklyn. Even before her first finger painting she knew she wanted to be a painter.

In 1971 she graduated from New York University, where she earned a B.A. in fine art. From 1971 to 1979 she worked in graphic design in New York City.

In 1979 she moved to Ithaca, New York with her husband Jim Blythe. Here she started a successful graphic design business which specialized in not-for-profit organizations. In 1992, Sheila and Jim moved to Memphis, TN, where Jim landed a job as a medieval history professor. Here she phased out her graphic design business and started painting full time. Shortly thereafter she developed an intense interest in writing and has been writing ever since.

In 2006 she started working closely with master fiction editor, Renni Browne, coauthor of the classic, *Self-Editing for Fiction Writers* who helped her write her first book, *The Coney Island Book of the Dead, An Illustrated Novel* which she independently published December 1, 2016. She has also written a second novel, *The Time Artist*, for which she is seeking an agent. She also writes short stories and paints.

Rachel Veroff's work has appeared in *the Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *The Tulane Review*, *Pure Honey Magazine*, *Red Fez*, *The New Engagement*, *The Daily Texan* and *Opium Magazine*. She is a former editor of *Fields* magazine. She holds a BA in English from the University of Texas at Austin and an MA from the American University of Paris.

Jana Harris teaches creative writing at the University of Washington and at the Writer's Workshop in Seattle. She is editor and founder of Switched-on Gutenberg. Her most recent publications are You Haven't Asked About My Wedding or What I Wore: Poems of Courtship on the American Frontier (University of Alaska Press) and the memoir, Horses Never Lie About Love (Simon & Schuster). Other poetry books include Oh How Can I Keep on Singing, Voices of Pioneer Women (Ontario); The Dust of Everyday Life, An Epic Poem of the Northwest (Sasquatch); and We Never Speak of It, Idaho-Wyoming Poems 1889-90 (Ontario) all are available online from Open Road Press as are her two novels, Alaska (Harper & Row) and The Pearl of Ruby City (St. Martin's). She lives with her husband on a farm in the Cascades.

Janice Hastert has been published in *Byline*, *Chicago Sun Times Sunday Magazine*, *Senior Connection*, *Rivulets*, *Ink Spots* and *The Maine Review*. She served as editor of the Naperville Writers' Group's annual anthology, Rivulets, for four years.

Ken Wetherington is an avid reader with wide tastes from the literary classics to pulp fiction. He has worked for many years in libraries at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Duke University. He is an obsessive film buff and teaches film appreciation courses for the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at Duke University. This is his first publication.

Larry Narron's poems have appeared in *Phoebe*, *Eleven Eleven*, *Permafrost*, *Whiskey Island*, *Berkeley Poetry Review*, *The Boiler*, and other journals; they've been nominated for Best of the Net and Best New Poets. Originally from southern California, he currently lives in northern Michigan, where he reads poetry for *Dunes Review* and is at work on a detective novel.

Bill Yarrow, Professor of English at Joliet Junior College and an editor at the online journal *Blue Fifth Review*, is the author of The Vig of Love, Blasphemer, Pointed Sentences, and five chapbooks. His work also appears in the anthologies Aeolian Harp, Volume One; This is Poetry: Volume Two: The Midwest Poets; and Beginnings: How 14 Poets Got Their Start. He has been nominated eight times for a Pushcart Prize. More information about Bill can be found on his website: <https://billyarrow.wordpress.com/>:

Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and is an alum of Oregon State's MFA Program. He won *Bayou Magazine's* Jim Knudsen Editor's Prize for fiction and has work published or forthcoming in journals including *The Normal School*, *Passages North*, and *Hobart*. He works as a contributing editor for *Moss*. Find him online at miketchin.com or follow him on [Twitter @miketchin](https://twitter.com/miketchin).

Bridget Clawson I received my degree from Western Washington University in Labor Relations and practiced until 2016. Since retiring, I write, live with dogs, collect and polish agates and jaspers, volunteer locally in Edmonds, Washington and camp intermittently in a teardrop camper.

Joseph Krauter was born and raised in Bakersfield, California USA, in 1982 to his parents Martin and Carmela. He started college at Bakersfield College as a Technical Theatre major with a minor in English, studying until age 23 when he was arrested. He began writing after being sentenced to prison at age 26. At age 32 Joseph was diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) on the High functioning end of the spectrum, formerly called Asperger's Syndrome, at San Quentin State Prison. Joseph's

autism is integral to his writing due to the fact that the way that he experiences the world around him in detailed vividness makes for interesting perspectives as a horror-fiction writer; he writes his nightmares for lack of a better explanation. Joseph has written several short pieces of fiction and has been published in the Literary journals *580 Split*, *Apothecary*, and the podcast "*Life of the Law's* San Quentin coverage of his Brothers in Pen's creative writing class' public reading production in November of 2016. Joseph has work forthcoming in the next annual Brothers in Pen anthology due to come out this year.

Labecca Jones currently teaches composition, creative writing, and literature, and technical writing at Colorado Mesa University in Grand Junction, CO. Her work has appeared in *The Cimarron Review*, *The South Dakota Review*, *The New Writer*, *Mad Poets Review*, *Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *Switchgrass Review*, and *Spirit Wind Poetry Gallery*

Bill Cook is a writer, commercial building inspector, and sometimes-avid home brewer. He resides in a small community within the Sierra Pelona Mountain Range. He has had work published in *Juked*, *elimae*, *Tin Postcard Review*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *The Summerset Review*, *SmokeLong Quarterly*, and in Dzanc's anthology *Best of the Web 2009*, *The New Flash Fiction Review*, *The Monarch Review*, *Great Jones Street*, among others.

Diane Glancy is professor emerita at Macalester College. Her latest books are *FORT MARION PRISONERS AND THE TRAUMA OF NATIVE EDUCATION* (creative nonfiction), University of Nebraska Press, 2014, and *REPORT TO THE DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR* (poetry), University of New Mexico Press. 2015. In 2016-17 Wipf & Stock has published several books including *MARY QUEEN OF BEES* (novella), *THE SERVITUDE OF LOVE* (short stories) and *THE COLLECTOR OF BODIES*, Concern for Syria and the Middle East (poems).

Adrian Slonaker lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, working as a copywriter and copy editor, with interests that include vegetarian cooking, Slavic languages, Victorian horror fiction, wrestling, and 1960s pop music. Adrian has been published in *Better Than Starbucks*, and publication in *Dodging the Rain* and *CC&D* is forthcoming.

Rachel Holbrook writes from her home in Knoxville, TN. She is the author of the syndicated serial, *Little River*. Her poetry and short fiction have been published in a variety of literary journals, including **82 Review*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Akitsu Quarterly*, *Ink in Thirds*, and others. You can find her online at www.RachelHolbrook.net.

Angela Doll Carlson is a poet, fiction writer, and essayist whose work has been published or is forthcoming in publications both online and offline, such as *Thin Air*

Magazine, Eastern Iowa Review, Apeiron Review, Relief Journal Magazine, St. Katherine Review, Rock & Sling, Bird's Thumb Magazine, Ruminant Magazine, and Art House America.

Her memoir, Nearly Orthodox: On Being a Modern Woman in an Ancient Tradition (Ancient Faith Publishers) was released July 2014. Her latest book is Garden in the East: The Spiritual Life of the Body (Ancient Faith Publishers 2016)

Angela currently lives in Chicago, IL with her husband, David and her four outrageously spirited yet remarkably likable children.

Kelly McNeerney After studying Creative Writing at UC Santa Cruz, I went on to complete an MFA in Poetry at San Francisco State University in 2013. In my time in at San Francisco State, I worked as the Poetry Editor and Editor-in-Chief of *Fourteen Hills Literary Review*. I currently reside in Beijing, China, where I continue to work as a Poetry Editor for *Spittoon Literary Magazine*.

My poetry has appeared most recently in *Gesture Magazine, The Loreli Review, Verse Wisconsin*, and I also work as a featured contributor for *The Tusk*.

DC Diamondopolous is an award-winning short story and flash fiction writer published worldwide. DC's short stories have appeared in online literary magazines: Antioch University's *Lunch Ticket*, Ball State University, The University of Toronto, Fiction on the Web, *Eskimo Pie, Five on the Fifth, The Scarlet Leaf Review, Five 2 One* and many more. DC's stories are also in print anthologies: Crab Fat Lit, Blue Crow, Scarborough Fair and Being Real (cc&d). DC won first place for *Billy Luck*, at Defenestrationism, second place for, *Taps*, at the University of Toronto, and honorable mentions for *The Bell Tower* and *Taps*, from the Soul-Making Keats literary contest for 2014. The international literary site, The Missing Slate, honored DC as author of the month in August 2016, for the short story, "Boots".

James Croal Jackson's poetry has appeared in *The Bitter Oleander, Rust + Moth, Isthmus*, and elsewhere. His first chapbook is forthcoming from Writing Knights Press. He is the 2016 William Redding Memorial Poetry Contest winner in his current city of Columbus, Ohio. Visit him at jimjakk.com.

Russell Hemmell is a statistician and social scientist from the U.K, passionate about astrophysics and speculative fiction. Recent stories in *Gone Lawn, Not One of Us*, and *SQ Mag*, and others."

"1348" originally appeared in *Strangelet*, 1.4, November 2015, and End of the Year Anthology 2015.

Twitter: [@SPBianchini](https://twitter.com/SPBianchini) Website: earthianhivemind.net

Andrea Moorhead was born in Buffalo, New York, in 1947. Editor of *Osiris* and translator of contemporary Francophone poetry, Moorhead publishes in French and in English. Poems and translations have appeared in journals such as *Abraxas, Great*

River Review, *The Bitter Oleander*, *Estuaire*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, and *Ginosko*. Poetry collections include *From a Grove of Aspen* (University of Salzburg Press), and *Géocide* (Le Noroît). Forthcoming in 2017, *The Carver's Dream* (Red Dragonfly Press), and *À l'ombre de ta voix* (Le Noroît). Translations include *The Edges of Light* (Hélène Dorion, Guernica Editions), *Night Watch* (Abderrahmane Djelfaoui, Red Dragonfly Press), and *Dark Menagerie* (Élise Turcotte, Guernica Editions, 2014).

Kirby Wright was born and raised in Honolulu, Hawaii. He is a graduate of Punahou School in Honolulu and the University of California at San Diego. Wright received his MFA in Creative Writing from San Francisco State University. His first play was produced at the Secret Theatre's 2016 One Act Festival in New York.

Allan Douglass Coleman writes poetry, fiction, and creative non-fiction, makes music, photographs, and produces various other forms of visual art. His poetry and fiction have appeared in *The Cape Rock*, *Creative Nonfiction*, *International Poetry Review*, *Lalitamba*, *Nimrod*, *The Pacific Review*, *Poetry Harbor*, the e-zine *Urban Desires*, and elsewhere. Coleman's second book of poetry, *Like Father Like Son*, was published in 2007. In 2008 he received a nomination for a Pushcart Prize in poetry. Under the pen name A. D. Coleman, he publishes critical writings on photography, art, and mass media. His creative work can be found online at villaflorentine.us.

Ian C. Williams is pursuing an MFA at Oklahoma State University. He has received the Florence Kahn Memorial Award from the National Federation of State Poetry Societies for his chapbook, *House of Bones*, and his poems have appeared in *Blue Earth Review*, *The Altar Collective*, *Appalachian Heritage*, and *Arsenic Lobster*, among others. He lives in Stillwater, Oklahoma, with his wife, Bailey, along with their two dogs and two cats.

Loretta Diane Walker is an award winning poet and five-time Pushcart Prize Nominee. She won the 2016 Phyllis Wheatley Book Award for poetry, for her collection, *In This House*. Her book *Word Ghetto* won the 2011 Bluelight Press Book Award. Her book, *Desert Lights* is forthcoming, July 2017 from Lamar University Press. Loretta teaches elementary music in Odessa, Texas.

Laura Dzubay I am currently studying English at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. My work has previously appeared in *Xylem Magazine*, *Fortnight Literary Press*, *The Oleander Review*, and the 19th and 20th Annual *Cafe Shapiro Anthologies*, and within the last year has been awarded first prize in the Caldwell Poetry Competition and a Hopwood Underclassmen Fiction Award.

Forest Arthur Ormes My stories have appeared in past issues of the late *Amazing Stories Magazine*, *Blue Lake Review*, *Long Story* and *North Dakota Quarterly*. The on-line journal, *Red Savina*, recently published my story, "Vanderdecken," in their Fall

issue.

I worked for two decades as a bi-lingual therapist and addictions counselor, serving the horsemen and women of the Chicago-area racetracks.

My wife and I divide our time between our residence on the southwest edge of Chicago and our small homestead in central Kansas.

James Claffey hails from County Westmeath, Ireland, and lives on an avocado ranch in Carpinteria, CA. His work appears in the W.W. Norton Anthology, Flash Fiction International, and in Queen's Ferry Press's anthology, Best Small Fictions of 2015. He was also a finalist in the Best Small Fictions of 2016.

E Laura Golberg spent her preteen years in Manchester, England, moved to London at 13 and studied English with Miss Cavanaugh at the Nonsuch School for Girls in Cheam, Surrey. She returned to the North of England to study psychology at Sheffield University.

After spending the summers of 1967 and 1968 in America with her family, she emigrated to America at age 21. The first year of her American experience was spent as a VISTA volunteer in Augusta, Ga. From there, she went to NYU to study Public Administration. Because classes were at night, she wrote poetry in the mornings and took her first poetry class with William Packard at the Cooper Union.

Laura went on to have a career in the local government of Fairfax County, VA, writing only occasionally. She was lucky enough to retire in her 50s and, after some casting about, returned to writing poetry. She has since studied at the Writer's Center in Bethesda, MD and Kenyon Review Writers' Workshop. She was a co-host at the Word Works Cafe Muse Reading Series for five years.

Her poetry has appeared in *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *RHINO*, *Gargoyle*, *Pebble Lake Review* and the *Journal of Humanistic Mathematics* among other places. She won first place in the DC Commission on the Arts Larry Neal Poetry Competition. She is preparing her first collection of poetry with the working title of Tell.

John Grey is an Australian poet, US resident. Recently published in *Schuylkill Valley Journal*, *Cape Rock* and *Columbia Review* with work upcoming in *Louisiana Review*, *Poem* and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

Robert Ciesla is a freelance writer from Helsinki, Finland. He has a BA in Journalism and a knack for writing urban fiction and directing short films. His personal website is at robertciesla.com

Euan Tait (b. Berlin 1968) is Welsh-Scottish. He's widely published in the UK, Ireland and the US. As librettist, he's produced texts for Unfinished Remembering (Paul Spicer, Birmingham, 2014), The Wound in the Water (Kim Andre Arnesen, Trondheim, 2016), and The Christmas Alleluias (Stillwater, Minn., 2015); shorter texts include Arnesen's Flight Song, a US best seller. He leads music retreats and is a college

lecturer.

Justin Fenech is a 28-year-old author from the island of Malta. He has had short stories published in several online reviews like *The Missing Slate*, *Brasilia Review* and *Rambutan Literary*. He is also a travel blogger and finalist of the 2010 IEMed Sea of Words Competition. His writing deals with hedonism, finding purpose in life, and the pleasures of people living under oppression of any kind.

Neil Citrin My poetry has been published in such magazines as *Lynx Eye* and the online journals *Folly* and *Danse Macabre*. I am the co-founder of The Greater Los Angeles Writer's Society (www.glaws.org), one of the largest writers groups in California. My web site is www.nkcitrin.com.

Soar is an international artist living in Berlin, author of three released books on the themes of love, human values, life and positive thinking. Currently a trilogy and a vinyl are in development, under the project "Poetry-in-Motion", by © Soar.

The author is a member of the Society of Authors (UK) and collaborates with international magazines in Germany, Italy, UK, Romania and the US (*Decanto The Poetry Magazine*, *Enigma*, *Lastbench*, *Flash Literary Journal*, *Women Move the Soul*, *Indie Spirit Magazine*, *Märkische Allgemeine*, *BW Polyglott - BDÜ Magazine*, *Schwäbische Zeitung*, *Woman@Work Magazine*, *The Munich Eye*, *The Berlin Eye*, *Terpress Urbana*, *Confluente literare*). Soar graduated from the universities in Romania, France and Germany and she currently finished her master studies in International Relations in The United Kingdom.

Soar lectures and performs to various artistic events in Germany, Austria and Switzerland.

Further enquiries and booking for interviews, readings, artistic events:

www.soaring-words.com
info@soaring-words.com

Richard K. Weems (www.WeemsNet.net) most recently released *From Now On, You're Back*. Previous collections are *Stark Raving Blue* and *Anything He Wants*, which was a finalist for the Eric Hoffer Book Prize. His flash publications include *Pif Magazine*, *Potomac Review* and *Flash Fiction Magazine*. He lives and teaches in New Jersey.

Karen K. Ford's short stories have been honored by the *Bellingham Review*, *bosque* (the magazine) and *Narrative*, and published in [Ginosko Anthology 2](#) and elsewhere. A former ad copywriter, she is now full-time fiction writer and freelance editor, currently hard at work on her second novel. She and husband S.L. Stebel co-teach a fiction workshop at the Santa Barbara Writers Conference every June. They live in Los Angeles with their rescue mutt, Dude.

Thomas Elson lives in Northern California. He writes of lives that fall with neither safe person nor safe net to catch them.

His short stories have appeared in the *Pennsylvania Literary Journal*, *Red City Literary Review*, *The 3288 Review*, *Lunaris Journal*, *Perceptions Magazine*, *The New Ulster*, *The Bombay Review*, *Blood & Bourbon*, and *Adelaide Literary Magazine*.

Alan Catlin writes in a wide variety of styles. As in he is currently at work on a mystery with no plot. He has two forthcoming chapbooks: Blue Velvet, winner of The Slipstream Chapbook Competition and Hollyweird from Night Ballet Press. His most recent full length book is American Odyssey from Future Cycle Press.

devin wayne davis has lived 54 years, and he still writes poems.

Andrew Hogan received his doctorate in development studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Before retirement, he was a faculty member at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, the University of Michigan and Michigan State University, where he taught medical ethics, health policy and the social organization of medicine in the College of Human Medicine.

Dr. Hogan published more than five-dozen professional articles on health services research and health policy. He has published seventy works of fiction in the *Sandscript*, *OASIS Journal* (1st Prize, Fiction 2014), *The Legendary*, *Widespread Fear of Monkeys*, *Hobo Pancakes*, *Twisted Dreams*, *Long Story Short*, *The Lorelei Signal*, *Silver Blade*, *Thick Jam*, *Copperfield Review*, *Fabula Argentea*, *The Blue Guitar Magazine*, *Shalla Magazine*, *Defenestration*, *Mobius*, *Grim Corps*, *Coming Around Again Anthology*, *Former People*, *Thrice*, *Foliate Oak Literary Magazine*, *Black Market Lit*, *Paragraph Line*, *Subtopian Magazine*, *Pine+Basil*, *Festival Writer: Unpublishable*, *Fiction on the Web*, *Children*, *Churches and Daddies*, *Midnight Circus*, *Stockholm Review of Literature*, *Lowestoft Chronicle*, *Apocrypha and Abstractions*, *Spank the Carp*, *Beechwood Review*, *Pear Drop*, *Marathon Review*, *Cyclamens and Swords*, *Short Break Fiction*, *Flash: International Short-Short Story Magazine*, *Slippery Elm Online*, *Story of the Month Club*, *Birds Piled Loosely*, *Zero Flash*, *Canyon Voices*, *Alebrijes*, *Rose Red Review*, *Yellow Chair Review*, *Serving House Journal*, *Funny in Five Hundred*, *Penny Shorts*, *The Thoughtful Dog*, *Front Porch Review*, *Minetta Review*, *Silver Pen Anthology*, *Zany Zygote*.

E.M. Schorb's Dates and Dreams, Short Fictions, Prose Poems, Cartoons won the latest Writer's Digest Self-Published Award for Poetry and Honorable Mention at the 2017 New York Book Festival. His Murderer's Day won the Verna Emery Poetry Prize and was published by Purdue University Press over a decade ago; another collection, Time and Fevers was a recipient of the Writer's Digest Self-Published Award for Poetry and also an Eric Hoffer Award. His novel, Paradise Square, was awarded the grand

prize for fiction by the International eBook Award Foundation at the Frankfurt Book Fair.

Penn Stewart lives and writes in Wichita Falls, Texas, where he teaches creative writing at Midwestern State University. He is the author of the novel Fertile Ground, and his most recent short fiction appears or is forthcoming in *Pacifica Literary Review*, *Word Riot*, *Night Train*, and elsewhere. You can learn more about Penn by visiting his website: www.pennstewart.com

Robert Wexelblatt is professor of humanities at Boston University's College of General Studies. He has published the story collections, Life in the Temperate Zone; The Decline of Our Neighborhood; The Artist Wears Rough Clothing, and Heiberg's Twitch; a book of essays; Professors at Play; two short novels, Losses and The Derangement of Jules Torquemal, and essays, stories, and poems in a variety of scholarly and literary journals. His novel Zublinka Among Women won the Indie Book Awards first-place prize for fiction. A collection of essays, The Posthumous Papers of Sidney Fein, is forthcoming.

Keijo Kangur is an aspiring writer from Estonia. He has only been published once before in the Medium publication *Fiction Euphoria* and is extremely glad to have had his story accepted to *Ginosko*. You can find some of his other writings on his Medium profile: <https://medium.com/@blackastheace>

Anjana Basu has to date published 7 novels and 2 books of poetry. The BBC has broadcast one of her short stories. Her byline has appeared in *Vogue India*, *Conde Nast Traveller*, *Outlook* and *Hindu Blink*.

Tobi Alfier is a multiple Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee. Current chapbooks are The Coincidence of Castles from Glass Lyre Press, Romance and Rust from Blue Horse Press, and Down Anstruther Way (Scotland poems) from FutureCycle Press. She is co-editor of *San Pedro River Review* www.bluehorsepress.com.

Douglas Nordfors I have a BA from Columbia University (1986) and an MFA in poetry from The University of Virginia (1991). Since 1987, I have published poems in major poetry journals such as *The Iowa Review*, *Quarterly West*, *Poet Lore*, and several others, and many other smaller journals, as well as, more recently, new and upcoming online journals. I have published, with Plain View Press in Austin, Texas, two books of poetry, Auras (2008), and The Fate Motif (2013), and have taught writing and literature at Milton Academy, The University of Virginia, James Madison University, and Germanna Community College.

Natalie Crick, from Newcastle in the UK, has found delight in writing all of her life and first began writing when she was a very young girl. She graduated from Newcastle University with a degree in English Literature and plans to pursue an MA at Newcastle this year. Her poetry has been published or is forthcoming in a range of journals and magazines including *Rust and Moth*, *The Chiron Review*, *Ink in Thirds*, *Interpreters House* and *The Penwood Review*. Her work also features or is forthcoming in a number of anthologies, including Lehigh Valley Vanguard Collections 13. This year her poem, "Sunday School" was nominated for the Pushcart Prize

Diane Webster's goal is to remain open to poetry ideas in everyday life or nature or an overheard phrase and to write from her perspective at the moment. Many nights she falls asleep juggling images to fit into a poem. Her work has appeared in *Philadelphia Poets*, *Illya's Honey*, *River Poets Journal* and other literary magazines.

Gene Twaronite is a Tucson poet and the author of six books, including two juvenile fantasy novels and two collections of short stories. His first book of poems "Trash Picker on Mars" was published in 2016 by Aldrich Press.

Read more of his work at www.thetwaronitezone.com.

Lisa Harris writes poetry, fiction, and essays. She has a Master of Fine Arts from Milton Avery Graduate School and holds other degrees in educational leadership, literature and literacy. Born of German and English descent in the Allegheny Mountains of Pennsylvania, she has lived in Savannah, Georgia and Trumansburg, New York. Her fictions have been published by Bright Hill Press, Westview/Harpercollins, *ginosko*, *The Distillery*, *MacGuffin*, *RiversEdge*, *Nimrod International*, *Stillwater*, *The American Aesthetic*, *Argestes*, *The Habersham Review*, *Phoebe*, *Zone 3*, *The Coe Review*, *cantaraville*, and the *Anemone Sidecar*. Her poetry has been published in The Second Word Thursday Anthology, *Puerto del Sol*, *The Cathartic*, *Karamu*, *Stillwater*, *Fennel Stalk*, and exhibited in collaborative word and image installations with Susan Weisend, Nancy Valle and Carol Spence.

Jennie Robertson is a New England native who currently writes from her Maine home or wherever her submarine-fixing husband's job takes them. She has two small children who are slowly but steadily making progress in their goal of teaching her to write in three-minute increments. She has been published in *Mary Jane's Farm*, *Literary Mama*, and *Mothers Always Write*, and in the anthologies So Glad They Told Me and Here in the Middle. She is a regular contributor to the TOTS Network blogs.

Z.M. Wise is a proud Chicago native, poet, co-editor and poetry activist, writing since his first steps as a child. He has been a written-word poet for almost two decades and a spoken-word poet for four years. He was selected to be a performer in the Word Around Town Tour in 2013, a Houston citywide tour. He is co-owner and co-editor of Transcendent Zero Press, an independent publishing house for poetry that produces

an international quarterly journal known as *Harbinger Asylum*, with his dear friend and founder Dustin Pickering. The journal was nominated Best Poetry Journal in 2013 at the National Poetry Awards. He is also an Assistant Editor at Weasel Press with another dear friend, Weasel. He has published four full length books of poetry, including: Take Me Back, Kingswood Clock! (MavLit Press), The Wandering Poet (Transcendent Zero Press), Wolf: An Epic & Other Poems (Weasel Press), and Cuentos de Amor (Red Ferret Press). Other than these four books, his poems have been published in various journals, magazines, and anthologies. The motto that keeps him going: POETRY LIVES! Mr. Wise will make sure to spread that message and the love of poetry, making sure it remains vibrant for the rest of his days and beyond. Besides poetry and other forms of writing, his other passions/interests include professional voice acting, singing/lyricism/songwriting, playing a few instruments, fitness, and reading.

J. TARWOOD has been a dishwasher, a community organizer, a medical archivist, a documentary film producer, an oral historian, and a teacher. Much of his life has been spent in East Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. His previous books are And For The Mouth A Flower, Grand Detour and The Cats In Zanzibar. His latest, What The Waking See: New and Selected Poems will be published in 2017. He has always been an unlikely man in unlikely places.

Margarita Serafimova has published two collections of poetry in the Bulgarian, "Animals and Other Gods" (2016) and "Demons and World" (2017). In English, her work is *forthcoming* in Agenda, Trafika Europe, Minor Literatures, The Journal, Ink, Sweat and Tears, Futures Trading, Poetic Diversity, The Punch Magazine, SurVision, and *appears* in London Grip New Poetry, A-Minor Magazine, Noble/ Gas Quarterly, The Birds We Piled Loosely, Obra/ Artifact, Dark Matter Journal, Window Quarterly/ Patient Sounds, Peacock Journal, Anti-Heroin Chic, In Between Hangovers, MockingHeart Review, Renegade Rant and Rave, Tales From The Forest, Misty Mountain Review, Outsider Poetry, Heavy Athletics, The Voices Project, Cent. Margarita is a human rights lawyer. Some of her work: https://www.facebook.com/MargaritaSerafimova/?ref=aymt_homepage_panel.

John Timothy Robinson is a traditional citizen and graduate of the Marshall University Creative Writing program in Huntington, West Virginia with a Regent's Degree. He has an interest in Critical Theory of poetry and American Formalism. John is also a thirteen-year educator for Mason County Schools in Mason County, WV. He strives for a poetics similar to Donald Hall, Maxine Kumin, James Wright, Louis Simpson, Gallway Kinnell and Robert Bly though enjoys learning from intrinsic poets and their theories in the critical writings of Denise Levertov, Robert Creeley, Louis Zukofsky, William Carlos Williams and Richard Kostelanetz. John is currently working on a creative dissertation in contemporary poetry, though outside the university

environment.

Recent and forthcoming work:

Blue Collar Review, Kestrel, California Quarterly, Ship of Fools, Floyd County Moonshine, Wild Violet Magazine, POEM, Ibbetson Street Press, The Iconoclast, Pulsar Poetry Magazine, The Society of Classical Poets.org, The South Carolina Review, A Time of Singing, ThePoetryShed.com, The Avocet: A Journal of Nature Poetry, Pennsylvania English, Pinyon Poetry Review, Ancient Paths, The Trumpeter Journal of Ecosophy, Westward Quarterly, Green Hills Literary Lantern, naturewriting.com, Straylight Literary Magazine, Wild Goose Poetry Review, South Poetry Magazine, Glassworks Magazine, The Lyric, Foliate Oak Literary Magazine, Red River Review, Nebo, The Olivetree Review, Miller's Pond Poetry Magazine, Connections Magazine, Fine Lines Creative Writing Journal, Pollen, Visions International and the Anthology of Contemporary Appalachian Nature Writing.
Critical/Craft Essays; "The Origin of "Wind on the Water."
Fine Lines Creative Writing Journal.

Ed Higgins' poems and short fiction have appeared in various print and online journals including: *Monkeybicycle, Danse Macabre, Word Riot, Triggerfish Critical Review*, and *Blue Print Review*, among others. Ed and his wife live on a small farm in Yamhill, OR, raising a menagerie of animals including a whippet, a manx barn cat (who doesn't care for the whippet), two Bourbon Red turkeys (King Strut and Nefra-Turkey), and an alpaca named Machu-Picchu. Ed is Asst. Fiction Editor for *Brilliant Flash Fiction*, an Ireland-based flash journal.

Lepota L. Cosmo (Belgrade), poet and theorist, founder of Anamodenism and Tensurrealism, writer of ANAMOD Manifesto, editor of *Journal of Advanced Rhetoric* (JAR). Published in Souffles Montpellier, Rowayat Cairo, Azahar Cadiz, Zunai Sao Paulo, Ama-Hashi Kyoto, Revue OC Bias (Lot-et-Garonne).

Carol Smallwood A Michigan writer in Wikipedia, Carol Smallwood's recent books include In Hubble's Shadow (Shanti Arts); Interweavings: Creative Nonfiction (Shanti Arts) 2017; Library Outreach to Writers and Poets: Interviews and Case Studies of Cooperation (McFarland, 2017).

Theodore Sabo is a resident of Washington State and an extraordinary lecturer at North-West University of South Africa. He has published in *Acta Classica* and the *Journal for Late Antique Religion and Culture*.

Richard Meade is a retired publisher and professor of English. He founded Story Press in the 70s and for ten years published award-winning short story collections. His book of poems is entitled Swimming the Channel. He complete an MFA in Poetry at San Francisco State University in 2013. In my time in at San Francisco State, I worked as the Poetry Editor and Editor-in-Chief of *Fourteen Hills Literary Review*. I currently

reside in Beijing, China, where I continue to work as a Poetry Editor for *Spittoon Literary Magazine*.

My poetry has appeared most recently in *Gesture Magazine*, *The Loreli Review*, *Verse Wisconsin*, and I also work as a featured contributor for *The Tusk*.

