

# RED CEDAR REVIEW



**REDCEDAR**

R E V I E W

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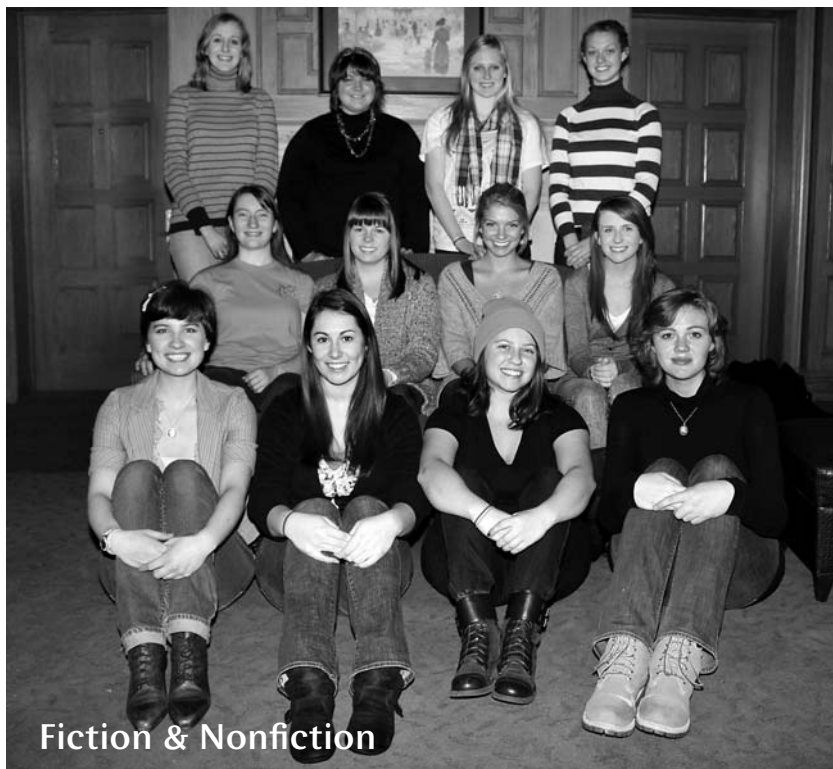
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# Editor's Introduction

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Kelly Caldwell

The dictionary defines “retrospective” as “1. directed to the past; contemplative of past situations, events, etc. and 2. looking or directed backward.” I can’t help but think the word merely establishes a foundation to accurately describe the work we’ve done here this year. Indeed, we have spent much time looking backward: our staff has scrutinized at minimum 244 journals (though I suspect the actual number is much higher) of approximately 60 volumes, each read twice in their entirety by two groups of genre readers, over a three-month reading period.\* While in our most frantic moments this process manifested as an impending duty, it ultimately resulted in a unique and spectacular immersion in the history and voices of the journal that certainly could not have otherwise been experienced and almost undoubtedly, precluding the unforeseen release of some future retrospective issue, will not happen again. Looking backward, we notice acutely what has evolved: variations of texture and dimensions from year to year have been subsequently standardized. An emphasis on artwork has been replaced by photography. The radical undertone of pieces from the 60s and 70s has decrescendoded. We are, however, inclined to resist considering these original characteristics as the traits of outdated tomes, and begin instead to internalize a convincing and vibrant persona in place of the text. As you read this retrospective issue, you will perhaps find as we did that the pieces *do* betray their era, and function as a testament to the psyche of their respective decades.

But here is another definition, which I’m sure is closer to what the MSU Press had in mind when they proposed a retrospective issue, and is in fact surprising in the specificity of what it actually implies: Retrospective

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\*The chronology of the journal is slightly off due to labeling repetition. Volume 6 Issue 1, which ran in 1968, was repeated in 1969. Original copyright dates have been retained.

(noun): “an art exhibit showing an entire phase or representative examples of an artist’s lifework.” Wouldn’t, then, the *Red Cedar Review* be the “artist,” embodying visible shifts in mood and technique (such as the recent establishment of a separate non-fiction genre) from year to year; an entity that provides a means by which to cultivate the voice of its era; a pulsing organism whose “lifework” is being evaluated in this issue in anticipation of the future, that hazy temporality wherein creation awaits?

And so inevitably, as we look back, we orient ourselves forward, because the truth of the journal you’re holding is better explained by considering the future. While you can see quite literally the culmination of all these various facets of the past, know that this adventure in retrospection will necessarily contribute significantly to our next steps. At our staff meetings, when we talk about next year’s relaunch of *Red Cedar Review*, the word “innovation!” is repeated; when asked for clarification, we hear, “more artwork!” and “engaging use of the white space on a page!” and perhaps most importantly, “interaction!” This goes beyond our journal’s projected branching out into different media in the coming years, and begs a more substantial relationship to the words on paper. So I ask you, while reading this issue, to not only consider the pieces for what they are individually, but also to imagine what they represent as deliberate encapsulations of moments in the lifetime of the *Red Cedar Review*.

I would like to thank the MSU Press, which continues to have faith in literary voices both new and old; Robin Silbergeld, our advisor, for working closely with us to ensure our success; Stephen Arch and the English department for supporting the conception of the forthcoming re-imagined *Red Cedar Review*; and most especially our brilliant staff of readers and editors, without whom this project could never have come to fruition.

KELLY CALDWELL



# Not All Dreams Die With Awakening

---

Gerald Bray

two tickets to chicago please

and shuffled his feet

sir

Goin North, Boy?

to the wrinkled old man

well sir we got relatives up there and im goin to help—

They aint gonna understand you up there you know that, Boy?

well its just me and my son and we—

You know your boy is gonna be goin to school with white folks?

my boy knows his place

He might even sit next to a white girl in his class.

my boy knows whats right

Suppose he start playing with the white kids white girls and boys?

he gonna play with his own kind

Suppose he started thinking he was equal?

ibroughtmyboyupright heknowshisplace he—

An suppose he wanted to marry a—

MY BOY AINT GONNA—

Dont go interrupting me boy, now dont take your son up there so he got to

mix with Radicals and Communist and Atheist now do you?

no sir not no more i suppose

*But black dreams after a thousand backdoors*

*And uncountable seats in the rear*

---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 1, 1963.



*Often evaporate in the heat of the day  
Leaving only a stain pointing the way  
On the road called progress*



# Insects

---

Richard Ogar

*Vacant shuttles*

*Weave the wind. I have no ghosts,*

*An old man in a draughty house*

*Under a windy knob.*

—T. S. ELIOT

I sit alone in this over-stuffed room  
Watching my shadows crawl across the walls  
Like spiders, or their ghosts;  
Black clouds of smirking thunder shadowing  
The faded gods on their Olympus  
Of yellow paper peeling  
Mock Pan fiddling with his pipes.

Perhaps I should explain:  
A steady rain began with my birth,  
The night sky bellowed unflashed  
And the stars strode by, oblivious.  
Two-faced rain,  
Floating the flowers and rotting their roots.

Above my head a bare bulb rocks,  
Haloed with a haze of bugs, like

---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 1, 1963.

Frenzied memories, flocking to a light.  
(The insects here are brown and brittle,  
Bark-fragments of a blasted tree.  
Squeezed between the fingers,  
They show no blood.)

What are these memories but dreams  
Turned inside-out?  
I should write them down,  
Pluck their wings  
To walk on doddering feet,  
But I cannot remember which are true,  
Which false . . .

What matter,  
After the bulb has burst,  
The wire snapped with too much heat?  
I will write them down.  
Once through the mind  
Both dream and memory are past:  
This is enough for me.



# Paris, London, Berlin

---

Ricka Leonhardt Dinges

The time was 1938, and so it might have been one hundred years ago—those pale, remote figures under the blackened trees. Cold winds stirred across the birch tops and down the meadows of the old, purple earth of Poland; and the last leaves dropped. It was in the aging Baltic country just before the War, at the north join of the German and the Pole on the historic black waters—in Danzig, a winter land of sticks and hunger, spiked with feudal lords whose hearts were overlaid with the thin elegances of Paris, London, and Berlin, but which still ached with the antique hates and griefs of the cold countries, in literature always called “Mother . . .”

Those were my childhood days, and the Countess—*the Countess*—had always been a figure in them, unseen but looming, like a witch. Her family was very old, very rich. She was said to be a complete aristocrat in the time when such expressions were still used; her very name was important, connecting us directly with the kings and bishops of our common history, begun in 1300. There was never a time when I first heard of her. She had reigned, possibly, since the time of the Hansa, when the trees were young, and the port open all year 'round, the Countess Andora von Etten and Spezca.

The weaving legends of the northern countries brewed about in the downstairs kitchens, and in the backs of churches, and possibly this is one of them. But it seems to me, now, later, that I really saw it all, then, when I was tiny, in that frozen world of ghosts and ginger cake. They are all dead now, the serving girls, even my parents, who might remember. But such stories are still told there, and this is what I recall . . .

I was a polite, well-trained child, preeningly typical of the upper classes,

---

This story originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 4, 1966.

given to little speeches in foreign languages and curtsies dropped to the floor. My mother and father, the *geehrte Herr Doktor und Frau Doktor*, trotted me around like a poodle and I leered at tall ladies for *marrons*. The world seemed very calm then, coherent, and genteel. My days were spent with the grownups, passing cakes and being polite, and in being taken for walks by a panorama of servant girls, seemingly all named “Maria.”

We lived in a fairy tale, at the edge of a great forest, in a villa built in the French manner. It was timbered and stuccoed and draped by willows, I recall, with a ladies drawing room of pale, thin, blue, and a smoking room for the gentlemen in hot velvets and wood and enamel. There was a grand piano” and a great deal of *fillet-tirée* work. The grounds, very flat, had a tennis court, and gardens, and a sunny dancing pavillion. I remember it with spring weeds, dandelions and daises. But at the edge of the gardens stood the woods—more than a mile of close black tangle, extending to the Polish border. At the far side of that forest, so far away that none of us had ever gone there, stood the winter palace of the Spezcas.

The servant girls in the kitchen, which was built beneath the house, and had a warmth to it, would tell me, over glasses of blistering tea, that naughty girls were eaten by Spezcas. How they must look, those Spezcas . . . like the witch in *Hansel und Gretel*? A woods, and naughty children, and then a tall woman with a long black skirt!

And the girl would stir her glass and whisper, “*Eat you!*”, and whistle the words out through curved yellow teeth into the sinking afternoon air. And I would cry, like my Mother, in English, the special language of counterfeit horror, “Oh, no!” And she would sing, “*Eat you. Eat you all up, still alive!*”

But then, upstairs, I would be allowed to sit with the ladies again, and sew, and hear about parties. But late, outside, as the clouds closed over the far, white sun, and the shadows ran ahead of my bicycle, I would keep my eyes away from the forest—and run in when the first lights went on.

There were many *visits* in those days. There was little else for ladies of a certain rank to do in Danzig. The gentlemen were in town until late, and there were servants for all the necessary work. Mother was the only one of her circle who had had a child, this being attributed to the fact of her being English. And so we visited and received, in the long afternoons between one and eight, and I heard stories from Paris and Vienna and Carlsbad. I was

even in Carlsbad myself at one time, for three months, while my mother took the waters; and learned to receive alone, later usually to become the guest of a very old lady or gentleman at tea in the Grand Salon.

The Danziger ladies were amused, it seems, to hear a five-year-old passing opinions on Carlsbad, and the performance was often requested. Through this story I was to become an invited guest of the Spezcas.

I remember the day vividly because I expected so much to be frightened, and wasn't. For though she was very tall, and blazing with the horrible fire of dirty diamonds and Parisian silk, she stooped immediately to my level in the foyer, and gently took my hand.

"Child . . ."

She had a beautiful voice, like a queen or a fairy, and a special white skin without mark.

"Child," she said again as if she didn't quite believe the word, and I, pulling my fringe, whispered to assure her:

"But I'm here!"

It was a moment away from time. In our low world, near the marble tiles, I realized no one had ever been just my size before, and very much liked her for it. But what she might be thinking I did not know, for she looked quite unhappy even though she smiled.

Yet a third time she murmured, "Child . . ."

And then the moment passed—my mother came in, greeting her.

"My Dear Countess . . ."

And bore her physically away.

I watched the party from the hallway, once again small amongst immensities, and had to be bribed to the fire with cakes. I watched her across what seemed a huge distance, sitting quite straight in a high gilt chair, holding a fine cup motionless in her long hands. Around her, the flamboyant circle of our robust ladies, formerly so satisfactory, looked gross and apoplectic. They fell over each other while yet sitting quite still. She was lofty, I could see, speaking rarely and yet always being spoken to.

And I could see, in my peace, the precision of her person, her innate chill and grace, and the care with which she had been made.

Time is always long for a child. I almost slept in my wonder and comfort, and it was through a trance that I saw her rise and come away.



The farewell, the stately dance, the weaving hats and crossing hands, the “We musts . . .” and the “Of course . . .” and then the final smile for my mother, who was carefully seeing her out. But then through my vapors I could hear her distinctly again. Her words flowed softly and increasingly until they hammered at me like shouts.

“ . . . the child in my motor car. Do you think the child would enjoy my motor car?”

I ran to her knees afraid to speak in my hope. My mother, with an arm to me, asked, “would you like to, Suzanna? Would you like to go in the motor car with Countess Spezca?”

I shrieked with pleasure and began promptly to cry. It was decided another day would be better, in view of my “tiredness,” and I was carried from the hall by the maid, too torn by sobs even to shriek a goodbye to my friend.

Late that night, the wind woke me, and I knew, with the child’s sure knowledge of promises, that she would never come back again.

Yet the following Friday afternoon, as the early dark swept up the grass, and the leaves began whistling around the sides of the house, I was picked out of the garden, given a bath, and festooned in a new green serge frock. It was the new party dress, I could see, from the handsmocked yoke and the rows of small buttons at each cuff. There was talcum, and hairbrushing, and a set-to with my hands. Cold, stiff party shoes were lifted from their tissue. And I was given orders not to touch anything, but to sit on the bed until called for.

Is all of childhood spent waiting? I sat on the bed watching the grey gloom spread, afraid to turn on a light. But then the door flew open again, and my mother came in, laughing.

“Such a lucky girl. *Such* a lucky little girl! Ride in a motor car, without even Mamma or Daddy. Look who’s here!”

On the doorsill a stranger stood, a fat old man in a uniform, holding a folded car rug. My mother never explained that this was the Countess’ chauffeur, being herself stiff with excitement at this triumph. I was led away all unsuspecting, laden with jackets and coats, a bonnet and gloves, scarf and a handkerchief; and carried, wrapped in the rug, from the rarely-used carriage entrance of the house, to an immense white touring Delahaye.

If was of course, the Countess, sitting inside, in the familiar clothes

she had worn before, and smiling, very pleased with herself. Beside her sat her lord, a silent, white man who looked at me once, and then resumed his thoughts.

But she, she was wonderful. She undid all my wraps, asked me where we should drive, and let me give the order into the speaking tube.

We drove very slowly down the allées, and turned eventually into town. It appeared we were chauffeuring the Count to a dinner, but that after that we could motor wherever we pleased. I gave pleasure by suggesting we see the Marienkirche, our cathedral dating from the Middle Ages, where a multitude still worshipped daily before a fine Memling altarpiece. The Cathedral is fantastical to a child—larger even than life, incredibly high, spun and whipped in a perfection of gothic tracery into the very clouds. Along its sides, the abandoned crutches of the believing ill and the minute cakestands of the believing well. Set in the heart of the valley of the Vistula, the Marienkirche soared past the highest points to be seen. The far mountains dwindled by comparison. Such is the power of faith. Outside the great doors, magicians and spiritualists performed impossibilities, one old man causing an entire horse and buggy to disappear into the sky.

We spoke a great deal, the Countess and I, about the nature of our mutual religion, she nodding, always, an “Ah, yes!” and I spewing my catechism verbatim. And then she suggested we also view Cafe Blum, and even stop there to eat.

The Cafe Blum, situated since the time of the Stuarts on the wind free side of the Hundegasse, was a shop devoted entirely to Viennese coffee and pastries, which had found great favor with the ladies of my mother’s circle. I had been there many times, permitted to choose by own cake if sufficiently quiet, and to sit at a table by myself, where I doused myself liberally from the silver bowls of whipped cream left standing. And so now I came into Cafe Blum in my glory, a debutante, a lady friend of the Countess herself, not only to choose cakes, but to order some chocolates too, in the Viennese style, and to talk politely about the events of the day.

Which were minimal. But she—she had spoken just that day to Paris—to her twenty-one year old niece of whom she was very fond, having no children of her own. I asked her several times about Paris, but she used it as a device to start me on Carlsbad again, and, half out of vanity and half out of politeness, I told her again my memories of the *haut monde*—gin,

silk, and old ladies. The piece had grown quite long with frequent telling, and I was still only half through when the Countess noted the time with a murmur and sent the waiter to summon her car.

We drove home very quickly. I was tired and seemed to have lost my ability to make her speak. She grew more and more silent as we raced down Oliva towards the country, and sank back into the blue shadows of the car, hard even to see. I fell silent, too, not wishing to offend. But as we drove up the gravel to my family's house, she roused herself with a pretty shrug and smilingly took my hand.

"You are a good little girl, my Suzanna."

"Thank you, Madame," I nodded, counterfeiting as best I could a sitting curtsy.

"Very dear, pretty child. You do me much good—you are still fresh."

"Thank you so much, Madame Spezca."

She gave me a kiss as I stepped out, and promised to come soon again.

Inside, up the steps, in the stifling air of the dining room, where my mother stood waiting as my father dressed for his dinner, I could not make the connection between two worlds—the one so vital and vivid, the other so remote and yet telling. My mother, in her pearls and her red crepe-de-chine, asked the servant to leave me for a moment, and asked me what the Countess had said.

I replied that I had had a lovely time, and that the Countess had said I was "fresh."

"But darling, you weren't, were you really?"

"I don't know . . ."

"But you're so perfect, you always behave." She smiled at me bravely, and with winks.

"Oh yes, I behaved," I replied. And to my father, as he entered, I made a low curtsy.

"The child's back from the Spezcas?" he asked.

"Mmmm," Mother nodded, "and the Countess thought she was fresh."

I realized just as she said it, that another construction could be put on that word, and was hastening with a statement of general and categorical innocence when my father, a customarily dour and even angry man, coughed with immense, rocking laughter and leaned, in his abstraction, against the wall.

“Fresh with the Spezca, your daughter! Well, good for her. What a change!” He laughed for an unreasonable time.

But my friend never came again. Not that I had really expected her, or even thought about it often; but when I did, I was sorry, and began to confuse in my memory the events of that afternoon until I wondered if I really had been rude and could possibly have made her cross. It did not really seem to me that I had, but on the few occasions I took these thoughts out and inspected them, I felt I had missed a thread, or forgotten something important.

But it was a busy time. I was starting school, where the nuns tried to cure me of my “Polish superstitions” with what my father told me were superstitions of their own. The Nazis marched with increasing frequency; a radio, a miracle, came into the house and was an accepted reality within three days, blaring flatly confused events in London and Berlin, Munich and Rome. The world opened up for me. I began to realize the rhythm of the world—that the strawberries came every year, and were not a unique, biblical happening; that the snow is made merely of very cold, *very* cold water; and that change is more likely than any lack of it.

By the following spring we were packing—Mother said, to take a holiday in France, but, in actuality, to emigrate to The Bastion of Freedom, America. Our favorite cups, pictures, napkin rings disappeared. I never thought of the Spezcas any more, there being so much talk about who was leaving. It seemed for a time that everyone was leaving—Van der Reis, Gutknecht, Donnermeister, freuhoff; and then, that everyone was staying, that nobody could “get out.” But at any rate it appeared that we could. Mother told me, in fact, that my father had already left, and was waiting for us in Holland. Why Father was awaiting us in Holland when our holiday was to be spent in the south of France I never asked. It was a great secret that we were ourselves to leave in two days. From the moment she told me, I was not to leave her sight.

We became now like madly matched sisters, she crawling about in the nursery cupboards with me, looking for the lost wig of a favorite doll, Armandina; and I trotting to a late evening dinner with her.

It was much different from the parties of the year before. Frau Tulle, it seemed to me, had become both much kinder and much older. She kissed us both now, and cried a lot, while my mother, once so gay, answered just with motions of her slender fingers. There were ten of us there, ranged around

an opulently set table, but all dressed for the day, and picking at what we had come to know as National Socialist Abundance. I sighed heavily for the Cafe Blum, realizing as I did so that we had not gone there for some time.

During a pause in the conversation I asked my mother about it.

“Cafe Blum?” She went pale, smiled vaguely at me, and turned back to the table with a tired gesture. “You see? What can one tell a child?”

“I would tell the truth, Dolly liebchen, so that they learn from this experience.”

“But oh,” breathed my mother, “Blum was . . .” She waved a hand, shaking herself.

“He was—Danzig, Madame,” Lukas answered, looking at me. “Danzig, Madame, as we shall remember her.”

The grownups were much stirred by this and there was the shuffling that always precedes toasts. I was let down from my chair and excused to go play if I liked with a favorite old toy left in the living room for me. I left the room and fetched my doll, who had an English coin hidden in her silk handbag, and told her for a while about choosing cakes at the Cafe, which she would be allowed to do if she ever learned to behave; but I felt alone and missed my mother, so went creeping back into the hall adjoining the dining room, still called in those last few days, *la salle à mangée*.

From between the imperfectly closed doors a hushed, musical voice was reciting—Frau Tulle. She spoke as did my teachers when it came time for a story during our days. I propped myself on the door jamb and listened. Before long realized that the story was about that long-ago princess, the Countess Andorra Spezca.

Frau Tulle was saying: “. . . I remember. Then she went again last year, for the tenth time, and by now they must have discovered something, or possibly it was just Peasant’s Luck” (here everyone laughed) “but by October our Dora was pregnant. Yes! Absolutely! Our Maria has relatives working there! And I saw her myself then, at the dentist’s office—now we all know she has flawless teeth, whatever was she doing there?—And I commented to Hermann who will recall” (Hermann must have nodded) “that she was plump, for once, and looking radiantly well, especially for someone who had just had a tooth drawn. Well! A tooth for every child, you know it as well as I do. So! At any rate. She was pregnant, really pregnant, took to her

bed immediately, even had the blinds drawn, saw no one, did nothing, lest she jar the baby somehow or some such thing. You know, some women . . . but then, again. The pregnancy ran along—well into the tenth month, even the eleventh. You know what a sign of luck they think that is, those insane Poles. But all right, luck, if you want to call it that. So that when the baby finally, at length, made its appearance, it was more than perfectly formed, fat, and very strong, with long black hair—so long they had to tie it back with a ribbon—and with nails that curved over the ends of the fingers, which had to be clipped, for he was already finding his mouth with his thumb, and so cutting himself. And then—then they saw that he had been born with a perfect set of teeth. Perfect! All of them!”

“Really?” a voice asked, amused.

“Really! And they say she was terrified, and flew into the most colossal rages, and swore . . .”

“Countess Spezca?”

“Hell yes, Countess Spezca, whom do you think I’m speaking of, some ignorant peasant girl? And she raged and swore and she pulled at her hair, my dear, great handfuls, and cried terribly. And lay on the floor, and hit at herself and at the others. And then—then—oh, my dear, it’s impossible to believe . . .”

“Yes? What is it?”

“Then she strangled it.”

“Tulle! You lie!” Hermann Tulle knocked back his chair as he stood. “Events excite you, Tulle! Remember yourself.”

“I do remember myself, Hermann. You asked me yourself why on earth the Nazis had her in custody and were handling her like an animal, not that they don’t handle everybody that way. I myself . . .”

“But Tulle,” I could hear mother asking, “how do you *know*?”

“My own girl went with them to bury it. With the servants. The family would not do it. They say already that there was no baby, oh, it’s too dreadful.”

“But why would she do such a superstitious, medieval thing?” Mother was asking. “She was the most civilized—*the* most civilized. And always so wanted a child. She used to borrow my daughter . . .”

“Possibly,” one of the voices added, “possibly we change only on the



outside as we grow up and are educated by the world? Possibly underneath we are only what we heard in early childhood? What stories we all believe in—Jesus, Hitler, Father Christmas.”

“But to kill one’s own child, Herr Blumenthal?”

“To kill all of Man, my dear lady.”

We left, we came to America. Of the Spezcas, little was heard. He escaped and went to somewhere in South America, where he married, and had several sons; she, it was said, had committed suicide.



# Untitled Poem

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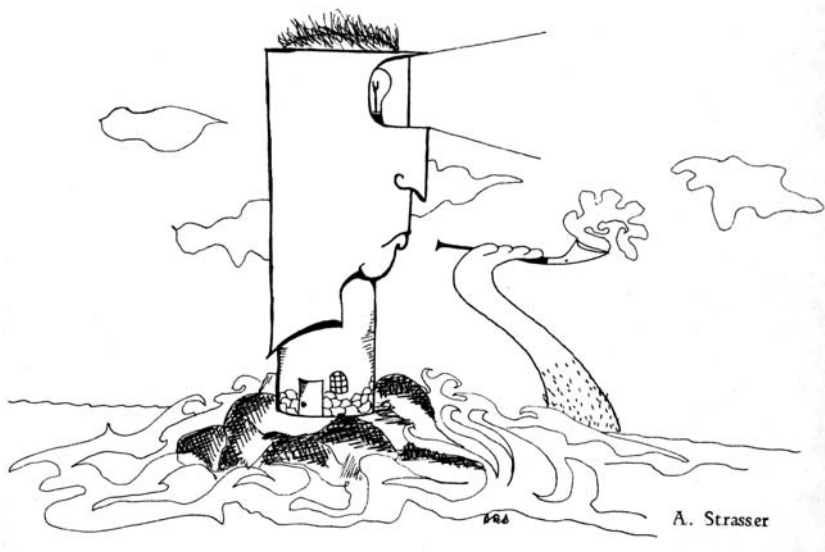
Martha Aldenbrand

This is a crazy game of tenderness,  
talk softly, rock back and forth,  
laugh long and quietly, say  
I am schizophrenic but  
you can come in, let's play  
this quiet game, pretend  
we're squeezing grapes with our tongues  
and tasting the juices dripping down.  
We're in a yellow attic,  
I will show you the clothes  
of the period, I have a muff.  
Do you love me for that,  
for showing you something  
that is only us? Baby,  
slip on this shaggy coat  
and we'll walk out through the rafters.



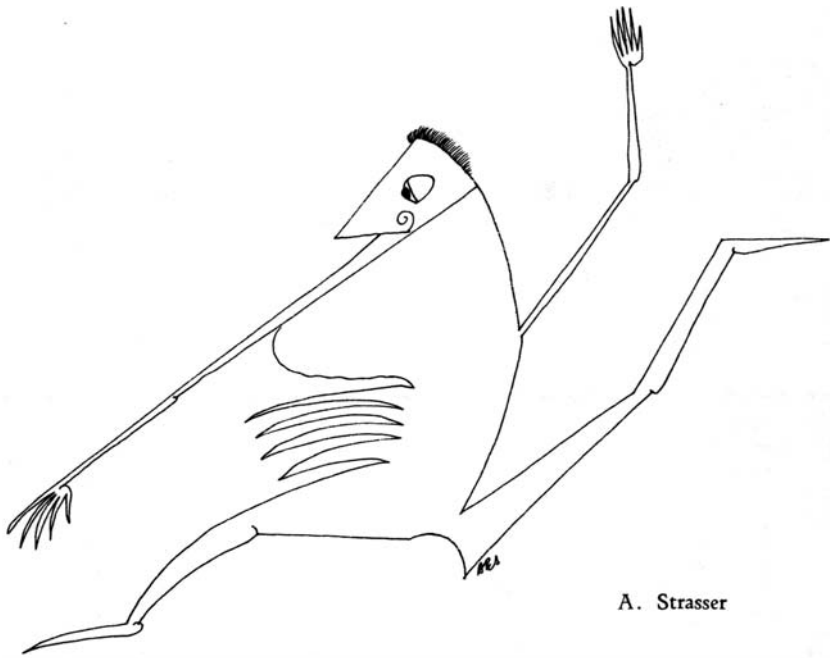
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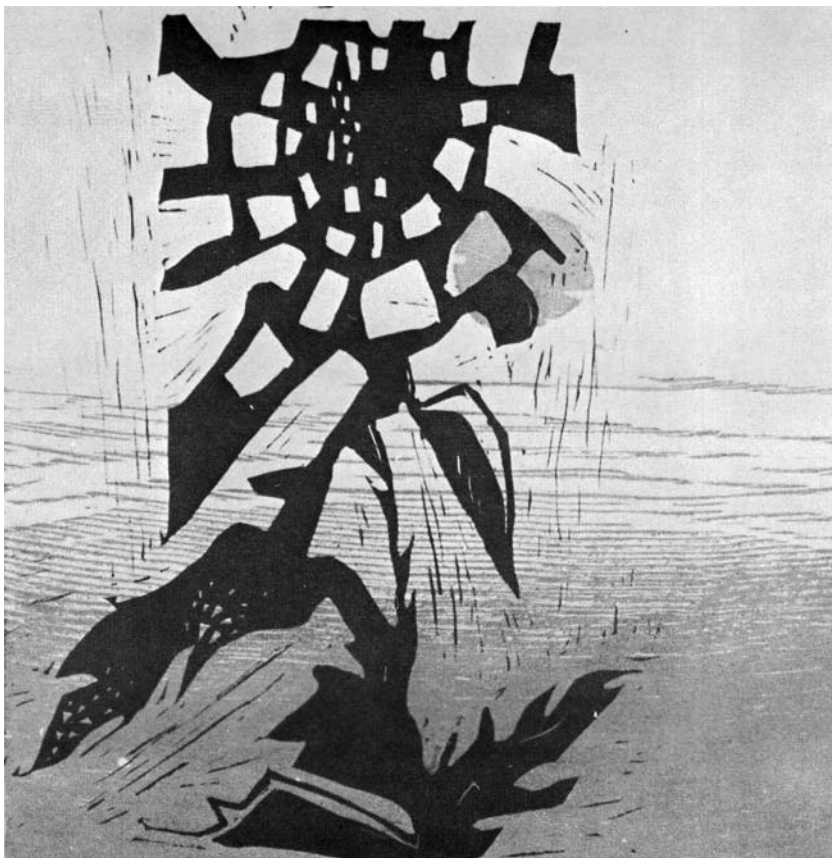
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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 5 Iss. 1, 1967.



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**Rising Sun**, C. C. Buchanan. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 5 Iss. 1, 1967.

# The Departure

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Brian Slaymaker

The day had been long for Martha. Days are always long when they hang about in idle confusion. Martha had wondered if she should tell Jim. The day had brought her to her wit's end, and made it all the more necessary for her to tell someone. And besides, Jim had to be told. It was Jim who had commissioned him. The artist was to beautify the new home. 'The large house was really quite bare,' she had thought, 'and a big landscape would help out the front room.' But now in the small room where he had done his work there was only uncertainty.

"Don't be ridiculous!" Jim said. "He couldn't have; it's not possible. You'd think we were living in the dark ages, the way you're carrying on. Now once more, if we go through it very carefully and slowly, we can find out how he tricked you,"

"He didn't trick me," Martha said. "He wouldn't—"

"Will you stop that! He did trick you! There's no way of getting around it. They're all alike, the goddamn self-centered artists—all they wanna do is . . . Oh, damn it! They're just self-centered."

He stopped abruptly and gritted his teeth and then started again somewhat more composed.

"Now please, let's start again slowly . . . right from the time I commissioned him." He turned and looked at the painting. The paint was still tacky. "Right up until now," he said, frowning—grimacing with disbelief.

Martha gripped the arms of her chair. She looked around the tiny room that she had spent so much time in for the past couple of months. It now seemed vacant, despite its clutter of paint tubes and stained rags. Everything was just as it was yesterday when he was there with his back to



her and the big easel before him. But now it was different somehow, and he was gone. The easel was still there, and the painting. ‘The painting—so beautiful,’ she thought. ‘Why couldn’t Jim have been satisfied with it? Then it never would have happened . . . It . . . That thing did happen though.’ She began to tremble again. ‘Oh why, why did it happen?’ she thought. ‘He was so . . . so . . .’

“Remember,” Jim said, “that day I was showing him this room? When I told him that this was where he’d work he seemed a bit disappointed.”

“No he didn’t,” Martha said. “I mean it didn’t seem that way to me.”

“Martha, if we’re gonna find anything out, we’re gonna have to agree on something.” Martha didn’t respond; she was still thinking about it. It had just happened last night—so short a time, but already it seemed unclear.

“Okay, Jim, okay . . . We gotta figure this out. Where do you want me to start?”

“Well . . . like I said, when I commissioned him. What did he say after I went upstairs?”

“He didn’t say much of anything . . . You had to push him into talking. I asked him if he only did landscapes. He looked at me and . . . Do you remember how his eyes were? . . . Well, anyway he just looked at me . . . but it seemed like he wasn’t. I mean it seemed like he was looking past me. He was thinking or something and he didn’t answer right away. It made me feel kind of funny. He said that he did other things sometimes. I asked him what, but maybe he didn’t want to tell me. Anyway, he was pretty vague about it. He said that he painted reality. I told him that that was good because you wanted it to look real. But then he kinda frowned and he looked at me real hard and said, ‘We’ll see.’

“He confused me then. I didn’t understand him at all. It was just that he didn’t seem to make much sense—not at first, anyway. After a while, I think I began to understand him a little. You see, when he spoke, some of the words didn’t mean exactly what you thought they did. Do you know what I mean?”

“Semantics,” Jim said. “But go on.”

“Well, in all of those days that I sat down here we didn’t say much of anything. But I still got to know him. It was like you couldn’t say much to know him. I mean, I had to watch him; that was the only way. That’s why

you never got to know him, Jim. You never watched him; all you did was talk to him.”

“You can’t expect me to sit here day after day and watch a crazy artist,” Jim said. “I got a business to take care of. I got you to take care of. That’s a real world out there, Martha. It’s not a world of artists. It’s the real thing, not a pretty picture.” He turned and looked again at the picture. Frowning, he said. “Not a pretty picture, Martha.”

Martha said nothing; she couldn’t. She wished he was here. He could explain it to him—whatever it was that she was trying to think of. ‘But he wouldn’t, would he?’ she thought. ‘He wouldn’t say a thing; he would just stare.’

“Come on, Martha,” Jim said. “If you don’t quit sulking, this thing will never come to light. You gotta be pragmatic. That’s the only way anybody will ever get to the bottom of anything.”

Martha didn’t know what Jim meant, but she sensed an urgency in his voice. Something in him was demanding satisfaction.

“If you could have seen him working . . . you’d know. The way he tried so hard to make everything right. He was so determined, and he just went on forever . . . It looked like nothing at first . . . and then it kind of grew, and I began to see it . . . Oh, you should have seen it grow, Jim, you should have seen it grow!” She stopped for a moment and began again very quietly.

“I never watched a picture being painted before; I never knew. There is so much that goes into it, isn’t there, Jim.” Jim was caught off guard and he momentarily stumbled for words, but she continued without a reply. “When he first began painting, it didn’t . . . Oh, I already said that. But I never asked him many questions—he didn’t like that. You did though, didn’t you? You didn’t like the painting, did you?”

“It’s not that I didn’t like the painting. It’s just that it wasn’t what I asked him to do. I asked him to paint a real picture, none of that ‘pop’ or ‘op’ stuff. I just wanted a nice pretty landscape. But I wanted it to look real. I told him that. I told him that over and over and, Christ, Martha, he gives me this. I mean, green snow and a purple sky . . . Why? . . . That’s what I ask myself. Why?—deliberately against my orders. I give him a job and he slights me . . . The man makes no sense.”

‘Purple sky,’ she thought. She had stopped listening with those words;

her eyes had turned to the painting. The violet sky drifted into a pale turquoise blue halo around the moon. It seemed far away, a 'never-never' land behind the dark and somber pines. The pines rose piercing the sky like thin black icicles, turned upside down. 'A dark enchanted forest,' she thought. 'It divided the heavens from the earth—the earth in its green velvet cloak.' A cool soft green, she could feel it on her bare toes. 'Snow is green,' she thought, 'sometimes.'

The artist's words came drifting back from somewhere. He said so few she wondered why they were so hard to remember. 'That's it,' he had said when she warned him of what Jim would say. 'That's it—stark and bare and beautiful . . . It is beautiful, isn't it?' Martha had nodded. 'That's what it is before human eyes and human mind. That's what it is before the night.' 'His eyes were so fierce,' she thought, 'I wanted him to cry or something. I wanted to help him . . . But I felt so insignificant. I almost cried myself . . . and I didn't know why. And then still . . . the whole thing scared me a little.'

"So, it all goes to show what a bunch of egotists they are," Jim continued. "Somehow they seem to disregard everything the civilized world has taught them. They're like a bunch of children. That's what they are, a sniveling bunch of children. They run away when they can't face reality . . . Well? Isn't that what he did?"

"What?" said Martha.

"Isn't that what he did? . . . Run away?"

"Oh . . . yes, I suppose he did . . . Yes, he even told me that, I guess . . . He said that his life had been one long struggle . . . like a war without battles. Every time there might have been a battle, he said, it got rained out . . . and there was never any rain-check. And that now it was time to give up since he could never meet his enemy face to face."

"Is that all he ever said? Pitying himself? Crying on your shoulder? He was less than a child. He was an infant. Artists must think they're indispensable. They forget what makes this country run. It takes men, real men! Not infants and women. And that's why you're siding with him. Women are no better; they sit home and never know what the real world is like . . . And I can't understand them either: women, artists, poets, none of them. But I tell you, he's not going to pull the wool over my eyes. You can't see him for what he really is because you're one of them."

"I . . . I couldn't understand him either, Jim. I . . ."

"That's exactly it, Martha. He's pulled the wool over your eyes, but he's not fooling me with any of his stunts. You can figure out anything if you take all the facts into consideration. That's what I'm gonna have to teach you. You can't go around letting everybody fool you . . . It isn't healthy.

"Now, last night, that's what we're really concerned with. I want you to tell me everything that you can remember, down to the last detail."

Martha began to grasp the arms of the chair. She felt frightened again. But Jim recognized this and reached for her hand.

"Relax, honey. Just relax and remember."

"I can't!"

"Nonsense. You can. Just relax."

She gripped his hand tightly and looked at him. 'It's all right,' she thought. 'Jim's here.' She drove through his eyes with a searching stare, like jumping into a bathtub naked and finding the water cold. The artist appeared in her mind, a warm coal in a dreary forest. She wanted to be close to him she thought. Jim turned his head away. She withdrew her hand. "Yes, I can go on," she said.

"That's the girl," Jim said. "I knew you were a brave one."

"He was already there," she began, "when I came in. He didn't even turn when I opened the door. I could see beads of sweat on his forehead . . . He must have been working a long time."

"Was there anything unusual about the . . ."

"Jim! If you want to hear this, you'll just have to listen . . ." She almost glared at him. Her eyes seemed to push through him and fix on an object just a little farther on. He was confused and didn't want to look at her. He was almost frightened, but not quite. He didn't answer.

"He turned after a few moments," she went on, "and said, 'It's almost finished, you know.' I remember that it looked quite a bit different from the last time I saw it. You would have liked it then. You see, the room was dim and it looked quite real—it looked more the way you wanted it. I told him I'd just sit back here and wait. He smiled at me then, Jim. He seemed to like me more than when he started—maybe it was just the painting, but anyway he was much happier. He said, 'Fine, you just sit there and wait.' And that's just what I did. I sat right here in this chair.

"He was bending over the painting at the bottom of the picture, so naturally I couldn't see what he was doing, since I was behind him. But I

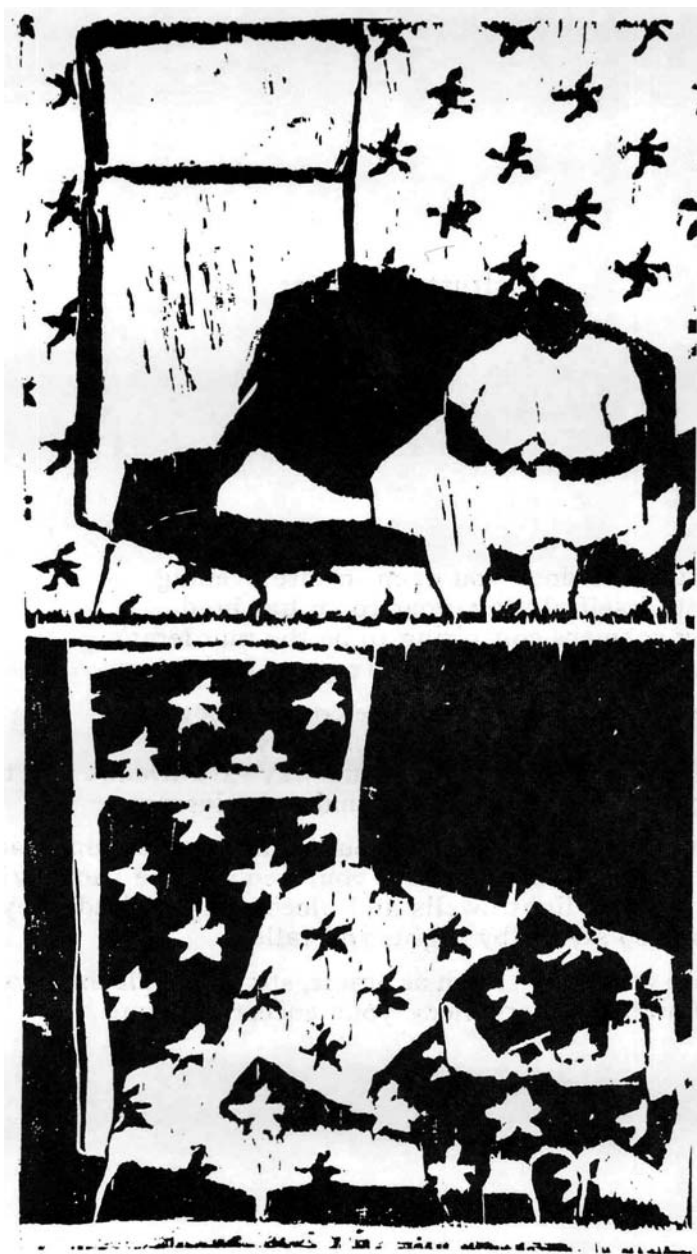
didn't want to really. I didn't want to see it until it was done so I started looking around the room. I didn't much care at what, just so it wasn't at the picture. There wasn't much to look at though, just paint tubes and rags, and such. So I picked up some of his pencil sketches and started looking at them—these right here. That kept me busy for a while, but I got kind of sleepy—not really sleepy, just sort of relaxed. So I just closed my eyes and leaned back in the chair.

“I could hear his brush rubbing on the canvas. It was kind of a smooth sliding sound; it sounded good. I could just imagine the snow he was painting—long wisps of pale green. I listened and got kind of excited because somehow I could tell that he was almost done. It seemed like it would be just a few more strokes. And then it was; he quit painting and there wasn't a sound. I couldn't open my eyes I was so excited; and he didn't say anything. There was just a long silence. I was waiting for him to say it was finished, but he didn't. So I opened my eyes kind of slowly—one at a time I think . . . He wasn't there, Jim, I swear it. He just wasn't anywhere. He was gone.

“I'm not sure what I did. I was scared. I remember at first I didn't want to get up, but I did. When I opened the door and looked down the hall it was vacant. The whole place was dead quiet. I turned and looked back in the room. I don't know, I guess it was foolish but I expected him to be standing there. The place was dim but I could see.

“When I looked where I thought he'd be, the painting was there. The little overhead light made it stand out, almost like it was glowing a little. It seemed like a window . . . looking out on a moon-lit winter night. When I got close I could see how really beautiful it was. It was better than I had thought. Look at it, Jim; the moon caught my attention first, and those puffy little clouds seemed to be moving across it. It seemed as bright as the real one . . . I looked at everything . . . the pines, that little frozen brook, and the snow . . . the snow . . . That's when I saw it Jim—right down there in the corner—those tracks leading off toward the forest.”

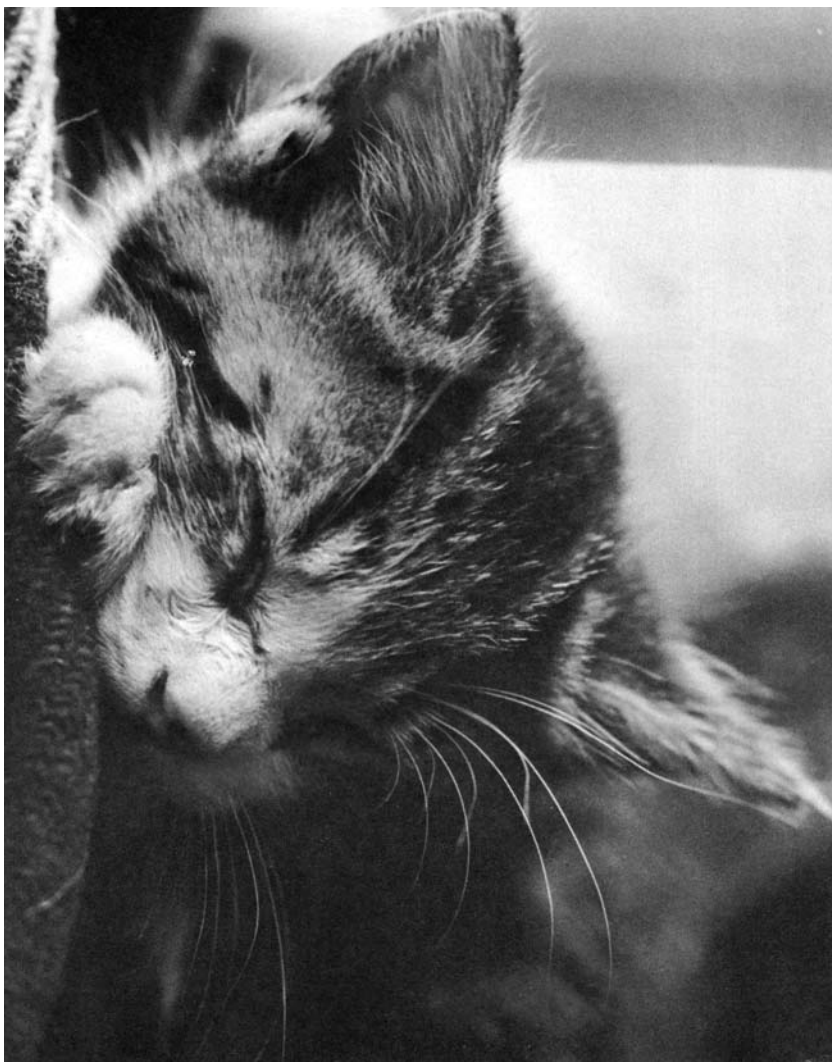




Indecision, Mary Rogers. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 5 Iss. 2, 1967.



Untitled Photograph, Justin Kestenbaum. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 6 Iss. 1, 1968.

# Border Crossing: Quebec to Maine

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*June 1968*

Margaret Atwood

In a white frame building  
the official writes on the form:  
everything is in order.

The road is black,  
no sun;

In the lake the black trees waver  
and are left behind.

As the car passes, children  
playing on the gravel  
turn up their faces to us, thin  
and soundless as a mirage

The yards and the strung washing  
carry on as usual

An old woman wearing a man's hat  
is digging in the earth.

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This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 6 Iss. 1, 1969.



Quietly  
we enter  
we are entered by  
the land of death.



# Edad

---

Pablo Neruda

Ay la mentira que vivimos  
fue el pan de nuestro cada día.  
Señores del siglo veintiuno  
es necesario que se sepa  
lo que nosotros no supimos,  
que se yea el contra y el por,  
porque no lo vimos nosotros,  
y que no coma nadie más  
el alimento men tiro so  
que en nuestro tiempo nos nutría.

Fue el siglo comunicativo  
de las incomunicaciones:  
los cables debajo del mar  
fueron a veces verdaderos  
cuando la mentira llegó  
a tener mayor latitud  
y longitudes que el océano:  
los lenguajes se acostumbraron  
a aderezar el disimulo,  
a sugerir las amenazas,  
y las largas lenguas del cable  
enrollaron como serpientes  
el mentidero colosal

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This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 6 Iss. 1, 1969.

hasta que todos compartimos  
la batalla de la mentira  
y despues de mentir corriendo  
salimos mintiendo a matar,  
llegamos mintiendo a morir.

Mentiamos con los amigos  
en la tristeza o el silencio  
y el enemigo nos mintio  
con la boca llena de odio.

Fue la edad fria de la guerra.

La edad tranquila del odio.

Un hombre de cuando en cuando  
quemaba el alma de Viet Nam.

Y Dios metido en su escondite  
acechaba como una arana  
a los remotos provincianos  
que con sonolienta pasion  
caian en el adulterio.



## Age

---

*translation by J. T.*

The lie that we lived  
was our daily bread.  
Men of the twenty-first century,  
you must know  
what we did not know  
in order to see pro and con  
because we did not see it,  
and that you do not eat  
the food of deceit  
that fed us in our time.

It was the communicative century  
of uncommunication:  
cables under the sea  
were real at times  
when the lie came  
to have greater latitude  
and longitude than the ocean:  
the languages became used to  
beautifying the false,  
to suggesting threats,  
and the long tongues of the cable  
coiled up as serpents,  
the colossal lie,  
until all of us became involved  
in the battle of the lie;  
and while we were running

we were lying,  
and we came out lying to kill,  
and we arrive lying to die.

We used to lie with friends  
in sadness or in silence  
and the enemy lied to us  
with his mouth full of hate.

It was the frozen age of war.

The tranquil age of hate.

A man from time to time  
burned the soul of Vietnam.

And God, stuck in his hiding place  
spying as a spider  
the distant country people  
who with sleepy passion  
fell in adultery.



# Tracks

---

A. P. Schroeder

A sudden noise  
is gone.  
The passage of the space between  
two things.

Nothing follows the thought of an  
abruptly opened door:  
In the full beam of the spotlight  
An empty man.

Between the temple and the temple,  
I am the difference, the same,  
between the temple and the temple  
of the identical priest

who hangs suspended in the silence  
of this wilderness.



# The Man with the Wicker Cigar

---

George Hitchcock

Observe him as he steps on the balcony  
to bless his squadrons of gasoline  
he holds seven jewelled microphones  
in his seven left hands  
his nostrils twitch  
lava pours from the studs  
on his shirtfront

below him a sea of bouquets  
each with its head zipped  
in transparent green paper  
bursts into cheers

his mouth is like a teller's wicket  
his eyes are of silk foulard  
his teeth are certified winners  
he is smoking a wicker cigar

reassure yourselves declares  
this sweetsmelling pope  
of the flatlands  
death is an illusion



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This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 6 Iss. 2, 1968.



The Head, Lonnie Rutkofske. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 6 Iss. 2, 1968.



# On Seeing a Picture in *Life* of a Child Gone Hungry in Biafra

---

Jerry Parrott

I thought the child  
was merely fat—

puffy about the  
wrists and ankles—

until I saw the gaunt  
grey cage of his chest

gone weak,  
attempting

to stop the constant  
growing in upon himself

which threatened always  
to make him vanish

into slogans:

a kola nut for pennies  
kills hunger  
for twenty-four hours.



---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 6 Iss. 3, 1968.

# First Freeze

---

Melvyn S. Bucholtz

My turned boat stuck,  
A dark maple hung  
Fast in thin river ice.  
The early grey lifted  
Through the olive marsh  
Shivering grass; the dull wind  
Breathed bass  
Over the brown gelatin water, stuck logs  
Gasped air bubbles  
Morning unstilled frozen teeth  
Along drying rock juts, beginning  
Water again.

A great blue crane  
Hugged his way  
Up the cove, all day I tried  
Making his passing  
Sound beating air over river  
Ice, with my mouth.



# Four Prose Poems

---

Stuart Dybek

## *The Calliope of Summer*

Across the alley the Calliope of Summer rented an old roominghouse room. All through June the metronome of an empty rockingchair creaked through the screen. But in July clownish moonlight fell across the garbage: an eggshell opened one eye, shook the coffee grounds from a wig of potato peels, and a smile spread across a banana when cowed in shoppingbags the conductor sprung out of the ashcan. Jack-in-the-box! What music! Accordians of cats, tin drums beat and cymbals trashed while mice nibbled at discarded clarinets. And to bent bugles, clothesline zithers, like kangaroos, the ballerinas in long black topcoats danced all night to soft goat bagpipes.

## *Night Wandering Fall*

The alley was like a river when it rained flowing with tin cans, cardboards, a doll's head. I'd wake because of lightning, go to the window and look down: flooded gutters, broken drainpipes like faucets, waves of wind splattered against the window. Under the streetlamp the phantom of autumn would look up at my face pressed against the trickled glass. He looked like a hobo's shadow under the slanting lamp—a shadow, but not plastered against a wall, nor spilled along the pavement, but standing straight up in the open supporting himself under the driving rain under the raining light looking up at me with wet newspaper eyes.

---

These poems originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 7 Iss. 1, 1970.

### *December Epithalamium*

Our first winter night we propped a sky rocket in an empty quart milk bottle. Wind kept snuffing out the matches so we huddled in a doorway while I lit a cigar: the flaring match flickered your windflushed face like a bride's blush. I tapped the ash and touched the glowing tip to the wick. It crackled into yellow-orange sparks like a sparkler, hurried up the fuse, while we edged back watching the rocket like a piece of July hissing in the middle of a cold, deserted street—whooshing up past bare branches and telephone wires, mirrored an instant on third story windows . . . Exploding: silver, gold, red, pinwheeled to an arced moment of green and blue flakes parachuting down as cinders, fading as we blinked our eyes. The smudged milk bottle was full of smoke and we left it smoldering patiently to fill with soot and snow.

### *Spring*

comes to the window like mist. And tattered sparrows twittering back laughter while the old woman children call “the witch” flings dry bread handfuls to the garage roof. And the earth soaks up wetness like bread, crusts turning penicillium green, sponging up drizzled rain. A butterfly blooms like a stemless four-petaled flower over the mushrooms and catpiss fungi. Feathery ferns, wispy dill await lilacs; black branches like skeletal wings; grackles, crows, blackbirds returning like swallows, swooping low over wet angled roofs. Spring. Angels come to my window like mist.



# A Lost Ball

---

John Stevens Wade

I found a ball.  
It felt funny  
in my soft hand.  
(Nobody saw  
the balding man  
in the back yard)  
Holding a ball  
is looking back.  
You don't know why  
until you feel  
it in your hand.  
Finding it is  
nothing; holding  
it is wanting;  
wanting to live.  
I ask myself:  
you poor, poor fool,  
just how many  
lost balls are there  
for you to find?  
And I can say  
I don't care much.  
One is enough  
in my soft hand.



This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 7 Iss. 1, 1970.

# Last-Fling Rose

---

Felix Pollak

Rosebud on a withering stem  
seduced by a burst of Indian summer  
to flaunt one last fling

now sways in the bitter air  
nipped.

Lamplight defines  
the vagaries of the sun:  
what was  
is.



---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 7 Iss. 1, 1970.

# The House and the Garden

---

Susan Musgrave

These days are treacherous—  
like cut vines and murderous roots  
the flowers in the garden  
grow deliberately out of proportion.  
Insensitive, they are colorless  
and don't leave any room for the grass.

Trees uproot themselves  
sending hidden fingers  
to hide the sun.

The stones are automatically bored.

When I walk outside  
devils sit and guard the rabbit holes.  
The fence is indifferent  
and the vegetables never get  
enthusiastic about anything.

I've given up simply trying  
to understand. Small animals mate  
between the walls of my house.  
I'm afraid it too will soon  
disappear—most of my neighbors  
wish I would leave.

---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 7 Iss. 1, 1970.

Because of them  
there hasn't been any weather  
for over a year.

I am such a sad young girl  
and they are such horrible old men.





# After This War

---

C. H. George

After this war there can be no other.

—AUGUSTUS CAESAR

where mothers work  
shallow graves,  
    wind-scooped,

covered over and over  
with engraved tea-  
spoons & butter spades,

    salt cakes  
    under wrinkled arms

    blue-veined breasts  
    will not bear purple hearts

    and children's dark  
    dreams & stained mattresses

float down distant  
well-utilized canals

---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 7 Iss. 3/4, 1971.

while mothers strain  
& sift thin red sand,  
bent beneath

shredded coffin wood—  
the harmless toy  
that made indians & robbers fall,

pentagon generals  
suck ball point pens

wall st. throngs  
for playboy breasts

and arthritic  
senators scan polls

every wednesday morning



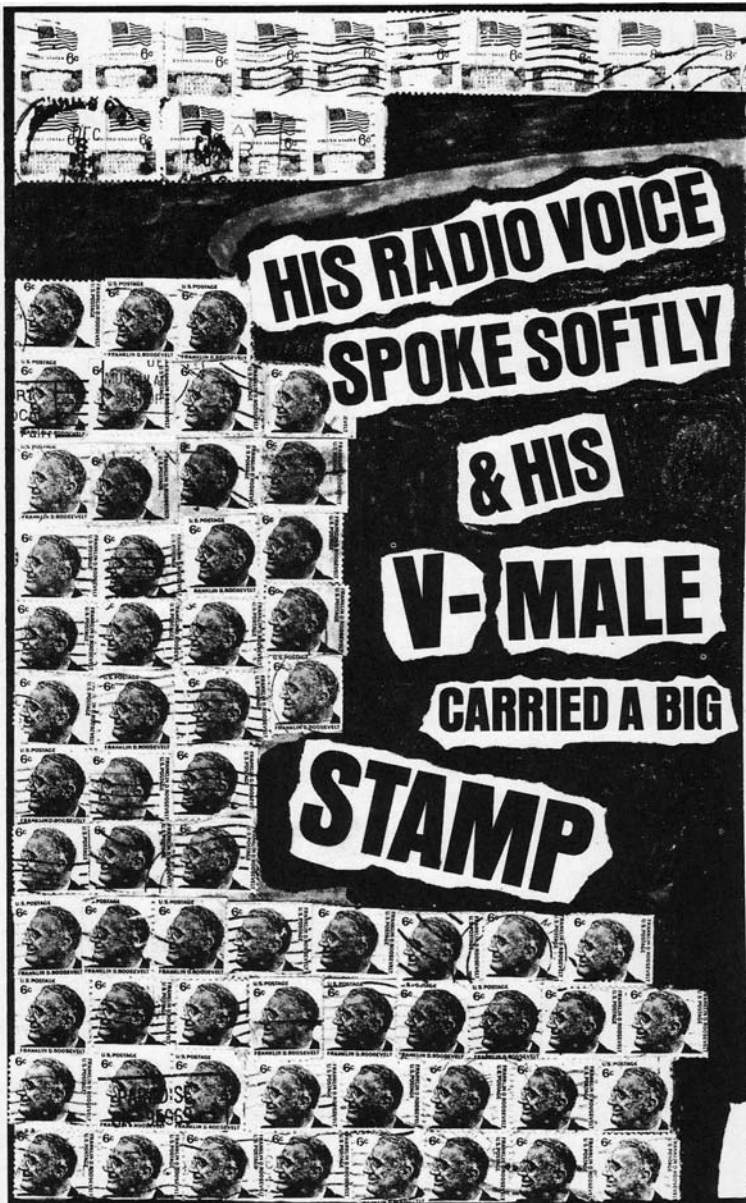


*With all  
my Love-  
Red*

**Ink Drawing**, David Kelly. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 7 Iss. 3/4, 1971.



Stamp Poem No. 1, Albert Drake. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 7 Iss. 3/4, 1971.



Woodcut, Dave Work. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 7 Iss. 3/4, 1971.

# The Day the Movers Came

---

Barbara Drake

The dreams we fenced last night are gone.  
Usurpers dally on the lawn.  
A broken lamp, a wicker chair—are these  
The dreams we fenced? Last night is gone  
My love—we cannot please  
Our demons with the chairs we sit upon  
Or, on a floating carpet, take our ease  
In dreams. We—fenced last night—are gone.  
Usurpers dally on the lawn.



---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 8 Iss. 1, 1972.

# Sergei Yesenin 1895–1925

---

*to D.G.*

Jim Harrison

This matted and glossy photo of Yesenin  
bought at a Leningrad newsstand—permanently  
tilted on my desk: he doesn't stare at me  
he stares at nothing; the difference between  
a plane crash and a noose adds up to nothing.  
And what can I do with heroes with my brain fixed  
on so few of them? Again nothing. Regard his flat  
magazine eyes with my half-cocked own, both  
of us seeing nothing. In the vodka was nothing  
and Isadora was nothing, the pistol waved  
in New York was nothing, and that plank bridge  
near your village home in Ryazan covered seven feet  
of nothing, the clumsy noose that swung the tilted  
body was nothing but a noose, a law of gravity  
this seeking for the ground, a few feet of nothing  
between shoes and the floor a light year away.  
So this is a song of Yesenin's noose which came  
to nothing, but did a good job as we say back home  
where there's nothing but snow. But I stood under  
your balcony in St. Petersburg, yes St. Petersburg!  
a crazed tourist with so much nothing in my heart  
it wanted to implode. And I walked down to the Neva

---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 8 Iss. 2/3, 1973.

embankment with a fine sleet falling and there was  
finally something, a great river vastly flowing, flat  
as your eyes; something to marry to my nothing heart  
other than the poems you hurled into nothing those  
years before the articulate noose







“RCR” Staff 1973. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 8 Iss. 2/3, 1973.

# Remaking Chant

---

## *for the Cherokee*

Steve Crowe

I am clean and dancing.  
Today, the first in a lifetime,  
I leave a rattlesnake's voice  
in the rocks, I frighten no one.

But I still have fangs,  
poisonous or not, and an urge  
to feel the warm ball of a field mouse  
dissolving inside me

the vibrations of rain drumming  
across dry hills, the stretch of moist  
sunlight along my body.  
I will coil into a short nap,

consider this spirit I am leaving,  
and maybe then I can abandon my brothers.



# Psychopathia Sexualis

---

Harley Elliott

My god I said  
but this is strange.  
My garter belt was up  
around my neck  
and my wig had fallen off;  
my handkerchief collection lay  
like sleeping birds  
around the room

as I read on page 164  
of sudden genitals in dense  
park shrubbery.  
The mirrors were all steamed up.  
Farther on young gentlemen  
were loving up black boots  
and penetrating unsuspecting bustles  
on the thoroughfare.

My god I said this seems to be  
the story of my life  
and right away I was ashamed  
of all the little oddities I kept around  
and lept up on my wife.  
Sex I said I want some sex right now

---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 9 Iss. 1, 1974.

I said and give it to me straight  
I think I love you more  
than you will ever know

and I tore my garter belt  
to shreds. But she just laid there  
naked in her bobby sox  
and blew pink bubbles in my ear.  
Her freckles burned like acid  
and the braces on her teeth were  
shining cruelly in the dark.



# One Day Last Month Iggy Christmas Found God

---

Michael Schulze

**L**ook: Iggy Christmas was reading a Stag magazine in this drugstore in Peoria.

Iggy flipped quickly through the pages looking at the pictures. One picture showed a naked Brazilian lady. Another showed a man shoving nails into another man's face. As he studied the pictures Iggy Christmas's eyes were bright as stars.

He was skinny. Big thick-lensed glasses perched on the end of his skinny nose. Big spider-like hands fumbled with page corners and a Timex on his wrist went tick tick tick. His legs were long as broomsticks and his face looked like two eyes set in the middle of a dinner plate. And he had a real hard-on from the picture of that naked Brazilian lady.

Then Voice spoke from inside Iggy's head and Iggy's neck snapped back and his eyes glazed. "Hello, Iggy," said Voice.

"Hello," Iggy whispered to the ceiling.

"Drop the Stag magazine, Iggy," said Voice.

Iggy dropped the Stag magazine.

"Now, Iggy," said Voice, "I want you to go over to the counter, buy a Mars candy bar, and waste the cash register man."

Iggy walked over to the drugstore counter but his eyes were still riveted to the ceiling so he kept tripping over things. The cash register man's name was Old Joe and he looked at Iggy Christmas suspiciously. He was an old man with white hair and buck teeth.

Iggy paid no mind. He tripped over a stack of Mad magazines and fell on his face.

Old Joe tottered over to Iggy and crouched by him. "Hey, son," he muttered. "Quite a fall you took there. You OK?"

"Sure," said Iggy. He grabbed Joe by the head and smashed it against the floor until it broke open. It broke open like a mango.

Then he got up and walked to the counter, picked up a Mars candy bar, put it in his pocket. Carefully, almost daintily, he placed a dime on the cash register.

He stepped over Old Joe and walked out of the drugstore.

"Act like nothing happened, Iggy," said Voice.

Iggy acted like nothing had happened.

Once Iggy's kid brother had asked him a question. This was about two weeks after Iggy had returned from Viet Nam and they were eating breakfast in the kitchen when Iggy's kid brother said,

"Iggy, how are babies made?"

Iggy chewed on his cereal a bit, took his glasses off and wiped them clean. Then he did it again just in case he'd missed something. He stared at his reflection in the kitchen table and made a funny sound in his throat.

"You find them," he said. "Under rocks."

Iggy's kid brother thought about that awhile. Then he said,

"Iggy, *why* are babies made?"

Iggy's eyes clenched because suddenly a sound screamed through his head and it was an air raid siren eating at his head and making it hurt real bad. He gripped the table and shook his head to make it go away and looked at his kid brother.

He shrugged. "Why are babies made?"

"Because," he said.

Once Iggy actually did find a baby under a rock. It was dead.

In army parlance, it was *wasted*.

Iggy stared at the baby for awhile. Half of it was gone but at least the ears were still there. In Viet Nam you count bodies by counting the number of ears in a field after an attack and dividing by two.

Iggy carefully counted the ears under the rock. "One, two," he said.

Then he divided two by two and got one. "One," he said. He chalked down a slash for "one" in his logbook. The slashes in his logbook looked like this.



Thirteen, he thought, was a very unlucky number. He hoped he'd find another wasted slope before the sun went down.

But Iggy wasn't thinking about that right now. He was thinking about getting the hell out of Peoria. He had his thumb out, walking fast along I-66 on the outskirts. His head was back to normal now and so were his eyes which at the moment were alive with dignity.

His shoulders were thrust back and his chin held high.

Iggy Christmas was on a quest.

For just as he had killed Old Joe, Voice had given Iggy two things to do. Iggy's brain buzzed with the details of his task.

1. He had to find the naked Brazilian lady in Stag magazine and give her a message, and
2. He had to find God and ask him a question.

Over and over again Iggy pondered the two things he had to say.

A car whizzed by and a couple inside waved. Iggy waved back. A bumper sticker on the back of the car had a Happy Face on it. "SMILE!" it said.

Iggy smiled.

The first time Voice spoke to him had been sometime in October. He'd been an officer in the Americal Division, 1st Cavalry, a little south of Danang. The idea was to drive the slopes out of their hooches into the Secure Hamlets so the enemy would be easy to spot.

Iggy was walking through a burned village in a mopping up operation when he saw a flicker of movement. It was a water buffalo. Voice spoke then for the first time.

"Shoot the water buffalo, Iggy," said Voice.

Iggy shot the water buffalo.

Then he saw a dog. "Shoot the dog, Iggy," said Voice.

Iggy shot the dog.

A Vietnamese girl rounded the corner and froze, her eyes wide. "Shoot the slope, Iggy," said Voice.

Iggy shot the slope.

And I really do know a guy who shot a slope once. His name is John Ferguson and he lives in a two story stucco in Grand Rapids, Michigan. He is big and fat and laughs a lot. One day he blew a slope's head clear off. He's a priest now.

"Me, I work for the Bell Telephone Company," the fat man said to Iggy. Iggy had finally found a ride out there on I-66. "Going down to a convention in Miami."

"Why, lucky me," said Iggy. "I just happen to be going to Miami, too."

"You are?" asked the fat man and smiled. "Well, you are a lucky one, aren't you?"

"Yes, I sure am," said Iggy.

Iggy sure was lucky.

And somewhere around Tennessee Iggy asked, "Do you like your job?"

The man smiled. "Sure I do," he said. "Communication is important, don't you think? I mean, if we couldn't communicate with each other, where would we be? Answer me that."

"I surely don't know," said Iggy. "Nowhere, I guess."

"Nowhere is right!" said the man.

They were quiet again. They drove for a long time staring at the road.

Iggy once knew a guy named Kenneth Barton Osborn of the 525th Military Intelligence Group in Saigon. When Ken was working in Danang he became good friends with Iggy and they got high together a lot. Ken's job was to get information from suspected Viet Cong agents who refused to communicate with him. He did this usually by pistol whipping them or else hooking them up to field telephones and turning on the juice. This method was a favorite of the Intelligence Corps because it established communication very quickly. They even had a name for it. "The Bell Telephone Hour."



Smiling, resting against the car window in the middle of Georgia, Iggy Christmas dreamed he was in heaven. The streets were made of solid gold bricks and into each brick was stamped the words "Fort Knox." Everybody in Heaven had big color TV sets with a choice of one hundred and sixty-seven channels and there were snowmobiles in Heaven and stacks and stacks of Stag magazines. Bob Hope was in Heaven and he was telling jokes all the time. And every morning this is what Iggy found under his pillow: a hundred dollar gift certificate from Sears.

There were hundreds of Sears stores in Heaven.

Iggy sighed.

Iggy had to go to the hospital once in Viet Nam because he'd tripped over an arm while body counting and sprained his ankle.

And next to Iggy in a bed was this twelve year old slope. One day the kid started talking to him lying there in the bed and Iggy couldn't understand what he was talking about until a doctor came and began to translate.

This is what the kid said:

"My friends are Nhung, Ky, Chau, Nguyen," he said. "They are thirteen, twelve, fourteen, twelve. I have a friend who is a boy named Liem. He was thirteen. When the bombs came I saw Ky's bowel and intestine come out of her body. Her head blew away. Her arm and leg blew away. Nhung was buried alive and dug out dead. Chau's teeth were broken by stones which shattered them. Nguyen was buried alive. Liem was beheaded. My friend Phuong laughs sometimes, cries, speaks without knowing what she says, she screams, she is twelve. I was buried completely. Teacher Minh dug me out. I have pains in my spine . . ."

Iggy had to stop listening then for the air raid siren was screaming in his head. "Weep, Iggy," said Voice through the screams.

Iggy wept.

I saw a television show once. It was an anti-war film. It was telling people what a rotten thing war was. Part of the film showed about a billion young men all jumping up and down and yelling, "Kill."

"Kill, kill," they said.

I wondered what made all those young men do that. It was like each young man had a Voice of his own inside his head and each Voice was whispering to his young man,

“You jump up and down and you yell *kill*.”

And there was another time when I was in elementary school. The teacher asked a question and everybody raised their hands to answer. There were the Voices again. Except this time they were saying,

“Raise your hands.” And everybody did.

Iggy smiled in his dream and this was why. He had finally found his Naked Brazilian lady.

He was making love to her on a bed in Heaven.

The bed was lined with Sears Perrna-Press quilts and they were making love on a Sears Perma-Snooze Boxspring Mattress. When they finished Iggy looked down at her and said, “I have a message for you from my Voice.”

She ran her fingers through his hair. “Urn,” she murmured. “That’s nice.”

“Do you want to hear the message?” he asked.

“Sure,” she whispered in his ear.

“Then I’ll tell you.” Iggy rolled over and stared at the ceiling, hands behind his head. He cleared his throat.

“*Life*,” he said, “*is funny sometimes*.”

They were quiet a few minutes. Iggy wanted to let it all sink in.

“That’s the message?” she asked finally.

“Yup.”

She laughed and pulled him to her. “Don’t you have anything to say?” Iggy asked.

“Sure,” she whispered and kissed him full on the lips. “Danang,” she said, “has changed hands more often than Liz Taylor.”

Which was an old Bob Hope line. Iggy had been in Danang when Bob Hope came, was one of five thousand GI’s who listened to les Brown and his Band of Renown play “Thanks for the Memories.”

“Is it true that Danang is really the in-country Rest and Relaxation Center?” asked Bob Hope.

“Laugh, Iggy,” said Voice.

Iggy laughed.

All around him everybody else was laughing.

"Danang," said Bob Hope, "has changed hands more often than Liz Taylor."

"Laugh again, Iggy," said Voice.

Iggy laughed again.

He did this several times throughout the afternoon.

Then Anita Bryant came on. She led a sing-along and the song was "Silent Night." After awhile with five thousand GI's all singing "Silent Night" together everybody started to cry.

"Cry, Iggy," said Voice.

All around him everybody else was crying.

And another time when he was in Viet Nam Iggy taught this little slope kid to blow soap bubbles. He kept a jar of Bubble-Glo in his coat pocket, kept it there all the time. Didn't know why. Except sometimes at night when he was on guard duty he liked to blow a bubble or two just to watch them break.

One day when he was body counting he picked up a body that wasn't wasted. It was about four. It stared at him with malice. He took it back to camp.

Everybody at camp liked the kid. They named him Joe. One night while Iggy was on guard duty smoking a cigarette Joe came out to see him. That night Iggy taught him how to blow bubbles. "Look," he'd say and blow a bubble. "You try."

But for some reason one of the bubbles didn't bust when it hit the ground. It was a big blue bubble and when it landed it just sort of sat there quivering in the breeze.

Iggy and Joe stared at the bubble for a long time but it didn't pop. Then for a quick second Joe looked up to Iggy. There was a question in his eyes and a lot of different things in there all at once.

Iggy didn't want to look at Joe's eyes but when he did all he could do was shrug.

Joe nodded, walked over to the bubble and stomped it.

Look: Iggy Christmas reached Miami in October of 1972. He found a job there at an old people's home named Mira Mar and he works there under the name of Hank. He is working there today.

“Hey Hank,” the old people say as they pass by each day on their way to the shuffleboard courts or the bingo room.

And each day Iggy looks up from his broom and says, “Hey.”

And look: One day last month Iggy Christmas found God. There, sleeping in room 256 of the Mira Mar: the blankets over him were warm quilts from Sears and he smiled as he slept. Iggy Christmas was in Heaven again. Only this time there was music all over Heaven and the song was “Silent Night.” And up he climbed a golden stairway covered with thick shag carpeting; he was crying and there was a light at the top of the stairs so bright he had to wear sunglasses. He climbed toward the light. The light was God. Slowly His form emerged in the blinding light. He was an old man with white hair and buck teeth.

Iggy fell to his knees. “God!” he sobbed.

“Don’t call me that,” smiled God. “That isn’t my real name. Iggy, don’t you remember me? Old Joe? I used to work in a drugstore in Peoria. I work in a lot of drugstores, Iggy.”

Iggy was crying so much now he couldn’t see at all. The stairways were covered with his tears. “Old Joe?” he sobbed. “Old Joe? Didn’t I kill you? Once? Didn’t I? I think I did. Didn’t I?”

Old Joe smiled. “Of course you did, Iggy,” he said, and wiped away a tear. “Of course you killed me.”

“Who doesn’t?” asked Old Joe.

Their tears were forming a big pool now; they were crouching in a big pool of tears in the middle of Heaven. Old Joe was holding Iggy and Iggy’s hands dug deep into Old Joe’s shoulders as slowly the puddle of tears melted and soon it and the light were the same.

“Old Joe,” whispered Iggy, his voice ragged. “I got a question for you. It’s a question I’ve had to ask for a long time. My Voice told me to ask it of you.”

Old Joe flashed a cracked smile as if the smile hurt him. “Shoot,” he said. “I know a lot about Voices.” And even Old Joe and Iggy were melting now, turning into the light, melting slowly so that tears and man and light became one. Iggy straightened. “Joe,” he said, straight to God’s face,

*“why are babies made?”*

Old Joe shrugged and smiled and patted Iggy on the head.  
He leaned forward and put his lips to Iggy's ear.  
This is what he said.  
"Because," he whispered.  
But only his voice remained.



# The Morning Baking

---

Carolyn Forché

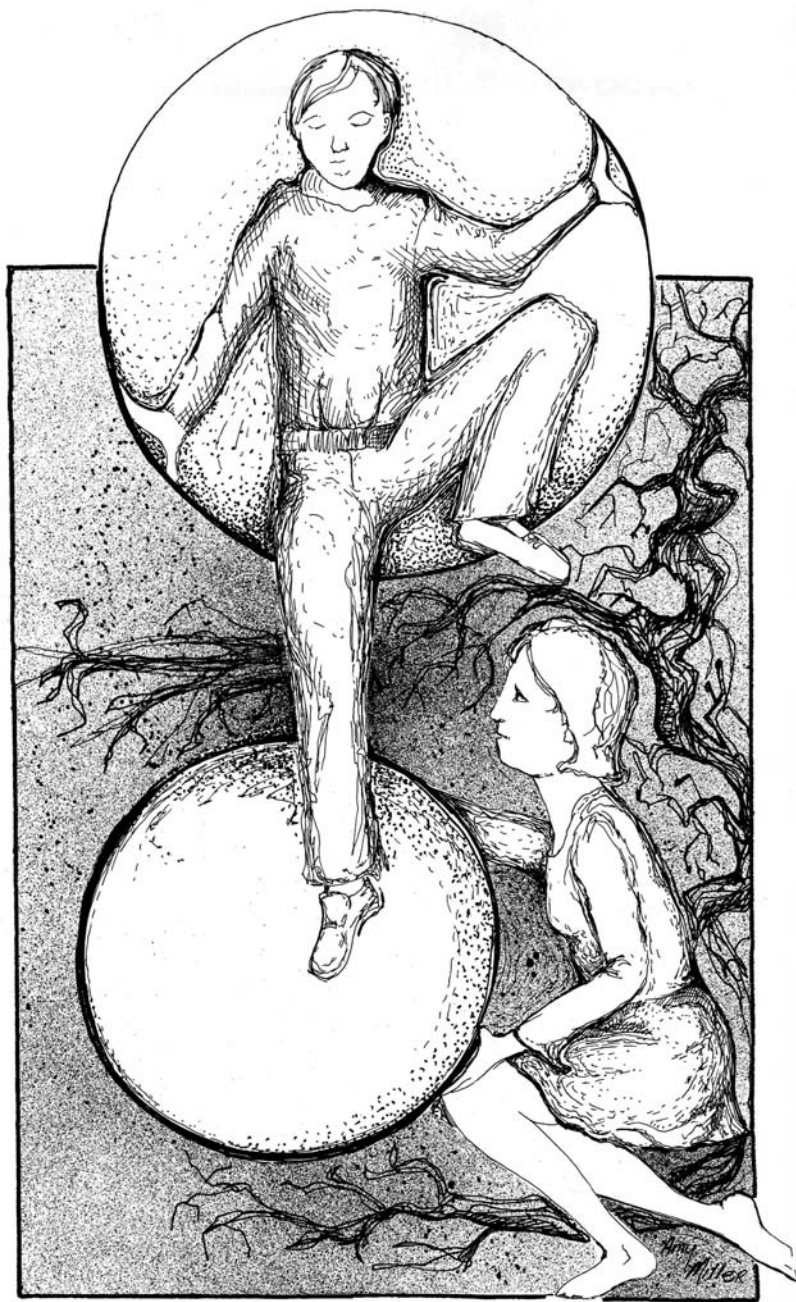
Gramma come back, I forgot  
how much lard for these rolls.  
Think you can put yourself in the ground  
like plain potatoes and grow in ohio?  
I am damn sick of getting fat like you.

Think you can lie through your slovak?  
Tell filthy stories about blood sausage?  
Pish-pish nights at the virgin mary in detroit?  
Hear your country on the radio and bitch.

I blame you for raising me up, making  
my tongue slav, all this slapping and dancing.  
I'll tell you I don't remember any kind of bread,  
your wavy loaves of flesh in my sleep,  
the stars on your silk robes.

But I'm glad I'll look when I'm old  
like an old gypsy dusha hauling milk.





Ink Drawing, Miller. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 10 Iss. 2/3, 1976.

## Challenging Situation No. 3: The Rolling Skull

---

David Citino

Having fashioned  
what you could not accept  
of your self and your parents  
into a figure your own size,  
you call it “enemy”  
and in a great struggle  
during which you prove  
to the world and to your lover  
your purity of heart,  
your courage and strength  
you behead this new man  
but the head  
becomes a grinning skull  
rolling after you in the dust,  
follows you into your tent  
when you try to rest  
or to lie near your lover,  
grows wings, a great tail  
and slithers or flies  
after you through mud,  
water and sky, laughing  
at you as if

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This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 11 Iss. 2, 1977.



it knew you better  
than anyone else  
in the world.

what do you do?



# The Housepainter's Recreation

---

Keith Taylor

The housepainter goes to bars  
where interesting women ask  
him what he does. He says—  
*I paint.* They treat him  
with respect, even awe; they see  
brown paint under his nails  
and imagine he paints dark  
canvases, full of *angst*  
and gloom and sorrow. He smiles  
sadly when they talk to him.  
One offers to pose, but he says—  
*I don't do people.* She understands.



# In Pittsburgh

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Daniel L. Klauck

brittle worn steel  
workers reminisce  
days of courage and honor  
strong and fine as the steel  
forefathers cried and bled for  
“giants worked the mills then  
men so tall they shadowed the sun  
their women stood by them  
children respected them  
this use’ta be one helluva town  
a real shot ’n’ beer town”

but of today  
drinking their ‘iron city’ beers  
these rusting remnants of legends  
sneer  
“the old ways are mocked  
children have grown wild  
our own women compete against us  
there is no honor left for men  
even the new steel warps and cracks”

they cannot tell you what happened  
these hard-hat relics do not know

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that blood and tears  
have nothing to do  
with the making of steel

when men cry and bleed for steel  
what are children to respect  
what comfort can women be



# Souvenirs

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Lynn Domina

in twenty-five years,  
when you climb the steps to your attic,  
looking for a china plate  
your mother gave you,  
or the quilt  
that has been in the family  
for five generations,  
you may come across these frogs,  
this family,  
a mother and children.  
they will be in the same box  
as the old love letters  
and trinkets  
from every city  
each of your friends has ever visited.  
will you wipe the dust  
from their backs,  
wondering which of us  
gave them to you?

will you realize  
how i carried them next to my body,  
protected them from customs officials and border police  
through five countries,

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wishing, finally, that i had bought something steel,  
something neither of us  
could break?

but there is nothing quite so delicate  
as blown glass,  
as tiny animals  
either of us could crush  
under our thumb,  
though i have been told  
thinking of delicacy  
and me together  
is like getting lost  
in a house of mirrors,  
a thousand images,  
and not one of them accurate.

but i have never seen frogs this small,  
although when i was fifteen  
our back yard was invaded  
by tiny toads.  
every evening, these toads crept to me,  
and i cupped them singly in my right palm,  
like i would cup a daughter,  
if she could ever be so small.  
when you are not as large as anyone else,  
when a raindrop is as big as your knuckle,  
anything could be delicate.

the night after i bought these frogs,  
i sat with two women,  
beside the canale della guidecca,  
our feet in the water,  
the canal patterned with light,  
rain trickling under our collars.  
we'd seen san marco,

and photographs  
of the whole place flooded in winter.

men leaned against the bridges,  
“gondola, gondola,” seductively,  
their blue and white striped shirts,  
their straw hats,  
trying to sound american.

for all americans go to venice  
for the canals, san marco,  
for the murano glass.  
yet, i bought only one small  
delicate family,  
to slip in my pocket,  
to carry next to my skin,  
to bring to you and say, here,  
close your eyes,  
hold this family  
in your right palm.



# Dinosaur

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Louis Phillips

*In the dark, we hear the boisterous, drunken singing voices of Edmund Spenser and Wilber MacKaye. They sing an almost forgotten folk tune.*

SINGERS: “Mr. Bourne and his wife once at breakfast had a strife.  
He wanted bread and butter with his tea, tea, tea.  
Says she: ‘I’ll rule the roost, I’ll have a plate of toast,’  
So to loggerheads went he and she, she, she.

Now there was a Mr. More, lived on the second floor,  
A man very strong in the wrist, wrist, wrist.  
He overheard the clatter, of toast and bread and butter,  
And he knocked down Mr. Bourne with his fist, fist, fist.”

*As the lights slowly come up, we find ourselves in the modest Aberdeen cottage of Mr. and Mrs. Edmund Bourne Spenser. Edmund Spenser is an ex-patriated American who has spent the last two decades of his life in various Scottish villages. Edmund is dressed in miner’s gear, with the light on his miner’s hat still on.*

*With Edmund is his best friend and upstairs neighbor—Wilber MacKaye. Mr. MacKaye is in his mid-fifties and his hair is white and thinning. He wears a light jacket, shirt, and blue wool tie, but at the moment his pants are draped over the faded sofa. He stands in his long blue undershorts and sings, sings.*

*Arlene Spenser, wife to Edmund, enters. She is a transplanted Londoner, and (like her husband) in her mid-forties, with a head of long red-hair and a music-hall temperament. She once had ambitions to be an actress, but she*

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*has long ago given those ambitions up. She wears a loose-fitting print dress and has pink cotton slippers on her feet. In short, neither her dress, nor her manner show her off to the best advantage. She carries Wilber's tweed cap and flings it in frisbee style across the living room.*

ARLENE: I found your bloody hat. It was in the garden where you left it.

*Wilber lunges for the object. Misses it, and spills some ale onto the sofa.*

EDMUND: (*to Wilber*) Watch what you're doing, you bloody ape.

ARLENE: I just had the cushions mended too.

EDMUND: Aye. Twenty years brand new to the day.

ARLENE: A good sturdy sofa it is. Who cares how old it is? You can't measure everything in life by age.

EDMUND: I'm sure that goes for you too, Dearie.

*Wilber continues singing.*

WILBER: Said poor Mr. More, a-sneaking to the door, for sure I'm a man without brains, brains, brains.

ARLENE: It's not funny anymore.

*Edmund grabs his friend by the shoulders.*

EDMUND: Did you hear that, Wilber?

WILBER: I have one bad ear and the other is not much good either.

ARLENE: I ask the solicitor up and you turn the whole thing to a drunken brawl.

EDMUND: The old lady don't think our sky-larking is funny. (*turns to his wife who is fetching the tossed cap*). Why, Madame, I shall have you know that the song we were rehearsing has weathered the years better than any of us. "Mr. Bourne and His Wife" is among melodies, a dinosaur. Of course we know that survival is all, and "Mr. Bourne and His Wife" has survived when other grossly over-rated tunes have dragged their quarter-notes out to some swamp to die.

WILBER: Hear! Hear!

EDMUND: Hear! Hear!

WILBER: No sense of humor, your old lady? Is that what you're saying?

ARLENE: I'll old lady the both of you out into the gutter, that's what I'll do.

(*to Edmund*) Now give Wilber back his pants, so he can be presentable to our guest.

EDMUND: Your guest. Not mine.

*From outside the back window, we can hear the cry of a dinosaur rummaging among leaves.*

WILBER: Pants? What pants? Did I have pants when I came down?

EDMUND: You can put pants on a monkey, but it doesn't make him a king.

ARLENE: I am a respectable married woman. I should be spared these awkward sights.

EDMUND: Exactly what she said to me on our honeymoon.

ARLENE: How would you know? You were out getting drunk with your chums.

WILBER: Peace! She's right, Edmund. Only unmarried ladies and Mother Superiors should be forced to look at a man in his garters.

EDMUND: I hate to tell you this, Wilber, but garters went out with the Stone Age.

*Wilber bends over and points to a scratch high on his leg.*

WILBER: And there is where Mrs. Chaplin bit me.

ARLENE: Mr. More will be here any minute, you fools!

EDMUND: (*to Wilber*) Fools? My loved one is talking to you, sir!

WILBER: And will this Mr. More be wearing pants?

EDMUND: Of course. It's a *sine qua non*! A civilized person can hardly walk abroad without seeing men in long pants. None just in their garters. Conformity is rampant. Why I hear tell of a society in Edinburgh devoted solely to the cause of putting pants on animals. Why, if the Clothing For Animals Society has its way, there won't be a naked arse to be seen from here to Newfoundland. (*picks up Wilber's trousers*).

You should send these down, just in case the elephants in the zoo need something to wear. If I am any judge, this pair could cover two or three of them in one shot.

ARLENE: You two can't go on celebrating forever.

EDMUND: Of course we could, that is if we could live forever. What a revolting thought that is. But no fear of that. Mortality with its stink throws a monkey wrench into everything.

WILBER: Forgive, forgive. It's not everyday your husband brings home a dinosaur.

ARLENE: If that is all he brought home with him, it would be easy to forgive, but he had brought the whole world upon our shoulders as well.

*The sound of a dinosaur eating a tree.*

EDMUND: That would be justice, and we know there is none of that.

ARLENE: Mr. Shelby will advise us. Mrs. MacAbee says he is a brilliant solicitor. He's handled all kinds of rock stars.

EDMUND: Well Gerty has handled all kind of rocks.

WILBER: Twenty billion dollars. Not a penny less.

EDMUND: Not enough. Not enough.

WILBER: Edmund, make your friend put his pants on.

EDMUND: Make him do this. Make him do that. Make your own friends is what I say.

ARLENE: We cannot conduct serious business if you do not put your pants on.

WILBER: The last woman who said that to me meant something else entirely.

EDMUND: What are we talking now? Ancient History? You haven't looked at a woman as long as I have known you. Upstairs puttering around your cats and books.

WILBER: That is because your wife has quite stolen my heart.

EDMUND: She should have stolen your cherry.

ARLENE: Talk smut down at the tavern. Not here!

WILBER: (*pulling on his pants*) When I was a mere broth of a lad, I couldn't wait for my first pair of long pants. Now, when I am all grown and tottering toward senility, I can never wait to get out of them. Does that tell you what you need to know about growing up in this world?

ARLENE: Women grow up; the male of the species grows sideways.

WILBER: (*sings*) 'Says More, 'Upon my life, you shall not

beat your wife, for it is a sin and disgrace, grace, grace.’  
‘You fool,’ says Mrs. Bourne, ‘This business is not of yourn,’  
And she smashed a cup of tea in his face, face, face.’

ARLENE: Sober you up quick enough.

EDMUND: (*at the window*) Look at Mrs. MacAbee’s hooligans throwing stones at Gerty . . . (*takes up a rifle*) Hey, you kids! Get away from her before you get hurt. I’ll blow your heads off if I have to!

*He turns back from the window.*

EDMUND: (*to Wilber*) Look at yourself, man! Your trousers are on backwards.

WILBER: So they are. I thought they were riding a little low.

EDMUND: Why can’t Mrs. MacAbee keep her children at home, locked up in an oven or something? Why do they have to be out there pestering a poor innocent dinosaur?

ARLENE: If you wanted her to be left alone, you shouldn’t have brought her home. (*looks at her husband and beats him to his nearly automatic response*) Which is what my Mum said when you married me.

EDMUND: And where was I going to leave her?

ARLENE: My mum? You didn’t have to drag her along on the honeymoon.

EDMUND: The dinosaur. Of course the difference between your mum and a dinosaur is merely a hair’s-breadth. Miniscule. But do you think after years of plotting, mapping, exploring, trudging, and digging that I would leave my prize out there so some villain could sneak up on her and snatch her out of my grip.

*Wilber is in the act of pulling his trousers off when the doorbell rings.*

ARLENE: That’s Mr. More now. And you two will probably be proud to greet him in the altogether. That will get us all off on a proper foot.

*Arlene crosses out to answer the door.*

EDMUND: (*calls after her*) If we greet your solicitor stripped to the buff, a proper foot will be the very last thing he’ll look at. (*to Wilber*) A proper foot! A proper foot in the arse is what I should be giving you.

WILBER: What did I do?

EDMUND: Why didn't you tell me that finding the world's only living dinosaur would be such a heavy responsibility? A world on my shoulders!

*Sounds of the dinosaur munching in the garden are heard.*

EDMUND: (*calls to Gerty*) Quiet you! You'll get some food as soon as we get a check in hand.

WILBER: Last time I looked, she was eating the fence.

EDMUND: So who's going to stop her? I'm telling you, my friend, that all the good things of the earth are dead. Someday you and I and Arlie will be extinct, and some spacecraft of the future will dig up our bones and put us on display. A penny for the peep show.

*During the above, Arlene has returned, bringing with her a sturdy tweed of a man. This is Shelby B. More, Esquire, who's tanned face is punctuated by a chaplinesque moustache. He sets his briefcase on an empty chair.*

ARLENE: One of these men is my husband, Mr. More.

SHELBY MORE: Aye. Which one?

ARLENE: Take a pick. Whatever one you think is best for me, though I hope you'll choose the one with his pants on.

*Mr. More thrusts out his hand.*

EDMUND: Careful of my hand, sir. I haven't gotten all the coal dust off. Frightful dirty stuff, coal. If God had wanted mankind to live in warm houses he would have allowed us to pick a clean and inexpensive fuel right out of the air. But as it is we have to be satisfied with oil, gas, coal, and dinosaur droppings. Is that what you think?

SHELBY: And the sun.

EDMUND: The sun is a dying star. It is a dinosaur like the rest of us . . . (*looks at Arlene*) Sorry. I was just apologizing for the unwashed hands.

SHELBY: That's the history of the human race, isn't it? We must thrust our hands into dirt to get what we want.

*All the while, Shelby has been staring with great puzzlement at Wilber who has been leaning out the window, waving his pants at Gerty.*

WILBER: Over here, Gerty. Over here.

SHELBY: (*indicating Wilber*) And this one?

EDMUND: That's our upstairs lodger—Mr. MacKaye. He's a dealer in rare books, but he has always had this thing for dinosaurs.

SHELBY: Pleased to meet you, Mr. MacKaye.

EDMUND: We have gone ahead in our celebrating. Shall we pour you a good one to help you catch up?

ARLENE: Wilber only comes downstairs to take his pants off.

WILBER: I was merely showing my friends where I had got bit.

SHELBY: The dinosaur bit you?

WILBER: Of course not. My cat did. Mrs. Chaplin I call her because she has a funny walk.

EDMUND: He has the only queer cat in the neighborhood.

WILBER: I wouldn't know about that, because I'm not home very much, but I know she is upset about having a dinosaur in the backyard. It interferes with her mousing.

SHELBY: I can imagine . . . I will have that drink if you don't mind.

*Shelby crosses to the window.*

SHELBY: It is down there in the yard is it?

WILBER: You cannot miss it.

SHELBY: I didn't think so, but all I see is this flat green hill.

WILBER: That's Gerty!

SHELBY: (*genuinely moved*) What a sight this is.

EDMUND: The only live dinosaur in the world and there it is!

SHELBY: What keeps her from running away?

EDMUND: Apathy.

SHELBY: Apathy?

EDMUND: It is difficult to get a dinosaur interested in anything.

WILBER: As long as we feed it, it won't go anywhere.

ARLENE: Just like some other people we could name.

SHELBY: It is incredible all right.

EDMUND: Seeing is believing.

ARLENE: That's what my mum always told me about sex.

SHELBY: No, seeing is only seeing. Believing is something entirely different.

*The cry of the dinosaur is heard throughout the land.*

SHELBY: I see the dinosaur, but I can't believe that you people have taken no precautions to keep her in place.

WILBER: Well, sir, we did chain her to the house on the left.

SHELBY: I didn't notice a house on the left when I came up.

EDMUND: Precisely. Does that prove our point? It was a beautiful cottage too. Not a stick left.

WILBER: She doesn't like to be chained down.

SHELBY: And you've tried nothing else?

ARLENE: Wilber put a dog tag around its neck. In case it should get lost.

EDMUND: Of course, what are the odds of a dinosaur getting lost these days?

SHELBY: (*with distaste*) A dog tag!

EDMUND: A dinosaur-tag if you will.

SHELBY: But that's nothing man! An itty-bitty tag around the neck of a great big animal?

WILBER: Nothing to you perhaps, but you try putting a tag around Gerty. I tell you I was hanging on for dear life. Every time old Gerty bobbed her head, I was sliding about on a reptilious roller coaster. Seasick, I was. Up, down. Up, down. A terrifying experience it was.

ARLENE: It makes our neighbor sick riding about on Gerty's neck, but it makes me sick to think we are sitting on a billion-dollar discovery and we don't know what to do with it

SHELBY: Well, I am certain there will be lots of uses for your dinosaur. A new commodity on the market always wets people's appetites.

EDMUND: New commodity on the market? Why, man, she is millions, and millions, and millions of years old!

SHELBY: New is a relative term.

EDMUND: Relative to what?

WILBER: Old. That's what new is relative to.

SHELBY: Sometimes a thing can become so old that it becomes new again.

You two . . .

ARLENE: Three . . .

SHELBY: Three own the only living dinosaur in all of existence. This will make you the richest people in the world. Everyone will line up for miles to see a dinosaur.

EDMUND: It is not as if she can do tricks yet.

SHELBY: Dinosaur rides at a pound a head. Movies, television, interviews. There is no end to the possibilities of turning Gerty into a goldmine.

*Sound of the beast.*

EDMUND: We will exploit the bejesus out of her, will we?

SHELBY: Exploitation is the name of the game. It is the stamp of the modern world.

EDMUND: I don't think we should take her places, though. Transportation might be a problem, with what the airlines charge for overweight baggage. A flight to Edinburgh would do us in.

SHELBY: We can only take one step at a time. What kind of dinosaur do you think it is?

WILBER: A big one. What can be more useless than an itty-bitty dinosaur.

SHELBY: Even a small dinosaur is such a rarity that it has its market-place value.

EDMUND: He wants to know the make of it, Wilber. Whether it's a Ford or a Volkswagen.

WILBER: A Rolls Royce. That's what our Gerty is. Doesn't our Gerty look like a Rolls Royce to you.

SHELBY: (*looking out the window*) Quite. But I would call it a Tyrannosaurus Rex.

WILBER: Brachiosaurus. Huger than seventeen elephants.

ARLENE: I always wanted to go out with a man who owned a Rolls Royce, but it was my station in life never to meet up with that kind of man.

*Shelby returns to his satchel and unpacks a great number of legal documents.*

ARLENE: The clock. I always wanted to hear the clock. Isn't that what they say in all the ads? The clock is the noisiest thing about it.



EDMUND: A clock isn't the noisiest thing about here. I can say that. I could say that if I could hear myself think.

ARLENE: Clamp on yer pipe before I crack yer head open with a teakettle.

EDMUND: Temper. Temper. A regular alewife I married.

WILBER: Yale wife? You wife went to Yale? What did she major in?

EDMUND: Alewife. Not Yale wife. Why is it so difficult to make myself understood in my own home?

ARLENE: Where do you want to be misunderstood? Among strangers?

WILBER: What's he yelling about? An alewife is better than a Yale wife any day of the week.

SHELBY: Please! No quarrelling! There will be plenty of Rolls Royces to go around. A Rolls for you . . . a Rolls for you . . . a Rolls for you . . . a Rolls for me!

WILBER: (*softly*) "Mr. Bourne and his wife once at breakfast had a strife. He wanted bread and butter with his tea, tea, tea."

SHELBY: All we have to do is merchandise her carefully. Little dinosaur dolls . . . make that big dinosaur dolls . . . huge dolls . . . dolls as big as cities.

EDMUND: Something cuddly.

SHELBY: The world's first cuddly dinosaur.

EDMUND: Something the whole state of Virginia can take to bed with it.

SHELBY: Virginia? Why Virginia?

ARLENE: Oh he mined coal there once, and he keeps talking about going back there.

WILBER: Yes, Virginia. There is a dinosaur. Don't go to Virginia. You'll have enough money to buy her.

ARLENE: You wouldn't have anything if I didn't have the sense to call in Mr. More. (*to Shelby*) Otherwise the two of them would be spending their days looking at her out the window.

EDMUND: I particularly like her at night when her great head obscures the moon. Oh take a great chomp out of the moon for us, dearie.

SHELBY: Just sign here and we'll get the dinosaur bolted down.

EDMUND: Bolted down? Come, come, Mr. More. A dinosaur is not a sewing machine.

SHELBY: I couldn't agree with you more.

EDMUND: You might.

SHELBY: We must be careful and not let harm come to the animal.

ARLENE: What are you asking us to sign, Mr. More?

SHELBY: Just a standard business arrangement. I shall act as your agent and in return will be paid 20% of all monies brought in. Perhaps you want to take these documents and have your own solicitor read them.

WILBER: You are our solicitor.

SHELBY: In that case, I have read the contracts and find them in order. Sign.

EDMUND: (*starts to sign contracts and stops*) We do have one problem.

SHELBY: What is that, Mr. Spenser?

EDMUND: We could use a bit of an advance to keep Gerty in oats.

WILBER: And fences—unless I miss my guess.

ARLENE: She is eating us out of house and home.

WILBER: And fences.

SHELBY: No problem. The food will be supplied for free.

WILBER: Free? Now there is a generous man.

EDMUND: Do you have any idea how much she eats?

SHELBY: It doesn't matter.

WILBER: So you say now.

SHELBY: I know food merchants who will trample over one another just so they can advertise that their beef is the official beef for the world's only surviving dinosaur.

EDMUND: Beef??

SHELBY: Steak then.

ARLENE: Gerty is a vegetarian.

SHELBY: An animal as big as that? Ah, no, you're mistaken. You just haven't been looking closely enough.

EDMUND: She eats grass, leaves, shrubs, flowers . . .

SHELBY: All right then, I'll call a couple of florist shops. A vegetarian. That is a disappointment. I was hoping we could feed her live animals. It would make a better show. Watching an animal eat leaves is little low on the entertainment scale. We're going to have to think of a gimmick.

EDMUND: Isn't a live dinosaur enough?

SHELBY: Not any more.

EDMUND: You're daft!

*Gerty roars.*

EDMUND: Even Gerty agrees with me.

ARLENE: Quiet, Edmund. Mr. More's the expert, not you.

EDMUND: I find the dinosaur, but everyone knows more about it than me.

SHELBY: Oh you might get a few good news stories out of it, but the public gets tired of things awfully quickly.

EDMUND: But, man, this is a dinosaur! Dinosaurs don't grow on trees!

*The crash of a tree is heard.*

WILBER: Speaking of trees, there goes the last one now.

SHELBY: King Edward gave up the throne to marry the woman he loved.

Where's the headline about that today?

EDMUND: That was fifty years ago!

SHELBY: Well, do you want a short play in the deadlines or do you want fifty years of coverage?

EDMUND: I'll be dead by then.

ARLENE: Let Mr. More speak, Edmund. It is a miracle any of us get a word in edgewise.

SHELBY: People walk on the moon and no body thinks of it twice. It's a bloody bore. People turn on the telly and go directly for the sports. (*Edmund raises his arm in protest.*) You have a good product, I agree. But packaging is everything these days. I suggest McAmm, McAmm, and McAllagher to control the flood of merchandise. Coloring books, T-shirts, lunch buckets.

EDMUND: Everything but the kitchen sink, aye?

SHELBY: No. I am sorry if I give you that impression. We are after quality. Quality merchandising. Quality entertainment. Nobel prize-winning writers will write the screenplays.

ARLENE: I always wanted to be in the movies. When they were filming the royal wedding, a lot of photographers took my picture.

SHELBY: (*not paying any attention to Arlene*) We'll have someone come up and teach her a few tricks.

EDMUND: You mean play on the horns like a seal.

SHELBY: Now there's an idea. We could have our own recording company. Dinosaur records.

ARLENE: I have heard records of whales singing.

SHELBY: Righto. The dinosaur plays, the whales sing. Twenty million records sold like that (*snaps his fingers*).

EDMUND: I don't want Gerty imitating a seal!

SHELBY: She doesn't have to imitate a seal. She can develop her own style.

EDMUND: And maybe you want her to jump through a hoop while she's at it!

SHELBY: So you think it could be done?

EDMUND: I am certain that this world can build a hoop big enough.

SHELBY: Are you angry at something I said?

ARLENE: Leave him be, Mr. More. He is as grumpy as they come lately.

EDMUND: I'm grumpy, am I? Well, you ain't seen nothing yet! When you start making my Gerty cute, making her walk through hoops, and play Auld Lang Syne on the Glockenspiel . . . Then you'll hear grumpiness. I don't want Gerty on the television advertising toilet tissue.

SHELBY: Of course you do, or you wouldn't have called me here.

EDMUND: My wife called you here. She's the one who wants to be rich and famous, riding around in a Rolls with her cauliflower ear pressed up against the dashboard to hear if the clock is ticking.

ARLENE: Cauliflower ear is it?

EDMUND: All over the world the clocks are ticking. Gerty out there is a living clock. She was on this planet before we were on this planet; she will be around after we're gone. She is a living, breathing animal. This is not Mickey Mouse time.

SHELBY: Mickey Mouse is still news, which is a lot more than we can say for King Edward VIII. A man gave up the throne of England for the women he loved. Who remembers him now?

EDMUND: I do! By God I do!

ARLENE: Nor everyone cares what you think, Eddie. What about Wilber? It's a third his, too. If we want to merchandise her, then he should have a say.

SHELBY: How about it, Mr. MacKaye?

WILBER: Well, I was thinking of a book.

SHELBY: Exactly. That's what we need, a biography. The Story of a Dinosaur, as told to . . .

WILBER: I was thinking of something scientific actually. I have been an amateur paleontologist all my life.

ARLENE: It was he who got us set on Gerty's tracks.

*The song of the dinosaur.*

SHELBY: Forget science. There's no money in science.

WILBER: I didn't think it would be a best seller.

SHELBY: If you could hang out with a scientist or Monty Python, which would you prefer? We know what the choice would be every time. People want excitement, laughs.

WILBER: What's wrong with knowledge?

SHELBY: Nothing. It can be presented in an entertaining, laughable way. If dinosaurs died out, it was because of boredom, that's all.

EDMUND: How can they have been bored? The world was new to them!

SHELBY: Newness is the oldest thing in the world.

EDMUND: I got it! Why don't we place a paper-bag over Gerty's head and we can charge people to come up and guess what it is.

SHELBY: I will take that under advisement. And I also think we should have hats.

EDMUND: Hats?

SHELBY: Bonnets. Sunbonnets with pictures of Gerty the Dinosaur all over it.

EDMUND: I'll take that under advisement.

WILBER: I feel sick to my stomach.

ARLENE: Mr. More, I don't think this is what any of us had in mind.

SHELBY: That is because you are all too close to the event. You have to step back to gain perspective. You are caught up in the excitement of finding. Soon you will be caught up in the far greater excitement of using what you find to your own best advantage. Now if you will just sign these three copies here, Mrs. Spenser.

*As Mr. More places a pen into Mrs. Spenser's hand, we hear the sound of a window breaking. And then the cries of a woman. and the cries of children.*

ARLENE: What was that?

*Wilber leans out the window.*

WILBER: Our dinosaur has crashed his noggin through the third floor window of Mrs. MacAbee's apartment.

EDMUND: Gerty gets her revenge. Good. Going after the children, is she? I hope she scares those nippers out of ten years' growth. Considering that the eldest boy is only nine years old that should send them all scattering back into Mrs. MacAbee's wrinkled womb like raisins.

*Excitement is heard from the house across the way.*

WILBER: She has got Mrs. MacAbee in her jaws.

*The house that we are in is also shaking with great tremors. Furniture falls over. Mr. More spills to the ground. The others hold on.*

SHELBY: Are we in an earthquake?

ARLENE: This happens whenever the dinosaur turns around.

*Wilber calls out the window.*

WILBER: Don't you worry, Mrs. MacAbee, Gerty is a vegetarian.

EDMUND: Mrs. MacAbee looks so much like a pumpkin it may not help her.

ARLENE: For God's sake, Edmund, we have to do something.

SHELBY: I think I've sprained my wrist. I hope you people are insured.

EDMUND: Why should we do anything at all? Her children have started it. What with her nippers tossing stones at Gerty.

SHELBY: Insurance for Gerty. That's what we'll need. And that won't come cheap, I can guarantee you that.

EDMUND: Of course it won't come cheap. What does come cheap? Even cheapness doesn't come cheap these days. We pay through the nose for cheapness!

*A woman's scream. Voices across the way. A second tremor. The dinosaur's tail comes crashing through the window.*

EDMUND: Duck.

WILBER: Hold on, Mrs. MacAbee, we're coming! Get the rifle, Edmund.

EDMUND: What good is a peashooter against a Brachiosaurus.

*Edmund grabs the rifle. He and Wilber exit. The dinosaur tail disappears from view.*

ARLENE: We just had that window repaired a fortnight ago. One of Mrs. MacAbee's little nippers tossed a pool ball through it...

SHELBY: If this happens every time Gerty moves, we're going to be up to our ears in glass.

*Arlene crosses to the window and calls out.*

ARLENE: The main thing, Mrs. MacAbee, is not to panic.

SHELBY: I'll sit on the floor where it's safe. It is safe, isn't it.

ARLENE: Very good Gerty is putting our neighbor back.

SHELBY: (*mopping his brow*) That is a relief all right.

*Arlene turns back to the solicitor.*

SHELBY: We must get Gerty out of this place as soon as possible. We have to find her a decent environment.

ARLENE: A tar pit, you mean. A tar pit is the only decent environment for a dinosaur.

SHELBY: That's not what I meant, Mrs. Spenser. No need to take offense. We are all on the same side of the fence, so to speak.

ARLENE: If we had a fence.

*Arlene begins to pick up the fallen furniture. She attempts to restore a sense of order.*

SHELBY: (*trying to smooth things over*) Tell me, Mrs. Spenser, I am very curious. How did you and your husband manage to come into possession of a dinosaur? One can't go down to the corner store and buy one.

ARLENE: Quite right about that. Can't go down to the store to buy it... (*continues' cleaning, as the noise out side starts to fade*). A lot of it was Mr. MacKaye's doing. Wilber has a vast collection of books and documents, all related to the Loch Ness Monster. For years he has been tracking every rumour, every photograph, every stitch of evidence relating to

prehistoric life upon our planet. Naturally, with such a library overhead, Eddie and I became interested ourselves. If one prehistoric monster could survive all the way down to us then why not more? And where was Nessie hiding all those years? And then not too long ago there were stories about dinosaur tracks being found in Africa.

SHELBY: Ah yes, I read that myself. It even crept into the financial pages.

ARLENE: One of the new countries.

SHELBY: Countries nowadays are always changing their names. The oldest places in the world sneak up on you with a new name. It plays absolute havoc with the Conservative view of things.

ARLENE: Our hearts sank. We thought that some Ivy League Paleontologist with a prestigious degree and an inexhaustible cash flow had beat us to the punch. Needless to say, no one gives people like us credit for anything. But we found the first dinosaur. It was right in our own back yard.

SHELBY: God works in mysterious ways.

ARLENE: No. Man works in mysterious ways. I always thought God was on holiday. Tell me, are you a golfer, Mr. More?

SHELBY: No, I am a Salmon fisherman myself. That is why I moved to Scotland.

ARLENE: Well, if you had been a golfer, you might have found Gerty before us. For eight years, the three of us scoured from Buchan to Cairngorm, hiking up one side of Cairngorm and down the other. We thought that there might be a system of caves where the relatives of Nessie might be lurking. We peeked into every hollow, cave, and den until last night, on the verge of despair, the three of us were walking home, taking a short-cut across the Cairngorm Country Club, with Wilber reciting aloud from Chaucer, that Middle English of his grating on our ears, when I looked up and there she was . . . A full-grown, living breathing dinosaur, chomping away on the 15th Green.

SHELBY: No wonder the greens have been in such terrible shape.

ARLENE: Our prayers had been answered. It was as if Eddie and I and Wilber had devoted our lives to a fiction, to an impossibility, and when that impossibility stood before us, a huge mountain between us and the moon, it told us everything we needed to know about ourselves. The problem of course was to get the beast home safely. We couldn't go for



help for fear the helpers would try to claim her for their own. That is the way isn't it? People always claiming what they have no right to. We were fortunate, however, that Gerty had an ear for Chaucer. Wilber simply recited Chaucer to her and she followed us home, quiet like and meek. We must have been the first humans she had seen. She took a liking to us right away.

SHELBY: All your efforts will payoff handsomely.

ARLENE: Sad, isn't it?

SHELBY: Sad? Why sad? I think there should be dancing in the streets.

ARLENE: What we want is right out the window, and nobody will leave it alone.

SHELBY: If that is how you feel, then why didn't you anticipate it? Why did you go to all the trouble of searching for it in the first place?

ARLENE: (*sinking into a chair*) I don't know. I don't know.

*We hear the door to the cottage open. There is the scrape of boots upon a mat. Edmund enters.*

EDMUND: We won the battle without having to fire a single shot. Mrs. MacAbee is resting comfortably at home, her darling family clustered about her mountainous bosom.

SHELBY: (*stands up*) Do you think she'll take any action against us?

EDMUND: She'll take action, all right. It's the only thing to take around here. They're very strict about keeping pets in this neighborhood. A fellow a few houses down tried to keep a kangaroo, but that was no go. The authorities made him surrender it.

ARLENE: What happened to Wilber? Is he all right?

EDMUND: Oh he is fine and dandy. It is the world that is all wrong.

SHELBY: Just sign these papers, Mr. Spenser. And we'll get your dinosaur set up nice and comfy, somewhere where children won't pester it.

EDMUND: We can't do that now, Mr. More.

SHELBY: What do you mean you can't do that now?

EDMUND: Wilber is taking the dinosaur away.

SHELBY: Away? What do you mean by away?

EDMUND: The world is not ready for dinosaurs. Wilber is going to lead her up Cairngorm and entice her over the edge of a cliff. Spatter her two brains against the rocks.

SHELBY: Over a cliff?

EDMUND: As long as Wilber recites Chaucer, Gerty will do anything he wants.

SHELBY: But you can't do this!

EDMUND: Of course we can. She's ours.

ARLENE: (*not disappointed*) Oh Eddie . . .

*Shelby rushes to the window.*

SHELBY: Come back here! Come back here with that dinosaur this minute . . . (*looks around for his hat*) . . . I'm going after her myself then. If you people don't want her, I do.

EDMUND: That does seem to be the problem, doesn't it? (*he turns the rifle upon the solicitor*). If I were you, I would sit down on the sofa, kick off your shoes, take off your trousers. Make yourself comfortable. You are going to wait here until Wilber returns. Until that time, we shall be one happy family.

SHELBY: Mrs. Spenser. Speak to him. Do something. You're his wife. They're taking bread out of your mouth.

ARLENE: I fear I have been outvoted two to one.

SHELBY: You can't agree with what he is doing. It's a crime against humanity. Mankind deserves this discovery.

EDMUND: Yes, all tied up in a nice little bonnet. Starring in the movies. Giving out interviews on the telly.

SHELBY: What about all those lovely Rolls Royces you promised her?

EDMUND: The next time. There is always a Rolls Royce waiting the next time.

ARLENE: My Mum said that if I ran away with Edmund that I would never end up with anything. A girl hates to prove her Mum wrong. That would be a terrible guilty thing for a girl to live with.

SHELBY: I will have you prosecuted within an inch of lives.

EDMUND: We have been within an inch of our lives so long, it cannot make any difference now.

ARLENE: (*at the window*) Our backyard look ever so bigger with Gerty gone.

EDMUND: She took most of the fence with her.

SHELBY: You idiots. People like you have no right living in this world.

EDMUND: I suppose you are right. We are like Gerty in that.

SHELBY: I'm going after her.

EDMUND: I wouldn't.

SHELBY: And when I get her back you will get nothing, nothing, nothing from me.

*Shelby bolts out, heading for the door. Edmund raises his rifle and fires. We hear the sound of the solicitor collapsing at the door. Edmund goes out to check. He returns.*

ARLENE: Oh, Eddie, did you . . . ?

*Edmund shakes his head.*

EDMUND: He's wounded, that's all. But he's unconscious. He'll be all right, but we have to get him to the hospital. Be a good girl will you and pop upstairs and ring up the Ambulance Service. I think I frightened him more than anything.

ARLENE: I'm on my way . . .

*Arlene stops.*

ARLENE: It's such a terrible thing the way everything turns out for the worse.

EDMUND: It is at that.

ARLENE: Is Wilber really going to lead Gerty over a cliff?

*Edmund shakes his head.*

EDMUND: You know he couldn't.

ARLENE: I didn't think so.

*Edmund takes his wife's face into his hands.*

EDMUND: We'll hide her away in that great cave we found. How about that, old girl. And the three of us will go up there and make sure she's happy and fed. We'll just have to keep her out of harm's way, that's all. Maybe someday the world will be ready for her.

ARLENE: Poor Wilber. It will break his heart to keep her hidden away like that.

EDMUND: I tell you my heart was in my throat the first time I saw her. A living creature so close the beginning of Time. One of the first large creatures in God's menagerie. Just as we are another. It was wrong for us to bring her back here. It was enough to have seen her.

*He looks up. His wife has gone upstairs to Wilber's apartment to call for an ambulance.*

EDMUND: If we had only known at the very beginning . . . (*he starts to sing*) . . .

“Now there was a Mr. More, a-bleeding on the floor,  
A man very wise in the law, law, law,  
He overheard the clatter of money in the platter,  
So he knocked him down with a dinosaur paw, paw, paw.”

It was enough to have seen her.

*Lights out.*

*Curtain.*



# A Suburban Epic

---

Kim Lockwood Johnson

I am  
in just  
my Sears bra  
screeching  
fists and arms  
whirring out of control  
an angry windmill  
(he thinks)  
trying to make a point  
that got lost  
in hysterical language  
he at least has his  
underpants on  
including shirt and tie

I remember when I was 14  
whoever saw me in  
my lace bra (I had 6)  
an intimate  
a girlfriend sharing secrets  
at the mirror we experimented  
with make-up  
both getting ready  
for good-night kisses  
or a boyfriend

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This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 18 Iss. 1, 1986.

the 1st one to see my  
lace bra  
the seashell pink one  
his anxious blush and mine  
his gentle awkward touches  
nice shivers  
I still feel in the afternoon  
when the kids are  
taking a nap

Now  
I am  
married  
inside a hothouse  
of flowers blooming  
rage  
we fight  
we argue  
(we tell the children) we discuss  
we scream  
about socks  
still damp in the dryer  
unpaid parking tickets  
car windows left open in the rain  
my sister  
his brother  
I can't even  
afford a lace bra

This is not  
what I expected  
in a million years  
years spent  
not married  
seeing friends marry  
before me

they looked so happy  
finally  
every day  
when the kids  
are napping  
I wonder if  
there are  
any married women  
with a closet  
full  
of lace bras



# Silence

---

Sue Saniei Elkind

It is not an ordinary silence,  
it's an emptiness  
as if a fetus had been aborted.  
It's like a membrane surrounding me and  
I'm afraid my thoughts will scream through.

It is the silence of winter,  
season of separation  
of falling snow.

It is the silence of loss  
as when I saw my mother die too fast.  
When my father took too long to die.  
When my husband died.

It is the kind of silence that cries  
through the house when the void is so great  
I sleep on my husband's side of the bed.  
Let mine be the unused space.

It is a silence that follows me always,  
a stream numb inside its own shell of ice.  
It is a cold clear night  
and the sky is heavy with it and stars.



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This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 18 Iss. 1, 1986.



# Waltzing

---

e.e.h.

“One wish. What would it be?”  
“Why only one? Most people get three.”

“We broke up,” she said. “Again. For the last time.” Each word was accented harshly. She blew smoke in his face. She had only been smoking for a couple of weeks, and she still had control problems. Back at his apartment, there were several burn marks on the rug, melted nylon, where she had been careless with her ashes. Here, where we worked, the floor was a safe, marred tile. “We broke up,” she said. “Again. For the last time.”

“Come on in. You want to talk about it, or ignore it?”

“Whatever works. Whatever works.”

At work, he was distracted even before she showed up, not that it mattered any. So late at night, it was rare for the phones to ring, and as long as the phones were quiet, he was free to do whatever he wanted. A phone company operator in a small town, the last of a dying breed. Directory assistance, maybe five calls a week. Another five calls of helping place long-distance calls. Once, an over-seas phone call. Paris. Every now and then, a panicked voice, an emergency. A choking baby. A robbery, a fire. “What does a gas leak smell like?” Nobody in their right mind used the phone in the middle of the night. It was a quiet job. He read a lot. He was being paid nearly five dollars an hour to become incredibly well read. He had a small combination t.v. and tape deck he took to work with him. Once, he talked someone out of committing suicide. Or maybe he didn’t. The person agreed to flush the pills, but never called again.

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Whether that silence meant the pills were flushed, or swallowed, he had no real way of knowing. No deaths were reported through his office. If the person did change their mind, flushed the pills, he believed they would be too embarrassed to ever call again.

Instinct: never show the same person the same weakness more than once because their first instinct would be to kick it.

She agreed to quit smoking that night, after she broke off with her boyfriend. If she didn't get back at him in any other way, she would simply outlive him.

"I should hate men," she said. "So why am I here with you?"

"I'm your best friend."

"Isn't there something weird in that? Men and women just can't be friends, can they? Really? Surely not best friends."

"I thought we'd been doing pretty well."

"Maybe so. Maybe so."

"You've been off and on with him for four years. Maybe fifteen breakups. Can you think of any fights we've had during that time?"

"Only one. I decided to start smoking and you told me I was being stupid."

"I was right."

"Don't rub it in."

"Remember that suicide I told you about? She said every time she made a mistake, her lover rubbed it in."

"Rubbed what in?"

"She didn't specify. I assume the mistake."

"Maybe so. Maybe so."

"Cancer."

"Is that your sign, or your condition?"

"My sign."

"Lucky you."

"Hey . . ."

"Sorry, but I've got a call on another line."

"She wanted to pick me up over the phone." He laughed. "She said I had a nice voice."

"You do have a nice voice." She got up from the hard metal chair, and turned on the television, not looking at it, but instead, pacing the floor. "Why do I want a cigarette? I only smoked for three weeks."

"I've got a couple of joints left. In my coat. Leave the door open, and it'll suck the smoke out of the room. No one will ever know. At least they've never noticed before."

"Not even the cops strolling around outside?" She shook her head. "I just want to get my lungs cleared again." She turned, and looked at the television, where Marilyn Monroe was pushing a flower pot off a ledge, barely missing Tom Ewell's head. The t.v. was snapped off, angrily, in mid-apology.

"One wish. What would it be?"

"Why don't I get offered three wishes?"

"What the hell do you think I am? A genie? If I were you, I'd take what I could get."

"Do you want to talk about it now, or keep ignoring it?"

"Whatever works. Whatever works."

"You at least could have had the courtesy to break up with him on my night off."

"Well, it's not like you have a lot of work to do here." She sighed. "Don't you go leaving me too. Please, don't you go leaving me too."

"Directory Assistance. Can I help you?"

"Shit. Wrong number."

To her: "How could somebody mistake a three digit number for one with seven?"

"I don't know. How?"

"That was rhetorical. Not a riddle."

She worked in a women's clothing store, and, with her employee's discount, always managed to look fabulous. Working alone, for the phone company, at night, he wore a lot of old jeans and ragged flannel shirts. They drew stares wherever they went together. He forgot to shave much of the time. Once, she wore brown shoes with a black dress. Once. It was at her father's funeral: the heel of the left shoe on her only pair of black shoes broke when she was stepping into the limousine, ready to leave. Holding the broken

heel in her hand, she began to cry. At the time, it made more sense to just change her shoes, instead of changing her dress as well. "It can't be helped," she told everybody. "It just can't be helped."

They had known each other for fourteen years, since the age of twelve for him, fourteen for her. Half her life. Her family, father still alive, moved next door to his. She was from Omaha. He had no idea where Omaha was. Although she was the girl next door, he never entertained thoughts of romance . . . It would have been just a little too traditional, and even if, at age twelve, he was not yet an iconoclast, he was working hard at becoming one.

"What's tradition ever done for me?" he asked her, years later. She shrugged, and changed her mind about asking him to the country club dance.

"I'm pretty, aren't I? I'm a nice person, aren't I?"

"I like you."

"Then why'd he dump me? And why do I always keep going back for more?"

"My job is just go give assistance. Not answers. There's a big difference."

"When I was about eighteen," she told him, after she had finally quit pacing, and had sat back down next to him, "when I was about eighteen and was getting ready to go away to college, I thought I'd never see you again." She laughed. "Remember when we went to the prom together? It was really a drag, going to the prom with my best friend, instead of a real date."

"That cuts both ways, you know."

"I know. But you got another chance later. That was my only one. But, anyway, you know, when I was at Bryn Mawr, I thought I'd finally do things the normal way. Have a close girlfriend. Indulge in girl-talk. I hadn't done any of that since I was fourteen. But it was so God-awful boring, I had to come back. One semester at that school was all I could handle." She sipped the Coke he had gotten for her from the machine. "It's so quiet in here. I'm used to noise, because my neighbors are so loud. Can I turn on the tapedeck?"

"Why not?"

"If this was the prom, and you were a real date, we'd be headed out to the lake now."

"If it had been 1873 instead of 1973, we could have been doing a proper waltz instead of the bear hug."

"'American Pie' was an awfully long song to bear hug to. And the tempo's all wrong."

"I know. See what a difference a hundred years can make? Timing is everything."

"One wish. What would it be?"

"How could I pin it all down to one thing? I've got more problems than one wish could possibly cover. Way more."

When she came back from school, tired, discouraged, and depressed, he was the only one who understood. To their friends, her parents said it had to be a drug problem. Why else would a girl with 750's on the SAT drop out of college? One night, they woke her up, looking for needle tracks on her arm.

"I could have been shooting in my eyes," she told them, helpfully.

"I thought school had been bad," she told him the next day. He was pushing her on the swings. She was in a childhood regression phase, and he was being cooperative. "Have your parents ever checked you for tracks?"

"No, but when my mother was studying to be a nurse, she practiced checking for hernias on me. Does that count?"

"Not hardly."

"How do they check women for hernias?"

"They don't."

Elton John on the tapedeck, singing softly. "Goodbye, Yellow Brick Road."

"Have you ever wondered what happened to all the flying monkeys after Dorothy melted the wicked witch? I mean, who took care of them?"

"One wish. What would it be?"

"How the hell do I know? What would you wish for?"

"Easy. To have back everything I've ever wasted. All the time, money, energy, food, opportunities. All of it."

"You'd just end up doing the same things again. I know that sounds cynical, but I'll bet that's the way it works."

"Maybe you're right."

About four in the morning, clouds blew in. They watched through the tiny office windows. The moon, a more or less fixed spot, and the clouds, blowing rapidly across its face.

“Do you think people are ever aware of it when they invent a—”

“That would take a pretty smug mind, don’t you think?” He shook his head. “Are we talking about it yet, or are we still ignoring it?”

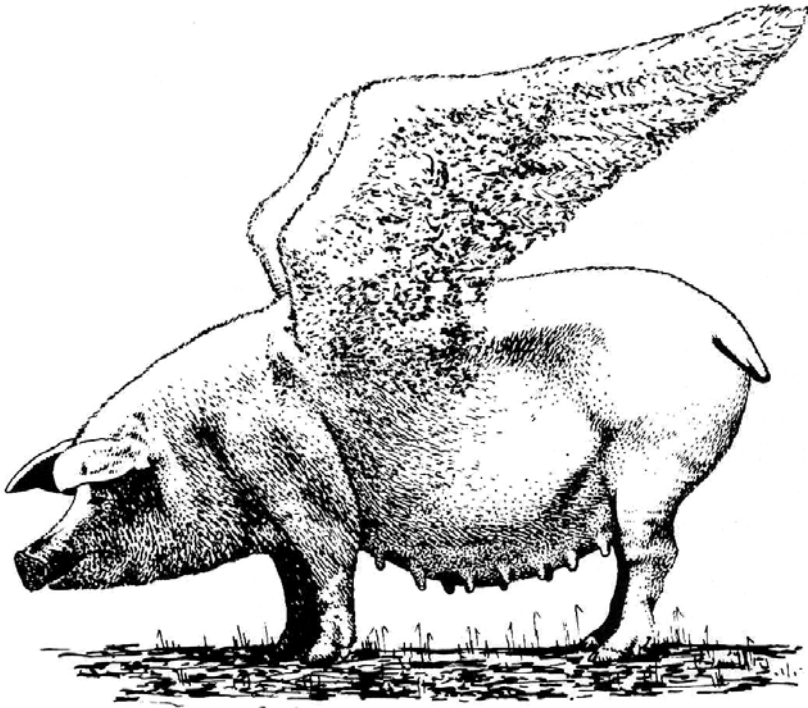
“I don’t know. I’m too depressed to see straight. I can’t believe he dumped me. I cannot believe it.”

“I know. If you want to talk, I’ll listen.”

She touched his hand. “Whatever works. Whatever’s right. Just, please, don’t you go leaving me too.”

“I’m listening.”





Ink Drawing. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

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# Poem of the Subterranean Buddah

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Zachary Chartkoff

I.

& they tore off my wings  
& they threw down my crown  
& my leather was no more.

last night the poet was down  
at the faux french cafe  
laughing her head off  
at her male counterparts.

“listen to me! listen to me!”  
she staggers about  
in her hiked skirt,  
“theeeze poets, i tell ya, are crazy!  
theze poets are dead & wild-eyed  
& think they screw god every night.  
theze poets are all anal retentive,  
repressed,  
always bichin’ about zen  
death erotics;  
ol’ vagina  
envious  
suppressed  
kept down  
tied up

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This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 29 Iss. 1, 1992–1993.



quelled  
 quashed  
 spanked  
 poetzzz . . .”

II.

& they tore off my wings  
 & they threw down my crown  
 & my leather was no more.  
 the poet howled at the passing students  
 heading off for ancient precalculus,  
 intro. to western arts,  
 bodhisattvas & zygotes.  
 they blankly stare at this paper  
 goddess—not the male  
 pseudonym.

tomorrow the poet says we  
 should march outside  
 up  
 down  
 the italian embassy  
 in protest,  
 “cuz’ they won’t let  
 can’t let  
 cicciolina  
 over for the latterday  
 sex holidays.”  
 jive ass  
 soft flesh  
 subterranean  
 buddah

III.

“& they tore off my wings  
 & they threw down my crown

& my leather was no more,”

muttered the poet in her rusty tone  
as we walked through the rain  
& over grey cobblestones

that led to swarnny cafes—  
—the halfnote, the underground,  
the mod hatter’s poetry party.

yokahuna says that bad luck comes in threes;  
the poet’s work returns from the publishers  
unmarked, not even folded right, someone  
reading each during lunch with one ear  
screwed to the phone, her finest dreams  
sent out into the void & not

one “sentimental” scrawled in red.  
tonight the venus in furs  
seems like a pale, sleepless thing.

her hair is suddenly asymmetrical.  
while her head is still shaved  
from her depression, the left side

blooms again, a cascade of black  
down to her ass, onto the street  
& away. away.

i do not think she can discover  
america in her dreams.  
she mutters female eroticism is dead.

you can only write so many poems  
of your excess—so many words  
covering your junkie past . . . finding

your sartori between your second finger  
    & clitoris, years of cheap wine  
    & yesterdays pipe smoke. yes, she

did have the power of the wyrd once  
& on her jacket she wrote her poems  
    floating in cowhide abstractions  
        &  
    her wings shouted steel +  
visions, yes, her eyes were so clear  
    that it made her words

strange & delicious.

℔

# To My Mother: Winter Circus

---

Lynn Swanson

Here, in Florida, you live  
in a sun-soaked house like  
the others

with a pool to soothe  
your arthritis, and a cocker spaniel  
your second husband walks.

You are exactly like  
your fellow dancers  
at the Elk's—grey  
hair curled, pink lipstick  
over Punta Gorda skin—

except for the homing  
device deep in your chest  
that lets you know how close  
you are to opening

day at the winter circus.  
When I visit, you  
take me there and sit  
next to me like I used to  
sit next to you,

---

This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 29 Iss. 1, 1992–1993.

your eyes bright as spotlights  
sweeping the tent, smiling  
harder than children, grabbing  
my sleeve so I won't miss the

clown spilling water. You have  
only these hours. these years left  
as spectator, transforming  
your body back to performer  
and you do, feeling each bump on  
your bare-backed horse, each sway  
of ballet aerial rope,  
every red sequin and feathery  
bow, center ring lips  
kissing crowds.

I see you clap your hands and remember  
how you used to tell me there was no  
hot water traveling with the circus

only cold, crabby elephants and  
slivered sleep on the train. The horns  
screech brass ghosts into my ear, but you roar  
at a seal barking notes.

I could peel you from this  
no easier than I could remove  
from myself the rustly taffeta  
skirts, long satin ribbons, little  
silver shoes I would take from

your trunk in the attic, no easier  
than I could shake from my limbs  
the monkey-bar spins you taught me  
to do, the stage smile I learned  
to go on with.

We take our bodies layered in our  
other bodies out of the tent, tie  
balloons to the car, let our cells  
light the way back  
to your retired subdivision,  
let them shine like spotlights on the  
houses all exactly like yours.



# A Slow Thaw

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Linda Godfrey

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a nice house in a nice town with a nice husband and two nice kids. True, it is winter, the time for stories and high-banked fires, but when I tell you the real story, the one that lives outside my head when I'm not looking, you'll know why I'm a story teller, a liar speaking truths.

Pay attention. Here goes. The sky hangs low, dull as oxidized silver. Another winter in upstate New York thirty miles from the Canadian border: sub-zero nights, snow banks high as giraffes, cars docked in driveways, their die-hard batteries electrical flatlines. At least a dozen people will kill themselves: cabin fever, full-spectrum light deprivation pulling the trigger or tying the noose.

It is February. What would you like for your birthday, my husband asks.

How about a divorce, I say.

He laughs, pops open his eighth can of Bud, turns up the volume on a Knicks game. Dribble. Dribble. Pivot. Dunk. My nice house swells with the stomp, clap, hurrah of a basketball-frenzied crowd. I look at my watch. 2:00 P.M. Four more hours until he passes out on the couch.

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a nice house in a nice town with an alcoholic husband and two nice kids.

Spring will never come. Not this year, so I grow it inside me, feeding myself stories about morning glories, rainbows, hummingbirds and a little

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old lady who lives in a big shoe, eats strawberry-rhubarb pie and dates a crooked man who has walked a crooked mile and is now tired enough to finally settle down and make a commitment. When he moves in, her big, high-buttoned house suddenly seems a tight fit. Bunions begin to sprout. She sells, makes a killing in real estate and avoids paying capital gains tax by buying a sprawling crooked house where she and her crooked man live together with a little crooked mouse.

Jack and Max are six and seven. They look like their father, heavy-lidded and uninspired, so I try to wrap them in stories, my thermal underwear of words to warm their genetic winters.

And the horse goes lumpety-lumpety-lump, I say. Or clumpity-clump or cloppity-clop. Its tail goes wiggily-waggily. This horse has a friend, a squirrel, who goes hippity-hoppity, its tail a whirly-twirly, its teeth a snappity-crackity.

Fiddle-de-dee said the bumble bee and I laugh and laugh, flying away on the wings of my words then zooming back to lay them like a magic carpet at my children's Reeboked feet.

Aw, that's sissy stuff, says Max.

Yeh, stupid, adds Jack. Geez! Who cares about a dumb old horse or a squirrel named Whisky Frisky.

So I stick them in front of the upstairs TV for the rest of their lives, let them fight undisturbed over the remote, and wait. This year their father bought them a Rambo Christmas and they pull on camouflage clothing, strap on toy submachine guns and fire rounds into me until their ammo clips are empty. They get mad when I refuse to drop to the floor and play dead.

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a nice house in a nice town with an alcoholic husband and two contemptuous kids.

Spring does come as springs do. Then another and another right on schedule. But I like to think crocuses and daffodils and budding trees have nothing to do with a rotating mass in space turning on its axis. I like to think that old man winter just gets tired of weaving snowflakes, icicle trees and snow blankets and simply takes a break to survey the damage: tally the number of body bags zipped, anti-depressants and pints of alcohol sold, pounds gained per person.



I begin to dream. Sometimes I am a waitress on the early shift, my hair battened down by a bun, eight bobby pins and a hairnet, my eyelids patches of pale blue, my mouth a professional pucker of fuchsia. Not-very-savvy businessmen in cheap Sears 'n' Roebucks suits eat high-cholesterol business breakfasts of eggs and bacon. I pass out copies of *Fortune* and *GQ* to every table as I refill their coffees. What are these things they ask, opening the magazines vertically, searching for a centerfold.

What are you going to wear? Every year my husband asks the same thing and every year he's just as excited about our excursion to the only country club in town. His father's a member, big in real estate, so we get invited to the Christmas ball where everyone drinks too much and still manages to feel superior heaving over a toilet bowl.

Other than this, there are eight cinemas at the mall, the Veterans of Foreign Wars' parade, Saturday bingo at Holy Family School, two dozen bars and rival band every weekend at the Ramada and Sheraton. Top forty country and pop, easy listening with synthesizers.

That's it. That's all there is.

Are the new doctor and his wife coming, I ask. (This is news. We live in the county seat, population 35,000, and this is the first black family in residence since the old days when the paper mill was still operating and three blacks worked the loading docks.)

I hear they're Jamaicans. Lovely accents. The wife is a knockout. Well, do you think they'll come?

Ha! Fat chance, he says, gulping down his gin straight.

Carrying my heels in my hands, my pile-lined boots clomping over the slick, hard-packed snow, I stare at the club's double oak doors. On one side hangs and elaborate wreath, on the other a sign printed in red and green magic marker: NIGGERS NOT WELCOME HERE. Someone has even drawn holly sprigs in each corner.

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a nice house in a redneck, culturally and morally bankrupt town with an alcoholic husband and two contemptuous kids.

Sometimes I dream myself into the stratosphere—a perky flight attendant nuking chicken divan at 10,000 feet. The plane crashes (as planes will) and

I am the only survivor. Not a bruise, not a nick, not a hair out of place even though I have to dig my way out through mangled bodies, bags of salted peanuts, a fuselage, a propeller, then walk to the nearest patch of civilization (which happens to be Paris), where I sip wine at Deux Maggots on the Left Bank, then buy a red skirt and big gold-looped earrings. I change my name to Isabeau, marry a starving artist named Guillame who somehow dies in an upstate New York white-out while I inherit his posthumous fame and fortune.

Paloma Picasso calls to ask me to lunch. We dine on lobster bisque and asparagus tips.

It is January again. My husband loses his sales job. Perhaps now he'll believe we're in a recession, won't blame it on leftwing liberal bleeding-heart propaganda. Maybe now he'll stop comparing Bush to John Wayne, George Patton and Jesus Christ.

The white paint on the clapboards crack and buckle in the cold. The oven thermostat blows but I can still use the burners and buy a cheap toaster oven as a pinch hitter. The ice pokes its curious fingers under the eaves where it sits lurking, thawing, then freezing until the foyer ceiling tumbles down in an avalanche of soggy sheet rock and insulation. We staple plastic to the rafters and use the back door.

After five months he finds another position, not as much money but I help out waitressing at the Ramada Inn, serving ham and eggs to cheesy businessmen.

Here is the story I tell myself. I live in a house any real estate appraiser would market as a fixer-upper, situated in a dying town in the wasteland of upstate New York, with an alcoholic husband and two kids who used to be contemptuous but are now contemptible.

I tell myself this story because if I say it often enough maybe then I'll finally believe it, maybe then I'll know what to do with my story, which has only a beginning and a middle and waits, as do all tales, for its teller to give it an end.

# How the Heartworms Came to Petit Trou

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Kenneth Huggins

It was during the time that the Major's wife was pregnant that the heartworms came. They swept along the ocean waves just like the Caribs and the Spanish had long centuries past, and they washed across the islands of the sea. They didn't come to Petit Trou at first. At first they hit the outer islands and the cities like San Gabriel and Guadeloupe. But everyone in Petit Trou had heard stories.

First, the dogs would go. The worms would creep into their mouths or noses while they slept. They'd travel down their arteries and curl up in the chambers of the heart, and there they'd mate and make more worms that curled up white and tiny in the ventricles and auricles and eat away the vena cava. They'd slide into the lungs and fill them up like water filling up a ship. And if the carcass of a dog were opened up, the worms would spill out like a pile of tiny skeletons. Outside, the dog would wince and curl into a ball as if it wanted to surround its heart and keep the pain from coming in. The pain, however, was already in. And there was nothing anyone could do. The dog would howl and squeal. He'd shake all over with convulsions. Then he'd die.

Although the world had reached the age of science, no one understood the heartworms—why they came or why they went beyond the dogs, which they had never done before. They got into the parakeets and myna birds. They got into the cats and donkeys and the cattle and the mules. They got into the howler monkeys. Then they reached the people. And no one knew a way to stop them.

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In Petit Trou, the people heard of stories from the outside world, of people dying in the streets, of children's bellies popping open from the pressure of the worms. Whole families died and rotted in their homes. So many died that people had to push them all together into giant holes. So many died that people walked around and over them as if they were a stand of trees that some big wind had flattened to the ground.

One traveler told of what he saw in Mirimire.

"All dead," he told them. "Everyone except a baby girl. I found her crying in her hammock. Right beside her, on the floor, her mother lay there dead. And then the baby shook, and then her eyes looked up, and that was all."

He bowed his head.

"We're lucky," said the man.

"Shh," a woman said.

And she was right.

At first it seemed that Petit Trou was lucky. The heartworms stayed out for a while, and people started saying that the harbor's narrow opening was good for something after all. It kept the heartworms out. But not for long. The first sign came when children found a howler monkey staggering down an alley back of town. They said he staggered like a drunk and reached out to them, like he needed friends to hold him up. His long prehensile tail dragged useless on the ground. And then he grabbed his heart and fell face forward. Doctor Barleyman himself conducted the autopsy. But everybody knew what he would find. The worms spilled out all over.

After that the people started burning clothes and bed sheets, throwing out old food and anything that might be tainted. The doctor told them "build the bonfires up and drive the humors out." But no one knew what humors brought the worms. They didn't understand at all. And then the people started dying. Not everybody died, not every animal, but many did. And that was all it took to break the town apart. The rich had houses in the hills, right by the tennis club. The governor, the mayor, the prosecutor, and the district engineer, the Colonel, even Doctor Barleyman, the Douglasses and all the officers with gold and silver epaulettes, they moved into the hills.

Mrs. Douglas said at first she wouldn't go.

"We can't just leave them here," she said. "It isn't fair."

But then the Major touched her big round belly.

"We've got to make the baby safe," he said.

So Major Douglas and his wife and all their friends moved out of town and up into the hills where no one coughed and no one shivered. Everyone played tennis, and their clothes were smooth and white. They shuffled decks of cards and sipped cool drinks and barely heard the sounds of weeping from the town below.

Nobody knew just why the heartworms didn't find the club or any of the tennis players. Doctor Barleyman would say they'd left the darkness and the tepid humors down below. But down below the people only shrugged and shook their heads. "No heart," they said, "no heartworms." Then they buried all their dead.

The plague took one of every four in Petit Trou, a better average than in other towns. The village square became a burial ground. And underneath the ancient banyan tree of Handy Juan Garay, where lights at Festival had always hung, markers for graves went up:

Here lie the dead of Nivelles Street

Here lie the Baniwars; I alone remain

The marker all were wooden, and the words were painted on. There wasn't time for carving stones.

And then, as quickly as they'd come, the heartworms disappeared. Nobody understood. But Petit Trou came back. And all the islands of the sea came back. The earth began to turn upon its axis once again. But no one who had stayed in town forgot the tennis players who had moved into the hills and stopped their ears up when the weeping came. And no one from the tennis club moved back to town.



# The Poet's Wife

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Michael Ranney

The poet favors shabby clothes,  
a vest strained with wrinkles,  
corduroy pants and  
long-sleeved checkered shirt  
to complement his ragged graying beard.  
Beside him she knows she looks elegant,  
velvetly styled,  
never wondering what image they make  
sheltered beside each other.  
When he reads she watches  
from the second row,  
seated sideways to scan his audience,  
to assist their responses,  
the snickers, groans and sighs,  
knowing the lines that cause the sounds  
she's heard them so often before.  
He's writing all the time,  
even during their nights in bed,  
eyes spinning behind closed lids,  
poems gathering like holiday families  
inside his still silent head.  
She loves him for his words,  
for all the songs he sings,  
for the way his lines wrap her around  
like the arms and legs of making love,

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for the way he touches her  
his fingers never leaving the page.  
Later wall leaning she watches him  
work the celebratory crowd,  
index finger extended  
from wine cupping right hand,  
holding forth on meter and tropes  
for the knot of women who listen.  
Finally tired she nods once  
and his observing eyes  
rise against his brows.  
Outside the ivied college building  
she soundlessly finds his hand  
to feel the man again  
behind the clothes,  
beneath the words.  
Hands entwined and legs in rhythm  
they drift away laughing together  
into the well known texture of their life.



# To Be Hollow

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Mary Winters

Store window mannequins—  
they have been made to  
overcome our limitations:  
our bent for blemishes,  
our lack of proportion,  
symmetry; our frailty in  
bruising, aging; our want to  
snarl, to bawl; our  
restlessness and smells.

But they are punished for it:  
stripped naked in public,  
we see what they lack—  
no body hair but woven mats  
for eyelashes; no nipples;  
undetailed mounds where  
sex should be; swivels for a  
joint; toes that will not part.

Their bouts of unblinking  
loveliness between the torment:  
wigs snatched away and  
heads removed, stacked in a  
corner; limbs twisted off or  
bent to breaking angles.

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They are sleepless, unable to  
die—only to be superseded for  
fashion's sake. Where do the  
old mannequins go? In what  
room are they pressed together  
eye to eye and left—





# The Baker's Wife

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Diane Wakoski

She is tiny as a butter knife  
and as if she were some dainty pastry, she  
often wears lace or hugs silver  
next to her cheek.

No children, but in the kitchen, a big red and blue Macaw,  
a living room full of yellow and blue parakeets  
which she claims all talk to her while she reads poetry  
and drinks coffee from a doll-sized cup.

If I met her in the library, I'd  
never think she were married to a dough  
man. And in fact if I saw her husband on the street,  
with his torso slim as a French baguette,  
and his long-fingered hands which don't seem like paddles  
or even hooks, but more like those  
of a man on a tropical terrace drinking rum,  
I wouldn't guess  
that either of them go fishing  
in the Rocky Mountains on their vacations,  
or that they avidly read a Star Trek  
fanzine.



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# Crescent Heart

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Marc Bookman

Waiting silently in the bus station a few minutes before midnight, Carolyn and Art Bradley wondered how in the world they had gotten themselves into this baby business. Neither of them wanted to voice an opinion, neither wanted to lose the courage they had so carefully nurtured together, but privately each speculated: Carolyn had answered the advertisement, made the first call; but Art kept talking about how empty their house seemed. Yet even to themselves the answer was obvious: they wanted a baby, and they were willing to do whatever was necessary to get one, including meeting a complete stranger at a midnight bus station and housing her for three months. In fact, the Bradleys had paid an exceptional amount of money to the Lullaby Adoption Agency for just such an opportunity, and they were in way too deep, psychologically as well as financially, to back out now.

At least the bus appeared to be on schedule. Midnight was not the time to wait for a bus, or to arrive in one, for that matter. But the message Carolyn had received earlier that afternoon, sufficiently cryptic to start the secretaries talking in her office, was clear on the time of arrival: “K. Miller on Greyhound from Dayton at 12:12 A.M.” A few days earlier they had been notified that their pending obligation was being called in—a sort of last minute check by Lullaby to be sure the couple wasn’t renegeing—but real information, other than a first initial and a last name, had been purposely withheld. Confidentiality was a large part of any adoption program, yet somehow they had expected a little more than a name and bus route. After all, this was not the mother of *their* future baby; they were simply obliged

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to house another woman giving up her baby—a “birthmother” in adoption jargon—for the final three months of her pregnancy.

“Many of our girls want to relocate those last few months,” the Lullaby spokesman had told them. “Some are trying to hide their pregnancies, some are forced out of their houses, all are under great stress. You are providing a service to these girls, a service we require, and in so doing you should remember our golden rule: treat your birthmother the way you hope a couple will treat your future child’s birthmother.”

I wonder how this K. Miller will think she’s been treated when the bus pulls up to this place, Carolyn thought, glancing at two drunks fighting over a paper bag and staring down a young hoodlum who had just inquired for the third time if he could hail her a cab. Probably like she’s been conned by the Lullaby Adoption Agency. Maybe they all had. After all, the Bradleys had passed up offers from four or five very fast lawyers for the stolid reputability of an established operation like Lullaby, and now here they were waiting for an unknown pregnant girl in a foul-smelling Greyhound terminal after midnight.

“We’re all going to come out of this feeling rotten,” she said out loud, as if Art had been listening to her thoughts.

“Let’s not be too pessimistic,” he said. That was Art, not too pessimistic. Of the two, he was the more likely to play the hand he was dealt, without complaint. After five years of trying, infertility tests, counseling, tossing about possible names in case they ever got lucky, still it had surprised him when Carolyn had suggested adoption.

“I don’t think you’re going to find too many optimists at this hour,” Carolyn said, waving her hand in a semi-circle across the station.

“Maybe a few cock-eyed ones,” Art laughed, but to no avail.

“Besides,” Carolyn continued, “how can Lullaby expect any birthmother to adjust under these circumstances?”

They continued on in this way a few minutes more, and soon a teenage girl was standing in front of them. Beside her was a beat-up leather suitcase that seemed to have come out of an old Truman Capote story, covered with travel stickers of locations she could not possibly have had time or money to visit. But soon she dispelled whatever air of worldliness the suitcase lent to her.

"Are you the Bradleys? This place is like cool," she said, as wide-eyed as a kid in her first video arcade. "And huge."

"You should see the train station," Art said.



"I'm sorry about that *K* business," the girl was saying as Art threw her bag in the trunk of their car. "Lullaby insists on initials; by the time they're done you think what you're doing is either top secret or filthy. Anyway, my name's Kayley."

"Forget about Mr. and Mrs. Bradley also. I'm Carolyn, this is Art. Kayley . . . Kayley . . ."

"Don't bother," the girl said, "it doesn't grow on you. Believe me, I've tried. Apparently I was supposed to be named for some actress, Hayley Mills. Hayley Miller, right? So of course the birth certificate comes back wrong, and my parents decide they like it the way it is. It always made sense to me that I'd be named for an actress nobody ever heard of."

"I heard of her," Carolyn said.

"You're the only one," Kayley muttered. Recounting the story seemed to have altered her mood.

"Well, it's certainly unusual," Art said. "It's nice to have an unusual name, once you get older."

"I guess I've got a couple of years to go. Not that you're old, Art."

Carolyn snorted. "Not old, ancient."

"Remember the application, dear," said Art. "We're supposed to be a loving couple."

"Kayley, forget you heard that," Carolyn said, finally turning toward her guest after a few seconds had passed without a response. The girl was asleep in the back seat. They drove as quietly as the traffic would allow through the streets of center city, and gently nudged her awake only after the engine had been turned off and the suitcase removed from the trunk. The phone was ringing as they entered their house, and Carolyn ran ahead to get it.

"They hung up," she said when Kayley and Art reached the kitchen. "Welcome to the big city. I guess you don't have to deal with too many phony phone calls in Dayton, huh?"

"Shoot," Kayley said. "That's about all there is to do in Dayton."



Later that night, Carolyn told her husband that Kayley "had gone down easy," a phrase she used to laugh at her sister for using: did she go down, did you put her down, is she down? Don't parents say put to bed or put to sleep anymore?

No, her sister had said. One sounds like punishment, the other euthanasia. The child is either up or down.

"Do you suppose that means I view Kayley as our daughter," Carolyn whispered.

"You would never name our daughter *Kayley*," Art said from the hollow of his own sleep.

"A name, a name for our daughter," Carolyn continued, and then dreamed about calling her little girl by the name that she had selected, not any name in particular but the name *she had chosen*, while her husband snored lightly at her side.

Kayley was up before either of them the next morning. The adoptive couple, as they had come to refer to themselves, found her sitting in the kitchen waiting for water to boil.

"You have a beautiful house," she gushed, nodding, it appeared, in the direction of the garbage disposal, as if any house with indoor plumbing might qualify. Who knew what she was used to in Dayton? Carolyn, unsure of the sincerity of the compliment, went to the cupboard for coffee.

"You don't have to have instant. We have a coffee maker we can dust off for you. Is decaf all right?"

"I'll stick with instant if you don't mind," Kayley said. "I need a jump start in the morning." She formed her right hand into a syringe and pretended to inject something into her left arm. "Caffeine fiend, don't you know?"

Carolyn caught herself before lecturing on the problematic relationship of caffeine and pregnancy, and instead mentioned, almost too quietly to hear, that you could barely tell the decaf without looking at the label. But Lullaby had warned about the great stress their birthmothers were under, advising their hosts to let minor transgressions pass without comment, which

was fine except that someone was going to have to raise a caffeine-thin or alcohol-shaking or drug-addicted baby and it sure as hell wasn't going to be the Lullaby Adoption Agency.

"The key word is *minor*," Art had said in their only real discussion about the policy. "No one is saying we have to overlook crack vials in the bathroom."

"No, just beer bottles in the trash."

"Maybe this is a bridge we should cross when we come to it," Art said, holding them together, modulating, playing the proverbial one game at a time. And it turned out he was right.

Morning was the only time Kayley needed a jump start; she was able to pass the rest of her day in the less than innervating state of decaffeination. In fact she survived Carolyn's scrutiny as well as Carolyn herself would have, perhaps eating a few more chocolates than the doctor might recommend but otherwise behaving like the ideal expectant mother, exercising and sleeping and avoiding even the small glass of wine that Art offered at dinners. There was a glow about her, how much Carolyn hated that word but there it was, the glow of healthy pregnancy and even more, of looking forward to motherhood. As if she were going to keep her child, Carolyn thought. And if she did, there was nothing anybody could do about it. How unfair! Somewhere a couple waited for a baby, sacrificed for it, *invested* in it, for god's sake, and a little girl from a little town could just change her mind at the last minute and take their baby away. Carolyn didn't clutter her mind with semantic, and ultimately pointless, debate about whose baby it was to keep or give up—a knowing and voluntary decision had been made, and no one had put a gun to anyone's head. If the Rubicon had ever been crossed, it was by the woman who decided to give up her baby. These were the thoughts running through Carolyn's head when she went to answer the phone during Kayley's seventh breakfast in their house. Again there was no one at the other end—they had been suffering a rash of such calls lately—and Carolyn took the opportunity to curse the dead receiver like a schoolgirl showing off for the shop boys. Just as she was hanging up, though, the phone came to life.

"I want to talk to Kayley," the voice said.



Carolyn covered the speaking end with her hand, and whispered loudly for Kayley to come in from the living room. "Have you given our number to anyone?"

"No," Kayley murmured, instinctively reaching for the phone that she now understood was for her.

"No one is supposed to know you're here," Carolyn said, a bit louder now but with her hand still covering the receiver. Then, as if what she'd said had been only advisory in nature, she turned over the phone to her boarder.

"Hello," Kayley said. "Who is this?" She waited ten seconds, and when no one answered she hung up. "Shoot," she said. Carolyn watched her walk slowly back to the living room, and followed her when it became apparent she wasn't going to discuss what had just happened. Kayley, deep into the newspaper, did not look up as the older woman entered. The two of them sat in silence at opposite ends of the sofa for five minutes, Carolyn practically staring at her guest in amazement, and then the phone rang again. She held herself down for the first ring and the interminable pause that followed, but Kayley didn't move a muscle; finally Carolyn grudgingly went back into the kitchen.

"Who is this," she said. Curious, angry.

"Arthur," the voice replied. "Arthur Bradley. Your husband."

"I thought it was someone else," Carolyn exhaled, feeling the tension leave the pit of her stomach and work its way to the surface, dissipating finally like perspiration through her skin.

"Milkman or postman?"

"We get milk at the AM-PM, and our postman is a woman," she said, feeling immediately at ease, spreading out on the sofa, her feet almost touching Kayley; by the end of the conversation, she had pushed the earlier call back to a more tranquil place in her mind. Her view toward Kayley had broadened and softened as well, and she decided that an explanation, if there was one, might reveal itself more honestly without cross-examination. She watched the young girl aimlessly turn the pages of the newspaper, seemingly absorbed in the print itself rather than the words. After a few minutes she put the paper down.

"I guess you're wondering about that call."

"Well, I did think it was a bit odd," Carolyn admitted.

"This whole situation is a bit odd," Kayley said, smoothing the newspaper

over her stomach. "I mean, it wouldn't really be normal if everything went normally, would it?" She bent the last few words, turning the sentence from a question into a plea, a plea that Carolyn understood was for forgiveness. And yet, even in the expansive mood she was now in, there was something that hadn't broken down yet between them, something that prevented her from making it easy on this pregnant girl who had perched so precariously on their lives.

"We've led pretty normal lives up till now," Carolyn said.

"I guess I should apologize for messing things up," Kayley said, her voice quavering in such a way as to make it likely she would soon begin to cry.



The first sixteen and a half years of Kayley Miller's life had passed without real moment in Council Bluffs, Evansville, and finally Dayton, where her father quit sales and opened a diner not far from the interstate. It was there that she'd met Leslie Moore, a slicked back short-order cook who shared with her the common thread of being named for a forgotten actor. This was not very much on which to base a relationship, and in fact no relationship ever developed, but for a two week period of sexual frenzy that started when Kayley got drunk the afternoon school let out. Indian summer had come before she even realized she was pregnant, and a long minute passed after that before it dawned on her that Leslie was the father. She had been ducking his phone calls since the middle of July, and certainly this latest development did not change her mind. There was a certain ambivalence in her feelings about the pregnancy, but time after time her thoughts came back to this: I don't want Leslie's child. She had written PRO and CON on a divided sheet of paper, listing the usual concerns and emotions that a sixteen year old might be expected to have, but always the father's name, in capital letters under the CON column, weighed in heaviest.

The problem was, who wanted this child? She had waited too long for an abortion, and her parents had not caught their collective breath since she'd told them her predicament. They were too staggered to give any real advice, too aghast to think of the next step when they could not accept the last. Instead Kayley sought guidance from the huge billboard two exits down from the diner on the interstate:

Lullaby Adoption Agency  
Can Help  
Confidential  
624-5353

Incredible that she had never read the sign before, or at least never focused on it, yet there it was bigger than life and telling her what to do. No one would know.

But word gets out. Always, always, in a small town like Dayton or a big one word gets out. Kayley's aunt mentions it to her best friend, Kayley misses some school and then some more, she starts to show, wears baggy clothes, word gets out. But not to Leslie, at least not directly. No one thinks to tell him, he's not the sort to have friends or discuss his affairs; but soon it's all over the diner, and even Leslie can add one plus one and come up with late June.

Now everything made sense: Kayley could ignore him till the weather turned and it didn't matter, the magic had been there and was still there, alive and growing and now part of her as it had always been part of him.

He started calling more often, leaving long, convoluted messages that Kayley's mother wrote down word for word and then threw out without showing to her daughter. "Meet me down the old tar road near the river, you know where," he dictated to Mrs. Miller a few weeks before Kayley left town, "and underline 'you know where'."

"Maybe you should tell me where, just in case she doesn't know," Mrs. Miller said. She imagined driving over there with a shotgun and blowing his brains out.

"Oh, she knows," Leslie said. There wasn't a trace of impropriety in his voice, in fact there was nothing but vacant worship, and what was the point of even shooting the damned fool? Each time he called, it was with the absolute conviction that Kayley would love him again. When her father fired him from the diner he seemed unfazed.

"I know this is about your daughter," he said after Ernest, Kayley's father, threw a stained white apron in his face and told him to get the hell out of his restaurant. "It's not necessary that you accept what happened, I should have come to you like a man in the first place instead of slipping around and losing respect for the both of us. But it *is* necessary that you

accept what's going to happen, because I think it's real important to have a happy home, and a child's got to see his grandparents."

"Les, I know you've heard by now that Kayley is not going to keep the baby," Ernest said. He was feeling a certain sympathy for this boy—his chest stuck out, his hair greased back with what he would have sworn smelled like Brylcreem—but he couldn't bring himself to say "*your* baby."

"I think you need to get past this, maybe you can even come back here to work in a few months after you get your head back on straight."

"She's going to keep it," Leslie said, wrapping the apron around his fist and then banging it against his thigh.

"Leslie, I should tell you that I've spoken to Kayley at length about this," he lied. He was surprised at the tone he was now taking with this young employee, a short-order man he had fired only seconds before after two years of sweating hard work in the kitchen. But there was something lost about him; for a passing moment Ernest was actually sorry things hadn't worked out for them.

He went on. "She's informed me, in no uncertain terms, that a relationship between the two of you is impossible. Impossible," he repeated, because he wanted the word to hang there, alone, and portend the future for this boy who apparently could not envision one without his daughter.

"I don't doubt your word, Mr. Miller, and I know you're her father. But you don't know her like I do. You *can't* know her like I do." From anyone else, Ernest thought, this would be sexual innuendo; from Leslie, it was no more, or less, than the embodying delusion of true love.

"Well, I'm sure we'll be seeing you again, and you'll be back to work here sooner than you think," Ernest said. He grabbed Leslie by the shoulders, pulled him an inch or two closer, and spoke conspiratorially: "Let her go, son, and let yourself go. You won't do anybody any good by holding on to nothing. If you do, you'll come away with less than you started with." Then, still holding on, Ernest shook him slightly and pushed him toward the door. "You go now."

Leslie did not resist. At the threshold, though, he turned back to see his former boss. "I'm glad we were able to have this little talk and clear the air," he said, and tossed his apron, all knotted up, behind the counter. It was only then that Ernest understood the extent of the future problems his daughter would have with this young man.

That evening Kayley thought she saw Leslie hiding behind a broken down pick-up in the field across the road from their house. It was that dusky lightless hour after the sun had dropped, and shadows defined the field and everything on it, including the blurred movements Kayley saw when she opened the basement door to put out the trash. Someone was out there—she was certain it wasn't an animal by the awkward ducking down of the silhouette she saw—and the only person she could think that had any business on that burned out acre was Leslie Moore spying on her. At the time, the significance of this conclusion escaped her.

"Whoever's out there," she said, trying not to embarrass him, "you should go on your way. There's nothing for you here."

Backing away across the field, low to the ground and hiding behind the abandoned truck as long as possible, the shadowy figure fled into a dark orange horizon that seconds later became black. Watching him run away, arms unbent and tight to his sides like a penguin, she started laughing uncontrollably; soon she was dabbing tears from her eyes, and only seconds after that she was crying. Maybe this was one of those mood swings the school counselor had told her about. Just stop it, she said to herself, and like that she stopped crying.

Leslie began appearing more often. He got on a bus she was on and stayed near the driver for two stops, finally exiting without looking back in her direction. He watched a quarter of a high school basketball game from the gym door, but never went into the stands where she was sitting. All the while, though, phone messages continued to come to Kayley's mother, along with a letter that made it past her to Kayley. In block print with a dull-tipped felt pen, he wrote: IN LATE JUNE THE MOON WAS QUARTERED. DO YOU REMEMBER? WE LOOKED UP FROM THE WET GRASS IN THE EARLY MORNING AND YOU SAID THAT SOMETIMES YOU FELT LIKE HANGING YOUR HEART ON THE CRESCENT. YOU SHOULD NOT DO THIS. —LESLIE MOORE

Kayley yipped with delight at the formal ending of the letter, but she was not moved by the rest of it. Tearing a page from a Snoopy message pad stuck to the wall under the kitchen phone, she wrote, "Our time was a mistake," and stuffed it into the envelope with his last paycheck. That night someone smashed eggs in their driveway and left a heart-shaped box of salt water taffy on the doorstep. The next day Kayley decided to take Lullaby

up on their offer to place her for the final months of her pregnancy. She didn't have any idea what else to do.

Two days later she was on her way to Philadelphia and the Bradley family. Lullaby had provided a cab to the station, where a ticket was waiting for her, but it was not until she was actually climbing the stairs of the bus that she understood how little she controlled her own destiny. Maybe she needed to get away, but she certainly didn't need to go to a strange town to have a baby she wasn't even keeping. And more even than a new town or a new family, her whole life seemed to be falling away from her. For just a second walking up the steps she felt that she could still grab it back, that her life was just at the tips of her fingers and if she could just reach an inch further she could pull it back to where it had been only a day before. Then she took another step and knew that everything was lost.

But with the loss of control came a feeling of power, and more, of danger, of being outside the society. At the threshold she stopped and peered down the aisle: the other travelers were already seated, whispering to neighbors, holding tickets in outstretched hands, going somewhere. For some reason this revulsed her; she was convinced that everyone was playing the role of satisfied customer to fool her. When the bus driver helped her to a seat and heaved her suitcase up to the luggage rack, joking for the fiftieth time that night about the bricks his passengers always carried, Kayley stared at him and said that the bricks were cocaine, not asphalt, and that the weight he was complaining of was from automatic weapons. He waited in the aisle for a laugh, but she sat down and told him to drive as fast as he could. Standing there, not knowing what to do, he watched her pull a paperback from her purse and start reading.

"We'll just see about this," he said finally, pulling the suitcase down and searching it. When he was satisfied that there was no contraband, he pushed the clothes back into the case and told her she could get it back up there herself, gesturing with his head to the rack above him. Kayley glanced at the men seated around her, and when each averted his eyes, she removed her clothes from the suitcase and piled them up neatly on the seat next to her; then she put the empty valise above her. She felt capable of anything.

Through Columbus, Wheeling, Somerset. Through Breezewood, Town Of Motels. Kayley loved that one, a town of motels in the middle of

nowhere. She waited for something to happen, she was sure something was going to happen. But the trip itself proved uneventful, and as they passed the King of Prussia mall—at one time the largest mall in the world, the driver intoned—she repacked her bag, fixed her makeup in the dark, clicked her compact shut, and the bus was in the terminal.

She spotted the Bradleys; she slept; and when she woke up, in a new bed, the edge was gone, the potential for danger faded away in the gloom of early morning. That muddy period when you open your eyes in a strange room, unsure where you are, passed quickly and calmly. She had gone to Philadelphia, she had decided to give up her baby. And she had put Leslie Moore behind her.



Carolyn waited. She had a house to show at eleven, but it was in the neighborhood, and she could hear from the television in the kitchen that *Today* was still on. There was time. Kayley, feeling watched, stood up and pulled at her belly, as if she had just eaten a big meal. Finally she whispered that she knew who had made the call.

“Excuse me?” Don’t let her off the hook, Carolyn thought. Not yet.

“I know who was on the phone,” Kayley said, louder than necessary. The volume helped to steady her voice.

Carolyn only nodded, afraid to talk or even make a sound for fear of disrupting the explanation.

“His name is Moore,” Kayley continued, “and he’s the father of my baby.”

“How would he know you were here, how would he know the number to call?” Carolyn said, more frantically than she might have wanted.

“I don’t know, I just don’t know. He wasn’t on the bus, I checked. I even looked in both bathrooms.”

“You checked? Why in the world would you have to check?”

Kayley told her about Dayton, and why it seemed like a good idea for her to leave. She told Carolyn everything, and Carolyn, who might have expected such a story that first night in the bus terminal, stared spellbound as her house guest detailed the bizarre messages and letters that led to her departure, ending the tale with an elaborate description of the salt water taffy left on her porch.

"But how could he know you're here? Isn't the whole procedure confidential?"

"I don't know," Kayley admitted, the weight of her problems just now becoming clear to her. "They don't tell anybody, they say, and I know I didn't tell anybody except my parents." Carolyn looked up, but Kayley barely acknowledged her. "They would *never* tell him. No, I think it's more likely that he robbed the Lullaby Agency and looked at my file." For a second her eyes grew distant as she considered the real possibility of such a crime.

"And that's not the worst of it. Leslie drives a light blue Dart, there's only about fourteen of them still on the road, he always used to say 'Let's go darting around town,' like that was some hilarious joke or something. Anyway, I thought I saw the car rounding the corner when I went out to get the paper this morning."

Now it was Carolyn's turn to stand. She arched her back, as if *she* were carrying extra weight around the middle, and went to the living room window. Kayley thought she might be looking for a light blue Dart, but then she heard Carolyn's voice, directed not at her but the window.

"I need to talk to Arthur," she said.



Later that day, while Kayley was off shopping for maternity clothes, Leslie called for her. Carolyn, back from showing a magnificent house to a couple who could never afford it, almost hung up without saying a word. Instead she said, "Stop calling, you little punk, or I'll have you arrested. Why don't you just leave town without trouble and go back to Dayton?" But his response, hollow, oblivious, almost automated, made her smile at the old West approach she had taken toward resolving the problem.

"Could you ask her to meet me at the Art Museum? There's a Hopper exhibit on the second floor. Thank you." Then a click: no time, just meet me. When Carolyn looked down, she was shocked to realize that she had copied the message word for word, and considered for a moment saving it to show to law enforcement officials. But just like that, she crumpled the paper and threw it out. She never mentioned it to Kayley.





“So what did you end up doing?” Art asked. Kayley was asleep in the room next door, and they were whispering. Carolyn had tried to reach him all day—it turned out he had been called to court unexpectedly, the last place anyone would look for a real estate lawyer—and felt the frustration of someone who gets a busy signal for two hours. She had been nagging him to get a beeper for a year now, but he’d said he didn’t want to be lumped in with doctors and coke dealers. And to make matters worse, he had come home late tonight after a business dinner with a developer, having drunk just enough to shorten his attention span.

“Do? We didn’t *do* anything. What did you expect us to do?”

“I suppose you might have considered calling the police and telling them that you saw a strange man around the house,” Art said, softly enough to remove any contention from his voice.

“Doing what,” Carolyn said, still whispering, but without the effort of her husband. “Driving a Dart around the neighborhood? It’s not a crime to do that.”

“Maybe it should be,” Art said, but there was no use trying to bring humor into this. They agreed that they couldn’t make a decision without Kayley, who had gone to her bedroom at nine-thirty as a precaution against having to repeat her story to Art, or so it seemed to Carolyn. They could hear her airy girlish snore through the door.

“Well, we have to do *something*,” Carolyn said.

“I think we’ll have to talk to Kayley tomorrow about how to handle this guy, or how she wants to handle him, I should say.” Art rolled over on his side and kissed his wife on the cheek: goodnight. The two vodkas at dinner had kicked in; and after all, nothing could really be accomplished until the morning. By the time Carolyn asked him when he would like the alarm clock set for, he was already asleep.

But by morning it was too late. The three of them woke at the same time before the alarm went off, as if they had been shaken by an intruder who disappeared as their eyes focused on the day, and together they convened at the kitchen table. There they found letters scrawled across the living room window in shaving cream: SEE ME KALEY

“Oh, my god,” Kayley said. “He can’t even spell my name.”

“I guess he didn’t look at your file as closely as we thought,” Carolyn

said. There was joy in a deep recess of her voice; she was happy this had happened in front of her husband. For weeks they had laughingly called each other birth grandparents, but now he was involved, stumbling unshaved and uncombed on the scene of the crime. Now Leslie Moore was his problem, too.

"I need to see about this," Art said, pulling a pair of pants on top of his pajamas, slipping into some loafers and out the door before Carolyn could tell him how ridiculous he looked. She followed him outside a few minutes later, wiped off the shaving cream with a hose, then, chilled, stood hugging herself in the living room while she waited for Art to return. Kayley came up behind her and started to rub her arms.

"I'm so sorry," Kayley said. She appeared to be choking back a hiccup, and Carolyn's heart suddenly went out to her. And to herself. For the first time, amazingly enough, the older woman understood her own desire to have a child—the pain of shrugging off years of childlessness with a "we're just not in that much of a rush," the constant monitoring of monthly cycles and monthly hopes, the anxiety of that dwindling hourglass of fertility—as a roseate collage of little diapers and one-piece pajamas. She had the passing sense of standing in an open field.

"It's not your fault," Carolyn said, reaching her arms behind her to hold Kayley. Which was when Art walked in, shook himself, and stared at the two women who were in a virtual embrace in front of him. He kicked off his loafers and sat down on the sofa.

"The boy's down at the comer," he said. "Just standing there, eating a doughnut, kicking his feet into the cement. He's as harmless as a five-year-old, and as emotionally well-developed, I would think," Art said, forgetting that Kayley had been with this boy, had made love to him, was carrying his child. "He wants to talk, he wants to hear what everyone has been telling him from the horse's mouth, it seems he's never actually spoken to Kayley about this. I think he's entitled to that."

"I'll go see him," Carolyn said, matter-of-factly, as if she had not heard a word.

"I told him Kayley would come out to talk, that she would explain her own feelings and her decision based on those feelings."

"Don't be such a lawyer, Arthur. What are you, some kind of father's rights activist? I'm not letting her go out there to talk to a guy who makes

spooky phone calls, smashes eggs, trespasses, smears shaving cream on our house, and leaves a goddamn box of salt water taffy as his calling card. What could you be thinking about?"

"I'm just saying she should talk to him," Art said, in the same reasonable tone he had never varied from in their twelve years of marriage. The same inanely reasonable tone, it now struck Carolyn.

"First let's give him a meat cleaver in case he wants to act out again," Carolyn said, reaching behind her for the younger girl, expecting support. But during the argument Kayley had slipped out of her grasp, and now she was in front of them fully dressed.

"I won't be long," she said confidently, pulling an Ohio University sweatshirt over her head. "Everything will be fine." Then she was out the door. Art gently held Carolyn by the elbows until he was certain she wasn't going to follow—more a symbolic than a genuine restraint—then let her pull herself free. She went right to the window, but Kayley was already out of sight. "Everything will be fine," she said. It had been a very warm autumn, rainy and humid like a late spring; and leaves were just now beginning to fall from the trees, swirling in little pools of wind and floating back among the branches. The leaves are the color of pink grapefruit, Carolyn thought; I should think more often about the color of leaves.

After a time she said, "Kayley . . . Kayley," rolling it around in her mouth as if to reevaluate her opinion of the name. She stayed in front of the window a while longer, but slowly, like a bottle in the ocean, drifted back to the center of the living room, where Art was standing. His arms extended, he received her tenderly, knowing somehow that she now carried a message he had been waiting a long time to hear. A message of finite possibilities and fathomable hopes. Of fulfillment.



# Jellyfish

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Darlene M. Pagán

Their bodies lay bloated in the sun,  
flickering like whole notes on endless bars  
of sand. In deep Orphic tones they suck  
at the waves as infants pulled  
from watery breasts, to sink vulnerable  
in the grit of a sweltering other world.

We avoid this path, walk with caution  
along the edge of a shore rife  
with music: a Capella sea gulls  
and the hiss of cymbal waves  
that touch, recoil, and shake.  
You dodge the broken shells  
while I skirt the rocks that spit at us both.

At another time, perhaps as children,  
we might have foraged castles  
and scattered crabs into them with sticks.  
Now, we know too much;  
read so far into images that we sink  
like the same jellyfish whose bodies  
hazard the ground as translucent welts.

A storm builds over the waves  
with green-tongued flames

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that puncture the sky as we pass.  
Like caesuras in the sound,  
we turn from one another  
as the music imparts a vast, imagined  
glance and a myth we've only read.



# Double Exposure

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Anne Sheffield

When she gets back her prints,  
she realizes her husband shot the film first—  
so their daughter pumps a long rope swing  
over her brother's football team like an autumn goddess,  
her friends' faces at her fifteenth birthday party  
smile through yellow and black numbered uniforms,  
knee-pad legs are heaps of leaves the girls jump into  
weeks later without realizing, boys rush a ball down  
a green field of girls with their feet in the air as they leap—  
the giant dog has an oak leaf stuck to his nose  
in the middle of a lilliputian huddle; and here she is, mother,  
part Chinese restaurant, part stretched on the bed.  
Her daughter trails long blonde lawns of sunbright leaves  
down both sides of face and body like a veil and train,  
and the family portrait is all raked up in a pile,  
starting to blow away.



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# Matisse in the Hospital

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Allen Kesten

Lenore tells Martin she is calling from the hospital and then gives him the news. “Beth had an accident on her bike this morning. When she fell, her left foot must have been trapped in the toe clip. Both of the bones in her lower leg are broken.” Lenore’s voice betrays no emotion. “It looks like she may be here for a while.”

Since the divorce, Beth has lived with Martin during the school year and spent summers with her mother. It’ll take Martin two hours on a bus to get to his daughter. He lost his marriage to Lenore three years ago. He lost a car in a crash nine years ago and hasn’t been behind the wheel since then. Without a wife to drive him, he has been forced to rely on buses.

Nights when he can’t sleep, Martin recounts his losses as if his life were a rosary. The people, possessions, and identities he has lost bump against each other like so many beads reverberating on a string. When he imagines the final loss, of life itself, he can see the string break and all his losses spinning away into the universe. And sometimes he can even picture Beth, all grown up, lying under an evening sky, her hazel eyes peering between stars to catch a glimpse of him.

“Hi Daddy. I miss you.” Lenore has relinquished the phone without a word of closing or comfort to Martin.

“I miss you too. How are you doing?”

“It hurts, but the doctors are giving me medicine. Don’t I sound dopey? Anyway, will you come see me?”

“Of course I will. Do you want me to bring you anything from here?” He hopes for a task to help him manage the fear and worry which now threaten to overwhelm him.

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“Maybe. This room they put me in is really ugly. Even Mom said so. There’s just a big, stupid picture of a houseplant hanging on the wall. Could you bring one of my pictures? The best would be my naked lady. Her lilacs are so pretty.”

Martin looks down the hall into Beth’s bedroom. A print of Matisse’s painting *Odalisque* hangs over the bed. The bare-breasted woman in the picture seems to wink at him. “We’re on our way, Sweetie.”

Despite his aversion to being conspicuous in public places, Martin carries the large, framed reproduction into the bus terminal. He has wrapped it in brown paper. In line to buy his ticket, he holds his wallet open and studies a photo of Beth. The picture was taken a few months ago, on her fourteenth birthday. Only traces of the child she was remain. The pearls he has been giving her since she was a baby, now amounting to more than half a strand, are around her neck.

Martin remembers shopping for the add-a-pearl necklace, the first gift he bought by himself for his new daughter. The jeweler showed him a selection of starter necklaces, one or two pearls on gold chains, and explained that as years go by more pearls could be given and added. Martin’s goal was for Beth to have a full strand by the time she went off to college.

Some years later, the jeweler mentioned to Martin that when a strand is completed, it is sent back to the company and exchanged for one with uniform color and luster. Martin was dismayed. What about the sentimental value of the original pearls, he wondered, the occasions, people, and love they denote?

Martin waits in another line for the bus to pull into the station, the wallet still open in his hand. Just a few years ago, Martin had noticed that Beth’s pearls were being threaded along a string which was then knotted to the gold chain. When asked why the chain didn’t pass through the pearls, the jeweler explained that pearls are soft and can be worn away from the inside by a chain, even a delicate one. Martin was disappointed: until then he had assumed that these gifts to his daughter were hard and enduring, not vulnerable at their very core.

The bus arrives and he pulls the picture of Beth out of his wallet and places it in his shirt pocket. His heart beats against it.

The bus driver looks familiar to Martin, a former student perhaps.



Martin has taught high school for almost twenty years. Lately, everyone looks like a former student to him.

Martin always sits in an aisle seat on a bus and close to the front. He needs to be able to watch the traffic through the windshield, as if some lapse in vigilance on his part might cause an accident. His legs are always tired after a bus trip. He tends to ram his feet into the floor each time the bus seems to come perilously close to colliding with another vehicle or crashing into an embankment. Is he steeling himself for the worst or trying to make up for the time when he didn't brake?

Once outside the city, the bus picks up speed. Soon the other few passengers nod off. Only Martin keeps watch as the bus tailgates the blinding red light of the setting sun up ahead.

Hospitals are like ghettos for the sick and injured, Martin thinks. A security guard stands by the hospital's entrance, his eyes trained on a woman getting into a cab, her short skirt riding up her thighs. Martin goes in, avoiding eye contact. He keeps his eyes averted from the information desk, from anyone who might keep him from seeing his daughter at this late hour. The bus didn't get in until after 8:00.

Further back in the lobby some other late visitors encircle an old man asleep in a wheelchair. They are blocking Martin's way to the elevators. He mutters, "Excuse me," as he squeezes by. The visitors close ranks a little more and continue chatting over an IV bag on a portable stand, as if it wasn't there. Martin marvels at how easily some people become acclimated to this alien world, to the ways of the ghetto. He waits a few moments for an elevator. One chimes and opens.

As he rides, he thinks back to his own brief stay in the hospital and how he had to keep himself together after the accident: through the ambulance ride, X-rays, IV, and sutures. The doctors held off the phone call to Lenore until they could determine the full extent of his injuries. Waiting alone was bad, but worse still was the moment when they wheeled him past the woman who was in the other car, one gurney gliding by another, just enough talking for her to tell him the accident had been his fault, a red light missed.

The elevator reopens onto a quiet corridor. Martin follows the signs to C844, Beth's room. Strange beds with wheels, pulleys, and torturous looking

contraptions stand abandoned along the way. This is the orthopedics ward. He turns a corner and finds himself looking into a patient's room. A young Asian man sits up in his bed. He's wearing a metal brace around his head and down to his shoulders. It looks like the frame of a lampshade stripped of its paper. An old woman in a silk jacket sits in a chair at the foot of the bed. She stares out blankly into the hall. Martin bows his head and moves on.

Beth's room hums with a halo of fluorescent light. The sight of the full leg cast, horrifying in its massiveness and what he can imagine it hides, empties Martin's head of blood and he feels faint. The bed with its guard rails is like some giant crib for his—always will be his—baby. Beth's eyes are closed. Her hair is brushed back from her bruised face. Martin feels a sudden elation to see her again, to end the missing of her that each summer brings. His emotions are like beads on a Chinese abacus, pain and joy quickly being added and subtracted.

"Beth, your father is here," Lenore says without turning to look at Martin. She stands in front of the window, its blinds drawn. Her strong features look like the profile of an Indian blasted out of a mountainside. Martin wonders whether Beth has appreciated her mother's strength today, or has she wished for moments of maternal softness? He puts his bag and the Matisse print down on the floor beside the bed.

Beth slowly opens her eyes. He watches them drift and the lids shudder. Then there is a small, sudden explosion: her eyes pop and come blazing through the scrim of half-sleep. She stares up at his face and seems to be searching for something there. She asks, 'Are you OK, Daddy?' Martin is dragged back in time to another reunion with his daughter, the one after his accident.

After a day and a half in the hospital, Martin returned home with Lenore. They walked in to find Beth napping on the sofa, her head in her grandmother's lap. He watched her sleep and waited for her to waken, worried that his cuts and bruises might frighten her. Then her hazel eyes gradually revealed themselves and looked into his with tenderness. Something burst inside him. A flash of tears drenched his face. Everything he had held inside while in the hospital, released. It was always this way for him: His emotions landed on Beth, stain and relief on pure white gesso.

"I'm glad you're here," Beth whispers. Martin looks away and sees

Lenore hovering on the other side of the bed. She holds a plastic cup with a long, bent straw in her hand and offers it to Beth. I will not cry, Martin tells himself.

An aunt:

*Today I rode the bus to some place new. Now I ride the bus back to my apartment.*

*There is a permanent in my hair to disguise how it is thinning, the scalp betrayed. The frog that closes my quilted silk jacket at the neck is frayed. I cover it with a jade pin. My hand is a mask across my mouth to muffle the dry hack that comes with the night air. I do not wish to disturb other people on the bus.*

*Twice a week I take a bus to see the acupuncturist. He is Caucasian, but studied in Hong Kong. He is helping me to move the fingers on my right hand again. The small stroke in my brain left the hand palsied. When he succeeds in getting my hand to close, will he also give it something to close upon? Another hand, a plait of hair, someone born of my body. I ride the bus and swallow hard, the mystery of what might have been leaves me empty, as empty as my womb has been since it shed the one life it tried to but could not carry.*

*Today I rode the bus to see my sister's son in the hospital. He has been hurt in an automobile accident. Tonight I will call my sister in Taiwan, and report her son's condition to her. She will treat me as her inferior because she has borne three sons. She will order me to take him things in the hospital, foods she thinks he likes, a scroll for the wall to ensure good health and longevity. I will serve her wishes. I have no right not to do so.*

A spider crawls along a slat of the half-closed window blinds. Martin thinks that this is unclean for a supposedly sanitary environment. He watches the spider while Beth naps.

As a child he worried about so many things. He had read in a magazine about the brown recluse spider, whose bite caused a hole in your flesh that spread and could not be closed. He had overheard some relatives talking about his uncle, who had burned his mouth on some extremely hot soup and could no longer taste food because of it. He had known of a child in his school with leukemia and understood the disease to be one that changed your blood to water. He always checked his bed for spiders before going

to sleep, blew on his food until his lips were dry, and felt relief when he cut himself and drops of thick, red blood appeared. It was a childhood led compulsively warding off what now seems so inconsequential and inevitable to him. He takes a sip from a styrofoam cup and cannot determine if it is tea or coffee. It's the start of Beth's third day in the hospital.

Beth sleeps only ten minutes and then awakens with a start. "Is it the pain, Sweetie?" She responds by pressing the button in her hand and dosing herself with morphine intravenously, even though she has complained it barely helps. Martin's fingernails leave imprints in the styrofoam.

A nurse appears and announces she will switch the arm receiving the morphine. Martin can see fear and regret in Beth's eyes, as if she wants to say: Why did I complain? Maybe it's OK the way it is.

The nurse pulls the IV brusquely out of one arm and then tries to jab a needle into Beth's other arm. It takes her three tries, and each time Beth lets out a yell. "Now dear, that didn't hurt as badly as you made out, did it?" the nurse asks smugly as she finishes the hook up. Martin strokes Beth's cheek. A web of anger has tightened over his chest. Sweat weeps from the skin over his heart like discharge from a wound and soaks the front of his shirt.

After the nurse leaves the room, his daughter breaks down and angrily sobs, "It's my body for God's sake. My pain, my bones, my future. How dare they tell me what hurts and what doesn't, what I need and don't need, what's good for me and what's unnecessary."

"I know, Baby. Telling you what's good for you used to be my job, and I gave it up a long time ago." Beth shifts position in her bed. Martin moves to adjust the stack of pillows under her encased leg.

"It's OK, Dad, just leave it." She reaches for the rolling table beside the bed and grabs for a tissue. "You know what you could do though? You could finally hang my picture." She points to the closet where the Matisse print has been stored since it arrived with Martin. Out of sight, out of mind, he had hoped.

Martin lays the print across his lap and carefully removes the wrapping. Beth sighs and smiles when he shows it to her. Martin looks from the odalisque to his daughter and notices both have their arms folded behind their heads. He leans the print against a chair. His hands shake a little as he removes the picture of a philodendron that is hanging on the wall.

"What should I do with it now?" Martin wonders out loud. He thinks he hears someone coming, the sound of rubber wheels or rubber soles on vinyl floors. He moves quickly and puts the picture in the closet.

Martin is a small man. He had been the tallest child in the fifth grade, but by high school he was one of the shortest, as if there had been an awful, immutable failure of his cells, a loss of courage, an inability to live up to some promise. He has to stand on tiptoe and stretch to hang the Matisse, to catch its picture wire on the hook in the wall. The woman's unfathomable, dark eyes and simultaneously bored, amused, and patronizing expression hover above him. He has seen this look unfurl itself on the faces of other women, known what it was like to be the object of their pity, delight, and condescension. He saw it on the face of one of the nurses as she waved him aside to take Beth's temperature. And on Wendy's face, that girl who always sat in the front row of his last period English class but seemed to only half-listen to the poems he read aloud. Thinking back, he wonders whether Lenore wore this expression through most of their marriage. It seems to him that when he was a young man just that look on a woman's face could arouse him.

He stands back to check if the picture is straight. His vision is drawn to the strand of yellow and black beads hanging between the woman's bare breasts. "Matisse painted that necklace to be as alive as a swarm of yellow jackets. Don't you think, Beth?"

"What's this about?" asks the nurse who has silently taken control of the doorway to Beth's room.

"It's my daughter's favorite painting, and I've hung it for her," Martin states firmly, even as his hands become suddenly too large to hide, too rigid to fold away.

"Yeah, right."

An ancient:

*Monsieur Matisse came to our shop in Nice for the first time in 1919. I was a girl of twelve years then. My sweet mother was too shy to speak to the great painter, so it was left to me to show him around the shop. At that time Matisse was enchanted by anything vaguely Oriental. Rugs, ceramics, and of course beads. He was looking for beads of golden yellow that first visit.*

*I tried to interest him in the yellow bodom beads we had loose. They were still*

*in the basket that they had traveled in from Ghana. Those powdered glass beads did intrigue him—the way their mottled surfaces held the light. It was their black inner cores that finally discouraged him, despite my guarantee that I could hide the darkness with a good tight stringing. “I will know those black hearts are there and this will distract me from their sun-like surfaces,” he protested.*

*Allah’s curse must surely be upon me for undoing an Islamic rosary of honey coloured amber for Matisse. This was the colour of bead he wanted and he could not be dissuaded. I had made a mistake, perhaps, to mention to him that in Morocco the Berbers believe that the owning of amber defends the holder against disease. I think he liked this bit of lore that I had learned from my mother. Maybe even then Monsieur’s stomach distressed him. And so I took a third of the rosary’s ninety-nine beads and strung them with black coral in an alternating pattern as Matisse stood over me, a cajoling taskmaster. I saved the long terminal bead from the rosary and kept it in a silver box by my bed for many years. I would touch the box before I fell asleep each night. Superstitious girl that I was.*

*Over the years, my mother and I sold many beads to Monsieur. You can see them in his Odalisque paintings. Our beads decorate the women, hanging from their necks, resting between their breasts, embracing their ankles.*

*When I learned that Matisse was in the hospital for an operation to relieve the enteritis, I sent him my long-kept terminal bead, instructing him to hold it tightly in his hand and cry out the Father’s name, as Muslims had shouted, ‘Allah,’ upon reaching the bead after naming the ninety-nine attributes of God. Now, as an old woman left alone, I truly know what it is to cry out in the night. I touch the place on the bedpost which will take no polish, the place where my old cat used to rub her toothless gums each night before falling asleep beside me, and I think about all the friends, lovers, and family who have left me behind. I stare at the moon in my window and feel the cold of their graves in my bones. Even my beloved cat has passed on now. I cry out for her, or for God. I don’t know which.*

The bones are not holding, the doctor reports. “I think it’s time to go in and put on some hardware. I’ll see you in the morning then.” He pats the bed beside Beth’s leg and is gone. It has taken four days and two casts for the doctor to arrive at his decision.

Martin sits beside Beth and watches her face. Her chin quivers beneath her clenched mouth. The now familiar beep of her self-dosing morphine

machine sounds. From her post by the window Lenore scolds, “You really ought to try to go longer between doses. You don’t want to become too dependent on narcotics, you know.”

Beth and Martin share a silent moment of exasperation: rolling eyes, crooked grins. Martin can’t see his daughter as Mary Tyrone or some Edwardian opium eater.

An ex-wife:

*Last night I dreamed Beth was home with me again. Then I woke up. It was difficult to look into her room after that, but I ended up in her empty bed, watching the sun rise in her window.*

*Today I’ll wash and wax the kitchen floor while I wait for news from the hospital. It’s what I do. I’m sure Martin will be at the hospital, all teary eyed and forlorn. That’s what he does. All that emotional outpouring and unbounded softness: I find myself hardening in his presence.*

*He and Beth just don’t know. Could they even imagine me standing here in her room, still in my nightgown at 8:00, holding her pearl necklace in my hand, against my wet cheek, the pearls in their element—salt water, clear and cold.*

Martin arrived at the hospital just after seven in the morning, but they had already taken Beth away. He sits on the bed in Beth’s empty room. Lenore told him last night she would wait at home until Beth was out of surgery. The doctor or a nurse will call her. He looks at the phone beside the bed anyway.

Panic strikes him when he realizes he doesn’t even know where the operating rooms are, where they’ve taken his little girl. He can imagine the operating rooms down in the bowels of the building—basement rooms that never see sunlight. Beth’s room is alive with sunlight this morning. The walls shimmer. The glare on the glass over the Matisse print obliterates the odalisque’s face. After barely five days, this room really has become Beth’s. Teen magazines and scented candles on the night stand, stuffed animals resting against the metal rail at the foot of the bed, a double-looped novelty straw in the hospital water cup, and a mobile of origami cranes suspended from the pull-up bar over the bed: all of these things hold a little of her spirit and bring peace to Martin for a moment.

Then with a start, Martin realizes that he and Beth have given in to the ghetto, have let it become a part of them. She has been diminished,

labeled, marginalized. They have accepted that she is a “teenaged patient” and are making “the best of it,” by bringing in bits of the old life. There is even a stack of Martin’s own books on the windowsill. The objects that had given him comfort a moment ago, now look eerie in this setting, like the salvaged artifacts of some destroyed civilization. His alternating emotions bump against each other, the beads of the abacus rattle.

“Please let her be all right,” he suddenly and involuntarily utters. Who did he think he was speaking to? Is this how the original conception of a god arose, he wonders, from the need for someone to hear man’s appeals? He’s not a believer, but still the impetus is there to speak words akin to prayer. He’s afraid that if he doesn’t plead aloud he won’t have done all he can for his daughter. “Please let her be all right,” he whispers over and over, like puffs of air blown into a ball of liquid glass, the ardent wish pushing against the glowing walls of the room.





# Queen Esther

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Dennis Must

Perhaps the most interesting bureau drawer in Ben's mother's room was her unmentionables drawer. Most of the items looked fragile, the same shade of pink, coral and dusty rose, stacked in three rows like silk scarves. Further, once the compartment was drawn open, a sweet aroma wafted out of a calico sachet bag.

Petticoats, half slips, camisoles, panties, and, at the very bottom, the ballast—a chunky girdle festooned with bone stays, wire fasteners and elastic straps with catches that kept her nylon sheers from drooping like loose skin on her legs. “It doesn’t belong here,” thought Ben. He recalled an aged catfish he’d once pulled out of a pond with wire leaders and hooks decorating its mouth.

Ben had looked forward to this day. She’d promised the two of them were going on a special trip. He sat all dressed on the side of the fully made bed. His father had left early to hurry onto the golf course.

“Where are we going, Ma?”

“To a Queen Esther social.”

Queen Esther was the name of her Sunday Bible class. All women, most of whom Ben thought looked like boarded-up Victorian houses. His mother was the youngest and prettiest in the group. He watched her draw cocoa stockings up her legs, careful so as not to cause them to run, then roll their ends in cloth covered rubber bands high on her thighs.

“Are the seams straight, Ben?” she asked. Lifting up the half slip.

“Yes,” he said. She never asked his father.

“Ben, go get the clear nail polish.”

He watched her dab its applicator brush on the snag that threatened to travel a cloud stream down her leg.

“What’s a social, Ma?”

“An occasion when women get together.”

“What do they do?”

“Oh, talk. Drink tea, and there will be much to eat.” He’d seen the fresh macaroni salad sitting in a container in the refrigerator that morning.

“What will I do?”

It didn’t matter, actually. When he was invited by his father to go someplace, it meant sitting on a barstool downing several fountain Coca-Colas while studying reflections of the patrons in the giant bar mirror. It was always dusky in those places, and smelled of Lysol. His father never wanted to leave. But he and his mother took long drives in the country; she’d turn on the car radio and sing like Jo Stafford. Sometimes she’d drive thirty miles to Warren, Ohio, to visit her aunt. Ben would walk down the street to the crossing and watch the freight trains move through. Alongside the tracks a black man owned a shack roofed with metal Royal Crown Cola signs; he sold bread, milk, candy, and soda chilled in an ice trough. Ben liked to go inside and “fish” for a bottle of lime green soda. The store had a dirt floor. Black children would fish with him in the soda trough, too. They liked purple soda.

“You will do what you’ve always done, Ben . . . stick by me.”

The social was being held in a rambling Queen Anne Victorian with a grand wrap-around porch in a rural community called Harmony. Several wicker-back rocking chairs with peony cushions lined either side of the oval windowed entrance like Hotel guests taking the morning sun. When the pair climbed the steps to twist the bell, Ben spotted goats in a penned enclosure alongside the driveway.

“See,” she said, “I told you there would be something for you to do.”

Ben immediately recognized Grace McKibben when the door opened, the president of the Queen Esther class. Except he was used to seeing her dressed in black wool, layers of it—blouse, cardigan sweater, a jacket, and skirt that fell just above a short expanse of her black cotton stockings and string-tied heels. A cameo brooch was the only color in the whole expanse of garments, and it rested tight against her Adam’s apple. Mrs. McKibben

always wore a pill box hat in church, too, with black netting over her chignon—a dark scrim that she might pull down over her chalky face at a moment's notice, he thought.

But this Saturday morning she met mother and son at the door in a dress patterned with a riot of melon peonies, like those on the porch rockers' cushions, against an ivory background, and matching salmon satin slippers and hose. Stuck in her gray bun was a sprig of baby's breath.

"Welcome to Queen Esther's *soirée*!" exuded Mrs. McKibben.

"Oh, Grace, you look so beautiful," Ben's mother declared.

"What's a *soirée*?" he whispered as they were being escorted into the dimly lit vestibule.

"Shhhh," she admonished. "It's a woman's social. Now be on your best behavior."

It was a grand interior. A Matisse *odalisque* hung in the paneled hallway. Oriental carpets jeweled its dark parquet floors, and like young girls, huge Chinese *jardinières* stood sentry at the living room entranceway. Ben could see perhaps a dozen women standing, talking to each other animatedly, all attired in muted spring dresses with white or pastel slippers. When the hostess opened the French doors the fragrance of a sweet perfume momentarily overcame him.

"Katherine Daugherty and her Gainsborough son, Ben!" the hostess gushed. The women all turned and smiled at the pair, one of them commenting, "Oh, Katherine and Ben, we are so glad you came." Ben watched a fawn-colored Siamese cat with gas-blue eyes brush up against the shiny hose of several of the guests. Cookies and delicate pastries graced glass-topped tables throughout the grand room. At one end in a circular alcove with curved windows sat a home organ. Mrs. McKibben was the organist for the Second United Presbyterian Church.

"It looks like we're all here," the Bible class president declared. "Please sit down, ladies." Eyeing Ben standing at his mother's side—"and gentleman."

The room is as large as our downstairs, thought Ben. Tufted sofas, love seats and overstuffed chairs were backed up against oak wainscoting. Timbers lined the ceiling.

"We have some minor class business to conduct before we begin the *SOIRÉE* . . ." she hesitated, and several women giggled. Ben's mother smiled

innocently, not knowing anything more than he did. "But before that, I want to introduce you to my dear friend and companion."

She opened the French doors to the dining room. A diminutive woman entered, perhaps a decade younger than the hostess, with marcelled raven hair, pale skin, and wearing a watery persimmon red lipstick. Mrs. McKibben wore no make-up, except white face powder.

"Lydia Hopkins, ladies." Miss Hopkins curtsied. The Queen Esther president grasped her hand and directed, "Go bring in the tea, dear."

The woman was as young as his mother and, Ben thought, as attractive, too. "Where's Mr. McKibben, Ma?"

Katherine Daugherty scowled.

"Who takes care of the goats?" he asked.

"Ben!" she hissed.

Miss Hopkins wore a crisp white waitress' apron over a black shirtwaist dress. Its collar, unlike Grace McKibben's, was open and exposed a flushed expanse of flesh. She had a self-effacing manner, and was given to uttering short sentences.

"Oh, you're welcome. I'm sure."

"Yes, isn't it a lovely home? Grace has such exquisite taste."

"Oh, no, I didn't bake these brownies. Grace did. She's a marvelous chef."

"Does she take care of the goats?" Ben asked.

Lydia Hopkins, who stooped over to pour tea in their bone china cups, smiled. Katherine Daugherty grinned sheepishly.

"Oh, why are you so nosey?" She glanced up at Lydia, appealing for her understanding.

"Yes, I tend to the goats, Ben. I'll take you out to meet them later this morning."

He liked her right off. As the Queen Esther women palavered about the upcoming business of the Bible class, she'd periodically glance over at him and wink.

Soon the noise in the large room subsided. The hostess had excused herself minutes earlier, and her guests were all comfortably ensconced, waiting for the next turn of events. Ben fidgeted like it was getting stuffy.

There were occasional puddles of hushed conversation, but most of the women sat decorously mum, a few studying the sunlight filtering through the stained glass window over the double keyboard organ. When, stunningly, Grace McKibben swaned through the dining room doorway bedecked in a bottle-green velvet chapeau festooned with plastic cherries, one banana, and an orange. Throwing her arms wide, she kicked off her salmon slippers and cried:

“Welcome to Queen Esther’s Soirée!”

The ladies burst into laughter that sounded more like delighted squeals.

President McKibben sat down at the organ, and broke into a rousing chorus of “Mississippi Mud.”

As she furiously pedaled, and pushed and pulled at the concert stops—the living room literally swelling with brass instrumentation—an undernourished Aunt Jemima shimmied into the gathering wearing a red bandana—just like on the box of pancakes Ben loved so. Lydia Hopkins’ milky white face, now marred with burnt cork, and in her hands—bones.

At the nodding of Mrs. McKibben, Lydia obliged her accompanist with a stiff one-minute jig and rib-clapper percussion.

The women were in titters.

Lydia curtsied once again. When the ringmaster held her hands high in the air, requesting silence, Ben wondered if they’d visit the goats with Lydia wearing blackface.

“Ladies,” Mrs. McKibben barked, “Now for the surprise. Queen Esther’s Morality Play! But you must all take part.” Conspiratorially, she swept her chignon about and glared at each woman assembled. “But never breathe a word of this to any of our congregation. We’ve survived for thirteen years through ecclesiastical famine and scarce liturgical fortune. But the God of Mercy loves each and every one of us. Pray and be merciful, He admonishes. *And, above all, HAVE INNOCENT FUN!*”

The ladies applauded, even Ben’s mother. The cat jumped up between the pair and rolled its back into his side. Ben thought the shade in the room had become rosier. As if the sky outside had begun to bleed salmon. The floral upholstered furniture . . . all of it gave off a pale carnation glow just as did the soft-hued women’s dresses. The tinted flesh of the photographs hanging on the wall. The painting over the fireplace—a pink calliope unicorn. The coral bordered carpet in the grand living room with a mimosa center.

Peach roses now began opening in their crystal vases, releasing their perfume. Ben, wishing he were outside with the goats, and slowly succumbing to the chamber's rising temperature.

Lydia Hopkins opened the double glass doors to the hallway, and switched on the tear-drop chandelier, illuminating a wide staircase with fanciful mahogany balusters. It was as if the women were sitting below a proscenium arch.

The audience was aroused by the sound of bells Ben had heard on horses pulling wagons for hayrides. Leather belts festooned with silver balls inside which rolled steel bearings. The straps shook several times, to announce an appearance. All eyes were fixed on the upper level of the staircase illuminated by a stained glass window.

Lydia Hopkins cried out: "QUEEN ESTHER!"

About her neck a black strap of Christmas bells, and scantily attired in a champagne brassiere, one of those catfish-hooked girdles with catches to which her black mercerized hose were fastened, and no shoes—her pasty flesh, mounds of it, harnessed by the unmentionables, brocaded and laced but still looking very much like saddles or straps—Grace McKibben held aloft two tambourines like the tablets of Moses. Each step she descended, the harness bells jangled, accompanied by a furtive glances she, Queen Esther, shot to her admiring, but noticeably embarrassed, dark-faced Lydia.

The Bible class, at first stunned, gradually affected a smattering of nervous laughter. When Grace reached the last step, they were applauding. Ben heard the goats bleating in the dooryard. Without any prodding, the auburn-haired women sitting alongside Katherine Daugherty darted into the dining room towards the back stairway. Momentarily, she, too, appeared on the upper landing, slapping her hand against a pressure cooker she'd lifted on her way though the kitchen. She wore no shoes or stockings, a purple petticoat, and had a carrot stuck in her hair.

The guests egged her on as she flounced down the steps. Soon the women were waiting in line to be the next on the illuminated stairway. The hilarity was building.

Grace McKibben and Lydia sat on carpeted Kurdistan cushions in the vestibule, clapping robustly for each grand entrance.

Another member of the Bible class (Ben recognized her as the Union Trust bank teller's wife, Sylvia Lowell) poised on the landing behind an

ironing board, her dancing partner. Out and in she moved it in clipped tango fashion, to the snapping of fingers in the audience. You couldn't see her entire body until she began to do a liquid turn as she and the dancing board "male" descended the oaken stairway as partners. She wore Titian-shaded panties, and for Ben's sake, one presumed, spools of thread cellophane-taped to her nipples.

Ben had forgotten the goats. He couldn't even hear them. *Would his mother dare do it?* The women all around her were plotting, getting ready. Finally, one of the last, Katherine Daugherty rose. Ben stood up, too.

"I want to do it," he begged. She shook her head and sat him back down. The women snickered. Soon she, too, appeared at the top of the stairs in a red and white gingham tablecloth.

"*Ohhhh*," her classmates teased, as if they were men. Katherine Daugherty held up her hand to silence the impatient, and with cunning deliberativeness, peeled the tablecloth off her body. Instead of panties, she wore a flour sack dishtowel diaper and copper wire pot scrubbers she'd strung over her breasts with kitchen twine. From behind her back she proffered an iron, and at each stair pantomimed steaming the creases out of her thighs and derriere.

The assembled stood and huzzahed. Ben heard the goats bleating. *What if Mr. McKibben comes home?* he worried.

The last member of the Queen Esther class to descend the stairs was Pastor Rose's wife, Blanche, who'd tied a length of clothesline about her upper torso and another about her waistline. To cover her bodice she'd attached labels from canned goods to the rope by clothespins. Over one breast was a Del Monte Com label, the other—Campbell's Pork and Beans. Two clothespins held the crushed tomato labels over her pelvis, front and rear.

The congregation had finally spent itself.

Gathered closer together—huddling actually—in the center of the capacious living room, they sat with their legs folded beneath them, some on pillows, still wearing their improvised costumes, or wrapped in bed sheets that Lydia had supplied. The detritus of domesticity—sundry pans, scrubbers, iron, ironing board, clothesline, clothespins, ersatz fruit-and-even silk panties, girdle and one camisole—lay in a heap over by the organ.

They ate coleslaw, macaroni salad, potato salad, and baked beans on

paper plates served by Miss Hopkins, who by now had cold cream buttering her face. Coffee was perking in the huge metal church urn in the kitchen. Katherine Daugherty made a plate of food for her son, who sat off with the cat, wondering if Mr. McKibben might take him out to tend the goats. It felt like it was getting that time of day. The dusty rose atmosphere in the room had begun to give away to a chromatic blue, and the strong fragrance of lavender sachet had evaporated, perhaps much earlier when Ben was watching the stairway show. Shadows had converged on the room. Several of the assembled looked pale under their sheets; others shivered in their unmentionables.

Katherine Daugherty finally stood, and gathered her clothes. The rest of the Queen Esther Bible Class did likewise.

"Oh, Ben, we didn't even get to feed the goats, did we," Lydia said. "You come again. We'll do it first thing."

Mrs. McKibben hovered behind her. "Did you enjoy Queen Esther's soirée, son?"

"I did," he said.

"Now you won't breathe a word of it. Promise?"

He nodded.

"Scout's honor?"

Ben extended his index and middle finger.

"You're still a little man. That's why your mother let you attend. We don't permit grown men in Queen Esther's Bible class."

He could understand why.





# How to Have a Visitor

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Toby Bochan

He is flying in to see you for a long weekend. He works at a place where you get every possible holiday, a bank or a school or the government. You don't know exactly what he does. Something involving numbers. You have known each other since college, from college. You've seen him once or twice a year since graduation: same place, same time kind of things. But this is his first visit to see you, just to see you. He lives far enough away that driving isn't feasible. Especially because you hate to drive and he doesn't own a car. Thomas, always for you Thomas and never Tom, Thomas lives in Boston. He doesn't, he says, need a car. How nice for him! Your car, on the other hand, has been acting up: making rude noises, stalling. Mornings you pump the gas (three times three is the magic number) and hope that it will start. There is really no other way to get around where you live in Texas. Thomas takes the T, the mass transit in Boston, Massachusetts. You mix up the words, try to fit it into a limerick:

*There once was a young man named Thomas  
who preferred to a car the train mass,  
And twice a day he  
is found riding the T  
from his home to his work in Boston, Mass!*

Poetry is not your strong suit. It's not a red power suit. It's not even your conservative navy blue interview suit that got you your current crummy job, copy editing. Poetry is the bargain dress that looks like a suit, but really is only one piece, a faux suit with a jacket that can't be removed.

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100% Polyester, but you kind of like it anyway. You wear it occasionally. Play around with it. Limericks are your new puzzle. Instead of trying to figure out a five-letter word for fatigued (tired) over coffee at work, spend time thinking of words that rhyme with Thomas. Make a list: bass, brass, crass, class, gas, grass, lass, pass, sass. Your big fat ass, impossible to pass after Christmas. Alas!

Start dieting. Start going to the gym every day, an hour and a half each time. You want to have nice, flat abs for him. Don't hope for a washboard stomach. Okay, hope for it all you want, but know it won't happen. You only have twelve days.

Each morning, stand in front of the mirror, stretching your arms overhead. Check your thighs for cellulite. Whoop! There it is! Go to the mall and buy an expensive, ineffectual cellulite cream. It is 35 dollars. You don't have this kind of money to spend on a cream, so charge it. At the Clinique counter, a woman asks if you would like a free skincare analysis. She is wearing a white lab coat open over her dress. You guess this is supposed to make you feel like she's a scientist, like she has a degree in dermatology or at least has taken a night course in beauty school. The way she has applied her blush, two peach slashes, makes you doubt that she has. Still, what the hell! You want to look your best.

Say: "Sure."

The woman with bad blush sits you in front of a magnifying mirror. This is not pleasant. And you have good skin! Mrs. Blush 1986 looks at you and slides the answers to question on a little plastic chart. She slides a silver knob over so a yellow block that says, Fair, shows in the window labeled Skin Color. She looks directly into your eyes, squinting. Eye color: Hazel/Brown.

"Is that your natural hair color?" she asks.

Say: "Yes," but it is not—you think. You think this shade is a little redder than your natural color, but it's close enough for her. What color is this hair? The box said dark copper. You think of old pennies. Your hair is nothing like the color of any penny. Dark Brown, she slides in, looking at your roots.

"Do you bum or tan, or bum then tan?"

"Bum. Just bum."

She slides another knob over. She has a zit on her temple! Why are you listening to her? You have, confirmed, beautiful skin. It runs in your family.

Pore size: Small.

Feel insulted that she has not picked Invisible. Wrinkles: Few. Few! If she were any kind of sales woman she'd always put none for that one, you think. You aren't even twenty-six yet! Stare at the row of answers. Almost the whole row of boxes is yellow. Yellow, yellow, yellow, you. Pusillanimous you. Everything to you is a sign. A symbol. You believe in such things despite yourself. You read your horoscope. You get it emailed to you every day!

She says, "You're a type two. You need a moisturizer with sunscreen to protect you."

Say: "From what?"

"From the sun," she says, earnestly.

You think that the sun is the last thing you need protection from. But buy some anyway. The Blush Nightmare is threatening to give you a makeover. For free! You need to get out of there.

Buy vitamins, a mud mask, facial bleach, new razors. You want to look your best. You want to look eighteen again. Or nineteen, the age you were when you met Thomas. Start cutting back on cigarettes. He is not a smoker. Plan on quitting a week before he arrives. You do not want to quit the day he arrives. You won't be able to do it then, and you want to get withdrawal over before he sees you. You don't want to be crabby for him. You want to be happy. Light. Like a thin clean cotton sheet. Do the laundry.

Get your work done ahead of time. Get ahead of your work. Plan to take a day off work. Try to figure out a way to take two days off: you will need a day to recoup, regroup after he leaves.

Do all the housework you never do: mop the floors, dust the ceiling fan blades. You need to keep busy the week before he comes. And there is plenty to! Hang up all the clothes on the "clothes chair" in the closet. Fold the sweaters in the closet that are usually tossed in a pile on the dresser. Straighten the bookshelves. Throw out the old magazines.

Stack a *Harper's* and a couple of issues of *The New Yorker* in the magazine rack in the bathroom. Throw in an issue of *People*—the sexiest man of the year issue. You don't want him to think you only think about him. But you want him to know you think. Throw in an issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* and an old *Science* magazine you bought because it was about new developments

in AIDS research. You are an intellect. Never mind that there wasn't an article in the magazine you could understand. You just read the introductions and conclusions, the abstracts of the articles—who cares about methods and failed experiments? The middle is a long boring passage of time. Right now you are about results. Beginnings and ends. The beginning: one night after drinks he kissed you. Confounding factors: neither of you was single, you were leaving town one way, he was leaving town another. Methods: you kept in touch through email and phone calls. Results: Here he comes. Is that the result? The long and the short of it. The long longing of it—where does that figure in?

When he calls, ask: "Is there anything you want to see here?"

He will say: "Just you."

Smile and smile and smile and smile.

At work, let it slip that you have a friend coming. Say it with a little smile, you can't help it anyway, cast your eyes down. When they ask, what kind of friend? Say: an old friend. Say it like you were saying: an old lover. They will be curious. Try to make plans for everyone to go out drinking when he arrives. You will want to show him off. He is good in a crowd.

When you tell your friend Laura that you have a visitor coming, she will ask, "Now, will that be a conjugal visit?" Laura assists in human resources. She is good at asking questions.

Laugh and say: "Yes." You like Laura. She is frank. Decide she will be your confidant in the matter that is Thomas. You need another perspective. You feel more and more that your own perspective is becoming impossibly warped, your logic the twisted puzzle of an M.C. Escher drawing.

"How long have you known him?" she will ask. "Where is he coming from?"

When you tell her she will say: "That's some trip just for a booty call."

Say: "Well, we've been friends a long time."

"Friends, huh? I bet," she will say.

Wonder what she means by that.

*There once was a young man named Thomas,  
Who came out to see a young lass,*

*He came out to Texas  
'cause that's where the sex was  
So don't fuck it up like a dumbass.*

Shave your legs from here to eternity, or as close as you dare to get to it with a razor. You wish you had light, sparse, blonde-type body hair, but no, not you—you of heritage of all lands hairy. Get a body wash and a loofah and scrub your skin until it is red and raw. New! And improved? Start with a new razor. Apply your creams. Take your vitamins. Go to the gym.

At the gym, compete with the woman next to you on the Stairmaster. Sneak glances at the red dot readouts on her machine. If blondie over there can climb 50 floors, you do 60. If she works off 200 calories, you work off 400. Never, ever, get off before she does. Your thighs ache all the time.

You need to vacuum. But you don't have a vacuum! Wonder at what age one is supposed to own a vacuum. There's nowhere to put a vacuum in your apartment anyway. The mop and the broom stand side by side in the kitchen next to the garbage. You don't have a broom closet. You don't even have a coat closet. You have a little apartment, a two-room space Texans call an efficiency. Wonder how an apartment can be efficient. Think of the Jetsons, Jane-his-wife pressing a button and Bloop! Out comes dinner. Still, she had a robot to help her. Wonder what Jane-his-wife did with all of her free time. Raise daughter-Judy and his-boy-Elroy? Even the dog walked itself. You would go insane. Still, you wouldn't mind having Rosie-the-robot to clean for you right now. Bloop! All done!

Call Laura and ask if she has a vacuum you could borrow.

Laura laughs and says, "You're vacuuming?" You don't know whether she is laughing at the fact that you are vacuuming, or that *you* are vacuuming for him. Become annoyed at her for her indeterminate tone.

Say: "He's allergic to dust?" Laura says Uh-oh! Does she think you're lying? Or perhaps you're making him out to be too much of a pansy! You've told her before he's sensitive. Why can't she make her undertones more overtonish?

Say: "Um, or maybe cats."

"But you don't have cats."

What a pain! Say: “Can’t I just ask to borrow a vacuum?”

“Sure, sure, but—”

Cut her off “But what? Is it so bad to want to have a clean apartment for him?”

“No,” Laura says.

Keep ranting: “I have dust dogs here! Great Danes of dust! Giant dust horses.”

“Dust horses?” she says. “Well, then I’ll bring it right over. I don’t want you getting trampled before your big visit.”

Say: “Thanks.”

“Or after,” she says.

Say: “I’m a big girl.”

Hang up the phone. Think maybe your wishes are dust horses and this is as close as you’ll ever get to riding.

*There was a young man called Thomas  
Who made plans but never would promise  
To staying quite true  
To you or to you  
So develop a thick epidermis.*

Meanwhile, the transmission in your car is acting up, like a child, or a black-mailer: I need attention! Fix me! Fix me or else! I need a fourhundreddollarfix, baby, aaaaa-drr-brrrrrap! Your car is giving you the transmission equivalent of a raspberry. Brrrap! Brrrrrrrap.

Take the car to the only mechanic in town you know, a big dude who first introduced himself to you as “Super-Dave.” Super-Dave splits his time working at this shop and teaching a class on Auto repair at the high school. Remember when you met him at a party, you said, “Well, that’s super . . .” and waited for him to fill in his name.

“Dave,” he said, shaking his big and still greasy hand.

“That’s me, Super-Dave,” he said, laughing a surprisingly girlish laugh.

When Super-Dave asks you, “What’s the problem?” Make sounds like a kid revving his little toy racecar.

Say: “It goes, like you know, brrrrrooooo—rrrrrooooo . . .” make

circular hand gestures with it, make smaller, faster circles and let your voice rise up, “brrr—rrr—oooo! But there’s a little hitch there, when it shifts over—.” Realize you have lost Super-Dave. Notice that his name is simply “Dave” in red script letters on his blue uniform.

Say: “I don’t know what’s wrong with it.”

“Transmission, sounds like,” says Super-Dave. Yell in your head: Moron! Even an honest mechanic would take advantage of a screwball like you! Even a screwball mechanic like Super-Dave.

Leave the car with Super-Dave who promises to have an estimate of the damages (he actually says that! Boy are you fucked!) some time in the afternoon. Tell him you need it fixed by Thursday. Friday morning at the latest. He says he’ll have it for you tomorrow, which is Wednesday. Don’t believe him. The car will be ready late on Thursday. It will cost you 800 dollars.

Thomas’ flight is arriving at 2:37 on Friday. Take that day off too. Use a personal day. After all, this is personal. Write “2:37” in red ink on your calendar. Wonder why the airline doesn’t round up to 2:40. Wonder if there is some kind of formula they use to calculate arrival time so that on average, the planes are on time, even with delays. Wonder if there are any kind of standards—could they say it would take eighteen hours to fly from Boston to Texas if they wanted? But of course, who would buy a ticket for that flight? Imagine a deep smooth voice announcing:

*This is your captain here. Since we’re in no rush whatsoever, we’re just going to cruise real low and real slow . . . it just might take all night long . . .*

Someone slick and funky, like Barry White or Isaac Hayes, grooving about a whole night of sweet loving . . . Lord knows you’re ready for a whole night of sweet loving! You’re ready to have a night where the highlight isn’t a new episode of an animated sitcom! Bring on the sweet loving. You’re ready to start losing sleep with him instead of over him. But you’re not ready yet at all! There is an impossible amount of stuff you want to get done before he arrives.

Wish you could increase your air speed to get everything done on time. But you’ve already released the throttle, you’re full-speed-ahead, baby! You never understood why planes don’t fly full speed all the time—each time the captain announces, we’ll make up time in the air, you think this. Why

waste time getting places when you could already be there? The view is the same from every airplane window—clouds, the ocean, the unreadable flat palm of land.

You are doing the dishes Friday when the phone rings. Wipe your hands on your jeans and answer it.

“I’m here,” he says.

Look at the clock. It is just past noon. He is impossibly early. You aren’t ready. You wanted to shower.

Say: “You’re here? Here-here?” Here-here? You think. What a retard you are. Do I like him or like him-like him? It’s bad-bad.

“I caught an earlier flight.”

Say: “Do you have any bags?”

“No,” he says. “Well, just a carry-on.”

“Oh, okay,” you say. “Well, I’ll be right there.”

“Where should I wait?”

“I’ll pick you up at the baggage claim area anyway. I know where it is in the airport.”

“I’ll wait to be claimed,” he says.

Say: “I’m on my way,” and hang up the phone. Tear off your T-shirt and jeans—they’re wet, after all, and put on a dress. Wish you had time to put on makeup. Put on lip-gloss. There. You look very kissable. Go to claim your baggage.

*There once was a young man from Boston*

*Who took a vacation near Austin,*

*On a plane he flew—*

*Don’t say I love you*

*If he don’t say it too then you’ve lost ’im.*

Drive to the airport. Your car hums nicely now. Turn on the radio. You are so anxious you are sweating. You are so distracted you almost miss you exit on the highway. Steer into the Arrivals lane. Slow down, look for his airline. There are a lot of people by the curb, waiting for their rides. You drive all the way down the terminal but you don’t see him. Make the turn around again. Go slower, even though there is a big angry looking man in



a truck behind you, jerking too close. Wonder after the second pass if he is expecting you to park and find him inside the terminal. On the third round, finally recognize the bald man with the green rolling-luggage is Thomas. He has shaved his head. He is bald as the proverbial ping pong ball.

Laugh. Realize that you've prepared all you can and feel like you've been signed up for the wrong class all along.

Pull up to the curb, still smiling and sing: "Mr. Clean, Mr. Clean," out the passenger window. Thomas smiles and waves. You unbuckle your seatbelt.

"Hi!" he says. He moves to open the door. "I was beginning to worry," he says, which makes you laugh again.

Say: "Waitaminnit," as you get out of the car. Stand on opposite sides of the car, looking at each other for a second. It's not just the hair, he looks different than you thought. Was he taller? Walk to his side around the front of the car.

Throw your arms around him. Notice all the places your body does and does not touch his.

Say: "Glad you made it," and then kiss him.

Since he was not expecting it, the kiss is more junior high school than you would like. Fumbling at first, tense. Put your hand on the back of his smooth head. Think he will say, What took you so long? And you will say, "I didn't recognize you." His lips are chapped and full and his mouth tastes of grape gum.

"Glad to be here," he says.

Know that he means it, and smile.

"Let's get this show on the road," he says.

You silly girl, know as you walk back around to the driver's side that the next few days will be nothing like you imagined. But know also that some things will be better, and some worse. Decide to let everything ride.

Now get in the car and see where it all goes.



# Father Reading

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Laura Apol

Before bed my father read to me  
—poems that rhymed, their riderless  
*ta-dum ta-da-dum ta-da-dum* galloping  
like the Highwayman's horse by moonlight.  
I dreamed red ribbons woven in raven hair,  
a man at the window with lace at his throat,  
and love.

It was a life I expected:  
the romance of the inevitable;  
the future a rhyme I could always predict.

So I went to a college he knew,  
married a man he approved,  
had two blonde children (a boy and a girl).  
I cleaned on Fridays, baked on Saturdays,  
picked up toys and dirty clothes  
at bedtime as I'd been taught:  
*ta-dum ta-da-dum ta-da-dum*

And I wrote what we knew I would:  
clean lines, their tidy syllables  
prancing past discontent,  
the sharp stones of regret, the sheer drop  
of anger unanswered.

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When truth mattered more than meter  
I saw clenched fists around me that  
were not mine.

Then they were.

And I heard a different story:  
the landlord's daughter pulls the trigger,  
shatters her own breast.  
I packed my bags, gathered my words,  
let the highwayman ride to his death—  
no woman as warning slumped over  
the musket's muzzle.  
*ta-da-dum*

And I wondered:  
how could a father embrace a daughter  
with lines close as poetic foot and meter.  
How could he weave love  
with blood red ribbons and lace.

And what of closure, the door  
ending the poem with a click—

no click of hot flint striking powder,  
but the click of a lock catching  
as a woman walks away.



# The Girl My Grandfather Never Met

---

Greg Wright

My wife was too swollen. Her pregnant belly threatened to expand into the next county, and her ankles were inflated beyond recognition. So, needless to say, when I asked if she'd like to fly across the country to visit my ailing grandfather, she respectfully declined. "Matt, darling, they'd charge me for two seats. I can see it now: 'In the event of a water landing, please use the giant pregnant woman as a floatation device.'" Jodi said she loved me but she wasn't going anywhere. The neighbors agreed to feed her and take care of her while I was gone, as if she were a pet. I was grateful that they helped out, though, because I hadn't been thinking too clearly since I'd heard that a major heart attack had hospitalized my grandfather.

Throughout my childhood, Grandpa Chuck looked after me when things were too hectic for my parents. Typically, life was too hectic whenever my parents were home at the same time, and so I saw a lot of Grandpa Chuck. By the time I was ten, the sound of my dad grinding his teeth had become my cue to go to Grandpa Chuck's house. Grandpa Chuck lived only a few blocks away from us, so the two of us were pretty close.

Grandpa Chuck's was a fun place, full of scary, dusty rooms to explore, and Grandpa Chuck was a fun guy, always ready to play or tell me a story. He instinctively knew when I wanted more candy, and even through college, I'd never seen his candy dish empty. On the plane, I chuckled at the image of him pulling a candy dish out from behind his heart monitor at the hospital. "Well, looky here, Matty. I bought too many caramels, and I need somebody to eat them right away. Can you help me out?"

The thought of a heart monitor scared me. Grandpa Chuck was always a hale and hearty old man, and I didn't know how I'd react when I saw him

weak and feeble. It was a vain hope of mine that my grandfather would outlive me, achieving biblical old age birthday after birthday. I'd always imagined the Grim Reaper arm-wrestling Grandpa Chuck, and Grandpa Chuck winning. While I ate my airline peanuts, I was shocked more than saddened to think that after all these years, his own heart attacked him.

I called Jodi from the airport as soon as we touched down. "How you feelin', honey?" "Pregnant and sweaty." Probably hungry, too, I thought but had the tact not to say aloud. I told her I was nervous about Grandpa Chuck. She told me some comforting cliché that frustrated me. All the same, I told her I was grateful for her support.

While I waited in the car rental line, I felt incredibly antsy. My trip's whole purpose was to see my grandfather, and I believed I was racing against time to see him alive. My parents said that they could pick me up, but I wanted my own car so I could be free to leave at any time. I was too old to ask my dad for the keys. From the airport, I dropped my luggage off at my old house, only saying hello to my mom and dad, and I drove over to the hospital, hurrying into the setting sun before visiting hours ended.

They had the same flowers in the hospital gift shop that they have in hospital gift shops everywhere. Still, I bought a big bouquet in hopes of fighting off the hospital's antiseptic smell. My parents had given me Grandpa Chuck's room number on a scrap of paper, and I followed the hospital map to the right floor. I didn't know what to expect in his room. I held my breath and stepped in.

Grandpa Chuck wasn't in the room. There was only a shriveled old man with tubes coming out of his nose and arm. Through half-closed eyelids, a flicker of recognition shimmered across his eyes. He gestured for me to come closer.

"How you doin'?" he asked. This old man had miraculously stolen Grandpa Chuck's voice. "How are you, Matty, my boy?"

"Doin' fine," I replied. "Jodi's pregnant. You knew that, didn't you?"

"I did. I did," the old man said, the muscles in his neck bulging as he nodded. "Congratulations. Heh heh. Knew you had it in you, Matty."

I felt my cheeks redden. "Thanks. Uh, I brought you flowers." My eyes darted around the room, overwhelmed by all the equipment designed to keep my grandfather alive. Even though I told myself I wouldn't ask, my

nervousness overcame me and I blurted: "But how're you doing? Are you okay? They take good care of you here?"

Bleary old eyes that I hardly recognized looked up at me. "I was in surgery Thursday. Heh heh. I've done better than I'm doin' now. Can't say I'm feelin' my best. But you didn't come to hear that. Let's talk about something else. Conversations about old men's health always depress me. Especially when the old man is me. Heh heh."

"Well . . . life has been pretty busy during the pregnancy. We've been reading a lot of books about babies, decorating a room for the baby, that sort of thing. Nothing much really to report." I fumbled through my mind, searching for conversation topics.

Our silence dragged out. I shifted my weight from foot to foot awkwardly, and finally decided to sit down. He yawned and it made me yawn. After a few minutes, the old man closed his eyes out of what looked like pain. He licked his lips, and said: "Did I ever tell you about a girl named Lynn?" I realized it was not pain but nostalgia that closed his eyes. After the pain of a heart attack, he was entitled to let his heart ache for a while, and nothing does the trick like nostalgia. "Did I? Have you heard about Lynn?"

Now I'd heard the story about Lynn dozens of times, mostly with my teeth glued together by caramels, but I was not about to remind the old man. After all, I knew that a heart attack at his age could conceivably push him right into his grave, and if this was my last opportunity to listen to one of Grandpa Chuck's stories, I didn't want to stop his train of thought. I didn't want to lie to him, either, though, so I just said, "Mmmm," and let his momentum carry him. The story wanted to come out, so I let it.

"It was when I was just a kid. Me and my buddies used to tear all over the place, into trouble everywhere. Harmless stuff, now that I think about it. But we thought we were hotshots back then, yessir. Heh heh. Well, there was this old geezer at the end of my block, Mr. Wardinski, and he was the most ornery old man you'd ever hope to meet. Ornery and cheap. All the rest of the neighborhood had switched over to indoor plumbing, but this old cuss was so stubborn he kept his outhouse since plumbing cost too much. People'd give him a hard time, and he'd just say, 'I don't want to crap in my own house. I ain't no animal.' But we knew it was 'cause he was too cheap." He shook his head at the frugality of someone long since dead.

"And Wardinski had this yippy guard dog, an annoying little mutt named Arrow or something. That thing would run after us kids all the way down the street, nippin' at our heels. It had every right to hate us, though, 'cause we tortured that dog nonstop." He always smiled when he got to the dog part. "We'd say, 'Come here, Arrow. Wanna treat?' and then—ZING!—one of us would nail that stupid dog with a slingshot. It'd yipe and run away. But I swear, every time you said 'Wanna treat?' that damn-fool dog would come a-runnin'. Heh heh. 'Wanna treat?' Heh heh heh." This time, the laughter was too much for the old man, and he put his hand gently on his chest and winced.

"You okay?" I asked.

"Heh. Yeah, I'm fine. Arrow's revenge, I guess. Heh heh." These laughs were gingerly executed. "Where was I?"

"Torturing Wardinski's dog."

"Yeah. So anyways, if Old Man Wardinski caught you messin' with his dog, he'd run out and holler at you, waving a shotgun. He always said he'd teach us a lesson, but the only lesson we learned was that we had to be quick so Wardinski wouldn't catch us. Heh heh." The old man ripped a long fart. "Ouch! Woo, Matty, I don't know where that one came from. It's not like I eat anything. All they ever give me around here is ice chips." In spite of my somber attitude, I couldn't help but snicker. He smiled at me. "Don't you laugh now. Don't laugh. Dammit, don't you laugh." Of course, I laughed all the harder at him telling me not to, just like when I was a kid. The dangerously old man who'd replaced Grandpa Chuck sighed and continued on with his story.

"Old Wardinski had a niece. He was old enough to be her grandfather. Hell, he was old enough to be *dead*, but he had this niece who'd come and visit every summer. She never came out to play, and we knew it was 'cause the old man never let her. When us boys were little, we didn't care. One less girl to ignore. But 'round about . . . age thirteen or so, we started taking a keen interest in the pretty girl locked away by her mean old uncle. Sometimes we'd go past Wardinski's house and we'd see her on the porch, reading or drawing. But the minute that damn dog started barking, Wardinski'd peer through the window, see us, and call his niece inside.

"As me and the gang got older, we got bolder. And as Wardinski's niece got older, she got prettier. In the summertime heat, tryin' to keep boys'

minds offa pretty girls is like trying to keep flies offa honey. And just like flies, us boys were never far from the Wardinski house, tryin' to see this pretty girl. I think all us boys were a little in love with her. Keepin' her locked away was a crime, we always said. But if it made her uncle a villain, it made her a princess in a tower to us boys. We'd always talk about her and what we thought she was doin'.

"One day, I sez to those punks: 'You boys are all chicken. All day long you just talk about that girl. "I bet she's doin' this. I bet she's doin' that." Phooey! You babies are all talk.' So then they say to me: 'Oh yeah? What're you gonna do besides talk? You gonna waltz up there and invite yourself to dinner?' Well, I hiked my britches up and I sez right back to 'em: 'I ain't goin' in there,' I sez, 'but I *did* write her a letter.'" The old man just beamed when he said this. "Those kids's jaws fell right to the ground. They were real sore about it, but when I asked 'em to help me deliver the letter, they had to. Because we were a team, y'know. They had to.

"We watched the Wardinski house like hawks, hiding behind bushes across the street. We just needed a chance, one chance. Early one Saturday morning we saw it. From our angle, we could see Wardinski's backyard, and that morning he went there with a newspaper under his arm. He was headed to his infamous outhouse for nice long crap! We had plenty of time to deliver my letter. Heh heh. Don't even remember what it said now. Somethin' like: 'I think it's real bad that your uncle is so mean. What's your name?' Somethin' embarrassing like that. Longer than that, but I can't remember what it said. Oh yeah, I signed it 'Charles' instead of 'Chuck' just to show her how dignified I was." I gave him a courtesy chuckle. He'd told me that detail innumerable times and I'd never thought it was funny, but I chuckled because I knew he thought it was funny.

"While Old Man Wardinski was dropping bombs in the backyard, us boys snuck up to the door. The letter was tremblin' in my hand. I crouched down and slipped it under the door. When I stood up again, I saw that pretty girl lookin' back at me through the window. I was so shocked, I backed up and knocked over a pot fulla dead flowers. The noise alerted Arrow inside, and he started barkin' like hell. We all took off runnin'. When we were halfway down the street, I looked back and saw Old Man Wardinski runnin', tryin' to hold up his britches and his shotgun at the same time. He was shoutin' and swearin' up a storm. 'If I catch you damn kids around



my place again, I'm gonna kill you!' Then he raised the shotgun up to fire a warning shot . . . and his pants fell down! Heh heh heh!" I laughed at this image, a genuine laugh too, even though I know the story by heart. The old man survived his laugh, maybe even survived because of his laugh.

"We kept up our watch faithfully, day after day, to see how she'd respond. One afternoon, she came and read on the porch. We knew she knew we were watchin' her. I kept tellin' them how I was gonna steal her heart, but by the end of the afternoon, we'd all but given up hope. Then Old Wardinski called her in for supper, so she closed her book and went in. The other boys whined about goin' home themselves, saying there wasn't any more to see. Then I spotted the paper. She left a piece of paper on the porch!

"Quietly, we crawled across Wardinski's crabgrass lawn. Even though we needed to sneak away, I read that paper right there by the porch. It was a letter. I may not remember my letter, but her letter, her letter I'll never forget. It said: 'Dear Charles, I loved your letter. That was so sweet of you to think of me. I hate being cooped up in this house all day long with nobody to talk to but the dog. So you're the one with black hair?' I musta told her that in my letter, even though I don't remember. 'Well, I think you're a handsome young man, and brave too, to risk your life delivering a letter to me. Alas!' She musta had a flair for the dramatic. 'We can never be together because of my uncle. I would like to meet you, though, at least once before I go home at the end of the summer. I want to get to know you. Tomorrow night, meet me in my room. Wait until after dark, so that Uncle Horace will be asleep.' Horace. His name was Horace Wardinski. Can you believe it? Heh heh. 'My room is on the second floor in the back. There is a trellis you can climb to get up there. I'll see you tomorrow, Charles. Love, Lynn.'

"Let me tell you, Matty boy, I didn't know what to do with myself. She signed it 'Love, Lynn' and I just did not know what to do." The old man's smile was bigger than it had been all night. I reciprocated. "The boys in my gang went nuts. They gave me the hardest time, punchin' my arms and pinchin' my cheeks, and I took it all with a smile. When I got home, though, I almost got sick in bed while I was thinkin' about her, I was so nervous. I don't remember what I did the next day, but I was a nervous wreck.

"All my buddies wanted to come along with me the next night, but I told them to go fly a kite. I didn't know exactly how I was going to execute this romantic adventure, but I'd be damned if those boneheads were gonna

screw it up. Those guys were pretty sore at me about it, but I didn't want them anywhere near me when I climbed up that trellis. No two ways about it. After dusk, I went to my room, and I slunk out the first-floor window, hopin' my parents wouldn't notice. The night air only made me more nervous, and I kept giggling and shivering to myself. A pretty girl waiting in her bedroom for me! I didn't know what to expect. I paced up and down the street, part of me wishin' time would go faster and part of me hopin' it would stop altogether.

"When I figured Old Man Wardinski was asleep, I slipped to the back of the house. As I slowly and silently grabbed hold of the trellis, I peered into the first floor window. It was Wardinski's! I had to climb right past his window to get up to Lynn's. My heart was poundin' in my ears. Quietly, I took a deep breath and held it, and I carefully climbed up the trellis. That thing was old and rickety. Wasn't even attached to the wall, just lyin' against it. Up through Lynn's window, I saw a light on. I wanted to rush right up there, but was too scared about makin' noise. So I climbed one horrible, slow step at a time. I laid one hand on the windowsill—I was almost there—when I heard the sound at the front of the house.

"Somebody rattled the door knocker like crazy! It was a real racket, and the damn dog started barking and snarling. I heard Wardinski swearing below me. I didn't know where to go. If I went up, he could catch me in Lynn's room, but if I went down, he'd see me go past. To tell you the truth, Matty, I don't know if I coulda moved anywhere. I was frozen, my ass hangin' in the breeze.

"Wardinski, he ran up to the front door, and Arrow took off down the street, barkin' up a storm. I looked up and saw Lynn's worried face lookin' back at me. She tried to help me up, but Wardinski came back to his room and saw the trellis wigglin'. So he stuck his head out the window and looked up at me. I about pissed myself right then and there. 'Aha! You little bastard. Gotcha treed now!' the old man shouted as he grabbed hold of the trellis. Then he gave the trellis a shove, and I fell ass over teakettle down to the ground. I heard the bone in my arm crunch when I hit the ground, but I couldn't feel it 'til I got to the bushes in the back of Wardinski's yard." He stopped to grab his right arm, as if the memory of his broken arm hurt more than his chest pains.

"My parents went right through the roof. They were furious I snuck out,

and they were furious I had to go to the hospital in the middle of the night. I told them the entire story while the doctor fixed me up, cryin' the whole time. They grounded me for the rest of the summer, and my dad woulda tanned my hide if the doctor hadn't been there. My parents were ready to kill me, Wardinski was ready to kill me, and, worst of all, I never got to see Lynn and had no way of contacting her." A nurse poked her head in to check on how the old man was doing, and he gave her the high sign. She brought in more ice chips, and I had to hold back a laugh. She said it was good to see "Charles" so animated. I smiled and agreed. He just wanted to keep telling his story. He was excited to get to his favorite part.

"For the next few days," he started up again, "I just sulked around the house, too busy feelin' sorry for myself to wanna do anything. Then, late one night, the boys tapped on my window. Petey told me that they were the ones who'd rattled on Wardinski's door. He said it was because they were sore at me not lettin' 'em come. This made my blood boil. Right away, Petey started apologizin' for everybody in a hushed whisper. I coulda killed alla them right then and there. Petey just kept apologizin' like a sap. Then he hit me with the sad news." The old man crunched a few ice chips, grinding his teeth before continuing. "Wardinski had sent Lynn away for the rest of the summer."

My heart always sinks at that part, even though Grandpa Chuck has more story to tell. "That broke my heart. I'd imagined us kissin', fallin' in love, even gettin' married some day. Heh heh. Didn't know any better. And you know what? She never came back. Never found out the details of it all, but I guess her parents didn't want to send her where hooligans'd try to sneak into her room. When I heard this, I almost started bawlin'. Instead, I hit my cast on the windowsill, but it just made me mad and hurt.

"The boys, my so-called buddies, said they'd do anything to make it up to me. Like I said, I was frustrated and confused and didn't know what to do. What first popped into my head was revenge. I didn't care about the consequences, and those turkeys couldn't back down after they'd said they'd do anything for me. If I woulda waited another five minutes, I woulda lost my nerve. Instead, wearing my pajamas, I hopped out my window, ready for anything. Some of those punks tried to back down, but I grabbed 'em and reminded 'em that their stupid stunt had cost me my right arm. They didn't know what to say to that, so they just followed along in silence.

"I didn't know what we were gonna do. But as we got close to Wardinski's, I suddenly got an idea. We'd tip over that bastard's outhouse! Heh heh heh. This got their spirits up. An outhouse for an arm. It seemed like justice to us.

"We crept through the bushes in the back, tryin' not to wake up the dog or the old man. Everything was silent in the moonlight. We walked out onto the grass cautiously. I was glad to have the whole gang there to help, because with the cast on my right arm, I couldn'ta done nothin' by myself. If we had any hope of not gettin' caught, we'd hafta get that outhouse over in one shove. So we all put our backs into it, and knocked it over in one fell swoop.

"As the outhouse crashed, we heard Old Man Wardinski shoutin' at the top of his lungs. How could he know so fast? We all ran for the bushes. 'Wait!' I whispered. We all listened. The yelling was coming from *inside* the outhouse. And since we'd pushed it from behind, the outhouse door faced the ground and he was trapped. The adrenaline made me laugh like a girl. I sat there, out of breath, laughin' my head off. All us boys started laughin' like madmen. Old Man Wardinski just kept shoutin' and swearin'.

"Then the strangest thing happened. The old man's head popped outta the hole at the bottom of the outhouse! He tried to crane his head so he could see us. 'Hey, you kids,' he shouted, 'I can *see* you, you little bastards!' But we knew he couldn't see us through the bushes, so we just sat there and kept laughin' at him.

"Us laughin' just made that old codger even madder. He didn't know what to do. He was stuck in the outhouse, with his head where his ass oughta be! So he yelled to his dog: 'Arrow! Attack, Arrow, attack! Yah! Kill, boy!' But the dog was just yipin' and barkin' at the back door. Then, heh heh, then he shouted: 'If you attack those boys, Arrow, I'll give you a treat.' Well, when that stupid mutt heard the word treat, he came a-runnin'. 'Cept he didn't run after us, he ran yippin' to the old man for his treat. He ran right across that yard and—SPLOOP! —he fell into the outhouse pit in the ground. Now us boys were rollin' on the ground with laughter. Oh, the look on Wardinski's face when his dog fell into that cesspool. The dog, he just kept yippin' and splashin' down in there. Heh heh heh heh." At the end, Grandpa Chuck wiped the tears from his eyes, just like always. I had teared up too.

“He never could pin that little prank on us. I was still grounded the rest of the summer, but I always had that night to laugh at. I’d won in the end, even if I didn’t get to meet Lynn. And, like I said, she never came to our neighborhood again. At least, not that I know of. Ever since, I’ve always wished that I coulda gotten to meet her.”

It is always at this endpoint, at this closing of Grandpa Chuck’s story, that I add my own after-comment. In the hospital, though, as I looked at an old man who’d be lucky to last the night, I said it with a lump in my throat. “Maybe you still will meet her, Grandpa Chuck. You never know.”

“I guess you’re right,” he said. “She’s probably still out there somewhere.” We talked a little more, yammering about this and that. Visiting hours had long since been over, but it wasn’t until late at night that the nurse kicked me out. I still consider that night’s goodbye to really be my final goodbye, even though I came to see him the next day with my parents. Small talk with my parents around didn’t have the same emotional impact as the story we shared. At the end of the weekend, I had to catch the plane back home. I would have liked to have stayed around through his recovery, but they needed me at work and the neighbors couldn’t take care of Jodi forever. A month after I came home, Jodi went to the hospital in the middle of the night and gave birth to our daughter, Katy. There was a window of opportunity for us to take her to see Grandpa Chuck. Things were too hectic for us, though, and we figured he would make it until our visit at Christmas. He had made it through his stay at the hospital okay, after all. All the same, he died about three months after Katy was born, without ever having seen her.

I think about that story a lot. I’d heard that one about Wardinski’s niece so many times. Why did hearing it that last time mean so much to me? It was just a goofy story about kids acting crazy, yet I was so glad I’d heard it. Maybe I like it because it’s about what we’re all doing: trying to connect with somebody and things getting messed up and twisted into something completely different. Now that the old man is gone, thinking about that story makes me want to cry as much as laugh because it fills me up with so much nostalgia. To keep them all fresh in my mind, I tell my daughter stories about her Grandpa Chuck when I tuck her into bed. And when I feel especially full of nostalgia, I call her by her middle name, Lynn.

# An Afternoon in Rome

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David Sapp

When coincidence gave us  
an afternoon in Rome  
it didn't occur to me  
to mislay our ages,  
before my graying head  
vanished around a corner,  
before your lithe form rushed  
headlong into life;  
now I wish we might  
have risked one kiss,

an impulsive urge  
in the Forum, shoulders grazing  
in a fragment of shade  
on a remnant of temple  
overlooking the ruins  
of the *House of the Vestal Virgins*,  
your soft figure making  
the sharp stones harsher;

a pause on our walk where the columns  
of Trajan's basilicas once rose,  
where the previous day  
when you were frightened,  
fending off a gypsy girl

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yanking at your tote:  
a quiet, unhurried kiss,  
a lingering, consoling embrace;

in the Magritte exhibition,  
our cheeks and fingers nearly  
touching, peering into each,  
curious, disconcerting canvas,  
our parting lips perplexed  
in a peculiar, electric landscape;

in the *Gesu'* church,  
our hearts like giddy kids  
dashing from a sudden,  
clamorous downpour  
into the thick, abrupt  
and silent, gilded chaos  
of unrestrained Baroque;  
a shy and tentative kiss,  
feigned awkward innocence  
in a forbidden holy place;

in the dark *Palazzo Venezia*,  
where Caravaggio's luminous bodies  
burst from shadowed walls,  
a kiss in a dim tenebristic passage,  
muted rain and desire echoing  
from high frescoed ceilings;  
oh, we could not stop  
at your lips! I'd find  
the corners of your eyes,  
the supple hollow of your throat,  
my face lost in your disheveled hair;

or when I pleaded  
for one more painting

in *San Luigi dei Francesi*,  
waiting on the steps for our doors to open,  
scooping fruity *gelato*  
to cool our tongues;  
if we kissed then,  
after the storm passed,  
the sun reappearing,  
our moods buoyant,  
we would have laughed,  
our mouths sticky.





# Every Day It Matters Less That I'm Not Tall

---

Charles Harper Webb

The time will come when, passing girls  
of seventeen, I won't stretch, hoping  
to meet them eye to eye. I won't buy

only shoes with heels, or puff skyward  
what's left of my hair. I won't scan fields  
of pro athletes for the smallest receiver,

shortest shortstop, slickest, quickest  
little guard with a deadly three-point eye.  
I won't wince when some TV commentator scoffs,

"He's really short—barely five-nine."  
I'll stop envying the young their great nutrition  
and medical miracles that came too late for me.

I won't care that my spine's collapsing,  
bones thinning, testosterone dwindling,  
only my ears and nose continuing to grow.

What relief to be retired from the game,  
no one expecting me to throw touchdowns,  
hit homers, palm a basketball,

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This poem originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 39, 2004.

or for that matter, write good poems,  
make good money, live in a good neighborhood  
with my good kids and sexually satisfied wife.

What will I care if, as I slide into the flames,  
the mortician thinks, "What a small coffin.  
What a light weight"?



# Midlife Crisis While Watching a Nature Program (*Octopus marginatus*)

---

Rob Hardy

On the one hand, look at all you've accomplished:  
career, house, children, money in the bank.  
Your life has taken a certain comfortable shape  
and there isn't all that much you'd wish to change.  
On the other hand, you will never be a marine biologist,  
scanning the ocean floor with your submersible camera,  
on the lookout for an octopus walking on two legs.  
Your eyes will never widen behind your mask,  
and you will never gesture in slow-motion  
to your fellow marine biologist, the water champagning  
with the excitement of your quickened breath,  
because you have just seen what looks like a coconut  
sauntering along the ocean floor with a purposeful stride  
that makes you think of John Cleese with tentacles  
and a coconut suit. No predator with a taste for sushi  
will go after a coconut rolling along with the current,  
water-logged terrestrial junk, not worth a second glance.  
But your human heart goes out to the octopus:  
no bones, no spine, nothing but head and feet,  
and a brain devoted entirely to escaping notice—  
little sea-nerd on rubbery legs, pretending to be tough.  
You admire something so soft and determined,  
so adaptable. How wonderful not to mind

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how ridiculous you look, to be self-contained  
like an octopus. How much harder for humans  
to adapt. Especially now, when we are who we are,  
when we will never be marine biologists looking  
in astonishment at the octopus disguised as a coconut—  
when we can only look out the window at the boat  
our middle-aged neighbor suddenly brought home  
when his wife had left him and his children had all grown up.





**The Field Was Still**, Cedric Tai. © Michigan State University Board of Trustees.

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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 41, 2006.



Akira. Wilco—Via Chicago. Sixteen-second exposure, Cedric Tai.  
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This image originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 41, 2006.

# The Buzz and the Glow

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William Winfield Wright

## *Buzz*

They sell whole machines now  
with fountains and smells and six varieties  
of white noise for beside your bed.  
I had a friend who could meditate  
in the silence between the beeps of her alarm clock.  
She got fired and moved to the ocean.

They put John Cage in a sound-proof booth  
and he could hear his nerves buzzing  
and the noisy plumbing of his blood.  
That's funny.

Even far away I listen for you  
and not just the phone or the way  
you make a door move.

## *Glow*

The sun makes light while  
the moon only reflects it.  
So what?  
It's the same for Venus

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each evening and morning  
and we are not supposed to visit there  
the days being too long and the clouds  
full of acid and high winds  
but why need to stand on a thing  
that is so beautiful to watch?

Somewhere the earth is only a little blue star  
a thing that comes between  
this rock and that rock in the long dark sky.

When I fell in love with that woman  
next to you on the bus  
you were not surprised at all  
wearing your half smile that morning.





# The Queer

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Michael Evans

I don't remember signing any sort of social contract that required me to take part in elementary school. It must have been slipped in on the first day of class, during handwriting practice. They gave us a series of documents so complex that they may as well been Latin to our toddler minds. I imagine it must have begun as all legally-binding documents would:

## ARTICLE I

### 01. *Structure.*

From September 14, 1990 to June 6, 1997, one (1) child (hereafter referred to as "Michael") enters into a social contract to be deprived from all ( $\infty$ ) possibilities of friendship (hereafter referred to as "enrollment at Chestnut Hill Elementary School"). During Michael's tenure at Chestnut Hill Elementary school, Michael accepts the responsibility for:

(a) Behaving like a loud-mouthed brat who thought he (Michael) owned the world. To these ends, Michael will:

- 1) Never shut his mouth.
- 2) Blindly dismiss his peers with or without provocation.
- 3) Have a mean, hypocritical attitude towards those on his rung of the social ladder (hereafter referred to as "the bottom").

(b) Allowing himself to be treated as a running joke in all social relationships he (Michael) fostered with those under the age of twelve (12). To these ends, Michael will:

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- 1) Constantly be ambivalent about whether he is being ridiculed.
- 2) Be unable to come up with an equally snappy reply, even by grade school standards.
- 3) Cry either way.

(c) Refusing to participate in all non-required (see Article III.02.) physical activities including but not limited to: baseball, soccer, football, basketball, hockey, skating, tennis, badminton, squash, horse polo, water polo, swimming, diving, cricket, tag, freeze tag, four square, and “heads up, 7-up” (see fig 1.1).

(d) Receiving merely “Satisfactory” or “Not Satisfactory” in his (Michael’s) citizenship grade (hereafter referred to as “worthless bullshit”).

There I sat in my ridiculously tiny chair, a kindergartener, my childhood signed away (and I hope I didn’t waste my black crayon on something like that). Of all the bad luck, I got to play pariah for almost seven years.

Because of “problems” (I never quite figured out what was wrong with me, or what my teachers and peers thought was wrong with me, but everyone assured me it was something), I was sent to the school counselor during the lunch and recess hour every Friday. The counselor was an incredibly patient and smiley woman named Mrs. Boyse. Her name was either pronounced like the capital of Idaho or wasn’t. I really should know considering how many recesses I would while away in her office, captivated by her poster of squiggly, peanut-shaped faces paired with various emotions. I was also in love with having a real grown up to listen to me and give me fun activities to do that all related to my favorite subject: me. She would ask how I was feeling that day, and I would point to the chart cheerfully and say, “Oh, today I suppose I’m a little ‘smug.’ And yourself?” This may have lead to talking about *why* I felt that way, but my mind was on the huge stock of Legos she had in her office. God, she even had green ones! I didn’t even know they made green ones! While I tried to find a way to use those creepy yellow blocks with the eyes painted on them, I would spout whatever sounded think-y enough to satiate her, often entirely removed from the questions she would ask. Her forehead would crease as she would ask, “What do you think the other kids

feel that would make them be mean to you, Michael?" She tried desperately to put things into perspective for me.

"I suppose people really, uh, ought to be nicer to each other and stuff. They can be mean. So do you, uh, have any other posters?" I credit her with my later interest in public speaking; this is where I first learned to bullshit.

After a few months of hemming and hawing, Mrs. Boyse released me back into the wild, harsh playground, a hopeless case. It was a transition I was not ready for; fall had yielded in the meantime to a Michigan winter, which never really has an identifiable pattern from year to year, but always means misery. My visits to Mrs. Boyse had saved me from the elements and the tedium of playground law.

Somehow, I survived the daily, half-hour of recess. There were all these metal contraptions with bars and tires welded on them that confused and horrified me. All the equipment was useless to me: the jungle gym, the other jungle gym, the balance beams, the broken tetherball pole, the iron maiden. There were even parallel bars on the playground like we were supposed to spontaneously arrange a gymnastics competition.

I usually vied against the girls for the swings. The swings let me imagine that I could fly away from recess, maybe to home, sometimes further. I imagined that wherever I went, there'd be beautiful rolling hills and giant trees, which I would dart in and around. When I finally got to my destination, I would lie down on the couch and take a long rest, proud of my ability to fly away when common grade-schoolers had failed.

Smear the Queer is essentially tag, only more ruthless. The goal is to hold onto one of those generic red playground balls for as long as possible until you're tackled or you've thrown the ball up into the air. Then someone else becomes the new queer. There is no score; there are no losers and no winners. Just a lot of running and tackling.

Now, I don't like running, and I've never been a fan of tackling either, so what drew me into that game? It was a catchy little name to a fourth grader, a Nipsy-Russell-esque rhyming couplet. The name, as I saw it, was also delightfully self-explanatory. Here's the queer. Smear him. I only knew of 'queer' in the Victorian sense: strange, weird, the odd one out. My classmates knew more than I did.

“Hey, Michael, are you gay?” asked Kyle back in second grade. He was with Dane, so I knew there could only be trouble in answering this question. I didn’t know how, but I knew it was a trap.

“Um, you mean happy?” Good, question the terms first. I was naïve, but I wasn’t dumb.

Already frustrated, Kyle lobbed the question “Are you gay?” at me again.

It never occurred to me not to answer directly. What was to be gained by ignoring someone? Only wrath, I thought. “Uh, if you’re using gay to mean happy, then I guess I am.”

Kyle and Dane smiled, but managed to keep themselves from laughing. I was still confused. Dane went on: “So you’re a fag?”

A cigarette? (Yes, I actually knew the other definition of that first, too. Call it an anomaly). What were they talking about? “What?”

“Fag,” he spat out, and then they moved on, giggling. My first concern was finding a dictionary. All I knew was that I was insulted, and that alone was enough to make a crybaby like me upset. Dane and Kyle sure were acting awfully queer.

The first day of the game was wonderful. I never realized that physical activity could be so invigorating during recess. For once, I wasn’t cold, rocking back and forth on a ridiculous swing, the wind sapping me lifeless. Instead, I was living a Pinocchio dream; all this time I had wished I could be a real boy, and now I was finally being treated that way. When someone else had the ball, the rest of us moved as a whole to stop them. And when I happened to have the ball, I got to be the center of attention for the few seconds I got to hold it. There was no losing!

I didn’t even mind the undesirable elements. The running, the tackling, or the people. Though apparently every boy was there, it didn’t seem right to me that even Tommy got to play. Tommy was like me, though you’d never have caught me saying that aloud in fourth grade. Tommy liked computers, and if TV had taught us anything, it was that computer nerds were the real social outcasts, and we treated him as such. I was one of the worst to him. We had fought once on the big snow piles down by the parking lot when only the other boys were watching, placing bets on who would be the victor. Gaining the upper hand, I would push his face into the snow. This gave me the time to mark the looks on everyone’s faces. They never rooted for either

of us; either of us being humiliated would have been perfectly fine. It was a cock fight. I was a fucking cock.

Oops, am I judging myself too harshly? I'm getting ahead of myself, I apologize.

I told Mom all about the first day of Smear the Queer, how I finally felt recognized. I told her all of the details about the game—the name of it made her do a double take for some reason—how we played it and where. She seemed worried about the game that we were playing over such icy ground. I said, “Mom, don't worry about it, okay? I think I'm finally a normal kid now.”

She replied, in a tone more serious than I had expected, “Michael. You need to be careful out there, okay? I don't trust those kids, and neither should you.”

There Mom goes, foreshadowing my life again. She should really become a fortuneteller, that one. She got all the foresight in the family, and I got the hindsight.

The second day was just as the first had been, I'd thought. The only thing different was that no one could hold onto the ball for very long at all. There were no grand dodges and no excitement. It was hostile. I managed my first tackle on D. J. Wilson, one of the Kings of Grade School. He was indignant, of course. The look on his face said it was unimaginable that someone like me would dare to touch him. It was a game, though, wasn't it? It was still fun. I got the ball again.

*I was running. The ball was in my hands. Suddenly, like a candle, I was put out. Arms grabbed me around my sides, then I was down. There was no transition between that moment of contact and my head landing on the ice.*

*My ear began to bleed into the snow, and the pain was immediate, and indescribable. It was my first real hurt, my most vulnerable time. When you're hurt, you become a blank slate, your thoughts and emotions are replaced with pain.*

*They asked some of the other kids later if I had lost consciousness when my head hit the ground. I told them that I knew I hadn't lost consciousness. They insisted I couldn't be certain of that, but I was. I remember the hot tears that came to my face, I remember the weight that had pinned me down come off of me, and I remember Dane saying, “You should have given up the ball.”*

The irony was not lost on me, even in fourth grade, that I was the queer and that I had been smeared. Through the pain, which I was certain I was going to die from, I had reached a kind of lucidity that was completely unlike me.

"He said, 'you should have given up the ball.'" I explained to Mr. Spencer, the teacher who had practically dragged me in, refusing to carry me even though all I wanted to do was lie down and die. "That's not right. Do something about it, please. It's wrong . . ."

I felt the self-pity tears coming again, the start of the throes of self-pity that would last for two feverish days. I lay in my bed, Mom or Dad occasionally by my side. "I'm sorry, Michael," my mom would say. "I wish you never had to go back to that school again." When I wasn't sad, I was angry. For the first time, I plotted revenge. It was a silly, nebulous revenge, physical torture rather than mental. I wanted to see Dane hurt, to understand what his words meant and to have them burnt onto his forehead. I couldn't give up the ball. It was the nature of the game, as I saw it, to hold onto the ball as long as possible. Fooled again.

Up until fourth grade, I never really understood that my place in life was solidified. I was the victim, damn it. And as soon as everyone realized what a wonderful person I was, when they reached that after-school special epiphany, I'd be appreciated. The incident changed my perspective in two ways. The first: I was imbued with a sense of self-consciousness, class-consciousness. I understood my role for the first time as the spaz, the femme, the prick, the conniver, the witch, the Pollyanna, and now the broken mirror, all my many sides. The social contract was revealed to me, and it was binding.

The second: suddenly, I could not forgive the little boy looking up 'fag' in the dictionary. After failing to find any entry for it, he looks up 'gay.' He finds the word. Definition one: happy, to wit. Definition two. I can't see exactly what it is, but the boy seems befuddled. I remember the train of thought he had, though; I haven't separated myself that much yet. He thinks, well, I *do* love all my male friends, as few of them as there are. Doesn't he understand anything?

That boy will keep doing the same thing again and again, trying to prove he's right, because otherwise he's wrong. He'll keep fighting every battle whether or not it's worth fighting. He'll get hurt and fight more, and he'll become stranger and his features will become even more twisted and

gnarled, and he'll fight more, and he'll keep losing, and when he sees the mistakes he's always made, he'll be a bundle of extremes too queer even for the queers. When they stop paying attention or when they stop trying to fix him, he'll be alone.

My return to school was marked by no one, as I expected. Dane was forced to apologize to me, and I was forced to forgive him. My teacher, Mrs. Glawe thought she gave us resolution.

"Dane has been in counseling with Mrs. Boyse for the last few days," I was told. Oh, I'm sure he's a changed person, I thought. She and her magical Legos will make him understand sympathy. *"You should have given up the ball."*

Where do you go from there?



# Where Johannes Brahms Was Born

---

Eric Gabriel Lehman

Joel pauses on the little terrace before Hanne's front door. She'll certainly shoot him a look with those large eyes of hers when he waltzes in at 11 in the morning, even if it is Pascal, her wild 14-year-old, who needs the talking-to. But Hanne has been around the block. She understands what it means to search for love.

The courtyard is strewn with bottles and plastic cups from last night's Bastille Day celebrations. Buildings on either side of the courtyard are laced together by strings of colored bulbs, their light feeble in the sun. Once a third building enclosed the courtyard but it didn't survive the war and now the yard opens to the street like a window. Hanne claimed to have rented the house because of the yellow plum tree that arches over it and bears translucent, golden fruit.

"*Morgen.*" Pascal sits naked, framed by his window, writing in a notebook, song lyrics for his band perhaps. The sill is where he used to chat with Sybille, his girlfriend from across the courtyard until she dumped him the week before. One leg shields from view what is not meant to be seen, but only just, an arrangement of discretion and tease executed by someone who knows people look at him. A shell hangs from a leather thong around his neck and a sliver of earring shines through thickets of hair. He is tall for his age, lithe, and dark-eyed. His position has him lit to the best advantage; sunlight burnishes his calf and dabs a shoulder. Joel imagines standing close enough to breathe in the naked Pascal as he might a handsome stranger waking beside him. Pascal's knowing smile reads Joel's mind. "Congratulations. You're the first *schwul* American I've met," he had said after Joel moved in. He let Joel know that he'd had erotic encounters

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with male friends, even if he is drawn to women “at the moment.” It is hard imagining a kid his age in Dubuque speaking with such poise, and Pascal clearly enjoys playing the enlightened northern European. He returns to his writing, allowing Joel—and Sybille—to observe him so engaged. He’ll be the first thing she sees when she looks out of her window, part of Pascal’s plan to get her back, Joel supposes.

Joel feels like a native with a paper bag of *Brötchen* from the local bakery, ordered in German, more or less. He has been in Hamburg for a little over a year and sleeps on Hanne’s couch in return for hauling cases of mineral water down to her basement cabaret, working the espresso maker and sweeping up, and he fills in if a singer needs a pianist, too. Hanne’s cabaret is stuck in an anarchist/hippie-flavored time warp of the sort Joel associates with college coffeeshouses. Last night Beate Schumacher sang blues with a distinctly Prussian lilt: *Sommertihme, when ze living ist eassy...* Hanne has asked her back in a couple of weeks. Germans love *die Blues*. Beate Schumacher told Joel that when she goes to New York in the fall she will head straight to Harlem and not waste time in museums. “Blacks, zey are ze real Americans,” she says. “Zey have soul.”

The large front room is clear of last night’s debris left over from post-show carousing; so Hanne must have gotten up especially early that morning, a bad sign, because it also means that Todd hadn’t stayed over. Pascal’s artwork fills the living room walls and an entire corner is taken up by his drum set. A radio crackles in the kitchen. “*Bonjour, mon petit.*” Hanne’s French is left over from her time in Lyon when she still lived with Pascal’s father. Her cigarette is gummed between her lips as she heaves a large cooking pot into the dish drainer. “You look half asleep, Liebling. There’s coffee.” Her henna-red hair is the color of the velvet used to line jewelry boxes and is pulled back, shiny as an LP. Large marcasite earrings dangle on either side of her face, and she wears a matching neck chain, ballerina slippers and a dark dress. She has thickened in her early 40s but moves tautly, still the European hippie-goddess. “Me too,” she says as Joel pours himself a cup. “So where were you last night?”

“Rudy’s.”

“*Mein Gott!*” Her eyebrows arch in exaggerated horror. Rudy’s Night Club on semi-sleazy Steindamm, near the main station and a stone’s throw from Hansaplatz’s open-air drug market, is a kind of drain that collects

people from other bars: lecherous, middle-aged civil servants in baggy corduroys, droopy sweaters, and gold-buckled loafers as well as randy 20-year-old plumber's apprentices in stonewashed jeans and mullets, and the occasional hustler. Its magenta carpeting, wall sconces, and circular bar might have been the brainchild of a syndicate boss.

"I wasn't there long. And afterwards I went to see where Johannes Brahms was born," he says as much to arouse her curiosity as to lend his exploits some class. "Is Todd here?"

Hanne grabs some soapy silverware, runs it under the water and crashes it into the drainer in response. Todd is in his early 30s, not much older than Joel, but a good ten years younger than Hanne and quite handsome. He has been in Hamburg since his college days and now works for a bank. He and Hanne have been seeing each other on and off for the past three years. "Have you eaten?" Hanne asks. Joel holds up the bag from the bakery. "Wunderbar. Help me finish with this and we'll have breakfast. Get the bucket, will you? It should be in the bathroom."

Joel came to Europe when a friend offered him an unused plane ticket that a travel-agent aunt was able to reassign. He arrived in Hamburg, a refugee from an East Village summer of humidity and Fourth of July firecrackers starting June first. Germany was not the first European country that Joel Meyerson of the Bronx, alumnus of the Jewish Center of Highbridge's Talmud Torah, would have chosen; Germany: the land of *Hogan's Heroes* and Zyklon-B and everything in between. Still, a free trip to Europe cost nothing. Hamburg had a train station and Germany bordered France and Holland; he would not go to Deutschland to settle there, only to sojourn, and unlike his forbears he would outwit history by self-deporting. But Hamburg grew on him, with streets named Beim Schlump and Bäckerbreitengang and Steintwietenhof and canals that fingered past old brick warehouses like blind men feeling their way. The city was snug, simple, unfussy, including many bars. Suburban trains clattered peacefully below viaducts and further out they slipped past little forests that stopped, politely, just short of the tracks. Hamburgers—it's what they called themselves—weren't back-slappingly friendly, but they were Europeans, after all. On some days, however, a street sign's ur-German ß or the sight of old men wearing yellow armbands—wounded war veterans—conjured up spectral thoughts. His eyes perversely sought the swastika and eagle capping the entrance to a leftover

bomb shelter, now a bar. On such days train tracks gleamed ominously and the crowd rushing into the gigantic plaza supermarket was a relentless, goose-stepping horde.

He hasn't been able to snag a boyfriend, either.



She makes her way with the little boy who clamors down the Passerelle Saint Vincent. He will be tired a third of the way up the hill, but it doesn't pay to ask him to slow down; he is always seeking to delight her, impress her, and in any case they will rest once they reach the top. She loves the old part of the city; they go there often. The basilica is up ahead. *Komm! Viens!* She and Michel speak to the boy in both languages. He looks more like his father, large, dark eyes and lips stained the color of Burgundy. *Komm! Viens!* Is her child French or German? Her mother keeps asking, and she tells her that it makes no difference. Lately she has begun to wonder. The boy wants her to hurry up, but she is content to stroll. It is the first day that is warm enough to wear only sandals, and her flea-market peasant dress flounces around her. Michel will be at the university most of the day. The little boy loves the view of the city from high up, its two rivers snaking through it. Later she will have a cup of coffee and head off to the market. She thinks about getting some kind of work, but her French isn't that good. Still, Michel doesn't pressure her, and the apartment he rents through the university is cheap and big enough for the three of them. She has sewn a curtain around their corner of the apartment for some privacy, even if it never stops the boy, whose curiosity and energy are boundless. He is like his father. He waits at the foot of the stone steps, although she would prefer to continue by way of the road, since it passes through a pretty park. She is in no hurry to reach the top, because when she does, she will come to a decision about whether or not she will remain in France.

"Don't you believe in knocking?" Joel recoils from the sight of a naked woman in the bathtub. Gabi is a wet island ringed by a coral reef of soap bubbles. She is thickly set and frankly maternal, around 20.

*"Entschuldigung."* The long word is hard to get out when under stress. Joel begins to leave.

"*Ach*, don't worry about it, I'm just giving you a hard time," she laughs. "Be careful." She points to two-year-old Elsabet, nestled in a mound of blanket on the floor. "But while you're here, you might as well learn something." She cups her right breast and jiggles it like custard.

Joel glances only briefly before looking away. Gabi enjoys taunting him about his preference, although sometimes it feels like flirting. The pail is beside the tub, and reaching for it brings him within inches of her face. The breast flops back into the water like a fish given a second chance. "And this," she says as her fingers circle her mound of pubic hair, darkly dense as soil after a rainstorm.

"I've been with women, Gabi."

"Yes? How many times? What did you do with them?" Just as Joel reaches for the bucket, she gives him a little splash.

"Stop!"

"It's just water. You're not made of cotton candy, are you? So who's your new lover?" She uses the English word, which she pronounces *luh-vah*.

"How do you know there is one?"

"Your face. Your *mouth*. Women can tell these things."

But he doesn't want to talk about the previous night. He doesn't quite know what to make of his encounter with Heinz, a clarinetist studying at the music conservatory with a face like polished stone of the sort easily smudged. His hair was bleached a stringent yellow-white and his eyes were the gray of metal submerged in water. Their gazes locked in Rudy's and moments later they were leaving, but instead of getting into a cab Heinz suggested that they go down to the harbor to watch the sun rise.

"Did you do it?"

"Gabi!"

"Gabeee," she imitates. "So tell me: yes or no?"

They didn't, but to his surprise it doesn't bother him. This might have made him feel cheated in New York, but in the Old World it leaves him oddly elated. Heinz's finely honed voice rills deep within his brain. He still feels their long walk in his legs. "Hanne doesn't seem too happy."

"Todd was here last night, what do you expect? It was still mobbed long after you left. Beate brought her friends along. Do you think she can sing? I don't. I told Hanne to break things off with Todd a long time ago. She never knows where she is with him. Always ready to go back to England.

He's made passes at me, too, you know, but I won't have any of it. Men like him can never make up their minds. At first I thought they were getting along. Hanne was sitting in his lap and laughing. Finally everyone left, it was just the two of them. I was in my room with Elsabet, but I heard them. All right, I listened. I wanted to know what was going on. Hanne's like my sister, and I worry about her. The next thing I knew there were shouts and something crashed. Hanne must have thrown something at him." Gabi lifts a heavy leg to inspect what looks to be a bruise and water pours off like a log. Elsabet lets out a little whimper. "*Na, mein Süßlein?* Are you hungry? We'll eat soon. Hand me the scrub brush, will you? Better yet, would you mind—" She sits up to offer him her back and her belly settles around her. "That feels good," she coos as he works the suds into her skin. Elsabet looks anxious as she tries to figure out what is being done to her mother.

"Do you think Hanne wants to marry Todd?"

Gabi's hands ripple through the water. "*Ach*, I don't know."

"What ever happened to Pascal's father?"

"Michel, you mean? Still in France, I guess. They never married. Pascal likes to joke about being illegitimate. He is too wild sometimes. Hanne likes you. She'd marry you if you weren't *schwul*. You say you have been with women, so how do you know you are really *schwul*?"

"Gabi—"

"You still haven't told me about last night."

The door pushes open. The naked Pascal stands there. "*Oopla!*" he cries but doesn't retreat.

"Hoopa," Elsabet imitates, clapping her hands in delight.

"Pascal, go back before your mother catches you like that," Gabi tells him.

"She knows what I look like. She gave birth to me, remember? We used to take baths together all the time when I was younger." He climbs onto the rim of the tub and begins walking around its edge as if it were a tightrope, arms airplaned on either side.

"Get down from there, will you?" Gabi laughs as she splashes between his legs.

"Stop, it tickles!" Pascal rounds the rim with a dexterous flick of his heels. He hits a wet spot, his foot slips, and he teeters against the wall.

"Watch out, *verdammte!*" Gabi leans out to grab Elsabet and sets her out of danger in a far corner just as Pascal rights himself with a foot on either side of the tub, a teenaged Colossus at Rhodes.

Elsabet starts crying. "See, you've scared her. Now get out of here and wait until I'm done, will you?"

"What's this?" Hanne stands in the doorway. Her eyes meet the boy, poised monumentally above her. "Get down from there!"

"I want to take a bath but Gabi's hogging the tub." He looks right at her, his *schwanz* dangling playfully.

"That's enough." Hanne lowers her eyes and points to the door. Her son slithers past his mother, narrowly escaping her slap on his bare rump.

"You too," she says sharply, gesturing for Joel to scam.

They sit around a table on the terrace beneath the yellow plum tree. Thin crusts of bread like eggshells litter their little wooden breakfast boards. Hanne wears a jester's cap, its bells tinkling merrily each time she has some coffee. Sunlight through the trees patterns her bare arms like lace. Elsabet snuggles in Gabi's lap. A hint of green soap wafts from the mop dripping on its nail on the side of the house. The courtyard is quiet; the traffic of nearby Grindelallee has lessened, for it is almost one o'clock and stores are shut for the weekend. The city is calm as no American city ever is.

"Todd was here last night," Hanne says.

Joel and Gabi exchange glances.

"He asked me to go to England with him again. I reminded him that I had a son, and do you know what that man said? It was time I accepted that Pascal wasn't a baby anymore. How dare he tell me what I am to accept? He's never been a parent. He's never been a mother. What do men know about children, anyway?"

"Todd's right," Gabi tells her. "Pascal's no baby anymore. He's sitting for his *Habitur* next month."

"Todd has no right telling me what I should do."

"If Pascal gets into that acting school he'll be living in Hannover anyway."

"Not if he doesn't pass his *Habitur*."

"It almost sounds as if you'd rather he not go."

"Are you saying that I should just pick up and go with Todd? I've known

Pascal far longer than I've known Todd, you know." The jester cap bells reflect sharp points of sunlight.

There are early photographs of mother and son where they might be brother and older sister. Their eyes swim with the same mischief and they look ready to play a joke on the person behind the camera. Hanne has filled her house with Pascal: his artwork, his drum set, his will. It's hard to imagine a man fitting into all of it. Joel has met Todd, who is nice enough but clearly no Michel, a free-spirit literary type who fathered Pascal one a night on a hillside overlooking the ocean in Brittany. For Hanne, accepting that Pascal is no longer a baby means accepting that France and Michel are gone forever. Joel spies a girl at a window a story above the uppermost branches of the plum tree, so still she might be a statue; her blonde hair is nearly white. In her nightgown she is a fairy princess in her tower.

Hanne turns to Joel. "You never finished telling me about last night."

After watching the sun rise Heinz proposed taking Joel to his favorite spot in Hamburg. They made their way through the older parts of the city past Bismarck Monument and the blackened ruin of the Nicholai Church until they came to a parking lot behind the *Stern* magazine building. "The birthplace of Johannes Brahms," he announced, gesturing to a field of asphalt painted with grids of thick white lines. A solitary Opal was parked at the far end. A white plastic shopping bag danced in the breeze. His house once stood here but was destroyed in the war, Heinz explained. Joel knew the usual about Brahms from his piano-lesson days: the heavy face with its Biblical beard, the Hungarian dances, his infatuation with Robert Schumann's wife. Joel said it was a shame about the house, but Heinz said he preferred it this way, since if the house still stood, it would have become a museum; it would have become kitsch. This way it remained a concept, an idea: pure. Brahms was very German; for the true German sought the symbolic in everything. "A missing house and *Stern* magazine. Destruction and advertising. Dialectical, yes?" Heinz said.

Joel says nothing, only smiles.

"Look at him," Gabi says. "*Die Liebe*. I remember that."

"You're only 20," Hanne says. "You talk like you'll never fall in love again."

"I don't have to. I have you, don't I?" She gives Elsabet a snuggle. "We don't need men, anyway, you and me, now do we?"

"Any coffee?" Pascal stands barefoot in the doorway wearing tight jeans and a clinging t-shirt that stops just before his navel, no more than a nick in the taut wall of his stomach. Curls of damp hair mass on either side of his face.

"There will be coffee if you make some." Hanne gestures to the Melitta pot, doing her best to sound firm. Pascal shrugs, takes the pot and goes back inside. Coffee for a 14-year-old? Joel once thought. But Pascal was Hanne's child.

"All he does is listen to music, play the drums, and hang out with his girlfriend," Gabi says. She points to the window, empty now, where Joel had seen the girl in white. "He should be studying for his exams."

"I know. I let him get away with too much." Hanne looks at the window. "The girl's mother calls me," Hanne says. "'Tell your son to stop coming over all the time,'" she imitates in a high, unpleasant voice. "'My Sybille must study.' As if I didn't care about my child doing well in school. Let her try raising a child by herself and see how easy it is. The little *Prinzessin*. I don't know what he sees in her."

"She's pretty," Joel suggests.

"Sybille, what a horrible name, a name for a poodle. But she's broken things off, so that's the end of that."

"Where are the filters?" Pascal's languid slouch in the doorway is almost feminine.

Joel thinks he might have misplaced them while helping Hanne earlier and is about to stand up, but she gestures for him to stay put. "Let him find them himself," she says, talking to Pascal via Joel.

Pascal emerges with the Melitta pot, its ceramic cone filter wobbling. "Your mother has already asked you not to carry it that way," Gabi tells him. "It's how the last one broke, remember?"

"*Calme toi*," he says. He sets the filter onto the table and replaces it with the lid.

"By the way, when do you propose to start studying for your exams, young man? What about your French, *par exemple*?"

"You used to speak French with me all the time, *ma chère Maman*. How am I supposed to learn a language if I don't hear it?"

"I actually don't like speaking French anymore," she says to Joel



confidentially. She turns back to the boy. "But what about maths? What about German? You don't study any of that, either."

Pascal pours himself some coffee and leans back in his chair. "School bores me. And besides, wasn't it you who once told me that most of your teachers just wanted to brainwash you into conforming, *chère Maman*? Didn't you take off right after *Gymnasium*?" He stretches out his legs and rests them on the table, exposing long, white soles.

"Stop," says Hanne, referring as much to what he says as his position. "Joel doesn't need to look at the bottom of your feet over breakfast."

Pascal smiles at Joel. "I'm sure he's seen the soles of a man's feet before."

"I need you to help me unpack a delivery later," she tells him.

"He can help." Pascal winks at Joel. "I have a date with Sybille."

"I thought that was over. Her mother told you to stay away, remember?"

"Temporary setbacks. I have plans." He has a sip of coffee as his eyes float toward Sybille's window. His head tilts back; he stretches his long legs in the sun and he smiles, savoring his thoughts, looking ready to receive the girl when she magically descends from the window. Hanne watches him, and soon Joel is watching too, drawn to Pascal's reverie. Gabi alone remains unaffected as she nuzzles Elsabet.

"I came back to Germany because of him," Hanne says after Gabi and Pascal have left the table. She yanks off the fool's cap, which falls to the table with a sad jingle. "His father wanted us to stay and I loved France. But I didn't want to raise a child there. I had left Germany without even telling my parents. I ran away, actually, and then I had a child without bothering to get married. I didn't want to live in Germany anymore, I was sick of it. But I started feeling a little homesick after all, or maybe I felt guilty, so I returned. Only when I got here did I realize how much I missed France, but by then it was too late to go back. I opened a cabaret because there was one I went to in the old part of the city. In France people knew how to smile, so I thought that I would have a place in Hamburg where people could smile, too. I would have a place where it would be acceptable to smile for no reason at all."

A little later Pascal appears with a soccer ball that he kicks around the courtyard, his concession to his mother's request that he stay close to home, even if he refuses to help out. Each bounce echoes between the blank walls.

It is not long before Sybille's mother throws her head out the window to complain about the noise. Pascal goes inside and starts playing the drums, and for the next hour the apartment rumbles. Hanne invites Joel into her room for a joint, lights a candle or two, and lies back onto her bed's many little pillows. Gold-threaded fabric is draped from the ceiling and Pascal's watercolors cover the walls. He is everywhere; Hanne cannot escape him, a constant reminder of her regrets. She has reached the age when decisions settle and become too heavy to move. Joel begins to feel the joint. Johannes Brahms walks across the empty parking lot, mumbling into his beard as he looks for his Opal. Heinz is nowhere to be seen.

"Maybe you have the right idea, not having children," Hanne says, staring at the ceiling as if it held an explanation, all the while Pascal's drumming brims just outside the door, ready to spill over.

The boy likes the metal radio tower, so they climb the many steps that approach the basilica from the rear just to pass by it. The little boy loves heights because up high he is able to understand everything. Soon they are on the top of the hill overlooking the city. She wraps her shawl around her against the chill and worries that the boy's thin jacket is not enough. He runs to the railing, enraptured by the view. She will miss all of this when they leave. The bells of the basilica chime as if a great cage has been flung open. The river glistens. Perhaps she and Michel will work something out, but for now her decision seems clear. *Pascal, komm! Viens!* She must get to the market while the old woman selling spices is still there. The boy clutches the railing until it looks like the bars of a prison. What if he doesn't like Hamburg? She thinks of the spice woman and her magnificently oily oregano, her marjoram. Hanne can taste them upon her tongue. She will never find such spices in Hamburg. People in Hamburg do not concern themselves with how things taste. The city is flat. There is little to see from on high. She will take the boy to where St. Pauli overlooks the harbor, behind the brewery. On a clear day they will look out and see all the way to the Four Lands. They will see as far as it is possible to see in Hamburg. It is already decided. *Pascalchen, komm hier!*

"I like the music of water," Heinz says when Joel appears.

It is just after nine in the evening. Heinz sits on the granite lip of a fountain below the ornate statue of a woman holding a trident high over Hansaplatz. The florid sculpture and its fountain are sentimental holdovers from the turn of the century, now surrounded by concrete apartment buildings. Heinz's brilliant yellow hair is a chemical hue in the blue of the streetlamps. He wears what he'd had on the other night in Rudy's: leather pants, t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and something heavy and shiny punched into one earlobe. The square is deserted but for a cluster of Turkish teenage boys in one corner.

Joel had waited two full weeks without hearing from Heinz before seeking him out. He looked up Heinz's address and telephone number and called but no one ever answered, nor was there a machine, so he went to where Heinz lived but never saw a light in his window. Did he really exist, or was he a manifestation of Joel's longing, another German symbol, right down to the blue eyes and blond hair, even if Heinz's was bleached? Maybe he was no different from the other men Joel has met in Hamburg, often distant and inscrutable, virile yet sterile. But Joel couldn't quite put him out of his mind. He took a detour through Hansaplatz to put off returning to Hanne's. These days she is moody whenever Todd calls but moody if he doesn't. Pascal is too preoccupied with Sybille to study for his *Habitur*. He has tried going up to where the girl lives, only to have the door slammed in his face, once by the girl's mother and then by Sybille herself. But he is undeterred. The girl's mother is brainwashing her, he says. She is too *spießig*, too bourgeois. He will triumph in the end. Love will have its day. He will get up there somehow. He has written a song about it entitled "I Will Break Open Your Heart."

"Sit down." Heinz takes out tobacco and papers to roll a cigarette. "You don't smoke, right?" He seeds the paper with dark brown flakes, rolls and draws his tongue across the seal. After a long, satisfied drag he studies Joel. "You are taller now than before. You are very tall, in fact."

Does Heinz like tall men? He doesn't say. He exchanges glances with one of the Turkish kids. "Do you know him?" Joel asks.

"Hansaplatz is a village."

Heinz seems even quieter than the first night, or perhaps he is stoned. Joel yearns to put his arms around him, to run his fingers through his yellow-white hair. He hopes Heinz will not start talking about symbols and

suggests going for a walk. Heinz thinks for a moment and says yes but stays where he is. He glances in the direction of one of the boys.

“Who is he?” Joel is irritated.

“We all know each other here.” Heinz gets up. “We go and eat something, yes?” Joel’s mood lightens until the Turkish boy comes near as if he has been waiting for a signal. “This is Ahmed.” Heinz throws what is left of his cigarette into the fountain. Ahmed’s face is the color of cocoa, and his hair is very dark. “Joel is an American,” Heinz says, and the boy nods appreciatively. Heinz suggests that they go to his house and he will cook something for the three of them. But Joel isn’t hungry. He hasn’t come to watch Heinz ogling this boy.

“Wait,” Heinz calls after him when Joel starts walking away.

Joel doesn’t stop until reaching the edge of the Alster, which has turned the color of slate.

What is he doing in Hamburg? It was nice at first: the novelty of Europe, the change from New York, the pleasant privacies of the foreigner. He loved staying put at Hanne’s instead of traipsing across Europe on a rail pass. But Hamburg is chilly. No wonder the sensitive Brahms fled to gentler Vienna: people don’t smile here. Hanne had to open a cabaret where people might do it. Pascal’s search for love seems doomed in a city that needs an excuse to smile. Joel misses New York’s static electricity; Hamburg feels wired to a switch that turns the city off when not in use. He keeps walking until he’s back at the Brahms parking lot. It is empty as before. The asphalt’s many painted lines resemble stick figures, skeletons of the unreachable and inaccessible: Heinz. Michel. Sybille.

Hanne is sitting on the terrace smoking a cigarette when he gets back. Before her are a half-filled bottle of red wine and two glasses, one untouched. “Todd left for England,” she says. “Tonight, on that new tunnel train.” When Joel puts his arms around her she weeps softly. “I guess it’s better like this.” The house rumbles like a ramshackle heart with Pascal’s drumming. “Here.” She pours some wine into the second glass for Joel. “Right after I got the call from Todd I asked Pascal to help me get the piano onto the stage and he told me to ask my boyfriend. I thought I would lose my mind. I slapped him. I have never, ever lifted a hand to Pascal until today. Now he won’t speak to me. Not a word.”

“Hanne—”

"Regret is worse than shame. Far worse. Hungry?"

At the mention of food Joel realizes that he hasn't eaten anything since the afternoon. Hanne picks up the bottle of wine. "Get the glasses, will you?"

Pascal doesn't look up from his drumming as they pass. Hanne keeps her eyes grimly forward. She closes the kitchen door to dampen the sound and starts making omelets. Her many bracelets clack against the bowl as she whisks the eggs.

"I wanted Heinz to fall in love with me," Joel says as they eat.

"Who's Heinz?"

He realizes that he hasn't told her anything about him. "Just some guy. I was wondering. What if that French man had agreed to come to Germany?"

"You mean Michel? I don't know. I left Germany to get away from myself but I wound up coming along anyway." The eggs slide from the bowl and hit the melted butter with a sizzle. Pascal's drumming becomes a solid drone. Hanne throws her head through the doorway and shouts, "Enough!"

The drumming ceases instantly, but something in the air keeps going, like people thrust forward in a car after braking. Mother and son look at each other for a single, fragile moment. Joel isn't sure what they'll do, what they'll say. "I'm making eggs," Hanne says quietly, "If you want any." Pascal looks at Joel as if to say 'Look after her, will you?' He shakes his head no. Hanne pulls back into the kitchen. "I'm so tired, Joel. So very tired. Please. Stay with me tonight, will you? Oh, don't worry. I'm not like Gabi. I just need someone nice to fill up the rest of the bed. I don't snore. *Bitte*." Joel says he will. He's glad not to be sleeping alone that night. "You know, only afterwards did I realize that when Pascal referred to my boyfriend he might have been referring to you and not Todd." She kisses him on the forehead. "I'm a fool. So, do you sleep in the nude? You don't snore, do you?"

"I'm a fool, too," Joel says.

Joel comes upon Pascal sitting on the terrace steps when he goes for a glass of water later that night. He sits down beside him, both of them in their underwear. The lights strung across the courtyard color Pascal's skin. "The sky is so bright from the moon," the boy says. They look upward but their eyes stop at the girl's vacant window.

"I'm not angry at my mother anymore, if that's what she sent you to find out."

“She didn’t. She really loves you.” Joel pauses. “People only bother being angry at those they love,” Joel says. Or at those who don’t love them, he adds silently.

“How about you? Who do you love?”

“I love Brahms. He used to live in Hamburg, you know.”

Beate Schumacher’s accompanist cancels the day before her gig, so Joel agrees to fill in, and they spend one whole afternoon rehearsing. *Sommertihme, ant ze living ist easy* . . . Her large front teeth clap the mike, but Joel’s German isn’t up to the delicate task of telling the touchy Frau Schumacher about it.

Hanne asks where Pascal is. Joel hasn’t seen the boy since the night before and volunteers to look for him but Hanne throws up a braceleted hand. “Pascal can take care of himself,” she says, but Joel hears worry in her voice. He goes out for some air before the show begins. He’s always found the cabaret’s ceiling a bit low—it is a basement, after all—but tonight it suffocates. The night before as they were tidying up the cabaret Hanne recalled scurrying down to the basement of her family’s apartment with her mother and the neighbors after the air raid sirens went off. It was stifling, and on the third day they ran out of water. The portable radio broadcast nothing but military music and news of German victories. Hanne asked why they had to stay down there and a neighbor said that the city was being cleaned. When everything was all nice and clean, they would go back outside.

Almost all of the dozen or so tables in the cabaret are taken, each with its candle and single carnation in a small San Pelligrino bottle: La Schumacher has a loyal following. Hanne is in full regalia: black dress, armloads of noisy bracelets, a string of bright-colored stones around her neck, darkly lidded eyes. The audience quiets down and Beate begins slowly, thinking about each word, each *syllable*, overly poignant and *Weltschmerz*y, but the audience eats it up, especially when she throws back a glass of whiskey onstage, part Joplin, part Tom Waits. Hanne’s eyes keep returning to the door, on the lookout for Pascal, who often wanders down in the middle of a show, but there is no sign of him. No wonder Todd split: as long as Pascal is around Hanne needs no other man.

They’re in the middle of “Since You Went Away” when a scream from the courtyard hits Beate’s high note, and her voice flutters down like something

shot from the sky. People in the audience rush outside to a figure sprawled below the yellow plum tree. It's Pascal, who has fallen below Sybille's window. His face is perfect except for an error of blood down one temple. The blonde-haired girl from across the way rushes toward him, followed by Gabi, but only when Hanne appears do the boy's dark, heavy lips begin moving, since she alone will understand what her son did in the heartless city of Hamburg and why.



# Tattoo

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Amelia Beamer

The man to the right of my place in the line, the tattoo on the back of his neck says *and*. The man on the other side of me, his tattoo says *girl*. The morning sun is bright, and the line of people is long.

"You're 1,203, right?" I ask *and*. "I'm 1,204."

"Yes. Are you? You're awfully young," *and* says.

"Let her alone," a woman on the other side of him says, "It's not just the '09 babies that were born with tattoos."

"Just mostly us," *and* says.

"I remember my mother said she was so afraid that there was something wrong with me, with this tattoo on the back of my neck." The woman laughs. She reminds me of my own mother, dark hair and soft, capable arms.

"Like it was the end of the world or something," *girl* says softly. He's a big guy, gruff-looking, but with a deep, calm voice. He must have been teased with that tat, growing up.

The woman nods. "Exactly. And every baby in the ward. Well, you know, the words were different. They tested mine and told my mom it was a birthmark—that there was no actual ink there." The wind picks up, and I can smell her perfume: cinnamon and warm earth.

"My best friend, Carrie, she just had a baby, Sera," I say. "The baby was born with a tattoo. To replace someone who died, Carrie said. So she had to hire a sitter for today to stand in line and say Sera's word because all of our friends are here and none of us are close to Sera's space in the line."

"Most of my friends are tattooed, too," the woman says, looking up the line. Her hair covers her neck. "Is the story going right to left again this time, does anyone know?"

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This story originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 43, 2008.



“Right to left, yes,” says *girl*. “They think they got it right this time.” *and* yawns, then runs his fingers over the stubble on his chin. “What are you, hon?” he asks me.

“*the*.” I slap at a mosquito. “Anyone got bug spray?”

“Here,” *and* says. He hands me a can and I spray it on my bare arms, on my shorts and my legs. My new white shoes have grass stains on the toes. *and* takes the can and sprays the back of my legs. He rubs it into my neck, though it doesn’t need to be rubbed in.

I nod thanks and move away from him.

“You remember the last time—you wouldn’t, child—the story made no sense,” *and* says. “Do they really have it right this time?”

“Does it matter?” *girl* says. His voice is thoughtful. “No one knows why or how we have the tattoos, to be honest, or what the larger meaning is, if there is one.”

“Do you know, am I supposed to say the whole story or just my word?” I ask. I wonder if I’ll be able to remember the story well enough to tell it.

“You’ve heard the one that says that if the story is told in the right order, the aliens that gave us the tattoos will come back and take us away,” a man near us says. He smiles like it’s a joke.

“Oh, please,” the woman says. “Aliens. The doctors that delivered all of us did it as a game, and are giving tattoos to babies like your friend’s in order to keep it up.”

“If it looks like a conspiracy, it’s probably just incompetence,” *and* says.

I smile at the joke, but turn away so he can’t see.

We’re quiet for a while, looking up and down the line.

I squat on the grass, placing my palms down on it, as if I could absorb the whole story through my hands. The grass moves; there is an ant colony. I move my hands away and watch their tiny comings and goings, hoping I haven’t ruined their chemical trails. They move surely, unaware that they are about to be trampled.

The chatter gets louder all at once. I look up, ask: “Has it started?”

“Everyone’s talking,” the woman says. “I can’t hear.”

“Look,” *girl* points. I squint, following the gesture. The people to the right are walking toward us, following the story. They move slowly, listening,

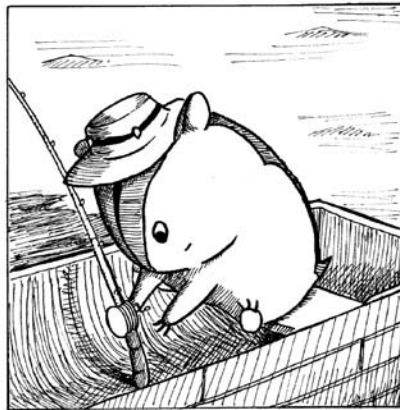
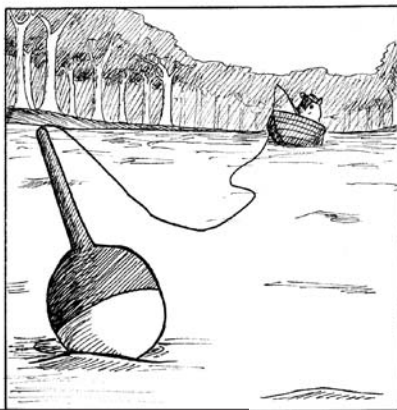
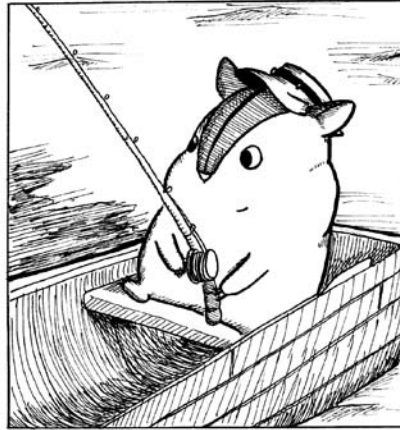
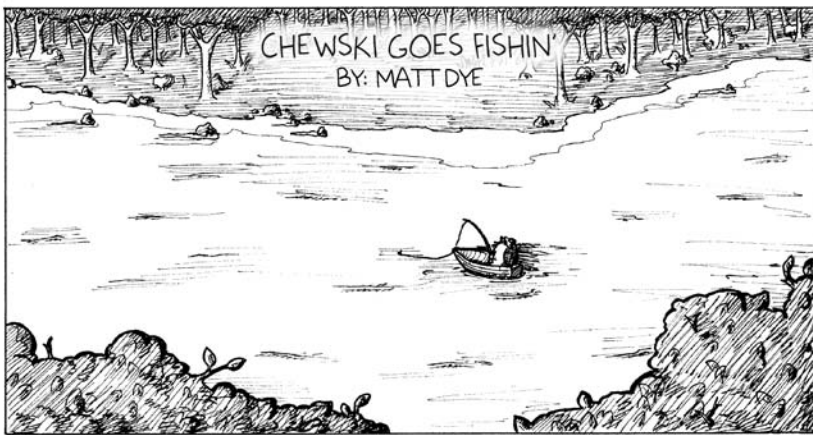
conferring over the story so far. Each person in turn adds his or her word, shouting with ownership. The story draws closer.

I reach for *girl's* arm. We stop breathing, straining to hear.

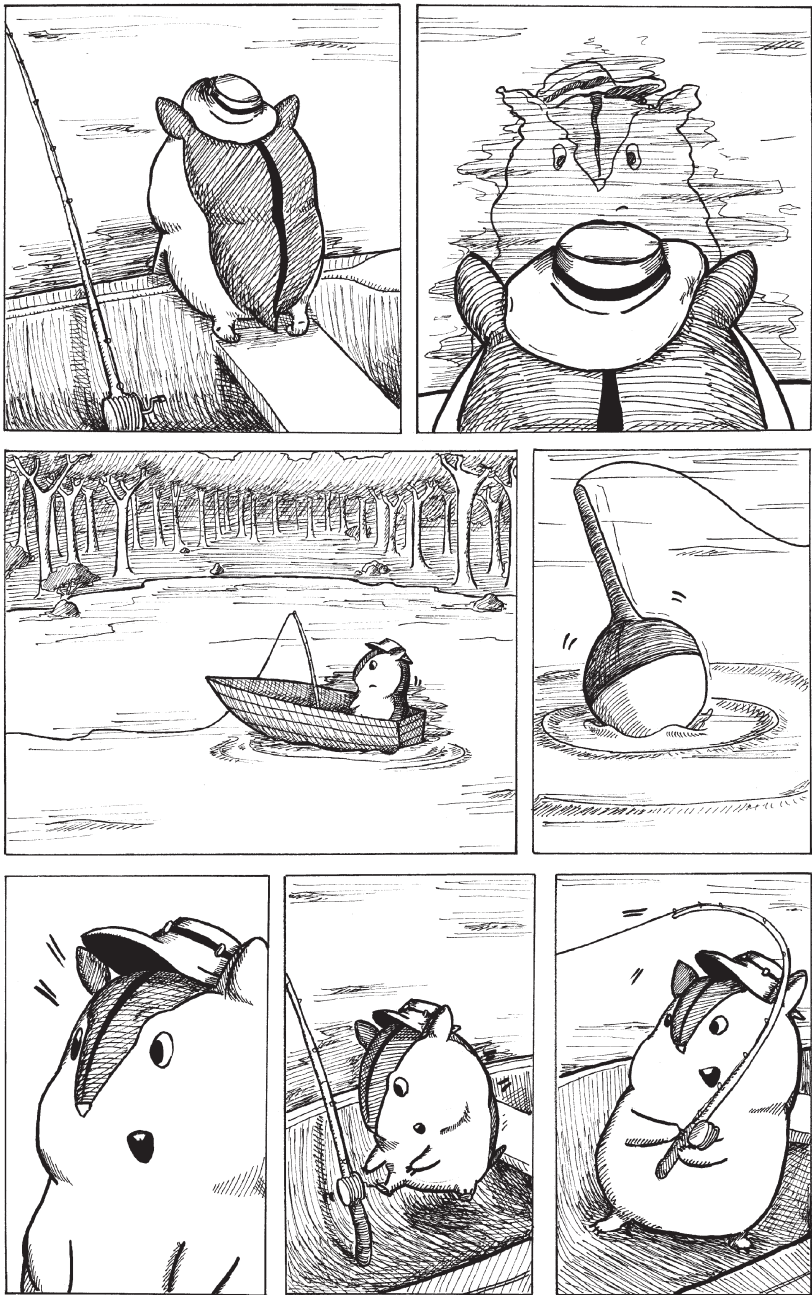


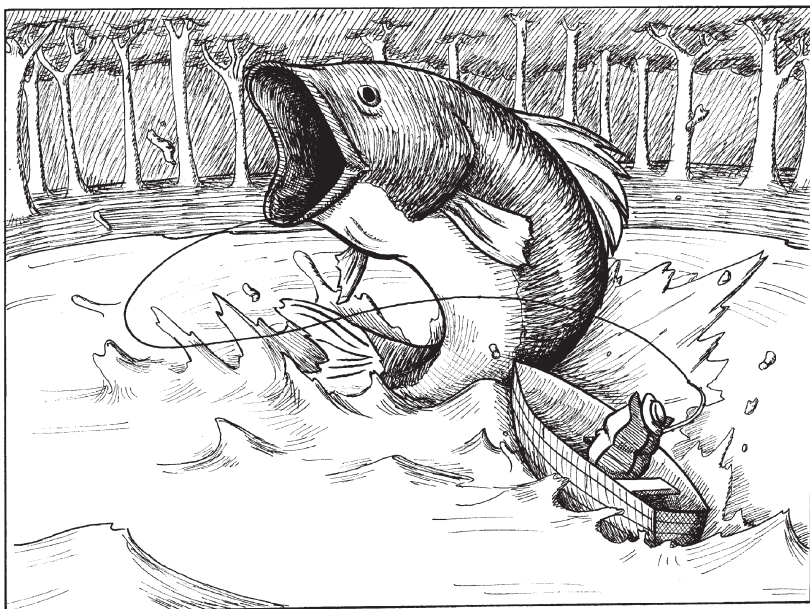
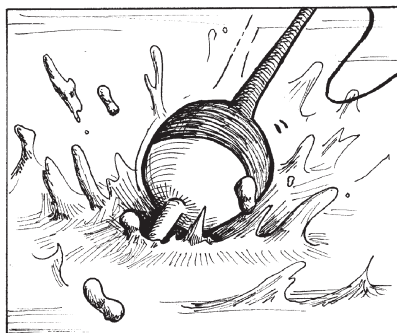
# Chewski Goes Fishin'

Matt Dye

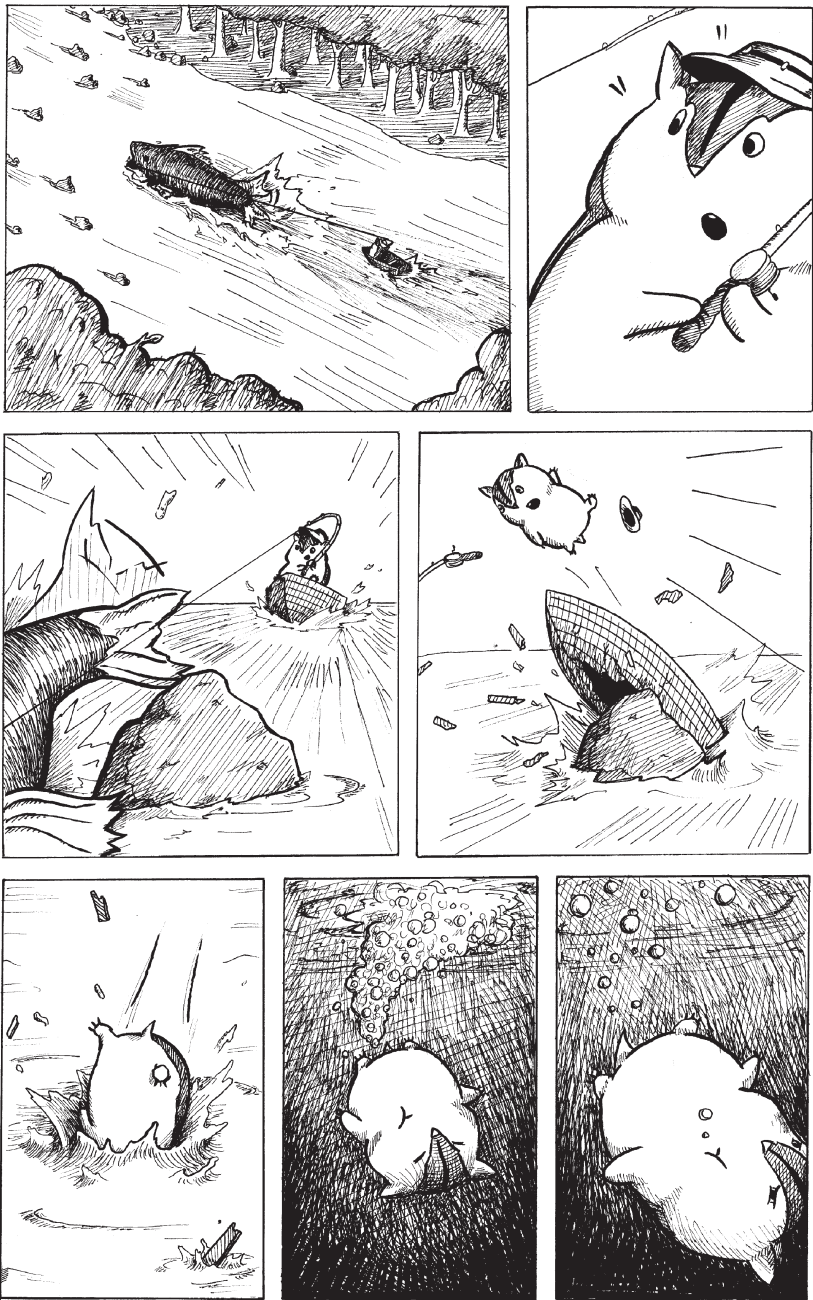


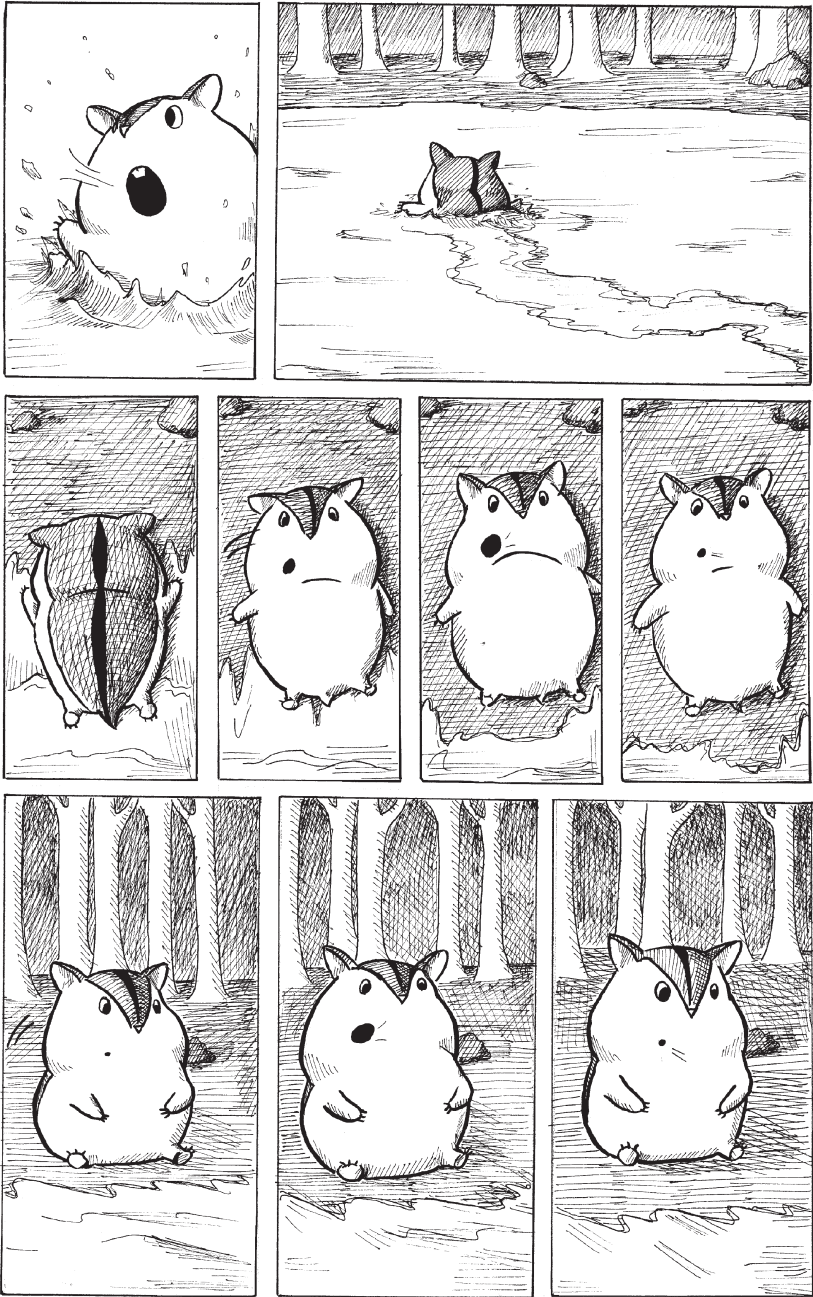
This story originally appeared in *Red Cedar Review*, Vol. 45, 2010. © 2010 Matt Dye, "Chewski Goes Fishin'"

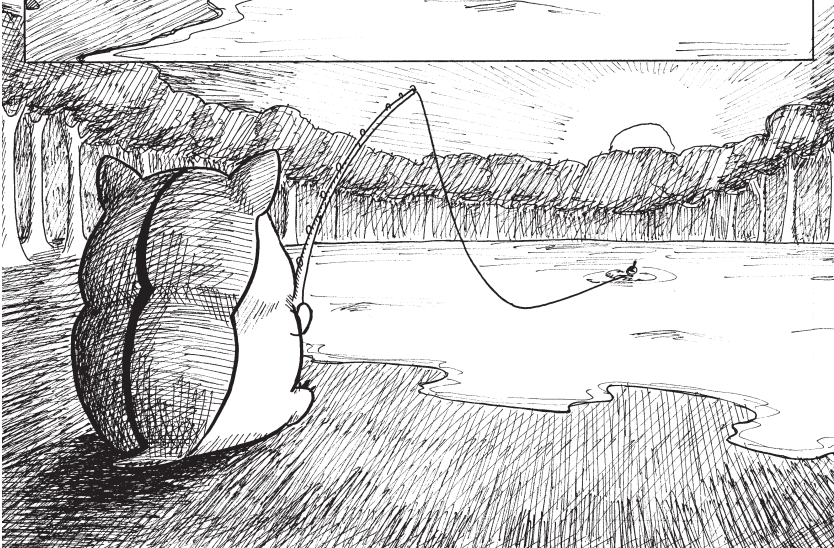
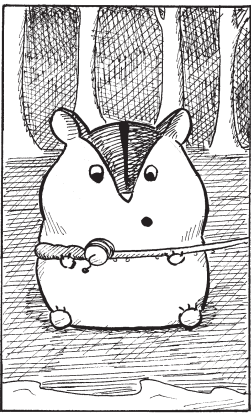
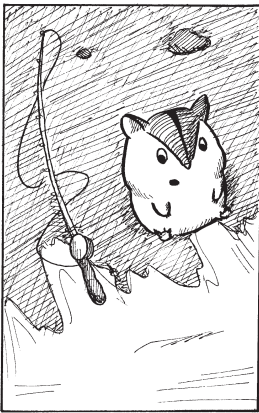






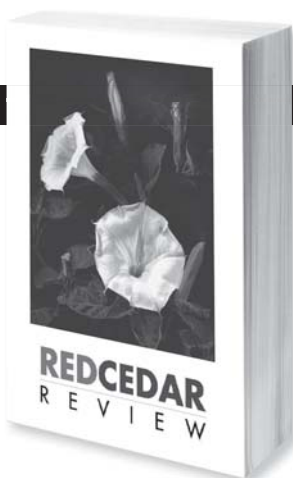












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