



EDITOR'S NOTE:

Welcome to issue 2 of Corvus Review. We are so pleased to bring you another selection of supremely talented scribes from all over the country. Whether this is their first rodeo or just a tour stop on a list of many, the writers in this issue are more than simple storytellers. They are scribes, representing many diverse facets in a broad spectrum of writing style.

This issue, as was the case with issue 1, offers a range of both poetry and prose. Truly, Corvus has something for everyone this time around.

Happy Scribbling!

Janine "Typing Tyrant" Mercer

EIC, Corvus Review

CORVUS REVIEW

Issue 2: Spring

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A Heated Discussion between Two English Gentlemen

For James Tate

Euphrates Moss

And I say to you
 And I say to *you*, sir!
 And I say to you
 And I say to *you*, sir!
 And I say to you
 And I say to *you*, sir!
 And I say to you...

My Mom's Coffee Order

Quad	4	
Grande		
Half decaf	½	
Extra hot	XH/XF	
Extra foamy		Janette
One raw sugar	1RS	
Hazelnut	H	
Latte	L	

The Sound¹

And soundness is the highest grace
 The zenith of defined completion
 The foremost object of compulsion
 The paramount necessity of all structure
 Yeats "wrote for the ear" in his verse
 When he fine-tuned the sound to perfection
 And struck lines for the eye invariably²
 Emily Dickinson found her voice in purity
 Of poems, her life, her dress, herself, etc.
 Whitman found the sound in heterodoxy
 Completely circumventing rhyme and meter
 Shakespeare found it in virtuosic wordplay
 Practically tuning language for his plays
 Joyce found it in the human menagerie
 Completely re-tooling The Odyssey for life
 Chaucer found it in the celebration of life
 The vibrancy of short stories and characters

¹ From the hills, from the clouds. Echo to Narcissus (suffixfusion), Narcissus to Reflexion (pale).

² I obviously write just as much for the eye.

And contrary to the conceits of Keats, the
Lush³,
Science is fully reconcilable with poetics
And even a boon to such happenings

Those who sleep would do so soundly
That they could rise invigorated, aware
The logician seeks fidelity and circuitry⁴
In the soundness of a given claim
Mathmeticians seek the sound
Often in the variable X
And Ex Y simply has no solution
Though life will provide hints:
The sound can be found everywhere⁵
And light: so much can be said
For eyes well that can see
Just as much can be said
For ears as well to hear:
The sound an object makes
Can tell more than the appearance.

The very worst of clichés it seems
Is to see “right through” someone or other

—As false as a note found in Mozart’s joke
score
Riddled with common amateur’s clams
No, nobody ever sees through anyone
Literally or metaphorically
But doctors always carry stethoscopes.

³ Lush verse, to be sure, but also an inveterate
imbiber of the spirits of ignorantalism.

⁴ True Premise + True Premise → True Conclusion

⁵ Not so rare, it would appear.

Friendship

Alan Swyer

"What are you up to today?" Rothbard
asked over the phone, breaking a silence that
was well into its fifth month.

"What do you have in mind?" Stern
replied.

"Lunch at the Indian place."

"I'll meet you at 1."

Though curious not just as to why – but
especially why at that particular moment –
Stern did not push, knowing that he would
find out soon enough.

Noticeably devoid of the bravado for
which he had become known, Rothbard
drifted into the restaurant nearly twenty
minutes late.

"I went brain dead," he explained,
"driving up and down Santa Monica
Boulevard like a total idiot until I
remembered the place is on Wilshire."

"It happens," Stern responded.

"Not to me. Let's hit the buffet table,
and then I'll start my tale of woe."

Together the two of them filled their
plates with rice, eggplant, curried vegetables,
and tandoori chicken, and then returned to
their booth as cups of *chai* were brought over
together with a basket of hot *naan*.

"I know you've never been a big Barb
fan –" Rothbard then began.

"Hey –"

"You've been good about it, biting your
lip –"

"C'mon -"

"And not getting pissed that you and I never see each other. But all that's over. Want to know why?"

"If you want to tell me."

Rothbard grimaced. "She wants out."

To Rothbard's surprise, Stern said nothing.

"No comment?" Rothbard inevitably asked.

"What do you want me to say?"

"You can rub it in if you want."

"No thanks.

"So what do you think of the Oakwood Apartments?"

"That your idea? Or hers?"

"She figures since they rent furnished places. And there's a pool -"

"Plus lonely souls out here for a month or two on business. Or like you, separated from their wives -"

"That bad?" asked Rothbard.

"Worse. Your kids won't want to visit. You'll be wanting to drown your sorrows or jump off a bridge. And meanwhile -"

When Stern hesitated, Rothbard put down the drumstick he was gnawing on. "Yeah?"

"Guess who will be living large on your dime."

Rothbard pondered Stern's words for a moment, then took a sip of tea. "So what do you suggest?" he asked.

"A call to a realtor I know."

An hour-and-a-half later, as he and Stern pulled up in front of a little cottage on the beach side of Pacific Coast Highway in Malibu, Rothbard shook his head.

"What's the matter?" Stern asked.

"I can't even begin to imagine what Barb would say."

"Does it matter?"

For the first time that day, Rothbard brightened. "Hell, no!"

Together, the two men got out of the car and approached the smiling realtor who was standing by the front door.

"Ron, this is Daphne," Stern said. "Daphne, Ron."

After a tour of the house and a discussion of terms, Rothbard was standing on its wooden deck overlooking the beach when Stern stepped out to join him.

"Gonna take it?" Stern asked.

"Not sure I can afford to.

"But can you afford *not* to?"

"Meaning?"

"Life's not just about bucks."

"I know, but -"

"And here's something that'll please you. Know who once rented the place?"

"Fire away."

"Koufax when he was pitching for the Dodgers."

"You're the best friend I have," Rothbard said after the lease was signed and they were back in Santa Monica. "Promise you'll come out and visit."

"Okay."

"Often?"

"Got my word," Stern said, knowing full well that even before Rothbard's wife became first a nuisance, than a road block, getting together had been a running joke for ages.

Though hardly reflective by nature, Stern found himself pondering something Rothbard said while headed back to his office. If he was indeed Rothbard's best friend, then the two of them clearly had different definitions of the word.

To Stern, Rothbard was mainly someone who'd been part of the scenery, off and on, for what felt like forever. Hailing from the same New Jersey blue collar town, they had only occasionally interacted there in anything but the most casual way. Thanks to a measure of prowess in sports – baseball, basketball, and even boxing – Stern had run with what was considered to be the *fast* crowd, whereas Rothbard had been nondescript almost to the point of being invisible.

It was only later, when the two of them found themselves 3,000 miles away from their home turf, that anything resembling a kinship began, which meant a lunch every so often, plus an occasional outing to a Dodger or Laker game.

Having driven cross-country after college with the hope of somehow making his way in the music business, Stern had gotten a

start of sorts thanks to an entry-level job working for an aging comic, which made him an unlikely guy in that universe since he was able to read without his lips moving. Next came a gig writing concert and album reviews for a trade paper, before a leap into what's known as the *reissue business*. That meant that in addition to finding hidden treasures in record companies' vaults, Stern also got to interact with long-time heroes such as Ray Charles, Solomon Burke, and Lowell Fulson, plus lesser known but far from unimportant music biz figures like Mable John, Sid Feller, Clydie King, and Hank Crawford.

During the time Stern was rising from writing introductory essays and liner notes to producing compilations, then adding additional importance by managing acts that included, during a tempestuous period, the notorious Ike Turner, Rothbard was taking a more circuitous route to the West Coast.

While toiling as a substitute teacher in working-class New Jersey towns, Rothbard suddenly got a second chance when a bachelor uncle died, bequeathing the wherewithal for his nephew to try law school. That, however, proved to be easier said than done when applications were rejected first by Seton Hall and Rutgers, then several other nearby places. Undaunted, he stumbled upon an unaccredited program in the woods of Pennsylvania that was willing to accept anyone who could walk, talk, and afford tuition.

Whether it was due to fate, karma, or just plain luck, Rothbard finished his studies just as a new test was offered to law school grads. Dubbed the Multi-State Bar Exam, it granted reciprocity to those who passed the bar in participating parts of the country.

After searching in vain for a prep course, Rothbard made what proved to be a life-changing decision. Instead of becoming one more scuffling lawyer in search of clients, he chose to create a program that would

prepare students for the test he had just taken.

After several months of work, Rothbard was elated to receive an offer from a New York publishing house. But that glee quickly evaporated when he discovered that the terms stipulated that he would receive only a pittance. Told that the alternative would be to start peddling from the trunk of his car, Rothbard decided to do exactly that. After depleting much of his remaining funds by self-publishing the study guide, off he went on an extended trek to law schools near and far, racking up thousands of miles as he crisscrossed the country in a battered old Saab.

As his business grew, and with it a tendency toward bombast that would have previously seemed unimaginable, Rothbard began to hire staffers, while simultaneously upgrading his resources by adding CDs, DVDs, then downloads and streaming. Next came a move to California, where his first step was to reconnect with Stern, not as the nonentity he once was, but as an ever more self-important entrepreneur on the rise.

"I need your help!" Rothbard implored over the phone ten days after moving into the beach house. "Indian food at 1?"

"I'll be the one attacking the buffet table," said Stern.

Though sporting a Malibu tan thanks to his new digs, once again Rothbard looked rattled when he trudged into the restaurant.

"Let's load up our plates before we blab," he said disconsolately.

Together the two men did just that, then sat down to eat.

"Tell me what I should do," Rothbard begged after wolfing down some chicken *makhani*.

"About?"

"For one thing, Barb's threatening to bring in forensic accountants."

"To find the diamonds and rubies you've got stashed in underground vaults?"

"I don't even know where the goddamn idea came from."

"How many divorced friends does she have?"

"An army."

"A happy-go-lucky bunch?"

"Happy, my ass! Most are vicious man haters."

"Not one of whom feeds advice to your soon-to-be ex-, who's probably steaming that you're not at the Oakwood Apartments."

"That's it!" Rothbard exclaimed. "So what in hell do I do?"

"Tell her you're willing to split everything fifty-fifty right down the middle without paying exorbitant fees for lawyers or accountants, forensic or otherwise."

"And if she says no?"

"Even with staff, how much of the business is ultimately you?"

"Most."

"Give me a percentage."

"For the heavy lifting? Eighty – maybe even eighty-five."

"And if the stress is getting to you?"

"Go on –"

"In addition to what's hers in a community property state, I'm sure she wants a chunk of future earnings."

"Absolutely."

"And if you're too burned out to do much work?"

"I love it!"

"Do you want to hurt her? Or simply do what's fair."

"I'm pissed, but I don't want to hurt her."

"And what about Barb? She want to play fair?"

"She wants blood," Rothbard stated. "And the crazy thing is I can't even figure out why."

"*Why* doesn't matter. Think of it as a game of tug-of-war. If you're alone against a squad of lawyers and forensic accountants, can you possibly win if you play by their rules?"

"Not a chance."

"But what happens if you change the rules?"

"How?"

"You know how in tug-of-war everything starts when someone yells *Go*?"

"Yeah."

"What if at that moment, instead of pulling, you simply let go of the rope?"

"They fall on their goddamn asses!" Rothbard said with delight.

As Rothbard's Bar Review empire grew, so too did personality traits that Stern never would have dared imagine. The quiet, thoughtful guy who seemed grateful for whatever attention he received evolved into a study in arrogance and insensitivity, throwing his weight around more and more by overstepping, over-tipping, and over-reacting.

Driving flashy cars, and sporting clothes more suited for a GQ model than for a pudgy, balding guy like him, his behavior became increasingly problematic for Stern.

Yet even as Stern was attributing his discomfort to Rothbard's changes in attitude and behavior, there was a part of him that could not help but wonder whether something else troubled him even more. Where historically there had been an imbalance in their relationship, with Stern, first as the jock who moved with the in-crowd, then as a youngster on the rise in the music biz, very much the alpha dog, Rothbard's ever-increasing affluence had created a seismic shift. Thanks to an ever-burgeoning empire that came to include an office in Manhattan plus a building in downtown Santa Monica, Rothbard, when it came to both money and influence, was on top.

Any misgivings Stern was having with the ugly side of Rothbard's metamorphosis surged even further when Barb came into the picture.

In contrast to the members of the bimbo circuit with whom Rothbard, who had never before had success with women, had been making up for lost time, Barb, whom he met while teaching a seminar in Cedar Rapids, was focused, clever, and driven. Recognizing an opportunity, her first move was to sweet talk her way into what had been Rothbard's bachelor pad in Venice. Then, just a couple of months later, the new couple moved into a house in nearby Pacific Palisades.

All the while, Barb deftly maneuvered a path into a vastly different, and far more upscale, social whirl. With her successfully distancing Rothbard from those who had been part of his single life, it was far from shocking that Stern received no invitation either to the wedding that took place in Iowa, or to the subsequent celebratory party in LA.

Though in some ways relieved, Stern could nonetheless not help but feel a measure of pique. While never actually voicing his displeasure, he ducked a couple of calls from Rothbard, then found excuses to turn down several requests and invitations.

It was only six months later that he finally relented, accompanying Rothbard to Staples to see the Lakers get beat by the Spurs. Then came a series of once-in-a-blue-moon lunches, which became even more infrequent after first a daughter, then a son were added to the Rothbard brood. Then came the period with zero communication until Rothbard finally broke the silence.

"Please come out and celebrate with me," Rothbard implored six weeks-and-a-half weeks later.

"The divorce is finalized?"

"Yup, and I'm a free man."

Not having been to that part of the world since the initial trip to the beach house, Stern arrived at an Italian place in time to see Rothbard play Mayor of Malibu. Between the glad-handing, the schmoozing, and the kisses, Stern had precious little appetite when at last the two of them were seated.

"You were really there for me," Rothbard announced.

"Hey -"

"Hey, nothing. And I'll never forget it."

"So onto the next chapter?"

Rothbard nodded. "And you won't believe what it is. Ready?"

"Fire away."

"Somebody made an offer for my company."

"That's great."

"And the beautiful part is that Barb won't see a dime. Which proves?"

"You tell me."

"Karma is some powerful shit!"

Snapping his fingers, Rothbard imperiously demanded immediate attention from a waiter.

"Champagne for me and my friend," he bellowed. "Make it Cristal!"

Had the evening ended soon after, perhaps Stern would have gone home without a terrible taste in his mouth. But by the end of the third bottle, he was beyond mortified by Rothbard's relentlessly overbearing behavior.

Recognizing that everything in the world is finite, Stern understood that his relationship with Rothbard, which was tenuous in the best of times, had finally reached its end.

A Small, Good Day

Mark McKee

Business is bustling inside Chuck E. Cheese. A kid you don't know just won a hundred points in skee ball and the red globe on top of the game is whirling madly. On stage in front of you Chuck E. Cheese himself is doing a soft-shoe routine with a very fake, but no less animated, man-in-a-gorilla-suit. The waiter, a kid bigger than you (but a kid just the same), hurried away with your order five minutes ago and between soft-shoe scuffles you cast glances over your shoulder, hoping the 10" pie with everything will not be long in coming.

Because you're hungry.

You hesitate to use the word because, frankly, it always strikes you as disgusting, but nevertheless it is the only way in which to describe the fleshy teeth gnawing at your belly: ravenous, you are ravenously hungry, which is strange because you had three pancakes and two patties of sausage not two hours ago for breakfast.

But its been that way the last few days. A growing hunger. And to make matters worse, things have, on the whole, stopped making sense. Just now, the older kid with the pimples, the one who took your order, you asked him for--you shake your head in embarrassment at how stupid it must've sounded to him; and before he stepped up you had already rehearsed your order twice in your head, but no--he said, "May I take your order," and you having practiced, said not "A ten inch pie with everything" but "Dabbled dream frog nine timber," and you gasped, blushed, knew you had totally muffed it up and began to try again only to find you couldn't remember what messages to send to your brain in order to make your tongue move--in fact, what was a tongue, again? But you recovered and after an inquisitive glance the waiter shuffled away, carrying his pimples with him.

The kid at the skee ball table has moved to Whack-a-Mole, beating senseless with his cushioned mallet the heads of molded plastic beings. As you watch the frenzy, his shape begins to change. He becomes a shape of orange light, blinding you as not only he, but your entire field of vision flashes bright white, blinks, shudders, shifts, dances, and then he is clear again, still beating the molded plastic with a cushioned mallet.

This has been happening frequently too. Along with the fact that things have stopped making sense, your eyes, your tongue, and your mental state appear to be failing you too. And for a second there, though you're loath to admit it, that kid with the mallet, the one whacking moles, he began to look almost...dead. His skin gray, hanging from his face in strips, the muscle long since rotted away, his blackened teeth peeking through a gaping hole where his cheek should be. But now that you look at him, he looks just like you. And you're right as rain.

Your stomach gnaws. The pungent scent of tomato sauce and cheese is about to send you from ravenous to I-could-eat-someone, anyone, when you see the kid with the pimples, his arms held aloft, a large round disc balancing atop one hand, swinging and twisting through the running children as he makes his way to your table. Your pie. You can finally calm that gnawing in your stomach.

"Your pie, sir," the kid says with an air. He sits it down in front of you. "Garnish?" he asks, brandishing a small shaker from his apron.

You shake your head no.

"Enjoy your pie," he says and begins the trek back to the kitchen--when you begin to scream, "My mother! My mother!!!" as before your eyes the pizza you've been relishing has turned into the desiccated head of your

mother. Though you will laugh about it later, the first thought--what made me think it?--after closing your mouth, the scream cut short as the waiter rushes back to your table, is: Wonder where Dad is? Because they have both been dead a year. Two of the first victims of the plague.

And the waiter grabs your eight-year-old arms and puts his chalk-white face in front of yours and says, "What? What is it?" And you say, "That's my mother's head! My mother's head is on the pizza pan where my pizza should be!" And the waiter drops his arms, but keeps his face close to yours as he says, "You feelin' okay, kid? I mean..."

And your mother's head speaks to you, the right side of the jaw hanging loose from its hinge, and says, "Christopher? Christopher, listen, it's okay, honey. This is the way it's supposed to be--"

And the waiter looks at her, interrupts: "Hey, kid. What's a matter? You know we eat our dead. The government said so. How else are we supposed to get rid of them? There's a pile behind the building that'll feed us for a month--"

#

Because you have, in your short eight years, always looked at the world through rose-colored glasses, a proverbial and literal childlike mind, and because the molecular structure of that mind has been metamorphosing over the last several months, you have failed to notice the rapid changes in your immediate environment.

But today is a good day.

Today you have learned to see things as they really are.

Dear Paul
Grove Koger

3 June 2015
Dear Paul,

I hope that this letter finds you in good health, at least as good as it can be at your age—meaning *our* age, of course. After all, who else but people our age writes letters anymore?

I understand that next Friday afternoon the authorities are going to come clean in some sort of press conference. That's Greenwich Mean Time, so I'll have a chance for a drink or two and a leisurely lunch. Presumably you've heard the same thing, so it really doesn't matter whether this reaches you beforehand. And probably it won't; I've been waiting for a package from the States for over three months now. I regret not having a computer, or whatever might have taken the computer's place since the last time I looked, but I don't suppose I'll be picking up one at this point.

In any case, there have been more than enough signs, haven't there? I climbed up onto the roof last night with a bottle of grappa to watch, well—whatever those things are. But the lightning drove me back inside. I thought it was frightening enough over Lake Geneva that summer, but to see a bolt stretch from one horizon to the other and then smell the waves of ozone roll over you was more than I could deal with. (I can't help but remember how you and Jane and I used to crawl out her window onto the battlements with a few joints. God how I miss her! Which I hope—despite everything that's happened—you'll have the good grace to let me to say.)

But getting back to the situation here, everybody is on edge, although they still lift their caps to you—those who are left, that is. Earlier this week I watched a poor fellow, he must have been at wit's end, beat his donkey with his belt in the street. Then the next thing you know he's weeping and embracing the

poor beast, which had stood there mutely the whole time. Even the damn gulls seem to know something's changed. They're not flying. Fine fall days like these and they're not flying. Silent too. Of course they're seeing the same things that we are.

Arrivederci,
Grove

It all reminds me of those apocalyptic stories that J.G. used to write, and that we laughed off at the time. What a pity he isn't here—or, presumably, anywhere—to enjoy the show.

I've just finished laying in some basics: a keg of wine, beans and rice, a crock of those olives you two liked so much, a bushel of apples for the cellar. Amazingly enough the building's cistern still functions. There's an old man living nearby, and I suppose he'll continue making deliveries as long as there's anything left to deliver. Or perhaps he'll disappear like so many others. There seems to be a tendency in a situation like this for people to head for the hills or the beach. In this case it's the hills, where several hundred people have taken up residence in caves. I wish them luck.

I'm not a particularly violent man, so I don't own anything in the way of weapons, although there's a lug wrench in the rental. If I remember correctly, you used to hunt, so you may be better prepared than I am over here. Perhaps you'll find some sort of closure in the news. I hope it's something worth waiting for, some kind of *solution*. Wouldn't that be grand?

Well, I'll definitely have that drink. Or drinks. A Negroni or two, maybe—the kind of thing I don't normally order, particularly in the middle of the day. There's a place down near the quay that has a television and claims to make the best Negronis on the coast. Friday may be the day for some. I was thinking about catching a taxi, but on reflection, I think I'll take the rental. It may be a good afternoon to have a car—and a wrench.

People Skills

Paul Lewellan

"Sometimes the goose crap is so thick on the sidewalk you think you're ice skating."

Hank looked up. The well-groomed bearded man standing in front of him wore a thick black wool overcoat, a dark red tartan scarf wrapped twice around his neck, and a black leather cowboy hat tipped at a rakish angle.

Hank nodded to the fifty-something stranger. "Walking on the grass is worse because of the dog crap."

"Scylla and Charybdis. Odysseus's choice."

"Exactly so. Two possible courses of action, both bad." Hank motioned to the empty spot on the park bench beside him. "Care to join me?"

"I wasn't sure you wanted company."

"Normally I keep my own counsel. This morning I could use a friend." Hank slid over to make room. "I'm Hank. Hank Briggs."

"Thomas Whellin. Tommy." Neither man offered to shake hands. "Damned cold out here."

"Not cold enough to freeze the lagoon." Hank pointed to the geese swimming from the open water toward the shore. A young couple in matching yellow and black Columbia parkas had brought stale Sara Lee White Bread to feed them. Hank recognized the female as the daughter of one of his neighbors. "The geese aren't complaining."

"I'm not complaining either, just stating a fact." Tommy looked out on the lagoon. It covered the area of a city block, ringed by a sidewalk with dark green park benches set at uniform intervals. All the benches faced the lagoon.

Copeland Creek defined the park's eastern boundary. Beyond the creek the oaks

in Pierpont Woods were dropping the last of their fall foliage. A cinderblock building at the far end of the lagoon provided restrooms in the summer when farmers' markets, band concerts, and Frisbee golf tournaments populated the park. In the winter, when the lagoon froze, the building served as a warming house for Pee Wee Hockey and Middle School skating parties.

"I like your hat," Hank said. "Don't know that I've ever seen one exactly like it."

"It's a jackaroo hat, made from kangaroo leather. Jackaroos are Australian cowboys. I found it in an empty bathroom stall in Darwin. Been wearing it ever since. It's my good luck hat."

"Ever get this cold in Darwin?"

"Never. Certainly not in December. That's summer there. Probably 32 degrees Celsius today—88 degrees Fahrenheit." Tommy glanced over again at Hank. "I can't help but notice that you didn't dress for the cold."

"The pajamas are flannel."

"Fair enough."

Hank wore powder blue flannel pajamas, a black and orange Chicago Bears sweatshirt, brown slippers, white socks, and a Chicago Blackhawks stocking cap. He'd wrapped a brown striped sleeping bag around himself.

"Left the house in a hurry." He motioned to a large two-story steel-gray Cape Cod style home down the block. A late model Ford Taurus was parked in the drive beside a gleaming new metallic red BMW X3. "Couldn't find where I'd dropped my coat last night. I was distracted at the time."

"Distracted?"

"Woman trouble," Hank said as he buried himself deeper into the sleeping bag,

tucking his legs up under him. "Thought the cold would clear my head."

Hank looked back to the couple in the matching parkas. The man was dressed in faded Levis while the woman wore black tights and a black wool skirt. They had on matching Keen hiking boots. After she'd emptied her bag of bread, the girl kissed her companion. The young man returned the kiss and then pulled her into his body. "Oh my!" Hank said under his breath. He turned back to Tommy. "At least you're dressed for the cold. Get that coat around here?"

"Hardly. I won it in a cribbage game from a rancher in Aukland. He claimed to have produced the wool for it, but I didn't believe him. Inferior herds, from what I could see. But then I was only in New Zealand a few weeks."

"And the scarf?"

"It's a Whellin clan tartan from Wales. A gift from a parson's wife I met in Tallinn."

"Tallinn? Is that in Wales?"

"No. Estonia, lovely country, the twenty-first century nestled in medieval stone."

"So, what are you doing in Iowa?"

"Visiting my daughter and her family." Tommy pointed to a beige split-level bordering Copeland Creek. "Discovered this morning that they blame me for my wife's death two years." He hesitated. "A skiing accident in Nepal," he told Hank as if that exonerated him. "I decided to take a walk with friends."

The only other people in the park were the young couple, their lips locked, struggling to unzip each other's parka. "Friends?"

Tommy tapped the left side of his overcoat. "Rum." He tapped the right side. "Rye. Your choice."

"Rum."

"Excellent." Tommy unbuttoned three buttons and reached inside his overcoat. "Twenty-five-year-old Ron Zacapa." He extracted the bottle and handed it to Hank. "World-class liquor deserves quality glassware." He reached into the coat again and removed two glasses. "Waterford crystal." He put his finger up to his lips. "Sh-h-h-h-h. My daughter's glasses."

Tommy held out the glasses while Hank poured the golden brown liquid. "Judged the world's finest aged rum three years running." He handed a glass to Hank. The rum smelled of caramel and spices, cocoa and smoked vanilla.

They clicked glasses. The Guatemalan rum had a syrupy consistency, but tasted like a well-aged cognac. Tommy finished his drink first and set the glass down on the bench. "So, tell me about your woman problems. I'm a bit of an expert."

"First, you need to know I'm a jobber. I supply grocery stores with nonfood items. Got hooked on the grocery business in high school when I was a bagger at National Tea. Lost my virginity in the cooler to the deli manager, Olivia Townsend, who was in my mother's canasta group."

Hank set down his empty glass, and Tommy poured another round. "After that I couldn't shake the allure of the food business even after six very profitable years in industrial linens."

Hank began to sip again as he spoke. "I met my wife, Peg, in the express lane at Hy-Vee. We courted while she went through management training and married when she was transferred to the produce department on Devil's Glenn Road. She left me when she discovered that our home freezer was filled with quality cuts of beef because I was having an affair with Denise Blouter, a butcher at the Fareway store on 53rd Street."

“So, when did this happen?”

“We divorced three years ago. But then last Friday my ex- and I had a tryst on the loading dock of Garden Valley Produce before the day shift started. Peg’s the manager there now. She’s also dating one of the partners. He knows nothing about food. He’s just a money man.”

“So I take it that’s his new BMW parked in your drive? And that Peg is part of your woman problems?”

Hank was startled. “Why, yes, it is. How’d you know?”

“You don’t strike me as the BMW type. Too ostentatious.”

“Exactly right.” Hank felt the need to explain. “I drive a five-year-old Nissan Murano with 230,000 miles on it. Runs like a top.”

Tommy nodded as if he understood perfectly. “So, one part of your woman trouble equation is that your ex-wife borrowed her boyfriend’s Beamer to pop in, unannounced, for a quickie on a Sunday morning, and someone other than you met her at the door.” He swirled the aged rum gently in the crystal tumbler.

“Something like that,” Hank admitted sullenly. As he sipped the rum he tried to shake off the imagines of that confrontation in the living room.

Hank turned back to the young couple. The woman’s parka hood had slipped off her head exposing a mass of auburn curls. The young man whispered something in her ear. She stepped back and slapped him. They started arguing. She refused to let the man touch her.

“So, who met Peg at the door?” Tommy felt the effects of the second rum. He was drinking too quickly. Still, when the glasses were empty, he poured a third drink before putting the bottle back in his coat.

“As a jobber I go to a wide range of stores from the high end to the discounters,” Hank explained. “Six weeks ago I went to the Save-A-Lot down on River Drive. First thing I noticed was that they had a new checker: Madeline. Actually, she checks, does some stocking, and is the backup bookkeeper on weekends. She’s mid-forties and shows some wear, but we clicked right off.”

Tommy took another look at the man beside him. His hair was thinning, but even wrapped in a sleeping bag wearing blue flannel pajamas he was very handsome. “You seem to have a way with women.”

“I can see through the surface to the true woman below.” The quarreling lovers distracted Hank. “Probably comes from my years in sales.”

“So what drew you to the woman at the Save-A-Lot?”

“Madeline.”

“Yes, what attracted you to Madeline?”

“That’s just it, most guys wouldn’t give her a second look.” He shook his head to clear it from the cold and the rum. “She was in an old red Wisconsin Badgers sweatshirt, faded Wrangler jeans, and black yellow Converse high tops she found at the Salvation Army clothing center. But it’s Save-A-Lot, so nobody dresses up there.”

Hank observed that the voices of the arguing couple had softened, and the social distance between them had narrowed. A moment later, the young woman took the man’s hand and led him over to a park bench. For just a moment she looked in Hank’s direction and waved. The couple began kissing again.

Hank watched the young man respond to the woman’s advances. Perhaps he’d been too impatient before, or else felt uncomfortable because of the cold or the old

men who stood watching them. He'd rushed things.

"Anyway, after I'd finished my business with the manager at the Save-A-Lot, I picked up a quart of 2%."

"Milk?"

"A conversation starter. I paid for it in coins to give more time to strike up a conversation. I found out that Madeline lived in an apartment over the Living Art Tattoo Gallery. She walked to work and everywhere else. She was in rehab. I think there were a couple DWIs and some jail time, although she hasn't fully confided in me. But she's very professional in the store."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, despite her obvious attraction to me she was hesitant to go out with a jobber. You know, someone who does business with the store. But I finally convinced her a couple weeks ago to go to a concert at the Redstone Room. Turns out that she loves Jimmy Thackery and the Drivers. I had to promise her AA sponsor not to let her buy beer, and I stuck by it. We made love in the back seat of my Nissan in the Third Street parking ramp. I think she was too embarrassed to let me see her tiny apartment and didn't want to invite me in."

"She had her pride," Tommy said. The two young people were still not touching, but he noted that their body language had changed. She was leaning in toward him, her head slightly tilted. "So, then what's your woman problem? Are you being forced to choose between Madeline and your ex-wife Peg?"

"Not really. Actually, it's Rochelle that I've asked to marry me." Hank picked up the third glass of rum and slipped again. "My this is smooth. Never had anything like it."

"Who's Rochelle?"

"That's just it. I met her the same day I met Madeline. I drove from the Save-A-Lot to Schnuck's on Middle Road. Upscale. High-end service. Very different from the West Side markets. Strictly suburban. I was setting up a new end cap display of imported Christmas ornaments, and I got the message that the new day manager, Rochelle, wanted to see me. I found her in the office wearing a red power suit, and black, sensible short-heeled Free Spirits. Turns out she came to the grocery game late in her career. She worked as a flight attendant for Delta until she saved enough to finish college. Got her degree in Business, and then was a pharmaceutical rep for Pfizer for six years. Went back and got her executive MBA at Wash U and wound up in Schnuck's management training program by lying about her age. By the time they found out she was over forty, she'd won their hearts."

"Rochelle sounds like an amazing woman."

Hank downed the rest of the rum. "Yes, if it weren't for her commitment problems."

"Commitment problems?"

"Yes." Hank shook his head. The young couple began kissing. He suspected that if it were after dark on a warm July night rather than 10:00 a.m. on a late November Sunday, they would soon be making love on the bench. He turned back to Tommy. "She told me she wasn't ready to settle down."

"But you just met her six weeks ago." Hank shrugged off the criticism "And you've had sex with two other women during that time period."

"Five other women actually. Not that it matters."

"Oh, but it does matter." Tommy had met men like Hank before. The last time was in Guatemala City nine months ago. It was at a party sponsored by Cervecería Centro

"You're the one with the commitment problem." Tommy drained the tumbler of rum and motioned for Hank to do the same.

"I think I can help." Tommy stood up and put his daughter's crystal back safely into his coat pockets. "You need to introduce me to your houseguests before they leave."

"I don't understand." Hank gathered up the sleeping bag he'd been wrapped in. He was unsteady, probably from the three shots of rum he'd rapidly ingested, but possibly from the prospect of facing the women waiting back at his house. "What do you plan to do?"

"I'm Tommy Whellin," he said by way of explanation. "That name obviously means nothing to you. But if you were to approach that young woman over there," he said motioning to the couple who were now repositioning themselves on the bench, "she would tell you all about me."

"I don't understand."

"I'm a consultant. Marriage and relationship counseling. I've published a dozen books. I have a syndicated column. I appear regularly on Dr. Oz, Ellen, and the Daily Show. I travel the world giving advice to troubled lovers with deep pockets and poor people skills."

Hank listened to Tommy's pitch, but he couldn't stop staring at the young couple. They'd opened their parkas and the woman had climbed onto the man's lap facing him, her legs spread, her knees pressed against the back of the bench. The young man looked nervously at the two men, but Hank gestured that they were leaving. Indeed Tommy had already turned toward Hank's house.

Hank imagined the woman unbuckling her lover's belt and unzipping his pants. He imagined her lifting her skirt and tearing at her black tights. He imagined her rising up and then thrusting down to impale herself on her lover. Forty years ago, that

young man could have been Hank. Life was less complicated then.

Hank felt the cold through his flannel pajama bottoms. He hurried to catch up with Tommy. "What's the plan?"

Tommy didn't slow down. "I'll just work my magic."

"I can't pay you," he said dragging the sleeping bag behind him.

"Oh, I think you can." Tommy stopped. He adjusted his jackaroo hat. "I'll trade my expertise for yours. You know how to attract women. I know how to retain them." Hank thought about that for a moment. It made a certain perverse sense.

"Hank, I am registered for the Million Dollar Texas Hold 'Em Tournament at the casino this week. I fly out next Sunday. That's all the time we'll need." He thrust out his right hand. "Deal?"

"Deal." Hank said.

"So, when we step inside that door," Tommy said, motioning to the front of the Cape Cod home, "who will we find there?"

"Madeline. We had a date Saturday night. She was embarrassed because she had no proper clothes to go out. So I cooked her a steak dinner on the grill, sautéed mushrooms, and my famous Caesar salad. Perrier, no alcohol. We planned to watch movies by the fire and pop popcorn over the dying embers."

"But...?"

"How did you know there was a *but*?"

"People pay me to know these things," he said, dismissing him. Then Tommy thought better of it. "It was your paralinguage. I can teach you the basics of reading it."

"Unfortunately, earlier in the day, I had suggested to Rochelle that I would be

spending Saturday night alone. She had to work late, but on a whim swung by after her shift."

Tommy was amazed. "On a whim?"

"Well, that's what she said." They were almost to the door. "But she'd packed an overnight bag, an assortment of lingerie, three bottles of wine, and a six-pack of porn DVDs. From her years as a pharmaceutical rep, she'd learned a few things about pleasing men."

"So what happened when she showed up unannounced?"

"Madeline wanted to leave, but she didn't want me to drive her. She had no cab fair, and the busses had stopped running at six." Tommy waited for the rest. "Rochelle suggested that I take a walk around the lagoon. She offered to help Madeline with the supper dishes before she gave her a ride home."

Hank resisted the urge to glance back at the young couple on the park bench. "By the time I'd returned from the walk they'd uncorked a bottle of Burgundy, changed into lingerie, and started watching a chick flick on my 60" Sony." He shook his head. "Rochelle is an amazing woman. When my ex-wife let herself in this morning, Peg found the three of us curled up by the fire."

"And?"

"Rochelle suggested that I take another walk while she made breakfast for the four of us."

"I can see why you'd want to marry her."

"She is definitely a problem solver." Hank hesitated. "Since your wife died, do you like traveling alone, or would you prefer company?"

"Definitely company. I have great people skills, but I have a terrible time

meeting women." Tommy noted Hank's body language. "Why do you ask?"

"It's just that Madeline loves to travel, but never has any money because she's always attracted to the wrong kind of men. She has a passport that she's never used, but she'd need a new wardrobe."

"You said she had a lot of miles."

"Highway miles. She's a classic. A collector's edition in the hands of the right man."

Tommy shrugged. "You're the expert." He motioned toward the door. "Lead the way."

"What about your daughter? Won't she wonder where you've gone?"

"My daughter will miss her crystal glasses before she misses me. Besides, my granddaughter will let her know."

"Your granddaughter?"

Tommy turned back to the lagoon. The lovers were zipping up their parkas. The woman looked over to where the two old men had gone. She hesitated and then she waved again.

"My granddaughter," he pointed.

The front door to Hank's house opened and a beautiful brunette stuck her head out. "It's about time you got back. Breakfast is ready." Rochelle recognized Tommy from his last appearance on *Live with Kelly and Michael*. "Just the person we need to work things out. There are plenty of scrambled eggs to go around, and I've uncorked a lovely Shiraz."

The Smell of the Leaves

Anne Britting Oleson

Sweet and sour is the smell of nostalgia,
as one memory after another
flutters its fiery orange way
to the hard dead ground of autumn.

I gather the leaves to me, as many
as I can hold in my palms,
examining each ravenously,
reliving the greenness, wanting it back.
I trace the veins with a trembling finger,
much as I have the lifeblood
flowing inside my wrist.

Desire. I press my face
into my treasures, breathing
that delicate line between
ripeness and rot, wondering
why the most gorgeous of all things
are more often than not the saddest.

Rosemount Trattoria

I want to say it was raining. Was it?
Yet when we sat at the scarred table
in the back, between a dusty ficus
and the Coke machine, the better to study
the menu board over the counter,
I don't remember being wet,
I don't remember shedding jackets.

The Italian lady, round and dark-haired,
tumbled her words at you, waving them
onward with butterfly hands,
and you nodded and nodded,
smiled and suggested the fish.
Looks a dive, you'd said, as
we'd approached the narrow storefront,
the faded green awning, *but*
it's fast and filling and cheap.

Now the proprietress sets
thick white plates before us,
a slab of fish, peas rolling
like pin balls, and even here,
on this tape-mended chair,
where I'm trying to remember *not*
to shift my fork from hand to hand,
I'm memorizing everything:

the brawny arms of the cook
 behind the counter, the two men
 in coveralls buying cannoli,
 the scuffed green and white floor tiles,
 the lazy circles of the overhead fan—
 so I can hold onto this, always,
 what this lunch was like,
 with you, tapping my elbow,
 admonishing me to clean my plate.

(for Stephen)

If You Find No Poem (V3)
 Michael Lee Johnson

If you find
 no poem on
 your doorstep
 in the morning,
 no paper, no knock on your door,
 your life poorly edited
 but no broken dashes
 or injured meter-

if you do not wear white
 satin dresses late in life
 embroidered with violet
 flowers on the collar;
 nor do you have
 burials daily
 across main street-

if no one whispers
 in your ear, Emily Dickinson-
 you feel alone-
 but not reclusive-
 the sand child
 still sleeping in your eyes-
 wiping your tears away-

if you find
 no poem on
 your doorstep-
 you know
 you are not from New England.

Scotties

Sandra Anfang

I remember the pair of Scotty dogs
we once bought in a bathroom vending
machine
that day mother was in a good mood.

I can hear the grinding of gears
in the machine's steel jaw
the turnstile groaning as it released
the cellophane packet into my eager hands:
a pair of magnets gripping two pups, one
white, one black.

How surprised I felt at the force of their pull
foot to foot they married
tail to tail repelled each another
as if an invisible shield had been wedged
between them.

I wondered if the colored bathrooms sold
these too
if they even housed vending machines
besides the nickel Modess boxes...because

we remind me of those Scotties
famished hearts tunnel deep into each other's
arms
our lust for love that bordered on addiction.

Your pursuit of light eschewed the shadows
my need to mine the darkness
for the rich humus of pain
scattered us to distant poles.

How powerful the repulsion
the equal and opposite reaction
to the attraction.

Tic

It flickers with the quiet of a browning
incandescent bulb

no lightning overture announces the tiny
wince at the corner of her eye.

It scans the crowd for danger

a periscope gone mad with vigilance

a gift from her brain, the red outline of her
mother's palm

welding body and soul

in the mine shaft of that house of pain.

No more beloved canary was ever lifted in its
iron cage

set down among the detritus of imploded
rage

left to weather the tests and accusations

as the oxygen grew thinner in that

cylinder of pain.

Later, she would wear it proudly

a hard-won badge; it helped her sort

the worthy from the ignoble

let them know she'd been selected

for the one-time honor

of being exactly who she was.

Heard In Quick Passing

Richard Fein

She is at least six months along.

And his eyes dreamily follow an iridescent
butterfly.

Her belly is a curved fullness. Her face oh so
pretty.

And he holds on tight to his earth mother
goddess,

while strolling through this narrow botanical
garden path.

June red roses blaze bright.

But she is biting her bloody lip,
and no dreamy smile is on her face.

This phalanx of two ignores me as I approach.
How can I pass by them?

But suddenly she pushes his arm aside
and does an awkward pirouette away from
him.

I pass through this broken unity.

That iridescent butterfly flies from his vision
to mine

and dances directly in front of me.

Behind me I hear a whisper. Behind me I hear
soft sobs.

"Don, the baby isn't yours, isn't yours."

Branding

Wendy T. Carlisle

I watch too much television, although I do get a lot from the news like last night on 60 Minutes when that actor said he looks for the day when the signifier "black" disappears: no more Black History Month. No Black Power. The language of separation will not exist; will have passed to the place where colored water fountains now abide. I see too many movies too, eat up empty afternoons with the flickering faces of loners and cowboy lovers, alternate, silent, fearful of the price of being different which will be a needless, unnecessary fear in the new world of no designations, without pigeonholes. I think of this future, a novel kindness of alike and with. I call to it and know it as a better friend, a peace without epithet. And I only sometimes wonder how we will identify and misidentify ourselves, how we will hunger to be loved for who we are. What will we do without labels in that silence we do not now recognize which may only later seem to be our name?

The Rain

It rains, has rained, for five days, our sheets perpetually damp. The rain does a slow release, sounds like palming Saran Wrap, sounds like a love noise, the splash like the movement of fingers between thighs, like the whoosh of a silk cami dropping, like the onomatopoeic word for slip. Too wet to go outside, too nasty to walk, we choose sex while the weather ushers in a new season, its leaf and puddle, we listen to the push and suck of wind, the systole and diastole of spring.

Signs in a Hot Climate

In and out of a southern childhood the signs of drunks are ever-present, but gray-faced fall is the best season for them when stoned misunderstandings, big as billboards, scrape across town on the keen edge of a rainstorm, soaking the lawn, unearthing a stashed bottle or two. Each Halloween northern birds blow back to us, wet & messy, gulls hunch on the jetty & elephant ears cluster up to the chain link bowing to the rain.

Everywhere the same boozy weather, rain outside and in the café, a table of women, back from the Fairfield cattle sale, hoists tequila and faces down three dusty flagmen, drinking Jim Beam and whispering across the aisle. The men consider the treachery of women times three. The women simmer and giggle. The tables put up with each other like first cousins; everybody chews and stares.

Stop! Burma Shave! RR Xing! Impeach Earl Warren!!! I've seen the signs. I know the names of hometown birds and Bourbon brands. In any climate, I can spot the 5-finger spread at the end of a buzzard's wing, the sign of something dead.

BORRIS

Chad McClendon

The Master always likes his meals hot- *PIPING HOT!* He'll tell Vaan Strudel every night, night after night. He'll tell Vaan Strudel, "Vaan Strudel! Give me my meals *PIPING HOT!*" Vaan Strudel likes to listen to the master. Vaan Strudel likes to serve the dark master of torment! Vaan Strudel is a good servant to the Master.

Vaan Strudel sees the teensy American girl with her hair the color of blood, Vaan Strudel can sense her dislike of Vaan Strudel – Vaan Strudel doesn't like her either. So, Vaan Strudel is sneaking in back now, to let in the Master of Vaan Strudels' soul, Vaan Strudel helps in the master. Vaan Strudel always says to the master "Master, Vaan Strudel thinks none look finer than you! With your gold ringed eyes, and your billowing black tail, and your four paws of perfection!"

The master always says to Vaan Strudel, "I can kill you, I can kill you." Vaan Strudel believes the master; Vaan Strudel believes that Master wouldn't even need to use his two sharp and pointy teeth. Not the Master. The Master could kill Vaan Strudel with his little paw if Master chose it to be so. Vaan Strudel will help the Master get blood tonight, so Vaan Strudel will, so Vaan Strudel will. In walks the master from the blackness, always with the "I can kill you, I can kill you."

Vaan Strudel helps the master survey the store, and Vaan Strudel can hear the winds picking up outside. "Master, the storm will be here quickly. The power will die as soon as the storm comes. Do not worry, Master. Vaan Strudel will see to it."

"I can kill you. I can kill you," says the raccoon.

Vaan Strudel waits with the master.

#

I step outside and look at the night sky, it is as clear as crystal. I scoff. *This is supposed to be tornado weather?* I walk back inside the

store, contemplating a quiz in a magazine I had found under one of the registers. *When I flirt, am I naturally witty, or painfully comedic? Indeed. As if any quiz could ever define me.* I am an enigma, and this particular enigma was getting bored. So good for me it was then, that I was getting to lock up the store early – we had to clean the floors tonight. So I ring out the last customer, and escort him to the door.

“Good night to you too sir, thanks for shopping at The Castle.” I say, holding the door for the liquor endowed man heading towards his beamer.

With a din akin to atom bombs dropping, a loud, vulgar yellow van careens into the parking lot. Music, I suppose you could call it such, fills the night with awful intrusion.

“Cue the god forsaken Russian cleaning crew.” I considered not letting them in, I knew it would make their mustaches twitch—that was just the way with Russian cleaning crews, their mustaches always twitched when they were flustered.

“Yenna!” The tiny man with caterpillar eyebrows yells to me. “So good seeing you!”

I put on my best *I’m getting paid eight dollars an hour for this bull smile.*

“Hello, Viktor.” *The name is still Jenna.*

His personal sidekick, Karlof—you know, pronounced Car-Lawv. See? I pay attention to how names sound. Anyway, Karlof steps out of the van, dragging his buffer machine. He hails me like I’m a taxi cab driver.

“Evening, Karlof.” I watch the other two Russians exit the van with their cleaning equipment, and remember not to breathe as they pass me. “I’ll be around front if you guys need me.” I say, watching as a new face in the Russian cleaning crew sets up a mop bucket.

“Vaas Strudel!” Viktor starts yelling at the Russian who was setting up the mop bucket, I let them work out their differences.

Viktor was quick to start hitting on me, he usually is.

“Yenna, tell me. How is your mama and papa?”

I give my usual forced smile, he was already laughing. He never seemed to tire of this joke. “I don’t know, I’ll tell you when I find out who they are.”

“Haha, you funny joker! I tell you, I adopt you as my daughter anytime.” Something in his smile made me wish he would have a heart attack.

With perfect timing our night manager emerges from the back room. Not only was he six feet of pure testosterone (need I say he towered over Viktor?), he also had a backside which made me writhe. *‘C’mon baby light my fire,* is it weird that I always think of that song when I see him? Whenever I think of Brody, that’s his song.

Brody talks to Viktor, he’s terse, and he outright ignored my ‘hello’ as he went back to work. Boy still makes me want to dance. Oh well, I still have eight hours of shift left to try and woo him.

#

Two hours have passed up front, here I sit on my conveyor belt, wondering why in the blue blazes of hell these guys just can’t ring out their own crap. “You don’t need a cashier on a night like tonight.” I get up, not wanting to be here any longer. I walk through the aisles, browsing really, nothing more. I could swear, two eyes just gazed out at me from behind the kosher dills. *No.* I tell myself it was just my imagination. “Jenna, it’s not even 4 AM, it’s far too early to be suffering from hallucinations.” I scolded myself again, wishing that I had brought my iPod.

Screep! Screep! Screep!

The usual sounds of the Russians scraping up some gunk off the floors. I peek around an end cap, and see a Russian in a long black cleaning mask, I don’t remember his name—mostly due to the fact that he

looks like he could be Luke Skywalker's dad. He waves to me all the same, all these guys want a piece of me. They can't even speak my name correctly, but I dunno. They want something, but I'm not sure I can give them anything, not when I'm dreaming of him. I dunno. Crazy mustaches.

Just then, a huge cacophony split the night's muzak, as a huge clang is heard from the roof. The wind must really be picking up, the storm is howling like my grandmother's teacup Chihuahua. Speaking of devilish beasts, there are those two eyes again, at the end of the aisle. What the hell are they?

I don't get to find out, because at that moment everything goes black—and a scream is heard from the back of the store. Seconds later, all the Russian voices are filling the store with their strange song...prayer...God knows what hymns.

"VIKTOR! Shut UP!" I scream, "The rest of you too!"

The emergency generators kick in and The Castle is full of light once again.

The Russians are at my side at once, my knights in skanky armor. Well, three of them are at my side anyway. "We are sorrying, Yenna." Viktor states. "But it says in Old Country, when lights go out during tornado weather, we must give praise to our ancestors! It must be so!"

"Yeah, I can only see one problem with that though, Viktor old chum. We're in Kentucky. Do you know how far Old Country is from here?"

"Unbeliever! Do not question our belief! Our religion is JUST!"

"Sure, sure. Do whatever you want, just...I'm going to check in the back."

"Everything alright here gentlemen?" Brody inquires, walking up and ignoring me.

"Yes, everything is being fine, Brody! We are cleaning like mouses before winter!" Karlof says enthusiastically.

"I was going to check out what that scream was in the back, actually – Brody. Maybe someone fell because of the blackout. If you want, you could come with me?" I ask, hoping my cute and innocent act will convince him I'm some naïve girl looking for some action behind the cereal backstock skids.

He seems to ponder me for a moment, as if he just realized I was there. "Okay, let's go." He says to me coldly, ignoring the babbling Russians as they begin to mop the perimeter. "This way, Henna."

My heart melts, he almost called me by my right name. "It's Jenna." I say, my voice rising angelically.

It is normally a very quick walk to the backroom, I keep stealing looks at Brody as I kept up with him. The walk ended too soon—as I knew it must—and of course, there was the body. Oh Lord! The body! I gape at a Castle worker I didn't know the name of, does that make me horrible? The guy is sprawled on the floor, in a pool of crimson. The ladder rests nearby on its side, surely he must have fallen. "God, I thought everyone but us was out."

"He's got bite marks on his neck." Brody says upon inspection.

"What?" I ask.

"Bite marks. On. His. Neck." Brody rips off the top two buttons of his grey shirt, and pulls out a small crucifix. "We must be dealing with a vampire!" He says with gusto.

"Um...no." I look closer at the guy's body, fighting back the bile that's rising to my throat. "That's actually just a birthmark I think." I lightly touch the brown spots on the dude's neck. "Yep, just two big dots close to each other. Sorry, no *Brody the Vampire Slayer* for us." I say sarcastically.

Brody storms off, him and his tight end. *Way to blow it*, I could see myself revisiting this moment in the near future. As I'm

standing there brooding, that new Russian comes by wheeling a mop bucket.

“Vaun Strudel is needing by, is cleaning up the messes.” I notice that he completely ignores the huge mess of blood and body. Only then do I realize, oh no—I should probably call the cops. Seems like a normal thing to do. I’m not totally panicked, it seems like he just fell off the ladder. Anyway, normal. A normal person calls an ambulance or the cops during an accident. They don’t run off. Well, much more normal than complaining about messes while bypassing a body, anyway.

I pick up the phone, sure that someone should be alerted to this. “You won’t get answer, Vaun Strudel knows.” Vaun Strudel says to me, almost sycophantically. “Is dead. Phone is dead. Like emergency exit doors. Like man on floor. Maybe your cellular phone, enh?” Just as he predicted, the phone was dead. Likely knocked out by the storm, (*or that thing that got the grocery boy—shut up! Show sensitivity!*)

“Yeah, well it so happens I don’t have my cell phone tonight, it’s being serviced.”

“Hah! Hah! Ha! HA! Then maybe Master can service *you*.” Vaun Strudel says, in a high cackling voice. His head flies back and he waves his mop crazily in the air, his mustache twitching all the while. So, I make a hasty getaway, those crazy Russians are always on about something. *Maybe the pay phone outside will work.*

Splish! Splosh! Splash!

The Russians are mopping, unaware of the body in back. I watch my back as I head towards the front of the store. That Vaun guy really freaked me out a little. Bodies were one thing, they couldn’t hurt you... but weirdo’s like Vaun? Heck, they could do a girl a lotta damage. As I reach the front door I see one of the Russians hunched over—the Vader mask surely—I remember my foster dad hunched over like that when he was passing kidney

stones. He looked to be in about the same amount of pain.

“Can you get up please? I have to make a phone call. Some guys’ dead in the ...”

The Russian looked up at me, his hands clenched around his neck, his bleeding neck.

“Bu...bu...behind you!” he falls to the floor completely, and I heeded his final warning, just in time to see Vaun Strudel with his mop bucket full of blood. He must have found a mess to clean up. It sloshes out the sides and onto the floor.

“Clean store is happy store! Master always wants his meals *PIPING HOT!* Haha! Vaun Strudel is happy to help!”

It is at this moment that I decide to get on the intercom. I jump to the checkout stand and pick up the phone. “BRODY!” I yell. “This Russian weirdo is freaking me out! Help! Help me!”

The Russians aside from Vaun and Newly dead corpsy guy all start chanting. “It being fine rush to clean like school bus! In the night that is so fine!” Viktor’s and Karlof’s voices ring throughout the store, ignorant of the terror I was feeling. Would they ever cease their maniacal praises?

Vaun had refocused on me, now that he had collected the excess blood that had spilled from his coworker. *Full bucket is happy bucket*, I think morbidly.

“Vaun Strudel! Master says, Vaun Strudel! Get me a bride! A young bride! A fine catch! Miss Yenna, Vaun Strudel only wants to help the Master! You must marry him!” He swings his bloody mop my way, and I run like hell was after me.

I didn’t mean to bump into *his* chest, but the next thing I knew, Brody’s strong arms are wrapping around me. It’s like magic, his aroma fills my nostrils and served as a stimulant, I felt none could harm me now. Or at the very least, I felt I could die happy.

“You!” He cries, pointing at Vaan Strudel. “You have brought this into my store, the blood of the innocent cries out to me! I will have you! To me, you deformed hellion!” Brody reaches in his shirt and pulls out his crucifix again, and withdraws a box cutter from his pocket. The duel that was to commence would surely be remembered by all who witnessed it, I however, do not. I faint.

#

I’m strapped to a fruit cart, hovering above me is the most depraved looking raccoon I had ever seen! Suddenly, the shining eyes from the dill pickles make sense! He speaks to me like a lover, whispering into my ear, his whiskers tickling my face.

“I can marry you. I can marry you.” It’s all he ever says.

The dream shifts.

I’m drowning, there is water all around me! All I can see is red. The water is red, and the only life preservers are bound in human flesh! Human flesh with two little marks side by side...bleeding birthmarks! The horror I feel echo through the next string of horrible minutes.

It shifts again.

I’m staring at Brody, who is wearing a paper bag over his torso, he wields a green and rather large (not to mention oddly shaped) box cutter in one hand. He is shielding himself with a gallon of milk. He’s fighting with Vaan Strudel, or rather, the ghostly form of Vaan Strudel. They exchange blows, and only when Vaan is dispelled does Brody mount me.

Which is, of course, when I wake up. Imagine my surprise when I see that Brody really has mounted me, I feel water pouring water onto my brow.

“Brody, oh what happened? I remember you shouting at Vaan Strudel, but where is your milk shield? Your strangely phallic box cutter?” I ask, my eyes growing wide as I spy

what he is using to revive me. A towel that is greasy black.

“You clean with that thing! Ugh!” I groan.

“Shh. You talk too much.” He says.

What a pleasant miracle! He actually said something personal about me! Oh wonders never cease!

“What is happening?” I ask.

“I will tell you. An evil Raccoon vampire and his man servant have overtaken the store. I fear that Viktor and Karlof are dead by the beast now. Their babbling has ceased. I am sure that they were innocent in the ordeal. I caught sight of the beast earlier, as he was salivating over their jugulars. I hope my language is not too coarse for your naïve and sensitive ears.”

“Not at all! I would have you speak until they were bleeding!” I only then thought of my words.

“No time for that now, come, we must find the monster.” He pulls me up in a sweeping arch and I am at his side at once.

“Is that Vaan guy dead?” my lip trembles, wondering what steps my hero took to save our lives.

“He’s locked in the meat department, under lock and key obviously. I thought he needed to get the chip off his shoulder, so I introduced him to our meat chipper.

I feel myself grow red. “Goodness save us.”

“Goodness took the night off.” He says icily as we walk the store, creeping around corners. I could feel the heat rolling off him, so why was my body so cold? Was it the fear?

“How will we fight him?” I look longingly into his brown eyes.

He pulls a box cutter from his shirt pocket. “I trust you know how to use one of these?”

“Do I ever! I can work one of these until...”

“Splendid! Then take this ruler and whittle me a stake! There is no time to lose!” He says, pulling a ruler from his pocket.

So I took his offered ruler and begin to whittle like my life depended on it. And as I pass the drained bodies of Karlof and Viktor (*Yenna! Yenna!* – Viktor still called to me from the grave. *I’ll adopt you, then marry you, we have a great number of children!*) I don’t feel bad about the kick I give to Viktor.

I hold out the stake to Brody as I finished. “How does it look?” I asked, desperate for his praise.

“Not nearly as good as I do, but it’s a start.” He says, putting a mirror into his pocket.

I feel the heat flowing back into my body, the work he had me do was helping. Maybe it was shock?

“Do you have everything in those pockets?” I ask.

“Haha, not your hand. But now is hardly the time! Behold! The beast!” He points to the Raccoon, a ghastly creature of enormous size.

The raccoon, yes—the terror of my dream to be sure, a raccoon – standing there on its hind legs.

“Declare yourself, heathen beast!” Brody yells.

“I am Borriss Raccuul, of Transylwanya. I see you have dispatched my manservant.” His speech was very good, considering he was foreign, and you know—a raccoon?

“I did. My, but you are a foul little thing.” Brody says threateningly.

“Transylwanya?” I giggle, despite my fear which rose like bile to my throat. “Don’t you mean Transylvania?”

“Tsk, tsk, you Americans know no manners.” Borriss says plainly.

“You speak of manners, yet you sold your soul to the devil! And for what? The powers of the immortals?!” Brody makes sure his box cutter blade was extended all the way. He caresses the handle in ways he would surely never caress me.

“Actually, Satan has a new leasing option. But it’s all the same. I inherited the powers of the Immortal Ones. Now, I will have your blood! For I will be sated!” Borriss growls.

“I am for you!” Brody calls, as he rushes forward to engage in battle with the dreadful raccoon.

The raccoon was inches away from Brody at once, as they fight and dance about the store, each looking for an opening. Borriss latches onto Brody’s hand, yet Brody is able to throw him off.

“Cry off your quest for my blood, and I may let you live!” Brody screamed.

“Never! Now feel my rage!” The raccoon was at Brody’s heels, tearing savagely through his denim jeans. Brody kicks hard, and I couldn’t help but laugh—it looked like a deranged folk dance.

Borriss rebounds off a shelf, and he quickly recovers from Brody’s kick. He upsets a cereal box in frustration. “You are a strong human! How delicious your blood must be! But I bet your friend’s will taste all the sweeter!” He squeaks horribly and rushes towards me.

“Brody! “ I scream in fright, as I run to the shelves with nowhere to go but up.

Brody slashes at the raccoon again with the box cutter, and with the speed of an angel, he draws down the sharpened ruler.

“I can kill you. I can kill you.” The raccoon wheezes, his yellowed fangs bared.

“BRODY!” I cried to my hero, pleading for him to save me.

Brody plants the ruler into the back of the demonic creature, ending its centuries’ long plague upon mankind.

“I can kill you.....I can kill you...”

I am quite sure those are Borris’ last words.

Brody finds us a way out of the store and just in time too. For the store is smitten by God, in a mighty bolt of lightning. The entire store catches on fire and the smoke rises and twists high into the night. I find comfort in Brody’s embrace, and as the winds continued to howl, we turn our backs on the Castle, knowing we could never go back.

Word Decay

Heather M. Browne

The words sat putrid
Clenched between tooth and tongue
Boring holes
My thoughts lick
Acidic
Cancerous tongue

My body devours self
Careful when I floss
Careful in excavation
Debris
Decayed words, thoughts
Chip

Accelerating

She saw the car coming
 Moments before the crash
 Wishing to rip out today's page
 From her treasured diary
 Paper sheets crumple easier than steel
 Less pressure on flesh

Thinking off unwashed dishes
 Soccer games missed
 Her hand-penned story flipping back
 Page by page, day and hour
 The braking winds fingering them fast
 Racing and hungry
 Births and babies
 Marriage, loss, her 7th birthday

Struck upon impact
 Watching her life reversed
 All the hands reaching, all the hugs offered
 It was she, who pulled away
 Her foot always pressing the pedal,
 accelerating
 Escaping the crash
 It was her fault
 She hears screaming
 As a siren cries
 Red

ARTHRITIC ANNIE

David Spicer

Arthritic Annie is a saint. I've told her countless times. She smiles at me with quiet grace and jade eyes. On this occasion she knows I'm happy, for she can read my mind. I believe she's lived many lives on many planets. She won't talk to me. I don't know why, but she doesn't need to speak. She knows what I'm going to do before I do it. When she wants something from me, she touches me on my knee with her long hands, and as I stand up from my red easy chair, she leads me to the computer room, where she looks up at me in her black and white body, carefully sits on the stool at the window, and purrs.

CLOUD

Driving each morning to work, I notice a servant walking her mistress by a lake. The mistress runs on the grass around the lake. One day I stop and ask the servant what breed of dog her mistress is. The servant, an attractive woman with blonde braids hanging down the back of her turquoise running outfit, answers, *A white retriever. It's a rare breed. She's beautiful, I reply. She's a pain in the ass. Why's that?* I ask. *I'm tired of picking up after the bitch,* she frowns with a sour look at the dog, who scampers up alongside her servant. She pants and looks at me with a benign expression, beautiful in a white coat that I stroke. *She likes you better than me. Here, you take her,* she says, handing me the leash as she breaks into a jog that increases speed until she disappears behind the trees. I'm shocked. I look at the dog and she looks at me and smiles. *What shall I call you?* I ask the dog. She stares up at the sky and barks.

Contentment

Scott Archer Jones

I, Joseph, am King of all I survey. The steam roils off the water and into the dry crisp air over the village, anointing my subjects like incense. I loll back, silver hair streaming from my temples. They always say that I look like Leonard Bernstein. The principal difference is that I am tone deaf, and he is dead.

It's been a perfect day for me, so far. My contentment stretches out before me. I turned sixty-eight last week and the proper number of people paid obeisance – this I remembered at the moment of awakening. The market opened up in New York, rendering life even easier. I arose at seven and shaved away all my body hair, taking due care with the razor. I then drove here to the gym. After the tanning bed, I visited with Becky of the Black Tights and attended a spin class, followed by the easy version of water aerobics. Now, here in the hot tub float three of my friends and a ravishing stranger. I recline in the hot water, sense the morning's strain of body maintenance melt into liquid magic and into camaraderie, flawed as it is. We all paid the price, spent our hour or more panting and heaving. In that shaky, ragged feeling from the workouts, we'd retreated from the fitness center to our hot tub outside. To my regret, our stranger rises up, water cascading from her hair and body, and in the twenty-degree weather flip-flops for the door. She's quite young, about forty-five, and I undergo that stirring I call the Viagra Aftershock. I've felt it several times this morning.

Across from me sits my old friend, Carl. Besides being the best orthodontist in Taos, he is the original comb-over man. I've stared at that comb-over for twenty-five years. Now though, it has parted from his scalp and flies away as a crumpled up wing out over his left ear, angling off towards the Taos Mountain that looms above us. The Viagra and my hypertension medicine make a

potent mix and they have improved my fantasy life – the drugs help me see his thoughts. A cartoon text balloon forms over Carl's head. It reads, 'Just this once.' Carl's voice comes through the steam. "Let's troop over to the Plaza Café after we shower. I want a five-thousand-calorie salad and a Pinot Grigio." The bubble flashes 'Bacon, cheese – lots of cheese.'

I count nods of assent all around. I announce, "And so it shall be." Beside me, my Egyptian beauty Noha stirs, irritated by my patronizing tone. Her thought balloon reads, 'Really, Joseph. Shut up.' She perches upon my right hand as I drape my arm around behind her. Her delicious bottom presses up against my palm. She is a full and charming woman, with beautiful skin and black hair, long and luxurious. Her eyes are huge and brown. I feel her weight shift as she leans forward and her thigh presses into mine. Noha is our cougar. We hear of all of her encounters, real and imagined, with the young men that she – well – hunts.

"Philip was my trainer this morning. We did lunges on the half ball. Each time, as I moved from the floor onto the ball, you know," and she glances over at me and flares her eyes. They are enchanting eyes, like fireworks. "He'd steady me on each lunge. At first he gripped my waist, but then he moved to my knee, to keep me from drifting. At least, he started at my knee. By the end, his hands had moved up my leg – just below, nearly there. I became all flushed. He's so strong."

I say, "Noha, they are always strong, or you wouldn't be interested." She squirms just that little bit and my loins tingle. I have had that ample plump dessert – and I would go back for more.

"Yes, Joseph. You're not jealous of youth, are you?" Her bubble indicates, "Time for another face lift, my friend."

"Unlikely, sweetheart. They have stamina, but I have guile. They have a certain charm – not to mention supple and

unwrinkled skin. But I have a true appreciation and understanding of women."

Mara, the fourth friend in the hot tub, interrupts us, once again about her mother. She and Carl are burdened by family, unlike Noha and I. Instead of flying free, they drag their aged parents along behind.

Mara is Irish-fair, and as we say, beat-all-to-hell. Even for seventy, she would be rough and hard – and she's sixty. She had plaited her hair, really iron gray but dyed to its original red, up onto her head, but it has begun to fall in the steam. The balloon over her reads 'I'm twisted off!' She leans over to Noha and touches her knee under the bubbling water. I believe Mara must have been a lesbian, before she gave up sex for bitterness.

"Noha," she says. I watch the bubble spell out, 'My angel.' Mara pauses, a claim for our attention. "Your Mother and Dad are dead, aren't they?"

"Yes, Mara. You know I flew home to Egypt two years ago when my mother passed on."

"That's right. Lucky you."

Noha shakes her head, a furrow chasing sadness across her forehead. "Mara, that's cruel. I loved my mother. I miss her every day."

Mara's thought balloon reads, 'Typical.' She snorts, an ugly sound of mockery. "Be glad you got out when you were young. I remember the old joke about life begins when you're forty sleeping with twenty."

We all chuckle for her, but she doesn't want a laugh – she wants a tirade. "I always thought life began when your parents died."

"But Mara," I say. "Your mom lives in a home in Kansas. Surely she can't be ruining your life from there?"

“She expects a call most every day. And I have to visit, every couple of months.”

Carl's bubble displays, 'My turn! My turn!' Carl stutters when he's in a hurry. “My mom lives over in Arroyo Seco and it's a lot of work, taking care of the details she can't handle anymore. WhWhWho would have believed I'd be babysitting when I turned sixty-three?”

Mara's bubble reads, 'Who gives a shit, Carl.' She ratchets back up. “Mom will live to a hundred and ten. She looks like it already.”

Noha tries to defuse the so-unpleasant rant, “It's only natural, Mara. They took care of us. So we take care of them.”

“No, it's unnatural. Old people should croak in their late seventies, not hang on-and-on ruining our glory times. All those drugs and treatments, they drag it all out. It's just pathetic, that's what it is, a horror.” Mara's cartoon bubble shows, 'I could kill the old bitch.'

I think, who wouldn't hold on to the last bitter second? A bed you're dying in is better than the casket on the other side. I say, “Mara, it's not that much of your time. You have a great life here with us and I don't think you miss much. With a butched-up body like yours, you'll outlast us all, much less your mother. Don't worry so much about it.”

She says with raised eyebrows, “Why thank you, Joseph. That makes me feel all better.” The balloon reads, 'Screw you, you old lecher.'

“You'll see, darling,” says our delectable Noha. “This weekend will be our usual round, as Joseph says, of parties and laughter. I promise you at least a good meal and lots of wine.” I see her bubble waver up over her head, half-formed, murmuring, 'A long afternoon with my trainer. A private workout.'

Carl heaves himself up by grasping my hand and jerking. Water cascades from his meager shoulders and off his pendulous belly. His balloon reads, 'You'll be dead in a month.' My mouth drops. He shakes his head over me, dripping down into my iconic face.

He sloshes to the tub edge, grabs his towel. “Mara, I promise you a drink right now. Come with me to the Café and we'll eat spinach salad with fried cheese croutons, with sliced egg and hot bacon dressing. We can even split an order of truffle fries. That and a margarita will hold the Living Dead at bay.”

I stand, turn for my towel. The wind at twenty degrees cuts through me. I shiver like the damned.

It starts slow, a perception of fullness, a distension of the belly. I get so the wine doesn't work – I experience nausea after, and sugary desserts give me intense diarrhea. My back hurts. She hovers across from me, my Doctor. She wears a new perfume – its high-dollar scent wafting towards me. But I don't care. Not today. “Okay, Joan, I can take it. Is it a brain tumor?” My ancient joke.

She flashes me that beautiful smile, the one so nice to wake up to. “Joseph, you wouldn't be peeking down my lab coat and blouse if it were a brain tumor. However, it's definitely something. I don't like your weight loss – I know you think you worked off those love handles by yourself, but your legs and arms look, well, spindly to me. Far too thin.” A cartoon forms over her head, 'You look like shit.'

“Then I shall return to lifting weights and guzzling growth inducers, dear. I shall bulk up enough to please you.”

She ducks her head to the paperwork. “And your blood work isn't right. You're hyperglycemic, with some ketone buildup in your urine. I'd swear you were diabetic if you had any history of smoking and obesity. Then there's that back pain.”

“Admit it, Joannie. You're puzzled. A beautiful mind in a beautiful body, but once again I baffle you.”

She chuckles, but she does it for show. “I'll write you a referral. I want you to see an old classmate of mine in Santa Fe – he's the best. He'll order the workup, and we'll find out what we're dealing with. I'll call ahead – I want you in quick.” Her bubble pops up, ‘Cancer. It's always cancer.’

I am bloody cold lying here in this hospital bed. Off and on for two weeks they have scanned me, probed my orifices, inquired about the health of my sphincters. They have whittled all of my dignity away. Now they have thrust a hollow sword into my back, through my intestine and into a mass the CAT scan detected and the MRI paints like a bird's nest in violet hues. I have a foreign body lodged within me, a frightening plague of my own cells.

Mara sits beside me. She has driven down from Taos, a two hour journey, by herself. She actually appears to care. At least she has all the right behaviors. My cartoon bubbles have failed me, so I don't know what she really thinks. Probably ruined by the extra drugs.

She hitches forward in her chair. Now I will have to suffer through the explanations. “How big's the mass, Joseph?” She appears distraught – amusing.

“Oh, the size of an orange. Perhaps a grapefruit by today. Of course, it is not a simple round thing. Rather messy, tangled up with my pancreas. And gut.”

Her eyebrows arch and her pupils dilate. “Pancreas!” The bitch already knows, from Noha, but we must pretend.

“Yes, Mara, we all know about pancreatic cancer. That's why they thrust that huge, painful needle into me.” I hold up my hands, eighteen inches apart. “A monster.”

Ridiculous, playing the role, she nods. “Biopsy. You're taking it okay.”

I know different. I am a little man inside my godlike head, screaming away. My smart phone delivered the web-page news days ago. Only a one-in-four chance to live a year. I summon a smile – it feels plastic on my face. I work harder, try for sincerity. “I am less worried than you think. I've always had luck on my side.”

She leans forward to take my hand. “I'm sure it'll all work out. How long before they get the results?” Her red hair floats forward across my arm. Ghostly.

Her kindness makes me want to smash at her, and I would too, if I were not so tired. At least with unkind words. “It's about a week. But they will peer at it through the microscope before it goes off to the lab. That should tell them something.”

“And then you'll know.”

I try on the condescending grin. Silly woman. “Oh, no. They won't tell me. If they were wrong and it's not malignant, they would have to explain later. And I would sue for mental anguish.”

“Surely not. They'll tell you.”

My turn to pat her hand. I know the conventions. “I have become a cog in the machine, Mara.” The little screaming man is louder now – I think he wants out.

She slips her hand out from under mine. “So it's a week. Do you stay here?”

“Oh God no, not here. But I have a room at the Residence Inn. The drive back and forth to Taos, it's too much.”

She frowns. Her lips have those vertical trench-marks of a woman who doesn't care what she looks like. “Joseph, you should have told us. We could drive you.”

"Hah. You think that I drive myself? No, Carl chauffeurs me. But speaking of back and forth . . ."

"Yes, sweetie?"

"They'll check me out in a couple of hours. Can you give me a lift to the hotel? Drive me back to my modest suite, tuck me into bed for the night?"

I watch her grin, the first genuine thing today. "Why, I believe you are trying to get me in the sack, you old fart."

I can feel the burning in my eyes. Tears want to form. I hate it when she is right. I ache for a woman's coddling, even a burned-out grizzled lesbo's. At least a distraction.

No chemo, no radiation, no surgery. Oh, to be Mara's parent, lying in a Kansas nursing home, waiting for my centennial so many years away! Instead I lie in this unimagined terrain – hospice. A morphine-infused wait for the cancer to explode out of my abdomen and vomit across the room. A wait for blood to cascade out of my rectum and float me off the sheets and onto the floor. I hear a skritch in my ears, like dog's claws on the linoleum. It is my anger.

Her head eases round the door, hesitant. Noha is still the most beautiful woman I have ever taken to bed. But now, when I see her, I see what I will lose.

"Are you awake?"

She among all still deserves a smile from me. "Come in, come in. You'll relieve this continuous tedium."

She leans across the bed, touches her lips to my forehead. I had imagined they would be hot, like her blood, but they are cool and dry. She asks, "Why are you all the way down here in Albuquerque?"

"No one at home, Noha, no one to shuffle my bedpans or stick morphine patches on me. Carl took my cats over to his mother, and the house sits empty."

"Can I watch the place for you, water plants?"

I nod. "That would be lovely, dear. Or better yet, throw them all in the trunk and take them to your place. You can have them."

She tosses both hands up in protest. "Oh, but you'll be coming home."

"Noha, you saw the sign on the building. I'll not be coming home."

Her face collapses like a melting milk chocolate. She didn't have to confront the imminence of death as long as it went unsaid. I have spoiled it.

She dabs at her eyes with a pink kleenex. "How are they treating you here?"

I see no need to swamp her with complaints about the service, service that cannot matter compared to my Big Event. "They're quite kind. Sit beside me, beloved."

Not in the chair. She perches on the edge of the bed, bundles my hand up in both of hers. She presses her tush up against my side and my glance flickers there before proceeding up past her breasts. She gazes down into my face. "We've had happier times, Joseph."

I clear my throat. "This morning I was thinking about our trip to Florida, five years ago."

She has the sweetest smile. "All that lovely sand and the sun."

I chuckle, for her benefit. "You didn't want to spoil your complexion. Instead you lay under the cabana."

"And you burned bright pink, racing around in the sun."

“But the pain of sunburn did not inhibit my performance.”

Now her face flares pink, beneath that luscious Egyptian chocolate. “Just at dusk, lying together, the sides of the cabana hanging down to give us privacy.”

I remember that the fabric fluttered like wings as the evening breeze drifted in from the ocean, showing me flashes of the hotel, of the beach, of the lights at dusk. As I poised above her. “Dearest Noha.”

She is pleased by the memory. She smiles, her full lips open slightly to show white teeth gleaming. “Yes, Joseph. It was so lovely.”

“Noha, would you do me a favor? The smallest of favors?”

“What is it, Joseph?”

“Perhaps one last time. Could you . . .”

Her eyes open as wide as they can. She stares at me from head to toe. My hair, no doubt sticky and matted, the beard stubble-gray across my cheeks. The gown wrinkled, and perhaps odiferous. Crumpled sheets. The squalor of sickness.

I gaze up into her face. “No, not the full shebang. Just a little manipulation. For old times sakes.”

Her forehead crinkles, then clears in a beautiful smoothness. She hops down, whirls to the door, and locks it. Back by my side, she fishes the sheets down, raises the gown. “No catheter? Thank God.”

“I should allow a man to thrust a tube up my penis? Not until the very last, my dear.”

Using the lotion on the over bed table, she straightens me, rubs in the lubrication, begins her motions. “How wicked you are, Joseph.”

I stare at her, the part in her hair, her head dropped, concentrating on me, on this thing we share again. “That is so very nice. It's like we are teenagers, in the back of a car.”

She raises her face, a grin appearing at the corner of her mouth. “I grew up in Egypt. Father had a chauffeur and we dared not use the backseat.”

“Oh, oh, ah.” My body contracts, three times. I curl up in the final shudder, and she hesitates, then strokes me a few times more. She catches all of it in her other hand – it pools up and looks like lemon curd. Nothing. I feel nothing, though my body performed the oldest dance. I have ejaculated without an orgasm.

She kisses my forehead again, fishes a tissue out of the box and wipes her palm. “You scandalous old man. Promise me you won't do this with anyone but me.”

“I promise.” My voice gags in my throat. I promise to let it go, cast it away from me, not to think about it.

“I can't wait to tell Mara. Or perhaps it should be our secret.” She reaches up, strokes my face with the hand that brought me to my sticky end.

I want, I need a moment by myself. “Noha love. Can you fetch me a cup of ice. My mouth is so dry these days. The nurses' station on the hall will tell you where.”

She is so pleased, her face soft and adoring. Some domestic task, after having done the dirty. Taking a Styrofoam cup, she unlocks the door, slips out like a courtesan leaving the chambers of the king.

I stare about the room. Institutional, florescent light eradicating all shadow. A giant TV hung from the ceiling, a black vacant slab. The side table and the over bed table filled with bedsore ointments, tissues, a box of alcohol swabs, bedpan and urinal, moisturizing wicks for cracked lips,

abandoned Styrofoam cups. A litany of objects, my final possessions.

It's been a perfect day for me, so far. My contentment stretches out before me. Unlike Mara, I am not dragged down by paternal constraint. Unlike Carl, no gluttony gnaws at me. Unlike Noha, the need for sexual congress has disappeared. The air conditioning blows down upon me. I feel a cold wind.

Not Spring, but nearly Spring

M.J. Iuppa

Despite foreclosure, so many buds swell on apple trees with expectation . . .

The orchard hasn't been touched in a decade.

Still, something stirs within these mottled boughs— filmy petals float on twiggy fingertips

like faint promises.

We forget the apple will be many apples, no matter what happens in town.

Waiting for Auberon

Cael Jacobs

I didn't take much notice of her the first time I walked past, at midday; or the second, in the afternoon. But when I returned a third time, just before sunset, there she was: sitting serenely on the park bench that stood beside the boardwalk, looking out to sea, holding a red flower in her hands. She was so still that I might have thought her a statue, but for that the wind played with the few wisps of silver hair that had escaped their bun, and fluttered the petals of the flower where it rested in hands folded on her lap.

I watched her then, at first out of curiosity, and then out of a desire to make sure that she was all right. She was old; so old that her skin was as thin as paper. I could see the shape of her bones through flesh no longer as resilient as it once had been. In her time, years, perhaps decades before, I have no doubt people would have thought her a great beauty; time had stolen her youthfulness, but none of the strength or the magnificence with which she held herself.

I had not thought that she saw me there, watching her, but after a time, she turned and looked right at me, and said, "Young man. Come out of the shadows there and sit beside me, do. The time passes slowly, and it is well to have someone to speak to." What could I do? I went to sit on the bench with her, not sure what to say. "I come here every day, you know. Every day they let me. But on special days, like today, I always make sure to come." Her voice was quiet, but strong, and carried an accent I could not place, but which was clearly from somewhere far away.

"Let you?" I managed to ask.

"It is a terrible thing," she said, as if she had not heard me, "for a mother to outlive her child. Seven children I have borne, daughters all. Would that I could have ended my journey through the pathways of this world

before ever any one of them should have come to grief." I could not be sure, but it seemed to me that she wept as she spoke, the tears hidden among the fine wrinkles on her face.

"I'm sorry," I said, "did one of your daughters pass away?"

She looked at me then, as if she were surprised to find me there on the bench she had invited me to just minutes before. "I'm waiting," she said, "waiting for my love to come back to me. It has been such a long time since I have seen him."

"Why? What has kept you apart?"

"Pride, I think. Yes, pride. On my part, certainly, and possibly on his as well. I was not," she said, "always a good and proper wife. Nor was he, if truth be told, the perfect husband. Still, I have loved and always shall love him, and I think that he would say the same of me, if one were to ask."

"Where is he?"

"I do not know. It is long and long since I have looked upon him, heard his voice. Not since well before my first daughter was born, all those many years ago. Oh," she said, before I could ask, "They were not his. None of them, no. When I first came to this place," she waved a hand vaguely at the boardwalk, and the beach, and the people walking by, "I was sure, so very sure, that he and I would be forever together, and it would not matter what I did. So new was this land, and the people I found in it, that I became infatuated with a certain young man, long and long ago, and thought to take him to my bed. But my lord, my husband, my king in those days, he warned me not to do it.

"You know," she said, turning to look directly at me, "in so many tales, an innocent is lured into the Kingdoms that lie beneath the world, and there they are tricked into eating the food they find there, and they are

trapped; trapped among the Fae, trapped and unable to return to the world above."

"Was it like that?" I asked, "When you met that man?"

"Oh, no," she said. "It was not like that at all. Those stories...all of them are rubbish, the ill-conceived maunderings of men who have never set foot in a magical place, and who would have no place given to them if they tried. No. It is not the food from under-hill that traps one in a world that is strange and frightening."

"What is it, then?"

"It is love, young man. Love in its purest form is the only thing that can take hold of our spirit and bind it, whether we will or no."

"So you fell in love with the man you found?"

"Him? Oh, no...he was but a toy; a shiny bauble that I found and decided I must have for my own. But a toy that was not without peril; my husband was right. For after our first dalliance, that man and I...I found myself with child. I told my husband, of course, for in those days I kept nothing from him. His face hardened to me, then, and he told me that my pride and recklessness would carry a price. And so it did, so it did, though I did not know it then."

"What price?"

"Seven daughters, I bore. The first, we called Maya, and she was the kindest of them all."

"There you are!" came a voice from behind us. I turned to look, though the old woman did not; there was a middle-aged woman striding toward us with a purpose. She wore what looked like some sort of nurse's uniform, and had a picture badge clipped to her breast pocket. "Miss Tanya,"

she said as she came around the bench to face us, "Where have you been? It's time to go."

The old woman's serenity did not waver. "I have been here. Waiting. You know that I always come here, especially in the liminal times. I come here, and I wait. For him. It is important, young Blossom."

"I have asked you not to call me that, Miss Tanya. It's not my name."

"No more than Tanya is mine, young Blossom. Now attend: I am having a conversation with this young man, and when I am finished, only then it will be time to go. Not before."

The two women locked gazes upon one another; one irate, one imperturbable...but it was the woman whose name was not Blossom who looked away first. "Fine," she said, with ill grace. "I will be just over here," she pointed with her chin toward a nearby cafe that faced the boardwalk.

The old woman watched her go, and then turned back to me and said, "They think I am suffering from a delusion, young man. I have seen the papers that the doctors write upon. They say that I cannot be what, who I say I am, so they gave to me a Guardian, a proper young man in a fine blue suit, who signs papers they think I do not understand, and makes decisions for me that no one has a right to make."

I had gotten a glance at the logo on not-Blossom's badge before she stalked off: Oceanside Psychiatric Care. Inpatient Unit. The woman I had been talking with had escaped from a mental institution.

"Maya was the kindest, of course," she said as if nothing had interrupted her, "but her son! Oh, her son! Quick as lightning, and such a musician. Of course, then there was Amber; she was one of those who seems destined to live a life of tragedy. She was raped when she was young, and bore a son,

but it broke her, and the city of her spirit crumbled, and she passed from the world soon after. Tiga, now, she was always one to find stray animals and bring them home to care for."

I was sitting on a bench with an escaped mental patient.

"Alysa never cared much for the land; as soon as she was able she left home and married a sailor, but I think it was the sea she truly married in her heart. Astera, she was a lovely girl, but she was ever too fond of the bottle. Mira, my youngest...she was ever jealous of her older sister Alysa, for I think she loved the same sailor, and knew that Alysa loved the sea more than she did the man."

The old woman fell silent for a time, and I tried to figure out how to get away from her so that her nurse could take her back to the hospital. But then, I thought back to what she had said, and before I could help myself, I blurted out, "That was only six."

"Yes. That was only six. I left Selene out of the telling, because the pain is too fresh."

"Why, what happened?"

"She died, like all her sisters before her," said a new voice, a man's voice. "Didn't she, my queen?"

There on the boardwalk stood a man, just as old as the woman on the bench, but with none of her frailty. He stood with strength, and worn his thinning hair like a crown.

The woman beside me crumbled, and wept loud and bitter tears. "Yes! Selene, oh, Selene! The last of my daughters, why? Why were they all taken from me?"

The man knelt before her, and said, "You know why, queen-of-my-heart. You are not of this place. You thought that you could

make it yours, as our home had been and will be again. But you wanted this place as well, and that cannot be."

The old woman sobbed for time, and then tried to collect herself. She wiped the tears from her face, still clutching the red flower in her hand, and said to me, "It was not love for a man that kept me in this place. It was the love for what that man gave me: my children. One such as I, such as we," she said, nodding toward the man, "cannot bear the strength of such love. It makes your kind so much stronger, and so much weaker, than we are. It was my children who kept me here, through the years, through the decades, through the centuries."

"Centuries?" I asked.

"Centuries," said the man. "It was young Will who wrote of us when we were young, and he is gone these four hundred years."

"Young Will, gone four hundred years?" I thought for a moment. "Young...Will Shakespeare?"

"Aye, the very same," said the man. "And now, my Queen," he said, holding out his hand to the woman on the bench, "The pain is done. Your pride and mine have been paid for and paid for again, in tears and sorrow. Mayhap it is time we returned home to the place where death holds no sway."

"Oh, no!" said not-Blossom, running back toward us from the cafe. "She is going nowhere but back to her room at Oceanside!" The woman turned to me, and said, "Did she ask you to do anything for her? To take her anywhere?"

"No, she didn't." I turned back to look at the old woman and the old man.

But they were gone. The boardwalk was empty, save for a single red flower blowing along in the breeze.

"Where did they go?" the nurse asked me, in a panic.

"Wherever they went, I think her wait is over," I said.

"She always said she was waiting. But what was she waiting for?"

For a moment, I saw two gossamer figures passing across the sand, and then disappearing into the liquid-silver path that the new-risen moon cast across the waves.

"I think," I said, "she was waiting for Auberon."

Bubble Trouble

Jodi Sykes

My childhood summers were spent at my grandparent's cabin on Lake Champlain in the Adirondacks. The day after school ended, we started packing the car with our suitcases, toys and inflatables to use at the lake. There were four of us kids and my mom was a master at building up a high level of excitement for the five hour trip. Like a kid herself. She had many tricks to keep us pre-occupied so that we wouldn't kill each other in the backseat.

It was always the same routine. She'd pack a big cooler with sandwiches, snacks and drinks; we'd each take an early shower and get dressed into our PJ's. As soon as Dad got home from work, he'd shower and change into something more casual to drive in. Then we piled into the car, Mom doled out the food and we were on our way.

Well-behaved, at least for the first hour, until one of my brothers would either tug at mine or my sister's long hair or get into a fun shoving match with each other. That's when Mom sprang into action with one of her games. "Okay, the first one to see a white horse gets a dollar!" There were plenty of farms scattered around the sides of the road and that kept us engrossed until someone actually spotted a white horse.

Out came a bag that contained Mad Libs, sketch pads, crayons, pens and pencils for us to draw, play hangman, tic-tac-toe with and Mom would occasionally interject in between our backseat activity things like "First one to find an Arizona license plate gets a Blow-Pop ... First one to spot a billboard gets a super ball...First one to see a red Volkswagen gets a new deck of cards..." She was good at being the event coordinator and could come up with things that kept us busy for at least two more hours.

THEN...then came the piece de la resistance, our annual bubble blowing contest. She'd turn around from the front seat to face us, with a big grin on her face. "Do you know what time it is, my dearies? It's bubble gum time!"

We'd squeal with delight, and although this was a family tradition, Mom had to go over the rules with us every year. She handed us each a small paper bag that contained 25 pieces of Bazooka bubble gum. First rule was, wait until Dad said, "Go." Second rule was that there was no limit as to how many pieces we decided to use. Third rule was, "Good luck and have fun – winner gets five dollars!" The stakes were high on this contest so it was every kid for him or herself. Mom ruled when it came to this challenge. She was a pro. There were pictures of her being wheeled out of the delivery room after she had me, blowing bubbles.

"Ready, set, GO!" yelled my Dad. And the five of us started cramming the pink stuff into our faces, smacking our mouths like cows chewing their cud. We giggled, Mom put down the visor mirror so she could join in our enthusiasm. The trick was to make the gum as soft and pliable as possible in order to achieve the perfect bubble. We practiced. Bubbles popping here and there, once in a while managing to blow a big one. Mom sat silently in the front seat and we were too engrossed with our own efforts to see what she was doing.

All of a sudden, we heard the "this is the BIG bubble grunt" and she slowly turned her head to face us in the backseat so we could watch her continue to inflate this monstrosity even more. It grew bigger than her head. We were awestruck as she continued to exhale, her eyes expressed the fact that this was, by far, the biggest bubble on record. Then, without warning, my brother Scott felt the urge to burst mom's bubble. *WHOA!* Pieces of the gooey stuff flew in all directions, sticking to wherever it landed. The

naugahyde on the doors. The windows. The crushed velvet seats. The ceiling. It was all a blur. My mother snapped back around to inspect the damage in her mirror and Scott began to roar with laughter. Before I knew what happened, my mother who always lacked good eye-hand-coordination, swung her arm over the seat and accidentally hit me instead of the real culprit, which made Scott laugh even harder. She yelled to my father to pull off the side of the road, where she gave Scott a swat or two, bubble gum stuck to her eyebrows, lashes and hair.

This was when the fourth rule was added, "NEVER pop anyone else's bubble."

8567437

Kyle Hemmings

You only mattered to munchkins on steroids and harlequin dames wearing social disease on their outskirts. Your life could be reduced to a used subway ticket, but if you steal a ride it could be a lifetime sentence. Birds rob your window view and leave your stalking lovers breathless with panic-holes. You dream of dogs dreaming of you dreaming of them as blind puppies. Somebody will not wake up. Somebody has a tender foot with a leash. Somebody's tired of cleaning up all the shit being made to shampoo the carpets with intrinsically beautiful tankas. Mr. Bojangles sends you his love then barfs a whole night's supply of pureed. Your mother stays gagged in one of your dreams about hotel rooms and bad drug deals. If you could scream you'd attenuate the universe with increasingly relentless orbits of black carbonic silence.

Goat's Dreamscapes

1.

The nanny-doctor diagnoses you with a malignant case of Violet-Blue

You obtain a second opinion from the shorn gypsy. She tells you

to bleed it out, baby.
Just bleed it all out.

2.

What did the goat say to Donald Trump after a bad hair day:

Please don't chew us out.
We were never meant
to be little people either.

Lost

Art Heifetz

we'd lost the trail
 the woods here were
 a different shade of green
 we passed a creek we hadn't seen
 the blazes on the trees had changed
 from blue to white
 and as the shadows lengthened on the hills
 we plodded on into the night

to calm the children
 I told how Silly Annie
 following the bear
 came to the lonely hermit's lair
 and how he grew to love her
 like the daughter he had lost

by the time I finished
 you could see between the trees
 lights flickering like fireflies
 laundry dancing in the breeze
 the farmer crammed us in his truck
 among the bags of feed
 and the children held on tight
 as they watched the stars appear
 one constellation looked like Silly Annie
 the other was the bear

What Goes Around

William Cass

I was driving home from a business dinner and thinking about the likelihood that my wife was having an affair when I saw the woman perched on the bridge railing. High clouds draped a full moon. The dinner I'd been at had been a lengthy one, and it was after ten as I rounded the big turn on the river road towards home. Our house was located in an abandoned apricot orchard out in the country, and as usual at that time of night, the road was empty. I hadn't passed a single car since leaving the restaurant in town, nor had I seen one behind me.

I didn't see her until my headlights swept across her crouched figure on the railing, her purse slung over the shoulder closest to me. She was fiddling with the strap and seemed preoccupied with what to do with it when her eyes turned flatly towards me, as if she was considering items in a bakery case. I stopped the car at the end of the bridge with the headlights on, got out, left the door open, and approached her slowly. She stayed in that pose, crouched, one hand grasping the strap of her purse, her gaze steady, a small breeze coming up the river rustling her short dark hair and the hem of her dress.

Woods were all around with the whine of the cicadas and the roar of the river in full spring run-off a hundred or more feet below. The old, wooden bridge was short, built consciously where the river narrowed a century before. There was no trellis, and she was on the upstream side. The wooden boards groaned as I made my halting approach, and we kept our eyes on one another. I tried to keep mine calm--neutral and mildly friendly, though I wasn't sure at all how to do that.

I stopped a few yards away. A little fog drifted in the milky glare of the headlights between us. In that wash of light, I could see a tiny tattoo of a red and yellow butterfly behind her ear closest to me. I let a minute, maybe two pass before I said as evenly as possible, "Hey, what's going on?"

She said nothing. Her left calf seemed to be quivering slightly. From that distance, I took her to be about my age, perhaps thirty. Her dress and shoes were of good quality, the sort of attire that might have been worn at the dinner I'd just left. But she wore no coat, and the late night temperatures in that northern part of the state in the mid-March couldn't have been much above freezing. I was trying to keep my mind clear and alert, but for some reason, I thought of that prior weekend when I'd opened our phone bill and come across a series of early morning calls I hadn't made to a number I didn't recognize.

I took another tepid step forward and the woman straightened a bit, teetering. I imagined the railing to be damp and slippery. Her shoes had short heels, so she was balancing precariously on their instep. A louder, lingering call of an owl came from the woods, to which she gave no reaction.

I said, "How about coming down from there?"

She didn't reply, but appeared to try to straighten further. Her expression, her gaze remained unbroken.

"Hey," I said and started to take off my sports coat. "It's cold. Why don't you climb down now and let me give you this? It's nice and warm."

I swallowed. I took another small step and was almost within arm's length of her when she straightened a bit more, teetered, and jumped. As she fell, she seemed to reach for me.

My voice said, "No!" And then I was at the railing where she'd stood and looking down as she hit the water. She entered it feet first, with one knee lifted, and both of her arms over her head. There was no scream. She disappeared under the surface, and I scampered to the other side of the bridge. In the moonlight, her body bobbed up again perhaps twenty feet downstream from the bridge and tumbled through some mild white water between two boulders. The fast-moving current tossed her like a ragdoll, and I couldn't tell for certain if she was dead or not. I called 911 on my cell phone, gave a quick summary and location, then ran around the end of the bridge where my car was parked and started down the embankment. It was a slippery going and I knew a futile endeavor. Before I was halfway down, she had disappeared around the bend, where I knew it was less than a quarter mile of rushing water after that to the falls. I kept on to the bottom and slogged through the shallows until I heard the sirens approaching. Then I climbed hand-over-hand back up the slope to meet the rescue folks so that I could direct them.

I drove home immediately after talking with the authorities because I was cold and wet. I thought my wife was asleep when I'd climbed into bed next to her, but she said, "You're late."

Her back was turned to me. I said, "Yes."

"Car trouble?"

"Something like that."

I curled up against her and kissed her shoulder, but she didn't stir or turn around. In a few moments, her breathing slowed into the low snore I'd grown accustomed to.

~

There was nothing in the news about the woman the next morning. My wife was still asleep when I left for work, but I stopped by the portion of the barn that she used for her pottery studio before getting in my car. I wasn't sure why. I picked up a few of the pieces she was working on and looked at them. I spun the potting wheel. It was cool, dank. I reached in the pouch of her hooded sweatshirt that was hanging on the back of a chair and took out a chrome lighter. As far as I knew, she didn't smoke, and I could think of no purpose for a lighter in the studio. I replaced it, shook my head, and drove away.

It was a busy day at work, and I didn't leave for home until after six. I turned on the radio as soon as I got in the car, but I found no information about the woman, nor from the clerk at the police station on the edge of town where I stopped to ask about her.

Darkness had almost completely fallen by the time I reached the bridge. I pulled over on the shoulder just before the wooden planks met the road and walked out onto it to where the woman had jumped the night before. There wasn't any indication that she'd ever been there.

The railing was smooth and unmarked. I looked down at the flowing river. What had taken place there suddenly seemed as impossible as my wife having an affair. But there was no mistaking the first, and the likelihood of the second seemed nearly as certain. I'd seen what I thought was my wife in the window of a passing bus a month before. She appeared to be smiling at a man next to her who had his arm around her. At the time, I was in the town next to ours having lunch in a diner. I'd stood up at the booth where I was sitting, but then the bus was gone and had disappeared out of sight around the next corner. I remember convincing myself at the time that the woman I'd seen must have been someone else who bore a resemblance to my wife. There was, after all, no reason for her to be in that town

or on any bus at lunch hour. I remember picturing her instead in her overalls at her potting wheel blowing a loose strand of lovely hair out of her face. I couldn't recall if that had been the first instance of suspicion for me or not. I walked back to the car.

My wife wasn't there when I got home. She'd left a note saying she was having dinner with a friend but had left soup on the stove. I sat at the dining room table and looked through photo albums as I ate. I started off with pictures of the days when we'd first met in college, then continued through the time we'd spent doing volunteer work together in Guatemala, and the few years when we both tried to make a go of it as artists, and stopped when I got to the ones of a vacation we'd been on to Jamaica that I'd won as a sales award the previous year. In the last one, we were smiling and standing arm in arm in matching tropical shirts at sunset. The number of photographs, I realized, had decreased with each advancing year. And, of course, there were none of any children. We'd agreed on that before we'd married, although I was reluctant to do so. My job at the advertising agency had been a reluctant, but necessary, choice, too. We were nearly out of money by then, so one of us had to find a steady income. At some level, I guess, we both understood that I resented that it had been me, and she made no attempt to hide her contempt for the work I did.

I looked at a movie on TV for a while and then went to bed before my wife came home. I woke up when I heard the soft click of the back door and looked at the clock. It was after one. I sat up when she came to the bedroom doorway, where she stopped.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey."

"Pretty long dinner."

She shrugged. "You know. Got talking."

She was silhouetted from the light behind her in the doorway, so I couldn't see her face. I nodded, though I wasn't sure she could see mine either.

"Listen," she said. "I feel like I'm coming down with something, so I'm going to sleep on the couch."

I nodded again.

"Goodnight," she said.

"Goodnight."

She left and the light blinked off in the hallway. I lay awake for a long time afterwards. I don't remember hearing her snore, so she may have, too.

~

My wife was gone for good when I got home the next evening. She'd left another note and this one said that she needed some time away. It said she needed space to think, that she

would be in touch. It didn't say where she was going. I tried calling her cell phone immediately,

but received a recording saying it was no longer in service, which was the same thing that happened when I dialed the unknown number on the phone bill. I called her family and friends; no one knew anything. She worked alone out of her space in the barn, so there were no colleagues of that sort to try. In less than a half-hour I was left with little recourse but to wander and search the house for some clues or indications, but I came upon nothing. My last stop was her studio, which I found exactly as I had the day before except for her sweatshirt, which was gone.

~

It's been three years and I haven't heard a word from her, nor has anyone I know. I wish I could at least claim that time has dimmed the pain of her leaving, that the sense of rejection and loneliness has diminished, or that I've moved on and embraced new relationships, but none of those are true either. Instead, it's as if there is a hole in me that refuses to budge – a barren, aching, empty place. I find myself thinking of her during ad presentations, seeing her in the faces of woman in line at the grocery store, hearing her voice on the wind's howl. Sometimes, I go into the bedroom closet and bury my face in her clothes, which still retain vestiges of her scent. I hug her pillow when I can't sleep, which is almost every night.

Over the past few months, I've begun travelling out of town more for work. I've had even more trouble sleeping on the road than at home. A couple of weeks ago, across the state, I gave up on sleep altogether around midnight, and went down to the hotel bar.

It was a typical place in a big hotel like that: red carpet and upholstery, brass, dark wood, bottles lined up on short glass shelves on a mirrored wall, a dark TV mounted in the corner. The place was pretty empty. A few men still in business suits sat at a cluster of armchairs, and two more of the same ilk huddled together at one end of the bar. I sat down on a stool at the other end. The woman tending the bar was drying glasses across from me. She didn't glance my way, but she asked, "What'll it be?"

"Draft beer."

She looked up and seemed to study me. "Any particular kind?"

I shook my head. "Just trying to make sleep come."

She nodded slowly. She poured my beer, set it on a coaster in front of me, and stayed there herself. "So," she said. "What's making it so hard to sleep?"

I looked her over. She seemed sincere enough. Her eyes were kind. So I took a chance on the truth and said, "Grief."

I took a swig of beer and watched her nod some more. "That'll do it," she said. "What sort of grief?"

I watched her brush dark bangs from her eyes and shrugged. "My wife left me. Oldest story in the book."

We regarded each other until she said, "I understand that kind of grief, and it's awful. How long ago?"

"Few years."

She frowned. "That's quite a bit of time to still be hurting so bad. You must have really loved her."

I felt foolish because my lips immediately began trembling and I felt moisture gathering at the corners of my eyes. She sighed, stepped away, filled two shot glasses with some sort of whiskey, and brought them back. She set one in front of me and held the other herself.

She said, "If it's sleep you're chasing, this will work better than beer." She held her glass out in front of her. "To hell with grief."

"I guess I could live with that," I said and touched her glass with mine. We both drank.

I wiped my lips with the back of my hand.

The men at the end of the bar put money on the counter and left. We watched

them walk across the lobby towards the elevators. Then she asked, "Was she involved with someone else?"

It was my turn to nod. "I think so. I'm pretty sure she was."

"But you don't know for sure."

"No."

"Neither did I."

She walked to the other end of the bar, cleared away the glasses there, and put the money in the cash register. She came back, stood in front of me, and folded her arms.

"So what'd you do?" I asked. "When you were in my shoes?"

"Silly things, desperate things. Kept loving him until he came back. Kept loving and loving and loving. Boy, did I love."

"But he did come back?"

She nodded. "You'll do the same. Keep loving. No choice."

"You think so?"

"Yes." Her gaze was steady. "I can tell. You'll have to."

"And what do you think the chances are that my wife will come back?"

She shrugged and said, "Doesn't matter."

We regarded each other some more until she looked over my shoulder. "Last call," she said in a loud voice. The businessmen shook their heads, finished their drinks, left

money on the glass table between them, and went on their way, too.

I took out my wallet, but she put her hand on mine and shook her head. "On me. You tried to help me once." She tossed her long hair, and it was then that I saw the tiny butterfly behind her ear.

The air went right out of me. I sat blinking until I could finally find my voice. "You?"

"What goes around, you know."

"You," I repeated. "I can't believe this."

"Believe it," she said evenly. "And now you'll go back to bed and go to sleep. And tomorrow will be better." She smiled. "I have to close up."

I watched her go around the end of the bar, collect the things from where the businessmen had been sitting, and carry them through a swinging door under the TV. The door swung slowly back and forth behind her until it stopped. The lights in the bar blinked off, and then I saw the sliver of light beneath the door where she'd gone expire too.

I took the elevator up to my room. I brushed my teeth, splashed water on my face, and got back into bed. There were no sounds outside except the distant hum of the highway a half-mile or so away. My bags were already packed for leaving the next morning, and I had no plans in the future or any particular reason to return to that city. Even if I had, I wasn't sure that I would come to that bar again. I wasn't sure there was anything more to be gained beyond that bit of time we'd spent together. What more could there be than the recognition we'd shared or the relief she'd provided? What more could one person do for another?

Clowning

J.W. Mark

Mad actors bent, we flair to peak
and peel the curtain draped
which slid reveals the waiting want
who sit their corn and cake

which popped prepared is fit to stall
for wait the gangly crew
who bloom to cast a giggler's dream
comedic fools to stage

and vibrant dots to polka cheeks
we scheme the ragged flesh
and spark to show their laughter hid
red crimson stock and stow.

The Echo

Among the cool, November fog
the bleating imbecile

requesting asks his Father help
and pausing waits reply.

Among the cool, November fog
The bleating imbecile

requesting asks his Father help
and pausing waits reply.

Among the cool, November fog
The bleating imbecile

requesting asks his Father help
and pausing waits reply.

Unwanted

Valentina Cano

You were an unwanted thought

unraveling inside my head lie a skirt's hem.

I tugged, thread by thread,

trying to find the faulty one,

the one that would rip you

out completely,

and instead knotted you

into the lining of my brain.

Warning Light

Behind him stood a table on fire.
 It scraped his name down the kitchen floor,
 dragging broken, sizzling legs into his
 periphery.
 Until there was no ignoring it.
 Until every room in the house
 had trails of flame
 dancing their warning in the dark.

You and Your Circus

William Doeski

Your shadow lies thin and flat
 on the bare frozen ground. It lost
 dimensions many years ago
 when you traveled with the circus
 and hardly ever saw the sun.

 Now your fellow performers
 return in ecrus and siennas,
 dragging grandchildren shaped
 like bottles, jars, or funeral urns.
 They want you to rejoin them

 at the old performer's camp
 where your forgotten lover shudders
 with phosphorescence, his whole body
 warped like a xylophone. Go,
 if you wish. No need to consider

 my needs. The harbor slops and sighs,
 anticipating the weekend storm
 that will drop a foot of snow to hide
 the naked and brittle garden plots.
 Your circus friends insist

on traveling south today
 to miss the oncoming weather,
 so you have to decide. The eggs
 of our favorite chicken deflate
 as rumors of your departure spread.

Your shadow will remain here,
 too scrawny and weak to travel.
 It will slump at the dinner table,
 and because unable to speak
 will gesture me to serve it greens
 only, no bread or meat. Meanwhile
 in Florida you and your circus
 will regroup in layers of flesh so dense
 you'll eclipse even that bolder sun
 and bring the crowd to its knees.

Metaphysics

Christina Murphy

In the metaphysics of sacrifice,
 the spine hobbles the spirit,
 and suffering endures with
 the expectation that suffering will not last.

It is an illusion, a myth that blows to the heart
 mark how far the soul can go beyond
 unfinished riddles into actuality.
 The lack of resolution creates the ache
 that everything should be so inscrutable.

In the midst of beauty, only loneliness.
 In the midst of the longing to connect, only
 silence.

Expect less, so that the expectation itself
 does not sting like so many nettles
 against a weary and fragile skin.

Expect more, so that all seems endless and
 open
 and there is no end to the mind's imagining.

Expect it all; there is so little that it hardly
 matters
 yet hope, like love, matters most of all.

Twilight's mystical shadows are the sweetest
of all.

The time when light and darkness
have not yet made peace or surrendered,
one to the other, the other into one.

In the truth of the half-light,
there is the journey and the quiet of
contemplation,
when the soul's tongue speaks only of
contentment
and the beautiful wires by which dreams
hang
until unfolding into the tight, strong, bitter
refusal to yield.

Rough Blur

Richard King Perkins II

Masked in chalky powder,
the widow rarely speaks of her dead husband,
so today is most uncommon—
her flinty voice brittles on
until the barnacle of her tongue is dry.

"I always lived on the second floor, alone.
Robert kept to the basement.
He never let me look beyond the cellar door.
Even after he was beaten to death
at the carnival two years ago last fall,
I haven't dared peek inside."

The moss-covered cocoon where Robert
stayed
and hid his burnished oddities would be
enough
to convince anyone that his violent passing
had been an entirely good thing.

Of course, his widow would never want to
know
what went on in the lowest portion of her
home.
The drench of her intuition told her that
much

Contributor's Page

Pushcart prize nominee **Euphrates Moss** has been writing since age 3. He has published various sketches in the Jibsheet, a weekly newspaper published at Bellevue Community College. He graduated Bellevue Community College with an A.A. Degree in Spring 2007 and Seattle University with a B.A. in English/Creative Writing in 2011. Don't hold that against him, though. His first book, *Early Harvest*, is currently out on unbound CONTENT.

Alan Swyer is an award-winning filmmaker whose recent documentaries have dealt with Eastern spirituality in the Western world, the criminal justice system, diabetes, and boxing. His fiction has appeared in England, Ireland, Germany, India, and in several American publications. www.elboxeothemovie.com.

Mark McKee is from the American south. In his spare time he collects nervous breakdowns. His work has appeared in *decomp*, *theNewerYork*, and others. Find him at goodreads.com/markmckeejr.

Grove Koger is the author of a guide to travel literature, *When the Going Was Good*. He writes for *Laguna Beach Art Magazine* and has published fiction in *Bewildering Stories*, *Phantasmagore*, *Lacuna*, *Two Words For*, *Eternal Haunted Summer*, and *Danse Macabre*.

Paul Wellan has published short fiction in magazines such as *South Dakota Review*, *Big Muddy*, *Word Riot*, and *Timber Creek Review*. His latest novel, *Twenty-one Humiliating Demands*, chronicles an aging assassin who retires to teach Atrocity Studies

as small Mid-Western college. Paul is an Adjunct Instructor at Augustana College in Rock Island, Illinois.

Anne Britting Oleson has been published widely on four continents. She earned her MFA at the Stonecoast program of USM. She has published two chapbooks, *The Church of St. Materiana* (2007) and *The Beauty of It* (2010). A third chapbook, *Planes and Trains and Automobiles*, is forthcoming from Portent Press (UK), and a novel, *The Book of the Mandolin Player*, is forthcoming from B Ink Publishing--both in 2015.

Michael Lee Johnson lived ten years in Canada during the Vietnam era: now known as the Illinois poet, from Itasca, IL. Today he is a poet, freelance writer, photographer who experiments with poetography (blending poetry with photography), and small business owner in Itasca, Illinois, who has been published in more than 875 small press magazines in 27 countries, he edits 9 poetry sites. Michael is the author of *The Lost American: "From Exile to Freedom"*, several chapbooks of poetry, including *"From Which Place the Morning Rises"* and *"Challenge of Night and Day"*, and *"Chicago Poems"*. He also has over 71 poetry videos on YouTube.

Sandra Anfang is a teacher, award-winning poet, and artist. Her poems have appeared in *Poetalk*, *The Shine Journal*, *San Francisco Peace and Hope*, *West Trestle Review*, *The Tower Journal* and many others. She hosts a monthly series, *Rivertown Poets*, in Petaluma. To write, for her, is to breathe.

Richard Fein was a finalist in The 2004 New York Center for Book Arts Chapbook Competition. A Chapbook of his poems was published by Parallel Press, University of

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Wendy Taylor Carlisle lives in the Arkansas Ozarks. She is the author of two books, *Reading Berryman to the Dog* and *Discount Fireworks* (both Jacaranda Books). Her most recent chapbook is *Persephone on the Metro*, (MadHat Press, 2014.)

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Chad McClendon is a 30 year old author who studied Creative Writing at Northern Kentucky University. He and his wife, Briana, have two daughters and are expecting a third child this August. In his free time Chad enjoys camping at Daniel Boone National Forest, playing video games and also swimming.

Heather M. Browne is a faith-based psychotherapist and recently emerged poet, published in the Orange Room, Boston Literary Review, Page & Spine, Eunoia Review, Poetry Quarterly, Red Fez, Electric Windmill, Apeiron, The Lake, Knot, mad swirl. Red Dashboard just released her first collection, *Directions of Folding*.

Follow her: www.thehealedheart.net

David Spicer is the author of one full-length collection of poems, *Everybody Has a Story*, and four chapbooks. He is the former editor of *raccoon*, *Outlaw*, and *Ion Books* and has published in *The American Poetry Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Greenfield Review*, *Hinchas de Poesia*, *Yellow Mama*, and elsewhere.

Scott Archer Jones is currently living and working on his six novel in northern New Mexico, after stints in the Netherlands, Scotland and Norway plus less exotic locations. He's worked for a power company, grocers, a lumberyard, an energy company (for a very long time), and a winery. Now he's on the masthead of the Prague Revue, and launched a novel last year with Southern Yellow Pine, *Jupiter and Gilgamesh, a Novel of Sumeria and Texas*.

M.J.Iuppa lives on a small farm near the shores of Lake Ontario. *Between Worlds* is her most recent chapbook, featuring lyric essays, flash fiction and prose poems (Foothills Publishing, 2013). Recent poems, flash fictions, and essays in *When Women Waken*, *Poppy Road Review*, *Wild: A Quarterly*, *Eunoia Review*, *Andrea Reads America*, *Canto*, *Grey Sparrow Journal*, *The Poetry Storehouse*, *Avocet*, *Right Hand Pointing*, *Tiny-lights*, *The Lake (U.K.)*, *The Kentucky Review*, and more. She is the Writer-in-Residence and Director of the Visual and Performing Arts Minor Program at St. John Fisher College. You can follow her musings on writing and creative sustainability on Red Rooster Farm on mjiuppa.blogspot.com.

Rick Hartwell is a retired middle school (remember the hormonally-challenged?) English teacher living in Southern California. He believes in the succinct, that the small becomes large; and, like the Transcendentalists and William Blake, that the instant contains eternity. Given his "druthers," if he's not writing, Rick would rather still be tailing plywood in a mill in Oregon. He can be reached at rdhartwell@gmail.com.

Cael Jacobs is an engineer, a teacher, a writer, a speaker, a storyteller. He was thirty-five, and fifteen years into a career in computers, when he realized what he really wanted to do when he grew up was tell stories. Now, he is on the winding path toward doing just that.

Jodi Sykes is a freelance writer, author of *Rhyming Activities for Beginning Readers* (T.S. Denison & Co.), *I am Special – The Power is in ME!* and *The House on Pancake Hill* (Amazon.com). She is also a website content editor, proofreader, and daily blogger of, *Living La Vida (Lymphoma)*. She is available for interviews and lectures. For more information, please contact her at JodiSykes@aol.com.

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William Cass has had over seventy short stories accepted for publication in a variety of literary magazines and anthologies, including the winning selection in *The Examined Life Journal's* writing contest. He lives and works as an educator in San Diego, California.

JW Mark is a poet living in Stow, Ohio. Publications to include his work include *The Ampersand Review*, *Eunoia Review*, *The Midwest Literary Magazine*, *flashquake*, and *The North Chicago Review*. He is the author of a novel, entitled *Artifice*, as well as a book of poems entitled *Patched Collective*. He is also a

critic of poetry and appears regularly at *The Ampersand Review*.

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Valentina Cano is a student of classical singing who spends whatever free time either writing or reading. Her works have appeared in *Exercise Bowler*, *Blinking Cursor*, *Theory Train*, *Cartier Street Press*, *Berg Gasse 19*, *Precious Metals*, *A Handful of Dust*, *The Scarlet Sound*, *The Adroit Journal*, *Perceptions Literary Magazine*, *Welcome to Wherever*, *A Narrow Fellow*, *Super Poetry Highway*, *Stream Press*, *Stone Telling*, *Popshot*, *Golden Sparrow Literary Review*, *Rem Magazine* and many, many more. Her poetry has been nominated for Best of the Web and the Pushcart Prize. You can find her here: <http://carabosseslibrary.blogspot.com>

William Doreski lives in Peterborough, New Hampshire, and teaches at Keene State College. His most recent book of poetry is *The Suburbs of Atlantis* (2013). He has published three critical studies, including *Robert Lowell's Shifting Colors*. His essays, poetry, fiction, and reviews have appeared in many journals.

Christina Murphy's poems appear in a wide range of journals and anthologies, including, *PANK*, *Dali's Lovechild*, and *Hermeneutic Chaos* and the anthologies *Let the Sea Find its Edges* and *Remaking Moby-Dick*. Her work has been nominated multiple times for the Pushcart Prize and for the *Best of the Net Anthology*.

Richard King Perkins II is a state-sponsored advocate for residents in long-term care facilities. He lives in Crystal Lake, IL with his wife Vickie and daughter Sage. He is a three-time Pushcart nominee and a Best of the Net nominee.

About the Editor

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Mercer's poetry book entitled, Collection: A Chesterfield Reader can be found on Amazon.com. She is currently working on another poetry collection entitled Human Stew.

She resides in Milwaukee, WI, with her life partner, a collection of (moderately creepy) taxidermy and a plethora of pets.