

The Oddville Press

A break from the norm

Digitallessandra



www.oddvillepress.com

Cover art: The Slow House Trailer

by ALLESANDRA VIALE

Allesandra says: I am from Italy. I am a chemist and work at the University as a research technician. The rest of my time is for family (I have two kids), friends, trips to the mountains we leave nearby (I really love to take long walks on the mountains during the good season), books, music and digital graphics. I am a self-taught photomanipulator. I started a few years ago learning to use Photoshop just to edit my kids' photos, then I moved to digital scrapbooking, and in the end to photomanipulation. I love both photography and post-processing, but what I enjoy more is to create different things, fantasy-surreal images which seem real, making my own ideas, feelings and visions come to life.

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Disclaimer

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised.

The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as "adult content": it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature.

If you aren't an actual grown-up then please don't read the Oddville Press, or at least, don't complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

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Foreword: Coffee, Anyone?

by LORRAINE SEARS

THEY SAY creativity is born of an idea. But these days, it would seem ideas are getting harder to come by. Generally they seem to flock around people's heads, just out of reach, like a cloud of gnats on a summer's evening beside the river. Trying to catch one and hold on to it can be difficult; and if you're too heavy-handed, you might even kill it.

But what if there was somewhere where creative people—who have huge clouds of ideas—could all come together in one place? Can you imagine the density of idea cloud? We'd be breathing them in. Well, above the dark, dank basement where I keep Oddville's editorial team chained to cold hard planks, which they gratefully call desks, there was a vacant shop space.

And, after a brief meeting with our owner, he thought we could use the space to help people catch their ideas to

see what could be made of them. So he opened a café; The Oddville Café, for creative people.

Everyone is welcome: performers, writers, musicians, sculptors, artists, photographers—you name it. If you're a creative person then come on over. The coffee is great, and despite being the cruel and harsh Managing Editor, I've been known to whip up a pretty tasty cake or two.

You can mix with our editorial team, past and future contributors of The Oddville Press, and a whole plethora of other genius, creative types. You can even share your work and help others be giving feedback and critique on theirs.

This is your invitation and I hope you'll accept. Don't forget to take this issue of The Oddville Press with you, so you can let everyone know how much you enjoyed it.

I'll see you there!

—Lorraine Sears, Managing Editor

Gutman Goes Free

by Robert Sachs

Robert Sachs is a writer living in Louisville, Kentucky. He earned an M.F.A. in writing from Spalding University (2009). He serves on the board of Louisville Literary Arts and has been a board member of Sarabande Books, a not-for-profit book publisher. His short stories have appeared, or are scheduled to appear, in Mobius, the Journal of Social Change, The Front Porch Review, Boundoff, The Writing Disorder, Red Fez, The Blue Lake Review, Northern Liberties Review, Black Heart Magazine, Literary LEO, Lowestoft Chronicle, Diverse Voices Quarterly and The 10th Annual Writer's Digest Short Short Story Collection. His story "Blue Room With Woman," was an honorable mention finalist in the Glimmer Train November 2009 Short Story Award for New Writers. He was a semi-finalist in the Nineteenth Consecutive New Millennium Writing Competition.

Gutman Goes Free

THE GUARD turns his back to light a cigarette and William "Dutch" Gutman, seizing the opportunity, squeezes through the gate and is gone. He was a long-distance runner in high school and still has some steam left in those skinny legs of his to make it over the bridge and into Manhattan. Cars to his left, the Hudson on his right, with each step he feels freer. The air is fresh. The sun is shining. The few hundred bucks his mother had smuggled into the joint is stuffed in his underwear. He smiles for the first time in a very long time. Luckily, Libby is at home. She gives him a square meal and gets him a change of clothes from a downstairs neighbor. "Don't worry," she tells Gutman. "He's not the inquisitive type."

She was eighteen when they met. Fair-haired, attractive, Libby was one of the most desirable women at the junior college. Gutman was handsome back then: black wavy hair, athletic, and a great smile. He wasn't enrolled in the school, but he'd walk the campus with a book bag, show up in the cafeteria, and attend some classes with his friend, Ronnie Fineman. It was Fineman who introduced him to Libby. On dates, he'd take her to the zoo, the aquarium, the museum, and to Yonkers Raceway to watch the harness races. He'd work it so they'd arrive after the seventh race to get in free. Gutman loved watching the horses, but he was not a gambler. "It's for chumps," he'd say. He felt the same way about college, but he never said that to Libby.

He was running numbers for a small-time mobster in Queens before he decided on a plan to make him rich. He wangled a desk job in the city's Child Services Adminis-

tration. The money, taken in modest checks over a three-year period, was deposited in the account of The Hudson River Boys Club. When an auditor doing a routine check discovered there was no such club, Gutman vanished. The account was closed. Gutman had pulled off what the Times called "The Crime of the Month." Eight hundred thousand-dollars embezzled, all by his lonesome. Three weeks after he disappeared, Gutman was captured. The cops had put a tail on Delores Feldstein, Gutman's old flame, and followed her to a movie theatre on the west end of Houston Street. After the film started—a documentary about a fashion photographer—a tall, thin man in a dark trench coat and a fedora sat down next to her. The cops, watching from the back, swooped in and cuffed him. The money was never found.

Libby stands behind him now, softly rubbing his shoulders while he eats. "You can't stay here, Dutch. I'm clean. Been clean for fourteen years. I'm not going back inside for anybody. No one, not even you."

It took a minute for Gutman to remember that she was in the slammer overnight once for copping a cashmere sweater from Macy's. Not exactly hard time. But she always stood by him and he's grateful for that. "Sure, sure, baby," Gutman says, finishing the last of his miso soup. "Don't get excited. I'll be out of here as soon as it gets dark. And burn those blues for me, okay?" he says, leaving his prison uniform folded neatly on her bed.

Around ten, he edges out of Libby's apartment house and catches the N headed downtown. He transfers to the 1 at Times Square and gets off at 23rd. It's a warm night, so if Delores won't let him in, he'll sleep out on the Greenway.

She buzzes him up. "Look what the cat drug in," she says, cracking gum the way nobody does anymore.

"Miss me?" he asks.

"Got the two grand you stole?"

"Don't start with the two grand, Dee. I'm in trouble. Can you put me up for the night?"

"With or without, uh, you know, privileges?" she asks, still with her hip hard against the edge of the door and a hand high on the doorframe.

"Your call, sweetheart," he says with a small smile, wishing he had a toothpick to roll around in his mouth or a cigarette to flick. Delores is looking none the worse for wear, but Gutman is dog tired. He needs sleep. He needs to figure things out. The adrenalin from this morning's break has long since been metabolized. He hopes she'll just throw a sheet on the couch and leave him be.

"Well, maybe just a quickie," she says. "You know, a kind of, 'Hello stranger?'"

Gutman knows.

Next morning he's in the shower deciding how safe it is to pick up the key to the safe deposit box. Gutman buried the key in wax, put it in a small cardboard box and covered it with a layer of white rice. It's been sitting ever since in the walk-in freezer of the Happy Dumpling restaurant on Hester Street. He's known the owner, Madam Hu, since he was a kid. All he needs to do is pick up the cardboard box and he's home free. The question is when. He cautions himself to be patient. Maybe, he thinks, he should just lay low for a couple of years. He toys with the idea of heading down to Mexico for some plastic surgery, but even in Mexico it takes dough. And dough is something he is short of at the moment. Delores makes him a breakfast of scrambled eggs and sausage. "Just like home," he tells her.

"You're takin' a chance being here, Dutch," she says. "Don't you think the cops are gonna come knocking on my door before too long?"

Gutman goes to the window, pulls the shade back about half an inch and looks down at the street. His eyes darken, his brow furrows. He walks over to Delores and grabs her wrist. Pulling her close, he says, "Say, sweetheart, you didn't happen to make a call to the cops while I was asleep, did you?"

"You're talking crazy, Dutch. I'd never do that. I'd never rat on you." She yanks free, sits down in an overstuffed chair, and rubbing her wrist, begins to cry.

"Awright, awright," he says. "There are two plain-clothes dicks leanin' on the mailbox across the street. What am I supposed to think?"

"You're supposed to think that maybe comin' here wasn't the smartest thing in the world, Dutch. You're supposed to think how the hell you're going to get out of here without running smack into those two dicks."

He always thought Delores was all glitter and no paste, but maybe he was wrong. He kisses her quickly and takes the back steps to the roof of the apartment building. He crosses from one brownstone to the next un-

til he's at the end of the block, where he shimmies down a copper downspout, crosses Ninth Avenue and is on the C train before he has any idea of where he's going.

He gets off at 168th and looks for a fleabag hotel he thought he remembered in Washington Heights. He gives his name as Amado Guzman, a character he recalls from *Wiseguy*. Looking out of the dingy window in his shabby hotel room, he sees the Harlem River and beyond that the Bronx. He lies down on the double bed and realizes how tired he is. He's got enough dough to stay at the hotel for a couple of weeks, but what comes after that? Does he risk going to Hu's place to pick up the box with the safe deposit key? With eight hundred thousand dollars, he can live like a king. But in what kingdom? The police aren't going to give up. And how long before the bank becomes suspicious? He's been paying the yearly fee for the box through an automatic transfer from an account at another bank in the name of Victor Laszlo. The bills are sent to Laszlo at Gutman's mother's address in Newark. He wonders now if the police are screening the mail.

He dozes off and is startled awake an hour later by the fear that Madam Hu is dead. Or what if he goes to the restaurant and she won't give him the box? What if the restaurant is no longer there? He moves quickly, taking the train to Canal Street. From there he walks over to Hu's. He sees the old woman behind the counter. She doesn't seem to have changed.

"Hello, Madam Hu," Gutman says. "It's me, William."

The old woman's eyes light up. "Yes, yes. All these years. Mr. William. Welcome back."

"The box," he says. "Is it okay?"

"The box? Oh, yes. It's gone."

"Gone?" Gutman asks, sitting down.

"About five summers ago we lost power for several days. Big storm. Unusal. Very hot. We had to throw out food. Everything. When I remembered your box, I checked and it had been thrown away with all of the other things." The old woman gives Gutman a toothless smile and asks if he is hungry.

Gutman sputters, "But, but..." But he can't think of anything to say. And he can't even consider eating. He gets up to leave.

"Sorry," Madam Hu offers.

On the train back to Washington Heights, Gutman decides he'll have to go to the bank and see if he can talk his way into the safe deposit box without a key.

"Laszlow. Laszlow," the bank manager says. "The name sounds so familiar."

Gutman explains that he's lost the key to his safe deposit box.

The manager's eyes grow dark and small. "How so?" he asks.

"What do you mean, 'how so'? I can't find the fucking key."

"No need for that kind of language, Mr. Laszlow. Now, we'll need two types of identification and we'll have to check your signature against the one on file. You under-

stand that the box will have to be drilled and a new lock installed. Of course, you're required to pay for this. It will run you, let's see, one hundred and ninety-five dollars. You'll then be issued two new keys."

Only problem is: Gutman does not have one hundred and ninety-five dollars. "There's money in the box," he says. "Can't I pay you once the box is opened?"

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Laszlow. Our policy is quite clear on this."

Gutman leaves, not knowing what to do or where he wants to go. He'd like to see his mother, but he knows the cops will be casing the joint and will have her phone tapped.

A week goes by with Gutman staying in his hotel room, venturing out only to eat. His money is running out. He calls Libby. "Look sweetheart, my dough is almost gone. I need a new driver's license. Probably a passport. I know a guy who can dummy these up for me. And I need a couple hundred to get into the box. All told about fifteen hundred. Can you front me that?"

"Fifteen hundred. Where am I going to get that kind of dough? Look, Dutch, you know I'd give it to you if I had it."

"I'm in a spot here, doll. Can you borrow it? It'll be paid back ten-fold once I'm in the box. We'll be sitting pretty, you and me."

There was a long pause. "I meant what I said, Dutch. I'm not going to risk it. Getting that money for you puts me in the deal and if I get caught I'll end up in the slammer. I can't do that, not even for you."

Gutman decides to risk it and calls his mother from a telephone booth. They had agreed on a code. He'd call and ask for himself. If things were safe, she'd say, "He'll be home in about an hour." If she felt it wasn't safe, she'd say, "He doesn't live here anymore."

"He doesn't live here anymore," his mother says.

Gutman feels his options slipping away. Contacting Delores again is too risky and there's no way she'd front him the money. Fineman, his old friend from junior college days, is dead. His old mob buddies, if you could call them that, would want too much of a cut.

Out on the street, he walks south toward Central Park. It begins to rain. A bum asks him for change. He says he doesn't have any and the bum calls him a cocksucker.

He dips into the Essex House to get out of the rain. A man in a suit asks, "Can I help you, sir?"

"No," Gutman says. "Just want to wait out the rain."

"I'm afraid not," the suit man says, and he takes Gutman's arm leading him back toward the revolving door.

"Get your hands off me, punk," Gutman says, pulling away his arm. In the blink of an eye, another man, larger than the first, appears and together the two men push Gutman out the door and back into the rain. *Can't afford to get pulled in*, Gutman thinks as he crosses over into the park. The rain has soaked through to his skin and he's shivering. He goes deep into the park, looking for a resting place the police are unlikely to find. He crawls into

some dense brush and spots a man lying beneath a large, flattened cardboard box.

"Hey," Gutman says. "Where'd you get the box?"

The man doesn't move or respond. Gutman gets close and pulls the box down a few inches. "I was just asking about the box," he says. But the man is motionless. Gutman pushes his shoulder with his foot. "Mister?" Nothing.

Gutman bends down and puts his hand on the man's abdomen. He picks up one of the man's arms and tries to find a pulse. After a few seconds, he takes the flattened box, folds it in half and puts it under his arm. He walks north for about ten minutes before he finds the right spot. He lies down and pulls the box over him.

Gutman has trouble falling asleep. These are some of his thoughts: *A power failure and they throw out my box. What rotten luck! What's that they say about the best plans? But what if Madam Hu is lying? What if she got curious, scraped off the rice and saw the key buried in wax? She could have taken it. Lost, my foot. But wait a minute, she doesn't know my signature or which bank to go to; even with the key she couldn't get into the safe deposit box. Gutman begins to shiver in the cold. He's coughing and his nose is stuffed. Could try knocking over a drug store. They might have enough cash around to stake me. Wouldn't be too hard. Na, get caught and they'd send me away for life. Can't risk it. Got to sleep.*

At first light, unsure whether he's slept an hour or not at all and worried he's got a fever, he walks slowly, hands in pockets, along a winding path leading toward the Pond. He sees the flashing lights, the yellow tape surrounding the area where he had taken the cardboard box covering the dead man. Dozens of cops. An ambulance.

"You," yells one of the policemen. "Over here."

Gutman turns as if to run, but he knows better. He turns back, his hands in the air, and heads for the police. The one who yelled at him grabs his arm and takes him to the dead body.

"Know anything about this?"

"Who was he?" Gutman asks.

"We don't have a make on him yet. No identification."

"Saw him there last night. No pulse. He was dead. I took a cardboard box that was covering him. Spotted a wallet a few feet away. Don't know if it was his or not." Gutman throws his wallet on the ground. "Lot of good it does me." As he does this, he knows it won't work. Desperation leads to dumb ideas. They're not going to buy the notion that the dead man is William Gutman. Still, it would be nice if they fucked up and did.

The cop draws his revolver. "Pick it up, punk, and hand it to me."

Gutman does as the policeman asks.

They push him into a squad car and drive the few blocks to the 22nd precinct on 86th Street. It's a century-old horse barn patiently awaiting renovation. He is fingerprinted and it is here that the police discover he's an escaped con named Gutman. The wallet is his. Duh.

Gutman is assigned a public defender. Her name is

Jennifer Weinberg. "Comely," is the word that pops into Gutman's head.

"You're off the hook on the murder charge," Ms. Weinberg tells him a few days later. "Natural causes. Heart attack. In any event, the rain washed away all the fingerprints. You're in for a Class A, so busting out could cost you some extra years. And don't hold your breath waiting for parole. I'll try to work a deal with the prosecutor."

She isn't exactly his type, but he thinks she's attractive and he finds that he's losing himself in her large, grape-colored eyes. And it doesn't hurt that she left one too many buttons unbuttoned on her soft, white blouse. "Can I get my old cell back?" Gutman asks, half serious.

"Look, Dutch, the joint's like a hotel. You got the reservation, but no telling which room you'll get."

"I'm cool," Gutman says. "Let's get this thing rolling."

"You seem anxious to be back in the pen," Ms. Weinberg says.

Gutman stops to consider this. "I suppose I am, Jennifer. To be honest. But only if you promise to visit." What the hell, he thinks. Might as well go for it. She seemed interested and she could be hot, not to mention helpful the next time he breaks out.

Poetry

by JOE LOVE

Joe Love teaches writing and literature in St. Louis on both sides of the Arch. His work has appeared in or is forthcoming from Bangalore Review, From the Depths, Drunk Monkeys, Bellowing Ark, and other journals.

Au Musée

Voices echo off marble and stone
as a pair of invisible women
contemplate Van Gogh,
whisper thoughts on line and colour,
still-lives and self-portraiture,
their steel heels mapping their path,
a dawdling voyage with frequent pause,
the silence the measure of the masterpiece.

They stop before
Quatorze tournesols dans le vase
not thinking they never stopped before
at home before the flowers
whose stems stand beside the path
faces bright and turned to the sun
passed by invisible
a thousand thousand times.

But here their eyes are riveted
to a painting on the wall,
oil on canvas removed from the earth,
flowers more alive than those
dreaming by the road,
dreaming of a pair of eyes
to carry them away.

And the silence of their shoes,
stopped amid the halls,
and the sound of the hearts
both pounding in their breasts,
and the heat from their hands
each encircling the other's,
reveals at last their common love
for what is most rare.

Le Désespéré

The girl with the flame-red hair and
the drooping numb smile hanging low on her chin
and crooked drooling
with eyes glazed and questions cocked
about what makes life so worthless dark
in a world where she says thirteen people rule
everything a human does,

pulls a cigarette from her case
and a lighter from the table
and flicks a flame we see reflected in the coffee
she bought on the Rue St. Martin
with just a little hint of cream and without any sugar
'cause nothing's as sweet as sugar suggests
except perhaps the flame in her hand
she holds like a torch
to light the cosmic Olympian pit
that awaits her up at the top of the hill unlit
and filled with midnight blackened coals
soaked in kerosene and gathered honey
needing a runner born of wings
no one's bred since ancient Greece
thought water air earth and fire
explained the why of everything,

and blows a cloud of blue-white smoke
into the swaying midst of the room
engulfing us all and burning our eyes with questions
puzzled from her jigsaw tongue and we choke
and we laugh with unrequited knowledge
only to find that now she's gone
somewhere down an unknown road
with a torch that only ever flickers
with legs weakened by over exposure
to a life that only the half crazy gifted
can ever even hope to a little understand.

A Proposal of Marriage

by **Lea Tassie**

Lea Tassie grew up in the Peace River district of northern BC. Due to six months of winter and two months poor sledding, she started reading books as soon as she could hang on to one. She has traveled and worked in many places, which may explain why she can't stick to one genre as an author. Her books include humor (about cats), romantic suspense, mainstream and lately, speculative fiction. When she discovered the temperate rainforest that stretches along 1200 miles of the Pacific Coast, from Oregon to Alaska, she quit traveling and settled in for good.

A Proposal of Marriage

WE WALKED UP the driveway beneath the dappled shade of golden locust trees, listening to the drowsy murmuring of bees and cicadas. My twin's high heels wobbled over the gravel as she struggled to keep her balance. Under my boots, the stones ground against one another, squeaking in protest.

"I've made a decision, Cristobal," Marietta said. "I shall marry Aubrey and embrace a tranquil life. He seems gentle and I love his garden. It reminds me of the old fairy tales our parents used to read to us when we were small."

"I thought you came here only to look at my new country. I've never known you to take an interest in tranquility."

"A girl can change her mind. I like Canada. I like the life Aubrey has here, the stillness he has around him." Her gaze followed a green-gold leaf as it drifted down to the driveway. "But I will make him sweep up these messy leaves as they fall."

It's true that Aubrey's place feels like a haven. His house sits on a small rectangle of land at the end of a long, narrow driveway, surrounded by flower gardens and guarded on all sides by tall trees and shrubs. One cannot see the neighboring houses nor hear the noise of traffic on the main road. The lush gardens make even me imagine I might catch a glimpse of elves weaving garlands of flowers under the giant hosta leaves. Except, of course, I do not believe in elves.

"Aubrey shows no signs of wanting a wife."

"How would you know what he wants?" Marietta demanded. "You never look at anything but the cards."

My sister does not like facts which are at odds with her desires. I met Aubrey soon after I immigrated and we

understand each other well enough. I do not know his past history, only that he carries some tragic burden and that his aura of peace was not easily won. "I don't need to look at him. I know Aubrey well now."

I know my sister, too. I spent too much of my life in our tormented country trying to help her reach impossible goals and paying more than I could afford in bribes to get her out of trouble. Finally I fled across the equator and half a dozen borders, hoping to find serenity in this northern rain forest.

Marietta gave me a disbelieving smile. "Suppose I commit an act of patriotism? If I assassinate the president, I'll need a refuge. Aubrey is a kind man; he would feel sorry for me. Besides, I am still attractive. Both of us would benefit."

I suppressed a shudder. "He may not believe in assassination nor that it would be a benefit."

"Don't quibble, Cristobal," she said. "I will convince him it is the only thing to do. Besides, I dream about it every night."

"Does the dream tell you how it will happen? The man who commits such an act will most certainly have fifteen minutes of fame before he dies."

"A woman would have more than fifteen minutes," Marietta said. "And she will not die if no one knows her real name." She tossed her head. "I am truly tempted to do it."

I heard a rustle behind me and glanced over my shoulder, a habit I have not managed to shake, though I have lived in safety for the past two years. But it was only a foraging squirrel and the locust trees receded harmoniously into a gold-green tunnel behind us.

When we came into the front garden, Aubrey was sitting at the wrought iron table. His friend, Prunella, came

out of the house with two decks of cards, a score pad, pencils and a bottle of dandelion wine shining pale gold like the essence of sunlight.

Marietta sat down opposite Aubrey. "Are we going to be partners?"

"Suits me," he said, shoving his cowboy hat to the back of his head. "Saves cutting the cards."

"I wasn't thinking about bridge. I mean real partners. Like getting married."

The sun was shining in my eyes, but I could swear Aubrey went pale.

"You'd have to wash my socks," he said.

At the corner of the house, beneath the wisteria's drooping clusters of pale lilac blooms, bamboo wind chimes clacked with a faintly hollow sound and a small fountain, almost hidden by the giant hostas, whispered liquid music. Ranks of red impatiens and blue bachelor buttons nodded their heads.

Marietta said sharply, "I don't do socks."

A slight movement among the hostas caught my attention. A black jaguar glared from the dim shade provided by a giant leaf. The cat emerged from the lush growth, padded through the impatiens and lay down on the gravel bordering the flowers. Its eyes were the pale yellow of the dandelion wine and the sleek fur glistened in the sunlight.

Marietta glanced at the cat and offered a deck of cards to us. We cut for deal and Prunella won. She dealt and passed.

"I'll be forced to ask for refugee status if you won't marry me," Marietta said to Aubrey, her tone more conciliatory. "I intend to assassinate the president of my country."

"Well now, don't be too hasty," Aubrey said, removing his hat to smooth back his thinning hair. "We'll work something out. Can you make beet pickles?"

"I never learned how to cook," Marietta said, with a demure smile. "I lived with a poet and we dined on iambic pentameter and moonlight. One no trump."

She was going about this entirely the wrong way, as usual. She could easily have lied about the pickles. I glanced at my hand and passed.

Aubrey stared at the jaguar, then his cards, and chewed his bottom lip.

"I make beet pickles all the time," Prunella said to Marietta.

"Two no trump." Aubrey's forehead glistened.

Prunella passed. So did Marietta.

I considered bidding merely to interfere, but it seemed too risky. I might be left in whatever suit I bid and have to play the hand. That could mean going down several tricks and giving Aubrey and Marietta many penalty points. "Pass." I led a card and Aubrey spread the dummy's hand on the table.

"Go get some glasses," Marietta said to Aubrey. "This wine is going to waste."

A growl so soft it was almost inaudible came from the jaguar.

"Listen to that! She's ordering me around and we're not even married yet."

Marietta looked hopeful. "Does that mean you're considering it?"

"Not if you won't wash my socks." Aubrey ambled into the house and came back with two wine glasses.

"Who's not drinking?" Prunella gave me a suspicious look. "Don't tell me you've got a mickey of scotch in your jeans."

"I promise I won't tell you that," I said, and took a trick with my jack of spades. "What I have in my jeans is my own business."

"I'm having a beer," Aubrey said, pulling a tall bottle from his back pocket. "It's Brazilian beer, made by Germans, and bottled in Canada. Which makes me a Renaissance kind of guy."

"I don't drink," Marietta said, taking the last trick and handing me the glass of wine that Prunella had poured for her. "That's one of my saving graces. And I don't care if you're a Renaissance man, Aubrey, you should have bid three no trump, not two. I made an extra trick."

"I didn't have enough points to go to game," he said. "I bet you don't do windows either."

"Windows? Don't you hire people to do windows?"

"Not when I'm married," Aubrey said. "When I'm married, my wife cleans the windows."

Marietta sighed. "You're making this really difficult. I'm seeking a refuge and ease for my soul, not a job. Prunella, is it my deal?"

Prunella nodded and took a delicate sip of wine as she watched Marietta deal.

I glanced toward the jaguar, but he was no longer lying in the sunshine. For a moment, I thought he had gone, but when my eyes adjusted, I saw that he had merely moved into the shade in order to drink from the fountain under the bamboo chimes. "I didn't know you had a cat," I said to Aubrey.

"I don't. No one has a cat. Perhaps he has me."

I glanced back at the fountain but the jaguar had disappeared. Perhaps to his cool lair under the leaves.

Marietta dealt and passed. "Aubrey, I think we should discuss marriage in private. What are you doing tomorrow night?"

"Seven Tibetan monks will be here for dinner."

A yellow jacket landed on the rim of my wine glass, attracted by forbidden sweetness. I blew on him and he staggered to Prunella's side of the table. She swatted at him with the score pad and he came back to me.

I went into the house and, though it took me so long I wondered if someone would notice and comment on it, came back with an ashtray. I sat down and lit a cigarette.

Prunella said, "Cristobal, for heaven's sake, will you stop fooling around and bid? I'm going to sleep here."

"Sorry, but I don't want to share my wine with this small black and yellow person." I blew cigarette smoke

at the wasp and he reluctantly headed for the wisteria. "Two clubs."

"That's a demand bid!" Aubrey said. "You must have a big hand. I'll pass."

"Don't you have any points at all, Aubrey?" Marietta took a tissue from her pocket and carefully cleaned a speck of cigarette ash from the tablecloth.

"You dealt," Aubrey said. "If I don't have anything, it's your fault. And you can't even make beet pickles. Can you make kugel? My mother always made kugel for me."

Prunella said. "Two no trump."

"I can make kugel," Marietta said.

"Are you going to bid or not, Marietta?" I said. "Prunella has a big hand, too."

"That makes a difference," Aubrey said. "What do you put in it?"

"Rice, eggs and raisins. Pass."

"That's not kugel," Aubrey said, "that's rice pudding."

The jaguar, a sinuous flow of muscles, stepped out from under the hosta leaves and came to lie beside Aubrey's feet.

"Three spades," I said.

"How did your mother make kugel?" Marietta asked.

"I don't mind doing it a different way."

"Aubrey, will you bid, please?" I said. It looked as if Prunella and I might have a slam. If she bid three no trump, I'd go to six.

"Potatoes and onions, grated. And eggs, of course. Pass."

"Is that all? Just potatoes and onions?" Marietta said.

"That's not sweet."

"Three no trump," Prunella said, swatting at the yellow jacket again. His darting flight, as he circled the table, betrayed irritation. If he stung the jaguar, we would be in trouble. If he stung Marietta, even bigger trouble.

"It's not supposed to be sweet," Aubrey said.

"If I make it with potatoes and onions," Marietta said, "will you marry me? Pass."

"I'll think about it," Aubrey said. "I'd have to taste the kugel first, of course."

"Six no trump," I said.

"Then we're engaged," Marietta said. "I know you'll like my kugel."

"What are you doing, Cristobal?" Prunella said. "You didn't even ask for aces."

"There are some risks I don't mind taking. It's your lead, Marietta."

"You mean I'm playing this?" Prunella demanded.

"Oh, yes, of course, I was the first to bid no trump."

Marietta led the ace of hearts.

Aubrey moaned, then swallowed the last of his beer and put the bottle down firmly on the side table. "You're not supposed to lead an ace against a slam contract."

Marietta's bottom lip quivered. "You're not supposed to yell at your fiancée for playing the wrong card. I'd cancel the whole deal if it wasn't a matter of life and death. I suppose you would enjoy seeing me executed."

I laid my hand down for the dummy, saw Prunella smile and knew we were going to make the contract.

"It's okay with me if you cancel," Aubrey said. "This marriage thing was your idea in the first place."

"I won't make you any kugel."

"Well, don't be too hasty. It's a long time since I had kugel."

"A whole week, at least," Prunella muttered.

"I take it we're engaged again," Marietta gazed at her hand.

"What should I lead now?"

"You're not allowed to ask your partner for direction," I said.

"You change the rules every time we play." Marietta led a small heart.

Prunella took the trick in her hand and led a spade.

"Would you like a drink?" Aubrey said to Marietta.

"There's a jug of iced tea in the refrigerator."

Marietta rose. "Cristobal, play my hand for me. I'll get the tea."

I slid into her chair and picked up her cards, hoping I wouldn't be tempted to cheat and make a bad play. I needn't have worried; her hand was worthless.

When Marietta returned, so did the wasp. I lit another cigarette in an attempt to defend myself against its bad temper.

"Aubrey, I don't want a real marriage, just the legality. I want to live here, where I'll be safe," Marietta said. "Does that make you feel better?"

Aubrey put his cards down. "You don't want me? You just want the convenience? Your words are wounding. I may cry."

The jaguar rose and stared at Marietta. He was panting.

"It's your turn to play a card, Aubrey," Prunella said.

"And if you don't hurry up, you'll have another cause for tears."

Marietta reached over to pat Aubrey's hand and I managed to knock her glass of iced tea across the table. Prunella grabbed the cards; I grabbed the wine glasses. Marietta scrunched the table cloth into a ball. "Oh, this is terrible," she said. "I hate messes."

"You can put the table cloth in the laundry room," Aubrey said.

"That little room you wouldn't let me see when you showed me through the house?" asked Marietta. "I've been dying to look in there."

"It's only a laundry room," Aubrey said. "There is nothing to see."

Prunella put the cards back on the table. "I can't remember what was in the dummy hand, Cristobal. Can you?"

When Marietta came back, her face was pale. "I never saw such a stinking mess in my life. I suppose your closet is in the same condition?" She slumped into her chair. "I don't think I will marry you after all."

"There were only four cards left," I said. "The queen of diamonds, for one."

"Do you mean it's all over between us?" Aubrey said. He looked at his empty beer bottle as if hoping it might refill itself.

"If it was the queen, then I can claim," Prunella said. "We made six no trump, doubled and redoubled."

I couldn't remember Aubrey or Marietta doubling the contract, and I'd have noticed if Prunella redoubled, but she always tallies the score and I have found it wiser not to question her.

I picked up my glass. The wasp floated in the last inch of sunshine wine, his wings too wet to lift him to safety. I stuck my finger beneath him so he would have something to stand on and took him over to the wisteria, where he crawled onto a branch and began shaking his wings and cleaning himself.

"I'm leaving," Marietta said. "I feel a migraine coming on."

"I'll walk out to the street with you," Prunella said. She sighed. "I'm so disappointed. I was looking forward to a long, stimulating afternoon of bridge."

"So was I. And looking forward to getting a husband, too," Marietta said. "But men can be so uncooperative. Don't you agree?"

The two women disappeared beneath the golden locust trees, their voices fading. Then came the thud of car doors closing and the sound of engines starting. Aubrey went into the house and came back with another Renaissance beer. I tipped the last of the dandelion wine onto the grass for the yellow jacket and poured two fingers from the mickey of scotch I had in my jeans. Now that Marietta had taken the car, I would have to walk to my apartment, but I have endured worse.

"Was Marietta serious about marrying me?" Aubrey asked.

"She's serious about everything."

The jaguar padded over to the fountain for another drink of water, then disappeared under the hosta leaves.

Aubrey gazed up at the canopy of blue sky for a couple of minutes. "Perhaps I should go visit my brother in Alberta."

"She's flying south on Wednesday. Only three more days."

He turned his gaze to me. "When you went into the house for the ashtray, did you happen to go into the laundry room?"

"I'll clean up the mess."

He smiled. "I was surprised to see that most of my compost pile had decided to move indoors. It rarely does that." Then he was serious again. "Do you think Marietta will really assassinate the president?"

"She's capable of it. But they may not let her back into the country."

"What will you do if that happens?"

"Perhaps I can go to Alberta with you."

I put my feet up on a wrought iron chair and leaned back, letting the sun bake the knots of tension from my muscles. The wasp came to examine my scotch, rejected it and dove on the dandelion wine in the grass. I heard a soft rumbling purr, but could not decide whether it was the jaguar or the happy breath of a now peaceful afternoon.

M and N

by NETTIE FARRIS

Nettie Farris lives in Floyds Knobs, Indiana and is the author of Communion (Accents Publishing). In 2011, she received the Kudzu Poetry Prize. Her work has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize. Poems in the m and n series have been published previously in Slow Trains, Limestone, Pegasus, and Bigger than They Appear: an Anthology of Very Short Poems.

1. Film rights to the m and n poems have been sold. Statement that Johnny Depp will play m merely speculative.
2. Dear M: I regret to inform you that Sugar Spoon has been deleted from the script. Seems she is simply too sweet to be believable. n
3. Dear M: You say that Sugar Spoon was furious and hurled a book at you yelling, "who the hell is n?"
4. Dear M: The book she threw was *In Search of Lost Time* by Marcel Proust—all 7 volumes.
5. Dear M: Did she throw them in chronological order, or randomly? n
6. Dear M: *In Search of Lost Time* is Sugar Spoon's favorite book; she's read it at least 7 times.
7. Dear M: Why do you insist that Marilyn Monroe would not be right for the role of n (even if she were alive)? n

Colourful Dreams



by Dwarakanathan Ravi

Dwarakanathan Ravi resides in Chennai, India. A freelance photographer and budding writer, he has seen his poems published in Wordweavers India (2013) and The Brown Boat (2014), The Bamboo Hut Press (2014), Intercontinental Anthology of Poetry on Universal Peace and Love(2014) and some of his artworks have appeared in Bare Hands Poetry (2014) Contemporary Literary Review India (2014), Blue Monday Review (2014), World Haiku Association (2014), Daily Haiga (2014), The 119th World Haiku Association Haiga Contest (2014) and Cattails (2014).

Bible Verses

by **Miranda Stone**

Miranda Stone's work is strongly influenced by the setting and culture of the Appalachian Mountains. Her fiction and poetry have been published in numerous print and online journals, including Pithead Chapel, Prole, and The First Line. Her short story "The Confession" was published in the anthology Southern Gothic: New Tales of the South. She lives in Virginia and can be reached at <http://AuthorMirandaStone.com>

Bible Verses

I SIT AT the kitchen table, my arms rigid, hands clasped before me. The muscles along my back and shoulders scream in protest, but I refuse to move. I keep my gaze lowered; I have stared at the vinyl placemat for so long that I can see the woven pattern behind my lids when I close my eyes.

My father stirs in the chair across from mine. The collar of his dress shirt is loose, and he has rolled the sleeves halfway up his forearms. "It's after nine, June," he says. "Are you ready to recite the verse?"

He tries to hide a yawn behind his pursed lips, but I know he's growing tired. We have been through this evening ritual numerous times before, but I've never lasted this long. The physical discomfort and mind-numbing boredom always force me to give in, but tonight I grit my teeth against the pain running like a hot current up my spine. My full bladder aches, and I press my thighs together.

The grandfather clock in our living room chimes once: half past nine. Father releases a sigh and folds his arms over his chest. A shadow of stubble darkens his jaw line. "You're being especially willful tonight. Wouldn't it be easier to say the verse so you can go to bed?"

"I told you I was sorry." My voice is low, and he leans closer to hear me.

"I don't want an apology. I want you to say the verse. Ephesians 5:22."

The words rest on my tongue, and I almost let them spill forth. My upper body trembles under the strain of being held still for hours, and I want nothing more than to leave the table, attend to my bodily functions, and crawl into bed. I bite the tip of my tongue to stop myself from speaking.

"Why did you disobey me?" he asks. "You are fourteen years old. You know better."

The situation is so absurd, I want to laugh. My schoolmates complain of being grounded for breaking curfew, for sneaking cigarettes, or having boyfriends over when their parents aren't home. And I'm sitting in this chair, held fast by the dogged will of my father, all because I wore jeans to school instead of my plain dress.

He wasn't supposed to find out. For weeks now, I had mustered up the courage to defy his rules. After he left for work in the morning, I slipped into a pair of jeans I'd bought at the thrift store with my lunch money. I didn't have the nerve to don a t-shirt or sneakers, so I wore a blouse and my sandals (with no heel or open toe). Every day when I got home from school, I hurried to my room and changed into a dress. The first few times, I felt a surge of trepidation as I shoved the jeans in the back of my closet, and then headed to the kitchen to make dinner.

Sitting across from him at the table, I was shocked he couldn't detect the change in me. I felt like Eve in the garden, quaking under the eye of God. I became habituated to my fear of being caught. When I pulled those jeans over my thighs this morning, my face grew warm, and my scalp prickled with excitement. A simple article of clothing embodied my separate life, out of Father's reach.

When I walked home from the bus stop and saw his car parked in our driveway this afternoon, my stomach roiled. My underarms grew damp with sweat. Donovan, a boy in my grade who lived two doors down from me, peered at my face.

"June, what's wrong?" he asked. "You look sick."

"I feel sick." Pressing a clammy hand to my forehead, I tried to conjure up a plan to save myself. Every lie I invented sounded flimsy to my mind, and I knew my father would see right through them.

"Might have been those chicken nuggets they served for lunch." Donovan grimaced at the memory. "I swear I'm packing a sandwich from now on."

"I have to go. I'll see you tomorrow." Without waiting for his response, I strode down my driveway.

"Hope you feel better," he called after me.

As I started up the porch steps, Father opened the front door. He stared at my faded jeans; his expression unreadable. "I'm sorry," I began, but his eyes locked with mine and flashed a warning. I hurried past him into the house.

The door closed behind us with a click. I dropped my bag next to the living room sofa and turned to face him. He rubbed the back of his neck like it ached. "Go to your room and take those off. Then bring them to me."

I knew better than to argue. In my bedroom, I changed into a plain gray skirt. Holding the jeans to my chest as I went back down the hall to Father, I fingered the soft denim still warm from my skin.

He stood in the kitchen with a large pair of scissors. Wordlessly, he extended his hand. I didn't watch as he cut the fabric into ribbons. When he was finished, he pointed to the mess at his feet. "Clean this up, then go sit at the table."

I count the clock's chimes: ten now. A steady tremor begins in my shoulders and courses down my arms. Father regards me across the table through half-closed lids. I hear his stomach rumble in protest; we never ate dinner. My bladder is so full it makes my entire midsection ache. I have to wonder at his resolve; he appears tired but not uncomfortable.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I say through my teeth, "Ephesians 5:22. Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord."

I slump in my chair, and he begins to applaud in his slow, mocking way. "Well done, June. How does your pride taste as you swallow it down?"

I manage to prop myself into a sitting position. Bracing my hands against the tabletop, I test my legs, making sure they'll hold my weight. "You are not my husband."

He raises an eyebrow at my show of defiance. "No, but I am your father, and until you marry, you will submit to me."

My hands clench into fists at my sides. "Did you make Mom do this if she didn't obey your every command? Is that why she left?"

It's an unspoken rule in our house that we don't discuss my mother. He slams his hand down on the table hard enough to rattle the salt and pepper shakers. "Your mother left because she is a selfish whore." His rage causes his cheeks to flush and forces beads of sweat from his temples. "Now get out of my sight."

I climb into bed and release a moan as my muscles relax against the mattress. I'm exhausted but unable to sleep. My eyes flutter open as soon as I close them, and I consider putting a quarter over each lid. It would be comforting to fold my hands over my chest and pretend I'm dead.

Sometimes I dream that my father's barely contained fury has transferred to me like a contagion. I stand be-

fore him and scream the foulest words imaginable. The obscenities rush from me in a muddy stream. Even when I cup my hands over my mouth, they keep gushing forth. In these dreams my father's feet are rooted to the floor; he can't move, can't speak as I call him a cocksucker and a motherfucker, but his bulging eyes let me know he can hear.

The following morning I stand with Donovan at the bus stop. Other neighborhood kids huddle closer to the road. If we're lucky, they ignore us. Donovan moved to our area this past winter. Newbies never have an easy time at our school, but his experience has been more grueling than most. Though he's fourteen like me, he doesn't look a day over twelve. I'm not tall, yet I tower above him.

He gives my simple navy blue dress a sidelong glance. "Back to wearing dresses?"

"I guess so." I stare at the hills to our west, their rounded tops shrouded in early morning fog.

"You feeling better?" He straightens his glasses and shifts under the weight of his backpack.

"I'm okay." I don't want to talk about myself anymore, so I bring up the book report our English teacher assigned us to write.

On the bus, Jessica Hammond, a sophomore cheerleader, snickers from the seat behind mine. "Looks like her grandma is dressing her again," she mutters to her friend.

Donovan pretends not to hear the remark and talks louder about the frog dissection we'll be performing for our Biology lab. I'm so grateful, I could throw my arms around him. I wonder what his reaction would be. Would he blush and sputter? Would he push me away?

Donovan and I stick together at school as though we're tethered by an invisible thread. If we were higher on the social totem pole, other students might start rumors about us. At lunch, he divides the slice of chocolate cake his mother made and offers me half. My Algebra teacher is working as the cafeteria monitor today. As she passes our table, her stare drops to my dress, and then to Donovan sitting across from me. Her grandmotherly face softens, and I imagine she looks the same way when seeing pictures of starving kids in Africa. Her helpless pity makes my face grow hot.

Walking home from school with Donovan, I see that my father is still at work. As a self-employed accountant, he keeps late hours; his early arrival yesterday was a fluke. Donovan must notice the empty driveway, too. "Want to come to my house?" he asks. I furrow my brow at him, and he adds, "My mom is home."

I've spoken to Donovan's mom only once, when the family first moved to our neighborhood. Father instructed me to bake a batch of sugar cookies, and then we walked down the street to introduce ourselves. Donovan's mom, a petite brunette with a kind smile, thanked me profusely for the cookies and invited us inside.

"We can't stay," Father said. "We need to go to church

this evening. Speaking of which, if you haven't already found a local church to attend—"As he droned on about the fellowship and sound Christian principles our church embraced, Donovan's mom stiffened. Her smile evaporated, and before Father was finished with his spiel, she inched the storm door halfway closed.

"Not very friendly, is she?" Father remarked as we headed home.

Today Donovan's mom welcomes me into the house as if I'm any other teenager and not the daughter of a fanatical Bible thumper. "It's great to see you again, June," she says. She wears a baggy t-shirt and leggings. Her feet are bare.

"Thank you, Mrs. Howard."

She waves a hand. "Please, call me Sharon. Would you two like a glass of lemonade?"

I politely decline, and Donovan leads me to his room upstairs. I hesitate on the landing, waiting for Mrs. Howard's objection, but she only retreats into the living room. I hear an afternoon talk show playing on the television.

"Coming?" Donovan asks, and I bound after him.

The floor of his room is covered with discarded clothes and comic books. The bed is unmade, and a stale odor of pizza hangs in the air. "Sorry for the mess," he says, throwing his backpack into the closet. I linger by the door. The room is small, with room only for the full bed, a desk, and a dresser. Donovan nods toward his bed. "Have a seat."

We sit together on the edge of the bed, and he grabs several comic books from the floor. "These are my favorite," he says. As he flips the pages and describes the characters inside, I spot a telescope in the back of his open closet.

"Wow, you have a telescope."

Donovan glances at it and nods. "It's just a beginner scope, but I can see Jupiter and Saturn, and the Orion Nebula with it. You should come over one night and check it out."

I let out a snort. "I don't think my father would allow that."

Donovan blinks several times, and then comprehension dawns on his face. "Oh, okay." He looks around the room as though seeing it through my eyes. Then he tosses the comic books on his bed. "You want to go back outside?"

On his front porch, we shuffle our feet and look everywhere but at each other. The sky is overcast, and I hear a rumble of thunder in the distance. "Watch this," Donovan says. He makes his way to the azalea bushes lining the front of the house, their pink and white blossoms in full bloom. A fat bumblebee moves from one flower to the next, gathering pollen. Donovan leans close to inspect the bee, and a grin breaks out on his face. He glances my way to make sure I'm watching, then cups his hands around the bee.

My eyes widen. "You're going to get stung!"

The bee buzzes between his palms. It sounds furious. Donovan holds it out to me. "Here, take it."

I step backward. "No way."

He rolls his eyes. "Stop being such a girl."

The words abrade me like burs. I take a deep breath and convince myself that the bee is harmless, or else Donovan wouldn't be able to hold onto it. Extending my hands, I place them over his fingers. He gives me an expectant look, and I nod. As his fingers open, I clasp my cupped palms tighter around them until the fuzzy insect is in my grasp. Its buzzing grows louder, and I brace myself for a sting, but it only bounces from one palm to the next, seeking escape.

"Why isn't it stinging me?" I ask.

"I'll show you. Make a little space between your thumb and index finger, so it will try to get out that way. When it does, take a look at it." I do as he says, and when the bee burrows its head into the crevice between my fingers, I study it. "Do you see that yellow dot in the center of its head?" Donovan asks.

I peer at the bee and spot a pale yellow circle between its eyes. "I see it."

"The bees with the yellow dot don't sting."

I let out a delighted laugh. "I never knew that." I open my hands and release the exasperated bee. "Now why don't they teach us interesting stuff like that in Biology class, instead of making us dissect frogs?" A drop of rain strikes my left cheek, and I lift my face to the sky. "Storm's moving in."

Donovan draws in a breath to speak, but he sees something over my shoulder that makes him press his lips together.

"What's wrong?" I turn and see my father's car idling at the end of our driveway. He is standing beside it, hands on his hips, paying no heed to the raindrops dotting his nice suit. My knees buckle, and I grab Donovan's forearm to steady myself.

"June, get over here right now," Father shouts over the drumming rain. He doesn't wait for me to obey before he climbs back into the car and maneuvers it down the driveway.

I swallow hard, but the lump in my throat doesn't go away. "I have to go."

"Why is he so angry?" Donovan's voice is low, as if Father, now standing on our front porch and glowering at us, might overhear. I shake my head, not trusting myself to speak. "Thanks for inviting me over. I had a good time." I speed walk down the road toward my house. The heavy rain strikes my skin, but I hardly feel it. I'm too preoccupied imagining the punishment Father will dream up for me this evening.

Father runs both hands through his hair, mussing it carelessly. Still he maintains control, aware that Donovan continues to watch us from his driveway. I glance over my shoulder at my friend and give him a small wave, hoping that will send him indoors. But he doesn't budge. His boyish features are etched with worry.

I stop halfway down my drive and look at Father again. His hands twist around the wrought-iron porch railing, and from where I stand, I can see his white knuckles.

I wonder if he will hit me once we're alone inside. He has never raised a hand to me before, but now I wish for the blows.

"First Corinthians 6:9, June," Father calls. A slow smile pulls at his lips as he looks in Donovan's direction. "Recite it."

I know it well. On the rare occasion I dare to mention my mother, Father is quick to end the conversation with that one verse. *Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind.*

Donovan has inched toward our house and is now close enough to hear my father's voice. I realize Father wants me to recite the verse so I can brand myself a whore with my own words. My skin flushes so hot, I feel like I'm burning up with a fever. I think of how my mother packed her bags three years ago while I was at school and Father was at work. When I got home that day, I found the note she left him: *You're a monster. I hate you.*

I pull at the collar of my dress hard enough to send the front buttons popping loose. Father's mouth drops open as I shrug out of the sleeves, revealing the plain white bra I wear.

I yank down the dress and kick it away from me, leaving only my slip to cover my underwear. I hold out my arms and slowly turn so he and the rest of the neighborhood can get a good look. Donovan stares in disbelief, and his expression makes me laugh.

"June!" Father shouts my name like a warning. I whirl around to face him.

"Ephesians 5:25." I scream with enough force to shred my voice. "Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it."

I let out a whoop like a war cry, throwing my hands above my head. Breaking into a run, I make an aimless loop around the maple tree in the front yard, still hollering as I head toward the back of the house. I pass my fa-

ther on the porch, expecting him to give chase. He could easily catch me. But I discover that he is now a replica of the man in my dreams. He is apoplectic, eyes so wide I can see the white area all around his irises, and yet he is rooted to the spot, unable to stop me.

I Planted my Garden

by JOAN MCNERNY

Joan McNerney's poetry has been included in numerous literary magazines such as Seven Circle Press, Dinner with the Muse, Blueline, Spectrum, three Bright Spring Press Anthologies and several Kind of A Hurricane Publications. She has been nominated three times for Best of the Net. Poet and Geek recognized her work as their best poem of 2013. Four of her books have been published by fine small literary presses and she has three e-book titles.

I planted my garden
on the wrong side
of the moon, forgetting
tides of ocean
lunar wax wane.

Only madness
was cultivated
there underground -
tubular roots,
corpulent veins.

Flowers called,
despair gave off
a single fruit...

I ate it.
My laughter
becoming harsh -
my eyes grew
oblique.

The Row of Beach Huts



by Shelley Chapman

Shelley Chapman has worked as a child practitioner for over 15 years. But she's always had arty ways about her: Along with admiring and collecting quirky antiques, Shelley creates bespoke jewellery. She enjoys walks in the countryside and staying in the quaint cottages to be found around Southwold in Suffolk, UK. Shelley took to photography when she realised the beautiful things she saw needed to be captured and shared. You can more of her pictures on Flickr, under [shelley.chapman53](#).

The Old Man

by Howard Russell

Howard is 58, married for 35 years (to the same woman!) with one child (age 27) and one grandchild (5). Originally from New York, he's lived in Arizona since 1981. He has eclectic tastes and varied interests, but has been an avid reader/writer most of his life. At age 55, he decided it was time to get serious and started taking classes at the Community College level, where he was introduced to the most terrifying challenge of all, the dreaded workshop. Fortunately, everyone else was just as scared, and the professors were most accommodating, which is to say they didn't kill anyone right away. Whether from personal experience or general observation of the general human condition (particularly of family, friends, and co-workers who won't mind seeing themselves in print so long as the names are changed to protect the potentially embarrassed) his goal is to write and publish poetry and fiction that points out human folly through friction.

The Old Man

HE SHUFFLED ALONG, his faded-blue hat drooping down over his forehead, mirroring his stooped shoulders. The stained t-shirt hung like a shroud over his stomach, long enough to conceal the neglected, rolling folds of his abdomen. The hideous yellow checkered shorts exposed way too many varicose veins, the matching socks disappearing into his untied canvas tennis shoes. A closer look revealed the reason, swollen ankles, probably gout.

Stanley watched as the old man walked purposefully, if slowly, towards the door to the post office. He was there every Saturday, a routine he'd maintained for the last six years, though he'd grown noticeably older the last three months. Stanley remembered Mr. Ballentine as dignified and personable, wrinkled and weathered, but sturdy. This new look evinced a sadness that he couldn't shake. Is this what's in store for all of us, he thought, to grow suddenly old and increasingly feeble? Putting his thoughts aside, Stanley strode past Ballentine and got to the door several Parkinson's-sized steps ahead of him. Holding it open, he pasted a smile on his face and said, "Good morning, Mr. Ballentine. Nice to see you today."

Ballentine lifted his eyes from the ground, "Thank you Sidney."

"Stanley," he corrected.

"Stanley. Yes, of course it is. Stanley. A fine name. Thank you Stanley."

Then his eyes looked down again, and he duck-walked past Stanley, through the open entrance, towards

the row of post office boxes beyond. Stanley followed him inside and headed for his workbench. Glancing back, he shivered; the long rows of neat, rectangular doors looked like a mailbox mausoleum, a place where letters and lives met their untimely end. Stanley shook his head to rid it of the disturbing image, then turned and walked quickly and quietly away.

It took nearly two full minutes for Ballentine to make it to his mailbox, against the far, back wall. He stood for another long minute before withdrawing the worn key from his pocket. Turning it over and over in his hand, he ran his fingers over the worn teeth, dulled to the point where they no longer scratched him when he did so. Finally, he inserted it in the keyhole and opened the box. Inside, there were three solicitations from African ministries requesting urgent help for hapless refugees, along with pictures of distended bellies and cleft palates plastered across each one. A post card announced an offering from Lowe's, 0% interest for 18 months on purchases exceeding \$500. Then there was the bill from the Postal Service for the next six months rental fee, \$32.00 if paid by month's end, otherwise the box would be sealed until the fee is paid.

The letter he hoped for, longed for, wasn't there... again. He placed all four items in the nearby trash bin, re-locked the empty box and returned the key to his pocket. As he hobbled back to his car, his eyes resumed their study of the floor. He passed by Gladys, cleaning the glass of the front door, but failed to return her greeting.

He was lost once more in his private sadness.

The beach had always been her favorite place as a girl. All through her childhood, and often during her struggles to become an adult, Sheila sought the soothing solitude of the ocean's shore. Sand castles gave way to sun tans, and romance novels were replaced with easels and paintbrushes. The canvas captured her spirit, sometimes soaring above the waves, like a seagull surfing a gentle breeze, sometimes tossed and tumbled like so much flotsam on an angry tide.

Marriage, divorce, a flurry of jobs that came and went like a parade of insincere lovers, all found their way onto her collages. Pulsating reds and horn rimmed purples swirled around a nexus of hurricane gray tears. She lost herself in her abstracts, which afforded her momentary relief from her loneliness and despair.

At first, her parents were supportive, telling her 'this too shall pass.' The clichés never did much for her. She needed some constancy, and their unconditional love kept her from drowning in her own misery. Still, over time, she gradually put more distance between herself and her parents, especially her dad. He offered her love, but what she needed was his understanding.

"You just have to gut it out, is all," he said, when her boss at job number three tried to seduce her. It was evident that sex was the price for advancement, and protests fell on deaf ears. She'd filed a formal complaint with HR when the same man groped her in the conference room. There were no witnesses of course, and it came down to her word against his. Seniority carried the day, a clean sweep under the corporate rug. She was subsequently passed over for two promotions, promotions she was imminently qualified for.

Sheila quit three weeks later.

To say she was luckier at love, where sex was actually appropriate, would be an unfounded exaggeration. She wasn't unattractive. No, that wasn't her problem. Blonde, with piercing blue eyes, sufficiently toned and tanned, she had no trouble attracting men. They just kept getting things mixed up, sex first, love and friendship later. She thought John was different, and after just six months, they eloped to Vegas to avoid the cost of a large wedding. In hindsight, it was a good thing. She'd have felt guilty as hell forcing her parents to pay for a lavish wedding that lasted eighteen months. Upon discovering affair number two, she left John and filed for divorce. How was she to know he was a serial romantic, emphasis on the serial part?

More and more, she found herself at the beach, art supplies in hand, transforming the waves and clouds and sea birds into homophobic demons. It seemed she was painting with Neptune's trident instead of the soft, supple bristles of her assorted brushes. Jagged lines and sharp edges defined her work; sinister skies and wind tossed seagulls presided over beaches eroded by the constant mauling of furious breakers.

One time, her parents came to LA for a visit, straying from their comfortable confines in Arizona. Upon seeing

paintings displayed on her living room wall, they shook their heads in disapproval.

"These are so dark, dear," her Mother opined. "Depressing. This isn't you! Where are the little hearts and bunnies and sunsets you used to draw for us?"

"Now, Mildred, let her be," her Father said, attempting to ease the tension. "These are fine paintings, Sheila, though I have to admit they do seem a little stark. How's the new job coming?"

The conversation deteriorated into the same polite rhetoric she'd long grown accustomed to. Her brother was doing very well, thank you very much, and had just won another sales award. The Johnson's across the street had a new Cadillac, and no one knew how they could afford to purchase a brand new car every other year. The summer was terribly hot again, and they knew they should move to Northern Arizona or Southern California to get away from it, but then they'd have to make all new friends and how could they just up and move and sell their home of twenty-nine years? No, they'd hold on to it and pass it along with the good china and their extensive collection of Time-Life classic books.

Sheila never asked them to visit her apartment after that, nor did they ever again express a desire to do so.

He parked the car in the garage. Pressing the remote on the dashboard, the door squealed closed behind him. The prison-stripe lines of light from the air vent on the wall fell across the hood. The radiator clicked and hissed as the tired engine cooled down. He really didn't want to go inside. He didn't want to walk down the long hallway filled with cracked and faded photographs. He didn't dare take them down, yet he couldn't stand to look at them anymore. Since his wife died, a thin film of dust had accumulated, but he couldn't bring himself to wipe it off; he might have to see what lay behind the glass.

Glancing around in the semi-darkness, his eyes landed on the toy rocking horse perched on top of the storage closet. The red and blue paint was faded and cracked, and one of the white streamers that served as its ears was missing. For just a moment, he pictured his daughter rocking back and forth, back and forth, her long, silken hair swinging in rhythm to those white nylon strings, her smile ear to ear as she pretended to be a rodeo star. He found himself humming the lyrics of "Rhinestone Cowboy," thinking how he and Mildred had such high hopes for their little girl.

He opened the car door and swung his legs out. Grabbing the roof of the car with both hands, he lifted himself to a standing position. He grunted as his sore ankles bore the full measure of his weight. He made his way through the utility room, down the hallway past the family photos and into the kitchen, where he put up some hot water for tea. While the water came to a boil, he prepared the cup, adding a drop of lemon from the refrigerator, a teaspoon of real sugar, and a fresh tea bag. He waited and watched as the bubbles formed at the bottom of the pot, little ones

at first, like tiny blackheads clinging for dear life. Soon, they streamed up to the surface in long columns, playing follow the leader in tornado formation. In the shortest of eternities, they were roiling the surface, a great tsunami throwing off steaming clouds of moisture. He turned the burner off, lifted the pot and carefully filled his cup, the sugar and lemon instantly disappearing into the swirling water. The contents gradually turned yellowish brown as he stirred. He pressed the tea bag to the side of the cup with a spoon to squeeze out the last few drops. Finally, he removed both tea bag and spoon, depositing them in the sterile sink before walking to the kitchen table.

There, sitting neatly before him, was a sheaf of stationary and a matching pile of envelopes. He picked up the pen that lay next to them, grabbed a single sheet off the top, and began writing.

"Dear Sheila..."

"When you get a chance, Stanley, clean out box 20177," the new shift supervisor said, "guy hasn't paid his rent, and it's been more than thirty-one days."

"What should I do with it?" Stanley asked.

"Mail it to his last known address," he replied, "and send it postage due."

Stanley walked down the aisle behind the mailboxes, noting how they all looked like indistinguishable pigeon holes in some ancient, roll top desk. He made it to the 20100's and searched for 77, staring sadly at the name punched into the plastic ribbon on the box, 'Ballentine.' Within, there were thirty-one items, mostly junk mail and bills, including several closure notices from the post office announcing the pending action if payment was not received immediately. He stood there, sorting through it all, unsurprised that Mr. Ballentine had chosen not to renew, based on the useless junk he held in his hands. Then, near the middle of the pile, he found a hand addressed letter. Printed neatly, it was from a Sheila Ballentine-Styles, to 'Mr. William R. Ballentine.' It was heavy, requiring additional postage. Something told him that this was important, so he made the decision not to mail it 'postage due', as instructed.

He would deliver it to Mr. Ballentine himself.

He looked up the address, then placed the remaining mail, including the closure notices, into a large gray envelope. He took it up front, had Gladys stamp it 'postage due,' along with the amount to be collected, and placed it in the outgoing mail satchel. She remembered Mr. Ballentine and commented that he looked so old and bent the last time she had seen him.

"Did he die?" she asked.

"I don't know," Stanley replied, quietly slipping Sheila's letter into his back pocket, careful not to fold, spindle or mutilate it.

"Boss just asked me to clean it out and mail the contents to him, and I'm doing what I'm told."

"Still, it seems a shame. I think I'll miss him!"

Stanley didn't feel much like conversing today. He,

too, would miss the old man—had missed him the last few Saturdays—and was hoping Gladys' suggestion that he'd died was premature.

The trip to 1618 E 5th Drive in Tempe didn't take very long. Though Ballentine mostly came by car, Stanley imagined that a younger Bill Ballentine could have walked it in under twenty minutes. The house itself was unremarkable; a faded beige exterior with a single car garage. The lawn was desert landscaped, as were most of the homes on the block, and as such was easily kept neat and tidy.

Stanley pulled in the driveway and parked. Pulling the letter from his back pocket, he smoothed out the wrinkles as best he could and walked to the front door. He rang the bell several times, then knocked loudly, in case Mr. B's hearing had begun to fail.

No one answered.

"Mr. Ballentine's not home," came a woman's voice from the street behind him.

Turning around, he saw an older woman pushing a walker, the kind with a seat and a saddle bag for personal belongings on the front. Before he could ask, she spoke again.

"Ambulance came by two days ago. A nice man in an EMT uniform came by and asked me if he had any next of kin. I told him I thought he had a daughter, but I didn't know her name or where she lived. He thanked me and told me that if anyone came looking for him, they were taking him to St. Luke's. Are you a relative?"

"No," Stanley said. "I'm just a friend dropping off some of his mail. Did you say St. Luke's? The one on Mill Avenue, just south of Broadway?"

"Only one I know of," she said.

"Thank you Mrs...?"

"Johnson. Irma Johnson. If you see him, tell him that we're worried sick about him and hope he comes home soon!"

"Yes, Ma'am," Stanley said courteously.

He waited 'till she was out of sight around the corner before trying the door knob. To his surprise, it turned and the door swung inward. He stepped inside and closed it quietly behind him. The lights were off, but there was enough sunlight streaming in for him to make out the living room and kitchen. Intending to leave the letter on the kitchen table, he walked down the quiet hallway. There were pictures on the wall covered with dust, but he could make them out; they were of Mr. Ballentine and what must have been his wife and daughter. He was quite handsome in the family portraits, and the young woman who most certainly was Sheila was a knockout. He nearly tripped over a hassock for staring at her picture, instead of watching where he was going. Putting his hand out to the nearest wall to steady himself, he saw the handset to the wall phone hanging silently, almost touching the floor. He picked it up by the chord and placed it back in its cradle.

He looked at the kitchen table next. It was covered with crumpled papers, as was the floor around one of the chairs. He picked one of them up and smoothed it out. 'Dear Sheila,' it began. He picked another, and then another. They were all unfinished letters to his daughter. He focused again on the table and saw the overturned tea cup, the liquid still drying on the surface. Next to it was a pill bottle and another sheet of paper, this one smooth and flat.

'Dearest Sheila, I'm sorry,' was all it said.

He hurried to his car, googling the address to St. Luke's as he walked.

He expected to be turned away at the intensive care unit, since he wasn't related and had no legitimate reason to visit the patient. Nevertheless, the nurse was glad someone—anyone—had shown up to sit there and keep him company. Ballentine was hooked to monitors and drip lines that softly whirred and beeped as they delivered fluids from three hanging latex bags. His skin was very pale and jaundiced. If it weren't for the slight movement he made when he breathed, Stanley might have thought he was dead after all.

Unsure what to do, he spoke softly, telling the man with the failing heart that both Gladys and Irma Johnson had asked about him. He explained that the post office required him to clean out the box and send him the contents, but he didn't want the letter from one Sheila Ballentine-Styles to go astray, so he'd brought it personally.

When Ballentine didn't stir, Stanley got up and started tucking the letter under the sleeping man's hand, but thought better of it. Instead, he sat back down and very slowly, very carefully, opened the letter.

Unfolding the contents within, he found two handwritten pages and several photographs. One was a family portrait, and he guessed the woman with the short blonde hair holding a baby in her arms was his daughter Sheila. In another, a beautiful seascape painting leapt off the page, hanging in what appeared to be a gallery. The colors and textures were remarkably vibrant and compelling, evident even though it was only a photograph. Stanley described these to Bill as dramatically as he could, though he realized that words couldn't adequately explain a sunset to a man who couldn't see.

Finally, he turned his attention to the letter, and he began to read softly out loud,

"Dear Daddy..

When he was done, there were tears running down both cheeks. He looked up from the words which were now out of focus, and realized that Mr. William Ballen-

tine, at some point during the reading, had joined his wife, Mildred, in the great hereafter. He refolded the letter, along with the seascape and the picture of Sheila holding William Ballentine II, placing them beneath the hands that had gone still. He put the envelope containing the return address back in his pocket, choked out a good-bye, and left, turning his head so the nurses entering the room to the suddenly steady drone of the heart monitor couldn't see him crying.

She opened the priority express package, and the first thing she noted was the folded envelope, written in her own handwriting. Recognizing it as the one she'd mailed weeks ago, she started to feel the anger boil up in her again. She wondered why he hadn't responded, and was convinced she would never hear from him again. Tempted to simply feed the entire thing to the shredder, sight unseen, she changed her mind and pulled out the handwritten letter and began to read.

"Dear Ms. Ballentine-Styles;

"My name is Stanley Danzing, and I knew your father. Please accept my sincere condolences on his passing. Let me tell you a little about him..."

Down the Garden Path

by JACOB CYTRYNBAUM

Jacob Cytrynbaum is an incoming freshman at Williams College. He is an all-American wrestler from Eugene, Oregon, who enjoys rock climbing, backpacking, and long runs through the woods. Among other talents, Jacob excels in string cheese peeling.

Their lovemaking is like two wild boars
having seizures.

Sighs and groans heard by passersby
awake envy in some, passion in others,
and hunger in most.

The hum of love in the air alerts the whole garden
to the presence of the lovers.

Two ladybugs grin sheepishly
as they crawl from under a leaf.

A sparrow lands. A flash of feathers.
The lovers disappear, their great dance
forgotten by all

except the sparrow, who tastes
interrupted love in his burps.

House in the Sky



by Shelley Chapman

Shelley Chapman has worked as a child practitioner for over 15 years. But she's always had arty ways about her. Along with admiring and collecting quirky antiques, Shelley creates bespoke jewellery. She enjoys walks in the countryside and staying in the quaint cottages to be found around Southwold in Suffolk, UK. Shelley took to photography when she realised the beautiful things she saw needed to be captured and shared. You can more of her pictures on Flickr, under [shelley.chapman53](#).

Dance, Darling

by **Richard Thomas**

Richard Thomas is the author of five books: Disintegration, Transubstantiate, Herniated Roots, Staring Into the Abyss and Four Corners. He has over 100 stories in print including Cemetery Dance, PANK, Gargoyle, Weird Fiction Review, Midwestern Gothic, Arcadia, Pear Noir, Chiral Mad 2, and Shivers VI. He is also the editor of three anthologies out in 2014: The New Black (Dark House Press), The Lineup: 25 Provocative Women Writers (Black Lawrence Press), and Burnt Tongues (Medallion Press) with Chuck Palahniuk. In his spare time he writes for The Nervous Breakdown, LitReactor, and is Editor-in-Chief at Dark House Press. For more information visit www.whatdoesnotkillme.com or contact Paula Munier at Talcott Notch.

Dance, Darling

TO SEE THEM in the grocery store, with their hair all pinned up, their faded grey suits freshly pressed and their red lipstick blazing, they were somebody's grandmothers, eyes twinkling, hushed conversations over grapefruit and green onions, their secrets buried deep. But if you looked close, there were hints of something more; faded ink on both of their wrists, concurrent numbers of 140603 and 140604. If you watched them fill up their grocery cart, you'd have to look close for the bottle of cheap bourbon nestled in between heads of lettuce and bags of hard candy. The prescription bottles were quickly shuttled into their leather purses, a sly smile to the pharmacist, no eye contact between them, the nightmares that would come later that night still hours away. They wouldn't talk about it in the daylight, Lucy with her blonde wig hiding the radiation treatments, the cancer long gone, but the shadows and screams still right around the corner. They talked about very few things that mattered, in the daylight, Darcy chain-smoking, her dry skin like faded parchment, her bloodshot eyes always rimmed with tears, pushing the cart across the linoleum, one wheel rattling out of sync.

The boys would help them to the car, sunshine on them like a searchlight, a moment in each of their tiny bird hearts where their ribcages rattled, wings fluttered, and the echo of gunshots caused them to stutter a step, grab the young man by the bicep, and gasp in hushed voices; curses muttered to the hot tar of the parking lot below their clumsy feet. They apologized, always, but the boys didn't mind. The sisters were part of the store's history, always together, never just one. They tipped one dollar and only one dollar, whether it was a grocery cart overflowing with toilet paper and family-size bottles of aspirin, or a bag of apples, fresh from the local

orchards. Nobody knew if their last name was actually Cipher, because they always paid in cash, never with a credit card, never revealing that little bit of history. And when Lucy and Darcy pulled out of the parking lot in the long Cadillac, something out of the 1970s, a car that Johnny Cash might drive, black death stretched out forever, their wraparound sunglasses comical on their withering faces, the boys would wave, and pause for a moment. For under the floral perfume was a hint of something sour, something going bad.

It wasn't much of a choice, the dancing, the games they had played, the roles they fulfilled. They told each other, over rocks glasses splashed with amber liquid, ash-tray overflowing, the sun setting behind torn blinds and faded drapes; that they had no choice at all. They were children then, five years old; too young for labor, worthless in the eyes of the pale demons that descended on the captives with random acts of violence and hatred. The gas chambers were always there, a threat that was never empty, faces they knew constantly disappearing, their parents long gone, the screams of their mother like talons over their cold, white skin, slicing them open; the dead eyes of their father two dark orbs that would float in the night sky for eternity. They shut down, Lucy and Darcy, the tears that flowed only drawing more attention, the rough hands of the guards eager to shake them, to bark orders at those that stood around them. "Schweigen," they would yell, "Schweigen die Kinder." Silence the children. So they went mute.

Years. A lifetime expired. And yet, they survived, the sisters. Not without effort. Darcy in a bathtub, the razor long and eager to nip, her forearm opened up as a sacrifice, the numbers carved out and left floating on the surface of the crimson water. Lucy learned first that they were inseparable, now; always within earshot, al-

ways a head cocked listening for the silence that meant success had been found, death recognized with a loving embrace. No, not on her watch, she'd mutter. And when she finally could hold Darcy up no longer, sinking into her own darkness, a needle and a spoon, again it was her arm that begged to be broken, severed, stabbing at the fading ink that branded her skin, numbers that reminded her of what she was; a commodity, a piece of meat, something to be sorted, stacked, and put on a train to a distant land. As if hearing a noise that only a twin can hear, Darcy appeared in the doorway, out of breath, her waitress apron still on, her fast hand slapping bare skin, Lucy trembling and crying out in anguish, the open hand coming again and again, across her face, knocking her to the floor, snapping the syringe in half, holding her as they collapsed to the floor.

The men knew they were damaged, but they filled the room anyway, lined the stage, as the Cipher Sisters danced. It made no sense, the dancing. It triggered hazy memories of phonographs spinning, glasses clinking, men in dark uniforms, fires blazing in stone hearths, women in pearls laughing the death laugh of survival, hands on shoulders, lips at ears, hems rising up in an effort to coerce. "Tanzen, lieblings," the women would say, settling in whatever lap was free, the men like wolves with their teeth bared, hair bristling beneath their caps, skulls trembling with dark deeds. Always together, the rooms lined with mirrors, the stages ringed with dull bulbs, holding each other up, pushing each other down, as the dirty money fell to the stage floor, wadded up, folded in half, tucked in garters and gathered with shaking arms. They were lost. Backstage they would find each other again, pick up the pieces, filling their handbags with rent money, whispers and cigarette smoke, empty pint bottles dropped into garbage cans. "Dance, darlings," Darcy would chuckle, "If only for a moment."

They filled a library with black and brown leather journals, wall to wall and floor to ceiling. They put it all down, in excruciating detail, never sharing, never reading, just channeling the darkness, vomiting out the suffering, in an effort to rid themselves of the poison that had seeped into their bones. On a good day they would smile at each other over grapefruits and green onions, knowing they were broken, knowing that it was futile, but unable to surrender, not now. They would place bent hands with swollen knuckles on the shoulders of the boys and the world would not crush them. And then, on the way home; the long, black car slicing the sunshine, prowling the back streets, a predatory grin in polished chrome, their only defense against the shadows that followed them; they would stop at the railroad tracks as the gates fell down, as the lights flashed and the whistle blew, hands shooting out to grasp for each other, smiles pasted on their faces, ignoring the cattle cars that flew by, the faces staring out, the screams never ending, and they would cry quietly in the black car, and say nothing; not a word.

Fractured, worn out, the library full, the refrigerator

empty, stomachs tied in knots, they would lie down on the king-size bed they shared and close their eyes. The papers would say they died within weeks of each other, but that was a lie. As if sharing the same breath, Lucy and Darcy listened to the phonograph that looped over and over, and they held each other, apologies whispered, until they could hold each other no longer. They let each other go, hands at their sides, wrists scarred with pink mottled tissue, their efforts in vain, ciphers no more.

Two poems

by CATHERINE CAVALLONE

Catherine Cimillo Cavallone is a teacher and poet. Her work has appeared in Four Walls, Sensations Magazine, The Rift Arts Forum Publication, and Beyond the Rift-Poets of the Palisades, and is forthcoming in Red River Review. She has been featured at the North Jersey Literary Series and other tri-state venues. She lives in New Jersey with her husband, George, and son, Michael.

The Attic Window

for Tu Fu

Up, behind a dirty attic window,
a young wife sat with her chin in hand,
admiring the moon.

To her young husband, she said, "Husband,
I admire the moon."

To this, his reply was, "Wife,
the sun is bleeding a thousand times
outside! You are ungrateful!"

And the young wife thrust her hand
through the glass
to confirm her husband's opinion.

Undressing for Satan

Lick your incandescent lips and the
noxious satisfaction from your face-
blink the dust from your eyes-
wipe your skull dry of lamentation-
upon your silken pillow-
squelch the whispers in your ears-

rip the faded brilliance from your hair-
pry the kisses from your neck-
tear the promises from your breasts-
burn the perfume from your wrists-
kick the waltzes from your feet and
retch out the world from your
naked soul.

Marbles Among the Bubbles



by Shelley Chapman

Shelley Chapman has worked as a child practitioner for over 15 years. But she's always had arty ways about her. Along with admiring and collecting quirky antiques, Shelley creates bespoke jewellery. She enjoys walks in the countryside and staying in the quaint cottages to be found around Southwold in Suffolk, UK. Shelley took to photography when she realised the beautiful things she saw needed to be captured and shared. You can more of her pictures on Flickr, under [shelley.chapman53](#).

December

by Ho Cheung Lee

Ho Cheung LEE (Peter), Ed.D., was born in Hong Kong. He is an ESL teacher, school administrator, curriculum developer, and writer. He earned his doctorate from The University of Hong Kong with a thesis on teaching reading. His short story "Midnight" has appeared in Miracle Magazine, and his poems have appeared in aaduna, FIVE Poetry Magazine, Miracle Magazine, Ozone Park Journal, The Interpreter's House, Wild Violet, and elsewhere.

December

December 1, Reggie's Studio. Audition for the last batch.

A sapphire-colored carpet lined the corridor and the walls exhibited artistically grained photographs of celebrated musicians and concert scenes, which gave nothing to the children but nervousness and anxiety. Amidst the obedient queue sat Thomas Bowkett, tagged 123, shifting in his seat. Dressed in shiny blue with fake crocodile-skin boots that were given to him by his uncle two days ago, he was warming an oval turquoise pebble in his wet palm, as if to hatch a bird from it.

Despite the presence of the sound-proofing devices, a thin layer of harmonious melody was still clearly notable, swimming in the air to blend with the heavy heartbeats of the candidates. Thomas knew the tune too well; he had been practising this at home, in the school, on the bus, and even in his dreams. It was initially his mother's idea that he enter the audition for the leading role in Reggie Angelou's newest musical "The Voice of the Prince." Yet, he had annoyed her with his incessant singing, day and night, of the same song. Thomas, a great fan of Angelou's, loved the plot very much. He knew this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to get close to his dream: to be Broadway's finest singer. He had struggled through two music tests and three interviews to win a place here, to wait for the singing audition which, to make it even more nerve-wracking, was headed by the composer herself. Thomas was aware that he had already achieved something extraordinary, but he knew he could extend himself further, as he always could. He just needed a bit of luck today. He grasped the stone even harder.

"Something inside? Your fist," the girl next to him asked, hiding her unease.

Thomas released his tensed fingers slowly, revealing a shiny smooth pebble of bluish-green. It was a fine-grade opaque gem with a unique hue. Astonishingly magnificent. The stone almost glowed in their eyes, opening

once more before the young possessor the door to his memory of how the precious item came into his possession, from a region one could only have heard of, from a man he could not have imagined before.

He never liked crowded places. He hated the place. The only positive thing was that the site was well sheltered, blocking the boiling sun of mid-September. People, local and from overseas, flooded the location. The alleys ran intricately across one another in such a way it was too easy to lose one's way, and day. It was a stretching labyrinth, under enormous dazzling pieces of cloth hanging above like over-sized umbrellas that could wave in the wind. On display were patterned clothing, ornate chandeliers, inlaid boxes, old-looking brassware and other traditional crafts. He smelled spices as well. It was a debating society; buyers played against sellers. The noise was overwhelming.

Khan el-Khalili was its name. A major market in one of the world's most populous metropolis: Cairo, Egypt.

His parents were ahead of him, visible, yet too far away to hear him. He never realized they could be so much absorbed into the Cairenes' cultural artifacts and the craftsmen's demonstrations. He did not have the interest today. He did not feel too refreshed this afternoon, walking with an annoying stomach; the meals had not been too friendly.

He approached his parents, wanting to ask when they could go back to the hotel, when an aged Arab on the ground caught his attention. The man sat on a square mat with torn edges, meditating. In front of him there rested seven tiny leather bags that each seemed to be holding a chicken egg. Head bandaged, a grey goat-beard wrapped in shabby, loose yellowish-white, the old man sat with his legs crossed. His arms drooped. The arms led to a pair of palm-less wrists. The elder had no hands.

The music ceased. Silence occupied the corridor of the studio. Thomas wrapped the stone again with his fin-

gers and prayed. None of the seven children was making any intentional noise. The young studio staff member went on to pace around, visually examining the postures and expressions of each of the candidates. Holding several sheets in her hand, she was not at all doing official assessments, though she must have felt like an assessor, enjoying a short-term power of decision-making.

The noise of door opening passed through the corridor. An older lady—blonde hair, oversized, with a staff card dangling from her invisible neck—came around the corner and into view. She received stares from the eight pairs of eyes, including the pacing staff member. She paused and gestured. The children stood up, packing up their belongings, flustered. Thomas placed the warm pebble back into his right trouser pocket. He gently pressed on it. The queue was calmly led down the corridor.

They walked into a medium-sized concert hall. Around them were empty seats, all coated in red velvet. The aged stuffiness in the air seemed not to be a problem to the newcomers as they marched down the stairs. Three judges were at a long table below, six meters in front of the stage, where several technicians were helping to adjust the audio devices. A few decent-looking adults were scattered around the place, holding piles of paper. Some were sitting, some preferred to stand, but all eyeing the youngsters on stage.

Reggie Angelou was dressed in plain but solemn black. In her late forties, the lines on her emaciated face were still visible in the distance, though she had tried to conceal them. The ladies sitting on either side of her seemed to be trying to start a conversation with this celebrity composer and playwright, yet received nothing more than a few brief nods. The children passing by saw the lady in the middle, and were all of a sudden afraid of her. Thomas, too, felt unease about singing in front of his only idol, for he could not afford to embarrass himself in the presence of such a musical giant.

Then the children were on the stage. The lady who led them there started briefing them. Thomas listened to each word, despite the disturbance from the deafening noise of his heartbeats.

They stood in a row, facing the audience, each with a number plate. They were first instructed to start voicing simple arpeggios. Then, they sang chorally a song they had practised. Angelou did not look up too often. A judge signaled to end the choral part and start the solos. On the judges' table, twenty-four sheets of participant profiles were arranged neatly, spread out for reference and for writing comments.

Thomas was stunned to hear his name called before any of the others. He stepped up, approached the long, thin microphone stand. Angelou lifted her head, her critical eyes locked with his. Yet, they were too far apart and the chief judge's expressions became mysterious to the child singer. The piano started. In the solid gaze of the composer, the twelve-year-old sang:

A voice too sacred
Carries passion in his songs
The voice of the Prince.

A young heart so pure
Born in skies, he is the man
To ride the great wind.

You are the brightness
That lights up my path, my days
Sincerely I yell.

You are the reason
That I have come to believe
God's alive and well.

"Can't you sing another one, Thomas?" his mother asked, checking the array of accessories she had bought from the market in the morning. "The play must have other songs too, no?"

The boy walked out of the bathroom, smelling of soap. He was wiping off the water from his hair. "Actually, they only gave me this one to practise."

Thomas drew near his mother to see the glistening collection spread in an orderly way on the elegant wooden table for display. Mr. Bowkett, his father, was sitting on the queen-size double bed with his semi-professional digital camera, appreciating the pictures he had taken during the day. He liked this country.

"Mum, did you see that man on the carpet?" Thomas asked.

"What man?"

"The old man, next to the basket shop."

"There are billions of basket shops there, boy." She kept on sorting out the jewelry and other small craftwork. She picked up a glass bottle to examine, paying little attention to her child.

"He's got no hands, Mum!" Thomas said, looking up at his mother, who was checking the surface of the glass meticulously.

"We'll go there again tomorrow morning, we've got to buy some more of this for your auntsies," his mother said. She then turned to Thomas, "I will give you some coins for that beggar."

The next day, Thomas and his family took the shuttle bus from their hotel to Khan el-Khalili again. Upon arrival, Mr. and Mrs. Bowkett knew their destination clearly and commanded Thomas to follow them closely. There they entered the maze for the second time. Thomas walked down the same tourist-fed path. Right next to a rattan-ware booth, the hand-less elder was still resting on the same old dirty square carpet, in the flapping shadows of the hanging cloth waving above. Lying in front of him were still the seven tiny fastened bags. This time, driven by curiosity, the child walked near him. Thomas doubted that the man was a beggar, but he could not tell whether or not he was selling something.

The man lifted up his head and met the eyes of the boy. "We meet again, young man," the old man said in accented English, with a warm smile. His chopped arms, however, were invisible under the long sleeves.

"Er—" Thomas was too stunned to respond, unready to accept the fact that he was noticed by this shabby-looking Arab the day before. "Hi," he said, thinking it would be a safe response in any case.

"Offer me all the money you have with you at this moment," the old man said. "I can make your wish come true!"

"All my money?"

"That is with you now, not what you have in the bank." He sounded quite friendly.

"Oh, you—" Thomas now thought he was actually a beggar who had invented a creative way to beg. "All right, here you go." The youngster showed him the coins his mother had given him. "You have a bag or dish or something?" He knew the old man had no hands to receive the money.

"Is that all you have with you?" the old man asked, not feeling disappointed though.

"Honestly, sir. And sorry, sir."

"Very well, son." He smiled with hints of tears in his turbid eyes. "You are the only one in all these years who is generous enough to completely empty your purse for me."

"You're welcome, sir," Thomas said. He just found this man funny. He placed the coins on the mat.

"In return, son, pick a stone." The man leaned forward and pushed the tiny bags a bit, revealing his incomplete limbs.

Thomas crouched excitedly, as if a game was about to start. He had wished to know what was inside those bags and now he was offered the chance to choose one. He ran his eyes from left to right, imagining that he could tell what was contained in each. Engulfed by the noise and dust, a stream of people flowed by them without noticing their presence. Quickly he seized the one at the far right.

"Open it."

Thomas did what the man said and poured out a greenish-blue pebble onto his palm.

"Turquoise, exquisite," the old man said. "The stone of December."

A female helper was mouthing the song down stage, putting up large paper cardboards with the lyrics on them, for the participants' convenience. The children were indeed amazed that she failed to notice that they had already memorized every word.

The conductor was moved by the poignant melody; his hands were birds swerving in the air. The gray-haired gentleman made a final silky circular movement with his fingertips, and muted the choir. The pianist's hands floated up from the keyboard, the last chord faded contentedly.

This last song was not really for the selection of the leading role. The judges had already made their choice unanimously. The children were just asked to sing for the closure of this huge and tiring audition project. Those who were fortunate enough to get through to this round knew well that they would appear in the play no matter what. It was only their roles that had not been determined.

The young singers were still on the stage. Some started chatting with their neighbours now that their performances and pressures were over. They had become much more relaxed and less reluctant to make new friends. Thomas saw no one but the three heads at the judges' table discussing what seemed to be significant matters. Then, a younger male helper was beckoned by Angelou. He pressed on the table and looked closely at a piece of paper the composer was holding. They briefly exchanged words. Thomas looked intensely at the chief judge's lip movements but could not understand anything at all.

It was only Thomas and two girls who chose not to talk with other competitors. Thomas caught a glimpse of the worried look of the girl who had noticed his pebble earlier, but she did not glance in return. A moment later, the young man at the judges' table nodded. He took the wireless microphone from the table. He lightly patted the microphone's head three times for audio checking. All of the children turned to the head table.

"Will candidate number one-twenty-three please come forward for a word, thank you," he called.

Breathing noises and gulping burst from the little performers. Thomas had no time to join their discussion on what the purpose of this call might be, yet he sensed it was positive. *It would never be a bad call anyway*, he thought. He took a final glance at the rest of the competitors, who in some way or another showed expressions of deep admiration, jealousy, or envy, and moved forward to the stairs stretching down to the audience.

He had imagined this scene so many times, just as anyone who has a dream or ambition to win something major would prepare an acceptance speech. Of course, many have such imaginations even though they know they would not have much chance to have their dreams realized, and it often turns out that they do not hit their targets. Thomas was superstitious at times. He did not want to do too much mental rehearsal or to prepare a certain speech for the press upon the offer of the main role. He did not want to disappoint himself. And yet, he could not help thinking about it, picturing himself in exactly the same scene: being called to approach Reggie Angelou for a breakthrough in his budding career. The few steps from the stage to the judges took him forever. He found himself walking in slow motion, just as he had experienced in his vision. Unconsciously, he moved his right hand to his pocket, placing his fingers around the smooth oval object again. The table, covered in dignified red cloth, was just in front of him. The echoing clanks of

his footsteps reminded him that the people in the hall had frozen the moment his number was announced, and that behind him were worried youngsters who were trying to think up other reasons that this boy had been asked to approach the decision makers.

The gentleman who had called him pulled out a chair for him on the shorter side of the rectangular table, and seated him; the host's seat. Thomas's wet hands clenched together. He looked at the sheets on the table, each with a photo of a child and personal information and statements, and looked up at the ladies, who smiled at him with so much warmth that it almost made him feel unnatural.

"Thomas," said the lady sitting closest to him. "We are very pleased with your vocal quality and skills, your interpretation of the words, your expression and your enthusiasm for joining our project."

Thomas thought he had just heard the most beautiful sequence of words in any language he had ever known.

"We have come to the decision that you be our prince in this project," she added. "A lot more work is to come, Mr. Bowkett."

In bewilderment, Thomas looked at the lady in the middle, still thinking the whole thing was surreal.

"You'll sing in front of the Prince," Angelou said, beaming, and put down the profile sheet with a big tag number 123. "No pressure, my boy."

"That's lovely," Thomas responded.

"You have some luck, child!" the beggar commented, grinning, exposing his decaying teeth.

"I love its colour," the boy added. "It's like the ocean."

"Enclose it deep within your fingers," he advised with intensity, attempting to show a hand gesture of grasping, but showing little embarrassment when he failed to do so. "Whisper your dream to your heart; only to your heart. That which you dream will come true in the month for which it was born. That which comes true will last for as long as you deserve, son."

"You mean it's a souvenir of luck?" the child asked, puzzled.

"I didn't mean to be rhetorical, but it is what the ancient Masters had written," the elder said. "Hide it in your fist, and make a wish," the man paraphrased. "Your dream—"

"Will come true in the designated month of the stone," Thomas broke the line. "And it will last for as long as I deserve."

The old handicapped fell silent for a second, and nodded with a satisfying smile. "Make a wish."

Thomas eyed him, still thinking he was a funny kind elder, and closed his right fist with the pebble inside. "Done," he said. "How much is it, sir?"

"You've paid. It's yours now," the man replied. "Keep it safe. Return it to me when we meet again, and when your dream has come true."

"But we're leaving Cairo. We may not meet again, sir. I doubt if we'll ever meet again."

"Keep it anyway, for the wish you've made will vanish if you abandon the stone now." He started to pack up the tiny bags with his disabled limbs. "Off you go, son. Your parents are looking for you like mad!" He flicked his gaze to his left.

Thomas turned to his right and suddenly realized that his parents had gone deep into the crowd. "Oh, no, I must go!" He jumped to his feet.

But before he made his move, having the stone in his palm, he could not help but to turn back to the man for the final time. "What, may I ask, happened to your hands, sir?"

The man paused. He looked up slowly. "There's a cost for collecting these precious stones from their guardians," he answered airily. "I'm still looking for the remaining five, but am running out of body parts!" He showed him again the remnants of his limbs, the jagged wounds. The aged one forced a bitter laugh.

December 25, Frederick Bell Hall, City Central. A Night to Celebrate: Vilman's Christmas Concert.

Standing at the centre spot of the patterned stage—in front of a live junior orchestra, under an intense spot light like a thick laser beam piercing from heaven and creating a sharply formed silhouette accompanied by a few lighter figures—Thomas Bowkett heard the fading of the strings' voices, blending with the echoes of his. He opened his eyes and let in the view of hundreds of people in the live audience, three camera sets, and countless lights focusing on the stage like over-sized stars. Thomas smiled and bowed with satisfaction. A deafening applause and jubilation hit his ear drums. The back lights were on. He straightened only to see the rise of the entire audience, in a clapping and yelling spree. He did not want the show to end.

The host of the show—Marlon Vilman, aged sixty-seven—appeared from the side, wearing a dark tuxedo, clapping with a microphone in hand, and smiling widely. Vilman hugged and kissed the 12-year-old fair-haired boy on the forehead.

"Ooh, what an amazing talent, what a voice!" Vilman exclaimed. "How did you feel?"

"Umm, well, I—I-um—"

"Too thrilled to find a word, uh?" Vilman laughed. The happy crowd began to sit down again.

"Yeah, probably." The boy also laughed. "I was just too happy to be invited to this show and be a part of it, you know. I have seen this show on TV every year since I knew what a TV was, and—"

"Yeah, and I started the show when TVs first came out, yeah." Vilman sounded very serious, the crowd laughed. "That explains my age."

Thomas found this gentleman warm and humorous. He almost forgot that he was talking in front of hundreds of pairs of eyes in the theatre, and millions of pairs of

eyes at home.

"Tell me Thomas, you've been selected for the title role of Reggie Angelou's latest musical by the composer herself." Vilman opened up an expected interview. "What do you think of this opportunity? How did you get your part?"

"I really have no idea, Mr. Vilman." Thomas spoke from his heart. "I have no idea why Ms. Angelou picked me. I didn't ask, lest she would change her mind!"

Vilman laughed. He thought that this young man was adorable, and the crowd agreed.

"Everything just came all of a sudden. I'm not sure if I have been reacting well." Thomas thought of the day after his role was announced: the newspapers and magazine reporters had tried to contact him so badly. He had to unplug his home telephone and turn off his cell phone for half a day every day to avoid the calls. And no less than twenty people from all over the country had approached him, in person, to offer themselves as his manager or vocal trainer within the first week after the news was out. "I'm signing up for commercials, doing concerts here and there, and invited to talk shows. You know, the musical hasn't even opened yet. I just wonder if I deserve this, you know, popularity. You know what I'm saying?"

"Of course I do," replied Vilman. "I went through exactly the same kind of euphoria when winning a role in my school play sixty years ago. And it was a tree that I played."

Thomas joined the audience's laughter.

"Yeah, and all the plant-lovers in my neighbourhood came to me to advise me on the way to be a tree, you know," Vilman continued with his impromptu joke. "It was pretty hard to be in the centre of attention. I absolutely share your feelings, Thomas, no doubt."

"And—" Vilman re-directed himself. "You're now rehearsing every day at Reggie's studio?"

"Yeah, almost, but gotta spend some time with my family for Christmas, you know, so—"

"When exactly will the play be opened?"

"It should be around the Easter time. Yeah."

"For the re-opening of the Royal Theatre," Vilman added. "You guys will perform in front of the Royal Family. How thrilled are you?"

"Um—well—that'll surely be great pressure," Thomas said. "But it's a great honour as well. We'll do our best to entertain our audience. Hope they'll like it!"

"Of course they will!" said Vilman encouragingly. "The Prince is probably watching from the palace at this moment. Now look into the camera. Look—say hello, say hi! This great young fellow is gonna put up a wonderful show for you in a few months' time, Your Majesty. It's really gonna be something! Just wait and see! Ladies and gentlemen, Thomas Bowkett!" Vilman yelled at last.

The boy gave a full bow, blushing. The audience once again offered a thundering standing ovation as he exited. He waved joyfully at the people, and wished to know all of them in person.

Thomas joined the backstage crew amidst the orchestral music for changeover, receiving lots of "great show" and "well done" from staff. He got changed and was back in the make-up room when a lady handed him a note, saying it was from someone outside. Thomas took it and seated himself in front of a mirror, surprised to be receiving fan mail so soon. He unfolded the piece of paper and read:

Mr. Bowkett, the stone collector has come to retrieve the item you borrowed from him. It would be very kind of you if you could spare a minute to meet this poor old man waiting for you outside the theatre.

Thomas looked at himself in the mirror, pondering, and felt the stone in his pocket.

There was no sign or hope that the snow would cease. In the whispers of the wind the heavily-dressed Thomas walked down the stairs in front of the historical concert hall, leaving shallow footprints on the greyish layer of snow. His hand-made scarf curled around his frozen face, exposing only his crystal blue eyes. At the bottom, two dark figures were expecting the youngster. They did not seem to be threatened by the weather.

Thomas slowed his last few steps before meeting them. He eyed the old man but could not instantly relate him to the one he expected to meet: the aged looked much more decent, wrapped in clean thick clothing, exotically patterned, and Arabesque. His white head cloth was knotted. It looked as if he had no sleeves, thus his arms were nowhere to be seen.

"What a star," said the lady on the right. "We loved your singing."

Thomas looked at the welcoming expression of the lady, who was in her thirties, and wore light make-up. He was still trying to figure out what could have led the shabby old handicapped Arab in Egypt who had been sitting on a worn carpet displaying weird items to have such a huge change of appearance. Not to mention the addition of this beautiful young company. And he wondered why on earth they would actually come all the way to find him.

"You've really come for the pebble?" Thomas spoke through the scarf, his hood getting whiter, and cooler, as the evening snow accumulated on it.

"The turquoise, I believe, has fulfilled its job," said the old man, blowing out warm vapour, like smoke. "As said, it should be returned when we meet again."

"How did you locate me? I'm just curious."

"How could we not be able to? You've been in newspapers and magazines and on TV since the beginning of the month!" the man said. "Though it's a bit hard to get the tickets for Vilman's concert."

"I thought you were just a—a—"

"Crazy old folk joking with kids?" He laughed. "Maybe I am. Who knows?"

Thomas smiled too. He fumbled for the item in the pocket, and retrieved it with difficulty because of the thickness of his clothing.

"It's been with me all the time," Thomas said, feeling upset that it would leave him soon. "It's like my lucky star." It lay on his palm. Snowflakes fell on it and melted.

"I did not lie to you, did I?" said the man. "The turquoise did realize the wish you made as soon as the month it belongs to started."

Thomas suddenly remembered the wish he made when he was asked to hold the pebble in his palm. "My wish—"

"I guess you wanted to be a singer, or a star," the lady joined the conversation. "Everything went so smoothly for you, young man."

"Madam, you are—" Thomas looked at the lady, then turned to the Arab for an answer.

"My daughter," said the elder. "Who I thought was long lost. She found me, and forgave me." The daughter gently grabbed her father's arm underneath the robe.

"Wow, that's—that's amazing!" Thomas said in amazement. "Congratulations!"

"Fate finally did something good to me," sighed the old man. "Finally."

"I guess you're enjoying these days as much as I am!" Thomas said.

"The happiest period of my life!" said the Arab.

"Good!" commented Thomas. He handed him back the stone. His daughter took it for him as her father had

no intention of budging.

Thomas smiled from his heart. "You know what?" Thomas said. "I didn't wish to be a star or celebrity or anything of that sort the moment I was given the pebble."

The two listeners went still. The man had a critical expression.

"I wished for you to have your hands back," Thomas said to the elder, feeling a bit embarrassed. "I'm so glad it has come true, in a way. I'm truly, truly grateful for that. You know, seeing you having a new life with your family, new clothes, good food, good shelter and stuff. I'm very happy tonight. Thanks for coming."

The lady looked at her father, feeling him shiver a little. He looked at the boy again, with a trembling smile. He breathed in slowly. "You will have a good life, son," he finally said.

The snow had stopped. Thomas waved goodbye to the two and walked back up to the main entrance. The lady supported her father and they turned around, slowly moving out, and dissolving into the dark side of the road hidden by the traffic.

Thomas looked over his shoulder once more to find them gone. His manager, who had been watching the exchange, escorted him back in and asked for the story, which Thomas was quite eager to tell.

You Gonna Pay for that Window

by Barry E. Nall

Barry E. Nall is an engineer by trade and education. He is currently in the research and development field. He serves his community as a volunteer firefighter and emergency medical technician (his work occasionally bleeds into some short pieces). He is currently working on his first novel, "From Paradise to Eden". Set in 2010, it deals with a prediction that Jesus will return in May of that year, and how it sets in motion a trans Appalachian trip to a revitalized ghost town, Eden Tennessee.

You Gonna Pay for that Window

"MAURICE, YOU GONNA pay for that window?" Bad Jeffy Black asked me.

Bad Jeffy Black, one-time, five-percent biker and the owner of County South Café, plopped down on a barstool next to me. The barstool belonged to his neighboring competition, The Cherokee Inn. All the stools in Jeffy Black's bar had the stuffing burnt off of them, along with much of the bar, the basement with the kegs, and the upstairs apartments.

A couple fellow firefighters were sitting next to me at the Cherokee Inn. Not that we were drinking, but when we put the fire out at the County South Café and got the trucks and gear wrapped up, the roosters were starting to bark out in the hills. It was breakfast time and, most of us being volunteers, had jobs to go to.

Bad Jeffy Black looked as bad as I had ever seen him. With his bar burnt, his usual entourage of blonde biker floozies wasn't following him around, sensing an impending loss of free booze and coke. At that moment he had nobody there for him. He would have gotten more sympathy from a rented mule than his rented chicks.

I took a little bit of time with the menu, then put it down and looked Jeffy Black in the hairy eyeball. "Jeffy, your insurance will pay for that window," I replied. "You have bigger problems besides that window. Your bar and the rest of the building is a do-over."

"You didn't have to break that window. Sheep Dog said that you didn't need to break that window. You broke that window for the fun of it again!" Jeffy was fixated on that big plate-glass window that used to be at the front of his bar.

Sheep Dog, aka Willie Bogs, was our local bar inhabitant who knew everything. Even though he wasn't a firefighter, he just knew that window didn't need to be

broken.

One of the other firefighters eating breakfast with me spoke up. "The building was puffing and showing signs of flashover; we broke the window to ventilate and control where it burnt."

Have you ever seen a two-story brick building puff smoke out of its eaves, and watch the entire structure move in and out like a bellows? That is what we faced. We were told there were people upstairs, and we were worried that when we went through the side door and up the stairs that we would be feeding air to the fire before we were ready to fight fire. We got lucky. The girls living upstairs got lucky—the fire hadn't breached the floor, and there wasn't too much smoke where they were. We got them out quickly (one sky clad) and into the ambulance to be checked and kept away from prying eyes.

We still had the dilemma on the ground floor—a structure filled with smoke, windows, and eaves puffing smoke, and the walls moving in and out. I was still "packed up," wearing an SCBA, when the chief gave me an axe. "We'll set up a line (hose and nozzle) behind you and as soon as you break that window, drop to your knees."

I broke the window, and as I dropped to my knees below the windowsill, the flames rolled over me. With the window out, the fire had a quick burst of oxygen feeding it, and the flames surged toward the wide open window. The team behind me was on a big line, a two-and-a-half inch hose with a Fog Hog nozzle—meant to turn a lot of fire into a lot of steam, as long as the room was unoccupied.

Seconds later, team two went through the side door and into the bar, playing the nozzle from the upper-left wall across the ceiling, down the right wall and to the seat of the fire. As they swept the ceiling they switched

the nozzle from a fog pattern to straight stream as they got toward the seat of the fire.

I recounted this to Jeffy, letting him know how lucky we were to get the girls out of the upstairs apartment.

"But you broke my window again." Jeffy couldn't get over that. "I think you like breaking that window."

I smiled a bit. I had to admit, I enjoyed breaking that big plate-glass window, with "County South Café" in gilded letters. And since I'm being truthful, it was a lot more fun breaking it the second time with a fire axe than it was the first time I broke it.

The first time I broke the window, it was not in any feat of heroism. It was an act of daring, done through a haze of Tanqueray and Jose Cuervo.

It was June, and I had just graduated from college. Thursday Night Ladies Nights, also known locally as the Thursday Night Fights, had just ended. It was early Friday morning, officially after closing time and a bunch of us were still at the bar. It was some preppy girl's twenty-first birthday and, as the custom went, we were drinking tequila out of one of the biker's boots. She had red hair in a style we called "Texas Cheerleader Hair," and wore a polo shirt with a fox on the right side. She was a fine red-headed fox, big hair and all. She had come with a gaggle of friends, who somehow abandoned her at closing time. My twenty-first birthday was just a week prior, and I discovered that while the idea was pretty nasty, the tequila probably killed whatever resided in those boots, even if the owner of the boots owned no socks. She was handling the booze from the boot like a trooper, but she had a worried look in her eyes.

Panhandle Johnson came in and tried to get a beer on a tab. He came here from the West Virginia Panhandle, but the nickname was more appropriate of him running up tabs, borrowing eating money and just being a mooch in general.

"Get the hell out of here, Panhandle," Bad Jeffy Black yelled. "Don't ask for anything until you've at least paid part of your bar tab."

"But you guys are drinking after hours. That's gotta be..."

Panhandle didn't finish saying that we were getting free drinks because it was after closing time. Bad Jeffy, all six foot two and one hundred fifty pounds, owned the bar. Big Don was the enforcer. Big Don was six foot five and about three hundred pounds, and at one point had been recruited to play offensive tackle for Woody Hayes. Big Don caught Panhandle by the shirt-collar and belt and gave him the bum's rush, complete with the *coup de grace* kick in the ass as Panhandle cleared the door.

After a few minutes, Big Don was looking around and said, "I wish I had thrown that fuckin' bum through the window."

"If you had done that, Don, you'd have to pay me for that window."

"It would be worth it, Jeffy. Hey, is there anyone here willing to be thrown through the window?" Big Don

asked.

Big Don had no takers, and then realized that I was sitting next to him. "It's my daredevil neighbor, Maurice. If you rode my quarter horse when you were eight, I bet I could throw you through the window. I bet we can even get two or three hundred dollars as a sort of prize."

Three hundred dollars was a couple weeks' pay for me in those days, but I didn't want to be too easy.

"Ok, Don, I'll do it. I'll do it for three hundred and fifty dollars and a couple conditions."

"What are those conditions?" Bad Jeffy was astounded. Who would allow Big Don to throw him or herself through a plate-glass window?

"Condition one. You don't throw me out of the bar. That's too cliché."

Before I could continue, Big Don rolled his eyes. "Cliché. The fancy boy got out of college with words like cliché, like some faggot. If I don't throw you out of the window, how's that gonna work?"

"Well, Don, we all go outside and you throw me into the bar. Nobody has ever been thrown into this bar, so I'll be the first. The second condition is that I need some gear. I want a full-face helmet, leathers, and gloves."

Even a half hour south of closing time, there were about twenty of us still in the bar, mainly because of the spectacle of the red head's birthday party. Don got at least twenty bucks from everybody, and handed me a little over four hundred dollars. We slid off our bar stools and trooped outside. The big-haired red head shot me a grateful look. She was no longer the main attraction, and not prey to our viking horde.

All the garb was rounded up except for the pants—we needed leathers that would go over my jeans. Don spotted Fat Bob at the back of the crowd. "Fat Bob, give me your leathers!"

"Big Don, all I got on is these leather pants," Fat Bob replied.

"I don't give two shits. Peel those bad boys off!"

Fat Bob gave in, and took off his leather pants, handing them to me. He was telling the truth, he had no skivvies, and it left his little dangler swinging in the breeze. I turned a bit so I wouldn't have to look at him and wrestled the leathers over my jeans. I put the jacket, helmet, gloves and my boots on and gave Big Don the thumbs up sign.

Big Don had just hoisted me over his head when we heard the "Whoop, whoop" of a siren. Luther the Park Ranger was pulling up to us in his jeep. We're at the far end of the county, and in the summer the park service rangers provided law enforcement for the area. Luther turned his spotlights on us and got out of the jeep. "What in the name of sam hell is going on here?" Luther thundered. "And why don't you have any pants on, Bob?"

"Big Don's going to throw Maurice into the bar, not out of it, and Maurice wanted to protect himself."

Before Luther could respond, or tell us to stop, Big Don heaved me through the window. The crown of the

helmet hit the glass first, the glass broke perfectly, and I was able to land on my knees. I was seeing stars, but I shook my head to clear it and went out the door and back to the crowd. I pulled the helmet off, raised it overhead, and the throng of people went wild. Bad Jeffy told Ranger Luther that he was okay with everything, as long as his glass was paid for. Ranger Luther got a picture of me in front of the broken window, "for his report," and then left, his lack of action implying that a fat hillbilly with no pants, a gorgeous redhead drinking Tanqueray from a boot, and a young man getting thrown through a window *into* a bar was nothing unusual, and all in a night's work.

Police report my ass. The next day, Ranger Luther's photo of me was on the front page of *The Oddville Press* (our local rag), and when I got home from work that day I had to face the music with my mom. Mom woke up to find the redhead in the guest room, and then looked at the paper to find her former favorite youngest son on the front page, clad in mismatched leathers and holding a

helmet overhead in shear, atavistic triumph. The dressing down I received got even worse because when she looked over at dad or the redhead, both of them were unsuccessfully repressing a snigger. It ended after an hour (or it seemed like it) with an admonition to stop embarrassing her.

The Incident, as my mom called it, put a black mark on my reputation. With that, I had made the leap from daredevil to hellion. Fathers of decent daughters turned their backs and closed their doors on me. The big-haired redhead was the consolation prize, and we've been together happily from then on.

Because my dad was on the volunteer fire department, the chief decided to bring me on board. I got it in my blood, became gung ho, and in the eyes of the community, started to become a worthwhile member.

Until I broke that window a second time, that is. Because as Sheep Dog said for months on end, that window didn't need broken. "That Maurice, he just likes to break windows."

Intro to Zombie Art 101

by EMENIANO ACAIN SOMOZA, JR.

Emeniano Acain Somoza, Jr. considers himself the official spiritual advisor of his roommates, Gordot and Dwight—the first a goldfish, the other a Turkish Van cat. Some forthcoming online and in print, his works have been Editor's Choice in The Poetry Magazine, and featured in the Moria Poetry Journal, Fogged Clarity, Everyday Poem, Loch Raven Review, The Buddhist Poetry Review, Shot Glass Journal, The Philippines Free Press, Troubadour 21, Full of Crow, Indigo Rising, Asia Writes, Triggerfish Critical Review, Gloom Cupboard, TAYO Literary Magazine, Haggard & Halloo, and elsewhere. His first book, A Fistful of Moonbeams, was published by Kilmog Press in April 2010. This year, 'Songs of My Mother', a collection of 5 of his poems—called a Jog—was published by W.I.S.H. Publishing.

Deadening starts around photocopy corners, water stations, behind
Pantry backdoor; about midway between the hour of mercy and sunset art

As dreamers engage in a game of shadow ping-pong with one another
Inside the ungraspable bubble of their making; and the dreamless yawning

Half-awaken amid the din of heady administrivia and nanotech stutter. While
Silently the espresso machine, faucets, and glue jars wage a secret

War against the disease caused by coagulating substances—such as sugar
Its all too crystallizing functional property that sticks to flesh as it sweetens...

This undead is trapped between the algorithm of a staple wire jamming his fax machine
And the unshakable emotion of a bad poem writ on a Bukowskian napkin

by some wayward love.

The Written

by J. P. Lorence

JP Lorence is a resident of Vancouver, Canada, and spends much of his time writing on the beach. His latest efforts at science fiction and short-story writing have been preceded by several years of spoken word performance. He is also a practicing graphite artist and draftsman.

<https://www.youtube.com/user/jplorence>

The Written

THE TWO NAMES floated in the silent void. They each felt the faintest trace of movement, although it didn't seem that there was any space to move through. Something omniscient was trying to fit them somewhere.

One name looked at the other. There it hung, suspended in blackness, nothing but the word "name" in parentheses written in ten point Arial font. The name asked its companion: "Well, what now?"

The other answered, "I don't know. I've never been here before." It reflected for a moment and added, "Actually, I've never been *anywhere* before."

"Should we do anything?"

"We can't do anything. We're not verbs, we're nouns. Or more like placeholders, I suppose."

Suddenly, one of the names felt a sharp twinge from somewhere. It felt like an extended hiccup, and was accompanied by a spark of light. Something erupted from between its parentheses, grew massive, and began to assume a shape, like foam insulation filling a hollow space.

The name looked down at itself. It had assumed a roughly humanoid shape, grey in colour, but without features. It looked over at the other one, and saw something similar had taken place with it. "What just happened?" the other asked.

"I don't know, but I think this might have something to do with it," came the reply.

They both looked down. They were sitting on a white surface, with parallel blue lines running as far as they could see in both directions. It was a sheet of writing paper, massive in size, and it comprised the ground of their new world.

"Something seems to be taking shape." said one of them.

Even as it said this, its body suddenly erupted with a series of ripples. Its face took on the appearance of a bubbling cauldron for a moment, and resolved itself into

the features of a young girl.

She looked at her companion. That name had undergone a similar transformation, and was formed as a male of about twenty.

"I think I know what's happening," said the female. "I think we're being written."

Even as she said these words, a tremendous gust of wind tore them up off the paper landscape on which they were standing and hurtled them through space for a moment, then slammed them into a new scene. There they were, in an office, occupying either side of a desk. The scene came complete with new clothes, and a window through which nothing could be seen.

"So, Miss Slater, I've looked carefully at your qualifications, and I'm afraid at this time I have to say..."

The name caught itself in mid-sentence and looked down at the desk in front of him, and at himself. He found he was dressed in a white shirt and blue tie, and adorned with a corporate name tag labelled "James Marsh". Upon taking in the present state of the other name, he saw she was wearing a brown sweater and slacks, clutching a white purse, and peering at him through a pair of glasses.

"I guess this is who we're supposed to be," said James Marsh to Miss Slater.

"I wonder what my job would have been?" Miss Slater responded.

The scene began to dissolve almost as quickly as it had appeared. The desk, the walls of the room, even the business clothes they were wearing quickly fragmented to dust and floated away.

There was a brief inside-out feeling, and a new setting took shape. The female found herself looking out a narrow window in a stone wall. The scene outside was nighttime, and the other name was standing in a courtyard down below, beckoning to her. He was dressed in seventeenth-century garb and spoke with an English ac-

cent.

"My love, come down and see me. Do not worry what your father--"

He caught himself again acting out the scene in someone else's head just as he had in the office. The name looked about with only mild surprise. Clearly, this was going to keep happening.

The two looked long and hard at each other, appraising their common fate. They were pawns in a scheme; some omnipotent force that could transport them anywhere and create and destroy worlds as they watched. Yet these two still had eyes of their own and could see for themselves. And they were becoming acquainted with each other. What would become of them?

From the shadows in the right of the courtyard emerged a figure. For the first few seconds it appeared only as a grey blank, as the two names had been first formed. As it approached, it quickly took on the form of a large bearded man in a guard's outfit. His hand was placed on the handle of a rapier strapped to his side, and he spoke gruffly as he neared.

"State your business! Why do you trespass on the grounds of Lord--"

Even as he spoke, a large, circular, pink object winked into space behind him and swept through his throat, wiping it away completely. The guard fell to the ground, or rather, both pieces of him did, and revealed the object behind him that had accomplished this. It was a giant pencil eraser.

The head of what was once this character barely had time to roll its eyes before the annihilating pink mass was upon him again and negated the rest of him; arms, legs, shoulders, even his rapier. All that remained was a quivering hand, and after a moment, the eraser got that, too.

The scene about them dissolved again. They looked at each other in terror as they realized their helplessness in the situation. The girl ran up to the boy and held onto him in fright, and he put his arms around her. Their world had turned white and cold, the ground had turned to lined paper once again, and a sharp wind cut through them. This was a wasteland.

The boy looked into his companion's eyes and thought about what he should say next. "Do you remember where we were before this? I mean, before clothes appeared on us, and these scenes started appearing? Where were we then?"

The girl's fright seemed to abate for a moment, and she considered the question. "You know, I couldn't tell you. I just seemed to wake up to this. The first thing I remember is being a word, and before that...nothing."

"If things keep changing like this, I think that's where we're going to end up again. Wherever that is."

And things were still changing like that. The ground beneath them seethed with energy once again, bubbling like a cauldron. Pillars of solid matter began to poke up out of it, and coalesced into a suburban track house. The two found themselves standing in a bedroom. The floor

was lined with school textbooks and magazines, and a bed and TV in the corner. The girl found herself screaming at the boy, "I told you to stay out of my room!" She caught herself in the midst of trying to throw a tennis shoe at him.

They both looked at each other and laughed. Now they were teenage siblings. The two even appeared younger physically, although not much. The girl scanned what was apparently intended to be her bedroom. Images of teen music idols glared down at her from the walls, along with photos of various adolescent faces; perhaps friends or classmates. A writing desk with a mirror fixed to the wall in front of it occupied one corner of the room. The girl looked at this fixture quizzically, and sat down at the desk to look at her reflection.

The boy followed this entire sequence in silence. The possibilities of the mirror intrigued him as well; he had never seen one before. Yet what he saw when his companion drew close startled him speechless for several seconds. At last, he pointed to the glass and called her attention to it.

The girl looked at her own reflection. What she saw reflected was not herself, but another girl of roughly the same age; perhaps fifteen. This reflected person was also seated at a desk, in a room larger than the one they were in. She seemed strained over the pages she was scrawling on; twisting her hair in her hands and tapping the end of her pen on the pad.

"What is that?" said the boy.

"I think we may have found who's responsible for this," said the girl. She pressed her ear up to the glass to listen, but no sound came through.

The two characters stared in sheer amazement for several minutes. Here was their author, the person who created them. A young teenage girl sitting at an average writing desk somewhere in the universe. Everything they had seen and all the changes they had undergone, it was all coming from the point where her pen contacted the notebook sitting on her desk. Somehow, their world had been twisted in some novel way that had opened a wormhole from that space into theirs.

"So that's where we come from!" said the boy. As he looked on, the girl inside the mirror took on an expression of exasperation several times, checked her watch, leafed through other books on her desk, and made a phone call. It was obvious why the story had borne so many false starts. He realized that as things were, he and his companion certainly were likely to vanish altogether into oblivion after a short time.

He turned to his companion and said, "We have to do something to reach her."

He took stock of the mirror for a few seconds, running his fingers along the top of the frame and tapping on the glass. "I have an idea," he said. He looked about the room, searching the objects in it. It was an apparently random assortment; a shirt, a broken radio, a few old ballpoint pens, two torn magazines. Some of the items

were not completely solid, fading in and out. Apparently the writer wasn't picturing them all that clearly. These were unsuitable, he needed something real.

Rifling through a dresser drawer, a suitable tool was finally located. From beneath some towels, he withdrew a small hammer. "Why would she include that?" asked the girl.

"I don't know, maybe for hanging those picture frames on the wall. After what I'm about to do, we may be able to ask her directly."

He approached the glass and put his finger on a spot about two thirds of the way up. Considering it for a moment, he removed his hand and gave it a short, sharp blow with the edge of the hammer's head. It produced three intersecting fractures and a slight gap in the glass. On closer inspection, he cut his nose on the edge of the hole.

"What the hell!" Is that part of the story, too?" he exclaimed.

"I don't think we're working inside those parameters anymore," responded the girl. She pointed to the girl in the mirror. The notebook had been set aside. Her head lay upon the desk and her pen remained in her hand, as the clock next to her ticked away the seconds.

The boy looked down from the mirror at the girl and said, "We have to do something. The alternative is clearly oblivion."

"Is that the reason for the hole?"

"Yes. I don't know if we can reach her, but we have to try."

The girl considered this for a moment. "What will we do? What can we change?"

"Well, let's try this one on for size. At least we'll know if it works." He pressed his mouth to the hole and spoke forcefully through it. "The two aren't teenagers, they're in their thirties. They're married and live in California."

The girl interjected, "There's no reason to think that this will work. And what if we scare her into giving up?" Even as she spoke, her face aged and her clothing morphed into casual business attire. The boy looked startled for a moment, and then turned to appraise himself and the room about him. It had become an upscale condo filled with expensive furniture and potted plants. Outside the window, he could see a palm tree and a pool.

"Wow. That worked. She really took off on that." He stepped back from the mirror. His shoes were now made of expensive leather, and he had a short beard and glasses. Taking no apparent notice of these things, he pointed to the young girl on the other side again. She had taken up the notebook again and was writing in long, rapid sentences.

"I don't get this. Who is she, and what is that book she's writing in? Why can we see her if she can't see us? And what *are* we?"

After a moment's consideration, the man answered, "We may never know the answers to these questions. But the book she's writing in seems to be the outside of what-

ever we exist in. And now we have a line out to that world."

"Here, let me have a try." The woman climbed up to the crack in the mirror and spoke into it. "They have two children, ages nine and twelve, and the younger one is adopted."

The sound of the house's new occupants could be heard from the next room, but the couple ignored them. They were too interested in what they had just discovered.

"Wait, I know!" said the man. "I'm a chief financial officer for a company, and I drive a Mercedes." After saying this, he looked out the window and waited for something to appear before realizing that he was looking at his own backyard. The driveway was on the other side of the house.

The girl left the bedroom to gain the view of the other window. She found a large front room with a sun window facing the street. Throwing back the curtains, she was aghast at what she saw.

Houses, buildings, cars, even half-formed people were poking up from the ground in various stages of development, coalescing out of the paper landscape. An office building reached full height and a moment later its windows lit up with life. A humanoid blob, solid only from the waist up, suddenly crystallized and stood straight up, taking the form of a middle-aged woman walking a poodle. She looked about nonchalantly, as if witnessing a world in the primordial stages of formation was nothing novel, and walked along with her dog.

"Oh my. Look what our friend in the mirror is doing." Even as the girl said this, one of the children from the other room ran in and grabbed her leg. It was a little boy, perhaps nine years old, having come into existence five minutes prior. He looked at the scene in the window, looked back at his mother, and said, "Mommy, Mommy! Is it where we live? Is it for me?"

The woman picked up her son and turned her to face the spectacle outside. The child's father had entered the room and gazed fixedly at the landscape.

After running her fingers through the child's hair, the woman said to her son, "Yes dear, it is for you. You and me and Daddy. We live here together, and--"

Without warning, everything slammed shut. The world went dark, and the volume of space was flattened instantly. The characters froze dead in place.

Heidi Kontag slammed shut her English class journal and spun her swivel chair away from her writing desk. She had gotten halfway through the third writing assignment of the semester, and she sighed with relief.

"Miss Gherringer was right. Once I got it started, the story just seemed to write itself. I'll finish it before class tomorrow."

Just then, something above the desk caught her eye. She stood up and leaned over to inspect the upper corner of the mirror.

"How did that get cracked? Odd that I never noticed it before."

Midnight

by Steve Parr

Steve Parr says: *Born in Berkeley, raised in Humboldt, I was destined to think differently and follow the unbeaten path. While showing promise as a writer during my school days, for thirty years I let my talent lay fallow while I pursued work in the woods, the oilfields and finally in the construction/deconstruction fields.*

Midnight

IN AUGUST OF 1993, I went to jail for driving on a suspended license and was released six weeks later at about four in the morning. I'd been staying in a converted box-truck behind the wrecking yard in Fields Landing. As I walked home I speculated on the odds of me having anything left when I got there.

Fields Landing was a rough-and-tumble little town where if you didn't keep a close eye on things they were liable to walk off. Six weeks absence would have almost assuredly given the local riff-raff plenty of time to clean me out.

The sky was just beginning to lighten over towards the East as I walked down Broadway in Eureka. A homeless man walked in my direction with two dogs, a little Blue Heeler mix on a length of rope and a big black dog running along free. As we met, he stopped.

"Hey, Bro—you don't know anybody wants a dog, do you? I got two and I can't feed 'em both."

Well, he was asking the wrong person, here. I'd just got out of jail. I didn't even know if I had a place to stay, much less a place to keep a dog, especially one as big as the black one. I started to tell him no but then I remembered my friend's big old German Shepherd. He'd died right before I went to jail. The kids were heartbroken and they'd been looking for a replacement.

That'd been six weeks before but just on the off-chance they hadn't found one yet I told the man, "I might know someone who'll take the black dog. I'll walk with you for a block or so and see how he acts. If he doesn't go running out in traffic and acting foolish, maybe I'll take him." Turning back the direction I had just come from, I started walking with him. The black dog looked at me, glanced back at him, and then ran up alongside me like he knew that's where he belonged. That's where he stayed for the next eleven years.

The dog's name was Midnight. He was a six-month old Wolf/Newfoundland cross, coal-black with a little

touch of white on his chest. His feet were huge, with long toes that could grip things and he had strange brownish-yellow eyes. He had a way of staring at people with an intensity that made them think he knew what they were thinking, and I'm pretty sure he did.

He was smarter than most people he encountered. He knew it so he was patient with most of them. If someone was bothering him he would ignore them at first. If they persisted he would give a couple of warning growls. If that didn't do the trick with a tremendous roar he'd snatch ahold of them like he was going to tear them up, then right before his teeth broke the skin he'd let go as if to say, "See what I could do to you?"

It wasn't that he didn't have the capability. He was a big dog. By the time he was full-grown he greeted me by planting his front feet on my shoulders and licking my face. He could outrun me on my mountain bike, looking back over his shoulder and laughing as I stood on the pedals in 21st gear and tried to keep up.

He had tremendous strength, allowing him to make huge leaps for such a big dog. I was working on a scaffold one time five feet off the ground. He was prancing about below, whining to be up there with me. I tried to coax him up the ladder. Instead, he squatted down, got purchase with those big hind feet and jumped from a sitting position up onto the scaffold beside me. He could easily clear a six-foot chain-link fence. He jumped like a deer. If he decided he was tired of being where he was, there wasn't much that could hold him.

For all his size and strength he was a gentle dog. Even though he didn't really like kids he'd let them play all over him, pulling his ears and bouncing up and down. When he'd had enough he'd slowly stand up, spilling them all off of him and go try to find a safer place. They'd all follow him. They loved their Midnight.

I went on a business trip with Dad, taking Midnight with me. Midnight rode in the back of the truck. When we'd get to where we were going he'd scope it out. If it was safe (say, not in front of the office at a "No Dogs" mo-

tel) he'd jump out, run around a bit, take a pee and hop back in.

Coming up to one of our stops, Dad said, "You'd better keep Midnight in the truck. This guy is deathly afraid of dogs." I told Midnight to stay while Dad and I went in the store. We did some work on the display (Dad sold wood stoves). When we were done we took our tools back out to the truck.

By the time we got back Midnight was gone. We went looking for him while Dad told me about a customer bringing a little tiny dog in the store one time. The owner nearly had a panic attack. God knows what he'd do if he encountered Midnight.

We needn't have worried. We found them both in the office, the store owner dipping cookies in milk and feeding them to Midnight. I started to take Midnight back to the truck, gruffly telling him, "I told you to stay!" The man would have none of that.

"I hope you don't mind," he said. "I got him out of the truck." They were best buddies after that. When we left he told Dad, "Make sure you bring Midnight next time!" Going down the road Dad just shook his head. "Only Midnight!"

When I worked up at the landfill they had a No Dog policy in effect. Midnight went with me everywhere. He'd have never forgiven me if I was gone all day and he didn't get to go along for the ride. I took him with me but I made it clear that he was not to get out of the truck except to pee and then only if no one was around (he could understand these types of things).

He was pretty good about it. He'd raise his head just far enough to see over the edge of the bed. If he saw anyone he'd lower back down. When it was clear, he'd hop out, do his business then get back in the truck.

When I checked on him one day, he was gone. *Damn*, I thought. I looked around, didn't see him anywhere. By the end of the day I was getting worried, driving around the landfill, hoping he hadn't been run over by one of the pieces of equipment. They had a couple of D-9 Caterpillar bulldozers up there and a sheep's-foot—another piece of equipment that rolled around on two big drums with spikes sticking out all around.

As I went by the office for about the third time, one of the girls waved me down. "Are you looking for your dog?" she asked. I thought, *Oh, no. Busted*. But it wasn't like that at all. One of the girls had seen him in the back of the truck. They'd coaxed him in the office, where they were feeding him treats. After that, they expected to see him every day, giving him the run of the landfill. He made a point of greeting every employee, every day, and I don't think they thought their day was complete until they'd said hello to Midnight.

The capper, though, was the day I was going to catch a ride to town with my friend Mia. Her daughter Cheryl was with her, strapped in her car seat, ready to go. As a toddler, Cheryl had been severely wounded in a vicious dog attack. Consequently, she was terrified of dogs. The

door was open. Midnight, forestalling being left behind, leaped through the open door, over the top of Cheryl. Landing on the seat beside her, he turned around, put his face right up to hers and smiled. Mia panicked. Before either of us could move, Cheryl reached up, put her arms around Midnight's neck and buried her face in his fur. Midnight just looked at me like, *What'd you expect?*

Midnight never seemed to tire. I'd ride my mountain bike all day, with him running ahead of me in that peculiar rocking lope that wolves have. He'd be as fresh when we got home as when we started. I decided to see what it would take to wear him out. I rested for two days, ate well, then early in the morning we took off.

We hit the freeway to Eureka, rode through the Redwoods at Sequoia Park, past the zoo. Then it was down to the waterfront to look at the boats, riding through the homeless camps on the edge of town on the way. Then out to Arcata, across the three graceful curves of the Samoa Bay Bridge. After passing through the town of Manila, with its sand and mosquitoes, we rode by Emmerson's sawmill. I waited while Midnight greeted the fishermen on the railroad bridge over Emmerson Slough. It would have been rude not to.

Between Emmerson Slough and the little college town of Arcata lies the Bottom, thousands of acres of bird preserves and rich dairy land. As we took the back roads across, Midnight looked to me for permission to chase the cows, shaking his head in frustration when I wouldn't let him.

We rode around the plaza in Arcata, with its statue of President McKinley panhandling, then it was up the hill to Redwood Park to watch the students and the hippies smoking pot like it was going out of style.

Overlooking Humboldt Bay is the Humboldt State University campus, with its Spanish Mission architecture nestled in the redwoods far north of any Spanish settlements. We passed through, one end to the other then left Arcata and headed out on narrow, twisty two-lane West End Road, cool and shady under a canopy of alder and oak. We crossed the Mad River just down from the fish hatchery, rode around the little town of Blue Lake, then rode the freeway back to Arcata.

We wandered around taking our time to get back to Fields Landing. When we arrived back home we'd been going for sixteen hours straight, with short breaks to eat, drink and pee. My legs were shaking as I staggered to my bed and passed out. I woke to Midnight bouncing around and nosing me, trying to get me to go out and throw a stick for him.

It took me about a week to recover. My muscles were so stiff I could barely walk. Midnight was fine. I rested up for another week, then did it again. This time we went for twenty-one hours, a phenomenal feat by anyone's standards. He started lagging at nineteen. By twenty I could barely lift my legs. We headed for home but only made it to the south side of Eureka. That was the last I remembered.

I woke up blind and paralyzed. I was so thirsty my tongue was stuck to the roof of my mouth. I tried to work up some saliva to call for help. I had none. I had no idea where I was or how I got there. Finally, with great effort, I raised an eyelid. I wasn't blind. I was just too tired to open my eyes. I still didn't know where I was. My thinking was all fuzzy. I tried to call out again but my throat was all dry sticks. All that came out was a huffing sound.

I could hear someone moving around in another room. I looked up and saw my friend Wilma standing by the bed, looking down on me with a big smile. "You're awake!" she said. I tried to speak and huffed some more. My face was all screwed up with the effort to open one eye. "You've been asleep for a day and a half," she said. "How do you feel?" I gave it everything I had and produced a croak. She took it to be a request for water. It probably was.

After she brought the water, she helped me sit up. I was so stiff, I had trouble bending. After two or three glasses of water I was able to speak. "Where's Midnight?" I asked.

"Right at your feet, dummy!" she said. I looked down. There he was.

"Midnight!" I said. No response. "Midnight!" Nothing. I looked at him closely. I couldn't even tell if he was breathing. Alarm bells went off in my head. I pushed him with my foot. He was stiff as a board. *Oh God*, I thought. *I killed Midnight*. I pushed him again with my foot and he tipped over on his side. One eye opened slowly, focused directly on me, accusingly. It seemed to say, *What did you do to me?* He was all right. I never again tried to find his limits, though. It was too hard on me.

Midnight seemed to know if someone was hurt or sick, even if the wound wasn't visible. He would pay special attention to that person, sitting next to them, leaning into them as they scratched him. Blissing out, he would sometimes lean so far into the scratch that he would tip over and have to catch himself.

It seemed like he had selfish motives, bugging them to scratch him, nosing at their hands until they did. What he was really trying to do was to get them out of themselves, distracting them from their worries by being a pest. He knew what he was doing. He just happened to have found a therapy that was good for him, too.

Most people who were feeling down when they ran into Midnight walked away with a lighter step and a better outlook on life. They thought that they had done something for him (scratched him), when in reality he had done something for them (made them feel good about how good they'd made him feel). He was a pretty smart dog.

When I came back from the Bay Area in 1993 to help out in the stove shop, I noticed Dad was starting to forget things. Little things at first, like appointments or where he'd left something. He was having a hard time with figures and I'd have to add up the bill when we went out on

jobs together.

Then I rode to the hardware store with him one day. It was four blocks up the street, on the same street that he had lived on for fifteen or sixteen years. On the way home he got lost. We sat at an intersection one block from his house for several minutes while cars went by sporadically. I was about to ask him why he wasn't going when he turned to me with the most perplexed look on his face.

"I haven't the slightest idea where I am," he said.

Over the next few years the Alzheimer's progressed to where he could no longer drive safely. Mom bought him a fat-tired cruiser bicycle so he could ride around the neighborhood. He'd spend an hour sometimes riding up and down the street on the other side of the block, completely lost.

I was not a model citizen back then. I spent some time in jail. (Remember how I got Midnight?) Midnight usually stayed with Mom and Dad when I was locked up. I got out one time and heard that Dad took Midnight with him when he rode around the neighborhood. Midnight was bringing him home when he'd get lost. Somehow Dad never forgot that if he followed that dog, it would lead him to safety.

After being released from jail in 2003, I went to pick up Midnight. I'd been debating whether I should leave him. As Dad got worse, Midnight seemed to sense it and each time I would get out it seemed Midnight's loyalty had been drawn a little bit more towards Dad and away from me.

When I walked in the door of Mom and Dad's house that last time, Midnight was sitting in his usual place next to Dad's chair. Dad's hand was on Midnight's head, absently scratching. When Midnight saw me he started towards me, just like old times, but the instant Dad's hand left his head he stopped. I guess he could feel the distress I saw in Dad's face. He backed up, looking at me as if to say, *This is where I belong now*. He had been my faithful companion for nearly eleven years. Now I realized that I had just been holding him until Dad needed him.

He stayed by Dad's side for the next four years. His legs, those magnificent hind legs that enabled him to run so fast for so long and jump so high finally began failing him. When my parents went somewhere Dad would have to help him over the side of the pickup, then he had to let the tailgate down. Finally, he had to be lifted completely into the truck, unable to propel himself off the ground at all. He still wanted to go, though, sometimes refusing to get out so as to be sure to not miss the next ride.

As Dad's memories went, Midnight seemed to be something he could always hold on to, something he knew would always be there in his rapidly shrinking world. Even when he seemed to have forgotten me, he still knew Midnight. He knew, as he sat in his easy chair, unable to read, unable to hear our voices, unable to communicate through speech anymore; he knew if he moved his hand Midnight would be right there and as long as his

hand moved Midnight would never leave.

Dad died at home September 9, 2007. Midnight never left the foot of his bed until right before he died, when he dragged himself to a spot directly beneath Dad. I figure he wanted to be close enough for Dad to touch so he'd know he hadn't left him at the end.

They say that dogs don't cry, that they don't have emotions like we do. They're wrong. I stayed with Mom for a while after Dad died, sleeping on the couch in the front room. Mom had a picture of Dad enlarged to poster-size for his memorial and afterward she sat it on her desk in the bedroom, leaning against the wall.

Midnight would lay all day and night on the rug by the desk, staring at Dad's picture. One night I woke to the sound of choking. Thinking it was Mom, I rushed into the bedroom to find Midnight standing looking at Dad, desolate, choking on his cries.

Midnight lived a few more months but only because we tried so hard to keep him alive. His heart wasn't in it anymore and the great strength in that indefatigable body was gone. Mom finally had him put down in early 2008. She didn't tell me she'd done it 'til afterward. It was better that way. I guess I'm not as strong as he was. I couldn't have been there at the end.

Two Poems

by R.M. Cymber

Bob Cymber, writing under the name R.M. Cymber, is an alumnus of Webster University in St. Louis, Missouri. Recently, he received an invitation to attend the University of Missouri St. Louis philosophy graduate program, but decided to go another route: a masters secondary English education at Fontbonne University. Most of his creative writing is philosophical in nature. Some of his influences include C.K. Williams, Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Aldous Huxley. He lives in the suburbs of St. Louis. His poem Butcher Shop is going to be featured in the fourth issue of Emanations magazine this year. One of his stories, Parenthood, is featured in Scrutiny Journal.

Perspective from a Low Place

Smell that grainy asphalt:
bits of tar on your forehead
while you cry there, lying still.

Thick mucus trickles like dammed,
streams down to wavering lips causing
mini pools around congealed oil.

It's a kind of dramatic episode:
an intense, bold climax
of a tragedy.

You know the flow of life
and how these things work.
Still, you feel a loss.

You hear the drone of polished
remarks, spoken to solidify
with good intentions.

He didn't know the one laying
in that box made of cedar.
How could he say those things
nice things?

Imagine if he told the truth?
Would it make you feel better?

An elderly woman mourns,
her blouse spotted with human rain.

You see the spots from the ground
in that box made of cedar.

Words stop; eulogy complete.
Box lowers into earthly orifice.
You already miss the love you lost.

Memories That Remain

Imprints of hands
around my neck like
an elaborate rash of anger
and misunderstanding, drawn
to a close by an interrogation
led by people I didn't know.

Women with letters after their
names, wide and serious bulging
eyes searching deep within me,
geographers of rivers
looking for the source of tears.

Then, a long drive out, out
beyond parental responsibility,
out to a place where my father
washed his hands of me in the
white porcelain sink that was
faded with agonies.

In a few hours, I met more people
qualified to proscribe MeDications,
who told me I would be there a while.

There, madness was as normal as
a cherry on a sundae.

It comes in different
more prominent as you walk
degrees, becoming
through the circles

Hey, whats your name?
I'm Marshall.
Why are you here?
I took a knife to a kitten. You?
I was too afraid to go to school.
That's messed up

Synecdoche, lol

by **Rebecca Blomberg**

Rebecca Blomberg holds an MFA in Creative Writing from Lesley University. She is a teacher of English language and literature, where she bestows her wisdom on the nation's youth.

Synecdoche, lol

LOOK AT ME. I am cute and quirky. I only use knives to eat yogurt, and I go barefoot in public, and I'm an artist so a lot of my clothes are smeared in paint. Don't you think I'm cute and quirky?

I am a cultured and interesting person. My favorite films include *What Is It*, the one with all the Down syndrome actors playing characters who do not necessarily have Down syndrome. You've probably never heard of *What Is It*; it's very esoteric.

Look at me. I'm an interesting person. I have HPV. An STD means you are experienced and worldly. I'm happy to have HPV, because I could have caught something like chlamydia or gonorrhea, which would be easily cured, and therefore lame. Herpes might be okay because it never really goes away, but then people could see the visual evidence and I'd lose my fun little secret. HIV would be the best alternative. Permanent, but basically controllable with modern drugs. The HIV would actually be pretty cool as a throwback, but I like HPV because it's so current, so now. The "it" STD. # Trending. A blessing for my art because I can speak to my generation.

Inspired by my STD diagnosis, I started brainstorming awesome ideas for new art projects before I went home for Passover break. A surge of sexually transmitted creativity.

One of my best concepts involved baking a cake shaped like a giant slice of cake. Good to get some domestic practice because my greatest ambition is to be a housewife/stay-at-home mom. Totally subversive. After garnishing the cake with a blob of Cool Whip and a mint leaf, I took some photos and posted the pictures on my Facebook page in my "Portfolio" album and tagged the project "Synecdoche, lol."

That was when a girl named Marie, who has posed as a nude model for the art department a couple of times, commented: *Maybe you could cut that cake into pieces shaped like tiny, whole cakes!* Under the "Interested In" prompt, Marie's Facebook profile indicated that she liked both men and women. In my own profile I have always

left that category, along with "Gender" and "Religion," purposefully blank because I don't believe in labels. I won't even let my roommate Sarah call herself my roommate. We say we "cohabitate" and let people wonder about the implications. As I browsed Marie's photos, I decided that she was my new lady-crush.

I brought the Synecdoche Cake to the Passover Seder at my grandmother Safta's apartment. My cousin Jessica's boyfriend, Sam, had been at our last two Seders, but they broke up recently, so she came alone.

Religious differences, she explained. Jessica couldn't have a future with him because he sincerely believed in Catholicism. They had a big fight over Transubstantiation because he said he believed that he was actually, literally, eating the two-thousand-year-old flesh of Christ when he took communion. Jess said she couldn't kiss a cannibal, and refused to involuntarily consume the parts of Sam's savior that stuck in his molars after he swallowed.

We set the table and I read the Four Questions, being two minutes younger than my twin brother Forrest and, therefore, the baby of the family.

"Remember when Safta first moved here and we would ring the buzzer outside and she would let us in?" Forrest reminisced. "You would complain, Dad, that she'd let in anyone? That Jeffrey Dahmer could be at the door and she'd buzz him in? Leah and I used to love that. We'd ring the bell and say into the intercom, 'It's Jeffrey Dahmer, let me in,' remember?"

"Great, another cannibal," Jess pouted.

Then I had an idea. "Have you ever wondered what human meat would taste like?" I asked. "I mean, do you think different people have different flavors?"

"I bet there are genetic differences," my mom said. "Muscle mass, distribution of fat."

"Good question, Leah. Would you taste human if you had the opportunity? Like if a guy died and stipulated in his will that his body be donated to a chef, and he wasn't murdered, would you try him?" asked Forrest.

"Why don't you just take some communion?" said Jess.

"No, no, you have to go through all the Baptism and First Communion rituals and all that for the Transubstan-

tiation to work," pointed out Dad. "We'd all just be snacking on matzah. The Last Supper was a Passover Seder, after all."

"Plus, after a few thousand years, I would think Jesus would go stale," Forrest said.

I looked down at my plate with my margarine-smear matzah. I tried a bite and figured human meat would be less dry.

"I'd try it," I said. "That'd be cool." Then his cells and nutrients would be absorbed into my body and we'd be unified on a molecular level. Is that what happens when you "eat out" a vagina or swallow semen? I wondered.

"I'd do it," Forrest agreed.

"Well I wouldn't because I'm not a sick-o murdering psychopath," Jess blurted.

"OK, all right, that's enough," said my aunt, noting Safta's puzzled but somehow unsurprised expression.

"This synchronized cake," Safta said. "Is it kosher for Passover?"

"No," I said. "Sorry."

"Oh well," she shrugged. "So how do we cut it?"

I sliced irregularly shaped chunks off the cake and handed out plates. Forrest took the first bite. "Mmm," he said. "Moist."

My next art project would be an interactive, oversized, 3D sculpture of a vagina, with a marzipan clitoris the viewer would consume using a pair of chopsticks. I sent a private message to Marie, detailing my vision, asking her to be my vagina model.

The weekend before classes started again, I invited her to join me in the woods around the perimeter of the campus. There was something like a couple of acres of land—I should start measuring things in terms of acres. That would be fun. "This penis is .000045 acres long," I'll assess the next time I see one—The land had thawed a few weeks prior and the green was returning through the rapidly deteriorating plant matter left over from before the winter. The weather was still a little chilly, so I wore a red Shapiro hoodie. Before stepping out the door, I tied a bandana around my forehead, then crowned my head with the sweatshirt hood. I was trying a new hip-hop thuggish look in an effort to be less bland and white. White people are so overrated.

I waited out at a splintery picnic table, and this cracker-ass a cappella singer dragged a rolling suitcase behind him into the dorm as he beat boxed to himself.

Marie showed up wearing a sundress and jean jacket, and we made conversation while we walked toward the woods. She told me she had spent Passover week on campus because her family is Catholic and lives in Wisconsin. Catholic. Does she take the wafer?

There was a certain point, marked with an X carved into a tree, no one ever passed because of a well-loved campus legend that a Dybbuk lived out there, praying on Goyish souls. Maybe the Dybbuk would be real, I psyched myself up!

"Better watch out, I hear the Dybbuk likes pretty young Catholic blood," I teased her.

"Is that why you brought me out here? As bait?" she said, narrowing her eyes, all coquettish.

We reached a bit of a clearing and I got out my sketch pad.

She stripped off her clothes and lounged in a casual pose, exposing herself fully to me. Her knees were bent, and she propped herself up on her elbows. All she needed to make this a gynecological exam was the foot stirrups. Her plunging, cavernous navel took me by surprise. I felt like I could arm myself with surgical latex gloves, then reach into her belly button, up to my elbow, and pull out some kind of treasure. Maybe an engagement ring so we could get gay-married.

Marie stood up and kissed me, but her lips were too soft and too wet and slippery, not like a man's firm kiss. I kissed her back, but disliked the moisture and squishiness of her mouth. She started running her hands all over my body, so I groped her back, and her skin was coated in a lavender scented lotion, and her whole being was too smooth and slippery, like a raw chicken breast.

But I'm bisexual, I reasoned. I find women beautiful, I have to be bisexual. That's one of my cutest, quirkiest qualities. The encounter with Marie wasn't bad. I just wasn't turned on.

When I pushed her back against a tree, we kicked something heavy that flopped. Marie looked down at the ground. I followed her gaze and saw a gray human hand, attached to an arm, sleeved in a faded, navy blue, puffy winter coat. Around the trunk of the tree, I located the rest of the body. Marie clamped her hand over her mouth to stifle a whimper, and I beheld the entirety of a middle aged man, barely decomposing.

He had a wispy beard, barely graying, and wore jeans and mud-caked white sneakers. Bugs crawled all over his neck, clambering over each other to get at his meat. Marie hopped up and down in place.

"Don't worry," I said calmly. "You get out of here and take a shower or something. I'll handle it. Don't tell anyone, we don't need to cause a riot. I'll deal with him."

She redressed, and turned on her heel. She walked in labored, forced steps, like the ground was sticky. I watched her body flow into a viscous gait until she gained momentum at the Dybbuk tree. She sped up, then disappeared into the woods.

Once she had vanished, I rotated around the body, relieved to be alone so I could really inspect him. He was super-dead, devoid of life. My pelvis tingled, drawing my attention to my partially deteriorated cervical cells, just a fraction of the cellular obliteration this guy was experiencing. I covered my mouth and nose with my sleeve and scanned the surrounding area. A rusty shopping cart was parked, like, .0006 acres away, containing a filthy fleece blanket, a tarp, and a bunch of bottles, and cans.

So he was homeless. Is "homeless" considered offensive? Domicile Challenged. An Outdoor American. There

was no blood that I could see. No wounds. He probably wasn't murdered. He only appeared to be in his forties, so maybe he died of malnutrition or he froze. He could have been out here, preserved in the snow, for months. How *did* he end up homeless, though? He must have had no family or friends who would let him crash on their couch, so maybe he was a huge asshole.

I envied the fact that he must have had a checkered past. He must have been so interesting. He might have committed a crime and then couldn't get a job because of his record. Or he had no remorse. Maybe he grew up impoverished or was sexually abused. Lucky bastard. What was his personality? Was he a pervert—I'm so disappointed I'm not even really attracted to women. This sucks, having a boring old penchant for penis. All great artists have fucked up sex lives—Anyway, no one could be missing him too much. They probably don't even know he's gone.

In fact, he probably came out into the middle of the woods here in order to die, so nobody would find him and he could peacefully reconstitute back into the earth, undisturbed and undisturbing. He was definitely dead and there was nothing anyone could do to fix that. I wouldn't call the police, I decided. I'd leave him there. An animal would eat him and it would be very cathartic, assuming he wasn't vegetarian. Animals don't mind rancid, spoiled meat. But it had been freezing, and meat stays fresh in a freezer, and maybe, I started to think... Maybe I could boil the hell out of his finger or something, kill all the germs... It would certainly be an interesting experience. True communion.

I bent down close to him and, even covering my face, was overwhelmed by the smell, my eyes instantly watering. I tried to force myself to stay near him, get used to the idea. This was my moment to seize the opportunity, make Forrest jealous and try a delicacy so rare, so forbidden... Scent is like small particles of a substance floating around in the air, though, right? So if I inhale him, I might integrate some of his cells or DNA into myself through my nasal passage, I figured. Close enough to nourishment. As close as I could get. I plugged my nose and sucked in a huge breath through my mouth. I closed my mouth, my cheeks ballooned out, holding the putrid air. I swallowed the air inside my mouth, pushing it down past my uvula. I coughed a bit and re-covered my mouth.

No police. No pigs, I thought, because snitches get stitches.

"Farewell, my Outdoor American Friend," I whispered, before gathering up my supplies and strolling back out of the woods toward campus. I paused at the Dybbuk tree to trace the X with my finger. Being possessed by a ghost would be so unique! In fact, I sensed a tiny fraction of myself, deep in the crevices of my soul, disappear and morph into something supernatural, something homeless, as I patted the tree goodbye.

I went back to my room. Sarah was supposed to be back from break within the hour, and I itched to tell her what had happened. Definitely about Marie. Not so sure about the homeless guy. She would admire my bisexuality and might even be jealous. I decided to keep the other discovery a secret because it was one of the most unusual things I'd ever experienced and, much like my STD, could be a fun influence on my character and my art. My nose got a little runny, but rather than wiping it with a tissue, I sniffed a couple of times until it stanchd, just to ensure nothing escaped from inside of me.

When Sarah finally showed up, I told her that Marie and I had bumped clams. "She's gorgeous," Sarah said, in awe, just like I knew she would. She asked if I liked Marie, whether we might start dating.

"College relationships are bullshit," I said.

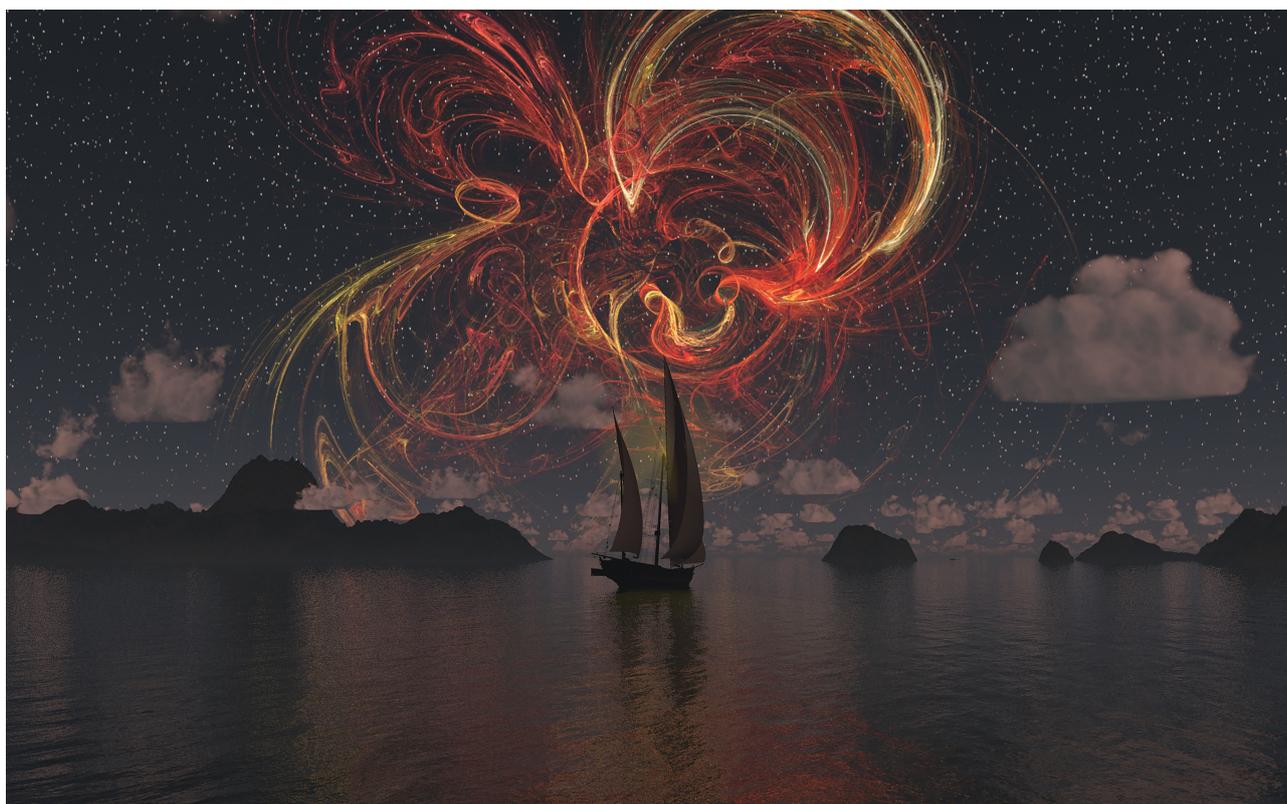
She absorbed my proclamation and agreed like a good disciple.

I had something now that nobody else had. I had communed with my homeless man, become a part of him and him of me, and with that I could create unknown wonders.

Aren't I super cute and quirky? I am, right? Right?

Since I had lost Marie for this project, I figured I could use the next best thing to a live model, and started perusing porn sites, looking for a good vaginal close-up as replacement. I set Mickey Avalon to repeat on my iTunes player and explained to Sarah that unlike most artists', Mickey's only good songs are his hits. She had never heard of him, so I feigned exasperation ("You've *never* heard of Jane Fonda?!") and Wikipediaed him for her. She unpacked her suitcase, tossing most of her clothes into a laundry basket, admiring how cute and quirky I am, and occasionally looking over my shoulder to yea or nay a vag.

At the Edge



by Karl Shaw

Karl Shaw says: *My name is Karl Shaw. I have been creative all my life, making drawings as a child and beginning to write novels when I was nine. I grew up with three older brothers and lived in Idaho and Oregon over the years. A daydreamer, I was always imagining things and creating stories in my mind. When I decided to start writing a novel, age nine, I had no writing skills so it was not very readable but the story was great! I wrote all the time and over the years and I created several novel series though I didn't actually get them down on paper. During high school my brother gave me a program that was used to create 3d scenes. That was when my graphic talents began. I started making wallpapers. My skills grew over time to what they are now. Currently I am finishing a Graphic Design degree at Walla Walla University. I am always exercising my creative talents, and I will always be writing. To find out more about me go to shawentertainmentstudios.com.*

Subtle Man Loses his Day Job

An Origin Story

by Thomas Allbaugh

Thomas Allbaugh first published a poem in 1982. Since then, he has published fiction and nonfiction in Writing on the Edge, The Whistling Fire, Pedagogy, Perspectives, Relief, Blue Moon Review, and a number of other venues. He has a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Composition and is Associate Professor of English at Azusa Pacific University in Southern California, where he coordinates the first-year writing program and teaches Composition, Rhetorical Theory, Fiction, and Creative Nonfiction. Information about Pretexts for Writing, his textbook for first-year writing, can be found at www.thomasallbaugh.com.

Subtle Man Loses his Day Job

I NOW DOUBT that Winky was his name. I now doubt everything. Even what I saw. After all, what you see can inspire many interpretations.

I'll start with the trip, which was my idea. I talked it up in Side Step for months. It was fun. But you never know who is listening, and that's the lesson. The truth is that I liked talking about the trip to California more than I liked going there. I liked talking about it because it was the trip that Winky and I bonded over. We were on our own journey. When push came to shove, though, I realized I didn't want to go to California again because it felt like I would be a tour guide to my own failure. At least it felt like a failure compared to just shooting pool and standing around in Side Step. So the week before departure, even though I didn't even save anything on my last pay check waiting tables, I started boozing it up extra heavy, even buying rounds. And if Winky is who I now think he claims he is, then I'm surprised he didn't notice.

I waited to tell him about my lack of funds until we were just about out of the U. P., in a restaurant where Winky was counting his money, had it all laid out there on the table, all seven hundred and forty-six of it. Liz had just gone to the bathroom.

It wasn't the money that made me say it. He was going on about the newspaper as he looked over his money. He was like that. Always counting his stuff. Always folding his socks and laying them out to make sure he had enough for the week.

"Somebody clearly benefits from melodrama in the news," he said.

Clearly? How was it clear? I blinked, my way of let-

ting on that I begged to differ. I was younger than he was, but I felt older, more experienced. I was bigger. I had solved a few barroom fights with my fists. He was abstract, living in his head.

"Dualistic," he said. This was a word he used often. Sometimes, I would push him there just for the fun of it. I'd set it all up, he'd have too much to drink, and then I'd wait for him to go there.

"Good and evil," he harangued now. "Current events are a corollary to the movie industry. As though we are watching a movie of our lives, and we can send in the usual action figures to just 'clean up.' It's the American, dualistic, 'damn the torpedoes' way." Then he seemed really put out about it. He hadn't seen me blinking and frowning, even though I was making it super obvious. I know what our mutual friend Phil would have said. If this were going on back in the Side Step Tavern, which I was missing already, Phil would have countered with the fact that the thirties led to comic books, and people were then able to survive through the worst of the depression and then war. And that's what the movies did for us, then as now. Then we would have had a great debate over comics and then some pool games. But that night, out there on the Wisconsin border, without Phil there, all I remember was thinking, "Man, I've got more of this to look forward to for how long?"

"There is no room in this world for something, say, more-between the lines." He looked at me and his sincerity made me want to laugh. "You know what I mean? Something that doesn't fit our normal categories."

I smiled. "You mean, like having four limbs, two eyes, and a nose?"

"Yes, exactly. But not quite."

As always at that point, I didn't know that this was a friendship at its turning point. I shrugged. "I only have twenty-six dollars."

Winky looked like he hadn't heard me. He finally asked, "You mean you only have twenty-six dollars?"

I nodded.

"You mean that literally?" he asked. "Not symbolically?"

"I can buy our dinner. Or I can buy smokes in the morning, coffee once. And then I'm broke. Literally."

Liz returned, sat down. She was in a blue tank top and folded her arms. "We leaving?"

"Neal only has twenty-six dollars."

"Oh," Liz said. "I knew that."

Winky picked up his money. "What do we do now? I can't turn around."

I didn't understand why he couldn't turn around. I realize that he was in his early thirties or late twenties or something, and he'd been divorced and saw this as a fresh start. But those six months when I was talking up the trip, I realized that I loved where I was. Didn't Winky also? I had my friends in Side Step. Liz had been a part of that scene too, and I was surprised to see my talk inflating her hopes. As for Winky, I thought that he could have just gone back with me. What else should a guy like him do? What was on the west coast? Jobs? I'd been there two years ago. But you don't know how the Winkys of the world will build their little castles in the air. I can't be blamed for that. Plenty of drunks talk big, but nothing ever comes of it except a trip to the john.

Who named him Winky, anyway?

We went as far as Seattle. We camped, woke up in the rain, and then drove to the city for coffee and looked for work. We spent two weeks. I shared a tent with Liz. I don't know if Winky could hear us from his tent at night, but I stopped caring. I had weed. He probably smelled it. I would have shared it, but he'd stopped really talking much, and it was best to have someone not cross-eyed out there. The one evening I did offer him weed, he wasn't in his tent. I found him standing in a place on the campgrounds looking over the river near. It was a place where he could see past the trees to the horizon. He stood there a long time without noticing me. I thought I saw him reach out and try to grab something from the sky.

Anyway, it was weird and I was high, so after I told Liz about it that night and we laughed about it, I forgot about that until later.

After two weeks, we had a meeting. Winky could pay for our bus fare back home. Liz could keep going in her car and make it to her sister's in a few days.

I remember the silence as Liz drove us to the Seattle Greyhound.

The night we returned in July promised to be the perfect homecoming. With Winky behind me, I took a

breath, yanked open the door, and walked into the familiar blaze of cigarettes, booze, video game lights, and greasy tacos of the Side Step Tavern.

"Dean!" I shouted at the first familiar face I saw.

"What?" He seemed annoyed. The resident communist, he stood up from the bar with difficulty due to some nonspecific disability in his legs or back. Because he complained of problems with both, Mike, the owner, allowed him to bring his Doberman in.

At a table near the door, Phil nursed a draft and fingered his voice recorder—what he used for his "research." A few regulars sat with him. He stared at me for a long moment.

"So," he said, "you came back after all."

I sat down. Next to me, Winky stiffened as Dean moved over to our table and his dog sniffed him.

"Trotsky," Dean said. Then he eyed Winky. "So you don't like dogs?"

"Not Dobermans," Winky said.

"I didn't notice this before. Is it just Dobermans?" Dean narrowed his eyes. "How would you feel if I brought in Khrushchev?" Khrushchev was his German Shepherd.

I held out my hands. "What kind of a welcome is this?"

"Yeah. So you're back." Dean eyed Winky. I hadn't noticed animosity between them before. "So, where'd you go?"

"Seattle."

"Oh. I was going to say Oregon. Close, anyway." He studied Winky.

"I could see you coming back," Phil said. Then he looked up at Winky. "But what's your take on it?"

"He's getting his old job back," I said. "It's all good."

"All good, huh?" He shook his head, as though he'd expected as much all along. "Okay, boys," and then he motioned to his voice recorder. "This is something I think you should all hear. Remember, everything you need to know you can learn from comics."

"Think I'm going to go," Winky said.

Without Winky for the first time in a month, back at Side Step, this was life.

Phil turned on his recorder.

"I still worked nights at the time," said the voice on the recorder. "My day job—er, night job—protected my secret identity. I never intended to work in a nursing home. But on dropping out of college, I wasn't going to be an accountant after all. My girlfriend was ready for marriage, and since I found geriatrics preferable to fast food and something to prevent me from going back and living with my parents, I stayed with it. My wife is the specialist. She's a teacher, and her income allowed us to move to the suburbs."

Phil's voice asked, "So what about the other? Not the day job, but the other."

"What about it?"

"When did it start? How did it start? And—anything else you could tell."

"Well, the first time I saw myself as a hero, I mean, in the wardrobe—I won't call it a costume, after all. It's my street clothes that are the costume. But that first time I appeared to myself as myself, I mean, as Subtle Man, it felt awkward. Some people take years to recognize themselves. And they take even longer to accept it. I thank the gentle, aged patients in the home who accepted me. Granted, most of them were probably not processing that a man in tights was sitting with them, listening to their impossible dreams of having their families and their old lives come back to them."

In the recording, Phil asked, "I think that everyone will want to know how it started. What incident brought you out?"

"I know. You are looking for a lost alien ship or a school bus sinking into the river with fifty kids about to drown."

"No I'm not."

"Everyone does. I mean subconsciously. The first incident—I solved a Medicare scam at the home. It was easy. I noticed unlocked drug cabinets that would stay unlocked until just before dawn. And the med counts were off, especially Mr. Sampler's morphine for his recent surgery to remove one lung. So I took the lock that was hanging there undone, photocopied the nightly schedule, circled the names, and brought this into my supervisor's office and put it in her desk drawer. I also placed a card on which I'd drawn my logo: a blue and gray emblem that resolved itself—if you paid attention to it—into an S. I admit I used to play with that at home before my wife got back from teaching. The next day, Pat Hand, the supervising nurse, ordered drug tests. The nurse and the other night janitor quit. Pat Hand pinned my card to the employee bulletin board. It stayed there a long time, generated conversation."

"And you never had any doubts about yourself?"

"Doubts?"

"Oh, say, that you were deluded?"

"No. I never doubted."

"First warning flag," said Pete.

"First?" said Nick, who sat with an empty shot class.

"To you listening, whoever you are," the recorded voice said, "this is not a mythical account. I don't have the typical 'origin story' you seek. I represent the human heart, those first steps into the taboo and the underworld. Because when you do that, you discover that America is, largely, a great underworld. You don't just plan to be a super hero. Look at the hero archetypes of Campbell and Jung. For me, it was as though with each step I took, more light dawned. It was slow, as though I could see my very hands transforming before my eyes."

"I'll admit I was duped until he got to the part about America and Campbell and Jung. Then, I recognized something. I didn't think it possible. I miss a great many things because I don't think they are possible. But the thought did come that this was Winky. I dismissed it. Winky was too shy. If I hadn't been the one to push going

out to Seattle, he would still have been stuck back in the kitchen at Joe's Pizza. Well, actually, now that I thought about it, he still was stuck there.

"But you want the straight stuff," the voice said. "Here's what you want, the fateful night when the new janitor went down to the next wing to mop the floor. I stepped into my secret room—the janitor's closet—and stripped to my uniform. Slender arms embraced me, and I heard Pat Hand's voice. 'Marvel Comics? Sexy.' And she turned me around and began to kiss me."

"I'd turned her on."

"Mmm," she said. "So many nights and you must not see your wife."

"Pat, the new janitor—"

"What about him?"

"I need to apologize, I—"

"You're Catman," she said. "You are so quiet, so, so subtle. No one knows." I'll admit that as she ran her hand down my chest, past my emblem of a blue and gray overlapping of shapes, that when looked at finally resolves into an S, I thought momentarily that 'Catman' would be a better hero than Subtle Man. And then I saw her, not as my boss, but as a sexual being, as a woman.

"Don't you think others have lost the power to see?" I asked.

"Shhh!" Her finger was over my lips. "Don't talk."

"Superman may have powers that we've lost, perhaps, but everyone has certain powers."

"Don't talk." She breathed heavily. "No one needs to know." She unbuttoned her blouse.

"How long have you suspected?"

"A while." And she licked my upper lip.

"This costume isn't a sex thing. It's real."

"It sure is."

"Then my blunder may cast on doubt my subtlety. I said, 'I'm happily married.'"

"I could watch it dawning on her. 'It's real?'"

"The next day I was told not to report to work. I tried to talk to Pat. 'If it was just sex,' she said very softly, 'that would be one thing. Happens all the time in this very dull job. But you really believe you can leap from tall buildings?'"

"I never said that. I am gifted with subtlety."

"My marriage ended. I had been exposed. I had to leave."

"Hahaha, ohmyGad. A fruitcake," Dean said.

"Has a kind of poetry to it," Phil said. "This guy reads books."

"So he passes your first rule for a superhero worthy of attention," I said. "Intelligence."

"And what's he look like?" Phil asked. "What do you think? Buff? Seven feet? He's actually shorter than me. He's got biceps and powerful legs, strength in subtle places for sudden bursts of energy." Phil looked at Dean.

"That's no superhero," Dean said. "That's just your average, over-compensating psycho who's stopped taking his meds."

Phil said, "Healthy skepticism is called for here."

"Some people need an outlet," Dean said. "You got comic books. He needs a hobby. Photography, say."

"Photography?"

"Yeah, photography."

Phil laughed.

"Okay," Dean said, "What's he done?"

"He stopped a Medicare rip off."

"I coulda done that." Dean stood up, leaned on his cane.

Pete, who worked in a meat department and usually came in wearing a tie, said, "If he's a superhero, what are his powers? Okay, he's intelligent. But what are his powers? What can he do?"

"I'm still cataloguing this," Phil said. "This is a real encounter. I didn't make this up to fit a theory."

"Intelligence," Dean said. "Listen to you losers." He limped for the door.

"The whole superhero thing," Phil said. "Lulls of incompetent normalcy, followed by archetypal heights. It's all here."

Later, at Phil's, we found him at "NewAmerican-Heroes.com." Subtle Man's strengths were listed: "intelligence, speed, an ability to haunt dreams." Intelligence was explained as intuition. Subtle Man relied on something "once attributed to the angels of the middle ages," the website claimed. He had lightning intuition. He apprehended wholes faster than normal minds. One commentator questioned his origin: Was Subtle Man in fact an angel?

The trouble with this superhero, also noted, had to do with dogs. A mythical struggle engaged him between heaven-his intuition-and hell-going to the dogs.

The next morning, I ate breakfast, I realized, without Winky. I relaxed. I loved the town, where I'd gone to school for a while, a small college town that also became a tourist site in summer. The transition between college town and tourist destination seemed well managed. I had lived through it twice now since dropping out. The college students, with exams passed or failed, cleaned and exited the dorms and were whisked away in family cars. A few weeks later, the prices in the local cafes and taverns went up and for two weeks, while the tulips bloomed, the streets were swept daily for the wooden shoe dances.

After school, I had found myself washed up into the company of those who stayed on past the tourist season. I was a member of the local economy.

These thoughts were interrupted as Winky passed by and then came in and sat down. "I can't stay," he said.

"Solving another crime?"

"I have to work." The waitress brought him coffee and

he refused it. "My plan is to get back out west by October."

"Really?"

"Monica has a car. You and I influenced a lot of people before we left. A lot of people. Monica and I, we can go in two months."

"Another rape last night," I said, unfolding the newspaper. I studied him. "More news melodrama?"

"The rape was like the others," Winky said.

"Huh?"

"New girl in town, staying out by the Lakeside. Cops should be checking for strange cars in the area, for someone hiding out there, or profiling the residents."

I stopped chewing. "I understand Subtle Man has the intuition of angels."

"Who's Subtle Man?"

"Whaddaya know about nursing homes?"

"I hope to avoid putting my parents in one. I know there are good ones. But we can't afford those."

So he was still set on moving. I felt guilty. I had planted this in his strange head. I'd built it up, this dream I had realized was just nostalgia, a dream long over.

That night, I went to Joe's, saw Monica in a sleeveless, flowery blouse. I had never seen her wear anything low cut. Her hair was wavy, she had many freckles, and her blue eyes were not seductive; they were delft eyes, large, childish flowers reflected in bloom.

And now she and Winky were going out west. She was probably ripe for a relationship. Winky was just "other worldly" enough to not push the physical. Suddenly, I envied them.

"Can I help you?" she asked, and then looked up from folding a pizza box. "Oh," she said. "He's not here. He left an hour ago with some friends."

"Friends?" I said. Winky had friends? I mean besides me?

I wandered back to Side Step. It was a slow night. I nursed a very weak light beer on tap.

After I left, I passed an all-night café and saw Winky sitting with four Mexicans.

At our apartment, I read until mid-night, when there was loud knocking.

It was Phil. "Oh boy," he said. "You're not going to believe this."

In Denny's, Phil stirred milk into his coffee. "Just can't believe it. I thought he was something else. But he's dark, definitely dark. This is a twist."

"Who?"

"Subtle Man."

"Just your average psychopath finding his way in the world," I said.

Phil set his spoon down on a napkin. "If I had a constant way of recording, I'd enter it in the record. Subtle Man is dark. My cousin has a desk job in the police department. I've been talking to him. He told me tonight

that a guy in a ski mask and tights helped the rapist to get away."

"You seem more concerned with how your comic book will play out than you do about stopping a rapist."

He was brooding.

"You know who this is," I said. "You need to turn him in. Your superhero got in the way of solving this. This is the way the comics happen in real life."

Crows' feet deepened around his eyes. "Maybe."

"You're the man with the recordings. You can help. No, you need to."

"I only saw him in his ski mask. I couldn't tell you who he is."

"You need to tell them everything." I glanced back at the couple coming in the front doors and standing at the waiting area for the hostess.

"This is sad. I just keep looking for another way." He stared at his coffee. "Something's going on here, and you're concerned with outing your friend."

"Friend?" I said.

"Yes, friend. I didn't say it was Winky. But I know your thoughts." He leaned forward. "If Subtle Man helped the rapist escape, is there another explanation? I'd like to know, and that's all I'm saying. It's not about some damned comic book farce to me. This is real."

"Damned right it's real. Real as the Unabomber."

The next night, the front door to Side Step swung open and Dean stood there with both dogs. Two drunks shrieked and the Doberman yanked at the chain and pulled Dean forward onto his bad leg and attacked a kid sitting with his dad at a table near the video games.

Dean pulled his dogs back and the door to the tavern opened again.

"I'll find him," Dean said. "Trotsky and Khrushchev got a huge scent tonight. Nothing truer than a dog's nose."

I looked at the strange dot on Khrushchev's nose.

I went home. He wasn't there, so I went for proof. I trashed Winky's room. I pulled all his clothes from his closet, all his notes, looking for evidence of his former employment with a nursing home. But true to the friend I had known, Winky was not nostalgic. Finally, I took a t-shirt from his laundry basket.

I didn't see Winky all that morning or afternoon, and that evening when I stopped at Joe's, he told me he'd stayed the night with Monica.

"Who are your new friends?" I asked him.

"What new friends?"

"Monica said you were out with some new people."

"Oh, just a couple of workers up from Texas. They are starting at the shop and had some questions about rental properties. I have an uncle who lives here. Did you know that?"

Distracted, hiding his shirt, I shook my head. He went back to the kitchen, and I went across the street. I had to wait a long time that night for anyone to show up. I

shot pool and drank Jack Daniels. I also noticed the appearance of a well-dressed Mexican dude. He had been at the bar two nights a week now checking things out. He looked to be from some Mediterranean port or somewhere from a wealthy province in Mexico. He spoke good English.

By the time Dean showed up that night with his dogs, I was slurring my speech.

Just as I had held Winky's t-shirt in front of Trotsky and Khrushchev, gave them both a great whiff of it, Winky came in and said in his voice that hurt with injustice, "My room was trashed. Somebody broke in."

The dogs lunged after him and he ran, scared, back to Joe's.

Later that night, I came home and found Winky was packing his stuff. He was moving in with Monica for a few nights. So I confessed the whole thing, including my suspicions. This made his mind up finally. He moved everything out that night. At the end of it, I slept soundly in the quiet, and I only noticed the next morning that I still had the t-shirt I had taken from him.

The well-dressed man from the Mediterranean sat across the bar with a glass of wine. He sat next to, Tanker, from whom I usually got my stash. I walked out on the pavement, and as I moved down the street to buy more smokes, I could smell the approach of rain and a distant rumble of thunder. I thought about how to approach Tanker and his new connection. Apparently, the man from the Mediterranean also wanted to score some. Across the street, Monica pulled out of Joe's lot in her smart VW. She really had a fine figure. Winky was quite the man to have recognized this. Then I was depressed again. I wanted them both to stay. I was jealous for the old days.

Back in Side Step, the Mediterranean checked his watch. Tanker seemed nervous. What happened next this: As I knocked my new smokes on the bar top, the front door opened, and the place was shaken by lightning—as though lightning had just struck the street right outside. The bar went dark, and then the lights went on, and I saw Subtle Man in the doorway. There was a cry and then Trotsky yelped in fear.

Subtle Man stared over the pool tables and shouted at the Mediterranean. "Rainbow Alley." Then he was gone.

There was a mad rush for the door. Dean fell and his dogs tore away and the man from the Mediterranean, with a pistol out, suddenly dragged Tanker, who was actually handcuffed to him, out the door.

I dropped back, kept my distance. When I slipped out into the rain now coming down, I was behind Phil and Dean, who had gotten up rubbing his shoulder after his dogs pulled him down. At Rainbow Alley, I was drenched as the police cruisers pulled in, their wipers splashing and their blue and red lights flashing against the dark windows of the buildings—an old sewing shop that was

empty and a computer store. I heard the gun shots and Dean's dogs attacking someone, and then I saw Trotsky and Kruschev tearing into someone, while his companion slipped and fell to his knees in the wet and was then pressed up against the wall and holding up his automatic weapon in surrender. It was raining, but I thought I recognized the t-shirt he wore as one of Winky's. Kruschev was snarling at him and two cops had their pistols aimed at his forehead.

Suddenly Dean shouted and pointed down the alleyway, where Subtle Man stood under the only building light. This distraction caused one of the cops to turn, and the suspect against the wall lowered his automatic weapon to shoot, and then was gunned down by the other cop who hadn't budged.

Subtle Man ran down the street to a car, and as it pulled away, I thought it was Monica's VW I saw partially lit by the street light.

Denny's that night buzzed with the accounts. Subtle Man was a drug dealer, an agent of the cartels. He was a rapist. He wanted chaos. Phil's cousin who worked for the police came in. The perps in the alley, he said, were

from a cartel. And Tanker was the rapist. Subtle Man had stopped the cops from arresting him before he could lead them to the cartel.

"Okay, Phil, what will you do with your recordings?"

"Cops have them."

"You should tell this."

"He's headed for Hollywood."

I thought about it.

Phil eyed me. "Imagine. A Subtle Man in Hollywood."

I didn't laugh. "Disappointing. Subtle Man should champion complexities. Education. Psychology. Stopping a cartel in this little Michigan town is a sell-out. I think he was driven by doubt. Had to prove himself, go big time."

Phil said, "Ah, Neil, you're just mad that he caught your source."

He's a narc.

There is always the human, unpredictable part. No one acts the perfect equation.

Phil never told me Subtle Man's identity. To this day, I can't remember if he ever smoked pot with us. I thought he did. But maybe he just led me to believe it.

I looked for Winky's name in various California cities. I never found it or Monica's.

Low Tide

by JACK BOOTH

Jack Booth is a San Francisco-based poet, artist, and teacher. He teaches history and literature at a public high school in the city's Fillmore District. He has recently launched a poetry blog called The Simple Self (www.jackbooth.org). When Jack is not devising a poem or a lesson plan, or talking with teens about gerunds or Antebellum America, he is out and about with his wife, Ingrid. Or he's pedaling down some lost highway: Jack is an avid cyclist.

Once at Point Reyes Station
I bought a kite
a big diamond-
shaped number no
that's not right.
I remember
I'd changed my name
rather my mind
and at the last second
chose something boxy
with panels.



Almost in the same breath
I bought two shirts at a shop
at the opposite end of town
the long blocks
notable for low buildings
high curbs and the rain
water running in the gutters.
I told the woman
who sold me the shirts
one plaid, one solid
about kites hanging from rafters,
the shopkeeper whom she knew
as a friend of her late husband
and my selection process
once I'd committed myself
to making a purchase.
She asked me my name.
I told her in a startled voice
it started with a J
because I needed at least a finger
hold on the truth
to speak without blenching
adding that mine was a quiet life
on the verge
so I'd always felt
of transformation.

Eyeing my kite
she announced my boyhood
for I was a boy
as far as she could tell
trapped inside a man's body
as erupting.

I'd chosen a stickless parafoil.
 Something less boxy
 than I'd previously let on
 the diamond-shaped one
 complete with two
 beautiful streamers.
 The woman who sold me the shirts
 a thin ruddy haired woman
 with large green eyes
 and a penchant for sighing
 nodded without speaking
 and over time
 and with downcast eyes
 blurted out nouns like whitewash
 and mackerel sky
 between silences.
 She was in magnificent physical shape
 a specimen of her (late) stage of life
 and old enough to be my mother
 numbingly isolated.

At the beach with Janet
 for she had closed up shop early
 I scrawled for her
 on the sky
 with my parafoil.
 Wind whipped her face.
 The hem of her coat flapped
 about her kneecaps.
 Waves petered out at our feet
 after their proverbial crashings.
 Following the kite with her eyes
 she asked me what
 I did with myself.
 Besides scholarship, I said
 for I was a Sunday Gogol scholar
 partway to learning Russian
 I was writing something
 based on sound
 something forgiving both of illogic
 and running against the grain
 of my character
 typographical errors.

Stacking her hands
 atop her sternum
 as if to clutch a medallion
 she nodded her head
 in the affirmative
 her long quilted coat
 a patchwork of squares
 enumerating a spectrum
 of colors I tend to call
 autumnal.

In the first place
 liquid darkness reads like a womb.
 (The rapid cycling parent of origin
 composes four episodes a year.
 I'm talking about madness
 when the clock secretes liquid.
 We secret it [sic.] in the dark,
 when we think it's night.
 We don't understand
 the kind of sleep we'd have
 if we didn't have electric lights.)

In the second place
 Janet, whose name,
 an English diminutive of Jane,
 female equivalent of John,
 finds its roots in Yochanan
 the Yahweh of the grace of god—
 my friend, a stranger of mine
 Janet rises into the air and the light.

In the third place
 is the life of the imagination.