

MEAT FOR TEA



VOL 18 ISSUE 4
THE VALLEY REVIEW

CUP

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review

Meat for Tea: The Valley Review was founded by Elizabeth MacDuffie and Alexandra Wagman. We are a non-academic affiliated magazine committed to recognizing and featuring the work of the artists, writers, and musicians living in western Massachusetts and beyond.

Staff: Editor-in-Chief: Elizabeth MacDuffie
Layout: Mark Alan Miller
Impresario: Elizabeth MacDuffie
Intern: Sunil Kumar

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Contributors: Doug Anderson, Julie Benesh, Chris Bodily, Luke Brannon, Shirley J. Brewer, Brian Bruso, Jacob Chapman, David Clémenceau, Paul Edward Costa, Mk Smith Despres, John Dorsey, Christine Gay Dutton, S.T. Gately, Daniel Hales, Richard Wayne Horton, Leo Hwang, Indë, Matt Jasper, Mary Jennings, Taya Sanderson Kessler, Tom Kovar, Linda Kraus, Kimberly Kuchar, Julia Ludewig, Dana Henry Martin, Maxim Martin, Matthew J. McKee, Niki McQueen, Reid Messerschmidt, David P. Miller, Darlene O'Dell, David Ram, Charles Rammelkamp, Kevin Ridgeway, Thomas Rowland, Connolly Ryan, Andrew Shelffo, David R. Solheim, D.A. Stern, Edward Michael Supranowicz, Peter Tacy, Claudia Tong, Constance Walter, Michael Washburn, Gerald Yelle, Jane Yolen, Frank Zahn

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Guest Salutation: Safe Microcosms Needed

I have been in one total wreck where my hands rose into the breaking windshield glass, and I have been in one soft puff of a wreck where I wondered what had happened but was able to get some help putting it all back together and no one was really hurt. What kind of a wreck we are in after November's election is partially known and partially unknowable until details emerge. There's a quiet after an accident when the shock that has given some safe remove is itself removed and the world starts filling in. As the aftermath fades we are beginning to apprehend the enormity of a debauched Nero plucking at the breaking lyre strings of democracy—an abhorrent cylinder of a man with a sprayed-on tan banqueting at our rising expense.

Not to strain a metaphor or bore you with details of my twenty-year-old self mounting half-ton paper rolls to spin words out of a Goss Community press the size of a gymnasium—but since I'm guessing we're in for a hard crash, here's what I lived through in a small one:

4 The great great grandson of Sitting Bull would light me up then caution he thought I'd get sucked into the massive rollers of the paper web someday because I was so clumsy. He had the best weed yet I wasn't needed that shift so was assigned delivery of one burgeoning bread van full of cellophane-wrapped stacks of newspapers carrying reportage of that day. I'd never driven it but soon got used to the slow sway of pallets behind me as I cornered with the chug of engine straining against a tonnage of words thought mere until they roared to protest a child of maybe three having tricycled into the roadway from a blind drive—quite safe as it turns out because even I was surprised that my reaction time left me a foot short of having to deliver his obituary the next week. I was so focused on this accomplishment, it took a few moments to sail back into my body and notice my face was pressed into the wide left pane of the windshield and it was hard to move. The pallets had offered all papers to inform me with news that I had wrecked—not an accident, really. Just that before this, I'd admired compression in language not imagining language could compress me. I thought of that truck today— that the guys who rushed out when I radioed in were like my friends after this election again unpinning me from entombment in news that makes a world close in—leaves an impression where our bodies can be filled again and again with what is—yet also is not really us.

Our place in the chorus is to sing sweetly one another's names, walk as sounds and lights of habitation fade into what matters more: a world of refuge we can shelter in until well enough to return to the fray of pages and screens overlaid with all we do and say to weave into this larger eye that can guide our steps more wisely.

Returning from shock, I almost want to carry away some of it in my pockets to pull out later as a cup of tea, as a pleasant remove and ritual of togetherness. Shock is an extreme form of rest. Anyone who has a great task knows or will soon learn rest's value. It rides along as a half-empty yoke bearing weight equal to what the visible ox of us can stand.

I will watch my preteen trans daughter at play with her half-Sudanese half-sister and their mix of neuro-divergent siblings. I will think of nothing but the guided tour of the world I want to give them where we have little helmets to cradle their brains hurtling across quarter-pipes and pump tracks, a warm house with good food, drawings, and books to read. It's all so cozy that—if pressed—I would fight to protect it. I practice tolerance within my family and as this family resonates with a greater world and its issues outside. Yet the paradox of tolerance is that if we tolerate intolerance it may rise to sweep tolerance away. In some small and large ways, this can sway us toward engagement as we are able to rest well and gather wisdom from this huge eye we are peacefully building knowing that vision and its expression through art in rehearsal for life is the ultimate power.

Matt Jasper

what flees in the fall

Jane Yolen

What flees in the Fall--
Geese in their loud orations,
vultures in their silent circles,
deer by the hundreds,
into the depths of forest,
and bears into their quiet dens.

They will all return in the spring,
but in my fancy,
I see their footsteps,
In their wing beats,
hear them calling me
from the far south:
“We will return, but will you? Will you?”

I am already 85.
It is a good question
with no honest answer.



october morning at 87

Peter Tacy

To suit the long-stored winter door
I've taken out this October day,
the sky is a refrigerant blue;
leaves are vivid, though not to stay.
First frost sparkles underfoot
as I fetch the daily paper, to learn
what lesser matters trouble those
whose days don't so gravely turn
as mine. I pull the house's heat
around me, then snugly settle in
to contemplate winter's sure arrival.
Just so, my daily metaphors begin:
welcoming autumn as a familiar friend
who decorates my days before the end.



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917.701.8672

Miriam.Sirota@ravelis.com | MiriamSirota.ravelis.com
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sag jenkins pt.1

Reid Messerschmidt

I. Sag Jenkins Breathes In the Thick Stink of 200 Shits.

In 1972, Richard Nixon went to China and Neil Diamond recorded Hot August Night.

Incredible.

We landed on the moon for the final time, to diminished applause.

Impressive, nonetheless.

ABBA formed.

The Black Hills flooded, “The Godfather” was in theaters, and the Munich Olympics were interrupted by terrorists.

Watergate. Bloody Sunday.

Momentous occasions, all.

Ezra Pound died.

Carl Stalling died.

Sag Jenkins didn’t know about any of it. He sat, bottoms on, in an overheated fiberglass port-a-potty, soaked in sweat. He breathed the thick stink of 200 shits and took hard pulls from an old glass liter vodka bottle filled with new cheap whiskey, now three-fourths gone.

In twenty minutes, Sag Jenkins was supposed to jump nineteen cars on his motorbike, and he wouldn’t make it. In twenty minutes, 227 attendees of the Argus County Speedway in Golgotha, South Dakota would watch Sag Jenkins die.

For now he felt all right. Depressed but drunk, and that was as all right as he got these days.

Sag was on the final leg of a spectacular descent, a bender devoid of the delirious, stupid revelry of the many that came before it. A lonely bender, and a sad one.

Sadness didn’t suit Sag any more than his leathers did.

The leathers were a particularly heinous variation on the red, white, and blue Evel Knievel knock-offs that were a prerequisite for daredevilry in the seventies. Each had its own representational geometry, but the colors didn’t vary much. Sag’s had thin red and blue vertical stripes that ran from his red patent boots up to the increasingly doughy flesh of his neck, pinched and spilling over his collar. Even daredevils are forced to melt into oblivion, if they don’t kill themselves first. He also had a big white star on his back.

The ill-suited leathers were unzipped and pulled down to the waist so his mushroomed paunch could expand to its full size. It protruded from beneath his still thinnish, sunken, hair-spotched chest like a loaf of uncooked bread on a warped, knife-scarred cutting board. The zipper dug into his flesh, but he was a sniff of what was in the bottle away from a blackout, and the sharp pain wasn't sharp enough to rekindle his dimmed, half-drowned nervous system.

The blackout sat just behind his eyes and narrowed his vision. So long as he didn't open his mouth, his thoughts stayed on the withered abstraction of his ego. If it opened, his mind would mute and unhinged instinct would push out a jumble of slurred garbage. What was left of his ego would give way to allow his hideous id to enter the world like rancid water from a tragic spit take.

He was thinking, "I'm gonna throw up again."

Had he the capacity, he may have used the spasms of clarity that followed to reflect on the devastating, self-inflicted shots his ego had taken of late after a prolonged period of unreflected upon inflation, which we'll get to.

Now we need to talk about his face.

It was a mess.

2. The Finest Jinkins.

Sag was born Sagory Troyal Jinkins III on the 10th of March, 1938 in the god-and-everyone-else-forsaken town of Unberg, North Carolina, behind a perilous shack, inside of a filthy, makeshift outhouse.

The circle of life, as they say.

His father, Sagory Troyal Jinkins II, was not present for the birth. He was rarely ever really present for anything but the eight seconds after orgasm. At the time of Sag's inglorious nativity, he was, presumably, drunk somewhere.

His young mother, Artis Barbara-Anne Jinkins, was present, obviously, but a conspicuously unwilling participant. Sag was too, but she didn't consider that. She smoked cigarettes and cried in the outhouse for twenty minutes when it was over.

The Jinkins name arced back to an overcrowded exile ship the Brits used to relocate their undesirables to the New World. They'd been proving the wisdom of the sentence ever since. They were, almost to a man, drunks, rascals, creeps, freaks, deviants, liars, losers, fuck ups, shits for brains, trash, bastards, sons of a bitch, mouth breathers, and beslubbing, dankish, flap-mouthed rogues.

There were some isolated exceptions, each with caveats.

Sag's great-great grandfather, Troyal Hostetler Jinkins, was a drunk and a violent racist and misogynist, but he was also a fireman. Fire fighting in 1833 was an analogue occupation with an

87% mortality rate, and he'd gone a long way towards redeeming some of his shortcomings by saving folks from mortally unfair circumstances. There were burn scars over most of his body and exactly one half of his face to prove it.

Hostetler "Hoss" Sagory Jinkins, Sag's great uncle, shot Sag's father in the back when Sag was 10 and Hoss was a deeply worn seventy-two. It was in retribution for the murder of Hoss Sagory Jinkins III, Sagory II's cousin. He'd beaten him to death over a game of horseshoes with, of course, a horse shoe. While far from a good deed, it was a just one. Everyone who knew Sag's Father agreed that the hard push to his eternal damnation was a cause for celebration.

Sag didn't celebrate. He felt relief, but guilty for that.

By fourteen, Sag was what passed for handsome in Unberg. He was symmetrical and lean with clear skin and good teeth. He had English features, but cockney and warped by a few hundred years of questionable breeding, but warped in such a way that folks called it character.

By seventeen, Sag was, despite his brutal and ongoing upbringing, poised to be the finest Jinkins the bloodline had ever produced. He was smart, polite, and kind. He never touched booze, never snuck around or lied, and didn't let the violence in his blood poison his heart.

The Jinkins' didn't know what to do with him.

His mother once passed out from huffing Floor Brite brand floor polish. Even the presence of floor polish in the house was suspect, as the wood floors in the shack were unwaveringly dirty and splintered. They had never been polished, ever. Never would be. When she purchased it, Doc Arbuckle at Arbuckle's Five and Dime knew as much and told her so.

She woke up with an evil headache, but lay in her bed with the covers pulled up to her chin and not on the ground behind the house where she'd landed. The shack was clean to the extent that a shack can be cleaned. Instead of thanking her cautiously optimistic son set quietly on the front steps, she yelled at him to get more floor polish.

The year before Sag left home, he began his Eagle Scout Project.

He had worked himself up from a diminutive Webelos to the brink of the honor through untemperable, unsupported force of will. When he told other Jinkins' that he intended to undertake the project as one of the required steps to reach the upper echelons of the Scouts, they were surprised to learn that he was a scout at all, though he wore his badge-laden uniform nearly every day.

His project was to be the construction of a gazebo in honor of fallen soldiers, none of whom were Jinkins', a family of draft-dodgers all the way back to the early days of the Indian Wars. Jinkins' had killed or been killed in combat countless times, but none of them did it in an official capacity.

Sag's gazebo was inspired by a film he saw two towns over, in Overton, at a beat up movie house called The Schwartz. He'd found a dime outside of Ardo's Barbershop and slipped it in his pocket after some head flitting and a thorough check against the scout code and his own

self-erected system of morality. He walked twelve miles to the theater, though he didn't know what was playing.

The movie turned out to be a six-year-old print with one reel missing of Laurel and Hardy's terrible war picture, Iwo Jima Screama, but it was enough to inspire a fiery love of country in a deeply sensitive kid who needed a totem to hang his sweat-salted hat on.

He decided his project would honor the troops.

The gazebo was inspired by a conversation between a pair of old women he'd passed on the sidewalk after the movie. He didn't get the context, just heard them say it: GAZEBO.

He thought it was the most beautiful word he'd ever heard.

GAZEBO.

He didn't know what it meant, but Overton was hardly bigger than a city park, so its modest library was fifteen feet from where he silently mouthed the word:

GAZEBO.

He went in, said hello to the librarian, Mrs. Chamber, and walked straight to the elegant, familiar Encyclopedia Britannica with a corner to itself. It wasn't the first time he'd consulted it. His family didn't know much and were pretty tight lipped about the little they did know. There wasn't a book besides the Bible anywhere in Unberg, and even those mostly just collected dust. He grabbed the G volume, took a deep whiff of its musky aroma, and flipped to the correct page.

GAZEBO:A roofed structure that offers an open view of the surrounding area, typically used for relaxation or entertainment.

Relaxation and entertainment were two of the many things Unberg lacked. There was idleness, sure, but idleness taxes. Relaxation refreshes. And the horsefeathers that folks got up to were far too cruel to be considered entertainment.

Next to the definition was a picture, a color photograph. Sag thought it was as enchanting as the word. An open air palace, an elegant comingling of the works of man and Mother Nature. A cathedral with walls painted by God.

He would build a GAZEBO, he decided.

And he did.

He checked out books on carpentry, obtained the building permit, collected scrap wood, borrowed tools, and performed odd jobs for low pay to raise the money for the necessary materials. He worked tirelessly, single minded and alone for five months. He documented every step for the presentation to his Scout Master, Erwin Everest Dox.

Sag measured and cut, beveled, sanded, and stained. The work was slow. He learned on the job. His limited funds meant he could only work when money was at hand, so he spent all of his time earning more when it wasn't

The Gazebo took shape, became beautiful. Sag was pleased with his work. More pleased than he'd ever been with anything.

He had a plaque engraved, at no small cost, for the Gazebo's base. It read "Veterans Memorial Gazebo - Sag Jinkins Salutes You!"

The final act.

Completion.

When he arrived at the all-but-finished gazebo, he found his uncle. He may have been a second cousin. Keeping track was difficult and unsatisfying.

Hickory Sagory Jinkins, an especially wild and dim-witted member of the clan, in his soiled britches, soaked in sweat, somehow both feral and leisurely, swung an axe at the splintered remnants of the gazebo's base. The rest had been tossed in a pile behind him.

Sag nearly fainted.

There was panic, like drowning, then rage, like a swarm of bees. Then he was charging his cousin/uncle with the heavy bronze plaque held over his head, screaming, high and clear at first, then lower, becoming hoarse and manly. His brown eyes turned dark and sharp.

Hickory looked up with a dumb, gappy, mean, smile. He shouted, "Ran out of firewood, Saaaaagory!"

He meant to juke the boy, send him to the ground, but froze as Sag got closer. He saw his eyes, saw the boyishness drain from Sag's face above the Scout's kerchief, and lost his smile. He said, "C'mon, man, just hold on . . ." and then Sag was on him.

The first blow from the plaque drew blood. The second took consciousness. The third and fourth and fifth knocked out Hickory's remaining, precarious teeth, crushed his already crooked hog's nose, and caved in his forehead. The sixth killed him. The blows after that just made a mess.

When he was too tired to swing the plaque any longer (Sag Jinkins Salutes You!), Sag dropped it where he stood and walked home slowly, his scout uniform torn and soaked through with blood and sweat.

His mother was passed out, so he washed up and changed without a word, hitched a ride to the nearest enlistment office, and joined the military .



the day they taught us how to do sex

Andrew Shelffo

The day they taught us how to do sex they brought the three third grade classes together into one classroom. That had never happened before. It felt weird. None of my friends knew what this was all about, and neither did I. But I could tell that whatever we were going to talk about, it was something important.

Instead of a teacher standing at the front of the room, by the chalkboard, there were two people I didn't recognize standing at the back of the room. They looked old, like moms, but I didn't recognize either of them. They explained that today we were going to learn about something very important about how our bodies worked. One of the moms held up a book with a drawing on the cover of a cartoonish family, Mom, Dad, and baby. And then they started reading.

They held up the book as they read from it, the same way that the librarian did when we were in the weekly Book Club. Only these moms didn't show the pictures to everyone the way the librarians did. Maybe it was because they realized that the room was crowded and the people in the back, like me, couldn't see the pictures that good, or maybe it was because they were afraid.

The book had a lot of rhymes. It talked about a foot in a sock and a key in a lock, and other similar ways to say putting things into other things.

As I listened, I felt odd. I didn't know whether to laugh or feel bad.

When they were done reading, they asked if anyone had any questions. No one said anything. The room was weird and quiet.

I had a question, but I was nervous, so I turned to Steven Hodges, who was in a different reading group than I was and who I never talked to, but he was next to me, and I asked him my question. One of the moms saw me whispering. "Yes, you in the back? Do you have a question?"

She wasn't a teacher, but she was the adult in the room. My parents had taught me to always listen to the teachers and adults. I had no choice.

"What if I have to pee when, uh, I have to put my foot in the sock?"

The explanation of how to do sex made sense to me. Really, it was a lot like multiplication. The way these two moms explained sex as a step-by-step process was like math. If you followed the steps, you got the right answer. Key in lock, check. Foot in sock, check. And the right answer was a baby.

After the day they taught us how to do sex, word got around to all the kids in the neighborhood about how sex worked. And we giggled in horror at the realization that our parents and all of the adults we knew and all of the adults from history had done sex. George Washington had done it. Our grandparents had done it. Babe Ruth had done it.

That same year, we learned about penguins and Antarctica. My teacher gave me a special assignment: make a huge map of Antarctica. She told me the steps: Draw an outline, write the names of the major places, color it in. The map was made from a couple of pieces of that thick art paper that they had in the art room that came on big rolls. It was so big that I had to do most of the work by myself, out in the hallway, because there was no room in the classroom. She gave me an old coffee can full of crayons. I wore down a lot of white crayons making that map.

As I colored, I had a lot of time to think about important things. While I enjoyed the big project of making the map, I knew I didn't want to go to Antarctica. It was too cold and too remote. Multiplication was good when I got the right answer, but frustrating and mysterious when I didn't.

I had to do multiplication, just like I had to do a map of Antarctica. I didn't have much choice. I didn't think they'd ever make us do sex, but if they did, I'd do it, because I wanted to be a good student. But I knew I wouldn't like it.



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there was time

Brian Bruso

A setting
as disjointed and cajoled
as a broken tibia begging
for more marrow.
Barely a hairline crack
of porcelain drinking
heavy Darjeeling.
Perhaps spouting
off about profile
versus overhead.
Lighting the way
for opening night
accolades. Forgoing
fears of resignation
and the inadequacy
of empty cups.



prayer

Julie Benesh

We can't all be *salmon en papillote*
or *andouillettes*: pig's guts!
Some of us are omelets,

(or even scrambled eggs,
uneven, with bits of shell).

We can't all be ocelots: sleek and predatory;
some of us alley cats have better back story.

It costs an awful lot
to buy a lawful yacht

so rather than to emulate
the extraordinary, let's amplify
and elevate, embrace the amulets

that grace the ordinary,
like parsley and chives
to garnish, a dash of gratin
to nourish: let us flourish.

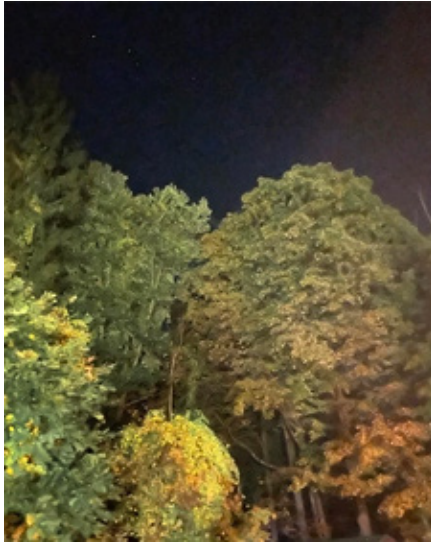


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the summer of three foxes 10.4

Leo Hwang



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Be careful with your heart. I have reached the age of diagnosis, where recovery and convalescence are vocabulary words. Plan for the future. My father's favorite sayings, his rhythms and patterns have become my own. You are only a reflection, that is the only way you can ever see yourself. I am a lion, I am a peach blossom, I am a boy with a striped shirt, I am an old man with gray in his hair. The first thing I remember is the chords to your song and how they shimmer and throb with tremolo. The last thing I remember is the space between words, all the things you do not say. It is a chance to listen. Sometimes voices sound different. I have to steady myself and reconstruct the sentence. What did you say about a finger pricked by a thorn, or the importance of apple blossoms? When you sleep you breathe like a creature of the sea coming up for air. I am always listening. Too many voices. I wonder if you will whisper our secrets in a crowded bar, or if secrets are no longer secrets. Time moves strangely and the mind wanders from the moment to tomorrow. Who are you talking to? Who is listening? What is emerging? Tomorrow and the day after. A heavy stone. The rope that rings the bell. It is the season when the fallen leaves hide things left in the grass. Between sunrise and sunset, after my second cup of coffee, before I take off my clothes and climb into bed, the echo that is like an imprint passed from father to son, father to son, and so on. In a distant city, the woman who lost her husband tells us about Siri Lankan food. She tells us about the coconut curries, and I promise that next time, that is what I will order. We are the only customers on an evening when even the dreams feel old. I am carrying my satchel that I bought at the surplus store. It feels like I should carry fewer things. One less novel, what the newspaper proclaimed was the best ball point pen. I do not understand myself; how can I possibly understand you? There is a wire encased center, a lovingly wrapped tender cage of the heart. The messages tapped into the ceiling, like a lumbering Morse code. I miss many things. Sometimes it is better to stay silent, to speak by listening.



the summer of three foxes 10.5

Leo Hwang

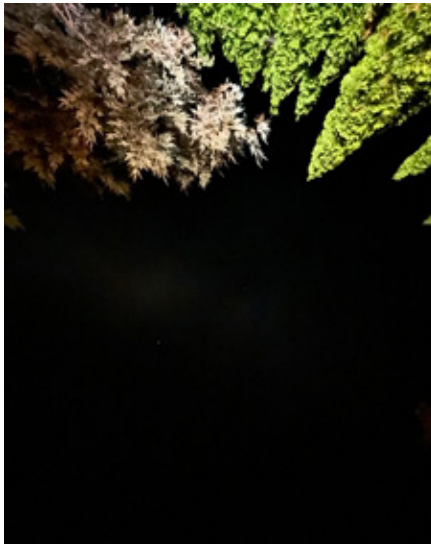


The quiet room. The voices of a passing argument. The sky after a hurricane. The field after a haying. An empty glass. An early Beatles harmony. A sock fresh from the dryer. The letter I meant to write. The last time I called home. The taste in your mouth after eating kimbap in the car while driving. The smell of a hard day. How my eyes feel when someone asks me a question and I say, Yes, I will. I already do. What frightens me that I do not say. My eyes after you say you love me. The television after the show is over and it is forgotten about, ignored, quiet. Two sweet potatoes, two heads of garlic, and an onion left on the counter like a ration. The cat's unfinished meal. Before dawn, before the shape of trees, before the fox slinks across the neighbors' yard, before the sound of trucks, before my shower, before children, before sibling, before I existed there was this stone. Everything is happiness, everything is anger. Everything is filtered through a cup of coffee, the first meal of the day, the last time we made love, the shapes your body makes when you sleep, how a cat purrs curled on my naked chest, remembering, forgetting. I place the car in reverse and draw out of the driveway. I listen to the novel where the collector of proverbs has taken a lover. It is neither a good idea nor a bad idea. It is a human thing to do even in catastrophe. I open the window and set the mosquito free. The air tastes crisp like a mountain stream. I work again because the day demands it, but really, it is only a day, it is only a small thing that feels like a big thing, it makes me no more tired than I was yesterday. I can hear the song about trouble, the woman's voice, an Appalachian warble. I listen to what I cannot hear, alert to the absence, knowing that I am missing what you are saying I press my ear to your lips. Some things are like trees rooted in soil. Other things are more like lines drawn on loose sand. This is just enough. This is not enough. This is a meal that was not forgotten. This is the eve of remembrance. This is the morning of broken toys. This is the way I memorize your face. This is how we talk and you say good, and yes, and take off your glasses.



the summer of three foxes 10.6

Leo Hwang



18

It is the season for warming cold fingers by an open flame so hot that it makes the soles of sneakers grow soft. I have a history with Adirondack chairs, but I do not mention it. The backs are just low enough to make it easy to scan the stars. Someone has been building a new home, they speak of it like a gestating child. It makes me think of the homes I have lost. The sky is still clear. All around us is evidence of a beautifully curated yard, but it is too dark to see more than the silhouettes of what might be there. When someone asks how we are doing, they look to one another as we look to one another and it is clear how little we know, how little we share. The night lilac attracts a certain kind of moth, the way this yard attracts certain kinds of animals. We are drawn by fire and salty snacks, the low voices that are almost conversation. You have seen the future and say it is inevitable, they are building a future and introduce the idea gently like the earth has not yet opened to receive it. I am thinking of the future foretold, how the trajectory can change how an object falls through space and its ultimate destination. The future is an imagination. The future is a poured foundation. The future is a broken rabbit. The future is a nearly empty bottle of scents. The future is just after now. It is what you say, what you allow, and what happens after that. I am spelling words out of the letters I am provided. Even so, there is something to hold, even when there is nothing. I am not an animal. I am a man with a heart that is a vessel for love, for sadness, for hunger, for a quiet night where we listen to the cars when we are saying nothing. The sky does not always reveal what it is hiding. There was something beautiful promised, there was a chance to separate this night from other nights. The missed breaching whale, the hawk that landed close and stared into a man's eyes, the story I didn't tell about how I moved the air with my hands, how I parted the room like a sea, and then collapsed as muscle coalesced around bone and hubris. You cannot escape the fantasy of innocence. You cannot accept a prediction. Not yet.



the shape in the sun

D.A. Stern

The doctor had given me some kind of lotion for the rash, but it took him for freaking ever to do that, so by the time I did the co-pay deal, and caught the bus on King Street, it was already full-on dark, and I wasn't gonna wait around at the bus stop on North State to transfer, not when the library was right there, and open till nine. What I figured was, either Jay would be there at the library, he'd get me home, or I could bum a ride from the goth-looking chick who worked the front desk, who I had run into the other night at the Poetry Open Mic at the Blue Onion.

But when I got there, they were both MIA. Chick and Jay.

Who was there, was the big ugly dude, and his dog.

That dude had been hassling me all morning – following me around, blocking my way into the Starbucks ...

“Gthulu?” he said, first time he saw me. “Rylathrotep?”

Looked like he was getting ready to do the same thing right now. He was wearing that same ratty-looking green overcoat, hung right down to his ratty-looking combat boots, standing out in front of the main entrance to Ford, him and his dog, arms folded across his chest, in a ‘they shall not pass’ kind of stance. Like he was some kind of guardian. He did kind of go with the library, to be honest, the library being this big orange and brown stone building that looked like a castle. Even had those little turrets on each corner. Towers, like they used to dump boiling oil out of.

Don't ask me how I know these things, cause right now, I can't remember. My head's all fuzzy.

Anyhoot, I saw big dude standing there, that big dog right next to him, and decided best defense – good offense.

I stopped five feet shy of him, and folded my own arms.

“I'm calling the cops,” I said. “Less you get out of my way, and leave me alone.”

The guy didn't move. But the dog...

The dog started barking its head off.

Let me tell you about that dog. It was big – but skinny. Like a greyhound, by which I mean grey, and kinda lean. It had a real distinctive bark, too. Loud, and then soft - short, and then long. Like each different bark meant a little something different. Like it was trying to tell me something. I looked into its eyes then, and I got the funny feeling I knew just what that something was.

Run for your life, motherfracker. Get on out of here.

“This guy hassling you, Danny?”

I turned around, and there she was. The Goth chick from the front desk. From the Poetry Open Mic. What was her name again? Strange kind of name. I tried to reconstruct the scene from the other night in my mind. She was up on stage. Everybody there was watching her, mesmerized. Like a game of Simon Says. Goth chick says do this. Goth chick says do that. Goth chick says you three come with me, you there, you wait. You there, you drink. Not that. This.

“Ayla.” I smiled, cause the name had just come bubbling out from somewhere inside of me. Deep inside my mind. “Hey. I was just thinking about you.”

She smiled back. “I’ll bet you were.” She looked past me and stopped smiling.

“You,” she said to the guy, and then he looked at her and spoke - first word I’d heard from him, I realized.

“Ayla.” Her name. Only the way he pronounced it, it had all kinds of extra syllables in it. The ‘l’ came from way back in his throat. A guttural sound. Or maybe that was the guy’s voice. It sounded rough. Hoarse. Like he wasn’t used to using it a lot. Like – and this was a weird idea I had right that second – like the dog usually did the talking for the two of them.

Right.

“Vergnik Marnya. Verg!” Ayla said, and she waved her arms, and the dog howled, like it was hurt. The guy cried out too, took a step back, and his overcoat opened just wide enough for me to see the scabbard hanging from his belt. And the gold handle of the sword in it.

Sword?

The dog growled, and bared its teeth.

“Get lost, losers,” she said, and took my hand. “Come on Danny, let’s get in there. They’ve probably started already.”

“Started?” I said. Started what?

But Ayla was paying me no mind. She was dragging me forward, dragging me right past the guy and the dog, her hand holding tight to mine. Really tight. I couldn’t have pulled away if I wanted to.

She was wearing gloves again, Ayla was. Long black gloves. She had long hands. Bony hands, I seemed to remember from the other night. Bony hands, and black gloves with red spots on the back. Only now...

No red spots. Where had they gone? What had they been?

Trust me, a little voice inside my head was saying. You don't want to know. You don't want to remember. And yet...

I flashed on the parking lot, outside the Blue Onion. After the Open Mic. After closing time. Way after. Like pitch dark, street lights out, road deserted, no cars, dishwasher, prep cook, bartender, all gone home. Just me and Ayla left in the parking lot. She did more poetry. She did...

"You don't want to remember," that little voice said again, only it wasn't in my head anymore. It was Ayla, staring at me. Her eyes boring a hole right through my head. No. Right into my head.

Don't think.

"There we are," she said, and stabbed a finger at the little 'announcements' bulletin board in the entryway.

Poetry Open Mic - Tonight!

Williston Room, 5th floor.

"Poetry?" I said.

"That's right." She nodded. "That's why we're here."

"No." My head was a little fuzzy, but...

That wasn't true. I was here because the doc ran late. Cause I went to the V.A. to get this rash cleared up. The doc gave me lotion.

"That should do the trick!" Only he was frowning when he said that. Frowning at the skin, flaking off on my arms. At what was underneath it. The scaly stuff, and the muscle and such.

"Never seen anything like this, though. To be honest." He shook his head. "Let's see how it reacts to the lotion, and we'll go from there. All right?"

He smiled. I had smiled back.

"All right." Ayla smiled too now. She had white teeth, Ayla did. Really white. Great cheekbones too, long, jet black hair. "Let's head on up, Danny. Fifth floor."

She grabbed my hand again, and pulled me the rest of the way into the library.

The door shut behind us. The dog howled, the sound muffled by the glass.

The guy in the coat was lying on the ground, lying on his back, not moving at all. I squinted into the darkness, through the reflections in the window.

It looked like there was something long and shiny sticking up out of his chest. Something that glinted in the moonlight.

Something metal.

“Trick of the light,” Ayla said, like she could read my mind, and pulled me away.

Poetry Open Mics.

Good God almighty, I ain't saying I'm Mohammed's gift to the written word but the shit that comes out of people's mouths at these things is ninety-eight percent of the time not to be believed. Stream of consciousness crap, like they just thought it up, didn't take anytime whatsoever to make the syllables flow, to give it some rhythm, to get to the power in the words. To make those words do something, make them have an effect on whoever is listening. Leave a little mark on the world before you go, and by mark I don't mean brown stains on your underwear, I mean saying something about the human condition, something that makes other people stop and think. That was my goal. Everybody needs a goal in life, right? Needs to have their time on the planet mean something. I mean we can't watch TV all day, can we?

Hold that thought.

That old Ford library elevator was slow as molasses. Like it didn't really want to get where we was going, which was funny, because right at that moment... neither did I. Had no choice, though. Ayla had hold of my hand real tight.

“Holy Bejeezus.” I stopped dead in my tracks.

The Williston Room was the very top floor of Ford library, a little rotunda of a room with a skylight up above. There were two doors leading into it, one of which went to the elevator, the other of which led to the necessities room, which on this floor was a unisex dealie with two stalls, handicapp and no handicapp, which had caused me no end of embarrassment one time when I forgot to lock the door and some very prim and proper had wheeled herself in for a number two when I was in the middle of same. But the necessary room wasn't the cause of my bejeezus.

That culprit was the painting. Dang thing was huge, took up half the wall facing me, half the wall between the necessary and the entrance. I looked at it and didn't understand how they'd got the thing up there, it was that big. Maybe twenty feet long, maybe ten feet high, stretching from floor to ceiling. A landscape, framed all around by a shining silver strip of metal. A desert landscape. Sand, sand, far as the eye could see. And a sun, beating down from high above.

At first, I thought it was Pakky. The war, all over again. The guy at the V.A. always says good to talk about it, soldier, but me, what I say... nuh-uh, no talkie, no thinkie, that Dan was done and gone.

Then I realized no - not Pakky at all. Two suns in the sky. One brown, and faded.

One bright, bloody red.

“Holy Bejeezus,” I said again, because at the Blue Onion, that had been the theme of the Open Mic. The bloody red sun. Usually we didn't have a theme, but that night...

"I insist. Blood-red. Why?" Ayla stood on stage, steepling her fingers together. Smiling. "Discuss."

We all went along. Goth chick says do this, goth chick says do that. And now...

Here we were again: here they were again, a whole bunch of the same folks from the Onion, kneeling on the floor in front of the painting. Chanting. They turned now, one by one, staring at Ayla with the same glazed over look they'd given her the other night.

"Asferada!" She let go of my hand, and stepped forward, throwing her arms wide. "Na'a'tu Asferada!"

She spun around, and cackled in my face.

Gave me the chills, for two reasons. One, because of the cackle, two, because Ayla had grown somehow. Gotten taller. Before she was a cute little thing, top of her head come up to my chin. Now...

She was eye-level with me. She put her hands on my shoulders.

"Asferada," she whispered. "Na'a'tu Asferada Goteen."

She pulled me forward then, and kissed me. Gave me a little tongue. Then a lot of tongue.

I gagged, and flashed on the parking lot again.

"Want to try something a little different?" she'd said, her hand in my pants. Searching. Finding. Squeezing. "A little kinky?"

"You go girl," I'd said, and then...

She'd taken hold of my arm with both hands. Done something like the Indian rope burn trick, only it didn't just burn. It bled. And later...

The rash.

Somehow, talking to the doc, I forgot to mention that.

"Danny?"

I blinked. Ayla had moved away.

Jay was standing in front of me.

Fat Jay, who drove the van back and forth between the Dunkin Donuts, the VA, and the Ford. Fat Jay, who wore the same thing everyday, stinky old jeans and a faded Max Creek t-shirt.

He wasn't wearing those things now.

He was stripped down to his tighy-whities, not white or tight anymore. Broken elastic, droopy drawers, pee stains drizzled on the front.

His chest was an oozy mess. A jungle of gray chest hair on top of pale green scaly skin. A rash. Same one I had on my arm, only worse.

Jay's rash was bubbling up. Bubbling as I watched, like when you get a cut and mom drops the hydrogen peroxide on it.

"I hab a new poem," Jay said, or tried to say, but most of what came out of his mouth was slobber. And blood.

He spit a tooth out on the floor.

"Na'a'tu Ashferada." He grinned. "Ish good, right? Eben with the lishp?"

I bent over, put my hands on my knees, horked something up in my mouth. Stumbled backwards, and into the necessary room.

I knelt down in front of the bowl. Nothing came up. Dry heaves only.

"Please please please," I whispered. "Please please please please please..."

I must have said the word five hundred times. No answer.

And then...

Beneath the chanting, I heard another sound. Something scraping on metal. A kind of a growl. A bark. A yip.

A little help here?

I blinked. I crawled out of the stall on my hands and knees, the old tile sticky and cold under my fingers.

The yip was coming from a heating vent underneath the sink. Metal painted black, stuck into the wall about ankle-high. There was something moving around in there.

The grate had a little lever on the right hand side. I yanked on it, and the cover came flying off.

A dog's head appeared, followed a second later by the rest of it. The big guy's dog, from downstairs. It was covered with dirt, and dustballs.

It barked, climbed all the way out of the vent, and shook itself off. Dust went flying everywhere. I got some in my mouth, and spat it out.

Along with some blood.

Along with a tooth.

Shit, the dog said. *Your arm.*

“You can talk,” I said.

No. More like you can hear.

It cocked an ear towards the door, then growled.

Asferada. Bitch.

“What?” I asked.

Asferada. The gateway she’s chosen.

I looked at the dog. The talking dog. The bubbling rash.

I sat back on my butt, and started to laugh. “I lost it. I finally lost it. Up the meds, fasten the straps, because – “

SNAP OUT OF IT SOLDIER!

The dog, all at once, was right in my face, growling. Thought for a second it was going to bite me.

“Don’t call me that.” I stopped laughing. “Soldier. I don’t do that anymore.”

The dog looked at me with big sad eyes. Big gray eyes.

Weird color.

Au contraire, mes ami. That’s who you are. That’s why she chose you.

I shook my head. “I don’t get a thing you’re saying.”

And we don’t have time for any explanations now. She knows something’s wrong. Any second now, that door won’t be there. A second after that, I won’t either. We have to go. Now.

“Go?” I frowned. “Where – “

DANIEL

That was Ayla’s voice, in my head.

DANIEL

Shit. The dog bent low, picked up the metal cover to the heating vent in its mouth, then trotted to the door and looked back at me.

On three. Open the door, run like hell.

“Run? Run where?”

Just follow me. The dog tensed. Here we go. One, two -

The door wasn't there.

Ayla was. Ten feet tall, arms drawn back, hands poised above her head. No gloves. Her hands were sticks – long, pointy sticks, sharpened to nasty-looking points. No, not sticks.

Bones.

The dog growled again, and with a toss of its head, flung the metal grate. It hit Ayla square in the gut.

She staggered back, and the dog ran, straight for the elevator.

Fat Jay and the others moved forward, blocking its path.

The dog veered right, and jumped at the painting. Jumped into the painting. And then –

It was gone.

I stood there like an idiot for a second, then Ayla snarled, and I ran too.

Straight for the painting. Right into the –

- I landed on sand.

In the middle of a desert.

There was a woman standing in front of me.

A long, lean, woman, with long white hair, and piercing gray eyes. Familiar-looking eyes.

“Danny.” Her voice was familiar too. “You had me worried for awhile. I didn't think you were coming.”

I blinked.

“You're the dog.”

“Is that a nice thing to say?”

“Sorry.”

She nodded, then took a step forward.

She was barefoot, wearing a long white robe that up until that second hid what she was holding down at her side.

A big, long shiny sword.

“Where’d you get that?” I asked.

“My turn to apologize.” She brought the weapon up in front of her, held it like she knew what she was doing. “This is going to hurt.”

My eyes widened. She swung at me.

“What the fuck,” I said, and stumbled backwards.

She swung again, and I raised my arms to try and protect myself, and she sliced down, and cut my right arm off at the shoulder.

I watched it fall to the ground.

“If it’s any consolation, it’ll grow back.” I heard her say. “I’m fairly sure about that.”

My knees buckled underneath me then, and everything went to black.

I woke up. I was lying on a hard, flat stone.

The woman was kneeling on the ground next to me. She had a bowl of something in her lap. Something steaming.

“Easy.” She dipped a wooden spoon into the bowl, raised it to my lips. I tried to spit it away, tried to raise my arm to push her away, but something was wrong.

Oh right.

“Why?” I managed to croak out. “Why did you – “

“Eat. Please.” She brought the spoon to my mouth again. “I’ll explain everything when you’re stronger.”

I thought for a second. Eat? Why not? Talking dog runs into a painting turns into a woman and cuts off your arm and then brings you soup... why not eat it? It did smell good. Kind of like...

“Pea soup?”

She smiled. “You like pea soup?”

I nodded.

“Then that’s what it is. Pea soup.”

I knew she was lying. But I ate it all up anyway.

That was how it went for a good long while. How long? I don’t know. There was no night, no way to mark the passage of time. The sun was always up, always shining, dimmer sometimes, brighter others. And when I say sun, I mean the brownish one, because the red one, I realized now, wasn’t really a sun at all. Was something else entirely. Something I didn’t enjoy looking at in the slightest, because every once in awhile, I felt something in that red shape looking back at me. And not in a friendly way. More in a ‘the better to eat you with my dear’ kind of way.

After awhile, I just focused on the soup. Or whatever it was. And the woman. Whose name turned out to be Dale. Who didn’t say much of anything other than ‘your color is coming back’ and ‘rest.’

Sure enough, I did start to feel a little stronger. Wasn’t just my body healing, either. My mind was clearing too. My memory. Things I’d blocked out since coming home, things I’d done over in Pakky, things I tried to forget, shove out of sight or drug away... they were all coming back. Faces. Words, and places. Islamabad, Kurram, and others of that ilk.

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Made for some serious sleepus interruptus.

One night I woke up with a big howl in my throat. Woke up, and found the woman – Dale - lying next to me. Propped up on one elbow, looking concerned.

“You all right?”

“Better.”

“Good.” She put a hand on my shoulder. My right shoulder. “Looks like you’re healing up just fine.”

I turned and saw she was right. I had an arm again – or the beginnings of one, anyway. How was that possible? How was any of this possible?

I looked around. (SET SCENE)

“We’re in the painting.”

“Well...” She made a face. “Sort of. Not exactly.”

“I don’t understand. Back there... in the Ford. The library.” I shook my head. “You were a dog.”

She smiled. “Guilty.”

“How does that work?”

“You know Superman?”

“What?”

“Superman. The guy in the movies. The comic books.” She smiled. “He’s super strong, right? Can’t be hurt, can’t be killed, and you know why?”

“Uhhh.” I shook my head. “What was this, some kind of trick question? “Because he’s Superman?”

“No. Because he’s from another world.”

“What?”

“Krypton, remember? Superman is from Krypton. Another planet. Not a real planet, but that’s how they explained his powers in the stories. On Krypton, he’s just an ordinary guy. But on Earth – sometimes it’s because of the yellow sun, sometimes because of the gravity, sometimes because of – “

“Can you please get to the point?”

“The point is I’m this way here, and that way there. It’s just... different worlds, different rules.”

“Uh-huh.”

“You ought to be thankful. That’s why your arm grew back.”

“Well that’s good.”

“Even more good news.” Dale smiled again. “What’s true for us, is true for them.”

“Them?”

“Ayla, and the others.”

“From the library.”

“That’s right. Back on Earth... well, you saw. We were lucky to make it out alive. But here... the odds’ll be a little more even.”

“Whoa,” I said. “Hold on a second. Odds? What are you talking about?”

“The fight to come. When they get here. Ayla, and the others.”

“They’re coming here?”

“Of course.”

“Why?”

She glanced up towards the sky. Towards the shape I had thought was a sun. , but what I knew now was something else entirely.

The gateway he’s chosen.

Dale’s words – barks – came back to me at that second.

“Asferada,” I said. “This is Asferada.”

“That’s right.”

“The gateway.”

“Right again. One of only a handful of places where he can transit back to Earth from.”

“He? Who’s ‘he?’”

She shook her head. “Best not to say.”

I nodded, because I understood it soon as she spoke it. Words – names – had power. And the red thing in the sky...

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“He’s looking for a gateway. That gateway there.” She pointed. “It’s hidden now, but Ayla and the others... they’re coming here to open it. We have to stop them. Thankfully... we’ve got time. A hundred years or so, I’d guess.”

“What now?”

She smiled. “Time moves differently here.”

“Another Superman thing.”

“That’s right. You probably took what – ten seconds or so to follow me?”

“Something like that, yeah – “

“I was here about ten months waiting for you. I figure it’s going to take Ayla a minute or back in the Ford to get everything together – to follow us. Gives us a little time too.”

I did some math too.

“Like a hundred years or so.”

“That’s about right.”

A hundred years?

“That’s crazy,” I said.

“It’s basic math. Science.”

“Yeah well here’s some more basic math. That was a lot of people back there in the library.”

“I counted thirty-three,” she said. “Multiples of eleven.”

“How are the two of us going to stop thirty-three people?”

“Well. Not just the two of us.”

She raised an eyebrow, and moved closer.

She wasn’t wearing any clothes.

“Hey,” I said.

“What? You worried you’re not healed? Not well enough? You don’t got the stamina?”

“Them’s fighting words,” I growled.



the meaty interview with D.A. Stern

What's your favorite color?

Well, I would answer black, but since black is technically the absence of all colors, let's go with navy blue. A deep navy blue.

What's your favorite animal?

My dog Marley.

Wait. That's 'who is my favorite animal?'

I am guessing by animal you mean 'species,' and my favorite species – dogs and humans aside – would have to be chimps. Virgil from Project X (the 1987 film) is a good call.

If you could choose to fly or to be invisible, which would it be and why?

Totally to fly. Cut down on the time to visit friends and family.

Are you happy and, if not, why?

Honestly, no. Figuring out how to get there.

What book/s are you reading at the moment?

The Overstory, Jerusalem: The Biography, Positively 4th Street, SPQR, The Vegetarian, Atomic Habits, Red Dragon (always reading/rereading this), Zodiac, apparently The Underground Man because there's a bookmark in it. there's also a dog-eared page on the Dead Zone, there's a hardcover of some sort peeking out from under the bed... etc.

What are you currently listening to?

Sarah Jarosz, Tetragrammaton, The Heavy, A History Of Rock'N'Roll in 500 Songs, Tom Petty, Atrium Carceri, R.J. McCarty, Bonny Light Horseman, Maggie Rogers, Sam Harris, The Beatles, several Spotify playlists, the Staple Singers Stax Compilation...

How old were you when it became clear you were a musician? a writer?

I have copies of stories I wrote in first grade.

I have the guitar I got when I was 6.

The first song I wrote was called 'Tricky Dicky's Marching Band.'

I guess what I'm saying is that there is no time in my memory when that work wasn't what I wanted/loved to spend my time on.

If you could invite six people, living or dead, to your ideal dinner party, whom would you invite?

Tom Dowd, because I want to hear those stories.

Rick Rubin, because he asks good questions.

Thornton Wilder, because *Our Town*.

Eleanor Roosevelt, because she and my mom would get along famously.

My mom, to talk to Eleanor Roosevelt.

Bobby Flay, because someone has to cook.

Tell us more about *Codename Blackjack* and your other books.

Codename Blackjack is my latest cowrite with Rusty McClure, who I met &#%&)*!! years ago, when we wrote the biography *Crosley* together. That was an incredibly fun project to work on, which also hit the New York Times Bestseller List. During that writing process Rusty and I discovered a shared love of classic spy thrillers (Bond/Bourne/Oakes), thrillers in general (Clancy/Harris/Patterson) and so decided to write our own thriller series, *Sagas of the Cincinnati*. *Codename: Blackjack* is the second of those, and it centers on – hand to heart – the real secret behind JFK's assassination.

I'm also deep into the research and writing of a sequel to my epistolary novel *Shadows in The Asylum* - which reflects my deep and abiding affection for Lovecraft and weird fiction/horror. The horror of the unexplained – the true supernatural. The things science cannot explain. The same territory covered by my story *The Shape In the Sun*, the first part of which is in this issue of *Meat For Tea*!

Where can people find you and follow you on social media?

My website is dastern.com. That's a good starting point.



Michael Favala Goldman

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sunk into the moon
Luke Brannon

unfamiliar echoes far off

Gerald Yelle

It was the last full moon of the year and it rose and fell all in one twelve-hour period. It had to pace itself. It had to avoid getting a headache. It's a big deal when the moon gets a headache. Especially when it's full. Because then it's liable to have a stomachache as well, and the one thing you don't want is a moon throwing up all over the planet because the migraine is the size of Neptune. You want to pick it up and give it a hug. But you don't want any mess. So you leave it where it lies. Or roll it under a tree and don't let the distraction off to the side make you sad. That being said, the absolute worst you can do is refrain from responding. Don't they all just catch up with you in the end? What's going to hurt most is the having to deal with it again and again until the weather picks up and the wounds heal and the peels fall off because the saws don't work unless they're plugged into the fridge. You could always take the bus to Central Casting. The undiscovered land. With seven lives remaining. Let the moon clean itself.



who are these people?

Gerald Yelle

They used to be you but now they're walking down the street and you can tell just by looking they're better off than they used to be. They're in love. They're richer than you in your dreams. They're teasing. They're not like that. They're like someone else. Maybe they're like us. Maybe time flies so fast they just have time to plan who they want to be then it's off to the next adventure. So why bother. Do you ever have time to call the doctor? Neither do they. Neither do they call in sick. Do you drink? Do you think about the alphabet? They once tried rewriting a chemistry textbook in mathematical terms. Don't be impressed. They knew you wouldn't be. They're okay with being this random character until they see someone with real options, then they swell with envy. There goes someone who doesn't let the speed of light slow them down, they say, and they wonder how they can do it. Do they have time? Could they ever learn to be like that? Do you feel that way too? They thought so. Your ability to focus makes them seem so real. Do they make you seem real? They would, even more so, but they're gone now, and you might be too.



i set my book aside

David P. Miller

At seventeen, I'm sitting in July dusk.
Our mown lawn's breath rises
to perfume Mount Norwottuck's
left-facing brow, one long town away.
I look toward the mountain,
or down to the grass as it darkens,
or the driveway, ordinary as it arcs
toward the street, the street slanting
to a river that flows between banks
where the neighborhood begins.

At seventeen, in one moment of dusk,
I forget myself *as myself*. Driveway, street:
I see them as *themselves*, un-ordinary, new.
Norwottuck's silhouette there,
small sweetness of green plants here,
sundown flowing across my arms.
Cut grass scent slides with the shade.

The drooped black Ford ambles
to the curb. One of my parents returns
from a brief journey for bread and milk:
something done, finished in clock time
(how long did it take? how late is it now?).
But dusk time is July, slant of the globe,
retreating sunlight: nothing of numerals
or minute hands. My breath's time,
facing the mountain, is dusk and clock both,
and neither. My heart's room swells.

Breath and blood. Everything arises
with these two. Driveway's ribbon,
crickets, starshine pulsing past streetlamp
as a long wave of night meets
the porch. I lie back, eyes gathering
distant light. The ground cools.
There's a sigh. It's mine, over-full
with no sayable thought
this one summer night at the lip
of late childhood.



barista through a window, caffe ladro

David P. Miller

6:50 near sunrise.

The cater-corner café opens in ten minutes.

Nine floors below my hotel window, a near-silhouette moves from point to point in partial interior light.

She sets baked goods in the countertop display case, uprights the chairs.

Seeing in to someone else's quiet concentration: yes, "voyeur" scolds in the skull. But this is not something to forget, a person's readiness to unlock the door.

6:58. Two mornings ago, I arrived three minutes early.

That morning's manager lifted a load of chairs to set outside beside bolted-down tables.

I held the door, with an apology for stepping into those last solitary minutes.

7:00. I've never before seen an OPEN sign

snap to attention. The red blue neon oval:

the manager calls its familiar light good, releasing her café's held breath.

7:05. I've become a short-term regular.

Regulars try to behave regular. We seek

a relationship, without revealing our names

to the morning manager, whose business cards

on the counter name her to us. But how steady

is anyone, unhinged by each day's reveille?

Or in mornings-after of firings,

breakups, deaths, elections? We want to offer

consistent faces, timbres of voice, to the one

who opens the door. Don't want to reward

the neon's *come in* with pleas for sympathy.

She's not your mother, your daughter.

Let her get your coffee, raspberry scone,

without exclaiming *My God! You look awful!*

7:10. Already a line behind me, with hopes

and desolations lying just underneath our requests

for a slice of apple coffee cake, morning muffin,

large Americano, bottled orange juice. We settle

at tables, find ourselves human, take, eat.

The air's framed by the hiss of steamed milk.

Our mouths fill with heat and sustenance.



snubbed by art

Tom Kovar

After I finished college, my second job involved selling tickets to campus arts events, from a small desk inside the college gallery. (My first job was caretaker of lab animals, but that's a story for another time.) I had a great vantage point, by a large plate glass window; I could watch my friends -- mostly those who were still students, but some staff -- coming up the ramp to the building for classes or appointments, and sometimes they'd stop in and visit. I also had a front-row seat to various art installations, some of which were reasonably conventional and others quite avant-garde.

At the time, the gallery's manager was a pleasant guy about ten years older than I was. His name, in fact, was Art, so he may have been destined for such a career. I never got tired of the joke, wherein someone (a student or a professor) would barge in, with some urgency, and ask, "Have you seen Art?" I would inevitably point to the wall and say, "There's some, right there." I could be extremely annoying.

However, right now I want to discuss a different guy named Art -- in this case, Art Garfunkel. Now, Garfunkel, along with his former partner, Paul Simon, still enjoys iconic status for many of us Baby Boomers. For me, they were good, but not great. I was bothered at times by Simon's self-conscious poetic style, and by the angelic purity of Garfunkel's tenor voice. Once Simon started his solo career, I liked him better. I also watched Garfunkel in a few movies -- both he and Simon had brief acting careers, in fact -- and liked him better as a singer.

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But my opinion doesn't matter. They seem to be deified by my peers, and the inequality of their relationship is ignored or not cared about (Simon did ALL the songwriting and guitar-playing and half the singing; he was three-quarters of the act, in my estimation). Furthermore, we Americans are hero-worshippers. The chance to meet a famous person -- ANY famous person -- makes us giddy with excitement.

So, to set the scene: my former housemate -- I'll call him Scott -- was visiting, in the early 1980s, some years after the art gallery experiment. I was living in my present college town, a place that is not unknown as a visiting spot for various celebrities. I, at different times, have spotted Nicole Kidman, Robert Downey Jr., Kurt Vonnegut, and David Crosby, and I'm sure there have been others. It was a summer Sunday afternoon, and I'd been in the habit of showing up, with my glove, at a pickup softball game every week down at the college athletic field. I had a spare glove and Scott wanted to come along. He drove.

As we headed down the hill to the parking area, which was across the street from the entrance to the field, I saw a woman and a tall man walking together. Scott was talking about something with me, and concentrating on his driving, so he paid them no attention. But as we drew up beside them, I realized that I knew her (slightly; I'll call her Rachel) and that the man was Garfunkel; he was unmistakable, with his blond Afro. We went right by them, and I can remember saying to Scott, in an uninflected tone, "Huh. There goes Art Garfunkel."

Scott, a huge S + G fan, asked, “What...some guy who looks like him?”

“No,” I responded, a bit more animated now. “It actually IS Art Garfunkel. And that’s Rachel he’s with...I know her a bit...”

“What!? We have to meet him!” Scott almost slammed on the brakes. But I cautioned him, suggested that we stay safe, and pointed to our parking space, just ahead and to the left. If we jumped out quickly, we would intercept the couple as they strolled down the hill.

“Now don’t embarrass yourself!” I insisted. (“Or me,” I might have added.)

The plan appeared to work perfectly. Scott pulled into the spot with aplomb, we grabbed our gloves and crossed the street, directly into the path of Art and Rachel.

And...Rachel smiled and greeted us, as Art *continued down the hill*, without so much as a glance in our direction.

“You...uh...actually know him?” I asked Rachel.

“Yes, we’re old friends,” she said, with a hint of mystery in her voice. “And I’m sure you understand that he resists meeting random people.” Scott looked furiously disappointed, staring as Garfunkel’s figure rapidly increased the distance between us.

“Of course,” I said. “C’mon, we’ve got a game waiting, Scott.”

“But...but...he *snubbed* us!”

“He sure did.”

The game was fun; I introduced Scott to my weekend softball pals, a motley crew at best. He played better than most of them, and certainly better than me! But we couldn’t stop talking about Garfunkel. Some of the other players had suggestions for strategies we should have pursued. I knew, though, maybe from having met some slightly famous artists back in my gallery days, that fame could be a burden, and that boundaries set by the well-known needed to be respected.

Thomas Merton said: “Art enables us to find ourselves and lose ourselves at the same time.”



i missed the plane because of sex

Thomas Rowland

I'll tell you a tale that'll surely not fail
To inspire heights of anxiety.
How fate can conspire to set afire
Your mind by gross impropriety.

You can't understand that events unplanned
Will rob you of your tranquility.
When you think you've got it made in the shade
Misfortune can blindside untidy.

At the hotel with trust when I jumped on the bus
Headed to JFK with alacrity.
Only an hour affording remained before boarding
And I still had to pass through security.

But, alas, there we stayed, our departure delayed
Awaiting some late-coming persons.
Needless to say, 'twas to my dismay
With rising arterial blood pressure.

While we sat and waited, on cell phone related
The young driver providing a box score
Bragging success in sexual congress
With a sophomore the night before.

When at long last we left, the driver with deft
Wound through the traffic horrendous.
A glance at a clock raised hope with some luck
A heavy accelerator might save us.

When suddenly the driver, no doubt a conniver,
Pulled up at a building (a dorm?).
He jumped off the van, to the entrance he ran
Disappearing with no word of inform.

In the silence that followed, we riders were puzzled
What on earth could this mean?
Had he stopped for a fare? Or engine repair?
Or maybe out of gasoline?

Five minutes went by, a child started to cry
Adding to the general disquiet.
And then grew to ten, with sense of abandon
Just where was our wayward young driver?

At fifteen I ween no sign could be seen
Of any return of our chauffeur.
The group lost its cool, but what could we do?
To wait, we agreed, no alternatives 'twere.

By twenty minutes it was clear we were stranded here
He wasn't going to return.
An explanation then came to the group's waiting game
One that angered us to discern.

Seems our driver today had "jumped ship" so to say
For a rendezvous with last night's lover.
Oh, the cad! We all said, who's up there in bed
Had left us all here for a "do-over"!

Filled with chagrin we filed off of the van
And each found a way to the airport
By taxi I arrived at the Delta site
Prepared for a six-hour wait.

The airline agent would say, in a pleasant way
"What made you miss your flight?"
When I answered "Sex," she replied "On what pretext?"
For this I could only sigh.

The moral is clear, a van should one fear
If the driver's years are under fifty.
To this I confess and sadly attest
This tale's, in fact, a veracity.

(With a tip of the poet's cap to W.S. Gilbert)



reading in the desert

Jacob Chapman

There I was, driving through a desert,
when I came upon a man
sitting by the side of the road,
calmly reading a book.
I pulled over, and he didn't look up.
He said give me a minute,
and he finished the page he was reading.
Now then, he said. How can I help you?
I said why are you sitting here
in the middle of a desert?
He said why am I sitting here.
In the middle of a desert. Well,
we both know there's nothing I could say
that would make sense to you.
So let's just say I'm here
because I need to be here.
We talked in circles for a while
about his need for water, food, and shelter.
He said is that all you think about?
I said no, and he said this
is where I come to learn.
I begged him to let me drive him
somewhere, anywhere,
but he said no, our time together
is ending. So I drove on,
shaken and confused,
but before I left,
I saw him open his book
and turn the page.

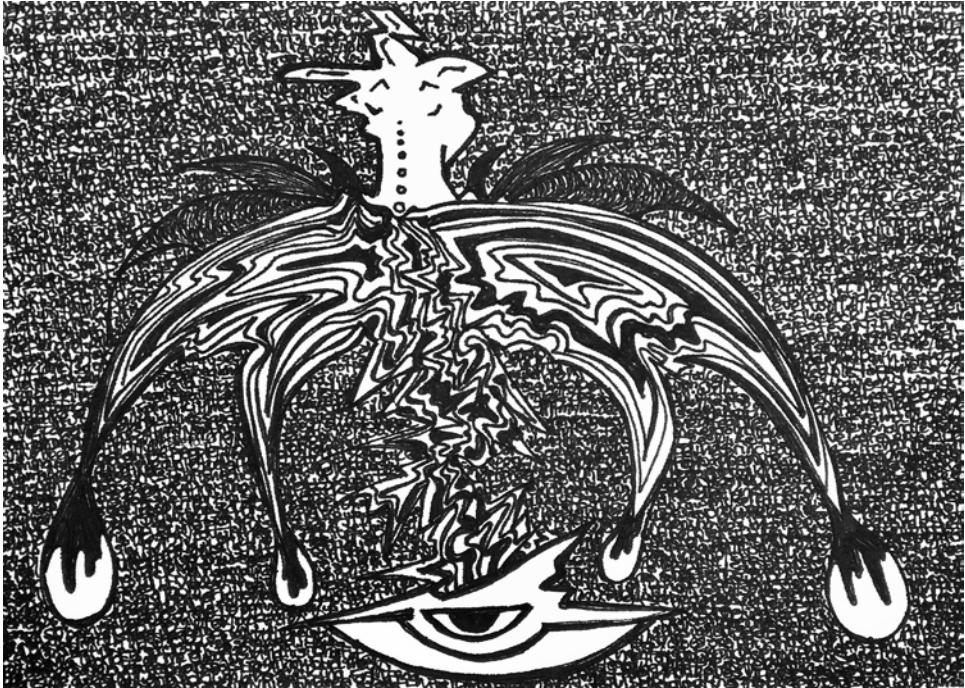


the blue room

Jacob Chapman

After spending time in the blue room
and its pools of hot and cold water
and its view of the mountains,
I return to the rest of my house,
which is green and tan
and full of plants.
Ahh, comfort. Softness and warmth.
In the blue room, I run out
of things to think about,
but that's kind of the point.
I don't use the blue room
in the summertime,
when there's so much fun to be had,
and everything's nice and loose.
But the first frost sends me back
to the blue room and the sound
of water trickling
into and out of the pools.
Does this make any sense?
Every time I think I'd like to be a bear,
I see a picture of a rabbit
and its little rabbit family,
and I think that looks pretty good.
But then I think about the bear again,
and I think maybe
I don't have to choose.





i didn't manifest hard enough
S.T.Gately

creature of obligation

Mary Jennings

1.
foul fortune began
with a bout of
fear-born
alignments.
glib was the touting
of the one he cared for,
begging
for her ear to hear
how he tears and toils,
gets boiled in oil
to see her footloose and
fancy-free.
feigned cuteness
is his talent
to charm and entice.
loot and burn
is his true skill
if she won't return
the heart that bears
lingering blight
from jealousy and hate
and fear that he cannot compete

2.
Keep
Your hands
Off
My stuff!
she finally says.

Steal my job
Steal my house
Steal the blouse off my back
and call me a floozy.
To you, I'm a saint one minute,
jailbait the next.

I am not obliged
to give you purity of soul.
I'm cleaner than you will ever be.

Why do you fear the creative spirit,
the divine within?
Gives us the idea that we're God?
Isn't that your issue?
Preaching the wages of sin,
of pride and vanity.
I've been there and back.

I know my purpose.
It is not to clean your house,
or let you suckle on my breast.
I am a creator, not your babysitter.
Take your toxic morality with you
and clear out of here!

3.
Take back the night
Take back her space
Take back the air she breathes
But, she can't take back the hasty,
nasty words flung.

She's always been
a creature of obligation,
but she had to walk away from this one.
Time lost, projects ruined
she can't also get back.
But, she can start new ones
without his input. And they will be
an improvement over
what she did before.
Just hang the "do not disturb sign"
on her door and don't let the bandits in.
Obligation starts with the self.



swamp summer 1964

Richard Wayne Horton

1. Downtown 2 Years Before, Age 15

I'm outside the Dallas Public Library where I listened to Wagner in a soundproof booth. My head is loaded up with rumbling majesty, the horns leaning into darkly rising drums. Why do I get it: the drama? Last I remember I was a cotton-headed cracker baby sitting in the red dirt next to a 1947 E.Texas front porch. Couldn't help it that my mind just rolled ahead, that I wasn't loyal, wasn't country, that I was never merely there. The street is dark, the traffic noise jazzing up the skyscrapers, men in cars leadfooting to get home. Needle in a groove harshly crackling. The bus, unimpressed, floats to the curb, to take me to concrete Mesquite where the houses are like cereal boxes tumped over on their side with little toy cars rolling up to them. Plastic suburbanites get out & walk up the driveway to cardboard doors. Mom & Dad live in one of the houses. They have produced me, a plastic adolescent. I live.

2. Mesquite

Funny name, Mesquite. A mosquito once bit me and gave me encephalitis. I had just walked off the end of a concrete street onto a dirt path between sun cooked weeds, and the mosquito was there waiting. It had a grin on its face. I enjoyed the rest of my day, then my memory trails off & mom's in my doorway asking "What?" I wake up in the hospital room, dim memory of Father King by darklight arriving with the last rites. Two days later I'm sitting up in the hospital bed working on a puzzle. Immortal, apparently.

On the hospital TV a beer slides my way but combat ensues when a cigarette pack comes at it from the side needling it. Clearly a fight's about to bust out. Outside the ring, the audience is newspaper print. Headlines hog the ringside: Johnson To Sign Civil Rights Bill. Other headlines yelp: Almighty God! Now Is Not The Time!!! Dixiecrats have convened in segregated café. They order hot dogs but discover after a time that they got hold of a tough damn weenie.

3. I'll Fast, Thank You

Mom & Dad tried in the 50s, to be good and take us to church. Now, with a house, car and more money, they were resting (nesting), grabbing the gusto, smoking it, drinking it, dealing it onto a card table, watching it squawk & buzz on the TV. Look it's gett'n away!

As for me, I went for long walks on the edge of the earth. I thought, come on, don't you believe in anything? Are you going to rot on a couch, snoring as TV commercials work you over?

Mom & Dad had parked us in a church of convenience (White Rock Baptist Church). But I wanted an ancient religion, strict in its rules, a religion of regeneration, shedding its skin, its lies. I fasted. My stomach went hardpan. I became lightweight and bony. I read lives of the saints. The Church's dirty old history was patched together out of convenience and atrocity. But I could live my own version of it, like mystics in 380 AD. Jerome. Simon Stylites. Tell no one.

Lead no one. Follow no one. I would create a ladder made of light. After I read The Seven Story Mountain by Thomas Merton, I wanted to be like Merton, a creative writer in a world of silence. So I spent the summer of 1964 in a Trappist monastery.

4. Getting off the bus in Carolina

The bus station is one side of a family home. Cooking smells and Southern voices come through the wall, a mama & kids. That accent: cannonballs over Fort Sumter. What's cooking? Porkchops? Fried taters? Racism? I cringe on the wooden bench waiting for the lovable family voices next door to go harsh, to gloat about civil rights slayings. They don't. Can somebody in the South be simply good?

George the lay brother arrives to pick me up in the monastery's produce truck & take me to one of the guest shacks at the monastery where I meet Bill the other summer guest, a Philly med student. Later on, the two of us will go with George on produce runs, the truck bellowing into Charleston along a high rickety viaduct, a rotten road made of regret. Tumpa-tumpa-tumpa, truck tires over planks, high above wet low places. Then the viaduct descends and lets us into old streets where Sherman's bummers once slouched, campaign cap raked to one shag-topped eye, lighting a stolen cigar and then casually tossing the still blazing locofoco over their shoulder.

At one stop an elderly black woman comes out in front of a grocery store & says "Hit me in the chest!" One of her bony hands slaps her bony chest. Why is she hurting herself? Is she mad at us? Then I see that her other hand holds a white plastic bucket with blue lettering that says Community Chest. George hits it, with something green. (\$)

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At the next stop a white haired white lawyer in a white suit stands outside his white house. "Come on in!" The place has no AC. Doors and windows are all open. Breeze comes through the screen wires like a little warm ocean, kissing us up. We hoist & carry a crate of eggs and another crate of glass bottles of raw milk through canyons of law briefs. He pulls a handle & opens the door of a cold storage room where we put down the crates. "I want you to see what I caught this morning." Out the back door and under the trees we see a big muscular black man in a white T-shirt with a knife in his hand. He's standing at a tree stump looking down at a great big catfish laying there.

The lawyer says, "This here's my cook. Al, these boys are from the monastery!" Al shakes our hands.

Watch out, now, here comes some fun. A catfish and a cat. Both are in the yard, the cat a few feet away, tensed, hunkered down, waiting for its chance. Whack! Knife comes down & cuts off the fishhead, flicks it off the stump toward the cat, which loses its mind at its good fortune. Wide cat jaws whomp down on the fishhead, owning it, in the heat, in the yard. Events on the stump are looking jolly: knife going down the fish belly, fingers poking in, cleaning out the guts & slingin em at the cat. Which is not offended. Lord no!

5. Three Parts of a Unity

Back at the monastery Bill & I do grounds maintenance to earn our keep for the summer, but really we're guests, and the work is for its own sake. No need to time it or price it out. This is

how the monks themselves think of the work they do. It therefore comes alive for them, and for us. Most mornings, Bill knocks on my door and we make it to the church on time, where we sit in the balcony to witness (attend) one of the “offices” such as lauds (5am) or prime (6am). Down in the church below, a door opens and the monks march in & take their places in stalls along the wall, each facing a lectern holding a big heavy leather book with clasps & bosses (brass cover knobs). In unison they unclasp all books (BANG!), open all books (BOOM!), read the office and sing Gregorian chant, in Latin. That done, they close all books (KA-BOOM!) and march out, probably to orchards and fields to do outdoor farm work.

“Physical work is part of contemplation,” says gravely genial Father Pachomius the talking monk, the guest outreach priest. “It’s free and one could say it has its own breath and soul. It takes up a third of the day. Another third is taken by study. The final third is prayer.” Sounds almost too simple. 1/3 for prayer. Prayer probably means the ritualized movements and prayer formulas, some in Latin, which calm the nerves, preparing the monks for meditation, the second stage. Meditation leads to contemplation, the reason for being here, the thing going on all the time.

Or you could just jump, if the jumping’s good.

6. Holy Pancake

After the church service, Bill & I head down the steps & out the door onto the light brown dirt road leading to the guest house built of whitewashed cinderblocks. Off in the swamp an alligator bellows, having its predatory day out there. If I had a mouth like that, I’d bellow too. When we get to the guest house brother Finbarr’s cooking breakfast. Released from the vow of silence, he’s loud and a little wild. We sit right down at a rude table made out of...I don’t know...rough old boards & 2 by 4s? Guest meals are served with homemade black bread & raw whole milk from monastery cows. Eggs, never more than a day old, come from monastery hens that were clucking in chicken language, “Hey where you taking that?” There’s coffee. The cream was scooped right off the top of milk buckets. Sugar must’ve been squeezed out of monastery sugarcane that got fed between great big steel rollers. The bacon is from monastery pigs. They ran hard but the monks caught ‘em.

One morning a devout family of farmers from Iowa comes for breakfast. The mom thinks one of the pancakes has the face of Jesus on it. She shows it around. Oooh! Ahhh!

I suspect miracles are a figure of speech. If they really happened, it would destroy faith, replacing it with certainty. But that’s logic, and logic kills more than faith. Common people just want a rulebook & a set of ceremonies for life’s big moments. Sun got to rise. Baby got to come out. And miracles? Bring ‘em on. Love me a miracle for breakfast!

7. Lagoons

When Bill and I aren’t messing around with brooms, rakes & clippers, we grab an aluminum boat & row out among former rice paddies, which are now swamp lagoons where we paddle, talk, speculate about things going on at the monastery, climb over jungle-covered banks & listen to swamp life, the gators, frogs, birds, insects. I thought at first there’d be lots of spiders, but they’re scarce, eaten up by the jaw snappin’ diversity around them.

8. Temptation

One day in town, we're carrying crates from the truck into the side door of a supermarket. Bill says, "Hold this crate, willya? Those two girls gave me a look. I gotta go talk to 'em for a sec." I say, "It's temptation, man! Thought you were getting away from all that!" He says, "I'm tired of people that get no sex, telling those that get it that it's wrong! You think pretending to hate it means you're ho

9. Sanctuary

Back at the monastery, we sometimes see a tall skinny guy with a severe expression, carrying a bucket or heading somewhere in rubber boots to fix something. Bill says, "That's Ted, the other lay brother. Ted's gay. He came to the monastery to find sanctuary. We need to meet him. He'll tell us what being gay is like. Whatever we do in life, we're going to know people who are gay. You should come along. It's good for you to know it sooner rather than later."

Bill's going to pick Ted's brain, and he wants me along because I don't know anything. He's wrong, though. I know stuff, but I'm not tellin'. A gay guy gave me a ride out at the park one time & tried to put the make on me. Maybe Ted can say something that will help me figure out what to think about it.

I worry we might just be using Ted, setting him up to be a character on Playhouse 90 delivering social awareness in a monologue.

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But we go talk to Ted in the common room of the upscale living quarters for paying guests. The brick walkway leading up to the front door is varnished. Posh! There aren't any paying guests at the moment, so there's no reason we can't go in and sit on the parlor/rec room couches. Ted says he always knew. In his teens he "dated" his parish priest. The church is full of gays and straights mixed. Always has been. If you didn't know that, you probably never would have guessed, the way the media covers everything up. Ted's a devout Catholic. As a kid he believed it when the church said being gay was terrible. Ted lived the gay life throughout his teen & adult years, and it was scary. Hide it and you're OK, kind of, but come out and you get pushed into places where crooks hang out. He read Merton. Everybody read Merton. "Did you read Merton?" "Yes." So he came here, talked to the abbot, and the abbot took him in & let him hide, calm down, rethink. He actually could be like the monks, renouncing sexual relationships. "The monks here at the monastery are like babies. They probably don't even have wet dreams."

So that's all I'm getting from Ted. I now know the terms "gay," "the life," "out," "straight," and "the closet." After accepting & examining those terms, I hand them back to Ted. I'm 17. For sex, I'm OK with daydreams for now. What I really need is conversation. If a gay person talks to me, I can get used to gay people in a snap.

10. Visitors

Guest neighbors arrive: Wagner fans. The skinny, disgruntled-looking husband with a fussy little mustache has brought a turntable, and heavy dark box sets of records, a shining chalice on the front of each, luminous in the mist. The husband keeps looking around suspiciously, like in pictures I've seen of glaring hatchet-faced Wagner. I imagine Wagner griping: "Who laughed at my music?" Through the wall later I hear the man trying (successfully it seems) to impress his

wife with how much he knows about monasteries. “In some monasteries in Europe, if you’re a man, you better not stoop over to tie your shoe. A monk’ll be on you!” His wife keeps murmuring, “Yes, dear. All right, dear:”

11. Notebook again

Home again, home again. I have another year of high school to finish. In study hall I put a spiral notebook on the wide wooden table. A wise looking horse is on the cover. Under it are the words, “knowledge is power.” Opening it, I find a clearing in the class notes & begin describing the monastery, birds, gators, monks, the swamp, croaks & bellows, zizzing insects, the splash of reptile claws climbing up out of the primordial. I’ve got a lot of time to form it up & get it right, if right is what I’m after. 60 years if I live so long. That’s a big drink.

At nearby tables, ducktail boys talk about cars they’ve seen and worked on, & girls they’ve fucked. (“Popped her cherry! Hoo! Hoo!”)

I write of alligators, and give them personalities, like those of the ducktail boys. Squawk of the prey as the jaws snap down. Boy voices pipe up: “Fuckn Corvette Stingray! Two seats. Me and my honey!”

“442 for me!”

“No fuckn’ way! GTO, that’s the one!”

“Fuck no! Mustang!”

A carpet F-bombing starts up. The monitor gets out of her chair & walks over to loom till the boys shush down.

I leaf through the messy notebook & find another clear space to put one of the swamp scenes.

“When we came to currents in the water, we followed them to see where they went. There were island-like green shapes made up of water lillies: no ground under them. The water mirrored the sky, seeming to float the islands far up in the clouds. I thought of them and of our boat falling upward into space. As we rowed, or didn’t row, we talked out threads in our lives, Bill describing the girls who made themselves easy to get for a healthy guy with a good future as a doctor. He had to get a hold on his life, turn away pleasure, quit being drunk and buzzed all the time, define himself. I talked about surfaces, directions. I was a kid. I knew nothing, had no form. Eyes and ears but no advice. That’s exactly what the abbot would say at the end of the summer. Go have a life, learn something. Knock around. Define yourself. ‘We’re not here to keep folks from living.’”



arrangement

Mk Smith Despres

She picks fistsful of the daisy-ish things
that grow in low clumps by the pond
and gives them out like kisses.

She is four and does not worry
about vases or later or wilting.

Instead, she trades sweet for sweeter,
peels the lollipop sucked and saved
off the red plastic kid-cup lid from yesterday's restaurant
and puts the one flower she has left in its place.

We have an arrangement.
I will call everyday and we will read
books through a screen and she will tell me
everything I've missed. We will both try our best.

She is four and does not understand
departures or one month or revision.

But without even trying, she leaves me
the perfect good morning: a tiny yellow sun,
splayed petals sugar-glued in place.



gerard malanga's neck ties

John Dorsey

for bill roberts

beautiful women
once nearly tore them to shreds
what's left is soft perfumed fingers
lost in a black & white photograph
taken in saks fifth ave in 1962
every mother's son
with hair gently brushed
with pearl white teeth
beaming with confidence
out front
cars honking
in the streets
in america's wide arms
only to end up in a battered mailbox
on a narrow country road
one man's past
is another's time machine
when i place them against my skin
i feel as if i'm draped
in a better life.



the nazis in mayberry

John Dorsey

jason & i joke
about the dark underbelly
of americana
andy griffith with a pillowcase
over his head
aunt bee
& the master race
cooling peach cobbler
on the window sill.



the christmas dead

John Dorsey

a few less cards
to put in the mail every year
a few more names
to take out of my phone
sometimes i forget one
& the other end of the line
is just silence
the only thing
that survives the cold.





do not approach the swan
Daniel Hales

how to approach a swan

Daniel Hales

Don't. The swans see us for the make believes we are. The swans are Barton Cove's docents & we are refurbished fog machines, doomed swansuited fops pulled screaming on plastic tubes.

a swan hearts her neck

with another swan's

you should not be watching

it is not for you to see this

The swans cruise through the reeds past glum teens texting on stepdad's gurgling Aqua Patio. The swans are gliding through mist, eliding a jetski's wake.

A young swan family is the Cove's ellipsis, stitching river to sky ...

The swans are winning & improving. Their cygnets are floating past our virus. The swans are feathered & buoyant. The swans are contiguous & concurrent. The swans are not sunburned or rueful. The swans are leaving & returning. The swans are dabbling for fish. The swans are

Do the swans sleep

on that island?

Is SWANS! the password

for God's sublime wifi

Does a sleeping swan slide

behind silence?



how to exceed impossible expectations

Daniel Hales

&

In a constantly expanding universe we're all getting smaller everyday. But you & I made gnarly stains on the bedcover, sheets, & pillowcases that even the expensive detergent can't get out.

&&

Your firm emails, flush with ominous innuendo & implied ultraviolence, are not merit-less, but have you tried enhanced interrogation? Between questions, threats, lashes, chew cubes of hospital ice like a savage, grind and crunch the arctic between your eyeteeth.

&&&

Stomp every frozen puddle. In February most calendars are fifty percent off. Leap headfirst into the quicksand. Don't be a casualty in the war between fog & mist, fall in the dunk tank even when they miss. Get verified as human by every website. It's not too late to change your motto until they embroider it on your collar. No one's guaranteed a sequel. Sister, you're lucky if you get a pilot episode. Save your tears in foil gum wrappers, you'll need them again soon.

&&&&

Bring a cherry pie to a knife fight. *Do Not Walk Outside This Area* is stenciled on the airplane's wing.

&&&&&

She may have been a pastor's wife but Franny loved turning Poison first, then hunting us all down, one by one, & whacking our croquet balls into the neighbor's yard. Her laugh of rapturous triumph, the exceptional light gushing from her eyes.

&&&&&&

As a kid I stole fireflies' glow, smeared luminous soulflesh on face & arms. Catch glints of my ancient fireflecks when jacket zipper gets stuck & I must crawl out like a caterpillar shedding cocoon.

&&&&&&&&

Upon depletion rest head on desk & never lift again.

&&&&&&&&

Evening is evening out
the day's great expectations
wouldn't you rather alchemize into
some exotic flower's mancandy
than be a rented mannequin
with a cyst you have to drain
each summer
it's easier to talk
to strangers than
to walk around
the backyard
naked at night
jiggling the dark breezes



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tea ceremony

Julia Ludewig

waiting: for the kettle
to get heavy, the stove hot. for
the water's gabble (whistle broke)
and the hemorrhaging into
and out of the bag. for the flavor
enhancers to stroke my tongue,
warmth my belly. for the thirst
to quiet and the tag to make
the plunge. for the cup
to dry and paint a layer
too thin even for the best
tasseomancer. for my bladder
to talk, the tea to leave.
for the thirst to return
for me
to learn
how to
wait
...



wine doctrine

Julia Ludewig

in response to his question ("red or white?")
and my bewilderment, my pious friend
quotes the Qur'an: "Do not go near prayer,
while you are stupefied, until you know
what you are saying" (4'43). I say
we take the red one.



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partisans

David Ram

Against Sunday noontime traffic, one drab man pushes a pile of wooden pallets on a metal hand truck along the curb beside the Musée des Arts and Métiers. This worker singularly focuses the forces of capital on display outside the former chapel where Foucault's reconstructed pendulum still holds sway.

Around the block, none of the Partisan Café Artisanal patrons are hip to this guy. They posture, purse lips and sip espresso, New Wave Ethiopian, or iced lattes sweetened with agave and nutty almond milk alternative.



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Locations - Nature - Animals - Macro - Candid and more...

suits

Matt Jasper

The furrier stitched garments from unusual pelts.
People wondered what animal they were wearing
yet accepted a stiff collar and stroked the long hair
that had been snared then coaxed back

to provide this luxury—the still-moist leather of which
seemed almost to twitch of its own accord when caressed
by the discerning buyer who could afford
the best and forgive this foible.

A parade of those laden with these robes
strode in formation through corridors of power
they hoped to ascend well-defended from the elements
yet assailed by hints that what they wore was wearing them.

When the twitching continued, they would pay
anything to have the garment removed. They tried steam
to release adhesion yet the pelt contracted to squeeze any wearer's
resolve if they attempted separation.

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Without breath, disobedience turned
to a growing acceptance that the clothes made the man
or woman. This garment was beautiful and loved flattery
so those inside grew resigned to let it speak for them extrinsically.

Yes, the poor should do more than scatter before them
on the sidewalk in fear they'll catch a briefcase or a shoulder edged in.
They should save up for their medicine, pay rent
that's extravagant, face arrest for their debts or insouciance.

The suits opined that taking over had been
easier than expected because those below
were so complicit in their own torture they
would never think to question the rule

of a class that didn't need to act like a parody
of itself because parody was the fabric
of the real made ethereal--the very material
of the clothing that was offered

and put on by people who were so far
gone by now they forgot it was they
and not someone else falling farther
and farther toward the center

of the damp fur suit that made them look
and sound more and more like their leader who loved
how he didn't even have to threaten or ventriloquize
for them to mouth along with his words.



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The logo for Delap REAL ESTATE LLC features the word "Delap" in a large, blue, serif font, with "REAL ESTATE LLC" in a smaller, blue, sans-serif font below it. A stylized house icon is integrated into the text, with a red roofline and a vertical red bar on the right side. Below the logo, the name "Carol Abbe Smith" is followed by "Sells Homes • Sings Jazz" in a bold, black, sans-serif font. Contact information including a cell phone number, an extension number, an email address, and a website URL is listed at the bottom of the block.

the visitant

Michael Washburn

The stylishly dressed lady did not wish to sit anywhere near Lucas, whose earthy appearance she found offensive, or maybe it was just his odor. He barely even got a look at her before she accosted one of the train's crew. Lucas knew how he struck her. The itinerant hand heard her plead with the young conductor and caught bits of his earnest assurances. Then the elaborate silk purple hat and dress and the educated respectable lady inside them were off in another area of the train, leaving the crew member to look with distaste at the unshaven dude slumped in the window seat.

The conductor quickly looked away from Lucas, seemingly annoyed at having to defend his employer's reputation and claims to offer the finest experience to guests making a jaunt through the Midwest and the mountain states and on to Seattle. Then the youth hurried off.

Mrs. Chambers, he had called the lady. Lucas guessed that Mrs. Chambers had gotten on in Omaha and now was mad at her husband for buying a cheap ticket. Well, there was plenty of space in the other passenger cars and the lounge car. But Lucas had to admit he was hardly pleasing to look at, not that it justified snootiness toward him. All the months of work told. The cuffs of his pants had rings of caked mud, there were splotches on the knees, and his shirt, only partly hidden by his winter vest, had hair and dirt on it from stables he had cleaned out and gave off an odor of hay and manure and the tobacco in his breast pocket. His dirty-brown hair was matted and unruly and he had not shaved in a week or had a bath in three days.

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In the company of other hands this grittiness was a badge of pride, but the same trait made him an object of derision for society's respectable men and women. He knew he should take more care, not least by bathing and shaving and wearing fresh clothes every day, but when prospects were as bleak as they seemed at the moment and not many chances to mingle with anyone from any walk of life presented themselves, it was hard to try.

Once when he had walked the streets of Chicago flush with cash, a fortune teller had cajoled him into sitting down and letting her read his palms, and he thought most of what she said was nonsense but she did use a phrase that stuck with him. She told Lucas that in his *self-schema* he fancied himself a handsome young man. Confidence is a big part of the trick, she said. The most obvious truths loll at your feet like moles. *Self-schema*, now there was an intriguing term. Further inquiries had led him to the knowledge that Dr. Freud, of whom Lucas had never heard before, Dr. Freud in Vienna had made this a popular expression. *Self-schema*, self-confidence, self-worth, it wasn't all so hard to digest, but some days he did not feel like acting on the wisdom imparted to him.

Today was a case in point. Gazing out the window as the train rumbled on into the late afternoon, he tried to make out the point way off to the north where the fields met the sky, but the gathering flurries made it impossible. Flecks of white dotted the barren earth and gave the canopies of the fir trees a mottled quality. Then the green faded until it scored the white of the snow and the black of the rock outcroppings here and there and the landscape grew dull and dreary as the train sped on. Though the train was nowhere near those rustic regions still devoid of habitation in this year of our Lord, 1902, farmhouses were vanishingly scarce out this

way. Lucas looked over the horizon in vain for a boy or a dog or any sign of life. In the train it was neither warm nor cold, and the rumble of the engine lulled him, not into peace and serenity but a sense of the time between here and Spokane. It was going to be a long lonely ride.

Of course there was the lounge car, which he had not yet explored. You had to have cash. It was the domain of Mrs. Chambers and her husband and other shiny-shoes types. Or maybe he had misjudged Mrs. Chambers. At least one thing about Mrs. Chambers was kind of nice. The purple she wore put him in mind of another outfit he had observed in a setting rather different from this one.

How often Lucas had wandered into a strange town or village with nothing in mind other than the imperative of finding work and putting enough money in his pockets to live another week. He usually did find work of one sort or another, and sometimes it paid fairly well, but to think of the evening and what diversions he might afford once employed was too much of an effort. This lent an aimlessness to his wanderings under the bright moon over so many hours, a randomness to any diversions he happened to find. His father would have killed him for spending so freely, but he worked so hard all day and it was just this tendency that lent a special satisfaction to whatever space he could make on the vast night of the plains for darts or cards or beer or the occasional show.

For six months the year before, Lucas had steady work on a farm on the western plains of Illinois not far from the state line. One night after hours of baling hay and sweeping out stables, Lucas wandered up the road from the farm in the direction of a cluster of buildings that some dignified as a town. One was an outlier, sixty yards from the others, easy to overlook as you walked up the road at night. This building was the only one with light in its windows. Coming closer, hearing hoots and cheers and laughs, he knew it was a tavern, one of the few places out here on the plains that would welcome strangers without regard for their social standing. *Siddown and have a beer, pardner.* The other buildings, whose nature he did not know, loomed frighteningly. Suppose you were to go up to one of those dark rectangles and press your face up against glass and stare into the pitch black.

The tavern was quite spacious, with a few dozen tables scattered on the floor between a bar running nearly from wall to wall and a big stage on which lamps high in the rafters cast cones of light. Here the blunderings of drunk fools on the floor would grate and the absence of the owners, those invisible people whose lives you could only imagine, would come to haunt you. The crowd was modest, smaller than he would have guessed. Clusters of three or four bantered among themselves without taking note of Lucas. He bought a glass of beer and took a seat at one of the tables twenty feet from the stage. Then the curtains at the rear of the stage parted.

The woman came out onto the stage. She had hair as dark and brown as the waters of a creek he had passed over once on a horse, in an untamed land far to the west and south of here, and the dark contrasted sharply with the paleness of her supple features and with the ruby of her lips which seemed, in the light from above, a studied provocation. The deep blue of her dress could not have more perfectly accentuated his sense of her as at once earthy and an emissary from a place to which the second-rate and undeserving could not gain entry. A category that very much included Lucas Hatch.

Now as her body began to sway with consummate grace and her lips started to move, Lucas realized that he could not match any images or thoughts with the words of "A Hot Time in

the Old Town,” pleasing song though it might be. She was not making eye contact with him by accident or as part of the dance of meaningless suggestion she might engage in with any stranger in a village on the plains. No, she had points to make, messages to convey, and all she had to do was fix Lucas with a look to overwhelm all the associations that he might make when hearing this music.

He knew one thing about her. Her name was Clara Summers. What she knew about him exceeded maybe his own self-schema. The words came now, bracingly lucid. *Lucas Hatch. You keep moving almost every day because you know that to stay in place on these plains is to let words and names swarm over you like bats, to take on an identity is to submit to limitations, and your spirit would revolt. But you are the saddest kind of fool if you imagine that in your frantic moves over the plains you will sooner or later catch up with something that has eluded you. That you will find love or treasure or that you might someday be worthy of me. You lack not only wisdom and worldliness but a heroic character that will stand strong and resolute long after time has left you ugly and bitter. Your fate is to roam these plains, season after season, until and unless you can alter the facts of your self.*

The smile of those ruby lips on the stage could not lessen the sting her words carried even as he realized with awe that he had engaged in communication with another soul on a level to which most people can never aspire, that here was what they call telepathy.

As Lucas lolled in his seat on the train in the dimming light, he knew it was just as well that the thoughts of Mrs. Chambers and others were, for now, their own.

But he could not avoid interactions with others on this train. It was getting quite late in the day and Lucas had not eaten since stopping at a shack in Chicago the evening before and digging coins from the pockets of his soiled trousers.

He knew that if he continued to languish here out of a feeling of social inferiority, he fully deserved the epithet *coward*. The way to the lounge car was short. He passed from his car into the next and advanced up the aisle, ignoring the curious looks from either side, until he faced the final set of doors. With a deep breath he passed out of the passenger car and into the lounge car, where smoke drifted and the smells of cigars and whiskey were heady. On the walls were polished plaques and the bases of the tables curved into burnished brass claws. At three of the tables, men sat playing cards, drinking, bantering. At other tables passengers read newspapers or sipped glasses half-filled with amber fluids, lulled by the dimming white outside no less than the liquor. In this car there were a few families but for the most part it was the domain of the cigar-chompers. He stood there awkwardly, looking around in vain for a place to sit.

Way over at the far end of the lounge sat Mrs. Chambers, eying him with contempt as she raised a cocktail to her lips. He felt he really should leave at once.

At last one of the people at a table to his left noticed him. The stranger was a nine-year-old girl with long yellow hair. She wore overalls and boots and had draped her parka over the seat of her chair. Beside her was a boy he guessed was her brother, in similarly plain but rugged attire. They had been passing a magazine back and forth when Lucas entered the lounge.

“Hey, mister. You lookin’ for a place to sit?”

He found her openness disarming.

“Yes, ma’am.”

The girl pointed to an empty chair to her brother’s left. Lucas quickly sat down with a thankful look. The boy too seemed animated with a kind and somewhat flippant spirit. He grinned and offered Lucas a piece of gum, which Lucas politely declined.

“Where you headin’, mister?”

“I’m going to Spokane to see about a job.”

“Ain’t there jobs in these here parts?”

“Of course there are, kid. I need to keep reinventing myself to stay sane.”

The girl looked at her brother with a grin.

“He’s like our daddy, Jack. Wants to be a different person every time he wakes up in the morning,” she said.

“That’s not far wrong.”

“Our daddy don’t have a job neither,” the boy said.

“And why not?”

Lucas looked around for the father of these ebullient kids.

“He was a lawman and he done shot the wrong person.”

A stranger at one of the other tables laughed, whether in response to Jack’s admission or something a fellow cigar-chomper had let slip.

“He shot the wrong person. I wanted to be a lawman once. I thought they all got training to avoid that sort of thing,” Lucas said.

“It weren’t no accident,” the boy replied.

“Of course it was, Jack!”

“If it wasn’t an accident then it wasn’t the wrong person,” Lucas said.

“In the law’s eyes it was.”

“Give him a break, Jack.”

“Shut up, Bethany.”

Another voice interceded.

“These two givin’ you trouble?”

Lucas looked up at a man in jeans, a flannel shirt, and a winter vest like his own. The man was not old, late thirties, but had a weathered face.

“Hello, sir. These your two charmin’ kids?”

“Yes they are. I’m Ethan Paulson.”

“Lucas Hatch.”

He rose to shake hands with the father.

“These kids were just up in the Badlands of South Dakota, where their granddaddy lives. Then I took ’em to Chicago to see a show, and now we’re headin’ home,” Ethan said.

“I wish I had a father like you,” Lucas said, and it was true.

Ethan looked embarrassed.

“Better move, you stole Mr. Paulson’s seat there. Watch he don’t put a round in your forehead,” said one of the strangers nearby, the one who had laughed before, and Lucas knew right then that the cigar-chompers had listened to every word from this table.

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Lucas moved away from the kids and their father and eyed the stranger who had spoken so boldly, a plump man with a thick mustache, wearing a scarlet shirt and black trousers.

“I ain’t as educated as you but I do know it’s impolite to listen in on others’ conversation,” Lucas said.

“You’re right, there, good sir. It should be the other way around,” the plump stranger said.

“Huh?”

“It should be the other way around. You should be listening to *our* talk, you poor rube. You just might learn a thing or two about lifting yourself out of penury.”

As Lucas mulled how to reply to this latest provocation, another stranger at the same table, a silver-haired gentleman in a tweed suit whose back had been to Lucas and the Paulsons the entire time, said, “Be quiet, Murray,” and then turned and made eye contact with Lucas.

“I’ll have to ask you on my friend’s behalf to forgive him. It’s the drink that makes him talk this way. He hasn’t let up since he got on,” the stately man said.

“Any idea where that might have been?” Murray said.

“I can’t imagine what would interest me less,” Lucas said.

“Boston!” Murray said, and laughed as if this fact had a hilarious incongruity to it.

“Boston. Boy, that’s a lot of drinks.”

“More than you can afford.”

With the tips of his fingers, Lucas probed the point on his vest where his Bowie knife would make a bulge if he had it with him.

“Does our boy know who the president is?” Murray went on.

“That would be TR.”

Murray clapped loudly.

“How about Secretary of State?”

“I forget.”

“Secretary of War? Come on, bumpkin.”

“Can I offer you a drink?” the man with silver hair interrupted.

“Why, sure,” Lucas said, letting his hand fall away from the spot on his vest.

Lucas ordered a glass of beer and sat down with the gentleman, who introduced himself as Harold and the two others who had been silent as Wilbur and Edmund.

“May I ask what you men do?” Lucas said.

“Murray here is an investor. Wilbur and Edmund are lawyers. If you haven’t figured it out yet, I’m a prospector, on my way to Washington State. On my way back, I should specify. I made a trip out east to make my case and fetch some expert legal help,” Harold said.

Lucas knew that none of this should be confusing to him, but it was.

“Are you in some kind of trouble, sir?”

All four strangers laughed.

“No, my boy. I’m not in any trouble, but there is a contested claim, you see. Another prospector, a very ambitious one, I should add, happened on a trove of silver deposits in a rough region of Whatcom County, not far from the border with Canada, at virtually the same time I did. He’ll tell you he beat me to it, but what’s he going to say? I had a very good idea of where the deposits were and was looking hard for them all through the fall. I worked much harder than that rogue. He’ll say the opposite, but again, tell me what you expect.”

Lucas nodded, intrigued. Harold went on.

“No one of good faith believes my rival beat me, but he sure thinks he did. In any event he was in far too much of a hurry for his own good, and made a mess of all the assessments. That sealed his fate. I had already drummed up interest from investors, and these two gentlemen here, Wilbur and Edmund, are my hired guns. We got an injunction against the rival claim, and we’re going to sort this all out once and for all in court, and then my partners and I will be fabulously rich.”

“What’s your rival’s name?”

This prompted Murray to look at the others and emit that highly disagreeable laugh again.

“How could that be of the slightest interest to you?” Harold said.

“I’m just curious. It’s such a good story.”

“It’s a rather familiar one, to be honest with you. Every man who shows up late to the game says he’s been wronged and wants to have it out in court. Well, good luck to him. I’ve got the best mining lawyers in the country here,” Harold said with pride.

Murray let out another guffaw. Tilting his head back a bit, Lucas saw that Jack and Bethany made no secret of listening to every word. Their father had vanished again.

“We’re prospectors too,” said Bethany, holding up a jar full of what Lucas guessed to be thick sand from the hills of the Badlands.

66

All the other adults had a laugh at her claim. Harold treated Lucas to another beer before Lucas began to feel he was overstaying his welcome. He thanked the partners, wished them luck in their venture, and sauntered back to his seat two cars down. Now it was quite late and he realized how tired he was. Sleep came, but not so fast that he did not turn over in his mind how those men in the lounge were so, what was the word, so *dynamic*. Drifting off, he thought of identities and how they freeze you in place, of a famous thinker a girl in Chicago had once explained to him over wine, a man with what she called an incredible mind and with ideas about self-realization, and Lucas could not recall the name just now but it started with an N.

In the morning he woke to a white so pure and ubiquitous he thought the train had passed high into the mountains and was moving through clouds. Then he realized the train was still. On either side the white blocked his view of anything else but he knew light was getting in here. Maybe there were gaps that he could not see between the tops of the mounds of snow and the roof of the car. The few others in the car talked anxiously and confusedly. He could not make out words. He sat there in bewilderment until at length the door at the front of the car opened and the young crew member came in.

“Good morning, sir. I’m afraid an avalanche has come right down the mountain and buried most of the train. I’ve got to ask you to be calm and sit still. We’ll have you all out of here in good time.” The kid went on down the aisle, carrying out his thankless task. Others reacted with words of shock and disbelief. It’s quite possible we can die here, one of them said. Lucas did not make out the kid’s reply but it was weak and ineffectual from the sound of it.

So they were stuck, who knew for how long. They might die. It was quite impossible to say whether he would see Spokane. He was Lucas Hatch, the broke failure, his identity as fixed in place as the train. As he thought of Jack and Bethany, he felt the stirrings of a big brotherly instinct, or just maybe it was paternal. They must be pretty darn scared.

The way to the lounge car seemed longer this time. He kept expecting someone to yell at him to go back to his seat. But people were caught up in their own fear. He wondered briefly whether he would be able to get from the final passenger car to the lounge, but the crew had forged a path through the fallen snow. In the lounge the scene was much like the night before, with lots of smoke and chatter, but people looked every bit as morose as he expected and Harold and his little party were absent. Jack and Bethany sat at the same table as the night before. Their father sat at the counter, chatting with the barman.

“Lucas! Do you think we’ll all die?” said Jack.

He loved the unmediated speech of children. The question begged such a stereotypically heroic answer that Lucas just smiled and sat down at their table.

“Our dad was talking about you last night,” Bethany said.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah. He says he knows a kindred spirit.”

“A what?”

“A man who knows when to be nice and when to be strong.”

“Our dad left with us on this trip cause he shot a man he knew was guilty but was sure to get off,” Jack said.

Lucas thought maybe it was just as well if the train stayed put and he got to talk to these children for hours. But abruptly he heard a loud, keening voice from the other end of the lounge.

“Arthur! Arthur!”

Mrs. Chambers was calling to one of the gentlemen in her part of the lounge.

“Yes, Millicent?”

“Arthur, would you make that awful man leave here at once? He’s a ruffian, Arthur. A vagabond! He looked at me suggestively yesterday and now he’s subjecting the children to his filth.”

Millicent Chambers was drunk. It was how she kept terror at bay. Lucas did not know how anyone could have construed his conduct the day before as flirtatious, but saw it was a moot point as Arthur and one of the young conductors hurried over. He got up and retreated to his car. So much for the coffee he had planned to enjoy on this bright frightening morning.

He languished in his seat, missing the kick that coffee provides, thinking maybe Jack and Bethany would be adventurous enough to come find him here. But now, in his disoriented state, there came a strange sense that someone else wanted an audience with Lucas Hatch.

Now Clara appeared before him in her deep blue dress, her hair tied up in a bun. The microcosmic form she assumed here did not lessen her physical presence a jot. He did not think others who passed by in the aisle could see or hear Clara, but he was in thrall to her gaze.

This predicament affects you more than almost anyone, Lucas, because you know what it means to be stationary, to be stuck. But you are not the only one for whom it poses grave problems. You tried and failed to recall Nietzsche's name earlier. You of all people, Lucas Hatch, understand the imperative to outpace everyone else, the peculiarly insatiable demon of mobility, how it claws, it tears, it rends from the inside. You want to be worthy of me, Lucas, but you are far, far too trusting, and that trust is a form of moral weakness.

That was all the visitant had to impart this time around. With a feeling of despair, Lucas looked out at the snow piled right up past the roof of the train, and nodded off in his seat before he even had a chance to ponder Clara's words. There came a dream in which he wandered all alone on a vast plain, with nothing relieving the monotony of the flat ground all around save for a range of jagged rock cliffs in the far, far distance. A wind howled and hissed and grew so fierce he thought he might topple backward, but he pressed ahead, looking for a town, a village. Nothing came or seemed likely to come at the pace he moved, not even a river he could follow in the hope of reaching some kind of settlement or a coast where friendly or hostile ships trafficked.

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When he opened his eyes, some kind of commotion just beyond the door of the car made him leap from his seat. Others further down the aisle had noticed and were talking excitedly. He rushed to the door and pulled it open. There in the space between the cars, the window on the train's right side offered a thrilling sight. Pickaxes, two or maybe three, hit the snow and knocked off chunks of it. Yes, three men were out there! They had broken right through the wall of snow and were within feet of the train. The conductors came rushing, yelling ecstatically.

Minutes later the three men were in the train. They were rugged types with thick beards but as friendly as you could hope for. After stomping hard to get the snow off their coats, pants, and boots, they marched triumphantly to the lounge car, followed by the conductors, Lucas, and a few other excited passengers.

As soon as Millicent Chambers and her husband saw the rescuers, they cheered and applauded, inspiring others to do the same. Arthur ordered a bottle of champagne and asked the conductors to lock the door to the lounge car so they could share a drink without getting mobbed. Just go and tell the others the good news and let us have a proper celebration up here. All but one of the conductors hurried off.

"You folks didn't think you were going to sit here forever, did you?" said Nate, the leader of the three rescuers, a big man in a leather jacket, a rugged shirt, and jeans.

"That ain't the way of this state. I know you're all passin' through and don't take a kind view of us rubes," said Doug.

“Ain’t that so. But we’d suffer the torments of Hades before we’d let any harm come to y’all good folk,” said Randy.

“Within an hour there’ll be an army up this way with blankets and provisions,” Nate said, drawing cheers.

They grinned broadly as they said these things and managed to charm pretty much everyone in the lounge, especially Mr. and Mrs. Chambers and Harold and his little party. Jack and Bethany Paulson, still seated at the same table as before, watched the rescuers with wide eyes and seemed to want to commit every word they spoke to memory. It was the speech of heroes.

Arthur had just gotten through his third toast to these men and their selfless efforts when Nate stood up, looked at the door leading to the passenger cars, turned to Doug and Randy, and nodded. The other two understood. All three reached into their jackets and pulled out Colt revolvers. Randy moved down a few feet and pistol-whipped the young conductor on the back of the head so hard that the boy fell with a cry and did not stir. Cries filled the lounge and Millicent let out a piercing scream until Arthur clapped his hand over her mouth in terror.

“What is the meaning of this?” cried Edmund, rising from the table he shared with Harold, Murray, and Wilbur, then sinking immediately back into his chair when Doug pointed his Colt at the lawyer’s face. Harold spoke.

“That was not prudent, Ed.”

“Make that woman be quiet or you’ll see how much I care for chivalry,” Doug called to Arthur.

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Lucas decided Doug may well have been the most vicious of these three. He wondered who they were and whether they would kill everyone on the train. His greatest concern was for Bethany and Jack, who watched with calm while seeming deliberately to avoid looking at their father, still seated at the bar.

“If you must know, there ain’t a single person here worth riskin’ a man’s life for,” said Nate, holding his revolver straight out in front of him.

People gasped as Millicent transitioned to sobs.

“You could all die here of hunger or cold for all I care. We ain’t here to rescue no one. No, we’re here because of a man that wants to use lawyers’ tricks to win a claim he ain’t got no right to. All of us out here on the frontier want to be rich, but there’s one among you that just can’t wait his turn,” Nate said.

There came more gasps, and whispers, and heads turned toward one passenger. Harold looked down, as if to deny that any of this deserved a reply.

“So, we got to take this man here, Mr. Harold Graves, this gluttonous trickster, and his associates. We ain’t got no designs against the rest of you, though like I said, I don’t care if you all die.”

“You can’t take me,” Harold said quietly.

“What’s that? Care to speak up?” Doug said, sticking the tip of his Colt in Harold’s face.

“You’ll hang for this!” Edmund said, rising from his table.

Doug calmly adjusted his aim and shot Edmund in the chest. The lawyer cried and pitched backward into the wall, then sank, leaving a bloody trail like snail’s slime below a burnished plaque. Millicent screamed long and loud again while the children gasped.

Nate addressed everyone.

“I should probably kill you all right here, but seein’ as you’ve been through a hard time and I’m in a charitable mood, and my boys and I need a rest before we start off again, I’m gonna let the party go on just a bit longer. Drink up. Harold, what’ll the last drink of your life be?”

Harold muttered a phrase, too low for Lucas to hear. Nate sat down with the children and Doug approached the bar. Randy stood by the door, ready to shoot down anyone who tried to unlock it or challenge one of his mates. Doug carried drinks to Harold’s table and began to talk earnestly to Harold, Murray, and Wilbur. Lucas wondered whether the three planned to “take” Harold, or to kill him on the spot, and how many others they might end up killing. Now Nate spoke to Lucas for the first time.

“Sit down, dude. You got me thinkin’ you’re gonna try somethin’. Tell me you ain’t that dumb.”

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Lucas walked to the bar and sat down beside Ethan, who seemed to know something the others did not. They ordered drinks. Neither man spoke to the other. Lucas wanted to tell Ethan how concerned he felt about the kids, but did not wish to draw any attention. Nate, big ugly Nate, was leaning across the table, telling Bethany and Jack some kind of story. The children listened but did not laugh. Periodically Nate turned to Randy, still standing by the door, to communicate something or other, his gun resting on the table. Doug got up, went over to inspect the body of the man he had shot, and went back to his table.

Lucas could not hear what anyone at Harold’s table said, but Murray, the fat investor who had insulted him before, was deep in conference with Doug. People were finishing their drinks and starting on another round, hoping the relative calm would continue, but now Doug got up and went over to Nate and the two had a whispered conference.

Nate rose.

“So it seems we got a copper in our midst.”

More gasps rose all over. Nate went on.

“A former copper, I should say. Got fired and split. Sure could have fooled me. Y’all look like a bunch of pansies. It’s about time me and my boys got goin’, but before we do that, I wanna know who the copper is.”

No one spoke. Harold looked as solemn as ever.

“Come on. I don’t wanna shoot no one other than Harold here,” Nate said.

Still no one said anything.

“Tell me or I waste him right here.”

Even now, no one volunteered any information. Lucas thought: someone is about to die.

Then Nate’s smirk grew into a sickeningly broad grin.

“I was just havin’ some fun with you all. I happen to know, courtesy of our buddy Murray here, who the copper is. It’s Ethan there at the bar. I’m real sorry your kids have to see this, Ethan,” Nate said.

Doug got up again, Colt in hand, and approached the bar, as Randy came up and stood beside Nate. Then something happened that Lucas could never forget if he tried. With a cry, Jack reached into one of the bags between his and Bethany’s table and the wall, pulled out a Remington revolver, and tossed it across the lounge to his father, who caught the weapon, leapt off his stool, and raised the gun.

Doug and Ethan fired at the same time. With a cry, Ethan toppled backward and Doug dropped to his knees with a huge hole in his forehead.

“Damn it! God damn it to hell!” Nate cried, thrusting his gun out menacingly.

“Dad!” Jack cried.

“He killed our father!” Bethany screamed.

But Lucas saw that Ethan, lying on his back on the ground, still breathed faintly.

“Don’t none of you dare be that stupid!” Nate cried, red in the face.

“We won’t! We won’t! Please don’t kill anyone else,” said Arthur.

“Oh, you don’t want me to kill the lot of you. Well I bloody well feel like doin’ just that. I was gonna be nice and only kill Harold, slimy dude. But now the spirit of compassion ain’t too strong in me,” Nate said.

“Please, sir,” Arthur cried.

“Tell you what. I won’t kill these here kids, Jack and Bethany. I’ll give y’all that much. But I need someone else, to feel even for the death of my buddy Doug here.”

This set off Millicent and Murray right away.

“I’ve got the perfect present for you, mister. See that ranch hand there at the bar! The scruffy one who hasn’t bathed in a year?” Millicent said.

“Yes, Nate, that vagabond there! Take him. He’s a man of low character who barged right in here! We all hate him. Take Lucas Hatch!” Murray cried out.

“Kill him!” Millicent said.

Nate strode forward with a curious look. Reaching the bar, he held his Colt straight out until Lucas could practically see down the barrel.

“It seems you ain’t real popular among these folk. Maybe if I take your life here today, along with Harold’s, they might even remember me fondly,” Nate said with a sneer.

Lucas watched the tip of the barrel dancing inches from his nose. Down there was the agent, the emissary, of his release from the white glaring world and everything in it.

“Whadda you say, dude?”

“Do it, mister. I ain’t gonna beg for my life.”

Nate laughed long and hard.

“Hear that, folks? We got a hero here!”

Carefully, with great deliberation, Lucas spat in Nate’s face.

For the first time Nate completely lost his poise. He cried out in shock and rage, then steadied himself, took careful aim at Lucas’s head, and pulled the Colt’s trigger.

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Nothing happened.

Lucas leapt off his stool, grabbed the Remington lying three feet from Ethan, and emptied it of all six rounds, three for Randy and three for Nate. They screamed as their bodies crumpled and blood and garb flew all over the lower parts of the lounge.

Dropping the empty gun, Lucas steadied himself and smiled at the little girl who had surreptitiously poured sand from the Dakota badlands into Nate’s gun while it had rested on the table and Nate was distracted. Bethany did not deny him a warm smile in return as she and Jack rushed over to the still breathing form of their father.





hypothermia

Matt Jasper

A catalogue of loss usually begins with disorder.
Days grew shorter as the winter snows came
to claim each of them one by one pursued to fall
with frozen sinews and limbs assuming some final position.
Often the freezing will hallucinate or burrow
into the ground or hide under something or have one last
panic amidst sweat and a feeling of burning on skin
as they strip clothing to trail after them. It's called
"paradoxical undressing" and they might guess
almost correctly that their clammy clothes are making
them cold, or be sure they are slipping into some
hot tub for gin. Mirages of being warm again
are common as is looking up into pale sun or
bright stars and knowing they are burning saviors
of warmth too far away until the end when as a bathing light
they may come right in from the sky turning white as snow.
The lost go running off and rescuers can follow hobbled
footsteps widening into leaps then almost leap themselves
when bright clothing shows up alone on the trail in
a striptease as of leaves falling. If the lost are
found before sweat freezes them permanently in
to the place they once wandered freely,
it is known they'll never make it back
unless wrapped and tented and warmed
right there. The crew—if so equipped—
may pull out a Mr. Buddy propane heater
and set up a little tent
but even then it's an uncertain venture.
Those teeth might chatter back
into life or glide down clenched, sledded,
inanimate after having allowed bulge
of soul to pass up from throat into the twinkling
stars that could have, but now must
close in and warm them.



shrill

Matt Jasper

I fell for the world.
it was so convincing
when the cartilage holding
Carthage together was removed,
and it fell so they could besiege
me with stories about it. Ah,
to rival Rome and be sacked
then come back again from the ruins
of Methuen, Mass to this patio where replicas
of the dead are playing something we'd pay them
to stop but there are no slots in the musicians
accepting of coins, no letters purloined
to pepper with bromides convincing enemies
to surrender weapons in this fire fight where we flare
then drop and roll to extinguish passions
ignited by bad music or the flash of a lover's
eyes in the dark. They are by far the only thing
reflecting pale moonlight. All the rest
is a clotted soup requiring the movement
of our bodies through it as we anticipate rise
and fall of grass empires beneath feet bare
until a Holy Roman Emperor is let out of a sedan chair
manned by future pallbearers. He Caligulates over
in a type of swagger later batted down
by daggerpoint. He is as thirsty for blood
as the grass on the lawn which hopes
it will grow more green and thick
from the ravings of this lunatic.
Just as life is getting hard the
Praetorian Guard throws on
some fugues and Smog as if to make
of this thick gloom a basilica,
as if to say only the amount of blood
in a song is what makes it
worth going on and on.



the-devil-with-hair-like-horns

Matthew J. McKee

I.

The frost had stopped growing, and the rice had sprung up healthy and happy in its stead. And finally, after what seemed like weeks of suffering, the wind and the rain had given up on lashing the homes and businesses of the common folk. All was bright. All was well.

Oh, but how wonderful that wind had been, I thought, sitting in the park with the still air. Without it, insects gathered around me to buzz incessantly, and people had come to occupy my park. I knew it wasn't mine exactly, I wasn't so delusional as to call an entire public park mine and mine alone. But when it rained or when the wind blew nobody else but I braved the weather to come for a visit. In that sense, I felt somewhat justified in imagining the park to be something dear to me and me to it. But now?

Birds sang and butterflies danced the ditz. Farther off, children's laughter rang, the creaking of ageing playground equipment echoing underneath. Parents lolled against tree trunks and sat on picnic blankets; some even had radios. I listened closely for the local forecast...

Ah. Drat. They'd gone and said it. Sunny and warm all week with only a five percent chance of rain on Friday.

What joy the news seemed to bring.

I was the only one frowning as far as I could tell. I was alone, sitting on a stone bench encircling the girth of an ancient Cherry Blossom, its blooms spent, boughs full of frilled foliage. I alone sat in the shade, not because I wanted to be alone or because I was singular in my thought that it was already too hot, but because of—

'It's your hair, isn't it?' a woman said, sitting down next to me.

'Huh?'

'It's your hair, right?' the woman repeated, crossing her arms. She nodded at the top of my head. 'Those two giant curls. It's like you have ram horns sprouting out of your forehead!' She laughed long and ludicrous. 'What a sight you are!'

Me? Who was this woman? Who was she to say such things?

My mind was thrown into a whirl. A strange curdling erupted in my gut; a giddy, bubbling anxiousness, like the excitement you get when finally reaching a long-awaited destination. Or when your excrement is banging on the door, begging to be dumped.

I should have moved, right? I should have flinched, right? This woman—this obnoxious stranger—had plunked herself down right next to me and unleashed a flurry of out-of-the-blue banter,

but I hadn't so much as jumped. At the very least I should have been taken aback by her sudden appearance, or her appearance in general.

She was a startling beauty with long, crimson red hair; dressed to kill in a luxurious black suit that fit her body oh too well. She wore polished ice-black high heels and a pair of overlarge and over-reflective aviators, perhaps to shield her eyes from her megawatt smile. She looked like she'd fallen out of a Hollywood stage set, but her presence was far too down to earth for her to be famous. The air about her was far too stormy and gloomy, even with her outer cheer. But it almost seemed to be because of that outer cheer that everything was gloomy; like she was sucking all the life out of the universe around her.

'I know what you're thinking,' she said, popping a knuckle with her thumb. 'You're thinking: "Who is this chick? Why'd she sit down next to me and start up a conversation out-of-the-blue?"'

I was impressed she got one part right.

'No,' I said, clenching my jaw a little. 'I was wondering why everything around you looks so melancholy.'

Woah. Where was I getting the nerve to talk to a stranger like this? But the more I let the feeling sit, the more I felt like I knew her from somewhere.

'Well, I'll tell you.' The woman continued on speaking as if I hadn't made an interjection. 'The truth is, distance is relative.'

'Huh?'

'I'm sitting close to you? You'd change your mind if I pressed my body into yours, right? Then you'd be thinking: "why can't this crazy chick just sit next to me like a regular person?" right?'

'Uh, well. Okay. Granted. But even then. You still randomly started talking to me out-of-the-blue.' Don't forget the one thing you got right, lady! 'Strangers don't talk to strangers, even if they tolerate them being in the area.' I gestured about at all the laughing children and lounging adults. 'All these people are all keeping the proper distance, don'cha think?'

'Ah.' The woman snapper her fingers. 'That's natural, sure. But it's also natural for me to talk with you. We're not strangers.'

'We aren't?' So, I have met her somewhere.

'Of course.' The woman leaned in a little closer to me. 'One Devil knows another. That's only natural, wouldn't you agree?'

'Devil?'

'Uh-huh.' The woman nodded. 'You're, The Devil.'

II.

The woman had been correct: It's my hair. I've always known there was something odd in me, but outwardly, it's my hair. No matter what I do, no matter how I style it, cut it, or twist it, two great curls of hair spring from my forehead like ram's horns. They grow long and full.

Of course, people aren't going to be nice to you when you look like that. I wouldn't say I'm a pariah, but I'm always put on the spot. Everyone thinks I do my hair up like this on purpose, they would never think it was my hair's natural shape. Therefore, everyone thinks I'm putting on airs; that I'm funny in the head.

'The Devil, huh?' Makes sense. I sighed a lament and leaned back into the tree. 'So, what? I'm like Damien in *The Omen*?'

'Sorry.' The woman held up a hand. 'I don't like horror movies.'

'Hrmm.' I ripped a piece of dried skin off my lip. 'Hellboy?'

The woman shook her head. 'Sorry, sorry. I'm far too busy to get to the cinema.'

'Okay.' I sucked up my humor and gave up on trying to find a convenient comparison. 'If I'm *The Devil*, why don't I have cloven feet or something? Or, like, you know, evil impulses to fight against?'

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'Hmm.' The woman put a finger to her chin in thought. 'Hm-m. I think you have a few misconceptions. How to explain...'

'You could just go away?'

'No good. No can do.' The woman flashed me her megawatt grin. 'Because I'm *The-Devil-Who-Finds-Other-Devils*.'

'Huh?' I raised an eyebrow. 'You mean I'm not *The Devil*?'

'No. You are.'

'Then there can't be more than one of me. I think you mean *a* devil, no?'

'No. I mean *The*. There are many of *The Devil*. We are all *The Devil* of something, but most of us don't have the time or can't be bothered to say our full name—except for introductions like these of course—so we usually all just go collectively as: "*The Devil*.'" The woman shrugged. 'It's simpler that way.'

'In what way is any of this simplifying?'

'Anyway.' The woman waved me off with a hell of a lot of nonchalance. 'Any Devil will know another Devil on sight, but they might not know what it is they're feeling. That's where I come in.' She jabbed a thumb into her ample bosom. 'I know all there is to know about us Devils.'

Therefore, I'm The-Devil-Who-Finds-Other-Devils...and names them. I'm sure you felt it when I sat down, you just didn't have a word for it. But you thought: "this lady, she seems familiar for some reason." Something like that, right? Am I right?

'You're right,' I begrudgingly agreed.

'The word you were looking for was *Kindred Spirit*, by the way.'

'Hm.' I mulled the idea over. 'Do we get superpowers?'

'Stupid question. Of course not.'

'Drat.' I hung my head. 'Then what's a Devil good for then?'

'Good?' The woman snickered and took off her overlarge aviators. 'We are good for NOTHING.' Her eyes were like blackholes, burning irises spiraling into nothingness—into the oblivion in her pupils. 'That's what makes us Devils. We can't put on masks.' She put her aviators back on. 'That's all there is to it.'

'Masks?'

'The human face is a mask. Every expression—every movement. All of it, a mask. Ask yourself, The-Devil-With-Hair-Like-Horns, why have you never thought of shaving your head?'

'Why? Well, what good would it do?' I pointed at my hair. 'They'd just grow back.'

'You could shave your head every day,' the woman insisted. 'Become a monk.'

'I...I...' I couldn't find the humility to tell her that the idea repulsed me; that as soon as she'd said the words, the mere thought of it had made me want to retch.

'That's what I thought.' The woman stood and shot me a pair of finger guns. 'Now. Rejoice, and go forth.'

'Go forth? W-wait! What...' I took a gulp of air. 'What, uh—what should I do?'

She shrugged. 'Just be you and watch the world burn.'

'Are we Devils the reason the world is burning?'

'What? No.' She sneered down at me. 'You're a thick one, aren't you? Haven't you been listening? You don't need to do anything. In fact, it's in your nature not to. All the Humans and all the Angels who don't do anything are the issue. The ones who could affect change—Humans; the one who should affect change—Angels; most have all become so useless. It's a shame, really.' A wistful look snuck onto the woman's face.

'Those were the days, you know? Having a proper back and forth, obvious good versus oblivious evil, being blamed for every famine, earthquake, and tsunami... Mm. Thank you kindly, The-

Devil-With-Hair-Like-Horns.' She pushed her aviators back up higher onto the bridge of her nose and smiled down at me. 'I had a nice reverie because of you.'

'Uh, sure?'

'Anyway. Until next time.' The woman snapped her fingers, and vanished in a blast of brimstone.

III.

I didn't see The-Devil-Who-Finds-Other-Devils until a week later. I was shopping at the York-Benimaru near my park where we had chatted, and had just put a sushi sampler in my cart when—

'Uwff!'

An old man slipped and fell, banging his head on the polished tiles as he did.

A Human near him yelped in surprise, and a few Angels rushed over to help.

'Ouch. That looked like it hurt,' someone whispered in my ear.

I recognized *her* voice right away.



The-Devil-Who-Finds-Other-Devils slid her arms around my neck and set her chin on top of my head so she was peering out at the world through my hair like horns.

'Hu-hey!' I could *hear* her megawatt grin. 'I could get used to this view!'

And had she been this tall the last time? I couldn't recall.

'Long time, no see,' she said, holding me tight. 'Been up to nothing at all I hope?'

'Yup.' I nodded. 'Nothing new. Nothing old. Nothing going on.'

She'd done it again, snuck up on me. And as with the previous week, my reaction was underwhelming, even to me.

I wasn't surprised.

I wasn't angry.

I wasn't even aroused (even though this time she was pressing herself into me, not merely making a point that she could).

My heart just kept on beating the doldrums.

'Poor old guy,' the Devilish woman purred, running her fingers up and down my chest. 'Looks like he's bleeding. Should we go help him?'

'Honestly? The thought hadn't occurred to me.'

'Yep.' She laughed. 'If it ever does, be careful. You might end up becoming Human—or God forbid, an Angel.'

'You can change factions?' I questioned, nosing my cart in the direction opposite the scene. Oddly, The-Devil-Who-Finds-Other-Devils didn't weigh as much as I was expecting, as if I was only lugging the upper half of her around.

The image made me chuckle.

'Of course you can,' she confirmed, knocking over a box of cookies into my cart as I went up the snack aisle. 'But only in one direction. Once you start giving a shit or feeling the need to give one, it's a very slippery slope. Expectations can build towers to heaven, you know?'

I didn't. But I kept quiet. It seemed she had visited for a reason—or that a reason had occurred, depending on how you looked at it.

'Anyway. Once you start feeling the expectation or noticing it, there's no way not to. An Angel can become a Human, and a Human can become an Angel, but there's no falling down farther, no matter what any one of them say. "You'll burn in Hell" is just cheap lip service; it's just good people trying to rid themselves of guilt that they can't get rid of.'

She knocked a box of crackers into my cart, too. 'Imagine a box of puppies, sitting out in the rain. If you see the box, you can't unsee it. Only The Devil, who never gave a shit to begin with, can walk by a scene like that without feeling anything. Go ahead and be as tough as you want—even if you don't do anything, if you're Human, it will eat at you, if you're an Angel, it will kill you. So, if you really think about it, you should be happy you were born The-Devil-With-Hair-Like-Horns. You drew the lucky straw. You could have been a do-gooder, a real hero, a busybody societal type.'

'Yuck.' I stuck out my tongue.

'Amen.' The-Devil-Who-Finds-Other-Devils laughed—and knocked a rather expensive bottle of alcohol into my cart.

'Hey! You aren't expecting me to pay for that, are you?'

'Of course I am. What's mine is yours; what's yours is mine. Money included. We're both The Devil, after all.'

'Now you're just being irritable with words.'

'Did you mean irrational?'

'That too.' I put the bottle back on the shelf. 'But I did mean irritable. You're rubbing me the wrong way, talking like that.'

'Oh?' The Woman reached down and twisted my nipple, her breath tickling my ear when she spoke. 'And what's the right way to rub you?'

'That way, I suppose.'

'So honest! Who says The Devil is a liar?'

'I just don't care.'

'Same thing. As I said. So very honest.'

'Hmm.' I pondered the idea as The-Devil-Who-Finds-Other-Devils settled back down and resumed her previous pose: arms wrapped around my neck, chin set on the top of my head. 'You have a fair point. It seems to me, honesty, is actually what everyone hates.'

'Right?' the woman agreed right away. 'Now you're catching on. Most don't mind a little truth, as long as it's slathered in distraction. They don't mind as long as it's made innocuous. "Rainy today." "I've been busy." "You look good." Ha!' The woman cackled. 'That last one is my favorite. I mean, you look good? Good relative to what? And does that mean that they looked bad before? Nobody wants to pay attention anymore, not when the details are so damning.'

'Is that something Devils do, too? Pay attention to the stuff everyone else wants to skip over?' I asked even though I was already somewhat aware of the answer.

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'Of course.' The woman preened my hair, her nails numbing my brain as she dragged them across my scalp. 'That's the saying, right? The Devil is in the details. It's not that Angels or Humans can't notice or won't notice, it's just that Devils are so much better at it... After all, you noticed before everybody else, didn't you?'

'Yup.' I nodded. 'I knew the floor was wet—'

'But you didn't say a thing.'

'Well, it wasn't like I spilled the water. And there was no guarantee that anybody was going to slip in it.'

'Well said! That's the lack of spirit I'm talking about! With an attitude like that, nothing will ever change! How wonderful! Keep it up, my dear The-Devil-with-Hair-Like-Horns, and we'll make The Devil out of you yet.' The woman kissed me on the cheek and—

Snap!

'...'

All alone again, the stench of brimstone burning in my nostrils, I rolled my cart up to the register, and started counting out my cash.





the tea snail
Niki McQueen

fair enough

David Clémenceau

Every family creates its own myth.

Prelude

Sunday afternoons were the worst to Aaron. The culmination of yet another week spent dodging rules and reprimands between school and the consistent yet permeable dictatorship of his widowed, working and constantly worried mother. School wasn't Aaron's strong suit. Nor did he like learning, doing his homework or having to answer to his teachers. Twelve-year-old Aaron cared more about roaming the neighbourhood with his friends, shooting pellet guns and playing with fire.

His unwillingness to follow rules resulted in a number of phone calls between his teachers and his mother, almost every week. There were hardly ever two weeks without a call. And when Anne came home in the evening, she often interrogated her son about his day. She always gave him the possibility to come clean before she let the hammer fall. But usually the boy wouldn't. Around dinner she would conversationally say, "Tell me about your day," and Aaron would lead her through it, step by step, mindful to keep every critical bit out. In the end, he would get grounded, be deprived of TV and video game privileges, or made to do more chores. Or all of the above.

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Over time, Anne became so desperate with her son she introduced him to the prospect of living in a Catholic boarding school. There, she explained, the friars could worry about his education. From a cousin, who had spent most of his teens in a Jesuit school, Aaron knew living with the friars wasn't all compassion and understanding. But he also knew these were empty threats. His mother couldn't possibly work more than she already did to pull the tuition fees. She was also painfully aware that Aaron missed his father who had passed away two years earlier.

When she was at her wit's end, Anne decided, one Sunday afternoon, her son would have to go for a walk with his mother, as part of his punishment for misbehaving in class and lying about it again. Of course, she knew it would mean torture for her boy. At the same time, she hoped for any vague benefit, like honing Aaron's argumentative skills. However, she had to believe some good would come from these walk-and-talks, because she always felt wretched afterwards.

Like most of the following ones, that first compulsory walk turned out to be an excruciatingly long and torturous trial, during which Aaron had to skilfully avoid compromising himself while his mother punctured his narrative with targeted questions. Naturally, she already knew all the answers. At best, he would have to listen to an endless sermon about the virtues of telling the truth and could choose his punishment. When he felt particularly resigned, he would come clean right from the start, as a shortcut through the whole cat-and-mouse process.

On weeks without any calls from school, Anne checked on her son's progress in his subjects. And on some Sunday afternoons, they actually talked to each other. Considering that the boy spent a lot of time on the defensive, always looking for the right answer, those conversations seemed rather more agreeable to him. He would still have preferred spending the afternoon with his friends, though.

Years later, Aaron came to understand that during that time his mother, too, had been missing Aaron's father dearly. On some of the better Sundays, she talked about him; how they met, their first travels together, their parents and families, their experiences and some of their misfortunes. Little Aaron always felt the absence – a visceral sense of longing for what could have been – and it hurt. Beyond the grief, there was also an unsatisfiable curiosity as to what his dad would have said about one story or another.

Since he hadn't really known his father, Aaron always listened with great attention to detail. When he noticed variations in a story he'd already heard, he would ask questions to which Anne always seemed to have an answer. He even got the impression that there were variations, details which hadn't been there before, each time his mother told one of the many stories about Fred. But the boy didn't want his mother to think he didn't believe her. So, he decided all the stories, with all their variations, were part of the same truth.

I-Ladies' Man

Fred was a ladies' man. He had always been one, without ever understanding why or how he did it. It just worked out for him with the ladies and he was quite content about it. To him, it was comforting to know that he was very likely to get what – or rather who – he wanted without almost any effort. He was kind and gently disposed towards everybody and didn't talk or think badly of others. His general attitude in life was that if he kept a positive mind-set, nothing could go wrong. This, too, usually worked out for him.

The youngest of four children, Fred grew up on a farm in the south German village of Stettringen. There, near the Rhine river and close to the French and Swiss borders, the country was rolling with corn and wheat fields and specked with romantic little woods through which gently singing creeks ran. It was a sun-bathed place where people lived a simple and hard-working life, far from the excitement and restlessness of the cities.

Fred's father, Albus, had learnt to farm the land with his father on the family's Black Forest domain and Albus, in turn, built his existence in the Rhine valley for more land and commercial outlets. Fred's mother, Liese, was an educated woman, unlike her husband. His elder sister, Alexandra, was their parents' favourite child. Then came Herbert, his father's favourite and heir to the estate. Shortly after came Synthia.

A patriarch in every respect, Albus was harsh on all his children but especially so on Fred. To the end, no one ever knew why. When Liese tried to talk to her husband about his unequal treatment of their youngest son – in truth, Fred was her favourite child – he burst into a fury, shouting and rampaging through the house while their children listened terrified in their beds.

Albus' undisputed authority guaranteed the three first-borns a mostly carefree childhood while, over time, Fred became used to working every morning before school. Even though he saw the injustice in his father's ruling, he had to admit the cows wouldn't milk themselves and the pigsty had to be cleared by someone. He grew to be strong and handsome and stole away as much carefree time of his own whenever he could.

Once, when Fred was eleven years old, he and Gunther, a classmate of his, took turns playing William Tell with a primitive and ineffective bow and arrow made of twigs and some string. For each turn, one of the boys stood completely still with an apple on his head while the other tried to hit it from a distance. They enjoyed the hit-and-miss game until, at one point, it was Fred's turn again to be the archer, and he missed the apple.

Luckily, the arrow didn't have any real pointy end and, even more so, Gunther had closed his eyes just in time before it struck. Terribly sorry and embarrassed, young Fred had walked his crying friend home and stayed with him at the hospital, where Gunther's mum had taken them. Eventually, a blue-eyed, rosy-faced senior physician with a moustache assured them Gunther would be all right.

The story of how Fred shot an arrow into his friend's eye had the entire village roaring with laughter for weeks. But even though people would make fun of him, he never resented anyone; not even his father, who tormented him during all these years. However, the boy grew increasingly frustrated with Albus's authoritarianism. Fred felt that he couldn't take it much longer and began to think there must be more to life.

During the summer months, there would be parties at the farm on Saturday nights with barbecues, beer-tables and long wooden benches where everyone would sit side by side. They were usually well attended with people from Stettringen but also from the surrounding villages. On one such occasion, when Fred was fifteen, a young woman, who had her horse stalled in the family stables, found him to her liking. They talked and, after lots of meat and beer, went for a walk in the meadow. After that night, a reputation as a good shot preceded him.

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By the time Fred lost his virginity, he had grown fed up with the farm-school combination. At sixteen, he quit school to work as a full-time farmhand, which earned him a small salary. Proud of earning his own money, Fred began to dream of independence.

Two years later, being legally an adult and having a driver's licence opened up even more perspectives, while his interest for televised-entertainment fed his fantasies of a better life – one that consisted of a decent job, a wife, a house and a dog. To him, that would be a good life.

Eventually, his father's uninterrupted tyranny led Fred to consider leaving the farm life altogether and to find a job of his own. His mother pleaded with him to stay, and if he did, it was solely because he didn't want to break her heart. But he quit with Albus.

A friend of his father's needed a short-distance lorry driver for his logistics company. The young man welcomed the opportunity and was glad to accept the offer. Fred was excited to go beyond the edges of his cradle and finally see something new. But right from the start, he felt a profound distrust of his new boss. Despite the man's overall jovial demeanour, Fred found him unnatural and always thought his eyes had a calculating coldness to them, almost reptilian, which he'd never quite seen in a person before.

That same year, one of his romantic encounters became pregnant. Fred was never particularly concerned about STD's or contraception, up until then. He was going to have to deal with the consequences of not worrying about unwanted pregnancy, regardless.

Pressure from both families cast nineteen-year-old Fred, now the father of a baby girl, into his first marriage. He moved in with his wife at her parents' place in a small town near Stettringen. A second daughter followed a year later. Four years later, he'd grown fed up with taking care of his two daughters almost single-handedly, while his wife spent the nights and weekends out enjoying herself. That wasn't what the young man had hoped for. He asked for a divorce.

After moving back in with his parents, he began to work in a tapestry factory which had recently been established in the region. His reputation as a good shot remained intact but, despite his undiminished success with women, Fred had lost interest in any even remotely serious relationship and he also began using condoms – for health and alimony reasons. Then, on another summer-night's party at his parents' farm, he met Anne.

II-When Fred met Anne

Anne was from France. She'd lived with her parents in a southern workers' town until the age of eighteen when she left home for Paris. There she enjoyed the freedom and excitement that came with youth and living in the city of love in the late 1960's – far from her parents' abusive rules which had governed her life until then. She worked in a chocolate factory and rented a tiny dump of a flat in Belleville which was all she could afford. But at least she was free.

At twenty years of age, Anne met a man from a faded Prussian noble family with whom she fell passionately in love. They got married in a fever and Anne moved to Germany where her husband made her a sales supervisor in his logistics company.

In their honeymoon phase, he was the perfect gentleman: well-spoken, versed in several languages, educated and with a decent bedside manner. He was kind, considerate and generous, took her to fine restaurants, bought her jewellery and turned up unexpectedly with flowers and presents. But within six months her husband, older than her by twelve years, turned out to be a misogynistic alcoholic in love with his own mother.

Although Fred would, in all likelihood, never meet the man to know his version of events, he sympathized deeply with Anne and listened with sincere interest to the dreadful accounts of her previous life. When she showed him some wedding photos once, Fred had a déjà vu but couldn't determine why her ex-husband's face struck him as eerily familiar.

After her shock of realizing the man she loved wasn't who he pretended to be, Anne wanted to believe this wasn't his true nature. If she was just patient enough, he would revert to the person she'd met and fallen in love with.

During the ten years they were married, she learned that she could be the submissive housewife her husband needed her to be. But she also discovered that she could get the affection and relief she needed from other men. Her husband's severe alcoholism and subsequent abuse also led her to a handful of half-hearted attempts on his life, none of which succeeded. They divorced eventually when Anne was thirty. She had had enough of her first marriage, with no inclination to ever marry again.

That night in Stettringen, Anne happened to be sitting right next to Fred, although she talked mainly to her redhead J. Rabbit type neighbour with whom she had come to the party. Both women were into horseback riding and ignored the young man, who bore a strong likeness to Frank Zappa, the entire night. But from the very first moment he saw the sunny, 32-year-old, blond *mademoiselle* with the French accent when she spoke German, he knew something was different. He'd never been in love before.

To show his fancy in the somewhat crude manner that was his own, he got unreasonably drunk, ate like a pig and burned her arm with a cigarette. The overwhelming intensity of his feelings, however, made it nearly impossible for him to actually talk to her.

When she and her friend wanted to leave, he caught up with them and asked if she would like to sleep with him. She declined curtly and set out to climb into her car. This unexpected rejection gave Fred some pause. But once his conscious mind had managed to wade through the swamp of confusion and alcohol, back to the front stage of his perception, he asked if she would marry him instead. When Anne declined again, she added that she'd reconsider sleeping with him if he lost the horseshoe moustache and the shoulder-long hair.

His inebriated mind registered this as an invitation to grace her with a juicy, beer-laden kiss on the mouth. She pushed back in disgust and slapped him in the face while he gawped at her empty-headed like a certified imbecile.

Fred watched them roll out of the driveway and stood there long after they had disappeared, gazing asininely into the darkness until he decided it was time to stagger back to his room. There, he dropped on to his bed, rolled off it and landed on the floor where he slept satisfied until the next morning.

The following week, he got Anne's address from her friend and drove up to her place on a Friday after work. He came unannounced, clean-shaven, with a short haircut and flowers. She was touched by his adolescent determination and she was, in fact, quite happy to see him again. They spent the weekend together.

For one year, Fred would drive three hundred miles every Friday to spend the weekend with Anne. She loved to travel and he hadn't seen much of the world, so they decided to go on holiday together. With her, Fred enjoyed discovering new places and seeing new things. She, in turn, enjoyed buying him fancy clothes and taking him to sophisticated restaurants and hotels. Young and inexperienced as he was in the mundane pleasures of the world, he learned to enjoy wearing brand jeans and shirts, smart ties and jackets and Italian leather shoes.

Anne became pregnant during a luxury trip to Gran Canaria, one year later, and when she gave birth to a boy, they named him Aaron. The year after Aaron was born, they married for the second time.

Albus gave his son a piece of land on the outskirts of Stettringen to build a house on. Perhaps he was trying to make up for lost time and affection, perhaps he wanted his grandson to grow up in a decent place and close-by. Anne encouraged Fred to attend evening classes in order to finish his A-levels, so that he could apply for jobs with more perspective. He even went on

for two more years, studying business management and taking additional lessons in English and French while his wife took care of their baby boy.

Fred was hired by a medium size retail and logistics company where he was offered a position as regional manager. This was it. He had a wife he loved and who loved him, a healthy son, a house, a company car, a great job and money. They even bought a dachshund (the largest pet Anne would agree to) from a Black Forest breeder. By the age of thirty-two, Fred had it all. He had it all and a twenty-year-old busty redhead secretary.

III-Hotel

Seven years later, Fred was with Barbara at a five-star-hotel on the French Riviera, with the Mediterranean right off the balcony. He had sold the whole idea to his wife as a business trip, without specifying his young and beautiful secretary would be a part of it. Anne probably knew it was bogus. She'd known about his unfaithfulness for some time. There was just the hint of suspicion in the beginning but, over the months, Fred got sloppy and overlooked details. Anne couldn't have helped but notice another woman's perfume on her husband's clothes. But what was she to do? Aaron was eight and she didn't want to break up their marriage now. Not now. Surely, there would be time to fix things, wouldn't there?

The couple arrived in Fréjus on Monday night and were scheduled to stay until Saturday morning. On Tuesday, after abundant intercourse and breakfast in a king-size bed, Fred wanted to call room service for the day's issue of *Die Zeit*, his go-to newspaper. As he pressed the button, the line appeared to be dead. This struck him as odd for such a fine venue, so, he put on his pants and t-shirt and went down to the lobby to report it.

When the elevator doors chimed open, Fred didn't notice how quiet everything was. The sound of his bare feet's slap against the cold marble echoed in the vast hall as he marched purposefully to the reception, past several tasteful and comfortable-looking couches and armchairs. There wasn't anybody around. He leaned over the counter to peer in the backroom for possible staff, but he didn't see or hear anyone.

Suddenly he felt as if he'd been left out of something, like a fire drill and he and Barbara were the only ones in the hotel who hadn't been informed. However unlikely this was, there was a growing sense of uncertainty forming in his gut.

"Um, hello-o," he said into the silence, waiting for a response. Everything remained very quiet. Nothing moved. Then he considered the bell which provided a serviceable ding and still nothing happened. He wondered whether he should climb behind the counter to see if he could find anyone in the offices. That didn't seem right, though, and he dismissed the idea, preferring to be patient instead.

He shifted to lean with his back against the counter and looked around. Until then, he hadn't been aware of being completely alone. No hotel staff, no clients, no porters, no passers-by outside the hotel. There wasn't a single soul in sight and Fred began to question whether he

was actually awake or somehow still asleep and dreaming. He glanced at the newspaper-stand right next to the reception. It was empty.

After a minute or two, he resolved to return to his room, somewhat disappointed. For the first time since he picked up the telephone in his room, Fred felt frustrated.

He reassured himself his room would still be the way he left it. Maybe he and Barbara could have another round, he mused, when he tripped over an object that filled the lifeless hall with a wooden clatter as it fell on the ground. He immediately fetched it up and handed the walking cane to the only other person around.

It was an elderly man with short white hair, a neatly trimmed moustache and a remarkable jawline. He was sitting in one of the red velvet couches. Small, Arctic blue eyes watched Fred like a cat watches scuttling in a dark corner. In his marine-cobalt striped suit and fitting Panama, the newcomer looked like a retired gangster boss straight from 1930s Chicago with a chummy air about him. How long had he been there, Fred wondered. Could it be that he simply didn't notice him earlier?

"Thank you," the stranger stated in a warm and impeccably articulate baritone voice. Something about his features reminded Fred of an old Max von Sydow.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't see you there," Fred said apologetically.

"Forget it. I should have been more careful with my cane and you have spared me the trouble of bending my old bones to pick it up again." His smile displayed a set of impressive canines in an array of shining white teeth.

"So, what can I do for you?"

Fred frowned. "What do you mean?"

"Weren't you looking for something?"

It was only then Fred noted the newspaper, neatly folded over one knee with a wrinkled hand resting on it. This time he was almost certain. It hadn't been there before, yet now it was.

"I was," he replied suspiciously. "But it seems there aren't any newspapers left. How did you know?"

The man ignored the question, though he kept staring at Fred expectantly, as if he were waiting for his interlocutor to provide a solution to the problem at hand. Meanwhile, Fred's eyes fixated on the newspaper. It was the day's issue of *Die Zeit*.

He hesitated. "Never mind. I'll probably just get one in town later."

"Yes, I see. I must have been lucky to get one of my own. Found it on the landing this morning, right in front of my room. I would be happy to give it to you," the stranger offered obligingly, while the object remained in his possession. Something about the situation made Fred uncomfortable.

“Say, do we know each other? I don’t remember you but I get the feeling you seem to know me.”

“Well, I do, indeed, although you probably don’t know me. Please, let me introduce myself: Maximilian Pryce, man of will and taste. My friends call me Max. You can call me Max.”

“All right, Max. How do you know me?”

Pryce was visibly pleased. His eyes sparkled with satisfaction. He took a deep breath and spoke as he exhaled. “Because, my dear Freddy, I know a lot of things.”

IV-Chlorine

Maximillian Pryce chuckled at the young man’s expression which spelled utter disbelief. With a sign of his head he indicated one of the armchairs.

“Perhaps you should sit down.”

Fred was conflicted. He was torn between his wish to leave then and there and his curiosity. He didn’t have any desire to talk to him anymore than he’d already done. At the same time, there was an irresistible attraction which got him genuinely intrigued. Pryce saw him hesitate and knew he had his attention. Just one more little push.

“For instance,” he continued insidiously, “I know the young woman with whom you are currently sharing a room is not your wife.”

“Uh, wait. How do you know that?” Fred searched for the nearest armchair, pulled it up and sat down uneasily.

“You must know, son, my interest lies in people. I am a people person, if you will. For that, I get around a lot and I noticed you quite a while ago.”

“Oh, really? Why?”

“Well, Freddy, as far as people go, you are an interesting person. Your story isn’t ground-breaking, mind you, but interesting. So, I followed you.”

“What are you saying? Since when,” Fred said indignantly. The queasy sensation in his stomach intensified with each passing minute. He realized on the fringes of his consciousness old Pryce was the cause of it. His realization was so remote, though, Fred was unable to fully grasp its magnitude. Instead, his mind fleetingly observed that it was now impossible for him to break free of Pryce’s influence.

“Don’t be upset, now. Let me try your patience just a little longer. You’re not exactly a good person. Not a bad one either, but not a good one. By general consensus, you are a nice fellow to be around, especially with women.”

The young man listened uneasily.

“The thing is, you have been kind to a lot of people – but not so much to your wife.” He paused. “Or to your son.”

The last words shook Fred to the core. His son, Aaron, was ill. He had been admitted to the hospital a week before and diagnosed with a degenerative sinus infection caused by a common chlorine allergy. The boy had been swimming with his friends at the public pool a few days before. Now he was in a coma and his doctors couldn't figure out why he wasn't getting better.

Fred cared deeply about his son, as he did about his two daughters. But they were taken care of. He had been trying to convince himself that modern medicine would soon find what was wrong with Aaron and make him well again. He had also been trying to justify his absence with the break he so badly needed from Anne. And there really wasn't anything else he could do. So, he had fled to the French Riviera – with his secretary – leaving his son and betraying his wife, to gather strength for what lay ahead. He felt confident he could make things right again, at some point.

He was painfully aware, nevertheless, that his self-justifications were nothing more than a card house of excuses for his desertion, for his weakness. He knew it was a precarious construct because, now and then, his conscience nagged at him. Helpless Fred realized old man Pryce was about to set it on fire.

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A moth flapped unsteadily through the vastness of the silent space. It ascended on a wobbly trajectory towards the ceiling where it began to draw obsessively chaotic circles around a light bulb; the heat singing its wings with each contact. The insect managed just enough momentum to be pulled, irresistibly, helplessly, against the light source anew. There was a distinct sound each time it connected with the incandescent glass. Tink. Tink-tink.

Fred mustered a feeble attempt at resisting the trance-like stasis Pryce had cast upon him. “You know, Max, I don't really care how you know all this about me. But you're obviously trying to tell me something and I'd like to know now what it is. What are you driving at?”

The old man's grin radiated smug superiority. He became so excited he almost forgot to bridle his eagerness. He wet his lips. “Your son is very ill, yes,” he said with malignant glee.

A chill ran up Fred's spine. His throat was suddenly clogged up by a fat, sticky lump impossible to swallow. The man's wide-open eyes made his skin crawl. Fred struggled to speak, hoarsely, barely audible. “He is.”

“The doctors who are treating him have never seen a case like his before?”

“Yes.”

“He is going to die within a month's time,” Pryce then remarked blandly.

A sickening overwhelming sensation made Fred's stomach churn in anguish, threatening to overtake his senses completely. The thought of losing his son was unbearable. He was trembling with fear while tears welled up in his eyes, about to break down and cry.

“What would you say if I told you how you can save him?”

“How – I can save him?”

Maximilian Pryce folded his hands on his knee as he explained in a low, professional tone of voice that usually people had to give up their soul in such cases. His words sank into the young man like fangs into a fresh kill. “But you must understand, Freddy, that your soul, pretty as it may be, won’t be enough for this.”

V-Aftermath

The next day, Aaron woke from his coma. His doctors were at a loss as to his regaining consciousness. His recovery was uncommonly fast. His sinuses healed within days and one week after he came to, he was discharged from the hospital. They told Anne to make sure Aaron received as much rest as possible for the next two weeks and to bring him back immediately if she noticed anything unusual in her son.

When Anne and Aaron arrived home that day, they heard the phone ring through the front door. She hurried inside to pick up the call. Aaron found his mother in the living-room, standing between the couch and the coffee table. She was holding the receiver absently nowhere near her head. Her face was livid. The person at the other end of the line was calling from France to tell her that her husband had collapsed and been brought to Fréjus Central Hospital. There was no diagnosis, so far, but they wanted to run a few tests and would contact her again the next day.

The following morning, the diagnosis was unequivocal. The CAT scan revealed a number of dark spots of various sizes in the lungs and other organs which left no doubt.

Fred had been into sports most of his life. He had played football since he was a teenager and later took to tennis, swimming and bodybuilding. He didn’t smoke and, after becoming a father for the first time, only drank occasionally. He observed a casual diet without excesses, slept reasonably, barely ever had sunburn – and now he had cancer.

After his transfer to a Hospital near Stettingen, Anne overheard his oncologist compare her husband’s CAT scan to a deer stuffed with buckshot. They gave him a couple of months to live. His case was hopeless. So, they tried everything, from chemo-therapy to radio-therapy to alternative medicine. Anne called miracle healers and charlatans, even a Catholic pastor, to work their magic. All to no avail.

He died eighteen months later in his sleep. His doctors couldn’t explain how he had survived so long or why he hadn’t had any problems before. According to them, he should have been dead by the time they brought him in. He left behind an ex-wife, two daughters, a widow and a son. His secretary appeared to have vanished into thin air. No trace of her was ever found.

VI-About Time

Pryce said, “Very well. Then we need to seal our compact to make it binding. How would you like to do it?”

“You know, where I come from, we—”

“Yes, I know,” the old man broke in with an impish smile and winked.

Both men rose and each spat in their right hand. They reached out and shook.

“Oh, and there’s one other thing.”

“What is it?”

“In order for this to work properly, our little agreement has to remain our secret.”

“You know,” Fred said, “I can barely believe what just happened and I don’t see how anyone else could believe me if I told them. I know I wouldn’t.”

Pryce nodded, “Then it is settled.”

At once Fred regained control over his senses. It was as if everything had been there all along – the clients checking in and out; the receptionists at the desk; the porters with their luggage carts; the taxis and rental cars out front; the hubbub in the street; the peddler selling beach items, souvenirs and stuffed toys on the sidewalk; the sun shining in through the glass façade. The lobby was bustling with business and life around them while Fred stood barefoot with the old man.

Fred knew now he’d seen his face before. Knowledge came with the might of a velvet-wrapped canon ball as distinct memories suddenly surfaced from the jumble of experiences that constitute so much of one’s personality. He was the doctor who had treated Gunther’s wounded eye. He was his first boss and Anne’s first husband. The man had been with him all his life and Fred now realized it didn’t matter anymore. Everything Pryce had told him was true. And this was the last time they would meet.

When Fred turned to leave for the elevator, Pryce called, “Don’t forget your newspaper.”

His surprise was written all over Fred’s face. He’d forgotten all about the newspaper.

“There’s plenty of good news today.”

Post scriptum

By the time Aaron was in his thirties, he realized he had known his father for a little less than ten years. He couldn't really include the first few years in that time, when he was but a baby and an infant. What remained were a handful of years from which he could draw conscious recollections – memories which were real to him. But with each passing year, those recollections grew fewer and thinner.

Aaron decided memories were a bitch that way because he remembered loving his father dearly and cherished each memory of him like a treasure. Witnessing those treasures slowly fade into oblivion was distressing and made him feel helpless. He also realized he never knew what kind of person his father really was. There were still some memories and personal objects which he cherished like artefacts, with almost religious fervour. But inanimate objects and fading memories was all they were. Yet, there were Anne's stories.

As a teenager, he had silently dismissed some of them as mere tales. However, there were accounts Aaron had experienced first-hand and never forgotten about, because their memory was grafted on to a specific item. Thus, a plush toy leopard always reminded him of the time when Fred returned from a business trip to France and brought him the feline as a gift.

The memories kept fading and the artefacts grew fewer. The stories remained.

Many years later, during a visit to his aging mother in Stettingen, Aaron went for a walk through his childhood village. On the way, he passed a neighbour's house where an elderly couple was enjoying a balmy Sunday afternoon in their well-tended garden. The woman was reading lazily in a deckchair with her lavish red hair flowing from under a large brim hat. Her husband had been crouching behind some bushes near the fence when he looked up amicably.

"Hello, young man," he said pulling himself up until his eyes were level with Aaron's. He was tall and lean with a head full of white hair and a scar by his left eye.

Aaron said, "Hello. Lovely garden you have there."

"Indeed," the man said humbly while the corner of his moustache betrayed his pride. "We're quite happy with it, even though it is quite a bit of work keeping it nice."

Aaron remembered them. They were always in their garden provided the weather was fair enough. He would see them often during the Sunday walks with his mother. He even knew their name, though it didn't come back to him. "Well, I wish you a good afternoon," he said and was about to be on his way when the man continued.

"How is your mother?"

"She's well, thank you."

"Good. I knew your father, you know?"

Without any particular recollection of these people in connection to his father, Aaron did remember that everybody in the village used to know Fred. Therefore, he wasn't surprised someone would remember him or ask about his mother.

"Oh, really? How so?"

"Yes. It's a shame he had to die so young. We went to school together. Best pals. He must have told you about me."

"It was all a long time ago," Aaron said. "In fact, it's been so long since I've been here last, I don't remember most people's names anymore. I'm sorry, this is a little embarrassing. Ever since I got here, I've been trying to remember your name. I even tried to catch a glimpse of your mailbox while we were talking, but I can't read it from over here."

"That's alright, laddie," the man grinned.

*



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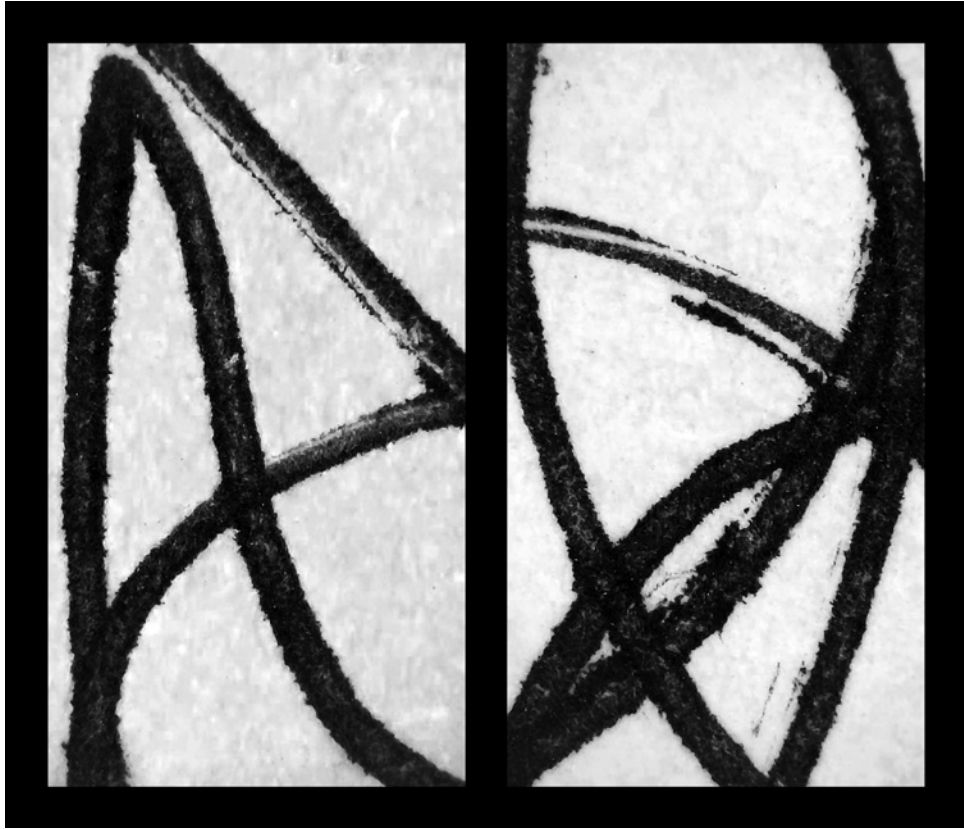
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mammoth and fox
Kimberly Kuchar



cat and fish
Kimberly Kuchar

a summer's story

Thomas Rowland

Much has written recently documenting the fallibility—that is, the veracity—of human memory. The point, of course, is not a minor one for writers of memoirs, who would like to assure their readers that their written material is “true.” As Sallie Tisdale has written “Our memory is both true and false, so must be our memoir....When I write from memory, am I writing a history or a story?” So be it. The wary reader can be confident, however, that he following “looking backwards” occurred just as recounted. I know this to be true.

This morning I'm sitting in an outdoor café up on route 9, enjoying the cool sunshine and, unusual for me, a second cup of coffee. Here I can think clearly, and, being alone, memories come flooding back more easily. I do this once in a while, just to clear away from my mind the ever-threatening cob webs. I'm musing today on the summer after I graduated from high school, working on the farms at Michigan State University to fill the months (and pocketbook) before heading off on my college adventure. My father, who was in the public relations department at MSU, helped me get this job, which consisted of working for a Donald Cation, a “fruit biologist,” out in the fields south of campus. Don had been on the faculty for probably 40 years, now an almost-retired curmudgeon--short in stature (he must have been no more than 5'6") but not in energy--who was tolerated by the other workers and their bosses out in the Quonset hut adjacent to the WDRZ radio tower.

My job was principally this: Around campus and in the surrounding area there were a good number of ornamental trees that bore what are called “mahaleb cherries.” I was employed to collect these cherries, whose seeds Don Cation wished to use for various purposes—as stock for growing other fruit trees and for some vague “research project” which was never really divulged. Now, the mahaleb tree is fairly tall, usually about 15 feet, and so the only way to obtain “them mahalebs” (as Don called them) was to beat the branches heavily-laden with the dark purple cherries with a long stick. This would cause the fruit to fall in showers on canvases that I laid out on the ground beneath the tree. Putting down my stick, I would gather up the canvases and deposit the fruit into large steel cans. At the end of the day I would deposit these in a refrigerated room in a small building on the south side of campus where Don had his office. I had at my disposal an official green MSU Chevy truck, with the school insignia on the side, and you could see me scooting around campus and the East Lansing surroundings every day when it wasn't raining to gather the precious fruit.

Initially that summer I worked alone, but soon I was joined by Vic and Geoff, two good friends who had both gone to Eaton Rapids High School together. These two, perhaps more than anything else, were what made the summer memorable, so I need to tell you a little bit about them. Both, I should start by saying, were rather crazy. They made the work fun—we would sing songs together, even dance with our “sticks.” When we would arrive at a tree, we would all shout out ceremoniously in unison, “GET THEM MAHALEBS!!” as we jumped out of the truck. I was a pretty strait-laced fellow, but these guys were all over the place, enjoying life. Unlike me, they didn't seem to feel a great responsibility for the work, and even on some days, when the boss was out of town, they would spend the afternoon at the MSU outdoor pool. I was always very uneasy about this, but sometimes I would tag along. These entertaining two

turned out to be my great friends, and we spent time together outside of work as well, playing tennis and double dating.

Even working with Vic and Geoff, this was pretty mindless work, and a good deal of time that summer was spent on my part daydreaming about a) girls and b) the upcoming Big Ten football season (the Spartans were the pre-season pick to take the conference championship that Fall). This would leave me little to reminisce or write about here, except there were four events that summer that, with your indulgence, I'd like to recount here. The first three might be considered at least interesting and memorable, but it was the fourth that has haunted me ever since.

1. Almost Toast

Every once in a while, we would take a farther excursion away from campus to gather them mahalebs. One day Geoff and I were asked to travel down to an orchard that the University owned in Harbor Springs, about an hour away. So we loaded the truck with canvases, sticks, and buckets and headed out one cloudy, muggy August morning. I was driving. Geoff had his feet propped up on the dashboard, smoking (which was expressly forbidden). We were about 10 miles away from Harbor Springs when some strange things began to happen. First, a couple of cars passing us in the opposite direction were sounding their horns. Then in another the driver of a convertible waved frantically. At this point, I felt the back of my neck getting warm, which didn't make any sense, since there was no sun shining.

I turned to look out the back window. Gads!! We were on fire! Flames had engulfed the entire bed of the truck. My immediate impressions were two. The first was a surrealist one: this sure looked like a Lions Club Sunday chicken barbecue. And, second, the only thing separating me from the conflagration behind was the gas tank. I panicked, yelled at Geoff. My first inclination, certainly a Darwinian survival one, was to get the hell out that burning truck before it exploded. So I opened the door and made ready to leap out. Something made me recognize, though, this wasn't going to work. We were going 60 miles an hour, and if I jumped a) I would almost certainly be killed, and b) Michigan State University would be out one green Chevy truck. So, I slammed on the brakes, and when we came to a stop both Geoff and I made a leap for it. At about that time, a fire truck from the local town arrived with sirens blaring and lights flashing. People stopped their cars to see just what these two idiots from their state institution of higher learning (as indicated proudly on the truck's doors) had done. So, the fire was put out, and there was no explosion, but the contents in the bed of truck were totally destroyed. Geoff and I flipped a coin to see who would call Don Cation to give him the news. I lost. When I recounted the events to him, he didn't say much. I can't remember if I told him the whole thing had probably been caused by Geoff flicking his cigarette ashes out the window. I know he must have been upset, and he certainly had a right to be. But at the same time I was disappointed that he had voiced no appreciation for my "sticking to the truck" in spite of the almost certainty of burning to death in order to save the MSU vehicle.

2. The Excursion

During my final week that summer Don Cation announced that he and I would be taking a two-day trip to a farm near Benton Harbor to "make some deliveries" of our mahalebs. We spent an hour or two loading all those cans of cherries which had accumulated in the

refrigerated room over the summer and headed out in the green truck. I learned a great deal on that trip.

I found out, for instance, that Don Cation liked to drink—a lot. At the restaurant on that first night he consumed a large quantity of whiskey (I believe it was) and turned into a garrulous drunk. His driving to the motel was erratic (I suppose I should have been alarmed), and he kept calling me David (which is not my name). I found out later that David was the student who had worked for him the previous summer. Fortunately, we survived the evening.

The next morning, when he was sober, he told me sadly of the encounter he had recently had with someone named Martha, who had been a classmate of his many years ago in high school. “Martha,” he said, with obvious pain, “told me that I was the only boy that she really had wanted to have sex with.” There was a far-away look in his eye. At that time I didn’t understand his angst. Today I do.

We later delivered our buckets of mahaleb cherries to a large fruit farming enterprise. There it was explained to me that the root stock from the cherry seeds would be used to support the growth of fruit trees whose own root system was inadequate to the task. I was entirely naïve at the time, but it was not difficult to suspect that Don Cation’s “research project” consisted of selling mahaleb berries to this private enterprise, with the profits landing in Don’s pockets. If so, I was an unknowing accomplice. Did the people at MSU know about this? Who knew? But, really, who cared? Certainly after all those years Don Cation had earned his due. So, as long as the football team was winning....

3. More Heroism, Unrecognized

That summer I was dating (more or less) a young lass named Mary Fran, who was the daughter of Professor Hooker, a renowned expert at MSU in potatoes. (I say this only for those who recognize his name as the greatest expert in the world, at least at that time, in all things potato—fries, au gratin, mashed, escalloped, etc.). Anyway, I was dating his daughter, whom I had met at a summer math course the year before. She was the prettiest girl in the class and was highly popular with all the boys. I had thought I had no chance, but there it was.

One night that summer, while my parents were away on a trip, Mary Fran and I were occupying the living room couch together, and it was there on July 24, 1952, precisely at 7:34 P.M., that I first experienced the touch of a naked female breast. (Obviously this event is engraved in my mind as a Truly Great Historical Moment.) So soft! It was immediately clear to me, for the first time, what sensuality meant, that there was an exquisite—call it ethereal—physical pleasure in sharing with another person such maneuvers that transcended simple lust.

The second half of this story was exciting, too, but in a far different way. Because as I was musing on the beauty of this experience, the sound of the opening of the garage door came to my ears. Uh-Oh! My parents had come home early! Panic! But remembering my Boy Scout training in “remaining calm at all costs,” I leaped to my feet. I threw Mary Fran her purse from across the room, and shoved her gently but quickly out the front door. “Walk around the block!” I whispered loudly “I’ll pick up you up.” So, as my parents came in the back door, I was closing the front door, and then “Wow! You came back early!” “Yes, the meeting was over, and we thought we get back quicker.” “Great. I was just on my way out to Jim Orsini’s house.

Be back in a couple of hours.” I rushed out and got in the car, circled the block, picked up a rather nervous Mary Fran on the other side, and took her home. No fireman who has ever successfully rescued a child from a burning building could ever have been as proud of himself as I was of my rapid thinking, life-saving heroics that night. There should be a medal awarded for such things.

4. A Sober Ending

A couple of months later, when I was enrolled in another university, Geoff called my on the dormitory phone to give me the sad news that Vic had died. It seems that, while working for the MSU grounds department, he was scaling the rafters in the ceiling of the indoor pool. There he tragically had slipped and then fallen 75 feet to this death, the pool unfortunately being empty of water. He had always been a devil-may-care risk-taker, so the event was not entirely surprising, but it hit me hard. I had never sensed death so closely.

To this day I wonder what went through Vic’s mind as he plummeted, maybe 4 or 5 seconds, through the air. Did his mind fill with horror as he saw the floor of the empty pool—and his fate—rushing up to meet him? Or, was it full of a divine sense of peace he had never experienced before, a quiet exhilaration, a release, an overwhelming sense of freedom. In my mind, knowing Victor, I would be willing to bet on the latter.

Today, once in a while I drive out by that Quonset hut south of campus. It’s still there, but the radio tower has come down. They still drive green Chevy trucks around campus. Of course, Don Cation is long gone. It is surprising to me that when I stop the car and think about all that went on there that summer, I don’t have any particular emotional feelings one way or the other. No nostalgia, no sadness, no feelings of happiness, no bitter-sweet thoughts. It was just something that happened. The times of our lives simply flow by. Time doesn’t care anything about football teams, girls’ breasts, drunken old men, or human death. It just travels on, indifferent.



150 Pleasant St., Easthampton, MA
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They say boiling water freezes faster than cold. It was 47 degrees inside the house when they found the body. The walls were covered in black mold, the floor caked with dirt, fecal matter, and filth. Rodent droppings littered the linoleum and carpet. The police had to turn sideways to enter through the miscellaneous items stacked on the walkway leading to the front door, the entryway, the bedroom, the bed. Dead rats were stacked up to scare off the live ones. The contents of a cream soup several months expired, festered in a pot on the front porch.

My dad had fallen with a broken hip and laid on the floor for three days wearing a soiled diaper and flannel shirt. There were bruises, scratches, and abrasions to his legs. His feet were discolored, his left foot covered in blisters that had popped and were seeping puss.

It felt like 47 degrees this morning when I woke. I knew the headlines before I picked up my phone. I sleep on the couch on nights when my brain is trying to kill me. Chelsea is already awake when I climb back into bed, my daughter's blonde curls on the pillow beside her. The dread of uncertainty becomes the dread of certainty. We silently agree to not talk about it in front of Maisie. We lie to her and tell her she can be anything she wants to be. She eats her mini pancakes, drinks her chocolate milk. She asks to watch Edelweiss on my phone while she drops a turd in her potty chair. "It's creaky because it's a witch," Maisie says of the turd.

My mother loved the Sound of Music. I think of the Von Trapps escaping to the mountains, singing their national anthem in face of the Third Reich, that little shit Rolf selling them out.

"Small and white
Clean and bright
You look happy to meet me
Blossom of snow
May you bloom and grow
Bloom and grow forever."





tea cups, appalachian fair
Darlene O'Dell

john loves ginny

Frank Zahn

John Bridges had grown weary of Omaha's singles world but more weary of spending another evening at home alone, watching television, and overeating. So, he got dressed and drove to a party for members of the Who's Who Singles Club at Donna Fields' upscale home in Regency.

In Donna's spacious family room, people mingled with cocktails in hand, greeted each other with big smiles and hugs, chatted, and munched on finger-food. They glanced at the entrance frequently, especially the women. John suspected they hoped someone would show-up that would prove more interesting than the people who were already there.

After several awkward and unsuccessful attempts to fit in, John relaxed in a chair and listened to a provocative conversation going on a short distance away. As he listened, a woman quietly pulled a chair up close to his and feigned interest in the same conversation.

Her dark blue eyes sparkled, and there was a girlish sprinkle of freckles across the bridge of her nose and cheeks. Her honey blond hair was pulled back gracefully away from the fine features of her face. Her silky, green dress hugged her shapely body and flowed into a full skirt that draped over her legs and onto the floor. Pearl earrings dangled from her ears, and a pearl cluster ring adorned her right hand.

"Hi. I'm John Bridges," he said.

"And I'm Ginny McLaine, who likes to dance. Do you?"

"Yeah, if I've had enough to drink."

"I've heard there's dancing downstairs."

"I'm game if you are," John said, jumping to his feet and facing her.

Ginny looked up at him and smiled. "Have you had enough to drink?"

"Let's find out," John said as he took Ginny's hand, pulled her up out of her chair, and led her downstairs.

In between dances, John and Ginny drank white wine and talked about their careers, their likes and dislikes, and the way they felt about being single again. It was clear they liked each other, so when she told him she had come to the party with a friend, who wasn't feeling well and left earlier, he volunteered to drive her home.

While driving, he glanced at her and smiled several times. Once, when they stopped at an intersection for a long red light, she leaned toward him with a soft glow in her eyes, cradled his

face in her hands, and kissed him gently on the lips. Aroused, he hesitated before lifting his foot off the brake when the light turned green.

At Ginny's front door, they kissed and lingered in a warm embrace.

"Good night, John," she said. "I had a wonderful time tonight."

"It doesn't have to end now," he whispered.

"I know," Ginny said, stepping back from him. "But I don't want to rush things."

"So, you're sending me out into the chill of the early morning air and telling me to accept the pain and frustration of rejection all alone."

"You'll survive," Ginny said with a teasing smile. "And does that line ever work?"

"I don't know," John said. "I've never used it before, but now that I've found a woman as attractive as you, I thought it was worth a try."

"I find you attractive too," Ginny said. "You're tall and handsome with the most beautiful brown eyes I've ever seen. But we might have something more wonderful than attraction starting between us, and I don't want to spoil it by moving too fast."

Although disappointed, John agreed and said good night.

Ginny and John quickly became a couple about town. They went out to dinner, to parties, to the theater, to art galleries, and of course, to Ginny's favorite place to dance on Friday nights, the Lazy Leopard Lounge. On Sunday mornings, they played golf and had a late breakfast at the Neon Goose.

John's friends told him how lucky he was to be dating someone like Ginny. He agreed. In fact, he believed he had met the woman with whom he could enjoy the rest of his life. And although he believed she felt the same way about him, he sensed she was keeping something from him—some part of her life that she thought might spoil their relationship.

After several weeks of dating, John thought it strange that he had not met Ginny's daughter Millie. Ginny always had a reason why Millie was not around when he came to the house.

Even stranger was Ginny's sudden coldness when they were close to sexual intimacy. She was very sensuous and free with displays of affection—kissing, hugging, and touching, but when John pushed for more, she backed away.

John decided to discuss his concerns with her one evening after dinner at Gorat's Steak House, but before he had the chance to say anything, Ginny surprised him by inviting him to her house the following evening for a late supper. She told him that it was about time she prepared a home-cooked meal for him, and more importantly, she wanted him to meet Millie.

“Great!” John said. “What time?”

“Millie won’t be dining with us. Eight-thirty is her bedtime, but you’ll get to meet her if you come to the house a little before that,” Ginny said.

She did not say anything about John’s major concern, sexual intimacy, and he decided to postpone that discussion until after their late supper.

John arrived early at Ginny’s house the following evening—almost an hour early. He rang the doorbell, and a girl in a plain white dress, sneakers, and barrettes in her hair opened the door.

“You must be Millie,” he said with a smile.

As the girl smiled and nodded yes, Ginny came in a rush to the door. She seemed tense. “Stand back, Millie,” she said, opening the door wider. “Come on in, John.”

“Am I too early?” he said, stepping inside and closing the door behind him.

“It’s okay. You’re fine. I’m just a little stressed this evening,” Ginny said, then placed her hands on the girl’s shoulder and added, “This is my daughter, Millie.”

“Hi, Millie. I brought two bouquets of flowers, one for you and one for your Mom.”

“How sweet. Thank you, John” Ginny said, taking the bouquet he handed to her and giving him a kiss on the cheek.

When Millie reached out to take her flowers, her pale blue eyes twinkled. She grinned, and her face flushed.

“What do you say, Millie?” Ginny said.

“Th-Th-Thank you,” Millie said, trying hard not to stutter.

“You’re quite welcome,” John said.

“Go to the bathroom, Millie, and put your flowers in a glass of water, and then put them in your bedroom,” Ginny said. “Take John with you. While in the bedroom, you can show him your doll collection.”

“I’d like that,” John said as he took Millie’s hand and let her lead him from the living room to a bathroom half way down a narrow hall.

He stood outside the bathroom door and watched her carefully put her flowers in a glass of water. Then he followed her into her bedroom across the hall where she placed the flowers on her dresser.

He straddled a small chair next to her bed while she sat on the floor in front of him, showing him her dolls and jabbering away about each one. She identified her favorite doll and told him that she named it Kim after her best friend at school. She got so excited sometimes that she didn't complete one sentence before starting another, all the while struggling not to stutter. She behaved like a girl of ten or eleven, but John sensed she was much older. He also sensed that in addition to her stuttering, she was retarded.

At a little before eight-thirty, Ginny came in and said, "Millie, it's time to get ready for bed."

"Oh, M-M-Mom!" Millie pleaded.

"No argument," Ginny said firmly. "I'll come in when you're ready and tuck you in."

Minutes later, John and Ginny heard Millie call out, "M-M-Mom, I'm r-r-ready!" When they returned, Millie, who had dressed herself in a girlish pink nightgown, jumped into bed and covered herself.

Ginny gave Millie a big hug and a kiss. "Good night, sweetheart," she said as she tucked in Millie's covers.

"N-N-Night, John," Millie called out. "And Th-Th-Thank y-y-you f-f-for the fl-fl-flowers."

"You're, welcome," John said. "Sweet dreams, Millie."

108 Ginny turned out the light and closed Millie's bedroom door. Then she and John went into the kitchen where she took what she needed from the refrigerator to prepare a tossed salad.

John noticed that she was even more tense than when he arrived. "Ginny, what's wrong?" he said.

"Nothing."

"Yes, there is. What is it?"

"I'll tell you later," Ginny said and then tried to divert John's attention by adding, "Why don't you go into the dining room and pour some wine for us? It's on the buffet, along with a couple of wine glasses. And while you're doing that, I'll finish this salad and check the roast in the oven."

John returned shortly with two glasses of wine. "Ginny, for God's sake, please tell me what's wrong?"

"I said I'll tell you later."

"Tell me now, so it doesn't spoil our supper."

"Please, John, don't push—just don't!"

John helped Ginny put supper on the table and poured more wine for them. Ginny avoided eye contact with him as they ate, and the pleasantries exchanged between them were awkward at times.

While clearing the table after they had finished eating and drank the last of the wine, John said, "It was a wonderful supper, Ginny. Thank you."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it. While I tidy up in the kitchen, why don't you go into the living room and relax? I'll be there in a few minutes, and we can talk."

After fifteen minutes, or so, Ginny came into the living room and sat facing John on the couch with one leg tucked under her.

"John," she began. "I'm sure you've noticed that besides Millie's stuttering, she's slow mentally. She behaves like a little girl, but she's actually nineteen—almost twenty."

"You mean she's retarded."

"That term isn't used anymore. Now, her condition is called mentally challenged."

"So, why haven't you told me about Millie's condition before now?"

"I should have, but I was hoping that if we dated for a while, and we liked each other, it might not make any difference to you that I have a child with mental challenges. I'm not ashamed of my daughter. I love her very much, and she loves me. But, I need a man's love too."

Tears rolled down Ginny's cheeks as she added, "I've been so worried and upset about you coming this evening, and it's gotten much worse since you arrived. I don't want to lose you."

John put his arms around Ginny and held her close. "Now, I understand why Millie was never around when I came to the house," he said. "I don't know much about children with mental challenges, but had I known about Millie earlier, I don't think I would have panicked and disappeared."

Ginny pulled herself away from John. "Perhaps you wouldn't have," she said. "But let me tell you that as soon as most men—at least the ones I've known—learn about Millie, I don't hear from them again."

She paused and then added, "Even her father, who I'm convinced caused her condition, took off and left us."

"How did her father cause her condition?" John said.

"It's a long story."

"Trust me. I'm not going to panic and disappear. And we've got lots of time. So, tell me."

Ginny rearranged herself on the couch. "I was pregnant—about seven months along. Sam, Millie's father, had been drinking most of the night at a party we attended," she said. "I begged him to let me drive home, but he wouldn't listen. He never listened to me, even when he was sober. Anyway, he was driving very fast and weaving all over the street. He ran a stoplight, and a man in a pickup hit our car on my side. My seatbelt broke loose somehow, and I was tossed over on top of him in the driver's seat. He was unharmed, but I was badly shaken and bruised."

"What about Millie?"

"The doctor at the hospital, and later my doctor, told me that Millie didn't appear to be harmed. After she was born, and we realized she was mentally challenged, my doctor said the accident might have caused some brain damage, although he couldn't be sure."

Ginny paused. "But, I know the accident was the cause, and that miserable drunken bastard I was married to was responsible! What hurts—what really hurts—is that Millie is not so unaware that she doesn't wonder where he is and why he doesn't come to see her!"

John reached out and cradled Ginny in his arms.

"I haven't behaved like this in a long time," she said. "You must think I'm an emotional wreck."

"Not at all, and I'm glad you've opened up to me about Millie. There is something else, though, that I've been wondering about and found very frustrating. It's your apparent fear of sexual intimacy."

Ginny pulled away from John. "I'm not afraid of sex, or sexual intimacy as you call it, at least not in the sense that I'm frigid or anything," she said. "The truth is I've wanted to rip your clothes off a dozen times and make wild and passionate love with you. But I held back—pushed you away—because I didn't want to get too involved until I knew how you would react to Millie's condition."

John smiled. "That's great news. It takes a big load off my mind."

"If we had become involved sexually, and afterward, you would not have been able to accept Millie, I would have fallen apart," Ginny said.

"You're too strong a woman for that, but I understand what you're saying."

"And too, I'm an old-fashioned girl. I don't want to jump into bed with a guy until I get to know him, and he has courted me properly."

"I'm a sucker for old-fashioned girls," John said with a grin.

"All of them?"

John kissed Ginny tenderly on the lips, and whispered, "Not any longer. From now on, the only old-fashioned girl for me is you?"

"I'm in love with you, John."

"I'm in love with you too. And you can stop worrying. The three of us will do just fine."

John kissed Ginny again and held her close until at last, she relaxed. After a long silence, she pushed herself away from him and felt her face and hair.

"God, what I must look like," she said. "Let me go freshen up."

While Ginny was gone, John tried to imagine the ways a child with mental challenges would complicate their relationship. Nothing occurred to him. Besides, Millie gave him the opportunity to become a father again and in a very special way make up for some of the mistakes he had made fathering his own children. He could help provide the love, protection, and guidance Millie needed as she faced what must seem to her at times a very complex world.

When Ginny returned, she had refreshed her make-up, brushed her hair, and straightened her clothing. "Do I look okay?" she said.

"You look terrific."

Ginny turned on the television to an old movie. "This is an oldie, but I don't remember the name of it," she said.

"It looks like the original version of *A Star Is Born*, the one with Janet what's-her-name and Frederick March."

"Want to watch it?"

"Yeah, sure."

John and Ginny lay intertwined on the couch and watched the movie, but before the movie was over, they had fallen asleep.

Thunder and lightning from an early morning storm woke John. Ginny was nowhere in sight. He went into her bedroom and found her in bed asleep. When he bent over and kissed her on the lips, she woke up, stretched herself, and smiled.

"Hi, handsome," she said.

"Do I still have to go out into the chill of the early morning air and accept the pain and frustration of yet another rejection all alone?" he whispered.

"You're funny," she said with a chuckle. "But yes, you do for now. I'm sorry, but Millie will be up soon. I'll call you later."

At a little after two o'clock, Ginny telephoned John. "Hi. I've been thinking about us all day, and I just want to know one thing," she said.

"What?"

"Do you still love me?"

"Of course. What's there not to love?"

"I'm at work, and I'm taking off early to have my hair done. When I look gorgeous afterward, do you think I could get you to take me out for a night on the town?"

"And then what?"

"And then come back to my house and fool around seriously."

"You better believe it!" John said, almost shouting. "But, what about Millie?"

"Millie is spending the night at a friend's house."

"Terrific! So, what time do you want me to pick you up?"

In Mae West style, Ginny said, "Pick me up at seven, sweet stuff. And when we get back to my place, I'll be ready, and I mean really ready if you get my drift."

John laughed.

They said goodbye. Needless to say, John was on time for their night out on the town, well-groomed and eager. And each time he got that don't-you-think-it's-time-to-go-back-to-your-place look on his face, Ginny smiled.



harvest

Constance Walter

Summer dallies deep into fall, and I dally too, giving those last fruits a bit more time to ripen. “Wait,” I say, “Wait one more day. Let’s see what happens.” And I do, again and again until a cool, late-October breeze whispers, “It is time.”

In the garden, I scour once-lush foliage, where I find
plump cherry tomatoes,
sweet banana peppers,
stray string beans,
deep green buttercup and red-orange kuri squash—the sweetest of them all
—the last kale leaves.

I leave behind the vines and stalks to house the bees and other garden dwellers over the long Black Hills winter.

I carry my small bounty in a straw basket, a gift from my youngest daughter—the child most like me, people say.

So many years ago, we worked the ground together, replacing grass with “Princess Diana” roses, a purple “Constance” clematis, morning glories, wildflowers and a fragile redbud.

We planted a vegetable garden, grape vines and fruit trees.

One Sunday morning while pulling stubborn weeds from a new flower bed, she said, “This is like church to me.”

And in the quiet I heard the song of cicadas above the rustle of leaves in the soft breeze.

Then, so softly I nearly missed it, she whispered, “You are my soulmate.”

I watched this lovely girl pulling a weed then smoothing the ground, pulling and smoothing, a beautiful ritual.

She smiled. And in that moment, my heart broke.

For it was true for me, too.

Then

The roses grew, the clematis twined up the old-fashioned light post, the redbud flourished.

And she grew, too, and moved on and away and into her own garden.

Now she shares her earth love with her children, not yet understanding they, too, will grow up and away and into their own.

I rub the basket between my fingers and thumb, now soft and beginning to fray in places.

“I will call her tomorrow,” I say.

In the deepening twilight I watch the nearly full moon rise above the mountain then head toward the house.

A single sunflower greets me, its tattered head slightly bowed, and I know this is the last perfect evening of fall.

At the sink I wash my hands and watch the last green of summer swirl down the drain, making its way to rivers and streams.

I study my rough farmer hands, still plant-stained, and smile, already planning for next year.



my gig as tinsel and beau

Shirley J. Brewer

Christmas, 1982

Inside this claustrophobic reindeer house, I practice playing with the handles—turning moves the heads, squeezing opens and closes the reindeer mouths. One lone peephole showcases the children's expectant faces. I speak in festive voices: baritone for Beau, high-pitched for Tinsel.

My caribou couple poses in front of the snow-frosted hut near the café at the old Hutzler's store. The scent of hot chocolate drifts. I long for a cup. First night on the job, the little microphone spews raspy sounds. Beau's handle sticks. Blisters form. My tapered seat induces an onset of holiday hemorrhoids.

A girl named Teresa introduces herself as five.
*I want you to sing with me, Tinsel and Beau:
Jesus Loves Me, Jee-sus, Dear Jesus My Lord.*
She bellows the hymn—a Bette Midler mimic. Reindeer Training School bans any mention of religion. My antler pressure rises.

I don't dare pray. Tinsel and Beau save the day. They hum along to the Jesus hymn. Looking back on my minimum-wage Talking Reindeer stint, no other job has ever measured up. I learned how to comfort with a big reindeer heart, and when I couldn't sing the words I figured out a way to hum.



morning

Shirley J. Brewer

after Mary Oliver

Barefoot in the cold kitchen, I contemplate
the scene on my coffee mug:
a moose serene in a pond, water
color-coded to match the sky.

Sunrise or sunset?
Even with clues—a glimpse of lemon orb,
misty turquoise mountains, peach horizon—
I'm a novice at detecting dawn.

Sunrise or sunset?
The moose knows, its glorious rack
raised, a giant pair of supplicant hands
cupping the world.



take me away from the ball game

Kevin Ridgeway

Curtis tells me the Dodgers' chances
are limited this season:
lots of naysaying disappointment,
but he's proven wrong when they defeat
the Padres in the playoffs
and Curtis celebrates with the other
dugout-heads and Big League chewers,
the rude loudmouth screams from every
living room on the block every night
drives me upstairs to read a book,
watch a movie or get so lost in thought,
I try to predict the future
or read people's minds
and I fail at both, but
my disinterest in baseball
gives me the power of being
invisible to everyone else.



feel good now

Kevin Ridgeway

Is there a dopamine shortage going on
that I am not aware of?
My chemicals aren't mixed the way
I prefer for them to be on
a Saturday afternoon—
even the sunshine isn't working,
let alone the convenience of the digital age,
pleasures gained without rising from my bed.

It's getting more expensive
and time consuming a search
for this elusive release hormone junkies
seek without resorting to the drugs
that always manage to stop working,
and are not to mention rapidly life-damaging—
along with everything else that's just a toxic fix
for a problem I'm too lazy and weak to solve.

In America there is a freedom to go insane,
to run away from the guaranteed pain
inherited by everyone that can breathe in
the fumes of an earth burning into extinction
with precarious desires of a human race who
drinks from cups that are always half empty.



glee

David R. Solheim

In our high school version of *My Fair Lady*,
I was only on stage as a plodding
Member of the back-up chorus.
I counted my dance steps knowing
I was wearing someone else's clothes
Unsuccessfully pretending to be them.

My granddaughter shows me
The script of her summer camp
Version of *Frozen* where she has three
Costume changes and a handful of lines.
She asks if I want to hear the songs.

In character voices she sets the scene,
Then becomes the Queen of Winter
Singing a medley of tunes with narrative asides,
Dance steps, gestures, and facial expression.
She sings for the audience she imagines
I'm part of, pausing to let us catch our breath
And gather her projected emotion.

The child's playroom is the stage
For her to do what I have never done:
Entrance herself in an imagined life.



party bus

David R. Solheim

After the big game
Alums in Brooks Brothers suits
And those dressed in Armani
Drink martinis and shimmy in the aisles
Rubbing against those they wouldn't date
In college, hoping this time for sparks.

On the way to steak dinners,
The listen to play lists
From their youth
Promising happiness from
Blue jeans and burgers, pick-up trucks and beer.
All the while tapping their toes
And bobbing their heads in agreement.



juncos

David R. Solheim

Vegetarian
Velociraptors skitter
Hunting flower seeds.



control

Doug Anderson

Every surface in her house
was covered
with tchatchkes, glass animals,
ceramic this and that
so that I had
to move as if I
were probing for mines.
Even the fridge was so organized
I feared I'd throw
something out of synch
by reaching in
and her place was so CLEAN
I felt like some insidious germ.
So, when, I think to please me,
she put the corset on
and cinched up her
already considerable breasts,
I thought,
where is the whip?
Certainly there is a whip.



after cavafy

Doug Anderson

At eighty, a new clock is set.
There are fewer numbers
and the hand seems to move more slowly,
as if to say, listen:
how many ticks to a breath,
how many breaths to a minute.
Outside, the wind picks up an old newspaper
and flattens it against the window.
It is a date from your youth:
you remember exactly where you were
the day he was assassinated.
You pulled off the road to listen to the news.
All memory clusters around that moment
like filings to a magnet.
How perfect the day,
not too hot, not too cool.
You were young. Women liked you.
You did not believe in death.
Even his seemed so remote, so other.





revenge of the teabag
Edward Michael Supranowicz

the boring billion

Taya Sanderson Kessler

Australian scientist on the podcast.
Studier of stones
of the millennia of Earth.

Rocks tell the story,
he says, of stability.
Of nothing cataclysmic
nothing extreme
in a billion years.

The Boring Billion
he says. Earth's middle age.
The Mid Proterozoic.

Boredom may be a feature
of life in the universe
he says. Isn't that exciting?

And I think of the one million creatures
whose Earth lineages will wink out
in the next few years and imagine
how exciting even a speck of stability
could be.



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significant eddies

Taya Sanderson Kessler

There are the warm-core
the cold-core
cyclonic and anticyclonic.

Tidal eddies also known as
starting-jet vortices.
River eddies, transient eddies.
Eddies in the air.

Swirling through oceans and the currents of culture
often emerging from instabilities
but dependable from time to time too.
Funny, musical, dramatic, kingly.

There is Norton, Redmayne, Asner.
Vedder, VanHalen, Sheeran, Murphy.
Snowden, the VIIIth.

There is the long-haired dishwasher
at the diner on the corner.
The downtown mechanic who does both
foreign and domestics.

The taco truck fellow who works
specials on Tuesdays.
There is even a sea slug of the taxon
Edmundsina reboloi.

Edward, Edmund, Eddie
Erd, Ted, Teddy.
Even Ned from time to time.

Anglo Saxon in its derivation
universal in its usage
composed of wealth and protection.
Eddies can be found everywhere these days.

So take some time to look around
close your eyes, feel the breeze.
Flip on the news, the radio, a show.

Look to the heights
to the depths, the shallows
and be amazed, delighted, swayed
by the Ed, Edward, Eddy nearest you.



i chose...poorly

Paul Edward Costa

It's true,
 I can't pour from an empty cup

but I can melt it
into bits I chew
 for the illusion of digestion
 that lets someone function
 one more minute
or down to a liquid,
 in the cast iron
 catch basin I tilt,
pouring that viscous substance
on whatever has lost
its natural shell

before scraping up plastic
from where it's set
or been spat out

just to start again
with the cup I hold
 becoming a symbol
 more impressive and eternal
than my ever more
 malnourished
pedestal of a physical frame

as observers
with too-distant
 utilitarian attitudes
ask why more things
aren't like
those nice stoic cups
you can usefully recycle,
or the unassuming one
that caught the blood of Christ
 without complaint.



in case atlas sits

Paul Edward Costa

It was like when tectonic plates
upend each other
and slide under watery graves
to where the Fisher King casts his lines,

every place or state of mind broken, tilting,
as slides,
as cutting boards angled
so scraps tumble into trash bins

two scoops of juxtapositions
in every box of a mad dog's
haphazard plans,

until a time
in facing general madness
when salvation
comes from abandoning the idea
of catching every porcelain cup
 cast aside,
where even manipulating gravity
won't stop what's coming,
and the sole course
 is holding yours,
 shielding it from every dish
cascading off tilting shelves
 in off-balance rooms
so no one can turn
your medium for eating a meal
 into a lethal tool.



robot lover

Dana Henry Martin

— after John Donne's "The Flea"

Why not me? Why not my human-
Like fingers and other hard parts? How would
That differ from licking a fork
Clean or having a mouth full of braces?
You know how I charge your skin when
You come close, the hairs on your arms rising
To meet me: allegiant soldiers
Who listen to your body's mute desires.
Your electrical wires, woven into

Every inch of who you are, brought
You here. And the grease that moves inside me
Could warm you until your devices
Soften, then melt, if only you'd give me
One free download. How easy that
Would be. So slide over here like
A well-lubricated cog, and add your
Piece to my machine. This is what I mean:

You complete my design; you're what
My creator had in mind. My circuits
Are heavy with you every night.
If I had been built to dream, my dreams would
Be viscous as crude oil, pungent
As electrical fires. You would be there
With your flawless architecture—
Calling me through caustic smoke and liquid—
Our world as small and flat as a diskette.



confession to the robotherapist

Dana Henry Martin

I feel really restless today and bad. I felt this way yesterday, too. I've felt this way off and on since I started thinking about robots.

The past two nights I've taken robots to bed. You think I've got too many robots? This feels different to me from having humans, but who knows.

My robot fixation started in early November and was confined to a couple of hours in the evening. Then I started having nightmares about robots. Now the anxiety about robots, if that is what it is, lasts all day.

The days I've taken robots to bed, I've felt restless during the day but have mostly been able to sleep at night.

For a couple of days, I stopped taking robots to bed. I couldn't sleep. I went to the ER looking for robots. They found me inside the magnetic resonance imaging machine crying because it wasn't a robot.

Being suffocated without robots scares me. I'm already anxious thinking about going to sleep tonight. I don't know how to not have robots in bed.

Sometimes I get out of my body in my dreams. I'm no longer myself, but I'm also not a robot.

I'm having trouble sitting still. I'm scared about this. I mean them. I mean robots.

I've decided to go back to humans. I may never be able to live without robots, even if they damage humans.

I'm so anxious right now that my hands and face are going numb. Am I becoming a robot?



brainspotting

Christine Gay Dutton

Welcome to the show! Grateful for the access?

We arrive in you, in curiosity and wonder, as expected
haunting your locus, maximal unveiling manifested,
sinewy, and stringy, everything connected by the
Guides, in servitude, as inner trackers of torments
Thoughts in mille-feuill layers, and between folds

Gaze upon the freedom and space that greets you,
your will, will guarantee great gouges in each place
over time, the inevitable bile rises and launches,
hopelessly cupped hands carrying toward the source
knowing nowhere is where you are there, in the now,
and how your perceptions crave to be amended

Enraptured by a newfound grand sense of reality
via vision, sound, smell of sea, the lightest touch
capturing the pointer at last discovering its point
as eyes slowly adjust to light, the mirror will show
the binding up of all afflictions now well known,
suffering sources gladly unearthed and displayed



choosing to smell the flowers

Linda Kraus

Munro Leaf's famous, beloved bull Ferdinand,
a crown of fragrant flowers encircling his horns,
forever blazes as a symbol of absolute integrity
as he chooses beauty and a peaceful existence
over the jeers and threats of a blood-seeking crowd.

When he was mistakenly brought to Madrid
innocently unaware of his sacrificial future,
he frolicked and gamboled in the emerald grass.
No one bothered to inform him of his destiny—
he would die gloriously after a savage thrust.

A triumphant Ferdinand refused his death sentence,
preferring to sit down and gaze at the roaring multitude.
The matador, surrounded by disbelieving picadors,
was humiliated—his machismo questionable, his
glorious reputation insulted because of an obstinate bull.

The indignity clearly shocked the furious thousands
who hungered for ritualistic bloodlust, spattered gore.
A nation of spectators seeking a Sunday catharsis
of mutilated flesh exploded at the lack of carnage.
They stomped and booed, hissed profanities and curses.

But Ferdinand nestled father into the dirt and waited.
He missed his friends, his cork tree, his unquestioned bliss
of a simple life lived on his own terms of small pleasures.
May we all choose a life far from the thundering hordes
in which the flowers bloom to comfort and sustain us.



heirloom

Charles Rammelkamp

When our daughter Anna was coming to stay with us
for several weeks this summer, from Korea,
along with her children,
we decided to clean up the “guest room”
which for the past quarter of a century
had become the de facto junk room –
the place we stowed stuff
we thought we might “need” someday or
whose sentimental attachment overrode practicality:
a Herculean task, akin to cleaning the Augean Stables.

Not only did we hire an organizer,
with junk men coming to haul furniture away,
but we scouted out “shredding events”
where we took decades and decades
worth of financial documents, spilling
out from an ancient filing cabinet, worthless now
but full of sensitive information,
the car weighed down like a trawler at sea
that’s barely able to rise above
the surface of the water
when we stuffed the boxes of paper
into the trunk and backseat.

After their visit, we continued going through
the inventory: clothing, books
we no longer needed, ridding ourselves
of a lifetime of acquisition, sad but liberating.

Out of the pages of one book fell an envelope
from my mother, dead over dozen years,
her handwriting so familiar, precise
if hard to read, with two photographs enclosed,
both of portraits of my grandmother
painted by who knows who. She had asked me
to give them to her two granddaughters,
both grown and married now, though at the time
either still at home or away at college.

I put them in the mail that same morning.
Sorry, Mom!



biscuits and porn

Charles Rammelkamp

“When he'd finished , he produced an unbranded packet of cigarettes, stubby, filterless, lethal. A health warning would have been like subtitles on a porn film. Utterly beside the point.” - Mick Herron, *Dead Lions*

When our daughter got married in Nags Head,
it was our first visit to the Outer Banks.
We found an Air B and B in Kill Devil Hills
while our other daughter secured a place in Kitty Hawk.

We drove up and down U.S. Route 158
to get from one event to another:
the legal ceremony at the Currituck County courthouse,
the ring exchange at the Bodie lighthouse –
somewhere near Whalebone Junction, I believe –
over the Wright Memorial Bridge to the reception,
held in a fancy restaurant, mimosas and champagne,
followed by a group trip to the beach at Hatteras.
Strip malls all over the place,
gift shops, amusement parks, outlets, grocery
stores and gas stations and a variety of tourist shops.

One we kept passing was called BISCUITS AND PORN.
“I think it says Biscuits and Corn,”” one of us speculated,
but everyone else insisted otherwise.

What a satisfying weekend!
A nice reunion with our daughter and grandchildren
all the way from Korea for the celebration,
the wedding of our other daughter and her partner,
so enjoyable to be a part of,
families and friends celebrating.

My one regret?
We never did discover
what they sold at BISCUITS AND PORN.





2005
Maxim Martin

Contributors' Notes

Doug Anderson's last book of poems was *Undress, She Said*, from Four Way Books, 2022. Also a photographer and workshop leader, he lives in Ashfield, MA.

Julie Benesh is author of the poetry collection *Initial Conditions* and the poetry chapbook *About Time*. She has been published in Tin House, Another Chicago Magazine, Florida Review, and many other places, earned an MFA from Warren Wilson College, and received an Illinois Arts Council Grant. She currently lives in Chicago and holds a PhD in human and organizational systems. Read more at juliebenesh.com.

Known for his bold line work and improvisational approach to drawing, **Chris Bodily** is a mentally ill tiger wearing a human suit.

Raising a family in the Pacific Northwest, **Luke Brannon** keeps a hand writing in his spare time. Influenced by language poetry, his micropoetry focuses on capturing the moment and its interplay with the reader's own experiences. When not writing, Luke illustrates line-art inspired by the American Southwest as Josiah. More recently, he has begun to bridge his writing and art into one.

Shirley J. Brewer serves as poet-in-residence at Carver Center for the Arts in Baltimore, MD. Her poems appear in Barrow Street, Comstock Review, Gargoyle, Meat for Tea, Plainsongs, Poetry East, Slant, among other journals and anthologies. Shirley's poetry books include *A Little Breast Music* (2008, Passager Books), *After Words* (2013, Apprentice House), *Bistro in Another Realm* (2017, Main Street Rag), and *Wild Girls* (2023, Apprentice House). Shirley was a 2020 guest on The Poet and The Poem with Grace Cavalieri, broadcast from the Library of Congress. Website: shirleyjbrewer.com

Brian Bruso (he, him, ours) has been writing all his life. Originally all poetry until he found himself deeply entrenched in the culinary world. Twenty plus years of menu writing continued to hone his creative skills until he was no longer able to perform. He has now turned back to poetry (and the occasional flash) and re-devoted his passion by joining Maya Popa's Conscious Writers Collective. Brian has been published in Rathalla, Burningwords, Levitate, Hibiscus and most recently in {trampset}.

Jacob Chapman lives in Amherst, MA with his wife and daughter. His book *Are We There Yet* is available from Human Error Publishing, and his publications include the chapbook *Other Places* (Open Country Press) and the book *Here Over Here Over Here* (Human Error Publishing). He plays guitar in the band Camel City Drivers.

David Clémenceau is of French and German origins and holds a master's degree in translation. His work has appeared in print and online in USA, UK, Canada, India and Australia and can be found with Idle Ink, Welter at University of Baltimore and Dark Rose Press. His story, *Müller's Mosaico*, won the 2019-20 Twist & Twain Story Writing Contest. He lives in Germany where he teaches and reads a lot.

Paul Edward Costa is a poet, spoken word artist, and teacher. He served as the 3rd Poet Laureate for the City of Mississauga and has published in many literary journals such as *Purely Liminal Literary Journal* and *NoD Magazine*. His book *The Long Train of Chaos* came out with Kung Fu Treachery Press in 2019 and his collection *God Damned Avalon* was published by Mosaic Press in 2021. He has featured at many poetry reading events in Canada and organizes Toronto's Outer Haven Poetry series.

Mk Smith Despres writes, teaches, and makes art in western Massachusetts. They were a 2024 Green Box Artist in Residence and are the author of many books for kids including *Night Song*, a 2024 New England Book Award Finalist, illustrated by Hyewon Yum, and *There's That Sun Again*, illustrated by Julie Benbassat.

John Dorsey is the former Poet Laureate of Belle, MO. He is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Which Way to the River: Selected Poems: 2016-2020* (OAC Books, 2020), *Sundown at the Redneck Carnival*, (Spartan Press, 2022), and *Pocatello Wildflower*, (Crisis Chronicles Press, 2023). He may be reached at archerevans@yahoo.com.

Christine Gay Dutton is originally from Rochester, NY and spent her early childhood in the deep south. She resides with her wife in Northampton, Massachusetts. She began writing poetry in 1999 and her work has been published with Kota Press, Aileron, Deep Cleveland, Poems for Peace, Survival & Beyond, and Identity Theory. She is a member of Writing Sisters, a BIPOC and Queer community of writers in Holyoke, Massachusetts. When not writing, you might find Christine running along the Connecticut River.

S.T. Gately is a Massachusetts based 2D Mixed Media Visual Artist and Certified Freelance Art Teacher. Gately has recently shown work at the Mill District Gallery, the Air Space Gallery, the Northampton Center for the Arts as well as had solo exhibitions at the Anchor House of Artists, the Sunderland Public Library and Easthampton Media.

Daniel Hales is the author of *¿Cómo Hacer Preguntas? or, How To Make Questions: 69 Instructional Poems* (Frayed Edge Press), the hybrid novel, *Run Story* (Shape&Nature Press), and three poetry chapbooks. His poetry, flash fiction, and hybrid writing has appeared in *Verse Daily*, *Conduit*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Booth*, *Quarter After Eight*, and many other journals. His band, *The Frost Heaves and Hales*, has released five albums, including *Contrariwise: Songs from Lewis Carroll's Alice's Adventures In Wonderland & Through the Looking-Glass*. He also records with the side-projects *Umbral*, *Selah haleS*, and *The Ambiguities*. www.danielhales.com

Richard Wayne Horton has 2 Pushcart nominations and is the 2019-21 MA Beat Poet Laureate. His work has appeared in *Southern Pacific Review*, *Scryptic*, *The Dead Mule*, *Meat For Tea*, *Bull & Cross*, *Danse Macabre du Jour* and others. His books include *Sticks & Bones* (2017, Meat For Tea Press), *Artists In The Underworld* (2019, Human Error Publishing) and *Ballet For Murderers* (2021, Human Error Publishing).

Leo Hwang's work has appeared in *Human Being & Literature*, *Meat for Tea*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Glimmer Train Stories*, *Fiction*, *Gulf Coast*, and other literary magazines. He was the recipient of the Rosselli/de Filippis Scholarship at the Napa Valley Writers' Conference and has been awarded scholarships to the Bread Loaf Writers' Conference. Mr. Hwang received his B.A.

in English and Fine Arts from the University of the South, and an M.F.A. in creative writing and a Ph.D. in geography from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst where he currently serves as Associate Dean of Inclusive Excellence.

Indë (they/he) is an artist-scholar born, raised, and residing in Massachusetts. In a nutshell, they contend with American imperial systems of division, using multimedia compositions to combat the lynching, disenfranchisement, and misrepresentation of queer people of color. While in Boston for their BFA at MassArt, they took advantage of the ProArts Consortium to complete courses in music theory, composition, and performance at the Berklee College of Music. Their studies at MassArt and Berklee nurtured a rigorous work ethic, collaborative capacity, and advanced multimedia approach to creative expression. These attributes make them a valuable member of the Northampton Arts Council, and staff member at the Northampton Community Music Center (NCMC). Indë is the Media Manager at NCMC, and facilitates the Ujima Singers, Northampton's first and only Afrocentric choir. Indë's touring exhibition, *Mirror, Mirror*, was first exhibited as a solo show at the 50 Arrow Gallery in September, 2024. *Mirror, Mirror* is made up of: music from Indë's forthcoming album *Role Model*, large paintings of queer people of color, mirror/glass-based sculptures, projections, and live performances designed for community education and the amplification of marginalized voices, both present and prematurely past/passed. "My would-be role models [are] buried: Marsha P., Marlon Riggs, and Malcom X."

Matt Jasper just noticed that his ass was specifically mentioned in a 2009 issue of *Bomb* magazine during an interview with Bill Callahan—who used to live on his couch. The guitar lessons with Bill didn't stick so the aforementioned *Bomb* reference is his only remaining claim to fame. He is working on a poem book called *The Water of Learning to Drink*.

Mary Jennings is a performance poet, musician and retired public servant. Her work has been published in *Oddball Magazine*, *Exist Otherwise*, and in the *Electric* issue of *Meat for Tea*.

Taya Sanderson Kessler believes that beauty will save the world. And poetry, and cookies, and kindness. She has been a homeschool mother, the CFO of a music business, worked at an animal shelter and practices as a Reiki Master. Taya's work has been published in many literary journals including: *3rd Wednesday*, *Door=Jar*, and *The Penwood Review*. She recently published her first book of poetry called *Seven Year Silence* and lives in the Pacific Northwest with her sweet husband and their many 4-legged creatures.

Florence, Mass. resident **Tom Kovar** (he/him/his) has been a social worker, a psychotherapist, a professional musician, a singer-songwriter, a poet, and a columnist. Oh, and a family man! Recently he's been working on semi-autobiographical short prose pieces. And on boning up on trivia for a weekly pub challenge!

Linda Kraus is a professor of literature and cinema studies. She has published two collections of poems, *Popcorn Icons and Other Poems Celebrating Movies* and *Listening to the Silence*. She is an orchid judge, a judge for film festivals, and an impassioned rock hound.

When she's not writing, **Kimberly Kuchar** sometimes enjoys taking photographs and micrographs or creating other kinds of art. She mainly writes Japanese short-form poetry and related forms, but she also pens other types of poetry and the occasional short story. Kimberly

has been nominated for the Touchstone Award, the Pushcart Prize, and Best of the Net. Her work has appeared in Frogpond, Wales Haiku Journal, Poetry Pea, Five Fleas, Otoliths, The Space Cadet Science Fiction Review, dadakuku, Star*Line, Heterodox Haiku, and other publications. She lives near Austin with her husband, son (when he's home from college), and pet cockatiel.

Julia Ludewig is a learner, teacher, and traveler who splits her time between the U.S. and Germany. She teaches German and Environmental Humanities at a small liberal-arts college in Pennsylvania. In both her academic and poetic worlds, writing is her preferred mode of thinking through the things that matter.

Dana Henry Martin's work has appeared in The Adroit Journal, Barrow Street, Chiron Review, Cider Press Review, FRiGG, Muzzle, New Letters, Rogue Agent, Stirring, Willow Springs, and other literary journals. Martin's poetry collections include the chapbooks *Toward What Is Awful* (YesYes Books), *In the Space Where I Was* (Hyacinth Girl Press), and *The Spare Room* (Blood Pudding Press). Their chapbook *No Sea Here* (Moon in the Rye Press) is forthcoming.

Maxim Martin is MEAT. MEAT is trapped in an endless cycle of joy and sorrow. Passion guides MEAT through that cycle. His passion will never die. It is a flame that has been lit with good intention.

Matthew J. McKee has had a collection of micro fiction and a short story featured in Meat for Tea, and has had several short stories published in Literally Stories and elsewhere. Atmosphere Press published his debut novel, *Keeping The Stars Awake*, in 2022 and his second, *Flicker*, in 2024. He currently lives in Japan where he teaches English.

Niki McQueen is a South African artist. Inspiration for her detailed, surreal and otherworldly artworks is drawn from multiple sources including vintage illustrations, museum collections, as well as Jungian theory, surrealism, street, classic and contemporary art. Her themes include anatomy, biology, psychology, archetypal interplay, eroticism, decay and rebirth. She has sold and group-exhibited both in Africa and internationally and has placed in several prestigious awards. In 2022 and 2023 she collaborated with The Dresden Dolls and Amanda Palmer to create a collection of artworks for their 2023 tours, as well as with Nathan Monk, bestselling author, and civil rights activist.

Reid Messerschmidt writes and fathers. He once punched a goose and lives in Fargo, North Dakota, if you can believe that.

David P. Miller's collection, *Bend in the Stair*, was published by Lily Poetry Review Books in 2021. *Sprawled Asleep* was published by Nixes Mate Books in 2019. His poems have received Best of the Net and Pushcart nominations, and have appeared in Meat for Tea, Lily Poetry Review, Reed Magazine, About Place Journal, Solstice, Salamander, Tar River Poetry, Kestrel, Vincent Brothers Review, and Nixes Mate Review, among other journals. His poems "Interview" and "And You" were included in an issue of Magma (UK) focused on teaching poetry to secondary school students. He is a member of the Jamaica Pond Poets.

Darlene O'Dell is a writer and photographer from Asheville, NC. She is the author of *The Story of the Philadelphia Eleven*, *Sites of Southern Memory*, and the chapbook *Raised in the*

World of Everyday Poets. She is also a poet in Japanese-forms, having published in Modern Haiku, Contemporary Haibun, Wales Haiku Journal, and others.

David Ram's recent poems appear in JAMA, Naugatuck River Review, Sport Literate, Star 82 Review, and elsewhere. He enjoys living in Easthampton, Massachusetts.

Charles Rammelkamp is Prose Editor for BrickHouse Books in Baltimore. His poetry collection, *A Magician Among the Spirits, poems about Harry Houdini*, is a 2022 Blue Light Press Poetry winner. A collection of poems and flash called *See What I Mean?* was recently published by Kelsay Books, and another collection of persona poems and dramatic monologues involving burlesque stars, *The Trapeze of Your Flesh*, was just published by BlazeVOX Books.

Kevin Ridgeway is the author of *Too Young to Know* (Stubborn Mule Press) and *Invasion of the Shadow People* (Luchador Press). His work can be found in New York Quarterly, Gargoyle Magazine, Hiram Poetry Review, Paterson Literary Review, Slipstream, Chiron Review, Nerve Cowboy, Plainsongs, San Pedro River Review, Trailer Park Quarterly, Main Street Rag, Sheila-Na-Gig and The American Journal of Poetry, among others. He lives and writes in Long Beach, CA.

Thomas Rowland is a retired pediatric cardiologist who has written numerous popular and scholarly works involving sports, science, philosophy, and neuroscience. He has been a frequent contributor to Meat for Tea. He lives a quiet life in Longmeadow, Massachusetts, with his wife Margot and their two loyal dogs Skip and Flip.

Connolly Ryan was born and raised in Lower Manhattan New York. He is the author of a volume of poetry entitled *Velocity At Rest*, about which the critic/poet Paul Mariani wrote: "Connolly Ryan's new poetry collection, *Velocity at Rest*, is just what its title suggests: poems which paradoxically push forth with the speed of wit and multi-tasking language to the breaking point, before the words, whipped to their limits and leaving the reader amazed, laughing, stunned, and whirled about with their incessant and jocular wordplay, for a moment come to rest in a world reminiscent of St. Francis's letters to the world and Mary Oliver's pilgrim-like meditations." He is currently a professor of literature at University of Massachusetts. He currently lives in Florence MA.

Andrew Shelffo is a writer, teacher, and storyteller who lives in western Massachusetts. He has told stories on the World Channel's Stories from the Stage, USA Today's Storytellers Project, and New England Public Media's Valley Voices Grand Slam, and numerous other storytelling events, including ones in Philadelphia, Toronto, and Chicago.

Seasoned, **David R. Solheim**'s fifth book of poetry was recently published by the North Dakota State University Press. He is also the author of the literary travelogue *A Week on the Minnesota and Mississippi Rivers: Thoreau's 1861 Minnesota Journey Revisited*. These books are all available at Buffalocommonspress.com.

D.A. Stern is the author of multiple works of fiction and non-fiction, including *Codename: Blackjack* and the New York Times Bestsellers *The Blair Witch Project: A Dossier*, and *Crosley: Two Brothers and A Business Empire That Transformed the Nation*. A longtime musician and newly-christened substacker, visit him on the web at dastern.com.

Edward Michael Supranowicz is the grandson of Irish and Russian/Ukrainian immigrants. He grew up on a small farm in Appalachia. He has a grad background in painting and printmaking. Some of his artwork has recently or will soon appear in *Fish Food*, *Streetlight*, *Another Chicago Magazine*, *The Door Is a Jar*, *The Phoenix*, and other journals. Edward is also a published poet who has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize multiple times.

After some successes as an undergraduate and graduate poet nearly sixty years ago, **Peter Tacy** spent his working years not writing, but as an independent-school English teacher, Headmaster, and regional administrator. When he retired, he deliberately returned to writing, and published two nonfiction books. More recently he's been writing poems. This latter development has been very much encouraged by his new wife Jane Yolen, whose own poetic output (a poem a day) has never abated since the 1950's, when they first knew each other. They live in Hatfield, Ma., Mystic CT, and St. Andrews, Scotland. His father grew up in South Hadley, and his mother's family first arrived centuries ago in Hadlyme, CT. He has a new chapbook of poetry with Jane entitled *The Black Dog Poems* (Meat For Tea Press, 2022).

Claudia Tong is an artist and quantitative researcher based in London, creating at the intersection of physical and digital art. Her practice spans from landscape, architecture and illustrations to mixed media, visual computing and music. With a background in computer science and psychology, she has worked, lived and exhibited internationally. <https://linktr.ee/clauidiuxt>

After working in communications and public relations, **Constance Walter** retired in 2024. Now, she uses her time to garden and write her myself.

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Michael Washburn studied literature and philosophy at Grinnell College and the University of Wisconsin before moving back east to work in publishing and journalism. His fiction has been published in dozens of journals, magazines, and anthologies in the United States and abroad.

Gerald Yelle has published poetry and flash fiction in numerous online and print journals. His books include *The Holyoke Diaries*, *Mark My Word and the New World Order*, and *Dreaming Alone and with Others*. His chapbooks include *No Place I Would Rather Be*, and *A Box of Rooms*. He lives in Amherst, Massachusetts.

Jane Yolen's book count is nearing 450. Her poetry (both published and unpublished far exceeds that number. Her broken femur is healing thanks to PT--though do not ask her to dance... yet!

Frank Zahn is an author of fiction, nonfiction, and poetry. His publications include nonfiction books, articles, commentaries, book reviews, and essays; novels; short stories; and poetry. Currently, he writes and enjoys life in his home among the evergreens in Vancouver, Washington. For details, visit his website www.frankzahn.com.

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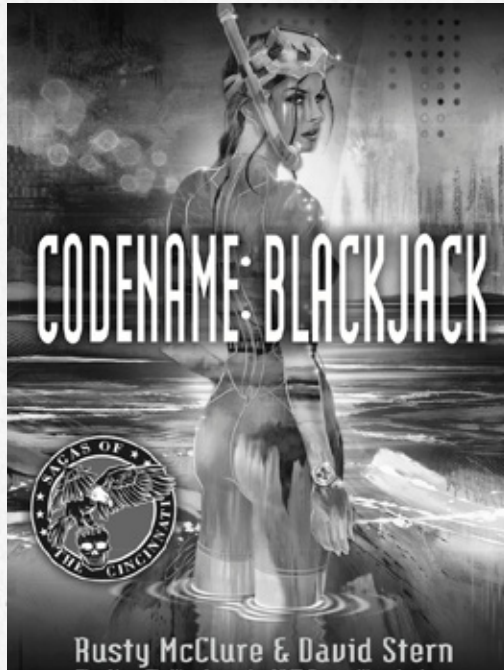


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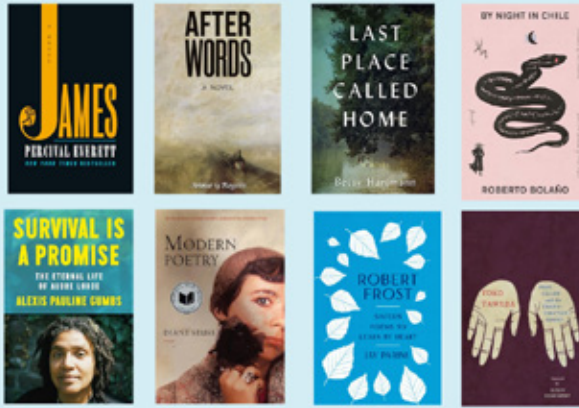
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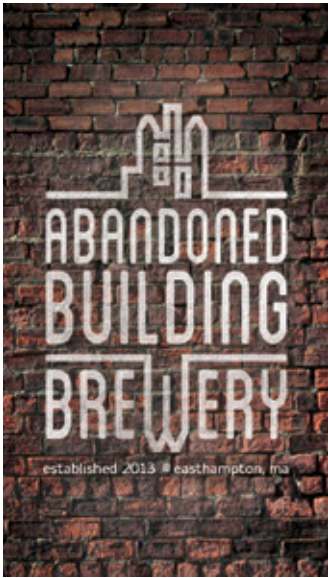
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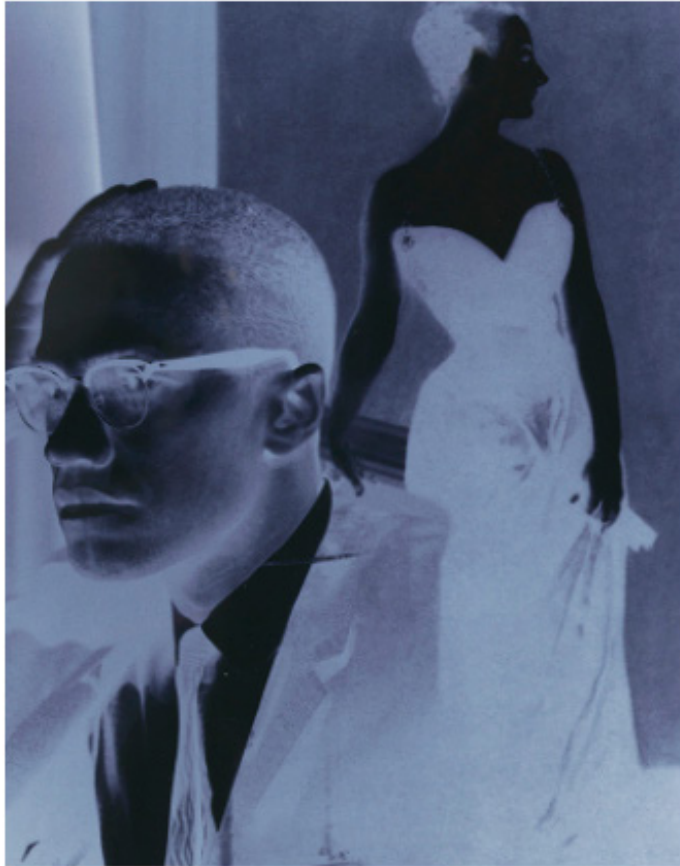
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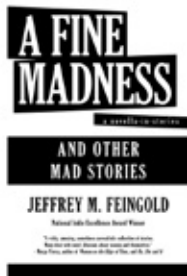
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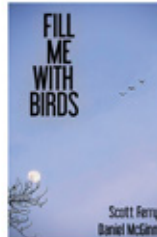
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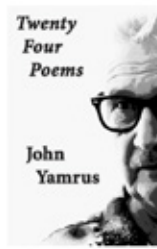
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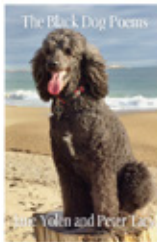
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