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Black Box 2019

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The Black Box

ERAU's #1 Creative Arts Magazine



Edited By Kelvin Russell & Martin Kurchubasche

Cover Art by Jorden King

Editor's Note

Our Mission

The Black Box is a student based creative publication serving the Embry-Riddle Prescott campus. It is our goal to provide a showcase for the creativity and talent of the Embry-Riddle students.

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Into the Dark for Light

By: Shane C. Baskit

Man, on the road: "What's on the horizon my friend?"

The Black bird on yonder branch: "Ca, Caw!"

Man, on the road: "So... more of the same old #%&*."

-The Weary Traveler to the Crow

The First Part:

Jupiter sat quietly, entranced by the spindly little spider crawling up the wall of his room. Slowly he brought his thumb towards the spider; the spider froze as his thumb hovered just above its delicate frame.

"I could end you now," breathed Jupiter. The spider sat still. Jupiter looked closely, squinting, "But I'm a merciful god," he whispered as he withdrew his thumb and blew lightly, sending the spider scurrying, hurriedly away to a small crack in the sheetrock.

The hour was late. Jupiter's drunken father was long passed out in his recliner, snoring ferociously as infomercials played upon the TV, peddling their fantastic and (too good to be true) wares to the compulsive spender and insomniacs of the world. His mother was at work, clerking a Stop and Go service station, surely asleep on her feet. Jupiter tip-toed across his room, slipped his coat from the wall hook and shrugged it onto his much too small eleven-year-old frame. Quickly he scooped up his worn-out sneakers into one hand and slung an olive drab knap-sack over his shoulder with his free one. Quick but silently he crept through the dark house and out the front door into the dark and still autumn night. Once his shoes were on, he hit the ground running, cutting through yards, and crossing streets where the lights couldn't reach.

Jupiter had questions and he'd be damned if he wouldn't get answers.

They Never Forget:

Jupiter dropped down into the overgrowth at the edge of the road. A police cruiser passed by, probably headed to the Stop and Go for a cup of coffee and maybe a donut, cliché he smirked. Jupiter felt comfort knowing the police frequently stopped in his mom's work; he worried about her being alone all night in that place.

Once the cruisers' taillights disappeared around a bend he continued on. He was headed to the small zoo a few miles from his house. There he would visit an elephant named Sophie. On a

school trip to the zoo he learned of Sophie. She's a 72-year-old Asian elephant who was rescued from a circus whose animal accommodations were found to be less than desirable. The zoo boasted that Sophie was in line to be one of the oldest elephants in captivity.

Jupiter remembered hearing that elephants had long memories, more specifically, "An elephant never forgets!" Though he was not sure of where he had heard it, he was sure that he had. With that knowledge in mind he figured who better to pose his many questions to than a creature so old with such a wonderful ability to recollect things. She must know it all he thought.

Jupiter followed the edge of the zoo's parking lot, where it was darkest until he reached the tall chain-link fence of its perimeter. With much struggling and a little cursing, he scaled the fence and made his way to Sophie's enclosure. The cage that contained the old girl had bars open enough to reach through and touch her, when she allowed it that was. When there last, Jupiter remembered the Zoo keeper calling Sophie over by making kissing noises and snapping his fingers. Jupiter did this now, and out of the dark the hulking beast emerged. Jupiter climbed up until he could see into Sophie's beautiful, giant, and dark amber eye; her thick lashes each as long as his outstretched fingers. Carefully he placed his hand, palm flat upon her forehead and calmly he asked his first question.

"Why is there so much fighting in the world?" he whispered. Sophie blinked slowly then just stared back at him. Jupiter huffed, closed his eyes and thought of his father and how he would often complain about black people (though that's not what he called them) being lazy and dragging down the system, and how Mexicans were bankrupting the country and stealing jobs from good honest white Americans, and don't forget the towel heads wanting to blow up the whole damn world; Jupiter's stomach would turn whenever his father began one of his rants. Opening his eyes, he asked "Why can't we judge others as individuals instead of by the way they look?" Sophie waggled her ears a little and waved her trunk... silently. "Please Sophie!" pleaded Jupiter. "Say something," he croaked while pressing his face to the bars. Sophie backed up a bit and turned her backside to Jupiter. He hung his head. Sophie made what sounded like a great sigh. Jupiter looked up hopeful, just then she blasted him with a thunderous fart; his straw-colored hair flapping in its wake. Then she disappeared slowly back into the shadows.

"WHHHYYYY!" cried Jupiter, shaking his head and fanning his hands. Once again Sophie had no reply.

Strigiformes Most Wise:

After some time and distance Jupiter decided not to be discouraged. It's only 2am he thought, plenty of time to seek answers from more intelligent beings. Just a few miles to the west there's a farm, with a barn, and in its eve an Owl (he saw it once while out exploring with friends.). Owls are wise, I think... he thought and so he headed west as fast as his legs would allow.

At the farm Jupiter took great care not to be loud, to disturb the livestock, to not get a butt full of rock salt via shotgun blast from a groggy farmer. In the barn Jupiter lit a Zippo lighter (he found it in his dad's junk drawer and fixed it up.). The small flickering light led him up a wooden ladder into a hay filled loft. Carefully he scanned the rafters. In the dim light shadows danced and jolted, making it hard to make anything out. He gingerly crossed the loft, eyes turned up and wide he caught a glimmer in the furthest corner, two yellow orbs floating in the murk.

With lighter held high he made his way over. Respectfully he called up, "Wise Owl, I have questions and need your guidance." Bowing his head slightly "Please help me," he spoke. The Owl spun its head, first left, then right, its feathered horns twitching a bit. After a moments silence, Jupiter licked his dry lips and asked, "Why must so many people suffer?" Patiently he waited for the Owl's reply.

"HOO!" blurted the Owl, winking one eye, then the other drunkenly.

"My friend Bill, his father beats him and his mother," said Jupiter, shaking a little.

"HOO!" cried the Owl once more.

"All the homeless and hungry people around the world!" proclaimed Jupiter a bit louder.

"Hoo?" cooed the Owl, softer this time.

"My grandmother, cancer took her life," responded Jupiter, tears blurring his vision.

The Owl undulated, ruffled its feathers, hopped a ways, then in a burst of wings took flight, soaring out and over Jupiter. He watched with bated breath as the owl passed over and released a huge splatter of bright white crap that thudded upon the lofts' timbered floor and peppered Jupiter's shoes and pant cuffs.

Hanging his head, Jupiter choked out a low, exhausted growl of dismay. After a while he descended the ladder and headed out into the dark and swaying corn stalks of the farmer's field.

Contemplations from Upon High:

Goose bumps sprung out on Jupiter's arms and neck as he walked through the dark and shadowy early morning air. It must be getting close to 3a.m. shivered Jupiter as he scrutinized his next move. Once he had asked his Church Pastor where to find answers, and his Pastor said God was the way; but soon enough Jupiter realized God was a quiet listener, who only answered in subtle and wordless ways, that is, if any answer came at all. Jupiter needed real, concrete explanations to ease his mind. God could not settle the churning, biting thoughts that often kept him awake at night.

Just then a shooting star fell from the ebony abyss of the sky, briefly illuminating flints peak, a gray and dismal mountain located on forestry reserve to the east. Once he had overheard a

man talking about an old hermit who supposedly lived, hidden amongst its nooks and caves. Again, unsure of why he knew what he knew, he was very certain that old hermits who lived upon mountains were supposed to be intelligent, world worn, and wise, full of great revelations and advice. With a renewed sense of purpose Jupiter pulled his coat collar tight and headed east into the foreboding woods between him and the answers he sought.

Morning glow was just beginning to break the horizon when Jupiter made his way to the base of the mountain. About three-quarters of the way up he could see a faint glow and a trickle of camp fire smoke hanging in the air. That must be him he thought as he began his climb upwards.

Sweaty and breathing heavy Jupiter wandered into the Hermit' camp. He saw the old man, frail, scraggly, with white tufts of hair springing from all directions of his head, sitting cross legged in the warmth of a modest fire. Jupiter fell to his knees at the fire across from him and held up one finger as he caught his breath and composed.

"Long way from home, young fella," stated the Hermit. Jupiter looked up into his dark and haunted eyes.

"Yessir," he said, positioning himself into sitting crossed legged as well.

"Who are you?" quizzed the Hermit.

"Jupiter, Sir" he said trying not to fidget.

"Jupiter is the Roman God of gods and thunder as well," said the hermit very matter of fact. "A very noble and difficult name to live up to." He mumbled, furrowing his thick brow.

"Yessir," said Jupiter again, "Also fifth planet from the sun." he said shyly.

"Last name?" barked the Hermit.

"Smith," replied Jupiter a little stunned.

"Underwhelming!" barked the hermit, working his Jaw, "What's in the sack?" he asked pointing a crooked finger at Jupiter' knap-sack.

"Lighter, knit- cap, Granola bars, water, some Cokes..." Jupiter was listing when the Hermit interrupted.

"Let us have a Coke then," he said reaching out to Jupiter. Jupiter pulled two out and handed the old man one who quickly took his, cracked it, and took a long pull, nearly drinking half the can. For a bit the Hermit only sat silently with his eyes closed, breathing roughly through his nose. Jupiter sat entranced watching the man's nose hairs bursting in and out of his nostrils like some kind of tentacled sea creature from the deepest depths of the ocean. The Hermit smacked his lips and spoke.

“Thank you, it’s been awhile since I’ve tasted something so sweet. I’m Roger Cain... what are you doing here Jupiter Smith?” he asked kindly.

“Answers,” proclaimed Jupiter, “I need to know why?”

“Why? Why what?” Roger asked puzzled.

“We’re here, what’s the point, where we’re headed,” said Jupiter a little exasperated.

“And you think I know?” answered Roger. “Why?”

“Because... you are here... a wise man, on the mountain top,” stammered Jupiter. Before Jupiter could go on Roger held his hand up signaling silence. He contemplated the boy for a moment, coughed, thought some more then said:

“A small quest for answers then... a cave half way down from where we sit, go there and ask your questions.”

“I’ll find my answers there?” Jupiter replied skeptically, his glare boring into Roger.

“Perhaps,” said Roger. “Won’t know until you try,” he finished with a wave of his hands.

Into the Dark for Light:

Jupiter took a long, deep breath, stood up, turned around, and headed back down the mountain, in search of the cave of answers. The sun was still hiding just beyond the earth’s curve, but it provided just enough light to navigate the steep descent of the mountains rocky and brush-brambled covered surface.

With a soldier’s focus Jupiter crawled, slid, tripped, and weaved his way through each obstacle the mountain served up. Roughly around 5a.m. he found himself battered and bruised but standing at the mouth of a great and pitch-black cave.

After a bit of scavenging, Jupiter was armed with a torch, comprised of a medium sized branch, a strip of cloth from his t-shirt, and a healthy portion of the extra lighter fluid he packed. The torch’s dancing light made the cave look more menacing instead of less. Jupiter sucked a large gulp of air and pressed on.

Once inside, his only company was the slap of his foot falls upon stone, the snap and pop of his torches flame, and of course the huff and puff of his own breathing. He walked for a while. The cave went deep. Sometimes it was narrow and other times quite large. Eventually he came to a sheer drop-off of which he could see no base. A great expanse was before him that consumed his meager light pulling it into its inky, seemingly endless ether.

Jupiter found a crevasse to hold his torch. Then carefully he walked to the edge and dropped to his knees. After some thought, he called out “Please! Tell me why! What’s the point of all this?” His reply came in a great cacophony of his own echoing voice, bouncing back from above,

below, and each side. Soon as the sounds settled, Jupiter sat, hands on his knees, head cocked, listening intently. Nothing. "WHY MUST WE EXIST!" He shouted as loud as his lungs would allow. Again, his own frustrated plea returned to him. Sitting, silent, once more he waited for a response. Then from everywhere and nowhere a booming voice replied.

"BECAUSE!" It exclaimed and then after a pause, a long and very guttural belch filled the silence, reverberating and crashing upon the stone walls. Crazy, exuberant laughter peeled off everything, a thunder crash in the great cavern.

Jupiter turned quickly to see Roger, the damned Hermit, staring stupidly at him, a huge grin spread across his face. Roger's grin quickly disappeared once he noticed the tears in Jupiter's eyes, and how he was shaking, fists balled at his sides.

"What?" croaked Roger weakly.

"WHAT!" shouted Jupiter. "I'll tell you WHAT!" He said waving his hands excitedly. "My father's a drunk who can't hold a job; my best friend fantasizes about killing his dad, My mom (Sob!) ... My mom works so hard I never see her; she seems so sad, there's wars, and genocide, disease, hate, and suffering all around, AND! (Sob!) The adults... the ones in charge... the ones who are supposed to be smart and protect us (Sob!) ... Just... Just argue and act like little babies; calling each other names, pointing fingers and blame (Sob!) NEVER WANTING TO TAKE ANY RESPONSIBILITY FOR THEIR OWN ACTIONS!" Tears and snot streaming down his face, Jupiter paused long enough to mop his face with his sleeve. Roger moved his mouth to respond, then thought better, then again; he looked like a fish gasping for life. Jupiter narrowed his eyes and began again. "So tonight, I had, had enough, and I went looking for answers. I asked an elephant; cause they don't forget; It farted in my face, then I found a wise owl and all it did was take a dump on me! (Heavy Breathing), and you... you send me into a mountains butthole and burp and laugh at ME! YOU ALL SUCK!" Roger stared dumbly. "I might as well jump in this freaking hole." Jupiter whispered as he turned and ran towards the edge.

"WHOA!" cried Roger moving quick enough to snatch Jupiter's jacket collar before he could leap off the cliff. "Jesus kid." He said before pulling Jupiter into an embrace, letting him run out his tears upon his bony shoulder. After a time, Roger and Jupiter made their way back out of the cave and together they sat on the husk of some fallen tree in mutual silence.

"I'm sorry, kid," said Roger solemnly. "I was just joking, didn't know how hard it was for you."

"It's okay," replied Jupiter.

"No," said Roger, "It's not... You know I once was a successful business man, beautiful wife, three great kids, then one day kids grow up, leave, my business fails, stocks fall, wife gets fed up, and I find myself out here in the wild, tired and looking for answers too."

"And?" Jupiter asked.

“And... I guess you can’t rely on anyone else to give you the answers. You must educate yourself, listen, and learn. And with time and much contemplation, you can search your own heart and find the best answers for yourself.” Roger absently scratched at the scruff of his beard. “Also, don’t take things so seriously, ya know. Sounds like your mom loves you, and your friend just needs someone to vent to; abusive men usually get left behind eventually anyhow, too. Your father needs your love and patience. Addiction can be a cold and lonely place, but I know, a person can escape it, trust me.” Jupiter could see in Roger’s eyes that yes, he did know something about addiction, and he had moved on from it.

“That’s it then,” said Jupiter, calmer now than he had been in a while.

“Yup, I guess so,” replied Roger.

“I guess it’ll do,” Jupiter concluded with a hand on Roger’ shoulder. “Thank you.”

Before leaving Jupiter and Roger both had one more Coke, they shared a few laughs, then said farewell. When Jupiter finally made it home, he laid a blanket upon his sleeping father, waited until his mother got home and hugged her and told her he loved her and then he went to bed to get some well-deserved sleep, and to dream of something better.

- S.C. Baskit



Photo by: Ryan Mahoney

Mother Earth asks, Will the Children Learn?

By: Jon C. Haass

Tears fell this week from heavy clouds,
raining down upon the broad fields
planted with thousands of white crosses,
the only harvest from the blood shed
by millions in the War to end all Wars
I ask, will my children learn?

Hot winds swept the rage into frenzy,
stoking the fires with Santa Ana breath.
Homes and lives lost in a dry storm,
temperatures rising, estates expanding
into the canyons and hills, indefensible.
Will my children learn from this?

Michael was no savior this season.
He whipped rising oceans into wrath.
Savaged trees and shelter in gales of fury
trying to cool the overheated gulf.
Please don't blame my natural rhythm.
My children are you listening?

Floodwaters flash death in the deserts.
Amidst bickering over long held grudges,
the real concerns of food, home, family
remain a mystery not to be discussed.
And fresh water runs off to salty seas.
Again, I ask... will my children learn?

Veterans gathered round the globe.
Heroes acting out national walls.
They know war's toll on the body,
aches remain from commands salute.
Families reflect on those not returned.
What will it take, my children, to learn?



© 11/11/2018 Jon C. Haass excerpt from *Treats for the Soul*

To Kill a Pheasant

By: Alan Malnar

Amidst the tall picket-fences and vacant lots of my youth my family kept a large coop full of various pen-raised fowl. Through a child's eyes this cage seemed as vast as a football field, but was really no more spacious than the sum total square feet of a two car garage. Within interior walls unequally studded by recycled lumber collected from the docks where my uncle worked as a stevedore we bred dove, quail, red-legged partridge, and ringed-neck pheasants. As it was my boyhood chore to fatten the occupants of this cage with seed, it was my Uncle John's and my father's job to slaughter them, and my mother's love to roast them to a deep golden brown. I have many fond Thanksgiving memories of family and friends sitting ceremoniously around our dining room table, sipping homemade wine and feasting on luscious pheasant stuffed with wild rice.

I recall Uncle John—his large frame stooped in cocky determination as he sharpened the edge of the cleaver. The tattoo of a lady sailor bulging from his brawny arm gave an air of morbid erotica to the butcher's act; her flowing hair and full lips spoke seductively of death's sensual kiss. I still see the glint of sun on the cleaver's blade, hear the *swish* as it cut through the air, and the cracking of bone as the steel-edged blade smacked the chopping block. Amidst the frantic beating of wings blood spurted from the severed neck of the doomed pheasant as its head plopped into the rusty bucket below. Such sights and sounds, however, proposed no terror to my youthful eyes and ears, for it was all part of Saturday's chores—no more than pruning the fruit trees—to slaughter and pluck the pheasants.

Of all the beautiful, bloody dead pheasants I ever held in my hands, I will never forget "Buggy." Brilliant in feather and proud in strut, he was a tyrant fowl, big and mean and unapproachable. His beak was a stiletto—quick to stick and slash any trespasser who dare disturb his cage.

I used to toss Buggy rubbery tomato worms through the wire mesh; he'd peck them with a *rat-a-tat-tat* and swallow them whole. Then he'd look at me with spellbinding stare as if to say, "your fingers, too, little boy are tomato worms."

This weapon, I suppose, did for Buggy what the Gatling gun did for Butler; for I am still haunted by the ghastly image of an evil pheasant poking a field mouse to its death that had been helplessly trapped in the seed bin. Adding insult to the pitiable act of murder, Buggy then ostentatiously paraded back and forth across the coop with that tiny dead rodent dangling from his beak. One morning as I entered Buggy's pen to fulfill my duty as bringer-of-seed, no surprise he even pecked me!—

Lost in a lifetime of forgotten days: across the yard and over the fence,

through the neighborhood and into the passing years of my life, rings the shrill cry of a young boy's pain—with no mother's arms to cuddle, no sibling rivalries to force me to swallow my pride. I had only my throbbing finger spilling the blood from the first shot fired in a war to be waged between boy and bird.

I hurled the seed-scooper at Buggy, but he easily averted my wild pitch. Then I slipped and fell on my rump; I sat dumbfounded on the dirt floor of the coop as I gawkishly wiped my face. I felt the salt of insurmountable frustration and the bitter taste of irreconcilable difference roll down my cheeks as I cried.

Then it happened—

I felt something strangely warm on the palms of my hands and the skin of my cheeks. I had accidentally smeared Buggy's fresh poop all over my face!

Buggy only mocked me—as if to prod and push me like some schoolyard bully who shoves a weakling into a helpless brawl. I swear I could have torn him into a thousand pieces—I swear it!—but I only cowered as he flared his wings and flew at me in a feathered rage.

I ran for the door and slammed it behind me. I hoped to smash Buggy's head in the doorjamb. I huffed and puffed and kicked the dirt. No unruly pheasant would disparage me; I would get my revenge.

I would fatten him with seed!

Uncle John would chop off his head!

Mother would stuff him with rice!

And I would eat him!

So goes my boyhood feud...

Buggy charmed me with his sleek, stout body as he swaggered across the coop. His pulsing beady eyes and his powerful spurs glistened like daggers in the morning sun. He could have easily slashed out my eyes with one deft swipe, so each day when I approached his pen I'd cautiously slip his water through the cage door as a jailer slips a meal through a cell-hole to an incarcerated thief.

He'd prop his head high on outstretched neck; stare at me and I would stare at him. His colorful feathers—teal blending with hues of blue, copper and reddish gold; shades of grey, snowy white and a blood-red membrane of skin encircled his beady eyes. To see Buggy rouse his feathers in the morning sun was akin to viewing a soft reflection of light on an oily puddle of rainwater; the refracting rays and resplendent colors swirled about into a vibrant masterpiece like a Monet or a Cezanne.

I recall his fight once with another cock pheasant. In defense of his harem, Buggy easily subdued his opponent into a corner and joyously cut him to pieces. Thereafter, he strutted about the coop in battle-pride as the loser limped helplessly wounded with its innards dragging in the dirt like a tattered satin cape.

One day I pitched a handful of dirt through the wire into Buggy's face. I even tossed a roll of firecrackers into his pen. Terrified females scurried for cover

but Buggy only stood motionless as any formidable foe who knows the art of equaling the score. His low guttural cluck—a vile curse in pheasant talk—seemed only to say, “I’ll get you.”

And he did.

He annoyed me in every bird-way known to boy. He’d knock over the seed feeder and poop into the water pan. When I crossed the invisible line of demarcation, the territorial boundary fifteen feet from the door of his cage, Buggy would incite total coop-chaos whereas the entire roost of pheasants fluttered wildly about, smashing into the wire mesh, breaking feathers, beaks, and sometimes even wings.

One day my baby sister wandered into Buggy’s pen to pet the “pretty bird.” She became utterly hysterical when he trapped her in the corner and refused to let her leave. Ever since that moment when I saw Uncle John dash to the rescue to save her from this villainous creature, I saw the ominous caricature of a pheasant in the faces of people everywhere.

The mailman was a huge, beak-faced bird who did not deliver mail but deposited feathers into our mailbox. The policeman was only a sinister fowl toting spurs rather than a gun. The nosy next-door neighbor lady—dressed in pearl necklace and rouge cheeks—was only an unruly pheasant as she stretched and craned her neck over the fence to meddle in my boyhood business.

And so it was because of the sudden absence of the great Tom turkey in the adjacent pen that Buggy seemed to instinctively know Thanksgiving Day had finally arrived. He sensed that he was slated for the dining room table—and he was right!

But first we had to catch him...

My father and Uncle John entered Buggy’s pen to perform the final task on that memorable Thanksgiving morning. My brother and I followed; I wore a pair of welder’s gloves. Save for the sounds of a few shy hens jostling for cover the air was deadpan cold and silent. Buggy, the dominant cock who so easily bullied these ladybirds into submission now appeared helpless at the sight of four, two-legged creatures toting broomsticks. The female pheasants tucked behind the feeders and seemed to ponder their fate too; if such overbearing creatures so easily entered the pen to subdue the bully that so easily overpowered them, what would become of their fortune?

Buggy thwarted many our attempts to cloak him with a gunnysack. We tried to snare him with an old rope tied to a broomstick, but his powerful beak merely twisted our clever invention into a worthless device. We then drenched him with the garden hose and attempted to weaken his spirit. But as any caretaker of devilish cock pheasants knows, the only way to capture Buggy would be to exhaust him. So we incited him into a game of chase around and around the coop.

One last time he perked his head up high. He looked me straight in the eyes and tried to calculate my next move. He cried a ghastly shrill as if he knew where he was going and he wasn't going easy. In one last vain attempt he charged me as if trying to knock me down. But he didn't see the jumbo fish net hidden behind my father's back.

With one quick *swoosh* Buggy was pinned to the cage floor.

He squirmed, pitched, fought, and wiggled like a fish on the deck of a boat. I tried to grab Buggy as we led him to the chopping block, but he struck like a venomous snake and beaked me one last time on the tip of my finger. A streak of blood wrapped around my hand like a holiday ribbon. Today was surely Thanksgiving.

Uncle John swung a few practice chops with the cleaver and spat irreverently into the dirt. Buggy's eyes dilated and retracted with unspeakable anger.

I glared at my finger and then at Buggy. He gave me the red-blood vision of life and I would now give him the bladed gift of death—

Whack!

He popped off the block like a wire spring. On stored nerve energy he flew headless across the yard and collided into the wire mesh of the coop. I sprinted toward the death scene but suddenly stopped when I saw Buggy's headless body quivering on the ground before me. With every last twitch a red shilling of blood spotted the dirt. I wondered if he had felt the blunt sting of the cleaver. Could he have possibly known that fate had thrown him onto the dirt of some suburban backyard located in the south of Los Angeles?

I thought of *my* fate.

Would I too be destined to collide with the walls of some cage that encumbered me? My head chopped off by some two-legged giant with a tattoo on his arm?

I plucked a feather souvenir from Buggy's tail, but then I tossed it to the wind and watched it blow away. No more pecks, no more scratches, and one less distraction to run my daily chores amuck.

So goes Thanksgiving 1965—

My mother sharpened the carving knife and polished her sterling silverware. Her best tablecloth draped our dining room table. We ate apple-strudel and *povitca*—a Croatian walnut bread that our family devoured by the platefuls.

Buggy roasted to a deep golden brown.

We savored his plump, tender breast on that memorable day. I recall with bittersweet joy the beauty of those yesteryears: the sound of "Victory at Sea" playing from my father's homemade monophonic record player; the echoing voices of loving relatives long since deceased sounding from the adjacent room.

Grandparents, great uncles and aunts, and family friends chatting in half-Slav and broken English as they engaged in boisterous pinochle games and drank *Slivovitz*, Croatian brandy made from plums.

I recall the chopping block impaled with cleaver, Uncle John, and I still see Buggy's feathers blowing wispily about in a gentle afternoon breeze. As he laid in rest on the dining room table—wings and legs akimbo—I turned abruptly and stabbed his naked carcass with my fork.

He was the *best* pheasant I ever ate!

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Photo by: Ryan Mahoney

Sweetness

By: E. Groom

Today, a girl of about seven recognized and waved to me at the town's swimming pool. She often comes with her dad. The times when little girls have come up to me, out of the blue, always have made my day, and some little girls have such a happy spirit that you wish such spirit remains in them and you wish they could sprinkle their dust over others. I guess they do, unaware. Sometimes, however, I have seen those happiest of girls turn 180 degrees, sometimes, it seems, turning more quickly and with a greater intensity than less personable children do. Maybe the 180 is an illusion because of the unexpectedness of the change. I wonder if maybe the source of their happiness becomes the source of their troubles. And I am reminded of the power of women when I consider the pain these happiest of girls cause when they seem to turn against people close to them: I am reminded of the strength of the shock.

Seeing these little girls also turns my mind to the strength of old women, fragile and spindly as many of them once were when young, but so much stronger than you would ever imagine. I remember working in a nursing home and trying to help three other people change one woman's diaper. The woman clasped my wrist in a grip that was strong enough to twist it into the size of a straw. But when I read the accounts about Miriam and Minnie Dunkleberger in a number of fragile newspaper clippings about Mertztown, my hometown, that my Pop Pop had saved, I shake my head, watching in my mind's eye the two escorted into the courtroom with their little hats on their little fragile old skulls, perms done so often their vanilla, yellowy scalps glisten, like the sun breaking through on a cloudy day, their shoulders slumped and tiny backs humped, bosoms sagging, but dressed well. Both of these ninety-year old women are tidy, no lint on their wool suits nor holes in their stockings, eyebrows painted in perfect sleeping crescent moons. I see the judge in the courtroom with these women wishing he lived in some other part of the country. I hear the judge give Minnie Smith (Smith being her married name) permission to speak. And her voice surprises all in the courtroom, being so deep and gravelly for such a petite woman.

Minnie told the courtroom that she had written a little something to explain herself, according to the local reporter--a frustrated novelist, I think--writing the news account who then quoted Mrs. Smith directly. Her words follow:

"I grew up next to the Mertztown school. When I was young and went to school in the building still standing today (which I am most proud of because of the efforts of the historical society of which I was a member), I wrote a story I was as proud of as I am today about preserving that landmark of Mertztown with its high ceilings, hardwood floors, and sun shafts pouring in the high arched windows eye level with the green leaves of the tall maple trees. I remember the May afternoon I wrote the story in my English class. I took it home to show my uncle. The teacher, Miss Drieblebiss, was really proud of it and said that I had a wonderful imagination so I thought my uncle should see it. He was Samuel Dunkleberger, who for years managed the foundry, a position of some status in Mertztown at that time, I must add. He had barely glanced at it when, and, oh, I remember this so clearly, my cousin Edie, their real child, tugged at his knee and he dropped all the pages on the floor (on the floor!) and pulled Edie onto his lap while I scooped up the litter so to speak. My uncle and aunt had adopted Miriam and myself when our father, my uncle's brother, and our mother died in a flu epidemic and about six years later their own child was born. Edie. Edie, their real child, received new clothes. Miriam and I wore the hand-me-

downs from the next door children for years, even though being foundry master, my father did better than most in our little town. Edie was the cream, and as soon as she could talk, maybe even before, would boss Miriam and myself, along with her parents. Her wish was our command. My uncle would call Edie the little supervisor and pat her on the head. Miriam, who is the quiet type, moved away as soon as she was old enough, married an engineer from New Jersey.”

The reporter described Miriam as being not only quiet but almost semi-catatonic, only occasionally moving in her seat. When she did try to speak, once, Minnie shushed her sister with a sweep of her hand, as if she were swiping at a fly. I imagine everyone sitting in the courtroom mesmerized, for although each word of old Minnie probably came out like a marble rolling down a maze of steps, da-plunk, da-plunk, each word, they hoped, would shine some light into the cellar of Minnie’s soul.

Minnie, the reporter wrote, also told the courtroom about her marriage to Whitey Smith, who unlike her, a town person, Minnie emphasized, had grown up on a dairy farm and was rough around the edges. But Whitey managed to build a solid brick house for his wife and his mother, who, Minnie claimed, she fed and cared for until she died.

She told the court how Whitey died young, only in his forties, while taking a nap, but she kept up her own good work, going to St. Paul’s Church of Christ and serving faithfully in the Republican Party. She helped at all the elections. She was concerned about all the young people in town also. She always told Reba Stauffer if her boys, wild ones, were up to no good with the wild Miller sisters—she would watch them in the evenings hugging on the swings in the schoolyard. And she could tell you why the Merkel boy never amounted to anything “His mother told me,” Minnie said. “I don’t want Stanley to ever have to work,” so that’s when Stanley Merkel started riding his bicycle all around with his pet kitten in the bike’s basket. His real name evaporated and he became the catman to everyone in town and in the surrounding areas where he rode in the morning, in the afternoon, in the evening.

In short, Minnie would tell you that she knew not only what was going on in Mertztown but also why.

I imagine the winter day blanketed with a thick, viscous grayness, as thick as a snail’s foot, when in the courtroom Minnie bowed her head and said, “Whoosh, before I knew what hit me, the years just disappeared, and I couldn’t make it up the cellar steps and Edie, who never married, fell and broke her hip, so we all moved in with Miriam, whose dead husband had left her a good sized house in Wigglesworf. We got along, sisters, cousins, for the most part.” She paused when she said “for the most part.” And with that, she fell silent and the expression left her eyes, a curtain dropping, the filmy membrane of a cat’s eye when dust threatens. Although the reporter in the last account of the trial does not come out and directly state it, you know that Minnie told the people in the courtroom all of the above because she felt bad or at least wanted to give such an impression.

Lots of strange things go on in my home area. One evening my husband and I watched a movie about a wife who tried unsuccessfully to poison her unfaithful pizza-making spouse only to get back together with him in matrimonial bliss after he did not die. I told my husband that the story was true, that I remembered reading about it in the newspaper of one of the cities close to my hometown. My husband said, “No way.” But it was true. Who could imagine? My Pop Pop, now dead, could have, and he was the sort to see the cup half full.

I don't know if you have ever read a book with comments in the margin from previous readers. To me, those comments are like footprints in the snow left by someone you will never meet but you follow anyway. Surprisingly, my Pop Pop left some of those footprints on the newspaper accounts: Surprisingly because my Pop Pop, I always thought, was a doer, not a commentator, but what do I know, and this situation, anyway, was different to put it mildly.

My Pop Pop knew Whitey Smith and knew the Dunkleberger sisters also. In fact, Whitey had worked for him when my Pop Pop was headmaster of the town's post office. Pop Pop was not a "writing kind of guy." He called professional people "inklickers," but he had taken the time to write, in tiny, clear print, comments (some of which began with the two words "no, no") in the margins of the newspaper articles on the accounts of the trial. In one margin of one account, he wrote: "Whitey loved to read, would sit at the post office and read people's magazines before he delivered them." When Pop Pop had gotten to the part where the reporter quoted Minnie as saying she took care of Whitey's mother, there in the margin sat another comment: "the mother had a pulley system she and the neighbor lady, god bless her soul, had rigged together on the outside wall beneath the mother's bedroom window to send baskets of food to her upstairs bedroom because Minnie refused to feed her mother-in-law." When Minnie described all her volunteer work, he wrote, "More than one person in town called her Satan's Sister. New folks in town were told not to cross her because she was mean and this told to them by people who weren't exactly the kindest people themselves." When his eyes must have arrived at the part about Minnie being left all alone when Whitey died, Pop Pop wrote, "She had scared Whitey so much that when he delivered mail he walked on the other side of the road if a female of any age was coming his way, even little, harmless girls, like my granddaughters." And when Minnie apologized for standing there, "dumbfounded," as she described it in that gray courtroom, when her sister bludgeoned her cousin Edie to death with a fire iron after a game of Scrabble because Edie had gotten on her nerves one too many times, he wrote, simply, "Minnie did it, not Miriam."

I'm reading these comments again and it makes me think, so what is the truth? You read the newspapers and say to yourself, "oh my goodness"; you read someone's marginal words who had firsthand experience with the people in the article and you say to yourself, "oh, my"; and now you read the words of someone who read the newspaper and read the materials in the margin—the third layer in this archaeological dig—and you think I'm telling you the truth? Was Minnie telling the truth? And I guess what is true is that life is much stranger than fiction.

Miriam was not jailed for the death of her cousin, nor her sister Minnie as an accomplice, because of their ages. The case was dismissed and became one more story that the natives of Mertztown still tell each other, at least for a while until time erodes the memories and the old, yellow articles with comments on them.

I think Minnie was the one. But I wonder if Minnie had ever been one of those little girls who sprinkle sweet dust if only for a short time.

I Sat Amongst the Dells One Day

By: Tom Perkins

A lone, bald hill rests silently amid the riparian growth that springs like ribbons among the dells. And though the hill is silent, all else is not. A breeze flows, brisk and gentle between the stone mounds, setting the reservoir water wavering. Ducks call absentmindedly as they trace lazy circles in rippling wakes. The water and the things that live there release a tell-tale musk, and the dusty stone itself seems to carry an odor all its own. It is stale and musty, the scent of wind-worn rock.

The stone presses as chilled steel on exposed flesh, and the wind carries with it cold barbs of its own. Don't look windward unless you want your face polished. But even with the biting wind, and the stone-cold hill, and the calling ducks, and the rustling, verdant strips of growth, it is peaceful, it is pleasant, and above all, it is lonely. Thank God, it is lonely.

A bald hill rests silent among the strips of riparian growth,
Ribbons of green amid the brown and tan. Blue sky above and gray water below,
Punctuated by the flecks of darker hues which honk and quack with abandon.
The troughs they cut expand and mingle, a lattice of rippling wakes.

The stone presses, steely against flesh, and the wind too carries
icy points upon its flows. A face turned windward will
be sanded smooth, polished as marble by that great, blowing gale.

But even with the biting wind, and the stone-cold hill,
Even with the calling ducks and the rustling, verdant
Strips of growth, it is peaceful, it is pleasant, and above all,
It is lonely. Thank God, it is lonely.

Sonific

By: G. L. Griffith

I bought this new sound
System—24-month plan
No interest with zero down

That Old 45 is no longer it
With its strident scratches
And bilious skips

Now I have this soothing voice
A woman, I believe
She loves me

She is always there
And does most things
I ask her to

“Turn the bass up—
And treble down”
Keeping things balanced as such

She has no opinions
That can be detected
She adjusts the speakers

In such a way
That I feel as good
As could be expected

Maybe we could break

Out of this space

And for old times' sake

Walk the beach hand-in-hand

While the sun dips

Or hitchhike to upstate New York

Where at dusk

The leaves would image me

Through a door left open

She would be delighted

To come to my birthday

Party if invited—

Maybe run for President—

Shatter that glass

Into shards hard

Upon gray marble floors—

Her voice of neutrality

Dissolving all anger

We would attend large soirees

With all of my friends

And of course, dignitaries—

One of whom, being her.



Photo by: Patricia Watkins

The Lab

By: Courtney Turner

Bright pristine surfaces

Neatly lined supplies

Faint smell of bleach

Strong smack of saline, to flush cells from mouths

Soft-coarse brush of clean lab coats

Gentle hum of instruments running analyses

Once pristine surfaces now covered in work

Supplies no longer lined up, but used up

Strong bleach covers pungent smell of bacteria

Saline lingers until washed away with caffeine

Lab coats softer now, not so clean

Abrupt thunks from autoclave shatters hums from other instruments

This is the difference in the lab

Between morning and afternoon.

Ladies and Gentlemen: We Are On Our Initial Descent into Seattle

By: Hugo Fonck

I felt a passion this morning on the plane
That I hadn't felt in years.

Just like when I was a little kid unable to sleep,
In the nights leading up to taking a flight for a family trip.

There I was: 19 years old,
Aviators shining in the bright stratospheric sun
As I gazed out at the smoky landscape below from my window seat.

Business or pleasure?
Fortunately, this trip covered both over nine days.
Music pulsing in my ears,
I gazed back outside.
I felt my mind shift,
cracking through the impenetrable depths
of the hell I had fallen into in those high meadows,
buried in the callous dry mountain air,
ice cold and devoid of love.

I felt the home I was never supposed to leave look up to me and gaze,
wondering where I had been all that time.

Though they didn't want to let go,
the angers and fears and anxieties of the past faded away
as I slowly began the arduous and rare process of living in the moment.

Maybe this would be all right.

Yeah, you could say I missed my home.



Photo by: Patricia Watkins